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CONTRIBUTION OF ROMILA THAPAR TO THE INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY – A STUDY

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Abstract: Romila Thapar was eminent reader in ancient India. She also reading so many the popular volumes, she was worked as Professor of Ancient Indian History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, where she is now Professor Emerita. Her historical work portrays the origins of Hinduism as an evolving interplay between social forces and recent work on Somnath examines the evolution of the historiographies about the legendary Gujarat temple. In her debate on feudalism in India has caught the attention not only of Indian historians but also of many medieval historians in other countries. In the history of India was moving towards what some scholars have described as historical renaissance. The writing of Indian historians, ranging over many opinions and interpretations also the many parts of the world used methods of historical analyses that were derived from a range of theories that attempted to explain and interpret the past. These included Marxism of various kinds, schools of interdisciplinary research, the debates on the Marxist interpretation of history, for example, led to the rejection of the Asiatic Mode of Production as proposed by Marx, and instead focused on other aspects of Marxist history. There was no uniform reading among Marxists, leading to many stimulating discussions on social and economic history. The ideas of historians other than Marxists, such as Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel and Henri Pirenne, were included in these discussions. She controversy about Thapar's appointment to the Library of Congress's Kluge Chair was opposed in an online petition bearing signatures, on the grounds that she was a "Marxist and anti-Hindu" and it was "waste of US money" to support a leftist. Journalist Praful Bidwai criticised the petition as a "vicious attack" by communalists who are "not even minimally acquainted" with her work. A number of academics sent a protest letter to the Library of Congress denouncing the petition as an attack on intellectual and artistic freedom.

Romila Thapar (born 30 November 1931) is an Indian historian whose principal area of study is ancient India. She is the author of several books including the popular volume, *A History of India*, and is currently Professor Emerita at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. She has twice been offered the Padma Bhushan award, but has declined both times.

EARLY CAREER AND HIS WORKS

After graduating from Panjab University, Thapar earned her doctorate under A. L. Basham at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of London in 1958. She was a reader in Ancient Indian History at Kurukshetra University between 1961 and 1962 and held the same position at Delhi University between 1963 and 1970. Later, she worked as Professor of Ancient Indian History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, where she is now Professor Emerita.

Thapar's major works are *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (editor), *A History of India Volume One*, and *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. Her historical work portrays the origins of Hinduism as an evolving interplay between social forces.[3] Her recent work on Somnath examines the evolution of the historiographies about the legendary Gujarat temple.

In her first work, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Maurya* published in 1961, Thapar situates Ashoka's policy of *dhamma* in its social and political context, as a non-sectarian civic ethic intended to hold together an empire of diverse ethnicities and cultures. She attributes the decline of the Mauryan empire to its highly centralised administration which called for rulers of exceptional abilities to function well.

Thapar's first volume of *A History of India* is written for a popular audience and encompasses the period from its early history to the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century.

Ancient Indian Social History deals with the period from early times to the end of the first millennium, includes a comparative study of Hindu and Buddhist socio-religious systems, and examines the role of Buddhism in social protest and social mobility in the caste system. *From Lineage to State* analyses the formation of states in the middle Ganga valley in the first millennium BC, tracing the process to a change, driven by the use of iron and plough agriculture,

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from a pastoral and mobile lineage-based society to one of settled peasant holdings, accumulation and increased urbanisation.

ROLE IN DEFENCE OF HISTORY

To comprehend the present and move towards the future requires an understanding of the past: an understanding that is sensitive, analytical and open to critical enquiry. This was attempted by many Indian historians writing in the last 50 years. Their studies were not only fine examples of historical enquiry but were also pointers to new ways of extending historical methods. They widened and sharpened the intellectual foundations of the discipline of history and enriched the understanding of the Indian nation. These are the studies that have now come under attack, either directly or indirectly, by the agencies of the central government who are busy making a mockery of history. It is because of this assault on history that some of us have to speak in defence of the discipline of history.

Indian history in the 1960s and '70s moved from being largely a body of information on dynasties and a recital of glorious deeds to a broad based study of social forms. In this there was a focus on religious movements, on patterns of the economy and on cultural articulations. The multiple cultures of India were explored in terms of how they contributed to the making of Indian civilisation. Therefore, many aspects of this multiplicity and its varying cultures – from that of forest dwellers, Jhum cultivators, pastoralists, peasants, artisans, to that of merchants, aristocracies and specialists of ritual and belief – all found a place in the mosaic that was gradually being constructed. Identities were not singular but plural and the most meaningful studies were of situations where identities overlapped.

Ten years ago Indian history was moving towards what some scholars have described as almost a historical renaissance. The writing of Indian historians, ranging over many opinions and interpretations, were read and studied in the world of historical scholarship, not only in India but wherever there was an interest in comparative history. Historical interpretations at this time and in many parts of the world used methods of historical analyses that were derived from a range of theories that attempted to explain and interpret the past. These included Marxism of various kinds, schools of interdisciplinary research such as the French Annales School, varieties of structuralism and others. Lively debates on the Marxist interpretation of history, for example, led to the rejection of the Asiatic Mode of Production as proposed by Marx, and instead focused on other aspects of Marxist history. There was no uniform reading among Marxists, leading to many stimulating discussions on social and economic history. The ideas of historians other than Marxists, such as Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel and Henri Pirenne, were included in these discussions. The intention was not to apply theories without questioning them, but to use comparative history to ask searching questions. If those who are currently busy attacking every serious historical interpretation took the trouble to read historiography – the history of historical writing – they might begin to understand what history is all about.

Some of the more obvious examples of these debates relate to varying themes of historical interest. The changing history of caste in Indian society was being studied in detail to ascertain social change and explain social disparities. It was also being viewed in a comparative sense with other systems of social organisation such as those dominated by masters and slaves as in the Greco-Roman world, or feudal lords and serfs of the medieval world or the more easily recognisable class oriented societies of recent centuries. Historians were asking the same questions that the Buddha had asked when told about Greek society: why do some societies have caste and others have a two-fold division of master and slave. These were questions that were not concerned primarily with making value judgements about caste but with trying to comprehend it as a system of organising society.

The debate on whether or not there was feudalism in India has caught the attention not only of Indian historians but also of many medieval historians in other countries. The categories of feudalism are no longer restricted to a single definition of a feudal mode of production, for many permutations and combinations are recognised and these give new forms to the concept of feudalism.

RECOGNITION AND HONOURS

Thapar has been a visiting professor at Cornell University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the College de France in Paris. She was elected General President of the Indian History Congress in 1983 and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1999.

She was awarded the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 1976. Thapar is an Honorary Fellow at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. She holds honorary doctorates from the University of Chicago, the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris, the University of Oxford, the University of Edinburgh (2004), the University of Calcutta (2002) and recently (in 2009) from the University of Hyderabad.[9] She was elected a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2009.

In 2004, the US Library of Congress appointed her as the first holder of the Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South.

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In January 2005, she declined the Padma Bhushan awarded by the Indian Government. In a letter to President A P J Abdul Kalam, she said she was "astonished to see her name in the list of awardees because three months ago when I was contacted by the HRD ministry and asked if I would accept an award, I made my position very clear and explained my reason for declining it". Thapar had declined the Padma Bhushan on an earlier occasion, in 1992. To the President, she explained the reason for turning down the award thus: "I only accept awards from academic institutions or those associated with my professional work, and not state awards". She is co-winner with Peter Brown of the prestigious Kluge Prize for the Study of Humanity for 2008 which comes with a US$1 million prize on 23 June 2016

VIEWS ON REVISIONIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Thapar is critical of what she calls a "communal interpretation" of Indian history, in which events in the last thousand years are interpreted solely in terms of a notional continual conflict between monolithic Hindu and Muslim communities. Thapar says this communal history is "extremely selective" in choosing facts, "deliberately partisan" in interpretation and does not follow current methods of analysis using multiple, prioritised causes.

In 2002, the Indian coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) changed the school textbooks for social sciences and history, on the ground that certain passages offended the sensibilities of some religious and caste groups. Romila Thapar, who was the author of the textbook on Ancient India for class VI, objected to the changes made without her permission that, for example, deleted passages on eating of beef in ancient times, and the formulation of the caste system. She questioned whether the changes were an, "attempt to replace mainstream history with a Hindutva version of history", with the view to use the resultant controversy as "election propaganda". Other historians and commentators, including Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar, Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma, Vir Sanghvi, Dileep Padgaonkar and Amartya Sen also protested the changes and published their objections in a compilation titled, *Communalisation of Education*. Writing about the 2006 Californian Hindu textbook controversy, Thapar opposed some of the changes that were proposed by Hindu groups to the coverage of Hinduism and Indian history in school textbooks. She contended that while Hindus have a legitimate right to a fair and culturally sensitive representation, some of the proposed changes included material that pushed political agenda.

CONTROVERSY

Thapar's appointment to the Library of Congress's Kluge Chair in 2003 was opposed in an online petition bearing more than 2,000 signatures, on the grounds that she was a "Marxist and anti-Hindu" and it was "waste of US money" to support a leftist. Journalist Praful Bidwai criticised the petition as a "vicious attack" by communalists who are "not even minimally acquainted" with her work. A number of academics sent a protest letter to the Library of Congress denouncing the petition as an attack on intellectual and artistic freedom. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) supported her appointment by calling her "a liberal with a scientific outlook". Martha Nussbaum has stated that Thapar is neither a communist nor a Marxist historian and the Library of Congress treated the petition with "the indifference that it deserved".

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