

Communalism and the Writing of Medieval Indian History: A Reappraisal

by

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Until very recently the writing of medieval Indian history primarily turned on an eloquent enumeration of the glorious achievements of great emperors; equally eloquent was the description of their failures. One way or the other, the emperor stood at the centre of all that was considered worthy of the historian's concern.

One way or the other, the emperor stood at the centre of all that was considered worthy of the historian's concern. To a considerable extent this concern was inherited from the large number of Indian historians who wrote their books during the medieval centuries themselves, contemporaneously or near contemporaneously with the events they had narrated, the contemporary historians as we call them. These contemporary historians were invariably members of the imperial or the provincial court and were often partisans of one or the other faction of the intrigue-ridden polity. Not seldom did they actually participate in the events they had described; equally frequently they or their friends or relations were eye-witnesses to such events. Inevitably, arising from each historian's predilections, his version of events was at considerable variance with those of the others even as they described the same events.¹

Yet, there was much that they shared with one another. As members of the court, their attention was confined to their surroundings. The events they narrated were events in which the court's involvement was immediate and direct: accession of a ruler, rebellions against him, his conquests, administrative measures, punishments meted out by him as also rewards given, conspiracies hatched for or against him, his deposition or

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death, etc.² Even as the historians' sympathies varied, they were all concerned about the stability of the polity as a whole, though individually each might have liked it to lean in his direction, if only just a little.

Clearly the emperor was the pivot around which this whole polity revolved; he ruled on behalf of the entire ruling class, keeping all the factions together, dealing firmly with overambitious individuals or groups who tried to disrupt the overall unity and being benign to those who kept within the legitimate bounds. Understandably the emperors' actions drew a major share of contemporary historians' attention, both critical and appreciative, in medieval India.

Historians in medieval India also understood historical causation in terms of human volition or, at best, human nature or disposition. This understanding too had, in a manner, been conditioned by the historians' own daily experience. By virtue of their position in the court they were often participants in, or witnesses to, some of the events that formed part of their narrative; their experience was that rebellions occurred when so-and-so had, of his will, decided to rebel; that a king was deposed when a group of nobles decided among themselves to terminate his reign; that an emperor engaged himself in extensive conquests owing to his virile nature; that another emperor followed a policy of treating all his subjects alike, irrespective of the distinctions of creed, for so enlightened was his disposition. Willful decision, conditioned by the nature of each human being involved in the events with which the historians - were concerned, formed the basic cause of the occurrence of those events, as our historians saw it. Zia ud din Barani, author of two of the most outstanding works of history around the middle of the fourteenth century,³ raised this understanding to the level of fine theory. Every man's nature, according to Barani, comprised contradictory qualities and the events in which a man was involved were a manifestation of those qualities. A balanced mixture of those contradictory qualities resulted in success, whereas an unbalanced mixture led inevitably to failure in life.⁴

Understandably, if the historians' own experience taught them lessons in historical causation in their context, it was easy for them to explain similar events in the distant or near past in the same terms.

The explanation of historical causation in terms of human volition also implied the treatment of each historical event as a single, individual, independent event unrelated to the other events described in their works.⁵ For in the absence of a structural analysis, the only other framework of historical explanation, within which all events together constitute an integrated pattern and thereby lost their individual identities, was the one in which divine will intervened to cause the occurrence of events. Medieval European historians' framework was indeed the prototype of such an explanation. Clerics as those historians were, their whole outlook on life and letters was influenced by the theological doctrine in which all that happened in the past and the present and was to happen in the future was predetermined by god's will; which in turn implied that the events of the past, the present and the future formed a rightly knit whole as the manifestation of god's wisdom, for surely no event could occur at random unless it had been assigned its due place in god's all-embracing plan.⁶ But such was not the understanding of medieval India's courtier-historians, even when some of them happened to be theologians along with being courtiers and historians.⁷

If medieval Indian historians focused their attention on events pertaining directly or indirectly to the court and if they explained the occurrence of these events in terms of human will or nature, the ruler's will or nature would clearly occupy a critical element in the explanation in view of his pivotal position. Indeed personal qualities of the ruler inevitably became the all-too-important factor in the whole framework of explanation. Indeed, the events that occurred during a reign were seen as the manifestation of the personality of the ruler.⁸

Communal and Imperialist Historiography

There was, too, an implicit communal undertone in this framework. If the ruler's disposition, his personal qualities, mattered all that much in the making of history,

surely the fact that he was a Muslim ruling over a vast mass of Hindus would be a material factor in the whole assessment of history. And, of course, medieval centuries were not the time when the influence of religion had been eliminated from the thinking of humankind in any part of the world. It was easy therefore for some historians of medieval India to visualise contemporary history as the history of Muslim rule in India.⁹

Yet the framework of historical explanation in terms of human will/nature in its essentials contained a strong element of ambivalence that accommodated, for medieval centuries, a quite astonishingly secular historical thinking such as Abul Fazl's along with a fairly dogmatic Muslim statement such as Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni's. Indeed, the whole range of historical works written in medieval India swings in degrees from one to the other thinking, yet never overflowing the human will/nature syndrome.

This then was the ambivalent framework that British colonial historians had inherited from medieval India. It was, however, the singular mark of colonial historiography that it sought to eliminate the element of ambivalence from this framework, boldly explicate its latent communal undertone, and make a linear communal study of India's past the dominant, almost the exclusive trend. Such was the end result of James Mill's periodisation of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods¹⁰ which was to become the universally accepted periodisation for the study of Indian history for the next century and a half and continues to be nearly universally accepted in Indian universities today though with a new nomenclature: ancient, medieval and modern periods. An even bolder and more deliberate attempt was made by Elliot and Dowson's eight-volume *A History of India as told by its Own Historians*¹¹ which was a translation of excerpts from Persian-language historical works of medieval India. The selection of excerpts left little to the reader's imagination: invariably the translated passages aroused communal passions. Apparently, Elliot knew what he was doing, for the professed purpose of all his intellectual labour was "to teach the bombastic babus of India the virtues of good government they were enjoying" under the British rule compared to the misery of their fate when the Muslims governed them. If Elliot succeeded eminently in achieving his objective of inflaming passions, it was

largely because he had adopted a long familiar, durable framework but had drastically changed its emphasis.

The framework, however, still endured. Early in the twentieth century, especially during its second quarter, some historians vehemently contested the version of medieval Indian history that spoke only of Muslim rulers' oppression of the Hindus and of heroic Hindu resistance to it—the version given by British as well the Indian communal historians reflecting the communal wing of the Indian national movement. Communal historiography had a degree of variation in its outlook: Hindu communalism visualised the medieval centuries as a long period of alien Muslim dominance over the Hindus (the vast masses of the country's native people), the repeated attempts by the Muslim rulers to convert the Hindus to Islam or else to eliminate them and the heroic stubbornness of the Hindus in defence of their religion and the country's honour. Other stereotypes were also created: if the Hindus lost their battles to the Muslims, this was because of mutual dissensions;¹² if medieval Indian history was a story of unrelenting conflict between the two major communities, this was owing to the Muslims' determination to retain and assert their separate identity unlike their predecessors, the Greeks, the Sakas, the Huns etc, who also had immigrated from distant alien lands, but having once settled in this country had lost their independent identity in the mainstream of Indian (i e Hindu) life; Indian (i e Hindu) civilisation has always been known for its liberalism in embracing any element that comes to it with outstretched, friendly arms: it is the Muslims who refused to merge their separate identity in the mainstream of Indian (i c Hindu) life; indeed they sought to forcibly change the course Of this stream. This was the origin of communalism in India, etc. etc.¹³ Muslim communalists, on the other hand, considered those regions which overly asserted their Islamic identity as the peaks of Islamic glory. However, the basic assumption of both Hindu and Muslim communal historiography (as also the British) constituted the unity of their thought: they all visualised the Hindus and the Muslims in medieval India perpetually in conflict, deriving their evidence from the arena of political, indeed dynastic, history.

It was this notion of perpetual communal conflict in medieval India that the nationalist historians were contesting. They questioned the genuineness of the religious

motivation of Muslim rulers of medieval India; they brought forth evidence to suggest communal harmony in medieval India; they emphasized the considerable extent of mutual interaction between the two large communities, in the realm of ideas, in the realm of culture, in the realm of life-styles in the centuries past. It was from this emphasis that the concept of "composite culture" was evolved.¹⁴

The contribution made by nationalist historians in secularizing the study of medieval Indian History was by any standard extremely significant. However, they were contesting communal historiography really on -the latter's terms. If communal historiography brought forth evidence to suggest Muslim oppression of Hindu subjects, nationalist historians cited cases of tolerance shown by Muslim rulers; if communal historiography highlighted instances of conflict between communities, nationalist historiography brought into relief other instances of cooperation between them. Both groups of historians studied mainly politico-administrative history and drew their evidence by and large from court chronicles. If communal historians over emphasised one part of evidence and covered up another, nationalist historians did much the same, though with a contrary, and admittedly more laudable, objective.

Clearly, this was rather a weak offensive against communal (and imperialist) historiography, for once the study of medieval Indian history in terms of the ruler's religious policy was conceded, the evidence overwhelmingly inclined towards the communal viewpoint. On this premise, nationalist; historians, while lauding Akbar's achievements, handed over the other six-and-a-half centuries of "Muslim" rule to communal historiography. It is interesting that when it comes to Akbar, the language of the nationalist and the communal historians becomes utterly interchangeable. This is essentially a communal vision, for by lauding Akbar's religious achievements, the validity of that historical methodology is established which seeks to evaluate all of medieval Indian rulers in terms of their religious attitudes. Akbar clearly becomes an exception, which merely proved the rule.

Fundamentally, therefore, even in nationalist historiography, the categories of historical analysis remained communal. So long as the categories of one's analysis

remained Hindu and Muslim, whether one argued on behalf of communal conflict or communal harmony, one's thinking still remained limited to the confines of those communal categories. The logic of both the communal as well as the nationalist historians emanated from a common assumption of the existence of separate communal identities; so long as thinking was based on communal categories, this assumption was inescapable.

If there was no escape from this assumption, it was because this was in fact the assumption of the national movement itself and was common to both its nationalist and communalist wings. Both the chief antagonists during the national movement, the Congress and the Muslim League, proceeded with their politics based on the recognition of the existence of separate communities, the Hindus and the Muslims. The politics of one stressed rapprochement between them and that of the other their irreconcilability. The common basic assumption often permitted an easy transition from one to the other; a slight shift into each other's direction would often bring them to a common meeting ground; it also permitted easy shifts in individual loyalties. Starting from the basic assumption, from the very categories of social analysis and political agitation which were communal, the "nationalist" politics as represented by the Congress carried far more than a "tinge" of communalism;¹⁵ communalism was integral to the politics, through its silent, non-violent manifestation. The Muslim League, starting from the same categories of analysis, charted off to its not-so-silent manifestation. Conceptually, nationalism and communalism in India had much in common with each other even if historically they were each other's negation.

It was this dichotomy, conceptually questionable but historically significant, that was reflected in the dichotomy of communal and nationalist historiography of medieval India.

The New Shift in Focus

The circle was broken from the 1960's onwards. This was the period when research was initiated on new themes altogether in which communal categories did not enter at all. These were themes like rural class structure, forms and magnitude of

exploitation of medieval Indian peasantry, the significance of *zamindars* as a class, production technology, trade and commercial organization, etc. An important role in this shift of focus was played by research on what came felicitously to be called "early medieval India" in Professor R S Sharma's terminology. This research made two significant contributions: one, it implicitly questioned the earlier, clearly communal, periodisation which divided medieval from ancient India at 1206 A D, with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, for it, again implicitly, opened up the possibility of seeing an extensive continuum of social and economic history from around the seventh or eighth to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, even as important changes occurred within the range of this continuum; two, it decisively shifted the emphasis from politico-administrative to socio-economic history, where communal categories in any case lost much of their significance.

As more research is done in newer areas, the very communal problematic— the relations between the Muslim dynasties and Hindu subjects or the extent of theocratic nature of the state in Medieval India, etc.— is being marginalised. There has been of late a movement of the study of history of medieval India towards society's lower end, indeed towards its lowest end: a study of the actual labour processes in the field and the workshop, at the hands of the peasant and the artisan. This involves a complex interaction of areas of study: to begin with, the ecology of a region, the nature and the fertility of its soil, the availability of water for irrigation, the duration of the sunshine etc; it involves also the given technology, the shape and size of the plough, the use of other implements and of course the knowledge and practice of agricultural techniques such as crop rotation or preparing of manures or the treatment of plant diseases; above all, it calls for a study of social organization of labour utilisation: whether labour is servile or free, whether the system allows the actual producer freedom from extraneous control over his process of production or not, whether the system permits mobility to the peasant or not. The attempt is to study the production system in all its multi-faceted totality. Similarly, the labour of the artisan is being examined. The very complexity of this study allows religion merely the share that is its due in social life, along with the share of elements, instead of giving it the overarching importance it had attained in the history writing of medieval India for so long. It is in this sense that history writing is becoming profoundly secular.

(The paper was presented at the seminar on “Problems of the Minorities, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes”, New Delhi, August 6-7, 1983, and it seeks to reappraise the earlier essay, “the Medieval Indian History and the Communal Approach”, in Communalism and the Writing of Indian History, People’s Publishing House, New Delhi, 1969)

¹ The outstanding examples of the writings of Abul Fazl and Abdul Qadir Badauni, both courtiers of Akbar, represent an extreme case of variation in their versions of the same events; others would constitute somewhat milder examples.

² There is at best a vertical growth in the contents of these works: from a mere narration of the stories of accession of rulers and their battles etc., such as in Minhaj-us-Siraj’s *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, increasing information on allied themes such as administrative system, imperial policies, composition of nobility, etc., begins to get incorporated in their works, the two most outstanding examples of which are Zia-ud-din Barani’s *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi* for the Delhi Sultanate and Abul Fazl’s *Akbar Nama* for Akbar’s reign. There is, however, little horizontal growth in the contents of these works which would extend to matters of no immediate concern to the ruling class.

³ *Fatawa-i-Jahandari*, English translation by M Habib and Mrs Afsar Khan under the title *Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate*, Allahabad, and *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi*, Saiyad Ahmad Khan (ed.), Calcutta, 1862. The whole of the *Tarikh* is yet to be translated from Persian into any other language though portions of it have been rendered into English by Elliot and Dowson and into Hindi by S A A Rizvi.

⁴ Barani, *Fatawa-i-Jahandari* (tr), pp 85-89.

⁵ Corroboration for this statement is found in the very style of writing of all medieval Indian historians. They break their narrative of history into regnal units and the reign of the contemporary ruler is mostly further broken into an annual chronicle. Within the regnal the annalistic form, the narration of each event begins with the statement, “...and another event that took place during this reign (or in this year) was...” or “another occurrence of this year was...”. One event having been described, they move on to the narration of the next event prefacing it with the same preamble.

⁶ See Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1946, p. 55.

⁷ Peter Hardy, (*Historians of Medieval India*, London 1960) has suggested that medieval Indian historians treated history as a branch of theology and that historical causation in their conception lay in divine will. Hardy appears to have overlooked the very substantial difference in the social, intellectual and political contexts as well as the social position of medieval Indian and medieval European historians in seeking to establish uniformity of historical approach between them.

⁸ For details of the argument advanced so far, as also for its empirical basis, see Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1976.

⁹ Thus for example Badauni reconstructs the history of India from the day Islam had made its political appearance here. Significantly, he does not begin his book with the Muslim conquest of Sind, for “Islam could not be stabilised in this region” after Muhammad bin Qasim’s death; on the other hand, since it was “*Nasir-ud-din Subuktgin* whose son was Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, who led annual expeditions to India with the intention of waging holy wars, and Lahore became the capital during the reign of his descendants, and moreover (since) Islam was never (therefore) eliminated from this land” Badauni considers it proper to begin his history with Subuktgin. See his *Muntakhab-ul-Tawarikh*, Vol. I, p. 8.

¹⁰ James Mill, *History of British India*.

¹¹ Trubner and Company, London, 1867 – 1877.

¹² The only available evidence for this all-encompassing theory is the alleged refusal of Jai Chand of Kannauj to come to the aid of Prithvi Raj Chauhan at the second battle of Tarain against Muhammad Ghori. Quite apart from the fact that one piece of evidence, even if true, does not substantiate a theory of such dimensions, this theory ignores the fact that Prithvi Raj did not get help from other rulers. Secondly, the assumption underlying this theory is that individually the Indian rulers were quite weak vis-à-vis their alien adversaries, but collectively they would have been invincible. This assumption is made contrary to all available evidence which invariably points to many times more numerous Indian soldiers in the field of battle than the Turks. Clearly, addition of more soldiers could hardly have improved the prospects of victory. The causes of defeat lay elsewhere than in inferior manpower; they lay in the obsolete methods of utilising this manpower.

¹³ This appears a reasonable enough statement on the face of it. However, under it lies a methodological flaw and communal logic. The flaw rests on making a comparison between two incomparable phenomena. While the Greeks, Huns, etc., have been identified on the secular basis of the country of their origin or of their race, Muslims have been given their identity in terms of their religion. Clearly, the two bases of identification are far from identical, and the comparison therefore is questionable. If, however, identical bases of identification for all of them were adopted, the problem would be posed as follows: the Greeks, the Huns, the Sakas, the Scythians etc came to India and over time lost their identity in the mainstream of Indian life; what about the Mamluks, the Khaljis, the Tughlaqs and even the Mughals? Have they retained their separate identity to this day, or has it been merged in the mainstream of Indian life? Evidently, the answer is quite unambiguous, for there is hardly anyone around to claim descent from all those dynasties that had migrated to India in the medieval age and had ruled here for so many centuries. Where have the descendants of all those dynasties and their nobles gone? Surely they have merged their identity, like their predecessor-immigrants, in the mainstream of Indian life and enriched it in the process. But then the whole argument in this unequal comparison is communal; not only does it identify Muslims on the basis of their religion, it also quietly identifies Indian mainstream with Hindu mainstream. The argument is thus posed in veiled communal categories.

¹⁴ The concept of composite culture was the especial contribution of the Allahabad school of historians: Professor Tara Chand, R P Tripathi and B P Saxena, in particular. Though Professor Muhammad Habib was situated at the Aligarh Muslim University, historiographically he too belonged to the same school.

¹⁵ Bipan Chandra, "Hindu Tinge in the National Movement" (mimeograph)