

History and Truth History as Truth

The Textbook Controversy in India



Address by

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International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo.

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A friend told me this story about Picasso. Once a man went to the artist with his wife, and asked him to paint her portrait. After a couple of sittings, Picasso asked the man to come back and collect the painting in a few days. The man duly went back, and was horrified when Picasso unveiled his painting, in which all he could see were what seemed like three triangles and a fish. "This is not what my wife looks like!" he shouted. Picasso was calm. "Really?" he asked, "What does she look like?" The devoted husband pulled out of his wallet a photograph of his wife, thundering, "*This* is what she looks like." Responded Picasso, "Rather small, isn't she?"

What Picasso's question does here is to startle us into confronting the concealed, normally unrecognized, codes that make a photograph acceptable as an unmediated representation of reality. Two-dimensional, selective, de-contextualised, reduced in size - and yet, a photograph *is* reality. This is why for a historian, Picasso's painting of the woman would be a fact about him, and about the period, but it would not be a fact about the woman in the way her photograph would be a fact. In other words, what makes a photograph as opposed to a painting, acceptable to us as a more or less direct representation of reality are the codes that set up photography as "capturing" the real, while a painting is understood as an "interpretation," one of many. The point here is not, it seems to me, merely that there

are different ways of representing reality, but that “reality” itself is made accessible to us by a series of narrativizations that need to be located in space and time. Is there not a “reality” that exists nevertheless, outside and in spite of systems of representation? We will return to this question later.

This is an old, old debate of course, and I can hardly claim any startling originality in posing the question in this way. Nevertheless, debates about reality and representation, and claims to true or at least truer, representation of a reality, are more central than ever before to public discourse all over the world. Burning questions about contemporary politics seem to turn increasingly on understandings of what constitutes acceptable difference, the particular histories that constitute such difference, and the status of “truth” that may or may not be accorded to those histories.

What I would like to do here is present one account of selected aspects of philosophical debates about reality and representation in the context of what has come to be called “the history text-book controversy” in India. I hope through this exercise, both to understand better what is at stake in this controversy, as well as to make a political argument about democratic values and practices.

I

In the struggle over history in India today, there is little confusion on who the two sides are, and what they stand for. The Hindu Right-directed rewriting of standard history textbooks produced in the 1970s by historians of world-wide repute, follows the explicit agenda of redressing what is claimed to be a distortion of the past. In this redressal, the declared aim is to valorize

“Hindu” achievements and to present the “Hindu” community as one that has existed from time immemorial, one that has always been and continues to be egalitarian. This community that is evoked is a homogeneous one that basically looks like the 19th century, North Indian, upper-caste version of Hinduism, with all its taboos and beliefs presented as eternal, but with caste inequality carefully excised. The other aspect of this project is the assimilation of all other religions than Islam into the fold of Hinduism, and the location of Islam “outside India”, forever alien and inimical to Hindu civilisation.

On the other side in this controversy are historians and social scientists ranging from left to liberal persuasions, but who would broadly identify themselves as secular, who lay emphasis on the need to recognize society as historically constituted, in terms of underlying structures rather than manifest appearances, and for whom therefore, power relations and conflict over power cannot be ignored while writing history. The Hindu Right’s project therefore, is rejected by them as a distortion of social reality.

It is of course clear that for both sides, “history” is the site for the struggle over the present and the future of Indian society. Locating myself on the second side, right there with the secular academics, I will try to identify and work through certain sorts of impasses that have been produced by this controversy.

For some years now, incidents of rewriting of history text-books from BJP-ruled states have been popping up in the newspapers – in each case, the rewriting has aimed at presenting the medieval period in India as one of Muslim vandalism, or at playing down the oppression of the caste system, or at presenting a Ram temple at Ayodhya as a “historical fact.” Each time, the central government has denied responsibility by passing the buck

themselves or sift fact from fiction, and text-books should be framed on this presumption.¹

A political argument to counter the Hindu Right's project could present an alternative view of education. We could argue that we believe that education should be subversive of the dominant values of an unjust society – that this might require in fact, the challenging of values learnt “at home.” That we hold that the purpose of education is precisely “to hurt sentiments”, to question *status quo*, to destabilize order. However, this is not an argument that can be made with any hope of larger public acceptance. Indeed, it is not clear that even all of the “us” who are opposed to the Sangh Parivar's agenda necessarily share this understanding of education.

However, if the unlikelihood of wider acceptance is the only weakness of a clearly political argument, the current arguments mobilised by historians and others who reject the politics of the Hindu Right share this weakness. These focus on the “scientific” and “rational” nature of history as opposed to “prejudice and propaganda”, on the need for an “objective” view of the past, and on “truth” as opposed to “falsehood”.² Sumit Sarkar writes, “Surely education is worthwhile only if it stimulates rational thinking and questioning, and much of inherited common sense comes under scrutiny: as when children learn that, contrary to the evidence of their eyes, the earth moves around the sun.”³ A number of questions are raised by this example. Undoubtedly education should stimulate questioning, but why is it that, while challenging the Hindu Right's rewriting of history, the example that springs to Sarkar's pen is from the natural sciences? Is it because no such uncontestable “fact” can be unproblematically produced for history? Can we - and need we - sustain an argument that the study of history is as

“scientific” as the study of astronomy? Or that this questioning must stop at “science”?⁴

Underlining the struggle over the present that this controversy represents, Mridula Mukherjee and Aditya Mukherjee argue that it reflects “two completely divergent views of the Indian nation” – that of “an open, democratic, secular and civil libertarian state which was to promote a modern scientific outlook in civil society in independent India” and “a narrow, sectarian and ‘Talibanised’ Hindu nation.”⁵ Presumably, the reference to “modern scientific outlook in civil society” is meant to emphasise the importance of such an outlook in reinforcing the “open, democratic and secular” character of the state. In other words, there is an easy assumption here of a link between science on the one hand, and openness and democracy on the other. However, it is not clear to me that the political values of democracy and secularism have a necessary connection to a “scientific outlook”, nor that a sectarian society cannot mobilise “scientific” arguments. Indeed, sexist, racist and Nazi ideologies notoriously use “scientific” claims of natural superiority and inferiority and conversely, the ultra-scientific nuclear establishment is predicated on a brutal denial of transparency and democratic accountability. It is the discourse of science, technology and development that is used to trample the democratic rights of the thousands displaced by the Sardar Sarovar dam and other “development” projects that coincidentally, also make the coffers of large multinational companies ring.

Conversely, “tolerance” is entirely compatible with the absence of a “scientific outlook,” as we know, to take one example, from the existence of over 300 communities, documented by Kumar Suresh Singh’s *People of India*, in which

traditionally, even one family has had both Hindu and Muslim members. No, there is no necessary link between science on the one hand and democracy and tolerance, on the other.

It seems to me therefore, the claim to “rationality” and “science” here is a claim to “truth”, and the effort seems to be to establish certain accounts of the past to be true, and others, to be false. However, it is necessary to note here that, as Dominick La Capra points out, truth claims are involved at two levels in history writing – both at the level of events (did such and such an event take place?) as well as at the level of narrative plots, interpretations and explanations (what is the meaning of the event?)⁶ Even if there is agreement on the first level, the second level is inextricably implicated within specific world-views. A striking example of an argument “at the second level” as it were, is Amartya Sen’s assertion that “the two greatest emperors of India were Ashoka and Akbar – one was a Buddhist and the other a Muslim.”⁷ Even if we assume agreement on the “fact” that these were India’s two greatest emperors, the problem at the second level remains: what Sen presents as an illustration of his argument that India was never a Hindu Rashtra but a society reflecting multiple cultural and religious influences, can as easily be used by a Sadhvi Rithambhara to prove her point that Hindus have never been able to rule in “their own” land.

The question I am asking is this - in order to oppose the Sangh Parivar agenda as anti-democratic and unjust, is it necessary to lay claim to “truth” and science? Can we win this battle for the correct representation of the past? So far have we gone on this path that all political formations today await the verdict of the Supreme Court on the question of whether there was a temple where the Babri Masjid once stood, and promise to abide by its decision. This is the extent of our faith in a “true”

history and in the ability of “our” historians and archaeologists to prove this truth. In a situation in which there is no agreement among trained historians themselves, on how to interpret the archaeological evidence, is it the case that we expect a “neutral” third-party, judges trained in law, to be better equipped to decide on the truth? More importantly, we cannot forget that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has about 3000 mosques on its list. Even if it can be proved that the Babri Masjid did not stand on the site of a demolished temple, it is entirely possible that some of those other mosques do. Surely we have to shift the question to some other terrain than truth and to fight it there?

Even when “heterodoxy” is recognized and valorized, both “as a method” as well as “subject matter to be studied”, as Amartya Sen puts it while opposing the Hindutva version of history, it only leads to the unproblematic reassertion that “Textbooks should contain truths rather than falsehoods.”⁸ We might then ask, if heterodoxy is to be valued, both in methods of doing history as well as “in” history, then what is the status of “truth”? And above all, what is history?

II

“Bengalis must have a history, or else, they will never grow up.”

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Late 19th century)⁹

“The fact of once again becoming conscious of one’s history is a sign of rebirth for a people.”

J Ki-Zerbo (1957)¹⁰

“...it is national liberation that causes the nation to be present on the scene of history”

Frantz Fanon (1959)¹¹

“Why cannot countries that even as late as the early 19th century did not have anything called ‘history’ do without it today?”, asks Dipesh Chakrabarty, and answers that ‘History’, as one of the forms of knowledge exported to the rest of the world by Europe in the 19th century, is one of the most important ways in which we learn to identify ourselves with the nation and its highest representative, the state.¹² A familiar sense of grappling with “historical consciousness” (sometimes, as in one of the quotes above, assumed to be lost but on the verge of being regained), is conveyed by articles in the African journal *Presence Africain*, founded by Alioune Diop in 1947, as a challenge to the imperial ambition of western civilisation. In a set of essays written on the 40th anniversary of the journal, we get a sense of the debates that it carried.¹³ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovich for instance, analysing some of these debates, suggests that history, historical awareness and national consciousness became inseparable, and the new history was a key element in the quest for national identity.¹⁴ Bogumil Jewsiewicki too, shows how the writings in *Presence Africain* are “immersed in the idea of progress”. In these writings, “history is a moral force from which societies drink deep in order to reconstruct their consciousness and their identity.”¹⁵

History, in other words, remains intricately tied to the quest for identity, usually national identity. This is what is implied when the Mukherjees assert that the difference over the approach to history is really a difference about what kind of nation we want. And conversely, it is precisely this claim to nationhood that is challenged by the provocative statement made by Dalit intellectual Chandrabhan Prasad - “the British came too late but left too early.” The conquest of India by the British, he states baldly, “gave the Dalits a breathing space.” Chandrabhan wonders “how some people think that during the time of Akbar the great,”

(one of India's two greatest emperors, as we have seen in one reading), India was a "perfectly secular" society" when " 'we' had to carry an earthen pot hung around our neck to spit, and announce our entry to the mainstream village, lest others get polluted even by our shadow."¹⁶ In Chandrabhan's history of India then, the "secular" nation was predicated upon other exclusions. In other words, the project of history is always deeply implicated within a sharply contested political project. Thus there is an irresolvable contradiction between history as a search for identity and history as the search for objective truth.

Clearly there is a need for the discipline of history itself to be historicized. As Ashis Nandy puts it:

...[W]hile the historical consciousness can grant, as the sciences do, that historical truths are only contingent, it also assumes that the idea of history itself cannot be relativized or contextualised beyond a point. History can recognize gaps in historical data; it can admit that history includes mythic elements and that theory terms and data terms are never clearly separable in practice...But it cannot accept that history can be dealt with from outside history...As a result, when historians historicize history, which is itself rare, they do so according to the strict rules of historiography.¹⁷

A recent example of self-reflexivity in the discipline, but which in my opinion gives up too easily in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles posed by the requirements of truth and verifiability, is Pradip Kumar Datta's book, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal*. Datta's introduction engages with the critiques of history made by, among others, Veena Das, Gyanendra Pandey and Partha Chatterjee. However, he understands such a problematizing of history as simply an argument that "The historical discipline is

complicit with communalism", which it seems to me, misses the point.¹⁸ Veena Das for instance, argues in the article cited by Datta that the narrative of the colonial state on the "Ayodhya dispute" seals off local codes of conduct from the encompassing bureaucratic and legal institutions introduced by the colonial state, and that this myth of the externality of the state enters social science discourse in India in such a manner that it now allows, on "scientific" grounds, the legitimization of the right of the state not just to govern but also to shape modern Indian identity. What Das does here is to question the legitimacy of the state as an assumed neutral arbitrator in disputes that have already been constituted in particular ways by colonial discourses that remain unchallenged by the postcolonial nation-state. Historians, Das argues, citing Romila Thapar and S. Gopal, treat religious communities as imagined, but not the nation, and thus fail to directly challenge the claim of the nation-state to legitimacy.¹⁹ "In this reckoning," she points out, "...the discourse of the nation-state occupies the public arena, its dominant mode of constructing the past is to be treated as historical and objective, while the construction of the private and other-worldly concerns come under the domain of religion, which gives up all claims to the past except those that can be stated in the mythic mode."²⁰

I do not understand how from this account Datta derives the following reading – "She argues that in continuation with its colonial heritage, the contemporary Indian state constantly rehearses the notion that religious communities are irreconcilably divided, and that their rival claims can only be transcended by appealing to the "objective" criteria of facts. Historians, who supply the facts, contribute to the suppressive tendencies of modernity by removing the state from the arena of religion

altogether, relegating the latter to the private sphere..."²¹ Datta then refutes Das's model of history, which is based, he says, on "an outdated idea of the historian as an arbiter of the past... This notion was moored in the positivistic conception of 'facts' in which facts were equivalent to their meaning. Their significance depended on their verification..." This sadly outdated notion of history, Datta informs us, is no longer valid among historians. The status of facts has changed – in the historical discipline today, "facts are not final, they exist in a constantly embattled state with other facts." The understanding now is that "the past is composed of a large range of facts that can assume different significations when either new facts are unearthed and/or old facts are looked at in the light of their discovery." Moreover, "Any historiography worth its salt will teach that it is the questions one puts to a period which determines factuality."²²

This is certainly an attempt to come out of the positivist understanding of history, but it is hardly "new". As long ago as 1961, EH Carr had famously answered the question "What is a historical fact?" with the following – "The facts are really not at all like fish on a fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation."²³ It seems to me that the status of facts remains unchanged from Carr's account four decades ago to Datta's above. In this understanding, the past is composed of a large range of facts, not all of which is always accessible to the historian, but they exist out there, and the right questions can

make them visible. The only thing that can challenge a "fact" is another "fact", and not every kind of knowledge about the past is allowed the status of a fact.

Datta tries to escape the lingering "positivistic resonances" of this account by giving up on the word "facts" altogether. He suggests instead, the word "details", from the analogy of pictorial representation. Thus "Their valences alter according to the frame of reference in which they are placed, thereby providing them with flexibility." However, this initial promise of relating meaning to context is immediately belied. A few sentences later, he goes on to talk of the "verifiable specificity of details", saying, "The 'bottom line' of the significance of details is not their expressive power, but that *they establish that something had happened in the past.*"²⁴ It is not clear after all, how his "detail" differs from a "fact".

What is significant and unusual here however, is the recognition of a serious problem with the notion of "fact". Although I think Datta remains within the implications of the framework he struggles to restructure, his analysis reveals a sharp sense of crisis.

III

So there is no reality out there - this is the argument supposedly made by "postmodernism." A term that has become an easy epithet of abuse within the Indian academy, its use to suggest rampant relativism, loss of moral certainty and a helpless slide into the arms of the Hindu Right, is bewildering. Moral certainty after all, is expressed as confidently by the "bad guys" in this picture as by us. In the debate over history, the accusation that each side makes is that the other is "tinkering with history" or

“presenting a one-sided view”. The battle is precisely over whose certainty is correct. It does not take us very far to insist that the certainty of “their belief” must be tested by the terms set by “our historiography”, on which terrain it will be proved to be false. This is what PK Datta suggests in his critique of Veena Das’s analysis of historians’ arguments on Ayodhya – “The recourse to historical evidence was not meant to substitute ‘belief’ by a matching absolutism of irrefutability. On the contrary, *given the premises of historiography*, it was a coded appeal to transfer the claim from the autocratic dictates of this ‘belief’ to the terrain of contestation, of which details provide a common, disciplinary language.”²⁵ But in the understanding of the Hindu Right, it is *our* history that fails the test of truth on *their* terrain of belief. And where do we go from this impasse?

This question is live and painful in current debates in historiography. Faced with the Holocaust, even the “radical constructivist” (in Dominick La Capra’s terms) Hayden White, retreated from his earlier well-known understanding that events are not in themselves meaningful, but are only retrospectively transformed into a meaningful story. “In the case of an emplotment of the events of the Third Reich in a ‘comic’ or ‘pastoral’ mode”, Hayden White wrote, “we would be eminently justified in appealing to ‘the facts’ in order to dismiss it from the lists of ‘competing narratives’ of the Third Reich.”²⁶ La Capra suggests that the problem encountered by White is not unique to his treatment of the Holocaust, that the Holocaust raises in an accentuated form problems that arise with other “extreme, traumatic series of events that are of particular concern... because...they are invested with affect and considerations of value.”²⁷ La Capra then goes on to develop a conception of history in which “knowledge involves not only the processing of

information but also affect, empathy and questions of value,” a process in which the historian must contextualise herself in a “contemporary context of exchange and debate with other inquirers.”²⁸ With this idea of history La Capra tries to stake out a space that is different from both “documentary” and “radical constructivist” approaches to history-writing. Central to his reframing of the issue is the notion of “trauma” as a “disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence”, raising specific problems for representation and writing.²⁹

The retreat and cautious reformulations of Hayden White and La Capra in the face of the Holocaust, but simultaneously, the attempt to escape the suggestion of an un-duplicatable uniqueness to the Holocaust, by generating a concept – “trauma” - that would cover a range of what one could call “Holocaust-like” events, is perplexing. What is the theoretical value in attributing a special quality to the Holocaust or Apartheid, or to the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, and terming these as “traumatic events” constituted as such by some internal quality they possess prior to the narratives of these events which the historian and “history” draw upon? Either we could offer more and more instances of such “founding traumas” that become the basis of individual or group identity (the extermination of indigenous peoples in Australia and North America, the caste system in India, African slave trade, Hindu hurt at the destruction of temples by Muslim invaders) – which would result in dissolving the specificity of the concept, or there would have to be a process of denying this status to some events but not to others, on the basis of some “objectively” defined criterion, which brings us right back to the positivist notion of history we are fleeing from. The instance of “Hindu hurt” is deliberately introduced above to

highlight the manner in which a trauma is retrospectively produced/recognized, precisely in order to constitute a community in the present, in the service of an ideology that both White and La Capra would recognize as anti-democratic and majoritarian, maybe even fascist. The point here is that "trauma" is not a quality internal to the event (as indeed, we have learnt from Hayden White), but *produced* by techniques of modern history, that enable specific kinds of imagining of "the past."

While it is not difficult to understand the burden of guilt and responsibility generated for European intellectuals by the Holocaust, it is not at all so self-evident that the "limits of representation"³⁰ are reached when we touch it. Is it the Holocaust that places the first question mark on all claims of European humanism? This very thesis, says Wole Soyinka, "merely provides further proof that the European mind has yet to come into full cognition of the African world as an equal sector of a universal humanity - for if it had, its historic recollection would have placed the failure of European humanism centuries earlier, and that would be at the very inception of the European slave trade."³¹ Aime Cesaire puts it even more bluntly - "And then one day the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific reverse shock: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up...And they hide the truth from themselves, that this is barbarism...the crowning barbarism that sums up all the daily barbarisms; that it is Nazism, yes, but before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it...because until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples."³²

There appears then, to be a parochialism involved in ascribing to the Holocaust a special status with a claim to universal validity.

It seems to me that a similar parochialism is present in the pragmatism of Richard Rorty, limiting his otherwise promising insights on the question of truth. Rorty urges that we recast what has been understood as the universal desire for "truth" as the universal desire for "justification."³³ This argument, he says, grows out of his earlier claim that "we need to restate our intellectual ambitions in terms of our relations to other human beings, rather than in terms of our relation to non-human reality."³⁴ That is, we do not need to aspire to the sublime object called truth in order to conduct democratic politics, which he defines as the attempt ultimately to bring into existence "a planet-wide, inclusivist community."³⁵ To move towards this objective, all that we need to try to do is to justify our beliefs to a "competent audience" - the question is "how to persuade people to broaden the size of the audience they take to be competent, to increase the size of the relevant community of justification".³⁶

Since I am interested here specifically in Rorty's understanding of truth, I will only quickly say that this naïve inclusivism remains insensitive to the possibility that the Other may resist inclusion on the terms set by the dominant discourse of universality. If the question for Rorty is posed in terms of "how to persuade people to broaden the size of the audience *they* take to be competent", clearly, "we" are to do the persuading, and "they" are to be persuaded.

But to return to the question of truth - for Rorty, whether or not truth consists in accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of reality is irrelevant to democratic politics; the question reflects in his opinion, a "scientistic" view that believes natural sciences are better equipped to reach this goal than say literary or political theory. Those who believe this, he holds, are not satisfied with justifying their beliefs to as large an audience as

possible, they have another goal – “getting things right.”³⁷ And this, for Rorty, is not only an impossible goal, but more importantly, irrelevant to the purposes of democratic politics. What is important about being human, he says, is not the ability to grasp truth, but “the ability to be citizens of a full-fledged democracy which is yet to come”.³⁸

Thus, Rorty leads us to believe that he holds that “conversation is the highest good”³⁹, that different communities are constituted on different principles, and that democratic practice requires a constant dialogue without the presumption of a context-transcendent reason, a presumption he is critical of Habermas for holding on to.⁴⁰ It comes as somewhat of a shock therefore, to realise that Rorty believes that this ideal value is rather more easily accessible to “inhabitants of wealthy, secure” societies, who are axiomatically also “tolerant and inclusivist”. These are the people “who are brought up to bethink themselves that they might be mistaken, that there are people out there who might disagree with them, and whose disagreements need to be taken into account.”⁴¹ We realise too, that he thinks Habermas’s commitment to “universal validity” is problematic not because it is unattainable but because this presupposition plays a part only in the behaviour of “a small minority,” a minority that is “morally superior”, – “those who belong to the liberal universalistic, inclusivist tradition of the European Enlightenment.”⁴² This philosophical tradition, Rorty says, “has tried to stitch exclusivist communities together by saying: there is more overlap between infidels and true believers, masters and slaves, men and women, than one might think.”⁴³

It seems then, that Rorty in his pragmatism, is simply saying that since “we” who live in wealthy secure societies cannot take recourse to a transcendental truth to convince the rest

of the world that their ways are morally inferior, “we” should simply do our best to persuade them that inclusivism (such as “we” have “here”) is best, but “we” cannot really do more than that.

I can but gesture here towards the decades of scholarship showing up precisely the non-inclusivism of the Enlightenment and the philosophical traditions associated with it, from the point of view of women, non-whites, and the non-West. Moreover, by now we are only too aware of internal critiques of contemporary western societies from a variety of sources that would not recognize it as composed entirely of people Rorty describes as having been “brought up to bethink themselves that they might be mistaken”. Thus, while Rorty’s emphasis on the socially constructed character of truth is significant, his belief that *his* world of privilege has reached the acme of tolerance and inclusivism, and waits patiently to let others in as soon as they can be persuaded to this superior way of life, is rather disconcerting.

More fruitful to our inquiry, I think, is K. Anthony Appiah’s work on this issue. Trying to face the full implications of giving up the idea of fact and values as “radically ontologically distinct”, Appiah makes two related moves. First, he proposes the notion of “interest” as constituting areas of inquiry, or “disciplines”. By “interest” here he means two things – “both in the sense in which it contrasts with disinterest and the sense in which it contrasts with a mere lack of epistemic engagement.” He suggests that we “recognize the interest- relativity of the discourse of the factual” - adding in a footnote - “just as we might insist, for other purposes, on the fact-dependency of the discourse of value”. Next, he takes up the notion of “idealization” from scientific disciplines. That is, the use of idealized theories that

are “approximately true”, to serve explanatory purposes. There are two major sources of idealization as he derives them from work on physics – “one is approximate truth, the other is what we can call *truth under idealized assumptions*.” Thus, in the case of ideal gas theory for instance, while the theory may be inaccurate for some specific cases because of its assumptions (i.e. in the case of a large molecule gas at high temperature since the theory’s assumptions are that gas is composed of frictionless, perfectly inelastic point masses), the theory would still give the right answer “in general.”

These two moves enable us to recognize that whether we count a theory as false or “approximately true” (which after all, Appiah points out, is just a special way of being false), is a question of *judgement*, a question that would depend on our interests. Thus, “A chemistry whose practical focus is on the development of industrial dyes might, say, accept the idealization that river water is H₂O; a chemistry interested in energy regulation at the cellular level probably could not.” In other words, “interests constitute areas of inquiry in part by determining what sorts of falsehoods are tolerable.” Our challenge to theories therefore, should not be on the claim of a theory as idealization, but rather, on the basis of the *interests* by which that idealization is judged as adequate.⁴⁴

Such an understanding of “truth” points to the instability of the concept as it is deployed by different disciplines, even the scientific ones, but nevertheless enables moral and ethical judgements based on “interest”. This shifts the battle on to a different terrain – from the assumed objectivity of a transcendent truth to the subjective, *political* one of struggles to hegemonize meaning.

So, does this mean there is no reality out there? To answer this question let me take recourse to a Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, in order to remind ourselves that the problematizing of “reality” has a far older history than its attribution to sinister postmodern moves would have us believe. Addressing, *as a materialist*, the question of “the so-called ‘reality of the external world’” Gramsci argued that to demonstrate objective reality we are forced to refer “to history and to man”. “Objective” for Gramsci “always means ‘humanly objective’ which can be held to correspond exactly to ‘historically subjective’ ”⁴⁵. Taking up the example of “East” and “West” as conventions or historico-cultural constructions, he refers to Bertrand Russell’s statement that while without the existence of man on earth, we could not think of London or Edinburgh, we could still think of the existence of two points in space, one to the North and one to the South, where Edinburgh and London now are. Gramsci’s objection to this is that without man, one cannot think of “thinking”:

What would North-South or East-West mean without man? *They are real relationships* and yet they would not exist without man and without the development of civilisation. Obviously East and West are arbitrary and conventional, that is, historical constructions, since outside of real history every point on the earth is East and West at the same time.⁴⁶

Through this statement, East and West are made visible not only as historically constructed conventions, but as reflecting power relations - the “world-wide hegemony” of “the European cultured classes”, whose point of view was naturalised across the globe.⁴⁷ In this understanding, there is a materiality to East and West as points in space, but they are inaccessible to us except through ways of thinking and the organizing of thought.

To use a distinction made by Ernesto Laclau, those points in space have *existence* whether or not there are humans to think about them, but they derive their *being* as “East” or “West” from their being articulated into discursive totalities, and “As a member of a certain community, I will never encounter the object in its naked existence - such a notion is a mere abstraction...”⁴⁸

This does not mean that “everything is relative,” and that we are doomed to inaction and paralysis. On the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere, denying the existence of an objective truth does not commit us to accepting every interpretation to be as valid as any other.⁴⁹ We take positions based on our discursive universes, we affirm that within this universe “our” interpretation is the most “correct” or even the only one possible. We attempt to demonstrate that this particular context or discursive universe is the one that renders visible the widest range of meaning, we affirm the validity of the values that order our universe. We offer these values as a challenge to competing ones, but our boundaries are also shifted and altered by some of these challenges (as the hegemonic secular or feminist discourse might be by one kind of Dalit challenge, for example). This is what the struggle to hegemonize meaning is all about.

This is a radically different project from Rorty’s, that of “persuading people to broaden the size of the audience you take to be competent”. For Rorty, democratic politics is about trying to persuade more and more societies to adopt the (assumed) values of universalism found in “wealthy and secure” parts of the world, which themselves have reached the point the rest of the world must now aspire to. On the other hand, the struggle to hegemonize meaning has to involve the recognition of the fundamental instability at the core of every discursive universe,

including our own. As Laclau says, “no discursive totality is absolutely self-contained...there will always be an outside which distorts it and prevents it from fully constituting itself.”⁵⁰

IV

The textbooks that the Hindu Right wants to do away with have been in use for several decades. Generations of school-students have read them and learnt history the secular way. And yet, every college teacher knows that the majority of students who come into her class in the first year of the undergraduate course invariably tell the story of India the way “they” tell it. That there was a Golden Age of Hinduism, when women were respected and educated, that the Muslim invasions destroyed an egalitarian society, that “India” has existed since the “Vedic Age.” Tourist guides at historical monuments all over the country retell this story in various ways, alleging the previous existence of temples at almost every monument built by “Muslim” rulers.

This is a “fact”, if you like - “our” history had dominated the academy and intellectual circles, “theirs”, the streets and common sense. This is not a statement of despair - rather, it is one of optimism. What it means is that the battle is not on the verge of being lost, the battle is just beginning to be fought. Until now, “we” have remained unaware that a subterranean battle was raging.

Perhaps we need to make a distinction in public discourse between two senses of history - history as *a modern academic discipline* (here Rorty’s notion of “competent audience” would be useful) and history as *political intervention*. In the first sense, history is not “objective truth”, it is not something that can be scientifically proved - history is simply what historians do.⁵¹

So as far as the teaching of history is concerned, we need to build up public opinion on an understanding of history as a series of conversations and mutually contested narratives, with no possibility of ultimate resolution or verifiability, based on certain disciplinary codes recognized within a "competent community". We have no recourse to "truth" as opposed to "falsehood" - indeed, if we are able to destabilise the notion of a "true" history, we would succeed also in hitting at the foundations of the Hindu Right's attempts to appropriate the past.

And this brings us to the second sense in which we need to understand history - history as political intervention. The recognition here is that when we write history, we make history. That to tell a story about the past is to shape the story of the future. In the very effort to know, we change that which we seek to know. As Mao put it - "If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself."⁵² History in this sense is a strong political statement, and outside textbooks, (where several such statements must be shown to be in collision, debate and engagement), we will defend our picture of the past precisely in terms of our vision of the future. Here Appiah's notion of "interest" is critical - we will produce narratives that we defend on the basis of our *interest* in producing that picture and those "idealizations." Our interest in history then, must be expressed as being irreducibly political.

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NOTES

- ¹ This account has been put together from: Mushirul Hasan, "Historical Disarray" *Indian Express* February 6 2002; Delhi Historians Group, *Communalisation of Education* Undated; Irfan Habib "Guest Column" *Asian Age* February 2, 2002.
- ² See Mushirul Hasan op cit; Amartya Sen "India's Two great Emperors were both non-Hindu", Interview in *Outlook* January 21, 2002; Mridula Mukherjee and Aditya Mukherjee "Communalisation of Education, The History Text-books Controversy: An Overview" in *Communalisation of Education* op cit.
- ³ Sumit Sarkar, "Does History Need to be Rewritten?" *Times of India* December 2, 2001.
- ⁴ Whether "science" itself can sustain its claim to the status of privileged access to objective knowledge is in question. The well-known debate for instance, between Einstein and Heisenberg turned on whether the outcome of an experiment would be affected by the fact of observation. Heisenberg held that it was the choice of observation that determined, for instance, whether what one was observing was a particle or a wave. Thus "reality", according to Heisenberg, was a function of the experimental condition. However, we can set aside this debate for the duration of this paper.
- ⁵ Op cit P 1.
- ⁶ Dominick La Capra, "Writing History, Writing Trauma" in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, P 11.
- ⁷ Amartya Sen op cit.
- ⁸ Op cit.
- ⁹ Cited by Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* Delhi Oxford University Press, 1998, P 124. Kaviraj has translated the Bengali phrase *manus haibe na* as "will never become human beings", but I am told by other Bengali speaking friends that this phrase can also be translated as "never grow up", and I preferred the second sense in this context.
- ¹⁰ "Histoire et Conscience Negre" in *Presence Africaine* Volume 16. Quoted by Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Presence Africaine as Historiography: Historicity of

- societies and Specificity of Black African Culture”, in VY Mudimbe ed. *The Surreptitious Speech. Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992. P 96.
- ¹¹ In *Presence Africaine* Volume 24-25, quoted by Bogumil Jewsiewicki, op cit. P 101.
- ¹² Dipesh Chakraborty “History as Critique and Critiques of History”, *Economic and Political Weekly* September 14, 1991, P 2164.
- ¹³ VY Mudimbe ed. *The Surreptitious Speech. Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992.
- ¹⁴ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovich “*Presence Africaine*: History and Historians of Africa” in VY Mudimbe op cit.
- ¹⁵ Bogumil Jewsiewicki op cit, P 96.
- ¹⁶ Chandrabhan Prasad “When Dalits walked into an evening of *The Gin Drinkers*” *The Indian Express*, November 2, 2000.
- ¹⁷ Ashis Nandy “History’s Forgotten Doubles”, *History and Theory*, “World Historians and Their Critics” eds., Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick and Richard T Vann, Theme Issue 34, 1995, P 50.
- ¹⁸ Pradip Kumar Datta *Carving Blocs. Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* Oxford University Press, Delhi 1999, P1.
- ¹⁹ Veena Das, “The Anthropological Discourse on India: Reason and its Other” in *Critical Events. An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, Pp 41-50.
- ²⁰ Ibid, P 49.
- ²¹ PK Datta op cit P 2.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ EH Carr, *What is History?* Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1961, P 23.
- ²⁴ PK Datta op cit P 3. Emphasis added.
- ²⁵ Ibid P 4 Emphasis added.
- ²⁶ Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Story of Truth” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’* ed Saul Freidlander, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, 37-53. Discussed by Dominick La Capra, op cit Pp 17-19.

- ²⁷ Dominick La Capra op cit P 18-19.
- ²⁸ Ibid P 35.
- ²⁹ Ibid. 41.
- ³⁰ The title of the book cited in footnote 25, in which Hayden White made his about-turn.
- ³¹ Wole Soyinka, “Memory, Truth and Healing” in *The Politics of Memory. Truth, Healing and Social Justice* ed Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na’im, Zed Books, London and New York, 2000, P 26.
- ³² Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1972, P 14.
- ³³ Richard Rorty, “Universalism and Truth” in *Rorty and his Critics* ed. Robert B Brandom, Blackwell, Massachusetts and Oxford, 2000, P 2.
- ³⁴ Ibid Footnote 3, P 25.
- ³⁵ Ibid P 1.
- ³⁶ Ibid P 9.
- ³⁷ Richard Rorty “Response to Daniel Dennet” in *Rorty and his Critics* op cit P 105.
- ³⁸ “Universalism and Truth” op cit P 3.
- ³⁹ “Response to Daniel Dennet” op cit P 105.
- ⁴⁰ “Universalism and Truth” op cit P 18.
- ⁴¹ Ibid P 4.
- ⁴² Ibid Pp 16-17.
- ⁴³ Ibid P 15.
- ⁴⁴ K Anthony Appiah “Inventing an African Practice in Philosophy: Epistemological Issues” in VY Mudimbe op cit, Pp 231-234.
- ⁴⁵ Antonio Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* International Publishers, New York, 1987, P 445.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, P 447. Emphasis added.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ernesto Laclau. “Post-Marxism Without Apologies” in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* Verso, London and New York, 1990. P 104.

⁴⁹ Nivedita Menon "Orientalism and After" *Economic and Political Weekly* September 26, 1992.

⁵⁰ Ernesto Laclau op cit P 109.

⁵¹ There is a critique of history as made by Ashis Nandy among others, which is critical of modern history for delegitimizing all other modes of comprehending the past, except those that conform to the rules of modern historiography. (For example, Ashis Nandy in "History's Forgotten Doubles" op cit.) This is an important critique, but I would argue for the need to retain the modern academic discipline of history as a valuable resource, although reconstituted now in a self-reflexive mode, with the self-awareness of being only one mode of understanding the past.

⁵² Mao Tse-Tung "On Contradiction" in *Selected Works* Volume I Foreign. Languages Press, Peking 1977, P 300.

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