Indian Historiography: Writing and Rewriting Indian History

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Introductory

This paper has two objectives. First, it provides an overview of the major issues raised in the debate on the interpretation of Indian history which started in India soon after the Janata Government came to power in 1977. Secondly, it focuses on the methodological sources of the difference between the two contending schools of Indian historiography, the Secular and the Communalists, the latter to be described hereafter as the Traditionalists.

For a fuller perspective of Indian historiography we may recognize the five paradigms or perspectives: imperialist, nationalist, Marxist, communalist, and secular, the debate between the last two being the subject matter of this paper.

The Beginning of the Controversy

The debate on the re-writing of Indian history on which this paper focuses started during the summer of 1977 (more precisely on May 18) with the presentation of a memorandum to the Prime Minister’s Secretariat attacking four books (to which a fifth was added as a result of an attack in a public meeting).

Later a large number of celebrated historians and some others joined the debate. For a synoptic view, a summary of the issues raised by Dr. R. C. Majumdar and others who have attacked the “Secular” model of history, the “rebuttal” by the protagonists of the Secular model and a counter critique of the Secular historians is given below in tabular form.

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<tr>
<th>Issues Raised by Majumbar, et al Against Secular Writing of Indian History</th>
<th>Secularists’ Rebuttal and Critique of the Communalist Writing of Indian History</th>
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<td>1. Muslim rule in India was a foreign rule.</td>
<td>It was not a foreign rule because Muslims settled in India. Resources did not drain out of India as during the British rule. By logic, Aryans too were outsiders. Indian society is composed of such “outside” nationalities.</td>
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2. Muslims until today are in India but not of it.

3. The Muslim rule oppressed the local Hindu population (e.g. "Islam or death", destroying temples, killings and tortures, were commonly practised).

4. The Indian history of the Muslim period (approx. 1200-1757) was a freedom struggle of Hindus against Muslim rule.

5. The freedom struggle of the Hindus against the Muslim rule is not brought out in the secularist writings.

6. The heroes of this struggle, e.g. Rana Pratap, Guru Gobind Singh, Shiva Ji are ignored or not given enough prominence. These national heroes were fighting for Hindu Rashtra or nationhood.

7. The result of (5) and (6) is that the concept of Hindu nationhood is ignored and no Hindu identity emerges.

8. The history which ignores the Hindu saga of freedom and its heroes and equates Hindus and Muslims or ignores the tyranny of Muslim rulers is a falsification of history.

9. Leadership provided by the educated intelligentsia in the last century is being treated as “hesitant” and “non-militant”.

10. The roots of modern nationalism and the freedom struggle is “Hindu nationalism” and this is not recognized.

11. The peasants who rebelled against the British have been treated as “backward looking”.

The controversy has been mostly around the Muslim period. However, to the above, the following points may be added, as illustrative of the controversy about the “British” and “Ancient” period:

9. Oppression by Muslim rulers was no different than by the Hindu rulers/Rajas. The tales of Muslim tyranny are overplayed. Aurangzeb also built temples, if he destroyed some. Hindu Rajas used to plunder temples too. Muslim kings hired Hindus in army and administration.

5. The struggle is brought out but not in communal terms.

6. These heroes are not neglected. Their struggle was regional and for human rights.

7. The concept of Indian nationhood did not exist in medieval times and under feudal conditions. There is not, and never was, a Hindu nation. India is composed of multinationals.

8. The attempt to write history in Communal terms is a falsification of history. We must “fight against Hindu chauvinism. For that indeed is the crux, the central issue”. (Sarkar, Mainstream, Dec. 10, 1977).

9. Only a realistic analysis of what it was is presented.

10. The modern nationalism and freedom struggle in India is secular and one in which all “nationalities” in India had an equal share of contribution and sacrifice.

11. The peasant rebels are treated as heroes but these rebels did not have before them ideals which could fit with future objective development.