

History Outside the Nation

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The privileging of the narrative of nation-as-history in post-modern historiography has overshadowed how people conceive time in terms other than nation.

THIS essay comes as a response and a reaction to K. Panikkar's recent essay 'In Defence of Old History' (U'W, October 1, 1994) where he puts forward an incisive critique, albeit from a predictably Marxist perspective of 'post-modern history'. The core of his argument is that by conceiving history as representation, without the possibility of ever knowing the truth, post-modern histories are engaged in the same historical project as colonialism which is to deny a history to the subjected. Panikkar's critique is particularly important when he points out that caste and communities that were the weapons in the colonial armoury to ensure the perpetuation of political power are invoked by neo-colonial history as the only valid categories to interrogate reality. I would add here that in post-modern histories the most important category invoked is by far the nation/modernity.

All histories are not nationalist histories and an investigation of the nation-state, its failures and its strengths is not the only way of addressing history. Today there is an uneasy alliance, sometimes even a curious complicity, between those who build nation-states through history writing and those who deconstruct their oeuvre. The terms of reference are defined by the warriors on each side. Histories which include the voices of those who before were condemned to silence in an elitist history still posit the nation-state or the nation as a reference point. Those who criticise the nation-state refer to it continuously, take position *vis-a-vis* it, while multiple histories of people lie untouched under the coating of nationalist histories.

My essay, which stemmed from reading Panikkar, aims at suggesting the idea of a 'history outside the nation' and the primacy of 'temporality' in history as a possible way-out from the impasse of uncertainties to which post-modernism has drawn history writing.

I Time in History

The subject matter of history, what makes history, is an area of contention. History can no longer be defined as a series of events

or cognitive points arranged in the order of chronology. In the last few decades, post-modern critiques of history writing have questioned, quite legitimately, the autonomy of the 'event'. Events, they argue, do not *exist perse*. Consciousness-which varies from agent to agent- acts as mediator. They have also questioned "the sequencing, the causal assumptions that underlie selecting and training the events, the theoretical understanding that sanctions that selection and framing of events, the adoption of an appropriate vantage point and the authority that authorises that vantage point" (Crapanzano 1992). They have taken a 'nihilistic delight' in the impossibility of any universal understanding, any incontestable truth. History, continuity, memory have been subverted as meta-narratives that legitimised science, while other totalising visions too crumbled before our eyes. Thus, one can, to a certain extent, laud the post-modern enterprise for having radically altered history by the changes in discourse that were postulated.

Today, however, this discourse forms a new sort of orthodoxy which few have the courage to contest. Instead of events we have texts representing the French Revolution, or narratives of the foundation of Islam which each and everyone will read in a different way. The Rashomon effect of the dialogically open-ended, self-questioning, multi-perspectival histories often means that anything is possible as egalitarianism prevails at the discursive level. Most post-modern thinkers come from literary or anthropological backgrounds where 'time' is not the subject of investigation. For them, just as for me, history as a sequential process ordered by time is problematic. But when Foucault and Deleuze question the validity of any possible notion of linear time and challenge, in a Heideggerian vein a notion even of empirical history in which events follow one after the other as causes and effects, their concern is with societies where circular time is anathema [Foucault 1972; Deleuze 1972]. Their own conception of time where events float haphazardly in a veritable sea

of contingency - a notion which is not part of the European heritage- is less ambivalent in societies such as ours which recognise that time is as malleable as the clocks in Dali's painting. The question I ask is this: Is it then necessary or indispensable that we historians studying South Asia put aside notions of 'before' and 'after' under the pretext that they suppose an order which does not exist, an overarching march of history? Is it necessary for us to deconstruct our time and history when our time is already fluid, circular? Must we like the Mad Hatter in 'Alice in Wonderland' kill time?

Time is the most important denominator in any history writing and history is, I believe, the science of the consciousness of time. Even a history of the fragments, even a history which is primarily interested in ideology must acknowledge time. Just as there is a today, there was a yesterday and there will be a tomorrow. This is what history, whether linear or circular is all about.

One can wonder whether time is a concept, a series of concepts or just a set of measurements? If one follows Leibnitz, things are quite transparent: 'time is the order of non-contemporaneous things'. More recently, anthropologists have looked at the time of cultures and focused their attention on time as a marker of social transformation. They have shown us that there are different ways of understanding ideas and experiences of temporality. Furthermore, one can speak to a certain extent of the objectivity of the historical fact, event, or of a particular period for the historian. It arises from an awareness not of the event itself but of the ruptures in time (past, present and future) which places it, at the time of its occurrence, in the present, and assigns it an associative relation with absolute time. All historical facts, with or without a specific date, possess a past and a future, both of which are independent of observation. For example, the foundation of Buddhism is an event since there is a pre-Buddhist India and a post-Buddhist India. As Chaudhuri writes, "historical events, structures or phenomena can be grouped into different classes of time which have different qualitative properties, different 'frequencies' and unequal power" [Chaudhuri 1990].

Thus, Chaudhuri and other structuralists take a different path, a path where some answers are possible, where time is the time of the historian, thus, objective and knowable. But like most structuralists, Chaudhuri fails to make a distinction

between measuring time and concepts of time. Just as BraudeJ, Chaudhuri writes of a time which is the time of the historians rather than of society's consciousness of itself. Both tend to posit an unconstituted objective world where time can be measured. This is a legitimate criticism. However, ii like Maurice Halbachs, we agree that there are as many collective notions of time in a society as there are separate groups, and we deny that a unifying time could be imposed on all groups simultaneously, cognitive reflection is suspended [Halbachs 1947: 3-31J. Just as there is no possibility of unifying time, there is no possibility of thinking about it, as Ricoeur asserts: 'Human thought has not produced a universal system of categories capable of embodying a personal experience of time and history itself having a universal validity'/ The historian is thus left to think of the particular. What s/he must come to terms with is that the linear history, which as an adept of post-modernism s/he is eager to deconstruct, is in fact the history imagined along those lines by a small group of people whom s/he has chosen to privilege in his/her study. What I suggest is that it is the obsessive concern in South Asian academia for the nation and the modern that leads us to **Iwk** at history through one small lens and privilege an interpretation of history (history as history of the nation) which has little bearing on the consciousness of the people.

II

History Outside the Nation?

The contention by well meaning, progressive thinkers that history always means nationalist history has led to a self-immolatory surge among historians. The nation and how it had been read, wutten about, vilified and adored has become the single question of the historian. This included nationalist historians, colonial historians as well as **post-colonial** subalterns, eager to retrieve the fragments of the nation or deconstruct the nation. In Sri Lankan academia quite clearly, nationalist historians as well as revisionist scholars, preoccupied with the pressing issue of legitimising and delegitimising the nation-state in its present form, have rarely concerned themselves with the way in which ordinary people at given time made sense of the world, how they construed the world, invested it with meaning and infused it with emotion. How they lived their relation to the past, the present and the future: in short, how they constructed their history. Many anthropologists have placed emphasis on deconstructing what makes

up the canonical text of Sinhala nationalism, 'the Mahavamsa', without attempting to assess to what extent the Mahavamsa was known to common people during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Some have suggested that before the translation of the Mahavamsa into Sinhalese in 1837, there was no concept of history as it is understood in the west. Rogers' work on 19th century Ceylon, for instance, has shown that the images of the past that developed in Hhe British period were produced by using 19th century western historical ideas and methods [Rogers nd: 88-102]. The central idea of historiography, the rise and decline of an ancient civilisation, was almost universally accepted, both because it was plausible - it was confirmed by both the Mahavamsa and the ruined irrigation tanks and cities - and because it was consistent with the pattern of Europe historically which looked to the classical civilisation of Greece and Rome. Later, Sri Lankan writers pointed out that Sri Lanka's civilisation, although weakened, had maintained its cultural continuity. My purpose is not to contest these valuable studies but to question the centrality of 'history' borne out of canonical texts or critical appraisals of these canonical texts. The images of the past that emerge from the writings of Rogers and other deconstructors of canonical texts, portray the views of a very marginal group, i e, the literate elite of the time. It is, indeed, as most scholars have shown, a view totally in consonance with the understanding of history prevalent in the West. But it is, nevertheless, *the* view of a few. What historians should question is whether the rest of the people did not think of history as history of the nation, whilst they were conscious of temporality, of a past, present and future. Their world-view has not been adequately considered. Perhaps they did no! have a modern concept of history but their life/time was ordered and sequential whether in a linear or a circular manner. This is apparent in Sinhalese grammar where the three tenses, past, present and future, provide a structural order. Thus, when speaking about histories of people and of their understanding of the past as a *sine qua non* for the emergence of a nation, is it not crucial to uncover their cosmology and at the centre of their cosmology the way they lived and thought 'time' at given moments? What were, for instance, the analytical categories available to the people when they wanted to measure time, quantify it and then record it in their tales, songs and sayings, thus 'writing' history?

Rather than privileging, as the post-modern ciritiques of history have, canonical

histories, written texts composed **in** a linear mode as objects of analysis, it might be time to forget the nation and the nation as history and turn our inquiring mind to 'temporality' as the thread of history.

It is my contention that communities are made more by common folktales, habits, *idiosyncratisms, common perceptions of time rather than by common imagined histories, common efforts to oust colonial rulers or modern ideologies of the nation and the downward seepage of ideas. A history from within would take into account the way in which time was experienced by its actors and stress the importance of an autonomous concept of time in the forging of a people's or community's history. The question which must be addressed is whether it is possible to have a people (nation) without a national history. I would venture to propose that the concepts of time and memory are central to the question: time was present in Sinhalese folktales but, it was not the time of the Mahavamsa or of later state-building histories. It was rather the time of the peasant, linked to the stars, the moon and the opening of flowers. Superimposed on a national history, on a history of kings and queens, battles and invasions were temporal continuities which had their own measures, discourse and moments of tension and breaks and also, their own heroes, sometimes mythic figures: a people's history, autonomous, separate, oblivious to nation-building.

III

Post-modern Historians and Writing of Texts

Pannikar's essay eludes one aspect of a ^critique of post-modern histones. Post-modern historians have not deconstructed the mode of history writing, Like docile bodies, they abide by the rules set, and enshrine some oeuvres, just like their predecessors enshrined (heir own canonical historical oeuvres). Canonisation prefigures the death of history. Today's historian who has studied history at the university is expected to produce written texts which s/he then reads at seminars and international conferences, and which s/he formats and footnotes according to the Chicago manual of style before submitting them to a journal. Only texts legitimise his existence, Without them s/he is like a painter who does not paint. But the historian is still not free in his creations. The texts he produces, even today, must be based on exemplary works or models which form the canon of the discipline of history. Unlike in anthropology where the critique of the canon has been absorbed, in history the

textual canon remains strong. Will *EPW* **publish** an article written in surrealist verse or composed in the form of a Platonic dialogue? From Colombo to Cambridge, from Chicago to Tokyo, historians obey an unwritten code.

Post-modern historians have, however, succeeded in undermining two fundamental precepts of mainstream history writing (although Sri Lanka's historians are still oblivious to these developments). The first age-old precept is that the argument of the text has to be distilled from a complex/narrative text (mainly archival sources) and then debated, detached from and free of the text. The second precept is that only what conforms to the canon will be focused upon and included in the canonical historical body. This means in effect excluding anything produced by anthropologists or literary historians. The discipline rests on an 'esprit de corps', on a **history** written by historians. The work of a historian is not looked at by his guild as an oeuvre that invites various interpretations or alternative readings. Rather, what is discussed and debated are considered the arguments, the 'truths' that inform it and are distilled from it. Historical

work is neither read nor written as a narrative because most working/writing historians still view history as a meaningful account of the past rather than a positioned narrative [Marcus 1992].

This is not so of anthropologists and sociologists who write histories. Nor is it the case of the subaltern studies historians who originally wanted to rectify the bias of elitist historiography and neo-colonialist historiography that credits the making of the Indian nation and the development of a national consciousness to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and culture, and not to Indian elite personalities, activities and ideas. These new histories are, however, written in a language that only the members of an elitist guild can comprehend. The new canons, the new orthodoxy of post-modernism has shut away the very people who were condemned to silence and whom they hoped to draw out from the blind alleys.

My hope is to see one day historiography, which is neither the biography of the nation nor a critique of the modern, speaks in words a child will comprehend. At a time when we indulge in variations

on the motives of the symphonies composed by Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu and Anderson, my hope is that historians will consent to lower themselves and write a fugue.

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