'I am not going to call myself a global historian'

An Interview with C.A. Bayly



BY BINU M. JOHN

You have already given a short account of your entry into the field of South Asian studies in your work Origins of Nationality in South Asia. *There you mentioned your first overland travels to North India as an experience that triggered your interest in Indian history. To what degree have such 'field experiences' influenced your writings?*

Very much so, I think, and from the very beginning. On my first trip to India I went to Gwalior with a friend who had spent a year teaching in the Sindhia School there. We travelled around the city and environs, met people with memories of the past and began to get a sense of what Gwalior and its fort might have been like in eighteenth-century India. From then on I remained interested in late-Mughal India and the very early British period, though it was nearly twenty years later that I published *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, a book about India in this period. In fact, I had originally intended to write a thesis on the eighteenth-century. At that time, Dr Ashin Das Gupta was teaching in Oxford and he confirmed my interest in the period. He taught a specified course on Warren Hastings and India and I remember him saying, 'I am not interested in Warren Hastings. I am interested in India in the eighteenth century'. This was shortly after I came back from the trip to Gwalior.

The reason I didn't study eighteenth-century India for my PhD was that Ashin Das Gupta soon left the University and S. Gopal replaced him as Reader in Indian History at Oxford. Gopal was just beginning to work on his biography of Jawaharlal Nehru and he obviously wanted some background to Nehru's early life. So he suggested that I write a thesis on Nehru's home city, Allahabad. It was only later that I came to know why he made this suggestion. But I think he was probably right. At that time, there was developing interest, particularly in Cambridge, but also in India, in the nationalist movement. Going to one Indian city and hinterland, working on it quite intensively for 3-4 years was actually a good way of getting into the subject. At that time, they didn't really teach Indian History as such at Oxford. It was really Colonial History and Indian history was simply tacked on to it. So, for me, the path

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115300000048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

into the proper study of Indian history was living in Allahabad and seeing the complexity of the city. I moved around different areas, looking at the central part of the city where the merchant community resided and examining the links between the inner city and the people who lived in the Civil Lines and Cantonment. That was the time when I became interested in the local politics and commerce of north Indian cities and I moved on from that over the following decade.

You also mentioned your travels in the south. What were the differences you perceived between North and South India? Are they differences in the perception of historians or are they based on actual historical facts?
In order to answer this question one thing we have to consider is the Mughal state. Of course, the Mughal state itself was based upon a series of underlying political segments. So the distinction between 'north' and 'south' should not be made too strong. But it does seem to me that the state, and particularly the Indo-Islamic state, did have a kind of presence in North India that it didn't have in quite same way in the south. For example, take the case of the kingdom of Arcot in the eighteenth century. This was formally an Indo-Muslim state with features in common with the Mughal provinces of the north. But it had a very small revenue base and little more than a vague claim to local political authority. Of course, it's possible to exaggerate the power of the Mughal state even at its centre. The Aligarh historians probably wanted to see the Mughals as a kind of precursor to the British, as a very strong, centralised state. While Irfan Habib himself sometimes viewed the Mughal state as a shifting system, Athar Ali, in particular, emphasised its character as a centralised, highly rational empire. As a comparative assessment alone, this is partly correct. Quite apart from language and cultural differences, South India had much less experience of the extractive pre-colonial state than did the North. At the same time, I don't want to go to the extreme of saying that history is simply constructed by historians. Otherwise, we would be out of job!

Colonialism is the recurrent theme in your books. Are you somewhat 'sympathetic' to colonial rule, as you have been concerned with discerning the 'co-operative' and somewhat weak structure of colonial administration—giving enough room for the local elites to exploit the condition in India—than with its destructive impact on the colonized society?
I think there is a certain degree of misunderstanding here. To say that the impact of colonial rule was elusive and often weak, as some historians, including myself have suggested, does not mean that it was not very destructive at some times and in some places. I have suggested that North India in the early nineteenth century was still in a state of war, and not just in 1857-59. There were constant peasant movements and landholder rebellions going on in all parts of the country. Company troops were constantly shooting 'dacoits', burning villages and hanging headmen. To say that the Company state was weak doesn't mean that it wasn't destructive. It was an intrusive force, but a very uneven one with only limited means. There is an assumption in much of the historiography that the strong and effective colonial state that people saw in the 1930s and 1940s was typical of the whole period right back to 1757. That wasn't the case. As for 'cooperation' or 'collaboration', the British Empire in India couldn't have functioned without a considerable degree of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115300000048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Indian cooperation, even if it was unwilling. The British wanted to rule India without paying for it. They needed a 'free army' in the form of the presidency armies and later the Indian Army. Indian troops, like Indian merchants and Indian writers and scribes were central to the operation of empire.

Do you also entertain the view that the collapse of the Mughal Empire had a decisive impact on Indian society or not?
My point is that it would be wrong to say that the period of the Mughal Empire saw complete centralized rule and social harmony. Equally, it would be wrong to see the eighteenth century as a period of total warfare and anarchy. Later, when we see once again the appearance of a more centralised form of rule under the East India Company, it doesn't mean there aren't local factional conflicts and rebellions, as I just said. What I wanted to do in *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* was to get away from the perception of universal decline and anarchy in the eighteenth century. There were new forms emerging: new political forms, new forms of trading relationships and new relations between town and country. Mughal elites migrated from the old centres such as Delhi and Agra and re-established themselves in new centres where they fostered relations with existing power-holders. Another helpful thing about this perspective is that it diminishes the difference between the north and the south. Hyderabad, Arcot, even Madras, were places to which groups from North India migrated and where they built new social forms.

In that case, do you think that it is a sort of replacement of the existing power(s) by a new emerging power rather than the emergence of a new system after the decline of the earlier ones?
Yes, that is right. Obviously, British rule by 1820s was much stronger and much more intrusive, certainly taking more taxation than the previous eighteenth-century rulers. But, in some respects at least, the post-Mughal kingdoms anticipated the form of the British provinces.

You have mentioned in an earlier interview that 'modernity' did not have an entirely 'Western' origin, and you favour the concept of 'multiple modernities', some of which had their roots in Asia. Then how do you explain 'the rise of the West' in the nineteenth century and the comparative decline of the East? Do you think that colonial rule did not play an important role in this decline in India? Or was it was the inherent inability of Indian society to modernise itself that resulted in its decline?
The key phrase is 'comparative decline'. My book *The Birth of the Modern World*, tries to show that western dominance did not completely wipe out movements of progressive change in the rest of the world. Clearly 'the West' was dominant during much of the nineteenth century for certain reasons: its military strength, the vibrancy of its 'civil society', the accumulation of knowledge, the worldwide projection of power, and so on. However, this doesn't mean there were no developments elsewhere. There were changes and, in fact, positive changes, progressive changes in non-European societies, and some of those, I think, had their origins in the period before that of European dominance. If we take the form of government in late Qing China and of the type of evolving economic system in nineteenth-century Japan,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115300000048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these were not simply the products of Western domination, but the consequences of its people striving against Western domination, using resources drawn from the earlier histories of their own societies. So, what I am suggesting is a halfway position between those who still stress the 'triumph of the West', on the one hand, and writers such as André Gunder Frank, on the other, who seem to suggest that there wasn't anything particular about the West, and the dominance of the West happened almost by chance and as a consequence of the 'collapse of the others'. I think that the truth is somewhere in the middle. I have always been interested in the non-Western origins of modern world. I pointed out, for instance, how Asian merchant communities survived Western domination and re-emerged as powerful forces in the postcolonial world. I am not just thinking about inland Indian merchants here, but I am also referring to the overseas Chinese diaspora, the Indian Ocean Hadrami traders, and so on.

You also paid due attention to the role of religions in world history. Do you think that the revival of 'world religions' in the nineteenth century changed the character of what you call the 'pre-history of communalism' in India from an earlier period?

Many scholars have failed to notice that there is a question mark in the title of my article 'The Pre-history of Communalism?'. Certainly, there were many pre-colonial religious conflicts. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has recently confirmed this, using many more sources than I can read. But the type of religious conflict that occurred before colonial rule did not have the effect of breaking up society into competing communal blocs. Even in the twentieth century many of the 'religious conflicts' that we observe were quite local. They did not result in the collapse of social relations between the various religious communities. I think this argument is perfectly compatible with the argument that, in the nineteenth century, religion began to take on a new form. Religions began to mimic or imitate each other. All religious leaderships by the late nineteenth century felt that they had to have history, that they needed a creed and rules for certain forms of deportment. One begins to see what one could call 'Islamization' or 'Hinduization'. Religion did, in fact, become something rather different, increasing the sense of competing communities that colonial political arrangements helped to foster. That is not to say that much of society didn't still operate on the older pattern of religious interaction. I would argue that there was a pre-history of religious conflict in India and that it involved the generation of competing ideologies and some degree of social conflict. But 'communalism', the breaking of society into huge, mutually hostile blocs was very much a feature of the 1930s and '40s. It was part of the civil war to appropriate the colonial state.

How much has the contemporary religious revival around the world influenced your thought process while writing about the significance of religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Is it a kind of 'projection' from the present to the past?

My interest in religion pre-dates the emergence of what people now call Hindutva and 'Islamic fundamentalism', because they are really a feature of the period after Ajodhya or 9/11, when a real debate about religion began, in particular about Islam. My interest in religion in India actually goes back to my first visits there. I don't think

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that I am simply projecting backward contemporary situations, but certainly my views have become stronger in recent years. Many historians—and I'm not only referring to secular Indian historians, but also to western social historians—underestimated the significance of religion in their works of the 1970s and '80s. There was a general belief that religion had declined in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a terrible shock for them when Islamists, Hindutva ideologues or American born-again Christians suddenly came into view. My position explains the persistence and even growth of religious belief and practice much more effectively.

You believe in the emergence of a 'modern period' by the end of the eighteenth century when many people began to believe that they were living in a 'modern world'. Then do you also believe in a 'post-modern' period in history?
What I wanted to get away from was the idea that there was some kind of essence of modernity that took hold, either in the sixteenth century or in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. My point is twofold. Modernity was not one thing, but many things that came to be intertwined especially after 1750. So modern forms of economic management, combined with modern state and with new forms of warfare. It was the interaction of all these forces at a very rapid pace that created what we call modernity. But there's still an essential element lacking from that formulation which is that people need to feel that there is a concept 'modernity' and I think really from the eighteenth century that concept of modernity became much stronger and much more reflective. At about this time, people began to justify their thoughts and actions in terms of what was modern rather than by calling on the past to provide legitimacy. This was true in some Asian societies as well. People began to write 'histories of the moderns' in the Islamic Middle East and South Asia, for instance.

What about 'post-modernism'?
What I see is that the processes of 'modernity' continue to speed up at a transnational or global level. However, I don't believe the argument that the state is falling apart and everything in social or economic life is now fluid. On the contrary, it seems to me that there was a short period towards the end of the twentieth century when the state was in trouble. But this was only a tremor. If anything the nation state has become more powerful again since the 1990s. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have written in their book *Empire* that there is something above the state, which is created by the interaction between super-states and capitalism. But I don't think that either in volume or in form this is very different from what we earlier called 'modernity'. I don't mind if you want to call this period 'late modernity'. But I don't think we are in an age of 'post-modernity'. Today's increasingly multi-centred and fluid world is in some senses no more than a return to the conditions of the eighteenth century.

Have 'post-colonial' writings influenced your approach towards history?
To some extent one can't help but be influenced by them. But I suspect that the post-modernist emphasis on 'fragments' or the subaltern school's emphasis on resistance is actually a continuation of earlier trends in historical writing. The French *Annales* school made the real breakthrough long ago. The emphasis on the histo-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115300000048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ry of experience and on the autonomy of localities or individual actors goes right back to Marc Bloch in the 1930s. Again, subaltern history was anticipated by the writing of E.P. Thompson or Christopher Hill in their emphasis on resistance and the 'world turned upside down'. Post-modern and post-colonial history always comes back to the history of elites and the state in order to understand why things change. Post-colonialism is more a 'brand name' than a new way of doing history or the social sciences.

How far has your 'local' knowledge of South Asian history helped you to write or influenced your writing of a 'world' history?
Well, very much. My book *Birth of the Modern World* came out of undergraduate teaching. When I was lecturing to students on the very broad canvas of the 'Expansion of Europe' or 'The West and the Third World', I always had in mind the experience of South Asia. Though I am sure that historians born in South Asia would have written it differently, I was attempting to go beyond the bounds of Western historiography. I didn't want to write just another story of the 'rise of the West', as I said earlier. I have always remained a local historian and a regional historian as well as writing world history, and I am not going to call myself simply a 'global historian'. Historians have a tendency to become very parochial and privilege their own method. There is great resistance to trans-national or world history in some quarters today. Thirty years ago some historians said that I was wasting my time by writing a study of only one city, Allahabad. My position is that global history, when done well, can explain connections and bring up valuable comparisons that would otherwise be invisible. But this is in no way to diminish urban history, local history, national history or regional history. All these methods continue to throw up important arguments and findings and can be employed simultaneously.

Tell me about the Cambridge-Delhi-Leiden-Yogya programme of the comparative history of India and Indonesia in the 1980s and whether you found that a stimulating experience when later writing a 'world history'?
I think international comparisons and connections are very valuable even if they don't necessarily produce immediate published work. They doput us in touch with other scholars and other intellectual traditions. I have always been very interested in the differing views of Asian history coming out of Delhi, Yogjakarta, Leiden, Cambridge or Oxford. Meeting historians such as André Wink, Henk Wesseling, Dharma Kumar, Om Prakash or Dirk Kolff through this scheme was quite fascinating. Some of the published work that came out of these meetings was very interesting. But it was the long-term effects of informal contacts and discussions with scholars in different fields, who were working in different ways, that really mattered.

There is a widespread belief among academics that the new generation is turning away from the social sciences. Peter van der Veer in a recent symposium [IDPAD Symposium, The Hague, 24 November 2006] and John Wills in an earlier interview with Itinerario *mentioned this. The latter particularly noted the increasing uncertainty that even the best students face in pursuing a career after getting their degree. What are your thoughts on this?*
Actually, I think that the number of jobs available to the younger generation has

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increased massively since I first came into the profession. But the supply has gone up even faster. Therefore, even some of the best students can't easily find jobs and go into other professions. In my view this is not necessarily a bad thing. Some of my recent graduate students have left the teaching profession. Some of them have gone into business, overseas aid work and some have been recruited by 'think tanks'. One of my recent PhD students, who wrote on the British campaigns in the Middle East during the First World War, is now working for a Middle East 'think tank'. It's not a bad thing to spread academic knowledge in this way because thinking critically about history may stimulate critical thinking about the contemporary world. We badly need this. There may be differences between European academia and some very specialised academic systems, such as the American one, where people are thirty-five by the time they finish their PhDs. In our system, where people finish their PhD by the age of twenty-six, they can contemplate a life outside academia. On the other hand, the crisis of the social sciences can be exaggerated. New centres of excellence are emerging even while some older ones face trouble. I was in Warsaw a couple of weeks ago for a conference and there is a flourishing history department at Warsaw University. There are people studying a wide range of historical topics, from Ottoman history, through Russian history to the history of Latin America.

As a scholar particularly interested in the Indian subcontinent, what is your scholarly interaction with Indian academia?
There must be about twenty-five of my PhD students working in Indian universities or Indian students who have gone to British, European, or North American universities. So I have many Indian colleagues and friends. In India, my connection with Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University are particularly strong. Though I have begun to return to the subcontinent, I haven't gone to India so much recently, mainly because I have been working on a South-East Asian project. My colleague Tim Harper and I have published two books on the region: *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* and *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia*. So in recent years I have been to Myanmar, Singapore and Malaysia. But I'm about to return to the full-time study of Indian history and I am working on Indian liberalism in the nineteenth century, or what we might mean by Indian liberalism in the nineteenth century. The first results of this will be in a volume of the journal *Modern Intellectual History* to be published in April 2007. Eight of us, from India, Britain, and the USA, have tried to suggest ways we might develop an intellectual history of modern South Asia.

What is the current situation of South Asian studies at Cambridge University and in the UK in general? Is it comparable to the conditions at the start of your studies at Oxford, which you referred to earlier?
When I was at Oxford, you could study only one document-based subject, which had some Indian history inserted into it. You couldn't study Indian history as such. Modern history, as it was called, was the history of Western Europe, especially France, Germany, and southern England. Well, that has changed. There are courses on South Asian studies, even in Oxford and certainly in Cambridge and London. So it is possible to study South Asian history. Of course, the other point is that

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graduate studies have expanded very greatly over this period. There were very few people before the 1960s taking history PhDs at all. Now my own South Asian and imperial history PhD group has fifteen or more students, including five Indians, several continental Europeans, two or three British students, and several North Americans. It is a very diverse and international group and my colleagues all have similarly large groups. However, there is a crisis, I would say, in the study of early India in Britain, and to some extent elsewhere. Cambridge has decided that it can't afford to keep the Sanskrit undergraduate course, though the subject will be taught at the graduate level. My job in the next year or so will be to try to create a post-graduate course in both modern South Asian studies and in classical South Asian studies. Still, there is tremendous general interest in modern Indian or South Asian history, and in Indian development economics, anthropology and geography, partly, of course, because of the growth of the Indian economy. I remain hopeful about the future.

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