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INTERVIEW WITH RADHIKA SESHAN

ENTREVISTA CON RADHIKA SESHAN

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INTERVIEW WITH RADHIKA SESHAN

Poznań, Poland, August 24, 2022

Today is August 24, 2022, and I am in Poznan with Radhika Seshan. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to get to know you better.

Thank you.

As I've told you, this is a project that goes back to two other books and the idea is to let people know about other ways of making history, and to know about how historians managed to make propositions; how they do their job, and so on. So, here are my questions. The first thing I always ask is: let me know about your origins and why you decided to take the path of history.

About my origins: I am one of the many Indians that is Pan-Indian. I was born in the South of India. I grew up across the North and East of India, and I settled down in the West of India. And so, I had first-hand exposure to the multiplicity that is India. Why I came into history is in many ways a much simpler thing to answer. My family has been associated in many ways with the building of the nation. Both my grandfathers were part of the national movement. They were followers of Gandhi,¹ and so they took part in the national movement in their own ways, in multiple ways, and I grew up, thinking, knowing that we had to do our history. We had to learn our history; otherwise, we would forget the present. That is basically where I came from, and that's why history.

You went to school to become a historian in India?

Yes, I did. In India we have undergraduate courses. I studied at Delhi University where we had this course called History Honors, where we did okay. This was back in 1975. So, we had courses on ancient Indian history, medieval Indian history, European history after 1648, the Peace of Westphalia. Then we had different courses. Actually, one very interesting course was on comparative constitutions of the world. And, we had a choice between, either far Eastern history or American history. I chose American history to study, so we did a whole range of courses. Plus, we had one course which I believe has been stopped in the university, subsequently. It was philosophies of history, so we did at least an introduction to the ways in which history was thought about in the Western world. Today, looking back, I realized that we didn't

¹ Mahatma Gandhi: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, (1869-1948) Indian nationalist thinker and leader. The main architect of his country's independence (1947), he was the most important figure on the Indian political and social scene during the first half of the 20th century and one of the most influential personalities in contemporary history. <<https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/g/gandhi.htm>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

do other than the political history of India. We didn't do anything, so the theoretical formulations were all from the West, not from anything within India; so, we didn't look within India's history to find something that was part of India's theoretical histories.

So, you knew the world historiography, but not the Indian production.

Another limitation that I realize now is that we studied it from a North India perspective. So much of India was left out from the teaching. India is huge, you've got the North, you've got the center and the peninsula. The peninsula was mentioned only, I think, in the last 10 lectures of a 60-hour lecture course, so we heard nothing about it. Coming from the South, I knew that history because I had grown up listening to the stories at home, but it was not an academic orientation. It was a very linguistic kind of study that happened. And so later, when I got into my postgraduate program, that's when I started identifying the gaps that we had had, and to think about the number of things that nobody knew anything about, which started with what is called in Europe the early modern period. That was always taught to us as the Mughal period of India's history.² And suddenly, out of nowhere, the English turned up and they conquered India. So that entire background was somewhere a gap until I started moving more into the studies of the coming of the European settlers to India, the ways in which they looked at India and the ways -equally important- how Indians looked at them, and that's where my journey began.

But before you have like the family tradition.

I had the family tradition.

You come from the South.

I come from the state of Tamil Nadu. So, my mother tongue is Tamil.³

How many languages do you speak?

Six languages of India that I speak very comfortably. So, the languages are Tamil, English and Hindi qualify as Indian languages, so English of course. Hindi, which is regarded as the national language, but which was never accepted by the Tamilians as a national language. So, if you study in the state of Tamil Nadu, then you don't learn Hindi. It's a north Indian language, but then I also learned Bengali, which is one of the Eastern Indian languages, and Marathi, which is the state that I live in now, and because I lived in Delhi, I learned Punjabi, and I learned a little bit of Kannada because finally we ended up having a lot of connection with Karnataka. Actually, I have a comfortable working knowledge of the four major languages of the far South, a very

² The Muslim Mughal dynasty of Turkic-Mongol origin ruled most of northern India from the early 16th to the mid-18th century. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mughal-dynasty>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024]. J. C. Heesterman, "The Social Dynamics of the Mughal Empire: A Brief Introduction", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2004, pp. 292-297.

³ Tamil Nadu is located in the south-eastern corner of India, home to the Tamil people, whose language is one of the world's oldest classical languages. <<https://www.maravillas-del-mundo.com/Taj-Mahal/India/Tamil-Nadu.php>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

good knowledge of Tamil and a working knowledge of Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam, which are the other three languages.⁴

And besides English, any other language?

French, I read, and I can understand, but I don't speak, mostly because I have let it go when not spoken. So, when I spend a week in France, around the end of the stay, I find that I'm speaking more comfortably, but then, that's the end of the stay, and I come back home, and I forget it.

But that helps you to do a lot of your research and read the sources.

It does a lot. In the same way, I have a working knowledge of Dutch through the sources, because I've started with the dictionary and worked with the Dutch sources, not so much with Portuguese. I need to start that now, but I'm looking at learning a little more Portuguese, but I've worked for my pieces. I mostly worked with the Dutch and the English records. And then went into French and then took a sidestep and went into travel accounts and the ways in which India was imagined through the medieval age. In fact, my latest book is called *The Constructions of the East in Western Travel narratives*.⁵

And you are specialized in medieval history. Why?

Because I found the colonial period very boring and everybody carried on, and on, and on about colonialism and I got also very tired of the ways in which colonial historiography, nationalist historiography, focused on only early India and the British period, as if the period in between didn't exist.

The Medieval histories were not included?

Approximately, let us say that from the 10th to about the 18th centuries is what is taught as medieval history in Indian colleges. So, this entire period was just dismissed in a couple of chapters in most of the lessons, and it was a history of kings. And beyond the kings, what happened? That's the time when we know in India there was this Pan-Indian religious movement which questioned castes, which questioned kingship, which questioned everything, and we were taught that as literature, but not as history. So, I found it very strange that you could ignore an entire body of what would normally be called the source, but ended up saying, "Oh no. This is just religious literature. It has nothing to do with us." And so I went into part of it, also probably because of my own studies in music. Because when we learned music, we invariably started with the basics, of course, but as you went more and more into music, what we were taught were the hymns of the Saints. So, through the music I started listening to the words and not just to the sounds, and that's when I realized that there was a lot in it that needed to be understood much more differently.

⁴ According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), launched in 2010, 780 languages have been identified in India. <<https://orientblackswan.com/books?id=0&pid=0&sid=191>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

⁵ Radhika Seshan, *The Constructions of the East in Western Travel Narratives, 1200 CE to 1800 CE*, London, Routledge, 2020 <<https://www.routledge.com/The-Constructions-of-the-East-in-Western-Travel-Narratives-1200-CE-to/Seshan/p/book/9781138367418>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

Historiography in India follows any particular interest?

We've got what are called the schools of historiography because history writing, as we understand it today, is a colonial introduction. And so, we have the colonial imperialist school of historiography, which basically negated anything that India had prior to the takeover of the British. And a classic text in this is James Mills' *History of British India* which, most interestingly, was published in 1817,⁶ when there was no such thing as British India. They hadn't even finished the conquest of India. They were still to have their last battle with the Marathas.⁷ And the version got into multiple editions. It was a three-volume work in which the first volume covered the entire period from antiquity till 1756, and the next two volumes were 1757 to 1816. It's had a very long-lasting impact for a very long time. We had to read that and I know I kept saying, "Why? What is he talking about?" 1757 is regarded as the beginning of the modern period and so periodization becomes in terms of dates rather than social cultural dimensions. So, in the year 1206, medieval period began because in that year Quṭb al-Dīn Aibak became King of Delhi.⁸ Nothing else goes on; so what if he was the King of Delhi. Dates as the basis of divisions in history was rather annoying, and is repeated even today, and so we started questioning all of this. But this was post 1857, particularly from the 1860s as Indian graduates from the university started coming up, because in 1854 the British established 3 universities in India: Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. And in the 1860s, the first graduates came out and started questioning both the actions of the British and the translations that the British had done of India's past. And with that begins what in India's historiography is called the Nationalist School of historiography.⁹ It was very closely linked to the national movement. And so, when the national movement and the Indian National Congress were set up, the early demands of the Indian national leaders were for a share in the government, as in claiming that they were capable of governing the country. They had a history of self-government, and so ancient India was studied to find proof that we had had administrative systems. In some ways it was a need to get

⁶ James Mills, *The History of British India*, London, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1817, 3 vols., vol. 1: <https://books.google.com.mx/books?id=Orw_AAAAcAAJ&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false> vol. 2: <https://books.google.com.mx/books?id=Z34IAAAQAAJ&pg=PR4&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false> vol. 3: <https://books.google.com.mx/books?id=e7w_AAAAcAAJ&pg=PP7&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

⁷ The Maratha empire rose in the 17th century and dominated much of the Indian subcontinent during the 18th century. They became politically active under the leadership of Shivaji, their first king, in opposition to the Islamic rulers of the time. It ended in 1818 after defeat by the English East India Company. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maratha-Empire>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

⁸ Quṭb al-Dīn Aibak, (1150-1210), founder of Muslim rule in India <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quṭb-al-Din-Aibak>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

⁹ "The nationalist approach to Indian history can be described as one which tended to contribute to the growth of nationalist feelings and to unify people in the face of religious, caste, or linguistic differences or class differentiation. This approach looks at the national movement as a movement of the Indian people, which grew out of the expanding awareness among all people of the exploitative nature of colonial rule. This approach developed as a response to and in confrontation with the colonial approach." <<https://edurev.in/question/2619917/Nationalist-School-of-Historiography-emerged-as-a-response-to-a-Marxist-School--Subaltern-School-->> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

a history. So anything that they found in European history, which was in any case taught, was to be found in India as well. So, if you had the Greek city states, then we had in the 6th century BC, we had city states as well. They were larger because India is of course larger. Anything that was there, was here as well.

Being part of the British Empire, you've received the British influence on how history was made.

Yes. So, it is positivist, it is empirical, it is archival. I know that. Even when I started my PhD very late, in 1990,¹⁰ I was told “how can you study on the basis of oral and subsequent writings as well, and how can you do it on the basis of songs? Where is your archival evidence?” So, the idea of the archive and the institutionalization of the archive is crucial to the ways in which history is supposed to be written. It's only in the late 20th century that oral histories have begun to be accepted as a valuable and viable methodology, so much later.

Students are interested in history nowadays?

Not very. Most are much more interested in some kind of a vocational course so that they can get a job immediately.

They are more interested in the present, and their philosophy is presentism, the belief that there are only events in the present.

The presentism is very much there, so take a quick course in computers and go get a job. And history is actually studied only because it is a compulsory subject for the national level competitive examinations to get into the bureaucracy. So, from the point of view of getting a job in the government services, they study history, so the critical thinking, the range of possibilities is mostly ignored by them. They want the factual history which allows them to pass an examination.

You are very interested in economic history. Were you formed as a Marxist?

I would say that I was taught by a number of Marxists, and so the economic dimensions became very crucial to the way I was taught. But again, over there, I will go back to my own family history, where one of my grandfathers was very influenced by Gandhi's idea of what he called Swadeshi,¹¹ that is of indigenous production, particularly of textiles, so he believed that we needed to revive our textile heritage and in fact, he was crucial and instrumental in setting up the first cooperative of weavers in the city of Madurai. So we could get the material together,

¹⁰ Radhika Seshan, “Trade and Politics on the Coromandel Coast, 1640-1720”, phd thesis, presented in 2002 at the University of Pune, India; published as *Trade and Politics on the Coromandel Coast, Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries*, New Delhi, Primus Publishers, 2012

¹¹ The Swadeshi ideal “refers to self-government and national autonomy. ...In the economic sphere, Swadeshi nationalists promoted the boycott of foreign - especially British - products and the development of indigenous industries. Mass organizations such as trade unions and other revolutionary associations, or samitis, also emerged”. Daniel Kent Carrasco, “Nativismo nacionalista y pensamiento de izquierda. El debate en torno al socialismo y el comunismo en la India Británica en las primeras décadas del siglo XX”, en *Signos Históricos*, vol. XX, n. 39, enero-junio 2018, p. 98.

get the weavers organized. The first cooperative movement among the weavers was done by my grandfather. The other grandfather had a different trajectory. He was influenced by Nehru,¹² our first Prime Minister, and by Nehruvian socialism,¹³ but in both, the issues of industry and industrialization were crucial to their understanding of the way in which we had to make India better. That's where my interest in economics began. Again, I was told that I ought not to be doing economics because I was terrible at maths. So, I have generally gone back to them and said, "See? I have done economic history even without mathematics."

You are interested in two peculiar spaces, the sea and the city.

Yes, but then the city is also the port through which the land and the sea meet. So, the cities that I have looked at have been mostly port cities.¹⁴

Do you study the sea from the sea or from the land?

From the land more than anything else, because I look at the ways in which the connection is outward from India. What goes out? How do they go out? What kind of ships exist? Or what kind of cloth is used, what kind of shipbuilding techniques exist? Things like that.

And how about ammunition or weapons?

They are mostly commercial exchanges. Back in 1025, there was this huge expedition that was sent by the Chola king to Indonesia, to the Island Kingdom of Srivijaya.¹⁵ And at that time the ships weren't armed, but there were a lot of soldiers and horses who were transported because they had to go on land and fight. The ship was typically seen as a conduit to take people across to the shore to fight. So, naval battles are there, but not so many. Historically the first reference that we have about a naval battle is from the year 623 or thereabouts, where

¹² Jawaharlal Nehru, (1889-1964), "first prime minister of independent India (1947-64), who established parliamentary government. He was one of the principal leaders of India's independence movement in the 1930s and '40s". <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jawaharlal-Nehru>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

¹³ "His socialism was evolutionary, not revolutionary, and it was inclusive, not based on class. It was democratic and comfortable with heterogeneity, egalitarian without levelling, committed to welfare and affirmative action, co-operative to contain destructive competition, oriented to rational planning to overcome anarchic individualism, stressed the need for the government to lead through an advanced public sector, valued local democracy and local management of utilities, and mobilized local initiative in every way". Madhavan K. Palat, "Nehru's socialism was evolutionary, inclusive, and not based on class", *The Hindu*, February 12, 2022, <<https://www.thehindu.com/society/nehru-socialism-was-evolutionary-inclusive-and-not-based-on-class/article38412870.ece>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

¹⁴ Radhika Seshan, "Patterns of Urbanisation: Port-Cities in the 16th and 17th centuries", in P.P. Mishra and K.N. Sethi (ed.) *Urbanization (Problems and Challenges)*, Delhi, Shivalike Prakashan, 2011, pp. 131-148. "Secondary Ports and the Hinterland: Chaul and Porto Novo in the Seventeenth Century", in Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Vanguards of Globalization: Port-Cities from the Classical to the Modern*, Delhi, Primus Books, 2014, pp. 111-125.

¹⁵ The naval raids sought to "put obstacles in the way of Chola trade with the East (especially China), '1025 JAN 1 - 1030' Chola invasion of Srivijaya", en *History-maps* Oct 10 2023, <<https://history-maps.com/es/story/History-of-Indonesia/event/Chola-invasion-of-Srivijaya>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

the king¹⁶ of the central part of India, the Deccan, he moved to the West Coast and he attacked and conquered the island fortress of what is today Elephanta Island off the coast of Bombay. But we don't have too many naval battles. We do have a lot of memorial stones which are along the coast, particularly the West Coast, which talk of how some hero died protecting his people from the invaders from the sea. We don't know whether the invaders were pirates, fishermen, aggressors, or what kind, but they were protected from invaders from the sea.

How do you make history within India, connecting India with the rest of the world.

In a great many ways, which hasn't been done, but which we are trying to do. One of the ways, which I have chosen, is maritime history, to understand how, through the Asian world, we have connections that exist. For example, there are inscriptions in Socotra¹⁷ which give us the names of Tamil fishermen, and in Thailand, a part of a gold touchstone¹⁸ has been found, with the name of the owner and the Tamil word for the Goldsmith on it. Then on a different level, oral testimony shows the links of Tamil and Swahili¹⁹ because of the ways in which navigation happened in much of the Indian Ocean world.

Mostly with Africa, not with America.

Mostly with Africa and with Malaysia, up to China, but it's there, so it's the Indian Ocean world. So, there are words that are used in Africa and in Malaysia and in Thailand, which are clearly of Tamil origin, and which give you the navigation words that are still used by fishermen today. There is a continuity that can be seen.

You have many travel accounts with your traveler books. They give you an insight of history. They are also sometimes turned into a particular attention to something else.

They are, the travel account is meant finally to be read by an audience in the country from which the traveler came, and so it is geared towards feeding into a perception that already exists among his audience. This is particularly true of the European records of India. If you do a comparison of the European and the Persian Arabic, you don't find the same kind. There is a very matter of fact, acceptance: "This is India; this is the world; this is the way things function." There is none of that sense of distance that you find in many of the European travel accounts.

¹⁶ Pulakesi II (r. 610-642 C.E.) of the Chalukyas dynasty. He defeated the Mauryas of the Konkan, and the port of Puri (modern Elephanta Island) fell after a naval battle. New World Encyclopedia <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pulakesi_II> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

¹⁷ The four islands that make up the Socotra archipelago are closer to Africa than to the Arabian Peninsula, yet they belong to Yemen. All the islands have been declared World Heritage Sites by Unesco. <<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-45044833>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

¹⁸ Touchstone, black siliceous stone used to ascertain the purity of gold and silver. <<https://www.britannica.com/technology/touchstone-metallurgy>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

¹⁹ Swahili is an African language spoken mainly in Tanzania and Kenya, and in neighboring areas of Uganda, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Zambia, Malawi and northern Madagascar. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Swahili-language>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

In fact, my famous favorite quote always remains Niccolò dei Conti,²⁰ who said that the Indians consider that Europeans are less, for they say that they have only two eyes and see only what is on the surface, where the Indians have three and see what is below the surface. It remains one of my favorite quotations on the perception of the travelers. What I'm looking at now is trying to do a comparative study of Asian perspectives and European perspectives.

Are they very different?

In the perceptions, yes. Primarily looking at two fairly contemporary ones, Ibn Battuta²¹ and Marco Polo,²² they differ in many ways. I decided against Marco Polo and went for Rabban Bar Sawma²³ who was sent by Kublai Khan to visit the Pope, and friar Odoric of Pordenone,²⁴ who was sent by the Pope to visit China, and doing a comparative of those three, trying to see what happens.²⁵

You were interested also in foundation myths. That is part of a national identity. It's a mythology. Is it history? What is it?

It's historiography and the ways in which history has been used to create a singular narrative and a singular identity, which says that Indians are first Hindus and then Indians and therefore history is written to show that this is the great, glorious past. And this is the past. All our

²⁰ Niccolò dei Conti (1395-1469), “Venetian merchant who brought back a vivid account of his 25 years of travels in southern Asia. As penance for renouncing Christianity during his travels he was required to recount his ventures to Pope Eugenius IV's secretary, the scholar and Humanist Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini. His narrative, recorded in Latin, is a valuable account of southern Asia in the 15th century”. <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Niccolo-dei-Conti>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024]. The first printed edition of *The Travels of Nicolo Conti in the East in the early part of the Fifteenth Century* was made in 1492 in the original Latin by Cristoforo da Bollate. In 1503 it was translated into Spanish.

²¹ Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/69), a Moroccan explorer from Tangier whose expeditions took him further afield than any other traveller of his time and resulted in his famous work, *The rihla of Ibn Battuta*. Joshua J. Mark, “Ibn Battuta”, *World History Encyclopaedia*, 07 February 2019, <<https://www.worldhistory.org/trans/es/1-17849/ibn-battuta/>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

²² Marco Polo (1254-1324), Venetian merchant and adventurer who traveled from Europe to Asia in 1271–95, remaining in China for 17 years, and whose *Il milione* (“The Million”), known in English as the *Travels of Marco Polo*, is a classic of travel literature. <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marco-Polo>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

²³ Rabban Bar Sawma (c. 1220-1294), an Ongudite monk. Turned diplomat of the “Nestorian” Church of the East in China. He travelled from China to Jerusalem at the behest of the Mongols. In his later years in Baghdad, he documented his life of travels. <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rabban-bar-Sauma>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024]. The English account can be read at <https://archive.org/stream/historiesofrabba01budg/historiesofrabba01budg_djvu.txt> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

²⁴ Blessed Odorico de Pordenone Mattiuzzi, priest of the Order of Friars Minor, who travelled through the regions of the Tartars, the Indians and the Chinese as far as the main city of China called Kambalik between 1318 and 1330. *The Travels of Friar Odoric*, Grand Rapids, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002. <<https://es.catholic.net/op/articulos/36316/odorico-de-pordenone-beato.html#modal>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

²⁵ These ideas are developed in *The Constructions of the East in Western Travel Narratives, 1200 CE to 1800 CE*, London, Routledge, 2020

history dates from these sources only and nothing else, and therefore anything that comes later is a degradation. And actually, this goes back to colonial historiography and colonial practices of divide and rule in India; where they said that India is a land where religion is supreme and where Indians have only one identity and that identity is religion. And so, I started looking at religion as the perceived basis of all Indian identity. And I realized it was far from being the truth.

Religion is quite spread, and there are many religions.

There are, but then there's an attempt to turn these religions into monoliths, the Hindu, the Muslim, without looking at the multiple differences that exist and the multiple fluidities that exist. For instance, in the regular practice, we know that there are families where, even today, one part of the family will look after the dargah, which is the tomb of some Muslim Saint. And the other part of the family -and usually two brothers- will look after the temple of the goddess and there is never any conflict seen in this. It is just what they have done, and it is taken for granted. Society also takes it for granted. But over the past 20 years, people have stopped talking about this fact, so the political dimensions of fixing the identity in religion has also affected these kinds of fluidities.

It's a foundation myth made for the family, for the community and then for the nation.

Yes, but this is primarily for the community and then for the nation. So, the nation is being constructed. The community is a Hindu community, and the nation is a Hindu nation. That becomes a very problematic kind of narrowing down. For one thing, Hindu is such a difficult term to come to terms with, because we don't have a single book, we don't have a prophet. Different parts of India will believe in different gods and goddesses. In fact, atheism is regarded as one of the ways of being a Hindu, because when you say that all gods are one and all gods are the same, then why should you believe in God at all? The world around you is the God, so better to deal with the world that you live in rather than put your faith in a God who doesn't exist. And that's a text which goes back to the first century C.E. so it's been around for quite some time. There are questions like this that keep coming up. And if one goes back, it'll go back to identity. If one goes back to those texts, then identity is seen as rooted in, first of all, the family. That individual is part of a group and as part of a group, that individual is first part of the family, then part of a community, then part of society. The nation is then constructed.

Many societies, many states, many countries rely very much on commemoration to try to homogenize the identity. With all this kind of identities, how do you find a common one?

You don't find a common one. You find one which suits a particular version, from the 1890s, and it was also something that was required during colonial rule in India, when it was said that public assemblies of more than three people were not permitted unless it was for a religious function. And so, they started a huge religious function called the Ganesh Festival. Ganesh is the

elephant-headed God.²⁶ The Festival is very important, particularly in Maharashtra,²⁷ where it is a ten-day festival, and in parts of Karnataka,²⁸ where it is a five-day festival, but around the country it is celebrated for at least one day. So, a public performance of the Ganesh festival was made and that has now become a very contested area. Typically, you have a procession that comes out, and processions used to be led by old Muslim families of the region. In recent times, there have been actions to keep the Muslims out of it. But commemoration has generally been more of national movement leaders. It's a very recent past that is commemorated.

So, the government dictates what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten.

Yes, what is to be forgotten. Well, we've always had Gandhi, so he is always commemorated. Then September 5th is celebrated as Teachers Day, in honor of the President of India, Doctor S. Radhakrishnan,²⁹ who was a teacher. So, his birthday is celebrated as Teachers' Day. And November 14th is celebrated as Children's Day because it is Jawaharlal Nehru's birthday and Nehru was reputedly very fond of children, so it is celebrated.

When is the Independence Day?

In addition, August 15th and January 26th are celebrated as Independence Day and Republic Day respectively. But what has also started now is local and regional heroes, so we have a Shivaji Maharaj³⁰ day and we have a somebody else day depending on which state you are in, but those are dictated by the government.

Which sources can you use to make the kind of history that you are interested in?

It is the same sources, but it is reading against the grain and seeing what is concealed in them, so it's the same sources read differently. I guess the easiest example is one that I used in class with my students. In 1875 to 1877, in the Deccan area, there was a series of peasant uprisings. In the British records, they are called riots. A riot is a local law and order problem and has to be handled by the police, maybe with the help of the army. But this was not a riot; it was a

²⁶ Ganesha, also known as Ganesh, Ganapati and Vinayaka, is an elephant-headed Hindu god with a human body, son of Shiva and Parvati. He is the god of wisdom, intelligence, prudence, abundance, politics and new beginnings. He is also the patron of the arts, letters and sciences. <<https://www.significados.com/ganesh/>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

²⁷ Maharashtra is a state in the western peninsular region of India occupying a substantial portion of the Deccan Plateau. The capital city is Mumbai or Bombay. <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Maharashtra>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

²⁸ Karnataka is a state of India, located on the western coast of the subcontinent. The capital is Bangalore. <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Karnataka-state-India>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

²⁹ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), Indian philosopher, professor and statesman. He served as the second president of India from 1962 to 1967. <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sarvepalli-Radhakrishnan>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

³⁰ Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (1630–1680), was the founder of the Maratha kingdom of India. The kingdom's security was entirely based on religious tolerance and the functional integration of Brahmans, Marathas, and Prabhus. <<https://www.vedantu.com/biography/chhatrapati-shivaji-maharaj-biography>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

series of peasant and tribal uprisings against the money lenders, and therefore against the entire system which protected the money lenders. The English records called them riots. But as you go through the records, you find the mention of army being sent out in order to suppress this, judicial action needed to be taken against them as rebellious subjects. So the idea of rebellion keeps coming up, but the records continue to call them the Deccan riots. Read them against the grain.

Does everybody know how to write and read in India?

No.

So, you also have the problem of different languages.

We have. Even today, English is not common among many of the first-generation learners. We did, at Independence, institute a three-language policy. So English is begun only in high school, so 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grades and therefore many are very unfamiliar with English even today. They are more comfortable in the vernacular, in whatever their mother tongue is, which gives us a lot of problem because, with 22 languages, it's difficult to be able to collate and to put together a more comprehensive narrative.

I can imagine that part of this family tradition is kept by oral transmission.

It is.

But somebody has to start writing it.

Somebody has to. Some families have started it. Well, again, my family, both my grandfather's memories have formed the basis of the oral history collection of the Madurai University³¹ and of the Madras University.³² They're adding to it slowly, but it's a long process. What is I think heartening is that there is a core generation of teachers, who have come in from about the 1980s, 1990s, and have taken up the idea of local history and local narratives, and so they are collecting village histories. And they are establishing within their own colleges, in particular, little clusters of local narratives. We are hoping to be able to collect all this region-wide starting next year. This was a project which was started about seven years ago. I'm talking only at the moment of Pune University,³³ because we started that with our own colleges. And the advantage that we have is that we have 600 colleges under the university covering this huge area of Maharashtra and most of our colleges are in the rural areas, where they are collecting village accounts, village narratives, memorial stones.

Pictures, images, photographs, engravings?

³¹ Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU) is a public state university located in Madurai city, in southern Tamil Nadu, India, that was established in 1966. <<https://mkuniversity.ac.in/new/>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

³² Madras University is a public state university in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, established in 1857. <<https://www.unom.ac.in/>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

³³ The Savitribai Phule Pune University was established in 1949 in Pune, Maharashtra. <http://www.unipune.ac.in/university_files/about_university.htm> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

Engravings, a large number of them. Pictures, photographs, not so many of them, but usually a lot of inscriptions, and there's one which I was just told about which is an inscription which has been dated back to the 8th century C.E. They are trying to do the rubbing of that and to read it. There is a whole lot that's being collected, again, a huge issue. But what they are collecting more is oral histories of the older people in the villages and seeing what they remember, how they remember, what they do. That's being recorded.

Recorded and transcribed.

Exactly.

There was a project in Mexico called "Papeles de Familia".³⁴ They encouraged families to open their old wardrobe and bring the things out. There is a children's song by a composer called Cri-Cri³⁵ that says, "Toma el llavero abuelita y enséñame tu ropero." Take out whatever you have. So, it was the idea of, "Bring us your history and we promise to keep it, to make a big collection of everything." And many people did have secrets and interesting things, but some others said, "No. My history is my history." Nobody knows it. The idea was to share these stories.

Yes, but they are sharing the stories. I think one of the problems that we have in India around sharing the stories is that, in many villages, there is still a concern over rights to land, and they don't want to share stories which might affect in some way the right to the land that they are cultivating at that point. And so that is something that we need to think about a little bit more and see how we can do it.

History is only for scholars or it's for everybody?

Unfortunately, only for politicians.

Oh my! it's even worse.

It's more politicized, which is the worst part of it, but written history has been for scholars only. Which is why there is such a gap between the popular perceptions of history and the academic narratives of history. And there, I will say, we historians have failed to take this knowledge to the people. And it was sort of taken for granted that everybody will know what we are saying anyway, and they'll see the truth of it. And when truth began to come up from a different perspective, many of the scholars were taken by surprise because they didn't expect that. They ought to have, but they didn't expect it. Finally, in 1992, on the basis of popular perception, we had the breaking of the Babri Masjid,³⁶ a mosque which was supposed to have been built

³⁴ The Historical Collection of Family Testimonies is kept at INAH's Dirección de Estudios Históricos, with copies of documents of the families that participated in a call for papers in 1992. <<http://papelesdefamilia.mx>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

³⁵ José Francisco Gabilondo Soler (1907-1990), known by his stage name Cri-Cri, el Grillo Cantor, was a Mexican children's singer-songwriter. The song is called "El ropero". <<https://cricri.com.mx/nosotros>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

³⁶ Babri Masjid, mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Babri-Masjid>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024]. Beatriz Martínez Saavedra, "La destrucción de la Babri Masjid: aproximación a

by the Mughal Emperor Babur, on the land and over a temple which was the birthplace of the God Ram. And so the mosque was broken down and they dug up the entire place to discover that there were no temples at all over there, but popular perception continues to insist that there were temples and they have been hidden and they have been taken away by Babur. That's when people woke up to realize that there was a popular narrative which was run totally against everything the historians were saying. They have begun to take that seriously now.

Do you think it's possible to make global history in India?

We are trying to. At any rate, we're introducing the course on aspects of global history, on connected worlds and world history and geography as two core courses which all students will have to take, and we will build up on that later.

Connected history or global history?

At the moment we've called this connected history because if we say global history, then I suspect that the students will get frightened and run away. We've called it connected history because they like the idea of connections so we are putting it in through the back door. Through connections, we are bringing in global. And they're Okay with globalization in economics, but put the word global into the historical context and they say: "This is so much, how can we study so much?" So, it's a matter of time; let's ease them into it. There's a Hindi song which says: "Take a straight path and you'll get there faster, but you don't know all you have left by the wayside, so take the circular path. You'll get there a little later, but you'll still get there." So that's what we're doing.

Huge conferences like this one by CISH, they gather people. That allow us to interconnect with other colleagues from around the world. Are they necessary?

To some extent, yes, because for me personally, what has been borne in on me very clearly is that India is not part of the "imaginaire" of South Asia as a whole, it is not part of the imaginary of things like CISH. And so I think we need to register a presence in order to bring it in. It's not much point for us talking of connected history when historical organizations tend to ignore this. If you look at the list of papers now, there are papers on Taiwan, there are a few from the Japanese perspective, there are a lot of Polish, but the entire list of papers has only three which are on India. One being my teacher, Shereen Moosvi.³⁷ She's in one of the international commissions. And one being mine, on connected histories from the Indian perspective.

las demandas históricas del comunismo hindú en la segunda mitad del siglo XX", tesis de Maestría en Estudios de Asia y África, El Colegio de México, 2007.

³⁷ Shireen Moosvi, Professor of Medieval Indian History in the Aligarh Muslim University is one of the most renowned economic historians of the age of the Emperor Akbar. But she's also worked on a whole lot of other aspects, including technology, especially ship-building, trade connections, and most recently, on gender. <<https://www.amu.ac.in/faculty/history/shireen-moosvi>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024]. Author, among others, of *Episodes in the Life of Akbar*, New Delhi, National Book Trust, India, 1994 and *The Economy of the Mughal Empire c. 1595*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

*But they're going to give the prize to an Indian born historian, Sanjay Subrahmanyam.*³⁸

Yes, an Indian born historian. So, I find that very contradictory. At one level, I'm glad that Sanjay is finally getting this thing because Sanjay has done some phenomenal work in bringing India to the world, but I think we need to do it at multiple levels as well. We have to look at the ways in which this is studied, examined. We need to bring the Indian content a little more visible.

*The original idea of this committee was being an International Committee of Historical Sciences, but in reality, it's mostly European. And although we have had a Mexican President, the presence of Latin America is not very numerous. Eliana Dutra,*³⁹ *from Brazil, whom we managed to put into the board, has made a huge campaign to incorporate the non-Europeans, but there is still a great absence of Africa and some areas in Asia, although they have Japan and Korea on the board.*

Yes, India's missing, Southeast Asia is missing, so, we don't have anybody from Malaysia or Singapore. The kind of work they are doing in Singapore on global connections is phenomenal, but there's nobody from there. And there's this scholar called Tansen Sen who's looking at Buddhist networks in the Asian world.⁴⁰ He is nowhere to be seen over here.

Memory is important in India?

Selective memory, as always, is important in India. There is a certain government dictating what constitutes national memory. There are local memories, and there are family memories, some of them, but by and large it is constructed within the narratives of the state.

You know that history has two coordinates: Time and space. Are they equally treated?

No. Time is collapsed. Space is compartmentalized. Time is collapsed when it comes to religious heritage. Time is ignored when it comes to questioning periodization, because then the time, the date becomes very important. And space is collapsed when they are talking of an empire, and space is expanded when they are talking about the local hero or the regional hero.

What's in the future for Radhika?

More writing, more research, more maybe breaking my head on the brick wall to say that there is more to history than just this.

³⁸ See the interview to Sanjay Subrahmanyam in Zárate Toscano, V. (2024). *Aportaciones historiográficas en la voz de quince protagonistas*. Instituto Mora. Edición disponible en: <<https://doi.org/10.59950/IM.129>>.

³⁹ See the interview to Eliana Dutra in Zárate Toscano, V. (2024). *Aportaciones historiográficas en la voz de quince protagonistas*. Instituto Mora. Edición disponible en: <<https://doi.org/10.59950/IM.129>>

⁴⁰ Born in India, Tansen Sen is Director of the Center for Global Asia, Professor of History, NYU Shanghai. He specializes in Asian history and religions, India-China interactions, Indian Ocean connections, and Buddhism. <<https://shanghai.nyu.edu/academics/faculty/directory/tansen-sen>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024]. Author, among others, of *India, China, and the World: A Connected History*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. <<https://www.amazon.com/India-China-World-Connected-History/dp/1442220910?asin=1442220910&revisionId=&format=4&depth=1>> [Accessed: february 14th, 2024].

Any particular project?

One on a weaving communities of South India from the 8th to the 14th century through inscrip-tional sources, trying to map the communities and the ways in which they are part of the village community. It is not a caste-based study but definitely a technology and community-based history of weaving communities and their spread.

So, we are going to find out more about India thanks to you and your students.

I hope so.

Do you have many disciples?

A few, not too many. The boy who came here is one of them, because I pushed him into urban studies and medieval studies. A few others have been trying to get to come to international conferences such as the present, but who are very hesitant because they don't know English. They're fine with the Indian conferences where they can speak in Hindi and not at all in English, but on an international platform, if they have to speak in English, they can't manage it. So, they're very hesitant about that. That is going to be a problem.

Your students are mostly women or men?

Mostly men. Women have tended to get to a certain stage of their studies and then unfortu-nately, they dropp out. Family pressures, probably. I will say that two of my best students are women. One has worked on a form of dance called Creative Dance, The School of Creative Dance as representative of the new nation, because that's something that comes up from ap-proximately 1945 till about 1975. She studies the ways in which this particular dance form evolved. And the other is a practicing musician who is looking at the question of tradition through the practices of music.

You have to keep promoting and encouraging them.

We have to keep pushing. We are doing that.

Well. Thank you very much.

My pleasure

Transcription by Brenda Erandi Aguilar Mercado

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