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In Search of History[•]

Abstract

Patience, tolerance and acceptance should be a must, when one begins the quest for history. For the current research, few dimensions of South Asian history were chosen that are based on the above mentioned virtues, to comprehend the events of the past.

Like most of our modern day terminologies', the term history has also evolved from an ancient Greek word historia originally meant inquiry, the act of seeking knowledge, as well as the knowledge that results from inquiry and from there it's a short jump to the accounts of events that a person might put together from making inquiries — what we might call stories.

Introduction

“The words *story* and *history* share much of their lineage, and in previous eras, the overlap between them was much messier than it is today. Today, we might think of the dividing line as the one between fact and fiction.¹” But for me, history is Hi Story. Personally I look for story and sometimes the stories look for me. All that is needed to do is add the research based authenticity with evidence, the way lawyers built a case.

Human and history go hand in hand. Occasionally we are able to record it but most of the times it is highly speculative, an evidence of our incompetence. Geology, geography, archaeology all provide us few clues but the puzzle is never completed and this is how it is going to be forever.

Of all the pieces of this puzzle, my favourites are quite diverse from traditional resources. The history is searched from many perspectives, myths, traditions, folk lores, poetry, literature, music, architecture, sculpture, murals, paintings etc. All these are narrated specimens, and the narrator is not making a conscious effort of recording the history but this happens unconsciously where the creators are leaving behind clues that are sometimes more accurate than the formal histories, which, most of the times are dictated by the monarchs. Sites holding information of the previous generations, become a wealth of knowledge for future researchers.

Most of the traditions and events ended right then and there but many continue till present times. Today I will share some ethnicities and stories of South Asian region. But along with that the current research is tend to raise questions rather

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•“In Search of History” title a book by Dr Mubarak Ali, Islamabad: Dost Publications 2009.

than to provide the answers, because I believe this is a more appropriate method to search history.

Evidence of pre historic wall paintings can be found in almost all parts of the world. Images preserved in Bhembitika caves portray an era that we have marked as pre historic, ignoring the fact that the artists who painted these walls had their own history that we do not know of. I have serious reservation for the term Pre Historic. The straight jacket of timeline, forced upon us by the archaeologists and historians of the 19th and 20th century, never allowing the future generations to breathe.

Further in history comes Mehr Garh, row after row of strange figures with interesting features. Contemporary researchers label it as stylization, not giving the chance to any other theory that might become the reason to shatter our age old beliefs that human can never have different kind of facial features.

We are made to believe that all the excavations were done in the quest for knowledge but, much of it was to find treasures both in the form of gold and ancient scriptures. The excavation sites were selected accordingly. Classical example in this regard is Mohenjo Daro that is not even unearthed properly except for the upper part comprising of the community centres, lower area that has the houses of elite and gold market of the ancient city, which must have brought lots of riches to the British Raj of that time. Rest of the sites that is almost 90% of the total of 555 acres, has been left untouched because there seems to be no further incentive.

Aryans of the 15th century BC sang hymns, and later built the altars that ultimately led to the worshipping of Suma drink that intoxicated the humans, thus becoming a medium to reach the Almighty. In later centuries, Sufis, Saints, Monks, Bhakshus of the Subcontinent consumed herbs to be inebriated, a mean to attain access to divinity. A persistent continuity of ancient practices.

The apparently mythological worlds of Mahabharata and Ramayana, have the clues that tell us about the usage of weapons like Brahmashirsha Astra, Naravan Astra, Brahmanda Astra, Bhargava Astra and Maha Pasupat Astra , which were declared imaginative but now we can see lots of similarities to the modern war tools.²

In these chronicles, even the art of Alpana is discussed to embellish the pavilion of Seeta's house, at her wedding. Many of the rural houses are decorated in more or less the same manner, till today.³

Buddha's life is full of stories, ending in a controversial death of either poisoned or consuming poisonous mushrooms mistakenly. The events of his lives as an Avatar are narrated in Jataka stories that have inspired us till today. A 1941 released Walt Disney production, Dumbo⁴, story of child elephant with abnormally big ears, is a direct inspiration from one of the Jataka stories, to teach the lesson of tolerance and acceptance.

Just like the Aryans, Greeks, Iranians and Huns, of the distant past, another streak of rulers in the valleys of South Asia, were the Muslims. In the first phase of Muslim rule, were Ghaznavid, about whom we have almost non existent

knowledge regarding their life and culture. So a very non traditional method was adopted when the poetry of that era was consulted to search for the cultural history and we are surprised to know about the number of arts, artists and artisans of that period. Abu Abdullah Rozbah Ibne Abdullah Alnakti Allahori, Abu al Farj Runi and Saad Suleman were the prominent poets and Salman in one of his poems *Shehar-i-Ashob* writes of a *Nay Nawaz* Awwal Muhammad - who plays the flute so beautifully that it fills a sad heart with happiness, Usman Khawaninda is a great singer, who mesmerises the audience with his singing, Mutraba Pari, another singer whose voice resembles the singing of a ringdove that brings life to the flowers of the court and a male dancer Maho who danced with such grace and style that Lahori *Umrahs* were crazy about him.⁵

History further leads us to Khiljis and the star of the empire was All ul Din Khilji who killed his uncle/father in law and throned himself in 1296 (1316). Although not a very popular ruler, he managed to fend off a series of [Mongol](#) attacks—at least five during the decade 1297–1306 and introduced an effective taxation and market price system in Hindustan. Alauddin was the first Muslim ruler who disregarded the position of the ulemas and refuted the authority of the Caliph.⁶ He also had the inclusion of Hindus within the political world. Both Alā' al-Dīn and his son married into the families of important Hindu rulers, and several such rulers were received at court and treated with respect.⁷

Mughals ruled India with a grandeur yet to be surpassed, leaving behind lots of contributions, stories and controversies. Humayun's role in the invention of Astrolabe Humayuni, Akbar's love for elephant portrayed on the Picture Wall of Lahore Fort, and then the myth of Anarkali, that has become larger than life, without any historical proof, marring the life of Sahb e Jamal, Jahangir's queen buried in the so called tomb of Anarkali.⁸

Mesmerizing realities of Nurjahan, Sher Afgan, Aseff Jah, Shahjahan and Mumtaz Mahal, more fascinating than fiction that ended up in the burial of Jahangir and Aseff Jah in the same vicinity, a very interesting gesture in the history of Mughals.

And how can I deny the fact of Sarmad, an Arminian Jew by birth, becoming the spiritual leader of Mughal crown prince Dara Shikoh, killed by Alamgir, one of the most ill famed Mughal kings, who imposed *jazia* to non Muslim population but eradicated 80 other taxes⁹ that many historians very conveniently forget to mention. Although he killed all of his brothers but later as a king, instead of ordering, requested the tailors of Lahore to altar the design of a female trouser that was too revealing but very much in fashion.¹⁰

Cultural truths have a way of recurring. 18th and 19th century white races, with their snobbish attitude towards colonies and rejecting the local wisdom, retracted their path in 2017 by offering Dudh Haldi as “The new Latte with Turmeric” at Starbucks¹¹ or selling *miswak* as twig brush.¹² These and many other merchandise of the subcontinent were ridiculed by the Gora Sahab.

Indian politics can never be complete without the great contribution of Gandhi but letters of Gandhi written to his German-born Jew architect and body builder friend Hermann Kallenbach, with a broad hint of homosexuality between the two men, should have been part of the Mahatma package. Gandhi lived with him, in

Johannesburg for about two years from 1907 before returning to India in 1914.¹³ The archive of letters and photos belonging to Kallenbach, was purchased by the Indian government in July 2012 for 700,000 pounds, just a day before they were due to be auctioned by Sotheby's in London and most of this archive is yet to see the light of the day.¹⁴

It does not shock me either when I study the love life of 39 years old Jinnah who falls in love with a 16 years old Parsi girl named Rattan Bai Petit¹⁵ (Ruttie). Got married on 19th April 1918, had daughter Dina at midnight on the night between 14 and 15th August, curiously the same time as the birth of Pakistan 28 years later.¹⁶ But things did not work out between them and then she was seriously ill, possibly had Tuberculosis, went to Paris where her husband looked after her¹⁷ and some say, Jinnah himself acquired the infection during that time. Ruttie died on 20th February 1929, on the day of her 29th birthday.¹⁸

In her last letter Ruttie Jinnah wrote to her husband,

“Darling I love you – and had I loved you just a little less I might have remained with you – I have loved you my darling as it is given to few men to be loved. I only beseech you that the tragedy which commenced in love should also end with it.

Darling Goodnight and Goodbye.”

Ruttie

“The only time Jinnah ever showed his emotions publically was when Ruttie’s body was lowered into the grave, he was asked to be the first to throw earth into the grave. He did that and as he straightened up, he started to cry___ not just silent tears but with hands over his face, he sobbed like a child for many minutes. He did not seek anyone’s hand or anyone’s shoulder; but in tune with his personality he cried alone. And having finished, he wiped his tears and with his face returning to stone, walked back to his car.”¹⁹

For me history is always in layers, there is no such thing as black and white, or a hero or villain but there are personalities and events with innumerable shades of grey. Leaders, kings, warriors, poets, writers, all had shades. If they were not all evil, then they were not all angels. If Ghalib and Iqbal were either alcoholic or fond of Nauch girls, look at the miraculous poetry they created. Should we reject Munto’s legendary fiction if we knew that he was being paid by USIS (United States Information Service)?²⁰ Does it make Faiz a lesser poet if he was associated with “apparently” not very positive organizations, according to state accusations?

We should stop creating saints and devils in the history. These names in the past were just humans, like you and me. They had their share of successes and mistakes. Best path to take is accept and respect for what they are, not what we want them to be.

We must search the history and revisit the narrative provided to us by the British Raj via mass media and textbooks that served its purpose by helping them strengthen their rule till today. Why is Alexander always called the great? In fact, most of us believe Azam of Sikandar is part of his name. Wasn’t he as barbarian as Sargon of Akkad, Gengash Khan, Tamerlane, Ghaznavi, Napoleon, Hari Singh

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Nalwa or Hitler, who destroyed civilizations and killed millions in their greed to conquer one region after another? On the other hand, local rulers Ashoka, Gupta, Akbar, Ranjeet Singh, Jinnah are looked down to the level of ridicule. It's our historians who must research and present facts and figures in front of our new generation and let them decide what to believe and what not to believe.

Being an inhabitant of South Asia, I don't search the history but it is the history that is searching for me. All that is required is to let my eyes remain open to observe, my head to be receptive of facts, my heart respecting the traditions and my intellect to react when it senses a fact, obscured in time.

Notes & References

¹ <http://time.com/4824551/history-word-origins/>

² Top 5 - Most Powerful Weapons Used in Mahabharath More Powerful than a Nuclear Bomb| SC#110 youtube 24th January 2018

³ Kanwal Khalid, The Art of *Alpana* Associated with the Women in the Ancient Traditions of the Subcontinent, to be Published

⁴ <https://consequenceofsound.net/2017/07/disney-unveils-cast-and-release-date-for-tim-burton-s-live-action-dumbo-movie/>

⁵ Sayyad Hashmi Afridi, *Maasar Lahore, Part 1* (Lahore: Idara-i-Saqafat-i-Islamia 1956), 128.

⁶ <http://www.historydiscussion.net/empires/foundations-of-khilji-dynasty-in-india-history-of-india/594>

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/place/India/The-early-Turkish-sultans#ref485615>

an epic poem written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi in the early 14th century or 1510 or 1540

⁸ Sayyad Sabah ul Deen Abd ul Rahman, *Hindustan Kay Musalman Hukamranon kay Ahad kay Tamaddani Jalway*, Publisher: Maaraf, Azam Garh, 1963, p. 190.

⁹ Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzab The Man and the Myth*, Penguin Random House Haryana India, p. 45

¹⁰ Archival Documents, Chughtai Museum Lahore

¹¹ <https://news.starbucks.com/emea/starbucks-uk-introduces-latte-with-turmeric>

¹² <https://www.twigbrush.com>

¹³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/9836759/Was-Gandhi-gay-Intimate-letters-go-on-display-in-India.html>

For further details regarding Gandhi's life read, "Gandhi: Naked Ambition, by Jade Adams, Published August 30th 2010 by Quercus Books"

¹⁴ Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2172967/Indian-government-spends-700-000-buy-letters-prove-national-hero-Gandhi-gay.html#ixzz558Oj4KKU>

¹⁵ <https://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/9573/rutties-love-letter-to-jinnah/>

¹⁶ <https://nation.com.pk/24-Dec-2016/jinnah-and-ruttie-when-love-is-not-enough>

¹⁷ Sheela Reddy, Mr and Mrs Jinnah, The Marriage that Shook India,

¹⁸ <https://nation.com.pk/24-Dec-2016/jinnah-and-ruttie-when-love-is-not-enough>

¹⁹ <https://nation.com.pk/24-Dec-2016/jinnah-and-ruttie-when-love-is-not-enough>

²⁰ <https://www.wasafiri.org/article/letter-uncle-sam-saadat-hasan-manto/>