



ICAS:MP Workshop (TM 1: History as a Political Category)

History and Democracy

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Concept Note (Shail Mayaram, Prathama Bannerjee, Ravi Vasudevan)

Decolonisation and democratisation have generated an efflorescence of histories, professional and popular. History writing, in turn, has been significant for democratic mobilisations, social movements and insurgencies, the formation of new religious orders as also for quests for justice and efforts to redress mass genocidal violence through truth commissions.

While history has itself been democratized in the face of democratic struggles some struggles have exposed the limits of history as both discipline and sensibility in the road to a fully democratic future. We have in mind how, for instance, non-script and non-literate communities have been at a disadvantage in a democratic public sphere defined primarily in terms of historical claims and counter-claims.

The long twentieth century was an age of identity politics, of multiculturalism and the breach of strongholds of prejudice relating to race, gender, class and caste. The many uses of the historical narrative have been demonstrated and hitherto unknown archives have been recognised and mined in the course of these struggles.

In India the new popular histories were unlike the old caste puranas and other genealogical texts that explained caste hierarchy, particularly “low” birth, as a fall. The newer histories coming from castes, hitherto classed as sudra and untouchable, made demands for recognition and for statist re-categorisation by arguing for reservation as “Scheduled Tribe” or “Scheduled Caste.”

Historical time and what Walter Benjamin called messianic time appeared in new weaves. While some popular histories are deeply imbued with hyper-nationalism, others envisage a reconfiguration of sovereign power and the rights discourse as they make normative demands on the state for welfare and even compassion.

The professional discipline of history has tried to grapple with these new challenges in many ways. Nationalist and Marxist historiographies competed to convey historical fact and truth. Subaltern Studies and Ranajit Guha, in particular, “democratized the writing of Indian history,” as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, and reformulated the idea of the “political” rejecting the idea of the pre-political. Chakrabarty maintains, however, that Ranajit Guha could not quite rid himself of historicism that derived from evolutionist paradigms of the nineteenth century. He suggests an alternative to the historicist and the anthropological, which is to treat the subaltern as a figure illuminating a life possibility in the present. Subaltern pasts intimate, in his view, the limits of history. Bhargupati Singh points out that for Chakravarty, however, there is an “irreducible gap”

between the “rational historian” and the “supernaturally infused world of the Santal” and expresses his discomfort with terms such as “supernatural” and the “world of the Santal.”

Another significant thematic in exploring the relationship between history and democracy lies in mining histories of spatial imagination and circulation, and how these would unsettle the determinate boundaries of the territorial nation-state within which deliberations about the democratic often tend to be circumscribed. What historical imaginations have developed to engage the movement of refugees and migrants across borders which were often more porous before the advent of the nation-state? How has the historical emerged in the space, for example, of oceanic trade, labour mobilization, religious pilgrimage and military expeditions? How has war reframed geographies and histories?

We envisage that the Workshop will debate the many issues have been raised as history has become the site of debates on sovereignty, the nation and historical imaginations which exceed the national. We are also concerned to explore the form, in print and literature, theatre and an expanding media repertoire, film/television/radio/Internet, through which the affective force of debates about history are produced. Here is a list of potential themes:

Is history a European myth, as Ashis Nandy and Gananath Obeyesekere have argued, and are its uses for democracy limited?

Is history embedded in our parts of the world in myth from which historical consciousness might be prised out, as Romila Thapar has argued?

Are lower castes (dalit-bahujans) “the bearers of an alternate social and cultural system” different from that of upper-castes and the sources of a counter great tradition that has always existed in India?

If democratic politics has thrown up new possibilities of cross-caste and inter-religious alliances (eg, Brahman-Chamar or Pasmanda) what are the new histories that have been produced in its wake?

How have postcolonial histories produced spectacle on stage and in cinema?

How do allied genres - poetic and lyric - create affect?

What are the special effects, as it were, of visual and auditory modes?

How do we examine the question of language, of vernaculars and contested histories and archives?

What histories have emerged from the experience of refugees and migrants in a spatial imagination of circulation, of economic, cultural and religious exchange? How do these reframe the question of the democratic?

How can we track the affective charge and intellectual engagement of historical imagination as it is relayed through media practices, whether those of print, audio-visual cultures, or contemporary digital practices? These include poetic and literary writing, sound and light shows, historical genres in cinema, theatre and television, as well as the way 24 hour media forms, from television news to social media, stir controversy through irreverent references and “fake” history (eg, tweets regarding the victory so-called of Rana Pratap over Akbar).

These are only a few of the questions that you are invited to address at the Workshop.