



## Session 1: Commentary

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Professor Sarkar, thank you very much for your excellent and well-designed presentation. I would like to give some thought to what you said now as well as to the topic of this seminar: “Can We Write History?”

I admit that it is increasingly becoming difficult for us to write a history, a history that can be shared by all of us. At the same time, however, I would like to subscribe to the feasibility of history-writing. I wish I could demonstrate history can be written even now, not because I am a university teacher and earn a living, raising my children by teaching and writing what I think is history, but mainly because I believe man is a historical being. We cannot comprehend the meaning of the present without referring it to the past. The present loses most of its meaning when it loses its relationship with the past. Conversely, it is to comprehend the meaning of the present, rather than the past, that we write a history. This means that history-writing or historiography is closely connected with the present, and therefore it must change in keeping with the ever-changing present. We have to design a new historiography if we want to show that history-writing is still relevant and that, by extension, hopefully, history can be written. As we know historiography was renovated many times in the past, even though it is counted among the most prestigious sciences, with a long tradition since the ancient times.

When I look at contemporary Japanese society, I observe that there is an intense desire on the part of the common people to have a new history. For example, a book on Japanese history written by right-wing historians recently made a stir by the fact that it sold unexpectedly well. It is possible that the book looked new and attractive to the laymen, simply because it broke with the main-stream historiography dominated by positivist as well as leftist

historians. But I believe this recent event should not be written off lightly. For it reflects a feeling of uneasiness, anxiety, or even fear shared by many people in the age of radical changes in all spheres of life. They wish to comprehend the meaning of the present by reading a “new history.”

On the other hand, it appears to me that the radical social changes have brought about a parallel phenomenon, i.e., fragmentation of historiography. Perhaps this fragmentation can be interpreted in terms of the decline of nation–state, because modern historiography has been heavily dependent upon both myth and realities of nation–state. Contemporary historians skillfully utilize sophisticated terms and framework introduced by such distinguished scholars as E. P. Thompson, Foucault, Habermas, Derrida, Stuart Hall, Bakhtin, Althusser, and Bourdieu, but it cannot be denied that historians today cannot be as confident as their forefathers who worked in the heyday of nation–state.

We are now put in the situation where people and historian, reader and writer, are in the grip of anxiety. And I am afraid this may result in a vicious cycle where the two reinforce each other, and where right–wing pseudo–history flourishes at the cost of a really new history which such scholars as assembled here will have to work together to give shape to. The central problem before us, it appears to me, will be to prevent from falling into the trap of this vicious cycle.

The above is about the situation in Japan. When I look at India, I notice Indian society has also been undergoing big fundamental changes since 1980s. The Congress one–party system collapsed and was replaced by a series of coalition governments. The central government is now a coalition government consisting of many regional parties headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party which has close connection with Visva Hindu Parisad, an organization of Hindu nationalists/fundamentalists. On the other hand, the elaborate economic planning system was put under critical scrutiny and a New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in the early 1990s to liberalise economic system. The NEP succeeded in realizing a fairly good economic performance, whereas the same policy worked to intensify social tensions.

In parallel with such political, economic and social changes, Indian historiography has become considerably diversified since the early 1980s. When I began to study Indian history in the early 1970s, the scene was dominated by historians with left-nationalist orientation. There were many Marxists among leading historians. With the 1980s, however, this left-nationalist historiography came under severe criticism by a group of radical historians, which is now known as Subaltern Studies group. They are critical of orthodox Marxism and has tried to restructure Indian historiography, relying first on Gramsci, then on Foucault and other post-modern theorists. In the meantime, such scholars as Ashish Nandy began an attempt at re-evaluating cultural values indigenous to India or Asia as a means to counter Euro-centrism and Enlightenment ideology. Since the 1990s right-wing historians have emerged with the rise of Hindu nationalist forces and made repeated and organized attempts at not only rewriting history but also capturing important positions in universities and cultural and educational administration.

Now I would like to put a few questions to Prof. Sarkar.

Firstly, I wonder whether the campaign by Right-wing historians, which you have mentioned in the first part of your presentation, is finding support among common people. If so, to what extent and why?

Secondly, I think there is no question of reverting to the good old days of left-nationalist historiography of the 1950s and 60s, because, as I said before, I believe historical studies should not cease to change if it wants to remain relevant. And I see from your presentation and other works that you are critical of Subaltern Studies and Ashish Nandy, to say nothing of Right-wing scholars. I am not sure whether I read the situation rightly, but as far as I understand, such Indian scholars as you tend to direct their attention to problems concerning public sphere. And you did exactly this today in your presentation. Could you please tell us more about public sphere, especially about the potentialities of public sphere as a methodological means to create a new history?