



## The Past as Present - Romila Thapar

*Romila Thapar, The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History, ALEPH Book Company, New Delhi, 2014, 326 pages, Rs. 595/-*

The book is the latest endeavor by the thespian Indian historical writer Romila Thapar. It is an anthology of essays that cover a wide array of topics. It examines what 'History' is to the public and how it contributes towards nation building; how it helps us build a national identity and understand who we are. This, the writer argues is, of pivotal importance in deciding, among other things, how we shape our future.

The writer takes the onus of inquiring critically into established notions of history. In doing so, she opens interesting debates with different standpoints. These debates examine not only age-old questions but also raise new ones. The answers doubtlessly, always were and still continue to be disputed and argued, but nonetheless allow us to understand the Nation State we are today, in a more objective light.

According to the author, national identities are a reflection on how societies are perceived to have evolved, and in order that the perception is not far removed from reality, it is imperative that history be evaluated and understood in a way that is reliable and leaves little or no room for error or doubt.

This book comes at a time when many versions of 'National Identity' from fundamentalist to secular are being argued, often with underpinnings of 'bogus nationalism'. It allows the reader to take a balanced and accurate view of our revolution, and the history that made it possible.

The first section of the book titled "*History and the Public*" contains six chapters. The first chapter deals with "*Interpretations of Early Indian History*". It covers the period from about 1000 BC to 1300 AD. In this chapter, the author deconstructs the history as built by colonial scholars in accordance with a nineteenth century European viewpoint. She argues that our colonizers also attempted to impose history on us that justified colonial dominance. The chapter helps unravel our inherently layered past and understand its genealogy.

The second chapter is about "*Historical Perspectives of Nation Building*", which explains how the concept of a Nation State came into being during modern times. The chapter compares the European Renaissance with what we had by way of cultural awakening. It traces the evolution of our cultural and caste identities through history and sheds light on how we came to be the pluralistic and heterogeneous society we are today.

The fourth chapter titled "*In Defense of History*" endeavors to analyze the attempts by some sections to 'homogenize' history by 'purging what is perceived as culturally pure by Hindu nationalists and such like ideologists'. The writer warns against taking narrow and parochial views as they threaten both: the true history and the secular fabric of our country.

The fifth chapter "*Writing History Textbooks: a Memoir*" is about the writer's experience while writing textbooks for the sixth grade on Ancient India, and the seventh grade on Medieval India. The writer recounts that she was able to surmount various biases and opinions plaguing the notion of what constituted cultural heritage and Indian History.

The sixth chapter "*Glimpses of a Possible History from Below: Early India*" is about reconstruction of history at a subaltern level, which is no doubt less spectacular but perhaps nearly as relevant.

The second part of the book "*Concerning Religion and History*" has three chapters. The first titled "*Communalism: A historical Perspective*" looks at the evolution of communalism and attempts to distinguish it from the critique of religion. She also examines the possibility of Uniform civil laws in light of communalism. In the second chapter "*Religion and the Secularizing of Indian Society*" the author attempts to make a distinction between secularism and secularizing of a society.

In the third chapter “*Syndicated Hinduism*” the writer points out the perils of according legitimacy to the notion of ‘Hindus’ in danger and allowing in to our psyche as a society, the ingredients of dangerous fundamentalism.

The third part of the book “*Debates*” has seven chapters. The first chapter “*Which of Us are Aryans*” argues that the theory of race was a result of essentially the European preoccupation with it. The second chapter “*Dating the Epics*” attempts to correlate the dating with archaeological findings. She argues that there is an undue zeal for tradition to be proven right and this essentially has to do with contemporary culture eliciting legitimacy from the idiom of the past. The third chapter “*The Epic of the Bharatas*” traces the evolution of kingdoms from clans in the historical perspective of the Mahabharata. The fourth chapter “*The Ramayana Syndrome*” analyses the various versions of the Ramayana. She questions if anyone including the state is aware of reality behind the fantasy. The fifth chapter “*In Defense of the Variant*” looks at alternative versions of epics like ‘*Dasratha Jataka*’ and ‘*Paumcharyam*’ and discusses the role of media in creating a hype about burning a book or tearing down of a panel at an exhibition. The sixth chapter “*Historical Memory without History*” gives an insight into the difference between ‘Faith and History’ and sometimes provides answers. The locations of ‘*Rem Setu*’ or ‘*Lanka*’ for that matter are cases in point. The seventh and last chapter “*The Many Narratives of Somnath*” discusses the various ‘histories’ of Somnath as propounded by various scholars and questions the dominance of a single narrative. She suggests caution when reconstructing the past and claiming that it derives from collective memory.

The last and fourth part of the book “*Our Women – Then and Now*” has three chapters. The first chapter, “*Women in the Indian Past*” as the name suggests looks at the role of women in Indian history and questions the tendency amongst earlier historians to focus only on ‘normative texts’. The second chapter “*Becoming a Sati – the Problematic Widow*” throws light on the history of sati as gleaned from edicts and how this evil came to be glorified so much that stray incidents are still visible. According to the author the dynamics of various factors like kinship, property relations, rights of inheritance, the approval to sexuality, the ethic of the hero and attitudes prevalent have to be understood to realize why women were encouraged to do so. The last chapter “*Rape within a Cycle of Violence*” talks about how women have been treated throughout history. Rape and how rape has come to be seen and protested against over the years.

The book offers a magnificent insight into how our national identities are shaped and how we may eventually shape our nation state. The book culls and is enriched from the wide variety of historical research that the author has undertaken in pursuit of studying, teaching and reinventing history.