

ON ITIHASA

by Dr Sachin Nandha

This is a short paper on understanding the difference between the term history as popularly understood and the ancient Sanskrit term *itihasa*, which is translated in popular lexicon to mean the former. *Itihasa* does not mean history, it never has. This paper only intends to capture the nectar that was churned out through an exploratory session with Professor Balagangadhara, and not the churning itself. Therefore, this paper will not provide a justification or reasoned arguments as to why *itihasa* if taken to mean history is to misconstrue the term completely, closing the access once and for all to the classical texts of Indian civilisation – categorised as *itihasa*; namely the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

What is history?

As E.H. Carr so aptly writes:

When we attempt to answer the question 'what is history?' our answer, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question what view we take of the society in which we live.

The meaning of history has ebbed and flowed between two poles; the pure unadulterated pursuit of truth as facts; and the notion that it is nigh impossible to ascertain facts from the past as each bit of knowledge has come through human minds and as such has been 'processed'. The pundits have always contradicted each other and the field is open to inquiry.

All facts are to be superseded, and all knowledge is to be doubted. History cannot be relied upon to teach us anything of significance that can aid humanity to learn from the past and build a better future. History is not, and cannot be the pursuit of truth through facts, as all objects require perception, and all perception is processed through the human mind. It is on this foundation that the statement 'way of writing about the past does not equate to knowledge' as made by Balagangadhara sits.

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What is itihasa?

If *itihasa* is not history what is it? Itihasa is not folklore, it is not a collection of fables, or any other such translation. The natural urge to fit relatively alien terms into neat tidy familiar boxes must be resisted. First, and foremost itihasa, is itihasa. Itihasa is a civilizational attempt to learn from the past to build a better present and future. The ancient Indians saw little merit in recording the past, as facts, as they well understood that the past is merely the recordings of a 'processed' bit of knowledge, which will not aid future generations. They were rather interested in the transfer knowledge that was useful across the breadth and depth of society, even to all those who were not interested in knowledge.

A little context will aid our appreciation of this nebulous term. In classical Indian literature, there are two worlds - *Vishva*, which is manifest; and *Para*, which is beyond *Vishva*. All human action, thought and knowledge is in *Vishva*. Krishna is said to be the *apara* avatar of Vishnu, the 'a' meaning 'not'. Therefore, Vishnu is *para*, and Krishna is the *Vishva* avatar of Vishnu, that is in the world manifest.

Itihasa was a tool, a tradition, not a set of texts. Its main purpose was the transference of knowledge through stories across the entire society - it was a tool to liberate knowledge from the few who pursued it to the majority who had little or no interest in it; with the sole aim of building a better society in the here and now. The tradition of itihasa has died in modern Indian civilisation, and an earnest attempt to rekindle it must begin by first appreciating that which is lost.

If the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata are to be understood as itihasa in its true sense then we can begin to better appreciate the texts in themselves, not only in transferring timeless values discovered in a forgotten past, but to challenge and critique values therein, in an attempt to build better values and rekindle the tradition of itihasa here and now.

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The danger of confusing itihasa and history

The closest word in modern Hindi which comes even close to the western idea of history is '*ateet*' meaning the past.

There is a clear and present danger in modern Indian society due to the confusion of these terms. By misinterpreting *itihasa* as history the very essence of the former is lost, that of transferring knowledge to build a better here and now. Instead human energy is spent on a wild goose chase trying to find 'facts' to justify what is in the itihasa. Historians the world over assert that history shapes the collective consciousness of a nation, and that may be true for other civilisations, but in the Indian traditions nothing could be more falsely construed. The collective consciousness of the Indian traditions lies not in history but in itihasa, and the sooner it rediscovers this, the sooner it can get on with the business of asserting itself to build a better society in the present and future.

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