

# EAA Interview with *Romila Thapar*

Distinguished historian of ancient India and the first holder of the Kluge Chair for Countries and Cultures of the South at the Library of Congress, 2004.



*Romila Thapar, one of the most eminent historians of India in the world, is Professor Emeritus in History at Jawaharal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has served as General President of the Indian History Congress and was named a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. She is author of numerous books including Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300. This work is a rewrite of her classic work, A History of India, Vol.1, which first appeared 39 years ago. EAA editorial board member Fritz Blackwell conducted the following e-mail interview with Professor Thapar. Readers interested in the new version of Early India should note that an essay-review by Ainslee Embree appears on page 60.*



**Blackwell:** Sometimes American students approach India as an alien culture, bringing misconceptions that are often based on fabulous or stereotyped images and concepts (such as, as you have mentioned in the introduction to *Early India, Oriental Despotism and a stagnant society and economy*). Also, there is the problem (for teachers as well as for students) of the clichéd “unity in diversity” and “diversity in unity,” especially in regard to the myriad of regional cultures. How would you advise dealing with the many cultures of India?

**Thapar:** I think it is important to emphasize that there are two levels at which all societies should be studied. There are basic similarities that need to be emphasized—and then there are specific differences. The processes, while similar, contain different units that change in diverse ways. Multiple cultures are not islands, and what needs to be seen is where and how they overlap and why overlapping features differ in various cultures. Furthermore these diversities are common to all societies, and the mistake we make is attempting to index societies and cultures into neat slots instead of giving them fuzzy edges that are in effect more real.

The basics are the environment and how it is used, family organization, social groups, the function and status of occupations, belief and worship, and self-expression through art and literature. This is an integrated package. Therefore, when one element changes, a wider change reverberates through the society. Environment in India ranges from desert to rainforest; kinship can be patriarchal or matrilineal; social groups are frequently caste groups; the grading of occupations also ties in with castes; religion spans the range from animism to monotheism; and there are varieties of literary and artistic expression.

This understanding of other cultures comes through studying the history of societies in their social, economic, and cultural forms. Only then will the dynamism of each be comprehended. Unfortunately, the curriculum in the USA in relation to South Asia is often predominantly the study of religions and that too in a static way.

**Blackwell:** You wrote of “the interface between literature and history” in the introductory remarks to *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, History—a text I found very useful, by the way, in the course “Civilization in Classical India.”* And you have cautioned that a text must be interpreted in terms of its historical context and intention. Could you please elaborate on the classroom use of literature for historical purposes?

**Thapar:** Literary texts have been used in the past largely to obtain information on a particular period of history. Fewer attempts have been made to see the text in itself as a representation of a historical period, perhaps even as an historical event. I am not suggesting that a work of fiction should be read as a record of historical happenings, but rather that it should be seen as an expression of the assumptions of a particular group in society at a particular time. Fiction after all provides a clue as to how people are thinking. Literature is important to history, not as descriptive of a reality—although in some instances it could be documentary—but as indicating what has been called *mentalité* (mind set and world view) by French historians.

**Blackwell:** How might teachers use classical dance and theatre tapes or DVDs in opening Indian culture to students?

**Thapar:** When used for teaching, perhaps they should be used in conjunction with a detailed commentary on the dance or the music. It is sometimes helpful to know the music the audience is familiar with and to make references to how forms are treated in other traditions of music. Dance has much more narrative and is often easier to explain. Discussing some minimal aesthetic theory would help—such as the *rasa*<sup>1</sup> theory of evoking a mood or an emotion. Introducing more perspectives makes for better understanding.

**Blackwell:** Fortunately for all of us who care about and teach Indian history, you especially have been in the forefront in combating Hindutva—the subordination of objective and scholarly history to pseudo-religious-nationalistic political goals. Indeed, it can remind one of similar instances in regard to politics and

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science in this country. A look at Web sites of this movement can reveal the danger it poses. Perhaps the most outstanding example is the focus on Aryan identity as ethnic and indigenous rather than linguistic, and as the litmus test for what is and what is not Indian. Do you have any caveats for American teachers, especially in regard to the expropriation of religion and culture by Hindutva ideologues?

**Thapar:** The Aryan theory includes a history of how it was introduced into Indian thinking in the late nineteenth century and how and why it was appropriated by the Indian middle class. It is important that students know this. It is equally important that they realize how this same theory of Aryan foundations and Aryan superiority was misused in European history. The European ‘race-science’ aspect and the colonial implications of this theory cannot be ignored. The current political agenda of this theory as propagated by Hindutva needs to be clearly stated. Claims to racial purity and the imposing of cultural and political identities on biological identities has been shown to be completely untenable, as has the claim to an unbroken lineal descent of five thousand years for those who call themselves Aryans today.

It is equally important that the actual debate on the theory among historians and archaeologists be discussed. The theory proposed half a century ago has been superseded by fresh evidence and new analyses. Theories proposed by scholars today emerge from assessing the reliability of the data on which they are based and the logic of the argument put forward. The version adopted by Hindutva does not meet these criteria.

All religions are open at the level of personal convictions, but all religions tend to close ranks when they are used to mobilize society in favor of social conservatism or the political capturing of power by some groups. These two aspects, even when applied to Indian religions, have to constantly be juxtaposed, even for earlier periods. Cultures vary as they reflect a way of life; they are not unchanging or eternal. Therefore, even the ‘tradition’ that is claimed by Hindutva as the foundation of Hindu culture is born of the present and does not come from any permanent, unchanged, unalloyed ‘tradition’ from the past. Each generation creates its own cultural patterns and draws on what it regards as a relevant past. As we inherit these creations we also inherit the changes that were incorporated into them. We therefore inherit an encrusted past.

**Blackwell:** *What specific and general occurrences between 300 and 1500 CE should be especially emphasized, and in what manner? As an example, the Gupta dynasty may have been magnified in importance—or at least misinterpreted as to the extent of its significance—by Western historians. Similarly, south India is often not given much attention.*

**Thapar:** Well, some salient features are:

CE 300–800

- Royal grants of land to religious beneficiaries and officers, which brought about major changes in the economy.

- Advances in astronomy and mathematics, as in the writings of Aryabhatta (author of treatise on mathematics and astronomy, CE 499, that employs zero and the decimal system as commonplace).

- Excellence in Sanskrit poetry and drama.

800–1200

- Rock-cut temples in the western Deccan (the inland plateau of south India).
- The philosophies of Shankaracharya (or Sankara, circa 788–820, foremost exponent of Advaita, or non-dualism) and Ramanuja (circa 1056–1137, advocated “qualified” or theistic Advaita).

1100–1300CE

- Hegemony on land and sea and the links with southeast Asia (Chola dynasty, circa 846–907, forged Tamil identity and classical standards in south India; established commercial and cultural contact with Indochina and Indonesia).
- The centrality of bronze sculpture in Indian art.
- The temple becomes both a sacred center and a social and economic institution all over India.

1300–1500

- The Sufis (Muslim mystics) influence the making of Indian Islam.
- Rajput (martial group of clans dominant in the northwest) epics reflect the upper caste world of the mid-second millennium CE.
- The growth of regional languages and literatures and the refashioning of earlier Sanskrit texts, such as by the authors of the variant versions of the *Ramayana*, e.g., Kamban (writer of the Tamil version of the *Ramayana*, ninth century CE), Krittibas (fourteenth-century author of the Bengali *Ramayana*), Tulasi (or Tulsidas, sixteenth century author of the Hindi *Ramayana*).

**Blackwell:** *Thank you, Professor Thapar, for your time and for sharing your expertise with us.*

**Thapar:** You are welcome. It was my pleasure. ■

#### NOTE

1. *Rasa*—the basic concept of classical Indian aesthetics, which holds that the poetic or artistic counterpart of human emotions (i.e., erotic love, comedy, pathos, fury, heroism, terror, repulsion, amazement; some add a ninth—peace) can be conveyed in art (including literature and music) through the power of suggestion. It must be emphasized that *rasa* (literally, taste or delight) is not the raw emotion itself, but its aesthetic refinement (social issues and stark realism would not produce *rasa*). [editor]