

# History is not written by committee, in India or anywhere else

Friday 18 May 2018, by [PATHAK Vikas](#), [RAMAN Anuradha](#), [THAPAR Romila](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2018).

**History and mythology both try to explain the past but while history relies on evidence, myths rely on fantasy and must be examined differently, says the scholar**

*The role of a public intellectual is not easy, especially when it comes to interrogating the government in power and holding it accountable. What is the role of a public intellectual in India today? One of India's foremost historians and Professor Emerita at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Romila Thapar, answers this question and speaks of the attacks on secularism. She also talks about the attempts to blur the distinction between myth and history, whether by the government which has appointed a committee to prove that Hindu scriptures are not myths, or by citizens who last year protested against the film Padmaavat, claiming that it depicted 'wrongly' their 'medieval queen'. Only by gathering knowledge can we understand how both history and myth inform historians but in different ways, she says.*

*Excerpts:*

**A committee formed by the Ministry of Culture has suggested that efforts should be made to find a correlation between ancient Indian history and epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Do you find this endeavour useful or problematic?**

History is generally not written by committees but by individual historians. A committee may be asked to assess what the historian has written. Assigning texts such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to particular dates is always complicated and becomes controversial as these kinds of texts, often called epics, are rarely written at a specific date since they tend to be added to at various points in time. This is why the Sanskrit scholar V.S. Sukthankar at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, who edited the critical edition of the Mahabharata, gave a span of time [of when the epic was written and added to] from 400 BC to 400 AD.

**A point you made in response to an essay in The Public Intellectual in India was that “a society like the one we live in needs its public intellectuals”. People who can ask the right questions at the right moments. What did you mean by “a society like the one we live in”?**

I am really referring to approximately the last quarter century in a general way, but more specifically to the last four years. Specifically, the last three or four years, because that is when asking questions has been discouraged.

We are increasingly told what is right and what is wrong, and we are being told this by the government and a range of organisations that claim status and authority and who, when questioned, answer by being violent. So, you have assassinations of people who question their views and you have the lynching of people who are suspected of acting against their diktat.

**Some people today who represent the majority are suggesting the need for a debate on**

**secularism, which forms a part of the Preamble of the Constitution. Does it call for a debate?**

This is a big question. Secularism is not something external to our lives that we can do away with as and when we choose. It is an attitude towards other people. Normally it is regarded as a good attitude. So, if people are questioning secularism, you have to ask what is wrong with their attitude to other people in questioning something which is essentially a positive feature of interaction? At one level, secularism requires the coexistence of religions. It also requires the equal status of all religions.

And this upsets those whose religion has supposedly superior status or has aspects that have privileges and advantages, like a majority religion. But secularism also goes beyond religions and envisages a society of citizens, all of whom have equal rights. Therefore, it cannot support a Hindu Rashtra where Hindus have a primary and privileged citizenship. Citizenship has to be based on equal rights.

In a secular society, identity changes — from earlier identities of caste, religion and language to an identity as citizens of the nation. This is a major change which has not been discussed sufficiently. It often comes together with nationalism which is not limited to simply shouting slogans but involves a commitment to building a new kind of society where everyone is entitled to a minimum of human rights.

**In your book Talking History, you discuss how histories are written. But there are popular myths around modern movements — be it Hindutva or the Dalit movement — that invent and inspire cadres. How would you look at these popular constructions as a historian?**

Myths are something we have always believed in. The only difference is that as you acquire more and more knowledge, you begin to differentiate between mythology and knowledge. Mythology is also a form of knowledge in its own way but it is different from the kind of knowledge that we discuss. Myths that have to do with history have to draw some comment from the historian. The historian has to differentiate between the mythologised narrative and a historical narrative. I am not going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and saying that history is a reconstruction of the truth because we do not know what the truth was. The truth exists in the past. So, it's not like science. We can't set up an experiment and prove that it happened or did not happen. So, one says much more with much greater humility now that the historian is not after the truth but is trying to understand and explain what happened in the past. Mythology is also an explanation, but the historian's explanation is totally different from the mythological explanation because it is not based on fantasy and imagination. It is based on what we call reliable evidence. But the interesting thing about mythology is that it does provide you with the assumptions of a society. Therefore, there is a sense in which you get a feeling that maybe it is telling us something about how people imagined what they were and what they wanted to be. You do examine them seriously but you examine them from the point of view of what is in it for the group that is inventing that myth.

**What about the myth of Padmavati, as per historians?**

It is a mythical ancestor because this entire story of Padmavati was a fictional poem written by an erudite Muslim nobleman who wished to express his artistic feelings by writing this poem. And it was accepted as a very beautiful poem about an imagined person. In a sense it doesn't surprise me because I have worked a great deal on ancient genealogies when families came to power. And very rarely did you have ruling families from the upper echelons of society. They were usually adventurous people who made a bid for power. But when families come to power, they want an ancestry. So, they invite the people who are the keepers of the ancestry. In the early days it was the

bards and later on it was the Brahmins. And they invent, they fabricate a genealogy. They invent a little history and as it comes closer to your own time it becomes more and more historical. Why at this point of time is it important to have a particular ancestor? It has to do with current politics and society. Social change is going on in which various groups that had a high position almost automatically don't have that high position now. So, there is a sense of social and political insecurity. So, one tries to rally round as many people by giving them an idiom. And I think this has become an idiom for that kind of rallying ground.

**Hindutva had been traditionally labelled as a Brahminical ideology. Would you see the rise of Other Backward Classes leaders such as Narendra Modi and Shivraj Singh Chouhan as the BJP's faces as a sign that Hindutva has considerably deepened its social base?**

In the beginning, there was a great deal of influence of what one might call original Hindutva, which was very Brahminical. That was the ideology. Now that they have become a political party — and one with an obvious future — they have to reach out to other people. And one of the easiest ways of reaching out is to go to the suppressed groups and say that we will give you a better life if you join us. And that is exactly what is happening. There is lots of Hinduisation taking place among the Scheduled Castes, as we know from places like Gujarat. It is likely that if they get a larger following among non-Brahmins and non-Hindus, as the Dalits are, they might have to make concessions in their ideology as well. About the OBCs, it is an easier outreach provided you are willing to say that Hindutva included categories of people who may not be actually observing conservative Hinduism. And by the looks of it, they are obviously willing to make that concession.

**There is a new discourse around a supposed Lutyens' elite and its alleged machinations. As a public intellectual, how do you see this new trend where expertise is looked down upon as elitism and exclusion?**

I faced this myself when I was asked to give a lecture at the Ambedkar University and there was opposition to it from various Dalit groups saying that the Ambedkar lecture should not be given by a non-Dalit. In the same way as we have had this for decades by people who said there are certain places where only Brahmins and upper caste people should be allowed entry and be allowed to be giving talks. So, it cuts both ways. It's a reflection of the present-day political scene where you have in a sense opened up society at different levels, but you haven't opened it up to say that what matters is expertise and quality. You have opened it up by saying that what matters is your social recognition, which includes caste and religion, and money.

But what worries me most about this attitude, whether it comes from the upper elite or the lower ranks, is the consistent effort that is made by such groups to destroy the content of education. The very backbone of a society is based on education. That is where you not only teach people to function but you teach them values and you teach them what their society is all about. So, your socialisation is taking place through education and your skills are being acquired through education. And finally, your employment comes through education. That is the one area that is being damaged the most by all these attacks saying your ideology is wrong, your caste is wrong, your attitudes are incorrect, and so on.

**But there were large classes of people who have been denied quality education. So, maybe this is a backlash.**

This is where teaching history comes in. Premodern societies were very elitist. The whole question of countering or questioning the elite, particularly the elite that is concerned with knowledge, is a recent phenomenon. And I think it is a very good thing that this questioning has come in.

But the act of questioning should not become more important than what is being questioned.

---

**Anuradha Raman and Vikas Pathak**

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.*

---

**P.S.**

South Asia Citizens Web

<http://www.sacw.net/article13701.html>