

What do Indians Need: A History or the Past?

Today, both in India and abroad, we see the emergence of a new intellectual trend: based on painstaking research, to write an accurate history of India. What is *new* about this approach? In one sense, as I shall explain in this article, this attempt is not novel; in another sense, which too shall be explained, there is something very new in it. I shall talk about both in the course of answering the question raised in the title, which contrasts 'the past' with 'a history'. This contrast needs explication because historiography is seen as an 'accurate recording of the past'. Yet, I am going to contrast the product of historiography, 'a history', with something called 'the past'.

However, this story is complicated: it has at least two beginnings, two middle points and one common end. There are many branches to this story and, although this is not enough, I will even talk of an alternative. In a way, to an Indian audience, this should not pose a problem: the story of Mahabharata is not unitary; there are stories within stories with multiple narrators and voices, and many synchronous events. I am not a Vyasa to keep you captivated by my narration, even though I wish I were. Unlike his epic, this article is both short and requires a sequel. My hope is to write that sequel in the course of the foreseeable future. However, these are my failings. I hope you are still Indian enough to find the time to give me a hearing and that you have not become all hustle and bustle the way the westerners are.

A first beginning

A few thousand years ago, two intellectual movements existed simultaneously in the Ancient Greek society. The first, with a venerable past, was exemplified by the bards: these were the story-tellers, who moved from town to town recounting Greek legends and mythologies. The bards drew reasonably large crowds wherever they went; they did not merely entertain the audience by recounting Homer and other respected poets but also, through the act of story-telling, addressed the actual problems of their society. They told stories of long ago: Ulysses and the Sirens, Cyclops and Zeus, and about Jason and the Argonauts. The characters in such stories were both human and divine; some among them faced insurmountable challenges; their deeds were, therefore, considered heroic. The poets, it was said, rightly immortalized them. The bards cherished telling such stories and the crowds loved hearing them.

And then, there was another group as well. For the sake of convenience, let us call them philosophers (those who loved wisdom). We know the names of many such; one of them, the most well-known, is Plato. This philosopher was not happy, either with the bards or with what they did. He felt that the bards incited the crowd into irrational behaviour based on irrational feelings. Instead of inculcating reasonableness, Plato thought, these bards pandered to the emotions of people. Emotions were always bad advisors, especially if they concerned matters of polity. He opposed educating the children (who would be the future Athenians) by teaching them legends and mythologies because such stories, according to Plato, always exaggerated, distorted and lied about the past. In fact, Plato envisioned an ideal state that would ban all the poets and bards into exile; such a state, ruled by a philosopher-king, would be *the polis* to live in because it alone cultivated reason among its citizens. He opposed 'myth' to 'history', and 'emotions' to 'reason'. He believed that not myths but history should guide the behaviour of the civilized Athenians. He saw the bards as 'orators' and counterposed 'rhetoric' (the art of *speech*) of his time to 'reason'. Oration cultivated

demagogy (that which appealed to the irrationality and the emotions of the crowd) and thus poisoned the youth, whereas philosophy cultivated reason.

These two tendencies were apparently each other's rivals in the Athens of so-long-ago. However, before either of the tendencies could gain dominance, the Greek civilization collapsed. In the future, the torch lit in Athens would be carried only partially by the Roman Empire.

A Second Beginning

We now move the tale forward by a few centuries. At that time, the Roman Empire included many parts of what we now call the Middle-East. Romans had also conquered Judea, a nation of people called the Jews. Like all other nations of the world, the Jews too had a story about their own past. Their story told them of the travails of the Jews, comprising of twelve tribes, who were scattered among other nations as a punishment. The punisher is an entity that we now call 'God' and He punished the Jews for forgetting Him, the 'God of Israel'. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the creator and sovereign of the Universe, and the Jews were instructed to keep the Law He gave them. He instructed them too in the difference between Himself (the 'True' God) and 'gods' of other nations and peoples, and revealed Himself in Mount Sinai. Being the merciful God that He is, He also promised the children of Israel that He would send down to earth a messenger, who would unite the Jews together again.

This caricature of a story about the Jewish past will do for the moment because what is interesting here is not the story itself but *the attitude* of the Jews towards it. Unlike the Greeks of yesteryears, the Jews of yesterday and today believe that theirs is *a true story*. In fact, they do not consider this as a story at all: to them, it is *the factual chronicle of events on earth*. In other words, their account of their past, the Jews believe, is history. God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – did punish the Jews; God did promise to send His own messenger ('the promised one', *Christos* is a Greek word) to earth, and that this messenger will come because God always keeps His promises.

In the course of time, some Jews began to proclaim the arrival of such messengers of God. Many said that the Messiah had come to earth at God's behest to save the children of Israel. The most well-known group among them crystallized around the person and acts of Jesus of Nazareth. Believing that Jesus was the Christ (the announced, the messiah, the anointed), this group tried to persuade the Jews about his arrival. Most of the Jews did not buy the idea that Jesus was the Christ. Largely rejected by the Jews, this group then proclaimed that Jesus had come to earth not just to save the Jews *but to save the entire Humankind*. The Jewish accounts of their past, their history, had already spoken of the Original Sin, Eternal Damnation, Hell and Heaven. The Christians (i.e., those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ) took most of it over but accused the Jews of heresy and a signal failure to understand their own scriptures. They believed that Judaism was dead and would be soon replaced by Christianity, a creed professed by the Christians, i.e. those who proclaimed the arrival of the messenger of God, his death on the cross for the sins of mankind and his resurrection three days later. This was the 'Good News' that the Christians proclaimed to the world at large.

This too is a caricature of Christianity but, again, I want to draw your attention to not only how the Christians looked at these chronicles but also to how they were and are *compelled* to look at it.

Much like the Jews, the early Christians also believed that their story about their past was not just their history but also the history of mankind. Every event that was chronicled in the Old Testament Bible, from Adam and Eve through the Garden of Eden and the Flood to Noah's ark, they believed, narrated the facts and events on earth. Adam did commit the Original Sin (as it is narrated in the Old Testament Bible) by thirsting after the knowledge of good and evil and the children and descendants of Adam (the entire humankind) do carry this burden. The Christians claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ; he was crucified by the Romans; he did rise from death three days later and promised humankind 'salvation', if they followed him. Those who did not, the disciples of Jesus maintained, would be eternally damned to Hell, the Biblical Hell, ruled by the Devil.

Apart from the Jews, who were sceptical and dismissive of the claims of Jesus to Christhood, the Christians also confronted the intellectuals of the Roman Empire. Among other things, these intellectuals found that the Christians were making ridiculous claims about 'God', 'the Devil' and Jesus of Nazareth. Though they tolerated the Jewish customs and traditions, they never accepted the story of the Jews as the history of humankind. In Christians, they not only found a silly sect that claimed that some entity called 'God' could create whatever He wanted just by 'willing' it into existence but also a new group that made ridiculous assertions about resurrection after death. Jesus must have been a magician, they thought, who merely pretended to die while convincing the gullible that he was 'really dead'. Who had ever heard of someone being resurrected after death? Among other things, they thought that Christians were simple minded fools, who ran away from all discussions and tried to 'convert' only the children, slaves and women. (None of these three, the Romans thought, was able to 'reason' the way a mature citizen could.)

Caught between the hammer and the anvil, the Christians had to insist more and more vigorously that they were telling the truth. *Theirs was not a story or a myth but the history instead.* It was not just the history of the Jewish nation without it being the history of the whole of humankind. The Christian God was not merely the 'God of Israel', the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, but 'the God' of the whole of humankind. He became the generic 'God': singular, unqualified, and unique. He was 'God'. He created the Cosmos; He is the Lord and Master of the World; He is the Sovereign and the fountainhead of all morality. His Will was the Law and, as His creatures, we have to obey Him.

Why, then, do different nations have and worship different 'gods'? This was easily explained: all these 'gods' were 'false'; as followers and lieutenants of the Devil, these false gods lead mankind towards destruction. They were vagrant 'spirits', the *daimones* of the Greeks from which the English word 'Demons' is derived. The Greeks, of course, did not think of their gods either as vagrant spirits or as the followers of the Biblical Satan or the Devil. Neither did the Romans. However, the Christians added their own spin to the Greco-Roman thought and, with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, they also gained political power.

In other words, according to Christianity, the Biblical story is the 'true' history of the whole of humankind. Jesus of Nazareth had to be a real, historical person crucified by the Romans.

The Christians believed furthermore that the stories that other peoples and nations told about their multiple pasts were just that: myths and legends but not history. Bible was History. It was the history of the humankind. Period.

The First Middle Point

There are two middle points I want to talk about. The first is the cognitive attitude one assumes with respect to looking at the past of a group. The second is about the attitude one has to the multiple ways in which human groups have, in fact, looked at their own pasts. Let me begin with the first.

Consider what happens when you look at actions and events in the world as expressions of God's will. Assume too that this will intends something with such actions and events and that this 'something' pertains to the future of human kind. Because, as human beings, our perspective about the present is more limited than our ability to gather records about the past, we can write fuller chronicles about the past. Furthermore, these narratives are important for discerning God's plan in the events of the past. Such knowledge is extremely crucial to determining the course of actions in the future, as far as we human beings are concerned. The Christians discovered very soon during their existence that the world was not going to come to an immediate end, an end which they hoped to see. Consequently, their problem became: what did God (and Christ) intend with human 'history'? In the events of the past, which was Christ acting in human history, they were provided with signs that required interpretation. In so far as God's will is revealed in the world (including in human history), it becomes the tasks of men to study the same to find out what God intends. God's will is also revealed in the chronicles of the human past. However, it is imperative to studying God's revelation that one studies what *actually happened* in the past. Only when we study the past as it actually occurred, only then could we hope to decipher what God intends for the human kind. An imaginary past is no substitute for an accurate rendering of the same. Not merely is such a past no substitute; the situation is even worse: by studying false chronicles about the past as though they were true, one endangers the very possibility of the salvation of the human soul.

The Bible, however, had already chronicled the human past. What was new, after Jesus Christ, was the emergence of the Christian Church. Consequently, one needed to chronicle the history of this institution as something that fulfilled God's plan on earth in much the same way one chronicled the coming of Jesus of Nazareth as the culmination of the strivings of the nations. Eusebius, the famous Church historian, accomplished both: one in his writings on the history of the Church and the other by showing how the 'wise' and 'noble' of the pagans from other cultures had actually, if only implicitly, anticipated the arrival of the Messiah.

It was left to St. Augustine to come up with the definitive framework from within which to study the human past. This philosophy of history suggested looking at the growth of the Christian *ecclesia* as the historical expression of God's plan. This community of believers (the Christian *ecclesia*, that is), to Augustine and his followers, was bigger than any empirical society of Christians at any given moment of time. It incorporated the entire set of believers, past, present and future. It was a grand philosophy of history that once and for all set the foundations to answering the question: *how 'ought' one to study the past?* Even more important than this fact is the following: he would make a very counter-intuitive attitude into a trivial 'but, of course!' The last sentence needs some explication.

Consider the following question: why talk about the past at all? Or, why do human communities feel the need of talking about the past of their communities? These and analogous questions are raised in order to make the human present representable to those who live. Why represent the past and present to ourselves at all? An answer to this question requires appealing to some kind of an idea about what it is to live as a human being, what we aim at in life and why. Because we are interested in human flourishing (“live a good life”, whatever ‘good’ means in this context), we need to think about ourselves as beings with some kind of a past. In other words, one looks at the past for the sake of living well and flourishing in the present. In most groups that have evolved into cultures, some kind of an implicit consensus is present regarding what human flourishing is, that is, what it means to live a good life. This consensus is as general and as abstract as the question itself (‘human flourishing means to be happy’). In this sense, each human group has some kind of story about its past.

However, St. Augustine formulated the question about the past within the Christian theological framework. That is to say, he formulated a theological question as though the query about the past was indissolubly connected with the ‘truth’ of a story about the past. As I have outlined it earlier on, to the Jews and the Christians, it was imperative that their claims about the past were ‘true’. If such claims were false, and the humankind acted in the present on the basis these falsehoods, its future was eternal damnation. Thus, to St. Augustine, it was very obvious that there was only attitude possible with respect to the past. Such an attitude sought the ‘true’ past: it was an attitude that answered the question “how ‘ought’ one to study the past”? One ‘ought’ to study the past in such a way as to find the true past. This ‘true’ past had to be found through a painstaking *study* (of scriptures and the writings of the early church fathers), said Augustine, because mankind has been deceived into believing the lies told by the Devil about the human past. In short, because lies about the past abound in human communities (these ‘lies’ are, of course, the stories that human groups have about their own multiple pasts), one needs ‘the truth’. The Bible was the only repository of this ‘truth’, as far as Augustine was concerned.

Because ‘truth’ is what all human beings like to seek, today it has become obvious to talk as *though* one seeks truth while one studies the past. Two important issues need to be understood here. There is, first, the question why study the past at all? There is, second, the problem of what ‘truth’ means in this context.

Consider the first issue. Why ‘study’ the past instead of recounting your community’s story about the past? I mean, why are we not satisfied in recounting Ramayana, Mahabharata, puranas, etc as our stories about our past? What do we need to study and why? To these questions, there is a plausible sounding answer: ‘we need to know whether these stories are true’. Ask again why: Why do we need to know whether these stories are true? After all, as we believe, these stories have been in circulation for millennia and they have adequately and admirably met the needs of our ancestors (and most of our contemporaries as well) in their quest for human flourishing. So, what extra reasons exist to ‘study’ the past?

Here is the first possible answer, which takes the form of a question: what if our stories about the past turn out to be false? Let me answer it with a counter-question: so what? What does it matter whether what we believe about our past is true or false as long as it helps us in human flourishing? One can choose truth above falsehood if (a) truth about the past helps us

live better as human beings and (b) falsehood damages us. Without answering these questions, one cannot provide extra reasons to study the past.

Here is a second possible answer that attempts to sidestep the issue: “we need to know the truth about the past because only as such do we have knowledge about the past. We do not need to justify this knowledge about the past any further because, surely, knowledge is its own justification.” However, this answer too does not work. Why?

This brings us to the second issue. You see, the only intelligible notion of truth we have today is one that makes ‘truth’ into a property of sentences, that is, into a linguistic property. (That is to say, it is only *of sentences* that we can say whether they are true or false.) Even though we do use the notion of truth in multiple other ways (when we say of someone that ‘he is a true friend’ or when we say ‘only truth is the real’ and such like), we are incapable (today) of fleshing out these, other notions of ‘truth’. In this sense, there are repositories of truth in existence today: the multiple telephone directories in the world. Such books are embodiments of ‘the truth’ about the world. Consequently, ‘the truth’ which the historians seek could only be the analogues of telephone directories from the past. While one does not have any objection to collecting factoids about the past, what have these to do with ‘knowledge’, except in a trivial sense of that word?

One might disagree by pointing to ‘historical explanations’. Do these not constitute knowledge? *No, they do not.* In the first place, all such explanations are *ad hoc*: one does not generate knowledge by sucking some explanation out of one’s thumb to ‘account’ for the facts already collected, no matter how large that set of facts might be. Second, such explanations do not explain: they merely insinuate some kind of connection between facts and some implicit thesis. Third, invariably, such a thesis is some or another commonsense variant of (or garden variety) psychological or sociological ‘explanation’. Fourth, the assembled facts cannot, in any way, testify to ‘the truth’ of the implicit thesis. As a consequence, except for being *ad hoc* stories about the past, such ‘explanations’ do not even clarify the nature of ‘historical explanations’.

In fact, there is a radical disjunction between what the historians think they are doing (‘seeking explanations about the past’) and what they do (collect factoids). When he seeks ‘the truth’ about the past, neither the historian nor his reader knows whether he has found it or even why it has to be ‘found’. The ‘archives’ of the historian is not some kind of ‘collective memory’ of the humankind. It is what it always was: a collection of records that sits in a library shelf slowly gathering dust.

The ‘truth’ that St. Augustine sought can never be proved or disproved by any kind of research in the ‘archives’. His ‘truth’ was about the Christ nature of Jesus of Nazareth and about the Bible. His predecessors had established that Jesus of Nazareth existed and their theologies had proved that he was The Messiah. Therefore, he claimed that one ‘ought’ to study the past on the basis of this knowledge. What sense does it make to take over his theological question and try to garnish it with ‘secular’ sounding dogmas?

The Second Middle Point

In 1160, Peter Comestor – the then chancellor of Notre Dame of Paris – wrote *Historia Scholastica*, a book that enjoyed tremendous popularity in all parts of Europe. As an appendix to his sacred history, Peter condenses some of the ‘mythological’ material into a

series of short chapters, or *incidentiae*. In these, he looks at some of the 'mythological' figures in the following way: Zoroaster, for instance, invented magic and inscribed the seven arts on four columns; Isis taught the Egyptians the letters of the Alphabet and showed them how to write; Minerva taught several arts, in particular weaving; Prometheus probably instructed the ignorant or fabricated automata. All these mighty spirits, suggests Peter Comestor, are worthy of veneration, as are the patriarchs, and for the same reason: they have been the guides and teachers of humanity, and together stand as the common ancestors of civilization.

This way of looking at stories about other people's past represents one end of the spectrum. At the other end stands a disparaging attitude towards all such narratives. For instance, this is exemplified by Sir Babbington Macaulay, in his famous minutes concerning the need for a British education system in India:

It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that *all the historical information* that has been collected to form all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England...

The question before us is merely whether when we can patronize ... *sound history*, (or) we shall countenance, at the public expense, ... *history, abounding with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long* – and geography, made up of seas of treacle and butter (cited in Keay, John, 1981, *India Discovered*. London: Collins, 1988: p. 77, my emphasis).

In the spectrum that I am constructing for the purposes of this piece, these two attitudes reveal two faces of the same coin. One face looks at the tales of the past of their peoples and cultures as disguised historical narration but discovers some 'kernel' of truth in such narrations. It assumes, in a manner of speaking, that other people somehow did not know how to compose historical narratives (or did not care to do so) and that one has to 'interpret' these stories to extract the 'truth' from such stories. This is how, for example, the European intellectuals looked at the Greek myths during the Italian Renaissance. They felt that the Greek legends talked of human virtues but that these narratives represented such virtues (like courage, bravery, generosity, justice, etc) in the form of 'heroes' and 'gods'. So, one had to 'sympathetically' read the myths and the legends of the Ancient Greek society to really understand what they are trying to say.

The 'heroes' of the European Enlightenment, by contrast, exemplify the second face of the coin. In their 'Quarrel with the Ancients', they were vitriolic in their assessment of the achievements of the Ancient Greek society, especially their myths and legends. Opposed to these myths and legends, which were mere stories and products of wild human imagination, stand 'facts' and 'history'. One merely reads these stories for 'entertainment'; to ascribe to them any other status is to live under an illusion. They were lies about the past which the poets constructed. The Ancients, with the exception of historians like Thucydides, really produced myths and legends. Instead of enlightening us about 'what the past was really like', these stories deceive us.

Common to both these attitudes is the idea that we 'ought not' to take these stories about the past seriously. Such stories are not about the past; these are merely products of the human imagination. Only historiography can teach us about the past and, if we care about the past at all, we should care about 'history'. In other words, what these two attitudes say is the

following: they claim that our stories about the past are not *about anything real*. They do not speak about objects or events in the world. If we are perceptive enough, these stories tell us something about the world of the authors *indirectly*; they do also *tell us* about the nature of human imagination. In and of themselves, these stories are really *about nothing*. If this is true, huge questions open up which they never even address: why did people from earlier generations produce all those stories? Why, instead of talking about the world, did they write only fiction? If Thucydides could write empirical history, why could Valmiki or Vyasa not be able to do the same? And so on.

There is something else too that unites them: the belief that they hold the key to the past and that they know how the past 'ought to' be studied. To Comestor, his theology had given him the certainty; to people like Macaulay (and to the enlightenment thinkers), it was equally obvious that they knew how to study the past, whereas the earlier generations did not. Do not read them amiss: the 'heroes' of the enlightenment were not defending some or another scientific orientation for appreciating the human past. Much like that of Peter Comestor, theirs too was a theological attitude. In which way?

One of the bones of contention between the Catholics and the Protestants was about 'miracles'. The Catholic Church believed that miracles occurred in the world: in fact, to this day, the Catholics believe that transubstantiation occurs during the Holy Mass, where bread and wine get transubstantiated into the flesh and blood of Christ. They further believe in the intervention of deceased saints in the world: in fact, they attribute miraculous powers to some shrines and relics as well. Arraigned against them and this attitude towards miracles were the Protestants: they denied any such interventions, attributed miracles only to Godhead and had withering contempt for the beliefs about the powers of shrines and relics. In short, their theologies persuaded the Protestants to look at the human past as something that required a different kind of study than even those which the Catholics engaged in. At best, human past consisted of merely those deeds which human beings could perform. Nothing 'supernatural' occurs in human history; after all, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (and the miracles he performed) had nothing to do with human beings. The Bible records all the interventions of God (these, after all, are the 'miracles') and anything else is a mere human addition to the human past. Any talk of miracles outside of what is recorded in the Bible reflects the disease of the human mind. If anything at all, the history of humanity chronicles their corruption; it is a story of their fall, foibles and follies. Human past is and 'ought to be' a mere record of what human beings could do and, 'in truth', have achieved. Human history does not edify; at best, it disappoints. Any human flourishing that we might want is not provided by stories about the past. Such stories merely lie and mislead. 'History' of the human past is merely a chronicle of the kind of creatures we are. *To think that narratives about the human past can teach us how to live or how to be happy or how to flourish as human beings is to assign to historiography a power that it does not possess and could never hope to possess.*

Only God's Grace, which is what 'true religion' is, can pull us out of the misery that the human past, present and future is. It is the task of the 'true religion' to tell us what happiness is and how to reach it. To think differently is to arrogate the status and power of God to human beings. The enlightenment thinkers merely reproduced (garbed, of course, in a fashion appropriate to their times) this theological stance towards the human past. Macaulay is a child of this Protestant attitude to the human past. What we call today as a 'historical attitude'; our ideas about why study the human past; how we 'ought to' do that; these are all

solidly rooted in Protestant Christianity. That is, it is both Christian (thus partially shared by the Catholics and the Protestants) and Protestant.

The Common End

Under the colonial rule, the British aggressively pushed their beliefs onto us. They quizzed us about our past in ways we were not used to before. Taking our multiple stories, epics and puranans as though they were historiographies, they derided us for believing in their 'truth'. Our intellectuals, whose story under the colonial rules (both Islamic and British) is a sad story of succumbing to what they did not understand, broadly took the only two paths available to them: either deny the truth of such stories or try and show that these stories were 'true' chronicles of the past. It did not occur to these intellectuals to study the culture of these colonizers and figure out what kinds of questions the colonizers were asking. They merely assumed that the attitudes of the colonial masters were exemplifications of reason, rationality and scientificity. In the first phase, our intellectuals accepted the absence of historiography in the Indian traditions and set out to solve that lacuna by writing histories of India. Of course, these were based completely and totally on the 'philosophy of history' that the Europeans sold at steeply discounted prices on the Indian continent. In the second phase, they joined the Europeans in deriding the Indian traditions and the stock of stories about the past. In the third phase, they simply took over the European historiography of India and went on to garnish it with Indian spices, which merely meant adding new 'empirical details', as and when one 'discovered' them. In this sense, the attitude of writing a history of Indian culture and civilization, based on a meticulous 'study' of the past is not anything new. It is an old knee-jerk reaction to the Protestant critique of the Indian culture and traditions.

What do these historiographies accomplish? They teach us, for instance, that the Mahabharata war could have taken place, except, of course, it was probably a war between a collection of tribes. It is merely the poetic exaggeration that has provided us with a description of epic proportions. So, in all probability, these historians assure us, there was some kind of a war, somewhere in the north of India about a few thousand years ago. As far as Krishna lifting the mountain with his little finger or about Ghatotkacha fighting the war with 'the magic' of the Rakshasas, they do not even bother to hide the snigger: of course, it is all either nonsense or mere poetic exaggeration. Surely, we know that no human individual can lift the mountain with his little finger and, in all probability, the 'Rakshasas' was the name of another tribe, which, perhaps, was neutral in this tribal war. In other words, Mahabharata and Ramayana (and all our stories about the past) are merely disguised historiographies or lies and exaggerations of our incompetent ancestors ('incompetent' because they could not even do what Thucydides did or the Chinese did so many thousands of years ago) which only the current generation of historians can decipher.

In one sense, until recently, the damage was limited. It was limited because this group of historians shared the deep, Nehruvian contempt for Indian culture and her traditions. They strutted around in the enclaves of elite universities, flew to international conferences to present their papers there and, generally speaking, felt much above the rest of the Indian 'masses' steeped in ignorance and superstition. Not knowing about their own profound ignorance of the origin, nature and meaning of these 'scientific' questions, these historians were content to reproduce whatever their Metropolitan masters wanted. They had built a wall of separation between their 'secularism' and the 'religiosity' of the Indian masses.

Today, especially in the last decades, the picture has changed drastically and alarmingly. It is important for us to understand this latest development.

Both British 'liberalism' and the Nehruvian 'secularism' brought another reaction into existence in India. We are familiar with one kind: the kind that derides Indian culture, her traditions and holds the West as the picture of perfection. These people have been dominant in the press and the universities for centuries long. But, I want to talk about its antipode: a tendency that too is a child of British Protestantism, Christian to the core, but one which borrows from other strands available in the European Christianity.

This tendency goes the other way: it claims that our stories about the past are literally our histories. We too have historiographers from the past, we too know 'the truth' about our past, what we say about our past is the literal 'truth' and they are not poetic lies or exaggerations. Enter the Sangh Parivar.

The Sangh Parivar, actually, is a confluence of at least two orientations. On the one hand, it intuitively reacts to the Christian descriptions of Indian culture. It senses that there is something profound about Indian culture, her traditions, her multiple stories about the past, and so on. It senses too that there are various ways of being on earth and that the Christian and the Muslim ways of 'being-in-the-world' are but two out of many different ways. And it reacts with incomprehension as well, while listening to the criticisms of the religiously founded 'secular' criticisms of everything Indian. But, it is also profoundly and deeply ignorant of the western culture.

On the other hand, for reasons I am not fully clear about, the Sangh Parivar has no intellectuals. It merely has ideologues. Ideologues to a movement are what pimps are to prostitutes: they do and say whatever is required to conclude a sale. Lacking the ability to do intellectual research, these ideologues of the Sangh Parivar pick up whatever is readily available. Two such things are readily available: nationalism and the Christian stories about history. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar have picked them both.

These two things, when mixed together, are catastrophic in nature. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar threaten to do what centuries of colonialism tried but could not accomplish: destroy the Indian culture and her traditions irreplaceably and irrevocably. They are going to do that while promising to 'save' the Indian culture and her traditions. Let me explain why.

Our multiple stories about the past, among other things, provide us with a deep connection to a collective past. We read or hear Mahabharata and the Ramayana and we feel that Rama, Duryodhana, Dharmaraja, etc were our kings. When we participate in the festival of Deepavali, we open our doors to Bali, a rakshasa, as the greatest king we ever had. We feel connected to Sita, Draupadi and Abhimanyu. We have wept when we heard the story of Ekalavya; we feel touched by Karna's fate; we get angry at Shakuni and Dushyasana. We want brothers to be like Rama and Lakshmana. We feel *connected to all these people* in a myriad of ways and our connection is deeper than our connections to great grandfathers, whom we have never met (in all probability). In short, we feel part of that genealogy which these multiple stories present as our collective past.

As children, we have often wondered where these people lived and what languages they spoke in. Did Krishna speak in a local language, Sanskrit or something else totally? In which language did Yaksha ask questions to Dharmaraja? How did Sita or Hanumantha speak to

Ravana? How did the rishis and the kings from Khamboja communicate with those from Jambudwipa? Are the nagas of today the descendents of Arjuna, is the Mathura near Delhi also the place where Krishna lived? Are the vanaras that helped Rama the ancestors of those monkeys that we see today? And the Yugas; what are they actually? Is the treta and the dwapara yuga merely how the earth was so many hundreds of thousands of years ago? And so on and so forth.

As we grew up and learnt our geographies and sciences, we did try to combine both: how could there be treta yuga when our species is hardly 50,000 years old? How could Bhima really have the strength of 10,000 elephants and Duryodhana merely 9999? How could Dharmaraja 'walk' to Swarga and, if he did, why could Trishanku not do the same? And so on as well. We went to our elders with these questions and their answers, which were no answers at all, satisfied us. And, over a period of time, we stopped asking these questions. Not because we knew the answers or that they were unanswerable. But we stopped asking such questions because we learnt, in whichever way we did so, that *these were not the right questions to ask*. To grow up as an Indian is to learn that these stories should be treated differently than claims from our geography lessons. Finally, we assumed an attitude that was indifferent to the facticity of these stories. We reached a stage where we could endorse the following dialogue between a Swiss-German and a Balinese (from Bichsel, Peter, 1982, *Der Leser, Das Erzählen: Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen*. Darmstadt und Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag. Pp. 13-14, my translation and italics):

When I discovered, or when it was explained to me, that Hinduism is a pedagogical religion, namely, that in so far as the best "good deed" of a Hindu consisted of explaining something or the other, I lost my inhibitions and began with questions...

A young Balinese became my primary teacher. One day I asked him if he believed that the history of Prince Rama – one of the holy books of the Hindus – is true.

Without hesitation, he answered it with "Yes".

"So you believe that the Prince Rama lived somewhere and somewhen?"

"I do not know if he lived", he said.

"Then it is a story?"

"Yes, it is a story."

"Then someone wrote this story – I mean: a human being wrote it?"

"Certainly some human being wrote it", he said.

"Then some human being could have also invented it", I answered and felt triumphant, when I thought that I had convinced him.

But he said: "It is quite possible that somebody invented this story. But true it is, in any case."

"Then it is the case that Prince Rama did not live on this earth?"

"What is it that you want to know?" he asked. "*Do you want to know whether the story is true, or merely whether it occurred?*"

"The Christians believe that their God Jesus Christ was also on earth", I said, "In the New Testament, it has been described by human beings. But the Christians believe that this is the description of the reality. Their God was also really on Earth."

My Balinese friend thought it over and said: "I had been already so informed. *I do not understand why it is important that your God was on earth, but it does strike me that the Europeans are not pious. Is that correct?*"

"Yes, it is", I said.

Were we to disagree with the above dialogue, or assume answers we feel comfortable with, even here, the basic point is this: *we learnt that our attitudes towards 'the truth' of these stories are independent of our acceptance of these stories as our stories and as stories about 'our collective past'*. Whether or not some story about our past took place on earth or not, such a 'fact' is utterly irrelevant to accepting these stories. This attitude works as long as we are not brought up with the idea that the ground for accepting such stories is their 'historical truth'.

What happens when people make claims that 'rama sethu' exists, Ayodhya is situated somewhere in northern India and such like? What happens when such 'historical' claims begin to find their way into people's consciousness?

In the early phases, there is happiness and euphoria. Not because we can now say, "ah, after all, everything that Ramayana says is true". But because we feel our connections to the past have taken on tangible presence. We feel that we recognize these empirical markers because we have always been familiar with them. Dwaraka, Brindavana, Kurukshetra, Ayodhya... these are our cities and our past. Suddenly, there is exhilaration: it merely requires a few days journey to go to Kurukshetra! However, this is merely the first phase. What happens in the subsequent phase when this claim is pushed further, as it is invariably going to be?

Consider the following scenario. It becomes common 'knowledge' that the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas was a tribal war, fought somewhere in the north of India some three thousand years ago. And that 'rakshasa', 'vanara' merely named some or another tribe in India. Krishna was a dark-skinned upstart from some tribe; Rama was a king somewhere up north; Draupadi was a daughter from yet another tribe that practiced polygamy, and so on. In short, we discover that our epics and puranas are badly written historiographies that chronicle the lives of ordinary human beings like you and me. We discover what we knew all along: it is not possible to train the monkeys that swing from tree to tree to build a bridge between India and Sri Lanka.

Then the 'Dalit' and progressive intellectuals turn up. They tell us that some or another Brahmin poet merely described the work of the 'slaves' of a human king called 'Rama' as the work of 'monkeys'. By calling these slaves as 'monkeys', they add, the 'upper-caste' proves yet again its disdain and contempt for and the oppression of 'the Dalits'. As has been typical of the 'Aryans', the Brahmin priests were not even willing to consider such 'slaves' as human

beings. The same argument would then get applied to the Danavas and Rakshasas: we 'discover' that the 'Dravidians' were the Rakshasas and the Danavas of our epics.

Do not mistake the point I am making here. No factoid or even a set of factoids will ever lend truth-value to these claims. They would be mere surmises and guesses. But they will get pushed across as 'scientific' and 'historical' hypotheses that very soon end up becoming 'facts' about the Indian past. They will acquire the same status that the 'Indological' truths have today. For instance, which intellectual in the world challenges the claim that 'Buddhism' battled against 'Brahmanism'? Almost none. How many know of the circumstances that produced this 'guesswork' or even about the amount of Christian theological baggage required to sustain this claim? Alas, hardly any.

In exactly the same way, with such stories accompanying the growth of a new generation, which one of them will ever want to become a Bhakta of Rama, Krishna or Anjaneya? How many will go to their temples or even build them? When they grow up in the knowledge that 'kurukshetra' names a place somewhere in North India where the local tribes from the region fought a war fought during 500 B.C.E; when they grow up in the knowledge that a tribe called 'Nagas', from some remote part of India, also figure in an imaginary epic whose authoritative critical edition is published by some or another University Press in the US; when they 'know' that the local events in some remote city (Bikaner, Ayodhya...) were presented to their credulous forefathers as 'the history' of India; when they know all these and more, what would be their connection to what we consider as our past today?

Perhaps, they would even end up being ashamed of their past and of their stories about the past: such stories confirm the worst that the world has told about India. Indian culture and her 'religions' were created to inflict massive injustice on fellow-human beings. 'Hinduism' would, of course, be the main culprit.

We are almost past the first phase. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar are initiating the subsequent phase. Instead of asking questions about the nature of 'historical truth'; instead of studying the religious culture where such questions originate from; instead, that is, of understanding the relationship between stories about the past and human communities, the ideologues of the Sangh Parivar want to establish the 'historicity' of our epics and stories. In the process of pushing this Christian theme, these ideologues will also achieve what Islam and Christianity have always desired: destruction of the 'pagan' and 'heathen' culture that India is. What the Muslim kings and the Evangelical Protestants could not achieve over centuries, the ideologues from the Sangh Parivar will achieve in a matter of decades.

In order to destroy the past of a people, all you need to do is to give them history. What is called 'history' today is a secularization of the Christian religion. Christianity (Islam, Judaism) is hostile to anything that is different from itself. Especially, what it considers Pagan and heathen. This hostility persists in its secularized form as well. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar, in their haste to capture political power, in their utter and total ignorance of the western culture, are pushing a Christian religious theme on to the Indian culture. Where explicitly Christian and Islamic attacks on the heathen culture of India failed, there, if left unopposed, this disguised attack on India will succeed. The saddest thing of it all is this: the Sangh Parivar genuinely believes that it is helping the Indian culture. Its ideologues are not; they are helping destroy the Indian culture.

So, it appears, the questions facing us are these: do we need a history that Christianity has written, or do we need to retain our past? What do Indians need?