

India: The pursuit of the Southasian past

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Moving beyond the colonial-era understanding of the history of the Subcontinent gives us a whole new way of looking at the Subcontinent's past. This now includes not just the usual explorations of politics and economy, ...

Sixty years ago, at the time of Indian Independence, we in the region inherited a history of the Subcontinent shaped by two substantial views of the past: the colonial and the nationalist. Both were primarily concerned with chronology and with sequential narratives. The focus was on those in power, a focus that has been basic to much of the writing of history. There was information on the action of kings and dynasties, on governors-general and viceroys, and on various national leaders. On these, there was broad agreement. What was contested, although only partially, was the colonial representation of early Indian society. The colonial view was a departure from earlier Indian historical traditions, and drew on European preconceptions of Indian history. The use of history to legitimise power had changed from the rule of dynasties to colonial and nationalist definitions of power.

Three arguments were foundational to the colonial view of Indian history. The first was a 'periodisation' (the dividing of history into periods) that was to have not just consequences for the writing of history, but also major political impact during the 20th century. Indian history was divided into three sections - the Hindu, the subsequent Muslim civilisation, and then the British period - as formulated by James Mill in *The History of British India*, published in 1818. In the first two cases, these labels were taken from the religions of the ruling dynasties. The divisions were endorsed by the assumption that the units of Indian society were monolithic religious communities, primarily the Hindu and the Muslim, and were mutually hostile. Religion was believed to have superseded all other identities. This periodisation also projected an obsession with the idea that Indian society never changed throughout its history, that it was static.

The second assertion was that, through the centuries, the pre-colonial political economy conformed to the model of 'Oriental Despotism', an idea conducive to assuming society to be static, characterised by an absence of private ownership of land, despotic and oppressive rulers and, therefore, endemic poverty. A static society meant that it lacked a sense of history, since history records change, and consequently there was thought to be no historical writing in pre-modern India.

The third assertion was the claim that Hindu society had always been divided into four main castes - the varnas. These had been rigidly separated because they were believed to represent the diverse races of the Subcontinent. The identification of caste with race resulted from European ideas of what was called 'race science', and the labelling of people by racial labels. This caste organisation of society was rooted in what was seen as the Aryan foundations of Indian civilisation. In defining Indian civilisation, Sanskrit was viewed as its dominant language and the hegemonic religion was Vedic Brahmanism. Above all, the attempt was to project India as alien, the 'Other' of Europe.

Colonial interpretations claimed to be applying the criteria of Enlightenment rationality in their reconstruction of the history of the colony. But in fact, they were imposing a history that suited the

requirements of colonial dominance. These preconceptions, together with a focus on chronology and the narrative of dynasties, governed routine history. Colonial historians drew on texts reflecting the upper-caste perspectives of Indian society. Many Indian historians, coming from the newly emerged middle class, were of the upper castes and were familiar with these texts; thus, by and large they continued this routine.

There was a debate, especially among historians influenced by nationalist ideas, about some of these preconceptions. For the most part, however, the colonial periodisation was generally accepted. A few historians altered the nomenclature to *ancient, medieval and modern*, terms that were borrowed from Europe and thought to be more secular – although the markers all the while remained the same and, in effect, there was little change. Oriental Despotism, as a system of political economy, was naturally rejected by the more nationalist Indian historians. Curiously, however, there was little interest in providing alternative hypotheses on the early Indian economy and society. Such an interest began relatively late. Social history in standard works largely reiterated the description of the four castes as given in the normative texts, the *dharma-shastras*. There was little recognition of how the system actually worked, however, with its many deviations from the norm.

The predominant form of nationalism, described as anti-colonial and secular, was beginning to be imprinted on Indian historical writing from the early 20th century. Parallel to this, and initially less apparent in historical writing, were the two religious nationalisms, Hindu and Muslim, both emerging at about the same time. Both had been deeply influenced by the colonial projection of monolithic and segregated communities of Hindus and Muslims in the past. Such nationalisms were not essentially anti-colonial, and were more interested in using history to legitimise their political ideology of religion-based nationalism to endorse the political mobilisation that they sought. Muslim religious nationalism came to define the identity of Pakistan, while Hindu religious nationalism sought a parallel identity for India. The agenda of colonial policy is apparent in such views.

‘Civilisation’ and identity

Despite the widespread nature of these views, the need to examine history in terms of a substantially different set of parameters was being suggested by other writings. In India, the prehistory of the social sciences, as it were, had begun in discussions around the nature of Indian society and the cause of economic poverty. Economists such as Dadabhai Naoroji had maintained that the colonial economy drained the wealth of India, and was the real source of Indian poverty. This raised heated controversies over the nature of the colonial economy, which eventually encouraged studies of the economies of pre-colonial times.

Sorting out the strands of the caste structure and its social implications was evident in the writings of sociologists such as D P Mukherjee and N K Bose, who were attempting to ‘unfreeze’ what had long been the theoretical pattern. Describing the ground reality of caste led to recognising how it differed from the *dharma-shastra* norms. The standard view was implicit in what was then the overriding vision of Indian civilisation, whose enduring feature was said to be caste tied to the conventional reading of religion. B R Ambedkar, writing on caste, projected his Dalit awareness back onto his writing of history, while working on the history of the Shudras and the Dalits. For him, the social hierarchy of caste was not just a matter of ritual status, but was linked to issues of domination and subordination. He also argued that confrontations and revolts by the lowest against the highest were prevented only because the intermediate castes intervened. But such views were not discussed in studies of social history until much later.

Among the more influential colonial representations of world history at that time was the division of the globe into discrete civilisations. Each was demarcated territorially, and associated with a single language and religion. Although this approach has been challenged by historians, even today Arnold

Toynbee's 26 civilisations have merely been replaced by Samuel Huntington's eight, and the out-of-date notion persists that world history can be studied merely as a collection of civilisations. The counterpart to the 'civilised' was, of course, the non-civilised, what were referred to as the 'lesser breeds without the law'. Colonial definitions identified caste Hindus as the civilised, and the others, such as the forest dwellers or the lower castes, as less so; these latter were labelled as 'primitive', a label that has persisted to this day at the popular level.

Cultural nationalism was influenced by colonial readings of Indian civilisation, as well as the Indian response to these. Few attempted to investigate the complexities and multiple variations of pre-colonial articulations of culture. The powerful intellectual debates of ancient times in India, between the orthodox and the heterodox (those who depart from belief), coupled with the theories of knowledge that resulted, were treated by historians as religious sectarian discourse. Thus, the atheist trend in Buddhism and Jainism was not given the centrality it deserved. That these earlier discussions had drawn on a wide spectrum of thought, ranging across belief, mysticism, and rational and logical reasoning, which had recorded fundamental differences and dissent, was rarely explored. Even while early systems of what are now called 'proto-science' (such as the shift in astronomy from calculations based on constellations to those based on planetary positions) were described, their intellectual implications, based in part on pragmatic data and rational methods of analyses, were seldom discussed as part of the historical image of a period.

Cultural nationalism thus stayed close to the contours dictated by colonial preconceptions. The notion of cultural heritage was coloured by colonial hierarchies. The claims frequently made by groups today of some identities being authentic, indigenous, unchanging and eternal, pose immense problems for historians. Identities are neither timeless and unchanging, nor homogenous and singular, as maintained in the 19th-century concept of civilisation. In every society, identities are multiple. The relevance of a particular identity, be it religion, language, caste, ethnicity or any other, has relevance to particular situations and events. Historians cannot treat one identity as primary for all time and for all situations. Cultural nationalism today resonates in many parts of the world, and claims to draw on early histories. Understanding how this nationalism is constructed therefore requires a critical enquiry into pre-modern history.

Homogenous history

The questioning of existing theories about the past began to be more distinctly formulated during the 1950s and 1960s, and gradually altered the criteria of analyses among historians. New questions began to be asked about the early past, which inevitably widened the range of sources. It also led to some distancing from both the colonial and the nationalist interpretations of Indian history. There was an appreciation of earlier scholarship, but knowledge also has to be related to a specific situation and time. This is all the more so when a shift in paradigm is involved, where the frame of reference is being realigned. In part, this shift had to do with questions related to the broader issues concerning the Indian nation state starting in the 1950s.

Emerging from a colonial situation, the initial question was how the new Indian nation was to be shaped. It was thought that a better understanding of this could provide a prelude to current concerns, including discussions on economic growth, the establishment of a greater degree of social equality, and comprehending the potential of a multicultural heritage. Inevitably, this also led to questioning the view of history that had been constructed over the previous 200 years. This, in turn, introduced information about aspects of the past that had not been researched earlier. The questions were not limited to politics and the economy, but extended to social forms, cultural and religious expression, and the formulation of identities and traditions. Emerging as a new topic of interest was research into historiography, which meant analysing the views of historians as part of the historical process.

During the course of questioning existing explanations, the validity of 'periodising' history as Hindu, Muslim and British was challenged. That route had posited 2000 years of a 'golden age' for the first, 800 years of despotic tyranny for the second, and a supposed modernisation under the last. Such divisions set aside the relevance of significant changes that took place within these periods. How could any age, stretching over a long period, be described as consistently glorious or tyrannical? How could an age be characterised merely by the behaviour of its rulers or by their religion? It was natural for these doubts to be raised when history became more than just the study of dynasties. There was also the realisation that communities and religions are not monolithic, but segmented into sects and groups, each with its own varying relationships with the others. The history of religions, ranging from social practice and ritual to belief and ideology, is a complex study, one that has to be constantly correlated with the particular social group that constitutes its patrons and its supporters.

Alternate notions of periodisation, different from the Hindu-Muslim-British divisions, were in part a reaction to the opening-up of a dialogue between history and other disciplines. Conventional history had juxtaposed the succession of dynasties in the early period - each more glorious than the next - with the bare bones of economic history, social history, histories of religion and art. These were all included within the same chronological brackets, but were not integrated. There was a vertical and almost exclusive view of each aspect, kept distinctly separate in standard histories such as the series called *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

By relating these aspects more closely to each other and to a common historical context, they provided a network of interconnected features. This gave greater depth to historical understanding. The interface between the past and the present encouraged the notion that earlier historical experience could provide insights into contemporary phenomena. Historians also began to look at the ways in which other disciplines studied various aspects of society. This was particularly useful, for instance, in trying to reconstruct societies from archaeological data, which now was no longer limited to just a list of artefacts. Linguistics and, more particularly, historical linguistics was another new source of evidence, and both archaeology and linguistics suggested new orientations.

Coinciding with these changes was the establishment of other disciplines within the social sciences - economics, sociology, anthropology, human geography, demography - with a much-needed focus on local issues in the Subcontinent. Ancient history, when seen as a social science, developed new orientations that were different from its earlier inclusion in Indology. There was the growing recognition that the past had to be explained, understood and re-interpreted on the basis of what historians were now referring to as a historical method involving critical enquiry. The reliability of the evidence and the logic of the argument continued to have the primacy that they had had earlier, but now there was a wider explanation of the historical context, as well. Such explanations could also help in understanding the present in more focused ways than before.

An altogether different approach to ancient history was initially considered marginal, but has now been revived as the ideology of religious nationalism. It was and is the reverse of mainstream history. Here, the investigation of the past depicts an almost ideal society, a golden age, attractive to present-day popular imagination. The reconstruction of this past is not based on using historical methods in analysing data, but rather on a return to colonial themes and interpretations about the Indian past. These are reincarnated, as it were, as and where is found suitable, in order to justify the political ideology of religious nationalism; in this, there is an insistence on distinctive Hindu and Muslim periods of history and the innate hostility of the two communities. Hindu society, it is suggested, has to be based on what are projected as purely Aryan, indigenous foundations. The 'Indian' identity is believed to be monolithic and uniform for all time, and is defined in accordance with colonial views of Hinduism. Yet the claim is made that this is 'indigenous' Indian history, whereas the history that uses a critical enquiry is a Western version of Indian history.

That some among the erstwhile colonised virtually appropriate the narrative of colonial interpretation in the aftermath of colonialism is curious, and requires analysis. Comparative studies of the historiography of other ex-colonies might be illuminating to such an analysis. Its significance lies in the study of politics of the present, for, in terms of furthering the exploration of the past, such a study will have little to contribute.

Defining nations and states

Let us return to mainstream history and the exploration of knowledge, which brought about a paradigm shift in the historical writing of early India. It involved not only asking a different set of questions from the sources of the past, but also the use of new methods of analysis that were under discussion in many of the social sciences. For many (including this writer), the universities of the 1960s and 1970s were places and times in which historians were eager to explore the earlier history of a variety of themes. These related to social, economic and cultural history, and triggered off myriad new directions in research.

Some explanations of the past arose from hitherto unnoticed or freshly discovered evidence, as from archaeology; but more generally, they arose from new enquiries into available evidence. This resulted in a different set of interconnections in existing knowledge, and new explanations for the data. In general, this approach encouraged the search for new knowledge, which, in turn, required the use of the historical method of investigation, as well as some interest in comparative history. Let us consider some examples of the kind of historical themes that have attracted historians of early India in recent decades.

In Southasia, the concept of the nation had run into confusion with the advent of the two-nation theory, central to the creation of Pakistan and India, and the insistence on religious identities being the primary historical defining feature. The clarification did not lie in taking the concept of the nation back to ancient times, as some were suggesting, but rather in differentiating between nation and state. The concept of the nation state emerged during the colonial period, but the idea of the state had primacy in the early past, though it took on various forms. These had to be differentiated. For the pre-modern period, a centrally administered kingdom had been assumed to be the basis of all states in those times. The break-up of these was equated with political decline, and seen as the fragmentation of a polity accompanied by an absence of consolidated power. Empires were the order of the day, particularly with British historians who saw the British Empire as the successor to the Roman. Every important dynasty was described as an empire.

The study of political forms and the likelihood of variation in patterns of power gradually led to demarcating varying forms of polities. Clan-based societies with chiefs, generally agro-pastoral, such as the gana-sanghas and the gana-rajyas, were thought of as existing prior to the kingdom. Kingdoms, as state systems, demonstrated greater complexity of organisation. The transition from clan-based polities to kingdoms has been seen as seminal to the societies described in the Vedas, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, as well as the early Pali Buddhist canon. Historical analyses are, of course, complicated by the fact that these variant forms do not move in linear fashion, not being uniform in space and time. But these studies will hopefully shift the obsessive discussion on the origin and identity of 'the Aryans' and the Aryan foundations of Indian civilisation towards broader and more relevant questions. Those being currently debated relate to the nature of social change, the interface between multiple cultures, and mechanisms of legitimising power. All of these are questions germane to enquiries into the early Indian past.

When the structure of the state began to be discussed, it led to a focus on the typology of state systems. How a state comes into existence at different times has now become a focused study in which the state is not something distinct from the society. The nature of the formation of states

suggested variations that made early states different from later ones. Thus, the Mauryan state of the fourth century BC was not identical to that of the Guptas, who ruled during the fourth century AD. The Gupta state is marked with greater decentralisation, and therefore records more intermediaries between the king and the peasant, as well as being smaller and less diverse as compared to the Mauryan. The discussion on varied forms had implications for the definition of empire as well, as is evident in the study of what have been called imperial administrations. It can be asked whether the Mauryan Empire was a highly centralised bureaucratic system, as most of us argued in earlier writings; or whether it can be seen as a more diversified system, as some of us began arguing in later writings.

The tension between control from the centre and assertion of local autonomy has been a recurring feature, and is now being regularly commented upon. The regular use of the term *empire* for all kingdoms has come up for questioning, with *kingdom* being differentiated from *empire*. Religion was an unlikely primary factor in the initial emergence of the state, which required more utilitarian resources. But in the welding of segments into empire - as in the policies of Ashoka, the Mauryan ruler, and Akbar the Mughal - there was recourse to certain facets of religion, among other things. Such facets need analysis.

Beyond the rural

The confrontation referred to earlier between the *gana-sanghas* (the chiefdoms) and the *rajyas* (kingdoms) is now eliciting greater interest, and their divergent ideologies are being recognised. Arguments and counter-arguments among intellectuals of those times were part of the urban experience. Earlier studies had noted that orthodox views were challenged by the heterodox, the latter referred to by the Brahmans as the *nastika* (the unbelievers) and the *pashanda* (the frauds). The so-called heretics used the same epithets for the Brahmans when the debates, on occasion, became fierce. Such discussions - for example, the divergent views on social ethics - are now being recognised not only as significant in themselves, but also requiring a closer analysis of text within a context.

From the colonial perspective, the primary economy of India was the agrarian economy, and there was little interest shown in the many dimensions of urban cultures. However, the latter has received considerable attention in recent historical studies. Urbanisation in the Ganga plains during the sixth and fifth centuries BC was linked to the emergence of state systems with attendant changes in technology and administration. (The currently debated question, for instance, is the role of iron technology in this urbanisation.) The investigation of the state has focused on its location in terms of environment, resources and demography, as well as its potential as a centre for the exchange of goods and as a hub of administration. This was partially influenced by the focused research on the much earlier cities of the Indus civilisation, both in tracing their emergence as urban centres and in assessing the causes of their decline.

Exchange in varying forms, from barter to commerce, for which there is a spurt of evidence from the post-Mauryan period, provided an additional economic dimension. The study of coins is no longer limited to fine-tuning the chronology of rulers, but has now introduced preliminary notions of money and markets at exchange centres. A study of market centres in South India, for example, raises the question of whether a hierarchy of exchange could be a causal factor in the transition from clan-based societies to kingship among the earliest Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. This would suggest the evolution of kingdoms from a different set of causal factors, as compared to the middle Ganga plains.

Closeness to other parts of Asia was long known through overland routes. But maritime connections have now come to the forefront, underlining new cultural and intellectual intersections. The perspective on the Indian past, earlier viewed largely from the Himalaya and the Hindukush to the

north, is now being extended to include the very different perspective from the Indian Ocean to the south. Increasing evidence of maritime connections has also raised questions linked to complex commercial arrangements. In the period just prior to European expansion, the commercial orbit of Afro-Asian trade ran from Tunis to Canton. This commerce crossed state boundaries and involved elements of what we would today call international trade and investments. Half-serious comments are now being made about a process of 'globalisation before Globalisation', which importantly questions the validity of the idea of segregated civilisations. The possibility of bilingualism in some regions, such as Prakrit and Greek in northwestern India, or Sanskrit and Javanese in Indonesia, suggests the need to re-examine the crosscurrents in many cultures, now that ancient cultures are recognised as being porous.

Feudalism and religion

Historians in many parts of the world have long discussed, and continue to discuss, the many theories of historical explanations of historical events, as well as their interpretations. In India, there was initially an interest in the writings of Karl Marx, Max Weber and the French sociologists and historians of what is known as the Annales School, all of whom had commented on the Indian past to some degree. For Marx and Weber, as noted previously, India was 'the Other' of Europe. Each thinker provided alternate explanations for why this difference, supposedly, existed. Historians have since debated these explanations, though the debates were never conclusive. In the process, however, aspects of the past that had earlier seemed closed to the historian were suddenly made visible, and the discussion brought what were thought to be peripheral subjects into the mainstream in a meaningful way.

The centrality of social and economic history was evident in all of these explanatory theories. This was certainly a change from dynastic history. Methods of analysis influenced by historical materialism were adapted by some, but with the caveat that the Indian data was likely to suggest variant patterns. Historical materialism introduced evidence from technology, economy, social organisation, labour relations, land-ownership and belief systems as possible causes of historical change as well as co-relating these and similar factors to the ideologies of the time. This is evident, for instance, in the studies of the Indian statistician D D Kosambi, who used historical materialism to give a new dimension to the study of ancient history. One may not agree with all of Kosambi's generalisations, but his analysis was methodologically rigorous, and at the same time reliably innovative.

Marxist historical writing introduced the idea of 'modes of production', which had a significant impact on the model of periodisation. Marx's notion of what he referred to as an Asiatic Mode of Production, a variant of Oriental Despotism, was rejected by Indian Marxists, as was the Slave Mode of Production. This latter was based on studies of ancient Greece and Rome; when comparisons with India data were attempted, the model was found unsuitable. However, the possibility of a Feudal Mode of Production, and the debate on the transition to capitalism, did capture historical interest in India. The notion of feudalism had initially drawn on European parallels, but now the discussion began to centre on the Marxist model. Significantly, the criticism of applying the feudal mode for India was also initiated by Marxist historians.

The argument was based on changes in land relations in the latter half of the first millennium AD. The transition to feudalism lay in the system of granting land or villages, primarily to Brahmans, to temples, to Buddhist monasteries and to a few who had served the state. Since the granting of land became a focal point of the political economy, it brought about a tangible change. This became central after about the eighth or ninth century AD, and has since become a time marker for a new periodisation. The discussion for and against the feudal mode opened up new perceptions about the state, the economy and society, religious activities and other potential areas of investigation. It also

brought in other non-Marxist theories of explanation.

Grants of land to religious beneficiaries led predictably to innovations in the ways in which they organised themselves, and in their modes of worship. They established institutions and became powerful property holders, as proven by the large number of inscriptions recording these grants. It is interesting that these inscriptions had been read since the 19th century, but largely only for data on chronology and dynastic succession. Just in the last 50 years did they begin to be examined in depth for data on agrarian history, and for assessing elite patronage to religious groups.

Some religious cults that had regional bases became networks of support for particular dynasties, a process that was to be common and visible at many local levels. The Yadavas in the Deccan, for instance, were both devotees and patrons of the emerging cult of Vitthala, a form of Vishnu, widely worshipped in modern-day Maharashtra and parts of Karnataka. This is thought to have had its origins in the hero cult of local pastoralists. Royal patronage of a popular religious cult meant that the geographical distribution of the cult could become the area of support for the patron.

Sifting the activities covered by the all-inclusive label of 'religion', and attempting to observe their social functions, helps to clarify the links between social roles and faith-based beliefs. Religious establishments, whether Buddhist, Jain, Vaishnava or Shaiva, quite apart from their role in fostering formal religion, were sometimes channels of political intervention through their relationships with rulers. At the same time, popular religious movements, some known to deviate from or even contradict the orthodox, occupied a prominent place on the wider social canvas. Historians have argued whether the relationship between the worshipper and his deity - in popular devotional worship referred to as *bhakti* - can be viewed as a parallel to that of the peasant and his feudal lord. The discussion provoked by this argument throws light on the intricacies of both the religious and political relationships.

Max Weber's idea of legitimacy, being essential in the context of political authority, has also received extensive interest. Even the very limited work on the Indian historical tradition indicates that the need for legitimation was an essential reason for creating such a tradition. Priests perform rituals to endow their patrons with high status and success. The patron acquires prestige through the ritual, and the priest receives a fee or a gift - the *dakshina*. Such relationships based on gift-giving are not just demonstrations of generosity, but are in effect mechanisms of creating bonds between the giver and the recipient.

Studies in the patterns of genealogies are providing insights into the reading of the epics, as well as the inscriptions of the subsequent periods. The lengthy ancestral lists of the heroes and anti-heroes of the Mahabharata were earlier treated as uniform, but now are increasingly being seen as referring to a variety of social observances. For instance, fraternal polyandry with Draupadi as the common wife of the Pandavas is not an expected custom among the elite. What was earlier thought to be the unchanging character of caste has given way to a realisation that degrees of upward social mobility were possible, though not widely so, and involved imitating the patterns of life of the upper castes. Politics was an open arena, and claims to Kshatriya status as part of the process of legitimation are among the more ambiguous. Thus, if persons of obscure origin could establish themselves politically, they could essentially get a genealogy fabricated asserting that they were of the 'correct' status. This process was not always one of gentle osmosis: imitating lifestyles or being incorporated into them could sometimes be a cause of friction, if not confrontation.

Myriad histories

These re-orientations in the study of early Indian history were anticipated as a consequence of interdisciplinary trends, of methodological change and of discussions on theories of explanation.

Other themes have emerged in the last couple of decades. Gender history, for instance, is not just the accumulation of more data on the history of women. It is concerned with re-examining the position of women in social relationships, and in searching for the perspective that women had of their own society. For example, according to several nationalist historians, women were said to have been held in high respect in ancient India. Evidence for this can include the narrative in the Upanishads describing the woman philosopher Gargi asking tough philosophical questions, or the emperor Ashoka's order that the donations of his queen Karuvaki be officially recorded.

However, such references sit uncomfortably alongside those referring to the substantial numbers of women domestic slaves, the *dasis*, gifted as wealth as stated in the Vedic corpus and in the epics. For their part, the Buddhist Pali texts have statements about women complaining of their distinctly subordinate position. In the legal forms of marriage discussed in the *dharma-shastras*, the woman was an object to be gifted (as in the *kanya-dana*) or abducted, as in the rakshasa form resorted to by Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*. The historian's concern is to place these statements within the context of the particular societies in which they occurred, and to observe why and when there were changes.

One of the important avenues of change in society was when clans emerged as castes. This was a continuous and constant process in various parts of the Subcontinent. The change was not simultaneous, and old forms sometimes remained as a parallel stream. But elsewhere, the origins of certain castes could be traced to low, non-caste groups, who had previously had clan or occupational identities, such as forest-dwellers or bead-makers. The cultural assimilation of clans often resulted in the chieftain families taking the Kshatriya status of nobility, with the rest of the clans relegated to low-caste Shudra peasant status. A picture of this process can be glimpsed in Banabhatta's *Harshacharita*, a seventh-century biography of the King Harshavardhana, where there are descriptions of forest-dwelling societies being slowly converted into settled peasant societies. This shift required the converting of forest into fields, and an erstwhile more egalitarian society accepting the hierarchies essential to caste. A permanent supply of labour was ensured by other means, such as declaring that some groups and some occupations were so low and polluting as to make such people 'untouchable'. The explanations for this theory provide another dimension of social history.

Indeed, connections are now beginning to be made between geographic regions, the environment and historical explanations. They cover a range of situations, of which there are many examples, such as changing river courses and desiccation that led to the migration of people during the second millennium BC in the Punjab; or the silting up of the Indus and Ganga deltas, which required the relocation of ports, as was observed by ancient Greek navigators and which may have affected maritime trade in these areas. An activity that continues to require extensive study is how deforestation may have changed the landscape, climate and human habitation in many areas of the Subcontinent over the centuries. Thus far, investigation of environmental factors has generally tended to highlight only the history of the region where the change occurs. Environment as a causative factor in history tends to be localised, and there are few generalisations about it on a larger scale. The silting-up of deltas was common to many areas, for instance, but this is not discussed as a possible cause in the rise and decline of trade.

Questioning 'knowledge'

The interest in the regional history of ancient India grew by degrees, assisted to some extent by the establishment of linguistic states in India from the late 1950s, superseding the more arbitrary boundaries of the erstwhile provinces of British India. The newly created states came to be treated by historians as sub-national territorial units, and the histories of states began to be written. But boundaries are political markers, and do transform with political change. Therefore, present-day borders of states rarely coincide with those of earlier times. Nevertheless, the perspective of

subcontinental history, conventionally viewed from the Ganga plains, has had to change with the evidence now coming from regional history. For example, the history of South India is rightly much more prominent in general histories of India today than it was 50 years ago.

Regional histories form patterns that sometimes differ from each other, and the variations provide interesting facets for the study of comparative history. For example, the model of the four varnas was not the caste pattern in the entire Subcontinent, as previously maintained. We still have to explain why Brahmins and dominant Vellalar peasants gave shape to the history of Tamil Nadu, as some think, whereas *khatri* traders dominated in the Punjab. Differences are not just diversities in regional styles; they are expressions of multiple cultural norms, which cut across the assumption that all identities are and have always been monolithic and uniform.

This brings us to the final theme, one that is still in its initial stages of formation but is nevertheless beginning to take shape. This refers to the question of historical consciousness, historical traditions and historical writings in early India. It is frequently argued that Indian civilisation lacked a sense of history; but this is based on an erroneous assumption, on the part of colonial scholarship, that there was no historical representation of the past. In fact, every society - whether early or contemporary - has a sense of history, but societies of the early past seem to have recorded theirs differently. The question is a complicated one, as we have to ask what early Indian society actually understood of its past, and in what form it remembered its past. The invisibility of how pre-colonial societies saw their past is a serious lacuna in understanding what emerged from the encounter of the colonised and the coloniser, and the shape taken by the reactions of each.

If historical knowledge is to be meaningful, then the past has to be understood and explained. It is not enough just to get information from a source, whether it is an archaeological artefact or a text. It also has to be interpreted. This requires asking a number of questions about its authorship, function, audience and significance - and, above all, about its reliability as evidence. This is particularly called for in the study of ancient history, since its very remoteness in time makes it difficult to grasp. There can be a thin line between what we like to believe happened and what the evidence is actually telling us. Historical knowledge, like all knowledge, is continually growing and changing, and this helps us to test our generalisations and clarify our understanding of the past. Questioning existing knowledge can help in delving deeper into possible explanations, and explaining the past justifies the pursuit of history.

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