

Hypocrisy and Indian History

A public statement by concerned Indian historians, archaeologists

and scholars of Indian civilization

17.11.2015

On 26 October, 53 Indian historians voiced alarm at what they perceived to be the country's "highly vitiated atmosphere" and protested against attempts to impose "legislated history, a manufactured image of the past, glorifying certain aspects of it and denigrating others...." This was soon followed by an "Open letter from overseas historians and social scientists", 176 of them, warning against "a dangerously pervasive atmosphere of narrowness, intolerance and bigotry" and "a monolithic and flattened view of India's history."

Such closely-linked statements appearing with clockwork regularity in India and abroad — there have been several more from various "intellectual" circles — are a well-orchestrated campaign to create a bogeyman and cry wolf. They are neither intellectual nor academic in substance, but ideological and, much more so, political.

As historians, archaeologists and academics specializing in diverse aspects of Indian civilization, we wish to respond to these hypocritical attempts to claim the moral high ground. Many of the signatories of the above two statements by Indian and "overseas" historians have been part of a politico-ideological apparatus which, from the 1970s onward, has come to dominate most historical bodies in the country, including the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), and imposed its blinkered view of Indian historiography on the whole academic discipline.

Anchored mainly in Marxist historiography and leftist ideology, with a few borrowings from postmodernism, the Annales School, Subaltern and other studies, this new School, which may be called "Leftist" for want of a better term, has become synonymous with a number of abusive and unscholarly practises; among them:

1. A reductionist approach viewing the evolution of Indian society almost entirely through the prism of the caste system, emphasizing its mechanisms of "exclusion" while neglecting those of integration without which Indian society would have disintegrated long ago.
2. A near-complete erasure of India's knowledge systems in every field — philosophical, linguistic, literary, scientific, medical, technological or artistic — and a general underemphasis of India's important contributions to other cultures and civilizations. In this, the Leftist School has been a faithful inheritor of colonial historiography, except that it no longer has the excuse of ignorance. Yet it claims to provide an accurate and "scientific" portrayal of India!
3. A denial of the continuity and originality of India's Hindu-Buddhist-Jain-Sikh culture, ignoring the work of generations of Indian and Western Indologists. Hindu identity, especially, has been a pet aversion of this School, which has variously portrayed it as being disconnected from Vedic antecedents,

irrational, superstitious, regressive, barbaric — ultimately “imagined” and, by implication, illegitimate.

4. A refusal to acknowledge the well-documented darker chapters of Indian history, in particular the brutality of many Muslim rulers and their numerous Buddhist, Jain, Hindu and occasionally Christian and Muslim victims (ironically, some of these tyrants are glorified today); the brutal intolerance of the Church in Goa, Kerala and Puducherry; and the state-engineered economic and cultural impoverishment of India under the British rule. While history worldwide has wisely called for millions of nameless victims to be remembered, Indian victims have had to suffer a second death, that of oblivion, and often even derision.

5. A neglect of tribal histories: For all its claims to give a voice to “marginalized” or “oppressed” sections of Indian society, the Leftist School has hardly allowed a space to India’s tribal communities and the rich contributions of their tribal belief systems and heritage. When it has condescended to take notice, it has generally been to project Hindu culture and faith traditions as inimical to tribal cultures and beliefs, whereas in reality the latter have much more in common with the former than with the religions imposed on them through militant conversions.

6. A biased and defective use of sources: Texts as well as archaeological or epigraphic evidence have been misread or selectively used to fit preconceived theories. Advances of Indological researches in the last few decades have been ignored, as have been Indian or Western historians, archaeologists, anthropologists who have differed from the Leftist School. Archaeologists who developed alternative perspectives after considerable research have been sidelined or negatively branded. Scientific inputs from many disciplines, from palaeo-environmental to genetic studies have been neglected.

7. A disquieting absence of professional ethics: The Leftist School has not academically critiqued dissenting Indian historians, preferring to dismiss them as “Nationalist” or “communal”. Many academics have suffered discrimination, virtual ostracism and loss of professional opportunities because they would not toe the line, enforced through political support since the days of Nurul Hasan. The Indian History Congress and the ICHR, among other institutions, became arenas of power play and political as well as financial manipulation. In effect, the Leftist School succeeded in projecting itself as the one and only, crushing debate and dissent and polarizing the academic community.

While we reject attempts to portray India’s past as a glorious and perfect golden age, we condemn the far more pernicious imposition by the Leftist School of a “legislated history”, which has presented an alienating and debilitating self-image to generations of Indian students, and promoted contempt for their civilizational heritage. The “values and traditions of plurality that India had always cherished in the past” are precisely those this School has never practised. We call for an unbiased and rigorous new historiography of India.

1. Dr. Dilip K. Chakrabarti, Emeritus Professor, Cambridge University, UK; Dean, Centre of Historical and Civilizational Studies, Vivekananda International Foundation, Chanakyapuri, Delhi; member, ICHR

2. Dr. Saradindu Mukherji, historian, retired from Delhi University; member, ICHR

3. Dr. Nanditha Krishna, Director, CPR Institute of Indological Research, Chennai; member, ICHR

4. Dr. M.D. Srinivas, former professor of theoretical physics; former vice-chairman, Indian Institute of Advanced Study; chairman, Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai; member, ICHR
5. Dr. Meenakshi Jain, associate professor of history, Delhi University; member, ICHR
6. Michel Danino, guest professor, IIT Gandhinagar; member, ICHR
7. Prof. B.B. Lal, former Director General, Archaeological Survey of India
8. Dr. R.S. Bisht, former Joint Director General, Archaeological Survey of India
9. Dr. R. Nagaswamy, former Director of Archaeology, Govt. of Tamil Nadu; Vice Chancellor, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Viswa Mahavidyalaya, Kanchipuram
10. Dr. B.M. Pande, Former Director, Archaeological Survey of India
11. Prof. Dayanath Tripathi, former Chairman, ICHR; former Head, Dept. of Ancient History, Archaeology and Culture, D.D.U. Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur; former Visiting Professor at Cambridge, British Academy
12. Prof. R.C. Agrawal, President, Rock Art Society of India; former Member Secretary of ICHR
13. Prof. K.V. Raman, former professor of Ancient Indian History & Archaeology, University of Madras
14. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, Dancer and Research Scholar
15. Prof. Kapil Kapoor, former Rector, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Chancellor, Mahatma Gandhi Antararashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya, Wardha (Maharashtra)
16. Prof. Madhu Kishwar, Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi
17. Dr. Chandrakala Padia, Vice Chancellor, Maharaja Ganga Singh University (Rajasthan); Chairperson, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla
18. Sachchidanand Sahai, Ph.D. (Paris), National Professor in Epigraphy, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Advisor to Preah Vihear National Authority under the Royal Government of Cambodia; member, ICHR
19. Dr. J.K. Bajaj, Director Centre for Policy Studies, Former Member ICSSR
20. Dr. Makarand Paranjape, Professor of English, JNU; Visiting Global South Fellow, University of Tuebingen
21. Dr. Nikhiles Guha, former professor of history, University of Kalyani, West Bengal; member, ICHR
22. Prof. Issac C.I., member, ICHR
23. Prof. (Dr.) Purabi Roy, member, ICHR
24. Prof. Jagbir Singh, Former Professor and Head, Dept. of Punjabi, University of Delhi; Life Fellow,

Punjabi University, Patiala.

25. Dr. G.J. Sudhakar, former Associate Professor, Dept. of History, Loyola College, Chennai
26. Dr. Bharat Gupt, Former Associate Professor, Delhi University
27. Prof. O.P. Kejariwal, Central Information Commissioner & Nehru Fellow
28. Dr. S.C. Bhattacharya, former Professor and HOD, Ancient History, Culture and Archaeology, Allahabad University; former National Fellow, IIAS, Shimla
29. Prof. S.K. Chakraborty, former professor, Management Centre for Human Values, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta
30. Dr. Amarjiva Lochan, Associate Professor in History, Delhi University; President, South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Culture & Religion (SSEASR) under IAHR, affiliated to the UNESCO
31. Dr. R.N. Iyengar, Distinguished Professor, Jain University, Bangalore
32. Professor (Dr) R. Nath, former Professor of History, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur
33. Kirit Mankodi, archaeologist, consultant to Project for Indian Cultural Studies, Mumbai
34. Prof. K. Ramasubramanian, Cell for Indian Science and Technology in Sanskrit, IIT Bombay; Council Member International Union for History and Philosophy of Science; member, Rashtriya Sankshipt Parishad
35. Dr. M.S. Sriram, Retired Professor and Head, Department of Theoretical Physics, University of Madras; Member Editorial Board, Indian Journal of History of Science; Former Member, Research Council for History of Science, INSA
36. Dr. Amartya Kumar Dutta, Professor of Mathematics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata
37. Dr. Godabarisha Mishra, Professor and Head, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Madras
38. Dr. R. Ganesh, Shathavadhani, Sanskrit scholar
39. Sri Banwari, Academic and Journalist; former Resident Editor, Jansatta
40. Dr. S. Krishnan, Associate Professor, Dept of Mathematics, IIT Bombay
41. Dr. Rajnish Kumar Mishra, Associate Professor, Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
42. Dr. Vikram Sampath, Director, Symbiosis School of Media and Communication; former Director of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) - SRC; historian and author
43. Prof. K. Gopinath, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore

44. Prof. M.A. Venkatakrishnan, former Professor and Head, Dept. of Vaishnavism, Madras University
45. Dr. Sumathi Krishnan, Musician and Musicologist
46. Dr. Prema Nandakumar, Author and translator
47. Dr. Santosh Kumar Shukla, Associate Professor, Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

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The above list was released on 17 November; on 18 November, three scholars who had been contacted but could not send their answer in time owing to the flood situation in Chennai. We include them here for the record:

48. Dr. Siniruddha Dash, former Professor & Head, Dept. of Sanskrit, University of Madras
49. Dr. Mamata Mishra, Managing Trustee, Prof. K.V. Sarma Research Foundation
50. Dr. Chithra Madhavan, historian and epigraphist
