

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HISTORY WITH ROMILA THAPAR

Kalpana Sharma

Eminent historian Romila Thapar, Professor Emerita at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, was awarded the prestigious Kluge Prize in 2008 along with the Irish historian Pádraig Kirby, who teaches at Princeton University. The Kluge award is often referred to as the American Nobel Prize, as it covers the human sciences for which there are no Nobel awards. In an interview, shortly after she returned from the United States after receiving the award, Prof. Thapar spoke about the importance of history teaching, the need for autonomous institutes to govern textbooks and historical research, and the media's interpretation of contemporary developments. Excerpts from the conversation:

In a talk you gave in 2002, you said: "To comprehend the present and move towards the future requires an understanding of the past, an understanding that is sensitive, analytical and open to critical enquiry." In the light of the November 26, 2008 terror attack on Mumbai and the criticism of the media's reporting of the event, what do you as a historian feel about media interpretation of such events and the absence of context in reporting?

As a historian I am and have been deeply disturbed – and I'm not alone in this – by the reaction to such incidents. Indian identity at the popular level is increasingly being narrowed to the perceptions of what is called the majority community. This is ironic because among historians the perspective has widened out. This is in

part due to the expansion of sources for constructing history. In archaeology, for instance, various sciences are giving us dimensions of knowledge that are new, such as the data on environmental factors affecting history. Our attitudes to texts have changed. We now ask incisive questions about the author, and why the text is written the way it is and what is the intention of the patron? One looks beyond the statements for deeper historical understanding. This has led to new perspectives on the past in terms of both evidence and the manner in which it is analysed.

So while the historian is opening up the past, its popular representation is narrowing it down. The kinds of linkages that are made with the past in popular outlets tend to marginalize many communities and cultures that make up Indian society. These linkages frequently draw from political agendas. Inevitably, one begins to ask whether or to what degree that which we've been writing and speaking about in the past 30 to 40 years have at all affected people's perceptions – perceptions of our past, our identities, and values that we hold as important in our lives? Possibly we have been too passive in our response to aggressive political actions. And we have failed to be sufficiently critical of the way the media plays with political agendas in representing what it calls "culture and history". These are themes that need much more open discussion.

We have not internalized our history in the sense that for most people seeing

the historical aspect of the world around us is still an experience of the extraneous. Historical analysis is really about an entire society with an accounting of different levels and the way in which they are interrelated; the way in which they disintegrate or integrate, and how these relationships have changed over time. We assume a kind of static past, which is of course the behest of colonial scholarship. This

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is being questioned by historians who are trying to understand the dynamics of different periods and communities, but somehow this questioning doesn't seem to seep into popular agencies like the media.

How much of media projection and the political discourse, which fails to locate events against history, is because of the way generations of Indians, including the post-Independence generation, have been taught history?

It has a lot to do with it. One of the biggest problems with the way in which popular representations of the past are accepted without questioning has to do precisely with the way history is taught. Not just history, our attitude to knowledge is generally still dated. A student is told, "Here is a body of knowledge, learn it and memorise it". The notion that a body of knowledge implicitly means that the person who is approaching it has to question it and understand it and maybe develop it further – that is not something that is implicit in our educational methods. The purpose of education is increasingly, with rare exceptions, a competition involving numbers in an exam which determine the next step. This is not what education should be about.

When we first established the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1971, it was suggested to us that our courses and syllabi should preferably not be a mere repetition of what was being taught in other universities. We were asked to think of new ways of projecting history where our courses would reflect interdisciplinary methods of investigating the past.

My 20 years in JNU were intellectually among the most enriching in my life, because we had a really good bunch of students who came because they felt that since the courses were different, the enquiries would be different. If one can take credit for anything at all it is for those students who are now teaching history and conducting historical research themselves. They are doing it because it is both an intellectual exploration as well as something that is providing insights into the society in which we live. It is through this way of looking at the past that students become curious about the world that surrounds them. If enquiry can be built into a subject it ceases to be just having to learn the same old dreary information and it takes on the challenge of finding out about other aspects – about objects, events, people, behaviour patterns, personalities, policies – a whole gamut of perspectives on what makes society, who makes it and who governs it.

You had spoken of what you called the "blight" of reducing Indian culture to a single identity, in the period leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Do you feel that this type of ideology has been somewhat diluted today because of other political developments, or do you think we still face the danger of this "blight" returning and attempting to project Indian culture in a monochromatic way?

There are two aspects to this question. One is the political aspect, the use of the Hindutva ideology to garner votes. We saw this displayed in the political mobilization around the Ram Janmabhoomi movement leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Echoes of this were audible in the debate on the Sethu Samudram. And if groups to Hindutva politics find that they are having problems with electoral support, it may be raked up again. That's one aspect that may at the moment be somewhat diluted, but it's unpredictable.

What worries me much more is the way in which the ideology of Hindutva has inveigled much of the middle class into accepting the idea that we should be only a Hindu country. This is essentially an unthinking acceptance of an ideology that claims to provide an easy answer to a complex problem, namely the modernization of a society that has always had multiple communities, and it is based on questionable and erroneous premises rather than what one expects in this day and age, namely at least a minimum of logical and rational thinking about the problem. The attitude of treating members of other religious communities as the "Other," as the ones who are alien and who will never be part of "us", that is something that I find unacceptable as it goes against the grain of the concept of being Indian. It is also unacceptable because it is historically untenable. Where education has not succeeded perhaps civil society will be the agency to oppose this attitude. But if it isn't opposed it will encourage the kind of politics that can take us to the edge of fascism.

Finally come to your award. You've turned down so many but this Kluge award is different.

The only awards that I've turned down are state awards from governments. Indian society has yet to respect the academic. It seems to me that one of the ways of creating respect is to give priority to recognition from one's peers in a profession and this will require a distancing from government patronage. I have accepted awards from historical associations in India including the Indian History Congress and the Asiatic Society of Calcutta without a moment's hesitation because this was a gesture from my fellow professionals.

The Kluge award, like the Nobel Prize, draws from a private donation. John Kluge made his money in media and movies and decided that he would use it to encourage human sciences and humanities. These are not covered by the Nobel Prize. He created a research centre in the Library of Congress, so as to attract the best scholars to one of the leading libraries in the world. Subsequent to that, he established the Kluge Prize.

The selection involves a rigorous process of academic assessment. Nominations are processed through a series of evaluations by scholars in a particular field – in my case it was Ancient History and Indology. The Council of Scholars attached to the Kluge research centre advises in the choice. The rigour of the academic evaluation makes it a coveted prize. ■

Courtesy, *The Hindu*

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