Chapter-5

Exploring the Relevance of Past to the Present
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EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF PAST TO THE PRESENT

To study the relevance of the past to the present is a very interesting as well as useful exercise. But while performing this task we must deal with the issues and events very cautiously. A neutral and impartial study of the past is a very difficult task. While studying the past either we are intoxicated by the emotive feelings and start glorifying each and every event or on the other hand sometimes we reach another extreme where we totally reject the past. Both these attitudes are to a large extent harmful and dangerous. Any event must be studied in the light of reason and the same is true with the study of the past.

History is much more than a mere record of events. It is a medium that monitors and surveys events, appropriately classified and analysed for posterity. Those who learn from history do not repeat it. Those who ignore it are condemned to repeat it. The right input from history can make a difference in the quality of decision-making process in a complex situation. Learning from history is a two-way process. To review the present in the light of the past also means learning about the past in the light of the present. It is rightly said that the function of history, therefore, is to promote a deeper understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.

Facts are important. They should not be tampered with. The moment that happens distortions creep in although there can be variant interpretations of their significance and implications. A flawed perspective of history would be disastrous. So would be any strongly emotional response to it. Emotions can blur thinking and create illusions. Illusions and historical facts are natural enemies. Regarding Indian history one may say that at least some Indian historical “episodes” are partially illusory.
As far as Indian history is concerned, apart from illusions, India’s colonial past too has had its share of distortions. The colonial masters had their own notions of history. They used the past selectively to suit their interests. India’s colonial association with the British masters in the 19th century fathered several Orientalists and Indologists, mainly European scholars, who made certain facets of India and Indian languages their special areas of study. However, due to little or no personal experience of the Indian reality, their writings lacked depth, objectivity and sensitivity. On the other hand those who were sympathetic to Indian culture tended to romanticise the ancient Indian past. These interpretations carried the imagery and preconceptions not only of the sources but also of those interpreting it.

5.1 The Two Academic Perspectives Regarding India’s Past

There were two dominant approaches to studying the Indian past during the colonial era. One was pro-British where as another was anti-British. Among the pro-British historians of the early period were included the Orientalists whose efforts to study India’s past began in the late eighteenth century principally because the East India Company required that its officers become familiar with the laws, habits and history of the people they were governing. For the Utilitarians the principle value of a culture was the degree to which it contributed to the furtherance of rationalism and individualism. They saw neither of these two values in Hindu civilisation and, therefore, condemned it vehemently. They also maintained that Indian society remained unchanged from its origin to the arrival of the British. Like them the Evangelists also maintained that Indian culture was without any virtue. But while the Utilitarians sought to change India through legislation, the Evangelists believed that Hindu religion was the chief cause of the backwardness of India and attempted to rectify the situation through her conversion to Christianity. India is a country of saints, snake-charmers and beggars; this has been the notion of many about India who belong to the affluent
Western world. Of India the only thing they know about is its spirituality, its inclination towards metaphysics, meditation and Yoga. All of this is important, but it is obviously one-sided. The West knows less about Ashoka, the Guptas or the Mauryas. Nor do they know much about medical science in ancient India, or about Indian contributions to astronomy and mathematics. And while other nations are regarded as highly civilised and capable of material and scientific contributions, India is relegated to Yoga, meditation and metaphysics. Max Muller, the German scholar wrote in 1859, “India is a country of spiritualist philosophers and the Indian mind has been weak in political and material speculations.” He further wrote that “for a Greek his existence is complete and real but for a Hindu it is unreal.”¹ Thus those having some serious interest in Indian culture do appreciate India as a spiritualist country where a great man like Buddha was born but they are doubtful about India’s contribution in the field of politics and economy. It is also believed that India and the Indians did not have awareness about history and politics. “The conclusion is inescapable that ancient India did not develop a historical tradition or a historical awareness in the same way as the Greeks and Romans, the Chinese and the Arabs developed. Perhaps a part of the explanation for the absence of this tradition of history may be sought in the nature and structure of the intellectual classes that dominated the life of ancient India. The village, a religion of a ritualistic kind and the Sanskrit language dominated the intellectual and emotional life of ancient India. The ancient Indian literati were invariably preoccupied with religion and ritual and unlike the Arabs they were little interested in the life of the common people either in war or at peace.”² D.D.Kosambi also writes that “the Sanskrit because it’s chief propagator, innovator, teacher was the Brahmin who had in the main to supply recruits to the priesthood is based in the same way upon love and religion which constitute the common interest of Brahmin and prince.”³

In the history of Indology we also find a group of authors called “Indophobes” who were much more contemptuous of what India had to offer. The
most important representative of the Indophobes was Baron Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) who wrote a note on public education which disappointed the young people who were interested in studying the culture of India, and which reads as follows:

“the matter now facing us is simple… we must not learn languages in which, according to general opinion, there are no books on any subject that deserves to be compared with ours; if we can study European science, we must not study systems which, according to general opinion, when they differ from those pertaining to Europe, it is because they are worse; nor must we, when we can favour a healthy philosophy and an authentic history, stimulate, at the expense of the state, medical doctrines which would shame an English veterinarian, an astronomy which would make girls from an English boarding school laugh, a history in which kings thirty feet tall and thirty thousand-year-old queens abound, and a geography which speaks of oceans of treacle and oceans of butter.”

All of this has various important aspects, one of them being that this denial or omission of India’s great values reduces her to being one of those countries whose culture and civilisation have no transcendence or continuity beyond its own geography. This is to a large extent false.

This is one extreme. But parallel to this extremism there is another extremism which glorifies every aspect of India’s past and goes to the extent of describing it as ‘golden bird’ and ‘the world teacher’. It completely ignores the inner contradictions of India’s past. This parallel ideology that has sometimes been termed as 'Indo-centric’ but may better be called ‘Hindu-centric’ since it is a self-representation of an orthodoxy that calls itself Hindu, is an exclusivist attitude that would consider all foreigners and even non-Hindus, mlechhas or yavanas, a tradition that has continued from Varahamihira to the present-day Hindu revivalists.
This practice of ‘otherness’ was also extended to so-called lower castes within the community, thus restricting the definition of the Hindu to the upper castes. *Nichal, Chândâla, Pariah*, were all epithets applied to the so-called ‘lower’ castes and epithets like *Shvetamukha* and *Sitasya* were applied to those from the West. The Hinduism being floated by the revivalists strangely enough is an Orientalist construct. It turns India’s pluralistic, culture into a monolith by selectively suppressing certain texts and trends especially those of the counter-hegemonic Sramana tradition and by selectively appropriating certain others from the Vedic tradition to the Bhakti movement – a movement that had a strong subaltern, egalitarian and radical spiritual content. It not only rejects the Buddhist, Jaina and Charvaka traditions of Indian thought but undervalues other non-Brahminical forms of thought and expression. It attempts to concoct, from a mosaic of varied voices, cults and forms of belief and worship a single religion modelled on the Judaic religions with a holy book, a prophet, some basic tenets and collective forms of prayer and celebration. This macabre construct also tries to retrieve the supremacy of Sanskrit and to legitimise the varna hierarchy and invites the oppressed within religion to uplift themselves culturally by accepting the Vedic ideology and condemns to oblivion or opposition all the vital contributions made to Indian culture by other religions including Islam and Christianity.

This viewpoint also represents another form of extremism. While tracing the impact of past over the present day problems of India – particularly the three problems of national integration, federal autonomy and personality-institution dichotomy – if these are to be adequately resolved, then we must disassociate ourselves from both these forms of extremism and look into the matter with a certain academic objectivity.

5.2 The Problem of National Integration

It may be a point of inquiry that whether in ancient India there was any concept of nation and nationalism. The concepts of nation and nationalism are
considered to be the result of the material developments that took place in European history from the 17th century onwards. Therefore, to look into our ancient past to trace out the genesis of these concepts is itself a disputed issue.

Much has been said and written about the inability of Indians to unite and their lack of common patriotism. This is true to a large extent in the political sense. Indian unity is basically spiritual and cultural. This matter has been discussed and debated at length by both Indian and Western scholars and they broadly agree that the unity of India, over the ages, has been symbolised by a cultural continuity which is value-based and carries within it a unified principle of consciousness according to the nationalists. This unity has not been static amidst innumerable substrata of cultural beliefs and practices. Both its substantive structure and its underlying process have been diversified and pluralised, each flowing like small rivulets and streams in its own local and regional matrix, and undergoing its own localised convulsions. But each finally, like all rivulets and streams, merged into the great ocean of the Indian cultural tradition.

Jawaharlal Nehru posed this question in somewhat different words, “what is India?” he asked and replied, “I sought a reply to it in her past and in the present”. He elaborated:

“the early beginnings of our history filled me with wonder. It was the past of a virile and vigorous race with a questioning spirit, an urge for free enquiry and, even in its earliest known period, giving evidence of a mature and tolerant civilisation. Accepting life and its joys and burdens, it was ever searching for the ultimate and the universal. It built up a magnificent language, Sanskrit, and through this language and its art and architecture, it sent its vibrant message to far countries. It produced the Upnishadas, the Gita and the Buddha.”

The talk of the Indian nation is not just a conventional claim. Whatever objective and subjective elements may be included in different definitions of a nation, but one thing is quite clear in the present context that a nation is such a cultural community which should or may provide a sense of security to each of its members from both internal and external exploitation. A number of traditional and modern elements may be found for the national identity of a country like India. If the cultural concepts like Jambūdvipa or Bharatkhand or Hindustān of traditional literature and the political ambitions of chakravartī emperor and empire besides real political boundaries achieved by some of the great emperors of ancient and medieval periods are taken as traditional features contributing to the idea of Indian nation, then the modern democratic order and whatever efforts and exertions in the direction of social justice were taken may also be considered as a more modern contribution to the construction of this nation.

At root, Indian political thinkers considered that the country could not be united without the willing consent of the people, by imposing a kind of political or cultural straight-jacket upon them. This was a spin-off of the philosophical concept of ‘unity in diversity’ which, in turn, was an outcome of the long-ranging ontological discussions regarding the nature of Reality, and the consensus which was set out in the Upanishadas that while there was a single Reality behind all the multiplicity, this Reality or Unity could manifest itself in multiple ways. This belief led to the concept of the trinity of Brahmā, Vishnu, and Mahesh, each of which represented specific aspects of truth, yet each was complete in itself. This concept of polytheistic monism had important cultural consequences: it was not necessary to obliterate the existing religious ideas and beliefs of different peoples who were conquered by the ruling elites, but to give almost equal respect to all religious sects and beliefs.6

If we particularly look at the Mauryan polity it is clearly visible that Mauryan India was also a mixture of different religions, regions, castes and
various other identities. Though we find the ideal of chakravarti in the various Hindu as well as Buddhist texts, it was only during the Mauryan era that we observe the emergence of a pan Indian empire and realisation to a large extent of the ideal of chakravarti. The Mauryas were the first to form an empire which was extended almost throughout India. They united India politically. The diversity of this Mauryan empire was multidimensional. Thus, though India attained a sort of political unity under the rule of the Mauryas, society was tremendously diversified. If we look at the religious diversity, we find various orthodox and heterodox sects. In popular life these sects were represented as the Brahmins and the Sramanas. Brahmins were basically the followers of traditional Hinduism. They are called orthodox because they believed in the supremacy of the vedas Heterodox sects were described as the Sramanas for example the Buddhists and the Jainas. We find reference to these religious sects frequently in the inscriptions of Ashoka. Besides these three dominant sects – the Brahmins, Buddhists and Jainas – there were other small sects like the Ajivikas and Charvakas. This situation may be compared with the religious diversity of modern India where we find the existence of various religious groups like the Hindus, Muslims and so on. At times they spread a feeling of hatred against each other and the fabric of national integration is torn and damaged. For centuries the principal characteristics of Indian civilisation have been its great size, its multi-ethnic character, its diverse languages and religions, its myriad sub-cultures and social divisions, its infamous internecine conflicts which have frequently been the cause of its undoing in a word it can be summed up as its diversity. United by the historical forces of Indian nationalism directed against British colonialism, this problem reappeared with the departure of the British.

Therefore, to some extent, the problems before the Mauryan state and the problems before the present Indian state have some similarity. Both these states faced the challenge of assimilation of people belonging to different religions, regions and castes into one unit. If we look at each of these challenges to national
integration it may be said that caste has frequently emerged as an impediment to both national integration and secularism, though it plays some positive role also. Besides caste, another problem for national integration is the problem of integrating the tribal regions of the country. Religious fundamentalism and communalism has been a serious threat to national integration. The linguistic configuration of India has also been unique and diversified and sometimes this linguistic diversity (when the issue is politicised) becomes a threat to national integration. Also, the country is divided into various regions having independent geographical and cultural identity. The present Indian state responded to these challenges by opting for a particular path of national integration in which the emphasis was given to protecting diversity in unity and creating unity in diversity.

If we look at Mauryan society it was also tremendously diversified. Similar to tribal diversity of modern India, we find the existence of forest folk in the Mauryan state. Various edicts of Ashoka mention semi-civilised groups like the hunters and fishermen in the bordering areas of the empire. They were still not a part of a system based on agrarian and urbanised economy. We see reference to these people in the 13th rock edict in which Ashoka warns the forest folks and asks them to obey the royal decrees otherwise the imperial army would destroy them. These people had their own lifestyle which was different from the lifestyle of Pataliputra and Magadh. Another source of diversity in the Mauryan state was the presence of a foreign population. The Mauryan empire contained a noticeable number of foreigners like the Greeks. In the North-Western part of the kingdom, the centre of this cosmopolitan Indo-Greek life, was the city of Taxila. Bordering the Greek settlements of the trans-Indus region and farther West, situated on an important highway, it acted as the meeting-ground of the two streams of Indian and Western ideas. Since it also had the official prestige of being a provincial capital and was an important commercial centre, the result was a happy situation where foreign ideas, although they did not modify Indian orthodoxy, were at least
allowed to co-exist. A fair amount of mutual understanding and respect must undoubtedly have ensued.

In the Mauryan empire there was a significant degree of regional diversity also. The Mauryan empire consisted of various regions which were culturally and geographically different from one another. These regions were divided into various provinces for administrative convenience. In Ashokan edicts we find reference to four provinces:

- North-Western province (capital Taxila)
- Western province (capital Ujjayini)
- Eastern province of Kalinga (capital Toshali)
- Southern province (capital Suvarnagiri)

According to R.C. Majumdar “it is certain, however, that in the 13th year of the reign of Ashoka, the Tamil kingdoms of Chera, Chola, Pandya and Satyaputra were independent states, and the Southern boundary of the Mauryan empire was formed approximately by a line drawn from Nellore to the mouth of Kalyanpuri river on the Western coast. But it comprised the rest of India (excluding probably Assam), in addition to modern Afghanistan and Baluchistan.” Sanskrit was the language of the elite class. During Ashoka’s time Prakrit also got prominence and it was the language of Ashoka’s court. The popular languages of the masses were Pali and other vernacular languages. The hill and forest tract of central India just to the South of the tract watered by the Ganges were unquestionably Austric and Dravidian in speech; also Bengal and Assam, Orissa; and within the Aryandom of the upper Gangetic area and the Punjab, particularly within the former, there were still large areas, or small pockets, of non-Aryan speech which were fast becoming smaller and smaller. In tracts far away from Arya-land, where Dravidian and also probably Kol (Munda) languages were spoken, the edicts were published in this Eastern official speech for example, at Dhauli and Jaugada in the Kalinga country, which was both Dravidian (old Telugu and old Kannada) and Kol in speech, and
at Siddhapur, Maski and Yerragudi where the language was equally Dravidian (old Kannada). Rhys Davids opines that it is probable, even at the time when dramas were written, that as a matter of fact everyone, in ordinary daily life spoke neither Sanskrit nor Prakrit, but simply the vernaculars.

As an attempt to provide solution to these problems, Ashoka formulated the policy of *Dhamma* which was an all inclusive policy. It contained the basic tenets of all sects but at the same time allowed the different sects to co-exist with their own belief systems. Ashoka understood *Dhamma* as consisting of good deeds, kindness, liberality, truthfulness and purity, proper behaviour towards elders and religious men, considerate conduct towards dependents and inferiors, intense self-examination, charity and compassion, tolerance and non-violence, equal justice for all and appropriate conduct at all levels of life. These virtues were common to all sects and hence might be acceptable to all. In this way *Dhamma* was a state ideology to bring unity in a diverse society.

### 5.3 The Issue of Federal Autonomy

As far as the issue of federal autonomy is concerned, we very well know that it is one of the major challenges before the present Indian state. The founding fathers of the Constitution were well aware of the diversity of Indian society. They knew that negative forms of politicisation of this diversity will lead to a greater demand for autonomy and in some cases it may lead even to separatism. Therefore, they designed a federal form of government with sufficient amount of centralisation which had the scope of being converted into a semi-unitary system according to need and circumstances. The Indian federal system, as established by the provisions of the Constitution is territorial in the sense that it sets up a dual polity with the Union government at the Centre and the State governments in the provinces, each endowed with supreme powers to be exercised in the field assigned to them respectively by the Constitution. But at the same time the Indian federation is horizontal with a strong unitary bias. It implies that though there is
the division of powers between the Central and State governments, the position of
the former is stronger, perhaps the strongest, if we compare our federal system
with other federal systems in the world. In the previous chapter we have already
discussed the federal and unitary features of our Constitution. Thus, the present
Indian polity is facing the dual pressures of a need for greater decentralisation as
well as strong tendencies towards centralisation. To make an adjustment between
these two competing trends, the polity has acquired a dynamic which is less
theoretically and more pragmatically driven.

If we scrutinise the history of ancient India, we see similar forces of
centralisation and decentralisation or unity and diversity co-existing and
interacting. Looking at the political aspect of the situation in ancient India the
kingdom was generally the portion of the region on which a rājā ruled. These
were small areas and there was one chakravartī rājā, who was paid annual
tributes by the smaller rājās and in turn the chakravartī rājā provided protection
from any aggression to the small rājās or vassals under him. To establish his
suzerainty over the vassals, the chakravartī rājā used to perform Aswamedha
yajña in which the vassal rājās paid their tributes in recognition of his overall
lordship over them. Otherwise these rājās were autonomous within their regions.
The invasion of one rājā over the other was generally not for the purpose of
annexing the rājya but to take presents and return the rājya to him to be ruled as a
vassal state under the suzerainty of the conqueror. In this way although there were
small kingdoms yet they were under the suzerainty of an overall chakravartī
rājā.¹⁰

The Indian concept of unity in diversity also had a bearing on the evolution
of India’s political system and world view. The concept implied that while it was
desirable to have a single head of the Indian polity, he should not try to obliterate,
or remove by annexation the rulers of various principalities comprising the polity.
Thus, the polity presided over by a chakravartī ruler was, in essence, a loose
federation. At a second level, such a ruler was also not supposed to interfere with the working of the village communities. Not only the village communities, even other groups, communities and castes were to be left free to follow their own laws.¹¹

The ontological basis of the Indian state as it emerged during the national movement after independence, and its world view, can be traced to the Indian concepts of cultural pluralism, unity in diversity, non-sectarianism, Kautilya’s concept of realpolitik and the somewhat naive idea of the world as a family. These, in turn, were strongly influenced by the Benthamite concept of utilitarianism and the British praxis of liberal democracy and rule of law. The nationalist movement consciously tried to bring about integration between the two. They proudly proclaimed the Indian ethos of accepting anything useful coming from outside, without being swept off their feet, and the Indian tradition of changing with the times or Yugas. In the process they often ignored or papered over the contradictions in the two approaches, their attempt being to bring together all elements, both domestic and foreign, irrespective of their divergent viewpoints and interests. This was the basis of many conflicts and contradictions which came to the surface later on, especially after independence – one of them being the issue of federal autonomy.

A loosely centralised polity remains the basis of Indian thinking and is reflected in the present Indian Constitution. However, the Kautilyan concept of world order has not been based on morality, but on careful calculation of power and of using force, peace, conciliation, and division as means of realpolitik. Thus, pluralism deeply coloured Indian thinking in the field of religion and politics, and had a definite impact on their concept of state and world order. These concepts were modified and adapted in the medieval period, which, in turn, had their own impact on Indian notions of state and foreign policy in modern times.
If we look at the Mauryan state in particular, there also we find both the forces of integration and disintegration operating together. The Mauryan state was definitely centralised at the core, but the peripheral areas enjoyed a sufficient amount of autonomy. The empire was divided into provinces and the rulers of the provinces had enough autonomy though the broader policy framework was decided by the Central government. The provincial rulers accepted the sovereignty of the emperor ruling at the Centre. There were officers like Samāhartā (the chief revenue assessor and collector) who controlled the overall revenue collection of the empire. This suggests that the higher officers came from the metropolitan state or the core regions. But the actual collectors at the level of village and town might have been local appointees. In the peripheral areas some of these were likely to have been clan chiefs. On the basis of this Romila Thapar concludes that:

“if such a system prevailed there would be a greater uniformity of administration at the upper levels and the local administration would be more decentralised. The administrative organisation when seen from the upper levels would suggest a centralised uniform administration geared to the requirements and functions of the metropolitan. But when seen from the lower levels it would be far less uniform.”

Hence we cannot think of a uniform pattern of centralisation or decentralisation throughout the Mauryan empire. Relations between the metropolitan state and each area varied. The primary interest of the metropolitan was dominance and exploitation which took place primarily in the form of revenue collection and appropriation of resources. If the resources could be easily tapped without too much interference with the existing channels then the areas would be left relatively untampered with. The other areas were economically restructured in such a manner that the appropriation of the resources could take
place smoothly. One may say that the need of appropriation of surplus shaped the nature of the imperial control in different regimes.

Gerrard Fussman also points out that due to topographical factors communication was very difficult in ancient India. It was much slower during the monsoons. Therefore, Central government was not in a position to always effectively force the provinces to act according to its own will. We also find the reference of revolt by the provincial governors against the Central rule and sometimes it resulted in the decentralisation or even complete autonomy from the Centre. Due to a vast distance between Pataliputra, the capital city and the remote bordering areas and at the same time underdeveloped means of communication, it was very difficult for the Central government to exercise full and effective control over the provinces. Thus, one must a priori assume the existence of local representatives of the king, who had at their disposal a large amount of power.\textsuperscript{13}

Pointing to the vastness of the Mauryan empire, Fussman emphasises the material impossibility of having the orders of the emperor carried out everywhere in the empire. Therefore, Buddhist legends report that towards the end of his life, Ashoka could no longer ensure obedience. The fact that during the Mauryan period issuance of currency was not the monopoly of the emperor as the Mauryan currency consisted of both the government coins and the coins issued by provinces, towns or even private banks indicates that the degree of centralisation of the Mauryan empire is often overrated.

On the basis of Megasthenes’s reporting, Fussman says that there were tribal populations which accepted the main rules of the empire but they were autonomous in their internal governance. These tribes existed before the constitution of the Mauryan empire; they continued to exist even after its dissolution. In all appearances, they continued to govern themselves according to their own customs, even when they were under the authority of the Mauryan sovereign.
Thus, one may conclude that the Mauryan state was a type of state containing both the elements of centralisation and decentralisation. Though from outside it seemed to be a centralised polity but its internal dynamics allowed the provinces to act autonomously at various levels. At this juncture the Mauryan state may be compared with the modern Indian state which has both the features of centralisation and decentralisation. It has been constructed in a unique manner which makes it a federal polity but the internal dynamics allows the forces of centralisation to act and operate in various ways.

5.4 The Issue of Personality-Institution Dichotomy

Development of personalised politics has been one of the most interesting developments of modern Indian politics. The genesis of this trend can be traced back to the colonial history of India itself. Most of the countries of Asia and Africa have been the victims of colonialism. In due course anti-imperialist nationalist movements started in these countries including India and usually a particular party led this movement. The role of this one party in the national movement was so intense and extensive that the national movement itself was invariably identified with the party. In other words the party and the movement merged into each other and it became difficult to separate the party from the movement. As a result of this the era after independence was often characterised by the dominance of a single party in politics. In India it can be seen in the form of emergence of what is generally described as the Congress system. Thus the party and its Central leadership got overwhelming support. The party leader's own personality and the legacy of the national movement helped him to directly address the masses and ignore the institutions like political party which generally function as the via-media between the leader and the masses. This ultimately resulted in the decline of institutions.

If we revisit the Mauryan polity we find a similar trend of development of personality politics particularly during the reign of Ashoka. By formulating the
policy of *Dhamma* Ashoka tried to establish a patrimonial relationship with his subjects. He declared that ‘all men are my children’. He was available for his subjects even at his private residence. If we look at the inscriptions of Ashoka, it becomes quite obvious that the emperor most of the time tried to directly address the people through his edicts. All his declarations were the declarations of an emperor who wanted to make direct contact with his subjects. The widespread presence of his inscriptions suggests that they were spread throughout the empire from North to South. Thus even at those remote places where he could not interact with his subjects directly and frequently, he tried to do this through his inscriptions. At every important occasion and social gathering these inscriptions were read out to the public. In this way he sidelined the mediating links and institutions which came between him and his subjects. This system might have positive implications from the perspective of making the administration sensitive to the needs of the people but in the long run it resulted in the weakness of the institutions. Personality of the monarch became so dense and influential that it overshadowed institutions. In his edicts Ashoka used the title *devānāmpiya* meaning beloved of the Gods. This declaration of the monarch being the representative and grace holder of God also helped to intensify the importance of the personality of the ruler over that of the institutions. Thus, we find noticeable similarities between the Mauryan state and the present Indian state.

This policy could work successfully during the reign of an able and influential emperor like Ashoka. But if the monarch was not able and influential, the same policy might lead to dangerous consequences. The ultimate strength of any state or system depends finally on the institutions which continuously carry out the responsibilities of administration and rule. But if the institutions are not well established and strong the system may collapse. Looking at the Mauryan empire one may clearly see that the empire worked successfully while Ashoka, the ablest of all the Mauryas, remained at the helm of affairs. But the successors of Ashoka did not possess that personal authority or charisma. Hence in the era of
weak successors finally the empire collapsed because it lacked the necessary institutions strong enough to sustain it.

5.5 Conclusion

The question now arises of whether and to what extent we should look into our past for solutions to our present day problems? On the basis of a thorough analysis of past and present day problems one may find some similarities. But on the basis of a few similarities it would be too much to conclude that the past can be seriously mined for extracting solutions to present day problems though we cannot ignore the past completely. For example, we find some similarity between the Mauryan polity and the present Indian polity as both of them contain the elements of both centralisation and decentralisation. But on the basis of this similarity it would be unjust to declare that the ancient Indians had the knowledge of a federal system and had practised it much earlier before the modern world came to know of it. Federalism is a modern concept based on the contractual division of powers between the Centre and the States. It presupposes the existence of a written Constitution. We cannot say evidently that in ancient India any similar notion of constitutional government existed though some references to something similar might be seen. Therefore, the past has its utility but it cannot be repeated as it is. It has to be interpreted in the light of the present. Slogans like “Back to Vedas” may raise emotions high but a rational and logical inquiry into our past and history will ask us not to give much importance to it as a source of solutions to our present day problems. Instead, what is needed is to “rediscover” India by identifying its cultural roots, and familiarise ourselves with our tradition in this modern technological age.

No nation can maintain its greatness by disowning its roots and legacies. At the same time, it is necessary to know what exactly constitutes the Indian psyche. For, over a period of time, several distortions have crept into what is called “Indian tradition”. It has to be realised that the “tradition” is more than
religion. It represents the sum total of varied cultural milieus giving rise to a more composite culture and a more integrated and unifying social ethos.

While modernising influences are undoubtedly changing many aspects of Indian society and culture, they have not destroyed its basic structure and pattern. They have given Indians some new alternatives and some new choices of life style but the structure is so flexible and rich that many Indians have accepted many modern innovations without loss of their ‘Indianness’. They have, in other words, been able to combine choices which affirm some aspects of their cultural tradition with newer accretions.

Hence to save ourselves from the danger of those emotive slogans even more comprehensive and rational analysis of the facts of history is desired because there is always a possibility of coming out with one-sided explanations in a bid to counter the above-mentioned narrow and one-sided explanations. Real history demands knowing and understanding both positive and negative aspects of the past. Hence, it will be necessary to search for other major causes of the iniquities of Indian society than indulging the widespread view of assigning all or most blame for this to the rule of Islamic kings and Britishers. It is as important to hold other factors responsible for this considering that most of the regions or states still remained in the hands of Hindu or non-Islamic rulers for most of the time even during the empires headed by rulers of Islamic faith, and that it was mostly Hindu officers and staff which ran the revenue administration even in the lands under the control of Islamic kings. Seldom did they (the Islamic rulers) try or wish to change or disturb the Hindu way of life or rituals, perhaps, because they could carry on their rule more smoothly without initiating any such disturbances. Any reform in Hindu or Islamic society was hardly welcomed by them. If there are instances of demolition of temples and the forceful conversion of the members or families of ruling Rajputas and others to the Islamic faith by some Islamic sultans, subedars or barbarous invaders giving some Hindus of the
present a feeling of defeat and dishonour then it is even more important to note that the majority of Indian Muslims came from voluntary conversion of many a downtrodden and socially divorced artisan and lowly castes and classes of Hindus.

A.L. Basham also puts two faces of Indian history in these words:

“at most periods of her history India, though a cultural unit, has been torn by internecine war. In statecraft her rulers were cunning and unscrupulous. Famine, flood and plague visited her from time to time, and killed millions of her people. Inequalities of birth were given religious sanction, and the lot of the humble was generally hard. Yet our overall impression is that in no other part of the ancient world were the relations of man and man, and of man and the state so fair and humane.”

Many would contend that the cultural identity of a nation is set in popular beliefs, notions and traditions and there is hardly any need of scrutinising the general notions and beliefs of people about their past in the name of uncovering a truer, more accurate history. For it would be enough to enlighten them to the common goal of building a new stronger and more developed nation! Of course, there is no question of disturbing popular beliefs unnecessarily, at least not those beliefs and great traditions which are representative of spiritual and humanist values developed and accepted in the long course of Indian history. But there are needed interventions. In the making of the modern Indian nation it is imperative to reconsider whether or not this is at all possible without a scientific approach to grasping real history! There are bound to be different concepts of what constitutes the Indian nation and its future trajectory given that there are different histories arising from different traditions and the popular lores of various religious and regional communities. If this were all then the only common vision about the nation as a collective unit remains nothing more than understanding modern India as a country freed from British rule and that there can be no other way of preservation and promotion of the present nation than to go
on preserving and promoting such economic and administrative institutions, techniques and systems which have been evolved in Western nations and which owe the concept of the modern nation-state to the same Western world. This would blur our understanding of the real causes and nature of colonialism, imperialism and material dissimilarities and would trap many into supporting or following the system of imperialist exploitation which would be so dangerous to the survival of the nation itself. For example, if all the so called Hindu communities think about Indian history before the advent of the Turkish/Mughal empire in India in terms of a history of ‘Hindu nation’ and would assume all their present 'Hindu traditions' as ever existing and continuous, then it would be difficult for them to reconcile with a culture of secularism and co-existence.

The past does not carry explicit lessons for the present. Though the past gives some principles to illuminate the present it cannot be used as a foundation for the present. Therefore, the Mauryan state cannot be more than a limited source of lessons for the present Indian state though it has some similarities with it. They differ in fundamental ways. The Mauryas had established an empire whereas the present Indian state is a nation state. Nation state and empire differ in various ways and therefore what was applicable and suitable to the Mauryan empire may not be applicable and suitable to the present Indian state.

An empire is heterogeneous. The heterogeneity of an empire is more distinct and specific than that of a nation state. An empire consists of people of different religions, ethnicities, languages, customs and traditions. There is the absence of “we feeling” in an empire which is the subjective basis of a nationhood. As a consequence of this an empire needs a state ideology which could keep the diverse elements united. The role of state ideology is more important in an empire then it is in a nation state. The Mauryas had established a diverse empire and in such an empire a state ideology in the form of Dhamma policy could be highly useful. But since the present Indian state is a nation state
therefore it is already substantially based on a subjective feeling of a common past and common destiny among its citizens. Though the present Indian state contains significant diversity this research suggests that a state ideology might not be as useful in the present Indian state as it was in the Mauryan empire.

A very significant difference between an empire and a nation state is that the frontiers of an empire are not clearly defined and demarcated whereas the borders of a nation state are clearly defined and demarcated. Territorial sovereignty is a very important feature of a nation state. Therefore, the strategies used by an empire for political unification are generally different from the strategies used by a modern nation state. In this respect also we cannot replicate our past.

The main purpose of an empire is appropriation of surplus from by the core areas from peripheral areas. Economic exploitation of the periphery by the core is the central feature of an empire. For extraction of surplus from different types of peripheral areas, different strategies are used. But this is not the main purpose behind the formation of a modern nation state. Generally, the balanced development of the different constituting units is a constitutional goal in modern nation states. In the Indian context this again suggests that we cannot look at the Mauryan empire for effective solutions to our present day problems.

Another important aspect of the modern Indian state is that being a democratic state, the forces of mass mobilisation are more active here. Mass activity is a very important feature of modern political life. But in an ancient empire like the Mauryan empire this mass politics was absent or insignificant. Since the Mauryan political system was a monarchical system notions like popular will and popular sovereignty did not form part of political context in such a system. The present Indian state however accepts the notions of popular will and popular sovereignty.

If the past does not have explicit lessons for the present then what is the utility of past? Is it completely anachronistic? It would be unworthy to reject the past
completely. Though the past does not have explicit lessons for the present it nevertheless does hold some implicit lessons. There is a certain continuity of the past in the present which we describe as our tradition. If this is true then in what sense will our past, particularly the study of the Mauryan state be useful to our present?

First of all, we need recourse to the past to understand some current debates going on in political philosophy and statecraft. For example, what is modernity? Does modernity mean complete detachment from our past or is it an extension of the past. This can be answered in a better way if we are familiar with our past and with what is meant by tradition, now presumably superseded or reshaped in various ways by the advent of modernity. In the Indian context one can say that today there are various debates going on about the concepts of nation, nationalism, national integration, etc. Some people talk of a nation based on composite culture whereas some others formulate the theory of cultural nationalism taking only a particular religion (Hinduism) as the foundation of our nation. But our study of the Mauryan empire suggests that religion cannot be the only basis for an all inclusive and therefore more widely acceptable concept of nationhood. Long ago, Ashoka had understood this and formulated the policy of *Dhamma* comprising the moral principles of various diverse faiths and beliefs.

Our past also tells us that in a plural society persuasive means of control are more effective than the use of force. Therefore, instead of adopting a policy of blood and iron to create unity in diversity, a state should try to build an overarching consensus among the different thought patterns and ways of living. More than 2200 years ago Ashoka had known and practiced this. When he was at the peak of his military glory and was able to establish control over India as well as neighboring foreign kingdoms through military conquest, he left the policy of *Yuddhavijaya* in favour of *Dhammavijaya*. The paternalistic attitude of the Mauryan rulers and their commitment to public welfare reminds us that the purpose of statecraft should not be personal gain but public welfare.
In the era of globalisation the study of the Mauryan empire is helpful in understanding and balancing the claims of local autonomy and national sovereignty. The Mauryas had formed an empire which was sufficiently diversified and in such a system there were various areas which demanded and sometimes struggled for autonomy. The state system had to respond to these demands so that the empire could be kept intact. Various means like a huge military set up, a well organised bureaucratic structure, a system of espionage, a system of provincial and village administration were evolved to curb such demands if they threatened separatism.

Today also we see the forces of federalisation operating in various ways resulting in a greater demand for autonomy and even separatism in various parts of world including in India. Globalisation has led to the emergence of a new pattern of federal autonomy. Now under the influence of the market mode of development provincial governments are able to catch and utilise the opportunities of global market system. On the one hand they are successful in inviting global capital into their territories and expanding their financial base; on the other hand they are more in touch with international happenings. As a result of this we find a renewed demand for state autonomy which in some cases take the form of separatism like in the North Eastern states of India and Jammu and Kashmir.

At international level also globalisation has encouraged the demand for more and more autonomy by the constituent units of nation states. Globalisation strengthens two contradictory trends – global and local. On the one hand it brings global consciousness but at the same time it strengthens local identities too. “Think globally act locally” has been the slogan of globalisation. The serious challenge of globalisation today is how to produce an overarching sovereignty which does not go against local identities rather it recognises and strengthens them. Those states which could not successfully respond to the challenges of globalisation collapsed. The disintegration of the USSR and Yugoslavia are
examples. India being a plural society cannot ignore these recent trends. At this juncture the study of the functioning of an ancient empire like the Mauryan empire may be useful for India because the Mauryas had also faced the problem of balancing local identities with universal sovereignty and had responded to it in a distinctive manner.

What is now required is not a rewriting of Indian history but a widening of its scope and dimension by correcting and supplementing facts. Also, there is need for a closer examination of all facets of Indian history beyond the existing chronological account of Kings and dynasties. It would do us a lot of good if history were to tell us objectively the life and problems of the common people – their hopes, struggles and sufferings.

History rarely repeats itself among historically conscious people. And as a vibrant democracy, India cannot afford to repeat mistakes of the past. It is for historians to have a look into the past and objectively draw relevant inferences from Indian history. What the nation needs badly is to learn from the present in the light of the past as well as to learn from the past in the light of the present. History is the source of inspiration as well as the source of warnings.

Today there is need in India for making a progressive democracy and all inclusive nationalism the dominant common sense among citizens. All nationalisms must necessarily interpret the past. In this interpretation many things may be invented but not everything. Highlighting those features that by contemporary standards we feel to be democratic and just can only strengthen our efforts to construct a stable and humane nationalist imagining. In this sense nationalism is always an ongoing political project, never only an inheritance even, as it does trace a necessarily selective continuity with that past. That selection must be based both on the facts of the past and the values of the present. Therefore, be grateful that the Mauryan empire has many features that can still be admired today.
REFERENCES


