

Early India

Through Multiple Lenses

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Publisher's Note

An international seminar was organized by the Department of History on February 11 and 12, 2023 to focus on various issues in early Indian History. The theme of that two-day seminar was "Early India through Multiple Lenses". A number of research scholars and students from various universities and colleges across the country participated and presented (online and offline) their papers. This volume is a collection of twenty nine essays and almost all were originally presented in the two-day seminar.

The Department of History later took the initiative to publish these valuable papers and the departmental faculty members really worked hard to accomplish the task. I convey my sincere regards to all of them. Swami Umapadananda, Jt. Coordinator, Swami Vivekananda Research Centre (SVRC), Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira (and also a monastic faculty member of the Department of History) took the responsibility of making all necessary correspondences to publish this volume. My love and best wishes are due to him. Both Sri Rituparna Chattopadhyay and Sri Soumya Ghosh worked as paper reviewers. I thankfully acknowledge their sincere effort. Sri Gautam Mukhopadhyay, senior faculty member of the

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Department of History, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira took the responsibility of making all designs and page setting of this volume. I convey my sincere thanks to him.

Finally, I seek the blessings of the Holy Trio for all the contributors of this volume.

Om Peace! Peace! Peace!

August 30, 2023

(Rākhi Pūrṇimā)

Belur Math, Howrah

Swami Mahaprajnananda

Principal

Introduction

This volume is a collection of twenty nine essays which were originally presented in the two-Day International Seminar entitled “Early India through Multiple Lenses” organized by the Department of History, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math Howrah, in February this year. The presenters were a motley lot, comprising of undergraduate and post graduate students, research scholars and early career teachers of history, anthropology and philosophy affiliated to institutions located in various regions of West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh.

The ranges of the essays are varied and diverse. Though I am not an expert on early India, I enjoyed reading the essays and found quite a few of them original and thought provoking. I hope readers to absorb the flavor of the papers by reading them thoroughly. Ayush Dey looks at the difference in the characterization of Sita as reflected in Valmiki and Krittibas. He analyses the socio-political times of Krittibas to understand if that in any way had a role in characterizing of Sita by the poet. Adiya Bhattacharya’s essay proposes a reading on the *Rājaputrarakṣaṇam Prakaraṇa* of *Kauṭīlya Arthaśāstra* in order to enquire into how the princes were understood and dealt within the *artha*-tradition of Early India. Deboproskash Bhattacharjee investigates the perceptions regarding forests in early India through the writings of environmental historians and Diptak Paul makes an attempt to understand the origin and decline of Tamralipta while discussing the economic, socio-cultural and educational activities surrounding the port town. Diptangshu Chakraborty’s essay is about the evolution of Chalukyan temples while Reshma Ara presents a detail

description of Virateshvara temple architecture of Kalachuri period in Sohagpur. The essay of Indrait Dhara on the other hand discusses the rise of *jati varna pratha* in early India, its socio economic implications and the views of Swami Vivekananda and Nurmahammad Sekh's subject of discussion is Cheraman Perumal Masjid.

The paper of Indranila Bose is refreshingly fresh as it traces the multifarious and associative aspects of cotton during the period of the Harappan Civilization. The essay also makes an effort to understand how cotton might have played a role in the economy of the civilization. In Kushadhar Maiti's essay one reads about the library system of early India in institutions such as Nalanda, Vikramshila, Taxila and how it had a bearing on the contemporary society. The subject of Mandira Ghosh's paper is Upanishad as she analyses the philosophy of the Upanishad as a text while Nilanjan Chaki discusses Jaina religion and culture of Bankura in his essay. Was the horse introduced by the Aryans or were the original inhabitants of the subcontinent familiar with this animal even before the advent of the Aryans? This is the question that Pallabh Bairagya tries to answer in his essay. Rupa Biswas and Avick Biswas discusses recent developments in methodological advances in Indian prehistory in their essay and Priyankara Chakraborty attempts to explore traces of a literary tradition in early medieval Bengal in the light of some Pāla inscriptions. Sagar Samanta studies the condition of sudras as reflected in the Arthasastra and Saikat Roy looks at the process of Sanskritisation through Jagannath and Kamakhya cult. Sangita Kolay on the other hand tries to look at the awakening of women during the Satavahana period while the subject of Samima Nasrin is the limitation and scope of *stridhan* in early India.

The subject of espionage in early India has always engrossed students of history and Sayan Paul in his essay

focuses on the Mauryan Period to find an elaborate system of espionage as reflected in various sources. Smaranika Banerjee's essay on the other hand attempts to show how Buddhism viewed healing in the *Mahāvagga* from a medical perspective at its early stage. The topic of Sreyasi Sen is cult syncretism. Using the imagery of Harihara, the author discusses the iconographic representation of Harihara while presenting a short discourse between the mythology and the iconography. Souradeep Mukhopadhyay in a fascinating essay sheds light on how Buddhism and Brahmanism had tried to capture and influence the network of dramatic performers and culture of dramatic performances for communicating with the masses. He suggests that the composition of dramatic literature in the socio-cultural milieu of Post-Mauryan India was not merely an 'aesthetic accident', rather the embedded connection between the performers and the politico-religious authorities had vehemently influenced the 'content' and the 'form' of composition as well as performances of the *Drśyakāvya*s in Early Historic India.

Subrata Chattopadhyay Banerjee's study links the Covid 19 to the complex ideas of Charaka Samhita. She contends that her goal is to explore this ancient text which can complement modern scientific knowledge and contribute to the development of comprehensive strategies to mitigate the impact of pandemics on human health. Chandni Roy and her co writers essay is a comparative investigation of the rock art site known as Isko, in Jharkhand. The paper sheds light on the interpretative approach with a glimpse of the prehistoric people's cognitive minds on their surrounding environment.

Readers may find some papers in this volume a bit amateurish, devoid of any argument or factual and bland, but the editors used their discretion to keep them nonetheless to encourage the young authors, especially

students with the hope that they would hone up their argumentative skills and produce better papers in future. Here I should mention that the arguments in the essays published here are the authors' themselves and the editors are no way responsible for them. I urge all readers to go through each and every paper and judge for themselves. We would also hope to hear from you and your feedback would be most welcome in any way that can improve future publications from our end.

Finally, I have no words to thank Revered Swami Shastrajnananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur for his contribution to this volume—'Writing Indian History: A Layman's Scribbling.' Maharaj is a specialist in Bengali literature, but his keen interest and knowledge of history is well reflected in the essay. He talks about the recent trends in historical writings, which do not always mirror the truth and stresses on an open mind when reconstructing the past. In the context of writing Indian history, he feels that prejudiced approach owing to the country's socio-political milieu, have made academics and institutions crippled. At the same time, he hopes researchers of early Indian texts will decipher the true meaning inherent in them and not reject them as mere religious literature. He believes that the writing of true Indian history can only make an auspicious beginning when scholars involve themselves in a healthy study of history bereft of 'ideological baggage' that fetters scholarship in this age.

(Readers will find a note on diacritical marks used in the last page of this volume)

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Writing Indian History: A Layman's Scribbling

Swami Shastrajnananda
(Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur)

The study of history, at present age, has gained a new momentum—both quantitative and qualitative. Different ideologies, each claiming its own approach as an unprejudiced one while branding others as partisan, are immensely impacting the study and research of history today. And, with the passage of time, these historical researches and studies, in turn, have been found to be steadily exerting their influences on the tenor of our lives. Through their diverse and complex explorations into the hither-to-uncharted areas of the past, historical researches have been continually coming up with fresh findings for us. These findings are what allow us to have a peek into our past traditions, cultures, religions etc. And, here lies the importance of an open mind with which one needs to analyse these findings without being biased by specific theories. It therefore becomes worrisome when we see renowned scholars, faculties, researchers, in their attempts to comprehend and appreciate our past through different archaeological and literary evidences, fail to unbiasedly assess those evidences and bring out their actual purport. To reconstruct the ancient civilisations, they sometimes

misinterpret these literatures and other allied evidences, either willingly or unknowingly.

E. H. Carr, in his well-known controversial book, *What is History*, has divided facts of the history into two categories: “facts of the past”, that is, historical information that historians estimate as trivial, and "historical facts", i.e. information which historians decide to be important. According to Carr, historians, because of their own biases and agendas, rather arbitrarily and randomly determine which “facts of the past” are to be turned into ‘historical facts’ (Carr E H, *What Is History?*, pp. 8–13, 1967, ISBN 978-0394703916). Indeed, in the determination of ‘historical facts’, there are six enquiries (as proposed by Gilbert J. Garraghan and Jean Delangle, (Gilbert J. Garraghan and Jean Delanglez *A Guide to Historical Method* p. 168) that can be rightly called the vital premises:

- Where was it produced (localization)?
- By whom was it produced (authorship)?
- From what pre-existing material was it produced (analysis)?
- In what original form was it produced (integrity)?
- What is the evidential value of its contents (credibility)?

While none can ignore these fundamental premises, precautions are nonetheless required to be adopted by the historians in expressing their views and formulating their doctrines, so that contrary attempts to understand and interpret do not get simply wiped out due to hegemonic socio-political pressures and intellectual oppression of a vocally powerful group. There should be ample space for the learners to know the apparently

contradictory readings and explanations. Our Intellectual room should not be a small, suffocating one where only one or two doctrines enjoy elite accommodation; rather it should be an elastically capacious one where incessant influx of free and open debates, arguments, doctrines, refutations will be housed with ease and comfort.

Themes of Indian History have always been a point of deep interest in our academic research. Historians have been excavating a number of locations to trace different layers of our ancient history. Apart from these, there are also numerous literatures which continue to assist us in reconstructing these past years of ours. Despite all these, we must accept that the Vedas, Dharmashastras, Puranas and innumerable philosophical treatises are yet to be fittingly unearthed in the process of historical research. In the pursuit of historical studies of India, opinionated attitudes owing to some compelling socio-political ambience, have made our academics and institutions crippled. Historically, colonised countries like ours continue to remain a victim to the unfortunately legacy of our independent academic expedition being systematically thwarted earlier by the intellectual, cultural and religious oppression of the colonisers. We have been trained and tutored to see ourselves only through the lenses imported by our erstwhile colonial rulers. This has systematically destroyed all the trends of indigenous studies and has ostracized a certain group of academicians of microscopic minority who dares to look at our history not through colonial glasses.

Indeed, India, being a country predominantly spiritual, can never ignore the vast writings created by

different sages, sects and religious groups which, if deciphered in a proper manner, will disinter the socio-cultural currents that have flown through the passage of time. Biographies of saints and seers are also of immense importance to unveil socio-economic and cultural trends of a particular age wherein a saint was born and active. Memoirs of such people not only reveal their inner lives, but also unravel other groups of the society, their behaviour and process of adaptations in a particular geographical backdrop. Just because of being religious in nature, these sources should not be discarded in the historical studies of the country like India. In Indian context, religious texts have always involved issues of society, economics, environment, politics etc. Of course, every documentary evidence must be subjected to 'source criticism' for determining the level of its importance and point of acceptance. In this regard, we may recall Bernheim (1889) and Langlois & Seignobos (1898) who propounded the following seven-step technique for source criticism in history: (Howell, Martha & Prevenier, Walter (2001). *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ISBN 0-8014-8560-6.)

1. If the sources all agree about an event, historians can consider the event proven.
2. However, majority does not rule; even if most sources relate events in one way, that version will not prevail unless it passes the test of critical textual analysis.
3. The source whose account can be confirmed by reference to outside authorities in some of its parts can

be trusted in its entirety if it is impossible similarly to confirm the entire text.

4. When two sources disagree on a particular point, the historian will prefer the source with most "authority"—that is the source created by the expert or by the eyewitness.
5. Eyewitnesses are, in general, to be preferred especially in circumstances where the ordinary observer could have accurately reported what transpired and, more specifically, when they deal with facts known by most contemporaries.
6. If two independently created sources agree on a matter, the reliability of each is measurably enhanced.
7. When two sources disagree and there is no other means of evaluation, then historians take the source which seems to accord best with common sense.

In the light of this discussion, we can conclude that a healthy study of history, instead of remaining confined to an ideological procrustean bed, must lend itself to open debates, free deliberations and cooperative understanding. This will help us in decrypting the new codes, new letters and new magnitudes of our ancient history. Let us hope that our faculties and scholars of history will fearlessly argue and, if needed, will agree to disagree when it comes to differences of ideas and beliefs. This will ultimately pave way for writing the new pages of history that would breathe the fresh air of synthetic vision, instead of reeking of unhealthy vapour of acrimony.

To rewrite our national history, we should not get predisposed towards one or more ideologies. With an unprejudiced approach, let us set ourselves to the task of

restructuring our manifestly skewed history database (towards certain ideological frameworks) by making our academic environment both conducive and receptive to the continual generation of fresh ideas and ideals. And, to render this achievable, it is most important to guard against playing ourselves into the hands of any socio-political creed. For, verily, it is only in an academic environment of intellectual freedom, unfettered by any ideological baggage, that the writing of true Indian history can make an auspicious beginning.