

## *Notes*

# **The Changing Face of History**

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Over the past five odd decades the face of History as a discipline has undergone amazing transformations. During the 18th, 19th and much of the 20th century, history, much like other science and social science disciplines, was dominated by the Positivist or Marxist paradigm which had posited an objective reality out there amenable to recovery through incremental knowledge of facts which would ultimately reveal the truth. Ranke's famous dictum captures this paradigm pithily: History tells us as it really happened. The embedded certitude of the existence of a singular, unambiguous Truth and its recovery was premised here, emulating the methods of natural sciences. 'Scientific History' was the elevating phrase used by its practitioners. It also had a clearly European provenance.

Over the decades the realisation grew that unlike the facts of the natural sciences which are given and immutable, social 'facts' resulting from human action are malleable. History as a social science does not have the luxury of a single Truth, but diverse truths, open to a variety of interpretations. The Positivist/Marxist certitude began to give way to ambiguities in the last quarter of the twentieth century, which in turn opened up elusive areas of study, beyond the hard facts of battles, coronations, depositions and trade figures. Evolving codes of human behaviour imbibed through daily lived experience, moral dimensions inherent in religions, mythologies and cultures, changing images of the past, including origin myths, and changing perceptions of time and space, and much more called out to the historian for attention. All of these led to not one but several directions.

## **Questioning Eurocentric history**

One direction that opened up was questioning the Eurocentric history of the world. For ages the assumption that the West was the driver of the

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universe we inhabit was a given, that the ‘modern’ world was what the West had made it and it got reflected in the view of the past globally. That ‘globalisation’ and ‘modernity’ were given to humanity by the West was taken for granted. Today, in the past few decades, both have been severely problematised and both are sometimes getting traced as far as we can go back in history around the world. In lieu of a Eurocentric history, the consensus among professional historians all around is that the world we inhabit was made up of contributions from all societies, civilisations and cultures throughout the past, whether in the arena of crops, techniques, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, ideas, cultural mores, whatever.

*History as a social science does not have the luxury of a single Truth, but diverse truths, open to a variety of interpretations. The school was targeted because it was a symbol of everything the Taliban are opposed to: enlightenment and freedom.*

This is as much the result of an opening up of the notion of diversities as its reinforcement. Positivism, by emphasising the singularity of Truth, had differentiated between history as the embodiment of the Truth and mythology as its opposite, implicitly fictitious. The use of ‘myth’ for mythology was especially conducive to this misunderstanding. The evolving vision, however, looks at mythology too as comprising ‘facts’, although of a different order than the facts of historical events. Mythology actually has a much wider reach in all human societies than historical facts have and requires a much subtler comprehension. Thus, the study of mythologies of different societies and cultures brings to the surface a whole range of values they had imbibed over the millennia underneath the overarching good vs. evil syndrome. So too with the study of the arts — theatre, poetry, paintings... the Positivist postulate of mythology as implicitly fictitious is the reason for the anxiety in projecting mythological stories as historical events, leading to absurd claims like the existence of nuclear bombs, stem cell research and head transplantation in ancient India. One wonders why Indian rulers, in possession of nuclear weapons, incessantly kept losing one battle after another to a host of invaders throughout history since several centuries BC!

### **Other diversities**

Two other diversities came to the fore. For long, history had a mono-causal explanation: conflict between civilisations embodied in religious difference. The Christian crusades against Muslims, the ‘Muslim’ rule in medieval India and so forth. All other facets that contribute to social and

historical change were subsumed in it. Today, religion is one among a milieu of facets which constitute historical causation and historical change, important but not determinist. Indeed, no single facet is given the determinist status.

Second, the great diversity of perceptions of the past, or history, in different civilisations, hitherto concealed under the layer of the western conception of history, is getting increasingly articulated with ever growing confidence. Jack Goody in his book *The Theft of History* (2006) has detailed how the many diverse notions of time, space and history around the world were almost whisked away to create space for the western notion of the 'Idea of Progress in History'. The very distinctive perceptions of the past in ancient India have been most definitively brought to light by Romila Thapar in her magnificent and massive recent work, *The Past before Us: Historical Traditions in Early North India* (2013). The exercise is an ongoing one globally.

In the midst of the enormity of change in the discipline of history, one lesson remains constant: whenever and wherever the state has intervened to determine what history should be taught to its citizens, the result has invariably been an unmitigated disaster both for the discipline and for the society. The most recent examples of it are the Soviet Union and the Pakistani state's interventions. History's evolution through its own momentum has brought unprecedented dynamism to it; state's immediate needs to legitimise itself and its actions through a forcible rewriting of history have invariably stunted both or taken them back. Is this the path the Ministry of Human Resource Development has decided to tread? It is best to hope otherwise.