

Session 3

Speaker No 1: Vinay Lal

I teach history but I'm not a historian. In a nutshell, what I'm going to tell you today is don't be interested in anybody's history, and don't be interested in your own history either.

Let me begin with three episodes or narratives. Episode No.1: For anybody who is interested in the intellectual life of modern India, you would know that India has been racked by textbook controversies over the course of the last couple of decades. These textbook controversies amount to such things as for example, people on the political left saying that certain figures in Indian history such as Aurangzeb deserve a different kind of reading than what has been ordinarily furnished, and people on the right complaining that Aurangzeb had not been given the critical treatment that he should have actually been given, or some people deploring the fact that an Indian leader like Shivaji, who came from what today is the modern state of Maharashtra, has not been given his due place in history while others believe that Shivaji's contributions have been overestimated.

The important point here is that there is not a single person on either side of the dispute, who has actually bothered to ask questions about the politics of textbooks themselves, the epistemology of the textbooks. How is it that the textbook came to acquire such a large place in the life of an Asian? What is the relationship of the textbook to the nation state? Have we always lived with textbooks? In fact we haven't. And if you think there is no political economy to textbooks, let me remind you that 95% of the textbook market in the United States is dominated by 5 publishers. So you might have 1000 different textbooks in American History, but all of them are ultimately published by 5 publishers, who, by the way, are a cartel and who very closely consult with each other as to what goes into a textbook and what doesn't. The questions to ask are: what is the epistemology of the textbook, the History textbook in particular? What is the relationship of the textbook to the Nation State? Why does the textbook represent the ethos of the nation state? Why do we think it does? Should it? These questions have just not been raised. Whether from the far Right or the far Left, the disagreement really has been on the particulars of what goes into a textbook.

Episode No.2: In 1992, as some of you are aware, a mosque called the Babri Masjid in the city of Ayodhya was destroyed by Hindu militants on 6th December 1992. Now what is very interesting in the events leading to the eventual destruction of the mosque, is that historians came to the fore in a way that had never been witnessed in India before. So there was a replay of the textbook controversy again, with the two camps fundamentally divided by their view of the history of this particular mosque.

The claim, made by the Hindu militants and their ideological supporters is that this mosque was built by destroying a Hindu temple that stood at that same spot. The temple that stood at that same spot was not any ordinary temple it was built to mark the exact spot, where Lord Ram, a Hindu deity, was in fact actually born. So it is a Ram

Janamsthan. The claim made by the opposite camp (secularist or the Left wing,) is that this is all a fabrication and there is no evidence to suggest that there was a temple here.

There has been an extraordinary amount of commentary in the newspapers where historians were quite dominant because they are called upon to provide veracity. Was there or was there not a temple at that spot? Was it or was it not destroyed? The most interesting intervention that was made in this debate is by the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, Mohandas Gandhi, who wrote a book called "Sita's Kitchen" where he makes a very different argument and in fact moves the argument away from the domain of history. So, we have to ask why a question like this becomes a question of history at all and what are the consequences and repercussions of this.

Episode No.3: In early 2000 I was invited by the Institute for Historical Research which is based in London and the Trans Asia Foundation for a conference on the writing world history from 1400 to 1900. The mandate given to me was to explain how Indians were writing world history.

Now I believe that Indians haven't been very much bothered with writing their own history, forget about the world. From 1100 A.D. onwards you begin to get a few histories, which are all from the Islamic tradition. But before 1000 A.D. there is virtually no work which you could call a history, in the sense of actual history.

There are other issues too. What does an Indian mean by the world? What conception of the world did an Indian have in 1400? In fact, the conception of the world which some Indians might have had was probably much bigger in 1400 than what it was in 1850 after we had been civilized by the British. Reason being that in the 14th century, the west coast of India was a highly cosmopolitan place.

There was something inherently impossible about trying to fulfil that mandate because we would have to ask very searching questions about what do we mean by history? What do we mean by the world? How do universal histories differ from global histories and from world histories and so on. These are the three episodes.

Now let me move on to different questions. These are a series about 10 different points that I have framed with the intent of trying to understand what we would have to do if we were trying to radically revise our syllabus in history.

No.1: The first question is, what do we mean by history. That may seem like a rather trivial question but it isn't. Two very simple distinctions can be made. One is that when we say history, most historians mean two things: one is the study of the past or what happened in the past, howsoever the past might be defined – whether it's remote antiquity or something that happened two days ago. And then there's the study of the writing of history which translates into historiography.

If you have to make a very simple distinction, you could say that historians work with the category of time, much like geographers work with the category of space. But that

distinction is not particularly useful. Because for example, if you were trying to understand 'development' which is one of the reigning words in the modern lexicon – are these spatial categories or are these temporal categories? I think that you would have to answer that they're both. In fact, in some ways, they are pre-eminently temporal although we think they are spatial. Under-developed means the Third World and Developed means the First World. But of course it is very clear that the whole notion of development is predicated on what I would call a time lag.

If a European wants to study what Europe looked like in 1750, then he should go to India in 1950. There's a time lag of roughly 200 years. After all you cannot see bullock-carts in Europe any longer, but you can see them in India and you can have quite a good conception of what Europe might have looked like in 1750 before industrialization came in and ruined the countryside. That's the notion of the time lag.

Obviously, the interesting question now is how do historians spatialize their categories and how do geographers temporalise their categories. This is what I mean by the question 'What do we mean by history?'. Was it simply the study of the past and would the study of the past be quite adequate? So what forms of knowing does history encompass and have people always been interested in these forms of knowing. The direction that I would take is that there are civilisations in India that fundamentally have not been interested in the enterprise of what we would call history.

No.2. How do we write the history of the ascendancy of history? That's a very serious question. There are historiographers who spend their entire lifetime on this. That question translates down to things like the professionalisation and the institutionalization of the discipline. When did people in the West first acquire a taste for history? In Elizabethan England, there is enough work to show that the taste for history began to be encountered in the middle class in about 1550. But by the early nineteenth century, history as a way of knowing has become institutionalized.

'There is no people who want to be without a sense of history', to echo a phrase from Eric Wolf's book "Europe and the People without History". The most offensive thing you can tell a person, representing a particular group, whether linguistic, ethnic or religious, is that they don't have a history. Everybody wants to claim that they have a history. So what are the consequences of staking that particular position?

No.3 : What is the particular relationship of history to the Nation State? I have already hinted at this argument in the episode that I narrated to you about the textbook controversy. Is history the particular form of knowledge most appropriate to the nation state than other forms of knowledge? It seems that the textbook controversies would suggest that it really is the case to a very large degree.

I might add that this whole question of textbook controversies is not particular only to India but there have been textbook controversies raging in the United States as well. What's interesting is that in India till relatively recently you really had no traditions of

history. The ascendancy of history in India is all the more remarkable, in view of that fact.

No.4: There is no more clichéd operation that I can think of today than the distinction between History and Myth. Things that we don't like or disown or want to disown, we call Myth. When did this separation of History and Myth take place? I would argue that it took place in the western world as far back as the time of Thucydides. In ancient Greece there were two major figures – Herodotus, who in the 6th century wrote “The Histories” and Thucydides who comes about a century later, in the earlier part of the 5th century B.C. Thucydides is very clear that you have to reject Herodotus because his history is not objective enough. There is too much of myth in it. There is too much about people who are half-animals and half-something else.

Indian nationalists were eager to make the separation of history and myth in the 19th century. One of the test cases for that is the treatment of the “Mahabharata” because there you see the conflict very easily. Indian nationalist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wants to historicise certain portions of the Mahabharata particularly Gita and he wants to turn Krishna into a historical figure. On the other hand Gandhi comes up with the observation that the Mahabharata is much more interesting than Gibbon because the writers of the “Mahabharata” were not burdened by the enterprise of trying to have to prove themselves to be factual and objective. Gandhi entirely rejects the claim that Krishna should be viewed as some kind of historical deity.

Remember that this links up to the whole dispute in Ayodhya. At what point in time did it become important for Hindus to start thinking that Ram was born at a particular point in time in a particular place. Why is it this compulsion to historicise a figure that we have lived with quite comfortably for a very long period of time? This is where I am not a historian because unlike my colleagues in history, I don't repudiate Myth and I don't disown it. I think there is a very fundamental problem with this separation to begin with and also with the fact that it is not receptive enough to things that might obviously complicate its own case for what constitutes the understanding of the past.

No.5: Is history the only way of comprehending the past? This is crucial here because it seems other ways of comprehending the past have a built-in mechanism which history doesn't. The argument fundamentally is that other forms of knowing the past are not simply ways of remembering the past but also of forgetting the past. What is crucial to forms of knowing the past is also forgetfulness. History is fundamentally a way of remembering. So there is a disjunction there that one would have to think about and this might very well be one of the things that distinguishes history from other ways of comprehending the past whether you call them oral narratives or traditional wisdom, folk tales, and so on.

No.6: What is the relationship of History to Temporality, to Time? How does history treat Time and is not actually predicated on some notion of what we call the Universal Time? Of course there is the problem that time itself has been highly homogenized in the West over the course of the last 500 years. In fact, as late as 1840s, in the United States

there were about 70 time zones. One of the reasons for standardizing or homogenizing the notion of time was because the expansion of trade and commerce cannot be conducted with a lax notion of time. This notion of standardization of time has an intrinsic relationship to the enterprise of History, because History as we do it at present is predicated on some standardized notion of time that we all accept.

No.7: It has been argued by a number of people that no matter what kind of history we do, (and here I'm speaking by the way of national histories, such as the history of China or India, or Peru) Europe is always the reference point, stated or otherwise, of those histories. Let me give you an illustration of two ways in which one can understand that kind of claim.

One of the ways in which we think we're being more progressive is when we do Comparative History. Comparative History fundamentally means that you do Europe on the one hand and the rest of it is fill-in-the-blank. If you happen to be Indian, it's Europe and India. If you're Peruvian, it's Europe and Peru and so on. When I say Europe, I mean the West, whether it includes America or not. Fundamentally, that's what Comparative History means in 99% of the cases. There are very few comparative historians who are going to spend a lifetime studying the relationship between Peru and South Africa or Peru and Zimbabwe or whatever the case might be. Comparative History means that one axis is always fixed and the other is determined by the national origins of the subject conducting that study, or the particular area that that person has picked.

The second illustration of that is that the kind of argument that has been taken by people like Fukuyama: the End of History and so forth. We understand that the destination of all of us is to arrive at something called the 'Station of Freedom' - electoral democracy etc. So when we do History, Europe remains always the reference point, even when our work apparently has nothing to do with Europe whatsoever.

No.8: Let me move to the enterprise of World History.

I think there are fundamental problems with the enterprise of World History. I'll give you again one illustration. When we do world history, it's not merely a matter of examining how much space has been allotted to say Nehru or Aurobindo or Gandhi vis-à-vis Jefferson, Washington and John Adams and the founding fathers of the USA, for example have. That's not the real issue. The question is that even when Gandhi is discussed he is as a model for Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and so on. He has never been incorporated in the World History textbook as a critic of modernity because that would be a fundamental problem for those who are writing history itself. So, even if you make space for somebody within the notion of world history, this is a space that has already cut out the possibility of a dissenting perspective.

It would be utterly naïve to think that simply increasing the number of pages or even actually putting in all of these figures, somehow gives us some kind of world histories. So we obviously have to ask, who is world history for? What is the conception of the 'world' in world? What is the relationship of world history to modernity? As far as I am

aware there is no textbook of world history which really takes as its central enterprise, a history of modernity and a history of counter-modernity because most world history textbooks would still be predicated on notions of time and space in the conventional sense.

No.9: Finally, I want to re-emphasise the point I had made much earlier about the importance of categories. Somebody here had mentioned literacy in the last session. I want to say something on that very briefly because I think it should alert us on some of the problems. Ashis and I finished a book, about a year ago, which is coming out next month called “The Future of Knowledge and Culture – Dictionary for the 21st Century.” There’s a piece in there by Barry Sanders on literacy. Now, Barry Sanders argues very rightly that if you actually look at the Oxford English Dictionary, you will find the word ‘literacy’ first came into use in the English language only in 1885. The word ‘literate’ has been around for a much longer time, for several hundred years. There is an enormous difference between ‘literate’. Literacy is basically a form of modern day eugenics.

Literacy now becomes a form of evaluation of an entire civilisation. Which is why, if you look at UNDP Reports, one of the three main criteria, to judge where a country stands on the Index of Development, is the rate of literacy. We have to understand that literacy is a category that we all prize, but it can also oppress. And that’s fundamentally what I’m arguing about - the category of history.

DISCUSSION:

Claude: Are you advocating that we teach myth rather than history or that we substitute history with myth? Frankly, I don’t mind. Myth is much more interesting than history. In fact all the history that I have read so far is basically myth.

Vinay: The history you have read so far is not myth. If it were myth, it would have already pluralised the conceptions of history that you were reading. It is history at its worst.

Vimbai: I think the problem of history is the problem of language. And the problem of language is the problem of conceptualisation. Let me give you an example from my own language. History or the past, as you say it in English, is very difficult for us to comprehend in Shona (my language). For us, history is basically saying who you are. To know who you are, you have to tell the whole story. So it is not a matter of the past only but also of the present and the future. In my language all history is a current affair. You cannot tell who you are, if you don’t know where you come from, why you are here and where you want to go. But when you say it in English, it neutralises the whole thing.

In my language, we refer to our ancestors as those who are ahead while we, the present generation, are behind. This is because we are following at the tail-end, and they are leading, they are ahead. Therefore we say to the youngsters who are born today, that they do not know much, whereas their ancestors have seen everything coming, including the generations to come. Therefore, in Shona, you cannot extricate yourself from your history

and from your so-called past. You cannot go into the future, following somebody else. So while the concept of history is interesting to argue about in the English language, in the indigenous languages, indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous communication systems, there is no problem about history at all.

Gloria: I think we have got to decolonise history and liberate ourselves from the Euro-centric definition of history. If we do that, we will not end up saying that there was no history in India at all. If we throw away the limiting definitions we will recognise that across continents and across peoples, we have always been interested in our surroundings and our past. We have to reject the definition of history given to us by a group of people who said that what we are doing does not fall within the model of standardised history, and so it is not history.

Second, where do we go from here? Considering that we are not comfortable with history as defined at present, what suggestions do we have for moving forward, vis-a-vis South Asian history? What should we be doing in terms of the curriculum to decolonise that history? I agree that the politics of textbooks and recognition by scholars is big business. We can talk about content and about biases, but the underlying politics of it all is something one must necessarily look into.

Edgu: Europe has dominated the world and it is necessary to free oneself from that domination. Europeans tell us that we have no history because if we have no history, we don't exist. However, I believe that all people have a history. History does not begin in Europe. Europe claims that it is a society with a history and that those outside of Europe have no history on the basis that if you do not write history you do not have history. So they have tried to link history to literacy. But Europeans themselves had no writing earlier. Their literacy started at a later period. By making such statement about people not having a history, Europe has done a great disservice to humanity.

It is a fact that Europeans actually drew a lot of their writing skills and a lot of information from the East and also from Northeast Africa. Egypt for example was the central point for mathematics. The Greeks had migrated to Egypt and learnt from the Egyptians all the fundamentals of mathematics. But now the Europeans present themselves as the main source of mathematics.

In the European medieval period, in fact it is the Arabs who dominated and gave life to philosophy, mathematics, medicine, etc. All the great universities were Muslim. Today the West does not recognise or acknowledge these sources of their knowledge. To continue to take knowledge from the world around without acknowledgement is a fraudulent activity. Now we must try and reverse the situation.

Wasif: Within the colonised world there is a stark anomaly as regards history and the understanding of history. As far as Islam is concerned, not only did Islam at a very early stage develop a very sophisticated tradition of recording history, it formed the basis for practising and understanding the faith itself. This written history is a very dynamic discourse. Within that there are controversies and disagreements but what it has

generated is a sense of morality of historically acknowledging what the true spirit of Islam is and that has an effect on the entire fabric and the entire construct of a society. No matter how the Muslims in recent times have tried to re-write their history, to try to glorify the misdeeds of earlier Muslims, as a reaction or a cooption of western historic techniques, what is still kept within the sensibility of the people is that essence of history that was captured at the very beginning.

If one wants to make a distinction between the histories of Islam and Europe, take a stroll down any major Islamic city in the world, and any European city, In Europe, every square, every monument is named or recognised after a genocidal monster - Leopold, Victoria, Washington, Jefferson. But that is not so in Islamic cities. There are no such remembrances of even the most dominant and powerful kings. The only Umayyad king who is remembered is Omar bin Abdul Aziz who relinquished his personal wealth when he became the Khaliph. So, within the tradition of Islam what is captured is a spirit of resistance, the spirit of the essence.

The Wayserat (?) which is the cornerstone of writing Islamic history has captured history with a sense of moral principles that need to be codified as memory for a society and as an inspiration to build history for the future. One of the reasons for this conflict between the West and Islam is the way in which Islam looks at its own history and the way the West does. Everytime the Haj is celebrated, everytime there is the tenth of Moharram and people flock around the mausoleum of Hussain, it is a challenge to the formal discipline of history which is written only from the perspective of dominance and oppression. But here there is a whole 1/5th of humanity which celebrates its own history from a totally different perspective, which is a history of liberation and a history of spiritual awareness.

Farid: Unfortunately, the Muslims have not made use of their tradition, their conceptual and theoretical resources to write their own history. For example, you do not have a tradition that developed out of Ibn Khaldun to reinterpret various aspects of the spirit of Muslim history. The Malaysians have hardly made use of the Dutch, Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese and the Indian sources, leave aside British sources to re-write their history. It is fine for us to criticise the West for the Euro-centrism, orientalism and distortion, but let us do something about it as well.

Let us get on with reinterpreting and re-writing history and when we present alternatives, let us not also be guilty of distortion or of omitting portions of the past. To give you an example, in our discussions here, the university was presented as a centre founded on the idea of teaching or being educated in one way, as opposed to a multiple, multi-perspectival approach. Hence, Multiversity. But let us not forget that the university itself comes from the Muslim world and the Muslim conception of the university and the early medieval conceptions of the university are not opposed to Multiversity. It is not university in the sense of uni or one, but in the sense of universal knowledge.

The early European universities i.e. Paris, Bologna, Oxford were based on the earlier Islamic models. There are many aspects about the modern university that go back to the early Muslim universities. For eg. the idea of the degree. One of the Abbasic Khalifs,

Mahmoon, had a problem of too many quack doctors in the city of Baghdad in the 10th century. So he had a physician go around and test those doctors and those who passed were given an Ijazah. That is the origin of the degree. The Sufis also practised this idea of conferring a degree, a permission or Ijazah, to the students they were willing to certify as learned and they symbolised their permission by placing their turban on the head of the student or placing their robe on the body of the student and this is the origin of the cap and gown ceremony of the modern universities. The term 'faculty' or 'facultas' also originates from the Arabic.

Murad: I want to raise 3 issues here. First, we still have a controversy here in Penang about who landed first on Penang Island. Was it the British or was it the native Malay. So the idea of discovery is always problematic. Discovery in history is always linked with Europe and the West. Asians it seems do not discover anything. Second, the idea of social science is founded on history while on the other hand we are discussing that the configurations of social science are due to evolution of history, writing of history and the politics and epistemology of the disciplines. Third, history defines our national consciousness. It also determines our world view. It defines our notions of nationalism, patriotism. In fact, it has defined the ethnicity of the Malays. It was Raffles and others, who as a result of their enlightenment and scientific rationality thought that when they came to the Malay world they had to classify the flora and fauna, before they defined what we are as Malays. So history is powerful because it defines and makes us conscious of ourselves. One of the things we have to do if we want to change things, is that we have to know our history. We have to internalize the origins of what we are studying.

Anu: Can a distinction could be drawn between itihās and history? Second, the proposition that India did not have a sense of history could be challenged with works like, Chronicle of the Kings, the Arthashastra, the inscriptions we have and texts written in Sanskrit or Pali which need to be decoded to create a sense of history which we could bring back into our social science curricula to give us some sense of the past.

Sunil: Can a distinction is made between writing about times for which there is popular memory and there is acceptance of that popular memory at some level in society, and writing about times for which popular memory is generally speaking not considered or accepted as a standard reference?

Chiu: If we look at the topic 'History and its enslavements' the word history is with a capital letter and in the singular, whereas, enslavement is in the plural. So the question Vinay is asking is how the capital singular 'history' is being enslaved by multiple situations and conditions. That is the way I read Vinay's talk, which has been about historiography and the politics of history, but not history per se. Second, Vinay says he is not a historian, he only teaches history, which means that he looks at history as something to be analyzed and criticized. When people ask what is anthropology, the best answer is, "that which anthropologists do". The same could be said of history - it is that which historians do. My story is what I, the story teller, tells. Don't forget that history is an event in a particular time and space and with specific conditions, which is reported speech. We do not invent history we only report it at various levels.

Shau Lung: We say we want to have a political use for history and we are contesting other political uses of history. History itself is a process of selection and there is a moral choice behind the selections you make when retrieving history. This poses the question of the use of history or even the use of myth. What use do we have for history? It could be an issue of respect. History functions as a chronicle of great deeds of accomplishment. Take the Islamic world as an example. Is the Islamic world most concerned over getting respect from the white West or is it trying to build its own self respect so that it can fight for some sense of liberation. So, is history a congratulatory pat on the back or is it a call to arms? Is it a process of challenging slander, is it a chronicle of injustices, or a record of accumulation of debts which need to be paid back? There is also the Chinese way of looking at history which is political. The Confucionists always liked to refer to the golden age to justify their social policies of the present. But the Taoists took delight in twisting the Confucion tradition and using it as fodder for satire and jokes. So what kind of uses do we want make of history? Irreverent uses, political uses, aggressive uses, militant uses or arm chair uses?

Roby: The response to Vinay's presentation, which is really a critique of history, has been received as a kind of resistance, with people wanting to claim their own versions of history. Vinay's message is sidetracked and people instead want to cling to the claim that they do have a history, that these histories are potent and we therefore refuse to give up on our history. So what do you do with resistance like that?

Firdos: History as a study is a very subjective discipline and it tells you more about the historian, his or her values and the prevalent situation, rather than the history itself that he or she is describing. So, is it possible to create a world history and ignore local history and what is wrong with localizing our history?

Mariam: Is there a right way to perceive history? Whose perspective of what history should be, is the right one? I think there is a need for research because as we write our view of what history should be, the Europeans and the Americans will also continue writing their own perspectives, so we must also simultaneously research and record what we believe our history should be. There will no doubt be others challenging our view. Sometimes even in our own community we cannot agree on our history. Nevertheless, this is the only way forward. It is not a question of whether we want to get respect from others or create respect among ourselves but that we want to tell the truth about the history as it was, because as it stands today, the West has put forward the European civilization and erased Islamic civilization totally.

Farid: What is important is the reinterpretation of history by using our heritage. The rewriting of history is not about uncovering of new facts but with the reinterpretation of history by recourse to new concepts and ideas.

Ashis: History is not the only way of constructing the past. Every society, every community, every people have constructed their past but that does not mean that they have written history and we have no business to fit it into the model of history as it was

developed in 16th and 17th century Europe. Itihas has nothing to do with history. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, are two best examples of itihas and both are epics. Did Islam have a tradition of writing history? The fact of the matter is that when people like Ibn Khaldun, like other Arab scholars, first came in contact with Hindu scholars, they were confounded with the encounters because any questions they asked about the past only got stories from the Indians. Khaldun was sagacious enough to recognize that to study a civilization or a people one must use their own categories. If they are not using history there are other ways of construing and constructing their past. That is the way in which our liberation lies. I believe that the enslaving capacities of history are rather limited. All said and done let us be aware that the power of a university, the power of text books is limited. We like to think of the university as a great moulder of minds but we ourselves are examples that one can break the shackles of the university. I believe that potential exists within each of us and our future is not as bleak as it seems at the moment.

Vinay: I will briefly address just a couple of issues. Roby has really hit the nail in the coffin when he asked why is there so much resistance to the kind of argument I am trying to suggest. Very simply put, the so-called lack of historical sensitivity for me is not a deficiency. This is what the colonizers believed. For me this is a strength of the Indian civilization. So it is not something that we have to try and redeem.

Second, the fact that we are using a Euro-centric model to try to understand Indian history has been known for quite sometime and it is not the crux of the problem. While decolonizing Euro-centric history should not be our only purpose, how do we go about decolonizing Euro-centric knowledge in order to change the curriculum? For example can we use the commercial Indian film and try to understand how Indians think about the categories of history? One of the extraordinary things of the Indian commercial film is that you find the main characters are without a sense of history. The sense of a-historicity that one is trying to understand is very clearly on display in the commercial film, its structures and its narratives. The commercial Indian film actually taps into a much wider kind of sensibility and includes people who have never been affected by text books, much less university level courses, historiography etc.

Vimbai referred to history as being only a problem of language I don't think it is that simple, because the political economy of global knowledge now leads to very different set of problems. We have to look at the political economy of knowledge on a global scale. The indigenous languages are not going to be able to produce text books on a scale large enough to be able to make any kind of difference to the global scene. The text books are largely going to be produced in English, French, Hindi, Arabic – some ten or fifteen main languages which dominate about 95% of the world global market in text books. At that time, whether you like it or not, you will be working with categories such as we call as history today.

SPEAKER 2
CLAUDE ALVARES

I will make a small presentation on the subject of the teaching of philosophy in social science departments. I find here the same ambivalence that Vinay Lal has portrayed between history and myth in the opposites that emerge in all philosophy departments when we discuss western philosophy vis-à-vis the rest of thinking that is taking place on issues like reality, cosmology, epistemology, etc. and how does one relate this to a syllabus.

My task is not very difficult here because philosophy itself by definition comes from the Greek: 'phil' means 'to love'; 'sophia' of course means wisdom. The roots are so obviously western that you can automatically say that this thing has a specific origin in a particular culture because it uses a core language that is no longer used even in Europe to represent what it is about.

My difficulty was that I studied philosophy for several years and even taught it at the University of Mumbai and after spending 7 to 8 years in it, I decided that I had wasted my time, that studying the discipline of western philosophy was a phenomenal waste of time. The reasons are very simple. The entire system of teaching of philosophy was based on a study of western philosophers and if you want to see the impact of the universal western regime of studies, I will just read to you two paragraphs from Ward Churchill's booklet, 'White Studies'. I'm reading it only to show you how everything that he said there, with all the philosophers that he mentioned there was something that I studied in Mumbai in the mid 60s. There is no change at all. That was the universality of this system of education. It's not just an American Indian in America but also a student in Mumbai in the 60s studying this.

Consider a typical introductory level philosophy course. Students will in all probability explore the works of the ancient Greek philosophers, the fundamentals of Cartesian logic and Spinoza, stop off for a visit with Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and John Locke, cover a chapter or two of Kant's aesthetics, dabble a bit in Hegelian dialectics, and review Nietzsche's assorted rantings. A good leftist professor may add a dash of Marx's famous "inversion" of Hegel and, on a good day, his commentaries on the frailties of Feuerbach. In an exemplary class, things will end up in the 20th century with discussions of Schopenhauer, Heidegger and Husserl, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, perhaps an "adventurous" summarization of the existentialism of Sartre and Camus.

Advanced undergraduate courses typically delve into the same topics, with additive instruction in matters such as "Late Medieval Philosophy," "Monism," "Rousseau and Revolution," "The Morality of John Stuart Mill," "Einstein and the Generations of Science," "The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty," "Popper's Philosophy of Science," "Benjamin, Adorno and the Frankfurt School," "Meaning and Marcuse," "Structuralism/Post-Structuralism," even "The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas." Graduate work usually consists of effecting a coherent synthesis of some combination of these elements.

These two paragraphs give you exactly what I did in my graduate and post graduate studies and the whole point I am trying to make is that the whole system of western philosophy is based on the idea that the mind can understand reality with the use of reason. This is a thing that goes from Greece up till our time today. The civilizational assumption is that reason enables you to understand reality. That's why there's so much, the theory of knowledge, the theory of being and how do we grasp reality. Can reality really exist independently of us, etc. All these concepts, this entire philosophical development was based on reason and finally failed with the phenomenology of Husserl and after that the West has never really gone back to trying to attempt a theory of knowledge or theory of trying to appropriate truth on the basis of reason. They have given that up. What they have done over the years is that they have slowly transferred the ambition into scientific method. So after sometime you find that instead of reason now people begin to talk about scientific method. Because scientific method becomes the new avatar of what reason is.

Reason is defined as scientific method. Scientific method has a new power in the modern age and therefore it can take over and convince people of doing things that they could not believe they could do any more with reason. Now if you look at the whole of the traditions of philosophy (I do not like to use the word 'philosophy' because it is a contaminated polluted term) from the Indian standpoint, from where I come, the tradition is completely the opposite of this. We do not believe in any way that you can appropriate reality with reason. It's an a priori statement generally that at that level reason cannot help you. It can only take you up to a point but it can never finally take you to the quest that western philosophy had for so many years.

So what these guys do when they begin to look at Indian philosophy in Indian universities. they make them into systems of philosophy. Now these are darshanas. These are ways they are made into philosophical systems and they make them into 6 schools of philosophy and then they teach them as they are teaching Western Philosophy. Now the amazing thing is that finally after they teach you all the advaita, Ramanuja's theory of dualism, etc. finally they say that the best philosophical school in India, the highest, the most pure is the theory of Shuniavad i.e. theory of Vedanta associated with Shankaracharya and that theory is finally reflected in just 3 Sanskrit words. Those were: *tat twam asi*.

I did not know any Sanskrit at that time so I could not know what the words meant. Everybody asks what is the meaning of *tat twam asi*. You can say it a thousand times, a million times, what is *tat twam asi*. So finally when you come to this phrase which is supposed to be the final defining principle of the Vedanta, and which translated means 'that thou art', it looks very funny. Then you say, is this what Indian Philosophy is all about? Only these 3 words? That is what thousands of people in India have been talking about, these numerous treatises from so many different types of philosophies. This is all they are able to achieve. Is what Vedantic Philosophy is all about?

I find it very difficult to explain to people that in India people don't do cerebral philosophy like people do in the West. Our philosophy is not purely cerebral. It is

cerebral, but not purely cerebral. For e.g. the Patanjali Sutras are not only a system of thinking, a theory of knowledge, a theory of being, but they are also the way you use your body. Yoga is the way you use your body. There is a wisdom in the way you use your body and the system of yogas is not just doing some exercises but it is exercising a way of approaching reality, a way of communion with reality, which finally one day you will understand when you use the words, *tat twam asi*.

But it is not something you can do in an MA Philosophy class where the professor comes and reads to you and say this is *tat twam asi*. This pauperizes the whole richness of the whole culture of what India was, what India's thinking was and it actually makes it sound very ridiculous. But the way the ordinary people do Indian philosophy is it is something that has to be lived. It is not something that is only to be taught. That is another big difference we found between the philosophers of the West who were sometimes in the West sitting with a pipe in the room somewhere and thinking – or what they call cogitating.

In India, whether you go to Banaras, Mumbai or meet a rickshaw driver, tap him on the shoulder and you will find a philosopher there because he has integrated himself with his own culture with the way he understands his body, the way he understands his diet, his breathing etc So we have a totally different subject of what we really had and what we were deprived of. That is why I am very vicious in the denunciation of this entire corpus of knowledge we call social sciences which was dumped on us at that time.

I can't understand how they could have sent me through 14 years of school and college and made me sit like we are all sitting now on dead trees in the same posture for hours on end at the end of which we had to go for P.T. - Physical Training. They would take us out in the school ground and make us shake a leg and shake a hand and that sort of thing. This ancient civilization which was brought up with yoga with pranayama and so on was finally reduced to doing P.T. I would not like my children to go through such a system, to be really deprived.

I am not so much bothered reading the West in terms of history and sociology and so on. I am talking about how we were made to forget. How history was written in such a way that we had no access to our own things and to people like us who come from civilization of 3 to 4 thousand years old, made monkeys by civilization that is not even 300 years old or at the most 10 centuries. That is why I have this revulsion against this notion of Enlightenment with Voltaire, Rousseau and so on. We took this Enlightenment in place of Moksha which was what we were brought up with. If we look at all our scriptures, tantras, mantras, whatever, in the end we had enlightenment. How can you compare the enlightenment of the Bodhisattva with what Voltaire said? Is it possible? Here a man is being set free of all the chains of being - that is Moksha. And yet we were taught that there is no logic in these traditions.

It was only when I began to read the Patanjali sutra, the Tattvarta Sutra that I realized that if I read these I would never touch a single text in western philosophy at all because those went round in circles. But these went logically step by step to prove their point and it

took me several years to begin the process of forgetting. For, whatever people may say about keeping some links with the West and so on, I have absolutely no difficulty at all but I give people the example of computers.

If you have a situation where you find your hard disk is full and you can't take in any more? You have to delete some files to make space. So let us delete some files and re-format the mind again. Or sometimes the hard disk crashes. So you cry a little bit, then start again, get a new disc. Now, you can't get a new brain, but you can get a new text book, you can get a new curriculum, you can get all sorts of new things and you can take this idea seriously and not as something that will take 2000 years.

We have got here people skilled in history, in research, good sociologists, good anthropologists, political scientists and so on. All sorts of very well qualified people, who can sit together and over a period of say two years, redesign the curriculum. In the meanwhile close down all the universities for that time. Nobody will lose anything. Send the cheques to the professors in their houses, leave the students outside on the streets, let them go and repair cars and motor vehicles, clean the streets. And in those 2 years let groups of people sit down and see how they can create history without Europe as reference but with ourselves as reference. It cannot be that difficult.

In Kerala, a group of tribals from Wayanad, who had reached the depths of degradation, alcoholism, prostitution, whatever, finally got together and then created their own school, their own history. In that history they teach first as a primary subject the history of the Wayanad tribal kings, then the history of Kerala and after that only do they go to the history of India. Forget about world history.

So how do you deal with this problem? Let's begin by using proper names for what we do. Universities have what is called a department of Philosophy. Let us call it a department of Western Philosophy, for that's what it is. Naming is very good. In India we have renamed all our streets and other places, replacing the western with the local. Similarly do it with scholarship. Then we will probably be able to decide whether we want to invest time in this exercise.

Take post colonial studies. I asked a friend to research on the internet if any blacks or browns have done anything on post colonial studies. He came back after one week totally disheartened, saying that every person is from the western world. So, they do our colonial studies, now they do our post colonial studies as well.

If I could solve this problem by re-titling, well and good. But I still don't solve the problem of how to create a proper syllabus in which I can teach the things I want people to learn. For eg. The Questions of King Milinda - how do I make that into a text book? Or, the Mahabharata? Or Vedic mathematics?

I would like to personally take on this job of doing the syllabus for teaching people - not philosophy, because the word itself is wrong - but we have to consult people, the learned and not-so-learned, the literate and the illiterate, to find out what would be the proper

term for this type of activity that was done for so many thousand years in Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, in India, China, and how do we teach that as theories of knowledge, epistemologies, anthologies to our children so that they can link up with it. There, there is some salvation. There is something at the end of the line. There is light at the end of the tunnel. In the western philosophy there is no light at all. It is only darkness.

So how do you teach philosophy, or whatever you choose call it, to people in India or China. I am quite sure if we are able to design such a course, we would be able to get our point across.

DISCUSSION

Farid: I am sympathetic with the problem you have just described i.e the student spending years in a particular tradition only to realize that he is going around in circles, while at the same time being deprived of studying other traditions. I believe that we should be open to all traditions and regard all traditions as sources, but one needs to have a criteria of selection. If one is rooted in a tradition, that tradition becomes the criteria of selection. For eg. in Islam there are four sources of knowledge: revelation, reason, experience and intuition. This is basic epistemology. It is also a matter of faith. So, for a Muslim the basic creed tells him from where to accept knowledge. If one is not rooted in one's tradition then what you learn from the West would create doubt and skepticism and you would go round in circles. But if one were rooted in that tradition then you have some criteria of selection and you selectively imbibe what is compatible with your tradition. You will also find that there is much to learn from other traditions. So the problem is how do you find a tradition which is sound and will not lead you to doubt and skepticism. I don't think the solution is to reject any tradition, including the Western one and supplant it with your own, because you still run the risk of being closed. Let us also remember that our own traditions too have problems. We need a critical perspective. But there has to be a base, a solid foundation which then enables us to be open to all other traditions in a selective way. That is for me is the challenge.

Clemens: I am worried about re-enforcing further the compartmentalization of the social sciences discipline. May be the problem arises if we look at philosophy strictly as philosophy. But if we look at it in terms of social perspectives - Asian or African - then there might be a lot more room for exploring the linkages within the disciplines or even beyond the disciplines. In the Philippines, if we look at the social sciences, those who have done more work in exploring local categories are scholars who have moved beyond the frontiers of their own specialized disciplines into other disciplines. For eg. historians who are doing anthropology, anthropologists who have done psychology, philosophers who have done psychology and vice versa. So perhaps there is more promise for exploiting holistic perspectives rather than compartmentalized or purely disjunctive rational perspectives.

Vimbai: I could not agree more with what Claude has just said. Most of us here have gone through the same afflictions where, as a consequence of our education we have ignored the sources of wisdom and knowledge that are rooted in our own traditions and

we have fetishized Europe as the mother of philosophy and so on. We are now making some efforts at the University of Zimbabwe to link up with the indigenous societies. For e.g. in the Department of English, Communications and Media Studies we have varieties of literature courses - Afro-Asian literature, Pacific literature, Caribbean literature, Afro-American literature, Latin American literature. We want to show students that there are different ways of looking at the world. Similarly we also have varieties of philosophy – Teachings of Taotep (African philosophy), Chemetic (Egyptian) philosophy and so on and different thought systems too. We find that after reading their own wisdom the students are able to compare it with the European philosophers and recognize whether our people are more or less advanced than the others. In other words we are exposing them to the imperative that all people think about their existence.

Besides text books, we are also using other forms of media to impart education. On television we have programmes where the university teachers and the community exchange views. We invite people from different societies and different ethnic groups to come and talk about their histories, especially the African notion of history and compare it with the European notion of history. People need to be exposed to different ways of thinking rather than one canon of thinking. That is why I hope that at the end of this conference we will come out with concrete suggestions and projects to produce literature and text books that deal with this kind of problem, in terms of implementation across the curriculum.

Shau lung: I would like to give you the example of my study of Taoism i.e Kungfu which has a tradition of not having a dead text in front of you as the basic element of study. There is a text but you also engage with it through physical practice. You attempt to explore and express the principles i.e it's artistic dimension through physical practice whether it be martial art, calligraphy, painting, dancing or meditation. That has a vibrancy and an immediate relevance that addresses the human condition far better than simply studying text books within the confines of a classroom. The very act of engaging in wisdom of life is not simply an encounter with dead wood with ink printed on it. It's more than that. It's vital, it's vibrant. So, sometimes we have to also step out of the classroom and think of different ways of pedagogy.

When you engage in the martial arts you engage in a spiritual journey. It is a wholly different engagement with a corpus of wisdom compared with the western philosophical tradition. Western philosophy suffers from a bipolar disorder. You either have this vulgar..... or this extreme mental extraction on the other and it can't seem to bridge the two. No philosopher in the western origin has been able to bridge the two because they are always caught up in a room in the university. And by that very choice it reinforces the forces of alienation that it claims to resolve. Many people who go to university to formalize knowledge by getting a doctorate feel that they have to abandon the traditional methods of learning. Our real challenge is to show when the classroom is appropriate, when the text book is appropriate and when the temple is more appropriate.

Vinay: I think merely changing the name of a department from department of philosophy to department of western philosophy may not be the answer, even though I understand

quite well the importance of naming. Mahatma Gandhi said that freedom is indivisible so we can't just say that this is the problem of the West, let them figure it out, we have our own problems. There is some relationship between their problems and ours. The best illustration of this is the passage from White Studies that Claude read. Ward gives a list of philosophers that he had to read for the period from say 1400 to 1900 which includes people like Descartes, John Locke, Barclay, Leibnitz etc. What is interesting to me is that the same period also produced people like St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, Maisteracarte (?) and a whole lot of other people in the West who were themselves marginalized by the Western philosophical tradition and who are not in the textbooks because these people argued against rationality as the means to achieve salvation. This illustrates that the phenomena that you are describing is identical to the phenomena that I described when I was talking about the separation of history and myth. At some point in time a separation takes place between philosophy as an analytical exercise and philosophy as wisdom. Then a second separation takes place between philosophy and religion. These separations take place in the formation of the institutionalization of what is known as the Western university. So these people who have been dropped out of the syllabus in the West, speak to dissenting traditions in the West itself. The result of all these separations is that in the end philosophy becomes philosophy of mind, analytical philosophy only. So, look for the point when rationality becomes both the supreme end and means in western philosophy. That is a critical point at which philosophy begins to turn in the West.

END