

A Blindness about India

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The attack on history and Indian historians by votaries of Hindu historiography has only sharpened in recent times. There is an attempt to use S N Balagangadhara's critique of history writing as an expression of the "colonial consciousness" to delegitimise the study of the past. This article explores Balagangadhara's own theories to show how this sentimental valorisation of a Hindu past is itself an uncritical acceptance of western categories and is based on a profound ignorance of India's own past.

The World Hindu Foundation's three-day Congress was held at New Delhi during 21-23 November 2014 with the avowed objective of forging Hindu solidarity at the global level for rebuilding the spiritual and material heritage of India. This occasioned the convergence of several scientists, technologists, social scientists and philosophers of communal pride.

One of the participants, S N Balagangadhara, a professor of philosophy at Ghent University, Belgium, has argued over the last two decades, as part of the project of "decolonisation", that social sciences and history written in Europe as well as elsewhere in the world misrepresent the cultural context of human affairs in south Asia, especially India. At this Congress he took an explicitly communal repositioning of his positions. He had put on the internet, some time earlier, an essay suggesting that the past as recorded in the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* is what Indians need rather than the history that historians and social scientists do.¹ His decolonising project, though hackneyed, is now being restated with a communal overtone in the World Hindu Congress and, given the contemporary political context, it necessitates a critical reappraisal of his entire views published in the two books: *Heathen in His Blindness* (1994) and *Reconceptualising India Studies* (2012).

Doing a doctoral study (1991) entitled "Comparative Science of Cultures and the Universality of Religion: An Essay on Worlds without Views and Views without the World", S N Balagangadhara put up the thesis that religion is an intelligible explanation of the cosmos and the term applies only to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. The term religion could never have anything to do with Indian traditions, which are pluralistic and thus preclude all efforts to privilege any one account definitive.

Accordingly, Indian traditions, which have multiple explanations of the cosmos with none becoming dominant in the absence of an authoritarian institution like the church, constitute a culture without religion. He argues that, therefore, religion is not a generic or universal notion, and viewing it as an aspect universal to all peoples and cultures is primarily a Protestant Christian theological construct of the 18th and 19th centuries (Balagangadhara 1994). According to him the notion inescapably trapped the mode of knowledge production in the West and made the East accept it uncritically under the twofold colonial processes – first the Semitic and then the European.

Truism Ad Nauseam

It is a truism to say that Christianity has profoundly influenced western culture; different cultures represent the world differently, and the empirical and theoretical study of culture and religion emerged in the West. Moreover, non-western cultures, particularly the south Asian, which differ from the characterisation prevalent in the West whose cultural identity is founded on the Christian religion, necessitate an analysis of the "how" of the construction of religions and cultural differences in India.

What then becomes obligatory is a thorough redoing of the intellectual and social history of south Asia in order to demonstrate as to how it was shaped without having a hegemonic explanatory account of the cosmos. This is what one would expect in the published version of the doctoral study, *Heathen in His Blindness*. But despite its size of 563 pages, Balagangadhara's book almost entirely lavished on an ideography of the widely-known western intellectual tradition with long quotations, often irrelevant, and had nothing to say by way of an illustration of the alternative.

To try and start doing it, one requires comprehending the contextual relationship between the past text and the nature of its historical, cultural consciousness. A detailed treatment of the embedded tradition represented by the

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fragmentary narratives from the Vedas, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* is necessary. It necessitates analysis of the emerging past consciousness as exemplified by genealogies in the making of a historical tradition in the *Puranas*. Then one has to study historical sense in the dramatic texts, alternative histories as exemplified by the Buddhist tradition and the externalisation of the historical tradition as exemplified by biographies like the *Harshacarita* and the *Rāmacarita*.

Uninitiated in historical methodology and unable to access the original texts, Balagangadhara escapes from substantiating his thesis through a demonstration of how ancient Indian intellectual formation and cultural context are distinct. Instead, he wraps up his long narrative with a few generalisations about Hinduism, notwithstanding the anachronism thereof.

After about two decades of that book Balagangadhara published *Reconceptualising India Studies* (2012) which still did not illustrate the distinction, but only reasserted the need for retrieving Indians from their colonial consciousness by means of decolonising studies in postcolonial theoretical insights. His concern is more about rejuvenating postcolonial ways of representing the West, rather than how one could evolve an alternative understanding of the East.

How a comparative science of cultures can be conceived of has been the main task of Balagangadhara who argues that a culture is how a particular social group generates a process of learning to learn (meta-learning). He maintains that meta-learning dominates and crystallises to structure its way of going about understanding the world. Whatever it is, Balagangadhara (2012) provides us with no concrete illustration of the alternative mode of meta-learning apposite to Indians.

By way of self-justification for being evasive about the task, he says that his allocated job is to only prepare the ground for building up a huge mansion of alternative social sciences, something which one book or one generation of scholars cannot accomplish. His project of mobilising a big team across continents

and organising a big consortium of European and Indian universities for rethinking Asian culture is part of this groundwork. Nonetheless, should not his disciples be shown a sample output of the so-called radical mode of meta-learning that he has been preaching?

Nothing New

There is nothing strikingly fresh about the decolonising perspective with which Balagangadhara is obsessed. Like colonisation, decolonisation also came from the West. Michel Foucault (1972) tried to do its archaeology and genealogy of the knowledge production and its organisation and classification, which was the major source for Edward Said's discursive processes of how the West went to terms with the East by constituting the latter as its opposite (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989). Dismissing such studies for being replete with jargons, Balagangadhara expresses that his central concern is with the problems of modern India studies and the potential direction for the social-scientific study of Indian culture. He debunks history and social sciences as mere theological reflection. However, what is this social scientific study that he proposes?

Balagangadhara is a philosopher trapped in a Husserlian double bind (J Derrida 1978). He, formulating an antithesis of the West but in European positivist ideography, reminds us of post-structuralists resorting to the language of structuralism to capsize it. On the one hand, he stresses the need for an alternative understanding of western culture and blames it for being a reflection of Protestant theology, yet on the other, he yearns for a study which is social scientific; this is a trap. It is ironic that a radical decolonising agent, to try and construct knowledge against the West, has to do so through the western positivist empirical methodology and has to articulate it in the knowledge-language of the West exactly as construed by western intellectuals. This would mean that colonial consciousness is the political unconscious of his writings. Why blame other Indians allegedly promoting the same old colonial ideas and lacking original framework, when he himself

has no framework of comprehension other than the colonial.

His argument is exactly the same as the coloniser's accusations: the "native Indian" knows no Indian view of India. So what, according to Balagangadhara, is this so-called Indian view of India, which he is now repeatedly asking for? He asserts that this Indian view is articulated in the epics and Puranas, which help to formulate alternative definitions of culture, colonialism, secularism, and orientalism (Balagangadhara 2014).

Debunking History

Balagangadhara debunks history and the historians' craft, for their being what the colonised uncritically accepted from the West and passed on to their progenies of colonial consciousness, who in turn could only perpetuate them. According to him what Indians need is their cultural past that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas contain, i e, the past "as existed or exists in reality for the natives of India". They do not require history, because it is what historians have done under the Protestant theology's epistemological imposition (Balagangadhara 2014)! Caste, sati, and dowry are allegedly constructs by historians with a western consciousness, who distort the Hindu past. This alleged distortion, according to him, speaks "more about the western civilisation than the native Indian civilisation". It appears that jāti, sati and similar other institutions of Hinduism, exposed by historians and social scientists to be atrocious, are for him intrinsic human values of Indian culture.

Even as he makes this astounding assertion, at the same time, interestingly, he argues that the main defect of the western way of understanding the world is that it is not science! However, he is silent about the fact that science, "as the genre of authority, authenticity, finality, certainty and credibility" is a by-product of Newton's *Principia*; and in that sense it should be a reflection of Christian theology. He is least reflexive about the historical constitution of science and hence the self-contradiction in his celebration of science. It is quite interesting that Balagangadhara as a

philosopher who discovered Protestant theological reflection in the entire corpus of western knowledge² has no quarrel over hanging on to scientific rationality as the foundation of intellectual legitimacy. Is it not tantamount to the uncritical acceptance of western science as the universal epistemic normative? Several historians and social scientists, allegedly of “colonial consciousness”, are at least aware of the epistemic violence involved in the imposition of science as the universally valid truth – an act expressive of the imperialist substratum of science.

It is clear that Balagangadhara is a victim too of internalising the cognitive mode, logical structure, constitutional texture and communicative strategy of knowledge in sciences, and accepting the ideology that the knowledge domain of human affairs and social life – the subjective disciplines – should also be “scientific”. Not only the West and the colonised, but all including him (now in the state of “enlightenment”)³ are subsumed by it. He agrees that science opened up a new epoch – the epoch of modernity.

How does his mission to make the “alternative science of culture” gel with the equation of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* to the past or with his celebration of *jāti* (not caste), *sati* and all kinds of other institutions of Hinduism as integral to intrinsic human values of Indian culture? While he speaks dismissively about European knowledge being merely a western story about human beings, and of Indian history being the rubbish output of a colonial consciousness, he boasts that there are serious alternatives. But so far, he has been unable to show even an illustration of what this alternative could be. It appears that following his prescriptions would only empty the mind and make it susceptible to be filled by Hindu sentimental stuff as opposed to the Semitic.

For an Alternative

For an alternative, it is necessary to learn Indian knowledge systems in terms of their historical epistemology. Instead of nibbling at sentimental bites of revivalism and dallying around with the temptation for becoming a cult-figure, the philosopher has to familiarise

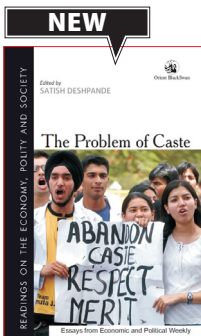
himself with the history of intellectual formation in precolonial India. Historians of India know that the current definition of what constitutes history is based on a western understanding of its own past, which has been considerably enlarged in recent times, with the enlightenment emphasising the notion of progress, and Marx and Weber seeking fundamental laws governing historical forms.

Although not altogether free of western presumptions, Indian historiography has had a course of development through nationalist reactions against imperial views. Contemporary Indian historians have questioned, much before Balagangadhara’s articulation of the thesis of “colonial consciousness”, how colonial European notions of history could set the universal normative. There is Romila Thapar’s classic questioning (2013) of how justified are we in judging the historicity of early writing based on what we define as history, which are impermanent too. Just because the various texts of the past do not match the contemporary genre called history, can we, Thapar asked, succumb to western prejudice and continue to deny the existence

The Problem of Caste

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Caste is one of the oldest concerns of the social sciences in India that continues to be relevant even today.

The general perception about caste is that it was an outdated concept until it was revived by colonial policies and promoted by vested interests and electoral politics after independence. This hegemonic perception changed irrevocably in the 1990s after the controversial reservations for the Other Backward Classes recommended by the Mandal Commission, revealing it to be a belief of only a privileged upper caste minority – for the vast majority of Indians caste continued to be a crucial determinant of life opportunities.

This volume collects significant writings spanning seven decades, three generations and several disciplines, and discusses established perspectives in relation to emergent concerns, disciplinary responses ranging from sociology to law, the relationship between caste and class, the interplay between caste and politics, old and new challenges in law and policy, emergent research areas and post-Mandal innovations in caste studies.

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of past consciousness, with the implicit presumption that there is no historical sense other than the contemporary sense of history? If historical consciousness has taken different forms from time to time, how can any particular form be superior to the other?

Also it is necessary to study the forms, features, structure, constitution and dynamic of traditional Indian knowledge in the perspective of historical epistemology. It would then enlighten him that “every society sees its past in a particular way, which it may refer to as history or not, but which is relevant to understanding that society” (Thapar 2013: xi). There is no epistemological discontinuity between the Indian and the western in several fields of knowledge like astronomy, mathematics and linguistics. He should understand that there is no difference between the East and the West in epistemological principles such as rationality, objectivity, verifiability, proof and the notion of truth in the enterprise of serious knowledge production. Epistemological properties like premises, inferential logic, nature of evidence, and concept of truth about traditional Indian knowledge and the modern European parameters remain the same.

Epistemic Continuity

An important epistemic property of traditional Indian astronomical knowledge, for instance, is its theoretical situation beyond the empirically given and its articulation of its premises and conclusions in the language of mathematics. This is integral to knowledge production all over the world even today. Long-term direct observation as guided by extant knowledge, regular and systematic recording and reckoning by means of mathematical tools had been the features of traditional Indian knowledge production. Mathematics was the object of understanding, tool of analysis, field of hermeneutics, subject of discovery and medium of articulation, exactly as construed in the West, although the insistence on the production of proof as an epistemic property began only at a later stage. Nonetheless, even that preceded the western instances. This epistemic shift began in the 14th century with Madhava

and Nīlakanṭha, who made lasting contributions to mathematical astronomy by developing on the inferences of *Aryabhaṭīyam* and through the formulation of new theorems.

The insistence of the production of proof as a primary epistemic requirement is best manifest, perhaps for the first time, in the works of Jyeshthadeva (K V Sharma et al 2008). It is interesting to note that proofs for Madhava’s series expanded by Nilakantha into sine, cosine and inverse tangent series were given only after a century by Jyeshthadeva in his *Yuktibhasha*, a Malayalam text (G G Joseph 2009). In spite of the constitution of the three crucial power series heading towards the invention of calculus, a comprehensive theory of differentiation or integration was not achieved by him. A fundamental theorem of calculus facilitating higher trigonometric functions was developed by Leibniz and Newton almost a couple of centuries later. However, there exists a running thread of the same epistemological control across the cognitive exercises involving empirical scrutiny, rational analysis and theorisation in Jyeshthadeva’s constitution of proofs for the power series and in Leibniz’s or Newton’s formulation of the fundamental theorem of calculus.

What disrupted and alienated this Indian intellectual culture was British colonialism. Modes of traditional Indian knowledge production are inaccessible today not only because they are in the technical knowledge-language of Sanskrit but also because we have not reconstructed their cultural ontology and historical epistemology. They are in a language of historically contingent cultural constructs that are not mere words or tropes but established traditional practices.

Thanks to the studies by a few dedicated modern scholars, we realise that there existed a single cognitive thread of epistemic control in the production of knowledge. There was no rupture in the process although the next higher phases were manifested not in regions within India but across in Europe.

Balagangadhara’s thesis is that the Christian theology generated the dominant theoretical knowledge when heathen

studied. But on the contrary when Indians studied, rituals lent identity to learning, the ritual culture imparted practical knowledge and performative knowledge dominated. Even if the latter could be true to a certain extent, at the level of the production and recognition of serious knowledge, the epistemological criteria remained the same in the East and the West. What then is the validity of Balagangadhara’s thesis of epistemological discontinuity between the intellectual traditions of the West and the East? You see an Indian in his blindness here.

NOTES

- 1 Interestingly this essay with the title, “What Do Indians Need? A History or the Past: A Challenge or Two to Indian Historians”, was presented by him as the ICHR’s Azad Memorial Lecture 2014, on 11 November, too.
- 2 For Balagangadhara this includes the thoughts of Renaissance intellectuals like John Wycliff, Roger Bacon, Peter Abelard, Galileo Galilei and Erasmus of Rotterdam; it also includes Enlightenment thinkers like Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes, Robert Boyle, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, Voltaire, Montesquieu, the Encyclopaedists, Physiocrats, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Hegel, Karl Marx, and even Auguste Comte.
- 3 On 7 July 2014, Balagangadhara declared himself “enlightened”, a clear indication of the creation of a charismatic aura for constituting his following with the status of a cult.

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