

Comparative Possibilities

— I —

The Challenge of Contemporary History*

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A paradox and a puzzle

History is demarcated from its sister disciplines principally by its method of gathering information. According to custom and convention, historians work in the archives, sociologists do field research, political scientists conduct surveys. In the Indian academy, however, the demarcations are also marked by a single moment in time. Thus, when the clock struck midnight on 14/15 August 1947, India was freed (and also divided), History ended, and Political Science and Sociology began.¹ This division made sense in the first years of Independence. The British Raj had definitively ended; it could therefore be treated as “history”. The new nation was being made; its making (and unmaking) could be fruitfully studied through the participatory methods of the ethnographer and the political scientist. But as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s and the 1970s, the division made less sense. Yet it has persisted. Even now, sixty years after Independence, 15 August 1947 remains a *lakshman rekha*, or line one dare not cross, that is observed faithfully on either side of the divide. Historians of India do not transgress beyond that date. Sociologists and political scientists do not look back before that date.²

The overwhelming importance in the academy of that single date has led to a paradox, namely that while India may perhaps be the most interesting country in the world, we know very little about its modern history. And what we *do* know about independent India is chiefly the work of sociologists, economists, political scientists, and journalists – not historians. In fact, the works of history, properly so called, on any aspect of India since 1947 are so few that they can be counted on the fingers of one hand or, at most, two.³

The paradox is also a puzzle, for it is not as if history as an academic discipline is underdeveloped in India. To the contrary, there is a large and visible community of historians of India, so large and so visible that they are, in fact, the

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1 In this artikel, I use “sociology” to mean “sociology and social anthropology”

2 This *lakshman rekha* is also carefully observed by foreign scholars of India; the historians dealing with colonialism and before, the political scientists and sociologists with independence and after

3 These works are cited at appropriate places in this artikel. I speak here only of books in English – as it happens, scholars writing in Marathi have written important works of contemporary history, that is, on Maharashtrian society and politics after 1947. Notably, these scholars – among them Dhananjay Keer, Kumar Ketkar and Y D Phadke – have worked for the most part outside the academy

envy of their colleagues in sociology and political science. These historians are British and American and French and Japanese, as well as Indian. Some are Marxist, others post-Marxist or subalternist, still others professing to be non-ideological, faithful only to the canons of empirical research. Arguing vigorously among themselves, these historians constitute an incredibly productive community of scholars, who have influenced intellectual debates well outside the borders of the Indian Union.

Perhaps even more than Indian economists, Indian historians have left their mark on global scholarship. Their special field of interest has been colonialism, or stated more precisely, the encounter between colonialism and nationalism. In contrast to the handful of works on independent India, there are perhaps several thousand books and articles on the history of British India. Among the areas most intensively mined are the high politics of Viceroy and English-speaking nationalists; the subaltern politics of peasants and workers; environmental histories of water, forest and wildlife; the economic histories of agrarian and industrial structure; feminist histories of women in the household and in the factory; and cultural histories of art, architecture and literature.

The historiography of India is a very rich and very well-tilled field. It is also a very narrow one. For it has focused closely – some would say obsessively – on the period “from Plassey to Partition” (to invoke the title of a recent survey of the field).⁴ The narrowness of the time frame has come at a cost – in fact, a double cost. In recent years, historians have begun to challenge this obsession with colonialism from one, that is to say the prior, side of the divide – with regard to the period of Indian history before 1757.⁵ It is past time that the obsession is challenged from the other, that is to say the later, side of the divide – with regard to the period of Indian history after 1947.

Some things we do not know about the history of independent India

Like South Africa, India is marked by a striking amount of social and cultural diversity. Its peoples are differentiated by religion and language and caste and ethnicity, as well as by ecology and technology and dress and cuisine. Again, not unlike South Africa, this very diverse population is simultaneously undergoing four fundamental transformations. The Indian economy was once very largely based on

4 S Bandopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition* (Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2004) Bandopadhyay’s book has an excellent bibliography, listing the important books and articles on different aspects of the history of colonial India “Plassey” refers to the battle of that name in 1757 by which the British acquired their first bridgehead on the subcontinent; “Partition” refers to the year 1947, when British India was divided into two independent nations, India and Pakistan

5 For too long was precolonial history identified with the history of the Mughal Empire, and with a Marxist interpretation of that Empire. Since the Mughals, at their zenith, controlled at most 40% of what is now India, and since Marxism is but one historical approach among many, this dominant paradigm was doubly limited. A new generation of scholars are now focusing on southern, eastern and western India (all areas scarcely touched by the Mughals), and writing sensitively about social, cultural, ecological and aesthetic matters that the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism was unable to adequately take account of. Among the pioneers of this new precolonial history are Muzaffar Alam, Richard Eaton, Sumit Guha, Sheldon Pollock, David Shulman, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Cynthia Talbot and Philip Wagoner

agriculture; now, it increasingly depends upon industry and services. An overwhelming majority of Indians once lived in the villages; now, more and more Indians are making their homes in cities and towns. India was once a territory colonised by and ruled over by Europeans; now, it is an independent and sovereign country. The political culture of India was once feudal and deferential; now, it is combative and participatory.

There were, and are, four revolutions occurring simultaneously in India: the urban revolution, the industrial revolution, the national revolution and the democratic revolution. The keyword here is *simultaneously*. In this respect, modern India is comparable to contemporary South Africa, where the national and democratic revolutions both began at the same time – after 1994 – and where those who were once farmers and herders are increasingly making their homes in the cities. The Indian (and perhaps South African) experience does not, however, match the historical experience of Europe and the United States. In those countries and continents, these four revolutions were staggered. Thus, the US became a nation (or at least proclaimed its national independence) in the eighteenth century; urbanised and industrialised in the nineteenth century; and became democratic only in the twentieth century, after first women and then people of colour were granted the vote. In Europe, a continent broken up into many different nationalities, the pace of these different revolutions varied greatly across and within countries. Crucially, in every country the national revolution preceded the democratic one by several decades or more. That is to say, the residents of a geographically defined and circumscribed territory came together under a single flag and currency well before they were allowed to choose the men who would lead and govern them.

India has three times as many people as the United States; as many major languages as Europe; and far greater religious diversity than either the United States or Europe. Besides, it became a democracy at the same time as it became a nation (in striking contrast to its great Asian neighbour, China). In any event, the urban and industrial revolutions would have produced major conflicts and upheavals (as they have elsewhere in the world); but in India these conflicts and upheavals have been made more intense, and interesting, by being articulated through the processes of political mobilisation and rhetorical expression that a democracy permits and even encourages.

In focusing on the period of the British Raj, the substantial and very sophisticated community of Indian historians has very largely ignored these multiple churnings. Take for instance those two words, and categories, and processes, which are of central importance to the history of modern India: *caste* and *elections*. Sociologists and anthropologists have done numerous field studies of caste in every decade since Independence. They have worked on single-caste villages, on multi-caste villages, on marginal castes such as fisherfolk and pastoralists. They have investigated the relationship between the caste system and the agrarian economy, and between caste and politics. Likewise, political scientists have undertaken surveys and opinion polls at the time of every election since Independence. Their studies have sometimes focused on a single constituency; at other times on the dynamics of party competition in an entire state. Scholars have investigated voter behaviour, styles of campaigning, means of finance, and much else.

There must be, by now, hundreds of books on caste in independent India, as well as many hundreds of articles on elections. Yet we do not have a single work by a historian that analyses or interprets the evolution of the caste system since Independence. Nor do we have a historical study that can illuminate our understanding of how elections and electioneering have changed over these sixty years.

The sociologist John Goldthorpe has argued that one advantage his discipline possesses is that it can generate its own evidence through fieldwork, interviews and surveys. The historian, he believes, is limited by his reliance on the world of the dead, that is, on what Goldthorpe calls “relics”.⁶ But he omits to mention the other side of the coin, namely that precisely because they deal with the world of the living, sociologists and political scientists are seduced into predictions about the future which often, or perhaps even usually, turn out to be off the mark. The graveyard of the social sciences is littered with the corpses of failed forecasts, predictions by sociologists about the retreat of religion from public life, for example, or predictions by political scientists about the coming extinction of particular political parties or political institutions.

On the other hand, because they deal with the past, and hence with a *completed* social process, historians are in a position to pass reasonably considered judgements on a particular society in a particular slice of time – on what happened there, how it happened, and on its larger significance. For the historian, the incomplete or fragmentary nature of evidence is compensated for by the completeness of the narrative. Seen from the perspectives of the disciplines, the orientations of the historian are different from that of the sociologist and the political scientist; seen from the perspective of human knowledge as a whole, they are also complementary.

The studies by sociologists and political scientists of caste and/or elections were all conducted synchronically, that is, at a single point of time. A historical approach would differ in being diachronic, or across time. It would differ also in the kinds and varieties of sources used. Thus, for example, a historian writing a social history of elections would make use of studies by political scientists of particular elections using surveys and interviews. But he would also seek to supplement this evidence with unpublished correspondence (whether personal or official), periodical literature (in English and other languages), posters and pamphlets, and oral histories. The political scientist and ethnographer are marked and shaped by the present. On his part, writing several years or decades after the event, the historian has the *distance* and *detachment* denied the participant observer. In writing of Indian elections, therefore, he⁷ could take a retrospective and panoramic view, using these varied sources to track changes in patterns of party funding, for example, or forms of propaganda and rhetoric, or the mobilisation of voters, or the incidence of electoral violence and crime. In the same manner, a scholar writing a history of caste since Independence would, to the published accounts of sociologists, juxtapose evidence from newspapers and journals, court records (civil and criminal), and parliamentary

6 J Goldthorpe, “The Uses of History in Sociology”, *British Journal of Sociology*, 42, 2, 1991

7 My use of the conventional “he” to denote “he or she” should not be taken as a manifestation of male bias. If there were an English equivalent of the Bengali word “shey”, which is gender neutral, I would use it; as things stand, it seems rather cumbersome to resort to “he or she” at every twist and turn

and legislative proceedings to interpret the changing role and significance of this very influential social institution.

There is not a single book on the social history of caste in independent India; not a single book either on the social history of Indian elections. But the neglect runs far deeper than that. Thus the year 2006 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the reorganisation of Indian states. Normally, anniversaries are a spur to the publication of historical works – remember how many books were published in 1997 to commemorate or deplore the Partition of India?⁸ And yet, the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of most Indian states was met with a resounding silence. No historian, living in any of the 28 states of India, thought it worth his while to write a social, or political, or cultural – or “total” – history of the state he was working in.

Some of the states of India are larger than a large European country. Their history has been as colourful and tumultuous as the modern histories of, say, France or Germany. But whereas there might be fifty or a hundred worthwhile histories of post-war France, there is not a single history of West Bengal since its formation in 1947. I mention this particular Indian state because it has a very active community of historians. These historians have restricted themselves almost wholly to the colonial period. There are hundreds of books and PhD theses on the agrarian structure of British Bengal, but not – as far as I know – a single historical study of Bengal agriculture since 1947. In this respect, at least, what Bengal thinks today the rest of India thinks today as well. Go to a bookshop in Thiruvananthapuram, and you would find there histories of colonial Malabar and the Maharaja’s Travancore, old district gazetteers and manuals, but not a single history of modern Kerala. When the advanced intellectual cultures of India have been so remiss, how can we expect there to be decent histories of Gujarat or Karnataka?

Move now from history to biography. There do exist some fine lives of the pre-eminent “national” leaders of modern India, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji), all written by accomplished historians and biographers. Since their subjects all died after 1947, these biographies

8 There is a veritable “Partition Industry” in India, comparable to the “Holocaust Industry” in Israel. The sixtieth anniversary of Partition prompted a fresh slew of books on the subject. As with the Holocaust, historians and writers have focused so closely – one dare not again say “obsessively” – on the catastrophic event that they have tended to ignore or underplay its impact on later generations and decades.

The residues of Partition, its impacts on the economic and social history of independent India, have only recently, and very belatedly, begun to receive scholarly attention. See, for instance, T Y Tan and G Kudesia, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (Routledge, London, 2000); G Kudaisya, “The Demographic Upheaval of Partition: Refugees and Agricultural Resettlement in India, 1947-67”, *South Asia*, 18, 1, 1995; J Chatterji, “Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50”, in S Kaul (ed), *The Partitions of Memory: the Afterlife of the Division of India* (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2001); R Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants in Delhi* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007); and, perhaps above all, P Chakravarti, *The Marginal Men: the Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (Naya Udyog, Calcutta, 1999) (The original Bengali edition of Chakravarti’s book came out several years before its English translation).

The imbalance is palpable. There are hundreds of books and articles on Partition itself, but only a handful on its equally interesting (and important) aftermath.

do also illuminate the history and politics of independent India.⁹ The second generation of national leaders, for example Indira Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan, have also had serviceable lives written about them, albeit by journalists rather than historians.¹⁰

Although these major national leaders have been written about, for a deeper historical understanding they need to be written about much more, and from many different angles. We need not one biography of Patel (which is all we have at the moment) but at least half a dozen. Moreover, we need to juxtapose these leaders to one another, to illuminate the rivalries and controversies that they initiated or responded to. For instance, a student of colonial India knows a great deal about how M.A. Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru differed with regard to the Hindu-Muslim question, or about how Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar disagreed about the past and future of the caste system. What, however, about the debates in independent India between Nehru and Rajaji on economic policy, or between Indira Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan on the proper role of the state? Should we not know about these, too? Till the 1970s at least, politics in India had a strong moral and ideological core – it had not become, as it is now, wholly cynical and instrumental. The policy and political debates of the 1950s and 1960s are interesting in themselves: more importantly, they had a defining impact on the career of the nation.

The major “national” leaders have not been wholly ignored by historians and biographers. However, if one moves a level below the “nation”, one draws a complete blank. If one excepts, as one must, hagiographies and party pamphlets, then there are no lives of such remarkable and historically significant figures as E.M.S. Namboodiripad, C.N. Annadurai, Sheikh Abdullah, A.Z. Phizo, or Master Tara Singh. From the perspective of India as a whole, these men might be considered “provincial” politicians. But their province is the size of a large European country. These leaders shaped, for good and for ill, the lives of forty or fifty million people. Their policies profoundly altered the economic, social and cultural histories of the states they lived in and led. At every major turning point in the history of Jammu and Kashmir, which also means the history of India and of Pakistan, one finds the hand of Sheikh Abdullah or of the party (and political dynasty) he founded. Likewise with Namboodiripad and the history of Kerala, or of Annadurai and the history of Tamil Nadu.

That we have no lives of such Indians is a commentary only on the impoverishment of our historical imagination. Not being able to read a life of Namboodiripad of Kerala, or of Abdullah of Kashmir, is like being French and not being able to read a single life of Charles de Gaulle. Like De Gaulle, these individuals are significant enough, from a historical point of view, to merit not one biography, but several.

9 See S Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: a Biography*, three volumes (Jonathan Cape, London, 1976-1984); R Gandhi, *Patel: a Life* (Navjivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1991); R Gandhi, *The Rajaji Story* (Penguin India, New Delhi, 1995) Also compare with S Gopal's *Radhakrishnan: a Biography* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989)

10 K Frank, *Indira: the Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* (Harper Collins, London, 2001); I Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi* (National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2006); A Bhattacharjee, *Unfinished Revolution: a Political Biography of Jayaprakash Narayan* (Rupa, Delhi, 2004)

But it is not just the lives of politicians that historians need to research and write about. Often, the history of a society can be illuminated by taking, as one's entry point, a middle-ranking figure, whose life and work touched both the top and the bottom, the decision-making elite as well as the humble farmer and labourer. Three such people in the history of independent India are the campaigning journalist and film-maker P.K. Atre, the novelist and activist Mahasweta Devi, and the novelist, journalist, film-maker and activist Kota Shivarama Karanth. One could write a wonderful social history of modern Maharashtra through Atre, or of modern Bengal through Mahasweta, or of modern Karnataka through Karanth. These names are thrown up for illustrative purposes only. Surely, in a country so large and so interesting, one could think of thirty or more Indian writers and thinkers, all of whom would, in a more sensitive and responsible intellectual climate, have already found their biographers.¹¹

Move now from biography to policy. It is the conventional wisdom that the autarkic model of economic development adopted in the 1950s, where the state occupied the "commanding heights", was a consequence of the preferences and prejudices of our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In fact, the claim that Nehru imposed a state-controlled economy on an unwilling nation is a claim made solely on the basis of the prejudices and preferences of the industrialists of today. The industrialists of Nehru's day were by no means *laissez-faire*. In their Bombay Plan, they themselves asked for a strong and interventionist state. They even went so far as to quote the Cambridge economist A.C. Pigou to the effect that socialism and capitalism had to find a common meeting ground. And *both* Nehru and the Bombay capitalists were merely reflecting the spirit of the age. Across the board, among politicians, businessmen, scientists and economists, there was an overwhelming consensus in favour of a self-reliant, state-directed, "mixed economy" model for India's development. This consensus is richly reflected in the private correspondence, official memoranda, scholarly literature and newspaper commentary of the 1950s.¹²

If the conventional wisdom with regard to the evolution of India's economic policy is all too different from the historical truth, then there is no one to blame but the historians. Or, more specifically, the economic historians. They have scrupulously stayed the far side of the *lakshman rekha*, writing many books and articles about the economic policies of the colonial state, while restraining themselves from examining, in an equally rigorous fashion, the economic policies of the successive governments of independent India.

The failure of the historian has led to gross misperceptions in the popular imagination, as in the myth of "Nehru the economic czar". More seriously, it has led to colleagues in kindred disciplines making elementary errors for which, again, they

11 Nor should one restrict oneself to politicians and writers. The poverty of the Indian biographical tradition could equally be illustrated by the fact that there are no biographies of a musician of truly global reach, namely Ravi Shankar, or of an entrepreneur who, for better or for worse, radically reshaped our political economy, namely Dhirubhai Ambani

While a life of Ambani is awaited, we do have a valuable study of the most politically astute businessman of the previous generation, namely G D Birla. See M M Kudaisya, *The Life and Times of G.D. Birla* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003)

12 See R Guha, *India after Gandhi: the History of the World's Largest Democracy* (Macmillan, London, 2007), chapter 10

are not to blame, but the historian. For instance, in a newspaper article published in March 2005, a political scientist at Delhi University claimed that the “Hindu code bills, passed in 1955 and 1956, did not reform Hindu personal laws, they merely codified them, that is, brought them into conformity with what was assumed to be the ‘Indian’ norm – north Indian, upper-caste practices”.¹³ Three months later, writing in another newspaper, another political scientist from the same university claimed that the (right-wing) Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) “had not opposed any legal or social reforms of Hindu society. It had proactively supported such efforts. The support to the introduction of the Hindu Code Bill can be cited as just one example”.¹⁴

Both these claims were false. The modernisation of Hindu personal laws was orchestrated by B.R. Ambedkar, who was admittedly male, but not north Indian, and certainly not upper caste (he came from the “Untouchable” castes, and grew up in western India). The reforms marked a substantial departure from (and improvement on) tradition and orthodoxy, allowing Hindu women, for the first time, to choose their marriage partners, to marry outside their caste, and to divorce (the reforms also substantially enhanced a woman’s right to her husband’s or father’s property). And far from supporting these reforms, the RSS and kindred organisations in fact bitterly opposed them. Members of right-wing Hindu parties sought to stall the new laws in Parliament. The RSS itself organised hundreds of demonstrations calling on Nehru and Ambedkar to leave their posts for daring to tamper with Hindu tradition.¹⁵

That, in everyday discourse, the common folk display a comprehensive ignorance of the history of the 1950s is bad enough; but that this ignorance is manifested also by trained academics writing in newspapers is simply shocking. The fault lies with the historians. By turning their backs on the formative decades of Indian independence, when the economic, foreign and social policies of the Republic were shaped, they have allowed the events and happenings of those decades to be distorted and misrepresented according to the whims and fancies of the individual (or scholar) concerned.

Historians have written with depth and insight of the many popular social movements that peppered the history of British colonial rule. But the period of Indian history after 1947 has scarcely been lacking in protest and struggle either. We can thus look forward to historical analyses of the many movements of peasants and workers that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, these including struggles for higher wages, protests against hazardous and polluting working conditions, struggles for the redistribution of land, and struggles for greater local control over forests.

Another fruitful area of research might be the history of institutions. Consider All India Radio (AIR), an institution that played a formative part in the first few decades of Independence. AIR sought to promote a national culture while paying respect to its regional diversities and differences. (One of its less-recognised achievements was to help save the great traditions of Indian classical music from extinction). At the same time, the imperative of cultural pluralism coexisted uneasily

13 N Menon, “A Debate Among Men”, *The Telegraph*, 23 March 2005

14 R Sinha, “Nasty, Brutish and Shorts”, *The Hindustan Times*, 23 July 2005

15 See Guha, *India after Gandhi*, chapter 11, for a flavour of these debates as they occurred at the time. For a more comprehensive and authoritative account, see Chitra Sinha’s forthcoming book *Hindu Code Bill and the Shaping of Modern India*

with the imperative of propaganda – for in political matters AIR tended to be an extension of the party in power. At any rate, in what was a largely illiterate society, All India Radio had a far greater reach and influence than the periodical press. A history of this institution would be of absorbing interest. So, too, would be the histories of other institutions that have had a major impact on the life of the nation, such as (to take examples from two very different spheres) the National Dairy Development Board and the Delhi School of Economics.¹⁶

Given the richness and diversity of the historical literature on modern India, the fact that so little of it deals with the period after 1947 is a paradox, a puzzle and a pity. Other nations and intellectual cultures have been more fortunate. There is no reliable study of the formation of economic policy in independent India, but there are many excellent books on the formation of the Welfare State in post-war Britain. Historians have not written with depth or insight about the (often very fertile) debates among writers and social scientists in independent India. Yet there are many outstanding studies of intellectual life in post-war France. No Indian historian has written a proper historical study of our wars with Pakistan. In contrast, studies by American historians of their post-war adventures in the Middle East and Asia are so numerous that they could stock a decent-sized library.

Hurdles and impediments

The historian who writes about the recent past faces difficulties very different from (and sometimes unknown to) the historian who writes about the more distant past. One problem is the availability of sources. Government archives and private papers generally become open only after thirty years. Relevant secondary sources may also not be abundant, since memoirs and biographies of key historical actors tend to be written or published some years or decades after the events which they helped shape or determine.

A second challenge faced by the contemporary historian is that his audience often has strong notions about the topics he is writing about. A historian of the Vijayanagara Empire or a biographer of Krishnadevaraya expects that his readers will know little about the subject. His own scholarly expertise and the depth and originality of his research carry great authority and value. In such cases, the historian speaks or writes, and the reader listens or reads, and learns. But a historian of modern Kerala or the biographer of E.M.S. Namboodiripad cannot count on such willing passivity. For his readers already have decided opinions about the subject. Facts or interpretations that tend to confirm these opinions will be endorsed; those that tend to dispute them will be dismissed.

The reader of contemporary history, unlike the reader of medieval or early modern history, is not willing to take the historian on trust. He comes to the text with his own, and often long-held, political and ideological preferences. The reader, in other words, knows the “truth” even before the historian offers it to him. The reader’s truth is usually based on hearsay and prejudice rather than evidence or research; for these very reasons, it is clung to fiercely, even though the historian’s alternate truth may be based on solid research and scholarship.

¹⁶ However, we will soon have a study of an important scientific institution – the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, whose history is being written by Doctor Indira Chowdhury

The farther back one goes in time, the more comfortable the historian is, the more in command of his material, the more secure of his terrain. No reader would challenge the historian of the Mughal Empire in the same, direct, combative way as he might challenge the historian of the 1950s. The biographer of Akbar, or even Aurangzeb, will not face the same searching, skeptical audience as will the biographer of Nehru or Indira Gandhi. The reader's confidence in his own opinions decreases in proportion to the distance in time. The reader *knows* that there are some things recent rulers or politicians, say Nehru or Namboodiripad, *should* have done differently. But when it comes to individuals or institutions of a hundred or two hundred years ago, the reader is more hesitant – he may wish that things had turned out other than they had, but he is not so certain that they *could* have.

The reader of contemporary history is a *critical* reader – an active participant in the historical dialogue. But it is not only the reader who brings his prejudices to bear on the facts of history. The historian might sometimes do so, too. This, then, is the third challenge of contemporary history, namely that the historian of the recent past can himself have strong, and preconceived, opinions about his subject matter. Before he enters the archives he may already know what kind of conclusion he is looking for. Evidence that fits his line of thinking will be eagerly seized upon; evidence that confutes it disregarded. It is not easy for a historian of modern Kerala to stand completely apart from the Communist-Congress polemics of the present day. On the other hand, the historian of the Vijayanagara Empire is less likely to bring his political preferences to bear on his scholarly research.

Both the writing and reception of contemporary history are suffused with passion and prejudice. For the world that the historian and his reader live in, and share, has been profoundly shaped by the personalities and policies of the recent past. The imprint of E.M.S. Namboodiripad and his party hangs heavy on modern Kerala, just as the imprint of Jawaharlal Nehru and his party hangs heavy on modern India. On the other hand, the imprint of rulers and political regimes of more distant times is less easy to recognise.

Thus, for *both* the reader and the historian, the farther back in time one goes, the more easy it is to stand apart from the din and clamour of political controversy and debate. The farther back one goes, the more willing the reader is to respect and seek to learn from the historian. The farther back one goes, the less likely the historian is to let his personal or ideological agenda have a bearing on his scholarship.¹⁷

These three challenges – namely that the sources can run thin on the ground, that the reader is a critical reader of the text, and that the historian can himself be strongly prone to bias and prejudice – are common to contemporary historians everywhere. But they operate with especial force in India. Here, the sources are even more scarce than they are in some other countries. India claims to be the “world's largest democracy”, which in some respects (for instance, the number of voters) it certainly is. But in the matter of official records the Government of India is less than democratic. Other established democracies make official documents available to scholars thirty years after the event. It is worth noting that a country like Israel, which

¹⁷ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, as in the Ayodhya conflict, where a political and religious controversy of the 1980s influenced how Indians understood – or misunderstood – events that took place – or did not take place – in the 1520s

has ongoing and bitter disputes with its neighbours, scrupulously adheres to the thirty-year rule, even with regard to questions of borders and sovereignty. But out of a peculiarly Indian combination of fear and carelessness, very few of the records of the Government of India for 1947 and later have been transferred to the National Archives. And those materials that have reached the archives are not particularly interesting or important. For instance, the records relating to the framing of our economic, foreign and linguistic policies since 1947 are still not accessible to scholars.

Historical research is also impeded by the fuzzy boundaries that exist in India between the “public” and the “private”. For instance, the official papers of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, remain in the control of his descendants. Only two foreign scholars and two Indians have been allowed to consult them. The official correspondence as Prime Minister of Indira Gandhi has not been shown to anyone outside the family. That these *official* papers are not available to scholars is possibly illegal. That they remain closed is certainly an impediment to the deeper understanding of the policies of the Government of India between 1947 and 1964, between 1966 and 1977, and between 1980 and 1984.

Outside of the Nehru-Gandhi family, the private or official papers of influential individuals are also not nearly as abundant or accessible as one might wish them to be. For Indians in general are indifferent to records and artefacts; thus, when a distinguished Indian passes away, his records are often burnt or disposed off as *raddi*. Alternately, they may be guarded with an almost paranoid vigilance, secreted and kept away from scholars. (The former is usually the case with writers or social workers; the latter usually with politicians or demagogues).

The compulsions and pressures of academic fashion also act as a deterrent to contemporary history. For some time now, the agenda for Indian history writing has been principally set by the currents of postmodernism and post-structuralism. These tendencies tend to underprivilege archival research; they have little time for political history; and they are actively hostile to biography. Finally, these fashions and trends are obsessed with the impact of European colonialism.

Those in thrall to academic fashion may not be so easily persuaded to fill the gaps in our historical understanding identified in this article. To write about the Bengal of the 1920s is to connect oneself to grand and ostensibly universal themes such as “colonialism” and “modernity”; to write about West Bengal in the 1950s, when the whites had all departed and the truncated province was merely part of the Republic of India, is to run the risk of appearing, at least among one’s peers, “provincial”. This may be one reason why the historiography is so disproportionately biased towards the first half of the twentieth century; why, for every historical article or book written about Bengal in the 1950s, there are perhaps a hundred articles or books written about Bengal in the 1920s.

And how to overcome them

The preceding section underlined some of the hurdles placed in front of the historian of contemporary India. This concluding section is an exhortation to my colleagues to disregard or overcome them.

To begin with, the sources for contemporary history are perhaps more abundant than many Indian historians allow. True, the National Archives in New Delhi and the India Office collections of the British Library in London are filled mostly with records of the colonial period. But the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) in New Delhi has painstakingly built up a magnificent collection of private and institutional papers. A handbook issued by the Nehru Library in 2003 lists as many as 681 separate collections. These include the papers of major political parties, as well as of influential and important writers, scientists, civil servants, diplomats, and above all, of politicians from all sides of the ideological spectrum.¹⁸ Some State Archives have also collected the papers of Indians who lived and worked after Independence.

From these collections one can, if one chooses, reconstruct many aspects of the political and institutional history of independent India. In fact, the materials in the manuscripts section of the NMML proved indispensable in the writing of my book *India after Gandhi*. However, after that book was published, the new management of the NMML imposed strict curbs on access to materials for the post-1947 period. In earlier times, in particular under the stewardship of the remarkable Ravinder Kumar, the directors of the NMML had allowed scholars access to all records in their collection that were more than thirty years old. Now, however, the fear of offending their political masters has made the NMML management restrict access to documents relating to Kashmir, China, the Emergency, and other such matters deemed contentious or controversial. Again, this policy is probably illegal, for the donors of these collections of private papers have not imposed any such restrictions. One hopes that this short-sighted (and anti-intellectual) policy will be reversed, and scholars once more allowed unfettered access to the records in the collection of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

Official records and private papers are two crucial resources for contemporary history. A third, and equally important, resource is the fabulous riches of India's periodical press. The NMML itself has a superb collection on microfilm of daily newspapers in English, Tamil, Hindi, Bengali and other languages; as well as runs of important weeklies. Newspaper and journal offices elsewhere in the country also maintain their own files. Vigorous and independent, documenting and reflecting the social and political currents of the day, the Indian press is a wonderful resource for historians, if somewhat underutilised by them.¹⁹

A fourth source is, of course, oral history. Here the contemporary historian has a decided advantage over his more backward-looking colleagues. The biographer of the nineteenth century Bengali reformer Raja Rammohun Roy can only know of his subject at third or fourth hand. But the biographer of the twentieth century Bengali politician Doctor B.C. Roy can actually meet, in the flesh, many individuals who knew his subject, sometimes intimately. The same is true for social history. For instance, there are many people around who participated in the all-India railwaymen's

18 *NMML Manuscripts: an Introduction* (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 2003)

19 Three works of contemporary history that have made good use of press reports are S K Gupta, *Kashmir: a Study in India-Pakistan Relations* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1966); G Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: the Impact on Global Proliferation* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999); Chakravarti, *The Marginal Men*

strike of 1974, whereas the rebels of the Santhal *hool* of 1855 have been dead a century and more. (In this domain, Indian historians can take a clue or two from their South African colleagues, who have made rich and imaginative use of oral testimonies in their own research and writing). It may be unwise for a historian to rely wholly on interviews; however, when used judiciously, along with and as a complement to contemporary documents – whether private letters or notings or newspaper reports – they can be of much value in reconstructing the somewhat recent past.²⁰

A fifth source consists of the official papers of other countries which have had close (or contentious) relations with India. Thus, the diplomatic missions in New Delhi of the Governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and France (among others) have kept a close watch on Indian developments, meeting Indians across the social spectrum and from different parts of the country. Their findings have been communicated in detail in dispatches sent home. These letters and documents are now accessible in the national archives of these countries. They contain valuable information on practically every aspect of Indian politics and economics.

Contrary to what is sometimes supposed (or claimed), the sources for writing contemporary history in India do exist. The research into these sources will be laborious; the writing up of the material perhaps harder still. For the historian of the recent past has to work his way around the prejudices of the present. We know that Indian history is a most contentious terrain. The battles over our nationalist heritage are very bitter indeed. There are those who see Gandhi and the Congress as the real deliverers of India's freedom; others who would accord the accolade to Savarkar and Hindutva; still others to Bhagat Singh and revolutionary socialism; yet others to Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army.

The historian of Indian nationalism has to negotiate a perilous path between these competing interpretations and claims. Who is to say that the task of the historian of independent India will be any easier? If anything, it might be more difficult still. The passions generated by Jawaharlal Nehru are even more heated than those generated by Mahatma Gandhi. Dispassionate analyses of the period of Indian history since 1947 are even more likely to be silenced or intimidated by sectarian identities based on caste and religion.

There is the worry that anything a historian will say or write about the recent past will be "politicised"; but the historian cannot escape his obligations, his academic duty, his professional calling, for that reason alone. However, to write contemporary history in a coherent, plausible, *independent* way, the historian must approach his sources with a completely open mind. He cannot completely abandon his own beliefs and prejudices; but he can at least try to hold them in abeyance.

How best can the historian face up to the challenge of contemporaneity? How best can he rise above the arguments and animosities of the present day, to which he,

20 The work of Granville Austin has been exemplary in its skilful and simultaneous use of private papers, official papers, newspaper reports and oral histories. See his *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966); and its sequel, *Working a Democratic Constitution: the Indian Experience* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999)

as much as his reader, is also prey? Two maxims might be useful here. The first is from F.W. Maitland: "What is now in the past was once in the future." The second is from George Orwell: "The writer must not be a loyal member of a political party". Maitland's maxim warns us against using the privilege of hindsight. Orwell's warns us against imposing the political preferences of today on our renditions of the past.

My own view is that the historian needs a generation's distance to write dispassionately and seriously about the past. In the 1960s, the 1950s could not be treated as "history"; but in the first decade of the twenty-first century it certainly can. After twenty-five or thirty years have passed, one can view events and processes away from the partisan passions they gave rise to at the time. The happenings of this decade and the previous decade are the stuff of current affairs; the historian has no business passing judgement on them. For example, one does not yet know whether economic liberalisation will decisively end the endemic poverty of the peoples of South Asia. One does not know either whether the political movement known as Hindutva, which seeks to build a Hindu state in India, has reached the peak of its influence.

On the other hand, the period of independent India up to and including the Emergency can be viewed through a properly historical lens. Living through the 1970s, it was hard not to take sides in the rivalry between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the opposition leader Jayaprakash Narayan, to see one (either one) as a protector or liberator (of nationalism or democracy), and the other as a destroyer (of the same). Now, so many decades later, with so many new sources available, and with the distance that comes with time, one does not have to take sides any more in that once intense rivalry (the fact that the rivals are both dead also helps). One might even see those fierce competitors as being, in the long run, collaborators – collaborators in the undermining of constitutional democracy, one working from above, the other from below.

My own hope is that the study of the first decades of independent India will become, for historians old and young, Indian and foreign, the real growth area of the future. The India of the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s – this was an extraordinary country living through extraordinarily interesting times. It was an unnatural nation; and an even more unlikely democracy. Never before had a society so large and so diverse sought to make itself into a single territorial unit; never before had a population so overwhelmingly poor and illiterate based its political system on universal adult franchise.

The early decades of Indian independence were indeed a time of quite profound churning. A society based on deference was learning to live with the language of rights; an economy based on the land was diversifying into other forms of productive activity. In the different states of the Union, and in the different regions and districts within them, these transformations were manifesting themselves in different ways. The variations in language, social structure and ecology made for different local and regional histories, all articulated within a wider history of India as a whole. These histories were sometimes marked by contention and conflict; at other times, by consensus and collaboration. The claims and desires of various social groups were expressed directly by themselves, and indirectly through the representations of artists, writers, musicians and film-makers.

The year 1947 marked a watershed in Indian history; as, long before that, did the year 1757. For the colonial impact on the subcontinent was wide-ranging as well as long-lasting. The British brought with them new technologies of production and communication; new forms of political authority; new ideas on society and culture; and, of course, a new language in which to express oneself.

The different parts of the subcontinent did not experience British rule in the same uniform pattern. The interventions of the rulers varied widely; one land system was imposed on eastern India, for example, but a very different one in the South. The indigenous response varied, too: some groups in some periods met the new institutions with resigned acceptance; others with militant opposition; yet others with a critical engagement. The languages of resistance and incorporation varied from province to province and often within a province as well.

When India became independent, a long, deep, look back at the period of British rule seemed a necessary task for the historian. For the economy, society, polity and ecology of the Indian subcontinent was *shaken up* by colonialism; and shaken up in a hundred different ways. One can understand why the colonial encounter, in all its variations and manifestations, became the “boom” area of historical research. One can appreciate and admire the very many excellent books and essays that came out of this preoccupation. But one must still insist that the historian’s obsession with colonialism has gone on far too long.

This insistence stems from the understanding that the changes unleashed by that momentous year, 1947, have been at least as far-reaching as those set in motion by the outcome of the Battle of Plassey in 1757. But they have been *much less written about*. Take, again for illustrative purposes only, the social history of West Bengal in the decades after the British had departed. The 1950s saw the massive influx of refugees from the east, which transformed the demography and social life of the premier city, Calcutta. The 1960s witnessed scarcity, food riots, the temporary eclipse of the ruling Congress party, and the rise of the Naxalite movement, which sought to bring about a Maoist revolution in India. The 1970s began with bloody battles between different Communist groups, continued with the Emergency (when Indira Gandhi abrogated democratic liberties), and ended with the emphatic electoral victory, through the ballot box, of a coalition of Left parties over the Congress. The 1980s saw this Left Front consolidate its hold over the countryside through agrarian reform and political decentralisation. The 1990s began a partial reversal of the anti-urban bias of the Bengal Communist; the present decade has seen the reversal continue further, with unexpected effects (such as the bitter battles about land acquisition).

These are the bare, skeletal facts, as put down by someone who does not read Bengali and does not know Bengal particularly well. But once – or *if* – the trained historian puts flesh and blood on them, who is to say that the history of postcolonial Bengal will turn out to be any less interesting than the history of colonial Bengal? On the political and economic fronts, it appears to have been scarcely less tumultuous. And we haven’t even mentioned the cultural side yet. For the West Bengal of these years also showcased the films of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, the plays of Utpal Dutt, the stories of Sunil Gangopadhyay and Subhas Mukhopadhyay, and the poetry of Sudhin Dutta.

I am confident, too, that the postcolonial histories of other parts of India will be as absorbing. The state I live in, Karnataka, has certainly enjoyed its own roller-coaster ride. Here, the first decade of freedom was dominated by the Samyukta (or United) Karnataka movement, by the struggle to create a single political unit within which all Kannada speakers could dwell. The second decade was dominated by a tussle for political dominance between two major peasant castes, the Vokkaligas of the southern parts of the state and the Lingayats of the north. The third decade saw these two caste groups being temporarily sidelined by an alliance of backwards and Muslims. The fourth decade witnessed (as in Bengal and elsewhere) the end of the Congress hegemony, and a fascinating but ultimately failed experiment with local self-government. The fifth decade saw impressive strides by the software industry, a movement of agrarian capital into manufacturing and real estate, and a rise in Hindu-Muslim violence. The sixth decade was marked by the emergence of Bangalore as a favoured destination for foreign investment, and by unprecedented levels of political corruption.

Taking the period as a whole, the political and economic transformations were profound, and their cultural expressions varied and effervescent. For the history of modern Karnataka has also featured, among other things, the stories of U.R. Anantha Murty and Devanoor Mahadeva; the plays of Girish Karnad, Chandrasekhar Kambar, and K.V. Subanna; the films of Rajkumar and Girish Kaseravalli; and the poetry of Kuvempu and Adiga.

Academic fashion calls the scholar to focus on the period of British rule. Political partisanship calls him to pass quick and motivated verdicts on the history of the recent past. But these calls are not compulsions. They can be resisted, and they must. For whether one is a political historian, a social historian, a feminist historian, an environmental historian; whether one is an urban historian, an agrarian historian, a film historian, a literary historian – in sum, *whatever* branch or style of history one owes an allegiance to – there are diminishing returns from working on the colonial period. The history of independent India after 1947, and of its states and regions, is easily as interesting as the history of British India, and of its provinces and Presidencies, before 1947. And it is so much less studied. Why write the four hundredth book on some aspect of the social history of colonial Bengal, when you can write the first book on all (or at least most) aspects of the social history of Bengal after Independence? Why write the twentieth or thirtieth book on the (nineteenth-century) writer-activist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, when you can write the first life of the contemporary writer-activist Mahasweta Devi?

Abstract

This article explores and deplors a paradox, namely that while India may be the most interesting country in the world, we know so little about its history as an independent nation. The article identifies the obstacles to the writing of contemporary history, but also outlines how they might be overcome. It suggests some important themes for research – among these are the histories of states, the histories of institutions, and the biographies of writers and activists. Finally, the article suggests that since the study of colonialism is meeting with diminishing returns, contemporary history might and perhaps should become a “growth area” for the future.

Opsomming

Die Uitdaging van Kontemporêre Geskiedenis

Hierdie artikel ondersoek en betreur 'n paradoks, naamlik dat hoewel Indië die mees interessante land in die wêreld mag wees, ons so bitter min van die geskiedenis daarvan as 'n onafhanklike nasie weet. Die artikel identifiseer die struikelblokke wat bestaan ten opsigte van die skryf van kontemporêre geskiedenis en dui verder ook aan hoe dit oorkom kan word. Dit stel belangrike temas vir navorsing voor – insluitend die geskiedenis van state, die geskiedenis van instellings, asook die biografieë van skrywers en aktiviste. Ten slotte stel die artikel voor dat aangesien die studie van kolonialisme verminderde opbrengste lewer, eietydse geskiedenis dalk 'n “groe-area” van die toekoms mag, of selfs moet word.

Key words

Archives; biography; contemporary history; historical sources; Indian historiography; Indian independence; Indian nationalism; oral history; post-independence history.

Sleutelwoorde

Argiewe; biografie; historiese bronne; Indiese historiografie; Indiese nasionalisme; Indiese onafhanklikheid; kontemporêre geskiedenis; mondelinge geskiedenis; post-onafhanklikheidsgeskiedenis.