

We are all to blame for WhatsApp history

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William Dalrymple's sweeping statement that WhatsApp history has gripped Indians because our historians did not write for the general public has, as expected, set the cat among pigeons. For the author, such ruffled feathers mean greater interest in his new book *The Golden Road*, and surely, better sales.

Some professional historians have taken the bait, even though they just cannot deny that almost all academics write only for academics, all the world over. The success of books produced by a small serious section of academics who still write (rather than live off their once-earned intellectual capital) depends a lot on the obfuscating coded argot that prevails within their community. But while professors of disciplines like Philosophy or Mathematics may get away with this, historians cannot — as it is their corpus that influences the common man more than others, in a world traumatised by conflicting “historical narratives”.

Vanya Vaidehi Bhargav (IE, 8th Nov '24) is closer to the problem when she says academic historians must also push for structural change, and engage more publicly — to stem the spread of pseudo-history. But the highly networked and extremely mobile lot of historians (like compatriots in other disciplines) have to steep in heavy-duty jargon to remain and prosper in the international conference-teaching circuit. That is considered more prestigious and rewarding than engaging in contesting toxic ‘histories’ and engaging in popular but lower-gear history. Non-professional historians, who have not earned their PhDs from Oxbridge or the Ivy League club, or have not taught generations of distracted, sleepy and quarrelsome undergrads, are dismissed by the establishment to the favela-slums of history— which is not a nice place. In fact, Dipesh Chakraborty had dismissed the small group of highly -motivated nineteenth century British civilians in India as primitive “hunter gatherers” for toiling under the blazing sun to collect historical and ethnological facts about India, instead of downing industrial quantities of alcohol and swearing by racism. Incidentally, at that stage of history, formal historians and anthropologists were either non-existent or were cramming imperial/imperious syllabuses of British Indian universities.

Seriously speaking, one is not blaming professional historians for not engaging enough with the public and most earn a tenth of or maybe far less than what a non-academic historian like Dalrymple sells. Except a rare Romila Thapar or a Ram Guha, very few hard-boiled historians succeed in getting their stuff across to the “great Indian middle class” no so phenomenally as a well-researched Dalrymple does, with both prose and hype. They can never aspire to reach the sales and reach of an Amish Tripathi's religio-historio centric fiction or the political position that a banker turned cherry-picking pseudo-historian like Sanjeev Sanyal achieved. The latter two are, as expected, role-models of WhatsAppians, who despise facts, as they revel in and manufacture imagined golden pasts and present hatreds.

So, where did we go wrong? We forgot to emphasise, with irrefutable evidence, that invasions are a recurrent feature of history and that India's population is chock-a-block to the brim with descendants of former invading forces and communities — who are no less Indian than the rest. We left this gospel truth to be mauled by the Hindu right for several decades, with no contest in the public sphere. They drummed their tale that pre-Islamic incursions were not invasions, because they had all settled down as good Hindus. Certain historians and archaeologists colluded with this project and are busy smashing the “Aryan” migration theory — and facts, linguistics, literature and

genetic evidence be dammed. Or else, they would have to admit that the core of Hindu philosophy and values was imported into India by the Vedic “Aryans”.

And while condemning the destruction wreaked by Islamic invaders, we forgot to mention other facts. The Ahoms who combated the Mughals were themselves invaders, to begin with. The founder Ahom, Sukaphaa, conquered India through the valleys of Assam in 1228, some 36 years after Muhammad of Ghur struck his flag over Hindustan. Sukhaphaa was a Shan prince of Mong Mao in present-day Yunnan, China, and a close cousin of the Thais. The Ahoms practiced their own “foreign” religion for three centuries, with utter disdain for Hinduism, until the-then Ahom king, Shungmung, started gravitating towards Hinduism. He traded his divine Sino-Thai lineage as descendant of the heavenly Leungdon for being declared celestial as Indra-vamsa Kshatriya, by delighted Brahmans. These valiant invaders-turned-Indians (who retain elements of their pre-Hindu religion) defeated the Mughals at the Battle of Saraighat — never mind the fact that the Mughal army was led by Ram Singh, son of Raja Jai Singh of Jaipur and more Hindus died than Mughals.

While valorising Shivaji as the last great Hindu warrior, we forget to mention that his armed forces had at least 13 major Muslim commanders, and it was a not a Hindu-Muslim binary, as is made out. And we also forget to highlight the wanton destruction and mass-rapes carried out by later Maratha forces on fellow Indians in the east and south. Similarly, Netaji’s bonhomie with Nazi Germany and ruthless Imperial Japan, as well as his personal political “Great Leader” proclivities are hardly discussed honestly by historians — to balance the analysis.

There is an eerie a silence on the demise of Buddhism in India and why we waited for millennia for the spade of British archaeologists to retrieve its splendid edifices from under tons of earth. Indian amnesia for things Buddhist was so overwhelmingly strong that our much-flaunted Samrat Ashoka was totally wiped out from memory. He had to be retrieved with extreme difficulty by James Prinsep in 1836-38. It is not that the Hindu angst against “unacceptable” religions and characters is a post-2014 affliction. Had we known all this in our history classes, we may have viewed the destruction of our temples by others somewhat differently. If the Archaeological Survey could fund its project called the “Archaeology of Ramayan Sites” for 49 years and legitimised the single-minded hunt of B.B. Lal (who has deeply influenced scores and generations of topmost archeologists) to prove the Ramayana is truly historical, one fails to understand why the “Buddhist past of Puri, Gaya, Sabarimala, Tirupati and so on could not be undertaken — to set speculations at rest.

We may never know how many sacred Buddhist sites have been appropriated later. Alexander Cunningham had proved, with definite evidence, in 1860-61 that the Rambhar Bhavani temple of Kushinagar stands on the sacred Buddhist spot where the Buddha entered into Mahaparinirvana. Countless images of Shiva and Vishnu that are worshiped in temples are, actually, icons of Buddhist and Jain deities and tirthankars. We are taught that Muslims rulers destroyed Hindu temples, but not that gold was their chief motive and religion the cover. The Kashmiri text, Kalhana’s Rajatarangini mentions Ashoka’s son, Jalauka, a Shaivite, destroyed Buddhist monasteries. We hardly know that the Divyavadana, a Buddhist Sanskrit text, describes so vividly Pushyamitra Shunga’s persecution of Buddhists — by destroying stupas, burning monasteries and killing monks as far as Sakala (Sialkot). Patanjali, a contemporary of the Shungas, stated in his Mahabhashya that Brahmins and Shramanas (Buddhists) are eternal enemies, like the snake and the mongoose.

The only purpose of raising these issues is to instil better balance in our approach, when viewing depredations by others. This is where formal history has failed, even though Congress governments had outsourced it to sharper Left historians, for countless decades. In a way, we are all to blame for the mushrooming of WhatsApp history and dogs of war it lets loose.