

Where History Falls Silent Tradition Speaks

Dr. Subroto Roy*

INTRODUCTION

Indians are charged with the lack of a sense of history. If we really look at what history has by and large done so far, we will really not be very proud of it. When we read historical literature, we see heavy reliance on linguistic, archaeological findings, astronomical data, genetics and other tangible things either individually or in combination of two or more of the above as evidence. These are taken as supporting evidences for conjectures about our past to be ultimately almost irrevocably accepted as historical facts, unless convincingly felled. But one has to employ the same method refute them, otherwise it is normally not acceptable in the community of researchers. This phenomenon has almost become like a dogma. As such despite their incompleteness, these methods are almost thrust upon us and serve as some kind of tools to implement an "epistemological anarchy"; where you are not allowed to change the rules of the game, borrowing from Paul Karl Feyerabend, an Austrian-born philosopher of science, who went on to profess that that all science is an anarchic enterprise, not a nomic one.

Despite this as far as such evidences can be found, it is a fair practice, but results should never ever be considered as irrevocable or infallible. Also, this digging into the past has value if it, in various ways enriches our present and promises value addition to our future; otherwise not. The value addition could be due to our knowledge of origins of present tangible and intangible things, chronology of their development, and ultimately their evolution. These three; origins, chronology, and evolution are after all the main concerns of history.

But There Are Some Unwelcome Possibilities In This Method:

1. Theories based on Archaeological findings keep changing rapidly and sometimes radically with reference to newer and newer excavations and non-researchers are

unaware of the latest findings and keep repeating the old 'truths' which have now been rendered 'false' or half-truths,

2. Some present tangible and intangible things may be of such great antiquity that these three essential aspects [origins, chronology, and evolution] cannot be established using the historical method; for example the origin of the Vedas,

3. History that is deemed to be factual may differ from traditional beliefs; the age of human beings evolved from chimps as against the ancient Indian cosmology. The rule thrust upon us thanks to the 'evolution theory' cannot be changed and hence not monic,

4. Unresolved gaps as missing links might exist in chronology and evolution of things around us; e.g., the almost sudden beginning of the so-called period of enlightenment in the West, and

5. Advocates/activists posing as scholars might promote concocted stories in the name of history; e.g., The Aryan Invasion Theory propagated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler [A theory which had little credible to substantiate] which I see as a colonial conspiracy to create an 'Aryan-Dravidian' divide where there was none. Scholars now term such theories as "factoids." A factoid is a speculation or guess that has been repeated so often that it is eventually taken for hard fact.

6. Lack of understanding of language or non-decipherment of language pose major problem to really pinpoint the thinking of peoples. For instance the Harappan Script has not yet been deciphered. Forget about this even the word Arya has been misunderstood and declared as a genetic variance of human beings. Here I quote Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, one of the world's leading experts on the Ancient

7. Indus Valley Civilization:

"The concept of an "Aryan" race is one example of a "factoid". The term "Aryan" is derived from the term "ārya" found in the Rig Veda and meaning "good or noble, someone who speaks Sanskrit, someone who practices the proper Vedic rituals" etc."

8. Therefore, merely knowing dates is of no use unless the

*Independent researcher and Dhruvad vocalist. He has been a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in Sanskrit, University of Pune. and can be reached at subrotor@gmail.com



9. knowledge adds value to the animate and the inanimate worlds. In Indian terms, knowledge is useless unless there is value addition to the gross and the subtle states of creation, and all the intervening states in the spectrum. Let's not forget that it is only cultural India which has prayed for peace in the entire universe "antariksha shantih", cutting across all conceivable parochial boundaries.

10. It is therefore important to gather data not only on cultural practices but also deeply understand cultural concepts that underlie these practices. Practices can be learnt, but it is difficult to absorb the essence of concepts. Cultural conceptual traditions give us deep insights into the minds of our ancestors; in our case the Vedic tradition.

CULTURAL TRADITION

The incompleteness of the picture of our past with the help of archaeology, linguistics, genetics, etc is a problem historians are facing. But understanding cultural practices of peoples spread over varied periods of time is seen as the most renowned scholars as an alternative theoretical framework. I have been independently thinking of this aspect of cultural tradition for long before I stumbled upon such scholars who have gone deeper into the problem and provided solutions.

A glance at the timeline of the Indus Valley civilization shows that there is a continuity of tradition in this part of the world which is the world. In his article Kenoyer writes in his article "Cultures and Societies of the Indus Tradition":

"Using...chronological and theoretical framework it is possible to describe the cultures emerging in the northwestern regions of South Asia without getting buried with all of the data..."

CORE CULTURAL VALUES

Drawing from Anthropology, Core Cultural Values (CCV)s are those which do not easily change with time within a culture. When we say that 'change is constant' we forget that 'continuity is constant' especially in ancient civilizations. The very fact a civilization is called ancient is testimony to its long standing and continuity of identifying factors of that civilization. Life after life is one belief that exists even today and has continued from the ancient most times.

India and Some of its CCVs

When I say India, I do not mean the current political India; it is the cultural India which I obviously refer to which includes the Vedic/Indus civilization. Geographically, recent researcher say, this civilization spread beyond Egypt and up to Mesopotamia.

Indian civilization beginning from the Rishis to the revelation of the hoary Vedas and later their trifurcation into Sama, Yajur, and Rig Vedas is the oldest human civilization whose "enlightenment" happened very early. The straight roads found in the Indus sites are unmistakable evidence of the fact that there were competent engineers among the Indus people. The British copied water proofing technique from Indus and termed it as 'English Bond' which is now a standard term. This is a learnt aspect of culture, but there are existents in human cultures which cannot be or will not require to be replicated elsewhere. Such cultural existents become hallmarks of a certain civilization.

The debate over dating existents in the ancient Indian cultural universe is never over. But dating them and therefore setting a chronology in terms of their origins, evolution, and development is like a wild goose chase because of their oral aural nature of communication. This automatically takes us into the domain of epistemology and question whether the historical method is valid while dealing with such a huge corpus of knowledge that was primarily transmitted not in writing, but in the Shiksha (oral-aural; from guru to student) tradition of ancient India. More fundamentally, the discourse of method in dealing with such material needs to be revisited.

I have seen that in the context of music there are some CCVs which have stuck to our culture from the earliest time. For instance the Vedic concept of time is cyclic and so is the

Table 1 : Indus Tradition: Basic Chronology

Foraging Era Mesolithic and Microlithic	10,000 to 2000 BCE
Early Food Producing Era Mehrgarh Phase	7000 to 5500 BCE
Regionalization Era Early Harappan Phases Ravi, Hakra, Sheri Khan Tarakai, Balakot, Amri, Kot Diji, Sothi,	5500 to 2600 BCE
Integration Era Harappan Phase	2600 to 1900 BCE
Localization Era Late Harappan Phases Punjab, Jhukar, Rangpur	1900 to 1300 BCE"

present musical time concept. It is increasingly becoming clear that the Vedic and Indus Valley civilizations are not differently placed in the timeline. Another CCV is the cremation ceremony in the Indus Civilization which involves that the mortal remains must have the feet placed in the South direction. This practice is being followed to this day.

Take the case of ancient Nayay (literally "rule or method of reasoning" according Matthew R. Dasti of the Bridgewater State University U. S. A.). He writes that Epistemologically, Nyāya "develops a sophisticated precursor to contemporary reliabilism (particularly process reliabilism)". "Nyāya's methods of analysis and argument resolution influenced much of classical Indian literary criticism, philosophical debate, and jurisprudence," He adds. You can see that 'jurisprudence' or the subject of judiciary has not be new to India. In fact the earliest dedicated texts on this subject can be safely said to be the Dharma-sutras which are also known as Vedangas meaning parts of the hoary Vedas.

Although the text is the Nyāya-sūtra is attributed to Gautama (200 A.D.), it may very well have come down by the oral-aural tradition from much earlier. Now you can see below (quoting Mathew again) how thoughts and views got added from time to time uniquely in India and which is the hallmark of this civilization:

"Throughout much of Nyāya's formative period the philosophical development of the school took place through commentaries on the sūtras (with important exceptions including works of Jayanta, c. 875, Udayana, c. 975, and the somewhat heterodox Bhāsarvajña, c. 875). Leading commentators include Vātsyāyana (c. 450), Uddyotakara (c. 600) Vācaspati Miśra (c. 900) and Udayana. The school would enter its "new" phase (navya-nyāya) in the work of the eminent epistemologist Gaṅgeśa Upādhyāya (c. 1325)."

Bimalkrishna Matilal, the Spalding Chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University and who introduced many Western thinkers to Indian philosophical thought, in his analysis of Indian logic in Navya Nyaya

quoted that 'everything is subjunct to time'. Now this is a very profound observation of Indians and is true. This comes down as a CCV from Vedic times since the shastras are but analysis and expositions of the Vedas.

So we see that some important CCVs have travelled to us through different kinds of cultural communications. In fact, they have travelled outside this culture; abroad. But None can claim that these thoughts originated elsewhere only because they have very deeply and widely permeated into own culture and stayed embedded in our lives. They are there in our collective memories and we have practiced these CCVs as second nature. For instance, the cyclic nature of time in our 'life after life' belief or in our music in the form of cyclic meter. Another culture might learn it but will not digest it as much as we have done. The Corollary is that if we find a large number of cultural existents in another culture that are common with us from the conceptual level to the practice level, then we can definitely explore the possibility of finding coherence between the two cultures.

This is possible more often in cultural traditions that are passed down in the oral-aural traditions. Unfortunately, these are brushed aside as folklore by myopic scholars or others with an agenda. The living 'guru shishya' traditions of the Indian classical musics, dances, Vedic chanting/singing, Ayurveda, and yoga are examples of how we can trace back the CCVs of our culture to the hoary past without really bothering so much about the dates.

CONCLUSIONS

Going by Feyerabend History is anarchic because it depends on science more than experiencing cultural values

It fails to deal with cultures whose origins are not physically traceable

Methods like Archaeology, Genetics, and Linguistics that supplement the traditional historical method do not always lead us somewhere

If we can well understand Cultural Traditions, then a better understanding of our past is possible