

Citizen Historian

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A. L. Basham

Citizen Historian:
Explorations in
Historiography

S. N. MUKHERJEE

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Introduction

This is a collection of essays on historiography, the chapters in this book having been written between 1961-95. This is indeed a very significant period in the history of historiography. The orderly world of liberal, scientific historiography of the fifties, when I was an undergraduate in London, is now lost, probably forever. Now we live in a world of intellectual anarchy, where the new *gurus* (who are mostly French and are not historians) are telling us that there are no 'facts', no 'reality', or that everything should be explained in terms of power relationships. Historians are now happily moving into a brave new world of poststructuralism and postmodernism.

This book is not a guide to this phenomenon — ever-changing idea of history, it only signposts the changing views of one minor historian who has been researching, lecturing and publishing on four continents during this period. He was educated in the old positivist school of history but had been involved with Marxism. My positivist teachers taught me to search for records and more importantly to be faithful to the records. The autonomy of the past had to be recognised. But I always knew that history, in the end, is an interpretation of facts. But we cannot deny the existence of 'facts' in history. It is like an old fabric handed down to us from the past; we do not fully understand its original pattern. What we can do is to take all the threads from it and reconstruct it in a way that we can understand. And Marxism taught me to reconstruct history in relation to a wider world of politics, society and culture.

When I came to the University of London I was already a communist. My enthusiasm for Marxism and revolution was very much moderated by my liberal humanist teachers and their positivist history at the School of Oriental and African Studies. 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 to us; we had a wider vision of history and we could see the connection between our research and problems of life as it really was. On the other hand, my teacher at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the late A. L. Basham, taught us that history should not just be concerned with modern Europe, but with humanity in other

cultures and other times (in his case ancient India). The British Marxists, despite all their strong anti-imperialist stands, remained Euro-centric. One can go through volumes of *Past and Present* (that excellent radical journal of history) and find only a handful of articles on non-European societies.

The anthropologists, despite their close connection with the colonial past, helped to change the idea of history. History as practised today in the Anglo-Saxon world is less ethnocentric than it was in my youth. It is also interested in new methodology of history borrowed from anthropology. To me the most important figure in this field was the late Edmund Leach. He showed how a study of the political system in Burma, or the land tenure in Ceylon, could be relevant to the European historians' debate on feudalism and land ownership.

Basham, Hobsbawm and Leach were my mentors in England. There were others like J. D. Bernal, Joseph Needham, Gordon Childe and Christopher Hill whose ideas have helped to shape my views on history, but Basham's humanism touched my soul,

My Indian gurus were D. D. Kosambi, Nihar Ranjan Roy and Nirmal Kumar Bose. They taught me that intellectual explorations are related to political and social issues. I think that I was very fortunate that I had known these men in India and England, not only through their writings, but personally.

In an unguarded moment Mao Tse Tung had suggested that his party should bury the past to create a new China. But even Mao could not carry on with his Cultural Revolution without 'past' — think of the way he utilised archaeology for his 'Chinese Revolution'.

The past is never dead — history is a process through which past, present and future are related. It is only the New Right, with their economic rationalism and their conservative politics, who deny the importance of past. The significance of the past is also denied by the postmodernists and the poststructuralists. They come with their toolbags full of useless jargon like 'deconstruction', 'discourse', 'text', 'sub-text' and so on. They are useless for they neither help us understand ourselves, our past, present and future. Nor do they provide a programme of action. Despite all their slogans the postmodernists and poststructuralists are ideologues of late capitalism.

In the nineties of this century and in the twenty-first century, we must redefine our roles as scholars and re-think the future of our disciplines — more particularly the discipline of history. History is the centre of all studies in the faculties of humanities; without this historical

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dimension there could be no philosophy, no social science and no textual criticism. We need a 'Revolutionary Past' — a living past concerned with creating a better future. We need a global approach. Doris Lessing, writing in the 'seventies, said in her *Golden Notebook*: 'A person who has been influenced by Marxism takes it for granted that an event in Siberia will affect one in Botswana'.¹ But today when we live under the 'new order' of aggressive late capitalism, threatened with a possible global disaster by the middle of the next century, we are aware of the connection between the French and the Chinese nuclear tests and troubles in Bosnia or Rwanda. We need a new history to guide us.

Since the revolutionaries should not forget the past, revolutionary scholars should not ignore past scholarship. The scientific historiography of Ranke and Acton had at least one hundred and thirty years of history; since the days of Adam Ferguson (1763)² European scholars tried to study man using the scientific methods. Empirical data are essential for scientific research. We should base our works on 'evidence' — records of history — and this preoccupation with 'facts' of history must not be confused with 'empiricism', a narrow philosophy of the nineteenth century. We must critically review the works of our founding fathers, but must not throw away the baby with the bath water. The danger of saying that all history is myth or interpretation is that we do not see the boundary between reality and 'imagination'. Myths could become history and used for a right-wing fundamentalist political purpose. It has happened in India with 'the birthplace' of Ram. Hindu fundamentalists mock archaeology which they consider, as a 'foreign' science, has nothing to say to India.

History is 'emancipation of man from the past'. 'Past' is now examined and re-examined by the profession and we 'emancipate' from the heavy hand of the past authorities. It is dangerous to deny the importance of critical assessment of past records.

Literary theories have now invaded all disciplines (I have heard that the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney is now dominated by the post-structuralists, who talk about deconstruction!!). Postmodernism is very attractive to the young radical mind, for it is anti-establishment. It is against the 'self', 'renaissance', scientific revolution, enlightenment, bourgeois individualism. It explodes the

¹ Doris Lessing, *Golden Notebook*, London, 1973, p. 15.

² S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth-Century British Attitudes to India*, 2nd. ed., Bombay, 1987, Introduction.

hypocrisy of western liberal humanism and some converts of post-modernism are very clever people — they are clever with words.

Take, for instance, the English Revolution. In an excellent essay David Norbrook has recently pointed out that:

The grand narrative that is now being displaced in reference to English Renaissance history was given its most enduring formation by S. R. Gardiner's history of the earlier seventeenth century. A huge piece of Victorian intellectual engineering posited on the notion of a steady progress towards political and religious liberty. That edifice was subsequently underpinned by Marxist interpretations of the economic bases of these political processes, most notably in the writings of Christopher Hill. England's Revolution was seen as a culmination of its Renaissance, a decisive break with the old order which had been prepared for decades of intellectual ferment.³

Now we are told by such revisionist deconstructionists as Herman Rapport that Milton is not unproblematically 'humanist', and the poet's defence of the regicide marks him as a predecessor of Himmler. To others, like Jonathan Goldberg, the notion that there was constitutional conflict between King and parliament is an 'illusory construct' devised by dogmatic leftist critics and historians.

In Indian history recent attacks on Indian nationalism and the nationalist historians by the Subaltern group of South Asian history echoes the conservative historians of Cambridge and Chicago. The Grand Alliance aims to belittle not only the nationalist and older Marxist historians, but also the nationalist 'freedom fighters' or the leaders of the old Left. The Indian struggle for freedom against the British, according to the followers of Derrida, is nothing more than mere 'shadow boxing'. It is indeed ironic to see how these historians, sitting in their comfortable universities with high first world salaries, could mock thousands of men and women who went to prison (including men like Gandhi and Nehru), and who lost their lives. The cause seen from their 'theoretical' position was not an important one.

It seems to me that the preoccupation with careers made them supporters of the market economy and hence what I like to call the bazaar academy. In this 'market' all individuals are free floating

³ David Norbrook, 'Life and Death of Renaissance Man' in *Raritan*, Spring, 1989, p. 100.

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consumers. Consumption and exchange of text (like all other commodities) is a powerful source of energy to the post-modernists. In the academic bazaar 'scholarship' is unimportant, we now look for 'excellent achievers' who can speak the language of both the managerial class and the post-modernist philosophers.

The chapters in this book are thematically arranged. The first chapter was originally presented to a seminar organised by the University of Sydney Political Economy Group and was published in *ARNA* (Journal of the Sydney University Arts Society) in 1974. In it I try to marry Plumb's liberal, humanitarian concern about the plight of history with the Marxist concern on the role of history in society, and defend my position with a quotation from Collingwood. I think that all historians should be Citizen Historians, hence that became the title of the book.

The next four chapters are concerned with the history of political and social ideas of Rammohun Roy, Sir Henry Maine and Sir William Jones. In these essays I try to devise a methodology to study ideas and I follow C. B. Macpherson's model, particularly his study of the English liberalism in the seventeenth century. The first chapter on Rammohun Roy was originally written in 1966 and was presented to Jana Siksha Parishad, Calcutta. The original version was published by Ram Saran Sharma in his *Historical Probings, Indian Society: Kosambi Memorial Volume*, 1974. The next chapter, on Rammohun Roy's views on women, was originally presented as a paper to the Australian Association for Asian Studies conference in 1978. It was published in Michael Allen and S. N. Mukherejee (eds), *Women in India and Nepal* (1982 and 1990).

The chapter on Sir Henry Maine was originally presented as a paper at The Orientalists' Congress at Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1967 and was published in *Enquiry* (Delhi) in 1971.

The chapter on Sir William Jones is a version of my Pratul Gupta Memorial Lecture delivered at the Calcutta Historical Society in 1993. The original was published in *Bengal Past and Present*, 1995.

In the next chapter I deal with the problems concerning fiction and history — how far can we use fiction for historical research. This was published in *Teaching History* (Sydney) in 1973.

The chapter on the historiography of Indian Nationalism was a public lecture delivered at the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge, in February 1966 and was published in *Afro-Asian and World Affairs*, 1966. A shorter version of this chapter also appeared in

my Introduction to S. N. Mukherjee (ed.), *St. Antony's Papers*, No. 18 (1966).

The next two chapters deal with the historiography of ancient India. The first one was published in *East and West* (Rome) in 1962 and the second in *The Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* (Sydney) in 1990. The historicity of Rāma Gupta is now beyond doubt, since the discovery of his official inscriptions. At the time I wrote the paper these inscriptions were not available. I feel that my arguments about historiography and the nationalist ideology are still valid. In the second essay I try to show how we could use anthropological literature to understand ancient Indian institutions such as polygamy and genealogy.

The last chapter has never been published. In this chapter on Nehru I explore the methodological problems of using autobiography as history.

This book is, for the younger generation, a warning about the danger of literary theories and to show what can still be done with the older tools of history.