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# Teaching History in Unjust Times

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Universities and the academic world have always been part of a game of status mobility. We may not articulate it in that way to ourselves, but the reason why people study something is at least partially to increase their status, be it in their own eyes or in the more broadly accepted prestige system of their immediate community. There may or may not be something of deeper meaning in higher education, but there is always a cultural framework that gives higher and lower ranks to different codes embedded in it. The frameworks may vary; some may consider learning the language and cognitive styles of elite Euro-American scholars the way to rise to giddy heights, while some may consider debunking those styles to be the path to higher self-esteem.

The moral and emotional appeal of the classroom, too, is based on status differences. Classroom life, when it is effective, draws students to admiring and wanting to become like the teachers performing next to the blackboard. Their language, style, knowledge and sense of humour, all symbolise higher social rank and students tend to learn to aspire towards that. Max Weber, M K Gandhi, Pierre Bourdieu and many others have described and commented on this status politics.

Unfortunately, this game necessarily needs losers so as to have winners. The prestige of a relatively higher-ranking social group has lustre and glamour only so long as it is able to show its distinction and social distance from the rest. Symbols of rank and exclusivity are of great importance in this field, particularly since political and economic gains are pitifully small in higher education compared to in several other fields. It is through the symbolism of knowledge, narrative and style that the greatest exercise of power takes place here.

Kumkum Roy's book is about young people who are relatively newer entrants

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Challenge of Democratization: Learning and Teaching History in the 21st Century** edited by Kumkum Roy, 2020; New Delhi, pp 230, free e-book, <https://www.academia.edu/44456294/Phoenixrjune>.

into the status politics of school and university education. She focuses on the teaching of history, though many of her insights could be generalised to several other disciplines too. A book like this makes us see afresh the relations of power which underlie common norms and practices of school and university life. The way the book is published itself breaks one of our sacred myths, that a good book is one which comes out from a prestigious publisher and therefore one should bring out one's book from the most prestigious publisher possible. In this field where the usurpation of academic status is all and scorning of those who get excluded is a necessary gambit, Roy has chosen to publish her book with no publishers' labels attached. Distributed as a free e-book during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown, Roy, in the e-book, writes about the experiences of those who start with little social and cultural capital in the fields constituted by schools and universities. At a time when academic institutions are commonly resentful of the entry of people from lower ranking classes, castes, genders, regions and so on, it swims against the tide by examining their experiences with empathy. The book presents a riveting bottom-up look at the teaching and learning of history in India.

Roy does other unusual things too. One of India's foremost scholars of the early historic period, she jumps ahead from her usual period by more than a thousand years to bring the ancient historian's ways to bear upon contemporary times. She uses the approaches by which manuscripts and epigraphs were examined to study the practice of teaching

history and particularly ancient Indian history today. She pores over newspapers, textbooks and even guide books for exams to inquire into how History is being conveyed and understood. She supplements this with questionnaires circulated to school and college teachers and her own long experience of teaching students at an elite Indian university to give us a peep into how men and women students coming from different social backgrounds experience and learn history and what sense they make of it. As the title indicates, the book is an extended reflection upon the place of history in higher education in this day and age when many social groups hitherto kept out of it are beginning to enter and contest those who previously occupied this space. This leads the book to inquire into several kinds of transgressions.

### Perspectives and Methods

At the heart of the book is a deep restlessness over the place and meaning of history in Indian schools and higher education. To write about history in Indian education is to write about a meeting place of many of contemporary India's conflicts, rebellions and challenges. History and higher education, to be sure, have always been struggled and fought over. Different social locations—including being in a position of power or of subjugation—influence our precognitive intuitions in different ways. These can lead to quite different kinds of concept formation and to the building of a variety of narratives when coming to grips with the same objective reality. Struggles within societies, communities, institutions and fields can also lead to the formulations of discourses that protect and enhance the power of actors' respective social locations. It will be difficult to claim that any group writing history or indeed sociology, economics or physics is or ever was completely free of the compulsions within particular situations to gain respect, recognition, power or even wealth.

Research methods within each discipline have usually aimed at eliminating biases and gaps in their practitioners'

understanding. However, the confidence of scholars in what they know has periodically been shaken up by the emergence of a powerful new set of perspectives which has made them aware of certain influences that coloured research agendas and empirical investigations. It has taken, for instance, the emergence of vigorous anti-colonial, feminist and Dalit movements for mainstream academics to acknowledge that it had been missing out certain important issues and ways of seeing things. These voices got heard only after they gathered enough social momentum to ensure that they could no longer be ignored. Social and natural sciences indeed try to grasp truths that are not just figments of our imagination, but they are always constrained in that by the social relations and cultures through which they themselves operate.

Roy does not take the stance made popular by extreme versions of post-modernism and post-structuralism that because knowledge is interwoven with power, all we can do is to deconstruct and critique it. Building relatively more valid knowledge is certainly part of her project. But this must be done more cautiously than ever before, through an interrogation of the discourses and fields within which we construct our understanding and by listening carefully to the

voices of those hitherto silenced or heard only from afar. It cannot be blandly assumed that the erstwhile silenced voices have the truth of innocence either. They too must be carefully scrutinised to see if they may be speaking things that are important to pay attention to.

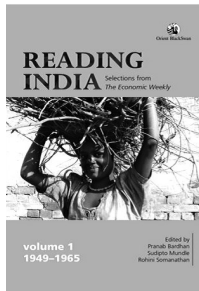
Roy believes that history can be empowering and can help people to better understand the narratives of the powerful as well as their own narratives. This book is her way of exploring both how history is actually being taught at different sites in India and the kind of possibilities that may exist within the study of history to create greater justice and freedom in the world.

**How History Is Being Taught**

The first part of the book is about the context within which history is being taught. In a fascinating account of post-graduate students of history at an elite Indian university, she brings out the struggles that many of them face. An increasing number of students are coming into the university from families that do not share the English-speaking academic cultures of their professors. They encounter barriers in the university of class, patriarchy, caste and region. Experiences of humiliation and even violence are commonplace at the hands

of teachers, co-students and the administration. There is little effort by those in relatively powerful positions to reach out to other languages and to create dialogues with the cultures and world views present there. The fear of the loss of status by legitimising new entrants is palpable. But is this inevitable? Roy cites the example of the non-governmental organisation Eklavya’s approach to social studies education to say that an empowering history is indeed possible. The challenge is how to visualise and implement it.

The problems in teaching history are manifold. To begin with, it is nowadays among the least preferred of all university subjects. The number of universities with strong departments of history, and among those departments, especially of ancient Indian history, is dwindling. Within the existing departments, there is a sharp diversity in academic orientations and interests when you go from the large central universities of our big metropolises to smaller cities and universities and colleges there. Whether among the schoolteachers or among college faculty, the predominant version of what history is supposed to do is to teach “great achievements.” The purpose of history is conflated with the purpose of mythologies and there is little recognition of the possibilities that history offers when it



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is done in the scientific rather than the mythological mode. Instead, it is expected that history mainly teaches about great heroes and the buildings they made, the wars they fought and so on.

A similar pattern is to be seen in most kinds of texts that purport to teach history, ranging from school textbooks to the coaching handbooks used by competitive exam aspirants. There is little space for a history that permits one to question or interrogate. The teaching of history is not seen as an act of building knowledge, where one tries to examine different events and representations and constructs a more general and deeper understanding of them. Instead in most of these texts, history is a place where we learn “facts” of what happened in the past and through them absorb uncritically a narrative that more often than not mirrors the prejudices and orientations of powerful social groups towards caste, gender and nationalism.

There are many kinds of knowledges and they have different characteristics, social backgrounds and effects. Mythological thinking, too, is an important and valuable part of our lives. It articulates the deep contradictions of our lives, desires and relationships and gives symbolic resolutions of them. When we think of Akbar’s *Din-i Ilahi*, it gives us a glow of happiness that we had Muslim kings who sought to bring people together and sponsored religious thinking that united rather than tore asunder. This is of special importance in today’s time of inter-religious strife. In contrast, the scientific mode of thought asks us to consciously look at all aspects of Akbar and to note that he had an earlier phase, too, when he was not averse to using slogans of Islamic victory over infidels to justify his expansionary military activities. When we practise a history that says it will let our theories and our evidences speak to each other and seek deeper truths and not bind itself to political interests alone, then maybe we will arrive at another way of seeing things. Perhaps we will arrive at an understanding of why rulers sometimes want to promote an identity politics of hatred and sometimes promote an identity politics of reconciliation. If we reduce history to being a handmaiden of

our popular narratives of today, then we miss out on its potential for giving new insights into our lives and our struggles.

### Possibilities in Studying History

Roy identifies a few bright spots, too, in school and college texts which promote history as a site for reflection and systematic inquiry. These include the post-National Curriculum Framework, 2005 NCERT school textbooks and an occasional undergraduate textbook like that by Upendra Singh. But these are vastly outnumbered by the kind of textbooks and coaching materials which most of our students read, assuming, of course, that they are encouraged to show any interest in history at all.

When students from the less powerful sections of our country arrive in elite universities, they are carrying mostly an exposure to history as “great achievements.” Here, they may get exposed to a different kind of history. This history may have its own problems, and may not have yet fully emerged from the shadow of the classes, castes, regions, genders and so on of the people who wrote it. And yet, it offers a new paradigm which can be made use of by these new entrants to understand their own situations better and to fashion tools for rethinking their own place in the world. Roy is charged with the pathos of the situation where the languages, cultural styles and interactions of these universities, far from being inviting, actually make these students feel like unwelcome outsiders.

In two astonishing chapters, Roy gives examples of how ancient Indian history can speak to the new entrants and empower as well as inspire them. She analyses five different narratives from over a millenium ago and sees in them struggles against domination that exemplify several different models of emancipation. The narratives are complex and call for careful thought and analysis. Satyakama from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, for instance, appears to show that it is possible for non-Brahmins to also get special knowledge, but he still remains liminal and peripheral to the system. Meanwhile, Shikhandin or Amba the charioteer of Arjuna in the *Mahabharata* personifies a breaking down of gender

stereotypes, but eventually is still co-opted within the power structure of that time. It is in *Manimekalai* from the Tamil Sangam literature that one sees a breaking away that is consummate and not just token in character. The protagonist in this narrative achieves great compassion rather than the ability to destroy others. The answer it seems is to accumulate the power that comes from feeling for others and communicating with them, and not the power that rests on their submission. It is dialogue, she argues, at the end that we must turn to. Along with the marginalised, academics too must learn to dialogue with the vast numbers that had earlier been left out of education and are now surging in.

Roy has produced a remarkable and unusual book. In a world where those who aspire to become great scholars learn to disparage teaching, she not only writes about teaching but about teaching the disparaged majority. The book speaks to many who worry about the nature of scholarship in these contested times. There are other existing debates, too, on education and inequality, which the book could have also taken up. The structural perspective on education, for instance, would ask where students go after studying history. What is the role allocation which studying this contributes to? How does studying history change people? Another interesting thing to examine could have been to look at what kind of status politics the new entrants themselves engage in. What do they challenge, where are they co-opted, what moves do they make? How do *Hindutva* and other such interpretations of the past fit into a project of self-respect? It could also have been asked what the place of history is in the neo-liberal and managerialist vision of education unfolding nowadays in India and around the world. But all this would have meant writing a very different kind of book. This is an ancient Indian historian looking at how history is taught in the very unequal India of today and that is the special strength of the book.

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