

Sovereign Historiography and Representations of Region

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ABSTRACT: In this sovereign historiography and representations of regions is studied. Regionalism has posed one of the most powerful and persistent challenges to the Indian nation-state. Often, this challenge has overlapped with other conflicts emerging from economic and social disparities. It is almost a truism today that the political contradictions engendered through "national" policies of modernization and development refurbished the caste-class polarization in Indian society. On top and in command is a numerically modest set of citizens whose interests define, determine the national policies; at the lower depths are the vast majority of impoverished, subaltern subjects whose lives are guided by the so-called "pre-modern" social relations. The Subaltern Studies group of historians contends that this structural split in politics has led to the emergence of two distinct political idioms in contemporary India: one articulates the language of rights, economy, development, modernity, Citizenship; the other speaks, but persistently, of the experience of inequity, violation, despair, and fury-it speaks in the "small voice" of history.

KEY WORDS: Sovereign, Historiography, Tourism, Enlightenment, Regions.

I.INTRODUCTION

A historical narrative, then, is today no longer seen as one damn thing after another. Closely intricate in axes of power/knowledge, it is perceived both as a savior, i.e. as a "truthful" or "verifiable" discursive account about the events-that-really-happened in the past, and equally as a specifically determined (secular-colonial European) mode of cognitive annexing that directs a contemporizing gaze upon the Lineages-to-and-from-the-present [1].

To state that History, as the "scientific" discipline familiar to us today as well as a characteristic conception of the past (i.e. historicism), emerged alongside, in the service of, European Enlightenment during the eighteenth century would possibly have the hollow ring of a truism to many readers.

The proposition that this newly emerging discipline of History had the task of inventing Time (or a secular-philosophical comprehension of the "real past") might be slightly more complex, but with some important qualifications not too difficult to grasp. What, however, often proves most contentious are the views that treat History--essence no less than contents-with scepticism; views that announce that despite appearances, history is and has always been inevitably about and for the present; that history is a political construct-not so much a scientific representation of true facts as "fictions of factual representation" and that calling this fiction into question might not necessarily be (or lead to) regressive politics [2]. Before I describe the somewhat unorthodox sense in which I shall be using the term historical narrative in this dissertation-Dr my reasons for doing so-it appears necessary to outline in greater detail the causes and the nature of the "crisis" that has stirred the discipline of history in recent decades.

A quick and convenient way to understand what was new about History as it emerged in the eighteenth century in Europe might be to identify those of its elements that are inseparable from the transition-in the mode of thinking and, needless to add, power-from the sacred to the secular "world-views." It was certainly not as if prior to the eighteenth century there was any lack of scholars interested in studying the people and events of the past, Walsh (1961), Stern (ed.) (1973) and Gardiner (ed.) (1974) for a more detailed account of what is summarized here) [3].

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The so-called antiquarians had devoted considerable time and energy in examining documents and artifacts that helped them to chronicle the happenings of bygone ages.

However, it would not be unfair to say that the antiquarians were concerned only with the "authenticity" of the documents they studied, and that they delighted chiefly in picturesque detail for its own sake. During this period, the study of the past was not a part of regular education for it was not a useful skill: no one claimed that studying the past could explain or reveal anything significant about human life (this being, of course, the business of religion, or philosophy, or even poetry).

History's "scientific turn" might be said to result following the influential exposition of empirical philosophy during the seventeenth century in the writings of, most notably, John Locke and Isaac Newton. The philosophical historians, or the Philosophes, of the eighteenth century set themselves the task of explaining, or accounting for, the true course history had followed so far. They thus inaugurated the project of objectively studying the past in order to create a universally valid science of man and society [4].

The philosophers were keen to bring to light, on the basis of empirically observable and ascertainable facts, laws and hypotheses with explanatory powers equivalent to those of the physical sciences. They believed that basic human nature was always and everywhere the same-and that the wide variety in behavior and customs at different parts of the world as described by the travelers was actually the result of external causes (like climate, population density, proximity to trade routes, mode of subsistence, etc.), or of crooked politicians and priests who kept people beguiled and subjugated.

The duty of the historian was to deduce and describe the "regular" features of human character by identifying the "laws" of evolutionary history, just as the physicist deduced and described the movement of objects by identifying the laws of motion and gravity [5].

II. MARX CONTRA HEGEL

Two philosophies of history proffered during the nineteenth century those set forth by Hegel and Marx-turned out to be as influential as they were controversial, and it is worth attempting a quick recapitulation of these two ("opposed") viewpoints before moving on to the twentieth century critiques of historiography.

For Hegel, the meaning of history was to be discerned in the march of the Absolute Spirit (or Idea) on earth, or more precisely through its manifestation as Freedom/Reason in what he believed to be the true "world historical" nation-state.

Hegel predicated his graded and teleological view of history on the observation that the different nations or civilizations of the world had different degrees of consciousness. In his assessment, the African domains were still in the stage of natural savagery, beyond the pale of civilized existence; the Oriental nations exhibited universal Spirit in its primitive stage; in the Greek and Roman worlds, the Spirit had advanced to the next higher stage; and it was "our own" world that embodied the Spirit in its fullest and most advanced form. Hegel's hierarchy allowed little room for neutral or static co-existence. Since, according to him the African and Oriental worlds were merely empty shells that the universal Spirit had long left behind, two consequences were implied.

First, whether or not the individuals inhabiting these territories realized it, the spirit of their nations yearned to merge with the universal Absolute Spirit that was (now) embodied in Europe. Second, it was ethically acceptable for Europe-perhaps even incumbent upon it-to occupy these (obsolete) nations and grant them the favor of being ruled by the prevailing universal Spirit.

In his well-known and widely-discussed Philosophy of Right (rpt. 1965), Hegel asserted that it was the "absolute right of the Idea" to embody itself in statist institutions, no matter whether this right materialized through "divine legislation and favor, or in the form of force and wrong."

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The same consideration justifies civilized nations in regarding and treating as barbarians those who lag behind them in institutions which are the essential moments of the state. The civilized nation is conscious that the rights of barbarians are unequal to its own and treats their autonomy as only a formality.

It has been suggested, for example, that Hegel's great contribution has been to elaborate the notion of individual freedom and rights, and that in supporting the case of historical Reason as the valid principle of governance (as opposed to the arbitrary despotism of kings), he made possible a great liberal-democratic step forward for the philosophy of history. Such suggestions need to be tempered in several ways.

Even within the European context, the "historical Reason" that jostled the tyrannical royalty out was not just the achievement or handiwork of Enlightened philosophers and statesmen but equally the defiance and struggle of other section of society who perceived a stake in the making of history. Hegel did not consider this to be of much import-his "history" was strictly the spiritual biography of the statist institutions.

III. REPRESENTING REALITY VS. THE FICTIONS OF FACTUAL REPRESENTATION

In contrast to the rigorous and exacting attention to 'detail with which the data, causal explanations, and conclusions presented by historians are routinely treated within the discipline, the narrative/enunciatory structure of historiography discourse itself has until recently received rather cursory notice.

This has perhaps been the result of the widely held belief that historians are, and should be, chiefly concerned with "hard facts" and empirically substantiable inferences drawn from valid sources, not stylistic embellishment. A historian's "eloquence," according to this view, is a welcome but dispensable supplement to the main task of dealing with the true facts of the case in hand and letting this "truth" speak with innate eloquence.

From the 1960s, however, the narrative part of historiography came in for closer scrutiny, the impetus coming-among other factors-from the poststructuralist interest in the signifying elements present in the forms (rather than just contents/referents) of signification. A pointer to the change that the discipline was undergoing during the 'sixties was W. H. Walsh's widely quoted Introduction to the Philosophy of History (1967), which signaled the new turn towards narratology in a perceptive yet limited manner.

Defining historiography as a narrative account of past events and actions arranged by the historian in such a way that "we see not only what happened but also why," Walsh pointed out that the historian viewed diverse historical events as constituting a single process. The historian's primary aim was to study/explain each event by locating it "in its context by mentioning other events with which it is bound upon.

This process, by which the historian seeks to connect within his account events that are (thought to be) "already" bound together by history, was termed colligation¹ by Walsh. He believed that colligation was the peculiar characteristic of historical thinking, for earlier accounts of past facts, like the annals or the chronicles, did not have to reveal--or be grounded upon--the underlying continues narrative of history.

However, if what the historian sought was not a "bare recital of unconnected facts, but a smooth narrative in which every event falls as it were into its natural place [within 1 an intelligible whole," it followed that the ideal of the historian is in principle identical with that of the novelist or the dramatist. Just as a good novel or a good play appears to consist not in a series of isolated episodes, but in the orderly development of the complex situation from which it starts, so a good history possesses a certain unity of plot or theme.

For Walsh, we notice, "good" history borrows appropriate and effective means of stylistic organization from "good" literature. As he describes it, narrative appears to be a secondary or additional contrivance, adapted in a utilitarian spirit for the purposes of greater persuasiveness, from fiction. On the whole, he subscribes to the primacy of (as well as the fundamental distinction between) the contents of history and literature, while treating film as a freely interchangeable garb.

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IV. COLONIALISM "AND/OR" CAPITALISM

During the 1980s and '90s, historical and epistemological questions relating to colonialism and post-colonialism were posed with renewed sharpness and vigour. As is well known, this was partly the result of the impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and the post-colonial deconstructions of Colonial Discourse within the ("western") academy. But in countries like India, this was also due to the coming into crisis of the kind of political nationalism that had until then been dominant or, to a lesser extent, hegemonic.

Indian historiography was forced to take into account new kinds of issues and possibilities. The critique of the elitism that marked the existing paradigms of historiography in/of Indian list, nationalist, and Marxist by the Subaltern Studies group of historians could be seen to respond to several kinds of provocations. The better-known formulations of the group have widely been perceived as deriving from post-structuralism and post Marxist Gramscian theories, but it is important to note that their work was also determined by "local" political exigencies and debates: principal among these, the Naxalite-inspired critique of Indian modernity, the persistent conceptual "neglect" and structural "accommodation" of the ever-mounting peasant disquiet, the dubious and increasingly menacing nature of Indian secularism, and more recently, the political strategies and visions articulated especially by women's movement and the dalit Bahaman movement.

Given the sharpness with which their critiques have dissected the prevailing modes of history-writing (including those that have hitherto worn the oppositional mantle), it is not surprising that the undertakings of the Subaltern (-allied) scholars have been subjected to extensive and heated debate. Of these, the debate between Gyan Prakash from one end-spelling out the nature and necessity of what he terms "post-Orientalist" historiography-and, from the other end, Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook-rejoining with a Marxist response-has been especially forceful and revealing.

In his essay "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World" (1990), Gyan Prakash emphasizes the need to engage with the question of how the "third world" wrote "its own history." Prakash acknowledges the hazards involved in such an undertaking-the essentializing of the object of study and exploitative use of "native informants," not to mention the vulnerability to, or complicity with, a voracious "postmodern" spatial imperialism. He contends, nevertheless, that with some caution an activity of this nature would be more -' beneficial than problematic for the third world: schematizing the historicity of the existing knowledge about the third world would help unpack the number.

V. THE POLITICAL TASKS OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The debate on the correspondence between historical and literary narratives contributes several key points that are elaborated in my re-working of the notion of historical narratives in this dissertation. We have noted that the term narrative connotes not just a sequence of events in a chronological order but also a mode/model of knowing that pre-organizes, and gives sense, to that sequence. Every narrative is informed by a specific logic of inclusion and exclusion, reasoning and colligation, characterization and illustration, disruption and closure. Thus, while engaging with a narrative, a reader comprehends its "story" by the manner in which s/he responds to its - conceptual presuppositions.

By describing historical narratives as "fictions of factual representation," Hayden White emphasizes that historical narratives borrow from literature the cognitive-affective instruments through which the historian and the reader perceive (and react to) "reality." The suggestion that reality is a fiction might of course even today raise the hackles of many historians, but this usage, derived from contemporary literary theory, implies not that fiction is "untrue" but that it is a mental construct-an index of a prevailing social narrative contract-through which "given" phenomenon or a set of events is read as true.

In other words, historical reality is a representation of the past based on the sanctioned conventions of the discipline and its rules of (textual zed) evidence. As Mark Cousins (1987) points out:



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“Historical facts are not illusions; we may well say they are true. But their truth is the finding of a particular mode of instantiation, and one which has particular effects on the type of objects which may enter its canons of verification”

The most particular of these effects is, of course, the reality effect. If, as I believe is the case, the function of narrative is to encapsulate the cohering logic that binds the various agents and actions it refers to, then the "reality" invoked and represented by historical discourse is not the source but the consequence of its choice of narrative form. The widely-held distinction between literary and historical narratives rests on the belief that while the former's logic of cohesion furnishes aesthetic gratification, the latter reveals the objective reality of the reader's world.

Such an austere distinction seems difficult to sustain today, whether in discussions on the philosophy of history or in the so-called "real world" of politics. What appears increasingly clear is the adroitness and force with which the "same" event, depending on how it is exploited by a historical narrative, can tell a different story to different reader-subjects within a given society.

Equally significant is the fact that "literary" narratives-which have for long been assigned a lesser status than historiography because they do not speak with the objective univocity of a science-are increasingly the focus of attention for their contribution of the affective technologies of invoking, addressing and consolidating the subjectivities that equip readers to affirm the "given" reality (about their national community).

VI.CONCLUSION

Regionalism does not merely express the contests over the appropriation/containment of the political-administrative units (or "parts") of the nation. It is equally an effective and "legitimate" mode of checking the territorial design of nationalism to produce its cultural-economic geography. The assertions of territorial autonomy and culture need not be perceived only as expressions of sub- or anti-nationalism. Since the notion of sovereignty, strictly speaking, does not appear to be an overriding concern for many of the regionalist initiatives in India, they might well be considered post-national.

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