Romila Thapar on “Interpretations of Early Indian History” (2005 Katz Distinguished Lecture)

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This episode is part of a special series for 2023-2024 featuring some of our popular talks from our annual Katz Distinguished Lecture series. This month’s episode features Romila Thapar’s talk from 2005 titled “Interpretations of Early Indian History.” Professor Emerita of History at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, Romila Thapar is one of the world’s foremost experts on ancient Indian history, and a clear voice for the necessity of detailed and nuanced historical study as a foundation for understanding the present and shaping the future. She has published over twenty books, among them, *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* published in 2020, *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (2013), and *From Lineage to State: Social Formations of the Mid-First Millennium B.C. in the Ganges Valley* (1985). Her writing can also be found in the Indian online newspaper *The Print* and in the *New York Times*. She is an elected Foreign honorary of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and co-winner with Peter Brown of the Kluge Prize for the Study of Humanity in 2008.

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Romila Thapar:

Once upon a time, many millennia ago, historians frolicked in the Garden of Eden. It was a blissful existence. They were nourished by the simple system of breathing in facts and myths.

But one day, they saw the serpent. And the serpent persuaded each of them to take a bite of the apple. But the bitten off bit had the curious quality that, rather like an amoeba, it became another apple. And then the contentions and contestations started. The apples were actually theories of explanation.

This evening, I'm going to speak about the interpretations and theories that have been used to explain Indian history. I would like to give you the flavor of the broad trends that have shaped and are shaping the study of this history in India. It is a long and rather complicated story because historical interpretations change each time a new set of questions are asked of the data.

The interpretations that are well founded may remain or get modified. Others may be found to be faulty and these are either graciously or fiercely shown the door. These judgments are not arbitrary or whimsical. We have, by now, worked out a methodology of historical writing dependent on the range and reliability of the evidence and the logic of the argument.

This also makes the history of other areas more accessible. Contemporary concerns and prospectives are frequently the reason for new questions, but the answers have to draw on what the evidence tells us. This often challenges cherished images of the past and more frequently questions those of our identities that we assume are unchanging and eternal. This makes the dialogue between the past and the present more spirited.

50 years ago, at the time of Indian independence, we had inherited a history of the subcontinent that incorporated two substantial views of the past-- the colonial and the nationalist. Both claim to be based on contemporary techniques of historical research. They were primarily concerned with chronology and sequential narratives about ruling powers and a concern that has been basic to much historical writing.

The initial colonial view, going back to the early 19th century, was a departure from any earlier Indian historical traditions and drew on European preconceptions of Indian history. Three arguments were foundational to the colonial view of Indian history. The first was a periodization that was to have not only historiographical consequences, but a major political fallout effect in the 20th century.

Indian history was divided into the Hindu and the subsequent Muslim civilization and the British period as formulated by James Mill in the History of British India published in 1818. These labels were taken from the religions of the ruling dynasties, first the Hindu and then the Muslim. The divisions were endorsed by the assumption that the units of Indian society were monolithic religious communities, primarily the Hindu and the Muslim, and were mutually hostile.

Religion was believed to have superseded all other authority. On the basis of their numbers in the census, the Hindus came to be called the majority community and the Muslims and others the minority communities. This periodization also projected an obsession with the absence of historical change in India. That this periodization continues even indirectly 200 years later indicates a willingness to deny historical change in the Indian past.

The second assertion was that the pre-colonial political economy conformed to the model of what was called oriental despotism. This assumed a static society characterized by an absence of private property in land despotic and oppressive rulers, and therefore endemic poverty. The pattern common to backward societies did not envisage any marked economic change. A static society meant that it lacked a sense of history. And it was asserted that there was an absence of historical writing in pre-modern India.

The third aspect was that Hindu society has always been divided into four main castes, the varnas as they were called. And these were rigidly separated and again, unchanging through history. Those that had some admiration for the Indian past such as a few orientalists derived the castes largely from what they saw as the Aryan foundations of Indian civilization, both as a race and a language.

Caste was said to reflect the separation of groups based on these-- Sanskrit was viewed as the dominant language of the civilization, and the hegemonic religion was Vedic brahmanism. Above all, India was projected as the alien, the other of Europe. Colonial interpretations claimed to be applying the criteria of enlightenment rationality in their interpretation of the history of the colony. But in effect, they were imposing a history that was not divorced from colonial dominance.

These preconceptions, together with the focus on chronology and the narrative of dynasties, governed routine history. Colonial historians drew on texts, encapsulating the upper caste perspectives of Indian society. Many of the Indian historians coming from the newly emerged middle class were of the upper castes and familiar with these texts. They, by and large, continued this routine.

Nevertheless, there was a debate, especially among Indian historians influenced by nationalist ideas, about some of these preconceptions. The colonial periodization was generally accepted. A few changed the nomenclature to ancient medieval and modern, borrowed from Europe, and thought to be more secular although the markers remained the same and there was no effective change.

The theory of oriental despotism was naturally rejected by the more nationalist Indian historians. Curiously, however, there was little interest in providing alternative hypotheses on the early Indian political economy and society. Social history in standard works largely reiterated the description of the forecasts as given in the normative texts-- the dharmashastras, registering little recognition of deviations, leave alone explaining them. Other ways of looking at the past were not admitted to the forefront of historical writing during this period.

The predominant form of nationalism described as anti-colonial and secular was beginning to be imprinted on Indian historical writing. But parallel to this and initially less apparent in historical writing were the two religious nationalisms, Hindu and Muslim, both emerging in the early 20th century. These were not essentially anti-colonial since their agenda lay elsewhere. They were less interested in researching alternate paradigms and explanations of history and more in seeking to use history to legitimize their political ideology and the mobilization that they were seeking.

There was an even greater insistence that a religious identity had always been the seminal identity in the past and continues to be so in the present. This identity of Hindu and Muslim would define the character of the nation states in contemporary times, even if it meant establishing two separate nations. The chickens of the colonial view of Indian history had come home to roost in these ideas.

The need to examine history in terms of a different set of parameters was, at this point, a somewhat premature thought among mainstream historians. However, such parameters were being suggested by other writing. The prehistory of the social sciences as it were in India had begun in discussions around the nature of Indian society and the cause of economic poverty.

Dadabhai Naoroji, a major nationalist figure, had maintained that the colonial economy drained the wealth of India and was, in fact, the real source of Indian poverty. This raised heated controversies over the colonial economy. But historians paid little attention to the economies of the pre-colonial period.

The teasing out of the strands of the caste structure and its social implications was evident in the writings of DP Mukherjee and NK Bose who were unfreezing the theoretical pattern, describing the ground reality of caste, underlined what differentiated it from the theoretical norms, and the new research on caste was initiated. But the point was not easily taken by most historians. The normative view was implicit to the then vision of Indian civilization where caste tied to the conventional reading of religion was seen as the enduring feature.

BR Ambedkar's writings on the History of the Shudras and later the Dalits were not cited in studies of social history. He emphasized the view that caste was not just a social hierarchy, but was linked to issues of domination and subordination, and that the confrontation between the two was prevented only by the intervention of intermediate castes in the social hierarchy. Among the more influential colonial representations of the world at that time was its division into discrete civilizations. Each was demarcated territorially and associated with a single language and a single religion.

I might add as an aside that even now, although it's been questioned by many, the Arnold Toynbee's 26 civilisations have merely been replaced by Samuel Huntington's eight in the general perception of civilizations. The implicit counterpart to the civilized was the presence of the non-civilized, the lesser breeds without the law. Colonial definitions identified caste Hindus as the civilized and the others less so, and labeled some of the latter as primitive, a label that persists at the popular level.

Cultural nationalism was influenced by colonial readings of Indian civilization and the Indian response to these. Few attempted to incorporate the complexities and multiple variations of pre-colonial articulations of culture. The powerful intellectual controversies of earlier times authored by the orthodox and the heterodox alike tended to be treated as religious sectarian discourse that these earlier discussions had drawn on a spectrum ranging across belief, mysticism, rational and logical reasoning, some approaching seemingly dialectical ways and had recorded fundamental differences and dissent was rarely explored.

There was a preference for viewing them as minor disagreements within a centrally agreed single philosophy. Early systems of what are now called protoscience by some were described, but their intellectual implications were seldom part of the historical image of a period. It was not thought necessary to locate ideas in a historical background.

Cultural nationalism, therefore, stayed close to the contours dictated by colonial preconceptions. The claims frequently made by groups today to authentic Indigenous identities unchanging and eternal pose immense problems for historians. Identities are neither timeless and unchanging, nor homogeneous, nor singular. Cultural nationalism resorting to aspects of early history now resonates in many parts of the world. Understanding the construction of this nationalism requires familiarity with the pre-modern history on which it claims to draw.

The questioning of existing theories about the past began to be more distinctly formulated in the 1950s and 1960s and gradually altered the criteria of analysis among historians. This widened the range of sources. It also led to some distancing from both the colonial and the nationalist interpretations of Indian history. There was an appreciation of earlier scholarship. But since knowledge is not chronos free, it has to be related to a specific situation and time.

This is all the more so where a shift in paradigm is involved where the frame of reference is being realigned. In part, this shift had to do with questions related to the broader issues concerning the Indian nation state in the 1950s. This was not an attempt at imposing the present on the past, but seeing the link between the two by more insightful explanations of the past.

Emerging from a colonial situation, the initial question was how the new nation was to be shaped. It was thought that a better understanding of this could provide a prelude to current concerns. These included discussions on economic growth, the establishing of a greater degree of social equality, and comprehending the potential of a multiple cultural heritage.

Inevitably, this also led to questioning the view of history that had been constructed in the last 200 years which, in turn, introduced information about aspects of the past that had not been researched earlier. The questions were not limited to politics and the economy, but extended to social forms, cultural and religious expression, and the formulation of identities and traditions. Historiography, seeing the historian as part of the historical process, began to surface in a significant way.

In the questioning of existing explanations, the validity of periodizing history as Hindu, Muslim, and British was increasingly doubted. It had posited 2000 years of a golden age for the first, 800 years of despotic tyranny for the second, and a supposed modernisation under the British. Such divisions set aside the relevance of significant changes within these long periods, that any age stretching over such a period can be described as consistently glorious or tyrannical was questioned as also the characterization of an age merely by the behavior of rulers or by their religion.

These doubts were encouraged when history became more than just the study of dynasties. There was also the realization that communities and religions are not monolithic, but are segmented. And segments have their own varying relationships with each other.

Alternate notions of periodization were in part a reaction to the opening up of a dialogue between history and other disciplines. Conventional history juxtaposed the succession of dynasties, one more glorious than the next with the bare bones of an economic history, social history, and the history of religion in the arts. These were all included within the same chronological brackets, but were not integrated.

However, by relating them more closely to each other and to a common historical context, they formed a network of interconnected features. This gave greater depth to historical understanding. The interface between the past and the present encouraged the notion that earlier historical experience could provide insights into some contemporary phenomena.

Historians also began to look at the way in which other disciplines studied aspects of society. This was particularly useful for instance in trying to reconstruct societies from archeological data which was no longer limited to just a listing of artifacts. It also led to new ways of relating these readings to other sources.

Coinciding with these changes was the establishing of other disciplines within the social sciences-- economics, sociology, anthropology, human geography, demography, with a much needed focus on Indian problems and peculiarities. History as a social science developed some new orientations, different from its earlier inclusion in indology. There was the growing recognition that the past had to be explained, understood, reinterpreted on the basis of what historians were now referring to as a historical method involving a critical inquiry.

The reliability of the evidence and the logic of the argument continued to have primacy, the same primacy that they had had earlier. But now, there was a wider explanation of the historical context. Such explanations could also help in understanding the present in more focused ways than before.

Another approach that was initially marginal, but which has now become the ideology of religious nationalism was the reverse of this mainstream history. In place of the investigation of the past being based on historical method, colonial notions about the past were reincarnated as it were in order to justify the political ideology of religious nationalism. The old chestnuts are brought out once again in the insistence on the periodisation of James Mill, on Aryan foundations of culture and history, and on the innate hostility of Hindus and Muslims.

The Indian identity is said to be Hindu and defined in accordance with colonial views. And it is maintained that only Marxists concern themselves with economic history. Yet, the claim is made that this is the first Indigenous Indian history. This approach has receded from historical writing, but has now been taken up vehemently by religious nationalists and is proclaimed as history by non-historians that some among the erstwhile colonized virtually appropriate the narrative of colonial interpretation in the aftermath of colonialism requires analysis.

Attempts have been made and continue to be made to give it hegemonic status by backing it with the force of the political mobilization supporting religious nationalism. Its significance lies in the politics of the present for in terms of furthering the exploration of the past, it has little to contribute. And I will leave it at that.

Let me return to mainstream historical writing and the exploration of knowledge which brought about a paradigm shift in the history of early India. It involved not only the use of new methods of analysis that were in any case under discussion in many of the social sciences, but it also came about precisely through discussions between those working in these various disciplines. If I may bring in a personal note at this point, for many of us, the 1960s at Delhi University and later the 1970s at the Jawaharlal Nehru University were times when historians were eager to explore the earlier history of a variety of themes. These related, once again, to society, economy, and culture, and triggered off new directions in research.

Some explanations of the past arose from hitherto unnoticed evidence. But more generally, they arose from new inquiries into existing evidence. There were also many more dialogues between Indian historians and those from other parts of the world in which the common concern was to move towards new ways of explaining the past.

I would like to consider some examples of the kind of historical themes that attracted historians of early India. The concept of the nation had run into confusion with the two nation theory, central to the creation of Pakistan and India, and the insistence on religious identities being primary historical identities. The clarification did not lie in taking the concept back to ancient times as some were suggesting, but in differentiating between nation and state with the state having primacy in early times.

A centrally administered kingdom had been assumed to be the common pattern of all states in those times. The break up of these was equated with political decline and seen as the fragmentation of a polity accompanied by an absence of consolidated power. Empires were, after all, the order of the day.

The likelihood of variation in patterns of power gradually led to the demarcation between forms of political organization. Clan based societies with chiefs, generally agropastoral, can be thought of as prior to the existence of a state. Kingdoms demonstrated greater complexity of organization. The transition from one to the other has been seen as seminal to the societies described in the Vedas, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana, as well as the early Pali Buddhist canon.

These studies will hopefully shift the obsessive discussion on the origin and identity of the Aryans and the Aryan foundations of Indian civilization to broader questions. The broader questions being currently debated relate to the nature of social change, the interface between the multiple cultures of that period, and mechanisms of legitimizing power. All these are questions germane to inquiries into the early Indian past.

Historical analyzes are, of course, complicated by the fact that these variant forms do not move in a linear pattern. They have coexisted and still do. And this complexity is reflected in historical sources.

When the structure of the state began to be discussed, it led to a focus on the typology of state systems. How a state comes into existence at different times has now become a focused study in which the state is not something distinct from society. The nature of the formation of states suggested variables that were different from earlier to later times.

The Mauryan state of the 4th century BC was not identical with that of the Guptas who ruled in the 4th century AD. The discussion on varied forms had implications for the definition of empire as well as is evident in the study of what have come to be called Imperial Administrations. Thus, it can be asked whether the Mauryan Empire was a highly centralized bureaucratic system as most of us had argued in our earlier writing, or can it be seen as a more diversified system as some of us began arguing in our later writings.

The tension between control from the center and assertion of local autonomy has been a recurring feature and is now being commented upon. The regular use of the term empire for all kingdoms has come in for questioning with kingdom being differentiated from empire. Religion was an unlikely primary factor in the initial emergence of the state which required more utilitarian resources. But in the welding of segments into empire, as in the policies of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka and Akbar the Mughal ruler, there was recourse to certain facets of religion.

The confrontation between what were called the Gana Sanghas, the oligarchies and chiefdoms, and the rajas the kingdoms earlier referred to in passing is now eliciting much greater interest. Their divergent ideologies are being recognized. Arguments and counter among intellectuals of those times were part of the urban experience.

Earlier studies had noted that orthodox views were challenged by the heterodox whom the brahmans referred to as the nastika, the unbelievers, and the pashana, the frauds. The so-called heretics used the same epithets for the brahmans when the debate on occasion became fierce. Such discussions, as for example, the divergent views on social ethics, are now being recognized as significant in themselves and also requiring a closer connection between text and context.

From the colonial perspective, the agrarian economy of India was primary and comparatively less interest was shown in the many dimensions of urban cultures. The latter has received considerable attention in recent history. Urbanization in the Ganges plain in the sixth fifth centuries BC was linked to the emergence of state systems. As a process, its investigation focused on location in terms of environment, resources, and demography, as well as its potential as a center for the exchange of goods and for administration.

Exchange in varying forms from barter to commerce for which there is a spurt of evidence from the post-Mauryan period provided an additional economic dimension. The study of coins was not limited to honing the chronology of rulers. It introduced the preliminaries of money and markets at exchange centers.

Closeness to other parts of Asia was known through overland routes. Maritime connections have now come to the forefront, underlining new cultural and intellectual intersections. The perspective on the Indian past earlier viewed largely from the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush mountains of the North is now being extended to include the very different perspective from the Indian Ocean in the South. Potentialities of possible bilingualism in some regions, Prakrit and Greek or Sanskrit and Javanese, suggests a re-examining of the cross-currents in many cultures. We are told that cultures are Porus.

Increasing evidence of maritime connections has also raised questions linked to complex commercial arrangements. The orbit ran from Tunis to Canton in the period prior to European expansion. Half serious comments are being made on globalization before globalization. But serious observation questions the validity of discrete self-sufficient civilisations.

From the mid 20th century and in many parts of the world, ever since historical research directed its attention more widely to explaining the past, theories of explanation came in for intense discussion. These focused on the writings of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and the French sociologists and historians of the Annales school, all of whom had commented on the Indian past to a greater or lesser degree. Historians researching on India debated the explanations of Indian society in these writings.

Such explanations were neither definitive nor permanent. Although, the fervor of the discussion suggested that there might be so. They introduced the historians two aspects of the past that had earlier seemed closed and brought the peripheral into the mainstream in a meaningful way.

The centrality of social and economic history was evident in all these theories. Methods of analysis influenced by historical materialism were adopted by some, but with the caveat that the Indian data was likely to suggest variant patterns. DD Kosambi's work amounted to a paradigm shift. One may not agree with all his eventual generalizations, but much of his analysis was methodologically rigorous and it has provoked innovative studies of conventional themes.

Marxist historical writing introduced the idea of modes of production which further altered periodization. Marxist notion of an Asiatic mode of production, a variant of oriental despotism, was debated but rejected by most Indian Marxists. However, the possibility of a feudal mode of production and the debate on the transition to capitalism captured historical interest in India.

The notion of feudalism had initially drawn on European parallels, but now the discussion centered on the Marxist model. Significantly, the critiquing of the feudal mode for India was also initiated by Marxist historians and when joined by others, became an even more vigorous debate. The argument was based on changes in land relations in the latter half of the first millennium AD. The transition to feudalism lay in the system of granting land or villages primarily to brahmans, to temples, to Buddhist monasteries, and to a few who had served the state.

Since the granting of land became a focal point of the political economy, it brought about a tangible change. This became central after about the 9th-10th centuries AD and this has become a time marker for a new periodization. The discussion for and against the feudal mode opened up new perceptions about the state, the economy and society, religious activities, and other potential areas of investigation as well as other non-marxist theories of explanation.

Grants of land to religious beneficiaries led predictably to innovations in their activities and beliefs. They established institutions and became powerful property holders. The large number of inscriptions recording these grants are a telling example of how a historical record is used only minimally until a new set of questions are asked. These inscriptions had been read since the 19th century, but largely for data on chronology and dynastic succession. Only in the last 50 years did they begin to be examined in depth for data on Agrarian history and for assessing elite patronage to religious groups.

Some religious cults became a network of support for particular dynasties. A process that was to be common, but more visible at the local level. The yadavas for instance in the Deccan were both devotees and patrons of the emerging cult of Vitthala, a form of Vishnu, widely worshiped in Maharashtra and parts of Karnataka in about the 12th century. This is thought to have had its origins in the hero cult of local pastoralists.

Royal patronage of a popular religious cult meant that the geographical distribution of the cult could become the area of support for the patron. Sifting the activities covered by the all inclusive label of religion and attempting to unravel their social functions helps to clarify the links between social roles and religious beliefs. Monastic establishments quite apart from fostering formal religion were also agencies of intervention often in association with rulers.

At the same time, popular religious movements, some known to deviate from or even contradict the orthodox, occupied a prominent place on the historical canvas. An interesting argument concerns the relationship between the worshipper and his deity in the Bhakti tradition of popular devotional worship. This has been seen as parallel to that of the peasant and his feudal lord. And although it remains a continuing argument among historians, the discussion it has provoked throws light on the intricacies of both relationships.

Max Weber's theories on Indian religion and the absence of economic rationality have not led to extensive research in history. However, the notion of legitimacy has been widely discussed in the context of kingdoms and dynasties particularly in the centuries AD. Even the very limited work on the Indian historical tradition indicates that the need for legitimation was one reason for creating such a tradition.

This relates to some studies of the Annales school on ritual as a source of power, particularly in societies governed by notions of reciprocity among which gift exchange is one feature and studies of genealogies other. Patterns of kinship connections are helping to trace diverse genealogical patterns in the lengthy ancestral lists of the heroes and the anti-heroes, the pandavas and the kurus in the Mahabharata. The earlier presumed uniformity is being replaced by seeing these lists as mechanisms of incorporating a variety of social groups.

What was earlier thought to be the immobile character of caste gave way to realizing the degrees of social mobility were not only possible, but recognizable. The sociological theory of what MN Srinivas called sanskritisation that lower castes sometimes sought upward mobility by imitating the pattern of life of upper castes was applied to certain historical situations, but it had its limitations. It was more appropriate to assertions of status among those brahmans and kshatriyas who were sometimes recruited from lesser castes.

Ritual specialists of various kinds could, for example, end up as temple priests when cult shrines mutated into temples. Politics was always an open arena and claims to shatriya or aristocratic identities as part of legitimation are among the more ambiguous. The process was not always one of osmosis. Imitating lifestyles or being incorporated into them can sometimes be the cause of friction, if not confrontation.

These reorientations in the study of early Indian history were anticipated as a consequence of interdisciplinary trends, of methodological change, and of discussions of theories of explanation. Other themes have emerged in the last couple of decades. They provide generalizations that can be used comparatively with similar themes from the histories of other societies.

Gender history, for example, is no longer just the accumulation of more data on the history of women, but now includes revised views on social relationships. Earlier, popular belief held that the philosopher's wife Gargi asking philosophical questions as mentioned in the Upanishads or the Emperor Ashoka ordering that the donations of his queen Karuvaki be officially recorded was proof enough of women being held in high respect. But such references sat uncomfortably alongside the evidence of a distinctly subordinate status, particularly references from normative texts.

For example, the list of accepted forms of marriage as given in the social codes reflects various patterns of control over women. The most appropriate form we are told, not unexpectedly, is the Kanyadana, when the father gifts his daughter. The worst is the Rakshasa, the abduction of the young woman. Nevertheless, even the latter is regarded as a legal form and resorted to by the best of heroes, Arjun in the Mahabharata.

Women were as central to the creation of communities and identities as were men. But their roles were diverse and their status varied in differing historical situations. This variation requires extensive explanations.

New modalities in the history of social change were hinted at where clans emerge as castes. For example, the origins of certain castes could be traced to low non-caste groups such as forest dwellers. The cultural assimilation of these groups meant that the chiefly families aspired to join the nobility, but the rest of the clansmen were relegated to being peasants and providing labor.

A vignette of this process can be glimpsed in the Harshacharita of Banabhatta, a seventh century biography of the King Harshavardhana. The mutation required the converting of forest into fields and an erstwhile more egalitarian society accepting the hierarchies essential to cast. A permanent supply of labor was ensured by other means, such as declaring that some ethnic groups and some occupations were so low and polluting as to make such people untouchable. The explanations for this theory provide another dimension of social history.

Connections between geographical regions, the environment, and historical explanations are now beginning to be made. These were causal factors in historical explanation and sometimes were problematic. The range included the silting up, for example, of the Indus and Ganges deltas requiring the relocation of ports as observed by ancient Greek navigators and geographers.

It also involved changing river courses, leading to the shifting of settlements, or deforestation, changing the landscape and climate and much more. Investigation of environmental factors tended to highlight the focus on the region. The interest in regional history grew by degrees, assisted, to some extent, by the creation of linguistic states from the late 1950s, superseding the more arbitrary boundaries of the erstwhile provinces of British India.

The newly created states came to be treated by historians as subnational territorial units. But present day boundaries do not necessarily hold for earlier times. The perspective of subcontinental history conventionally viewed from the Ganges plain has had to change with the evidence now coming from regional history. For example, the history of South India is much more prominent in general histories of India than it was 50 years ago.

Regional histories form patterns that sometimes differ from each other and the variations have a historical base. The model of the four varnas castes was not the caste pattern in the entire subcontinent as was thought earlier. Why, for example, did brahmins and vellala peasants give shape to the history of Tamil Nadu in the South as some think, whereas Cotchery traders dominated the Punjab in the North?

Differences are not just diversities in regional styles. They are expressions of multiple cultural norms that cut across monolithic uniform identities. This requires a reconsideration of what constituted the identities that existed in the past. This also often requires the historian to juxtapose a diversity of sources even if the sources are largely textual. Indological studies of texts were extensive and were valuable investigations into the structure of the language, the dating of texts, and the reconstruction of a narrative of events.

This is extended by placing the text in its context and of scrutinizing its author, audience, and agenda, thus widening the possible range of meanings and intentions. Even in the official versions of the history of a dynasty, there are differences. Where royal inscriptions are in two languages as, for instance, Sanskrit and Tamil, the purpose of using two languages was not just a demonstration of linguistic ability. The metaphor of language has meanings other than the literal. Inscriptions have to be differentiated from the vamshavali, the chronicles. And these again differ from the charitas, the biographies of rulers.

The texts that have survived from the early period are generally of elite groups. Less has survived from those that were marginalized in past society-- women, dalits, forest dwellers, lower castes. A rereading of sources is needed to search for the perspectives of such groups. It is interesting that the subaltern historians claiming to be writing about such perspectives have not ventured substantially into these histories nor indeed into history earlier than that of colonial times. The invisibility of pre-colonial societies in these studies is a rather serious lacuna in understanding what emerged from the encounter of the colonized and the colonizer and the shape it took.

Let me conclude by saying that I have attempted to give you a glimpse of a few of the changes that underlie the study and interpretation of early Indian history. To look at the early past as a historical process rather than in isolated fragments is a response to our curiosity about the past and our attempt to understand and explain it. But it also illumines our own times. This in itself is a significant justification for a greater familiarity with early history. However, we are often unwilling to concede this in our focused attention on the present.

Let me now say something slightly convoluted to end the lecture. The past is not static. We believe that because we have created it, we can also control it and it then becomes contested. But the sources we use have already captured the pasts that preceded them.

No past is an island unto itself. The past, therefore, is inherently layered and has a genealogy. When we speak to the past in the sources we use, we are tapping into points of time which have experienced their own pasts and have moved into their own futures before we have even reached out to them. And when we invoke the past, we need to ask what are we invoking and why. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]