



NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY
School of Social Sciences
DD 26, Sector I, Salt Lake, Kolkata - 700064

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Reporting of the 9th Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture

The School of Social Sciences is entrusted to organize the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lectures on behalf of the University. The Ninth Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture was delivered by Professor Ranabir Chakravarti, Professor (Former) of History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, - eminent historian and a distinguished scholar - on “Why read early India? And, how to do it”? on 31.07.2021 on the zoom platform. Professor Chakravarti spoke on ways of studying and understanding the early India. Professor Subha Sankar Sarkar, Vice-Chancellor, NSOU presided over the Programme.

The programme initiated with the Welcome Address by Professor Chandan Basu Director, School of Social Sciences, Professor. Ranabir Chakravarti first analyzed the importance of the primary source materials in constructing the past. He made us peek in the world of primary sources to explain how the multiple possible readings of sources shaped our understanding of the past. He said while studying ancient India, one should contextualize the textual, art, historical, epigraphic and numismatic sources and alongside give importance to field archeological evidence.

In his lecture, Chakravarti made very clear that the problem of periodization and the evolutionary schema is the central focus for the construction of historical past. For him, periodization is very important, and he remained well at ease with the broad chronology of the early Indian history. He touched upon the various periods of the Indian history and showed how each of them impacted each other. These divisions like, the ancient civilization, Vedic age, Mahajanapadas, the Maurya Empire, the Guptas etc. contributed to the making of the early Indian History.

Chakravarti chose to bask away from the tradition of separately dealing with each of these sources. He instead, emphasized on their inter-connections and their related historiographical issues. This helped us to realize the changing nature of the sources. At the same time, he demonstrated the role of the new findings and interpretations in the production and recognition of the historical processes. He showed how words and their meanings changed over dynasties. He was very clear in showing how primary sources of history like Vedas presented a phenomenon in a way that changed meaning over the change of the dynasties. For instance, in the pastoral societies, kings were termed as ‘Gopati’ which however changed with the coming of the trade and economy and the word gave way to ‘Nripati. For Chakravarti this was important, for we do not have an adequate knowledge of Sanskrit and Indology, we won’t be able to understand the osmosis of words and the inner meaning of the words in the changing context.



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In the similar fashion, he delved upon the word, 'Arya' and its ramifications in the society. It was a word of the Indo-Aryan regime written in Greek but carrying elaborate and complicated under-currents. The lecture stood out for its wonderful way of offering a broad overview and connected narrative of early Indian history, taking into consideration major historical developments from the earliest times to c. AD 1300. Salient features of political, socio-economic and cultural history have been discussed elaborately, and regional diversities in early Indian history have been commented upon, keeping in mind the features at the regional significance. Rich in empirical details and containing relevant illustrations and demonstrations, the lecture delves into the historiographical twists and turns in the study of early India. It is marked by attempts to demonstrate elements of change in early Indian history beyond dynastic shifts. The lecture also offers critical readings of diverse primary sources from the fields of archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics and art-history, and the various congruent, and contesting, images of the past, of which a collage has been generated.

The lecture also throws light on the necessity of looking back in retrospect to understand the various dimensions of the Indian history and its impact in understanding the current society. He talks of the process of appropriation or 'atmikoron' as one says, and goes on to elaborate its underpinnings. He says it is wrong to say there has been an equipoised exchange between the higher and the lower castes for there had always been a tendency to get attracted towards the higher caste, and this hadn't changed much since then. The higher castes had maintained their dominance and their authority hadn't changed any bit on the lower castes. The unity in diversity model which is followed is more of a manifesto and less of a practical model to be followed by the society at large. He still believed how the equipoise is badly shaped when talking of the exchanges between the unequal echelons of the society. Though we claim of inhabiting a just society with perfect syncing between hierarches in society, we hardly recognize the gaping gaps between such hierarchies. We swell in pride in claiming for a multifarious society but hardly make efforts in sealing these anomalies.

This multifarious society must be studied in great detail and this becomes more scrupulous while studying the ancient society. Chakravarti unfolded the ways of studying ancient India, which must be carried forward in a very careful way. We shall discuss these as takeaways from the lecture:

Thus, the takeaways from the lecture:

- Studying the Ancient History should not be a mere study of facts.
- It should include the change of perspectives and novel interpretations.
- There is no universal truth in historical facts, for there is always a scope of subjective findings.
- Though there is no one way of interpreting history, for it varies across contexts and characters, there is always a scope of doing history in the scientific way.
- Preservation of historical facts and going through the rigorous steps must be a primary criterion for historical research.
- The significance of historiography in curving the shape of tools for studying ancient India.



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- The contribution of ancient languages like Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit in studying a challenging area like ancient India, steeped with rigour and complications, less found in other areas of history.
- Capturing the present contexts of the concepts used, for they remain heavily loaded with symbolic meanings which must be interpreted in detail to reach to a conclusive understanding.

Herein lied the justification of the stated memorial lecture, which we think will go a long way in creating interpolative ripples that shall show the path for further ameliorations and deliberations on higher education in India and beyond.

The programme was followed by well-rounded questions and answers sessions.

The day came to an end with the vote of thanks delivered by Debojit Goswami, Assistant Professor in Public Administration, School of Social Sciences, NSOU before the august gathering.

The Report is prepared by Dr. Srabanti Choudhuri, Assistant Professor of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, NSOU.

