

# Interview with Gyanendra Pandey

Aditya Pratap Deo, IAS

**What are the main debates and issues in Indian/South Asian historiography today and to what developments in recent years are they connected?**

It will help to take this question in relation to a larger one: what have been the main issues and concerns driving South Asian/Indian historiography from its early days in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? The answer, categorical in the colonial period and more implicit afterwards, has to do with the qualifications for and preconditions of modernity, and the need to challenge and overturn the colonialist view of India's backwardness and unpreparedness for self-government. That question survives, if in modified form: so some of the most important historiographical debates and controversies of recent decades have had to do with the potentialities of capitalist development (was there an Indian feudalism, for example), the existence of a historical consciousness and tradition of history writing, the possibility of national unity and secularism in a multi-lingual, multi-religious and caste-ridden society, and the political agency and potential of poor, and largely illiterate, peasants and workers.

I think the main debates in South Asian historiography still follow these tracks – except that they have been greatly extended, and now include long neglected and marginalized sections of the population. So today we have a great deal of research and publication on the Dalit (and more broadly, non-Brahmin) past, on women's struggles, and tribal peasant life, art and politics, to mention a few broad themes. In addition, the question of the environment has now emerged as a major focus for investigation, since this has seriously complicated the already knotty problem of 'development'.

Your question on the main debates and issues in today's historiography, then, may have a short answer: whose development, whose nation, whose history – and how is this being pursued?

**How would you assess the Subaltern Studies interventions (given that from the beginning it was less**

**one project and more a collection of diverse questions critical of the state of historiography then) from a 21st Century perspective? What do you think are the legacies for our times of the various questions raised in the Subaltern Studies?**

The answer to this question is linked to the previous one. As various commentators in Subaltern Studies and other critical writings have noted, Indian historiography has been animated by an anguished relationship to the question of modernity: what kind of modernity (nationalism, democracy, secularism, liberalism) is appropriate to a vast country like India, with its great diversity, persistent hierarchies, inequality, poverty, and the need to set these right in a changed dispensation? We have, rightly, been dissatisfied with ideas of 'modernity' that have been handed down to us, or preached by other countries; and many groups and individuals have engaged in serious and ongoing debate on the question of the social, economic and political conditions necessary to establish 'real' democracy – and opportunities for all.

The Subaltern Studies intervention was clearly part of that endeavor. It came in the wake of Naxalbari (and the peasants struggle in Vietnam and China, protests against the Vietnam War, Black struggle, women's struggle, and the student movement in Western Europe and North America). We were concerned with the question of social transformation in a predominantly peasant society, which was also shot through with caste and religious sensibilities; and the critique of statist, bourgeois and even traditional Marxist historiography followed from that.

Those questions remain, although as I've said, they have acquired dimensions and depths that the early iterations of Subaltern Studies were hardly aware of: we had a very limited understanding of gender and caste, and some relatively uncomplicated notions of recovering subaltern consciousness and agency. Much of that changed over time, as Gramsci and Foucault, and postcolonial theory and feminist writings and minority

histories, emerged as powerful interlocutors. And, at the same time, urgent questions were posed by lower caste and women's movements in India, and by struggles over minority rights, encroachment on forest people's lands, state oppression of border peoples, and so on.

**Which of the criticisms directed at it do you think were significant and which missed the point completely?**

The 'off the point' criticisms shouldn't detain us: that this or that contribution wasn't really History, or that it wasn't really Leftist; the point was precisely to investigate what an Indian Leftism, an Indian struggle for social, economic and cultural transformation, might consist of. The pervasiveness of 'feudality' in Indian society, incredible tolerance of hierarchy and debasement, the widespread incidence of rape and corruption, are issues we still need to confront.

I've already indicated the many areas in which the early Subaltern Studies' arguments were inadequate, and even naïve. Fortunately, contributors to the volumes were critical of themselves, and willing to take on new problems and new perspectives. Indian society and politics was showing the way to researchers and scholars, and I hope we've learned a little as our projects, and our research and writing, have matured!

**How would you look back at *Construction of Communalism* from the conjunctures today?**

It is interesting that you should pick on the 'Communalism' book, rather than 'Ascendancy' or 'Remembering Partition' or my later work. But that probably reflects the context of the question. The problem of what was called 'communalism' continues to bedevil us, and seems to have got worse in many ways – with communalist parties and groups coming to hold power in so many of our institutions, at so many levels.

I think one of the more useful points made in the *Construction of Communalism* was that communalism – that of Jinnah's Muslim League, or the Hindu Mahasabha, or today's BJP – was best seen as a kind of nationalism: that is where it drew much of its energy and strength. I want to make it clear that nationalism comes in many stripes: the Hindu, and Muslim, and Sikh, and (in Sri Lanka) the Buddhist version was, and is, a rather warped and exclusivist kind of nationalism, not so much looking to build a new community of interests and opportunity and hope, but rather seeking to preserve what these nationalisms call our tradition, heritage, religion, languages, 'culture', ways of life, even as they forge and insist upon ever narrower, reductionist and flattened versions of all these. That is the fundamental problem

with the identity politics – including a national identity politics – that has been a defining feature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that continues to reign in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Hence, all these damaging calls for British exit from Europe (Britain for Britons – as if we know who those are), America for Americans first (not Native Americans), India for the Hindus (who's included in that category? and when?), and so on and so forth.

In my view, the critique of nationalism remains imperative: perhaps it is even more important today than it was when the *Construction of Communalism* first appeared. We need to challenge the underlying credo of nationalism: that our identities are somehow eternal, given from birth, fixed and immutable. Until we acknowledge that all communities are *constructed* (and contested), and that the struggle to form 'community' is a fundamental and ongoing part of the human endeavor, we will continue to encourage a narrow and intolerant view of visitors, strangers, immigrants and even neighbours who are not exactly like us (without bothering to ask, what is 'exactly like us', and who is 'us?'). Until we change this unhistorical but pervasive 'common sense', we are not going to be able to celebrate the richness and diversity of beliefs, practices and ways of being, that is to say, of human life.

**In which directions has your own work moved in the last two decades?**

You can probably answer that better than I can. As I see it, my work has always been concerned with questions of citizenship and marginalized populations, and how these have been constructed and perpetuated – often through violence of one kind or another. Over time, these investigations have led me into a more forthright consideration of the categories and concepts we work with: less well-understood concepts such as subalternity and difference, as well as apparently well-understood ones like history and the archive.

In my earlier books, I looked at peasant involvement in the national movement, at the category and consequences of communalism, and the meaning and fallout of Partition. I was working on various aspects of the history of Dalit struggle when I moved to the United States in 1998. With that move, I extended my investigation of marginality and citizenship, and history-writing and its assumed archive, to the history of the US along with that of India. It seemed important to me to engage seriously with the history and politics of the society and people I now lived among, and not focus exclusively on the history and politics (and the making of a revolution) 8000 miles away. That is what led to my *History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and Difference in India and the United States*. And I at least have learned a

great deal from juxtaposing these very different histories, which of course crisscross, interconnect and share many common challenges in this age of 'globalization' and 'human rights'.

**What has been your experience in your effort to dialogue, from a South Asian History vantage, with historians and histories engaged with questions concerning the marginalized in the US?**

Well, the first thing we learn is what we have long known – that people in the more advanced capitalist societies of the West, the erstwhile First World, know much less about the rest of the world than the rest of the world knows about them. But we also learn, as I said in response to your last question, that our own knowledge of the West tends to be fairly un-nuanced, and often superficial: for example, we don't allow for the many Americas, and the people in many different conditions, and the many different kinds of struggle even within America, that go into the making of an 'America' that is, fortunately, still acknowledged to be changing and open to debate.

Among the first questions I heard from historians of the US when they engaged with Subaltern Studies and other South Asian scholarship was the following: 'Why should we use the word 'subaltern'? What would we gain from it?' My answer was that there was no call upon anyone, in India or the US or anywhere else, to use the word at all, but that the query itself gave rise to a more interesting question. Why had South Asian scholars felt the need for an umbrella category like 'subaltern' (or, earlier, the revolutionary working class and peasantry), while historians of the US felt satisfied doing the same kind of work on marginalized and subordinated populations under discrete labels such as labour history, Black history, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and so on? That divergence, it seems to me, has something to do with inherited social and political conditions, including the strength of 'local' democracy in the USA, and inherited traditions of organizing and writing history in the two countries. And, perhaps most importantly, it says something about the greater and lesser comfort that critics and scholars in the two lands have with the 'modernity' and 'democracy' they have inherited.

In any event, the juxtaposition of very different kinds of historical experiences and political struggles, even as they respond to similar national and global, 'religious' and rationalist, challenges and demands, seems to open up many new questions about our own histories and struggles (and our own blind spots).

**You recently organized a conference on the state of democracy. What were the key issues you focused on**

**and what was the general drift of discussions there?**

The context for the conference is clear: the ascendancy of right-wing chauvinist and authoritarian tendencies in many countries throughout the world, the trust that large numbers of people (in India, the USA, Russia, Turkey...) seem willing to place in 'strongmen' who promise to deliver – or recover – 'greatness', and the reduction of 'democracy' in so many places to nothing but the holding of a 'relatively free and fair election' – whatever the bribery and corruption and money involved in swinging the results. The discussions had to do with the emergence and shameless acceptance of the growing divide between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent, the chauvinism and fear-mongering and religious rhetoric that is used to back it up, and the problems of organizing resistance to these tendencies. An underlying aspect of the discussion was the issue of how populations are increasingly distributed and classified in cities and countries across the world – what I have called 'segregation versus democracy' in a recent essay – and whether our frames and terms of analysis are adequate to these newly emerging conditions.

**How may one revisit the figure of the historian and the craft of history in the context of present-day challenges?**

It seems to me that critical historians have already been doing this for a long time now – thinking through the terms of analysis, chronological divisions, received ideas and beliefs about the pattern of world history (of which Europe was the unchallenged model), and received notions of the archive. They continue to challenge the inherited common sense of what was called History through close investigation of multiple and varied histories, with multiple and varied and not always obvious 'archives' – histories that were long denied the status of history, and archives denied the status of archive.

The new challenge today, or the much increased challenge, comes from the greatly expanded hold of the market and of anti-intellectualism. Fewer and fewer publishers want any history that isn't written in a straightforward narrative style, written in English, and written for the lowest common denominator – the people who travel through airport lounges, fancy malls and (though this seems less important now) railway stations. And fewer and fewer people believe that there is any need to read books, especially serious, 'academic' books. That is a considerable challenge: but critical histories have always been minority histories: that 'minority' may take on additional dimensions today, but minority histories will continue to be written – and they may yet contribute, in small ways, to changing the world.