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# Reporting History: Early India

Romila Thapar

I was wondering what I should speak on when addressing an audience of budding journalists and media persons. So I thought I might speak on why some of us historians, feel bothered by the way the media, both print and visual, report on and treat themes that have to do with history, especially early Indian history. So now that I have a captive audience with all of you here, I shall try and explain why the reporting on historical subjects, is something of an intellectual challenge, if its intention is to project the kind of knowledge that historians are exploring.

Let me begin with a definition. History is a construction of the past in which various historians attempt to explain what happened and why. Indian history began with such an explanation of the past by British colonial historians. Subsequently nationalist historians attempted to refute some of these explanations, or else to accept some. Colonial scholarship laid out the ground plan as it were, by insisting that India, and particularly pre-Islamic India, was a civilisation that lacked a sense of history. Colonial scholars were told that there were no histories of India written in ancient times. India could not boast of a Herodotus or a Tacitus. Therefore, it was argued that since there was an absence of historical writing, colonial scholars would have to discover and write the history of India. Naturally there was a bias towards presenting the past in a manner that would support colonial policy. Admittedly their work on deciphering scripts, locating archaeological sites and reconstructing chronology was remarkable, but their broader reading of the past requires correction.

The basic statement came from James Mill, who in 1819 wrote, *A History of British India*. He divided Indian history into three periods, which he called Hindu civilisation, Muslim civilisation and the British period. This was the first modern history of India, so his views were accepted by all, even by the nationalist historians. The three periods became axiomatic to the study of Indian history. To this day one hears people talk about the Hindu period and the Muslim period, despite the fact that historians have now dismissed this periodisation. The first two of these labels were taken from the religion of the rulers: the Hindus from the earliest time, the Muslims from the time of the Delhi Sultanate in about AD 1200. The British period began when they came to govern parts of India in the eighteenth century.

This periodisation lent support to the colonial argument that the primary identity of Indian society was that of religious communities, generally antagonistic to each other. We have internalised this colonial interpretation of our past at the popular level, and to such a degree that although it has been repeatedly questioned by historians, the popular mindset does not change. By conquering India, the British argued that they had got rid of Islamic tyranny and freed the Hindus, for which the Hindus should be grateful to the British.

Historians today maintain that the religion of the ruler does not characterise the entire society. There are more fundamental characteristics that determine a period, such as the kind of political economy that prevailed, the social functioning of various groups, and the different ways in which religion related to the elite and to ordinary people and not just to the ruler. Periodisation should be based on substantial change in society and economy and this is now visible from the evidence.

And then came the new discovery of nineteenth century Europe, that all humans can be identified by race. There was a rush to allot racial categories. When applied to Indian society, it was argued that caste was actually a form of racial segregation. Each of the four *varnas* was a separate race. Its purity was maintained by insisting that one could only marry within one's own *varna*. The physical co-relation with the hierarchy of high and low caste was sought to be proved by measuring the nasal index and the cephalic index of various castes. The narrower the nose, the higher the caste. The two groups that were excluded from all this were the two that were not included in the *varna* system – the untouchables and the forest-dwellers. So these were labelled as the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The category of race was taken back to the beginnings of history with references to the Aryan race and the Dravidian race. We still use the term 'race' loosely and apply it to language, nationalities and anything else.

That Indian society was a collection of religious communities as argued by Mill became the basis of the Census in 1882. The Indian population was counted in terms of religious communities. The numbers in each community were soon converted into the idea of a majority community of Hindus and the minority communities of Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis and others. Buddhists and Jainas were not differentiated from Hindus, although historically they were generally regarded as distinct.

In this manner, colonial administration sorted out Indian society and wrapped it up into neat packages. Unfortunately nationalist historians did not unwrap these packages. We still have them and they have become part of how we see ourselves in contemporary society and politics.

However, nationalist history did question some of these ideas and the questioning started a debate. It opposed the negative features of the colonial history of India, but unfortunately did not analyse why and how colonial theories were arrived at. What was missing was what we today call historiog-

raphy. By this we mean investigating the prevailing ideologies and knowledge of the time and seeing how they influenced the way in which the past was understood.

Today we do this routinely. It is part of what is called historical method and historians and their writing are examined from this perspective. The method involves a series of steps. The evidence quoted by a historian has to be assessed for its reliability. We have to ascertain that there is no other evidence that might provide an alternative reading and, if so, weigh it in balance. The explanation relies on critical analysis and logical reasoning. And if one is working on pre-modern history, one has also to know the languages of the texts that are consulted, and for still earlier times, one has to be trained to read the reports of archaeological excavations.

Writing history has become both a complicated and a technical procedure. Gone are the days when one could read six books on a historical subject and become an expert. So, if you are reporting on a historical subject, prepare yourself by doing some intelligent background reading – the same as you would do for other subjects, as for example, something on the economy – and also by trying to understand how it has been variously investigated.

Let me try and explain this by giving you some examples. Nationalist historians changed the labels for the periodisation of Indian history. Hindu, Muslim and British periods were replaced by Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods. These were more secular sounding labels, and were therefore preferred in the atmosphere of growing communalism in the twentieth century. They were also currently in use for European history, so it was thought that Indian history was being brought up-to-date with European history. However, the span of the period remained the same as before as did the reason for the span. Ancient History came to be equated with Hindu history and Medieval History with Muslim history. So there was no real change and we were back to square one. Mill's periodisation was part of the ideological nurturing of communalism culminating in the Partition of 1947.

Ancient India was projected as a virtual utopia, starting with the Vedic age and culminating 1500 years later in the so-called 'golden age' of the Guptas. It was supposedly a period of unchanging prosperity. Society functioned according to the norms laid down in the *shastras*, so historians did not have to investigate the reality.

But let me add that this was not a situation typical of India alone. All nationalisms have to have a utopian past, preferably located as far back in time as possible. With limited evidence, the imagination is free to conjure up a romantic past. Questioning this ideal picture is treated as an anti-national act, as happened in India not so long ago. Some of us have been subjected to the slings and arrows of religious nationalist views when we have tried to give a more integrated and reality-based view of the past. Historians began to analyse early Indian society in the 1960s and 1970s to arrive at a

more realistic picture. But the opposition to this research was articulated through a range of religious organisations whose main concern was with using religion for political mobilisation and for acquiring authority. This has now increased and has become more recognisable.

This again is part of the relationship between nationalism and history. Where nationalism is an anti-colonial movement, there is on the whole, unity among those opposed to colonial power. After the removal of the colonial power, identities fragment. Generally one group among the many lays claim to a special status in a post-colonial context. The interesting aspect of this is that, in ex-colonies the fragmentation follows the definition of society as given by the colonial power. Therefore predictably, in India there is a turning to identities other than the overall Indian identity that was so powerful in the anti-colonial movement. We are now obsessed with religious, caste and language identities, the same as the ones defined for India by the colonial power. We do not bother to enquire into what were the identities in the pre-colonial period, which were different from what colonial scholarship invented for us. The reason for this may in part be that the identities of the pre-colonial period were not such as can be widely used for political mobilisation.

Therefore, we have accepted the colonial idea of a religiously defined majority community in a commanding position and minority communities in lesser positions. This view now governs our polity. We have endorsed the idea that in the past, caste functioned in accordance with the normative texts of upper caste authors – the *dharmashastras* – and was frozen and rigid for centuries. This view was strengthened perhaps by nationalist historians being themselves largely of the upper castes. They were hesitant to question too closely the agenda and purpose of ancient texts, forgetting that all texts have an agenda. History was largely viewed as the actions and attitudes of the elite. It is only recently that there has been a concern for seeing the past from the perspective of those who were excluded from caste society – and even more so, from the perspective of women at various levels of society.

Each of the periods, Hindu and Muslim, do not fit into any historical categories. The Hindu period extended from Harappan times 2700 BC to AD 1200, a time span of almost 4000 years. Such a long, unchanging period of history is not feasible. All the rulers were supposedly Hindu but this was not so. We do not know the religion of the Harappa culture. Artefacts and monuments of a seemingly religious nature are not found uniformly in every Harappan city-site, suggesting that religious practices may have been varied and localised.

It is only with the texts of the Vedic religion that we can speak with confidence on what the religion was, constituted as Vedic Brahmanism. Its focus was the ritual of sacrifice with the slaughter of animals, the complete absence of images, and the consuming of the collected wealth through elaborate rituals of worship.

Vedic Brahmanism was opposed by various sects, such as the Buddhists, Jainas, Ajivikas, and so on. The *brahmanas* called these sects the heterodox – the *nastikas* and *pashandas*, which terms were used in turn by the heterodox for the *brahmanas*. The opposition was firm and clear. The heterodox opposed the ritual of sacrifice, and the *varna-ashrama-dharma*, caste system. There were many kings who were not patrons of the brahmanical religion but were patrons of the Buddhists and Jainas, such as the Mauryas, who are therefore described as *shudras* in the *Puranas*.

By the early centuries AD, the Vedic religion was declining. Buddhism and Jainism were popular. Hindu sects worshipping Shiva and Vishnu were becoming prominent and these together with later Shakta and Tantric sects were brought under the umbrella of Puranic Hinduism. Their preferred form of worship was *bhakti* – devotion to any selected deity. The deity was worshipped in the form of an image and placed in a temple. The dominant belief was in rebirth, conditioned by one's actions in this life. All this differed from Vedic Brahmanism. Such an enormous change in religious beliefs and forms can only occur when there are major historical changes taking place at the same time. For a historian it is not possible to refer to the period even from 1000 BC to AD 1200 as one period. There is a marked change from the post-Gupta period. This change has been the subject of an intellectually vigorous debate on whether or not there was a feudal system at this time.

We then come to Mill's second division, the Muslim civilisation. This is supposed to begin with the commencement of Muslim rulers all over the sub-continent, generally dated to AD 1200. But this also poses problems. Various parts of India were brought under the rule of Sultans at different times. Sind was conquered by the Arabs in the eighth century, Punjab by the Turks and Afghans in the eleventh century, Delhi and the Ganges plain in the thirteenth century, and South India in the seventeenth. This is a span of 1000 years, so where do we place the start of Muslim rule? It makes nonsense of a periodisation based on the religion of the ruling dynasty.

Given the small number of the Muslim population in India, it is clear that the religion of the subjects of a kingdom did not change dramatically with Muslim rule. Court chroniclers, and this is typical of court chroniclers, exaggerated the figures. So it was invariably 50,000 infidels who were either put to the sword or else converted to Islam. This figure is clearly notional. Conversion was actually a slower process and affected fewer people.

Conversion is also associated with invasion, treated as a single purpose event. But invasions tie in with many other activities, and are the least effective mechanism of conversion. An invading army follows the normal route into an area and does not stray too far. If it is victorious, it may pillage the countryside around, but as soon as the army moves on, activities are back to normal, perhaps with some little dislocation. The bigger dislocations happen when an area comes under a new administration. This happened even prior to Turkish and Arab invasions, although as with all such changes,

the attempt is invariably not to disturb the administration at the lower level, as long as it is bringing in the revenue. There is also a distinction between brief looting raids and well-planned expeditions aimed at settling in and colonising the territory, which introduce change.

The army's relation with the local population in those days depended on the mercenaries that the army recruited to fight in a campaign. Mercenaries create an aura of familiarity if they are from the same region. Mahmud of Ghazni for instance, had a large number of Hindu mercenary soldiers and officers, recruited from the North-West. One of his most trusted generals was a Hindu called Tilak, who campaigned in Afghanistan. Similarly, some of the Hindu kings of Kashmir employed Turkish mercenaries.

Armies often travel along routes that are known from before. These can be routes used by pastoralists who take their herds annually along a circuit of pastures. Or they are routes used by merchants and their caravans. This makes it easier to garrison soldiers and have access to local supplies. Merchant caravans used locations along these routes, which became staging points, where animals and traders could rest for a few days before travelling further. Remember that the distances they covered were enormous. Such points became meeting places where local produce could be exchanged with goods brought by traders. In early times, Buddhist monasteries were sometimes located at these staging points and the monks participated in the trade. In later centuries, this was where the caravanserais were located. They were built around a large courtyard, enclosed by rooms, so that they could be manned as small forts in times of disturbance. Caravans were loaded with expensive items and therefore a target for brigands.

Where the trade was on a large scale, as between China, central Asia, Afghanistan and Northern India, information about these places would be well-known. Armies on the march would halt near these staging points. Raiding armies target rich towns, so that there is enough loot to keep the soldiers happy and ready for more raids. Inevitably such towns were temple towns where every temple received – and still does – enormous gifts from its patrons which it stored in its vaults. Raiding temples was not unusual even in pre-Islamic times. A victor in a campaign would forcibly remove the icon from the royal temple, and take it home as a trophy. On other occasions, Hindu kings are on record as despoiling temples and looting their wealth when there was a fiscal crisis. The eleventh century king of Kashmir, Harshadeva, did this repeatedly, and the famous historian of that time, Kalhana, writes of him with contempt.

The other outcome of invasion was indirect. It is generally said that Muslim invaders threatened death to the infidels if they did not convert to Islam. But in fact, the maximum conversions to Islam were not through invaders but through Sufi teachers. The Sufis began arriving in Northern India along the routes opened up by trade and by migrants. They came in small numbers and settled locally. Sufi Islam was amenable to assimilating

local religion and there was often an overlap between various religious traditions. Local religion was mostly the fluid and flexible *bhakti* tradition rather than hide-bound sectarian belief. The larger numbers followed teachings which were based on the inter-face and mingling of various religions. This was inclusive teaching and was in fact, the actual religion of the majority, especially the lower social strata. If the Census of 1882 had included a column for those who observed a cross-over kind of religion, a mix of Hinduism, Islam and other formal religions, this column would undoubtedly have had the largest number. In terms of observing common customs, festivals, and even forms of worship, the vast population below the Hindu and Muslim upper-castes would have constituted the religious majority. There were many sects with a wide following, such as the Nathapanthis, who did not observe the boundaries of formal Hinduism and Islam.

European scholars of the nineteenth century who worked on Asian texts of ancient times, were called Orientalists. Their interpretations of the civilisation and cultures of Asia defined the culture of various regions. In many ways, it continues to do so even now. They divided the world into civilisations. Each was clearly demarcated by a territory, a single language and a single religion. Indian civilisation was defined as the territory of British India, its language was Sanskrit and its religion Hinduism. Persian and associated languages were excluded and so was Islam, because they were said to be foreign and not indigenous. Historians have questioned this theory on all three counts. Territories, religions and languages changed frequently and crossed boundaries, defying definition in narrow and precise terms.

Furthermore, historians today argue against the concept of self-contained, autonomous civilisations. The essence of civilisation which we define as literature, art, philosophy, science and a high standard of living, is the product, not of isolation, but of maximum inter-mingling. Civilisation is by definition porous and the product of the symbiosis of neighbouring cultures. The high-point of a society's culture is precisely when it is both giving and receiving. This it does through a variety of exchanges, both of objects and ideas that relate to what we call civilisation. Science for example, as an intellectual achievement, cannot be thought of without tracing the many strands from many societies that went into its making, even from the earliest times. Scholars in India, China, West Asia and the Mediterranean world, were constantly interacting and this was at the root of contemporary science.

Language was crucial in every activity and language changed with the requirements of cultural change. The same facility was required for the maritime trading circuits at around AD 1000, which ran from Tunis in North Africa, via Egypt, Yemen, India, South-East Asia to Canton in China; and indeed the same applied to the over-land routes which went from the Eastern Mediterranean via Iran, North-West India, central Asia to China.



The link was the market, visible and known. This almost constitutes a globalisation before our current Globalisation.

The way in which language creates historical change is something that we have not studied adequately. We need to look more closely at how language reflects social change. It played a role in another myth that is still dominating our understanding of the early past. I am referring to the theory of Aryan race. Nineteenth century Orientalists argued that the foundation of Indian civilisation was Aryan culture encapsulated in the *Vedas*. It was held that a superior Aryan race invaded Northern India in about 1500 BC, conquered the existing Dravidian race and settled in India. Incidentally the theory now being propagated at the popular level is that the Aryans were indigenous to India. In fact, both theories are unacceptable to most historians.

A century later it was established that there is no such entity as an Aryan race, in fact, it is virtually impossible to identify any race. Aryan is in any case a language label, as also is Dravidian. More correctly we should refer to the Aryan-speaking people, and the Dravidian-speaking people, and not to Aryans and Dravidians as races. The term *arya* refers to language and to persons who are respected. Race is a biological concept whereas Aryan and Dravidian are social and cultural constructs, named after a language.

So far we have no archaeological evidence to prove an invasion by an Aryan race. The more feasible suggestion is that there may have been a slow and graduated migration of Aryan speakers into India. The picture however, is complicated, because we also do not have evidence that the language – Old Indo-Aryan/Vedic Sanskrit – was spoken in India prior to 1500 BC. Since this is later than the Harappan cities, the Harappans would not have been Aryan-speaking. Nor do we know the language spoken by the Harappans. However languages related to Indo-Aryan were used in two areas. One was Old Iranian – the language of the *Avesta* – used in North-East Iran and associated with Zoroastrians; and the other was the language of the Hittites in Northern Syria. Both are later than 1500 BC but their linguistic form has affinities with Indo-Aryan. So, on the basis of current evidence, the languages that Indo-Aryan is related to are outside the Indian sub-continent. Co-incidentally, they all seem to surface at the same time, although in diverse geographical regions.

If there was no invasion, but in the period after the decline of the Harappan cities there was a gradual but increasing use of Indo-Aryan, then the question is, how did this happen? The earliest Indo-Aryan, that of the *Rigveda*, shows traces of linguistic elements of non-Aryan languages, which could suggest a period of bi-lingualism among various peoples. Was there then, as some of us have suggested, a slow migration from the North-Western borderlands into the Punjab and the Doab? From the *Rigveda* it is clear that they were agro-pastoralists, primarily cattle-herders, since they counted their wealth in heads of cattle and horses, chariots, gold and *dasis*. They looked for

good pastures and settled wherever the ecology was suitable. Did they introduce new technologies that gave them an edge over the existing population?

The basic point therefore is, how and why Indo-Aryan spread slowly across Northern India. A language is picked up by a community or group if it suits them. It was a time when some people were on the move and migrating and others were settled in optimum areas. Either way, there was an exchange between those already settled in an area and those coming in. And some local people obviously picked up the new language well enough to become part of the newly emerging society.

This ties in with an interesting reference in the Vedic texts to a category of *brahmanas* called *dasi-putra brahmanas*, literally, *brahmanas* who are the sons of *dasis*, slave women. This is an oxymoron. The *dasas* were the Other, the Opposite, the Alien of the *arya*. They had different customs, rituals, beliefs and eventually the term referred to those who were enslaved. But it seems some were also assimilated, or else there would not have been any *dasi-putra brahmanas*. This group was looked down upon initially but when the other *brahmanas* came to believe that they were favoured by the gods, they too rushed to welcome them. Some pre-eminent *rishis* were of this category.

What I am trying to suggest is that we should get away from meaningless questions like, whether the Aryan-speakers were indigenous to India. India was not a demarcated territory in those days. The area where Aryan in some form was spoken crossed many present-day boundaries. So we cannot say that only those who lived within the sub-continent were indigenous and those outside were foreign. There was so much constant coming and going across central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, India and further East, and this went on throughout the centuries, that the question of indigenous and foreign is a non-question. Populations were always mixed and the more mixed they were, the more they made a fetish of being pure.

This brings me to the question of caste. It has been said that the normative rules of marriage within a caste support continuity in the blood line. The notion that caste was racial segregation is, of course, erroneous. Castes are socially distinct but need not be biologically distinct as they are artificially constructed social divisions. That is why caste can be used for political mobilisation. This is not a new feature of caste society, except that earlier it was the upper castes that used it for this purpose and now it is open to all.

The *varnas*, castes, became so large over a period of time, especially with new groups being assimilated, that inevitably their occupations and marriage rules had to concede change. This was not always admitted. *Brahmanas* for instance were initially ritual specialists but also became scholars, military commanders, kings, record keepers, revenue officers and land owners. Some were born within the *varna* but some others, living in remote areas, were probably recruited from local priests, since they have strange names

and their knowledge of Sanskrit is poor. By the post-Gupta period, distinctions were being made between what were called *shrotriya brahmanas*, the scholarly ones, and the *rauta* and *thakkura brahmanas* who were land-owners and bureaucrats.

The term *kshatriya* was originally used for the chiefs of clans and what are claimed to be their genealogies were maintained. When society evolved into kingdoms, politics became an open arena. The *Puranas* state that after the Guptas, new *kshatriyas* will be created. The new *kshatriya* is defined as he who has horses and soldiers. Adventurers from obscure families worked their way up in the king's favour, and were given a grant of land for services rendered. If it was large enough it could become the nucleus of a principality, and this later evolved into a small kingdom. A genealogy would hastily be put together linking the family to the ancient *kshatriyas*, an elaborate origin myth concocted, a marriage alliance was made with existing royalty, and a new *kshatriya* family was established. This may explain why in the *Puranas*, most pre-Gupta dynasties are said to be either *brahmana* or *shudra*, seldom *kshatriya*.

There was a formal insistence that the norms of patriarchy be observed and marriage be according to the rules of the *dharmashastras*. Whether this was so cannot be ascertained at this distance of many centuries. The only known identity that a child can inherit is that of the mother, for the rest it is a believed paternity. Hence the patriarchal insistence on controlling marriage. This is so even today to the extent of murdering those that break the rules and calling this murder an 'honour killing'.

To claim predictable genetic continuity through observing caste rules is to ask for something that cannot be guaranteed. It is more probable that consistency in observing the rules was among those who had no choice or had their own different rules and were kept excluded from caste society. Unfortunately we do not have data from such groups, nor have they been given the attention they deserve from historians.

The question of caste has been raised again in the claim that it can be genetically defined. Some argue that genetic samples from present-day caste groups can provide us with their history. Attempts are made to determine when new genetic groups entered India, which in turn is taken back to finding out who was Aryan and who was not. This is problematic because as I have tried to explain, even single castes are generally mixed groups. And by the time one has accounted for all the people that came and settled in India – pastoralists, migrants, traders, invaders – through all the coming and going, identities become even more complex.

And then there is the problem of using genetic samples from the ancient past. These are usually taken from burials. Having lain in the ground for such a long period, they tend to get contaminated with bacteria or disintegrate, and these changes have to be taken into account. So the data from genetics dating to the past has to be treated with great caution. And now, of

course, even the earlier studies are being questioned by epigenetic investigations, where it is being suggested that the genome may not be the sole evidence of identities as the environment also introduces changes.

Let me now turn to the last point I want to make that touches both on history and the freedom to write it. We proclaim that we are a democratic culture that nurtures freedom of expression. Yet we don't stop to think before we rush to ban books. And curiously, the core reason for banning a book usually has to do with something historical. What is the historicity of the Satanic verses in Salman Rushdie's book? Was James Laine correct in questioning Shivaji's origins however indirectly, or Joseph Lelyveld in speaking of Gandhi's friendship with a gay friend? Should Ramanujam have discussed the many versions of the *Ramayanas*? Should Peter Heehs be prohibited from staying in India because he has written what some think is a critical book on Aurobindo?

In each case, some religious organisation claims that the religious sentiment of an entire community has been hurt by the book. The media's first reaction should be to investigate the claim. Which organisation is making this claim, which fraction of the community has been hurt, and more than that, are there factions within the organisation that are using the book as ammunition to attack other factions? In other words, what are the politics behind the demand for banning a book, since such demands are motivated by groups competing for authority, however localised it may be. We have not questioned the statement of colonial writing that Indian identities are religious identities, so we also do not question the right of any religious organisation to claim that it is speaking on behalf of an entire religious community.

And why history? To which, the answer is simple. We still think that everyone can pronounce on history irrespective of whether they know it or not. People do not meddle with books on subjects believed to be more rigorous in terms of data and method, such as philosophy, economics, or the sciences. And, of course, history is what has been used by colonial scholarship to create our identities and we are continuing to use it, and even abuse it, for this purpose.

Some of us in our study of the past are trying to re-examine the identities inherited by us from colonialism and distinguish these from the ones that existed before. It isn't that we did not have identities of religion, caste and language, but their role in our cultural patterns was different. Where a religious organisation in the past created islands of monolithic thinking, these were for fractional and orthodox groups. Their use for political mobilisation had limitations because for most people, religion was fluid. Beliefs and observances frequently over-lapped across religions. Large numbers could not be got together to shout slogans. Caste was visible in all religious communities. Within the system the boundaries were rigid for the orthodox. They were equally rigid in excluding those outside caste, and this

was characteristic of virtually all religions in India. This exclusion was an inhuman system of ensuring a permanent availability of labour. The banning of books was unheard, of because critical views on any subject were answered by argument, as they should be. In any case, books were all limited editions in the absence of printing.

In questioning the identities that we have inherited from colonial interpretations of our history, we have eventually to be ready to replace them with more meaningful identities. This means understanding the pre-colonial past but not attempting to implant its institutions onto the present. This we cannot do, as we now have contours and patterns of living that are quite different from those of centuries ago. We have to rethink the identities we want. Should we continue to see ourselves primarily in terms of religious and caste groups fighting for community rights? Or, should we not be demanding, with much greater emphasis, a society that gives priority to social justice as a right in itself; and not just as a concession to improving upon the wrongs of the past, which concessions are given piece-meal from time to time? The laws of social justice would have to include the equitable distribution of resources, and entitlements to the essentials of life such as health care, education and welfare. This would require us to stop thinking of ourselves in terms of limited communities with narrow commitments, but rather to think of ourselves in broader categories. If this becomes our civilisational foundation, then we have no option but to re-think our identities.

Let me conclude by saying that in this re-thinking, we cannot sneak in colonial definitions, reincarnated in the shallow and desiccated attempts of those extremist groups, who claim to uphold indigenous values allied to religious fanaticism. In the prevailing globalisation, battles for self-definition can easily slip into distorted nationalism. Nor are one-byte definitions – the quick-fix to all problems – an appropriate answer. It has to be a thoughtful, questioning, evaluating process, involving sensitivity to both the past and the present. And I hope that some of you will think about it with deep concern, because it impinges directly on your future.

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