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Misuse of History: Assault on Democracy in India. An interview with Aditya Mukherjee

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In the interview with Aditya Mukherjee, various issues related to Communalism in India are addressed. The attempts of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), currently ruling the country, to change history textbooks to introduce the manipulated view of India's past expressed by Hindu nationalism. Mukherjee also talks about the current Indian government's attacks on historians' freedom of research: the public accusations of terrorism levelled at dissident scholars and also the professional marginalisation of those who refuse to bend historical discourse to the demands of the establishment linked to Hindu nationalism. Mukherjee inform us about the strong resistance against attempts to erase Muslim culture from India's official history.

KEYWORDS: ADITYA MUKHERJEE; MISUSE OF HISTORY; INDIA; COMMUNALISM;
HISTORY TEXTBOOKS; BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

Quando alla metà del secolo scorso l'India ottenne l'indipendenza dal dominio britannico e venne proclamata la repubblica, le generazioni di attivisti e studiosi che avevano a lungo lottato per la liberazione, si trovarono ad affrontare un compito arduo.

L'opera di liberazione nazionale, che aveva favorito, nel corso dei decenni, l'elaborazione di una visione politicamente laica, democratica e pluralista del paese e del suo futuro, non poteva dirsi giunta a piena realizzazione poiché i retaggi del colonialismo permeavano strutturalmente la società e la cultura indiana.

In particolare, la memoria storica del paese, costruita sulle narrazioni della scuola di Cambridge, risentiva fortemente dello *sguardo* del colonizzatore. Nei febbrili decenni che seguirono la vittoria del Congresso Nazionale Indiano, andò dunque emergendo l'esigenza di ritornare alla storia dell'India inforcando lenti diverse e rinnovate. Un ruolo fondamentale in questo processo lo ebbe la Jawaharlal Nehru University, fondata nel 1969, il cui dipartimento di studi storici era stato inaugu-

rato con il preciso intento di elaborare storie dell'India che adottassero *an independent, non colonial and pro-poor perspective*. Una storia scientificamente robusta dunque, che superasse i pregiudizi eurocentrici e coloniali, e che non fosse più un dispositivo di dominio quanto di liberazione.

Aditya Mukherjee, professore di storia dell'India contemporanea alla Jawaharlal Nehru University sino al 2018 e direttore del Center for Historical Studies, si è formato in questo contesto e ha dedicato la sua vita e il suo impegno scientifico a questa impresa.

Se dunque questo progetto storiografico, ispirato alle idee dei padri della liberazione nazionale, si faceva promotore di una visione della società indiana che potesse rendere il paese uno spazio di inclusione delle diverse etnie e dei suoi principali gruppi religiosi, non stupisce che quando i nemici di questa visione politica – le forze ispirate al *Communalism* – tornarono a rialzare la testa dopo il lungo interdetto voluto da Nehru, fu proprio sul piano della storia che sferrarono il loro attacco. Prima nelle scuole private del RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, il principale movimento nazionalista indù), e poi con sempre più violenza nel dibattito pubblico, fantasiose storie dell'India vennero diffuse per dimostrare che fin dalle origini, ossia ai primordi dell'età antica, la civiltà indiana e la religione indù avrebbero coinciso, con il chiaro intento di rendere oggi incompatibile la convivenza con la minoranza musulmana.

Oggi, le forze espresse dal *Communalism*, rappresentate dal BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) del premier Modi, non sono più una pericolosa forza di minoranza, esse sono al governo del paese, e quella che era faziosa propaganda di gruppi eversivi trova spazio sui manuali di testo delle scuole primarie. Ancor di più, la libertà di ricerca degli storici e il mondo accademico in generale subiscono un attacco di inaudita violenza: le pubbliche accuse di terrorismo mosse agli studiosi dissidenti, la marginalizzazione professionale di chi si rifiuta di piegare il discorso storico alle esigenze dell'establishment legato al *Communalism* e il clima di forte ostilità ci restituiscono un quadro a tinte fosche sul quale è necessario fare luce.

A questi processi storici, in qualità di studioso e di testimone diretto, Aditya Mukherjee ha dedicato numerosi saggi, e abbiamo colto l'occasione per intervistarli, nel corso del convegno *Storie Pericolose* svoltosi

all'Università di Torino, per conoscere il punto di vista di chi nell'India contemporanea ha vissuto, si è formato, e ad essa ha dedicato i suoi sforzi intellettuali.

(VF, EM)

As you have previously stated in a speech held at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in 2019, several generations of Indian historians in the nehruvian era strove to create an independent, non-colonial, secular and pro-poor perspective on Indian history. This scientific and political project certainly had a profound and significant influence on the development of both Indian society and the study of History. As a historian and JNU alumnus, how did taking part in this project influence your life and professional outlook?

For me it was a life changing experience. Being part of a movement where academics was not seen merely as a 'profession' but as an effort to study and understand society so that one could contribute to transforming it for the better was an exhilarating experience. The initial decades after independence of India in 1947 (after nearly 200 years of Colonial rule) witnessed a massive intellectual upsurge of independent thinking, free from the colonial baggage and looking forward to a scientific secular future. The attempt was to learn from and try to undo the devastating political, economic, social and cultural impact of colonialism, as well as, the painful partition of the country caused by a divisive politics based on religion (called communalism in India) promoted by the colonial power. The JNU was started in 1969 with this objective in mind. I was fortunate to be in the first batch of MA students, join the faculty in 1976 and serve for more than four decades.

At least from the last decades of the 20th century, the political and social forces opposing the project of a secular, pluralist and democratic India, started to lead their offensive on the level of historical narratives. As a historian and direct witness, how do you read these political and social processes? How did history in India turn into a battlefield?

The offensive against a secular democratic approach in the discipline of history begins not at the end of the last century but much earlier. The modern discipline of history emerged when India was under colonial rule. The most important ideological basis of the colonial regime since the second half of the 19th century became a distorted and incorrect

view of Indian history where the Indian people were seen as deeply and permanently divided on the basis of religion. The religious identity was seen as subsuming all other identities based on class, region, language, caste, etc. Colonial rule (not democratic rule under self government) was therefore argued to be necessary in India to prevent the domination of the religious majority over the minority. This distorted view of history was propagated with the full backing of the colonial state by religious communal or anti-secular political organizations whose survival depended on this interpretation. The Indian nationalists rigorously battled against this colonial/ religious communal interpretation of history. Unfortunately we are witnessing the return of the colonial/ communal version in the name of religious nationalism. This resurgence got a big boost at the end of the last century with the Hindu communal forces acquiring state power first in the provinces and then even at the national level.

In the last two decades, you gave great attention to the issue of historical textbooks, with many essays on the matter and claiming that these textbooks are the prime target of an authentic onslaught against scientific history. School textbooks are one of the meeting point between historical knowledge and society, therefore they are at the top of a triangular network that encourages - or at least should encourage - productive communication between academia and governmental institutions with future citizens who are being educated. Why do you believe that those who are attacking scientific historical research have chosen textbooks as a battleground? Furthermore, what will the average Indian student learn at school about his own country's history?

School texts are critical in creating the mindset of future generations. That is why a valiant effort was made after independence to bring to children a scientific evidence based history free from colonial and religious communal bias. That is precisely why the ideologues of the religious communal forces have focused on school texts. They have tried to poison tender minds with distorted and fictitious history, which glorify members of one religion and demonise the other. Just after the ban on the RSS (the mother organisation of the Hindu communal forces) due to its links with the murder of Mahatma Gandhi was lifted, they started, in the 1950s itself, a network of schools where this poison was spread in the name of history.

As the religious communal forces began to get close to state power they launched a sustained attack on secular scientific history textbooks written by some of the tallest internationally recognised scholars while promoting their own distorted version. As has been pointed out secular activists when you poison the minds of children they grow up to participate in or support the stormtroopers who go about threatening, bullying and even killing members of the other religious community. It is absolutely essential therefore to oversee what is being taught to children through their school texts. We are paying the price today of for not taking sufficient corrective action when political power was in the hands of secular forces.

We are thus faced with a political offensive in the ground of history, through even evident fabrications and through the legitimacy of historical myths that openly conflict with the scientific status of this discipline. What was the reaction of the scientific community in India facing these occurrences?

It has become common these days for leading politicians to make absurd claims like India in its Ancient 'Hindu' past having access to nuclear missiles, airplanes, etc. Even the Prime Minister of the country confused ancient mythology with history and said that the elephant headed God 'Ganesha' must have got his elephant head planted on his human body through plastic surgery known in Ancient times in India. He said this while inaugurating a major hospital in the presence of a galaxy of public figures including eminent doctors! Though no one walked out, there was criticism in the national and international press. However a highly controlled and bought up media kept this under wraps as much as possible. The scientific community has rarely protested in an organized manner though there are honorable exceptions. The fear of retribution pervades. Universities like JNU where this kind of mumbo-jumbo is questioned have been under severe attack. Rationalists like Narendra Dabholkar who headed a movement against obscurantism and blind faith was shot dead as was Gauri Lankesh a journalist, women's rights activist and critic of right wing Hindu extremism.

Given this framework, how is the historical research being carried out in India today? What is the environment like? Are there limitations researchers have

to deal with when they do not find themselves in agreement with the historical narrative carried on by the political forces in power?

Critical to academics is academic freedom. That is definitely under stress today. Political control is being exercised not only in faculty recruitment, but research funding and even in granting permissions to hold seminars and conferences where scholars not sympathetic to the Government's world-view are invited. Provinces where opposition parties are in power still has a modicum of academic freedom. By targeting the intelligentsia an atmosphere of fear is sought to be created. This is extremely damaging for the development of any system of knowledge or discipline, including history.

In the speech you gave in 2019, you quoted E.P. Thompson whilst stressing that history "must be always least precise". Quoting your speech, History is in fact, just as every other scientific discipline and even more, an unstable form of knowledge that, by its own admission is always partial, perspective, resistant to any claims of absoluteness and always open to reappraisal. These considerations have an important repercussion on the historian's epistemological conscience and also on the style of the historical narratives he produces. However, the historical narratives of the counterparty are a chain of undeniable facts that are set in stone, of linear and unavoidable processes, and it adopts a decisively strong narrative style. How would you interpret the differences between these two approaches? Could the appeal of these narratives reveal the difficulty that academic history faces when confronted with a growing thirst for certainty that is pervasive in our society?

No one can or should in the modern world make claims to 'absolute truth'. Such claims are best left to Gods and authoritarian political tendencies. One can only attempt to reach closer to truth with one's hypothesis and research findings. One may argue vigorously in favour of one's claim based on universally accepted scientific rules of each discipline but one must simultaneously be open to someone else modifying or even overthrowing one's argument on the basis of new discovery. Part of the excitement of pursuing the discipline of history is because of its all-encompassing nature where every other discipline meets and therefore where newer interpretations are possible by applying to the discipline of history knowledge from other disciplines like archeology, economics, politics, psychology, sociology, genetic sciences, linguistics,

stics, climate science and so on. Continuously evolving interpretations of history and debate among them is welcome as they enrich human knowledge, so long as the interpretations follow, as E P Thompson puts it, “rigorous procedures of historical logic, its own discourse of proof”, which we commonly call the scientific method. The problem comes when in violation to the scientific method facts are invented or suppressed, when faith, belief, mythology is substituted for facts in order to push a particular political or social agenda. It no longer remains a debate within the boundaries of the discipline of history. Falsehood in the name of history being popularized with a political purpose cannot be met by writing better history, it needs to be challenged politically. Historians will of course record the societal implications of spreading such falsehood. As historians have done about Nazi propaganda in the name of history.

In your historical reconstruction, one point of particular interest is the bond you noticed between the view of Indian history espoused by British colonialist historians and that of Indian fundamentalists. How do these two perspectives intersect? Moreover, such a homology might seem paradoxical to a layman, but can it really be considered such?

There was an identity of interest between the colonial rulers and their allies, the religion based divisive parties. Both saw as their chief enemy, the secular Indian National Movement, which had the vision of an independent democratic republic where all citizens would have equal rights irrespective of religion. The British colonialists as well as the religious communal forces both needed to promote a view of Indian history where the Indian people were seen to be permanently divided on the basis of religion, particularly the Hindus and the Muslims. The colonialist needed to do so to justify continuation of colonial rule in the name of preventing religious persecution. The religion based political parties needed to do so as this was their *raison d'être*, their political survival depended on this religion-based division. The paradox is not the congruence of interest between the colonialists and the religious communalists but that the religion based divisive forces, which actually breaks up the nation, masquerade themselves as the true Nationalists!