

# Curious Stranger

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**July 1957. A 26-year-old Romila Thapar waits at Prague Airport. She is dressed in a sari. The pockets of her overcoat are bulging with yet more saris. 'It is blasphemous', she laments in her diary, to have crumpled 'the garment of the exotic, the indolent, the unobvious, the newly awakening East'. But there is no more room in her suitcases. They are stuffed with photographic equipment ('cameras, cameras, more cameras') and saddled with 'large bundles of books and papers, strapped together with bits of string'. Thapar - today the pre-eminent historian of ancient India - is on her way to China along with the Sri Lankan art historian Anil de Silva and the French photographer Dominique Darbois. Earlier in the year, the Chinese Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries had accepted de Silva's proposal to study two ancient Buddhist cave sites in the northwestern Gansu province, Maijishan and Dunhuang. After some hesitation, Thapar, then a graduate student at SOAS in London, agreed to join de Silva as her assistant. She had been nervous about her limited expertise in Chinese Buddhist art, as well as the practical difficulties posed by the cave sites. And not without good reason. Just imagine crawling about in those rock-cut caverns 'enveloped in billowing yards of silk'.**

But China was still far away. The three women were waiting for their delayed connection to Moscow. The latest, much-publicized, Soviet plane had got stuck in the mud. Loitering in the terminal, Thapar observed the entourage of the Indian actors, Prithviraj Kapoor and his son Raj, a newly anointed superstar in the Socialist Bloc. As heavy rains poured outside, some members of the group began discussing the film *Storm over Asia* ('Would they think it rude if I gently pointed out to them that the film was not by Sergei Eisenstein, but by Vsevolod Pudovkin, and that the two techniques are so different that one can't confuse them'). Elsewhere, a French family tune into Radio Luxembourg; a young African man listens to the BBC on his radio; the terminal loudspeakers play the Voice of America ('poor miserable propagandists'). Late into the night, Thapar leisurely smokes her black Sobranie. She thinks of herself 'an overburdened mule wrapped in folds of cloth'.

This journey followed a new, but already well-worn, diplomatic trail. In 1950, India had become the first non-socialist country to recognize the People's Republic of China. Two years later, a motley crew of Indian economists, writers and artists embarked on a self-styled Goodwill Mission. Their visit inaugurated a wave of political and cultural exchange that lasted for nearly a decade. In 1954, Nehru and Zhou Enlai signed the Panchsheel Agreement ('five principles of peaceful co-existence') in Beijing. Friendship societies bloomed on both sides of the MacMahon Line. And Indian trade unionists, state planners and litterateurs became eager pilgrims to Mao's fabled cooperative farms. This growing decolonial intimacy was memorably captured in the breathless opening sentence of a 1956 dispatch, 'Huai aur Cheen' ('Huai and China'), by the cultural critic Bhagwatsharan Upadhyay: 'Abhi mazdoor-jagat Cheen se lauta hoon' ('I have just returned from the workers' world of China'). The tone of the original Hindi conjures a neighbourhood gossip returning with the latest news from a corner teashop.

Thapar's diary, recently published as [Gazing Eastwards: Of Buddhist Monks and Revolutionaries in China](#), is a relic of this fraternal decade. But she was neither an emissary of the Indian state nor a member of any friendship societies. Unlike her fellow countrymen, Thapar's travels were not

fettered by the demands of cross-border diplomacy. Traversing the Chinese hinterland on trains and trucks by day and recording her experiences by night (often in the flickering light of a single candle), she travelled and wrote with greater freedom. The resulting travelogue is not only steadfastly historical, but also unexpectedly entertaining, a quality sorely missing from the reverential accounts of her compatriots. For instance, when the historian Mohammad Habib chanced upon a group of elderly war veterans during the Goodwill Mission, he sanctimoniously declared: 'We are your sons from distant India'. Spreading her arms, a woman promptly responded: 'If you are my sons, then let me press you to my heart'. When Thapar encounters a member of the youth team working on the Beijing-Lanzhou railway line, she cheerfully asks the young man if he stuck pictures of pin-up girls on the wall by his dormitory bed (he did).

Thapar's political commentary is equally revelatory. Unlike other visitors who eulogized the popular emblems of Chinese development – factories, farms, oil refineries, dams – she highlights the uncanny persistence of ancient China in the Maoist era. As the workers laid the foundations for new construction sites, the remains of prehistoric societies were turning up with unprecedented frequency. After just a few years, hundreds of accidental archaeological digs spread out across the country. During stopovers at a neolithic excavation site near X'ian and a Ming-era Buddhist monastery in south Lanzhou, Thapar learned that groups of archaeologists and younger students were being attached to construction sites, where they mended, labelled and catalogued the discovered artefacts on the spot. The quantity of newfound prehistoric greyware was in fact so large that the country was facing a severe shortage of buildings to house them. During conversations with Thapar, the officials explained this popular enthusiasm by repeatedly quoting Mao's directives to archaeologists – 'discover the richness of China's past' and 'correct historical mistakes'.

Faced with Thapar's inquiries about the pitfalls of 'salvage archaeology', the provincial archaeologists and museum officials regurgitated statistics; politics was never mentioned, while the name of Marxist archaeologist Gordon Childe drew blank faces. Her requests to meet the historians of ancient China, university students and young intellectuals meanwhile were brusquely ignored. This puzzled Thapar to no end, not least because their counterparts in India were working through similar problems. Back in Bombay, she had recently come into contact with the left-wing polymath D.D. Kosambi, whose work contained a blend of Marxist theory, numismatics, archaeology, linguistics, genetics and ethnographic fieldwork. In *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956), Kosambi lyrically described India as 'a country of long survivals', where 'people of the atomic age rub elbows with those of the chalcolithic'. China, Thapar slowly realized, was no different.

Recording her group's trek towards Maijishan and Dunhuang, Thapar's travelogue gracefully blends the world-historical with the everyday. Multiple timelines gather a heterogenous throng of characters onto the stage. At a monastery in Xi'an, we hear of the legendary seventh-century monk Xuan Zang lugging cartloads of Buddhist manuscripts, sculptures and relics collected during his sixteen-year sojourn across northern India. Back in the twentieth century, in nearby Lanzhou, Czech-made Škoda buses ferry Chinese workers to a power station. As Thapar proceeds across the hinterland, extended spells of isolation are broken only occasionally, as when a radio set catches the BBC News ('the Russians had developed an intercontinental rocket that had alarmed the Western world'). On most days, Thapar's battered copy of *Ulysses* serves as a marker of the passage of time ('*Ulysses* is stuck at page 207 and at this rate will probably see me all through China'). Fittingly, this drama reaches its climax at the ancient cave sites, nested at the Chinese end of the Silk Routes which had once linked the region with Central Asia, India, and the eastern Mediterranean.

Thapar and her companions were the first group of foreign researchers to access the Maijishan site. Carved into sheer cliff faces, the caves contained hundreds of Buddhist murals and sculptures created over the course of a millennium. They were 'like museums of Chinese paintings': offering something like a historical timelapse of how the earliest Gandhara-era depictions of Buddha's life

were gradually adapted to the Chinese landscape. Every evening, the group descended from 'heaven' on rickety wooden ladders, sometimes nearly a hundred meters long. Back in the candlelit monastery, as wolves and bears roved outside, their experiences were equally startling: we hear of holidaying Chinese soldiers singing Cossack folk songs picked up from the touring Russian Red Army choir; a head monk toasting the end of the hydrogen bomb; a guard playing scratched folk records, featuring a Chinese cover of 'Aawara Hoon', the title song of Raj Kapoor's latest hit. Meanwhile, at Dunhuang, the group discover that the Western explorers of the early twentieth century had vandalized and stolen numerous murals, paintings and manuscripts from the 'Caves of a Thousand Buddhas'. In 1920, the White Russians fleeing the Bolsheviks had found refuge in these same caves, and had spent their days gouging out gold from the artworks.

The thread of the present ties these proliferating timelines together. In 1957 the Chinese revolution started to unravel. Shortly before Thapar's arrival, Mao had effectively ended the Hundred Flowers Campaign. His key distinction between 'fragrant flowers' and 'poisonous weeds' had instead impelled a brutal 'anti-Rightist campaign'. Meanwhile, despite stiff resistance, the CCP was still pushing its ill-fated campaign for rural collectivization. Arriving in Beijing, Thapar fleetingly notes the ubiquitous 'bright, bold cartoons and statements', portraying the so-called 'Rightists' as venomous snakes. In the following weeks, her solidarity with the Maoists was severely tested by ongoing clampdowns on intellectual freedom (she was greatly disturbed by the case of the feminist novelist Ling Ding, who had been denounced and exiled). Despite warm encounters with the locals, she greeted village cooperatives with a mixture of guarded suspicion ('Were we expected to believe that before 1951 production was low, in 1954 it rose by half and by 1956 it had doubled?') and open cynicism ('I asked somewhat diffidently if they had tried any experiments along the lines of Lysenko in Russia'). On returning to Beijing, she was told that Professor Xiang Da, an authority on Dunhuang, was too busy to meet her, only to discover from a newspaper report that he had already been charged as a Rightist last month. Soon China would be utterly transformed by the Great Leap Forward and the ill-fated Sino-Soviet split. The 1962 Sino-Indian War over their borderlands would close the curtain on a short-lived decolonial friendship.

In the six decades between Thapar's journey and the diary's publication, her scholarly studies have spanned the history of state formation in early India, the politics of the Aryan question, the conflicts between the Brahmanas and the Shramanas (the Ajivika, the Buddhist and Jaina lineages), the Itihasa-Purana traditions, and the Indian epics, among others. Along with Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma and Bipin Chandra, Thapar is widely credited for inaugurating a paradigm shift in the study of Indian history - a radical break with the British colonial periodization and research methods. Her honours include both the Kluge Prize for lifetime achievement in the humanities and social sciences, and the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award in India (she has declined it twice). In the context of such an illustrious career, the diary is likely to be read as a relic of youthful indulgence. And yet, as Thapar has often argued, past events always accrue new, unexpected meanings in the present. It is hardly surprising, then, that the diary has significant affinities with her later work.

In the widely acclaimed *Somnath* (2004), Thapar describes how a single event - the destruction of a Hindu temple by Mahmud of Ghazni, a Turkic king, in 1025 - has been narrated across Turko-Persian and Arabic chronicles, Sanskrit temple inscriptions, biographies and courtly epics, popular oral traditions, British House of Commons proceedings and nationalist histories. Patiently decoding these dissonant voices, Thapar disproves the myth of Hindus and Muslims as eternally warring civilizations, established by British colonizers and popularized by their modern-day heirs, the Hindu nationalists. In doing so, Thapar reflexively shows that history is a process of 'constant re-examination and reassessment of how we interpret the past'. Her pursuit however has never devolved into a postmodernist free-for-all. This is not just because of Thapar's lifelong engagement with sociological theories, economic histories, archaeological methods and Marxist debates, but also

because her scholarship has always been grounded in the public life of postcolonial India. Thapar has written school textbooks, given public lectures on All India Radio, and published extensive writings on the relationship between secularism, history and democracy in popular periodicals.

In recent decades, Thapar's work has been systematically discredited by a Hindu right-wing smear campaign (popular slurs include 'academic terrorist' and 'anti-national'). She has responded with characteristic aplomb, poking more historical holes in the fantasies of a 'syndicated Hinduism'. Shortly before turning 90, she published *Voices of Dissent* (2020). Written during the upsurge of nationwide protests against the new citizenship laws (CAA and NRC), the book traces a genealogy of dissent in India – spanning the second millennia B.C. of the Vedic times, the emergence of the Sramanas, the medieval popularity of the Bhakti *sants* and Sufi *pirs*, and the Gandhian satyagraha of the twentieth century – that offer a vital corrective to the popular right-wing tendency to label 'dissent' as an 'anti-national' import from the West. Yet with the BJP pushing for the privatization of higher education, its affiliates infiltrating university administrations and its stormtroopers terrorizing college campuses, the struggle for decolonizing Indian history is no longer merely a matter of critique. There now exists a nationwide network of 57,000 *shakhas* operated by the RSS (the parent organization of the BJP), where the rank-and-file receive both ideological and weapons training, while the BJP's IT Cell has infiltrated the social media feeds of millions of Hindu middle class homes, promoting its historical propaganda.

These changes have not only upended the paradigm shift in Indian history of which Thapar was a leading figure but have also illuminated its political limits. Historically anchored in the Nehruvian-era universities, the decolonial turn has struggled to significantly transform popular consciousness beyond the bourgeois public sphere. The Hindutva offensive has put liberal and left intellectuals in a difficult double bind. This contradiction was first captured by Aijaz Ahmad, shortly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, now widely recognized as the emblem of the 'Hindu nation'. The Indian left, Ahmad had argued, cannot abandon 'the terrain of nationalism', but nor can it just occupy this terrain 'empty-handed', that is, 'without a political project for re-making the nation'. In Ahmad's words, to counter Hindutva with secularism is certainly 'necessary', but it remains 'insufficient'. Likewise, countering the syndicated, market-friendly Hinduism by recovering a subversive genealogy of the Indian past is necessary but by itself, it too remains insufficient.

Thapar's studies of ancient India naturally offer no ready-made cures for these modern maladies. One incident from *Gazing Eastwards* though reads like an allegory for future action. As Thapar declared in a lecture for All India Radio in 1972, 'the image of the past is the historian's contribution to the future'. In Lanzhou, Thapar and de Silva's clothes drew considerable attention from the Chinese public. Trailed by curious strangers, they found it difficult to walk the streets. To blend in, they ditched their saris in favour of peasant jackets in the customary blue, made famous by Maoists at the time. As the universities continue to crumble, perhaps historians of the new generation should also discard their clothes of distinction, and blend as organizers, pedagogues and foot soldiers into the agrarian and citizen struggles erupting against the BJP-led right.

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