

THE NATURE OF INDIAN HISTORY

This article deals with the nature of Indian History and the criticism on it. It lists popular opinions concerning the history of India and then goes on to describe how the history should be considered. Finally it questions the meaning of the 'past'.

It is said that Indians don't have any records of history and are loath to maintain any records. A lot of history is mumbo-jumbo, with a billion Gods and their ventures. The data is all mixed up with mythology, history, that it is not easy to define what has been Indian's history. Perhaps this may be true. But does that mean that Indians would not have been aware at all of their history if colonial contact was not at all there? Tough question. I think, Indians would have been aware of their history nevertheless, but in a very different way in which, myth, oral history, tales, factual events are mixed as a kaleidoscope of culture. Another way of looking at scientific historical 'facts' is sieving the subjective data from this kaleidoscope. The Indian way of recording and telling history was different from modern scientific attitude. And by present anthropological journals, one will realize that a lot of 'cultures' in fact depend on similar methods such as oral history, myths and legends to such as extent, that oral history has become one of the valid approaches to record, document and do research in Qualitative Studies. They argue the strengths of oral history over 'dry factual data' and proclaim that the subjectivity of this method is its strength rather than weakness.

So in this hindsight, one will be grateful to realize that Indian civilization has probably the longest recorded oral history from 1500 BCE and the organization of this oral history is intact enough to feel the proximity of the Vedic mind – just at one's doorsteps. Similarly, the countless Gods are said to be an indication of the inclusion of the 'indigenous' cultures with the Vedic civilization – early example of 'multiculturalism', one can add. There is a profound continuity and development of thought, if one decides to spend some time to understand the Vedas, epics, puranas and the shastras. It has everything – you name it and you will have it. The only requirement is of patience. So, if *this* is not a sign of history and cultural continuity, then what else is?

India represents a peculiar mix of history-culture-development matrix, but the model that India represents is not entirely unique. People may have valid reasons to complain about the dilapidated state of historic monuments in India. India needs workable toilets more than trying to retain historic monuments, some might also enthusiastically justify. Indeed much needs to be done, if one compares this state with the conservation efforts with other developed nations. However, pressures of urbanization and the population explosion are very much real for the developing economies like India. What should be retained in the name of national identity at the risk of forfeiting future developments for a growing population is a debatable issue. One must bear in mind that different contexts exist in different nations and there is no standard rule of thumb applicable for all and neither should one belittle the other. Successful examples of preservation efforts around the world are many times backed up by global funds, so one cannot be really sure who maintains the monument at a particular place and so the issue of relating a nation's pride with the monument or a ruin becomes hazy and has a lesser co-relation with the geographical incidence. Other contexts may experience such negligible rise in population that they may not face the challenge of preservation over development concerns.

Contrast this scenario with India and the issue is not that simple to resolve (but it is not impossible either). Anyway, I also think, that 'history', 'culture', 'tradition', or 'continuity' (whatever one prefers to call) is also displayed in the day-to-day customs, greetings, manners, dress, food, songs and so on. In so many ways India lives Her history (or engages with Her past) on a daily basis and Her history is not just restricted to some detached dilapidated ruin or an academic discussion to some students or in some heavily publicly funded museums. India breathes history simultaneously as She looks forward and churns out the present. There is probably no distinction between Her past and present (at least it is not very strictly compartmentalised). The prayers one says are from the Vedas and Shastras (3000 years old by the way), the concept of God or a Spirit is from stone age times, the puja practices one does at home were codified ritually about a 1000 years before, the Ramayana and Mahabharat which are an inspiration to the generations of Indians are 2200 years old. The Ganapati idol was conceived probably around 100 AD. The fire altars, marriage ceremonies, thread ceremonies, the necklace, bindi.....all are ancient. Here, in India, people have managed to find answers to a Reality which is eternal and forever present. And this answer is retold exactly in the same manner since 2000 years or more, so that the present generations can derive meaning from it.

This is not to imply anybody's superiority. In fact, this is all a political game. Which civilization is greater than who will not yield any output. If one is really concerned about the past, then it will make sense if the past is used to inform the critical issues of the present, such as that of the environment. One should realize that there hasn't been any separate past or a future in humanity. It is only our projection that we have divided 'time' in this way. What we are today (in terms of our wants, desires, short comings, motives, political games and so on) were exactly what we were in the past and what we will be in the future. We don't improve anything, neither we fall down to something obnoxious. We remain the same. So the question of a glorious past and a hopeful future is redundant for any political society wishing to state its claim. I believe that one should get on with the prospect of living the present truthfully, that's enough for a start.

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