

Discipline in focus

The margins in historical consciousness

Aloka Parasher-Sen

History as an academic discipline, preoccupied with scholarly description and analysis, has so far succeeded in creating the history of the dominant 'event', 'structure' and 'process' to, thus, consciously leave out the so-called 'non-event', the 'ordinary' and the 'small' endeavours, not encompassable within the 'structure' or 'process'. Most historians from countries bequeathed with a heavy colonial cultural legacy have had to struggle to understand the present by mapping the historically constituted locations of the past. However, we cannot talk about the distant past without referring to our essential and immediate history of the last two hundred years, for ancient India was a contesting ground for some of the earliest endeavours by both the imperialists and the nationalists. This has led to the moulding of most of what we study today as ancient Indian history.

The first generation of Indian historians faced the task of using a mature, well developed discipline of history, with all the limitations of liberal historiography, and of grafting it on their past. They had to do so within the given 'rules of the game' which meant an acceptance of: (a) the fact that the ancient past of their country was devoid of a sense of history writing, (b) the simple logic that the past was linked through a chain of cause and effect to the present, and in this present the most desirable form of collective existence was one reflected in a nation-state with all its representative institutions, and (c) the idea that to make sense of any kind of history, absolute/universal meanings of time, progress, humanism, etc., had to be somehow drawn upon to explore the Indian past.

This easy and comfortable escape through writing the history of an overarching 'traditional' system, apparently monolithic in time and space, based on a synthesis of opportunistically chosen indigenous texts/inscriptions (often translations by well known 'Orientalists') and other odd bits of premodern information suitably muffled by early British

records, was suddenly shaken from its stupor by political opportunists who, by using the same tools of historical authentication, tried to suggest a certain type of 'Indian' *monolithism*. The so-called conservative, reactionary or nativist historians, who helped these politicians write history, do not talk the language of a 'history' embedded in indigenous idioms. In fact, their fanaticism draws strength from the positivist elements of history writing that discovers 'facts' of the past to 'prove' a particular point of view. In this situation, history begins to straggle not only the marginal but the dominant as well.

In a study of premodern society, where history as we understand it today was an alien concept, when we privilege a modern notion of history and all that it entails so that it becomes central, the object of study remains distant and marginal. Therefore, when we mediate with our distant past we consciously seek not only to bridge the past through the present but also to more forcefully argue that *there existed a premodern self-perception of the past* which needs to be focused upon.

The agenda, therefore, needs to be shifted to focus on absences/margins in early Indian history rather than on the presence — the 'center' or the dominant subject — even if these emerge in fragments and do not fit into a whole. Instead of looking for rigid boundaries of separation, understanding the relationship between the dominant and the subject shall revolve around looking at the 'margin' vis-à-vis the 'center' in terms of the former being an 'area of resistance' and thus recovering the socio-historical space for groups of people located outside what has been written of ancient India, so far defined in terms of a monolithic, largely unchanging society bound by rules to constantly reject the outsider/other.

The first absence which looms large upon scrutiny is the recognition that there is a denial of the historical mode of explanation in the formation of the dominant brahmanical discourse in early India. It is thus important to note that before the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, maps of historical consciousness in India showed large tracts of boundaryless territory accommodating the small and the local in decidedly different ways from the grand narratives and historicized notions of social totality that we have come to burden ourselves with today. People all over the world live their lives in relation to the past and they understand their world by referring to 'tradition' (the word *parampara* is commonly used in India to signify this) which is marked by human experience. Today it is no longer as simple to suggest that there was a total absence of historical consciousness in traditional India as some of the early Orientalist writers had proclaimed.

'Tradition' and History

I draw upon an analysis of the formation of the dominant Sanskrit discourse as articulated in the *Purvamimamsa Sutra* to argue that history cannot be looked at even in terms of a simple duality of 'presence' and 'absence' in ancient India. Sheldon Pollock in 'Mimamsa and the Problem of History' (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 109:4) discusses the *Mimamsa's* 'confrontation with history' and its 'valuation of real knowledge'. The *Mimamsa*, he argues, rejected the historical mode of interpretation and projected the transcendence of the Veda. The idea of the rejection of history in the Veda emerges as a powerful 'tradition' out of a complex discussion in the *Purvamimamsa Sutra* on the authority of texts and practices. These texts and practices in so far as they relate to dharma secure validity by way of their claim to be based on Vedic texts. The result was that these texts were authenticated to exist 'out of time' as this gave them a claim to truth and authority. In doing so, there was a dual impact on the understanding of all other cultural practices and texts in ancient India.

Pollock goes on to show how the *Mimamsa* view of what the Veda meant supplanted an important alternative conception, namely, the *aitihāsika* mode of 'historical explanation'. What the *Mimamsa* developed as principal guardians of the Veda was on the basis of the *nairukta* or an etymological analysis of the Veda. What is significant about the *Purvamimamsa* commentators dismissing the historical interpretive mode is that Indian intellectual history and all texts emanating from it have ever since based their validation and their truth claims on their

affinity to the Veda. The latter as 'true knowledge' achieved this status by suppressing and denying 'the evidence of their own historical existence...a suppression that took place even in the case of *itihāsa*, "history" itself.' This is what made the Veda the general rubric under which every sort of knowledge in early India was subsumed. The notion expanded pervasively because of the textual basis of dharma which determined the nature of all rule-bound action. The genealogy of knowledge thus created was not all identical, but different levels of the *parampara* developed, each claiming authority by asserting a Vedic or quasi-Vedic status. Pollock concludes: 'History...is not simply absent from or unknown to Sanskrit culture; it is denied in favour of a model of truth that accorded history no epistemological value or social significance...'

If texts we use to write the 'modern versions of history' in fact deny their origination in time and are rendered immune to 'the challenge of their historicity,' it is to the nature of 'tradition' and its explication that we need to turn to next. The ideological basis of the brahmanical discourse was based on rule-boundedness. The accessibility of tradition rested on the memory (*smṛti*) of the audible (*śruti*). In this context too, the *Purvamimamsa* proclaims the validity of only the Veda because it clearly does not want any other 'interest' to challenge the former. Other texts and practices whose existence can be inferred in the Veda but which are not recited word for word were accepted only if their essence was preserved in memory and did not contradict the Veda.

By rejecting history and, thereby, man-made intervention there was the possibility for the rearticulation of the predominant discourse, but within a certain flexibility, to govern every day practices; these could be made recognizable, repeatable, and interpretable within the force of 'tradition.' However, the second issue of how it represented ideas that were imported from outside the elite Vedic realm remains to be tackled. By raising the discourse to the status of a revelation, the everyday practice of oppression of the subject, and the outsider in general, meant that the same system had to sustain hierarchical and asymmetrical relations of power for the ideology to function.

History of the 'Other'

To tacitly accept that because of the denial of history in the dominant

brahmanical discourse there was no questioning of its power would be too simple a proposition. I would like to emphasize below that though there was the formation of a dominant discourse of power by denying history, yet this tradition accepted the diversity of cultures, within, of course, hierarchical relations of power.

My study of the *mleccha* (1991) or the outsider as the ideologically permanent marginal to the social mores of the *varna* oriented society brought to the forefront an interesting debate on the use of *mleccha* words during the course of the *Purvamimamsa* discussions on the authority of the Veda on all matters of social and cultural practice. As would be expected, though it is difficult to pinpoint the historicity of the *mleccha* languages from which these words were taken, it is none the less significant that the dominant discourse accepted the cultural practice of the outsider within certain given parameters of social acceptance. The *Sutra* under discussion begins with the statement that the usage of words current among the *mlecchas* is also authoritative. Sabara's *Bhasya* on this *Sutra* gives the impression that the commentator was conversant with the life and language of the *mlecchas*. As noted above, the source of dharma in the *Purvamimamsa* is the eternal, infallible and self-evident Veda. Hence, *śabda* or 'word' in the form of a Vedic injunction alone is reliable. In order to justify this, Sabara enters into elaborate arguments giving the example of four words -- *pika*, *nema*, *sata*, *tamarasa* -- which were not used by the *arya* but by the *mleccha* occurring in the Veda. He gives the meaning of these words according to the usage of the *mlecchas*: *pika* is 'cuckoo', *nema* is 'half', *tamarasa* is 'lotus', and *sata* is 'round wooden vessel with hundred holes.'

Following the *nairukta* mode of explanation, the question raised is whether their meaning should be deduced etymologically from commentaries, grammars and lexicons, or whether the meaning should be accepted in the sense that they are used by the *mlecchas*. The latter possibility is refuted by the *Purvapaksa* which states that only the usage of cultured people is valid, not the memory (*smṛti*) of the uncultured (*asista*) as they are not careful with their meanings. Therefore, *mleccha* words should be understood with the help of grammar, etymology, etc. The arguments of the *Purvapaksa*

are contended with; the *Siddhanta* ruling follows. In this opinion, the four words mentioned above must be understood according to the usage of the *mlecchas*. The conclusion is arrived at on account of the fact that: (1) any word that is not incompatible with any authority and comprehensible should be accepted, (2) the *mlecchas* are more careful and reliable in certain specialized fields of activity, and (3) where there is no usage of the *mleccha*, and no guide to the deduction of a meaning, only then should the use of grammar, etc., be resorted to. Further, by deducing words from their etymology there always remains a certain degree of uncertainty.

The debate, however, does not end here. The next important figure in the development of the *Purvamimamsa* system is Kumarila Bhatta whose commentary on Sabara's *Bhasya* is very critical. His *Tantravarttika* contains passages which disagree with and question Sabara's views on the usage of *mleccha* words. The *Purvapaksa* viewpoint in the *Tantravarttika* also begins by stating that etymological and grammatical bases have more authority than the usage of *mlecchas*. The former method, it argues, is well established even though the meaning that the word gets is new, while the second option gives the old meaning but its origins are faulty. Above all, writes Kumarila, 'how could words occurring in the Veda be taken in the same sense that is recognized only among *mlecchas* especially when the very sight of a *mleccha* makes us stop the recitations of the Veda? Nor is it allowable for the people of Aryavarta to have a conversation or consultation with the *mleccha*; and hence how could we ever come to know the sense in which any word may be current among them? ...and then too, the countries inhabited by *mlecchas* being innumerable, how could one succeed in getting at all their usages?' The second great criticism about the use of words among *mlecchas* is that they distort the meanings of words they borrow from Sanskrit. This is partly, he says, due to the fact the *mlecchas* are found to have no regard for dharma. Kumarila then takes the example of words from a Dravida language used by the *arya* having meanings different from the former. 'Thus then, ...how can we ever reasonably deduce Sanskrit words from those current among such distant peoples as the Parsis, the Barbaras, the Yavanas, the Raumakas and the like?'

The *Siddhanta* reply to Kumarila Bhatta clarifies that basically those *mleccha* words whose interpretation is not against the authority of the Veda with regard to dharma can be accepted. Concerning the distorted forms it says that one can hardly discern the real from the unreal in the various dialects and, therefore, this is hardly an important point to dwell on. An important issue raised is that if they did not accept the meanings attached to physical objects by the *mleccha*, they would be going against their own theory that 'the eternal signification of eternal words can be ascertained by means of the usages of men,' and the *mlecchas* were also men! This would especially apply to words such as *patrona*, 'a silken or jute fabric', *varavana*, 'armour', etc., as these articles were produced only in the *mleccha* countries. Finally, the controversy over the comparative strength of *mleccha* and *arya* usages is settled thus: 'The superior authority of the *aryas* has been laid down only in matters relating to dharma directly; as for the ordinary worldly things such as agriculture and the like, all usages are equally authoritative. Consequently, in matters relating to menial service, house building and the like, we can freely admit the superior authority of the *mleccha*.'

The necessity of the above debate can be analyzed in the context of the pressures on the dominant brahmanical discourse to constantly define words in the face of its contact with outside elements. In the cases cited above, these words had become central to certain usages of the *arya* and, therefore, had to be brought within the framework of the discourse. This meant an acceptance of diversity without destroying the unflagging faith in dharma. In an overall sense the above exemplification points to the fact that when directed to identify the specific nature of the margin, there were flexible borders between an absolute rejection and/or an accommodation to privileged society. Central to this was the implicit individuality of the margin that could not be easily diffused into the center, apparent in the way the debate in the dominant text changes in the subsequent commentator's views. Within the tradition, the constant opening of the 'original' text lent possibilities of adjusting to new historical and social circumstances without changing the stable definition of dharma.

'Othering' the Other

The *mleccha* in general was rejected by being placed in the same basket with different kinds of outsiders, all of whom were as racially, religiously, and culturally diverse from each other as from the dominant society in relation to which they were being defined as *mleccha*. The marginality of this reference group can be understood in relation to the cultural norms of acceptance wherein behavior or language of the dominant was not available to the outsider. However, what is significant to point out is that when it came to elite outsiders of all types, there was a constant incorporation into the *varna-jati* society. This can be illustrated in the texts of the dominant itself. Contrary to popular perceptions that the 'foreigner' was always rejected in India and that the rule-boundedness of ancient Indian society inhibited interaction of any kind with them, I would argue that the dominant society defined itself in relationship with conquering elite from time to time. Thus, descriptions of the 'foreigner', '*mleccha*', 'outsider', 'tribal', etc., that the marginal were given vis-à-vis the center's concern to maintain stable relations of power and dominance. These rationalizations can be seen as the magnanimous gestures of the indigenous society to accommodate and assimilate; what is often lost sight of is that this incorporation was crucial to the maintenance of the discourse of power, in the process denying the actual causal history of events.

One of the most popular of these rationalizations narrates the creation of the *mleccha* by Nandini, the magical cow of Vasistha. To combat the army of Visvamitra who was forcibly taking her away from Vasistha, Nandini created a strong *mleccha* army. These *mlecchas*, in their manifold armours and brandishing arms, comprised among others the Yavanas, Sakas and Pahlavas. The gist of the legend is the fight between Visvamitra and Vasistha-- the *ksatriya* and the *brahmana*; it was the *brahmana* who had foreigners fight for him. The intention of this myth perhaps was to offer some explanation for the presence of a large army consisting of people who already formed different elements/strata of the population and were in particular noted for their military might. The allusions to the Yavanas, Sakas and Pahlavas as essential constituents of Indian society is emphasized at great length in two other accounts, which

even more closely reflect on the relationship of the new elite and their incorporation as central to maintaining the structures of power relations. The mode of explanation of these accounts is far from historical, but unlike the above example there is some historical referentiality in the narrative.

The first account occurs with variations in the details in the *Harivamsa*, the *Ramayana*, and some Puranas. It is stated that the achievements of the Ikshvaku dynasty were temporarily halted when the kingdom of Bahu was vanquished by the Haihaya and Talajangha tribes, who were assisted by the Sakas, Yavanas, Kambojas, Pahlavas and Paradas. Sagara, the son of Bahu, recovered his kingdom by exterminating the Haihayas and the Talajanghas, and would also have destroyed the Sakas, Yavanas, Kambojas, Paradas and Pahlavas. But these tribes applied to Vasistha, the family priest of Sagara, for protection. *Vasistha absolved them from the duties of their castes and, on his advice*, Sagara contented himself with making the Yavanas shave the upper half of their heads, the Paradas wear long hair, and the Pahlavas grow their beards in obedience to his commands. He also absolved them from their established duties to offer oblations to the fire and study the Vedas. In this manner, the *Visnu Purana* adds, being unable to carry out religious rites and abandoned by the *brahmanas*, these different tribes became *mlecchas*.

It is also important to take note of variations in the later traditions. The account in the *Harivamsa* agrees in the main with that of the Puranas, but the author of this text adds that the Sakas, Yavanas, Kambojas, Paradas, Pahlavas, Mahisikas, Daravas, Cholas and Keralas had all been *ksatriyas* before Sagara, acting on Vasistha's advice, deprived them of their social and religious status.

The statement that Sagara barred *mlecchas* from studying sacred texts and enjoying the assistance of *brahmanas* suggests that they had these privileges before. Therefore, as one of the texts deduces, they must have been *ksatriyas* when they were defeated by Sagara (*Harivamsa*, X, 44-45); otherwise, they could not have claimed the protection of Vasistha. Since non-Indian sources do tell us that these foreigners became kings and controlled north Indian politics during the early centuries of the Christian era, the *brahmanas* in general could not have maintained their positions and privileges intact

without their patronage. The ingenious solution was to regard these kings as erstwhile *ksatriyas* who had been degraded. Being originally *ksatriyas* they could, at least theoretically, become *ksatriyas* again although in the eyes of the *brahmanas* they may have behaved like *mlecchas*.

The outsider, then, was not only the perennial contestator to privilege but also the permanent outsider. Tribes and indigenous peoples outside the *varna* society lived in close proximity to civilized society but the local boundaries between the two were often difficult to delineate. Further, the duality between the absolute outsider at the margins and at the center of dominance breaks down, since the core of the tradition allowed space for their acceptance, although on its own terms. Moral boundaries rejected the outsider but the encircling frontier was not impermeable. This has to be considered fundamental to any 'rationality' that we may attribute to these texts within which were left deliberate, open spaces for interpretation.

Hitherto, interpretations of early India have tended to emphasize on an integrated history of the nation-state without raising questions of the complexity of how cultural diversity was both absorbed and rejected in the dominant written/remembered traditions of India as a civilizational entity. In India today the debate between schools of historical interpretation diametrically opposite to each other persists in only using the premodern material as 'material' or 'source' for history writing without any discussion on the nature of the theoretical premises in which this 'evidence' is couched. Given the fact that the dominant indigenous tradition denied the importance of history as a discursive practice, we need to reckon the fact that the dominant text was able to account for both the diversity of cultures and the differences within them thereby making it impossible for us to see a monolith single tradition embedded in single structures of linearity in space and time.

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Aloka Parasher-Sen is professor of ancient Indian history at the University of Hyderabad.

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