Introductory Essay

Rescuing the Nation from History: Implications of Indian Historiography for National Security

Arpita Mitra

“A nation that has no history of its own has nothing in this world.”

~ Swami Vivekananda

In his classic book on China, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (1995), Prasenjit Duara begins by noting: “Historical Consciousness in modern society has been overwhelmingly framed by the nation-state.” In fact, it may be possible to argue that a sense of history is inextricably linked with some kind of a national consciousness, whether ‘nation’ in such contexts is defined in predominantly political or civilizational terms. It is true that this connection between history and the nation became even more palpable in modernity, when nations came to be increasingly defined in political terms, and the very rationale for their existence was sought in history. But how does the past become history? While the past may simply seem to exist out there, history is something that is produced through a narrative about the self. In modern times, these narratives are inseparably linked to the creation and sustenance of nation-states. Duara’s book is mainly a critique of the kind of “linear, evolutionary history” that was produced in early twentieth-century China in the Chinese state’s bid to strengthen Chinese nationalism. Duara even calls this connection between history and the nation “repressive”, and he is a critic of “national history [which] secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of a selfsame, national subject evolving through time.” While Duara makes his arguments mainly with reference to China, he also draws many generalized conclusions, which are in common with similar arguments made by many scholars for Indian history. Whether one likes it or not, the connection between

Dr. Arpita Mitra is a Research Fellow at the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi. She is the guest editor of the current issue of National Security.
history and the nation is inescapable, and rather than decoupling them, as suggested by Duara, a better course of action would be to pay attention to what kind of a history we want the nation to produce, and what kind of a nation we want our history to produce. This boils down to the single question: what kind of a nation do we want to build? This essay is, thus, an attempt at reversing Duara’s approach of rescuing history from the nation and drawing attention to the process of rescuing the Indian nation from the kind of histories that have been written in the past few decades.

**Why History?**

While nation-states manipulate the production of history, one should note that all nations do not write their histories with the same underlying philosophy of national identity. This goes on to say that nations are temperamentally different. Hence, there is a grain of truth in all national histories, because they are all reflections of how these nations have been shaped civilizational. Critics of national histories say that these are constructs. What they forget is that constructs cannot be pure fiction, they need to have a basis in reality, otherwise there would be no takers for them. The utility of history is also precisely in discovering this national identity, which is unique for each nation.

If one asks what the use is of knowing the past, especially from the point of view of national security, the answer would be that national history is of paramount importance for national security. The specific relationship between historiography and national security in the context of India will be taken up in a later section of this essay. This section will provide a general outline of the importance of national history for the nation.

Why do we need to know our history? To know ourselves and to love our country, and these two processes are inter-related. As put by the educationist, Sister Nivedita: “We love that which we think of, we think of that which we know.” Without knowledge of the object of love, there can be no love. Thus, right knowledge about the nation helps in fostering love for the nation. The process of knowing who we are as a nation involves understanding the civilizational direction of India. As mentioned above, each nation is a type. Thus, Duara’s critique of the agenda of Chinese nationalism may not hold good for Indian nationalism, because the Indian nationalist historiography may have glorified India but never made any aggressive claims on other people’s territories. Each nation also has its own function and purpose to fulfill in this world. This allows nations to be complementary to each other—otherwise one would die of vanity. All these ideas are now suspect in the scholarly world because Europe has witnessed war and destruction in the previous century in the wake of such grandiose and prophetic national claims. But it needs to be recognized that the
case with India is different, because the Indian ideal is one of peace and non-aggression, of cooperation and not extermination.

This leads us to another crucial issue. If we have to decipher India’s purpose in this world, we have to follow our history on its own terms and not look at narratives constructed by others. The beginning of modern historiography in India started in the wake of colonialism; hence, many dominant ideas about the Indian past were shaped by the imperialist imperative. Curiously, we see a return of some of these positions (for example, "India was never a nation") in the contemporary post-colonial discourse as well. One is likely to commit this mistake if one overlooks the need for retrieving Indian history from the Indian perspective. As put by Nivedita: “...India herself is the master-document...The country is her own record. She is the history that we must learn to read.”

Finally, we should also remember that it is the past that not only shapes the present but also the future. Swami Vivekananda says: “Do you believe that one who has such faith and pride as to feel, “I come of noble descent”, can ever turn out to be bad? How could that be? That faith in himself would curb his actions and feelings, so much so that he would rather die than commit wrong. So a national history keeps a nation well-restrained and does not allow it to sink so low.”

Rectifications required in Indian Historiography

The way Indian history is projected and represented in academic study today has a bearing on national security, because it has the potential of feeding identity politics and undermining nationalistic feelings. In this issue, Dilip K. Chakrabarti’s article on ‘Nationalism in the Study of Ancient Indian History’ sheds light on the politics of representing ancient Indian history in a particular light that is not only dangerous for the country but also far removed from empirical reality. The historiography of ancient India acquired certain characteristics since the emergence and increasing predominance of a Marxist or pro-Marxist line of theoretical engagement. Chakrabarti discusses how the works of stalwart historians such as R C Majumdar and others have been completely side-lined because of ideological reasons.

Historians with a nationalist orientation during colonial rule and immediately after Independence put in hard work for re-constructing India’s ancient past firmly on a strong empirical foundation. All these efforts at writing and disseminating Indian history were reversed, when 1970s onwards, Marxist tools of analyses started to play a dominant role in understanding pre-modern Indian history. At the same time, the control of research
project fund disbursals and faculty appointment also passed into the hands of the Marxist historians, who almost monopolized the writing and teaching of Indian history. This has led to a skewed representation of facts related to Indian history. Let us discuss just a few examples pertaining to pre-modern India briefly. Firstly, one common argument is ancient India was oppressive and not so glorious. For example, there was no Golden Age during Gupta rule; caste is the most hideous aspect of Indian society; Manusmriti is a casteist and patriarchal text, and so on. The truth about Manusmriti is that probably its most authentic manuscript is lost and the several versions that exist often contradict each other. As far as achievements and social evils are concerned, no society on earth is perfect and free from ills. Likewise, the caste system originally had a certain role to play in Indian society, but in course of time, the main purpose was lost and it became a rigid and oppressive institution. The achievements of India under the great dynasties were also real. A second example is the still-quoted piece of absolute fiction that the Aryans came from outside. Pages have been filled with arguments and evidence against this fiction and they need not be reproduced here. It can be said briefly that the very definition of ‘Aryan’ from a racial perspective is dangerous and erroneous, and that there is no direct scientific evidence that can prove definitively that there was such a migration. Also, this false theory originated in a particular context of European imperialism and racism. A third example is that there was something called Indian feudalism, and bhakti was an oppressive instrument to ensure the loyalty of subjects (archaeological evidence counters this). The other side of the coin is that there are significant lacunae in history textbooks. For example, the following are not adequately discussed in the textbooks: the influence India exerted on other countries in pre-modern era in terms of transmission of knowledge; the high achievement in all domains of art and multiple areas of science; the economic prosperity India achieved till the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century; a high level of religious tolerance; and so on.

It should be clear to any discerning reader that all these positions have wider implications beyond merely specialized academic study. Belittling India’s grandeur has the potential to destroy national self-respect. Communities look for the root of their identity in the past. Reiterating differences based on identity has repeatedly brought the whole world to conflict and violence, it is bound to prove detrimental for a single nation by creating more social strife. Two issues arise here. Firstly, is the representation of grandeur correct in the first place? Secondly, can we not discuss our problems candidly? Before answering the first question, it is important to note that just because some positions are critical of narratives of glory, does not mean that they themselves are free from error or firmly grounded in empirical facts. In fact, these positions are often purely theoretical in nature; they are skewed and lack a balanced approach to reality; and they are even at times ideologically
motivated and factually erroneous.¹

Answer to the first question, in fact, leads us to the issue of objectivity in social sciences. The social sciences are epistemologically very different from hard sciences. There will always be greater subjectivity in the social sciences and humanities. Since interpretation plays a crucial role, room for disagreement will always be there, because different people tend to draw different conclusions even from the same fact. But this should not lead us to an infinite regress where we fail to arrive at a workable solution. Glorifying India should not mean glorifying her at the cost of truth. On the other hand, critically assessing our national past should not entail highlighting problems alone. If one follows the psychological dimension involved, repeating only one's drawbacks does destroy one's self-esteem. The glory of humanity is greater than all her problems. The history of India should be studied in a similar spirit. We should aspire for self-improvement through self-knowledge and self-introspection, but criticism alone will never lead to rectification, and self-knowledge is incomplete if we only know our limitations and not our potential and strengths.

Just like the history of ancient and medieval India, it is possible to show that the historiography of modern India too suffers from some typical trends that have been bolstered by control over funding and job appointments (including those in foreign universities). People who are in a dominant position (of giving jobs and ensuring research funding) reinforce these discourses. It is doubtful if these positions live up to a rigorous scholarly scrutiny either, but these positions are reproduced and perpetuated and hardly ever questioned. Some of these trends are as follows: (1) a delegitimization of Indian nationalism; (2) the discourse of 'derivatives' (for example, Indian nationalism is a derivative discourse, Hinduism is the product of colonial rule, and so on); (3) portrayal of religion as something regressive and repressive; (4) lack of engagement with—and even scorn for—indigenous concepts; (5) predominance of certain themes that reinforce the divide along the lines of caste, region, language, and so on.

For our purposes here, it is necessary to discuss the issue of Indian nationalism in some detail, as it has a direct bearing on national security. One of the fads in postcolonial studies is to call Indian nationalism a ‘derivative discourse’⁰, which means that Indian nationalist thought as it originated during and against colonial rule, was a prisoner of the same episteme that it was opposing. Put simply, it means that while Indian nationalism sought to oppose European hegemony, it itself drew ideas and intellectual resources from

¹ For example, in many of her publications, the noted historian Uma Chakravarti repeatedly translates “bipeds and quadrupeds” appearing in a Rig Vedic hymn as “slaves and cattle”. Bipeds and quadrupeds simply mean the “two-footed” and the “four-footed”, it is a literary way of saying “all living beings”. Many scholars too in fact translate it like that. Then why does Uma Chakravarti translate bipeds as “slaves”? Because she wants to prove that the Aryans came from outside and subjugated the indigenous population and turned them into slaves!
Europe, because nationalism itself is of European origin. We all know today that the debate on nationalism is far more complex than this. There is no reason to believe that nationalism as it originated in Europe is the only true form of nationalism. Nationalism has taken a different trajectory in different countries, no matter which way we group them—Eastern/ Western, Northern/Southern, or any other way. There is a distinctive flavour to Asian nationalisms, although there are, at the same time, differences between Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian nationalisms, for instance. Again, there are some specific characteristics of nationalisms that emerged in the process of anti-colonial struggle. There should no longer be any reason to consider French or British nationalism as the benchmark. In any case, nationalism is a rather young ideology on the world map of ideas. Civilizations have existed with their own repertoire of concepts for thousands of years before the rise of modern nationalisms.

The argument of ‘derivative discourse’ also ignores certain important aspects of Indian nationalist thought. It is true that modern Indian nationalism was forged through the process of anti-colonial struggle, and itself borrowed many conceptual resources from the West which were in fact introduced in India through English education. However, if one examines the body of Indian nationalist thought closely, there is no dearth of highly original thinking and creative fusion of traditional Indian ideas with Western concepts. It was a process of active, creative and critical engagement with foreign ideas, and not always naïve surrender to them.

**History and National Security**

In their article on the concept and measurement of national security, Satish Chandra and Rahul Bhonsle argue for looking at national security in a holistic manner. They draw our attention to a wide gamut of non-traditional threats to national security and call for widening the scope of the concept of national security so as to translate it into the concept of national power. However, the ideological and ideational threats to national security are not discussed in the otherwise very comprehensive article. In the light of the above discussion, the relationship between national history and national security would be quite evident. History can be used in any direction—for promoting national security or threatening it. In the context of India, the way Indian history has been used of late has the potential for fanning identity politics, which is a threat to the unity of India and the solidarity of the Indian people. It should be remembered that even terrorism often has an ideological and ideational basis. To say the very least, in the case of a common citizen, a negatively-portrayed history can strike at the roots of love for one’s country, and lack of awareness about the national history and heritage can lead to apathy towards the nation. On the other
hand, if it is used properly, a balanced national history can promote national cohesion. The right kind of history of India should, therefore, be facilitated, encouraged and promoted.

Let us discuss a few examples. In the case of ancient India, conceptualizing identity in terms of race and ethnicity or region, has the potential for widening divisions. Rather, there should be more focus on unifying factors that have historically shaped the Indian consciousness and that can also be established empirically. One such factor was the historical geography of India, and archaeological evidence proves beyond doubt that the concept of a ‘pan-India’ developed quite early on. Dilip Chakrabarti writes that since the Vishnu Purana (4th-5th century AD) clearly states that the land between the Himalayas and the sea, where the progeny of king Bharata lived, is called Bharatavarsha, we find a clear formulation of the geographical concept of India by the Gupta dynastic period. Going further back, the “Asokan inscriptions of the late 3rd century BC introduce us to an India that we know—a clear formation of the pan-Indian route network.” Chakrabarti then cites two historical evidences that take the concept even further back. First is the geographical distribution of the sixteen (or more) mahajanapadas (principalities) that suggests close knowledge of the essential geography of the sub-continent from the north to the south. The second evidence is the geographical source of the armies arranged on the two warring sides in the Mahabharata. F. E. Pargiter’s study (1908) on the subject contains a map which shows that most of the areas from Bahlika or Bactria in the Oxus Valley in the far north to the deep south were involved in the war in taking the side of one camp or the other. This goes to prove—without even getting into the debate on the historical veracity of the war—that by the time at least the text of the Mahabharata was composed (the first surviving stage of this composition is put around 500 BC), the whole of the sub-continent was well within historical light. Chakrabarti would, however, like to take the concept even further back:

“I would like to take the concept of pan-India to about 2000 BC at the first stroke. My argument is based on the find of the two copper implements in the deep south, one in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, and the second in a tea estate of the Munnar area of Kerala. These implements are typical of the implements of what we call ‘Gangetic valley copper hoards’ found in the Doab. These are parts of the Harappan tradition, and this is further confirmed by the radiocarbon date of about 2200/2000 BC for a hoard found comparatively recently in the Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh...There is no doubt that the people of the Doab region around 2000 BC or earlier had knowledge of the southern tip of the Peninsula.”
In the essay ‘The Early Concept of Bharatavarsha’ in this issue, Rupendra Kumar Chattopadhyay and Arkaprava Sarkar discuss various scholarly opinions regarding the early history of the concept of Bharatavarsha—it's territorial contours, political dynamics and cultural dimensions. Thus, we see that subjects such as the network of routes, geographical distribution of political orbits, and other aspects of the historical geography of India provide a fertile ground for study and research. Just as it is important to highlight the positive aspects, it is equally important to counter negative projections that are clearly false. For example, in recent times, in the backdrop of identity politics, Kashmir has been projected as a unique and isolated geographical and cultural space with a distinct cultural identity of its own, which historically had very little to do with the flow of mainstream Indian culture. This view is completely wrong and the old historical scholarship on Kashmir highlighting the various networks that resulted in transmission of knowledge, art, religion and trading objects, from India to other countries through Kashmir, will give the lie to it. If Kashmir was culturally distinct and isolated, why would the two great religious personalities Adi Sankara and Sri Ramanuja travel all the way from the deep south to do pilgrimage and study scriptures in the library of Sarada Peeth? Even a child should be able to challenge such false constructions if proper historical knowledge is disseminated. An equally false projection is that Sanskrit was an exclusive and elitist language. There is sufficient textual evidence to suggest that Sanskrit was, at one point of time, the lingua franca of India. There was a time when people arriving to a common congregation from different parts of India would speak in Sanskrit to avoid unintelligibility. Sriharsa describes this in his Naisadhiyacarita in the context of the kingly suitors for Damayanti.¹²

History is also related to national security from another perspective—the protection and promotion of heritage. From pilferage of artifacts from archaeological sites for short-term gains to large-scale organized illegal trade in Indian antiquities—none of these threats to national power and prestige is unknown, and we cannot even doubt the complicity of many Indians in it! Graffiti on and defacement of built heritage is also quite common in India, which is only indicative of the apathy of the ordinary citizen. Probably they do not even know what they are destroying! There is also the issue of unidentified archaeological sites which lay unknown under the ground and are therefore exposed to the threat of destruction due to activities like construction, etc. M B Rajani and Shalini Dixit’s article in this issue discusses the potential of geospatial technologies for helping us identify hidden archaeological sites. Identification is the first step towards protection. Dilip Chakrabarti also notes in his article that in recent times, many conservation projects in India have flouted the basic rules of conservation. The architectural consultants who are hired these days have mostly deviated from the sound conservation norms and principles that were laid down by none other than
the British archaeologist and erstwhile Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, John Marshall (1876-1958).

It may not be out of context to mention here that the Indian state needs to invest in infrastructure and human resources for the study of the Indian past. An independent premier ‘Institute for Indian History & Archaeology’ with updated scientific know-how and laboratories is the need of the hour. We need to promote scientific evidence-based research at the level of higher education and innovation in teaching history in schools. Most new central universities lack even a department of history, and even institutions of pre-eminence are understaffed in their history faculty. In this backdrop, a policy directive for promoting historical research and teaching, keeping the larger context of national security, nay, national power in mind, is urgently needed.

Home and the World

Promotion of historical research is also essential for building India's portrait before the world in the correct historical light. It is time for the nations of the world to realize that eventually a country’s national security cannot be at loggerheads with global security. Put in a positive way, it is time to realize that when the whole world is free from threat, one's own country will automatically be safe—an impossible vision for international politics, but a supposed impossibility for which we all have to pay a hard price. One's own desire for aggrandizement is the real threat to oneself. The ancient texts of India say: dharma rakshati rakshitah, that is, dharma (righteousness) protects one who protects dharma. On the other hand, as pointed out by Vivekananda: “If you project hatred and jealousy, they will rebound on you with compound interest.”

There are two motive powers that are manifest in this world—one is love and the other is the quest for power. There is no reason to believe that it is only the latter that will always win. In fact, if we reflect deeper, we would see that all negative emotions such as drive for power, aggression, violence, hatred, jealousy, vengeance and so on have their origin in fear. Fear is the cardinal evil; it leads all other vices into our hearts. Fear and love never co-habit. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says that fear arises out of a sense of two, that is, we have fear because we perceive ourselves and others as two separate entities.

Fear is the force that drives one through a sense of lack, and the only thing that can heal this sense of lack is right knowledge. Thousands and thousands of years ago, the seers of India saw Truth face to face—they saw that the whole universe is pervaded by one consciousness; to injure another is to injure oneself in another form. India has always been a nation that wants to transcend the barriers of self-interest between nations. This
approach is reflected in her ancient thought as well as her conduct in the modern world. For example, India’s behaviour after the resounding victory in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 is without parallel in modern world history. Our intent of absolute non-aggression was reflected in our action—no thought or attempt of co-opting Bangladesh, which was, till a decade or two ago, its own integral part; exemplary treatment of Pakistani Prisoners of War in the Indian jails; and no unjust bargaining with the vanquished Pakistani state. To be a beacon of knowledge, virtue, and peace—this is no moral high ground, but the ideal and role of India in the world. In his essay on *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and the new multilateralism in this issue, Arvind Gupta has highlighted the potential of ancient Indian ideas for serving as the much needed panacea in the current world order of human conflict and environmental degradation. Gupta argues that such lofty Indian ideals have to be assimilated as the basis for the emergent multilateralism, if we hope to establish a new world order of peace and harmony.

However, this generosity should not be misconstrued as weakness. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which has baffled so many scholars in the West, and has inspired generations of Indian leaders, thinkers and workers, holds the key to unlocking this knotty problem. Krishna left no stone unturned to prevent the war. He himself went to the Kauravas as the ambassador of peace, proposing that the Pandavas will forget and forgive all the misdeeds of Duryodhana, including Draupadi’s *vastraharan*, if only he agreed to give merely five villages to the Pandavas. The Pandava’s claim to the kingdom was a rightful claim. Krishna made this proposition because war is verily the *last* resort. However, when all efforts failed, and the war was finally declared, Krishna entered the battlefield as Arjuna’s charioteer without any remorse or doubt, and scolded Arjuna for his delusion caused by weakness. While trying to prevent the war, he applied all his energy and intelligence in that direction; when the war was declared, the same Krishna did not waver an inch to instruct Arjuna at every step to fight the righteous war. The wisdom of India was *complete* wisdom. We knew what was applicable in what context. For example, even the lofty ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* can be misused by ill-meaning people. Hence, on the one hand, we have the sacred texts proclaiming this ideal; and on the other hand, we have the *Hitopadesha* showing how a crafty jackal used this expression as a ruse for gaining the confidence of the deer so that he could eventually eat up the latter.

In the context of politics, international or domestic, the above issue leads to the question: how to strike a balance between Political Realism and Political Idealism? In her review of Medha Bisht’s *Kautilya’s Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy* in this issue, Kajari Kamal discusses the difficult question of the equilibrium between the desirable and the
feasible. Kamal argues that the ancient Indian text Arthashastra provides a possible solution to this problem which is very relevant today.

This also leads us to the issue of an alternative paradigm, an *Indian* paradigm of politics and ethics. Many efforts are in progress for mining the non-western intellectual traditions for conceptual resources. India still has a lot to contribute to this paradigm shift in the international discourse on values. Such non-western narrative can emerge from the other Asian greats like China or Japan as well. However, each country has a distinct identity and a distinct contribution to make. For instance, India's civilizational identity is very different from that of the other ancient Asian civilization of China. In her review of Pollock & Elman (eds.) *What China and India Once Were* in this issue, Abanti Bhattacharya highlights precisely these differences, as also the failure of Western theoretical tools in grasping these fine differences.

It is not that the world will be benefitted from Indian ideas and knowledge for the first time. This has happened in the past and is happening again. The International Day of Yoga is a prominent example. In the past, be it religion, philosophy, science, art and architecture—countries have benefitted immensely as a result of their interaction with India. Even in the domain of music—which never appears in the discussion about India's contribution to world thought and culture—many Asian countries are indebted to India. In this issue, Piyal Bhattacharya and Shreetama Chowdhury's article on the transmission of musical instruments from India to other countries, for example, traces the journey of the ancient Indian *vina* or arched harp to countries like Myanmar and Cambodia.

**Conclusion**

Thus, instead of engaging in intellectual gymnastics, it is time to feel and assert the civilizational pulse of India. We already live it, we just need to be more conscious of it now. The great Indian past is something we need to know more closely now. We need it, and the world needs it as well. India never tried to preach to the world, but Indian ideas percolated silently into various societies and contributed immensely to the development of a more humane approach. This is not a one-sided narrative but one that can be verified objectively. Whether or not India follows these ideals anymore, these ideals are the treasures of the entire humankind. Turning outwards, it is time to spread these ideas once again. Turning inwards, it is time to *follow* these ideals once again. But for this narrative of the self to emerge for India, for this self-understanding to dawn on India from the cobwebs of the past and the manipulations of the present, it is important to pay attention to the study and writing of Indian history.
References


