



Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History

Romila Thapar

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In 1026, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni raided the Hindu temple of Somanatha (Somnath in textbooks of the colonial period). The story of the raid has reverberated in Indian history, but largely during the raj. It was first depicted as a trauma for the Hindu population not in India, but in the House of Commons. The triumphalist accounts of the event in Turko-Persian chronicles became the main source for most eighteenth-century historians. It suited everyone and helped the British to divide and rule a multi-millioned subcontinent.

In her new book, Romila Thapar, the doyenne of Indian historians, reconstructs what took place by studying other sources, including local Sanskrit inscriptions, biographies of kings and merchants of the period, court epics and popular narratives that have survived. The result is astounding and undermines the traditional version of what took place. These findings also contest the current Hindu religious nationalism that constantly utilises the conventional version of this history.

Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History Details

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Bijo Philip says

Prose is Romila Thapar like; what else one can say? Her style of trying to be empirical and staying away from popular historical myths makes reading her at time excruciating. But she always has a counter point that one can ruminate on.

Now I'm left to wonder if Mahmoud of Ghazni is not that big a villain as he is made out to be in the popular history of India. But why would British, merchants and tyrants, contrive to vilify some one of that distant past. Their gains are difficult to fathom.

Yes her views set you thinking...

Vinil Paul says

great ...

Richa Kedia says

The book is very relevant in the world today when the debate of religious intolerance is of growing concern. Romila Thapar has brilliantly summarized the description of the same event: the raid of Somanath Temple in 1026 AD by Mahmud of Ghazni by various sources at various eras and how each source molded the description of the event to suit its own political agenda and the manipulation and molding continues even today, 2000 years after. Many people have reviewed the book as a slow read but I had finished the book in about 2 days, maybe because I was reading for a book discussion but also because I found the book very interesting and also amusing. It is particularly amusing when British colonialists invent the part about the "Somnatha gates" and everyone believes the same without reading any other account of the event and Ranjit Singh demands the gates without even knowing the gates under discussion are for which temple. After reading the book I understand Satanic Verses better and now will also reread Moonstone by Wilkie Collins as I now know that plot as well, thanks to this book. Would strongly recommend it to anyone who is interested in history.

Aamir Riaz says

its called a research

Nishant Bhagat says

This book is specifically for people interested in reading history. The author puts the facts in front of you from various texts dated around the time the events occur and then it is left to your intellect to believe what happened.

Brilliantly written bereft of any emotional pleas. completely factual.

Vikas Lather says

It is an incredible book about different voices from history. Romila Thapar has the talent without which the liberal ideas would have been less ventilated in Indian sub continent.

I would regards this attempt to explain complex relationship of politics, religion and history as one of the most intelligent and brave cultural effort

Tariq Mahmood says

Once upon a time there were no Hindus and Muslims in India but a rich and diverse culture with Turks, Persians, Arabs, Jains & Shivas. There was a temple in Somanatha dedicated to Shiva which was never actually destroyed by the Mahmud Ghazni, never once let alone seventeen times. The whole story is apocryphal, concatenated by the Colonists to foster their own take on history which was a pretty straight forward story, Muslims terrorised Hindus for centuries, forcibly converting them and destroying their temples, thus instilling a great hatred for their Muslim masters. The British finally came to the rescue of the pliant and slavish Hindu and saved them from the Muslim tyranny, thus Hindus should be thankful to their new masters. The author states that even after independence, modern historians have chosen to pick pieces from the British history without questioning its authenticity. The author has painstakingly researched Jain and other contemporary narratives and decided that the whole story was an probably a very elaborate hoax!! Wow.

The Book Outline says

Somnatha – The Many voices of a history is a detailed research work by Romila Thapar with an attempt to weave these numerous voices using a comparative outlook of an unbiased researcher to reconstruct the history of Somnatha and to place each narrative, often resembling fantasy, in their own historical contexts. Romila Thapar narrates and analyzes these accounts dividing the book in unequal distinct sections. The Turko Persian narratives typically resembles the conquerer's voice of telling the history while the Sanskrit sources focus on activities related to the Somnatha in the later period. Romila Thapar present both and also an alternative Jain perspective of the situation.

You may read the complete review on my blog
<http://thebookoutline.blogspot.in/201...>

Sudhir says

its researched all right!! What else does one expect from a historian of this stature!! However, it sets up a narrative of acceptance & doubt of the popular versions of this history- with a discernible slant of a secularist ideology & than goes about proving it tenaciously- almost flogging the hypothesis!! Not a very interesting reading- relying on the reader to be rather well informed!!

Again, however, its a great research work!!

Maitrey says

It was an incredibly slow book to read, but at the end of the day it feels like it was worth it.

Romila Thapar has undertaken a painstaking trawl through various sources which talk about the Somanatha Temple in southern Gujarat. The temple shot to limelight in recent history when it became a centre-piece (and excuse) for a struggle in the late 19th Century between British India and Afghanistan according to Thapar. Popular history in India suggests that Somanatha was desecrated and its idol destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1026 CE. While the actual event's occurrence has never been questioned by anybody, its importance and centrality to later events has been critically re-looked at by Thapar.

She does this masterfully. Thapar methodically tackles various sources from different viewpoints. She starts out with the traditional Turko-Persian narratives and proves that they are not as monolithic or clear-cut as they are made out to be. It is undeniable that they are the only sources we have that deal with the event first-hand. The very first chronicles especially those from near-contemporaries such as Firdausi or Al-Beruni treat the raid on the Somanatha as the one of the many temple-raids carried out by Mahmud in South Asia. It is the later ones which worry Thapar as somewhat indulging hyperbole (such as the improbably booty or number of people killed) if not out-right fantasy (the idol being suspended by magnets). Thapar points out glaring contradictions such as the uncertainty on whether the idol was a lingam or man-shaped or even female (!) (some chronicles insist that Somanatha is actually Manat, a pre-Islamic Arab goddess). If one takes all these Turkish chronicles at face value (as so many have) the temple was regularly destroyed/converted to a mosque every half a century, something which other sources or archaeological records do not support. Thapar finally concludes that these sources should be analysed again and evaluated as to their trustworthiness by juxtaposing with the other material we have.

Another oft-neglected body of material are the Sanskrit inscriptions we have around the region. Colonial historiography has always neglected these records along with Jaina and Rajput bardic and epic tales under perfidious excuses such as the "Hindus having no sense of history". What little records we do have present a fascinating account of South Gujarat in the 11th Century CE. Thapar spends quite a bit of time on particular inscription signed by many of the Somanatha elite which allowed an Arab Muslim trader to setup a mosque in the vicinity of Somanatha. This throws up fascinating questions such as the relations between Hindus and Muslims in this region. She somewhat concludes that Gujarat was not divided along the clear-cut religious lines and there was a complex relationship between various groups such as the Shaiva and Jaina priests and Arab, Jaina and Bohra (a Muslim group native to southern Gujarat) trader communities. Another interesting inscription is by a Goan Kadamba king who undertakes a religious pilgrimage to Somanatha only fifty years after Mahmud's raid but makes no mention whatsoever of the raid but rather talks about how rich the

surrounding area is.

The so-called "Hindu epics of resistance" from the 14th Century onwards are also discussed. While Thapar agrees that their actual historical content is very limited, they make for good lenses with which we can observe social mores during this period. She also categorically dismisses the label "Hindu" and thinks Rajput would be better suited as all of them deal with court intrigues between Rajput kings in Western India and their occasional tussles with Turks based around Delhi. Some of these epics even have vignettes featuring Muslim Mongols who fight with the Hindu Rajputs against Muslim Turks or even one where a Brahmin leads a Turk army into Somanatha against its Hindu rulers as revenge for a slight!

One section deals aptly titled "The Perceptions of Yet Others" has details of how Mahmud was viewed by the later Sufis and other Hindu/Muslim/mixed cults. The mere fact that these labels are very hard to apply is repeatedly highlighted by Thapar. In some cults Mahmud has been transformed into a holy warrior ascetic who bows down before the piety of a local pir (saint) before carrying out his attack on Somanatha. Another famous cultic figure called Ghazi Miyan has transformed over time from Mahmud's son to his nephew to an unrelated personality who watches over his devotees first with the sword then later on, just with his holy powers of piety and asceticism. These cults and groups maybe only locally important but the mere fact they have alternate stories to tell in a world increasingly seen as divided along only Hindu-Muslim lines is an important message to be carried away.

The concluding section deals with the Colonialist and Nationalist histories of the event which is the one that has most impacted modern Indians (and Pakistanis). While colonialist interpretations were the first to state that the raid was the one "which traumatized the entire Hindu-nation", later nationalist histories (especially fundamentalist Hindu and Muslim ones) exploited this event to their advantages once it was clear they would be big players in independent South Asia. Thapar questions the claims of many fundamentalist Hindu historians such as Munshi that Somanatha was raided 17 times which glaringly contradicts present archaeological evidence.

The last chapter makes a wonderful conclusion and explores ideas about how memories, actually constructed and competing memories influence the writing of history. It serves as a recap of the whole book.

Overall although the book was small it was extremely dense and slow to read. Thapar has an annoying habit of hammering certain facts over and over again (these are undeniably important, but they grate after a while). Also, the book is not something I'd recommend to a somebody not used to reading a lot of history as Thapar hedges so much. The book's purpose is obviously not a revision of Somanatha's history, rather a message that one shouldn't be drawn to simplistic versions peddled by so many historians. The sources are not perfect, whether Turkish, Jaina or folk but one can still learn and write good history if all these are juxtaposed and analysed fairly. This book makes for revelatory reading and recommended to readers who want to hear sane voices in an increasingly polarizing world.

Romi Mahajan says

One must always revisit the "truths" of the past since they all have political motivations- in India this is true especially for all "facts" that are adduced in favor of the current Hindu right agenda.

Mian Faizan says

Pretty damn good

J. Ramki says

Author could have concluded that therez no such temple called Somnath ;-)
