

Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Rashtripati Nivas, Shimla – 171005

**Two days National Seminar
On**

**Reclaiming Truth: Healing from Historical Distortions and
the Historiography of False Narratives in Indian History**

Scheduled on **13 to 14 August 2026**

Concept Note

Indian history does not only get written in evidence, but power, ideology and epistemology also play a role in the writing of Indian history. Historical narratives of India have been shaped and conditioned by perspectives that often give greater importance to external categorizations than to indigenous experiences, such as in colonial constructions and later in postcolonial reinterpretations of such histories. This essay evolves a nationalist historiographical viewpoint which questions the bias and prejudice that have permeated ancient, medieval and modern Indian history and which advocate for a startlingly clean methodologically approach to the recovery of civilisational truth. The goal is not to build a gem president's memorial, but to reveal the distortions that occurred and to call for a historically informed perspective of India's history based on evidence and a civilizational rooted approach.

Colonial historiography is the initial important source of distortion. Later administrators and thinkers like James Mill created the narrative that portrayed India as a country that has withered away into stagnation, irrationality, despotism and constituted a civilisation. Mill's distinction between the Hindu, Muslim and British period of Indian history imposed a very narrow and biased organization on a much broader and more complex Indian past. Apart from dividing India's history, this system also validated the presence of British and supported their rule as it was a civilising mission. Notably as well was the colonial erasure of Indian history. The colonial scholars, by focusing on linear, chronicle based historiography, neglected the fact that historical memory was preserved in India through the different mediums such as the epic, genealogy, inscriptions, and oral cultures. It went down as an epistemic bias, and a foundational prejudice emerged: that India did not have history in the 'proper sense'. Naturally this bias was keenly displayed in the building of origins within the framework of Ancient India. This theory of Indus Valley Civilisation as an isolated forerunner to Vedic Civilisation along with Aryan invasion theory indicated that each one of these externalities was an integral part of Indian civilisation. In addition to this disruption of indigenous continuation, this interpretation also reinforced the belief amongst the colonisers of the inability of native societies to produce complex civilisations. This is a perspective that has been contested by the Nationalist historiography, which focused on cultural continuity, regional interactions and the re-evaluation of the monument with no prior assumptions based on archaeological and textual

evidence. On balance, more sophisticated accounts as those developed by scholars such as Michel Danino have emerged which seek alternatives to basic invasion models, but that still remain critical advocates of evidence.

Another space in which biases can be seen are ancient Indian intellectual traditions. The knowledge systems of the Indians were frequently condemned as one of the mystical or unscientific fields in the colonial discourse and in the early post-colonial writing. However, the accomplishments in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, language, and medicine indicate the presence of a developed intellectual culture. The systematic enquiry and empirical observation in the astronomical model of Āryabhaṭa and the medical text of *Ayurveda*, as well as the grammatical system of Pāṇini, bear witness. The importance of the work laid out by Dharampal is his proofs through Colonial records that indigenous education systems were prevalent and working in a normal way prior to the Colonial disruption. The nationalist view does not argue that ancient India was without blemish and without even parts that were not equally advanced; but it does hold that its contributions must be judged by themselves, and without the distracting deceptions of Eurocentric judgments. Concurrently, the nationalists' theory of history has to deal with the complexities inherent in ancient society. Caste divisions, social barriers and gender discrimination are not to be overlooked. But these are just some of the elements of ancient India, and there are still others if you'd like to consider that. A more balanced view acknowledges hierarchy as well as diversity, including the existence of guilds, regional cultures, and philosophical pluralism, and traditions of debate and reform.

Perhaps the most polarised and the area of the greatest dispute is the historiography of Medieval India. The medieval era is depicted in a negative light in colonial histories, an era of unalloyed degeneration that is replete with foreign invaders and despots. Other, postcolonial and Marxist, readings, in contrast, wanted to reinterpret this period in the context of syncretism, class relations, and economic systems. They questioned colonial perceptions, but some nationalist critics claim the methods of these, 'dimmed the evidence' of political violence, or interpreted religious conflict and cultural changes through a particular lens. The role of political and military history in understanding the dynamics of medieval India including imperial power and resistance was highlighted by historians, such as Jadunath Sarkar. Primary sources have been re-examined by more recent scholars including Meenakshi Jain who discuss such matters as the desecration of temples, which cannot solely be dealt with from the economic dimension and shall be seen in political and religious terms. The point of view of the nationalists is that enunciating such an aspect is not in any sense a communal bias, but rather a determination to acknowledge and address the histories without ideological blinders.

Meanwhile, in parallel, a contextually particularist history of nationalism also acknowledges the multifaceted nature of medieval India as a time of contact, creativity, and difference. The Arabian world was in a dynamic historical position with the introduction of the Bakhti and Sufi movements, regional literary works and emerging political groupings. The challenge is to deny both the colonially derived perspective on 'decline' and the uncritical syncretistic perspective; in favour of a more balanced perspective that addresses conflict as well as coexistence. The biases of the historiography in the context of the Modern India assume a different character. Modernistic discourses of colonialism highlighted the positive forces of British colonialism its

effect of political unity, law reforms and modern education. In turn, nationalist historians emphasized the exploitative character of colonialism and the power of Indian resistance. Historians like R. C. Majumdar criticised the approach that stressed only the writings of the elites of revolutionary movements and brought regional movements to the forefront.

Post-Independent historiography however entailed new debates. Class, peasant uprisings, and marginalised voices were brought to the fore in Marxist and subaltern theory to increase the range of historical investigation. Some of these contributions tend to downplay the civilising and cultural aspects of the freedom struggle, putting its emphasis on economic or structural considerations, a criticism brandished by nationalist critics. Often the nationalist viewpoints stress that the fight for independence was not just a political, but also civilisational, a search for dignity, identity and autonomy. The issue of Partition also reflects the intricacies of contemporary historiography. The differences between these competing narratives may stem from different ideological views, which have different attitudes and priorities toward communalism, colonial policy and political leadership. A nationalist perspective demands a holistic analysis, which recognizes the factors in play, without reduced explanations.

In all three periods in history (Ancient, Medieval and Modern) bias and prejudice are seen to influence historical accounts. Though they are manifested in different ways, the distortions, whether called colonial denigration, ideological reductionism, or selective emphasis, attempt to keep the complexity of India's past out of focus. Thus the intellectual struggle of reclaiming truth is a part of the nationalist project of reclaiming truth. Not only is it a challenge to the prevailing narratives, it is also a process of rewriting history afresh in a more inclusive and evidence-based way. Healing is an integral part of the effort. History has been distorted and it has an enormous impact on collective consciousness that affects the way collective consciousness understand itself and their history. The healing itself means the restoration of historical trust, but not the end of critical questioning. This entails the inclusion of such sources as oral histories, vernacular literature, inscriptions and local histories, which have been marginalized. It encourages methodological openness as well; it is not one size fits all, but is scientifically and factually robust. However, a self-critical approach for the study of a nationalist historiography cannot be abandoned. There is a potential for replacing one kind of bias by another. The project may be undermined by romanticisation, selective use of evidence, and nothing but rigidity of one's ideas. So what is required is a critical nationalism, one which focuses on civilisational dignity but also one which will readily debate, recognise complexity and adjust in the face of fresh evidence. To conclude, reconstruction of truth in Indian history is not the job of one day but an intellectual process which goes on forever. This is an attempt to explore and sketch a balanced and nuanced description of the India of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern times and dispel inherited biases from the historiography of these periods. A nationalist perspective with a level of evidence and open inquiry is useful for this endeavour. It allows the possibility of rethinking Indian history, to be thought of not as a disjointed history according to other others' meeting or measuring, but as a continuous and evolving diverse civilisation marked by both conflict and creativity, and deserving study in its terms.