

'History with a political edge'

David Washbrook, on the issues

internal heat, while winds in the high Jovian stratosphere move primarily from the poles toward the equator.

Just after the impact of one of the largest cometary fragments, the Hubble telescope detected unusual arc-like auroral emissions at Jupiter's northern mid-latitudes, where the planet normally does not have auroras.

Astronomers said the aurora – glowing gases that create northern and southern lights similar to those on earth – was apparently produced by the impact, though it appeared nearly 112,000 km away from the collision site.

Auroras, which are common at Jupiter's extreme northern and southern latitudes, are produced by high-energy charged particles trapped in the planet's magnetic field that cause atmospheric gases to glow. Astronomers believe the cometary impact created an electromagnetic disturbance that travelled along magnetic field lines into Jupiter's upper atmosphere.

Finally, there is still a debate among astronomers as to whether Shoemaker-Levy 9 was a comet or an asteroid: comets consist largely of ice while asteroids are thought to be giant rocks that exist mainly in a belt between the orbits of Jupiter and Mars.

According to Harold Weaver, an astronomer at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, Maryland, telescope observations seem slightly to favour a cometary origin for Shoemaker.

"The fragments were releasing dust all along the path toward Jupiter, as would be expected from a comet," he said. "This was evident in the persistence of spherical clouds of dust surrounding each nucleus throughout most of the comet's journey."

But Weaver said it would not be easy to provide a definite answer because comets and asteroids have so much in common: they are small bodies; they are primordial, having formed 4,600 million years ago along with the planets; and either type of object can be expected to be found in Jupiter's vicinity.

Hammel said it would be interesting if the objects turned out to be asteroid fragments because scientists do not know much about the strength of such objects.

"We know about comets," she said. "We know they are very weak... and have a tendency to fall apart. If this was an asteroid and it was that weak, that would change our ideas about asteroids dramatically." ■

United States Information Service

David Washbrook, who was appointed Director of the Centre for Indian Studies at the University of Oxford in January this year, is a leading historian of colonial South India. When Washbrook's work on late 19th century and early 20th century South India appeared in the late 1970s, it received wide attention. The work introduced an emphasis on localised, provincial history, moving away from the tradition of studies of broader trends in historical development. His work, which drew largely on colonial-bureaucratic records, provided an analysis of one level at which events occur, a level that (it must be said) has yet to be fully interpreted within a more comprehensive, qualitative understanding of historical processes.

Washbrook's current research interests are in the social history of capitalism in India and, in particular, in socio-political and economic processes in 18th century and early 19th century South India. He is working on two books, one on South India, 1750-1850, for the Cambridge History of India series, and another in collaboration with Rosalind O'Hanlon of the University of Cambridge, a book he describes as "an attempt to write, at the level of a university textbook, a social history of colonial India."

Washbrook was in India recently to attend the landmark International Congress on Kerala Studies in Thiruvananthapuram; in this conversation with V. K. Ramachandran, in Bombay on September 14, he speaks of Indian history studies in Britain and issues in the social history of 18th cen-

tury South India, and he offers a critique of the subaltern studies school of Indian history-writing.

► *This trip to India was to participate in the International Congress on Kerala Studies, wasn't it? What are your impressions?*

I enjoyed it very much, and was extremely impressed with the organisation of the conference and the enthusiasm of the organisers and participants. It was particularly encouraging to see questions of social welfare and distribution occupying a major place on the political agenda and to see that all political questions were not immediately surrendered to a logic of income

growth and advancement, in the hope that, somehow or other, welfare will dribble down to the masses and majorities of society.

Of course, Kerala does have problems of production and these were also explored. But there certainly were no demands that social welfare programmes be cut in the interests of economic growth; given that bottom line, the discussions on possible ways of increasing Kerala's economic growth

were very interesting. One of the strong points in Kerala's history has been the creative use of cooperation, and I was pleased to see that cooperative programmes are still very much on the political agenda.

So for those of us from the West and with a leftwards disposition, battered by arguments that put economic growth and "structural adjustment" before anything else, it was extremely pleasant and encouraging to find an



V. K. Ramachandran

alternative political discourse alive and well and very convincing in Kerala.

► *You've taken over as the Director of the Centre for Indian Studies at Oxford; what is your assessment of the state of Indian history scholarship in Britain?*

Thriving under difficult conditions. History is a very popular subject in Britain; applications to read history at Universities are very high, and applications for research grants are running at virtually record levels. We face problems of institutional funding in general, the scope of history studies in schools has recently been reduced, there is a strict quota placed upon university places, and the whole world of history is under constraints in Britain. Within those restrictions, however, the history of India is more than holding its own at certain centres, for instance, Oxford, Cambridge and the

School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). We are fortunate in having a number of scholarships specifically for people from India and, as a result, we are able to attract some very good students, particularly for research programmes. Cambridge is Number One in this, because of Dr. Anil Seal's ability to raise very large sums of scholarship money (I understand that he has money to finance around 500 students a year from the Commonwealth). SOAS has funds for persons from India to study history, particularly from the Charles Wallace Trust and the British Council. Oxford has, most famously, the Rhodes, the Radhakrishnan Foundation, and the Inlaks Foundation, and also the Felix awards and Commonwealth studentships. One point I would like to make about Oxford is that the subscription to several of these awards is often low, and, as a result (for example, with the Felix awards), the full quota is often not used. It would be excellent if we had more applications to read history and other subjects for the Felix scheme. Any person interested in studying in Britain should really investigate in their local British Council office, which has full information about the awards available.

Coming to Britain to study India sounds like a peculiar errand, because facilities to study India in India are also

very good. There are, however, certain advantages to coming to Britain, at least for a period. One is the general scholarly environment, particularly in places like Oxford, Cambridge and London, where students of Indian history can meet students of other kinds of history, which perhaps they couldn't to the same extent at home. Students gain access to a wide spectrum of views

on the nature of history, and become aware of the wider context in which Indian history itself came to develop. Equally, whether for good or ill, one of the legacies of the empire is excellent collections of books and materials for the study of history in the India Office Library, in the Indian Institute Library in Oxford and in other collections, which help make study easier. These materials are available in India, but it is arguable that they are put together in any one place in the same way as in some of the major

British libraries and institutes. These facilities help save time and make it possible to do quite a lot of original work on India in Britain. Of course, a requirement of a higher research degree on India in Oxford, Cambridge or London is that only part of the time be spent in Britain; original research has also to be conducted in India in Indian archives.

► *My question was also about who's doing what in Indian history in Britain.*

There's a wide range of different histories and historical approaches to be found. One of the major areas of research interest is the 18th century, the pre-colonial period and the period of transition to colonialism. That interest reflects changes in perceptions of the history of modernity in general. With regard to English, French and American history, until a decade ago, the 19th century seemed to be what one studied to understand the origins of modernity; now the frontiers have been pushed back into the 18th century, the century that, after all, produced the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. Perceptions of India have also been affected by these wider histories.

► *Is most of the work on modern history?*

Most of the work is either modern

history or ancient history, that is to say, scholarship in departments of Sanskrit or ancient Indian history that work on the period up to A.D. 1000. What is missing and is very problematic now is the mediaeval period of Indian history. For example, K. N. Chaudhuri has not been replaced at SOAS, and there is no mediaeval or Mughal historian as such at Oxford or Cambridge. Christopher Bayly and I work on the fringes of that period, but our interests are really in the 18th to 19th centuries. This is a major gap in Indian history studies in Britain.

► *And is modern history mainly political and economic history?*

Compared with the United States, there is much more of a bias towards "hard" economic and political history. We wouldn't like to think that we neglect issues of culture, but very few of us seek to treat culture as autonomous of the spheres of politics, economics and society. We have been more resistant than the United States to using cultural theories from other disciplines, such as anthropology and social psychology, which may not be very securely grounded in history. The mainstream of the British study of Indian history is a species of social history with political, economic and cultural orientations, as opposed, say, to the United States, where the mainstream is really culture studies and cultural anthropology.

► *What is the thrust of your own work on 18th century state formation and society?*

My interests are, first and foremost, in the social history of capitalism, that is to say, in social relations and their connection to relations of production. I regard myself as being within the Marxist tradition, though I'm not a base-and-superstructure person who sees history determined by abstract economic forces and society and social organisation just trailing along behind. I'm concerned with the cross-cutting impact of social and political institutions and ideas and ideologies on the material and social reproduction of society.

With regard to 18th century South India, I work on regional state formation, a process that is often seen to have fallen out of the Mughal imperium, particularly on the states of Mysore under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, Travancore, Hyderabad, and Arcot. I also work on processes of new class formation, partly induced by the new demands of the state in the 18th century for professional soldiers, for scribal expertise, and for merchant and banking functions. I am interested in the relationship between emergent

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gentry and mercantile elites and the organisation of production and social reproduction in society at large, the way that essentially corporate forms of social organisation and social reproduction began to be affected by the rise of more powerful states, and the way that organisations of peasants, weavers and others reacted to new forces and the resistance they put up. In that context, I am interested in the way the Europeans became involved in the processes of social, political and economic transformation, very often facilitating them through trade and banking, and through new kinds of military power to buttress more centralised species of authority, and the way that European influence percolated into South Indian society, remodelling it, remoulding it and ultimately taking over political dominance in society.

We suffer a bit from hindsight in these matters. We assume that, because the Europeans had established a kind of world dominance in the 19th century, this dominance was imminent in the 18th century and earlier, and that there was no alternative, no possible or meaningful resistance, to the rise of European power. It is worth remembering, however, that in the 18th century we are dealing with the Europeans before the Industrial Revolution, when their technological advantages were limited, and that one has to look very carefully to define the kinds of strategic advantages they might have had. After all, in 1782, the English were on the point of being thrown into the sea by Hyder Ali, and if it weren't for his misfortune to be in alliance with the French navy, which was completely incompetent, the English might very well have disappeared from South India at that point. Things were much tighter, and the game was much closer run than appears in hindsight.

► *You see this period as a period of dynamism, in terms of economic growth and institutional change.*

Yes, potential dynamism. There were, in certain areas, clear signs of economic development, of class transformation, of the establishment of dominant classes based on commercial production. There were concentrations of power and authority in these regional states, perhaps most marked in the case of Travancore, a successful proto-modern state formation. But the establishment of new forms of authority and economy had very damaging effects on the old structures of society, and the old structures were capable of putting up very considerable resistance. We are not here dealing with any kind of smooth transformation to capitalism,

or smooth process of modernisation; there was an enormous amount of social conflict and political conflict at different levels. A very interesting question is how far these new proto-modern states and class formations could have established themselves independently of colonialism. That is a very arguable question; one of the corollaries to that is the notion that the growth of new capitalistic commercial forms of dominance within Indian society was very closely related to the transition to colonialism itself.

► *You've also now acquired a reputation as a hardline critic of the Subaltern Studies school of history studies.*

I fully agree that we need to explore and examine the subordinate classes of Indian society, to look at their role in making the major themes of history, their reactions, and their independent initiatives. I've enjoyed and gained a great deal from much of the writing in the earlier volumes of Subaltern Studies. I refer particularly to the work of Sumit Sarkar, who is, of course, an outstanding historian of modern India; I refer also to the work of David Hardiman, Arvind Das and other contributors to the series. I'm concerned about the way that Subaltern Studies has developed in its later volumes, and I've had difficulty with the contributions of certain historians within Subaltern Studies, particularly with the work of Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty.

One problem concerns the attempt to define subaltern *autonomy* in ways that make subaltern and elite orders completely autonomous and independent of one another. This is not a very useful reading of Gramscian theory, which has *hegemony* as one of its central concepts, and a concern with the way that elites capture and manipulate the ideology of lower orders. By making this dichotomy, one also fails to explore the dynamic interrelations between dominance and subordination, or that dialectic of domination and subordination that is central to understanding these processes.

A second problem concerns the nature of class and material relations. The emphasis on culture has very often been to deny the significance of

material relations and to deny the importance – and to some extent the existence – of class relations within colonial Indian society. Another problem is that it is unclear that they really are studying the *subaltern* orders of society. More and more their work seems to be about the *bhadralok*, the middle class, particularly of Calcutta. The extent to which the *bhadralok* themselves are part of the subaltern classes is very problematic. They were dominated by colonialism, but they enjoyed many benefits from that colonialism and occupied structurally privileged positions in society.

I find difficulty with the way in which post-structuralism and post-modernism have come to be used by these leading members of Subaltern Studies. In particular, they set up a very sharp antagonism between West and East, between modernity and some notions of a particular and peculiar “indigenous” set of traditions. Their understanding of the West, of the Enlightenment, and of modernity – which is critical to their meanings, since India is construed *against* understandings of the West and of modernity – is itself problematic. Very often it seems to me that the India that they wish to recover is little more than the India of colonialism with the British left out.

What is necessary is a Subaltern Studies project that is more directly in tune with India's subaltern orders. It would have to be a history which didn't exclude class and materialism but included them, a history that presented the alternative positions to a high-caste Hindu and capitalist India more clearly and directly, and a history with a political edge to it. I believe in the closeness in history of past to present and in the radical and subversive character of history, probing, questioning and dissolving received

images and orthodoxies. We may need to turn back towards Gramsci's own project, which was, of course, located very firmly in Marxism, and which was not an attempt to displace materialist history with cultural history, but to complement and supplement it. Under the influence of discourse theory and post-modernism, the radical edge of Subaltern Studies seems very blunt at the moment. ■

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