

History and Literary Criticism: Towards Reconstructing a More Responsible History

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Abstract

It is overtly believed in academic circles and the media that we Indians lacked a sense of history. This fallacious idea has been widely percolated in the present times as a socio-cultural tool to deny India any credit, as being the cradle of the finest civilizations and learning. The present paper attempts to examine this cliché and its rampant use both in the colonial and post-colonial times. The paper refers to some of the historical events which were either obliterated or downplayed by the mainstream historians, thereby trying to paint the indigenous civilization in a somber shade. A similar dismal image is carved for literary criticism and historiography of the land. The rich literary and cultural tradition was made to look inferior to the western concepts and knowledge. The subversion of the traditional Indian criticism by the Western canon can be traced in the historical analysis of the literary criticism, for instance in the case of epic poetry. The paper ends with a pertinent question-- Does the measure of the creative viability of a country rest on the assumptions of a set of socio-literary theories alien to the native soil?

Keywords: *historical sense, misinterpretations, literary historiography, cultural onslaughts, amnesia.*

Do the inhabitants of the sub-continent lack a ‘sense of history’? Were they a bunch of ahistorical people who easily allowed their invaders and conquerors to dominate the course of historical narration? Was the meta-narrative so propounded by the conquering powers determined the state of reality of the land. All these are perturbing questions, assume alarming proportions particularly, in recent times with the heightened socio-political awareness and the rampant spread of social media. To state that Indians have no sense of history would be a cliché; the issue is a complex one and needs to be dealt with unobtrusive modality.



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Students either at school or at the university were made to believe that all knowledge disseminated from the West; that it were the Greeks who propounded all the natural laws and laid the basis for all learning. It were the Romans later who added to it and carried forward the lineage, until, Western Europe became the custodians of all that was rational, modern and knowable. Consequently, they became the creators of the ‘master narrative’ entailing such preposterous notions as ‘social obligation,’ culminating into the white man’s burden, the ‘reformist zeal’ to purge lands of all the inherent evil, and a spirit of the ‘renaissance romance’ to know the unknown. All these sublimated into an established ethos of the imagined superiority of the West. Such understanding, which the indigenous scholars were made to imbibe, had left but little that could be claimed as indigenous. something that one could identify with. Thus, the denial of the historical sense to the Indians was yet another act of falsification geared to push the inhabitants of the land into a pool of un- belongingness, an impending identity crisis. These were socio- cultural tools for political mileage to build grand colonial structures of hegemony, either real or virtual. Assessing the damage incurred to the indigenous cultures by these intimidating tactics, Jo-Ann Episknew labels it as a historical trauma causing an irreparable injury; “this injury is both emotional and psychological, both individual and collective, and is transmitted over the individual life span and generations,” (Episknew, 2009:79). Closely akin, and running almost parallel to these colonial adjudgements on the history of the colonies is a similar treatment of the literatures of the colonial lands. The history of the literatures of the aboriginal assumes significance as they ignite hope of some resurgence, as this would be; “one of the ways in which alternative discourse on alternative literature and cultural theory can develop.” (Deb, 2009: 47). However, the case of the various colonies of Africa, Australia, Canada etc, is variably divergent from that of India if it comes to a cultural inoculation precipitated by a mighty indigenous tradition predating the invading cultures by a span not less than of three millennia, where a very powerful tradition of historicity of literature existed much before the Europeans could even step out of the cradle of civilization. This paper is therefore an attempt to trace these two concepts of historicity in a dialogical relationship. The history of the land has been subjected to an abject misreading, misinterpretations and prevarications, not only by the European colonists but a whole set of invaders and settlers, of the rulers of past and present. The study,

after referring to the erroneous records of the past and their consequent socio-cultural and economic impact on the country, shifts to the history of literatures of the indigenous languages. This rewriting of history of the land and also of its literatures could be an act of all erasures, a vital agency to rectify in a non-rudimentary way, all historical ills that had been, from time to time, inflicted upon the psyche of the civilization. It would also deal, in sufficient detail, with issues related to the growth, development, struggle and survival of the literary tradition. such an undertaking would, however, be free from the presumptions of concepts and ideas which tend to tilt toward a euro-centric version of reality.

The vast expanse of land almost to the size of a continent, ensured diversity; both geographical and socio-cultural, which perhaps has been the reason for the various histories that one is witness to in the various regions. These regional histories might have diverse perceptions and conflicting claims, yet they constitute a part of what can be settled to be the grand historical narrative of the land. The charge that Indians did not have a sense of history is often imposed at the academic circles and has usually found the defense fumbling and even apologetic. To an extent there are perhaps no answers or rationally plausible reasons to justify such a grave lapse. However, referring to the repeated holocausts in the form of iconoclastic invasions, with historical proofs of the mass scale destruction of the cultural artifacts: temples, universities, libraries etc, it is possible that there was a substantial written account of history which was destroyed. The Kashmiri chronicle of *Rajtarangini* was perhaps one of these attempts that come down to posterity. However, to have an understanding of the history of the nation one must have a profound understanding of the civilization, the culture which was unique and diametrically opposite to all the values that West stood for. To a western mindset, rationality and empirical correctness is perhaps of foremost value, on the contrary an Indian mind would always seek for the essence of life. The form of reality to the former is a mental construct, whereas for the latter, it has always been intuitive, with an inborn urge to see a profound order in an otherwise chaotic state of things. A western notion of inquiry has always been carried out in the physical realm, in adventure and discovery. The Indian adventure has been subtle and non-physical, the metaphysics of the 'self' has always intrigued them, and it has been the territory to be explored and conquered. The history of the sub-continent is abounded with the principle of

inclusion and exclusion of events, narratives and conclusions from the grand-narrative by different communities at different times and spaces to accommodate, to highlight their perspective. The conqueror and the conquered syndrome have been in the play from the earliest times. There have been revisions, alterations, obliterations on a mass scale to suit the interests of the dominant groups and meet their immediate political goals. This phenomenon in the present times is practiced more consciously. Arun Shourie in 'Eminent Historians'(69) refers to the circular issued by the West Bengal Govt. in 1989, clearly stating that no negative reference of the Islamic rule in India is to be made and no reference of the destruction of temples and forceful conversions etc, should surface. In the same vein in more recent times we have the right wing's attempts to transform and re-interpret the historical facts.

It is imperative that reference should be made to certain aspects of history, to certain episodes which were conspicuously altered or obliterated from the mainstream historical accounts of the recorded history of the nation. Although the entire history of the land is infested with such vitriolic interjections, to refer to a few of them would clearly show how the misrepresentation/ underrepresentation/non-representation of facts clouds up with the understanding of history and how devastating it could be in the long run. To begin with we have at the very inception the Aryan invasion theory. The theory envisaged that the subcontinent had white skinned Eurasians as its first settlers who were culturally advanced and who subjugated the near barbarian inhabitants of the land. So the conquest was not only political but deeply penetrated the socio-economic and cultural life patterns to establish a pivotal from where civilization sprang and is continuously growing thereafter. The reasons and the need to indoctrinate such a theory were obvious; it had a political motive of justifying the Aryan occupation of the Indian lands as an act of revamping what had allegedly happened two millennia ago. It is rather conspicuous to note that these claims had no historical evidence to fall back upon. The Vedic texts do not exhibit any geographical knowledge of the far off lands that were claimed to be their original home, their knowledge seems confined to the Sapta-sindhu region and the foremost part of northern India. As far as archeological evidences are concerned there are none, rather on the contrary, recent excavations like Sinauli, seem to suggest an overlapping of the Aryan and Harappan sites obliquely referring to a possible continuation or of

a simultaneous existence of the two supposedly distinct civilizations. Further these recent excavations indicate that the settlements were inhabited for a considerably long span of time, predating the prefixed date of the Aryan migration and settlements in the sub-continent, for instance earliest levels of excavations at Alamgirpur ranges from the mid third millennium B.C., which rules out any settlements by the new communities. The whole history of the land is infused with such fallacious interjections, however to prove the point that how decimating they have been to the glory and pride of the nation I have chosen a few of these cases in point. I must admit that I am indebted to Sanjeev Sanyal in making a selection of these instances.

- The total annihilation of the army of Masud, a nephew of Muhammad of Gazani, in 1033-34 in the battle of Bahriach by Suhaldev of Sravasti. The mainstream historians do not speak about this major battle, but for the local chronicles the fact might have been lost to us. It is also important to register a reticence of historians between the years 712 A.D. to 1000 A.D. and thereafter from 1026 A.D. to 1192 A.D. (the second battle of Tarain) regarding Arabic and Turkish onslaughts. This was the period when India struck back, and it is rather unfortunate that we have to look for conflicting claims in the local annals and chronicles depicting such legendary warriors as Bappa Rawal who counter attacked and drove away the Arabs from the sub-continent's soil and established such an effective defense mechanism that the Islamic invaders could not enter into the Indian soils for centuries.
- The so called glory of the Mughals would have been tarnished if the eminent historians would have cared to make a mention of the repeated victories of Ahom kings of Assam in the battles of Duimunisila (1638), battle of Saraighat (1671), and battle of Itakhuli (1682) over Aurangzeb's invincible armies when the Mughal might was at its peak.
- Somehow the historians forgot to applaud the unquestionable might of the Marathas when they sidelined the impeccable generalship of the great Peshwa Baji Rao, the invincible warrior of forty one battles without a single loss. The empire of his son Raghunath Rao was bigger than that of Akbar and for almost a century the Maratha power overshadowed the Mughals. It was from the Marathas, and not from the Mughals, that the British took the reign of governance.

- The battle of Colachel, does not find a mention in the mainstream historical narratives of the country. The battle was of phenomenal importance because it vanquished and put to dust the pride of the European maritime powers, as it was here, and for the first time ever, that an Asian victory was registered over the European powers by King Martand Verma by completely annihilating the Dutch Navy.
- It is rather on a welcome note that in recent times efforts are being made to trace the glories of the Great Chola kingdom, the earlier historical texts hardly mention the great achievements of the Cholas in the field of administration buildings and above all of the Chola maritime activities and their colonization of Sri Lanka and the far-east.
- The Vijaynagar Empire has been forgotten. Delhi-centric history has considerable concern for minor Delhi Sultans like Sayyids and the Lodis, but they deliberately omitted the glories of the Vijaynagar Empire. The ruins of Hampi bear sufficient testimony to the splendor of one of the greatest south Indian kingdoms, it speaks of the lost grandeur which standard history books could not.
- Now that it is evidently clear, that the INA movement of Subhas Chandra Bose followed by the chain of revolts by the Air force, the Royal Navy and the armed battalions were the main reasons for the tactical British withdrawal in 1947, the so called historians, with vested interests, obliterated these recorded facts, which even the British official records make a concerned mention.
- It is rather very unfortunate that a country could forget its foremost warriors and patriots. The magical disappearance of Subhas Bose not only from the Indian scene in 1944 but from the subsequent historical dialogue is not only unexplainable but an unpardonable act of shame. It is all the more shameful to learn that the Indian Government after 1947, living in dread of a possible return of this most popular of the nationalist Indian, resorted to espionage on his household as late as the sixties. The recognition has finally come during the present regime to acknowledge the unprecedented contributions of this great freedom fighter, yet the pertinent question remains to be asked; isn't it too late.

Thus the decadence and disorder rendered to the historical discourse is a cumulative interjection of multiple factors: repeated destructive invasions and cultural infiltrations, the amnesia generated as a deliberate colonial tactics during the two centuries of political and cultural subjugation, and in more recent times the post-colonial legacy of a set of historians with parochial outlook, each bound in their own preconceived ideological suits without the slightest touch of the indigenous sensibility. Finally, it is advisable to note that the British do not, in their schools and universities, teach colonial history. This gesture may be accounted as a customary reflection of a deep sense of guilt within the conscious which they have successfully managed to camouflage.

It is conspicuous to note that many scholars had their hand on the nerve of the crisis: thus G.N. Devy is not superfluous when he states; ‘Indian Literature is a historian’s despair’ (Devy 1). When we assess the literary history and theoretical formulations of India, we find that they have been subjected to a similar apathetic and conniving treatment as the historiography of the land. Panini comments that it is the *shishtha* who decides what is good in language; the learned decides what is learning which decides who is learned. (Devy). Thereby a hierarchy of the elite critics may well be visualized as arbitrarily selecting/ rejecting and also interpreting the available source material. The current literary criticism is in crisis and the literary scene is horrendous (Satchidanand, 2014, its categories clearly insufficient to explain many of the modern genres like- dalit, woman, tribal, nativist, ecocentric writings, modern folk, blog poetry, concrete poetry and many others. The experiments with reviving classical Sanskrit and the contemporary West; separately and / or also in conjugation have drastically failed...the theory of Rasa is also too limited to be applied to the modern text essentially in a post-modernist world (Satchidanand, 2014) Within the democratic and decolonized literary setting the critics vehemently cry for a “retrieval of the regional as well as the foregrounding of the marginal against an assumed Indian-ness” (Satchidanand 2014). They go on to plead for the effacement of the Sanskrit literary tradition and in a meek voice to disengage western import of theory. This peculiar perception of literary history, conceived from the western perspective of theories and isms, visualizes the Indian reality as bereft of the historical sense. This inadvertently speaks of the vast cultural divide and the incomprehensibility of avowing the other as an ontological failure. This is

markedly a failure of not being able to recognize the vibrancy of a profound sense of life, of order not envisaged between straight lines and linearity of thought. All these failures stem from not being able to conceptualize and acknowledge the bedrock of a very strong philosophical tradition which had attached but little significance to historical time. A.K. Singh forcefully writes, “We have committed intellectual suicide by linking Sanskrit, the principal culture bearing language of India for more than three millennia to a caste. And in the process of rejecting the caste, we abandoned the most unparalleled reservoir of knowledge systems. What an irony that when Europe raved about the Indian knowledge system and revolutionized itself through them we were either inveigled upon or compelled to drive these knowledge systems out of our own mainstream educational system.” (Singh, 2012). No civilization has such a varied and powerful tradition of interpretation: with the prime objective of *rasa vadana* the literary discourse was open to formulation of theories and inference of varied philosophical interpretations. Rajshekhar mentions nine types of criticism in Kavyamimamsa and is consciously aware of the distinction between disciplines like *Itihas* and *Purana*, and in describing the *purushya vidhya* he anticipates the humanities.

The subversion of the traditional Indian criticism by the Western canon, can be illustrated, in the example of epic poetry. The criticism of epic poetry evolved between the seventh and eleventh century i.e., between Dandin and Bhoj in the development of the sub-genres like the *adikavya*, *mahakavya*, *sargadhanda*, *champu*, *akhyana* etc. These sub-genres were however subsumed and obliterated by the meager European criticism. Even after the advent of the Islamic rule Sanskrit poetics showed no signs of decline but attained further sophistication in the treatise of Abhinavagupta, Bhattanaka, Kuntaka, Mahimbhatta, Bhoja, Kshemendra, Mammata, Ruyyaka, Vagbhata, Hemchandra, Jayadev and Vidhyadhara.

G. N. Devy has laid a lot of emphasis on *Bhasa* literatures as a possible replacement/displacement of the Sanskrit canon. He tries to trace some legacy in that transformation and disappointingly affirms that there is a lack of historiography in that account. However, certain traces of the passing of the legacy are clearly apparent, for instance Hemchandra’s *Kavyaanushasan* (1140 A.D.) depicts this transformation to Gujarati Literature. Similar transformation to Marathi literature is observed by Mukundraj, and in the Kannada literature by

Nrpatunga's *Kavirajmarga* and Nagaverma's *Kavyalokana* and in the Pali literature in the work of Sangharakkita. Such transformations occurred in other languages also but there is unfortunately no documentation available.

The *Rasa* theories have an existence of about two millennia or more, and are still viable and universally relevant. The *Bhakti* movement endorsed the canon by expanding its creative impulse within the ambit of the theory; consequently, *Bhakti* was conceived as the tenth *Rasa*. In a less similar vein, and despite all the iconoclastic urges and vehement attack to the Sanskrit tradition, the Leftist, and the Dalit literatures could not conceive of an alternative framework for their discourse and ended up by adding a few more *rasas* to their canon like- *Akrosh*, *Kranti*, *Vidhroh* etc. Universals in literary history, the self assured Eurocentric assumptions have had but a brief span of existence; from a few decades to not more than half a century, until a fresh wave of criticism swept it and replaced it with a new set of theoretic formulations with claims of a better representation of the contemporary socio-cultural and political transformation of the populace. Movements and genres like; Classicism, Neo- Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Structuralism, Post- Structuralism etc. have all come to stay but for a limited period of time. On the other hand the Sanskrit tradition is still as relevant as before and is still to be located in the *Bhasa* literatures and a little less consciously in the Indian Cinema.

Therefore the present crisis in the historical criticism is not that the traditional is no more organically viable and that the Indian sensibility is being caught between the contending claims of the neo-colonial theories and the heritage asserted by the contemporary regional languages. The crisis is artificially generated in the politics of post-colonial hegemonic structures unwilling to relent loosely, and also the consequent amnesia it has engendered along with a collective demoralizing effect upon the nation. The present situation is hopelessly marred by an inferiority complex which has come to be associated with the national culture. This is further perpetuated by the alleged Native intellectuals, unabashedly hankering for international recognition, even if it accounts for a diminutive role and sacrifice of selfhood pride. The other disabilities encountered are roughly 'unavailability of the authentic text; much of which has been destroyed over the years in the marauding invasions and the iconoclastic exhibitions of mindless belligerence. Furthermore, there has been an alienation from the intellectual ethos within which these texts

were generated. There is very limited awareness outside the specialist linguistic circles and a marked disjointness of the specialists with the set of intellectuals who have monopolized the contemporary literary culture and historiography.

The act of translation which in pre-colonial India was an inter-textual activity with considerable freedom for diversity, was unfortunately displaced by the European insistence upon exactness and matter-of-fact approach. Moreover, the translation works in colonial India were further restricted to selective and pragmatically useful texts. This creative life force needs an urgent revamping in the present times, to be revived as a dialogical activity; juxtaposing the past and the present and also the multiple language cultures of India.

Indian intellectuals, unabashedly hankering for international recognition and applaud, even if it would mean, a diminutive role and a surrender of all self esteem and national pride, “paves the way for an unholy conglomeration of various interest groups to exploit Indian archaeological materials for misrepresentations” (Satyamurthy 2015). The peculiar perception towards Indian history, and literary historiography, mistakenly conceived under the aegis of a western prospect, speaks of the vast cultural divide and the incomprehensibility of the ‘other’ as an ontological failure in conceptualizing the vibrancy of a profound sense of life. It also speaks of order not envisaged between straight lines and linearity of thought, of not acknowledging the rock-bed of a very strong and all-pervasive philosophy of life which had attached but little significance to historical time. The decadence and disorder rendered to the historical discourse and the literatures of the Indian languages, is a process of cumulative utterances of the past. These infiltrations ensue from repeated destructive invasions, cultural onslaughts, amnesia and in more recent times; from the legacy of the post-colonial historians with parochial outlook, each bound in their preconceived ideological suit, without the slightest touch of indigenous sensibility. These are rather rude shocks for any civilization to bear, and many ancient civilizations succumbed to such external pressures. Indian civilization stands out alone as the one, still existing from the unrecorded times amid all disruptive forces.

Finally the pertinent question, the often asked one, which transcends all the epistemological accumulations of the pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial theoretic compilations is- Do we, or for that matter does any culture need a bunch of theories to justify, to

examine, to measure its creative viability? Would the creative urge of Man cease in the absence of a critical historiography? Why do we allow ourselves to be judged and tabulated by any fixed norms of critical discourse? Gandhi writing in Harijan, (14th November 1936), emphatically exhibited this concern; “Why should I need an artist to explain a work of art to me? Why should it not speak to me itself?”

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