



Foundation for Indian Historical and Cultural Research

“धर्मार्थकाममोक्षाणाम् उपदेशसमन्वितम्
पूर्ववृत्तं कथायुक्तम् इतिहासं प्रचक्षते॥”

History and Memory

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The past exists in our minds as a set of mental notions, images, or impressions. These collectively amount to, what we normally term, memories. The average human being's memories, for the greater part, are about their individual lives. They encapsulate their successes, failures, loves, and hates. They are also about the people they have met, their experiences, families, friends, and what they have done in their personal and professional lives. To some extent, however, an average person's memories are also about their social and cultural affiliations and, most importantly, the nation-states they belong to. We tend to 'remember' things as Hindus and Muslims, or Gujaratis and Bengalis, and, definitely, Indians, Germans, and Americans. In this sense, a part of our memories pertain to what is commonly understood as history. They encompass the bygone heroes and villains, triumphs and tragedies relevant to our identity frameworks. We feel, on account of them, either happy



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or sorrowful, proud or shamefaced. Thus, the average human being experiences and knows history through memories.

The average historian, however, is usually chary about approaching the past through collective, popular memories. One may refer to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's (1913-2005) work *Memory, History, Forgetting* to understand why. Here is what, in my opinion, is inferable from this remarkable book about the fraught relationship between the historian's craft and the memory heritage of human collectivities – To start with, our memories of the past as social and cultural groups and national communities are never spontaneous and acquired at first hand. They cannot be. For instance, I ‘remember’ the Vedic age as an Indian and a Hindu not because I lived in it – I am, after all, not that old – but because I learnt about it in school and college. My ‘memory’ of it is, in this sense, an inculcated one. It is, thus, an artificial memory and cannot be an authentic source for the historian. They had better reconstruct it from the texts – genuine primary sources – composed in the age. Then, again, collective, popular memory is sometimes mandatorily commemorative. We might focus on a putative golden age in the past in a way as to relatively ignore the other times and ages therein. Again, we might find it necessary to highlight certain injustices committed in the past so that they are not repeated in the present. This too would result in a certain part or parts of the past being accorded an extra importance or significance. In both cases, thus, it might be said, we end up acquiring a somewhat warped notion of it. It is almost as though the past becomes unevenly lit in our collective memories – some segments thereof become way too brilliant in our perception while others languish in partial or total darkness. Moving on, collective memories are also liable to be ideologically manipulated by the powers that be. This is precisely due to the reason that they are so fundamental to our identity frameworks. Hence, social and cultural elites as also the political class find it expedient to cherry-pick bits and pieces of the past and inculcate its remembrance (through varieties of institutional means) in the demographics they lead or oversee. They can find it an expedient means to impart their own ideological outlook to them and secure their own power and privilege. Thus, a Marxist or Communist minded elite or political class would ensure that their followers remember the past in terms of class struggle



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and, based on that, learn to nurture an antipathy towards the owners of capital. This is so that their collective identity takes the form of ‘class consciousness’ and they can be easily manipulated with Marxist or Communist rhetoric. Finally, collective memories are not a fully authentic historical source due to the feature of elision – they are likely to expunge the especially painful or traumatic episodes of the past. A case in point is Hindu society’s collective amnesia about the large-scale medieval desecration or destruction of its sacred sites and religious shrines. This amnesia does make an occasional exception for an especially important site or shrine. However, barring that, it is near total. Hence, human collectivities do not necessarily remember or commemorate the past in its multifaceted totality. They leave out those parts of it which hurt them.

Does this mean that collective, popular memories are completely pointless from the historiographic point of view? No, not at all, provided that the historian approaches them with the right professional sagacity and sensitivity. This, in my opinion, is what we ought to infer from the historian Cynthia Talbot’s extremely interesting monograph *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past. 1200-2000*. The book examines the various ways in which Prithviraj Chauhan was remembered in medieval India and to what ends. What emerges from the study is that his memory was fashioned and refashioned at various historical junctures to further particular points of view or to achieve certain social and political objectives. Talbot, thus, evocatively describes Prithviraj Chauhan as a ‘site of memory’ and, if I remember correctly, as a basis of ‘memory communities’. That is to say, she understands his diverse commemorations as a kind of shared psychological terrain and facilitator of certain types of social solidarities. Talbot’s position seems to suggest that collective, popular memories, while not articulating factually authentic accounts of the past, are still social and political history phenomena. This is since they are outcomes of concrete social processes and, over time, facilitate or fulfil social and political instrumentalities. Therefore, collective, popular memories can be of considerable value to the historian, provided that they read them right.



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