

Gottlob, Michael, *Historical Thinking in South Asia: A Handbook of Sources from Colonial Times to the Present*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2003, pp. 318, Rs. 695.

Review by Vinay Lal

Political and ideological battles in India are increasingly being fought on the terrain of history. Historians occupied an extraordinary place in the debates over the Babri Masjid, and in the course of the last few years controversies over history textbooks have intensified. To be sure, these disputes have surfaced previously: in the textbook controversies of 1977-79, those years memorably etched as the aftermath of the emergency and the period of Congress's exile from the seat of power, contemporary disagreements over Aurangzeb's allegedly wanton destruction of Hindu temples, the prevalence of beef-eating among the early Aryans, and Shivaji's iconicity both as a "freedom fighter" and "Hindu nationalist" appear to have been anticipated. Indeed, after the attainment of independence, the nascent nation-state turned its attention not only to five-year plans to generate economic growth and commit the country to 'development', but to the task, construed as urgent, of rewriting Indian history. If, as was then widely believed, colonial histories were almost invariably contaminated, engendered by the impulse to make history serve as the handmaiden of the state and often animated by wildly indulgent representations of Indians as lazy, intensely emotional people who were predisposed towards viewing themselves preeminently as members of monolithic religious communities, it became almost a moral imperative to install a competing narrative at the heart of the nation-state. Nationalist historians had emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but now their ascendancy, aided considerably by state patronage, would become palpably evident. How, then, considering the importance that has been attached since independence to history, as the vehicle of both the dream-work and culture-work of the Indian nation-state, might one argue that history has, in many respects, become the chosen terrain, the very field of dharma (*dharmakshetre*), for staking claims to India's past as much as its future?

This query brings us to the book under review, Michael Gottlob's *Historical Thinking in South Asia*. It is, as its subtitle indicates, a "Handbook of Sources from Colonial Times to the Present." One might begin with what is perhaps a minor quibble: like many writers on the Indian subcontinent, Gottlob takes South Asia and India to be synonymous terms. Doubtless, Gottlob expends a few pages on history-writing in Pakistan, but this volume remains firmly anchored in Indian history. The historiography of Sri Lanka receives no mention, an omission all the more regrettable from the fact that the work of John Rogers, E. Valentine Daniel, Stanley Tambiah and others represents a very distinguished body of scholarly accomplishment. Gottlob's error is much less egregious than that of some historians who, writing on Bengal, indeed I should say the middle-class society of Calcutta, somehow imagine that they

are writing on India. *Within* the parameters of what Gottlob takes to be appropriate sources for the study of historical thinking in colonial and post-colonial India, one is struck rather by the ecumenism of his choices and his relatively wide conception of what can reasonably be construed as examples of the historical sensibility at work, especially in the twentieth century.

Though each of the nearly fifty selections is prefaced by an interpretive and biographical note, Gottlob sets the tone for the volume with a long and knowledgeable essay that comprises a third of the book. The usual suspects, William Jones and James Mill, are invoked in Gottlob's account of colonial indology, and from here he moves at once to Rammohun Roy. The scholar-administrator types -- Mountstuart Elphinstone, Joseph Cunningham, James Grant Duff, and James Tod, to name four-- whose histories proliferated in the first half of the nineteenth century scarcely receive mention. Tod exercised, as we have come to recognize, an incalculable influence not only on generations of scholarship on Rajasthan, but even on Bengali self-understanding. Early commentators such as Robert Orme and Alexander Dow had represented the Bengalis as effeminate; and Tod's characterization of the Rajputs as the paradigmatic example of the martial race was calculated to enhance the contrast. The omission of colonial historiography becomes less puzzling once it is understood that Gottlob takes it as his mandate to sketch the rise of historical thinking not merely in India, but more particularly among Indians. Just when did history become an object of reflection and inquiry, if not research, among a significant section of the educated elite? What intellectual positions were embraced by the most enthusiastic advocates of history, and what place did nationalism, patriotism and communalism, as well as conceptions of social reform, progress, and revolutionary change, occupy in Indian historiography through the nineteenth century? Gottlob devotes the last third of the book to the twentieth century, and his attentiveness to the works of historians such as Devahuti, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, R. S. Sharma, and K. M. Panikkar, of whom the present generation of historians whose work has been shaped predominantly by postcolonial theory remain largely oblivious, is commendable. Not surprisingly, the narrative is brought up to the present, concluding with a section that recalls the emergence of women's histories and ecological histories, as well as the enterprise, first sketched out in a little programmatic note by Ranajit Guha on colonialist and nationalist histories, that has come to be known as *Subaltern Studies*. It is characteristic of Gottlob's ambition to remain "objective", still cultivated to a remarkable degree in the German academy, that Guha's note is reproduced without any attempt at critical exegesis.

So long as one accepts Gottlob's framework of historical sources, his handbook of "historical thinking" in India from around 1880 down to the present day will doubtless be of pedagogic use, though even here one can occasionally question his judgment.

What Jadunath Sarkar was to Indian historiography for the late nineteenth century, R. C. Majumdar was to the middle portion of the twentieth century; and though it is in the fitness of things that their communalist outlook, if not their unrepentant worship of facts (which could nonetheless, in Sarkar's case, be conjoined with dramatic flourishes), has now banished them to the margins, at least two generations of Indian students were fed on their histories. But they are not represented in Gottlob's volume. Moreover, if the overlap between Gottlob's volume and Volume II of Theodore de Bary's *Sources of Indian Tradition*, which has never been advertised as a handbook of historical thinking, is very considerable, then obviously one may ask what marks Gottlob's sources as examples of "historical thinking" as such.

Moving beyond Gottlob's chosen framework, the questions multiply. In Maharashtra, for example, as Tilak and the nationalist party gained ascendancy, historical plays came into vogue; similarly, for the eighteenth century, *bakhars* remained the preeminent form of historical expression. Gottlob's *Handbook* is, unfortunately, silent on these matters, though attentiveness to them would have opened up Gottlob's field of inquiry. The debate over the Babri Masjid was conducted at least as much in newspapers as in propaganda tracts, government white papers, and scholarly works. What relationship do newspapers, in English and Indian languages alike, bear to the rise of historical thinking in India? Have newspapers been instrumental in advancing the study of history? If the newspaper culture of India is in many ways distinct, how does it impact debates in historiography? Or take another question: The film society movement played a crucial role in the advent of regional cinemas. Can something similar be argued on behalf of historical societies? Historians of India have been singularly indifferent to the question of what constitutes an "historical audience", and subsequent works on Indian historiography will have to display greater sensitivity to such considerations.

[First published in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 41, no. 4 (2004), pp. 501-4.]