

“And then the government fell. But the books continued!”



Violence against Muslims, against socialists, against intellectuals, against women – India has been witnessing a pattern of tragic events since the coming to power of the right wing government, whose actions and policies scream out ‘Intolerance!’. The country’s citizens and its media, deemed as the fourth pillar of democracy, have been taking sides without entirely understanding the situation. It is not just India, but a problem shared by many countries worldwide, where people fail to see through the political manipulation of their governments that distort knowledge.

We interviewed Professor Emerita Romila Thapar on these issues. Holding a doctorate from SOAS and honorary doctorates from the universities of Paris, Oxford, Chicago, Edinburgh, Calcutta and Hyderabad, she is known not only for her brilliant contribution to the field of history, but also her refusal to accept the Padma Bhushan (awarded by the Indian government) as well as her strong condemnation of the anti-intellectual attacks by certain political groups in India.

Byapti Sur and Kanad Sinha

Sur & Sinha (SS): You, as a historian, have been a pioneer and one of the very few in India to take up the challenge of bringing academic history to the public. Your statements about the responsibility of ‘public intellectuals’ to help make citizens aware of governmental policies have invited a lot of attention. How far do you think India has come as a democratic society, in terms of understanding the use and abuse of history in politics?

Romila Thapar (RT): Well to begin with, I think the understanding of the differentiation between history as an academic discipline and history as used in politics, is a distinction that isn’t being made sufficiently in India. There is a tendency for the popular use of history to try and overwrite academic history. At this moment, I think, this is our major struggle in trying to convince public opinion that academic history is something different. It’s not popular history. Therefore, even though one may say that popular history is legitimate because people will have ideas about their past, a differentiation needs to be made. The two cannot be confused.

SS: There is clearly a gap then between academic history and the popular ‘histories’. You have pointed out that neither the policy makers nor the common people pay any heed to the opinions of the ‘public intellectual(s)’. In fact, they freely use history as constructed pasts – be it fabricated, mythologized, glorifying, revivalist or pseudo-historical – to legitimize debates in the public sphere. Do you think that the academic arrogance of professional historians is to be blamed?

RT: Let me go back a little to say that in all nationalisms, history plays a central role. Nationalism derives its identity in part from the way the past gets projected. The desire for a particular community to set itself up as a nation means that it seeks legitimacy in its past. And in the process of constructing the past, the past can get deliberately twisted, distorted, and presented, in a non-academic way, as ‘History’. Political parties writing history therefore don’t interpret the past as historians, but force it to be bent in the ideological direction they want. There itself you have a clear distinction. Besides, one needs to understand that the colonial reading of history had simply been a case of putting together the narratives from texts – pick a book, read it and state its contents in the form of events that happened. This kind of writing came to be challenged around the 1950s and history began to change. It ceased to be a part of Indology, raising a lot of questions about the colonial reconstructions of the past. Soon it became a part of the social sciences and interacted with other social science disciplines like sociology, economics, anthropology, archaeology and so on. Eventually history developed into a method of analysis, which is what characterizes academic history today. There is a method. And popular history knows nothing about this method. The problem starts when neither the method nor the questions that are being asked by historians become comprehensible to popular opinion. For the public at large, history is simply some information about the past with a few dates strung together. So there is a gulf, an enormous gulf between academic and popular perceptions of history.

SS: It is indeed extremely frustrating when you talk to people about history and they miss the entire point of critical thinking, reducing it to what you just said – a bundle of facts and figures.

RT: Yes, it is a rather silly question that people ask me: “A historical fact is a historical fact, so why do you talk about these different interpretations?” The understanding of what are historical facts, how they are analyzed, is often beyond the comprehension of the popular mind. This is simply because

28 September 2015, night-time in Bisara village in Uttar Pradesh, India – a Hindu mob lynches a Muslim man and his son for allegedly consuming beef. The man dies while his son is severely injured. They had been guilty of killing the sacred *Go-mata* (Mother Cow) of the Hindus.

Morning of 30 August 2015, in the Kalyan Nagar locality of Dharwad, Karnataka – a man knocks on the door of the famous Indian scholar and vice-chancellor of Karnataka University, M.M. Kalburgi. Kalburgi’s wife answers the door and leaves them to talk, assuming the man to be Kalburgi’s student; she then hears gunshots. Moments later, she discovers that the man has fired two shots at point blank range through her husband’s chest and forehead. Kalburgi’s fault lay in raising questions backed by textual evidence on nude idol-worship and other semi-religious issues.

12 February 2016, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi – undercover police enter the campus and arrest Kanhaiya Kumar, the JNUSU (students’ union) president, from his hostel room, without a warrant. They continue raiding other hostels too, arresting students on charges of ‘sedition’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘anti-nationalism’. The alleged crime of the students is organizing a peaceful cultural event criticizing Afzal Guru’s death penalty. Guru was sentenced to death on the basis of mere circumstantial evidence for his supposed involvement in a terrorist attack on Parliament House. The charges also include speaking in favour of the ‘right to self-determination’ of the people of Kashmir.¹

An interview with Romila Thapar

they have not taken an interest in the methods used by this discipline. What is interesting is that people don't ask these questions from scientists, because they do not understand the discipline, and because they expect scientific knowledge to change and be up-to-date. They also don't question economists because they can't handle econometrics. Even with sociology they are a little unsure with the terminology. But history is very easy in their minds because it is about their identity, their past and it can be concocted in any way that they want.

SS: Is there a solution then?

RT: I think we can solve this problem to some extent by making our first attempts at teaching history properly in schools. Children are mostly taught to just repeat information for getting good grades. It is a bit like the creed and the Catechism of religious organizations – you already know what the questions are and you even know what the answers are. I am not suggesting that whatever is being taught is rubbish. There is a method of teaching students to question knowledge in a creative way so that knowledge is opened up and further questions can be asked. Otherwise you are dealing with dead knowledge. The characteristic of knowledge is that it is constantly being tested and if need be, being renewed and taken forward. This is absolutely essential. Take for example the dominant Hindu and Muslim nationalisms in India. Their intention is not to question knowledge. You are given answers and you have to accept them. The syllabus of the *madrassa* (Muslim schools) or that of the *shishu mandir* (Hindu schools) inhibits students from questioning knowledge. Unless this is redressed, public opinion will be based on just repeating information, and this will continue without it being questioned.

SS: Coming back to these Hindu-Muslim nationalisms you just talked about; let's focus on India being in the international news recently for its rising intolerance debates. Don't you think that it is more of a universal problem of 'Islamophobia' in all places, and not just particularly India?

RT: It is, and one has to analyze it not just in terms of Christians against Muslims or Hindus against Muslims, but rather in terms of what is happening globally. What are the ideologies that nations are adopting? What is the global economy doing? One can even assert to a large extent that its genesis lies in history. After all, let's not forget that the anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe began with the crusades. Recent research has proved that religion was much less of a reason behind this and it had more to do with the competition for trade and profits. What goes wrong is when certain aspects and ideas during such conflicts get emphasized and remain ingrained in public opinion. The religious cause in this case has geared the widely prevalent 'Islamophobia'. The Iraq War in our time worsened the situation. The present European-American politics and their relationship with the Islamic states also contribute to heightening this phobia. There is a political and economic reality as well, which enhances Islamophobia and one should therefore not see it only in terms of religions battling each other. This is not a kind of Huntington notion of the clash of civilizations – it is rather a clash of realities. These are nations trying to establish themselves and they are running into problems with their neighbours and with distant people. So I think that when one looks at all the fears in the world today, one can't just limit it to religious fears. There are many other problems that sustain Islamophobia, and therefore need attention.

SS: The Netherlands, where one of us works, takes pride in being called a 'tolerant country'. It is similar to the 'Unity in Diversity' kind of nationalist message proclaimed in India. These kind of debates raise questions about what in fact tolerance means, and why should that word exist at all. Isn't it a dichotomy to preach tolerance where one should suppose diversity to be a natural factor and accept it that way? The word 'tolerance' is apparently a loaded term with subtle implications in that sense. Do you agree?

RT: An insistence on the concept of tolerance indeed foretells the existence of intolerance. You do not keep talking about the need for tolerance and how good it would be to be tolerant, unless somewhere there is some niggling little evidence of intolerance. It is therefore a double edged word. Now why are we making such a fuss about it in India? I think we have to go back a little into the anti-colonial nationalist ideology where tolerance and non-violence were said to be the difference between the West and the East (or India in this case). The West used stereotypes of Oriental Despotism and anti-democratic societies for the East. The Indians reacted to it by accusing the Westerners of being materialistic, unlike the spiritual East. The notion of 'tolerance' is part of this package of spirituality. It is from then on that India has come to be touted as a tolerant culture. And of course in order to be tolerant you have to be non-violent, since one of the biggest consequences of intolerance is violence. Both go hand in hand, and this image of a non-violent and spiritual India worked well for the anti-colonial

nationalist propaganda, particularly for Gandhi. But then the violence during the partition happened. The question is, if we were such an innately tolerant and non-violent people, would these massacres have ever happened? Probably not!

Throughout Indian history there have been examples of Buddha, Ashoka, Akbar and others propagating the values of tolerance. But these values coexisted with examples of strong discord among religious cultures, which proves that there was not that much tolerance after all. For example, from the accounts of Megasthenes, the Ashokan edicts, Xuanzang and from Alberuni, the distinction between the *brahmanas* and the *shramanas* (non-Vedic heterodox mendicant groups, like the Buddhists or Jinas) can be quite clearly deduced. The grammarian, Patanjali (c. second century BCE), refers to their relation as that of the mongoose and the snake. Buddhist and Jaina teachings did not accept Vedic Brahminism and a lot of deaths and destruction followed. It was thus a society that was not entirely harmonious. One has to come to terms with this and as historians try to understand what the underlying intolerance was about. It is true that India did not suffer from the type of Catholic intolerance in Europe – the burning of people, the heresy, the inquisitions... We didn't have any of that. So the kind of intolerance here was perhaps a little more muted, but this has to be investigated. But one has to first admit that there was intolerance. Only then is it possible to start examining it. Moreover, beyond religions, there was enormous social discrimination against the *Dalits*. The moment you mention intolerance people think of religion. But the social stratification of Indian society irrespective of religion, was one in which intolerance has remained a powerful factor.

SS: You too have been a victim of this intolerance. You have even received physical threats from certain political groups.

RT (laughing): Oh yes, it all started when Morarji Desai's government came to power and Murli Manohar Joshi attacked the history textbooks that we had written. He would stand up in Parliament and call us 'academic terrorists', 'anti-national', and 'anti-Indian'; he asked for the books that we wrote to be banned. Calling those who disagree with you 'anti-national' seems to be endemic to the thinking of these groups. Since those times we have had to defend ourselves. For three years the debate went on and on and then the government fell. But the books continued! This has been the story of the textbooks in this country – every time you write a textbook that the right wing Hindu extremists don't like, they call it anti-national and anti-Indian. The historian is then attacked and a fierce battle of words ensues. So far it has been words and actions against academics, but rationalist thinkers have fared far worse and have even been assassinated. One cannot predict what might happen this time.

SS: Your statements have always been quite strong and assertive.

RT: I don't make strong statements. If you are in a profession and your profession is being attacked, you have to defend yourself. That's all I do!

SS: In that light we think that you have raised a very daring and obvious point in terms of demanding the attainment of a totally 'secular' India. This involves reforming the legal system and ensuring a 'uniform civil code'. It is something that has always remained a very sensitive issue (since the colonial regime) and nobody has dared meddle with it. Given the sentiments of the diverse society that India accommodates, every political group would find it an extremely precarious legislative task to execute. In fact, you have argued for being "conscious as a citizen and having the courage to say we object to it". How or what would you suggest should be the way or the first step to make such major changes happen? Do you hope to see the citizens or the government taking the initiative in making the first move?

RT: All I mean is that the time has come for an extensive debate. And it should not only be in terms of setting religious goals. It should address questions like, what is meant by a 'uniform civil code'? Nobody knows since we play around this idea. It needs to be defined much more clearly because it is tied into the concept of a democracy. A democracy requires secularism since the status of every community has to be equal and every citizen has equal rights. And this requires the uniform application of basic civil laws reflected in the issue of a uniform civil code. One has to accept its inevitability if we are to be a democracy. Otherwise there will be continuous violence and the ridiculous love *jihads*, the horrors of the *khap panchayats*, and other such practices. Do we want proper civil law or should we allow religious customary law or religious personal law of every kind to prevail?

When I talk about forming a uniform civil code, I do not mean a bringing together of all religious codes and somehow knitting them together. A new and different simple, secular code that relates to the basic features of a citizen's life – registration of births, marriages, and rules on inheritance

of property, has to be worked out. If you take even these three issues and place them under a uniform legal code, that will be enough to make a world of difference to people, such as *Dalits*, *Adivasis* and women. I am certainly not talking about making a radical revolutionary step. All I am saying is that let's start talking about it, discussing it, and making it a kind of reality. These aspects don't come to the fore unless people talk about them. We as the citizens need to debate every aspect of this.

SS: The problem lies again in the same old assertion – who reads what the 'public intellectuals' write? It is well-known today that history books written by academics are hardly read, bought or circulated beyond a certain group of readers. But that does not mean history does not sell. The movies based on historical themes and characters or the TV soaps and the large genre of historical fiction, happen to have mass appeal. But they suffer from the paradox of spreading awareness about history on the one hand and yet presenting a distorted version of historical events on the other. Do you think there is a solution to this problem? Also, how far do these ranks of 'creative intellectuals' bear a responsibility towards their audience and readers about using biased depictions that go on to stir up dangerous identity politics?

RT: They have a huge responsibility but either they are not aware of it, or even if they are, they cater to their own commercial interests. The enormous number of rapes that we hear about now is a reflection of the mind-set of the people, which is in part shaped by the media. Patriarchy is accepted in India and instilled in everything that is made and shown and continues to be so. Those that make the programmes should be the ones who take up the responsibility of changing the mind-set, by the way they talk to people, educate them, use the media – in terms of asking questions like, "If you don't agree with rape, are you aware of what the preconditions are and are you willing to do something about that?" The media should be more responsible and not keep supporting the values that are regarded as retrogressive. There has to be some awareness and it will come only when civil society stands up and says "that's not the kind of thing we want to hear and see."

SS: How can an academic contribute to the formation of this informed 'public'? Should s/he also participate actively in alternative forms of knowledge production outside academia, such as writing journalistic pieces, contributing to popular magazines, delivering public speeches, engaging more with electronic and social media, and composing more in the vernaculars?

RT: The question is – how to educate the public? It is important to remember that not every academic can or wishes to write in the style of a journalist. The journalistic style of writing is very different from the academic style. And let's face this – the really serious academic is addressing his or her research paper to fellow researchers. So that cuts off a lot of the popular audience and its interests. Now this doesn't mean that in case you are someone who has been gifted with skills for communicating with the public, that you must not do so. You certainly can do so. But do so from the point of view of taking it as a responsibility to educate. I am amazed for example that Indian TV or radio hasn't had a single channel devoted to serious discussion of problems. Every self-respecting country in this world has at least half a channel, half of prime time on a channel, where a serious discussion takes place. Here there is zero. It is substantially superficial discussion. So there is a tendency for serious academics to stay away. Besides this, academics should also feel equally responsible for the basic education at schools and colleges. How teachers are being trained is certainly crucial. They should stimulate younger people to think since that is what education is about – getting information and then thinking about it and asking questions. Once that is done, we shall have an educated public.

Romila Thapar (b. 30 November 1931) is a distinguished Indian historian, and currently Professor Emerita at JNU in New Delhi. Her area of expertise is ancient Indian history, on which she has published extensively, besides other popular writings. Her books, *A History of India and Interpreting Early India* are part of the history syllabus of several international schools and universities. She frequently appears on television and in newspapers for interviews, like the BBC and the NDTV. In 2008, Thapar co-won 'The John W. Kluge Prize for Achievement in the Study of Humanity' with Peter Brown.

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References

- 1 A group of Leiden University students and faculty have extended their solidarity in protesting against government high-handedness and suppression of dissent with regard to this matter.