

An Indian Journey through the (Sandstone, Gothic) Corridors of History

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I came to this university in 1971. I should say, at the outset, that the University of Sydney was not on my intellectual map.¹ I applied for a lectureship in history largely because my teacher (from London) and friend, the late Professor A. L. Basham, then of the Australian National University, asked me to do so. At that time I was out of work, having resigned my position in Mrs Indira Gandhi's organisation, the Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi. I had no prospect of getting back to Britain or obtaining a permanent visa to work in the U.S.A. So I was most grateful to get the position here.

My academic experience was entirely English (even the University of Calcutta, established in 1857, was modelled after the University of London). In 1971 I had already eight years teaching and post-doctoral research experience in Oxford, Cambridge and the Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi (where I was the editor of *The Nehru Papers*). I had already three books, two selections of papers given at international conferences held in Oxford (1964) and in Cambridge (1968) and a monograph. Two of them were published by Cambridge University Press and one by Oxford University Press. I had already published eleven papers in learned journals in Italy, U.K. and India.

I found it very hard to understand the Scottish system of education as it had evolved in Sydney (e.g. nine units for a pass degree, seven units plus for honours and a student did not specialise in one subject until reaching the fourth year). I am not

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criticising the system, but simply saying that it was quite alien to my experience in Calcutta, London, Oxford and Cambridge. I eventually understood the system, however, and, with time, I began to appreciate the value of it in training young people. In 1971 what I found difficult to adjust to was Sydney University's narrow authoritarian functional view of education. The professorial rule did not encourage intellectual exploration or debate and there was no idea of specialisation or research. Professors used to decide what we, the sub-professorial staff, should teach and how we should teach. If they were kind they might allow us a share of their 'research' funds or let us take part in the decision-making process.

I think that an ideal university is a constellation of anarchy, where individuals (both staff and students) are allowed to pursue their particular fields of knowledge without undue interference from any bureaucratic apparatus (internal or external) or from the community. In an ideal university, knowledge should be transmitted from individual to individual—from master craftsman to apprentice craftsman. Here, research and teaching should be closely linked and teachers and students should have close ties (an ideal university, according to Tagore, that now forgotten great Indian poet and sage, is an extended family). But this is only an ideal; no university could live up to it. What is most disturbing is the fact that universities have now abandoned this ideal altogether. We are no longer a community of scholars but a factory, producing education. The students are the customers, the academics are the employees and the administrators the employers.

In the early seventies Sydney was not an ideal university but at least our leaders told us that Sydney and Melbourne were the Oxford and Cambridge of the southern hemisphere (I never knew which was which). The point I want to make is that the idea that a university is a place for high-powered research and excellent teaching was not an alien concept in the Sydney of 1971. But there were already disturbing signs abroad. I shall come back to this later.

I had no formal training in history beyond the Intermediate of Arts level in India. I grew up in colonial India. The history that

we had to learn at school was mostly about the English—kings and parliamentary reforms. What was taught as ancient Indian history was not much more than the myths and legends from the great Indian epics and the *Puranas* (ancient Indian religious texts). The history of modern India was about the British pro-consuls like Clive, Hastings, Bentinck and their ‘reforms’. At St. Xavier’s College, for the Intermediate of Arts I had to study for two papers on history: the history of modern Britain and the ancient history of Greece and Rome. We were taught by a Belgian Jesuit Father, who was no doubt a scholarly and kind person, but he spent more time on Henry VIII and his foibles than on any other topic. He delighted in belittling the Church of England from the time of Henry VIII. For ancient history, his main theme was the victory of Christianity, although we did learn about the Persian Wars and the Roman constitution. There was no scope to examine Gibbon’s views on the ‘decline and fall of the Roman empire’. I left history and St. Xavier’s College, joined the Scottish Church College and took my B.A. degree in economics and philosophy.

Although I did not read Gibbon until I reached England, both history and Gibbon were part of a rich educational heritage. Bengali boys (and much later, girls too) who had received a college education knew their English literature well, especially Shakespeare and Milton. From the thirties of the last century successive governors-general and their wives were suitably impressed by the ability of these boys to recite Milton and to stage a Shakespearean drama.² In my youth, about one hundred and ten years later, I too could recite Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and hosts of other poets of Victorian and post-Victorian times. The characters from the novels of Austen, Scott, Dickens and others were very familiar to us. History was also a part of our literary education. In 1847 Charles J. Montague, a Professor at Hindu College, Calcutta, delivered his ‘Introductory Lecture on History’:

History is one of the most delightful and important branches of literature. It peculiarly comes home to everyman’s business and bosom.... It is so useful to man in every station and relation of life. It hives in its storehouse the experience of the world. It is the

cabinet of curiosities of all time—the repository of the passions and follies of men. It is the book which continues the wisdom of every age—it is the chronicle of every important event—and it is the scroll in which a nation may read its own fate.³

Generations of teachers, Europeans and Indians, taught history in the spirit, so eloquently put by Montague, confirming the syllabus set out by the Council of Education, Calcutta. In the official ‘scroll’ we read that the fate of our nation was closely linked with the ‘rise and fulfilment of the Raj’. So we had to read the ancient history of Greece and Rome, modern British history and the history of British India. The courses were so organised well beyond 1947 when India gained independence.⁴

As history was an important branch of literature, Gibbon’s name was familiar to us, although most of us had not yet read his famous work. There were, however, many exceptions. As early as 1842, during the winter vacation, Lal Behari Day (1824–1894), then a student of General Assembly’s Institution, Calcutta (this came to be known as Scottish Church College by the turn of the century), went to visit his ancestral village. In those days if you were not rich enough to hire a horse or palankin, you had to hire a boat from Calcutta for some distance and then travel on foot, staying a night or two in one of the inns on the road. Day, writing in 1874, left an account of this journey in a Dickensian style. He had to hire a *kasid* (guide or messenger),⁵ called Ram Pal. One evening, when they had to stop for the night, Day recalls:

I well remember that while Ram Pal was engaged in cooking I sat on a reed mat, about two yards distance from him, and began reading Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The whole of which history I had with me at that time in four volumes, having borrowed it from one of my missionary professors. In those days I was quite charmed with Gibbon’s magnificent history; his rolling periods, the dignity and majesty of his style and his superb eloquence, completely fascinated me; and though advancing years have given me a severer and more simple taste, even now I can hardly read a page of Gibbon without a thrill of pleasure.⁶

I, however, had to wait until I got to London and started studying history for that ‘thrill of pleasure’. But history was happening

all around us. Elsewhere I have recorded how important public events in the British Empire affected our daily life.⁷ These public events are only 'historical' with hindsight and not when we were living through them all. I feel, however, that such events made us politically and historically conscious about past and present. I also learnt history at party (Communist Party of India) schools, where we studied Marx, Engels and others. The texts, like *Class Struggles in France* or *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, were, as Eric Hobsbawm pointed out, 'not written as history, as people who pursue the study of the past understand it'. They were, however, 'case examples of how Marx applied his method to concrete problems both of history and of a period which has since become history.'⁸ Of course, at the age of eighteen with no background knowledge of European history, I did not understand Marx's writings well. I was, however, thrilled to read the *Communist Manifesto*, and parts of *Capital* helped me to understand the history of capitalism.

The books that influenced me most were written by Bengali Marxist historians like Hiren Mukerjee, Niharranjan Ray and Susobhan Sarkar. In 1946 Sarkar, under an assumed name, published *Notes on Bengal Renaissance*. This created a stir in the left-wing circle in Bengal. Although in 1970 Sarkar denied that the book was a Marxist analysis of Bengal's history, his students and colleagues took it to be the first Marxist explanation of the history of Bengal in the nineteenth century. In the early 'fifties we were still debating about this book in the coffee houses of Calcutta or in party meetings.⁹ The other book that created a stir amongst us was Nihar Ranjan Ray's *Bangalir Itihas* (A History of the Bengali People), published in 1949. Ray was an independent Marxist historian. His study of Bengal in the early period was the first full-scale study of Bengal history; it was written in Bengali and based on the Marxist concepts of economic infrastructure and class.¹⁰ We debated about the book and even went to see the author to discuss our views. We, like many others in England, learned Marxism and history from Emile Burns's *What is Marxism?* We in Bengal, however, read the Bengali translation by A. S. Majumdar. The party encouraged us to work among the

working classes. I came into contact with the jute mill workers and coal miners. Soon I realised that the barrier between us, the educated rich or upper class Bengali youths, and them, the uneducated poor, working classes of non-Bengali origins, was hard to cross. Despite our enthusiasm about radical trade unionism, the workers did not trust us. Their defiance was an antidote to our arrogance, affluence and youth. I learned a lot from these poor workers. Their 'oral histories' told the stories of oppressions and struggles which had gone on for centuries. They were not victims, they were fighters. I learned some of their lurid songs and swear words which I can never repeat in polite company.

So I did not formally study history in India. But I was already involved in historical studies. This was because a) the colonial education system, with its emphasis on literature, included a study of history as literature; b) with the hindsight of history, we now know that men and women of my generation witnessed some really earth-shaking events at close quarters; c) my involvement with Marxism made me read Marxist histories, particularly those written by the Marxist historians of Bengal; and d) I learned something about 'history from below' from the poorer section of the community who lived in abject poverty—at least their 'oral histories'.

I went to London to study law but by a series of accidents I met Basham, then Reader in History, University of London. In 1956 I left law and enrolled as a full-time student of history at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. I have already written about this in my introduction to the Basham festschrift.¹¹

I was trained in Basham's department. He and his colleagues taught me to search for records and more importantly to be faithful to records; the autonomy of the past had to be recognised. I have called these teachers positivist and empiricist.¹² They were not positivist in the Comtean sense; but, despite many reservations, they carried on the tradition of Ranke and Acton. There were a number of former students of Peterhouse, Cambridge, in the history department, SOAS, who were taught by Herbert Butterfield, so we were told to study the role of ideas in history. Basham's liberal

humanism touched me very deeply. My enthusiasm for Marxism and revolution was much moderated by his humanism. But the narrow empiricism of some of my teachers was well balanced by Eric Hobsbawm, whose lectures on Modern European History and History of Political Thought opened up a new world. We had a wider vision of history. I read many books on history but two that remained more influential than others were R. G. Collingwood's *An Autobiography* and March Bloch's *The Historian's Craft*.

In London, for my B.A. (Hons) degree, I specialised in Ancient Indian History, taking four out of ten papers on this subject. Basham taught us Ancient Indian History and we had to learn to use primary sources, texts and inscriptions written in Sanskrit or Prakrit. We also attended lectures on Modern European History, History of Political Thought (by Hobsbawm), History of Modern Britain, History of Modern India and European Activities in Asia. The tenth paper was a test of our linguistic abilities: translation of unseen texts from non-English sources.

Basham gave us freedom to explore many areas of history and other related (sometimes not so related) fields and I attended lectures which had no relevance to our syllabus: for example, lectures on Florentine architecture at the Courtauld Institute or talks on the pre-history of Europe by Gordon Childe at the Institute of Archaeology, then in Regents Park.

I wrote my Ph.D., under the supervision of Basham, on 'Sir William Jones and the Beginnings of Indology' (discovery of Ancient India).¹³ Those three years were the most exciting years of my life. I travelled up and down the U.K. to study in public libraries and private archives, records offices, etc. I spent weeks in the National Library of Wales and the Muniment Room in Althorp Park, the family home of the Spencers. I visited Leiden, and libraries and archives in India. I corresponded with libraries and archives in Copenhagen, Budapest, Dublin and with a number of libraries in the U.S.A. and I spent days studying eighteenth-century books and magazines in the British Museum. It was then that I got to know Gibbon and his works well; he was a friend of Jones and they exchanged letters. I felt as though I had been living with the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment and their Scottish

and English admirers for a number of years.

I went to Oxford to a Fellowship at St. Antony's College. I did not teach undergraduates there; I did, however, organise, or help to organise, graduate seminars. In 1964 I left Oxford for Cambridge. I was appointed to teach Indian History by the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Cambridge. In Cambridge I taught 'Cultural History of India' for students of Oriental Tripos Part I and 'Ancient Indian History' for students of Part II. In 1967, with the help of the late Professor Sir Harold Bailey and the late Dr. T. G. P. Spear of Selwyn College and the Faculty of History, I introduced a new Hindi-History Tripos for Part II students of both the Oriental and History faculties. The students were expected to take 'Ancient Indian History', History of North India (1200 AD–1700 AD) and 'Modern South Asian History'. A group of us, Percy Spear, Eric Stokes, Anil Seal and myself, taught this course for the Faculty of History. We also encouraged the students to take Spear's special subject. Foundations of Modern India, 1818–1835'. My Hindi-History Tripos only attracted a small number of undergraduates who were interested in learning a language and studying history. But I struggled hard to teach the History of North India (c.1200–1700 AD). I had no knowledge of classical Persian and all the important primary sources of this period are in that language. I read up all the translated works that were available and some excellent books on the subject which were being published from Aligarh University, India. I decided to study classical Persian, since Cambridge had good facilities for this. Sadly, I left Cambridge in 1969 and I never learned Persian.

In 1971 the Sydney Department of History was hierarchically structured, with three professors at the top of the pyramid. There were three associate professors, one reader and a number of senior lecturers, hordes of lecturers and tutors (part-time or full-time) and two senior tutors. The professors had carved out their own domains; one was in charge of late modern European history, Australian history and American history. The second professor was in charge of Asian history and ancient (European) history and the third professor presided over medieval (European) history and early modern European history. The historians of late modern

Europe were the largest single group within the department. Such high offices as the headship of the department or chairmanship (non-sexist language was not invented then) of the postgraduate committee were professorial prerogatives. In 1973 a staff-student consultative committee was set up and the professors told the committee about the decisions regarding courses, new positions and appointments that they had already decided among themselves. The departmental meetings were also a large 'consultative' committee with no power to alter professorial decisions.

The course structures were also organised by the professors. The young first-year students were able to choose an area of history out of four that were offered. There were three on European history, Ancient or Medieval or Early Modern, and one on Modern Asian history. In the second year students had to take a course on late Modern European history (there were many options for this period of European history). In their third year students could take Australian History, American History, Ancient History, Medieval History, early Modern European History and Asian History. There were a number of honours seminars attached to second and third year pass courses. In their fourth year students had to take a compulsory seminar on methods of history and another general seminar from a small number of such seminars offered. The professors and a handful of their nominees could teach in the fourth year. We were all, however, allowed to offer thesis topics.

I think that the system had a logic of its own. Students had a shared experience in the second year and in the fourth year and they could choose subjects from other areas in the first year, third year and in the fourth year for thesis topics.

I felt that the system was undemocratic in not allowing the staff and students freedom to pursue their own areas of interest without unnecessary restraints. I also thought that it was in their first year that students should have a shared experience, with two courses; History of Historiography and The History of the Modern World. Collingwood's *Idea of History* could have been a textbook for the first course and Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution* a textbook for the second. I wanted to have 'floating' courses for

the pass students in the second and third year, and thought options should be available from all areas of history, some specialised and others comparative. The honours seminars should be separated (a number of options for the second year and another number of options for the third year) and specialised. In the fourth year students should have one shared seminar on historical method or on the philosophy of history and one general seminar and a thesis on topics for which there are primary sources available in Fisher Library.

The Department of History was not a great place for high-powered research and publication. My trips to Fisher Library confirmed what I always suspected, that most of my colleagues in the department were not writers and those who wrote were not great historians of our time. There were no exciting debates or discussions on matters historical. One of the professors did introduce Monday lunch hour seminars, which we attended often; there was always a glass of wine and sometimes some interesting papers or an important visitor who spoke to us. In fact I found that some of my colleagues were outstanding scholars and intellectuals and the majority of them were good and caring teachers. Some of my students were brighter than the students I knew at Cambridge. But the system was stifling and it made the place intellectually dead.

I got involved in battles on a number of fronts. My aims were to democratise the departmental government; to open new options for students; to offer options on comparative history and opportunities for all teachers to offer seminar courses in the fourth year (which should rotate). I took part in meetings and demonstrations, and spoke to the media, especially during the troubled time in the Department of Philosophy. I became known in academic circles as 'a difficult person'.

But reforms did come. For a time we had democracy in the department and many of us were able to mount our desired courses, although we had to persuade a number of power-brokers in the department who were not necessarily democratically inclined.

I was able to offer a number of courses, including 'Racism and Imperialism in English Literature', 'Change and Continuity

in Indian Culture’, ‘England and India in the Victorian Period’, ‘The Bengal Renaissance’, ‘The Age of the Imperial Guptas’, ‘Victorian Cities’, and others. The happiest hours that I spent on this campus were with the students discussing Kipling’s *Kim* or the influence of ancient Jain philosophy on Gandhi (when the weather permitted we sat under the jacaranda tree) or discoursing on ‘The Bengal Renaissance’ with my honours students over a flagon of good Australian red. I spent a lot of time with students and encouraged the honours students to bring their essays for discussion, more like Oxbridge style tutorials.

I encouraged my fourth year and postgraduate students to learn an Indian language. Australia is poorly served by the so-called South-Asianists who have no language, yet they teach Indian culture, history, art, religion, even literature, and society. I started teaching Bengali and fought in the Faculty of Arts for a department or centre to teach Indian languages and literature. The story of my frustrations is well-known to my friends and enemies in the Faculty. At least we now have a lecturer in Sanskrit and some part-time teachers in Hindi.

But the wind of change was not, alas, for ‘reform’ (in the sense the word was originally used as a change for the better in political, religious and social affairs) but to change the whole idea of university and academic research to accommodate economic fundamentalism and all the other ‘isms’ that came in its wake.

Historians were asked to learn semiotics, postmodernism, poststructuralism, etc., not a language, nor methods of interpreting primary sources. The department was in a constant state of ‘perpetual revolution’—which only led to its destruction. Every year new course structures were suggested. Students were to attend a compulsory ‘method’ course in the first year, then the course was not compulsory, then the ‘method’ lectures in the first year were abolished. We were back in the good old authoritarian days; now the department was run not by the professors but by an oligarchy with a fanatic zeal for ‘isms’. Those who wanted to better their promotion prospects jumped on the bandwagon of postmodernism and Australian nationalism. Now there are a large number of postmodernists and Australian historians in the

department. The varieties of history that we thought we could offer had to go through the acid test of postmodernism or 'theories'.

John O. Ward has well recorded our efforts to mount a 'cross-cultural' seminar in History IV. We failed because of the 'mania for teaching-impeding buracratalia'.¹⁴ I shall not repeat these efforts here. I would like to point out two incidents which finally drove me out of the department. In 1987 a group of feminists in the department put up resolutions at the departmental board meeting (it was then called 'board') that the language of all question papers should be non-sexist, attempts be made to have fifty percent of the course devoted to women, and a committee be set up to monitor this. I opposed the motion, calling it a form of fascism. It was put up by a group who had no idea of history and the non-Anglo-Saxon world. If we wanted to go by numbers then fifty percent of our courses should be in the histories of India and China, as half the world's population live there. In my language the third person singular was neuter—*se* (he or she). But this linguistic political correctness did not make Bengal an enlightened society about women.¹⁵ In 1989 I was again outnumbered by the new bureaucracy who made 'theories' a compulsory subject for History II honours students. The teachers who wanted their students to read Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, etc. could not read French! I refused to teach in the second year.

In 1988 I was partially seconded to the newly-formed Centre for Indian Studies as its Director. In 1991 I officially left the History Department and joined the newly-formed School of Asian Studies, although I continued to supervise postgraduate students of the department until 1994. It was no wonder that there was no farewell ceremony for me in the department.

Fernand Braudel, who needs no introduction, in his 'Memorial note on Daniel Thorner' (the great American economic historian who was hunted out of his own country and lived in exile in Paris) said: 'Thorner, like myself, remained faithful to the ideas of Marc Bloch and thinks that every model should be based on empirical observation, completed on a theoretical plane, then re-exposed to the test of real life, just as a boat on land should be

launched on the sea to prove it is able to sail, or else it has no reason for existing.’¹⁶

For twenty three years this was the message I wanted to get across to my colleagues and students in the corridors of history. I do not think that I was successful. But I did enjoy the company of my students (some of them were outstanding scholars), and their views and questions improved my historical training. I must acknowledge my indebtedness to my colleagues, especially John O. Ward, Robert Hind, Grahame Harrison, Bruce Fulton, Iain Cameron, Robert Sinclair and John Pryor. John Wong and Zdenko Zlatar are good scholars in their own fields but now ‘notorious’ for being ‘difficult persons’—I can only smile.

Notes

- 1 This is part of a speech that I gave to a gathering of SASSC members and friends for the launching of a book written in my honour.
- 2 ‘Court of directors to the Bengal government on the education of India, 24 October 1832’, in C. H. Philips, ed., *The Correspondence of Lord William Bentinck*, Oxford, 1977, Vol II, p.933.
- 3 Charles J. Montague, *The Substance of the Introductory Lecture on History delivered to the students of the Hindu College*, 15 November, 1847, Calcutta, 1847, p.1.
- 4 Shivaji Kayal, ‘Itihas Sammanik Srenir patyasuchi Samparke’, *Aitihāsik* 3.2 (1984): 105–11.
- 5 Lal Behari Day, ‘Recollections of my school days’, *Bengal Magazine*, 1874, reprinted in M. Saha, ed., *Lal Behari Day. Bengal Peasants’ Life*, Calcutta, 1969, pp.458–66.
- 6 Day, p.531.
- 7 S. N. Mukherjee, *Citizen Historian*, Delhi and Sydney, 1996, p.139.
- 8 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, London, 1977, p.158.
- 9 Susobhan Sarkar, *Bengal Renaissance and other essays*, New Delhi, 1976, p.3.
- 10 Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas*, Calcutta, 1949.
- 11 S. N. Mukherjee, ed., *Indian History and Thought: Essays in Honour of A. L. Basham*, Calcutta, 1981, p.xi–xii.
- 12 S. N. Mukherjee, ‘Orientalism and History’, A. R. Davis Memorial Lecture, 1996, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 27–28 (1995–96): 2–3.
- 13 S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A study in Eighteenth-century British Attitudes to India*, 1st edn, Cambridge, 1968, 2nd edn, Bombay, 1987.

- 14 John O. Ward, 'Feudalism Re-visited: a tribute to S. N. Mukherjee', in Mabel Lee and Michael Wilding, eds, *History, Literature and Society: Essays in Honour of S. N. Mukherjee*, Delhi and Sydney, 1997, p.203.
- 15 The late David Stove came to interview me for *Quadrant* about this and I became 'notorious, right-wing and anti-feminist'. There was correspondence in newspapers but I refused to join in a useless discussion.
- 16 E. Hobsbawm et al., eds *Peasants in History: Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner*, Calcutta, 1980, p.xii.