

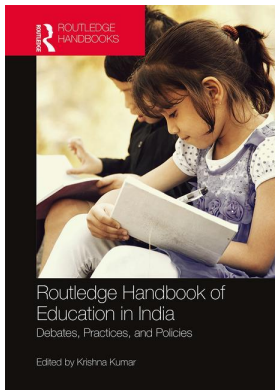
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The uses and teaching of history

Kumkum Roy

History occupies a rather unique space within the urban, literate, upper-caste/middle-class imagination in India at present. On the one hand, it is considered crucial for the formation and consolidation of identities, including a highly contested national identity; on the other hand, the actual pursuit of the study of history is viewed with an odd mixture of suspicion, disdain, and condescension. This is evident if one glances through the career guidance supplements of the daily newspapers, which typically list dozens of options such as becoming lawyers, managers, entering the hospitality and health ‘industry’, or making careers in interior design, the omnipresent information technology sector, fashion, the media, and tourism, to name a few. But the option of becoming a historian is virtually invisible.

Although impressionistic, conversations with those who have had systematic access to formal education, almost invariably middle class or aspiring to middle-class status, suggest that SST (the popular acronym for social studies) is low on the priority list of most students and parents. Within that schema, history often slips even further down the hierarchy of the social sciences, as it is perceived as irrelevant – about the past in a world that is hurtling towards the future at a breakneck pace. And yet, it remains critical for identity formation, for what a teacher described, with remarkable brevity and precision, in Hindi, as learning about ‘*acche acche cheezein*’, literally, ‘the good things’.

To cite just one example: most educated laypersons, when asked whether they remember anything about ancient Indian history, are likely to cite the Harappan civilisation. If pressed a little further, features like town planning, centralisation, and the drainage system constitute the core of these memories. Obviously, when smart cities are the ideal, it is reassuring to know that these had spectacular precedents in the past.

And yet, even as we acknowledge these features, archaeologists have provided us with a far more complex understanding of the Harappan civilisation, which persuades us to contextualise and problematise these ‘achievements’ (e.g. Ratnagar 2001). What prevents us from engaging with these discussions, even when they are presented in an accessible mode, shorn of academic jargon?

Part of the answer lies, I would suggest, in the training we impart in schools. This is evident if we explore the way in which material that is potentially open and creates space for critical thinking is circumscribed through the examination system and the ‘assessment’ it provides. I will

illustrate this by discussing the way in which the French Revolution has been treated in a text-book (*India and the Contemporary World vol. I* (2006: 3–24); henceforth ICW) and compare this with a book *Golden Social Science* (n.d.: A: 2–32), meant to master the same theme in order to crack the examination. I will then move on to possible alternatives.

At one level, the examples I choose may seem somewhat far removed from the questions around which heated ‘controversies’ are frequently generated. These include the Aryan question, with almost interminable debates on whether the Aryans were indigenous or not, and whether the Aryans can be regarded as the authors of the Harappan civilisation or not (for a brief discussion, see Roy 2013: 35–50). The resilience of these controversies is at once remarkable and sterile. If we are to account for their persistence beyond conspiracy theories, we may wish to turn towards ways in which history is learned. Within the present context, the focus is on formal modes of learning, which are, inevitably, only the tip of the iceberg. And yet, these provide us with an opportunity and a space to develop skills (a much abused word) of critical thinking, of acquiring a sense of the ways in which historians work, and an ability to assess different positions and arguments. How we use this space, then, becomes a challenge.

Before going on to the specifics, it may be useful to bear in mind that history itself has had a long and chequered past (e.g. Arnold 2000; Bhattacharya, n.d.: 4–38). While the relevance of history in an immediate utilitarian sense has often been called into question, historians and others have almost invariably turned to history (among other things) in order to make sense of or find meaning in the worlds they inhabit.

It is also worth clarifying that while history is based on evidence, what is considered as evidence is by no means self-evident. Over a period of time, historians have cast their net wide – to include all kinds of traces of the past – written documents, inscriptions, remains of material culture, visual archives, and oral traditions, to name a few. Many of these explorations of sources have emerged as the concerns of ordinary people have attracted attention, as the focus of history has shifted, somewhat, from grand narratives about kings and queens to the less exalted lives of the vast majority. But there are other issues as well. These include the transformative potential of history. As Arnold (2000: 13–14) observes:

And if the evidence that existed always spoke plainly, truthfully and clearly to us, not only would historians have no work to do, we would have no opportunity to argue with each other. History is above all else an *argument*. It is an argument between different historians; and, perhaps, an argument between the past and the present, an argument between what actually happened, and what is going to happen next. Arguments are important; they create the possibility of changing things.... Part of thinking about ‘history’ is to think about what – or who – history is *for* [emphases in the original].

Traces of the past can be both tantalisingly elusive as well as overwhelmingly present. By and large, histories have tended to be dominated by accounts of the powerful, who often both create and preserve written and visual records. Thus, we may find it difficult to reconstruct the histories of poor, non-literate populations. On the other hand, archives maintained by government and religious institutions, for instance, may be very carefully preserved. Sifting through and evaluating these vast quantities of data poses a different kind of challenge.

Arnold (2000: 56–57) draws attention to another set of issues as well – revolving around the professionalisation of history, traceable through the last two centuries or so. National agendas and a level of economic prosperity often constituted the context of professionalisation. Professionalisation has meant that historians are now paid for their work; it has also often widened the gulf between the historian and laypersons; and it underlies divisions among historians in terms

of specialisation and perspectives, rendering a single, omnipresent ‘true’ history impossible. This often poses a challenge to teachers and learners who long for the comfort of certitude.

With these preliminaries complete, let me now turn to the specific examples to illustrate the potentials, problems, and excitement of teaching, learning, and presenting history.

The textbook as a pedagogical tool

ICW contains several interesting preliminary statements. It was part of an endeavour to bridge the ‘gap between the school, home and community’ (*ICW* 2006: iii), and to ‘discourage rote learning’ (*ibid.*). Underlying this attempt was a more radical shift – an attempt to ‘treat children as participants in learning, not as receivers of a fixed body of knowledge’ (*ibid.*). The preliminary pages included the preamble of the Constitution of India (*ibid.*: viii), which was particularly apposite, given that the very first chapter of the book dealt with the French Revolution and discussed ideas such as liberty, equality, and fraternity, among others.

The structure of the chapter (as indeed of many of the other chapters in this book) is at once rich, complex, and challenging. I will just highlight some of the elements. In terms of running text, the chapter contains an introductory page (*ibid.*: 3). The rest of the chapter is organised as shown in Table 8.1.

The sectional and subsectional heads give us a sense of the contents and focus of the text, the connections envisaged between society, economy, and political change, and the concern with relatively marginalised groups such as women and slaves.

Apart from running text, the chapter contains 17 visuals (see Appendix 1 for details), each of which carries a caption, and many of which are accompanied by thought-provoking questions. These visuals include reproductions of prints, sketches, paintings, charts, and maps, focusing both on the spectacular as well as on the everyday. The chapter also has a box spread over two pages, discussing the symbols commonly used by artists during the period (*ibid.*: 12–13). Additionally, there are representations of Marat, Robespierre, and Olympe de Gouges (*ibid.*: 11, 16, 19, respectively).

The third structural element of the chapter consists of boxes, set in the margin, dealing with relatively unfamiliar terms and concepts, inserted close to where they occur in the text. These include, for instance, eighteenth-century French terms for taxes (*ibid.*: 4). Intended to facilitate

Table 8.1 Details of sections in chapter 1 of *India and the Contemporary World*, part 1

Sections	Subsections	Pages
French society during the late eighteenth century	The struggle to survive	
How a subsistence crisis happens		
A growing middle class envisages an end to privileges		4–7
The outbreak of revolution	France becomes a constitutional monarchy	8–13
France abolishes monarchy and becomes a republic	The Reign of Terror	
A directory rules France		14–17
Did women have a revolution?		18–20
The abolition of slavery		21
The revolution and everyday life		22
Conclusion		23–24

Source: all tables in the chapter have been compiled by the author.

reading and understanding of the text, they are particularly useful in the spatial context within which they are placed, enabling the reader to shift from the text to the margin and back.

Far more challenging, and potentially exciting, are the boxes containing activities. Apart from two activities listed at the end, there are 12 activities located within the main body of the chapter. Many of these pertain to the visuals, inviting learners to explore the material, analyse it, and form and express an opinion about what they see. Some are fairly obvious: for instance, having to explain why the peasant is compared to a fly and the nobleman to a spider (*ibid.*: 5) may not be particularly demanding for the learner. Other questions, such as those posed on the print depicting ordinary women going to Versailles, and reconstructing the attitude of the artist towards them, have space for more than one answer, and create an opportunity for discussion and debate.

Other challenging activities include those inviting the learner to compare different viewpoints – such as those of Robespierre and Desmoulin on liberty and tyranny (*ibid.*: 16) or between the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the manifesto of Olympe de Gouges (*ibid.*: 20), advocating the rights of woman. These push the learner towards contextualising categories that have often been reduced to slogans, and to appreciate the grey areas within apparently transformative historical moments. They create space for moving beyond a simple classification of the ‘event’ of the French Revolution as either good or bad. In other words, they allow for and even encourage, if not necessitate, an argument.

There is a single box titled ‘Some important dates’ (*ibid.*: 8), containing a total of six entries. While other dates are mentioned in the text, it is evident that those who developed the chapter did not wish to foreground these dates, which lend themselves very easily to rote learning.

Another set of seven boxes contains extracts from written sources, accompanied by activities/questions. These include excerpts from contemporary accounts of the pre-revolutionary situation, from the writing of the revolutionary journalist Marat, from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the views of Desmoulin and Robespierre, and those in favour of as well as against women’s rights. These convey a sense of the immediacy and intensity of the concerns and conflicts that shaped the Revolution. A single illustration of this rich material must suffice for the moment. This is from the writing of Camille Desmoulins, who opposed Robespierre. He asked:

Would it be possible to bring a single person to the scaffold without making ten more enemies amongst his relations and friends?

(ibid.: 16)

The chapter ends with a set of longer questions. As these, and other questions, are answered in the *Golden Social Science*, we will turn to it next. But before doing so, it might be useful to remind ourselves that the chapter compels us, time and again, to ask: from whose perspective are we seeing things or understanding them? In other words, it pushes us to move away from the comfort zone of mining history for ‘good things’ or achievements, to a more unsettling engagement with a complex world.

Comforting certainties: converting the chapter

The preliminary pages of the *Golden Social Science* emerge from a different but far more immediate milieu as far as the learners are concerned. The reader who can distinguish a fake from a genuine copy of the book is assured of a reward of Rs. 1000 (GSS, n.d.: ii). There are several other assurances as well:

A WORK OF WISDOM YOU SHOULD HEED THE GOLDEN GUIDES YOU SHOULD READ

The *Golden Books* contain all that is required in the examinations

The *Golden Books* are written in sweet, simple but idiomatic language.

...

The *Golden Books* contain all the Expected Questions likely to be set in the Examinations.

...

The *Golden Books* suit all the pockets and serve the triple purpose of Textbooks, Help-books and Examination Papers, just *All-in-One*.

(*ibid.*: xv, original formatting retained)

Running into 31 pages, with only a single visual (*ibid.*: A 23), the chapter is structured rather differently from that in *ICW*. Organised in seven sections, the chapter provides the reader with a relentless torrent of accurate information.

The first section, titled 'TECHNICAL TERMS' (*ibid.*: A 2–A 3), includes virtually all the words glossed along the margins of *ICW*, often adopted verbatim. The difference is that here each is a standalone term, deprived of the context in which it is used. This lends itself to being converted into a decontextualised item to be committed to memory. Given that a total of 29 terms are listed, studying the French Revolution can become an intimidating task.

The second section is titled 'NCERT TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS' (*ibid.*: A 3–A 6) and provides answers to all six questions posed at the end of the chapter in *ICW*. The largest number of questions is in the next section: 'VERY SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS' (*ibid.*: A 6–A 10). As many as 55 questions are included in this section. This is followed by 'SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS' (*ibid.*: A 10–A 15), containing 19 questions, and 'LONG ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS' (*ibid.*: A 15–A 22), with 18 questions. The next section, titled 'NCERT TEXTBOOK ACTIVITIES' (*ibid.*: A 23–A 27), is devoted to providing 'answers' to most of the activities suggested in *ICW*. Finally, 'MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS' (*ibid.*: A 27–A 32) provides 48 questions.

There are three features that are noteworthy. First, all the questions are answered, and answered accurately. So there is nothing left for the learner to do but to memorise the 'correct' answers. Second, the chapter is converted into 140 questions. If we add the ten activities and the six questions from *ICW*, we arrive at 156 answers to be learned. Third, and implicit in the above, the structure of the chapter as developed in *ICW* is dismantled, and the information provided is reassembled. This follows certain principles.

The first strategy is to arrange the questions in an order that does not correspond to that of the chapter in *ICW*. While this is obvious in all the sections, I will illustrate this from the section titled 'LONG ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS'. Consisting of 18 questions, it is at once interesting and disturbing to see how the questions zig-zag through the sequence of sections laid out in the chapter in *ICW* (Table 8.2)

If the sequencing of questions disrupts the logic of the chapter in *ICW*, the other strategy that renders the chapter skewed, if not redundant, is the weighting given to various sections. This is evident from the distribution of questions: there are five questions based on section 1, three based on section 2, one based on section 3, none on section 4, which poses and addresses the question 'Did women have a revolution?', one based on section 5, one based on section 6 and two based on the brief reference to Napoleon in one of the concluding paragraphs in the chapter in *ICW*.

It is also evident that some of the questions are repetitive. Compare, for instance, questions 1, 9, and 17, based on section 1. As such, the space devoted to them is not used to develop any fresh understanding, but simply to reiterate much of what has already been stated.

Table 8.2 Distribution of long answer type questions from *Golden Social Science*

Sequence	Question	Corresponding section in ICW
Q 1	Briefly discuss the condition of France before the French Revolution.	Section 1
Q 2	Give any five accomplishments of the National Assembly of France from 1789 to 1791.	Section 2
Q 3	Briefly discuss the role of the philosophers in the French Revolution.	Section 1
Q 4	How did the Revolution affect the everyday life of the French people? Discuss.	Section 6
Q 5	What was the impact of the events in France on Europe, especially the neighbouring countries such as Prussia, Austria-Hungary and Spain?	Section 6 [brief reference]
Q 6	<i>The teachings of Rousseau laid the foundation of democracy.</i> Give any four arguments to justify the statement.	Section 1
Q 7	What was the impact of the French Revolution on France?	Addressed in several sections
Q 8	Explain any five features of the French Constitution of 1791. Or How did the new political system of constitutional monarchy work in France? Explain.	Section 2
Q 9	Describe the social causes leading to the French Revolution. Or Explain the organization of the French society during the late 18th century.	Section 1
Q 10	Explain the achievements of Napoleon.	Conclusion [brief discussion]
Q 11	Mention any five political symbols which came up during the French Revolution and explain their significance.	Section 2
Q 12	What is the subsistence crisis? Mention any four factors responsible for this in France.	Section 1
Q 13	How did France become a Constitutional Monarchy? Why were women disappointed by the Constitution of 1791 in France?	Section 2
Q 14	Who were the Jacobins? Who was their leader? Who came to be known as <i>sans-culottes</i> ? Or Explain the role of the Jacobins in the French Revolution. Or What was the Jacobin Club? Describe their activities.	Section 3
Q 15	What is meant by the Triangular Slave Trade? How was slavery abolished in France?	Section 5
Q 16	In which year did Napoleon become Emperor of France? What did he do as a modernizer of Europe? When and where was he defeated?	Brief mention in the conclusion
Q 17	What was the financial position of France at the time of Louis XVI? In which three estates was French society divided during this period? Write one main feature of each.	Section 1
Q 18	Explain the impact of abolition of censorship in France.	Section 6

Also, and expectedly, there is an overwhelming emphasis on rote learning. While this is apparent in all the sections, it is most striking in the section on 'MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS'. Here, as many as 38 of the 48 questions are based entirely on information recall.

Some of the information recall requires a degree of processing. For instance, No. 37 (ibid.: A 31) asks:

Which of these did not belong to the Jacobin Club?

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------|
| (a) Printers | (b) Servants |
| (c) Daily wage earners | (d) Nobles |

But most are far more mechanical, as for instance No. 41 (ibid.):

Austrian princess Marie Antoinette was queen of which of the following French rulers?

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| (a) Louis XIII | (b) Louis XIV |
| (c) Louis XV | (d) Louis XVI |

There are ongoing debates among educationists about the efficacy or otherwise of multiple choice questions as a mode of assessment. Without entering into these, I would like to share two examples of alternative ways in which multiple choice questions can be framed, to challenge learners to think through their answers. These were generated by a team working within the existing framework, and are not published:

- 1 The French Revolution is significant because
 - a France granted independence to all its colonies
 - b It led to several decades of peace in Europe
 - c It led to the Declaration of Rights of Man
 - d It was followed by an increase in agricultural production

- 2 Women were
 - a Active participants in the French Revolution
 - b Joined the army in large numbers during the French Revolution
 - c Employed in major industries during the French Revolution
 - d Granted equal political rights with men in the French Revolution

At another level, the *Golden Social Science* introduces fresh content. This in itself would have been unexceptionable, if not desirable – elaborating on some of the ideas touched on in the chapter in *ICW* would have enriched it and rendered it more accessible. What happens, instead, however, is that these insertions of ‘fresh’ material almost invariably cluster around a set of historical figures who lend themselves to being classified as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, or as winners or losers. So Louis XVI and Napoleon receive considerable attention.

The information on Louis XVI, reiterated through all the other sections in abbreviated forms, is encapsulated in the first SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTION (ibid.: A 10):

What role did Louis XVI play in bringing about the revolution?

Ans. Louis XVI played a significant role in bringing about the revolution.

- (i) Louis XVI was a pleasure loving, extravagant ruler who believed in the Divine Right of Kings.
- (ii) He was ignorant and indifferent to the conditions of the poor.
- (iii) His wife Marie Antoinette constantly interfered in the administration.
- (iv) He squandered money and drove France into useless wars bringing the country to the verge of bankruptcy.

There are two things about this response: each of the statements is reasonably accurate. At the same time, the way in which this ‘correct’ answer is framed leaves no space for considering the other contexts of the Revolution, which gave Louis XVI’s personal proclivities a unique significance. In other words, possibilities of engaging with any kind of complexity, and contingency, are erased through these formulations.

What is also interesting, and sad, is that the *Golden Social Science* simply omits addressing some of the more challenging activities suggested in *ICW*. The latter has an activity on page 20 which could have opened up possibilities of a lively and possibly contentious debate on ‘women’s nature’. Addressing this, or converting it into suitably digested ‘points’ was probably somewhat uncomfortable for the authors of the *Golden Social Science*.

I will conclude this section with just one more illustration, this from the list of technical terms inserted at the outset in the *Golden Social Science* (ibid.: A 3):

Revolution: A recognized momentous change in any situation. A revolution may result in sudden overthrow of an established government or system by force and bloodshed, e.g., the French Revolution. It can also be a great change that comes slowly and peacefully e.g., the Industrial Revolution.

ICW does not attempt to circumscribe or define a revolution. In fact, once revolution is reduced to a definition, there is a compulsion to delimit it. More specifically, whether the Industrial Revolution, which involved impoverishment, displacement, and dislocation for vast numbers of people, can be classified as peaceful is a question that is not even raised. Nor is it possible to raise such questions once we are faced with such a categorical definition. So, at the very outset of the text we are provided with an authoritative definition, distinguishing neatly and conveniently between a violent political revolution and a peaceful economic one. Given the use of the rhetoric of *ahimsa* in Indian political discourse, this distinction acquires a certain significance.

It is likely that the majority of students and teachers, for whom the examination is a hurdle to be crossed, and for whom the social sciences are a low priority in any case, will pay far more attention to the *Golden Social Science* and its equivalents, and ignore or at best refer occasionally to *ICW*. While this may be an effective strategy of survival, it means that most learners with access to formal education will end up considering history as an assortment of facts, more or less easily recalled, and more or less relevant. The challenge of thinking through the past, of engaging in a dialogue between past and present, is virtually erased. Also lost is the potential for argument, debate, discussion, for evaluating and assessing historical writing, and the blurred and constantly shifting lines between history and myth/fiction. Are these losses significant? And are there ways of recovery? I will touch on both of these issues by looking at two recent works in the next two sections.

The attraction of the Sapt Sindhu

The *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Book I of the Rama Chandra Series by Amish (Amish 2015) is among the current bestsellers, and is likely to remain so for a variety of reasons. The book is set in India of 3400 BCE, and a map is provided on the inside back cover and referred to in the preliminary pages (ibid.: xv). The date chosen is significant; pre-dating the Harappan civilisation by several centuries. The work itself is a heady blend of past and present: we have echoes of the Nirbhaya case (ibid.: ch. 12–14),¹ even as all the central figures almost invariably wear dhotis and *angavastrams* (ibid.: 1). The book makes few demands on the reader, except for a reasonably high level of tolerance for recurrent, graphic descriptions of violence (ibid.: 147–150). It also slides effortlessly between times, contexts, and spaces. While this might trouble some historians, it may be of little or no consequence to the average reader. What I will attempt here is not to measure the text against the yardsticks of fact and fiction. Instead, I will highlight the handling of four inter-related themes – the ways in which spaces have been named, the treatment of caste and gender, and the ideal polity that is projected.

The naming of the kingdom of Dashrath (and by extension that of the Ikhvakus as the Satp Sindhu (ibid.: 8) is an interesting strategy. It extends the geographical reach of Kosala, traditionally located on the Sarayu, a tributary of the Ganga in present-day Uttar Pradesh, to the Indus and its tributaries, and thus to the river from which the name India is derived. It also stakes an implicit claim to the heartland of the Harappan civilisation, a claim that is reiterated, non-verbally, through the use of a set of symbols based on the Harappan script, accompanied by a solar symbol, which serve to mark breaks in chapters (ibid.: 10, 11, 15).

Curiously, for a work that abounds in contemporary allusions, including weapons of mass destruction (ibid.: 267), the representation of caste resonates with the concerns of nineteenth-century upper-caste social reformers. Brahmanical and kshatriya identities remain unchallenged and intact, the former best exemplified by Vashishta, the family priest and preceptor of Ram, and the latter by Ram and his siblings. At the same time, there are occasional placatory platitudes thrown in: '*A person becomes a brahmin by karma, not by birth*' (ibid.: 253; emphasis original).

At first glance, representations of gender seem to be radically transformed – unlike the Sita of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Amish's Sita is a capable administrator and has martial skills. At the same time, at crucial junctures, both she and her polity require the intervention of men for protection. Thus, Vishwamitra ensures the safety of Mithila by deploying the *Asuraastra*, which has an uncanny resemblance to an atom bomb (ibid.: 278–283), and when Sita seems to be hunting a wild boar fairly successfully, she has to be ultimately saved by Rama (ibid.: 330). What is more, in Amish's version the sexually charged Shurpanakha mutilates herself, thus absolving Lakshman of all responsibility. These are just examples of the ways in which gender relations are reworked, and hierarchies are gently reinforced, in a setting of near timeless antiquity.

It may come as no surprise that Amish's ideal polity is what can at best be described as a benevolent despotism – run by a king who follows the *shastras*, whose chronological order, complexity, and contradictions are erased by assimilating them to the Vedas located in a virtually timeless past (ibid.: 116). In this neat scenario, the messiness of democracy is irrelevant.

From the Malayaputras to Mizoram

At several points in the narrative, Amish introduces the reader to the Malayaputras, literally the sons (and daughters) of the hills. There are explicit references to tribal traditions (ibid.: 75), including norms governing gender relations, which are represented as different from those of settled populations. The relationship with the Malayaputras is represented as one of wary support (ibid.: 327), and as one where, ideally, control must be retained by Ram.

We learn that Amish is 'IIM [Indian Institute of Management] Kolkata educated, boring banker turned happy author' (ibid.: i). One has to be highly competitive and very well trained in order to gain admission to management institutions. This often involves blocking out other academic pursuits completely. Would Amish have written differently if he had been trained in the far less prestigious and lucrative discipline of history, instead, in any one of the institutions of higher education that still survives in the country?

Perhaps. I will conclude this discussion by illustrating the immense possibilities of writing rich, complex histories of some of the people Amish would classify as Malayaputras, drawing on a recent volume by Joy L.K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel (Pachuau and Schendel 2015).

Organised around four broad themes, Pachuau and Schendel use over 400 visuals, mainly photographs, drawn from an archive of over 17,000 images, to reconstruct a history of Mizoram, one of the smallest states in India, ranging from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. Pachuau and Schendel carefully and systematically unpack stereotypes of 'primitivism,

exoticism and stagnation' (ibid.: 3) and compel the reader to engage with 'the remarkable transformations and multiple forms of modernity that have flourished here' (ibid.: 4).

Pachau and Schendel persuade us to engage with the everyday as well as with the spectacular, more familiar mainstream processes. So there are discussions on the many ways in which the visual record was constituted, clothing and its significance, music, and the ways in which it was used, intertwined with responses to Western education, Christianity, and the colonial state. Moreover, complexities and conflicts are acknowledged rather than erased – so the engagement with Christianity, for instance, emerges as a dialogue, with diverse strands and possibilities.

The encounter with colonialism is reconstructed in painstaking detail, focusing on how the landscape was transformed, modes of communication changed, and negotiations with the market economy undertaken. Links with the outside world, including mobilisation during the World Wars, are also demonstrated through a rich array of visuals and texts.

The post-colonial world, with all its tensions and conflicts, is discussed with remarkable, often understated precision. Consider the following:

Within India, Mizoram is the region with the highest proportion of 'tribals' (or 'scheduled tribes'). This makes Mizoram the 'tribal' state par excellence.

Mizoram is also amongst the most highly educated regions in India, and its inhabitants think of themselves as more modern and better connected to the wider world than many of their compatriots. In other words, to them being card-carrying 'tribals' has nothing to do with 'primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness', which is how India's Ministry of Tribal Affairs defines tribes. It is an ill-fitting and external ascription that provides certain economic advantages but also comes with an unwelcome burden of prejudice, disdain and racism.

Living under a paternalistic state that classifies you in this way affects how you represent yourself to it – and how you look at yourself. State officials and the Indian public at large found it helpful if 'tribals' were seen to be tribal. They should perform their identity. As a result, much emphasis was put on display by means of costume and artistic presentation.

(*ibid.*: 266)

Pachau and Schendel also document one of the most turbulent periods in recent Mizo history, a period of famine and revolt, which were handled with an unprecedented display of force, with quiet sensitivity:

The Troubles would last from 1966 to 1986, a period during which violent and less violent periods alternated. This was a very dark time in Mizoram – and, at a different level, also for its visual history. More than four-fifths of the population were uprooted and shifted to new settlements, poverty and fear increased and armed confrontations were frequent. In these circumstances, many people lost their family possessions, including photographs, and few were in a position to document the distress that the Troubles caused in their lives.

(*ibid.*: 314)

At the same time, they draw attention to unsettling issues of minorities within Mizoram, within territorial boundaries that have hardened over the decades (ibid.: p. 374). In doing so, they alert us to the possibilities of and the need to negotiate through contentious issues which refuse to be resolved through the reiteration of platitudes.

Does history have a future?

As a historian, one would like to answer the question in a quick, confident, affirmative. Yet, in order to make the affirmation effective, there is clearly much that needs to be done. More important, the political will to do so is an urgent and inevitable prerequisite.

Returning to our starting point, history can perhaps flourish if we constantly ask who our histories are meant for, and how we can shift the focus from the powerful to other social categories, to engage in a democratisation of processes of constructing and sharing knowledge in all its complexity. This is a challenge that is only beginning to be addressed. If Pachua and Schendel's (2015) work reveals the immense possibilities of such strategies, the far more popular and accessible work of Amish (2015) is a reminder that we are contending with a dominant understanding that is far less demanding of the reader, and provides a scaffolding for existing socio-political and -economic hierarchies, of reassuring certainties in a rapidly changing world.

At another, more pragmatic level, are there ways of changing the system of evaluation, which at present allows, if not encourages, converting almost all learning material into a rote learning activity? Clearly, this is an enormous challenge. And yet, if it is not addressed, the pedagogical potential of history will remain largely unrealised. While rote learning may be common to several other disciplines, including the sciences, those at least are accompanied by the lure of potentially profitable job opportunities.

At yet another level, we need to understand and engage with the shrinking academic spaces available for formal training. Several central universities, set up recently, have no provision for teaching history – in yet others, such as the Guru Ghasidas University of Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, a three-member faculty transacts courses ranging from the undergraduate, through the post-graduate and research programmes (information from www.ggu.ac.in, accessed 10 February 2015). And while a handful of high-profile private universities have created spaces for the teaching of history, the vast majority of private institutions simply find the discipline unprofitable.

History, as indeed many of the other social sciences/liberal arts subjects, seems to be poised at a critical juncture, demanding that practitioners revisit their academic concerns and work out ways and means of connecting the past and the present in ways that can be meaningful to those who have been excluded from these processes. At the same time, the paradox of supposed irrelevance combined with mining the past for sustaining and constructing a range of identities needs to be understood and addressed. Whether this enormous challenge can be met or not remains to be seen.

Appendix 1: list of visuals in chapter 1, *India and the Contemporary World*

Fig. 1	Storming of the Bastille	p. 1
Fig. 2	A Society of Estates	p. 2
Fig. 3	The Spider and the Fly	p. 3
Fig. 4	The course of a subsistence crisis	p. 6
Fig. 5	The Tennis Court Oath	p. 9
Fig. 6	The spread of the Great Fear	p. 9
Fig. 7	The Political system and the Constitution of 1791	p. 10
Fig. 8	The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen	p. 11
Fig. 9	A sans-culotte couple	p. 14
Fig. 10	Nanine Vallain, Liberty	p. 15
Fig. 11	[A festival organised by the government] ²	p. 17

Fig. 12	Parisian women on their way to Versailles	p. 18
Fig. 13	Women queuing up at a bakery	p. 20
Fig. 14	The emancipation of slaves	p. 14
Fig. 15	The patriotic fat-reducing press	p. 22
Fig. 16	Marat addressing the people	p. 23
Fig. 17	Napoleon crossing the Alps	p. 23

Notes

- 1 I owe many of the ideas in this section to a stimulating discussion with Naina Dayal.
- 2 Abbreviated caption, provided by me.

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