

Interview/ Dwijendra Narayan Jha

Q. Let me begin by suggesting that the historian's craft is under increased scrutiny today, due to the necessity of their role as public intellectuals as well as towards whom their positions can be seen as being aligned. Do you agree?

The historian's craft is under scrutiny by those who don't know history or those whose understanding of the past is based on faith. It is under increased scrutiny now because the RSS backed political party is in power which is afraid of scientific history.

Q. A recent statement has appeared, signed by 46 historians in reply to the previous statement signed by you, Professor Irfan Habib, Professor Romila Thapar and others. It states that the Leftist school in Indian history had produced a "legislated history which has presented an alienating and debilitating self-image to generations of Indian students and promoted contempt for their civilizational history". In the same statement they have asserted that they are against attempts to portray India's past as a glorious and perfect age. Amongst the signees one of them is Dr. Dilip K. Chakrabarti. What do you make of this statement?

The assertions made in the statement are baseless. In fact, its signatories have indulged in shadow boxing...there was no legislated history written by any serious historian. What they mean—and this is their routine allegation---that history writing in India has been dominated by Leftists and liberals. But this is hardly true. Very few among Indian historians can be labeled as Marxists. Even those who are Marxists seldom agree on historical interpretations. In other words, there may be isolated Marxists or Leftists but there is no Marxist school of historiography in India. Any one who disagrees with the Hindu Right is dubbed a Leftist. Most of the historians are either unmarxists or antimarxists.

I may add that several scholars among the 46 signatories of the statement you are referring to are the beneficiaries of the so called Leftist dispensation. They are hypocrites.

Q. In your book the *Myth of the Holy Cow* you had questioned the Hindutva vision of a glorious Hindu vegetarian cow worshipping culture. You were writing against

the grain, against what was till then believed to be the hegemonic, rhetorical sense of public memory. What were your main contentions and what sort of a backlash did you have to face for the same?

India has never been a wholly vegetarian country and so the vision of a glorious Hindu vegetarian worshipping a cow is ridiculous. There is ample textual evidence to show that animal food has been quite common among the people including the Brahmins. The Vedic texts testify to killing of animals including the cow for food and sacrifice by the Brahmins and so do the Smriti texts. Vegetarianism in India has to be seen against the background of religious developments and ecology. As for the Brahmins, as you know, they are not vegetarians throughout the country. While most Brahmins in south India are vegetarians, there are very few vegetarian brahmins in eastern India (Bihar, Bengal etc).

I have had to face a backlash when I published my book not because I contested the imagined vegetarianism of the Brahmins but because the Hindutva brigade is in the habit of creating problems if one speaks or writes against its foolish ideas.

Q. Just when we were decrying the incidents in Bangladesh leading to the deaths of Avijit Roy, Washikur Rahman, came the horrific murders of Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi. Does this dishearten you?

The murder of rationalists is condemnable; it is an assault on reason. Intellectuals have come forward to oppose this, which is an indication of their resolve to fight against obscurantism.

Q. While the academia had always fought on methodological issues, interpretations, etc., and never really seen eye to eye on political issues, today there is an increased effort to bring together academics, artists, and performers to a particular camp. Is that a sense you get or does it appear this way because of the right wings' failure to attract intellectuals over the years, thereby the desperation when it control's the state's resources?

The intellectuals have differed and will differ on various issues but one should not expect them to remain silent when there is persistent attack on reason. That is why intellectuals and academics have come together to fight against the atmosphere of intolerance. This coming together has not been consciously organised, it is spontaneous. The right wing had never any following among the serious intellectuals; they cannot see

beyond Savarkar and Golwalkar. Tell me who is their Amartya Sen, Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra? None, I'm sure.

Q. In the mainstream media there is often this argument of counterbalancing 2002 against 1984 and a suggestion that those crying foul today have forgotten the atrocities of the past. A contemporary historian also has to stand in as witness to the bygone. You have also seen both 1984 and 2002. What do you make of the binary arguments?

I have seen both 1984 and 2002. As far as I know the intellectuals opposed the horrible killings of both 1984 and 2002. What about the RSS? It was silent as pointed out rightly by Navalakha in his interview.

Q. For many years now historians have analyzed many myths and debunked them after thorough scholarly analyses. Right from your work on beef-eating, which we spoke about, to Uma Chakravarty's work on the Vedic Dasi positing it against the pride of place held by a Maitreyi or a Gargi. Let us for the moment look at the colonial era myth of the Brahmanical religion having propagated peace in early India. You have argued against this. With the Indian civilization being pushed back further and further, do you fear that the Aryan discourse, of which you had also partaken, would be brought to the fore once again?

The Aryan problem is more or less settled for professional historians according to whom the Aryans came from the northwest. They have discarded the Aryan_invasion_theory and have been arguing in favour of the migration theory. But the question remains very much part of the Right Wing discourse. The Hindu Right groups (they have no credible professional historians) are never tired of repeating that the Aryans were indigenous people and that they were the authors of the Harappa civilization. They are suffering from an incurable antiquity frenzy and their favourite pastime is to claim greater and greater antiquity for the Aryan civilization and Hinduism.

Q. There was earlier a suggestion from India's External Affairs Minister for making Gita a national scripture while recently in the debate on Constitution Day there was the revival of an age old suggestion of how 'secularism' was a western import and imposition which Ambedkar was not in favour of. Raising the bogeyman once again you think?

The Gita has meant different things to different people in different ages which is why it has a large number of commentaries—recently a scholar has counted as many as 227.

Not surprisingly the first translator of the text, Charles Wilkins, asserted that this small text has more comments than Revelations. But two basic facts remain uncontested: the Gita is a book of war and it provides justification for caste—these are facts that fit into the RSS scheme of things. They are at war with religious minorities and are upholders of the upper caste ideology. This is the reason why the RSS and its affiliates have enlisted it for the propagation of the Sanatana Dharma. When Sushma Swaraj made the ridiculous suggestion that the Gita should be declared the national scripture or Narendra Modi presented its copy to the Japanese prime minister, or when the Haryana Chief Minister made it a prescribed reading in schools they assigned a hegemonic status to the Gita and the Sanatana Dharma in a country like ours with enormous religious diversity. This to my mind is a communal act.

As regards Ambedkar not being in favour of secularism, perhaps I am not the right person to comment on the constituent assembly debates. But I can say that the issue of caste weighed heavily on him and not communalism.

Q. You have also written and spoken about the historicity of caste. Mohan Bhagwat's statement on caste requiring re-evaluation was said to have led to BJP's defeat in the recent Vidhan Sabha elections in Bihar. Your comments on the same.

Mohan Bhagwat's statement demanding a revaluation of the reservation policy seems to have had an impact on Bihar elections. In principle, there is nothing wrong in reviewing govt policies from time to time and criticize the govt for certain policies. But it all depends on the context.

Q. While the philosophy of history of history has always accommodated a multiplicity of meanings, there is however, a problem with this because the argument can then be extended to suggest that every narrative of the past is valid, the hindutva version included. Do you believe the same? Should history be accommodative of all forms of reading the past? I am reminded specifically here of your – “How history was unmade at Nalanda”, in reply to Arun Shourie.

Only that history is valid which is based on a rigorous examination of the sources. The Hindutva version of history is not based on critical analysis of the sources. It is mythification of history. This is clear from the manner in which ancient texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are taken at their face value.

In my view students of ancient Indian history will be well advised to consult these texts but interpret them in conjunction with other sources. Taking ancient texts at their face value would lead to grossly misleading statements about the past and to the denial of scientific knowledge.

Interviewed on behalf of JSHC by Rohit Dutta Roy.

Interviewee Bio:

Dwijendra Narayan Jha has been a Professor of History at the University of Delhi and a member of the Indian Council of Historical Research. He is regarded as an authority on Early India. Some of his published works include *Holy Cow: Beef in Indian Dietary Traditions* (New Delhi: Matrix Books, 2001), *Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2009) & *Economy and Society in Early India: Issues and Paradigms* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993)