

History, Pseudo History or History as Politics

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The simple dictionary meaning of history is “an account of past events and developments; a methodical account of the origin and progress of a nation; the academic discipline of understanding and interpreting past events”. History can be a straightforward narrative in chronological order about who ruled which country and when, the wars fought by that country, the progression of politics and either the broad or very detailed account of everything which happened in a country at a given point of time. History can be oral which would take the form of spoken narrations or it could be recorded. For example, a chronological narration of the Plantagenet Kings of Britain and their doings is history and would be in the form of a straightforward narration of events as they are remembered and recorded. Vincent Smith in his Concise History of India has recorded that the Meos of Mewat revolted and Mohammed Ghayasuddin Balban, the Sultan of Delhi, exterminated the population and restored peace. This narration is history, but it does not tell us why the Meos revolted and why Balban reacted so ferociously. Was it because of the nature of the revolt, or was it because Balban was himself a cruel man, or was it because the structure of society in medieval India demanded extreme steps to deal with rebellion? Vincent Smith’s bland statement is history without giving the underlying causes of a particular phenomenon.

Let us take another example. Alexander the Great invaded North India and on his return to his homeland, which he never reached because he died en route, he left behind General Selucus Nikator as his Viceroy. This is history. Chanakya, also known as Kautilya, the tutor of Chandragupta Maurya, taught his ward the science and art of governance and he also drilled into him that he must bring together the separate principalities which constituted Northern India and together take on the invader so that he could be defeated. Chandragupta Maurya, in keeping with what his mentor taught him, did take on the Greeks, defeated them and established the supremacy of Pataliputra. This is history, a narration of events. However, the Maurya Empire folded up a few successors down the line from Chandragupta. By contrast the Meiji dynasty in Japan has produced a continuing line of Emperors going back to more than two thousand five hundred years. What was it that ensured continuity in Japan but did not allow the Maurya Empire to exist beyond a point? Why it that the Gupta Empire also disappeared, as did the Moghuls? What is it in the Indian character that ensures the end of dynasties after a given period of time, whereas in Japan the dynasty never ends? For history to be complete this question must also be answered. This falls within the realm of social history.

Even as narrative there can be different accounts of the same event. After one takes the account of a road accident given by different eye witnesses one would find that each one has seen the accident through his own perspective and there may be variance between the statements of different witnesses. If this can happen regarding an event which has taken place in front of one’s eyes, one has to do some thinking on how accurate are the accounts of historical events. That is why a historian, without prejudice, must access as wide a range of narratives and archives as is possible so that there can be an accurate account of what happened. It is human nature to accept an account which suits us and the underplay or even ignore a narration which runs contrary to our own beliefs. A historian lacking in application and with a preset mind will do exactly the same with any historical event. For example, Aurangzeb is looked on by pro Hindu historians as a man who tried to forcibly impose extremely narrow minded Islamic principles on India. In Benares he is alleged to have demolished the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, he imposed Jazia on non Muslims and he was almost wholly bigoted in his approach to religion. This is the picture of Aurangzeb which is presented to us by one group of historians. But there is another group of historians who point out that when Aurangzeb camped at Ujjain and the priests of the Mahakal Temple complained to him that the temple had been vandalised by the stabling of cavalry horses in the temple compound, he gave a Farman that as an act of penance the State would provide in perpetuity four seers of ghee every day to the temple authorities for lighting devotional lamps. These historians point out that in the Shariat Muslims have to pay ‘zakat’ and also perform military service whereas non Muslims have to pay the

Jazia tax in lieu of military service. In other words, in true Islam the Jazia is equivalent to commutation of military service.

Historians also point out that it is not only Shivaji whom Aurangzeb targeted but rather that his main objective was the Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan, especially the Bahamian Kingdom. This had nothing to do with religion but was an exercise in empire building. A true historian, when drawing up a profile of Aurangzeb's regime, would include all these facets of the emperor in a single narrative so that both the obverse and the reverse of the king were shown.

In Britain G.M. Trevelian wrote his monumental "The Social History of England". Arnold Toynbee was another historian who combined history and social history in his studies. William Shirer's book, "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich" is a monumental narration of how post First World War Germany progressed from extreme economic anarchy to the discipline of national socialism (Nazi). Hitler revived Prussian militarism, he based all his policies on an extremely faulty reasoning about ethnicity and Germany degenerated into total tyranny and ultimately led to the destruction of the German State in the Second World War. Shirer goes beyond history because he enters the field of psychology, sociology and social history when writing about Hitler's Germany. One could state that he was prejudiced against the Nazis, but he has been careful to chronicle his narration by anchoring it in facts and he has tried to retain objectivity. In any case with a regime like that of Hitler it would be very difficult to find an apologist for him. William Shirer's account goes well beyond just historical narration and moves into the field of analysis. This is a legitimate exercise for historians.

Let us come to Karl Marx who viewed history from a completely different perspective. He used historical analysis to try and understand the political progression of the world. For him the movement from feudalism and serfdom was naturally to capitalism and the conversion of serfs into the bourgeoisie at the upper end and the proletariat at the lower end. To him the capitalist system must inevitably surrender its place to socialism, initially in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat but ultimately by withering away of the state to be overtaken by a totally egalitarian social structure of society at large. Here was history as politics and its dogma was contained in the principle of dialectical materialism. However, what is important about Marx is that he tried to move history away from just a narration of kings and rulers and their doings into the far higher plane of trying to delve behind such narratives and to try and understand the social structure of society in a particular country, how people lived and what was their combined psyche in the matter of employment, the social services and the manner of government. Once again this is legitimate history, though it is social history. It is in the matter of social history that perhaps the leanings, the ideological moorings of a historian come into play and here one has to give the historian latitude.

We have the Indian Council of Historical Research. Its initial mandate was to really look at the history of the freedom struggle in India. It was required to be non partisan, to adopt rigorous academic standards of research, to firmly reject that which could not be proved by credible evidence and to see that historical studies in India became a world recognised discipline. However, ICHR split into political segments. Some historians such as Romilla Thapar became associated with a Marxian interpretation of history. Others were considered hacks who picked up historical narrations where they could find them and then put them together as text books which were bland because they did not contain analysis. Now we have historians who have a pro Hindu, RSS slant and who are prepared to look at myth, legend and beliefs as sources of history. The myths and legends of all countries do have a certain mooring in events of the distant past. For example, the Trojan War as narrated in Homer's Iliad is part history and part legend. Troy was real and it was destroyed in the internecine warfare of the Hellenic world. But the narration of the doings of Greek Gods and Goddesses and the supernatural deeds of the heroes of the Trojan War are obviously not history. It is possible that there may be an element of truth in past events which now have become our mythology as stated in the Ramayan and Mahabharat. It would be perfectly legitimate for historians to rigorously study the events narrated in these legends and to try and separate truth from legend, but this exercise cannot be conducted by a historian who accepts the Mahabharat and

Ramayan as a part of our religious culture and beliefs and, therefore, gospel and then approaches the issue with reverence rather than a spirit of enquiry.

Viewing history through a religious prism is not unique to Hindu India. Even within a monotheistic religion such as Islam the Shia-Sunni rift gives us two absolutely different views of the Battle of Karbala. The Shia version is that Hassan and Hussain were martyred at Karbala and Shias observe the month of Muharram as a period of mourning. The Sunnis, on the other hand, look on Karbala as a victory of Islamic righteousness over two usurpers of the Imamate. Not one learned Muslim has seen the battle as a struggle for power between two claimants for the Imamate, a purely temporal post, both of them from the family of the Prophet (PBUH). Yet such religious heat is generated by this event that today the two schisms, Shia and Sunni, are almost at war with each other. How a temporal issue became one of the religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy must be studied by historians rather than the Ullema so that something which has divided the Muslim world can be logically explained and, perhaps, the rift healed. Such can be the power of history.

Let us take another example of how a partisan approach can distort facts and lead to our arriving at wrong conclusions. To us Indians the real villain of Partition was Jinnah the founder of Pakistan. Yet when viewed objectively he alone is not to blame. When in 1937 elected governments took charge in the Provinces the Congress was the lead party in most of them. Had the Muslims been given a legitimate share in power then it is possible that they might have looked on an united India as their best bet. But that did not happen and the Muslims were given only token representation in government.

In the Punjab it is the Unionists who ruled and here the communities were given proportional representation. This worked so well that till partition became almost inevitable neither Congress nor the Muslim League had a role in government. In overwhelmingly Muslim NWFP Mehar Chand Khanna was Chief Minister for almost two years. But in Congress ruled Provinces, still under British rule, when Muslims felt left out of power, the feeling grew that independent India would be predominantly Hindu, the Muslim would enjoy only subaltern status and, therefore, there must be a separate Muslim homeland. Can the historians not study this in detail and tell us whether or not Congress must share the blame for partition with Jinnah? One is delighted to come across an unbiased historian, Ayesha Jalal, a Pakistani, who has done a seminal study of Pakistan to try and understand why that country has developed such fault lines in its basic structures, its polity, its administrative set up, its military domination over government and its weak civil society. Ayesha's study is analytical, critical, objective, but never self flagellating. That is what a real historian is and should be.

The present Chairman of ICHR is alleged to be sympathetic towards RSS ideology and the newspapers report that he has suggested three names for the council of historians who have a similar leaning. Without going into the merit of each of these names one can presume that they are not devoid of academic merit, but one must still question the nomination on the ground that they have a preconceived bias. A political party making a choice of persons as ministers or as public functionaries is normal because it would certainly be expected to select those who are in tune with its political thought. However, so far as civil servants are concerned, this would not be a legitimate exercise because civil servants are expected to be totally impartial. In the academic world it is the duty of teachers to expose their students to as wide a range of disciplines and ideologies as possible because a student is supposed to study, assess and accept or reject a particular line of thinking. Denying him universal access to thought is tantamount to indoctrination and this is not permissible or desirable in a democracy. Similarly an academic discipline, including history, has to have equally rigorous standards of study, interpretation and acceptance or rejection. This is in the national interest because any one-sided view of history can do nothing but harm to the country. My prayer to government would be to let the Indian Council of Historical Research remain what it and was designed to be, that is, an academic institution devoted to historical research in which there is no bias, no preconceived notions, no doctrinaire approach but a straightforward academic narration and analysis of history in which prejudice is absent. This incidentally, is the very essence of Sanatan, which demands enquiry with an open mind, a quest for knowledge and a complete

rejection of mumbo jumbo. Let us not politicise ICHR as previous governments have tried to do, so that neither Marxian dialectics, nor narrow political interests, nor half baked religious beliefs cause it to deviate from the highest standards of academic research.
