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5.

INDIA, *ITIHASA*, AND INTER-HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE

RANJAN GHOSH

ABSTRACT

An effective and enriching discourse on comparative historiography invests itself in understanding the distinctness and identity that have created various civilizations. Very often, infected by bias, ideology, and cultural one-upmanship, we encounter a presumptuousness that is redolent of impatience with the cultural other and of an ingrained refusal to acknowledge what one's own history and culture fail to provide. This "failure" need not be the inspiration to subsume the other within one's own understanding of the world and history and, thereby, neuter the possibilities of knowledge-sharing and cultural interface. It is a realization of the "lack" that provokes and generates encounters among civilizations. It should goad us to move away from what we have universalized and, hence, normalized into an axis of dialogue and mutuality. What Indians would claim as *itihasa* need not be rudely frowned upon because it does not chime perfectly with what the West or the Chinese know as history. Accepting the truth that our ways of understanding the past, the sense of the past, and historical sense-generation vary with different cultures and civilizations will enable us to consider *itihasa* from a perspective different from the Hegelian modes of doing history and hence preclude its subsumption under the totalitarian rubric of world history. How have Indians "done" their history differently? What distinctiveness have they been able to weave into their discourses and understanding of the past? Does the fact of their proceeding differently from how the West or the Chinese conceptualize history delegitimize and render inferior the subcontinental consciousness of "encounters with past" and its ways of being "moved by the past"? This article expatiates on the distinctiveness of *itihasa* and argues in favor of relocating its epistemological and ideological persuasions within a comparative historiographical discourse.

Efforts to circumscribe our understanding of Indian history within Chinese and Western universals lead to the conclusions that "history is one weak spot in Indian literature" and that "early India wrote no history because it never made any."¹ These efforts have the same result as that of Hegel to incorporate all history within a single scheme, as Wilhelm Halbfass notes:

1. A. A. Macdonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1900), 10-11. Quite rightly, Troy Organ considers Macdonell's statement as "unkind and untrue." There is, however, a greater amount of truth in Macdonell's statement that "the Brahmins, whose task it would naturally have been to record great deeds, had early embraced the doctrine that all action and existence are a positive evil, and could therefore have felt but little inclination to chronicle historical events," even though it is misleading. See Troy Wilson Organ, *The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970), 30.

Hegel's scheme of the history of philosophy is primarily designed to deal with the history of European thought from Thales to Kant and Hegel himself. However, this is not just one line of development among others. Hegel's conception of "Weltgeist" (world spirit), and the corresponding unity of the world-historical process, leaves no room for the assumption of other, independent or parallel streams of historical development. Where in this scheme does Asia, and India in particular, have its place?²

Why should India need to have a place in Hegel's scheme of things, or in schemes derived from Chinese or Western historiography? Can we not argue for a distinctive character in the Indian approach to history—"an Indian historiography of India" (in the words of Ranajit Guha)³—that would embody a different scheme? So in the efforts to disclaim what I see as the "Indian" way of doing history, or *itihasa*, the point that goes unperceptively overlooked is how history can be conceptualized and appropriated in ways that are different from one's very own. This is crucial because it is the difference in the approach toward how one makes sense of the past that makes historical knowledge-formation and the relevant discourse vibrant. Thus, to qualify a historiographical approach as anomalous and ahistorical because it does not fit within the purview of a particular civilization or culture, or is incongruous with the idea of the "world-historical," is not only to misunderstand and disrespect that approach but also to cut off the generative dimensions of history and to ignore its potential for intercultural dialogue.

Professor Huang's essay, with its underpinning of ethnocentrism (in Jörn Rüsen's sense of the term), contains a "pre-given sense of what historiography is."⁴ Specifically, it assumes that it is comprised of efforts to appropriate didactic principles from history (including basing law and principle, and generating universally applicable norms of humanity and dynasties, on the facts of history); loyalty to "real facts"; and the "hermeneutic circle." In this way his essay bears the implicit claim that no civilization can legitimize its authority/authenticity in historical meaning-generation without being true to these requirements. But this way of proceeding violates the comparative method of historiography. Peter Burke finds that virtually no one has tried successfully to study historiography in a comparative way, regretting how comparative studies can at times be vitiated by the author's assumption that the "Western style of historical writing is superior in every way to the alternatives."⁵ To generalize Burke's point: in understanding comparative historiography it is more essential to argue out the differences and the cultural and social contexts responsible for them than to judge the viability and legitimacy of the "other" by the extent to which it conforms to some universal principles or the dictates of "world history." On these grounds, the Indian concept

2. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 88.

3. See Ranajit Guha, "An Indian Historiography of India: Hegemonic Implications of a Nineteenth-Century Agenda," in his *Dominance without Hegemony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 156-176.

4. Jörn Rüsen, "Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparative Historiography," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 35 (December 1996), 7.

5. Peter Burke, "Western Historical Thinking in a Global Perspective—10 Theses," in *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 15.

of history should not be validated by how much of Chinese or Western principles of historiography it can take in its stride.

Amaury de Riencourt rightly observes that, "As a self-contained, self-enclosed and autonomous civilization India had completed her historical cycle, whereas the west was not even halfway through. The dramatic misunderstandings of the past and the present were the inevitable outcome of this mental blindness."⁶ India's history does not possess the "detailed narrative" that is found in the history of Greece, Rome, or China, but like the histories of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia it has only been possible, in the words of R. C. Mazumdar, to "reconstruct the skeleton with the help of archaeological evidence discovered in comparatively recent times. This history differs radically from what we normally understand by the word."⁷ Mazumdar points out that it is the "continuity of her history and civilization" that differentiates India from Persia or Babylon or Sumer; Indian history and institutions "form an unbroken chain by which the past is indissolubly linked up with the present":

The modern peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia have no bond whatsoever with the civilization that flourished there millennia ago and its memorials have no more (usually very much less) meaning to them than to any enlightened man in any part of the world. But not so in India. The icons discovered at Mohenjo-Daro are those of gods and goddesses who are still worshipped in India, and the Hindus from the Himalaya to Cape Comorin repeat even today the Vedic hymns which were uttered on the banks of the Indus nearly four thousand years ago. This continuity in language and literature, and in religious and social usages, is more prominent in India than even in Greece and Italy, where we can trace the same continuity in history.⁸

For instance, it is said that, though sketchy and disheveled, the information found in the *Puranas* can be stitched together into a narrative of meaningful political history all the way back to the start of the Gupta rule in the early half of the fourth century CE. Despite having a "good deal of what is untrustworthy in them, Puranic history can still lay claim to something like a continuous historical narrative and it is absurd to suppose that the elaborate royal genealogies were all merely figments of imagination or a tissue of falsehood."⁹

But this continuity is not comprised of a series of well-established empirical facts fashioned into a well-toned flow of events caught between a past leading to the present. Although Kalhana (in the mid twelfth century) exclaimed that a "virtuous poet alone is worthy of praise who, free from love or hatred, ever restricts his language to the exposition of facts,"¹⁰ Indian history plays a good deal looser with the notion of fact than that found in either Chinese or Western historiography. (Recall that, in Huang's words, "judgments were taken with absolute seriousness. To get at the real facts has been an all-consuming passion of Chinese historians,

6. Amaury de Riencourt, *The Soul of India* (London: Honeyglen Publishing, 1986), xiv.

7. R. C. Mazumdar, "Indian History, Its Nature, Scope and Method," in *The Vedic Age*, ed. R. C. Mazumdar (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952), 41.

8. *Ibid.*, 38.

9. A. D. Pusalkar, *The Vedic Age* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951), 304-305. It is debatable, though, whether Pusalkar's chronological division of early Indian history can be left unchallenged.

10. Mazumdar, "Sources of Indian History," in Mazumdar, ed., *The Vedic Age*, 49-50.

so much so that some of them sacrificed their lives in opposition to their rulers' pressures on them to write otherwise than what they believed to be true."¹¹) What Chinese or Western historiography takes to be universals may not always be the right criteria by which to judge the Indian way of historical meaning-generation. Unlike the Chinese who have left well-attested historical treatises for posterity, Aryans are said to have left behind myths, and in several cases of transmutation we have history as a blend of fact and "imagination." Though the court of every important king in India is said to have been endowed with a chronicler (*Artha-shastra* points out the existence of official records and the importance of officers responsible for maintaining them), and despite the fact that a strong oral, literary, and writing tradition in ancient India was somewhat informed with a sense of preservation, the unflinching commitment to the factual is nonexistent in subcontinental culture. Hindus did not preserve records as diligently as the Chinese did; "what the Hindus felt worth preserving was the meaning of events, not a record of when events took place."¹² They were more tradition-minded than history-minded but this is the way they generated meaning out of their interface with the past. One needs to acknowledge that mere chronological progression does not make up the fundamental ingredient of Indian history; Indian history requires an understanding of an abiding spiritual quest for the ultimate changeless reality, a quest that can lead it to overlook strict documentation of the rise and fall of an empire, the ascension and dethronement of kings, and so on. In this way Indian history can flaunt the luxury of achronicity and ahistoricity. So the Indian mind would prefer the "general to the particular," and meaning to chronology.

It should thus not be surprising that Indians over the ages have not evinced much interest in the history of doctrines and their development. Scarcely a document exists that traces the history of philosophy or the history of politics or of medicine. As A. B. Keith observes:

What interests writers is not questions of the opinions of predecessors as individuals, but the discussion of divergences of doctrine all imagined as having arisen *ex initio*. The names of some great authorities may be preserved, as in the case of schools of philosophy, but nothing whatever with any taint of actuality is recorded regarding their personalities, and we are left to grope for dates. This indifference to chronology is seen everywhere in India, and must be definitely connected, in the ultimate issue, with the quite secondary character ascribed to time by the philosophies.¹³

So the ancient Indian view of history puts greater accent on the processes of thought and cultures than on the flow of events. The emergence of the concept of *yugas* is one such dimension of the cultural process, for Indians found more interest in eternity than in temporal linearity. It is in this spirit that the Indian concept of time is unique compared to its Western and Chinese counterparts. Referring to the *Puranas*, Ainslie Embree notes that, "human existence must be seen against a background of an almost unimaginable duration of time." Compared to other civi-

11. Chun-chieh Huang, "The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking," *History and Theory* 46 (February 2007), 180-181 (this issue).

12. Organ, *The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man*, 30-31.

13. A. Berriedale Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), 146-147.

lizations that view history in term of thousands of years, the Indians—Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus—narrated it in terms of billions of years, and the historical process in its temporal manifestation becomes a part of a “vast cyclical movement.” Quite distinct from the Western and Chinese temporal schemas, then, the Hindu model, writes Embree,

is of concentric circles, moving within each other in a complex series of retrogressive movements. The vastest cycle was “a year of Brahma,” which by some reckonings was 311,040,000 million years long, with Brahma’s life lasting for one hundred of these cycles. This was followed by dissolution of all the worlds—those of men and gods—and then creation once more took place. Within these cycles there were other cycles which were of more imaginable dimensions, and it is these which are of primary significance for human history. A Kalpa or day of Brahma was 4,320 million years long, and within this were the smallest cycles, the four yugas. The Krita Yuga, the golden age, lasted for 1,728,000 years; the Treta, for 1,296,000 years; the Dvapara for 864,000 years; and the Kali for 432,000 years. The four ages are calculated as a descending arithmetical progression, marked by progressive physical and spiritual deterioration. Present history is taking place within Kali Yuga, which explains the violence and evil of human history. When this age comes to an end, a new cycle will begin—one of the thousand cycles of yugas that make up a day of Brahma.¹⁴

In fact, the polarization of the Indian and Western concepts of time has engendered a host of “stereotypical images about India” and her “otherness.” “Indian notions of time as cyclic,” writes Richard King, “are not unusual even in a western context. Ancient Greek notions of time (if this counts as western) were also predicated on a similar scheme of progressive decline and in the case of movements like Orphism, Pythagoreanism and Platonism, were also explicitly associated with a doctrine of rebirth.”¹⁵

Within a proper interculturalism it is not just the recognition of the differences between Indian historiography and its sense of time on the one hand, and Chinese and Western on the other, that matters, but also an appreciation of this difference and a valorization of it. It is the latter that makes our understanding of comparative historiographical study interesting, encouraging an attitude that refuses to predispose itself toward superiority of a system that tries to historicize every other past in its own terms and thereby to overlook the fact that in all cultures there is more than one single logic of making sense of the past.¹⁶

One must admit that India did not produce a Herodotus or Thucydides or Livy or Tacitus, or at least could not inspire herself to make sense of history in the way they methodically and conceptually did. But then this is not what Indian historiography was trying to accomplish. Indeed, it was after much bigger game; as D. K. Ganguly makes us see, *itihasa* was originally “understood to mean a past episode. But by the time of Kautilya it acquired a wider connotation to embrace all possible areas of human interest, mundane and spiritual, real and imaginary, practi-

14. *The Hindu Tradition*, ed. Ainslie T. Embree (New York: Random House, 1972), 220-221.

15. Richard King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (New Delhi: Maya Publishers, 2000), 200. It is interesting to see the argument behind King’s statement: “We might just as well define lunch as eating a Big Mac and then point out this activity does not occur amongst vegetarian Brahmins!” 234.

16. See Jörn Rüsen, “Crossing Cultural Borders: How to Understand Historical Thinking in China and the West,” *History and Theory* 46 (2007), 189-193 (this issue).

cal and speculative. . . . It is in this broader concept that Mahabharata merits the title *Itihasa*.”¹⁷ It thus demands an understanding that would differentiate *itihasa* from what the Greek or the Chinese would mean by history—*itihasa* being “more akin to religion and morality than history proper.”¹⁸ In India, unlike in the West, neither philosophy nor religion has ever been considered in isolation. Indeed, the Indian concept of history can be seen as a combination of the two. Hence, a strong mythic structure undergirds the concept of history, and there is no denying that history for the Hindus is lived-in reality and Hindu culture has both a paleocentric and mythopoetic character.¹⁹

As Sanskrit escalated to the position of *devbhasha* (language of the gods) it failed to inspire the growth of works that could be called historical by Western or Chinese standards. Indian historical consciousness with its inherent distinctiveness grew out of what the Hindus conceptualized and experienced through the concepts of *yuga*, *avatara*, *samsara*, *moksha*, and causality, to name a few. Its different view of history was strongly influenced by the rather elitist projection of the Sanskrit language, the centrality of the Brahmins in the existential-social scheme of things, and theological orientations.²⁰ So Hindu history, in the ancient and the medieval period, did not care much to acknowledge the date and life of an author, and instead argued for the truth of experience or the soundness of doctrine rather than the circumstances that gave birth to it.

In this regard one needs to revisit the fact that the storytelling ability of the Hindus has not been given the attention it deserves. The presence of *charans* or traditional minstrels, Brahminic barots and *bhats* who composed eulogies of their royal employers, formed part of the distinctiveness of the Indian concept of the past. The emergence of the *charans* expresses an attitude that “subordinates the historical reality of past individuals and individual events to the process of cultural continuity and cultural renewal.”²¹ The narratives of these Hindu storytellers have their own share of legends, fairy tales, and myths that under Western traditions of historical scholarship would not be considered “proper” history. But what is “proper” history and what is not depends on how one conceives history and its function; this is what lead Ashis Nandy to note that

in traditional Indian historiography, the data produced and the statistics used are often unique. A king is mentioned as having sixty thousand children, and the heavens are mentioned as being inhabited by three hundred thirty million gods, not only to the make the point

17. D. K. Ganguly, *History and Historians in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1984), 5.

18. *Ibid.* Can epics be designated as history? As part of a discussion of Homer’s *Iliad* M. I. Finley points out that epic is a “narrative, detailed and precise, with minute descriptions of fighting and sailing and feasting and burials and sacrifices, all very real and very vivid; it may even contain, buried away, some kernels of historical fact—but it was not history. Like all myth, it was timeless. Dates and a coherent dating scheme are as essential to history as exact measurement is to physics.” M. I. Finley, “Myth, Memory, and History,” *History and Theory* 4 (1965), 284-285. From this perspective *Mahabharata* too is disqualified from being considered as history.

19. Prakash N. Desai, *Health and Science in the Hindu Tradition: Continuity and Cohesion* (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 10.

20. Pratima Asthana, *The Indian View of History* (Agra: M. G. Publishers, 1992), 26.

21. Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists*, in *Return from Exile* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

that the king is potent and gods are many, but also to wipe out what many would consider the real data, and obviate any possibility of verification or empirical treatment. . . . In other words, in this type of historiography data are important only so far as they relate to the overall logic and the cultural symbols that must be communicated.²²

This is in strong contrast to the quantitative approach to history, which is distinctively Western.

It is not just an attitude to life and to sociocultural processes that determined the making of the Indian sense of historiography; certain realistic disadvantages also account for its characteristic differences from its Western counterpart. The lack of sufficient evidence is an important factor, as cataclysmic dynastic clashes, waves of invasion, and marauding political bands destroyed important documents and other material, with the result that several junctures of Indian historiography remain obscure (despite the fact that a tradition of maintaining archives existed, and colophons of manuscripts provided the name of monarchs and interesting historical details). This rendered as “black holes” certain crucial events in Hindu history, holes that serve as temptations for intrusive adventures—conducive to more contemporary ultra-religious incursions than objective explorations. Too, manuscripts in India could not successfully battle the climatic factor (failing most often to survive much more than five hundred years) except in the arid west of India (though the temperate climate in neighboring Nepal and the absence of hegemonic Muslim inroads helped preserve old manuscripts).²³ Again, the archival tradition lost steam and fell prey not just to climatic changes or political violence but also perished on account of certain and sudden changes of administrative centers that each dynasty created; preservation also suffered owing to the emergence of other local or regional powers who would scarcely exhibit interest in archival preservation, preoccupied as they were with their warring abilities. (That said, it needs to be pointed out that the writing of history in the Indian way did not exclude the importance of inscriptions [the two most revealing of them being the Junagadh inscription of Rudradaman c. 150 BCE and the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta c. 350 AD]. Hindu history can also, to a substantial extent, be narrated through epigraphic records and *vamsavalis* or chronicles of ruling families.)

The distinctiveness of Indian historiography briefly explicated here corroborates Rüsen’s point that history is a medium for articulating one’s own cultural identity in respect to its difference from the identity of others. To categorize the Indian concept of history as prehistory within Hegelian principles or strategic British historiographical imperialist schemes is cutting down the richness of possibility as “historicality shrinks in scope to enable a narrowly constructed historiography to speak for all of history.” So “what is discarded is not only the pasts these so-called historyless people live by in their everyday existence but also the modes adopted by their languages to integrate these pasts in the prose of their respective worlds. In this way World-history has promoted the dominance of one

22. *Ibid.*, 6.

23. See Michael Witzel, “On Indian Historical Writing,” *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies* 2 (December 1990), 8-10.

particular genre of historical narrative over all the others.”²⁴ Writing the *itihasa* of India would demand acknowledging her wide diversity (histories within history) and thus the little narratives and attitudes that have come through in her making. So, being on guard against the risk of projecting an “essentialized” India, I would suggest that the intercultural discussions of varying dimensions of historiographies humbly acknowledge the fact that what would raise a smile if applied to Europe would be soberly accepted when applied to India.²⁵ Would then embracing a way of doing history that is not like that done by either the Chinese or the paradigmatically Western methods discredit Indian ways of appropriating the past and historical meaning-generation, rendering them a less valuable and peripheral player in the stage of world history, or would it rather make them a valuable contributing member to this discussion? The answer from a sophisticated comparative historical perspective is clearly the latter.

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24. Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45, 49.

25. See F. E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1922), v. In response to Max Muller’s assertion that the Sacred Books of the East “contain so much that is not only unmeaning, artificial and silly, but even hideous and repellent,” Sri Aurobindo’s rejoinder is worth noting: “As to what he intends by unmeaning, artificial and silly elements, there can be no doubt. Everything is unmeaning in the Upanishads which the Europeans cannot understand, everything is artificial which does not come within the circle of their mental experience and everything is silly which is not explicable by European science and wisdom.” Most European Orientalists have failed to understand the Indian psyche and this has resulted in unconvincing criticism. Peter Heehs shows us quite analytically that “Europe’s literary criteria were not applicable to India. Albrecht Weber’s idea that the original *Mahabharata* consisted only of the battle chapters was a case of ‘arguing from Homer.’ It was, he insisted, ‘not from European scholars that we must expect a solution of the Mahabharata problem’, since ‘they have no qualifications for the task except a power of indefatigable research and collocation. . . . It is from Hindu [i.e. Indian] scholarship renovated and instructed by contact with European that the attempt must come.’” Aurobindo sees an “essential difference in mentality: the Indian mind was ‘diffuse and comprehensive,’ able to acquire ‘a [deeper] and truer view of things in their totality’; the European mind, ‘compact and precise,’ could hope only for ‘a more accurate and practically serviceable conception of their parts.’” What is required is the understanding of both continents of mind and thought and an effective mediation. See Peter Heehs, “Shades of Orientalism: Paradoxes and Problems in Indian Historiography,” *History and Theory* 42 (May 2003), 177-178.