

OUTLOOK

Some of India's most eminent historical scientists discuss—in detail and with fresh insights—the development of research into India's multi-sided, fascinating history.

State of Historical Research in India

What can be said qualitatively—and with reference to specific conceptual and methodological issues—about the state of historical research in India? Is our history a vigorous and healthy component of our social sciences, in terms of concerns, relevance and method? How are problems such as periodisation and generalisation for a highly varied and complex historical experience to be solved? What are the front-line areas in Indian historical research and how important is quantification? And, finally, how can a developed history contribute to the development goal and to the life of the people?

We sounded five historians based in the main centres of historical research in the country through detailed interviews—on these themes. Each of them is an acknowledged pioneer of, or outstanding contributor to, front-line advances in the field. In alphabetical order, they are Professors:

AMIYA KUMAR BAGCHI, a trained economist who has most fruitfully turned his quantitatively rigorous and analytical social science discipline to the field of modern economic history, apart from India's current development problems, and has published a distinguished study of "Private Investment in India, 1900-1939";

BIPAN CHANDRA, well known for his systematic researches into the colonial impact and the freedom struggle and as the author of an authoritative study of the rise and growth of economic nationalism in modern India, and also of some of the important contributions in the textbooks which came under obscurantist attack a couple of years ago;

IRFAN HABIB, whose path-breaking study of the agrarian system of Mughal India and subsequent researches in economic history, production technology and social organisation in pre-colonial (or late "medieval") India and on the solution of a series of theoretical problems, have won him national and international renown;

K. K. PILLAI, a veteran whose specialisation in the social and cultural history of the Tamils makes him a leading representative of the older school of classical regional history; and

ROMILA THAPAR, whose range of concerns in the scientific historical interpretation of ancient India, and the process of social change in particular, is comparable only to the work of D. D. Kosambi in an earlier phase of historical research.

The separate interviews, conducted for THE HINDU in the historians' own place of work by **DR. VENKATESH ATHREYA**, a biologist and development economist, were originally composed of 18 core questions grouped in 10 sections: a basic preliminary assessment; the influence of ideological standpoints and scientific history; the problem of periodisation of Indian history; analytical frameworks; problems of sources and method; the problem of generalisation in the vastly varied Indian historical context and the role of regional and local histories; quantification; economic history; organisation of historical research; and the potential value of a scientifically developed history to development and to the life of the people.

Each historian was also invited to weave into the responses the specific insights or experiences he or she might have gained from specialised research over a sustained period, which might be of value in assessing the state of historical research in India today.

The recorded interviews ran to nearly seven hours in their totality. Here we highlight the outlook of each historian on the issues and problems posed—departing from the usual "Outlook" format by grouping detailed extracts from the interviews around the core questions.

In addition to presenting the responses directly, we indicate after each core question the **RANGE OF RESPONSES**, highlighting the basic positions taken. The views of historians and other readers are especially invited on this feature and on the various positions taken by the specialist participants.

I. A Basic Preliminary Assessment

Venkatesh Athreya:

Historical interpretation and research appear to have been pursued with some vigour during the past two centuries in India. But in relation to the earlier development (as of, say 1900 and 1950) and in relation to the progress achieved elsewhere, could we have a preliminary assessment of the state of Indian historical research to-day—in terms of relevance, discipline and method?

Range of Responses

The basic preliminary assessment of the condition of Indian historical research by the historians interviewed is overwhelmingly positive. With Dr. K. K. Pillai dissenting. The positive evaluations range from Dr. Bipan Chandra's characterisation of the historical discipline during the last 10 or 15 years as "socially very relevant" and as "interacting on an equal plane with the disciplines of a world and a variety of other social sciences" to other social scientists' more qualified responses from Dr. Irfan Habib and Dr. Amiya Kumar Bagchi.

A. K. Bagchi:

I would not really say authoritatively very much about the work on the period before colonial rule started in India. But my general impression is that historical research in India has been for the last twenty years or so in a very active and healthy state of enquiry. I would particularly cite some of the landmarks in Indian history such as D. D. Kosambi's study of Indian history and Irfan Habib's "Agrarian System of Mughal India". These have given to us a new perspective on the flow of the life of the Indian people in earlier epochs which is very different from what I remember from reading history books in my school days.

There is also a group of young historians—it would be invidious to name any of them individually—working throughout India who are trying to deepen our understanding of the way people's life patterns evolved over time, and to make us conscious both of the contradictions which beset ordinary people's lives and the heritage that was left by not only the names that are sung in the ordinary historiographic works, but also by countless numbers of artisans and artists and makers of tools for use by ordinary people.

This progress, of course, cannot make us happy in the sense that we cannot say, yes, this is the right direction, yes, this is the right speed, in every way—but that is part of the contradiction of society. The society which is ridden with such contradictions cannot itself then produce the

developments in respect of method and some in respect of approach. And the method, if concerned, there has been an attempt to get away from formal political history which used to dominate the scene and explore some other aspects of society, notably economic history and social structure and also some other aspects of culture, notably intellectual history. Research in this field has been limited in scope and some respects the methods as yet are not satisfactory.

Before 1947, most of history writing was confined to political history, even from the nationalist point of view, with some writing on culture and economic history. The writing on economic history developed after the controversy between the Nationalists and the Imperialists.

Q: THE drain theory, and then C. C. Dutt and so on?

A: WELL, partly the debate on the drain theory, then partly the debate on the assessment of British rule from the point of view of India's economic development or backwardness... and therefore the desirability from this point of view to make assessments of pre-British Indian regimes—whether they were of the seventeenth century or of ancient India. So long as economic performance remained one of the tests of the rationality of British rule, it provoked explorations of economic history.

Q: BUT you find that by and large they were rather limited, and mostly political history...

A: ...Political history, but important work was done in economic history as an offshoot of this particular controversy. Then some work was done on cultural history, some of it inspired by the nationalist objective of showing that India exhibited a mixture of cultures and that no cultural tradition in India was really alien.

But after 1947, I think there have been other sources of inspiration for historians. One notable factor for historical research, as I see it, is the quest for a juster society, and therefore the examination of earlier social systems as well as the contemporary social system. I think that this has led to the growth of Marxist historiography. In particular, there has also been quite a good deal of influence of advanced methods of research developed outside India. For instance—not in order of importance, but just by way of description—Numerical methods of statistical analysis. And then perhaps one sees also the beginning of econometric history. There has been interest too in examining documents with a far greater degree of rigor.

K. K. Pillai:

I am afraid there has been a deterioration. Quantity has taken the place of quality. There are more Ph.D.s, probably more books also. Earlier there was more of intensive research in spite of fewer, in spite of some limitations.

Q: BUT would this be true of our area alone or would it be true of India as a whole do you think?

A: I should think generally of India as a whole. There may be exceptions, as I said—the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi is one, due to the quality of the students also... it works favourably in the Jawaharlal Nehru University, even in Calcutta University. There may be others which I do not know. Generally speaking, they are in a much higher position than the South Indian universities.

Romila Thapar:

Well, I think one of the interesting things that has happened in the last few years is a realisation that probably history is, amongst the social sciences, the most, shall I say, sophisticated. And, in the most intellectually questioning of disciplines, I think this is something which is realised by economists and sociologists as well. There has been a kind of sea change in the study of history which hasn't occurred to the same degree in any of the other social sciences.

And, obviously one must ask oneself why this has happened. I think it is partly that there has been a long tradition of "debates" in history on the question of the validity of interpretation, the use of evidence, the use of generalisations—a debate which began in the late nineteenth century among scholars working on Indian history, the kind of line of demarcation between what were generally called Orientalists and administrative historians.

Then the debate is made much more effective, broad-based, much more intensive by the arrival of what has been called a nationalist school of historical writing, who essentially questioned some of the theories of the earlier historians, and even though they never actually produced an alternative theory or explanation, nevertheless the fact that they questioned was extremely important to the study of history.

And then, of course, in the post-nationalist phase, I think that the most impressive contribution both directly and indirectly, has been that of Marxist historical writing. Directly, in the sense that it has tended to raise questions, take the interests of historians into areas which were not considered before, not considered relevant or important. And indirectly, because I certainly do believe that one of the contributions of Marxist historiography the world over is the fact that non-Marxists, in order to counter the Marxist position, have to take like the debates as if because of that my knowledge is a second-hand one. The general picture seems to be that historiography is very much influenced by the colonial heritage and by the reaction against that heritage from particular sectarian standpoints—communal or linguistic. The British said, let us say, that the Indian people were not good fighters. So as a reaction to that, some of our historians have felt it necessary to project the military leaders as great heroes...

Q: Shivaji, for instance, while forgetting the other dimensions of struggle by the

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

In my own particular field, if we look at the current historiography of economic history... I would say, first of all, that unfortunately there is not enough

people which are not recorded in the exploits of military leaders, or forgetting what the military leaders were really aiming at. Now I think as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle this is something that was necessary... or inevitable... **Q:** ...or inevitable, yes. I cannot judge whether it was necessary, but I can say that probably it was inevitable. But today we are unable to outline that kind of heritage is a sign of retrogression. And we should be able now to look truthfully at all our great figures, not only because we want to have a true picture of these figures individually, but also because we want a true picture of the society and the changes in that society that were coming about through the centuries.

That is the general picture, I would say—that British historiography left its imprints and left its sectarian opponents. What we should have are opponents who do not simply react to particular strands of British historiography, but opponents who can look at people's history as a whole, with all the contradictions, with all these spirals through which history goes.

field for the simple reason that to write nationally about modern India could have made the writer anti-colonial. And that was dangerous for those who were naturally involved in their academic work.

Then we have also the development of communalist historiography. But the interesting thing is that the nationalist hegemony or influence over the intellectuals was strong enough to prevent them from going over to communalist historiography which was openly divisive. Consequently we find that while we had communal strands in the writing of historians in the Twenties and Thirties, which contribute to communalist historiography, nakedly communal historiography does not come into existence yet.

Q: That's more recent?

A: That comes into existence after Independence when, in India, develops the R. C. Mazumdar type of history on the one hand, and in Pakistan also, openly Muslim communalist historiography develops.

Then I think we have a very strong school of Marxist historians in India, but I would like to put them together with others who are making efforts to try to write scientific history...

Q: Secular and scientific history?

A: Secular and scientific history? Well, scientific history is secular—I would not say secular

to the example of the hostile responses to historians who date the "Shilappadikaram" later than the second or third centuries A.D. Isn't that a clear case of many other instances also? There are times when people said the Vedas were 8000 years old, and that!

Q: Are you saying, in other words, that there is a premium on making a particular work more and more ancient?

A: Yes, there has been a great clamour on the part of Sanskritists, Tamils, Telugu Kannadigas, and all the people to ante-date their civilisation, their products of literature and so on.

Q: Linguistic chauvinism, isn't it?

A: Linguistic chauvinism, yes. **Q:** But I suppose, in relation to Tamil, perhaps, there is a premium on making a particular work more and more ancient?

A: Yes, there has been a great clamour on the part of Sanskritists, Tamils, Telugu Kannadigas, and all the people to ante-date their civilisation, their products of literature and so on.

Q: Linguistic chauvinism, isn't it?

A: Linguistic chauvinism, yes. **Q:** But I suppose, in relation to Tamil, perhaps, there is a premium on making a particular work more and more ancient?

A: Yes, there has been a great clamour on the part of Sanskritists, Tamils, Telugu Kannadigas, and all the people to ante-date their civilisation, their products of literature and so on.

Q: Linguistic chauvinism, isn't it?

A: Linguistic chauvinism, yes. **Q:** But I suppose, in relation to Tamil, perhaps, there is a premium on making a particular work more and more ancient?

A: Yes, there has been a great clamour on the part of Sanskritists, Tamils, Telugu Kannadigas, and all the people to ante-date their civilisation, their products of literature and so on.

Q: Linguistic chauvinism, isn't it?

A: Linguistic chauvinism, yes. **Q:** But I suppose, in relation to Tamil, perhaps, there is a premium on making a particular work more and more ancient?

A: Yes, there has been a great clamour on the part of Sanskritists, Tamils, Telugu Kannadigas, and all the people to ante-date their civilisation, their products of literature and so on.

Q: Linguistic chauvinism, isn't it?

A: Linguistic chauvinism, yes. **Q:** But I suppose, in relation to Tamil, perhaps, there is a premium on making a particular work more and more ancient?

A: Yes, there has been a great clamour on the part of Sanskritists, Tamils, Telugu Kannadigas, and all the people to ante-date their civilisation, their products of literature and so on.

Q: Linguistic chauvinism, isn't it?

A: Linguistic chauvinism, yes. **Q:** But I suppose, in relation to Tamil, perhaps, there is a premium on making a particular work more and more ancient?



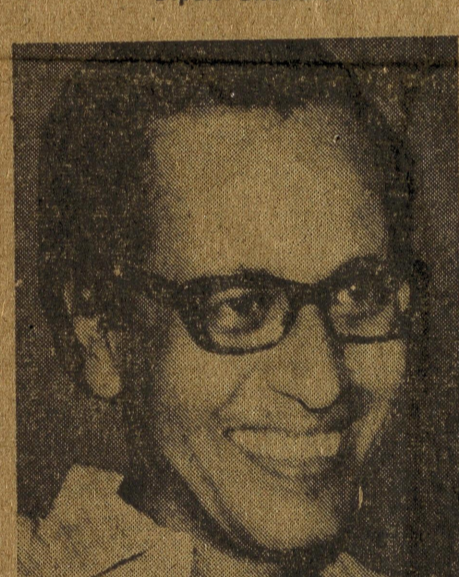
Bipan Chandra.



Irfan Habib.



Romila Thapar.



Amiya Kumar Bagchi.



Venkatesh Athreya.



K. K. Pillai.

Range of Responses

Bipan Chandra, Irfan Habib and Romila Thapar, in their responses speaking from the thick of the struggle—analyse at length, the situation on the ground, identify the essential elements of the debate to be involved and express appreciation of the strong resistance to the attack on scientific history, making a clear case for a fresh detail. A. K. Bagchi, belonging to "the tribe of economists" rather than that of historians, states he is less aware than his historian colleagues of the details of the struggles, but characterises them as "worthwhile" and deplores an official onslaught of this kind as endangering "not only academic freedom, but the narrow sense, but also people's struggles". K. K. Pillai speaks up, in somewhat general terms, for some of the more recent efforts in the pursuit of historical research, noting that interference with this right is from "some political quarters" and that some historians themselves.

A. K. Bagchi:

Well, since, as you know, by profession I belong to the tribe of economists rather than that of historians, I'm less aware of the struggles that were launched by historians than many of my historian colleagues would be. But I know that there were worthwhile struggles. To the extent that an attempt is made to revive various ideologies—whether of a communalist character or of a neo-imperialist character—in the name of academic freedom, in the narrow sense, but also people's struggles. Because it blocks one way of asking the people the truth about their own past.

Q:

It is significant in this context that the attack was on text books, and this is a point made by both Bipan Chandra and Romila Thapar. And so to that extent, it is probably one instrument in terms of the development or non-development of people's consciousness.

A:

I think the attackers knew what they were aiming at, and they were not simply aiming their attacks on some of the historians, but on something that they thought schoolchildren would know and should not! But I'm afraid that more than that cannot be said. I think these attempts must be resisted. And there is no question that an official onslaught of this kind endangers not only academic freedom in the narrow sense, but also people's struggles. Because it blocks one way of asking the people the truth about their own past.

Q:

It is significant in this context that the attack was on text books, and this is a point made by both Bipan Chandra and Romila Thapar. And so to that extent, it is probably one instrument in terms of the development or non-development of people's consciousness.

A:

I think the attackers knew what they were aiming at, and they were not simply aiming their attacks on some of the historians, but on something that they thought schoolchildren would know and should not! But I'm afraid that more than that cannot be said. I think these attempts must be resisted. And there is no question that an official onslaught of this kind endangers not only academic freedom in the narrow sense, but also people's struggles. Because it blocks one way of asking the people the truth about their own past.

Q:

It is significant in this context that the attack was on text books, and this is a point made by both Bipan Chandra and Romila Thapar. And so to that extent, it is probably one instrument in terms of the development or non-development of people's consciousness.

A:

I think the attackers knew what they were aiming at, and they were not simply aiming their attacks on some of the historians, but on something that they thought schoolchildren would know and should not! But I'm afraid that more than that cannot be said. I think these attempts must be resisted. And there is no question that an official onslaught of this kind endangers not only academic freedom in the narrow sense, but also people's struggles. Because it blocks one way of asking the people the truth about their own past.

