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Present in the light of past

SEBANTI SARKAR



Jawhar Sircar delivers the talk. (Subrata Bhattacharjee)

Indians' slackness about punctuality and vagueness about distance can be explained by Brahmanical ethos once dominant in the country, feels Jawhar Sircar.

The cyclical view of time, a product of Brahmanical ethos, afforded mention of events in "patches in reference to reginal eras". It was only during the Mughal era that the concept of linear record keeping was introduced. And the study of history had to wait till the British explorations and excavations began.

"As a result we don't have it ingrained in us to consult the watch and be on time," the CEO of Prasar Bharati said while speaking on "What and Why Indians Do and Don't?", a Bengal Club Library Talk presented by **The Telegraph** on Saturday.

Sircar's talk offered a new perspective on the relationship of history and the present. The concepts of directions, distances and signage were all foreign to the Brahmanical culture, where travel was considered unnecessary except for two minority classes — "pundits and merchants, who never cared to share information".

"Why do we splash about so much with water in toilet? Why do we spit and cast our junk out on to roads and in public spaces?" asked the scholar of history, political science and sociology.

Sircar — introduced by Rudrangshu Mukherjee of **The Telegraph** as the last of the erudite scholar-administrators — provided the answer himself. "All are the results of Brahmanical teachings on purity and pollution which was strangely restricted to the individual."

It was the same notion of purity that stood in the way of Indians making museums, because museums house objects considered impure as they belong to people who are no more.

Brahmanical India thus had few monuments (tribes believed in relics, something that manifested itself in Buddhism) and India had no archives of objects till the British came.

The Brahmanical culture did not think in terms of community. "When we pray in temples we do so for individual salvation and don't mind if we have to trample on half a dozen toes to do so," said Sircar.

The concept of village did not exist in ancient India, Sircar said. There were only *mohullas* based on occupations and castes.

The presence of zigzag roads in India can be explained by the absence of a sense of the collective. "No one is willing to sacrifice land for common good."

The lack of team spirit, Sircar said, may be the reason why Indians excel in individual sports at the Olympics.

But if there is one thing that binds Indians together, it is their love of music. Right from the "Sama Veda, people were urged to learn the scriptures through rhymes and tunes. If 10 different people were travelling in a bus, Hindi songs would unite them".

In the question-answer session that followed the talk, historian Sugata Bose suggested that it was time we cast off the "rigid and narrow concepts" of history handed down to us by Europeans and accepted history as inextricably linked to literature and political theory.

The Marathi ballads and chronicles and Bengal's *Mangalkavyas* will then be found to include political thought as well, apart from social history as mentioned by Sircar.

"*Annadamangal* has a fantastic description of Durga being worshiped by a Mughal emperor. Jadunath Sarkar's history of the Mughals may not have been as effective in capturing the flavour of the times as D.L. Roy's plays were able to do," said Bose.

Responding to author Amit Chaudhuri's question on why there was so little state support for the arts, Sircar, who was once Union culture secretary, said: "Throughout history it has been mainly the state or the rich that has patronised the arts. State support in India now requires a serious re-look, as most bureaucrats hardly understand the nuances of culture. Often, the national or state cultural bodies are infested with politics and vested interests or have bloated non-performing babus.... It is time for society to step forward... as the nation's cultural resources belong to it's people, not to the caretakers who often behave as if they owned them."

