

CONTESTING THE PAST: IDEOLOGY, INSTITUTIONS, AND THE WRITING OF INDIAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the debate over ideological influence in Indian academia, particularly from the late 1960s onward. It explores how institutions, curricula, and textbooks became sites of contestation between Marxist, nationalist, and civilizational approaches to Indian history. Drawing upon the writings of Kapil Kapoor, Makarand Paranjape, and Sankar Saran, among others, the paper argues that historiography in India has been shaped by competing epistemologies rather than a single dominant narrative. It foregrounds the tension between methodological rigor and cultural memory, emphasizing the need for a more balanced and plural historical discourse.

KEYWORDS: Indian historiography, Marxism, education policy, NCERT, JNU, nationalism, postcolonial studies, curriculum debate

INTRODUCTION

Institutional Foundations and Ideological Orientations

The shaping of India's intellectual life after independence was closely tied to the formation of state-supported institutions and the ideological orientations that guided them. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, the early decades of the republic saw the promotion of a secular, scientific, and modernist outlook in education. However, it was during the tenure of Indira Gandhi that the role of the state in shaping academic discourse became more pronounced, particularly through centralized institutions and curriculum bodies.

The establishment and expansion of universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University marked a significant moment in this trajectory. These institutions became influential centers for the development of theoretical frameworks, many of which drew upon Marxist historiography and Western critical theory. Scholars associated with these approaches emphasized class relations, economic structures, and social hierarchies as primary lenses for interpreting Indian history. Kapil Kapoor has argued that this intellectual orientation often led to the marginalization of indigenous categories of knowledge. In his essay "Text and Interpretation in Indian Traditions," Kapoor observes that "Indian texts were increasingly interpreted through frameworks external to their own epistemological foundations" (Text and Interpretation: Classical Indian Perspectives, D.K. Printworld, 2005, p. 87). This, he suggests, resulted in a disjunction between traditional modes of understanding and modern academic discourse.

Similarly, Makarand Paranjape, reflecting on postcolonial academia, notes that "the dominance of Western theoretical paradigms, including Marxism, often prevented a fuller recovery of India's own intellectual traditions" (Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English Authority, Springer, 2012, p. 142). His critique is not of methodological rigor per se but of what he sees as an imbalance in the sources of intellectual authority.

Sankar Saran takes this argument further by suggesting that institutional control over academia enabled the consolidation of a particular historiographical narrative. In *Invading the Sacred* (Rupa & Co., 2007), he argues that "control over educational institutions ensured the reproduction of specific ideological positions across generations" (p. 56). While this claim remains contested, it highlights the perceived link between institutional authority and intellectual direction.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that proponents of Marxist historiography viewed their work as a corrective to earlier nationalist histories, which they believed had insufficiently addressed issues such as caste, inequality, and economic exploitation. Historians like Irfan Habib and Romila Thapar argued for a more critical and evidence-based approach, grounded in archival research and material analysis.

Thus, the emergence of ideological orientations in Indian academia cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of dominance or exclusion. Rather, it reflects a complex interplay between state patronage, intellectual trends, and scholarly debates. The institutions that were built in this period became arenas where competing visions of India's past and future were articulated—an intellectual contest that continues to shape the country's academic landscape.

Textbook Narratives and the Writing of Medieval Indian History

If institutions provided the framework, it was through textbooks that particular interpretations of Indian history achieved wide circulation and pedagogical authority. The role of the NCERT in producing standardized school textbooks made it a central actor in shaping historical consciousness across generations. From the late 1960s onward, historians associated with leading universities, including Jawaharlal Nehru University, contributed significantly to these textbooks, bringing with them specific methodological commitments.

The dominant historiographical approach in these texts was influenced by Marxist and materialist frameworks. Historians such as Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, and Satish Chandra emphasized socio-economic structures, agrarian relations, and state formation. In *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals* (Har-Anand Publications, 2005), Satish Chandra writes that “the Turkish conquest should not be viewed merely as a religious phenomenon but as part of a larger pattern of state formation and military expansion” (Vol. I, p. 38). This perspective sought to move beyond earlier narratives that framed medieval history primarily in terms of religious conflict.

Similarly, Irfan Habib, in *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (Tulika Books, 1995), argues that “economic factors and class relations provide a more reliable basis for historical explanation than communal interpretations” (p. 21). Such positions informed textbook narratives that foregrounded processes of economic change and cultural interaction, often under the rubric of a “composite culture.”

However, critics have argued that this emphasis led to the relative underrepresentation of certain categories of historical evidence. Sankar Saran, for instance, contends that primary Persian chronicles—such as those describing campaigns by rulers like Mahmud of Ghazni or policies under Aurangzeb—contain explicit references to acts of temple desecration and religiously framed conflict. In *Why the West is Wrong about India* (Voice of India, 2008), Saran argues that “ignoring or diluting such records creates an incomplete understanding of the period” (p. 112).

Kapil Kapoor similarly raises concerns about what he terms “selective historiography.” In his essay “Education, Culture and Knowledge Systems,” Kapoor notes that “when certain kinds of evidence are consistently foregrounded and others minimized, the result is not neutrality but a structured preference” (*Education and Culture: India’s Quest for Knowledge*, Academic Foundation, 2011, p. 64). He suggests that textbook narratives, by virtue of their authority, play a decisive role in shaping collective memory.

The debate becomes particularly pronounced in discussions of major historical events and sites. The destruction of the Somnath Temple by Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century is described in contemporary sources such as the *Tarikh-i-Yamini*. Yet, in many textbook treatments, the event is contextualized within patterns of political conquest and economic plunder rather than religious iconoclasm. Likewise, the decline of Nalanda University is variously attributed to multiple factors, though accounts such as that of Minhaj-i-Siraj in the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* refer to its destruction during invasions in the 12th century.

Makarand Paranjape has observed that such interpretive choices reflect broader epistemological commitments. In *Decolonizing English Studies: Attaining Swaraj* (Springer, 2018), he writes that “postcolonial India’s academic discourse has often privileged certain theoretical frameworks at the expense of civilizational self-understanding” (p. 89). His argument points to the need for a historiography that is both critical and rooted in indigenous categories.

Defenders of the prevailing textbook narratives, however, reject the charge of deliberate omission. They argue that earlier nationalist histories themselves exhibited selectivity and that the emphasis on socio-economic analysis represents an effort to bring methodological rigor to the discipline. For them, highlighting syncretic traditions and shared cultural spaces is not an ideological imposition but a reflection of historical complexity.

Thus, the writing of textbooks in India has become a site of enduring contestation. It is not merely a question of what is included or excluded, but of how history itself is conceptualized—whether as a record of conflict, a narrative of synthesis, or a layered interplay of multiple forces. The debate over medieval India, in particular, continues to exemplify the broader tensions within Indian historiography.

Universities, Intellectual Networks, and Academic Gatekeeping

If textbooks represent the dissemination of knowledge, universities constitute the sites of its production and validation. From the 1970s onward, leading institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Aligarh Muslim University, and Delhi University emerged as influential centers where historical, literary, and social science discourses were shaped. These universities were not ideologically monolithic, but critics have argued that certain theoretical orientations—especially Marxist and left-liberal frameworks—acquired disproportionate institutional authority.

The question of “academic gatekeeping” arises in this context: how intellectual networks influence appointments, promotions, research funding, and publication opportunities. Makarand Paranjape reflects on this issue in *Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English* (Springer, 2012), where he observes that “institutional power often determines not only what is taught but also what counts as legitimate knowledge” (p. 156). His argument suggests that academic authority is not neutral but embedded within networks of influence that shape disciplinary boundaries.

Similarly, Kapil Kapoor has written about the institutional privileging of certain methodologies over others. In *Education and Culture: India’s Quest for Knowledge* (Academic Foundation, 2011), Kapoor notes that “the dominance of specific theoretical paradigms tends to marginalize alternative knowledge systems, especially those rooted in classical Indian traditions” (p. 71). This marginalization, he argues, is not always explicit but operates through curricular design, research priorities, and peer review mechanisms.

Sankar Saran offers a more pointed critique of academic networks. In *Invading the Sacred* (Rupa & Co., 2007), he contends that “intellectual circles often function as self-reinforcing systems, where dissenting perspectives struggle to find institutional support” (p. 63). According to Saran, this dynamic can lead to a narrowing of acceptable discourse, particularly in fields such as history and cultural studies.

The issue of publication further illustrates these dynamics. Academic journals, university presses, and editorial boards play a crucial role in determining which research gains visibility. Critics argue that scholars whose work challenges dominant paradigms—such as those emphasizing civilizational continuity or indigenous epistemologies—have often faced difficulties in accessing these platforms. The relative marginalization of historians like R. C. Majumdar in mainstream curricula is frequently cited as an example of this phenomenon.

At the same time, defenders of the academic establishment caution against overstating the case. They argue that peer review and scholarly consensus are essential to maintaining academic standards and that claims of exclusion often arise from disagreements over methodology rather than ideology. Universities, in this view, remain spaces of debate rather than instruments of control.

Nevertheless, the perception of gatekeeping persists, particularly among those who advocate for a re-centering of Indian knowledge traditions. Makarand Paranjape, in *Decolonizing English Studies: Attaining Swaraj* (Springer, 2018), calls for “a more plural intellectual ecosystem where diverse epistemologies can coexist without hierarchical exclusion” (p. 103). This call reflects a broader movement to rethink the structures of academic authority in India.

Thus, universities are not merely educational institutions but arenas of intellectual negotiation. The question is not whether ideology exists within academia—it inevitably does—but how it is balanced, contested, and made accountable. The debate over academic gatekeeping underscores the need for openness, plurality, and methodological diversity in the ongoing project of understanding India’s past.

Cultural Institutions, Public History, and the Shaping of Collective Memory

Beyond universities and textbooks, the contest over India’s past extends into a wider network of cultural institutions that shape public history and collective memory. Bodies such as the Indian Council of Historical Research, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and the Sahitya Akademi have played influential roles in funding research, organizing conferences, and legitimizing particular intellectual frameworks. Through grants, fellowships, and institutional recognition, these organizations have contributed to the shaping of what may be termed “publicly sanctioned history.”

Critics argue that from the 1970s onward, these institutions often reflected the same ideological orientations that were prominent in leading universities. Sankar Saran, in *Invading the Sacred* (Rupa & Co., 2007), observes that “state-supported cultural bodies frequently functioned as extensions of dominant academic paradigms, reinforcing particular interpretations of India’s past” (p. 74). According to Saran, this alignment created a feedback loop in which institutional authority and intellectual discourse mutually reinforced each other.

The representation of historical figures and events in public discourse further illustrates this dynamic. Kapil Kapoor has pointed out that “public history is often shaped not only by evidence but by the interpretive frameworks endorsed by institutions” (*Education and Culture: India’s Quest for Knowledge*, Academic Foundation, 2011, p. 92). He argues that exhibitions, museum narratives, and cultural programming can subtly privilege certain readings of history while marginalizing others.

A notable example of this contestation lies in the interpretation of civilizational sites such as Hampi and Somnath Temple. While archaeological and textual evidence points to episodes of destruction and reconstruction, the framing of these events in public discourse has varied widely. Some narratives emphasize political conquest and the cyclical nature of historical change, while others foreground the cultural and religious dimensions of these events. The choice of emphasis, critics argue, reflects broader ideological commitments rather than purely evidentiary considerations.

The role of popular historians and writers also merits attention. William Dalrymple, for instance, has been influential in shaping global and domestic perceptions of Indian history through works such as *The Last Mughal* (Bloomsbury, 2006). Dalrymple writes that “Delhi in 1857 was a profoundly composite culture, where religious identities were often fluid and overlapping” (p. 27). While such interpretations highlight syncretic traditions, critics contend that they may underplay episodes of conflict and rupture, thereby contributing to a selective public memory.

Makarand Paranjape addresses this issue in *Decolonizing English Studies: Attaining Swaraj* (Springer, 2018), where he argues that “the shaping of public discourse through cultural institutions often mirrors the priorities of academic elites, thereby influencing how history is popularly understood” (p. 117). His critique underscores the interconnectedness of academia, cultural policy, and public perception.

At the same time, defenders of these institutions maintain that their primary objective has been to promote scholarly research and cultural exchange rather than ideological conformity. They argue that the diversity of voices within these bodies and the evolving nature of their work reflect an ongoing process of intellectual negotiation rather than a fixed agenda.

Nevertheless, the question of representation remains central. Public history, unlike academic history, operates at the level of collective memory and identity. The narratives that are institutionalized through museums, cultural programs, and public commemorations shape how societies understand themselves and their past. In this sense, cultural institutions function not merely as repositories of knowledge but as active participants in the construction of historical consciousness.

The debate over their role thus mirrors the larger historiographical contest: between competing visions of India’s past, differing methodological approaches, and divergent understandings of what constitutes historical truth. As with universities and textbooks, the challenge lies in fostering a plural and balanced discourse that can accommodate multiple perspectives without erasing complexity.

Civilizational Perspectives and the Recovery of Historical Balance

The debate over Indian historiography ultimately converges upon a deeper philosophical question: from what standpoint does a civilization interpret its own past? The preceding sections have shown how institutions, curricula, and cultural bodies have shaped dominant narratives. Yet the persistence of critique indicates that these narratives remain contested, and that the issue is not merely one of content but of perspective. The need, therefore, is not simply for revision but for a re-grounding of historiography in categories that emerge from India’s own civilizational experience.

In this regard, the reflections of Sri Aurobindo offer a foundational insight. In *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1953), he writes that “a nation’s history is the record of its soul’s experience and not merely a

chronicle of outward events” (p. 12). This formulation challenges purely materialist interpretations and insists that historical understanding must account for the inner continuity of a civilization—its spiritual aspirations, cultural symbols, and intellectual traditions. For Aurobindo, the neglect of this dimension produces a fragmented and inadequate picture of India’s past.

A parallel corrective emerges in the work of Dharampal, whose archival research re-examined long-standing assumptions about pre-colonial India. In *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Biblia Impex, 1983), Dharampal notes that “the extensive network of indigenous schools, as recorded in early British surveys, indicates a far more widespread system of education than is generally acknowledged” (p. 23). His work demonstrates that historical recovery need not rely on rhetorical assertion; it can proceed through careful engagement with primary sources, even those produced by colonial administrators.

Dharampal’s method is significant because it exposes the extent to which historical narratives may be shaped by inherited assumptions rather than empirical evidence. As he observes, “much of the prevailing understanding of India’s past has been formed without a systematic examination of the available records” (*The Beautiful Tree*, p. 29). This insight reinforces the need for a historiography that is both critical and self-reflective—one that is willing to revisit its own premises.

The broader implication of these perspectives is that historiography must move beyond binary oppositions. The choice is not between “Marxist” and “nationalist” history, nor between “critical” and “civilizational” approaches. Rather, the challenge is to develop a framework that integrates multiple dimensions: economic and cultural, material and spiritual, empirical and interpretive. Aurobindo himself cautioned against intellectual exclusiveness, observing that “true knowledge comes by widening and not by limiting the consciousness” (*The Foundations of Indian Culture*, p. 18). This call for expansiveness remains central to any meaningful renewal of historical inquiry.

Institutions—whether universities, research councils, or textbook bodies such as the NCERT—must play a crucial role in enabling this plurality. Their responsibility is not to enforce a single narrative but to create conditions in which diverse perspectives can be rigorously examined and debated. The credibility of historiography depends not only on evidence but also on the openness of the institutional structures that sustain it.

In conclusion, the controversy over ideological influence in Indian academia should be understood as part of a larger process of intellectual self-definition. It reflects a civilization grappling with the task of interpreting its past in a manner that is both critically sound and culturally resonant. The contributions of thinkers such as Sri Aurobindo and Dharampal point toward a historiography that is at once rooted and reflective, empirical and expansive. The future of Indian historical writing will depend on the extent to which it can sustain this balance.

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