

**EXCERPTS OF SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB
MUKHERJEE ON THE OCCASION INAUGURATION OF THE 77TH
SESSION OF INDIAN HISTORY CONGRESS**

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, DECEMBER 29, 2016

We must keep in mind that there is no conflict or contradiction between the promotion of regional history and the pursuit of the history of our country as a whole. Indeed, the more we know about our regions, the more we enrich the history of the whole country. My first Master's degree is in the subject of History. Kolkata, where I studied, has been home to some of our great historians like Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Professor R. C. Majumdar, Professor N. K. Sinha, Professor D. C. Sircar, Professor B. N. Mukherjee and others. They doubtless wrote on Bengal but their eyes were also set on India as a whole. Professor N. K. Sinha authored a detailed work on the economic history of colonial Bengal. Yet, he also compiled the standard biography of the famous Haidar Ali of Mysore, since he held Hyder Ali's resistance to the expansion of British power in India near to his heart. This larger concern for the history of the whole of India was shared by prominent historians from other parts of the country as well. The great authority on South Indian history S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar published important studies of the Guptas and Gurjaras of Northern India.

Whether we focus on regional or national history, what is needed the most in our approach to History is that we should be as objective as possible. This is of course true with respect to all subjects of enquiry and academic activities. Behind many professions of impartiality may lie deeply rooted sentiments of prejudice or an innate sense of superiority.

It is useful in this regard to recall Edward Said's influential work of 1978, *Orientalism*, whether he critically scrutinised the claims to objectivity of writing in the west on Asian culture and history. It will be unfair to deny that western orientalists introduced a broader conception of history and a more critical attitude towards historical evidence than our own traditional analysts. 'Orientalists' deciphered our early scripts, they discovered Ashoka for us and tracked as well as translated an enormous amount of source material. They deserve our gratitude for all the valuable work they have done. However, Edward Said's work serves as a warning against the intrusion of personal prejudice into historical interpretation. In my view, every branch of knowledge, whether it be one of the so-called exact sciences or belongs to the spheres of humanities and social sciences, prospers only when clinical objectivity is maintained. It is often the case in history that evidence is either so scarce that the room for speculation is extremely wide, or is so massive that the historian is unable to explore more than a small part of the available data. Personal proclivities of scholars such as

loyalties to nation, region, religion, etc. can influence their choice when evidence suggests not a single occurrence but a range of possibilities.

How should one guard oneself against temptation in such a situation? I would venture to recommend that reason and moderation alone should be our guide. It is natural to love one's country and see as much glory in its past as one can detect. But patriotism should not result in blinkered approaches to interpreting history or a compromise with truth in order to justify an argument of choice. No society is perfect and history must be also seen as a guide on what went wrong and what were the contradictions, deficiencies and weaknesses of the past. The study of history will be of use to us in shaping our conduct today only if undertaken with objectivity and my impression is that mainstream Indian historiography has been quite conscious of this responsibility.

An objective pursuit of History, such as our best historians have attempted, requires an impartial mind of a judge and not the mind of an advocate. We must keep our eyes open for unfamiliar ideas and be ready to consider a range of different inferences or assumptions. This necessarily bars intolerance of contrary opinions or judgements. There has been an unfortunate tendency in our country from time to time to take umbrage at the expression of any view perceived to be hostile to our social or cultural institutions, past or present. Similarly, critical appraisals of our heroes and national icons of the past have been met with hostility and sometimes even violence. The freedom to doubt, disagree and dispute intellectually must be protected as an essential pillar of one democracy. Nothing should lie outside the realm of reason, and therefore of discussion and argument. Such freedom is vital for progress in any field, especially a calling and a craft like History.

It is my firm conviction that India's pluralism and social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity are our greatest strength. Our traditions have always celebrated the 'argumentative' Indian not the 'intolerant' Indian. Multiple views, thoughts and philosophies have competed with each other peacefully for centuries in our country and freedom of speech is one of the most important fundamental rights guaranteed by our Constitution.

The Indian History Congress has a creditable record of standing up for freedom of expression and asking historians to be faithful to the cause of reason. It has often taken cudgels against distortions of history. I hope the Indian History Congress will continue to remain alert and vigilant in the cause of an objective study of history.

I am very happy to learn that the Indian History Congress regularly publishes its annual *Proceedings*, containing a large selection of papers submitted at its annual sessions. I am sure that these papers faithfully represent

the current level of serious historical research in India. I congratulate you on the high standard that has been maintained by the volumes so far published of *The Comprehensive History of India*, brought out under your organisation's auspices. I hope this series can be completed within a reasonable amount of time, so that an authoritative historical work of reference is made available to our scholars.

I compliment both the State Government of Kerala and the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, for hosting this session of the Indian History Congress. I understand that during the last two decades Kerala has already hosted three sessions of the Indian History Congress. Most delegates at this session will not therefore be strangers to Kerala. Whatever be the occasion, those who visit Kerala from any other part of India soon realise that Kerala has a message for them. They are visiting a state which occupies the top position in the human development index despite limited economic resources. It has the highest literacy rate and the lowest infant mortality rate in the country. Its institutions of higher education are the pride of India. The state was amongst the first to implement land reforms, which even critics regard as among the most equitable in the country. There is much that the rest of the country can learn from Kerala. I congratulate you, Mr Chief Minister and through you, the people of Kerala on your State's impressive achievements.

I wish this session of the Indian History Congress all success.

Thank you

Jai Hind