

Conversation

Romila Thapar with Kumkum Roy and Rakesh Batabyal

This conversation with Romila Thapar, distinguished historian and intellectual, was recorded at her house in New Delhi. In a freewheeling discussion with KUMKUM ROY and RAKESH BATASYAL she expresses once again her major concerns as a historian and social thinker, but this time in a voice which is much more trenchant and also at times autobiographical. The Hindutva historians and practitioners of 'cultural studies' in particular come under the focus of her analysis.

Batabyal: Culture has always been an inseparable, embedded part of ancient Indian historical research. In what way do you think its definition has changed contours in the last ten or fifteen years?

Thapar: I would say that the most important change is in the *definition* of culture. We began, of course, with the notion of culture as it was developed by Orientalism, and the notion of a Hindu civilization, essentially seen as the basis of the foundation of Indian culture. And this was the dominant idea right through the nineteenth century: that it was a civilization with Sanskrit texts and the Hindu religion. With the coming of what has been called the nationalist direction or school of Indian history, there was a change in the definition of culture, which was inevitable. The change is in issues like the search for an identity — nationalism is very much concerned with the search for an identity, and this is often expressed in terms of a monolithic culture. There is a fear of plurality; i.e., how do you fit plural cultures into a mainstream national culture; therefore, the emphasis on a monolithic culture. In that context, it comes to be treated as something separate. Not only was it something separate but generally there was an association of the definition of culture with high culture — high culture almost to the exclusion of anything else. Therefore, cultural history is very seldom integrated into

general history. It is very common to come across, even today, departments of what is called ancient Indian history, culture and archaeology, as if culture is something out there. Cultural history, therefore, continues to play this role in the traditional history departments, and, I think, very strongly in the ideology of groups like the Sangh Parivar or in what one otherwise calls Hindutva history. Culture is something separate and distinctive, it is unchanging, it is idolatry of the Hindu past, it is antagonistic to Muslim contributions, and it is hostile to modernization in any essential sense.

Pasts and the Fragments

But alternatively cultural history, as I understand it at least, is being written about and taught by more historically sensitive historians who moved away from this Hindutva sort of definition and also from the nationalist definition of culture. I am *not* referring here to postmodernism and cultural studies; interestingly, these have not so far entered the debate on premodern Indian history. This is a question I have often asked and never received an adequate answer to: why is it that modern Indian history has been influenced by postmodernist thinking and what is broadly defined as cultural studies? I am referring to the studies which some of us are undertaking where cultural history is defined rather differently. In a sense, all

history is cultural history, if culture is defined, as it is frequently now, as the pattern of life of a society. There is no sharp distinction between 'popular' and 'high' cultures, but it is assumed that it is the pattern of life which constitutes culture. Therefore, I like to think that in a lot that I have done, the writing is *about the writing on pasts*. In fact, this is the title I am giving to a forthcoming collection of essays, which in many ways would normally be regarded as papers on history but which I see as important to the understanding of what was the pattern of life of societies in the pasts. I am deliberately using the word pasts in the plural. A society broadly defined, e.g., Indian society, consists of multiple societies, multiple manifestations and, therefore, of many cultures. And, quite apart from the difference in the definition of culture as a pattern/way of life, this is a crucial difference that has come up — that a society is not monocultural. I would insist on the placement of the fragment, to use the fashionable term, in the whole, in the totality. And to that extent I differ very much from those who are quite happy only looking at the fragment, for I think that one of the problems for them is the question of generalization. If you are looking only at the fragment, you do not generalize. And for me generalization is still an essential feature of historical research

It is being argued that some of the new areas in cultural studies are rejecting universalism because it is Eurocentric and therefore it is in some ways inimical to the understanding of areas outside Europe. I find it a little problematical, because I think that in the rejection, and what the rejection is being replaced by, there is also Eurocentricism. I find it interesting that the trajectory often is from Marx to Derrida and not to someone else.

The second thing that bothers me is the question of reclaiming the past. Can we really reclaim the past? We

can wipe out aspects that we think are negative, for example, some of the attitudes to the perspectives of Orientalism or of colonial studies of the Indian past. Can we reclaim that precolonial past or can we at the most be more precise about it by knowing that we have until now been looking at the precolonial past through the frame of colonial perceptions? The colonial experience is now a part of our past. And therefore an awareness of a precolonial past is really all that we can get, and we can use various ways of arriving at this awareness.

Related to this question is of course the issue of how we have up till now accepted a certain ordering of knowledge, which emerged out of European enlightenment. There is now a call for questioning this ordering of knowledge, and all ordering of knowledge, as we know, has to be continually questioned. What I find a little curious is that those who call most loudly for the questioning of this order, because it is based on enlightenment thinking, do so in fact on the basis of the order which enlightenment thinking has provided within it. I think that the debate on secularism in India is very much of this nature where the categories that are frequently used by people arguing and taking various positions are categories that came out of enlightenment thinking, and we have not thought of different categories as it were.

Roy: Would you like to add something to this observation about the premodern past being avoided by those who do cultural studies?

Thapar: I think there are two things in this issue of why the premodern past has not come into the limelight of postmodernism. One is that it is more remote. Their understanding of the past is a much more immediate understanding, it is the colonial understanding. The issues that are raised are related much more to this kind of period.

I think also that since

postmodernism bases itself so strongly on looking at text, you really can only understand the premodern past if you are well grounded in the languages of those texts. And generally those who have a theoretical background of postmodernism are not well grounded in the languages of India's premodern past.

Interpreting the Text

Roy: What do you think about the interpretation of the epics? This issue comes to the fore because to some extent the postmodernists convert everything into texts. What are the problems in this conversion?

Thapar: This is, as I was saying, applying modern theoretical approaches to the study of the past. What I mean by this really is that, to take a simple problem, epic literature, most historians who deal with literature know it was not composed in one go. Its characteristic is that it is culled from different fragments, and there may eventually be one poet who actually puts it together. Even then, a substantial part of it is either not composed by that poet or is composed at different periods and added on. The *Mahabharata* is a typical example of this pattern of bardic fragments being put together and people adding bits and pieces. In fact, there is a debate on the difference between the epic and pseudo-epic: the narrative and the didactic sections. This, therefore, makes the text a difficult proposition to analyze, just as a 'text' for postmodern theorists would presumably do, i.e., you take up a section of the epic and analyze it simply in terms of its own interrelationships. As a historian, my instinct would be to ask where does this section fit in.

I am coming back to the notion of the fragment and the whole, and the need to correlate the two. If it is telling us something, that something does have a historical context. And this, I think, has been my big problem in the past with people who have worked on literature and described it as just a literary text. It is perfectly legitimate to take an epic and say it has beautiful verse, etc. But texts also reflect a human condition, a context. For me that context is extremely important; hence, my problems with those who feel that the context can be set aside or it need not be foregrounded. It is precisely this lack of emphasis on the historical context that results in texts being in some ways ideologically abused and misused. The way in which the

Ramayana narrative has been brought into the politics of today is very much because the studies on the text have largely been studies where the historical context has not been sufficiently emphasized, where the text is not rooted in the background from which it has come.

Then there is the question, 'what is a text?' Modern theorists have illuminated the whole issue of how one looks at a text. There is a significant departure from the way texts were used in the past. No historian today can pick up information and say this text says 'x', and that is it, without going into the question of why he/she says 'x' and providing some explanation for it.

What worries me quite enormously though is the idea that any statement made is to be treated as a 'text'. I am old fashioned enough to be insistent that there is a difference between what is intended as a text and what is incidental, however important that incidental statement may be. And, therefore, that distinction is very necessary.

Batabyal: I will combine two of the issues that you have just raised. There are pasts. And being epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have in them layers of these pasts. Now, without looking into the different pasts in concrete terms and thereby locating those epics in their respective historical contexts, some historians and writers on epics have tried to circumvent this problem by just talking about many *Ramayan*s or many *Mahabharatas*. Is that sufficient to look for a context?

Thapar: No, I do not think it is sufficient. I have done it myself, in the sense that I have done a long essay on the different versions of *Ramayana*. But the purpose and function of that essay was to try and locate them at a historical moment, and argue that the history of *that historical moment* is being reflected in the form the text takes. In other words, no *Ramayana* is identical with another; the Jain *Ramayana* is quite different from the Valmiki *Ramayana*, which is substantially different from the Tulasi *Ramayana*. Each of these texts, then, has to be placed in the context of its history: when it was written, why it was written in that form.

Role of the Historian

Roy: Can you pursue this a bit? In a certain sense, what you witnessed over the last few years, at least till the destruction of the Babri Mosque

and so on. A certain kind of construction of *Ramayana* has taken place. On the one hand, one can see that you are asking for a contextualising of this new construction of the *Ramayana*; but beyond that, you have intervened quite substantially on the debate around it. What do you think is the role of the historian in these circumstances?

Thapar: Well, at one level it is understanding the context, but at another level as a member of society one has to explain what the new contextualization is about. There has to be awareness as far as the historian is concerned of the role that this new contextualization, whether good or bad, has to play in terms of the society to which it refers. The case of the creation of the new *Ramayana* takes as its society virtually all of India, which makes the relevance of the contextualization and the need to explain it all that much greater.

Batabyal: But it is not just historians who try to understand history. For example, a person like Tagore, who believed that society, and not the state, was the center of life in India, while trying to understand Indian history insisted on *Ramayana* being the major text. At almost the same time, Bhandarkar was looking at *Mahabharata* as the major text for Indian history. Why do you think there is this difference of perception regarding these two texts and their potential use and abuse? I am posing this question in a particular context where state is posited against the civil society and vice versa.

Thapar: I think this is a very complex question. To start with your second question first, the positing of the state and civil society is something we all experienced and were aware of as part of nationalism. With a lot of subconscious acceptance of change in civil society and a much more deliberate acceptance of change in the state, and the two are kept separate. Now, my position is very much one where you cannot separate them. Today, the civil society is as important as the state and it is the civil society in a sense that ensures the proper functioning of the state. There are occasions historically when the state behaves in a particular way which is disastrous for civil society and the civil society has to take an anti-state position. Ideally speaking the two should be properly integrated for the state to function properly.

As far as the first point goes, it

depends on how you read these texts. In a sense, we certainly need to acquaint ourselves much more with the thinking of those who were writing at that time, like Tagore and Bhandarkar, but it also has something to do with the way in which they were reading the texts. I could argue that *Ramayana* is in fact a much stronger defense of the monarchical state than of civil society, whereas in the *Mahabharata*, I have argued over and over again, the kind of societies that have been projected as ideal societies are not strongly monarchical ones. They are societies in which issues of kinship relations, clan relations and embedded economies are much stronger. So at which point in time and how you are looking at the texts also needs to be addressed. If you are looking at the *Ramayana* in terms only of the kinds of social issues raised, then you see it as a text that is concerned with civil society. But if you are looking at it the way I am, that it is essentially a confrontation between the monarchical system and the clan system, then there are different issues that come to the forefront.

Text and Meaning

Roy: This is a question which has bothered me for quite some time. Now that we have so many meanings being read into texts, and texts have been widened so much, the meanings are very often translated into different agendas as well. Do we have any means of differentiating between legitimate meanings and motivated ones?

Thapar: This worries me enormously as well. I simply cannot accept the whole issue of equal status of all meanings, that any number of readings are all equally legitimate. I think you have to have a priority. This is again my empirical positivism coming to surface. But some priority regarding meanings which are more meaningful than others is really quite necessary. I mean it is fine to argue that multicausality exists and therefore the historian should not pick up one cause/meaning and say this is more important. In many ways, it is quite untenable. But if you are doing an analysis and there is a multiplicity of meanings, obviously some meanings make greater sense. It is after all the meaning or meanings based on the most effective evidence. (I was going to say 'the most authentic evidence' but people will jump down my throat.) The nature of the evidence, of the argument, to me is very important.

Batabyal: For the last couple of years, one feels, the notion of civilizational history, which was thoroughly rejected by serious historians way back in the early parts of this century, is coming back with some force. It is being pushed academically by conservatives in America like Samuel Huntington, and, then, there is a section of people that talks about global history, for example Bruce Mazlish. Joining the bandwagon are a large number of Indian teachers in the US and Canadian universities. Where do you think such a history fits into the current historical discussion and practice?

Thapar: I have great problems with civilizational history because I have a problem with civilization as a concept. It is an eighteenth-nineteenth century concept in the European thought. And as it grows, there is an attempt to try and demarcate the world into 'x' number of civilizations, while its counterpart is primitive societies. So the value judgement in saying this society is civilized, whereas the other society is not. I think the reason for this in nineteenth century was partly to put societies onto a grid and understand them; that grid has changed now.

A very strong basis of identifying civilizations was that this had to be a society that had cultural characteristics that were recognizable, whether it was language, religion, dress, or behaviour, and then generalizations on that entire society using particular items as an index were passed. The problem that I have with this kind of notion is that first of all civilizations are multiple. You cannot talk about a single strand in a civilization as being the characteristic. There are multiple ways in which society expresses itself. Bits and pieces come together in different forms.

Secondly, the notion of civilization is static. The Hindu civilization is associated with India and it is suggested that it just went on and on in the same way, and that is historically absolutely unacceptable.

The third problem that I have is that societies in the past, as I often say, are like psychedelic pictures; they keep on changing their forms. There are all kinds of interactions, interfaces taking place. It is a continual, pulsating movement which is not conveyed in the notion of civilization, and this is ahistorical and contrary to historical experience.

Agencies of Change

Batabyal: The notion of civilization,

as you said, is static. In such a notion of history, the agency of change is not visible. In that context, where do the agencies of change lie? Till recently we had the agency of class or of community which could bring changes in the third world.

Thapar: I think agencies of change are also multiple. I do not think there is any one agency. First of all, categories like class cannot be defined as a single area. If you take for example the evolution of the Indian middle class, what has gone into the making of the middle class from the middle of the nineteenth century has been a whole range of very different castes, social backgrounds, economic interests, professions, etc. I think even in the crystallizing of a class there are different facets that go on to make that class. And because of that, there is a constant change in the nature of that class. The middle class behaves in a particular way for may be a century or so, and then it begins to change and behave in a different way. These are not really self-contained concepts. So the changes that are likely to come are varied. A very crucial area that we as historians have not given enough attention to is the history of change in caste. We have done histories of caste: this caste had a high status in that period, and its status was lower in this period. But what was the dynamic of that change? We have not really studied that, and in a sense even sociologists have not looked at it sufficiently, in terms of a variety of social groups within which these changes are taking place. That is a very important component in determining some of the ways in which the changes will occur in Indian society.

Roy: Much of your work has focussed on the state. Why do you think the state is a central institution? Also, how have perceptions of the state and the empire changed over the span of last thirty years?

Thapar: To answer this question, I have to be biographical. Remember, people of my generation were in school during the national movement. I finished my schooling just after independence. We were deeply imbued with two things: one was to fight for independence, in the national movement, and the other was the coming nation-state. The coming nation-state was the blueprint of our utopia. Right through, we grew up with the idea that the world functions on the basis of a

good state. I think that when I first went to England to do my thesis and I picked on the Mauryan period, there were two things. One was my interest in this question of a very strong individualistic ruler belonging to a particular religion. To what extent did that religion determine policies? In other words, what was the difference between the personal religion of a ruler and his religious identification as a public figure?

The other thing was the Mauryan state, because we were all brought up with the idea that right from the beginning of Indian history there was the state. It was very essential to have such a centralized state. We saw the imprint of the British Indian state which was strong and centralized. Although the two interests coincided in my book, it was not as if I was only concerned with the state. I was very much concerned with the individual as a ruler in the context of the history and society of that period. Over the years, one began to look more critically at early Indian texts and arrived at theories about how different kinds of societies and histories do not begin with the state system. One began to critique the notion that Vedic texts talk about constitutional monarchies. Once you start doing that, start looking much more critically, examining the several agencies and foci of power, you begin to understand that state evolves gradually. Therefore my interest in the study of the evolution of the state and at what point one may say that there was a state.

On this, there has been a big debate. I argue that the state comes in when you have various aspects of the state recorded and therefore the developed monarchical state was the beginning of the state system. Others will say that oligarchies, what I call proto-state systems, were also state systems. The important point in this discussion is the fact that there is a process of evolution towards the state, whether it takes the form of a certain Marxist model of evolution or whether it takes any other form that has been suggested. Whilst I was working on that, I began to reconsider the whole question of a centralized state for an early system. Because one began to see that a centralized state had certain preconditions which probably did not exist. And so I went back and began to look at the texts again. I gradually began to argue that what you get is a system where there are differences...And then the idea developed that perhaps in the Mauryan period you had these three

distinctive categories where there was one area centrally and directly controlled, the others less so. There were peripheral areas from which the administration simply creamed off the resources and did not bother much about local changes.

This tied in with other issues that I tried to develop in the book *From Lineage to State*, that the process of historical change in India is very much one in which what we may call a centralized, caste bound society encroached into areas of 'the lesser societies', as they were described in the texts, which were different societies. In a sense, the evolution is not necessarily from earliest times to now, but also a horizontal, lateral change where certain types of societies are beginning to spread and encroach over and into others.

Textbooks

Roy: You mentioned that your interest in the state partly stemmed from certain kinds of perceptions and then there was a critical shift in your ideas. Could you elaborate on that?

Thapar: To me perhaps the most important factor was the national leadership, and I would choose particularly Gandhi and Nehru, for they had a blueprint for the future that none of the others did to that extent. So, there was the consciousness that we have been struggling all along, talking about the need for a nation-state, now it had arrived and we were going to construct it. In the process of construction, there was a certain consciousness that economic growth was a great thing, partly because we had this galaxy of absolutely brilliant economists who were all committed to economic growth. We would talk to them about the future that was round the corner, an absolutely rosy one. Till the early sixties, the feeling that the state will do something to change Indian society and take it to where we wanted it to go persisted. From the late sixties onwards, the disillusionment began to set in when somehow things just did not go that way, and then gradually of course it became worse and worse. The big shock was the Emergency when we suddenly realized that the state that we had thought as the blueprint for the future had backtracked and was being destroyed. At that point, through the experience of Emergency what came through very strongly was the centrality and the importance of civil society. If the quality and character of the state were to be secured and protected, it had to be through a very

active civil society. And this is something that is a great disaster today, in 1998; we do not have a strong civil society.

Roy: You have taught for all these years. What do you think are the constraints in terms of the institutional structures, etc., as far as history teaching goes. How much do they impinge on historical research?
Thapar: As far as institutional frameworks go, and history teaching in particular, the most depressing thing has been that in all these years, thirty odd years of lecturing and sitting on committees, there has not been a sufficiently radical change in the way history is taught. The syllabus, the content of what is meant by history, the understanding of history, and the relationship of the past to the present, which is fundamental to the understanding of history, remains unchanged.

Why has that not happened? I think for two reasons. One, is that we have far too many universities and we do not know how to maintain standards. Many of the universities have in the past been opened for political reasons, during election time, and they have just become agencies of state patronage without really becoming centers where any work of excellence can be carried out.

The other aspect is that history has been hijacked by a whole lot of other activities which have tended to pull behind the discipline. Let me give you one example, the competitive exams. The kind of history that is required of students in the competitive exams is a caricature of history. I remember many years ago we were asked whether we would sit and change the syllabus. We did. And there was such a howl, from candidates, from teaching shops, etc., that they went back and started the same old thing... This is a prime case of a situation where institutions other than the university and colleges are, in fact, detracting from the advances that historical research and historical teaching could make in India.

The problem starts from school. And that is really where many years ago we decided to make an effort. And there again, if I may be autobiographical, in the early sixties some of us did a survey of the textbooks that were used in the schools of Delhi. We were appalled at how bad they were... We wrote a very passionate letter to the then education minister M. C. Chagla and said that something should be done

to change this, at least start from the textbooks. Chagla promptly wrote back that since we were so concerned and we were a bunch of historians, we should write the new textbooks. Some of us took time off and wrote textbooks for middle schools.

These textbooks came under a strong ideological attack from Hindutva historians who argued that we were trying to spread Marxism, which was an absolutely laughable argument because one does not spread Marxism through six standard texts. All that we did was to bring a little rationality into the discussion of history, medieval history in particular. I am not saying that these are the ideal textbooks. *I think that the books that have been produced by the Eklavya group are far superior to ours.* They have paid attention to a lot of things that we should have paid attention to but did not think of in those days. But our textbooks were the start in that direction, making a statement that history is a serious discipline and this is one way it should be looked at in schools.

The basic thing about writing school textbooks in history is that you have got to force the child who is reading it to think. Unfortunately, we have been brought up to not question. Certainly the majority of our textbooks are what I call historical catechism. There are known answers and there are known questions, and the child is simply supposed to learn those answers by heart and answer these questions... The big attack on me was why I have mentioned that there was beef eating in the Vedic period. So, I quoted chapter and verse and said, 'what do we do with this?' The answer came back, 'yes, yes, even if there was, even if beef was eaten, we should not tell the children that.' To which I said that it was much more honest to say to the children that it was eaten at one stage and then it was prohibited and explain why the change occurred.

'Kis ki Adalat?'

This attitude of 'one question-one answer' and that is all you need to know in history continues to this day in adult circles as well. The attack on us was that we were being ideological, and a lot of people said that what we needed to do was to change the ideology. That is the Hindutva approach. We do not need to change the ideology here. This is a question of essential explanation of what the discipline is about. Now, this is what I mean by 'affecting the

adult view as well', and this is something I would like you to keep in the interview if you can. A few weeks ago, I watched a programme on Zee TV called *Aap Ki Adalat*. What was the programme? There was one historian, one journalist and there was the so-called moderator. The journalist was needling the historian and trying to corner him because the journalist obviously had very strong Hindutva views and the historian was, what he called, a secular historian. The needling went on. The journalist at one point said something to the effect, 'you say, you and your gang of leftist, secular historians say, that beef was eaten in the Vedic period. Where is the evidence?' The historian said there is ample evidence. There are lots of references to this. 'No, no, no. You quote one. Give me one reference.' The historian said that 'look, we do not carry references around in our head, but if you want to know I will send you a whole list tomorrow.' 'No, no. We want you to tell us right now.' Then somebody from the audience gets up with four Vedic texts and says, 'open them up and tell us where is the evidence.' The historian said that look this is not the way history is researched. 'O no, no. You do not know the reference,' shouts came. He said that the whole issue was incorrect. 'There is no beef eating,' they decided at the end. Then they turn around to him and short of physically beating him, browbeat him with the question, 'Was Aurangzeb a religious bigot? Answer yes or no.' And this went on at least half a dozen times. That was the only question. Was Aurangzeb a religious bigot? Answer yes or no. And I sat here absolutely horrified and saying that this is precisely what we have been fighting against. History is not a discipline in which you call a question, and answer yes or no. There is a poor historian trying to explain that there are subtleties and nuances. It is no longer a question whether there are secular leftist historians or Hindutva historians; it is the very essentials and the very nature of the discipline which are attacked in this country. It is fine if you want to have a discussion on what the *Satapatha Brahmana* really means. One can sit and talk about it as a text, its authorship, audience and all the other things we were talking about in a perfectly reasonable manner. But, when you reduce knowledge to this kind of catechism, I think it is the end. Then the discipline is finished, and that is really what worries me about

the kinds of changes that may happen if we are not careful. It will start at the school level but it will go all the way up and finally we will all be struck with being described as ideologically wild or motivated, so that this kind of totally valueless information which goes in the name of history gets projected.

Universities and Institutions

Batabyal: For the past few years there has been a growing decline of, as well as attack on, the credibility of the university system here. This coincides with the acquisition of a degree of legitimacy and importance by certain institutes and researchers who have a close association and collaboration with organizations and institutions of the developed countries. The visibility that this constantly enlarging section has begun to attract seems to be disproportionate to their manifested intellectual and social responsibility. They appear to be part of a global community of floating intellectuals who are parasitic on the societies they come from and study. In the light of this, how do you think can the university system regain the academic initiative it has been losing over the years and root the academic inquiry organically back into the society? One of the very visible attacks on history as a discipline is from this side.

Thapar: As I was saying earlier, the postmodernist theory has been much more effective in terms of attracting modern historian than the premodern historian. One of the questions one could ask in this connection is whether there is a hesitancy to question the theories of Hindutva history. Because, if you question the theories of Hindutva history as far as premodern history is concerned, you question the periodization of the Hindu and Muslim, you question the golden age of the Guptas, you question the theory that the Muslim intrusion into India was an unmitigated disaster -- that it destroyed Hindu civilization and so on. If you question all these, first of all you have to know your society very well. You cannot get away by talking about colonial and indigenous structures, etc. Secondly, if you question the Hindutva position, there is really no alternative except what they call the leftist secular position, as far as premodern history is concerned. You have to fall back then on the kind of writing that a lot of us have been doing. This whole discussion of the evolution of society, the way in which institutions

function, even the study of the texts. I am relating them to the historical context. This may be another reason why there is a hesitancy to go into premodern history, because either they would have to align themselves with the Hindutva kind of history or they would have to support leftist history. It will create problems for them. But as I say, this is not an explanation I am offering, but a question that I think needs to be asked in terms of this very curious business that premodern history is still outside the interest of a lot of them.

About the university and institutes, first of all a distinction has to be made between the two. The universities in a sense are performing a different and a much more difficult function. Universities have to recruit students across the board, they cannot be very selective. They have to recruit a large number of faculty. They have to work with a great deal that a limited research institute would say is not good enough/quality material, both as far as faculty and students are concerned. So the research institute in itself becomes rather specialized and different, and to that extent a little distanced from the needs and functions of a larger society.

The other problem, of course, is that universities, with very few exceptions, have today become part of the game of politics. Whichever area you go to, there are very few universities that can really stand outside and say that we are not involved in patronage from the state government. Percentages of certain castes whom they recruit as administrative staff and faculty, the use of the local language; this is, of course, not something that an institute has to bother with. The institutes are small enough to be divorced from a lot of this and manage to maintain a certain autonomy. So the social responsibility of institutes, in a sense, is far lesser and has become even lesser over the years. This is because they assume that universities alone have been socially responsible and so they can carry on with pure research; that is one of the things written into the structure of these institutes.

There is also very little ploughing back of people from institutes into universities. This is again because the institutes have a certain privileged position; there is a tendency to either try and get a job within an institute or in a similar institute somewhere else. And these

days a lot of NGOs are beginning to move in and pick up people. How does one sort this out? One drastic solution would be to have a moratorium on new universities. No more for the next generation, until there is an improvement in the standards. But there are other ways in which it can be done, for example, even in the discipline of history; the updating of the courses and syllabi should help to improve the standards. Every ten years, the department should go through this exercise.

Much more important, I think, is to spend major sums on libraries and reading facilities, which is the lowest priority in all universities. Also, integrate more closely with the issues of civil society. The university should be much more tied into the functioning of civil society than the state. Whereas it is closely tied into the functioning of the state at the moment because its funding and patronage come from the state. In fact, it is a terrible dilemma, for I have often thought about whether a university can really distance itself from the ideology of the state, whatever that ideology happens to be. Is the alternative, then, private funding? An ideology will be equally impinging in this case. What is the solution when there is this constant demand?

But there are other ways of looking at this problem, in the sense that you can diversify the functions of the university, which we have not yet begun to think about. Does every university have to teach the same subjects in the same way? Or can we say that within a state, there will be, for example, one university that will specialize in the literature of this language, or another university that will specialize in teaching sociology, another university will specialize in another branch of social sciences or some other subject? So there is not a multiplication all the time, and there is a consciousness of putting funding into areas where some degree of specialized research and knowledge can go up.

Globalization

The other issue that you raised was on the question of researchers looking elsewhere. Yes, I have often asked the question about all this talk about globalization and transnationalism, which I do not object to. I mean, it's fine to have global knowledge; if you want to become part of a global human internet, that is your choice. But the people indulging in this have to be very

careful in drawing a distinction between genuine globalization of knowledge and self-projection. And I think in many cases where there is a commitment to transnationalism, the commitment is much more to self-projection than to the globalization of knowledge. I wouldn't know how to illustrate this except by perhaps a rather cranky illustration. Thirty years ago, there were a bunch of us who were described as radical historians who took time off and wrote textbooks for schools. Because we thought this was an important enterprise. Today there are many sub-disciplines within the discipline of history, people who argue that they have taken history forward enormously and have revolutionized the understanding of history. Would these people take three years off and write school texts? This is a question one would like to ask them. That is really the crucial choice. It is fine to revolutionize the discipline of history. But who are you doing it for? Are you doing it for an international audience or are you doing it for the discipline as it is being taught in your society? If you say that you are doing it for the discipline as it is being taught in your own society, you have to get down to the nitty-gritty and explain at school level, undergraduate level, and at teachers' training level what the revolution is all about. And I think until you get that right, the fear and suspicion will always remain that transnationalism is self-projection.

I think when one talks about the globalization of knowledge and when one talks about being understood across the board, there has to be some — to just take history for the time being — concern regarding your own dialogue with your colleagues, Indian historians. Those who have this dialogue with their colleagues in India should reflect this dialogue in their dialogue with colleagues outside India. I think this is important because the direction in which the globalization of knowledge has gone so far is that we are all at the receiving end of something that is coming from outside... There is a tendency to say you know who is fashionable out there, and start using that. This is not something which is starting now. This is something that goes back earlier. There have been Marxist phases of that. There were times, in my early days, when I was a student, one would pick up a book by a Marxist historian on land relations, and it was a language that was incomprehensible. But over the years

those books have got left behind, and there are other Marxist histories of India which are and continue to be extremely relevant. I think similarly, with this kind of globalization of knowledge, one has to be clear as to whether one is talking about those who are living in fashion or those who are really investing knowledge.

Batabyal: In this context, the question that is becoming extremely relevant is the question of 'responsibility', and you have been hinting at that in your responses so far. In a recent debate historian Gabrielle Spiegel charged that though people are questioning and attacking the discipline of history in the name of postmodernism and poststructuralism, what they completely ignore is the very ethics of the profession. Though she did not expound on this, what do you consider as the ethics of the profession? What do you think constitutes that ethics?

Thapar: I will go back to something I said earlier that the ethics of the profession are, in a simplistic form, that you try and get all the evidence that you can if you are investigating a problem; that you do analyze it in as many ways as possible. Your readings should relate to the analysis but should also relate to your theoretical understanding of the question and the problem that you pose. Which means that your ultimate analysis and reading of that problem does have an order of priority and your concern is with things like historical causality. It does not matter even if you do not use these words because they are now very unfashionable, but that is what you are essentially concerned with. People today talk about the importance of perceptions as the be-all and end-all of historical investigation. Perceptions are what you acquire once you are on the way, for example when we talk about an embedded historical consciousness. So what are the perceptions that the Puranic texts or epics have about the past? But that is not historical explanation. And they are not even beginning to say that they are giving a historical explanation. I think there is difference between the two, and my problem is very great with those who stop at perceptions and say here is a row of perceptions.

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