

February 13, 2019

The Historian and Chauvinism

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Historians, when practising their craft, must not be vulnerable to the chauvinism of their discipline, or of method, identity and ideology.

Human beings tend towards an extreme attachment to their family, their caste, their village, their religion, their nation. This exaggerated loyalty to one's personal or political circle goes by the name of "chauvinism." For all their professions to objectivity, scholars can be chauvinists too. This is certainly true of historians, who, in their search for the truth about the past, can be constrained by an excessive allegiance to the frameworks they have inherited.

Indian historians are particularly prone to the chauvinism of discipline, the narrow-minded belief that only a person who has a BA, an MA, and a PhD in history can teach or practice the subject. This is a dogma that I particularly relish resisting, for I last formally studied history when I was twelve. I majored in science in high school, and did a BA and MA in economics before pursuing a doctorate in sociology. It was through a chapter of accidents that I became a historian. Happily, I am anything but alone. The great historian of ancient India, Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi, was a mathematician by training. The great historian of medieval and early modern India, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, took all his degrees in economics.

Studying history at an advanced level is not mandatory to becoming a professional historian yourself. What is mandatory is the learning, or self-learning, of the practice of history. You must learn to do original research. You must learn to find documents nobody else has seen. You must learn to craft your narrative in a compelling and interesting way. But it is not essential that your own academic degrees must be in history.

“Trained” Historians

Disciplinary chauvinism takes many forms in the Indian university, where the boundaries between the departments are unbelievably rigid, defined in the most peculiar and old-fashioned ways. The teachers of different disciplines rarely interact with one another professionally, while in most of our universities students are discouraged, and often prohibited, from taking courses in departments other than their own.

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Those who do have MAs and PhDs in history usually did not have the opportunity to study with teachers in other disciplines. This is a shame. For history is an inclusive social science, indeed an integrative social science. A historian can learn a great deal from colleagues in other disciplines, and vice versa. You can be grounded in history and learn from political science and sociology. You can be grounded in sociology and learn from political science and history. So the first form of intellectual chauvinism that needs to be contested is the chauvinism of disciplinary affiliation.

The great British-born Indian, J B S Haldane, once wrote:

I consider it desirable that a man's or woman's major research work should be done in a subject in which he or she has not taken a degree. To get a degree one has to learn a lot of facts and theories in a somewhat parrot-like manner... [I]t is rather hard to be highly original in a subject which one has learned with a view to obtaining first-class honours in an examination.

Haldane was one of the most influential biologists of the last century, yet his own degrees were in mathematics and classics. Yet it was not just his own experience that persuaded him that the best and often most original work comes from an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary perspective. The Haldane legacy, so to say, is carried on by the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) in Bengaluru, which is perhaps India's finest research centre in any discipline. Many of the scientists at the NCBS originally trained in engineering or physics (or even computer science) and then moved to "biology" as defined in a disciplinary sense. Individual scholars at the NCBS are not disciplinary chauvinists, and much of their research is collaborative, conducted with scientists in other fields.

Unfortunately, this model is anathema to our humanities and social science departments, which tend to work in narrow, departmental, silos. That said, in their own work, individual historians must still seek to transcend, supersede, overcome, and conquer the chauvinism of dogmatic disciplinary affiliation.

Eclectic Methods

A second form of chauvinism that has bedevilled history-writing in India is the chauvinism of method. Now, history is above all an empirical discipline. It is not based on personal opinion, or coffee house conversations, or on what one reads on social media. Rather, history-writing is based on research in primary, unpublished, materials. However, while these materials are of many different kinds, the professional teaching of history biases one towards using certain kind of sources. Thus historians of modern India were once told to focus on government documents. As instructed by their teachers, they went to the provincial archives, the national archives, the imperial archives, where they studied the records of the home department, the police department, the commerce department, and the revenue department. Documents generated by the state thus became the primary, pre-eminent, and sometimes sole source for historians of modern India.

From the 1980s onwards, historians began ranging more widely. Some innovatively tapped the private papers of politicians and social reformers; others reached out into oral history, conducting interviews with eyewitnesses or participants in important historical events. This was very welcome, and long overdue. For history is a form of bricolage, to use a term favoured by the legendary French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Like a house, a work of history is assembled from different kinds of materials. You cannot build a house only with brick, you need lime, you need water and you need wood. Likewise, the most robust, and often the most attractive form of history-writing is that which uses a diverse range of sources.

While I have myself raided state archives and collections of private papers—and done some interviews too—the research that has given me most pleasure is reading old periodicals. I was alerted to the richness of newspaper sources by two historians I befriended early in my career. One, the Bengali polymath, Hiteshranjan Sanyal, worked in the next room to mine at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Kolkata. The other, the scholar-activist Shekhar Pathak, taught in Kumaun University in Nainital. Sanyal had used small-town Bengali newspapers in writing about peasant nationalism in Medinipur in the 1930s and 1940s. Pathak, who wrote a pioneering thesis on popular movements against forced labour in Kumaun, had extensively used Hindi newspapers published in the districts of Almora and Nainital.

At the time, I was studying the origins of peasant protest in Garhwal, the region of Uttarakhand immediately to the west of Kumaun. Inspired by Pathak and Sanyal, I went in search of a local paper whose old issues might give me insights that sarkari files could not. I found one in my home town, Dehradun. Called Yugvani, it was founded in the 1940s by a Gandhian named Acharya Gopeshwar Narain Kothiyal. Acharyaji had gone to jail in the Quit India movement; freed on completion of his term, he settled in Dehradun, and started a newspaper devoted to the ideals of the freedom struggle.

Issues of Yugvani, carefully filed in the newspaper's office near the town's Clock Tower, proved invaluable in my research. From them I gleaned many new facts about peasant movements of the 1940s as well as the Chipko Andolan of the 1970s. An additional pleasure was that the editor-proprietor of Yugvani worked in the next room. Two or three times a day he would call me in for tea, where I would tell him about what I had found, and he would reflectively set my findings in context.

The actions of anonymous peasants in the past can be understood more fully by studying old newspapers. So can the actions of famous and influential individuals. In writing a biography of Gandhi, I have scoured dozens of sarkari files and read thousands of handwritten personal letters. At the same time, I have also examined runs of periodicals published in Durban, Johannesburg, London, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Delhi, New York and Kolkata (among other places). The reports, editorials, letters, and cartoons published in these newspapers complemented (and sometimes contested) the materials on Gandhi that I had found in government records and manuscript collections.

Prejudices of Identity

A third form of chauvinism to which historians are prone is the chauvinism of identity. Like other human beings, their views are shaped and influenced by their gender, class, religion, region and nation. A man looks at the world in a certain way, different from a woman. A Kannadiga looks at the world in a certain way, different from the Tamil; that is why we have the Cauvery dispute. A Dalit looks at the world in a different way from a Brahmin. An Argentinian looks at the Falklands/Malvinas in a different way from an Englishman.

In India, as elsewhere, historians carry their personal identity into their professional work. Thus a historian born in Uttara Kannada will write about Uttara Kannada, a Tamil will write only about Tamils. I had a friend who liked to joke that he was the only Bengali historian of modern India who had not written about Rabindranath Tagore. He chose to write about Maharashtra and the history of Western India himself.

Not everyone will choose to follow my friend's example. However, even if you write about your own people, do not write about them from their perspective alone. So even if you are a Brahmin writing about Brahmins, try and understand the perspective of a Dalit or Other Backward Classes (OBCs) or a Muslim or a Christian with whom the Brahmins you are studying have interacted (and sometimes oppressed). If you are writing about our own district, conduct your research through a comparative lens, setting it against studies of districts to the north, south, west and east. If you are a man, pay serious attention to the lives and struggles of women (which for a long time male historians absolutely did not).

Traditionally, history writing was dominated by upper-caste males, and, of course, this had to be challenged. You needed Dalits and women to write histories too. At the same time, it is equally important for high-born historians to transcend their privileged identity, to acquire what the poet Keats called “negative capability,” the ability to empathise with a different perspective or point of view. For, a historian must never become a prisoner of his or her identity. Historical truth crucially depends upon the success with which the historian transcends the chauvinism of identity.

Historians as Patriots

I have spoken about the chauvinism of caste, of gender, of language. There is also the chauvinism of nation. I myself come from a family of teachers, public servants, and social workers, and was raised as a patriotic Indian. Indeed my early years were spent in the shadow of the wars of 1962, 1965, and 1971. I grew up adjacent to the campus of the Indian Military Academy, whose trainee officers often marched past my house, their rifles to the ready. During the day, fighter jets from the nearby base of Sarsawa screamed overhead, leaving traces of white smoke against the sky. At night, my mother shut the windows already blackened by cardboard, so that no Pakistani pilot would know that humans lived in our Valley. Our meals were determined by rationing and shortages, our table never enriched by the leavenings of the black market.

Such was my patriotic, or indeed hyper-patriotic, boyhood. Many years later, while working on my book *India after Gandhi*, I had to deal, this time as a scholar, with our disputes with China and with Pakistan. In the course of my research, I found that when it came to our western border (in Ladakh), India's case was stronger than China's, but when it came to the eastern border (in Arunachal Pradesh), in fact China's case was stronger. That was the objective historical truth, and that is why the conflict arose, and persisted (since neither side would recognise that the other had any case whatsoever).

As for Pakistan and our quarrel with that country over Kashmir, here too the historical record was not unambiguously in our favour. The ruler who aligned with India in 1947 was a Hindu, but the majority of his subjects were Muslim. In Junagadh, where there was a Muslim ruler and a Hindu population, Sardar Patel held a plebiscite when the Nawab acceded to Pakistan. However, in Kashmir, India did not hold a plebiscite. At the same time Pakistan was scarcely free of blame, fomenting war in 1947 and 1965 through invasion, and sending a steady stream of jihadis in later years, using force rather than diplomacy in a bid to settle the dispute in their favour.

As an upper-caste male who had never known poverty or discrimination, I would find it hard to understand the struggles of women and Dalits. Likewise as an Indian patriot I was instinctively prejudiced against Pakistan and China. However, in my book I tried to write about our border disputes as I thought a scholar should. How far I succeeded is for others to say. Shortly after *India after Gandhi* appeared, a Delhi weekly carried an interview under the headline: “Guha says India's case on Kashmir is not constitutionally fool proof.” A few days later, there were reports in the Pakistani press that said (and I quote from memory): “Indian historian says India has no case in Kashmir.” In fact, as I had made it clear in both interview and book, while India's case on Kashmir was not constitutionally fool proof, Pakistan's case was not constitutionally fool proof either. That is why the conflict was so intense and long-lasting.

Card-carrying Historians

If the historian is to arrive to any form of approximation to the truth, she has to seek to transcend the chauvinism of discipline, the chauvinism of method and the chauvinism of identity. However, she must also keep at bay a fourth kind of chauvinism, that of ideology. George Orwell famously remarked that “a writer must never be a loyal member of a political party.” I would go further, and insist: “A writer must never be a disloyal member of a political party either.” To be sure, writers and scholars have their views and

prejudices too. But they must not compromise their independence, their integrity, and their intelligence by joining a political party.

Allow me to illustrate this point by way of a personal anecdote. I did my doctoral studies in Calcutta, whose intellectual life was dominated by scholars variously owing allegiance to the Communist Party of India (CPI), the CPI (Marxist) [CPI(M)], and the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) [CPI(ML)]. Judging early that party affiliation was problematic, but influenced nonetheless by my surroundings, I had begun describing myself as a “non-party Marxist.” Then, on a research trip to Delhi, I met a brilliant historian recently returned from Cambridge named Basudev (Robi) Chatterjee. Robi was in his early 30s; but I was much younger still. When I told him of my politics, he suggested that I altogether abandon my allegiance to a particular ideology or doctrine. Or else abandon my scholarly ambitions and focus solely on activism. If I wanted to pursue Marxism seriously, he said, then I should join a trade union or peasant organisation and work for the revolution. I could, in the process, behead landlords or assassinate capitalists if I so wished. At least that way I would be true to my political convictions.

On the other hand, if I wanted to be a scholar, said Robi Chatterji, then I should stop calling myself a Marxist. For committing oneself in advance to a particular ideological standpoint was antithetical to original research. Marx and Marxism provided a valuable frame for historical analysis; but, by so strongly focusing on class and class struggle, they provided a partial vision with which to investigate the past. Other approaches paid more attention to culture and religion, equally important forces in human history. And as for environmental factors, the Marxists (at the time) ignored them altogether.

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Why, asked Robi Chatterji, limit yourself in advance to a single framework or thinker? Human history was many-sided, many-hued; it required many tools and approaches to begin to comprehend it. By all means, I could take what I wanted from the Marxists; but I needed to learn from the Weberians too, and from social and cultural anthropologists. Above all, said Chatterji, you must take your clues from the archives, which had a discomforting way of nullifying ridiculous previous conjectures and theories. Let your conclusions be guided by your primary research, advised Chatterji; let your analysis be determined by which concepts, which thinkers, are most apposite to your particular problem. His arguments were compelling, and I stopped calling myself a Marxist.

Looking back at that conversation some 30 years later, I think Robi Chatterji might have been influenced by his own experiences as a young historian. While studying in India, he had been taught by Marxists who had dogmatically told him that “base” always determines “superstructure,” that economics was always more important than culture. While studying in England, he had come across other Marxist professors who asked for more democracy in their home country while whitewashing the crimes of Stalin and Lenin in their real Fatherland, Soviet Russia. Meanwhile, he had also come to read the great historians of the Annales School, such as Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, whose curiosity about the past was uncontaminated by prejudices they held about the present, and who (unlike their narrow-minded British colleagues) drew abundantly on other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and linguistics.

To be sure, one can, inspired by Karl Marx, choose to focus on the struggles of the working classes. However, one must not become a Marxist historian, who bases his or her frameworks on the writing of Marx or the Marxist canon alone. Likewise, scholars of Dalits and their struggles would limit the reach of their analyses by referring back to B R Ambedkar at every point. (Towards the end of his life, Marx famously proclaimed: “I am not a Marxist.” I have little doubt that were Ambedkar around now, he would say, wearily: “I am not an Ambedkarite.”)

Rising above Chauvinism

Historians, like everyone else, have opinions on the state of affairs in their city, province and nation. We all want the world to move in a certain direction of our choosing. However, while an ideological orientation is inevitable, an ideological dogmatism is problematic, while a concrete party affiliation is in my view disastrous for a writer or a scholar.

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A historian has beliefs and prejudices, which, like his or her personal identity, cannot ever be entirely suppressed. But one must continually be aware of them, and seek to limit their influence on one’s work. Here, too, it helps to seek to see and listen to the “other side.” Just as a male I must learn to write empathetically about women, as a person of the centre-left I must always be alert to what is

being said by intelligent writers on the right. Whenever I am in England I make it a point to read *The Spectator*, which unlike the *New Statesman* does not merely confirm my own instincts about where the world is going, but offers alternative perspectives on Modi, Trump, Brexit, globalisation and the like. (If there was an Indian right-wing magazine with contributors who wrote with comparable intelligence and elegance, I would read it even more keenly than I now read the *Economic & Political Weekly*.) To engage with intelligent people with views opposed to or divergent from one's own can be a hugely educative experience.

In his or her professional work, a historian must never be bound by allegiance to caste, religion, nationality, or ideology. In his or her personal conduct he or she may sometimes be obliged to act to further or protect his identity. If she sees a person of her caste subject to discrimination, she might rise up in protest. If he sees his favourite shrine subject to decay or neglect, he might raise funds to restore or repair it. And although in assessing the history of international relations one must forget the colour of one's passport, when one's nation is attacked by another nation, the patriot in the historian might compel him or her to take up arms. The greatest historian of the 20th century, Marc Bloch, fought in both World Wars, and was murdered by the Nazis in the second. However, in between these two conflicts Bloch spent his time writing books and essays that consciously transcended the chauvinisms I have here spoken about.

In their struggle to write a non-or-anti chauvinist history, scholars can take their inspiration from what at first sight is an unlikely authority: Mahatma Gandhi. Compared to other icons of the national movement—Aurobindo, Nehru, and Rajaji for example—Gandhi was not a particularly learned man. His reading was eccentric, rather than wide or deep. And the books he read were oriented towards religion and ethics, rather than works of history. However, scattered through Gandhi's writings are some interesting reflections on the historian's craft. In 1930, for example, he made a categorical distinction between history and myth. As he put it: “To us, however, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are not historical works but treatises on religion. Or, if we call them histories, they narrate the history of the human soul; they do not tell of what happened thousands of years ago, but depict what takes place in the heart of every human being today.”

“Can you, as a historian, forget the whole of Muslim history? Even if you can do so, can you make the whole of India forget it? Can you reverse the flow of water and make it go upward? After the British have left, will it be possible to wipe out all the consequences of the British connection off history?”

Gandhi recognised that it was not always possible for historians to rise above their national or cultural biases. During the Non Co-operation Movement he set up his own university, the Gujarat Vidyapith in Ahmedabad. In a speech at the Vidyapith in June 1928, Gandhi remarked: “The teachers should consider what the history of India could be. A Frenchman writing a history of India will write it in a different way; so would an Englishman. An Indian looking into original records and studying Indian conditions would certainly write it differently. Do you believe as absolutely true the English accounts of the Anglo-French conflicts? Whoever wrote them might have written them correctly, yet they are written from his own point of view. He would narrate only those incidents wherein the English won. We would do the same. The French would do the same.”

Gandhi recognised these biases, but did not wish to encourage them. For he was against chauvinism in all forms of thought and action, the writing of history included. If Hindus rewrote the past to glorify or magnify their role in history, that was just as unfortunate as the Mughals or the British doing likewise. When the writer-politician K M Munshi sent Gandhi a copy of his historical novel Prithviballabh. Gandhi read it with interest, but also with some puzzlement. As he asked Munshi:

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In March 1945, a correspondent named Gope Gurbuxani asked Gandhi: “How can a historian best serve the country and how can he write a progressive history of India?”

To this query, Gandhi answered: “He can serve by writing a true and original history of the people. If there is progress he will describe the progress; if he finds there is decline he will record the decline.”

Gandhi's credo remains as relevant as when it was first offered more than 70 years ago. The wider the ranges of sources a historian uses, the more original her work will be. And the less he suppresses facts (including unpleasant facts about his community or nation) the more true as well.

Reading History

Just as the historian must be non-chauvinist, the reader of history must be non-chauvinist too. Unfortunately, this is rarely so. The Jawaharlal Nehru University student of the 1970s and 1980s thought that the last word on modern India was their own Bipan Chandra. The student who votes for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) now tends to take his clues mostly from V D Savarkar, while the devotee of the Congress First Family believes that the best source for the history of our country is Nehru's *Discovery of India*. (Of these three only Chandra was a scholar, and his work has long been superseded by other and less chauvinistic scholars.)

[H]istory is not mathematics. Even when based on the most rigorous research, even when written with the most open mind, it is never the perfect truth. It is only closer or further from the truth.

Just as the serious historian does not rely on just one kind of source material, the sophisticated reader of history must not trust one version or book alone. It is vital for the student of history to read widely, to study works by different generations and persuasions. He or she can then decide, on the basis of the depth of the research, and the clarity of the argument, which historian to believe. Or rather, whom to disbelieve less. For history is not mathematics. Even when based on the most rigorous research, even when written with the most open mind, it is never the perfect truth. It is only closer or further from the truth.

Lessons of History

I would like to end with a question that historians are often asked: What are the lessons of history? How can one learn from what happened in the past to become a better prime minister or CEO? Now, just as I believe that historians must stay away from party affiliation, I also think they must stay away from giving advice to governments or corporations. Recall that some famous Ivy League historians assured George W Bush that when American troops invaded Iraq, the Iraqis would, as it were, welcome them with flowers. We know what actually happened; they were (accurately) seen as invaders. Undeterred by that experience, one scholar has now demanded that the US President establish a Council of Historical Advisers (on the model of the Council of Economic Advisers which actually exists).

My own view is that historians should not give advice to people in power. Historians are in the business of education, enlightenment, truth telling; they are not in the business of problem-solving. To be sure, historians should hope that their books are read beyond the academy too. Human beings, all human beings, are curious about other societies and other times. Any one in any profession can enjoy and appreciate a well-crafted and elegantly written work of history. But what they make of it in their professional conduct is their business. Historians actively helped Bush make a disastrous war. On the other hand, Barack Obama on his own read books by historians on Abraham Lincoln, and came to the conclusion that in appointments to his staff and cabinet, and in his broader conduct, he should seek to adopt a more bipartisan approach than his predecessors. It may thus be that by reading subtly argued and seriously researched works of history, a general, president, CEO or sporting icon may commit fewer errors, and go further in their own chosen profession. But the historian must not seek to give such big shots advice; still less tell them what history can (allegedly) teach them.

If at all there is a lesson of history, it is this, that there are no permanent winners or losers. Hitler talked about building a Thousand-Year Reich, yet his regime collapsed in a mere 12 years. The British moved their imperial capital from Kolkata to Delhi in the belief that they would be here as rulers for centuries. They took 18 years to build their new capital (1911 to 1929); in another 18 they were out of India.

This lesson applies to individuals as much as to corporate entities. Whether it is empires, countries or business houses, whether it is sportsmen or scientists or politicians, there are no permanent winners and losers. I once asked a Mumbai audience, "What is common between Varghese Kurien, Manmohan Singh, Ratan Tata and Sachin Tendulkar?" The answer was quickly forthcoming: these individuals all did not know when to retire, since they could not conceive of a time when they would not be at the top.

This lesson of history applies to historians too. Thus, a final form of chauvinism that a historian must transcend, is the chauvinism of self-pride and self-aggrandisement. My first intellectual mentor, a wise old civil servant named C S Venkatachar, told me that "All works of history are interim," written only to be superseded. And so they are. However proud the historian is of a book that he or she has just published, he or she should know that it will one day give way to a better work on the same subject, written by a historian

who is even less bound by the chauvinisms of discipline, method, ideology, and identity that he or she claims to be.