HISTORIOGRAPHY, RELIGION AND STATE IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Satish Chandra

The present work starts with the theme of decentring of history and how, in the context of decolonization, all people in the world must write their own history. It goes on to assess the impact of Central Asian ideas and institutions on Indian history during the 10th to 14th centuries, and the growing concept of historiography in the country.

In the field of culture, the historical roots of the rise of the bhakti movement are re-examined. The section on state examines the problems of social formations, cultural developments and the growth of the economy on the structure of the state, and comes to the conclusion that despite some limitation, India had by the end of the 17th Century largely completed the first phase of capitalist development.

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HAR-ANAND PUBLICATIONS PVT LTD
E-49/3, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-II, New Delhi-110020

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Satish Chandra

PREFACE

Little excuse is needed to bring forward another collection of articles. Some of these articles were published in Journals or collections, in India and abroad, which are difficult to have access to. Some papers represent new thinking on my part, or an effort to assimilate much that has gone on. This includes the article on "Society, Culture and the State in Medieval India" which was read in a preliminary form some years ago, and has been drastically revised. The sections on historiography and culture reflect changes in historical thinking which began in the country after India attained independence, and was faced with the problems of forging a unified polity on the basis of a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual society. It was also influenced by new thinking on approaches to history in the West following World War II, and the process of decolonization which signalled an end to the Euro-centric view of history.

I am grateful to the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library; to Dr. A.P. Srivastava, Director of Libraries, University of Delhi; and the Librarian, Indian Council of Historical Research for helping me with procuring books for study and to check references. I am grateful to Shri J.K. Gosain from the Society for Indian Ocean Studies, who has typed out all the papers which needed revision and updating.

Lastly, I am grateful to Shri Narendra Kumar, Chairman Har-Anand Publications, at whose friendly instance I agreed to undertake this work. I hope the readers will find some use in this work in their on-going study of Indian history not in a narrow, or narrowly Indian, but in an Asian, or world context.

Satish Chandra

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DECENTRING OF HISTORY

It is possible to assert that the present crisis in history on which there has been so much discussion is more specifically a problem affecting the historical sciences in the West rather than in the Afro-Asian countries. In the Afro-Asian countries, particularly those which have either become independent recently or have been able to assert their independence recently, history is considered important in forming a national self-image, help in the processes of national unity, and in the processes of modernization or social change within the nation. The role of history in providing an ideological-cultural framework for national unity and growth is important, for in many of these countries the concept of a nation has not grown out of a long historical process by which people belonging to different race, religion and regions have become emotionally welded together. Rather, nationalism in these countries is a means for bringing about such a unity. The interpretation of the past therefore becomes a matter of wider public concern. In this context, history can hardly be regarded by anyone as irrelevant: it remains a prestigious subject in most universities (not only because it offers a better opportunity for entering into a civil service career), and national historians command a measure of public esteem which is becoming rare elsewhere. On the other hand, history has been displaced from its pre-eminent position in the West. The profession no longer enjoys the prestige which it enjoyed among nineteenth-century

intellectuals: many social scientists consider that "the destruction of the conventional historian's conception of history is a necessary stage in the construction of a true science of society"; "a significant number of philosophers seem to have decided that history is either a third-order form of science, related to the social sciences as natural history was once related to the physical sciences, or that it is a second-order form of art, the epistemological value of which is questionable, the aesthetic worth of which is uncertain."[1]

However, it would be superficial to conclude from these outward appearances that the crisis which has overtaken history in the West need not be faced by the historian in the Afro-Asian countries. In fact, any attempt to divide the historic processes on any such regional basis would be harmful. The problems regarding the nature of the discipline of history, the nature of the historical fact and of historical knowledge; the problems of methodology, causation and objectivity are of world-wide significance and have to be treated as such. There cannot be two separate methodologies in history, one applicable to the Western countries, and the other to the "Orient" or to "Africa" or to the other under-developed parts of the world. Yet, such has been the assumption and approach of many western historians in the past. The concepts "Oriental despotism," "Oriental barbarism," "the unchanging East" etc. are all too familiar.[2]

[1] Hayden A. White, "The Burden of History," *"History and Theory*, V (1966) pp. 111-134. There is a vast literature on the subject. Most of the significant works are listed *seriatim* in *History and Theory*.

[2] The literature on this theme is too vast to be even listed here. Some of the recent works on the subject are A.J. Toynbee, *"A Study of History"* (1933-61); *Civilization on Trial* (New York, 1948); *The World and the West* (New York, 1953); Grace E. Cairns, *Philosophies of History, Meeting of East & West in Circle Pattern Theories of History* (New York, 1962); H.P.R. Finberg, (ed.), *Approaches to History* (Toronto, 1962); Philip P. Weiner, and Aaron Noland, *Ideas in Cultural Perspective* (New York, 1962); H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago, 1963). For an Asian view, see D.P. Mukerjee, *On Indian History*; K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and the Rise of Western Dominance*; S. Radhakrishnan, *Philosophies of East and West*.

While these are not used so often now, they still colour the thinking of many historians. It would be easy to continue the old attitudes under the garb that different peoples must have their own approaches to history.

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The assumption among historians during the 19th and early 20th centuries that the political and economic domination of large segments of the world by some powers, in a word, the system of western colonialism, was something ordained by history is no longer tenable; seemingly, it has been abandoned. However, the moral and intellectual bases of the belief in Western superiority have continued. In part, they rest on certain assumed superior values in Western civilization, such as rationalism, individualism, a deep seated spirit of adventure and experiment etc. which are not to be found in civilizations outside Europe and its cultural extension (the U.S.A., Australia, etc.). There can be many variations on this theme. Like Toynbee, it could be traced back to the superior ability of the Christian mind to respond to external or internal stimuli; or like Dr. William S. Haas, the difference between the civilizations of Asia and Europe could be explained in terms of two divergent thought processes—one subjectifying and centripetal, the other, the Western, objectifying and consequently centrifugal.[3] The idea of the superiority of the West may perhaps be traced back to the Christian idea that all those who were not received in the bosom of the Church were to be eternally damned.[4] The

[3] William S. Haas, *The Destiny of the Mind: East and West* (London) 1956.

[4] The effects of this thinking on the western interpretation of non-European civilizations have been deeper than have been generally accepted. For a view on the western interpretations of Islam, see Albert Hourani, "Islam and the Philosophies of History," *Middle Eastern Studies*, III (1967), pp. 206-268. It is true that every civilization has produced its own myth of being the chosen people. But no previous civilization has been as successful in imposing this belief on the rest of the world as the Western civilization. This lends a sense of sharpness to the reaction against it.

Renaissance thinkers only secularized this belief by postulating a special link between modern Europe and the civilizations of Greece and Rome which, in course of time, became *the* classical civilizations from which all modern concepts of progress, liberty, law, etc. were traceable. With a better understanding of the role of the Medieval phase and of the Arabs in the formation of modern Europe, these views have been considerably modified. However, they continue to colour the entire European *ethos*, and are reflected in historical writing. For example, it is still possible for a history of the world written in the West to devote only a preliminary chapter or two to the role of the classical civilizations of the Middle East and to India and China. The Greco-Roman civilization, far from being a Western achievement, was an integral part of the civilization of the old world which included the countries bordering the Mediterranean, and had ramifications extending beyond it to India and China. The early processes of what is regarded as the glory of Greek science were, in fact, developed in this area; these views are rarely projected in the standard history books written in the West. The tremendous achievements of the Achaemenian and the Sassanid empire in Iran, of the Mauryas in India, of the Ch'in-Han in China, each of which comprised territories which in size were as extensive as the Roman Empire in Europe, affected a larger segment of humanity, and provided stable conditions for the growth of economic and cultural life for a comparable period, are either overlooked, or mentioned cursorily. The fact that until as late as the 16th or the 17th century, the East rather than the West was the centre of the then civilized world is still not accepted. The peculiar concatenation of circumstances which placed tremendous power at the disposal of the Western countries, and allowed them an opportunity to dominate almost the entire world, is already passing. With the shifting of the balance of power to countries outside the traditional boundaries of the West, a more balanced historical appraisal should be possible of the Age of European Domination.

With its passing, the comfortable belief that somehow all earlier history was working for the emergence of Europe as a world power, and that Western civilization constituted the mainstream of human civilization has to go. It has to be replaced by a concept of multi-focal growth of human civilization, with history as the discipline of the study of their processes and interactions.

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Perhaps the most important basis of the persistence of the belief in the superiority of Western civilization is the myth of "scienticism" or the chauvinism generated by the leading role of Europe in the growth of science and technology from the 15th century onwards (more particularly from the "scientific revolution" in the 17th century) till the present. At a time when the level of the growth of science and technology in a particular country more or less fixes its position in the hierarchy of nations, this attitude is understandable. However, the idea that the growth of science and technology is a specifically European achievement has not been accepted by the best minds in Europe. George Sarton, Professor J. Needham, to name only two among the distinguished scholars who gave spent long years in studying the development of science, as well as the best scientists of the time, have regarded science as being truly international.

Two questions are at issue here : *a)* the early origins of Western science and technology, and *b*) the socio-cultural processes of the sustained growth of science and technology in Europe after the 15th century. As far as the first is concerned, it has been fully proved that "the origins of Western sciences (not only of religion and art) are Oriental—Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Iranian..."[5] What is not clear is the role of India and China in the process. The monumental work of Professor J. Needham on science and civilization in

[5] G. Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* (Baltimore, 1947) vol. 3. part I, reprinted *Sarton on the History of Science*, ed. Dorothy Stimson, (Cambridge, Mass, 1962), p. 17.

China has made it clear that neither India nor China were isolated from the West during antiquity, and that their links have been much closer than have been generally imagined. The Indian origin of the atomist theory, and the contributions of the Indians in the field of mathematics and medicine are now widely accepted. Needham has established the transmission to Europe of such Chinese inventions as paper, gunpowder, the magnetic compass, the wheelbarrow, the collar-harness, and possibly of a host of other processes such as deep drilling, iron foundry, iron suspension bridges etc.[6] A satisfactory study of the growth of science and technology in India and Iran has yet to be carried out. We do not know enough about the processes through which other inventions such as the watermill, the spinning wheel, the windmill etc. reached Europe. Only a careful study of the state of the sciences in the countries of the region, the channels of communications, the attitudes of different strata, the intellectual and religious climate affecting science and technology will enable us to elucidate these problems. The cooperation of scientists, historians, linguists, etc. belonging to different countries and cultures from Europe to China will be necessary to elucidate these processes. In order to do so, the upgrading of the study of the history of science in universities, in the West as well as in Asian countries, will be necessary, regarding it as something more than peripheral to the main study of history. In this context, one may recall Sarton's dictum that "the acquisition and systematization of positive knowledge is the only human activity which is truly cumulative and progressive," and that "the history of science in this broad sense becomes the keystone of all historical investigation."[7] The invention of the zero by the Mayas, of the wheel by the Aztecs

[6] J. Needham, *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West*, (Cambridge, 1970); *idem., The Grand Titration; Science and Society in East and West*, (Cambridge, 1969). For fuller details, reference must, of course, be made to the author's larger work, *Science and Civilization in China*.

[7] G. Sarton, *Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 24, (1956). p. 413.

independently shows that human ingenuity was not confined to any one area. A fuller study will undoubtedly show that the Africans were not lacking in scientific ingenuity either.

As regards the stages and processes of the growth of science and technology in Europe since the 15th century, how deeply indebted Europe is to the Arabs, who acted as carriers of East Asian technology, and themselves contributed greatly to the growth of European science in the early stage has now been accepted. That does not, however, help us in answering the question: what specific socio-cultural features in the European situation have been responsible for the sustained growth of science over the past three centuries? No satisfactory answer to this query is available so far. Tawney's attempt to link the rise of science and technology, specifically the growth of capitalism, with the Protestant ethic has been discarded by the historians, as also the idea that the Industrial Revolution in Britain was the product of individual scientific men of genius. The historian of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, with rather more material available to him than for any comparable processes during the earlier period, has been compelled to fall back upon the concept of effective demand (which is traceable, in part, to the natural growth of population). Methods of quantitative analysis may be able to resolve some of the problems (though historians are aware of the inherent limitations of such methods in interpreting broad human movements and motivations). Recent experience shows that science and technology can grow under vastly different socio-cultural circumstances. The earlier assumptions about the specificity of European socio-cultural circumstances for the growth of science and technology can, therefore, no longer be accepted without modification. With the passing of the lead in space exploration to the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., and the rapid advance in the field of science by other nations far removed from European culture, such as the Japanese and the Chinese, science is becoming truly international once again. The historian will continue to search for the specific

features—for the determining factors, if you like, for the self-generating growth of science in Europe after the 15th century. These, however, will be comparable to processes which have taken place in the world in the subsequent period, or in a more limited manner, anterior to it in other parts of the world.

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From the above it may be concluded that while the conditions and the intellectual premises on which the notions of Europe's supremacy were based are rapidly disappearing, Eurocentrism or Western ethnocentrism is still a marked feature in history writing, and has a definite effect on the types of subjects chosen for research. An example of this is the manner in which the history of African and Asian countries is studied (or not studied) in most Western universities. In trying to assess the impact of foreign rule on Afro-Asian countries, primary emphasis still tends to be placed on the policies, programmes, and processes of Imperialist rule, rather than on the study and understanding of the pre-colonial patterns and relationships in these societies, and the manner and the extent to which they were modified by foreign rule.[8]

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The growth of and persistence of an ethnocentric view of history have had other effects as well on history writing in the West. The belief that rationalism, individualism, respect for law and liberty, a detached scientific spirit etc. were the prerogatives of the West led to the notion of the East being mystic, contemplative, a slave to religion, otherworldly, indolent, negligent of material incentives, etc. This notion

[8] A number of universities have, in recent years, sponsored programmes dealings with the pre-British period in South Asia. Such programmes existed already for the Middle East, whereas there has been a tradition of Sinology in a number of U.S. universities. The U.S.S.R. has also an old tradition of Oriental studies, and has published a number of monographs on the ancient and medieval periods in India. The above remarks have, therefore, more relevance to the state of area studies in Britain and Europe.

of the dichotomous nature of the East and West precluded any attempt at developing or applying any common historical categories or regularities applicable to both. This, in effect, meant an abandonment of the attempt to develop any concepts encompassing the history of the entire world. This was all the more remarkable as it coincided with the maximum expansion of European domination and control over the rest of the world during the second half of the 19th century. During the period, instead of the canvas of history being broadened with the experience of other areas of the world being brought into focus, it was steadily narrowed down. Thus, the history of Europe remained the main discipline of history, "orientalists" and others who studied history of peripheral areas being virtually treated as outsiders. Thus, the conditions were created for the wholesale acceptance of German historicism. It is neither necessary nor possible to go into the causes for the retreat into historicism. Under the influence of German historians, the historians certainly improved their techniques, but narrowed their vision. Implicit in the entire development was the rejection of the Marxist historical method, and Marx's postulate of certain necessary stages of historical development called slavery, and feudalism, before the attainment of a rapidly growing (and rapidly decaying) society characterised as capitalist. Marx was not certain in his mind whether these broad categories could be made applicable to societies outside Europe as well. His concept of an "Oriental society," by-passing the stages of slavery and feudalism, has led to a considerable debate among Marxist historians. Without attempting to go into this debate here, it may be noted that the dominant trend of thinking among Marxist historians in China and India[9] is to deny its validity, either to their

[9] For the views of Indian historians such as K.M. Ashraf, D.D. Kausambi, D.R. Chananna, R.S. Sharma etc., see note on "Main Trends in Historical Sciences in India, 1900-1970" prepared for UNESCO by a committee of Indian historians. (Ch. 4 below), Reference may also be made to Daniel Thorner, Marx on India and the Asiatic mode of production," *Contributions* IX, pp. 36-66.

own countries or as a useful general concept. But there is no general consensus on this point so far.

However, rejecting the Marxist categories and deeply influenced by scientific nominalism, the bulk of the Western historians turned to the concept of "uniqueness." The concept of every civilization and country, nay every historical event, being unique did, to a certain extent, promote a meticulous study of historical events, ideally without importing any preconceived notions. The results of this approach, and its growing stultification, need not be gone into here, except to note that the reverse side of the coin was the growth of "exceptionalism" in the field of oriental studies. Thus, in India and in many of the Islamic countries, in some circles, science, which was associated with the West, was considered the enemy of religion, ascribing to it all the evils of European society, and extolling the idea of a return to primitive simplicity, based on religious revivalism. These views had a definite effect on political processes in these countries, as well as on history writing.

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While Western historians accepted the concepts of slavery, feudalism and capitalism as stages in the development of Western society, by treating the rest of humanity as outside the scope of these processes, they automatically denied the validity of universal concepts in history. If the bulk of humanity living in the Orient was an exception to the law of development, the concept of development or progress as a basic category in history could not be maintained. The theory of "uniqueness" was hardly capable of solving this dilemma, and only papered over the cracks. The inability to put forward any general concepts applicable to history must be regarded as one of the fundamental causes of the present crisis in history, flowing in turn from the essentially ethnocentric view of history developed in the West.

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In his essay on Comparative History of European Societies,

Marc Bloch had long ago brought out the dangers as well as the possibilities of the comparative method in history. Following him, and the school of history set up by him in France, comparative studies in the history of European society has made progress. Marc Bloch had favoured the method of choosing "from one or several social situations, two or more phenomena which appear at first sight to offer certain analogies between them," and warned against "grouping together under the expression `the comparative method' two widely different intellectual processes."[10] Intra-regional studies spanning the oceans, encompassing the effect of the sea on countries bordering on it, have been attempted with some success. However, it would not be wrong to say that historians are still chary of adopting the comparative method. Comparative studies in the processes of growth, spanning countries having widely different social and cultural backgrounds, have made more progress among economists and social scientists as a whole. The only recent study of social processes between countries widely separated in time and space has been the study on feudalism in history organised in the U.S.A by Joseph R. Strayer and Rushton Coulborn. Explaining his approach to the problem, Coulborn remarked:[11]

"The larger aim... is not to produce a new definition of feudalism, but to see if the study of feudalism will throw light on the question of uniformities in history. That question, in its simplest terms, is this: historians, for many generations, have insisted that every historical event, every historical personage, is unique and will never be duplicated or repeated. At the same time, in their writings, and the thinking that lies behind that writing, they use words and concepts of

[10] Marc Bloch, "A Contribution towards a comparative history of European Societies," (reprinted in *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*) London, 1967, (English trans. of selections from his *Melanges historiques*, Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1963), p. 45.

[11] *Feudalism in History*, ed. Rushton Coulborn (Princeton, 1956), Introduction, p. 4.

general rather than specific meaning: they assume that every new situation has something in common with certain other situations which have preceded it..."

Starting with these premises, the results of the study must be disappointing, inasmuch as they showed that feudalism as defined in the study did not extend outside Europe, with the possible exception of Japan. This brings us back to the starting point—is it possible to talk of uniformities in history, and if they can be found, can they be made applicable only to Europe, with the rest of the world (the major portion of humanity) treated as an exception? Perhaps the study could hardly have led to any other conclusion than the one arrived at since it took the European pattern as the normative pattern, and insisted that "Feudalism is primarily a method of government, not an economic or social system."

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If history is to be regarded as the study of the processes of the development of human society, the processes of development in the 'Orient,' i.e. in the areas of Asia and Africa where the largest mass of humanity resided and still resides, must be regarded central to the study of history, instead of being considered as an expansion or an additional dimension to the study of history, as it is at present. This, in turn, would imply that history should be studied not so much from the viewpoint of power equations existing in the world at the time, as was the case in the 19th century and has, with some exceptions, continued to be the case till now, but from the viewpoint of humanity as a whole. In this case, greater attention would have to be given not only to historic processes in the most populous areas of the world, but to the processes of the communication of ideas, inventions, products between various sections of humanity, and the contribution of various sections and areas to the development of human civilization as a whole.

Such a shift in the focus of history can only be regarded as a long process. It would require an intensive effort for

making available to the historian the type of historical information needed for these studies: literary sources, manuscripts and documents (many of them still buried in remote libraries), the study of folk traditions, physical objects, field studies, etc. It would also require the development of the necessary academic infrastructure in the countries concerned, for experience has shown that where the study of societies with living cultural traditions is concerned, the perception of its *ethos* and inter-connections requires a very long period of training for persons not born and reared within it. Even the development of "area studies" in many of the Western countries can play only a limited role in this process. For one, many of the area studies programmes in these countries have a heavy presentist bias, being dependent for their finances upon government and/or private foundations, and geared to fulfill certain political or business purposes. Secondly, within these countries, area studies are often considered peripheral to the study of history by the university departments. In consequence, they sometimes fail to attract the right type of student or researcher, thereby further strengthening the ethnocentric bias in history. To an extent area studies programmes have tended to perpetuate the notion that Afro-Asian countries are "patients" in the field of history, and that the history written by the historians of the area are somehow inferior, being tainted by the "nationalist" bias, whereas it is presumed that the writings of historians from metropolitan countries, i.e. the former colonising powers would be free from the "Imperialist" bias. This tendency to attempt to continue the colonial situation in the field of history in the name of the centre and the periphery is bound to have harmful repercussions.

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The specific problems of history writing and research in Asian countries have to be viewed in the context of the observations above. It is clear that one of the major tasks facing the historians of the area is to rise above purely "na-

tional" history, and to study the history of their countries in a wider, "Asian" or world perspective. It is being slowly realised that the Old World, from the Mediterranean to India and across Central Asia to China, was much more closely knit together than has been generally accepted. The upper reaches of the coastal areas in East Africa, as well as south-east Asia, had been brought into close relation with these areas with the growth of sea trade. The transmission of Buddhist and Hindu ideas, and the growth of cultural and economic relations between South India and the countries of south-east Asia, between the 5th and 12th centuries A.D., which in terms of human enterprise, the size of the area and the numbers involved parallels the expansion of Christianity in Medieval Europe, and must be regarded as a major development in the expansion of the frontiers of the Old World. Yet it hardly merits more than a paragraph in any standard history of the world written in the West. It is obvious that this expansion could not have been taken place without a considerable expansion in the growth of the knowledge of sea-faring, geography and of ship-building, and without considerable daring in exploring the seas. However, Western historiography is still not prepared to look much beyond Prince Henry the Navigator.

That India, both north and south, had commercial and cultural relations with Mesopotamia as well as with Egypt since the 3rd millenium B.C., and that many Assyrian legends (such as that of the great flood, Gilgamesh etc.) have found their way into Indian mythology is well known to historians. Recent studies have shown a close link between Assyrian science, particularly astronomy and mathematics, and growth of science in ancient India. The nature of these processes, the manner of the transmission of ideas and of the extent of mutual borrowing are still largely unknown. Nor do we know much about the manner in which, at a later period, Buddhist and Hindu ideas travelled to the Mediterranean world, their traces being found not only in Greek neo-Platonism but in Christian monasticism and Islamic

mysticism.[12] The role of the Central Asian empires, particularly those which controlled the Central Asian trade routes—the Sassanids, the Scythians and Huns, the Arabs, Mongols etc. (not excluding the Tibetans), in the exchange of ideas and goods not only between India and China, but between these and the Mediterranean world, is crucial, not only for understanding the processes in individual countries in this region but of the processes of the entire ancient and medieval world. Such a study is only possible with the close cooperation of the historians of this area, and by giving up the deeply rooted ethnocentric view of history which tends to limit and inhibit such approaches.

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The question of the impact of Islam on the unity of the classical world has been a subject of debate for long. Recent scholarship does not accept the earlier proposition that the rise of Islam, or of the growth of the power of the Ottoman Turks, disrupted the trade relations between the West and East, and hastened the onset of the medieval age in Europe. Nor does it consider that the Portuguese discovery of the new route to India resulted in a diversion of Asian trade from the Mediterranean to Atlantic ports, i.e. to a net decline in overland trade, and the revenues it secured to the countries

[12] Professor Needham has observed that "the science of Asia has a dividing line running north and south through Bactria and the opening of the Persian Gulf." Professor Needham calls this a barrier or filter across which East Asian science did not filter through to the Franks or Latins. He goes on to say: "The science of Arab culture... was focal; it gathered in East Asian science, pure and applied, just as it built upon the work of Mediterranean antiquity. But... while on one hand East Asian applied science penetrated to Europe in a continuous flow for the first fourteen centuries of the Christian era, East Asian pure science was filtered out; it came into Arabic culture but no further west. Obviously this is a historical phenomenon of much interest and importance." (J. Needham, UNESCO Month Lecture, Beirut, 1948, reprinted in *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West*, (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 14-29.)

of the region.[13] There is growing evidence that the rise of Islam in West Asia did not result in a sundering of the cultural relations between East Asia and the Mediterranean areas. The Arabs strengthened rather than weakened the movement of ideas and goods across the region, with a sharp understanding of the importance of both. Why, in this context, Western science and technology did not filter to the countries of this region and to East and South Asia from the 15th century onwards is a question of careful consideration. Was it due primarily to the socio-cultural atmosphere in the countries of the region (as al-Biruni suggests in the case of India), or was it the effect of the socio-cultural impact of Islam as modified by the Turks? In this context the wider question of the bearing of religion or religious value systems on social stagnation or resistance to innovation needs to be examined more fully.

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A powerful ideological superstructure had been built up by historians to explain the absence of change in Oriental societies, and their resistance to Western science and technology. While this was mainly the work of Western historians, many Asian historians subscribed to this view also, in the name of continuity. Amongst the views that have been put forward to explain the absence of change in Oriental societies, the most widespread as well as the most persistent have been: the retarding influence of religion and/or caste/tribe (Max Weber); selfishness and self-indulgence of the ruling classes (W.H. Moreland); absence of private property in land, resulting in the absence of a landed aristocracy which could limit royal despotism (Bernier, Wittfogel); a social structure based on an unvarying distribution of labour, and village self-sufficiency (Sir Henry

[13] J.H. Parry, "Transport and Trade Routes" in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, ed. E.E. Rich and C.H. Wilson (Cambridge, 1967), IV: *The Economy of Expanding Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, pp. 155-200.

Maine, Marx) etc. Even the old idea of climate as a factor either on character or communications has been recently revived. Experience of planning in many countries of the region has compelled the historians to review many of these concepts. Thus, the experience of India has shown that in many areas peasants have been remarkably responsive to new cropping techniques or seeds or new imputs if they give them assured opportunities of making more money. It has also been shown that caste has not been as rigid or the pattern of distribution of labour in villages been as unvarying as had been believed. It has, however shown considerable variation from region to region, calling for detailed studies aimed at arriving at a better understanding of the social structure and its processes taking as its unit a village, or a group of villages or a definable region. However, to be meaningful such descriptive studies have to be co-related to a conceptual framework within which the processes of change and conservation operate in traditional societies.

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A careful study of religion, its social structure and value-system, the manner of its filteration of external ideas, the phases of its development, etc., have to be carefully analysed in order to understand the leadership pattern, communication structure, authority system and processes of change and conservation in traditional societies. The study of the function and role of religion in traditional societies has suffered from pre-conceived notions based on the value-attitudes of Western/Christian societies; or has been based on pure ethnocentric interest; or on the assumption of stability, harmony, etc. Careful training in the tools of social analysis, as well as deep familiarity with the history, languages, and literary forms and traditions in which religious thought and movements have expressed themselves, as well as familiarity with folk traditions, is needed for a purposeful understanding of these societies, so that the historian and sociologist can play a useful role in their present processes. The extent to which

this can be done by outsiders, not born and bred in the traditions of the country, will depend upon the stage of development in each country.

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As has been emphasised earlier, the problems of national identity, national unity and national growth are bound to interest the historians of Asian and African countries which are just emerging on the world scene as independent entities. In this context, the concept of region or tribe has become important for many of these countries. Tribal conflicts have threatened the unity of a number of African countries. But Africa has also had the tradition of large tribal empires, sometimes consisting of a number of tribes linked together by various ties. The complete isolation of tribes is an ethnologists' myth which does not exist, or existed only in remote areas. The manner of the linking together of tribes, and of the manner of the breakup of tribes into territorial communities is of more than antiquarian interest to African historians. In India, both region and tribe have come increasingly to the forefront. Although the region has generally been conceived in terms of language, it is not certain that language is *the* most important element in regionalism (any more than that religion is the most important element in it). The recent demands for breaking up some of the bigger linguistic regions (such as the present Andhra, or Maharashtra, or U.P.) is indicative of this. This has led to a need to reassess the nature of the regions, and their relationship to what might be called the Indian *ethos*. It should be made clear here that the need to reassess the nature of religion or regionalism in India does not necessarily lead to a rejection or questioning of the concept of the basic unity of India.[14]

[14] This is not the place to expatiate on the basis of Indian unity, this being a favourite theme for long for Indian historians, literateures, politicians. Difference of approach on this issue continues to be a cause for sharp differences of opinion between Indian and Western scholars. For an approach to Indian sociology, making the unity of India functionally vital to the study, see Louis Dumont, *Religion, Politics and History in India* (Paris—The Hague, 1970), pp. 4-6.

The problem of tribe and tribalism has of late received greater attention from historians (as distinct from anthropologists) in Asia and India. The pattern of tribal settlements, of transformation of tribal society into peasants, the role of tribal settlements in the formation of linguistic units and regions are questions which are of deep interest to historians. The manner of assimilation of tribes into Hinduism, which is proceeding apace, is of considerable interest to the historians for interpolating historic processes on a retrodictive basis. It is being realised that the tribes are not on the margin of society, and as such of academic interest to a select band of anthropologists only, but are closely involved with social processes. A clearer understanding of the nature of the region and tribe is important for understanding historical evolution, as well for development strategy and political processes, for India as well as for a number of other Asian and African countries.

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It has been argued in this essay that continued Western ethnocentricism limits and distorts the processes of historical development, in the West as in the rest of the world, by establishing an unreal dichotomy between the two. This does not imply that we should subscribe to a unilinear view of history, but that we should abandon the concept of centre and periphery, with the West as the centre. Despite the tremendous contribution of the West in the sustained growth of science and technology which is transforming the face of the world, there can be no centre and periphery in world history for any length of time. In the long run, history has to come back to the fundamental unity of mankind: despite differences in social organisation, mores, cultural traditions etc., similarity of the human thought processes and responses are revealed in them. Apart from studying the differences between different countries, areas and civilizations, history must study their interactions, and the role played by them at varying times in the growth of human civilization. Not ethnocentrism, but multi-polarity should be a key-note of history.