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Don't Judge the Past through the Eyes of the Present

By: Alok Sheel

It would be wrong to use present-day norms to label certain historical events as crimes. If we must judge the past, it should be in relation to its time, rather than our present.

The past can never be taken out of the present. In December 2022, the Dutch prime minister [apologised](#) on behalf of his nation's historical role in the slave trade. That same month, a 97-year-old secretary at a former Nazi concentration camp was [convicted](#) for her role in the murder of 10,505 people.

The former secretary is culpable for her actions under modern criminal law. But under this same law, children are not culpable for crimes of their ancestors. In what sense are descendants of colonial-era Dutch collectively culpable when they are not in their individual capacities? Or the British, Americans or Germans? Or the descendant of former invaders, conquerors and persecutors, as is sometimes argued in India?

There are demands to seek an apology, and even restitution, from the British government for the sins of Empire. In India, as there is no Mughal government to seek apology or restitution for the sins of 'Islamic' conquerors, there are instead calls for exacting revenge from present-day Indian Muslims or from Pakistan or by destroying mosques that might have been built on temple sites centuries ago.

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Contemporary Dutch, British and Americans might not be culpable for the sins of empire and slavery, but their states nevertheless could be since the state is a continuing entity. But is a democratic state represented by a government elected by present-day Dutch, Americans and Britons responsible for the sins of past governments with which the present generation of electors had nothing to do?

Would the present government of Greece be responsible for slavery in the classical world, the government of Italy for the Roman Empire, and the State of Mongolia for the deeds of Changez Khan? Would this line of thought repeat the original sin of the Treaty of Versailles, where citizens of the Weimar Republic were made to pay for the deeds of the Kaiser? The indemnities imposed on Germans fuelled resentment, culminating in the rise of Hitler and Nazism.

One of the uses of history is to learn from the lessons of the past. Do we wish to go down that road all over again?

What is the past?

There is also the issue of what constitutes a crime. This question turns on how we judge the actions of historical actors long gone. The question of the culpability of the descendants of head-hunters arises only if head-hunting was a crime when it was practised.

These issues take us to the core of the philosophy of history: how do we view – or should view – the past.

Folks of the past are dead, and we cannot really gaze into their heads. Our picture of the past can, at best, be fragmentary.

The German historian Leopold Von Ranke famously remarked that we should describe the past "as it really was." Ranke's aphorism might have come from the age of technology he was part of. A historian imagined Ranke as having bought one of those early German cameras – German lenses were amongst the best – and as he gazed at those black and white photos, assumed historians could create similar photos of the past.

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From another end, the Italian historian Benedetto Croce argued that every generation rewrote history, as it asked new questions of its past based on contemporary concerns – including apology and restitution. For Croce, all history was contemporary history. While the

Ranken view of history remains relevant at the level of meaning to understand the actions of historical actors, Croce's view is predicated on the notion that each generation can validly ask new questions of the past.

Historical trends have reflected these changes in emphasis. The earlier obsession with political and dynastic histories has been replaced by more attention to developments within the economy and society and, later still, to more granular cultural themes. Marxist historiography tends to look at socioeconomic divides within society, and the Subaltern approach to history is especially interested in what quotidian life entailed for commoners. Such questions also look at the past to determine how current fault lines in society, including communal ones, came to be as their origins are rooted in the past.

Assigning meanings to the past

How people looked at themselves and their times, and the meaning they assigned to their actions, is critical to answering perhaps the most important question that historians, and also the general public, ask of history: Why? It is this burning desire to understand their past, the edifice on which their own world is built, that makes history amongst the oldest human disciplines. The first historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, asked this question while trying to explain the wars between the Greeks and Persians, and between the Greeks themselves. (The former was inclined to invoke divine intervention to answer the question. We can relate more to the latter, who was more modern and scientific in his thinking, in turning to human foibles as causal factors.)

Trying to peer into the heads of those in the past, howsoever imperfectly, remains critical to history. Let us take a concrete example to illustrate the point. For long, the history of medieval India relied mostly on Persian records. The Persian scholars who wrote these contemporary accounts represented the views of the conquerors. They saw themselves more in ethnic terms ('Turks') than religious, and the word 'Hindu' had more of a geographical connotation (those living east of the river Indus) or social, to describe the indigenous brahman-kshatriya ruling class that remained both a political threat and recalcitrant revenue collectors at the cutting edge of administration prone to defalcation.

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But how did the conquered look at themselves and the conquerors? Their perspective is becoming clearer from recent work by scholars, such as B.D. Chattopadhyaya, Richard Eaton and Audrey Truschke, who have scoured contemporary Sanskrit records to see how Indian elites looked at both themselves and the new invaders. These records show that the Indian elites were defending the brahman-kshatriya world against outsiders, who could be from both outside the country and within the country. Those who did not subscribe to the varna system or did not respect brahminical rituals were outsiders (*mlechhas*) and ostracised.

What of these 'outsiders'? Even the term Hindu did not extend to non-Muslims as a single category, as they were far from being a religiously homogeneous group, which is true to this day. (The highly sensitive issue of temple destruction is best understood within this perspective, as these were both destroyed and patronised by the rulers, including pre-Islamic.) The term 'Hindu' used in the religious sense today first arose out of the work of the early British historians of India and was expanded to include those outside the four varnas just over a century ago, in the wake of the 1911 Census of British India. The preaching of popular bhakti saints and the Rekhta – Urdu poetry – of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries point to the emergence of a more syncretic popular culture below the elite worlds of Brahmanism and Turkic rulers.

Biases of the present

Asking new questions about the past does not mean that the current generation should also assign new meaning to past actions based on beliefs and values that are very different from those that prevailed in the past. Those studying the very near term, or contemporary history, tend to be more judgemental of the past because the question inexorably arises of how things might have turned out differently had the choices available to decision makers been different. Sometimes historians project contemporary ways of thinking or values into the minds of past actors to make historical events appear relevant at the level of meaning. Thus, current communal divides are projected back into the past, and past historical events, such as temple destruction, are interpreted in their light. This is not merely anachronistic but also sinister as it tends to weaponise the past, as we see in India today.

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Much of this projection is made by non-historians, and especially by those engaged in political activity. This projection makes it easier to judge the past. The job of the historian, the scholar, however, is to analyse, describe and explain the past. As the French historian Marc Bloc argued, with that, the task of the historian is finished. It is not the historian's job to judge the past or pronounce a sentence. For they cannot do so without reference to certain values, which are likely to be contemporary. With judgement comes inexorably sentencing – demands for justice in the form of apology and restitution. It is just a step away to call for revenge upon descendants for the sins of their ancestors.

Looking forward

The temptation to judge, however, satisfies a deep-seated human instinct. Is there a way of doing this in a non-anachronistic manner?

One way of doing so is to assess the past in relation to its own past and not through the lens of the present. What were historical actors thinking when they took particular actions? It is this which gives perspective to the acts of both the Dutch in colonial times, the Nazi secretary, and even the head-hunter. Howsoever gruesome, inhuman, or criminal they appear to our sensibilities today, imperial conquest, religious bigotry – and headhunting – were commonplace and considered normal in their time and not considered illegal and criminal. Indeed, there was arguably no modern rule of law at the time: might bestowed right. The Nazi secretary, however, was party to activities that were unacceptable and criminal by yardsticks of the modern, post-enlightenment era she lived in.

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Such a view of the past has the advantage of embedding the notion of progress in historical understanding. The problem with an argument that British rule was worse than the Mughal era, and the Mughal era worse than the one preceding it, and so on, is that it would then be difficult to understand how we got from caves to Artificial Intelligence. Progress might be uneven and non-linear, temporally, spatially, and across different sectors, but is difficult to deny that later periods were mostly improvements over the past.

Was the age under consideration overall an improvement or regression from the preceding age? This raises the issue of how we view progress. Our view of progression and regression is a contemporary one. Enlightenment thinkers saw man not as a perfect design of God but as capable of infinite improvement. Their scientific observations validated the view that the present was an improvement on the past.

The Enlightenment also generated a counter-revolutionary response that rejected the idea of progress and reconstituted a mythical or imagined 'golden age' in the past, which had been degraded over the aeons. The Nazis wanted to return to their pristine Aryan past. Both Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists wish to reconstitute their own golden pasts by turning the secular modern state into a Hindu or Muslim nation.

The nationalism of anti-colonial movements too leveraged past myths and the existence of imagined communities to unite all ethnic groups against imperial outsiders. But these movements did not wish to return to some past golden age. They looked ahead to build modern, forward-looking societies based on the ideas and values of the Enlightenment. Nationalisms that seek to unite and liberate are forward-looking, while nationalisms that seeks to divide and dominate others are backwards-looking, fascistic and counter-revolutionary.

One could perhaps see the Enlightenment and its counter-revolutionary visions as different escalators, the first moving forward and the second backward in time. The demands for revenge and justice for supposed sins committed by ancestors usually come from those who tend not to believe in the sensibilities of the Enlightenment.

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The past is never dead. As William Faulkner put it, it is not even past. The Ranke-Croce conundrum remains and is likely to remain unresolved. The past can neither be fully reconstructed as it really was nor can the present be kept fully out of it. Each age must ask different questions of the past, as ways of thinking and concerns change and evolve with time. But this should not entail changing the meaning that people in the past assigned to their actions or be critical of them to the point that we judge them by present-day yardsticks and extract retribution from their descendants for actions for which they are in no way responsible.

Perhaps we should confine our criticism and judgement to the present, which we can influence and change by our current actions for a better tomorrow, rather than to the past that we cannot change, just rewrite. If we must judge the past, it should be in relation to its time, rather than in relation to the present.

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