

# The Role of Historical Understanding in Addressing Social and Political Challenges in India

Dr. H.S. Rakesh

*M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., K-SET, B.Ed., PGD in A,C&T., Dept. of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in History and Archaeology, Kuvempu University, Jnanasahyadri, Shankaragatta-577 451, Shivamogga (Dist), KARNATAKA*

After almost 77 years of Independence, India as a nation, is yet to make its leap from the heap of unresolved issues pertaining to its social, economic and political spheres. As India raced towards progress in second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the challenges it faced did not completely cease to exist. It was during this time Indian historians had started to adopt new approaches to the Indian Historiography, that were different from Orientalist, Colonial and Nationalist school of History writing. This endeavour was further aided by the already prevalent historiographical ideas of Western world. By now, history writing was not about recording events and countering different perspectives but it was about critically analysing past without any personal bias. When historical understanding is achieved through critical and rational means, there will be high chances of past becoming a relevant lesson to the present.

In India most of the socio-political problems are somehow connected to the past. This fact makes it clear that India can solve its huge chunk of problems by retrospectively looking at its past. A lot of misconceptions in the narratives regarding Indian history has substantially derailed Indian minds for decades. Main reason for this was the initial inability of Indians to write their own history. Dependency of Indians on colonial historians for history writing had resulted in the creation of distorted Indian history. Prime and earliest instance was of James Mill in whose work we come across hugely misunderstood view of Indian past. His take on dividing Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British period was intensely criticised by later historians for being communal and irrational. Despite receiving criticisms, this view has widely spread among the masses, deepening the communal divide in the country. Prevention of such a

large misconception can be done through systematic collection and unbiased interpretation of historical facts. In this way, the historian is not just presenting the truth in front of people but also, he is cementing century old feud between different communities.

Many a times we find articles and books that deliberately misinterprets actual facts in order to support its one-sided argument. These write-ups will have no positive implications on the society except triggering hate among the masses. In the field of history, such publications are avoided by putting the research paper into the rigorous system of peer review. A person with proper historical understanding will always be aware of the value of peace in the society and will always be conscious of distorted history that could harm the harmony of a society. Hence, it is expected of such people to spread unity among Indians through history.

Communalism has been a major challenge to India since independence. The wounds of partition had left obscure mark on the Indian minds. In such a condition, the answers to communal question can only be found in the pages of history. A proper understanding of roots of communal conflict can prevent further repercussions of such conflict. In India, there is a popular perception that Islamic invaders looted and destroyed Hindu temples and kingdoms only on the basis of religion. This view has no historical basis but is based on misconception and ideological bias. Only a well-read historian will be able to counter such myths by stating historical evidences. The attempts of some groups to villainise a whole community on the basis of distorted history can be effectively resisted by fact-based history. It is a fact that no Hindu king resented a Muslim ruler just because he was Muslim and vice versa. For instance, confederacy of Adil Shahis, Qutub

Shahis, Barid shahis and other Deccan Sultanates did not defeat Vijayanagar empire due to its affiliation to Hinduism. There was a long-standing conflict over other issues like Tunga-Bhadra doab region, Krishna-Godavari delta, Konkan coasts and others. Complicated geo-politics was involved in their conflicts but all such details are deliberately ignored by some people to turn the whole debate into Hindu-Muslim question.

Historian also has a role to play in policy-making. The distant past teaches us how problems of policy making has led to the downfall of kings and kingdoms. Majority of rebellions have occurred when the regime on top was not in favour of masses and was disinterested in their problems. By intricately observing the causes of a specific revolt or rebellion, historian will be able to understand what went wrong in the first place. This understanding helps to know how masses react to policies that are not in their favour and it plays instrumental role in providing good governance. The historians contribute, in their own capacity, to problem-solving by identifying the roots and sources of the problem.

India, as a country, has long been facing social problems that are rooted in its belief systems. Sati, Caste system, female infanticide and others have haunted Indian society for centuries. Sati was successfully fought by a consorted efforts of British administrators and educated Indians in 19<sup>th</sup> century. By understanding the history of such struggle, a historian can build a discourse on how Indians can fight against other evils of our society. For instance, caste system in India has scriptural sanction but only a historian can meticulously study such scriptures and critically analyse the problems of it. History teaches us that whenever there existed a caste problem, society had always resisted such problems in its own way. Important example of such resistance can be found in 12<sup>th</sup> century social reforms of Basaveshwara. When caste discrimination peaked in Kalyana, Basaveshwara proposed new ideas that could be incidental in the creation of egalitarian society. His ideas revolved around fighting against caste system and to provide identity to the masses who were subjected to exploitation in that period. In this way history of dissent and resistance has always served as a guiding light to the people who are victims of exploitation. In

modern times, we have come across Dr B. R. Ambedkar, a towering personality who pioneered the Dalit movement. In his struggle, he was primarily equipped by modern education and western political ideas that advocated for individual liberty and rights. He systematically destroys the whole discourse on caste system and questions its legitimacy. All these instances of history show us that it is possible to decode even complicated problems and find necessary solutions to them. History is crucial in understanding the context of historical event. This understanding leads to effective analysis of present conditions in comparison to past and helps us get solutions to similar problems.

From millenniums, India has been a sanctuary for migrants who were persecuted for either religious or other reasons. It has sheltered people from multiple cultures, ethnicity, religions and other diverse groups. The essence of such migration and cultural amalgamation lies in the ideas of tolerance and acceptance imbibed in Indian culture. This fact is evident from all the sources ranging from archaeological to written, passed on to us through generations. An in-depth understanding of such sources in the context of historical research has paved way for the creation of history that embraces diversity. Such historiographies have the potential to override differences among Indian citizens and lead them towards unity. In this way, history writing has a significant role in fighting against hatred created by false historical narratives.

Role of historical understanding while dealing with the issues of geopolitics has come to the forefront since the end of second world war. Detailed analysis of the causes of both First and Second world war has highlighted the failures of governments of that period. Inefficiency of warring nations to follow the principles of diplomacy had costed millions of lives. It also had irreversible impact on the lives of almost everyone in this world. Realization happened only in the aftermath of the war, that such a large-scale devastation could have been avoided by stepping the paths of diplomacy. This very realization is the essence of historical understanding. Prevalence of peace in the face of international disputes in current global scenario, owes largely to the interpretation of historical events that had previously led to full-fledged world wars. Global

powers are now more conscious than ever of their moves, as even unintended mistakes may have everlasting impact on the whole world. India had never directly participated in the world wars as a nation. India's policy of non-alignment has not only prevented a major global war during cold war phase but also served as role model for many countries in propagating peace. India had effectively made use of historical experiences in advocating diplomacy over war.

India should always look at its past to find breakthroughs to further its advancement in future. By building upon the knowledge and achievements of previous generation, India will be in the position to accelerate new developments. History of India has taught us that no authoritarian regime can fully take control of whole nation for a long time. Internal dynamics of ever-changing politics have always resisted the absolutist rule in India. Shifting balance of power among the dynasties that ruled in the past had caused rise and fall of kingdoms. The same principle can be applied to modern politics, although the conditions and context of politics has changed in the modern democratic regime.

Conclusively, Indian history has a wide range of experiences to offer. It serves as a rich repository of valuable insights, cautionary tales, and inspiration that can guide us in effectively solving complex problems in the present and future. But care should be given to rational interpretation of historical facts, avoiding personal bias and false narratives. Indian history which is free from all biases and is objective in nature has potential to effectively address socio-political challenges of present.

#### REFERENCE

- [1] Carr E.H., 1961, *What is History*, Penguin Publications, New Delhi
- [2] Edward W. Said, 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*, US: Vintage Publication.
- [3] Keith Jenkins (Ed), 1997. *The Post-Modern History Reader*, London: Routledge.
- [4] Sheik Ali B.,1978. *History its theory and Method*, Madras: Macmillan Published.
- [5] Sen S.P.(Ed.), 1978. *Social and Religious Reform Movements in 19th and 20th Century*, Calcutta: