

## REWRITING PAST

# When world history can be re-written, why not India's?

There is much hue and cry from a section of society when attempts are being made to re-write Indian History – a history that has been a victim of distortion and incompleteness. Perhaps this exercise threatens to dislodge some from their zone of comfort.

## OPINION

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## WHY RE-VISIT HISTORY?

Re-writing History mainly serves two purposes – firstly it refreshes our memory of events. The second purpose is perhaps more important. It ‘fills in details’ and addresses the gaps, grey areas existing in the current literature.

There is much hue and cry from a section of society when attempts are being made to re-write Indian History – a history that has been a victim of distortion and incompleteness. Perhaps this exercise threatens to dislodge some from their zone of comfort- a warm cozy place of belief that Indians were a bunch of uncivilized

barbarians before the British enslaved the country and taught us manners. Their ‘grooming’ by the whites is so powerful that any attempt to revisit certain aspects of history will be met with severe resistance – after all their knowledge is from writings on India by army officers and administrators of the East India Company. Lt. Colonel James Todd, Major General John Malcolm, Joseph Cunningham, Captain Grant Duff Lt. R.F.Burton were the likes who wrote at length. Their account of India, seen thru their lens can be compared to the ‘narration’ of a bank heist by the leader of gang looting it. But the Indian left leaning historians would rather get their perspective than that of the bank manager and employees who actually experienced the assault. Unfortunately many Indian leaders too fell into the trap set by these narratives. They indirectly contributed to the distortion of Indian history- Justice M.G.Ranade, Mahatma Phule, Brahma Samaj leader Keshavachandra, Gopal

Krishna Gokhale founder of Servants of Indian Society and Lokamanya Tilak were a few who allowed their mindspace to be influenced.

If glorifying Ghazanvis, Ghoris, Gulams, Turks, Afghans, Khiljis, Tughalaqs, Lodis and Mughals as brave and noble became the calling of left leaning historians of India, scholars like Vishwanth Kasinath Rajwade, Balshastri Hardas, R C Mazumdar, B.D.Basu, G.S.Sardesai’s attempted to correct those versions. It was perhaps Veer Savarkar’s lectures between 1950-51 that exposed how Indian history is written with a strong anti-Hindu slant. These lectures appeared in newspapers later but no publisher was ready to publish his book ‘Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History’ - a book that destroys the myth that Hindus suffered defeat upon defeat, and asserts that Hindus survived aggressions because they fought tooth and nail to preserve their religion and culture.

Those opposing revision of Indian History should know that in historiography, reinterpretation of a historical account based on new data and new evidence is quite common. It is not a controversial process in fact is much needed to set the records straight.

## HISTORICAL REVISIONISM

In the last few decades the

World History has morphed substantially. Access to new data, asking nuanced questions, focusing on ‘details’ have exposed stereotypes and mis-representation in historical accounts. For instance in documenting the European colonization of the Americas, some history books paid little attention to the indigenous people of the Americas. They made only passing references to them and made no attempts whatsoever to see events from their point of view.

In India, historians like Ram Chandra Guha resorted to the same technique of highlighting some aspects while ignoring others. In Guha’s books ‘he showers encomiums on M.K. Gandhi for being singularly responsible for India’s Independence conveniently neglecting the role played by Subhas Chandra Bose and his army. It was, in fact, Bose’s army that was responsible for eliminating many British soldiers in the current Manipur and Nagaland areas. Many Indians were inspired by Netaji’s militant approach and rose to the occasion listening to his call “Give me your blood and I promise you freedom!”

The world was a witness to machinations of some historians who actually denied slavery and even questioned the Holocaust. It was the grit of historians like Deborah Lipstadt and Michael Shermer /Alex Grobman

whose published books (Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory- 1993), (Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It? - 2002) set the record straight. In 1935 Du Bois, an American activist and socialist wrote, “One is astonished in the study of history”, “at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over.”....How true!

Rama Chandra Guha, in his famous book ‘Makers of Modern India’ projects Golwalkar, a senior RSS Ideologue as a Muslim, Christian hater. He writes that Golwalkar viewed them as ‘Rakshasas, - Demons’. Nothing can be farther from the truth. In 1961, Golwalkar had a dialogue with Muslim leaders for consensual action. Guha targets all RSS leaders by implying that they belong to a ‘Cult’- a Bramhachari Cult - of life-long self-imposed celibacy. In his characteristic ‘writing in hyperboles’ style he tries to create an aura around Mohamad Ali Jinnah. Guha says that Jinnah’s speeches were electrifying and the audience gave a resounding prolonged applause. Guha’s style of writing has a subliminal influence on the reader instilling either awe or fear.

History is replete with examples of distortion, for example, in school books’ history on Europe, in the Battle

of Waterloo, most British, French, Dutch and German schoolbooks present the battle to emphasize the importance of the contribution of their own nations.

While authors have challenged the traditional understanding of the fall of the Roman Republic, today’s historians are even debating the causes and responsibility for the Cold War.

History, my friends, has to be understood as a continuing dialogue between the present and the past. Interpretations of the past can be changed based on new evidence and new perspectives. There is nothing eternal or immutable about the ‘truth’ of the past. Historical records are being revisited and refined regularly and that is the truth.

Though I do not endorse Devdutt Pattanaik’s interpretation of Hinduism, I wish to quote a few lines from his book ‘My Hanuman Chalisa’ :

*Within infinite myths lies an eternal truth*

*Who sees it all?*

*Varuna has but a thousand eyes*

*Indra, a hundred*

*You and I only two*

Today in the new ‘Age of Reinterpretation’ how fair is it to question India’s attempt at rewriting her history?

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