

# THE MANY WORLDS OF INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

## ABSTRACT

The birth of Indian historiography has been a lookout of draconian criticism and surveillance. Historiography in modern times needs to be addressed in a crucial and meaningful way, especially when we confabulate about those countries which have a colonial past. In this paper we fancy to ruminate and canvass the case of making of Indian historiography. For an extensive and dominant phase, India struggled to extricate between literature and historical writing, clouding itself into indecisive dividing lines to demarcate periods. The advent of the British sculptured and synthesized the inception of Indian historical writing, craftily attempting it to periodize and document it. Indian historiography found itself dichotomizing into religious premises and kept thriving and coalescing bit by bit from rationalist to nationalist to economic paradigm. There is beyond any shadow of doubt, a dire role of the British in cobbling up Indian historiography. This paper assays to radiate how Indian historiography crept in to augment itself into glorifying the ancient glorious past which was once placed in juxtaposition to the glory of the Roman and Greek. This paper is also delves into the saga of catechizing the profound quest in the making of the Indian historical consciousness.

**Keywords:** Indian Historiography, Historical Writing, National Consciousness, Economic Nationalism

## INTRODUCTION

The present age of globalisation where we are living into emerged as a main thrust produced by the west. Interestingly enough, the recent times in the history of the world, dating back to the pre-Independence era, South Asia too shows similar impulses. But when globalization took a deep turn towards westernization, the result was not homogenised. It produced and imparted disparate responses which imbibed innately into the indigenous cultures. Thereafter,

homogeneity was witnessed resulting from the processes of globalization, which simultaneously increased heterogeneity. Globalisation can therefore be summed up as, extremely variegated and complex, leading to massive homogeneity in terms of economic organization and scientific developments, and even following Western life styles patterns. The modern period witnessed the rise of historical consciousness simultaneously with the emergence of powerful nationalism. This can be the cases of the countries which were once subdued or threatened by the Western colonial domination, like India, China and Japan. Nations began the use of history to justify their present. There can be no denying the fact that historical scholarship runs a major role in the construction of memories for a whole nation. Although, if we talk about theory, we find an uncluttered zone dividing the legend and scholarship. But the praxis is intimately correlated in terms of the historical imagination, both of the West and the non-Western countries.

### **WEST'S TAKE ON THE MAKING OF INDIAN HISTORY**

Both the Indian and the western historians are of the similar view that Indian historiography was first introduced by the British during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the similar period Western historians observed the phase as '*no history*'. This absence of '*history*' was linked with Indian notions of fantastically large cyclical time according to which every period of time invariably returns, every event is repeated, and nothing is unique. And the theory of cyclical time was regarded as a hindrance to the development of a true, linear historical sense. This was so attributed since they felt that Indian civilization possessed an unchanged character – a stagnant case of historiography. Before the advent of the Europeans, South Asian society was an Oriental despotism and a static society, which was not subjected to any historical metamorphosis. From Marx to Hagel to Ranke, the idea that the Indian society was immobile and stagnant prevailed. Hence from this premise it supervened that Indians had no understanding of historical thinking (Michael Gottlob, 2003, p.8).

Gradually it constituted that history was a typical British import. James Mill's *History of British India* (1817) compiled the first historiography of India. The Western conception of historiography rooted in Renaissance Humanism, Classical Antiquity and the Enlightenment, which were to be then taken as the standard of measuring historical studies. Great Britain

possessed positive depiction of foreign cultures, taking instance of Sales' *Universal History*, followed by accounts of Sir William Jones, according to whom the ancient Indian civilization was as equivalent to that of the ancient Greece. Though Jones belonged to the colonial government, there was no acceptance of the classical model of progress, placing India as a primitive, with feeble development when compared to Europe. There was a different glory of the Indian civilization, even though her ancient glory suffered a setback, and was in much need of the '*protection and welfare*' of the colonizers.

Thereafter it was construed that the British were burdened to free the Indians from their primitiveness. It was made a matter of agreement that the project of colonization was justified. Thomas Babington Macaulay renounced that the Indians did not imbibe any meaningful civilization. To cite Macaulay, "...*I certainly never met with any orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanskrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable.*" (Minutes of 2nd Feb, 1835).

## **INDIAN PRE-COLONIAL HISTORICAL WRITING**

It can be considered a fact, that India during the ancient time, did not accumulate the tradition to pen down history in its modern or contemporary form. '*None... reveal any understanding of causation in history; none demonstrate any familiarity with historical method and rules of evidence,*' for the Sanskrit texts (Vinay Lal, 2003, p.50). However, Romila Thapar has made a distinction between 'embedded history' and 'externalized history'. Embedded history is where historical consciousness can only be extracted with effort, as in myth, epic and genealogy. Externalized history, on the other hand, exhibits a more evident historical consciousness, as in chronicles of regions and biographies of figures of authority (R. Thapar, 2013, pp.58-9.). Thus, while India was lacking the familiar forms of history writing during the ancient times, there was also existence of an abundant number of texts of historical intent like the *Charitas*. '*Even Hindu kingdoms had elaborate records, genealogies, and annals which could be as precise as those*

*found in other early modern societies.*' (C.A. Bayly, 1997, p.678). To add on to that, there seems to be a connection between the levels of organized bureaucratic power and the emerging of such texts. At this point, royal biographies started to emerge more in quick succession after the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The historical content of these were asserted from the Hindu mythology and drafted in poetical structure.

There has been three distinguished phases of Indian history. The first is predominantly being the Hindu, with the birth of the Aryan invasions, where Sanskrit was sacred and the dominant literary language. The second was marked by the Muslim rule dawning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with Persian playing a pivotal role in scholarship and administration with the final was the British colonial period. During this phase, the English replaced the Persian. In spite of that, regional languages continued to exist as a medium of literary expression. Many of the texts of this phase written in the regional vernacular, expose a historical awareness. This was significantly different from the earlier Sanskrit writings, where historical references were unified into writings-primarily mythological and religious. These were often penned down by Brahmin priests.

The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate trod a new way of producing a huge number of historical texts. The dominant language seemed to be Persian, controlling both the administration and the texts. The texts were marked by attention given to the individual, administrative and military events, which were rather captivating. Their causes were comparably marked in non-religious terms. To note here, there is an unmistakable display of contrast in the former Sanskrit texts. The religious and mythological content displayed in the latter, were primary, while the historical measure secondary. The Islamic texts were not only historical but also contained a moral and religious outlook, which marked very less difference from the medieval texts. Both of these were marked by an identical theodicy. There is a strict need of authenticity while reconstructing the past. Interestingly enough, the authoritarian line which segregates the natural to the supernatural, is missed with definite space for the divine. Thus, the depiction of Islamic notion of time as a '*piecemeal vision of... a sequence of instants... which are the signs and spaces of God's interventions*' (Sarkar, 1997) conforms quite well along with the medieval perspective.

## **THE MAKING OF INDIAN MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY: COLONIAL PHASE**

South India harboured a tradition of historical writing during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But it was strictly dominated by the traditional form of poetry. Bengal this time devoted itself into a Persian historiography, which was authored in prose. These historical writings have a thin ray of political focus but moral in its outlook. Nevertheless, it came into terms with the secular views of causality. These historical elaborations registered the corruption and disapproving virtue which became common among the Mughals. They also highlighted to the moral incapacities and how the English failed. It was evident that Ghulam Hussain Tabatabai, who authored *Seir Mutaqherin* (1781), was also conscious of the turmoil arising into the political culture during the East Indian Company period. A completely new historical consciousness crept in after this. The East India Company's victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 was achieved by uncouth means against Nawab Siraj-ud-daula. This was trailed by an era of rampage. The British East India Company soon after this deferred to various reforms and self-regulation. Therefore, '*Ghulam Hussain may have been the first to characterize the nature of the East India Company's early government of Eastern India as a system of colonial rule.*' (Kumkum Chatterjee, 1998, p.942)

The nineteenth century witnessed two different variety of historical writing. Interestingly enough both coupled along with the presence of the East India Company. There were a number of British servants who served the Company along with drawing attention to pen down the historical narratives. Among them was James Mill, who served as the Chief Examiner of Correspondence in London and had never visited India. The second group of people mainly consisted of the Bengali Hindu scholars who were commissioned by the Company College at Fort William, Calcutta. They were commissioned to produce historical texts which would later help in serving the British Company. In order to collect revenue, a deep knowledge of the local customs was required. It resulted in a different type of administrative history which later became the standard fare of the administrative order. Doing this, there seemed to be a rather problematic zone which lied in terms of the local information, which was not always manageable. This posed a question to the colonial historical knowledge. "*The need to end dependence on local sources of information, which were often regarded as suspect and even deliberately misleading, gave rise to a historiography that was wholly instrumental in its scope, that is to say, a colonialist historiography.*" (Ranajit Guha, 1988, p.14)

The Hindu scholars who wrote for the Fort Williams College, were technically the first historians, who drag our interest since they wrote not in Persian but in Bengali. Another reason to call for our attention is that they were the first historians to write in prose and not in poetry. Few works by the pandits' which drag our attention are Mritunjoy Bidyalankar's *Rajabali (Chronicle of Kings, 1808)*, Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay's *Maharaj Krishnachandra Rayasya Charitram (The Life of King Krishnachandra, 1805)*, Ramram Basu's *Raja Pratapaditya Charita (The Story of King Pratapaditya, 1801)*. Ranajit Guha pens, 'All three works were textual sites of a conflict between archaism and modernism at both the literary and historiographical levels.' (Lorenz von Stein, 1964)

### **HOW MODERN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS EMERGED?**

The next phase of writing history differed from its previous mythological-poetical tryst. The present phase dealt with demythologising and rationalizing history, to justify the quality governance of the British rule, their mission of civilizing India and withdraw India from the deplorable socio-cultural past. The missionaries also took part in documenting history; J. C Marshman (1768 – 1837) was one such man. He authored *History of Bengal* and *History of India*, was both translated into Bengali in 1840 by Gopal Maitra. The book consisted of the negative portrayals of the tradition and culture of Hinduism. The translation offered a defensive response to the test, providing fantastic and relevant legends of Hinduism, constituting to the fact that they were no less from the miracles of the Bible.

While delving deep into the role played by history in formal education, it was found that, it was not only the missionaries but also the vernacular schools which provided teaching history in order to train the servants of the Company. Very soon these schools recouped the traditional *pathshalas* and Madrasas. Education now was a matter of colonial interest and was wrapped with colonial educational values. The traditional *pathshalas* and Madrasas bestowed the necessary basic skills. Being one of the most important subjects, History was included into the new pedagogy. Governor-General Hardinge in 1844, accorded orders for the "establishment of around one hundred vernacular village schools which reflected this new curricular emphasis"

(Sumit Sarkar, 1997, p.14). It was observed that history attracted an intellectual and pedagogical interest, evoking interest on '*facts*' and '*accomplishments*' documenting India's past. It was an earlier generation of Orientalists and liberals like Sir William Jones, who drafted Indian history with tinge of sympathy.

## **RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM AND SEARCH FOR GLORIOUS PAST**

This was the time when meta narrative began to emerge along with a contrasted display of the materialistic West to that of the spiritual East. But it was evident that West might have its moment, Indian spirit would conclude in triumph to preserve history. These kinds of assertions were addressed by religious or social reformers, who took interest in documenting events. While talking about historians, we obviously need to know that reformers like Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati and Vidyasagar, can of course not be called historians. The desire was to invigorate an order which was older, more accurately Hindu, uncorrupted by the ravages of time. While critiquing this, scholars have identified this as '*Protestanization of Hinduism*'. Interestingly enough, they toiled to discover how the foundations of India's civilization, and its destiny in terms with the ancient past. They strove to find out mankind's creativity which had already reached perfection in terms of both spiritual and intellectual creativity.

The term '*reform*' could be attached to a sense of reviving the past, breaking it from its corruption and attaching the goodness that India possessed. Well to be specific here, modernity was not rejected doing so. It called for a debate which would be a homogeneous definition describing the ancient Indian society. It would also further equate India's ancient past along with a glorious Hindu past. Hinduism, though was a well-defined religion, existing all over the sub-continent, it would rather not be appropriate to glorify and homogenise the period as '*Hindu*'. This newly formed historiography in turn provided a dimension of 'Indianness' and harnessed nationalism. Indian Muslim intelligentsia also contributed into social reforms which were developed along the religious lines. But Islam had a more defined and structured tenets compared to Hinduism, which was rather flexible to interpret. This definitely had a very deep

impact on the nationalist writing, and further accumulated itself into drawing the 'Two-Nation Theory', underlying the Partition of India in 1947.

Numerous national and regional histories, soon began appearing mostly in Bengali. We have, for instance, Kedar Nath Datta's *Bharatbarsher Itihas (History of India, 1859)* and Ishwar Chandra Bidyasagar's *Bangalar Itihas (History of Bengal, 1848)*. Colonialist historiography played a major role in developing and shaping his new form of history, borrowing many cues from it, questioning its presumptions. This is when Mill's periodization schema, the tripartite Hindu–Muslim–British periodisation was opted for. The negativities depicted by Mill throughout his work calling Indian society a zone of darkness when looked into as the civilizational aspect, was thoroughly rejected. There was a stern inclination towards liberal Orientalists of which the Indian historians approved. Two of such Orientalists were Mountstuart Elphinstone and William Jones. Their works were important and dependable since they began with comparing ancient Indian civilization to that of the civilizations of Rome and Greece. The works celebrated India's achievements in astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, literature, science and even praised the linguistic diversity of India.

### **BIRTH OF RATIONALIST AND NATIONALIST PARADIGM**

Looking after all the aforesaid paradigm this turned to be a popular notion accepted by Indian historians too, that Indian historical writing did not exist in a true sense of historiography until the British crept in. Rajendralal Mitra confesses, '*Indian literature is almost void of all authentic historical accounts*' (Gottlob, 2003, p.2). Partha Chatterjee highlights this notion to be '*a singular discovery of European Indology*'; (Chatterjee, 1993, p.95). This would have the least chance of occurring to the historians of the Fort William College. This eventually led to the wide acceptance of the western criteria. A greater consciousness was generated, incorporating method and rules describing evidence of authenticity. Now, history was beginning to be separated from bits previous form of fictional writing. With the latter half of the nineteenth century '*itihasa*' - the term though talked about before but achieved its definite shape and attained a link to the factual. (Meenakshi Mukherjee in Gottlob, *Historical Thinking in South Asia*, p.25.) Indian writing or to be specific, the historical writings of this period thematised the colonial writing, while social

history identified itself with 'folklore', economic history with land-grants having administrative significance and political history turned to be the history of kings and nobles.

A new index and form of identity now began to evolve- language, breeding into the emerging national consciousness and a hope to create a broader dimension of the concept of nation formation. It is essential to look into certain aspects, that the diverse discourse regarding identity was a part of the creation of Indian nationalist thinking, which was again the sense of region and nation emerging together. To make the matter specific let us say that there seemed to a rising graph of nationalist consciousness which with time '*subsumed the regionalisms is not borne out by the facts*' (Sunil Khilnani, 1997, p.153) Machiavellian machinations, a result of the colonial victory, was now identified by the Indian historians, engulfed into European political philosophy, history, and statecraft. The victory of the British in the Battle of Plassey was supposedly a result of Mir Jafar's treachery to Siraj and Clive's intrigues. Therefore, the last Nawab of Bengal was defeated because of power politics, and never because of personal failings. Hence, '*ancient India had to become the classical source of Indian modernity, while the "Muslim period" would become the night of medieval darkness.*' (Chatterjee, 1993, p.91) According to Tarinicharan, the negative portrayals of the colonial narratives featured during the Muslim period, was '*slunk in sloth and debauchery, and emulating the vices of a Caligula or Commodus*'. The fanatic conquerors were not originally from India unlike the Hindus. Therefore, the nationalist historiography written during the nineteenth century was posed against both the Muslims and the British.

## **SECULAR NARRATIVES AND THE EMERGENCE OF ECONOMIC NATIONALISM**

India witnessed Historical writing as an emerging form in various vernacular languages developing in various parts of India. Shiva Prasad's first written history of India titled *Itihasa Timirnasak (History as the Destroyer of Darkness, 1864)* turned to be a guide towards change. Therefore, history was taken not only as a fundamental for self-understanding, but also as a way towards progress. Self-understanding gradually went forward towards self-development, which was itself a very mammoth act. Beginning during the 1870s a new form of historical

consciousness was awakened, questioning the progress of India and Indians under the British rule. The '*Drain of Wealth*' caused as a result of repatriation of income and heavy taxes imposed on Indians. These economic consequences were strongly speculated into by the Marxist analysis. The '*economic nationalism*' was also important in a way since it marked a steady shift from the religious to the socio-economic politics. The economic nationalists provided a platform for scrutiny which would look deep into the colonial political context and at the same time pave a major focus for the Indian National Congress. Their focus to achieve economic well being and '*Drain of Wealth*' posed a very composite plot for political action during the Indian freedom movement. The Swadeshi movement (1905) was one such movement which was based on these debates, which were more open to global processes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Colonialists provided us with a scheme of consciousness and the importance of documenting our past. Indigenous historians willingly came to adapt and accept the modern yet rationalistic criteria of documenting history. History became a discipline to be acknowledged as an important domain of cultivating knowledge, further recreating and structuring national consciousness. Though at a phase, the writing of history was engaged into the colonial principles of determination, the writing of history tended to be imitative and reactive. Therefore noticeably, Indian history, was also very specifically and ardently divided into three broad ages. The ancient past was glorious and in no way deemed itself inferior than that of the ancient Roman or Greece. Interestingly enough, this glory of the past did not ensure the present state of colonial domination – a state of utter indignity. There was an imbalance and contrast between the Islamic period which was termed as a period of turmoil to that of the very next phase which echoed Anglophone historians. History is a very important for a nation. It is vital to develop national, economic, political and social consciousness. At the same time, periodising history is also mandatory, since without this history would turn into a form of propaganda.

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