

---

# KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

Romila Thapar

## 1. The Historical Method

Keeping in mind that one of the purposes of education is ultimately to advance knowledge, and where this is not always possible, at least familiarize the educated knowledge, I would like to consider this question in two ways: one is to discuss what an advance in knowledge involves, even at the level of schooling and even in relation to the one discipline that I know? History; and secondly, to touch on some of the practical aspects of educational bodies and institutions that are expected to encourage the advancement of knowledge.

It was recently reported in the press that the ex-Minister for Human Resource Development, M.M. Joshi, had stated that historians such as myself, and a few others, needed to brush up our history in order to be in touch with the latest views. This was rich, coming as it does from someone who has repeatedly demonstrated little or no familiarity with history, whether old or new. Doubtless the remark was also intended to renew the controversy over history textbooks.

The debate on history teaching and textbooks will continue because the issue is not limited to the writing and interpretation of history, but concerns at least three aspects that impinge on history teaching as part of the process of education and as a part of the advancement of knowledge. The first of these raises the question of how committed are we to advancing knowledge even in a particular discipline. The second concerns the methods used to advance knowledge. The third is the degree to which we are aware that a discipline is being misused in the interests of assisting political mobilization.

Commitment to advancing knowledge applies not just to history but to every branch of knowledge. This involves a familiarity with the direction taken by a system of knowledge via its evolution, a comprehension of how and why it has changed over time, and what the relevant questions emerging from current knowledge are. In the case of what has more broadly been called Indology (which is often at the root of the present controversy) it would involve examining the early texts? for instance, the *Vedas*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and such like? as well as the commentaries on these texts that were written during the centuries between their composition and now. If we are to study these texts as part of a system of knowledge we have to consider the scholarship and the historical context of the discourse from early times and understand how scholars commenting on these texts analysed them. This requires a degree of expertise not easily available to all.

Associated with this were the variant versions in which the themes of these texts were treated. Why, for example, were these texts treated. Why, for example, were there Buddhist, Jaina and multiple other versions of the *Ramakatha* that differ in significant ways? This was also part of the discourse among scholars of the ancient past and among those who responded to these versions. But in the current discussion of these early texts we marginalize the commentaries and variant versions and refer largely only to 19<sup>th</sup> century writers. This is an impoverishment of our intellectual tradition. It would be worth examining why our views of these texts are largely determined by 19<sup>th</sup> century views of the past. Similarly, we are intolerant of attempts to analyse the past crosscurrents of intellectual life and their historical context, using contemporary techniques of analysis. If such discourse is thought to be a Western way of looking at the texts, then surely the logical reaction in terms of advancing knowledge is to discuss these analyses and not merely dismiss them. Why do we wish to freeze the past instead of exploring it? If the Jaina *Ramayana* – the *Paumacariyam* – tries to provide rational explanations for some of the fantasies of Valmiki, as has been argued by scholars, it would be of interest to find an explanation for this.

I refer to the 19<sup>th</sup> century because what is being projected as 'tradition' is generally the limited view of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then too of the more conservative writers on the past. Even when earlier commentators are occasionally referred to, little mention is made of the lively and contested debates among these scholars and commentators throughout the centuries, debates that arose through questioning and commenting on the meanings of established texts. There was a long lineage of such commentators spanning a range of views. Both the continuity and the changing historical context are relevant. Yet few students know that there were differences of opinion among intellectuals of the early periods on the texts that today are strait-jacketed into an almost meaningless description. Every text is 'sacrosanct'. Few kings are not 'great'. Most kingdoms are empires. Every hero is the epitome of moral values and there is no discussion of lapses. This is sought to be justified by arguing that such a treatment of the past is necessary for building confidence in the Indian identity; but in effect, a more realistic evaluation would create far more confidence since it would be pertinent to person, place and time.

If we are to familiarize ourselves with our intellectual tradition as a prelude to advancing knowledge, we have to bring into the discourse the debates and controversies among scholars of the period prior to colonialism who wrote in Sanskrit, Persian and a range of regional languages, commenting on a variety of earlier text. Discussions of the views of opponents were treated as essential

to the start of a philosophical debate. Current explanations of the Vedas for instance, frequently quote the views of Aurobindo and Vivekananda and the 19<sup>th</sup> century commentators. Their audience was the colonial power and the Indian middle-class and the end purpose was frequently some kind of mobilization. Few attempts are made to try and understand why a major commentator such as Sayana writing in the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D., explained the *Rigveda* for example, in the way he did. If his comments were more familiar to us, even those that remain opaque, we would learn about his intellectual world and also have to consider ways of responding to the text, ways that are currently unacceptable. Since the modern theory of “the Aryans” did not exist in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the context of the *Rigveda* was looked at differently. This is not to suggest that we adopt the fourteenth century reading of the text, but that we try and understand why the reading was different from what it is today, and the degree to which knowledge to this field has changed and advanced. There was in the past constant exchange of diverse views among scholars, writing in Sanskrit, in Persian and in what are now called regional languages. What was the impact of these dialogues? An advance in knowledge does not mean the imposition of a single point of view. It means analyses and assessments of a system of knowledge and these may sometimes lead to fresh perspectives.

The second aspect that impinges on teaching history is that of the method used to advance knowledge. The defining of a method, acceptable to those who are proficient in a particular area of knowledge or a discipline, is essential to the advancement of knowledge in that area. Curiously in India, and especially at the popular level, this concession is made to scientists and to scientific method, but less so to other disciplines. Non-scientists hesitate to pronounce views upon the work, for example, of physicists, astronomers, engineers and those conducting medical research. It is conceded that both the handling of data and the methods of analyzing data, require special training. But in the social sciences, barring the use of mathematics and statistics in economics, for instance, this receive little recognition.

Some social sciences are becoming quite technical, as for example, in the use of mathematics and statistics in economics and in certain kinds of sociological and geographical studies. But history remains the plaything of anyone and everyone. This is largely because the centrality of what is sometimes termed ‘historical method’ in the profession is not generally discussed in the average history syllabus even at college level, leave along high school. This is parallel to the kind of science teaching that ignores talking about scientific method. The result is that scientific formulations are often repeated in school (and sometime even later) as if they were mantras without going through the process of understanding the pros and cons of how they were arrived at.

Historical method involves the processes of understanding the nature of the data and learning how to analyse it. The data, for example, can be potsherd, a coin, an inscription or a text. Understanding the first two categories requires a knowledge of the

material from which they are made and their functions as an object. The information from the latter two trends to be more extract. It is not enough to be able to say that the potsherd belongs to the Northern Black Polished Ware variety, or that the coin was issued by Samudragupta, or that the inscription is a document recording the grant of land in Tamil Nadu or the text, the *Ain-I-Akbari*, is among other things, a statement on Mughal revenue administration. Each source carries a further range of information, not always obvious, but evident to the person trained to search for the information. The analysis of the information does not stop at the obvious statement, for the well-trained historian can draw out much more evidence than just the obvious, and seek answers to a further set of questions.

Explaining the quality, number and distribution of the potsherds and the coins adds further information to what is obvious. If potsherds of the Northern Black Polished Ware are found at sites all over the subcontinent, it is not enough merely to say so since the reasons for this distribution have to be sought. The weight and metal content of coins provides some glimpse of economic exchange, and the depiction points to style and symbolic content. What does it mean – beyond the obvious – if a coin shows Samudragupta slaying a tiger? In the case of an inscription the language and the format can point towards many perspectives. If it is recording a grant of land by a king to a person, then there is the issue of political legitimacy – who is making the grant and why and who is the recipient; what information does it convey about the person issuing the grant, or about a religious sect that is being favoured and if so why; or the implications of the grant for the agrarian economy, if such grants are frequent and on a large scale. The primary questions posed to a text are those concerning the background of the author; the purpose, function and content of the text; and whether these can be compared with those of other texts similar in time and function.

What this means is that the historian has to think beyond the surface information. And since it is the function of the historian to try and explain the past, and the study of the past involves not just chronology but other social sciences as well, the historian has to be aware of the theories of explanation, not only in history but also in other social sciences, theories that have a bearing on the historical aspect of the study. Theories do not have to be applied literally, but an awareness of suggested explanations can help in formulating questions. If the purpose of history is to understand the past and attempt to explain it, which is what the contemporary approach to history is all about, then the theories of explanation in other related social sciences – archaeology, linguistics, social anthropology, sociology, economics, for instance – all have a bearing on this understanding. It is the inter-relationship of all these strands that go into the making of a historical generalization. This is why historical explanations can be and often are, complex.

Not so long ago, I was giving a talk on historical method to a group of science students in Bangalore, who compared it with the scientific method. They raised two questions: firstly, what procedure

does a historian follow in order to examine a historical question since history deals with the past and this cannot be reconstructed and demonstrated as in a laboratory experiment? Secondly, in science if an experiment in a laboratory fails, it is discarded; what do historians do? There are similarities and differences in the processes involved. The historian has to draw upon as much data as is available, to be familiar with previous discussions of the data, to assess its reliability and authenticity and to subject it to a critical enquiry. Unless the data is reliable, and the subsequent analysis is logical, the historical hypothesis collapses. These are the first steps towards stating and then testing a hypothesis, as a prelude to historical interpretation, and prior to making an eventual historical generalization. The historical generalization that then follows must explain as fully as possible the historical question that is being investigated. To this extent the historical method has similarities with the scientific method. Further, every theory finds a niche for discussion and is discussed by historians who are specialists in that field. If it cannot stand up to its critics, it is discarded. The later is not done through government fiat but through an evaluation of the research on which the theory rests. As in the sciences, so too in the social sciences new data and new theories of explanation, when they have been evaluated and established, lead to advances in existing knowledge. However, the evaluation of data from the past cannot be as extensive or as precise as in contemporary science. Therefore insights based on critical enquiry can be helpful in suggesting new avenues of research. Above all, historians focus not on molecules but on human beings.

## 2. Some Popular Misconceptions about History

An aspect that impinges on teaching history but is often overlooked is the popular use or misuse of history both at the level of individuals and by organizations. A number of people, otherwise well read, believe that the history that was current a century ago is still at the cutting edge of historical knowledge. It is often said that if the facts remain the same then surely the reading of these facts must also be unchanged. But not all facts continue to be facts for some do change. New evidence can modify or even annul what were previously taken to be facts. This happens more rapidly with the new evidence of archaeological material from excavations. Not only by this but by asking fresh questions the casual connections between facts can give a different reading. This leads to new historical interpretations.

There is a disinclination to understand, leave alone accept, the more recent interpretations of the past. Knowledge moves on, but for some people out-of-date knowledge remains evergreen. This is not to denigrate the classics of historical writing that can still be read with intellectual profit. But like any work of history, they are best understood when placed in a historiographical context as expressions of a particular space and time. There is also a feeling that the uncertainties of the present and therefore of the future can be relieved by the imagined certainties of the past. What is curious

is the continuous clinging to these imagined certainties among those who have in their own professions questioned past knowledge and projected new interpretations of knowledge in the present: I am referring to those scientists and technologically trained persons who use the scientific method in their own fields, but refrain from using even an approximation of the rational method when it comes to their vision of the historical past. If the method of investigation and assessment outlined above is not used in relation to all knowledge, then the question that needs an answer is, why is there a deliberate choice not to use it in the study of history.

One simple answer is of course that it is a political choice. For some, the past is a given and the particular interpretation of the past supports a political ideology. Such ideologies are being enmeshed in perceptions of identity with an insistence that identities have to be religious. In such cases it is not the history of the Indian citizen that is being sought but the history of the religious community, since that has now become the prime identity.

Where history is geared to a communal identity, attempts are not made to abide by the historical method. Statements of belief are made and reiterated and claimed as history. An example of this is that both Muslim and Hindu communalism have insisted that there was continuous hostility between Hindus and Muslims throughout Indian history. This was also the historical explanation given by most colonial historians to explain events in the medieval period. The communalists and the colonialists propagated the two-nation theory. Historical research over the last 50 years has shown that such a generalization is not tenable. There were immense variations in Hindu-Muslim relations ever since the coming of the Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Mongols and Persians. In some situations, relations were hostile and confrontational both between the two and among the many, in other situations they were amicable and friendly. This requires that historical situations be analysed and assessed in some detail, indicating the variations in the nature of these relationships and explaining why they varied.

There is also the myth that all conversion to Islam took place at the point of the sword: the choice was Islam or Death. This is a caricature of conversion and was first stated by Muslim chroniclers and has since been picked up by others in recent times. Conversion is a psychologically charged process and also relates to conditions of status and general well being. The majority of conversions were by *Jatil* caste and were therefore voluntary. This needs an explanation. Frequently it was the Sufis whose teachings were persuasive. Often this resulted in closeness between the guru and the *pir* in religious forms that eroded religious boundaries. It was this in part that brought about the pluralism of Indian Islam. Since cultural and religious pluralism is a strong component of Indian civilization it makes an impact on all religions in India. It is again this pluralism that is expressed in the many religious forms that allowed multiple and overlapping religious expressions. These are now being axed by the various religious fundamentalisms.

It is disheartening that those who otherwise pride themselves on their analytical abilities cannot analyse the propagandist projection of history. It is argued for example, that upper-caste Hindu culture has primacy because it is the indigenous culture and its history is indigenous history as against the history of India formulated by western scholars. Yet the central features of this so-called 'indigenous history', as for example the Aryan foundations of Indian civilization, or, the innate hostility between Hindu and Muslim, are essentially contributions of colonial interpretations of Indian history as has been repeatedly demonstrated by historians. Since the claim to a particular historical interpretation can become a justification for constructing a particular kind of society, there should be an awareness of what history is being used for example the Aryan foundations of Indian civilization, or, the innate hostility between Hindu and Muslim, are essentially contributions of colonial interpretations of Indian history as has been repeatedly demonstrated by historians. Since the claim to a particular historical interpretation can become a justification for constructing a particular kind of society, there should be an awareness of what history is being used for.

The 'indigenous history' is then described as being attacked by Leftist historians. The more trendy media, anxious to pick up anything that hints at controversy, and ready to sensationalise the trivial, projects the debate inaccurately, as Left versus Right. This particular projection is not peculiar to India. It is typical of many parts of the world where the current political battle is over the supremacy of groups defined by a variety of religious, ethnic or linguistic identities. Those insisting on a narrow, national identity invariably dub the liberals supporting a broader identity as Marxists – intending it as a derogatory term. In doing the same here in India, we are following an international fashion.

The description of Leftist historians in the Indian context has been particularly inept, since any historian who uses the word 'economics' or 'class' is immediately dubbed a Marxist, irrespective of whether he/she has claimed to be one. There seems to be a lack of awareness that such words have an independent existence. The same label is used for those who argue that Indian history has been largely the history of royalty and upper castes, and that history should also incorporate the activities of those lower down in social ranking. Such studies are relevant since the latter have not only provided the labour and the enterprise of much that went into the making of Indian history but have also pioneered a variety of religious movements cutting across formal religions. The objection to discussing the history of caste in India is because it inevitably highlights the warts on Indian society.

Some of the most intellectually stimulating debates in Indian history, have often originated in disagreements among Marxist historians but have then gone on to include a large spectrum of non-Marxist historians, and the debates have extended our understanding of historical problems. An example of this is the extensive debate on feudalism in India where there have been sharp differences among Marxists as well as between Marxists and non-

Marxists. The debate has resulted in far more knowledge now on themes relating to the nature of the state, agrarian economies, changes in caste statuses and the evolution of religious sects. Let us not forget that in a similar fashion, major debates on European feudalism involved economic historians who were not Marxists. Nor is feudalism the only subject of controversy. The definition and difference between states and empires is also being discussed, as is the question of the social origins of religious sects, the role of women in society, or even the impact of environmental factors on history. The issue is not one of Left Fundamentalism and Right Fundamentalism: it is one of history as against a political programme masquerading as history.

The debate on history came to a boil over the issue of textbooks. The Bharatiya Janata Party's attempt was to curtail knowledge rather than to advance it. Passages in the old textbooks that were unacceptable to the BJP ideology were deleted from history textbooks. Any thought of advancing knowledge was terminated by disallowing discussion of the passages in class. This was done not at the instance of historians but on the demand of organizations that were sympathetic to the BJP. History textbooks became a platform for political alliances among such organizations. The textbooks of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) brought out by the BJP government show no evidence of being based on the historical method. If we are not going to repeat the same arguments again and again, and wonder what every change of government is likely to mean to the future of knowledge and education, then perhaps we need to understand the processes involved in the advance of knowledge, particularly in systems where government policy includes the handling of knowledge. This would mean underlining the transparency of institutions concerned with education at various levels and those unacquainted with the processes of advancing knowledge.

### 3. The Institutions of Education

In societies like ours where governments seek to be patrons of knowledge, government policy towards education is fundamental to the way in which knowledge can be advanced, or for that matter, reversed. This becomes central and sensitive in situations where the major part of education, at all levels, is controlled by the Central and State governments. The alternative is not that education should be privatized but that governments should treat it in a less casual way than most have done, or in a callous way as one recent government has done. We have experienced the disastrous impact on education of a committed propagandist policy under the BJP. Such experiences could well be avoided if there is a great participation of educationalists and academics in hammering out the policy, and if the institutions involved in education are allowed to exercise their autonomy and at the same time made transparent and responsible in terms of their social function.

We may choose to regurgitate what we find indigestible from the period of the BJP government in matters of education, but it is

equally, if not more, important to set up procedures and give them the necessary statutory and legal basis so that they cannot be overturned by the next government. This demands urgency since we are chronically slow at activating clearly thought out procedures. It also demands some hard thinking on how to structure institutions. This may involve reformulating the statutes that govern such institutions, a reformulation that could require more than just a ministerial sanction. It would also need a fresh look at the procedures for funding institutions and procedures of how funds are made available. Is it possible to think of alternative ways of ensuring that at least the funding for research can be an independent source even if the finances come from government? The crisis that we have been through was in part created by the collapse of those institutions that had neither the democratic nor the professional autonomy to sustain themselves against government directives. This has to be corrected. Such a correction should be the priority of the present government.

The Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) needs to reconsider urgently the curriculum for school education and do so not in a leisurely fashion but with alacrity, drawing on widespread discussion. There would be at least a small safeguard if the CABE were to be made a statutory body incorporating some legal rights in determining educational structures. Frequency of meetings to vet the procedures could be stipulated. An adequate membership representing educationists and professionals in the disciplines should be a requirement. A good professional representation may allow it to exercise more autonomy than if it is swamped by ex-officio members. It may be worth reconsidering the balance of membership in such bodies. Governments tend to fear the autonomy claimed by academics, consequently academics will have to insist on being represented on state organizations that have educational functions.

In bodies such as the Indian Council for Historical Research, the Indian Council for social science Research and the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, which were mutated to suit the political policy of the BJP, it is not enough to change the people running these organizations. It is equally necessary to examine their existing constitutions with a view to incorporating into these institutions the required statutory and legal provisions that will give them the authority to resist the pressures of a government. These are all primarily research institutions and even though financed by the government, their administration of research projects should not be so vulnerable that they are subjected to the whims of whichever government happens to be in power.

The NCERT could enhance its role as a center for pedagogy interwoven with the disciplines. It could have a primary concern with assessing the textbooks that are used. NCERT textbooks need also to be sieved through professional bodies both for disciplinary content and for pedagogy. Two committees of historians vetted the NCERT textbooks in History prescribed in the 1960s. It might also put into perspective the function of the NCERT textbooks, which were originally thought of as model textbooks.

Since there are a number of textbooks on the market for each subject and class, an evaluation of these books by a responsible body would be a considerable help to schools and Examination Boards in prescribing books. An additional exercise would be to set up discipline committees to assess at least a sample of textbooks used in a range of schools, be they government schools, *shishu mandirs*, *madrassas*, *gurdwara* schools, convents, Dayanand Anglo Vedic (DAV) schools, those of the Ramakrishna Mission and the lot. This is not to suggest a centralized control but transparency in who is teaching what, a transparency that needs to be taken seriously both by professional educationists and by the citizens. Textbooks in some States have been startling in terms of giving misinformation. And the assessment needs to be more than perfunctory. An evaluation of what is acceptable and what is not and for what reasons would raise debates about what goes into school education and such debates are essential for responsible schooling.

Textbooks are not just teaching manuals. They shape the minds of children and to that extent invest the next generation with values of citizenship. Consequently there has to be an awareness of the attitudes inculcated through textbooks – not values that promote political ideologies but values that ensure an informed citizenry and a vibrant civil society, and particularly an awareness of the human rights that go with both. However, vetting textbooks is not sufficient. The procedures of the Examination Boards require to be looked into – particularly the manner in which a syllabus or a textbook is chosen. More often than not there is little evaluation of the content and pedagogy of the book, the choice being arbitrary. Nor is there an attempt to involve teachers who are professionally interested in what they teach. This leads on to the publishers of textbooks, and that is another complex story.

If the syllabus in a subject is to be made more up-to-date then the training of teachers who teach the subject has to be improved. It is unfair to expect teachers to teach what they themselves are unfamiliar with. Extensive refresher courses would be one way of handling the problem. These could be aimed to train the teacher in the methods of the discipline and acquaint her with some of the more established advances in the subject with an emphasis on explaining how the advances have come about. The locating of the discipline within a bigger body of knowledge may help improve the intellectual world-view of the teacher and may well inspire an initiative in pursuing the subject at greater depth. Teachers also need to be encouraged. In many schools, teachers are not trained in a specific subject and teach a range of unconnected subjects. Such teachers would need to be familiar with both the subject and its wider context. If the context catches the attention of the teacher, the subject will also be taught in a more meaningful way. Such refresher courses could be backed by additional ongoing activities. A single course is not enough. It has to be supplemented with the assistance of booklets, television programmes, radio talks, so that the interest of the teachers can be both sustained and enlarged. Since the textbook provides the basic information, the audio-visual media could be used to talk more fully about the subject and to encourage teachers and students to apply this knowledge to the

world in which they live. If the general pattern of the programme can be worked out intelligently and imaginatively, it can be applied in multiple ways.

Doordarshan could have an educational channel bifurcated into programmes for students and teachers. This idea was discussed in the initial stages of Prasar Bharati but was not pursued when the BJP government came to power. Presumably this could also draw on the work of EDUSAT which need not be limited to science education. A basic TV set for every secondary school should not be difficult, particularly if manufacturers can be encouraged to donate such sets. It would make a substantial difference particularly in the teaching of subjects in which visual objects play a part, such as archaeology and history – showing what has been excavated; geography – displaying maps and landscapes; and demonstrating scientific experiments.

Some resources should at least be made available for setting up minimal library facilities in schools that might encourage teachers and senior students to read. The gifting of used books that can be distributed to school libraries may be a way of starting a useful trend. Band textbooks are less of a problem where teachers are themselves aware of the many dimensions of a subject through their reading. If the allocation of resources makes this difficult, some serious thought should be given to putting a stop to financing new universities until primary and secondary education has caught up to a greater degree. Or at least frill interests in university curricula can be divested. Clearly there was enough spare money to fund the whimsical interest of one Minister when finances were made available for establishing Departments of Astrology. This money could have been better diverted to more schools and more training for teachers. In most places children, and especially Dalit children, become literate despite the obstacles presented by the so-called 'educational facilities'.

Speaking of libraries, this is one fundamental requirement for research that with rare exceptions, functions in an appalling manner. Quite apart from books and manuscripts being badly housed, even up-to-date cataloguing is regarded as unnecessary. This makes the retrieval of books so difficult that finding them in the library becomes a battle of wits. When universities are financed, the library is not a priority even though it is in fact the most essential, if not dynamic, part of a university.

Where the state is disinclined, inadequate funding could be improved with private donations for the purchase of books as happens elsewhere where libraries are well managed. Part of the drag on the functioning of libraries is also that the staff is so poorly trained. Sometimes one has the impression that the only qualification seems to be basic literacy. Library science has perhaps to be converted into a more rigorous discipline.

And then there is the problem of duplications in holdings. Libraries have a tendency to order the same books and journals as other libraries in the city. If libraries were made more accessible this

could be avoided and there could be the availability of a wider range of reading. Such measures do become necessary where funding is limited and libraries are specialized. Added to which the cost of books keeps leaping upwards. A computer-based catalogue could provide useful information of the holdings of major libraries in a town provided the data is complete. For example, holding of journals should state which volumes are available where. The format for such computerized data is available from well-established libraries.

One assumes that this could be done more easily for libraries run by government departments. However, three major libraries in Delhi, (the libraries of the Archaeological survey of India, the National Museum and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts) in an area of less than half a mile square, with substantially similar holdings, function independently of each other. A few years ago, some of us working in fields of pre-modern studies had suggested that the functioning of these libraries might be rationalized. They could be clubbed together into a large library complex or their holdings could be so co-ordinated as to avoid duplication, allowing each one to specialize in different fields and subscribe to a different set of journals. A combined catalogue would help locate publications and would provide researchers with access to a fuller range of up-to-date publications and journals. This is centrally important to research since much that is new often takes the form of papers in reputed journals.

Lack of journals and recent publications puts Indian scholars at a disadvantage. Subscribing to many foreign journals is undoubtedly expensive. One of the ways of making such journals in the humanities and social sciences available would be to have a single center where all these are available and where researchers can come and consult them, or else purchase photocopies of relevant papers published in these journals.

Unlike university libraries there are not that many people using these libraries and the functioning could be streamlined. Research does not emerge full-blown seated on a lotus. It requires access to up-to-date information – the kind of access that is now taken for granted in the Institutes of Science and the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management. The existence of the Nehru Museum and Library has helped in raising the sights of research into modern Indian history. Access to up-to-date information is also a requirement for intellectual freedom.

All this cannot immediately be put into action, but much of it can be if it is prioritized and planned. Priority does not mean taking up one institution and funding it lavishly while neglecting others. It can also mean setting up pilot centers to introduce some of the activities and such centers may hopefully become the nuclei of expansion. It also means that there could be some integration with non-governmental agencies involved in similar work.

The advancing of knowledge is an activity at the level of research scholars and institutes, therefore why should one bring in the issue

of improving school education? Knowledge cannot advance in isolation. There has to be a support system that allows, or better still appreciates, cutting-edge research. This can come through an educational system that recognizes one of its purposes as being encouragement to the advance of knowledge through the educational values it endorses and the facilities it provides. This would strengthen the other function of education, namely, ensuring quality in professional training. Such educational values require the availability of school education to all. It is a commitment that few governments are willing to make as is evident from the perennial refusal of an even half way adequate budget for education.

Some like the previous government were reversing measures to advance knowledge because they used educational channels primarily and systematically to propagate an ideology with a deliberate deletion of knowledge that was unacceptable to the ideology. The procedures and institutions I have referred to are not

necessarily where advances in knowledge take place as a first priority, but where the future safeguarding of knowledge has to be ensured.

The wider support comes from a public recognition that the requirements for knowledge have to be comprehended and carried forward, for this alone makes it possible to explain the world around us: knowledge is not there to be bandied about by politicians and the trendy media. Advances in knowledge are always controversial, but the controversies have first to be understood, before they can be pronounced upon. Given all the talk about how advanced we are in Information Technology and what have you, we remain backward in the essentials of education. Having witnessed, not so long ago, an attempt to mangle knowledge, we have to prevent that from happening again. ■

Courtesy *Frontline*, January 28, 2005

Romila Thapar is an eminent historian in India.

## 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium on Poverty Research in Sri Lanka

### CALL FOR PAPERS

#### Putting Land First?

#### Exploring the Links between Land and Poverty

The Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) and the Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre (SPARC) at the University of Colombo would like to invite researchers and development practitioners to submit papers for presentation at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium on Poverty Research in Sri Lanka, to be held in Colombo in November 2005.

Authors are invited to send an abstract to the organisers on or before August 15, 2005. Research papers should address at least one of the following topics:

- Understanding the links between land and poverty
- Land policy and land reform and their impacts on poverty in Sri Lanka
- Land policies in tsunami-affected areas and their impacts on poverty
- New conceptual and empirical research on other poverty related topics

Priority will be given to Sri Lankan experiences, but the organisers welcome research papers on relevant work in South Asia.

**For abstract format and more information, please contact:**

Centre for Poverty Analysis

29, Gregory's Road, Colombo 7

Tel: +94 11 2676 955-8, Fax: +94 11 2676 959, E-mail: [info@cepa.lk](mailto:info@cepa.lk); Web: [www.cepa.lk](http://www.cepa.lk)