

COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE

“A Biographical Note”

Romila THAPAR

I was born in the city of Lucknow in 1931 to Punjabi parents who belonged to the city of Lahore, now in Pakistan.

My parents were married in 1920. My mother was much admired as she was among the early women graduates of the Punjab University. My father trained in medicine from Edinburgh University. He was part of the ambulance corps organised by Gandhiji and Sarojini Naidu and served as a medical officer in France during World War I. Returning to India he joined the medical wing of the Indian Army, what is now called the Armed Forces Medical Corps and had a very distinguished career.

The first child born to my parents was a son, Romesh, who was to become a well-known journalist and much respected for his independent views and his defence of civil rights in India. The second child was a daughter, Bimla. I was the third and last child.

My early childhood was spent in what was then called the North West Frontier Province where my father served as medical officer to various army units posted on the Frontier. This was the rough country of the Pathans and a kind of no-man's land lying between what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan. We lived in the forts built by the army and I have many memories of both shoot-outs between the British and the Pathans as well as the generous friendship and hospitality offered to my family by the Pathan clans each time my father went to attend to them as a doctor.

My father being in the army meant a frequency of transfers from city to city in various parts of the sub-continent and therefore many changes of school. I started schooling in Dalhousie and went on to Peshawar and then to Rawalpindi, ending with a longer period in school at Pune. I enjoyed most of the schools I went to and especially the one at Pune. Initially the adjustment to a new place was difficult but such adjustments also made me very aware of the diversity of my country and my society.

Similarly I also had to change universities each time my father was posted to another place. This was less easy to adjust to partly because the courses and the organisation of each place were totally different. This took me from Pune University to Delhi University and finally to the Punjab University at Shimla from where I graduated with BA Hons. in Literature. I then went to London University and took a BA Hons. in History before proceeding to a Ph. D.

Whilst at school I was undecided about which subject I should take up for further study as I was interested in three: botany, literature and history. I was attracted to botany because I loved drawing plants and was fascinated by the life of plants. But somehow I did not receive much encouragement in this pursuit.

So I turned to literature. As with every other teen-ager, I too was anxious to write poetry, which I did. I tried sending it to magazines for publication and usually it was returned with a rejection slip. At that point I decided to do a BA Hons. in Literature but with a subsidiary in History.

The attraction of History increased in the ambience just after independence. By the time I was ready to go to London University I had decided on History. The national movement and independence made a deep impression on the mind of a schoolgirl, for the conversation in every circle, whether at home or at college was

focussed on these matters. I had been to Gandhiji's prayer meetings and had been deeply moved by his speeches. The link between nationalism and history assumed that independence would also clarify for us our identity as Indians, a clarification in which history was central.

So gradually my interest in history intensified. My fascination for ancient Indian history was in part this search for roots in the quest for identity but perhaps more immediately also the influence of my father's new found interest in classical Indian sculpture. My father was a man with clear-cut interests apart from his work, and he explained this by saying that he was never overworked in his profession and therefore had time to pursue his hobbies.

His interest in classical Indian sculpture meant that he read widely on the subject and visited museums and sites. He would take me along for company and to educate me. Although at that age I would have preferred to have indulged in less serious activities, I went with him, asked questions, read the books he read and gradually came to be involved in trying to understand the early Indian past. This was also one aspect of the question of a historical identity. But my concentration slowly moved away from Indian art and focussed more on social and cultural history of a broader kind.

At the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University, I took a BA Hons. in History as my earlier degree had been in Literature. This enabled me to register for a Ph. D. SOAS had courses in Asian history and languages and African studies as well. For me this was an eye-opener, coming as I did from the more limited study of India and Europe in Indian universities. But the orientation to Asia in British universities in the 1950s was still largely colonial, although there were a few scholars who were different and it was these latter historians whom I found presenting a new perspective on Asia. Some of them were visiting scholars from various Asian countries. The students too were varied and I got to know many from places which had only been names to me before.

My decision to do a Ph. D. was not planned. I had thought of spending only two years in London, which is all that my father could afford. But I enjoyed my independence and the cultural life of London immensely. I was beginning to understand something of the cultural tradition of Europe as well, which I had only known as a colonial subject of a colonial empire. I was tremendously excited by the discovery of various aspects of knowledge and experience which London, then the capital of the world, could provide. I was determined to stay longer and the only way in which I could do so was by getting a scholarship and working for a Ph. D. With the awarding of a London University Scholarship for three years, I was catapulted as it were, into the academic profession. I chose to work on a re-interpretation of the policies of the Mauryan emperor, Ashoka. A brief interruption in my Ph. D. was occasioned by a chance to visit China in 1957 and work for a month each at the Buddhist cave sites of Maichisan in northern China and Tun Huang in the Gobi Desert. This introduced me to another part of the world which I had not known before the civilisation of east Asia and made me more conscious of Asian connections. China was also another impressive civilisation which had suffered the disjuncture of a colonial experience, although of a different kind from India, and there was much that I instinctively recognised from my Indian experience, which created a bond with what was a newly discovered part of the world for me.

It was whilst I was a student in London that I wrote stories for children which were published as a book. This was quite accidental. I was giving some talks in the museum on the myths and stories which occur in Indian sculpture and painting. The talks were for children. Among them was the son of a publisher who went home and spoke enthusiastically about the stories he had heard. His father contacted me and suggested I write them for publication. I was hesitant as I had never

written for children and thought it would be difficult. But he insisted that I give it a try. So I did. That resulted in a small collection of stories taken from many sources, myths, fables, historical legends and much imagination. And it turned out to be a fun thing to do. As a matter of fact it was also a useful exercise, because a few years later some of us wrote model textbooks for schools on different aspects of Indian history and I wrote two for middle schools for twelve and thirteen year old children. My experience with writing the stories helped me in trying to make myself clear to young readers.

I completed my Ph. D. and then taught at SOAS for a brief period. This was when I realised that although I had entered the academic profession almost by accident, I was ready to continue with it, but also, that I would like to do so in India. Finding a job in India was not so easy although I was lucky and found one quite soon.

But there were difficulties since I was a woman and in those days it was expected of women to marry and discontinue with scholarship. One had to be twice as good as a man to be taken seriously in the academic profession, less so by one's peers but certainly by the senior members of the profession. When I began my career as an academic there were women teachers at the Universities but very few at the level of full Professors. It was not expected of women to be at the forefront of research. If one was good as a scholar there would be attempts to put one down. The favorite comment was, that, "You don't have to work because as a woman you should be looking after the family and the household. Why do you take away a job from a man." Or otherwise the jealousy was such that whatever one achieved was not attributed to one's own quality of mind, but to extraneous factors such as social class or an attractive personality. Now of course this has changed, at least in the metropolitan universities. In the major cities women not only do not hesitate to take up research in various fields, but such a choice is acceptable to most people.

My insistence on leading an independent life ran into other problems with the world around me. My family was extremely supportive through these difficult times and no matter how unconventional my decisions may have been, I could always rely on their sensitivity to my problems. So I can't say that I suffered immense hardships as did some of my other women colleagues in those days.

My first experience of a university position was short-lived at Kurukshetra University. Although it was a pioneering institution there was little concern for setting standards of quality education. It was frustrating not to be able to put into practice the expertise which I had acquired in London. Perhaps this was also my lack of familiarity with an India outside the big cities where I had always lived. I learnt slowly to understand the problems, but was nevertheless pleased to finally get a job teaching at Delhi University.

Teaching history at Delhi University in the 1960s made me realise that there was much in the interpretation of Indian history which required a fresh analysis. Many universities still taught dynastic history, almost to the exclusion of all else. Social and economic history had to be introduced as well as theories of historical interpretation. There was in the 1960s much new analysis by Indian social scientists of Indian data and there were many discussions on the application of Marxist ideas to Indian history. This made the social sciences among the most intellectually alive disciplines. Studies in social and economic history also resulted in new perspectives of other aspects of the past. These were facts which I had tried to highlight in my study, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, where I tried to correlate the policies of Ashoka to the historical background of his time; as well as in the *History of India*, Vol. I, (and translated later into Japanese) which was an attempt to integrate social and economic history with cultural history.

In 1970, I was appointed to the Chair in Ancient Indian History at the newly

established Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, popularly referred to as JNU. This was a chance of a life-time to introduce the kind of history that some of us thought was what the discipline of history should be concerned with. During the seventies and eighties therefore my energies were largely given to participating in the building up of a Center for Historical Studies at the JNU. This was a tremendous challenge for those of us who had been initially appointed Professors, since we were in a sense being put to the test. There was scepticism outside the University as to what we would achieve, particularly when we insisted that we would not repeat the syllabus taught in every other university but experiment with new forms and new ideas.

The time spent in working out new courses was most stimulating. The JNU emphasised inter disciplinary studies which we introduced into our courses as well some comparative history. The students who came to study with us were not only bright but committed to the discipline of history and we were thus able to establish firm foundations. It was perhaps a matter of some pride for us that gradually a number of good university departments of history at other universities began to borrow from our courses. Frequent lectures at other Indian universities were opportunities to explain the kind of history which we were teaching, researching and writing.

The 1970s and 1980s were therefore a creative period for me personally. I published a number of papers some of which have been republished in collected editions and some which are under republication. A monograph on the first millennium B. C. entitled, *From Lineage to State*, (and also translated into Japanese), suggested new ways of looking at a seminal period of early Indian history. This is an interest which I am still pursuing. It was also a period when I was a Visiting Professor at universities in the USA, lecturing at the College de France in Paris and spending time at Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford. Such visits provided me with opportunities to meet other historians who were at the forefront of new kinds of historical analyses and to discuss new perspectives in the study of history. Visits to the universities of Tokyo and Kyoto were also extremely stimulating academically.

I retired in 1991, having declined the five-year extension offered to me by JNU, because I wished to complete some further writing. I have for many years been working on a study of historical consciousness in early India and I hope to be able to complete this study. So far I have only been able to publish one aspect of the study which appeared under the title of, *Time as Metaphor of History: Early India*. I also wanted to indulge myself and spend long hours in reading poetry and listening to music. But retirement has been even more busy than my teaching life as it involves invitations to lecture at places both in India and outside, and also the writing of papers for journals and seminars. Since my contemporaries have also retired there is a frequency of requests to write for their festschrifts.

Apart from my academic work, much of my time has been taken up in the defence of secular rights and in combating religious nationalisms in India. This often results in considerable distortions of Indian history. This involves holding workshops for school teachers and college teachers of history and monitoring textbooks, not to mention participating in public debates on the nature of the distortions.

I am still therefore awaiting the time when I shall be able to spend hours reading poetry and listening to music!