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This book of extraordinary scholarship traces how different human societies have developed their modes of narrating and comprehending aspects of the past over time. This is a book about how collective knowledge about the past was always crafted in interaction between communities and guilds of specialists, however those may both have been constituted. Furthermore, Sumit Guha demonstrates how such interactions between communities and specialists always occurred within the context of political and economic exigencies.

Chapter 1 surveys differing practices for the social authentication of collective pasts across contexts ranging from early Babylonia and Egypt's great temple complexes to early India and China, to medieval Europe. The broad geographic sweep allows Guha to show how, at most times in the past and in most places, "all history was nonprofessional history"—whether "high scholarship" or "folk and popular modes of reconstructing pasts at various scales—from the family estate, the clan, and the village up to the larger imagined communities of ordinary folk and their commonplace and everyday pasts" (p. 6). He thus considers the nature of "local and folk traditions" beyond the strictly textual world; they may well have been "mutually contradictory," but they could coexist because they were "noncompetitive narratives of the past." Besides, when the non-agrarian groups who adhered to such traditions overran settled, agricultural societies, "literate society then had to adapt to the historical memories of its new rulers"; thus "historical memory" typically represents "a dialectical relation between the oral and the textual" (p. 27). Continuing to survey the history of historical practices in African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian societies, Guha shows us how oral traditions themselves were institutionalized and regulated in the past, by the "training and sustenance of a mnemonic elite, men who learned and transmitted key learning" (p. 30). Furthermore, "the depth of genealogical and historical memory was structured by the society in which it was generated and transmitted," so that "status societies preserved longer genealogies" of their elites, while "segmentary societies more readily truncated them" (p. 31).

The survey of memory- and history-practices in different regional and ecological contexts then allows Guha to show how in western Europe, which has long regarded itself as the "crucible of modern historical practice, as possessor of a continuous tradition," heralds "recognized the symbolic language of coats of arms that formed a parallel set of glyphs in an increasingly literate society," granting and proclaiming "visible honor and status in a heavily illiterate society," and eventually making way for "royal genealogy" (pp. 34, 35).
In fourteenth-century France, where "noble status brought tax privileges and career advantages, especially in the army," efforts to establish and authenticate the status of nobles and the exemptions of their lands generated growing historical documentation (p. 36). As old documents were sought to be "verified against earlier contemporary materials," historical methods also clearly developed (p. 37).

Chapter 2 turns to multiple traditions of remembering and recounting the past in South Asia between the thirteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Guha explains ruptures in practices of recording the past: many Buddhist monastic libraries were destroyed during the sultanate conquests of the Gangetic plain in the thirteenth century, and those Rajput lineages in western India that had their political power destroyed may also have experienced breaks in their genealogical record. At the same time, however, Jain monastic lineages continued to maintain religious and literary traditions in the new sultanate territories. The thirteenth century also saw the emergence of new inspirations from West Asia, including Persian-language and Islamic traditions for recording and authenticating the past. The one notable point in this chapter pertains to the coexistence of institutionalized memory as maintained by specialized literati and merchant elites, on the one hand, and, on the other, of humbler forms of historical memory in village societies oriented toward preserving the status and entitlements of local family lineages. Guha then correlates the emergence of more organized and more stable written traditions about the past from the later sixteenth century on, with the political stability that emerged during high Mughal rule (between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries). As political authority became more stable, there was also an increased interest in evaluating the content and accuracy of multiple traditions about the past, especially as (often parallel) oral traditions were recorded increasingly in written texts.

In chapter 3, the focus is on historical accounts from the Marathi-speaking cultural zone in western India. Guha investigates the incentives that led literati in this region to generate texts within specific conventions, and in a particular regional language, Marathi. The author draws on his own extensive knowledge of the Marathi-language archive from the eighteenth century to illustrate how the Maratha state displayed significantly greater concern than earlier with recording disputes—over patrimonies, property claims, and their attendant tax implications. The need to generate and reaffirm "common knowledge" on such matters prompted bureaucrats and scribes to produce records valued for their factual content (p. 85). Even as more powerful and expansionist kingdoms emerged, local society and its local territorial authority remained "resilient." At lesser sites still, "claims were argued and village memories debated and formed" (p. 86). A new, more historicist genre of the bakhar (chronicle) thus emerged in the context of "an increasingly bureaucratic regime," in which "rulers needed to know their domains, and began by demanding testimony from local officials" (p. 87).

Perhaps the highlight of this chapter is Guha's demonstration of the modes by which subaltern social groups also embraced the new strategies of claim-making through paper for the benefit of the bureaucracy, by producing documentary evidence and attesting to its veracity. Moreover, while the sociopolitical order may well have been deeply hierarchical, specialist Mahar (Dalit) knowledge of "both external village and internal field boundaries"—acquired through the "constant patrolling of village lands"—was deemed to be invaluable for proving or rejecting claims, well into the colonial era (pp. 97-98). Guha thus demonstrates persuasively how "there was a striking similarity in origin and purpose between elite and subaltern history," even as subaltern narratives were directed to more modest claim-making, grounded in "the feas-
ible aspirations of the people who generated them” (p. 104).

Chapter 4 traces how converging “standards for historical authenticity” were tied to the rise of “global imperialisms that were driven by metropolitan nationalisms, and soon opposed by emergent ones” (p. 118). Citing Prasenjit Duara, Guha points out how the forging of a national history, resulting in a singular, “national subject evolving through time,” became a peculiarly urgent political project in the colonial world. One of the strengths of this book lies in the parallels that Guha is able to show between different regional contexts at comparable historical moments. Thus, French-colonial constructions of Algeria’s past closely echoed British-colonial perspectives on India’s past; in both instances, colonial historiographies developed similar narratives of natives helplessly victimized by multiple foreign invaders. In both instances, nationalist historiographies used the structure of colonial scholarship and “turned its prototypes upside down” (p. 119).

As Guha summarizes the familiar history of how the writings of James Mill and Thomas Babington Macaulay generated a deep hostility to earlier Indian norms and practices, he reminds us how British bureaucrats in India continued, however, to rely on Mughal-era statistics—and grappled with Persian-language documents in translation—as they confronted the remarkable durability of Mughal administrative regimes. By the mid-nineteenth century, English education under colonial rule created new opportunities for Indians in the professions and colonial schools became crucial for social mobility. School history textbooks produced a new, more homogenous, and more durable narrative, and their reach has made them a continuing battleground for differing visions of the past and future of the nation.

Even on relatively well-known ground for historians of South Asia, Guha is able to point out striking genealogies; thus, he suggests that the roots of Ranajit Guha’s plea in founding Subaltern Studies—for a “distinctively Indian historiography of colonial India”—lay in the Bengali-Hindu nationalism of the civil servant and novelist Bankim Chandra in the later nineteenth century (p. 134). Especially for nonspecialist readers of colonial Indian history whose entry to the field is mediated largely through Subaltern Studies, Guha helpfully lists counterexamples of Indian scholars and historians who, by the turn of the twentieth century, demonstrated greater philological rigor and deployed the most current methods of source criticism: such as Ramaprasad Chanda (1873–1942) and Vishwanath Kashinath Rajwade (1864–1926). [1] Similarly, the book foregrounds contemporary scholarship produced within the Indian academy that tends to be ignored in the North American university system, such as the work of Nita Kumar and Krishna Kumar: sociologists and historians of education with deep knowledge of how schooling works on the ground in India, who help to push the field beyond analyses of syllabi as driven by the political agendas of competing groups.[2]

While the bulk of the evidence for Guha’s argument comes from South Asia—his own region of expertise—the book is more ambitious in suggesting strong correlations across the world, between the emergence of bureaucratic regimes, the asserting of claims over resources, and the emergence of rules and methods for ascertaining the veracity of such claims, especially if they were based on past precedent. In an argument that Guha does not emphasize enough, perhaps, the book demonstrates how collectives and states in different geographies turn out to have developed comparable strategies to buttress their claims or to adjudicate those claims; and all such strategies involved the production of evidence believed to have been verifiable as accurate. In that sense, this book is less a history of memory and history and more a history of the emergence of historical methods in vastly different geographies, but with comparable political imperatives. As a result, the book is also a departure from an earlier generation of comparative studies of the world’s historiographical traditions,
which tended to scrutinize the nature of historical consciousness and the historicism of narrative traditions about the past in different regional contexts; there were separate chapters on India, China, and western Europe, typically.[3] In place of this comparative model, Guha provides us with a model of comparable political-bureaucratic conjunctures generating comparable strategies for the verification of claims by scrutinizing particular kinds of documentary evidence.

The book is a little less convincing, however, in how it frames this history of the emergence of historical methods in the introduction. Here, Guha invokes Dipesh Chakrabarty to characterize professional historians as “makers of social memory”—as “socially recognized guardians of the past,” residing inside of institutional processes that produce and authenticate different types of social or collective memory (p. 5). Continuing in the same vein, he echoes Partha Chatterjee’s call “to recognize the diverse forms of social memory that shape beliefs, stereotypes, and attitudes in the public sphere.” Guha rightly critiques scholarly affinity for “the high scholarship of past times” and seeks out “folk and popular modes of reconstructing pasts at various scales—from the family estate, the clan, and the village up to the larger imagined communities of ordinary folk and their commonplace and everyday pasts” (p. 6). Unlike Chakrabarty and Chatterjee, however, Guha does not assume that subaltern memory is invariably hostile to the social memory authorized by the academy. Instead, over the course of the book, he repeatedly shows how subaltern leaders like Umaji Naik Khomne also recognized the importance of documents and memories in local and family history and “sought to create a ‘genuine’ record of the past by incorporating what they believed to be authentic” (p. 93). That is, in a socioeconomic order organized around claims to watan (hereditary patrimony), Dalits and other subalterns—as much as elites—learned quickly to adhere to the new language, but, in a point that Guha does not emphasize enough, it also indicates, arguably, the internalizing of the norms of evidentiary practice that could authenticate such claims.

In other words, the emphasis in the introduction on professionalization, the evolution of institutional matrices, and the social locations of narratives about the past (whether classified as history or memory) ends up avoiding methodological questions about fact-seeking protocols—whose histories are traced in the rest of the book. Such questions about strategies for ascertaining and verifying facts have become evermore urgent at the present moment, when political regimes around the world resort not merely to manipulating facts but also to denying facts and evidence outright. Equally, those who assert monopolies over the past in the popular domain through brute force, nevertheless, seek affirmation from historians ensconced within the university system; they tend to argue that the history produced within the academy is biased, but they do not wish to do away with history altogether. Furthermore, civil rights groups around the world use the same methods to establish and document instances of oppression that hostile state regimes might wish to obscure and erase.[4] In this sense, we in the guild might perhaps be better off renewing our emphasis on the forensic function of history, cultivated through a set of methods, a practice that can doubtless be improved but that retains fundamental distinctions between fact and fiction.

Notes


[2]. Nita Kumar, “History at the Madrasas,” in *Seminar (Re-Writing History)*, no. 522 (February 2003): 57-62; and Krishna Kumar, *Prejudice and*


[4]. See, for instance, People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) and People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Who Are the Guilty: Report of a Joint Inquiry into the Causes and Impact of the Riots in Delhi from 31 October to 10 November 1984 (New Delhi: PUDR and PUCL, 1984).

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