

PERCEPTIONS OF THE PAST

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Romila Thapar

I sometimes reflect on the curious situation when, in about the mid-nineteenth century, the inscriptions of the emperor Asoka were being deciphered in India. They were discovered in various parts of the country and initially their author was unknown. It was thought that a clue might lie in his title which also occurs in the *Mahāvamsa*, and especially as the author was sympathetic to Buddhism. For a brief period the question was asked as to whether he could have been a king from Sri Lanka who had established his rule over the Indian sub-continent? The thought is historically provocative even if inaccurate, and is one of those with which one can play the game of, "If it were so, then what follows."

What follows is a well-established fact that throughout the history of South Asia, India and Sri Lanka have been closely linked. Such ties are expected of territories that are continuous, but there are special aspects to these ties that go beyond being neighbours. The closeness is so well known that I shall not repeat what has been frequently stated. The many historical occasions when India and Sri Lanka were brought together either by political connections, or religious interests or commercial concerns, have often been recalled. I would therefore like to turn my attention to a different historical perspective.

I would like to speak about the themes that are now of interest to historians and of how the historical study of these has changed the perceptions of the past in the last fifty years. My concern is not with narrating history but with the historiographic interests. I shall touch on a few of these changes in the understanding of the past and emphasise those on which there has been much discussion. Readings of the past invariably have repercussions on the present, as indeed the present can determine the reading of the past. A continued exploration of these readings through a variety of dialogues, prevents the past from becoming a dogma. It has taken many centuries of struggle all over the world, for the historian to emerge out of the cocoon of being merely the official record keeper. It would be a shame if the historian has to go back into that cocoon.

The modern readings of the South Asian past began with the European investigation of its history in the nineteenth century. This can be said to have had two characteristics: one was the insistence

that the civilisation of the sub-continent traditionally lacked a sense of history, and therefore its history had to be freshly "discovered." The second characteristic was that this discovery was heavily influenced by European preconceptions, both in the definition of history and in the understanding of the culture of South Asia.

History in this definition was a sequential narrative of politically important events: the succession of rulers, battles won or lost and such like. This was skeletal history, providing a prop, but not necessarily conducive to searching questions. The concerns now pursued with reconstructing the past, as for example, the legitimacy of rule, the appropriation of resources, the justification for

dominance and subordination, the organisation of social hierarchies, and the inter-face between religion and society, are all themes which were not to the forefront in the colonial investigation of the past. There was a hesitation to probe into what might result in awkward discoveries, undermining colonial policy. But the hesitation was also conditioned by preconceptions about South Asian civilisation.

The nineteenth century was a century of certainties, many of which were expressed in the way the past was organised. This involved, among other things, arranging the many unfamiliar cultures and histories of the world into comprehensible categories. There were therefore, the basic categories of the primitive and of the civilised. The world was divided into geographically well-defined civilisations, on the fringes of which were those described as primitive and barbaric peoples. Civilisations were viewed as emerging almost miraculously but it was believed that they were constantly threatened by attacks from primitive peoples. The argument that it was often the latter that helped forge a civilisation, would have been blasphemy.

The interface of varying cultures within the same civilisation, was inevitably out of focus. In the context of India for example, a sharp segregation was maintained between what was regarded as Hindu culture and Islamic culture. Because the sub-continent was identified as Hindu and Sanskritic, manifestations of Islam and Persian culture were frequently dubbed as alien, even if they had been embedded in the Indian consciousness for over a thousand years. The dismissal of the non-Hindu was often without any historical explanation.

But the certainties of the nineteenth century were transmuted into the uncertainties of the twentieth. The notion that a civilisation could be self-contained, and uni-cultural, was questioned. The inter-face between cultures rather than cultural monoliths began to acquire visibility. It is this visibility and its historical presence that is being resented today by those who continue to maintain that civilisations are monolithic and untouched by anything which they define as extraneous.

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This approach is reflected in many history syllabuses. And what is also interesting is that the debate or in some cases even the insistence, is not restricted to new nations, but is also present in the older nations of the west. In the latter, a losing battle is being fought for instance, by those who insist that the civilisation of ancient Greece, to which all European culture is traced, is a miracle and unique unto itself, untouched by contemporary non-Greek societies. It would seem that the very concept of civilisation now requires a new definition, if it is to be retained.

Some of these preconceptions are closely tied into nationalisms. European nationalisms often arose during the process of the historical transformation of pre-modern societies into nation-states. This was in some ways a different kind of nationalism from that of the colonies. Here there was a contestation with the colonial power. The eventual conversion of the colony into a nation-state was not an identical experience to that of the European. There was also an imprint of colonial interpretations of the history of the colony. The reactions of the nationalisms of the colony to these and the attempt to change these interpretations, becomes therefore a significant aspect of reading the past. This has particular relevance to the central concerns of nationalisms in as much as they relate to questions of origins and identities.

I would like to review three themes which have been seminal to the interpretation of the history of various societies in the past and which are now being viewed rather differently by contemporary historians. One of these is the notion of origins, particularly those linked to race; the other is the concept of the historical identity of a community; and the third is the concern with cultural inter-connections among societies, often triggered off by exchange through trade which includes both artifacts and ideas.

The new readings of these historical concerns question the claims to unbroken historical continuities or an absence of cultural inter-face in relation to either origin or identity. Identities become self-conscious concerns when a society undergoes historical change as

is the case with contemporary modernisation. The essence of modernisation is not just technological change or the imitation of the west, but lies in the way people relate to one another. This changes from the earlier belief that some people in a society are inherently superior to the rest to an insistence on the equality, dignity and self-respect of all members of a society. This is a fundamental change and therefore not an easy one. Because it concerns a change from the past, history can be mobilised to obstruct or to facilitate.

The themes of origins, identities and cultural interactions are being analysed in the histories of many societies. In a certain sense the common concern about these themes makes it possible for there to be dialogues among historians across the world, dialogues which are stimulating and richly explorative. If I am restricting myself to the Indian data, it is only because that is the history with which I am most familiar.

The Category of Race

Among the more favourite categories in nineteenth-century Europe, which were used to explain cultural differences, was the category of race. This was derived from what was then regarded as the new scientific knowledge referred to as "race science." Various current theories went into its making: there were the newly formulated principles of Linnaeus for defining the genera and species of plants and Darwin's theories of evolution, both of which were applied to human societies; and inevitably, there was the impact of triumphant imperialism which believed

in the invincibility of its achievements. Race science worked out a hierarchy of races and inevitably, some were said to be superior to others.

The theory when applied to the Indian past claimed to provide the answer to the question of origins. India was described as Hindu civilisation, originating in the second millennium BC, through the conquest of northern India by the superior Aryan race which implanted its culture and language – Sanskrit – and became the fountainhead of South Asian civilisation. A century later, the theory of the Aryan *race* as the progenitor of a civilisation, has little credence in scholarly circles. However, the notion of such a race still has an appeal at the popular level perhaps because it was reiterated so often and because it is useful in political mobilisation.

The construction of the Aryan race initially drew upon the erroneous idea that those who spoke the same language belonged to the same race. This combination of the monogenesis of language and

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ancestry, can be traced back to the ideas of William Jones and other Orientalists, although the theory of Aryan race was a later development. The racial identity of the Aryan in Europe was initially based on those who spoke Indo-European languages and was later extended to physical characteristics, such as skin colour or the colour of hair and eyes, the size of the nose and the shape of the skull. Ethnographers in India also busied themselves searching for Aryans through measuring the nasal index. The Sanskrit-Aryan equation having been proposed, there was an insistence on the equation of the Dravidian languages with a Dravidian race, which was propounded with equal vehemence.

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The first application of the theory of Aryan race to the earliest Indian textual source, the *Rgveda*, was by Max Muller writing during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was despite his being well aware of the inaccuracy of identifying race with language and even cautioning against it. What he called the Aryans of India were for him not only related through kinship to the Aryans of Europe but were also their nearest intellectual relatives: virtually a lost wing of the European past. This touched a chord in middle-class India and Keshab Chander Sen, stated that, "... in the advent of the English nation in India we see a reunion of parted cousins, the descendents of two different families of the ancient Aryan race."

Since this theory claimed to reveal the origins of Indian civilisation it was appropriated by innumerable groups with varying ideologies and particularly those of a nationalist nature. Interpreted differently by each, it was used as ammunition in their political confrontations. The question of the earliest peoples and the original homeland is always a sensitive, and often a contested issue, among all nationalisms. But to the historian this is not a matter of primary concern. The past in every culture is a reservoir of potential that could remain untapped and unseen. But often the revelation or the unveiling is through one culture interacting with another. In such situations identities assume new meanings. We also need to remind ourselves that identities are not determined at one point of time. They evolve through the interaction of peoples and cultures and undergo historical change.

In the nineteenth century in India, every ideology, whether political or socio-religious, or whether colonial or nationalist, had its take on the Aryan theory. Let me illustrate this by mentioning the two extreme positions among a range of others. What has now come to be regarded as the Dalit interpretation was first propounded by

Jyotiba Phule in the late nineteenth century. He argued that the Aryan invasion had brought the Brahmans to India and their conquest had led to the lower castes, who were the indigenous and earliest inhabitants, being reduced to servitude. Brahman oppression was exercised through the caste system. At the other extreme, those who formulated the ideology of Hindu nationalism in the early part of this century, came to deny that there was any invasion or migration. For them the Aryans were indigenous and the Hindus or Hindu Aryas were their descendents. Furthermore, picking up from the current Nazi ideology, it was argued that the Hindu Aryas had valiantly defended the "race spirit" of their ancestors. This was said to be their attempt to resist the intrusion of the aliens who were listed as the Muslims, the Christians and the Communists.

Given the conflicting uses of the theory, the historian has to ask what was the evidence for constructing the Aryan race from statements in the earliest Vedic compilation, that of *Rgveda*. The construction was based on just a few ideas. One was that the word *varna* meaning colour and was used as distinguishing category, read as skin colour. But *varna* is used in a variety of contexts, such as the colours of dawn, of the sky, and of the earth. It does not necessarily refer to human pigmentation. It is now being argued that the word was used symbolically to differentiate groups. Many cultures use black and white when they wish to speak of extreme differences of any kind. Later, *varna* came to refer to ritual status, and was translated by European observers as "caste." There seems to be only one reference to human pigmentation where the dark skin of the *dāsa* is mentioned, and this occurs in a very late section of the text. If skin colour, viewed as race, was the major feature of difference, then surely it would have been mentioned in the earliest part of the text and would have been repeatedly referred to. What are repeatedly referred to are differences of language, of rituals and of custom.

The generally held view among historians and archaeologists is that the *āryas* did not belong to a distinctive and superior race but came to northern India as migrants from north-eastern Iran and Afghanistan, speaking what we call the Indo-Aryan language. The larger view still maintains that there was no massive invasion causing displacements of peoples, but rather, there were a series of small and constant migrations with the pastoral migrants looking for better pastures and bigger cattle herds. Conflicts were frequent but more in the nature of skirmishes and predatory cattle raids. Such hostilities were sometimes said to have been between *āryas* and *dāsas* and sometimes among the *āryas*. The *dāsas* were rich in cattle, spoke a different language and observed rituals and social customs other than those of the *āryas*. Thus the difference was essentially linguistic and cultural and therefore historically conditioned. *Arya* was a claim to a cultural and social status, encapsulating this difference and reflecting the use of Indo-Aryan as an obvious feature.

The historically important question therefore does not relate to a conquest of northern India by the Aryans and the subordination of the local people; embedded in this is the popular political obsession

with the question of who came first to the land on the basis of which a priority in rights is to be worked out. It relates instead to investigating a process of change in northern India that incorporated the Indo-Aryan speakers into what was evolving as early Indian culture. It also relates to explaining why Indo-Aryan eventually came to dominate the languages of northern India. But this change was not a simple, linear process and has posed many questions for the historian.

The Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic languages seem to have been prevalent in northern India prior to the arrival of Indo-Aryan. This is suggested by the language of the *Rgveda*, dating to between 1500 and 1000 BC, which shows the incorporation of elements of Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic – in syntax, in phonetics and in vocabulary. These increased when Indo-Aryan spread from northwestern India to the Ganges valley by about 500 BC. These elements are noticeably absent in other languages of the same Indo-European group as Indo-Aryan. Languages as we know, change both through use over time and through contact with other languages. What needs to be examined then is the nature of this contact.

Such an investigation inevitably requires that historians move from the simplistic explanation of an invasion leading to political dominance, and begin to consider the far more complex factors that play a role in the relationships between different groups of people. In trying to understand how a culture comes to be dominant among a multiplicity of cultures, we would have to analyse the changing relationships between the groups who are members of the cultures. This would involve a range of agencies, and an equally broad span of processes – from contestation to assimilation. There is no single, easy answer.

The spread of the Indo-Aryan language, has now to be examined in terms of the role of the Indo-Aryan speakers. Coming as pastoralists, what was their relationship with the people among whom they settled? There is evidence of hostility but also of some inter-mixing. Where the relationship was one of mutual accommodation, there it would have encouraged bilingualism. Eventually this would result in the spread of that language which had an edge over the others. Was this advantage claimed by the Indo-Aryan speakers because they came with a better technology – the use of the horse and chariot for herding and speedy movement, familiarity with the solar calendar to assist agricultural processes, and perhaps even an eventual preference for iron technology as more efficient than copper? And was all this enveloped in claims to move effective rituals?

Most importantly, this also implies a new and different understanding of the meaning and role of Aryanism as a historical process. It is not the victory of a racial group or the easy imposition of one culture on another, but the evolving of a pattern that uses many parameters. Those claiming to be *āryas* must have proximity to political power, to authority and control over resources; in such a society Indo-Aryan derived languages are expected to be the languages of high culture, but may well incorporate elements of other languages, which continue to be used at other social levels; the divisions in society should follow the rules, in theory at least, of ritual status or *varna*, since the *ārya* is placed among the upper, twice born castes; those viewed as powerless are subordinated and relegated to be providers of labour and services.

Despite this the term *ārya* gradually acquired a wider connotation. It was even used on occasion as a designation of status for those

whose ethnic and linguistic identities did not conform to the above in every way. It became a term of respect and was extended even to those whose claim to power lay paradoxically in having renounced it, such as the monk and the ascetic. Renunciation was viewed as a form of acquiring authority, although of a different kind from the usual. That *ārya* could have multiple levels of social meaning was a notion unfamiliar to historians for whom authority was solely political. As a designation, *ārya* could become a mechanism for appropriating status.

The defining of the two communities was not based on careful historical research but was largely an extension of the earlier colonial theory: namely, that South Asian civilisation was Hindu and Sanskritic and had to contend with cultures which came later into the sub-continent, such as the Islamic. James Mill, by the 1820s, had invented his hegemonic periodisation of Indian history, dividing it into the Hindu, the Muslim and the British periods. This division of history took root so firmly that it was virtually impossible to question it until a few decades ago.

Historical Identity

The late nineteenth century also saw the beginnings of nationalism in the various countries of South Asia. This was associated with the emergence of a middle class as a new social phenomenon. And like the middle class in other colonial societies, and elsewhere too, it sought a status. This took the usual form of segments of the society claiming priority in the history of the society. The claim came in part through theories of origins and identities, and raises the question of the present impinging on the past.

One of the most evident forms of the present impinging on the past relates to the history of communities. These were seen as an essential constituent of the social pattern and indeed they were so. But the definition of the community, more often than not, drew its contours from the present and these were then imposed on the past. Thus for the Indian past, it was stated that the history of the second millennium AD was dominated by two communities, identified by religion – the Hindu and the Muslim – and the two were permanently in an antagonistic relationship. Such claims to historical identities were nurtured by colonial readings of the past which were then supported by some forms of nationalism.

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To the historian, the categorising of people as indigenous or alien for a period going back four thousand years into the past, seems anachronistic. This has become politically fashionable in some circles in India for instance, where the arya are said to be indigenous to India and are identified with the people of the Indus civilisation. What archaeology tells us loud and clear is that people in those times were not stationary. Many migrated long distances, with some going back and forth.

The descriptive labels of Hindu and Muslim, come to be used quite late. "Hindu" was initially a geographical term, derived from *al-hind*, the name that the Arabs have to the land across the river Indus to its east and south. It was subsequently used for the people who lived in this land. It was not until some seven hundred years after the contact with Islam, that Hindu came gradually to be used for the religions of India, other than Islam and Christianity, and some Hindus accepted the label. Similarly, the term used for the Arabs in inscriptions from western India was *Tâjik*. The Turks were referred to by various names such as *Turuska*, *Saka* and *Yavana*, some of which go back to pre-Christian times with reference to people from west and central Asia. *Mleccha* is another one of these terms meaning those that are outside the caste hierarchy. All these terms are used despite the Arab and Turkish presence in India both as conquerors and as traders.

The significance of this terminology is that all the Muslims were not included under one label, as we tend to do today. The Arabs and the Turks for example, were differentiated. Those for whom we use the blanket term 'Hindu' today were also differentiated according to whether they were Saiva or Vaisnava or followers of any other sect and named after their sectarian belief. The continuing use of terms from earlier times also suggests that they were not seen as strange newcomers but as the usual people who came across

the borders and the seas as pastoralists, traders, navigators and soldiers: as part of a continuum. The meanings of the terms by which groups of people refer to themselves and to others, are very significant. They change through history, but the precise point in time when a term comes into use, also has a historical importance. Historical accuracy does require that we distinguish between the labels that we now give to communities, and the labels that they used earlier for each other and for themselves.

In the study of medieval Indian history in our times, conforming to the perspective of Hindu and Muslim nationalisms, communities are depicted as monolithic and uniform in identity. Historical causation is limited to arguing that throughout the period from 1000 to 1800 AD, the Muslim was hostile to the Hindu, and from the other perspective, that the Hindu was treacherous in his dealings with the Muslim. But communities are not uniform and monolithic and their behaviour is never invariable and predictable. Major studies of this period are now indicating the complex inter-relations between communities. Their identities may be fashioned up to a point by religion, but their concerns are equally determined among other things, by caste, occupation, location and language. Historians are trying to understand historical causality through an analysis of multiple factors, rather than just a single one. Religious differences were expressed but were not overly projected as in our current assumptions about the pre-modern past.

The colonial notion of the two Indian communities was also nurtured by the expectations of varieties of nationalism. Notions of origins and identities attempt sometimes to use the alternate classification of indigenous and alien. This derives partially from the narrow definition of a civilisation as imprinted in the nineteenth century, but is also coloured by nationalisms that exclude groups within the same society.

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the action was. The archaeology of this area clearly points to its witnessing a considerable coming and going of peoples, goods and inevitably therefore, ideas. This activity has been a constant factor in Indian history. Mountains are seldom barriers, for mountain passes are corridors of communication. Animal herders, itinerant traders, migrants were all milling around in these parts as they are to this day. And in those days there were neither cartographic boundaries, nor national frontiers which had to be crossed, nor a demarcation of citizenship.

Cultural Interaction

Areas such as these were also the locations of innovation in South Asian history. Asian trade had a number of nodal places where routes met, where traders exchanged their cargo and from where ideas traveled along with the ships and caravans. Sri Lanka was clearly one of these, set in the heart of the Indian Ocean. Early links were with immediate neighbours. Information from the excavation of megalithic sites in the island has filled in the historical lacunae relating to the beginnings of sedentary culture – irrigation, agriculture and iron artifacts. These societies parallel the megalithic burials of South India in date and form. Those of the Indian peninsula suggest heterogeneous cultures, given the striking variation in the patterns of burial. There is also a parallel with the arrival of Buddhist missions, doubtless made easier by the fact that Mauryan administration extended as far south as Karnataka and had friendly relations with those further South.

The expansion of contact from immediate neighbours to the wider world came about later when trade was initiated, not only with South India but even further afield with merchants from the eastern Mediterranean. The traders from the Roman empire sought spices, textiles and gemstones, the items which the patrician women of the Roman metropolitan cities fancied. Roman senators and historians of the time – men such as Tiberius and Pliny – complained loudly about the drain of wealth to the eastern trade, but the trade went from strength to strength. Spices and especially pepper became a necessity for the preservation of meat and for medicines.

This long distance trade locked into the existing networks of exchange. Gradually the megalithic societies in India were transmuted from being societies with simple technologies to

complex societies of merchants, production centres and cities. The trade was not to be scoffed at since the exchange brought high quality Roman coins. The economy of the trade would have played some part in determining the form of the states that emerged subsequently. But equally important it stretched eastwards to south-east Asia. Sri Lanka became the major entre-pot when trade was no longer confined to the coast of the Arabian Sea and of the Bay of Bengal, but spanned the Indian Ocean. Inevitably therefore, the coming and going of people as required by trade led to their intermingling which in turn resulted in the forging of new identities and to contributing to the changing of earlier identities.

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An almost exact counterpart to this situation was the area known as Gandhara in northwest India, the nodal point where many routes met. Some came from central Asia and were to become part of the Silk Route; others came overland from west Asia and the eastern Mediterranean and what was eventually to emerge as Byzantium;

Silk Route; others came overland from west Asia and the eastern Mediterranean and what was eventually to emerge as Byzantium; and yet others from South Asia and particularly the Ganges valley route, which in its eastward extension developed links with south-east Asia. And as often happens, it was also a nodal place for the exchange of ideas particularly in medicine, cosmology and astronomy. One of the most complex and fascinating statements about ethnic perceptions come from the high status *brâhmana* astronomer, Varâhamihira. He writes in praise of the Greek study of astronomy and mathematics and says that the Greeks should be treated as *rsis* – even if in terms of social status they are *mleccha*/impure. The locating of the nuances of such perceptions would

provide insights into understanding cultural interconnections.

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More pertinent to our present moment of time, was the gathering interest in a concept common to many sects and societies of these centuries – the concept of the saviour-to-come and the new millennium. There was a blossoming of parallel ideas in religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. Millenarian fantasies occur in situations of social change or conflict. They are attempts to re-establish status by those who may have lost it, and thereby also establish a new identity in the midst of change. Social anxieties often tell us more about a past society than glowing descriptions of golden ages.

A major Hindu deity Visnu, acquires at this time a tenth incarnation, that of Kalkin. We are told that he will be born a *brâhmana* and will come riding a white horse, bringing salvation to the upper

castes. It is predicted that towards the end of the present time cycle, the lower castes will have appropriated upper-caste status and authority. For those laying down norms there is always the fear that their ordering of society may not be observed. In a world turned upside down, Kalkin restores the order of the castes and ushers in another time cycle, a new age of virtue.

There is also a noticeable emphasis on the Buddha Maitreya – the Buddha who is yet to come. Some say he will be born in a Brahman family and will live many thousand years as a householder before leaving home to preach the doctrine. Fa Hsien, the Chinese-Buddhist monk who traveled in India and Sri Lanka in the early fifth century was told that a time would come when people would take to evil ways and the faithful would have to hide in the mountains. The Buddha Maitreya would appear to restore the doctrine and give confidence to the faithful.

The Revelation of John, the final book of the New Testament in the Bible, is not dissimilar. It too speaks of the coming of the reign of Jesus Christ that will last for a thousand years – literally, the coming of the millennium. Written in the eastern Mediterranean, as about the same time as the others, this text assumes the continuing persecution of the virtuous by the wicked, by those opposed to the teachings of Christ, a persecution which will be terminated by the coming of Christ.

The similarities are parallel in terms of the concept. There is of course a difference between an oppressed *brâhmana* and a persecuted Christian. Kalkin is concerned with reinstating the status of castes, Maitreya and Christ with alleviating the suffering of the down trodden and re-establishing the doctrine. There was a time when there were heated debates among historians as to which of these versions had influenced the others. Today we understand such similarities as being not necessarily the influence of one upon the other, but as emanating from a common universe of discourse. The effort now is to try and understand both the discourse and its historical contexts.

What is historically interesting about the concept of the saviour to come is, that the decline of society is linked to the decline of what in today's terminology would probably be viewed as the functioning of civil society. There is therefore a turning towards the powerful imagery of the return of the saviour. It is he who will bring back the social order or the doctrine from which it is derived. Almost two thousand years ago, the millennium metaphorically symbolised the hope for an upward turn in the human condition, even if the turn required supernatural assistance. Perhaps now after two thousand years we can at least attempt the kind of human effort which may bring about an upward turn.

The coming of another millennium introduces a paradox. The year 2000 points to the future in a far more dramatic way than in earlier times when our ancestors stood on the cusp of a millennium, as we stand today. The future now can be like the expanding galaxy breaking the communication barrier on earth and in space. But it also carries the alternative of a burnt out world rotting aimlessly, if nuclear destruction and ecological pollution cannot be curbed; or for that matter forms of genocide, frequently politically motivated which often seek legitimation from history even if this history has to be invented. The paradox is that the key to the future lies in

the past. The way in which we analyse the past, enabling us to comprehend the present, will determine the form of the future. We can bring about an upward turn in the human condition if we allow the humanism of the past to empathise with the future. ■

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Romila Thapar has written extensively on the many aspects of the Indian past. Her better known books are: *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*; *From Lineage to State*; *Interpreting Early India*; *Time as a Metaphor of History*; and recently *Sakuntala, Text, Readings, Histories*. She is now Emeritus Professor of History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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