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ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN HISTORY WRITING

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In the later part of the 1970s and the early 1980s some discomfort with the historiography under discussion was visible. It was being realized that economic developments could be influenced by factors other than economic. Stratification of society, social requirements, and the distribution and channelization of resources were as important as their production and availability. Explanations based on technology and economy factors alone had to make way for the interplay of multiple forces. The shift in perspectives on early India can be seen in the writings of Ramila Thapar. B.D. Chattopadhyaya and Herman Kulke. Perspectives tend to change depending on the kind of questions historians ask, the variety of sources they use and the methods they adopt. The Mauryan economy was usually seen in terms of state control over all sectors across the empire, largely drawing on the Arthashastra. Recent researches, by looking at the regional material cultures brought to light by archeology and moving away from the traditional treatment of literary sources, have modified our understanding of the period. Archeology has revealed the coexistence and interaction between multiple cultures at different levels of growth.

The idea of a general crisis and decline characterizing the movement from the early historical to the early medieval, despite the acceptance of agrarian expansion in the regions during the same period, has been questioned in the recent years who focus on the processes of change and the gradual phased integration of spaces, economy, society and polity.

Archeology has enriched our understanding of early India. It has given birth to new sets of questions bearing on the spread of agriculture, urbanization, state, crafts, money trade and literacy. The numerous archeological cultures (Black and Red ware, Ochre coloured, pottery, copper hoards, etc) dated between the later half of the second millennium BC and the middle of the first millennium BC suggesting mutual contacts and adaptations have helped us to move away from invasion and colonization as explanatory categories for change.

The history of caste, shudras, Bakti, tantricism, temples as sites of interaction, and women in society and gender relation as distinguished from the position of women perspective, are part of wider canvas of History. They are related to issues such as social differentiation, social mobility and state formation and can't be treated in isolation.

Technology and economy is no longer seen as the only agency of change. An agrarian base, settlements and some kind of social differentiation are necessary for the emergence of the state. However, once the state was in place it could and in fact it did, influence changes. Again, both the developing and developed states needed social acceptance and support to continue, and they made use of religious ideas, temples, monasteries and Brahmanas to achieve their objective. Such examples, highlight the interplay of numerous forces in the making of history.

A communal and distorted unscientific view of Indian history, especially of its ancient and medieval periods, was a major instrument for the spread of communal consciousness as a basic constituent of communal ideology. The teaching of Indian history in schools and colleges from a basically communal point of view made a major contribution to the rise and growth of communalism. For generations, almost from the beginning of the modern school system, communal interpretations of history of varying degrees of virulence were propagated, first by imperialist writers and then by others. So deep and widespread was the penetration of the communal view of history that even sturdy nationalists accepted, however unconsciously, some of its basic digits. All this was seen by many contemporary observers. Gandhiji, for example, wrote: 'Communal harmony could not be permanently established in our country so long as highly distorted versions of history were being taught in her schools and colleges, through the history textbooks'⁴. Over and above the textbooks, the communal view of history was spread widely through poetry, drama, historical novels and short stories, newspapers and popular magazines, pamphlets, and above all, orally through the public platform, classroom teaching, socialization through the family, and private discussion and conversation,

A beginning was made in the early 19th century by the British historian, James Mill, who described the ancient period of Indian history as the Hindu period and the medieval period as the Muslim period. (Though he failed to characterize the modern period as the Christian period!). Other British and Indian historians followed him in this respect: Furthermore, though the Muslim masses were as poor, exploited and oppressed as the Hindu masses, and there were Hindu zamindars, nobles and rulers along with Muslim ones, these writers declared that all Muslims were rulers in medieval India and all Hindus were the ruled. Thus, the basic character of a polity in India was identified with the religion of the ruler. Later the culture and society of various periods were also declared to be either Hindu or Muslim in character.

The Hindu communalist readily adopted the imperialist view that medieval rulers in India were anti-Hindu, tyrannized Hindus and converted them forcibly. All communalist, as also imperialist, historians saw medieval history as one long story of Hindu-Muslim conflict and believed that throughout the medieval period there existed distinct and separate Hindu and Muslim cultures. The Hindu communalists described the rule of medieval Muslim rulers as foreign rule because of their religion. The talk of 'a thousand years of slavery' and 'foreign rule' was common rhetoric, sometimes even used by nationalists. Above all, the Hindu communal view of history relied on the myth that Indian society and culture had reached great, idea heights in the ancient period from which they fell into permanent and continuous decay during the medieval period because of 'Muslim' rule and domination. The basic contribution of the medieval period to the development of the Indian economy and technology, religion and philosophy arts and literature, and culture and society was denied.

In turn the Muslim communalists harked back to the 'Golden Age of Islamic achievement' in West Asia and appealed to its heroes, myths and cultural traditions. They propagated the notion that all Muslims were the rulers in medieval India or at least the beneficiaries of the so-called Muslim rule. They tended to defend and glorify all Muslim rulers, including religious bigots like Aurangzeb. They also evolved their own version of the

'fall' theory. While Hindus were allegedly in the ascendant during the 19th century, Muslims, it was said, 'fell' or declined as a 'community' throughout the 19th century after 'they' lost political power.

A major factor in the growth of communalism according to some authors was the religious pluralism or the existence of several religions in India. This is not so. It is not true that communalism must arise inevitably in a multi-religious society. Religion was not an underlying or basic cause of communalism, whose removal was basic to tackling or solving the communal problem. Here we must distinguish between religion as a belief system, which people follow as a part of their personal belief, and the ideology of a religion-based socio-political identity, that is, communalism. In other words, religion is not the 'cause' of communalism, even though communal cleavage is based by the communalist on differences in religion-this difference is then used to mask or disguise the social needs, aspirations, conflicts, arising in non-religious fields. Religion comes into communalism to the extent that it serves politics arising in spheres other than religion. K.M.Ashraf put this aspect in an appropriate phrase when he described communalism as 'Mazhab ki siyasi dukandari' (political trade in religion).⁶ Communalism was not inspired by religion, nor was religion the object of communal politics-it was only its vehicle.

Religion was, however, used as a mobilizing factor by the communalists. Communalism could become a popular movement after 1939, and in particular during 1945-47, only when it adopted the inflammable cry of religion in danger. Moreover, differing religious practices were the immediate cause of situations of communal tension and riots. We may also note that while religion was not responsible for communalism, religiosity was a major contributory factor. (Religiosity may be defined as intense emotional commitment to matters of religion and the tendency to let religion and religious emotions intrude into non-religious or non-spiritual areas of life and beyond the individual's private and moral world). Religiosity was not communalism but it opened a person to the appeal of communalism in the name of religion. Secularization did not, therefore, mean removing religion but it did mean reducing religiosity or increasingly narrowing down the sphere of religion to the private life of the individual.

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