

Neglect of knowledge traditions



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The Indian History Congress (IHC) recently held at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi passed a unanimous resolution condemning “historical distortions” promoted by the ruling party at the Centre or its associates. Several articles that appeared online and in the print media (for instance, *The Hindu* of December 31) have reported criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s recent mention of Ganesha’s head transplant as proof of advanced surgical expertise in ancient India.

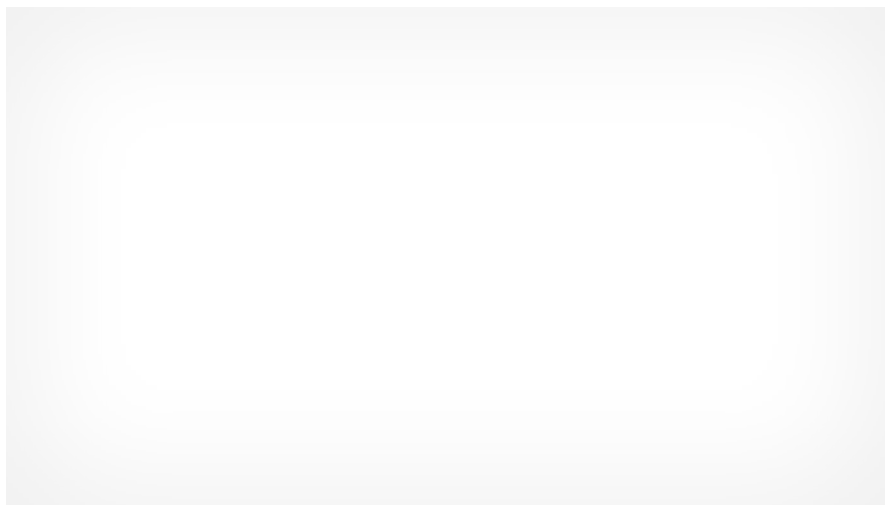
It is hard to decide whether Mr. Modi expected his listeners to take his pronouncement literally or as a metaphor, but it remains true that a number of publications and websites abound in grotesque claims: ancient Indians manufactured advanced aircraft, while Vedic rishis went about in automobiles and knew all about the heliocentric system, nuclear weapons and the Theory of Relativity.

But is our job done when we have righteously condemned such childish daydreaming and conflated all “historical distortions” with it? I take the view that the kind of historiography that the authors of the IHC resolution represent is,

partly at least, responsible for this situation. Most mainstream history books on classical India, such as D.N. Jha's *Ancient India* (revised edition 1998) or Romila Thapar's *Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (2003), are almost completely silent on Indian scientific achievements. Professor Jha does briefly mention Aryabhata (whom he has clearly not read, as all his statements about him are factually wrong) and Varahamihira, but not once Brahmagupta or Bhaskaracharya, classical India's finest mathematicians, or their many peers from Bhaskara I to Sridhara, Mahavira or Narayana Pandita. Curiously, Professor Thapar also limits her discussion of Indian science to a couple of paragraphs on Aryabhata and Varahamihira, conveying little of the former's real breakthroughs.

Examples could easily be multiplied. A recent exception is Upinder Singh's *History of Ancient and Early Medieval India* (2009), which devotes over five pages to a more substantial treatment of scientific and medical advances, including Sushruta's surgical techniques to reconstruct a severed nose or ear lobe and remove a cataract or bladder stones – admittedly better examples of surgical skills than Ganesha's head transplant. That is indeed the whole point: if our history books did justice to genuine, well-documented and well-studied scientific and technological accomplishments, there would be no room left for the fantasiers. And it is not just mathematics, astronomy or medicine that have been blanked out by mainstream Indian historiography: chemistry, metallurgy, agricultural and veterinary science, water management and irrigation techniques, textile manufacture and dyeing, construction and transport technologies, perfumery and cosmetics, numerous crafts, and a few intriguing technologies from ice-making to weather prediction and water divining, are all equally worthy of study. They are part of India's considerable heritage of indigenous knowledge systems, beside an equally extensive intellectual field ranging from grammar, prosody, philosophy and logic to literature, plastic and performing arts.

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Any study of classical Egypt, Greece or China would naturally include accomplishments in all those fields, so why are most of our Indian historians so shy of dealing with them? I believe plain ignorance of India's traditional knowledge systems is one factor; this attitude is largely a subconscious relic of the colonial era, which had decreed that India's literatures were vehicles of superstition rather than of any genuine knowledge. As a result, most scholars prefer to confine themselves to an overview of literature and the arts. Yet scientific and technological advances are of equal importance; ironically, we owe the first studies of them to a few fine European scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as Jean-Sylvain Bailly, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, G. Thibaut or Léon Rodet.

Indian scholars followed with major contributions, but Independent India did little to promote the field: no Indian university has a department of history of science. Search the Internet for a substantial resource on past Indian mathematicians and you will soon reach the website of Scotland's University of St. Andrews. Indeed, scholars from the U.S., France, Japan or New Zealand have in recent years contributed important studies to the field. On the other hand, most of their Indian colleagues – thankfully there have been quite a few and of a very high order – have worked with little or no institutional support. It is hard to understand why our educational system and intellectual circles have failed to realise the importance of history of science as a full-fledged academic discipline. And a very enriching one, too, for it deals not just with the evolution of scientific ideas but with the interface between many civilisations and cultures.

This lacuna is what needs to be addressed. The historians behind the recent IHC petition should realise that some of the blame for the distortions they object to lies at their own door. Their resolution is titled "In Defence of Scientific Method in History," but what is "scientific" about suppressing the genuine achievements of Indian science? If our students had substantial exposure to them, they would feel no need to let their imagination run wild.

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