POLITICS, HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM INDIA

Benjamin Zachariah

The question that we have set ourselves, in what to my mind is a retrospective look, after the Cold War, at historiographical production, reads as follows: Have any complex theories of society emerged since the discrediting of Marxist historical schemes? What is to be done with historiographical production from the 1970s and 1980s? Two hidden questions appear in these two questions: whether "Marxist historical schemes" have indeed been altogether discredited; and to what extend historiographical production from the 1970s and 1980s adopted Marxist paradigms. The answers to these four questions naturally vary with the specific historiographies being discussed.

If we are to deal with these questions from a comparative perspective, we might come up with more evocative answers than if we were to attempt to answer the question from within the historiographical perspectives of a particular region or country, or as is more commonly done given the continued hegemony of nationalism in many countries, a particular "nation".

This paper, therefore, seeks to make a few comparative remarks on the importance of a framework of analysis that compares peripheries rather than routes its comparisons through the centre. It goes on to provide a short account of historiographical trends in writing about India after formal decolonisation, and more specifically since the 1980s. By way of conclusion, it provides nothing much, for fear of imposing closure; instead it makes some suggestions regarding productive comparative frameworks, a sort of looking-over-one's-shoulder as one works, in the interests of a self-reflexive historiography that nonetheless avoids the anarchy of complete relativism and ultimately solipsism.

I. COMPARATIVE REMARKS

Comparative perspectives are particularly important to avoid the obsessive particularisation that has become a feature of many historiographical fields and sub-fields. If we compare peripheries, and in this case the historiographies of South Asia and of South-East Europe, we might observe, at a basic and possibly

rather simplistic level, a number of similarities. Problems of nationalism, of ethnicity and religion (these themes often being confused and mixed up in the historiography) have been extremely important. One of the problems that needs to be grappled with is what has been called "rescuing history from the nation": can the needs of nationalism to create its own comforting and often mythical genealogies be allowed to dominate the work of the historical profession?

Another problem has been one of a historiography whose agenda has to a large extent been imposed from the outside: by theories of "backwardness" or "modernisation", for instance, or more recently of the "development" of "civil society". This stems from the political asymmetry of centre-periphery relationships: central debates often remain debates imposed by outside agendas. Assumptions that are made about the peripheral societies – "ancient hatreds" between "peoples" inexorably and irrevocably divided into "communities" rather than relating to each other as "individuals" – begin to dominate historiographical production, and much energy must be expended on exploding these stereotypes, historicising and qualifying them, before other agendas can be set.

We might dwell on this point a little further: during the negotiations between British and Indian leaders of various description on a potential "transfer of power" in India, various people spoke of the dangers – or advantages – of "Balkanising" India. Names that in themselves might be descriptive then acquire normative or stereotypical attributes that can no longer be detached from the names themselves.

And to stay with the question of political asymmetry: the assumption that certain societies are somehow inherently prone to irrational, brutal or lawless behaviour carries with it the corollary that certain others inherently aren't. I live in a country ruled by a war criminal, a murderer who has no respect for democracy or the lives of civilians. I mean, of course, Britain; but Tony Blair is not on trial for crimes against humanity in the Hague; nor, I think, will we ever see this happen.

This political asymmetry is also exacerbated by problems of funding: when resources are scarce, outside donors have much leverage; but how far does it remain possible for receivers of monetary assistance to set their own agendas?

All this is premised on an assumption that we are, of course, likely not to question: that there is a role, and a need, for professional historians.

II. "SOUTH ASIA"

II.1. Abstract

In India, the historical establishment from the time of "independence" – formal decolonisation – in 1947 was overwhelmingly dominated by left-of-centre readings, but tended nonetheless to be "nationalist". Marxism was often not explicit or dominant in historical writing, but was a very influential paradigm. Non-alignment was taken very seriously, and consequently the collapse of the

Eastern Bloc and fall of the Soviet Union did not altogether discredit the Marxist paradigm for historians, although the influence of post-modern or post-colonial modes was strongly felt from the mid- to late-1980s onwards. But it was a world of great academic freedom. Conservative and liberal histories had plenty of space.

Parallel to that, previously outside the historical establishment, and now taking over, are explicitly right-wing and fundamentalist appropriations of history. Since they run the government (in 1998 a Hindu fundamentalist party with strong and explicit fascist sympathies came to power), they control the establishment now. And the remaining left and liberal spaces are controlled, censored and intimidated – history is live politics, and historiography is fiercely political, contested, debated in parliament; historians are abused or discussed in the press, intimidated and assaulted by right-wing paramilitary units. Schoolbook history is rewritten to glorify in particular Hindu right-wing readings of history. Mythological figures are recast as historical heroes; Muslims are denigrated as murderers, terrorists, and above all, foreigners.

The historical profession has been rethinking its own position on the moral anarchy of the late 1980s, where "truth" was abandoned as imposing closure in favour of fragmentary histories – although they maintain professional standards and therefore academic recognition on a world scale, they fear they may have eroded their own basis for making hard claims about what constitutes proper history and what does not. This leads back to a reassessment of the 1970s and 1980s historiography (before the post-*al* turn) that is not yet complete.

All of this takes place against a backdrop of an earnestly debated question: how far does popular historical imagination diverge from professional historical work? How far should this divergence be accepted? Is a reasoned understanding of history necessary for a reasoned political and social order?

These historiographical concerns are intimately intertwined with the political economy of the emergence of the disciplinary area of "South Asian history". To properly understand the developments in Indian historiography, we must keep in mind three broad centres of historical research: India, Britain and the United States. The latter two have had a strong bearing on how the historiography has developed.

A further distinction is extremely important: Indians working in India, and Indians working outside India.

II.2. Before the 1980s

The nationalist movement was the main current in Indian history-writing in the post-independence period, from the 1950s to the 1970s. This was in contrast to history-writing on India from e.g. Britain, which still worked within imperialist paradigms, suitably tempered for the times. Indian political "progress" towards a "modern nation" were gifts of the imperial civilising mission, which admittedly had an ugly side but was on the whole progressive.

History was a national project; historians who studied in Britain were careful to restate their nationalist credentials when they returned to work in India.

A third centre, the United States, had not yet acquired the same emotive involvement in the historiographical consciousness in the immediate post-independence period: after all, the US was in theory opposed to formal colonialism, and therefore US-sponsored histories of the colonial period took sides with the nationalists. (In time, this was to change: with a growing awareness of US-led neo-colonialism in Latin America, Asia and Africa among practitioners of history in India, the assumption of US disinterested innocence in matters historiographical began to shift. In addition, the Cold War-led establishment and funding of "area studies" programmes, although they provided some autonomy to scholars, certainly ruled out writing within explicitly revolutionary or Marxist paradigms. This influence extended to India, where political propaganda and political parties were funded by the CIA front, the Congress for Cultural Freedom; academic practitioners of history and literary studies also benefited from this largesse. Although not all those funded by the CCF were explicitly pro-US, the condition of CCF funding was anti-communism – which artificially provided research and publishing resources to a group of writers who had one thing in common: they were not Marxists.

Not all the CCF-funded figures were unimportant puppets: the Cambridge-trained historian of Indian Ocean trade, Ashin Dasgupta, was possibly the most famous member of the CCF circles. He taught for much of his career at Presidency College, Calcutta, which from the late 1960s became a by-word for student radicalism and Maoism – a reputation it could now well afford to lose.

II.3. The "mainstream"

"Mainstream" historians, many of them accommodated within Government-sponsored Research Councils, "did" Nationalist History: the early years were spent documenting the heroics of the nationalist struggle against imperialism, and defending the nationalists against claims of narrow self-interest, regional or upper-caste/class chauvinism (leveled against them, from the 1960s, *inter alia* by the so-called "Cambridge School").

This "mainstream" had been culled from a wider range of historians pre-1947, who tended to identify the "Indian" nation with the "Hindu" religion. In the interests of a secular, left-leaning, democracy (the self-definition adopted by the Nehruvian state), the more overtly sectarian and anti-Muslim of such historians (who traced "Indian" cultural decline from the time of the "Islamic conquest" of India) were ostracised. The "mainstream" still contained, however, conservative historians who explicitly or implicitly regarded the "national" entity as a "Hindu" one in which sectarian voices were by definition Muslim ones: a sectarian majority can hide in a majority ethic. Prominent among them was one Romesh Chandra Majumdar, who wrote and published a great deal. But these were men whose best days were often behind them, and the next

generation of Hindu fundamentalists found themselves largely without historians who could speak for them from legitimate platforms.

The historiographical trend that proved most assimilable to the new state's need for a "secular" view of the "nation" was a nationalist-tinged Marxism. Historically, this was a product of the political struggle in which Marxists were allies of the nationalists against imperialism; a hangover lasted into the post-independence period that had historiographical as well as political consequences (we shall consider only the former here).

Now the "nationalist-Marxists" to use a term that has now acquired some derogatory connotations, also wrote about nationalism, but were less concerned with how nationalism was defined than how it involved itself in struggle: how nationalists led the "masses". Since one potential definition of India that had been mooted by the Marxists in 1946 was that of a multi-national state (on the Soviet model) they could hardly be expected to take the definitional question terribly seriously. The avoidance of an answer to this question was provided by what was the typical slogan of schoolbook history: "unity in diversity". India, according to this argument, had an ability to assimilate all that entered its boundaries. Religion or other "identity" questions were largely irrelevant: and there was a consistent distinction between a "true" nationalism – directed against the British – and a "communalism", which was a false nationalism that directed its aggressions against fellow-Indians who happened to be of a different religion – or "community". Aligarh Muslim University, formerly the intellectual home of Muslim separatism and the movement for a separate Pakistan, now became a centre of Marxist scholarship of extremely high quality.

Class struggle, with tales of trade-union activity, strikes, peasant movements, was indeed written about; but the nationalist movement was seldom decentred. The deferral of socialism to the post-independence period that was the agreed coalitional strategy of the pre-1947 years was defended. By the 1970s, histories of movements of ordinary people had begun to be written.

Under this consensus, non-alignment could be defended on nationalist grounds: an independent foreign policy. The left-leaning, but never properly socialist, orientation of Jawaharlal Nehru's government could be defended as the best of all possible worlds in current conditions; and as neo-colonialism came to be recognised as the new enemy, difficult questions about internal politics were externalised.

Of course, this was simplified by the fact that then, as now, most historians never crossed the chronological barrier of 1947. History happened before that; mere politics took place afterwards. Moreover, the history of precolonial times was written up according to the concerns generated by colonialism and by the nationalist movement.

The Marxist history practiced here, however, never degenerated into Stalinist oversimplification, because when it did, other professionals, Marxist as well as non-Marxist, rapped the practitioners over the knuckles.

II.4. The 1980s: Early Subaltern Studies

In the early 1980s, a group of historians launched an attack on all existing historiography of South Asia: nationalist histories told a tale of nationalist heroes leading the masses to victory; imperialist histories told a tale of "England's work in India", with modern nationhood as a British gift; and even Marxists tended to talk of left-wing struggles as if only the leaders counted and the led simply obediently followed. What was missing was the "politics of the people". Influenced by the 'histories from below' of the British Marxists, and of EP Thompson in particular, and armed with selections from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, the "subaltern studies" group began a quest to find subaltern agency, an "autonomous domain" of subaltern activity; to restore to the subaltern his [still 'his] own voice. The subaltern was defined negatively and relationally: he [she, eventually] was not elite; and an elite in one context might be a subaltern in another – but nevertheless, "subaltern" was assumed to mean marginal, downtrodden people.

The driving concerns of the project were broadly Marxist; they rebelled against a doctrinaire, economistic version of Marxism, and sought, as Gramsci had recommended for the Italian peasantry, to understand how the subaltern mind worked. There was, initially, and despite their best efforts, a residual nationalism in what they wrote: Ranajit Guha's Subaltern Studies manifesto sought to find the contributions of the subaltern *to the nationalist movement*.

There might be an interesting parallel to the Subaltern Studies movement's beginnings and the writings of Gramsci: many of the former had been involved with or inspired by the agrarian movements and student radicalism – broadly Maoist, in the sense that revolution was expected to come be a radicalised countryside surrounding the cities – of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This movement had been crushed under cover of war with Pakistan and the "liberation" of Bangladesh by India in 1971, with most of the casualties being middle-class students; the peasantry had failed to live up to its radical potential, and the working classes had proved a terrible disappointment. As for Gramsci, for the Subaltern Studies group, here was a moment of defeat that gave cause for reflection: why did the Italian peasantry support the Fascists? Who were they anyway? The questions were suitably reformulated for India.

The problem the Subaltern Studies group encountered was often one of sources: underprivileged groups could often only be traced in written records of elites or even of the coloniser. So it became necessary to read the existing records "against the grain"; to read what Guha called "the prose of counter-insurgency", in which ordinary people appeared only as "insurgents" and as "threats to law and order", and to find the subaltern in this way.

Obviously, this led on to a good deal of text-criticism, to expose hidden assumptions in the sources, to examine what would come to be called "colonial discourse". And this led in the direction of high theory.

II.5. The 1990s: late Subaltern Studies, post-*al* addresses and the Great Schism

Before we proceed, let us note that Indian scholarship had always had a tendency, especially in writing in English, to veer towards the high altitudes of current social theory in Europe: from colonial times, a need to be more current than current had driven Indian scholarship to seek legitimation from academic sources that their colonisers were forced to regard as valid. Veering towards "indigenism" was, in addition, the hallmark of the reactionary who was unable to distinguish between what was universally progressive and what was contingently imposed by the "West" (the category "West" was itself not properly questioned – nor has it yet been – even by Marxists).

The 1980s had seen the beginnings of critiques of dominant perspectives through an understanding of discourses *à la* Michel Foucault – in the historiography of India, by the mid-1980s this had been supplemented by Edward W Said's *Orientalism* (itself drawing on the Gramscian description of hegemony as well as Foucault's conception of a discourse as power-knowledge), and by Gayatri Chakrabarti Spivak's translation of Jacques Derrida and her own intervention into Subaltern Studies when she argued that the subaltern could not speak except when – and therefore even when – mediated through the representations of well-meaning educated historians: her paraphrase of Marx's dictum, "sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden". The "Vertreter", the historian, could never fully find the authentic subaltern voice, let alone re-present it. This exploded the more ambitious claims of early subaltern studies. By the 1990s, in a now familiar story, because the genealogies of the "post-structural" or the "post-modern" in historiography are broadly the same across the field of professional history, debates moved on to the subjectivities of "identity", the false claims of the "Enlightenment" to universalism, the "constructed" (and in some readings the "Western") nature of "history" itself.

This gave rise to a problem. Post-modernism, "deconstruction" and an attention to discourses of imperialism challenged existing conventions of representation, exposed their complicity with various forms of oppression and opened out a space that could potentially give a voice to minorities. However, in the course of the assault on "history" and existing claims to "truth", the spokespeople for the subalterns had undermined their right to make any hard claims. They could now only insist on attention to the particular, to the celebration of the fragment against all grand narratives.

Marxism was a victim of this process: it was a Eurocentric discourse – and (after Said) an Orientalist one.

In some readings, "Western" became as much of a suspect word as it had been to the practitioners of "Hindu" history before 1947; one could certainly accuse the cruder practitioners of such history of "Occidentalism", of stereotyping the "West".

The outcome, of course, was that some of the absurd claims to mythology as history that accompanied a shift of politics to the right had been given their

space: with "truth" dead, relativisation to the point, at times, of solipsism legitimised, and "history" being only one way of looking at the past, why was it illegitimate to claim that a mythological figure or ancient god had really existed – according to the (legitimate) point of view of true believers? Or that "secularism" was an imported, "Western" concept that had no place in India?

The old "mainstream" now accused the post-modern, post-colonial, subaltern studies side (I shall abbreviate this to PoMoPoCoSS) of scoring "same-side goals". The latter were now, in many ways, the new "mainstream", since they fit better into the agendas of North American academic debates, where the funding and the jobs, increasingly, were to be found. The Marxists among the old "mainstream", including defectors from Subaltern Studies (the "old" Subaltern Studies) accused the new "mainstream" of neglecting their political duties and undermining the positions of those who did not neglect them: celebrating the "fragment" and the particular undermined attempts to create solidarity on the basis of wider and more universal principles. There was no epistemological basis remaining from which to make political arguments.

There was a politics of postcodes involved in this: the importance of Metropolitan Location. The "old" mainstream also accused the North America-based PoMoPoCoSS of being more interested in the academic agendas of their chosen location than in the history of South Asia.

New entrants to the field had to declare their allegiances clearly. Ironically, in this context it was relatively easier to be a non-Indian practitioner of "South Asian history", because the locational factor became less emotionally charged. (In the other large space in "South Asia", Pakistan, the discipline of history had not been given sufficient space for such agonised debates to emerge: access to archival material was enough of a struggle on its own).

II.6. The rise of the right

The rise of the right was not intrinsically connected with the historical profession. And in much of their populist rhetoric, the right did not particularly care for the historical field (although they clearly took their inspiration from Fascist and Nazi history – *Mein Kampf* was readily available on street corners across North India from the mid-1980s – with Muslims presumably taking over the Jewish-Bolshevik positions). But the so-called "moderate" right was alive to the uses of history for different audiences: the official Indian Council for Historical Research positions were quickly occupied, publications of document collections blocked (with the partial collusion of the publishers) and the old "mainstream" hounded from their positions, to be replaced by persons of no professional standing – even, in some cases, policemen. The Archaeological Survey of India started falsifying archaeological finds. School textbooks are rewritten to include what in an epistemologically less uncertain environment would be referred to as downright lies – as they are, in Parliament, by the opposition: the Left has complained about the "Talibanisation of history" under the Hindu right.

This does not affect professionals in their dealing with fellow professionals: very few of the right-wing ideologues have enough intellectual sophistication to make an impact in terms of the standards of the discipline. But since a secular, broadly non-aligned and somewhat left-leaning reading of history had been seen as a necessary underpinning for a tolerant "national" entity, professional historians and non-sectarian politicians alike are worried about the consequences for public debate.

II.7. Rethinking the Public Role of History

The battle has now moved into public spaces. Since the high theoretical debates on the contingency of truth and the "constructed" nature of History itself had reached ordinary people, if at all, as a complaint against "Western"-imposed and offensive readings of the Indian past, how can they be weaned away from right-wing readings that celebrate a völkisch, "pure" past that needs to be returned to?

But the old "mainstream", now fighting a strong rearguard action, has to address and reformulate a problem that has emerged: how far do the "facts" of history need to conform to a desired political order? For instance, does the loss of a historiographical battle over a "secular" reading of the Mughal Empire have to mean an acceptance of the Hindu right's right to persecute Muslims, allegedly as retrospective revenge? How far must history (or readings of the past) provide justifications or positive normative examples for the present?

III. CONCLUSIONS?

These are explicitly political questions that require historians, as everyone else, to take part in explicitly political debates. Let us return here to some of the questions we have raised. Public expectations of history, we have said, tend to revolve around "the truth". Historians are cast as "experts" who can tell the "truth"; only, in a buyer's market, those historians who tell the most palatable alleged "truths" are those whose "truths" are accepted. Others are "biased".

In a way, the problem is that everyone has some way of relating to the past, and to memories of the past. Since historians have claimed some special custody of a privileged way of seeing the past, it is also the duty of a profession to convey to a public that "experts" are not those who possess "truth" but those who attempt to impose upon themselves certain standards of debating "evidence": standards that can, and must, be shared with and communicated to, a wider public.

This also requires historians to place their own histories, their politics, their "interests" (in the crude and instrumentalist reading of the problem) before a readership and leave these open for scrutiny and comment. In a way, we have called for a new genre of historical autobiography of the historian, which lies implicit in many projects, to be made explicit. This is an imperfect and partial project; but it is worth the effort.