From *Transfer of Power* to *Towards Freedom*: Envisioning and Documenting the Indian Independence

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Historical documents, both official and non-official, play a seminal role in the construction of historical knowledge. But the manner in which these documents are catalogued and classified also shapes the trajectory and the orientation of historical research. In this context, a comparison between two different documentation ventures on Indian independence can be very instructive. The British government sponsored the publication of a large number of documents related to India's independence, available at the India Office in London. They were organised under the title The Transfer of Power and contained the story of India's independence from a British perspective. In response to this, another set of documents titled Towards Freedom was published in India, offering an Indian perspective on India's independence.

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I

This is the second issue of *Reading the Archive* (*RTA*). The articles included in this issue represent the long and diverse journey of history as a discipline and a vocation. History predates the social sciences by a few centuries, but it emerged in a new avatar in the 19th century, as an inseparable component of the social sciences. It acquired social prestige and a unique paradigmatic aspect in two ways. First, it became sufficiently discontinuous from earlier ways of looking at the past, internally consensual, and sufficiently open-ended. Finally, it also developed fairly sharp and identifiable boundaries from other disciplines, in addition to a break from other ways of looking at the past.

As part of the new thinking, it was believed that just as the natural world was open to exploration and manipulation, so was the human world. This was

virtually the *a priori* belief of 19th century orthodoxy. A basic premise of this orthodoxy was that there existed a world of humans, independent of human subjectivities, while simultaneously existing outside this realm. The social scientists engaged in this intellectual activity were experts who had privileged access to this world. In short, they understood people better than people understood themselves. This was the crux of 'social causation', which became increasingly central to 19th century social sciences. Consensus was based on a neat separation between the theoretician and the social actors that were being studied. These social actors performed things (for instance, say, reinforcing the social structure, leading a protest struggle, or working for the status quo) *without* the conscious knowledge that their actions were circumscribed and shaped by structural or institutional forces. They were also unaware of the consequences, both intended and unintended, of their actions. It was the task of the expert to unravel this world. In simple terms, what people did was intertwined with both causes and consequences, but they did not know it. A 'discursive consciousness' separated the actor from the expert. The actor was devoid of it; the expert possessed it.

As mentioned in the introduction to the inaugural issue of the RTA, this paradigm, the orthodox or the mainstream view of the social sciences, was constructed in the 19th century and subjected to critique in the 20th century, particularly after the Second World War. However, it is significant to note that the critique of this paradigm was not accompanied by any alternatives. In the 19th century, the social sciences made certain claims and assertions. These were questioned, but not replaced by counter-assertions. A curious plurality replaced the earlier singularity of the mainstream social sciences. What Anthony Giddens has written in the context of sociology is equally applicable to the world of social sciences, in general, and history in particular:

> The orthodox consensus is today a consensus no more. It used to be a majority position in social sciences, but now has become a minority one…. Those who would now defend such a standpoint represent only one among a diverse range of perspectives. In its place stands a plurality of different theoretical perspectives – such as ethnomethodology, various forms of symbolic interactionism and neo-

> Weberianism, phenomenology, structuralism, hermeneutics, and critical theory – the list seems almost endless.[1]

The important point, however, is that multiple critiques of the mainstream social sciences are all united by what they are opposed to, but not much else. As such, it is difficult to see them as bound together by a common paradigm and the coherence that goes with it. This coherence was very central to the orthodox tenets of social science. The decolonisation and democratisation of social sciences effectively demolished the 19th century paradigm, but did not replace it with an alternative one.

However, there is one field in which critiques are particularly sharp. This pertains to the role of social actors in the making of social phenomena. Are these actors merely cogs in the large wheel, unaware of their role in the making of these phenomena and of the consequences of their actions? Are they intelligent beings, in possession of agency, reflexivity and discursive capacity? Or do they simply constitute one of the many elements in the giant wheel of historical movements, unaware of the consequences of their own actions? Anthony Giddens, while recognising the importance of "un-anticipated consequences", however, did grant much greater agency to the individual than was possible within orthodox social science: "The predictability of the social world does not just 'happen', as the predictability of the natural world does. It is brought about by the knowledgeably organized practices of human agents."[2]

Perhaps this ideational binary related to the place and role of social actors can be understood by symbolically classifying the various historical phenomena into the Renaissance-type and the Enlightenment-type. The social actors involved in the Renaissance had no awareness of their place or the fact that they were playing a part in creating one of the important breakthroughs in the history of Europe, and possibly that of the world. No leader of the Renaissance showed this awareness. The Renaissance, as a concept, was invented in the 19th century, which then imparted a great historical role to the social actors

[1] Anthony Giddens, "What is Social Science", in *In Defence of Sociology: Essays, Interpretations & Rejoinders,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 66.

[2] Ibid., 70.

involved in its development. These social actors fitted very well into the 19th century version of the social sciences.

Not so with the Enlightenment. Social actors displayed great awareness of their role in the making of the Enlightenment. They did not leave its theorisation to subsequent historians and sociologists. *They* were the sociologists of the Enlightenment. As actors, they made the Enlightenment, and as experts, they theorised upon it. Emmanuel Kant's seminal essay "What is Enlightenment", written in 1784, still remains one of the most articulate commentaries on this philosophical movement.[3] It should thus be clear that the social actor-theoretician separation, so central to the orthodox social sciences, obviously does not apply to the Enlightenment or other, similar phenomena. The practitioners of the phenomenon of nationalism, who played an important role in bringing forth its applicability and acceptability, were also often its theoreticians. However, all such actors-cum-theoreticians of such historical phenomena were obviously unaware of the influence they were going to have in subsequent times. The leaders of the Enlightenment understood their creation very well. But they had no idea about the fate of their ideas in the 19th and 20th centuries. That universe could only be unearthed by the sociologist and the historian of the Enlightenment.

II

There is a central episode of modern Indian history in which this binary does show up in a stark way. It involves the prolonged anti-imperialist nationalist struggle, launched over many decades, culminating in 1947 by way of India's independence. The actors and leaders of the movement also happened to be the major thinkers of their time, especially during the various stages of this struggle. The activities of the leaders of the nationalist movement reflect the entire range of mainstream social sciences and their subsequent critiques. They wrote, with great sophistication and scholarly rigour, on the three salient features of this struggle: the economic critique of British imperialism and the

[3] Two centuries later, in 1983, Michel Foucault wrote an essay with the same title "What is Enlightenment". The original essay, written by Kant in 1784, represented the theorisation of the phenomenon by someone who was also involved in it. Foucault's essay, on the other hand, represented a sociology of the same phenomenon.

highlighting of the economically exploitative character of the British rule,[4] the making of the Indian nation and their own role in it, and the making of a blueprint of India's future. Particularly during the active phase of the nationalist struggle (1920-47), there was a great correspondence between the principal activities that underlined the political struggle, and their subsequent theorisation, albeit in a popular language, by the political leadership of the movement. Some examples of this double role of the leadership include Gandhi, who led the Khilafat-non-cooperation movement (1920-22) and later also critiqued it. In fact, it was not unusual for Gandhi to initiate political activity and later subject it to criticism, much like a detached observer and scholar.

Jawaharlal Nehru played his part in popularising Indian nationalism and taking it to the people, but also critiqued it as essentially a middle-class phenomenon with all its limitations in his autobiography, written in 1936 during the course of the nationalist struggle.[5] Rajendra Prasad, as the leader of the nationalist movement, was obviously opposed to the demand for Pakistan, made by the Muslim League under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah in 1940. But he also produced an empirically rich and sociologically penetrating document on the Pakistan movement, bearing the title *India Divided*, two years before the making of Pakistan in 1947.[6] It was quite usual for the leaders of the nationalist movement to produce descriptive and explanatory accounts of the struggle they were all involved in. Leaders such as Lajpat Rai, Gandhi, Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Subhash Chandra Bose, and J.B. Kripalani are only some of the important individuals who produced largely non-partisan accounts of the freedom struggle. It would be true to say that in the writings on the historiography of the Indian nationalist movement, a very significant proportion had to be devoted to those who fought the

[4] A comprehensive codification of this aspect was done by Bipan Chandra in his seminal work *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905*, (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966). His work was based substantially on the writings of the nationalist leadership of the 19th century. Thus, 19th century leaders were both subjects and the important source for his enquiry.

[5] On how Nehru was the leader and scholar of the Indian National Movement, at the same time, see Irfan Habib "Jawaharlal Nehru's Historical Vision" in *The National Movement: Studies in Ideology & History* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2011), 38-57.

[6] Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided*, first published in 1946, republished by Penguin India, New Delhi, 2010.

struggle and wrote on it at the same time. Importantly, their writings do not simply constitute the self-image of the movement. They also offer an outside view, sometimes critiques and often sociological insights into the nationalist struggle. It should, thus, be clear that the social actor-theoretician separation does not really work in the case of the leaders of the nationalist struggle.

However, it is also true that certain dimensions of their activities were not very clear to them and were highlighted by professional social scientists only afterwards. While they could anticipate, and sometimes also predict, the outcome of their struggle, i.e., independence in some form or the other, none of them anticipated the Partition that accompanied Independence in 1947. During 1940-47, a large number of nationalist leaders wrote on the Partition, but none of them engaged in what could be considered a social scientist's gaze *vis-à-vis* the movement for Pakistan. A proper and comprehensive understanding of the Partition had to wait for professional historians and political scientists. The point is that the writings by the leaders of the nationalist movement tell us a great deal about the struggle. They were not just the spokespersons and mouthpieces of the struggle; they were also its scholars. They described the nature of the struggle, explained it and also anticipated the outcome. However, the counter-phenomenon of the nationalist movement, the movement for Pakistan, presents a different picture. Even though a large number of treatises and essays were written on it, they do not add up to a coherent and comprehensive picture of the movement for Pakistan. For an explanation and the delineation of the veins and arteries of the movement for Pakistan, one would have to turn to professional social scientists.[7]

III

It is for these reasons that the different sets of documents on the freedom struggle acquire salience. Given the nature of the struggle and the role and cognitive capacities of its leadership, these documents contain not just the self-image of the struggle, but significant commentaries on it as well. After

[7] A notable exception is B.R. Ambedkar's book *Thoughts on Pakistan,* written in 1941. Ambedkar's account comes closest to a social scientist's view of the movement, well before the making of Pakistan. But Ambedkar was not an active participant in either the movement for Indian independence or for Pakistan. He reserved for himself the role of an outside critic.

independence, the government of India took the initiative in publishing the selected, Collected Works of prominent leaders of the nationalist movement. As a result, nearly a hundred volumes, consisting of over fifty thousand pages of the speeches and writings, letters, telegrams, and personal notes of Mahatma Gandhi became available in the public sphere for students, researchers, journalists and other scholars of history. Likewise, selected works and correspondences of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Motilal Nehru, Lajpat Rai, Govind Vallabh Pant, Rajagopalachari, Acharya Narendra Dev and many others were compiled and published. This was nothing short of a great treasure for the students and researchers of the nationalist movement, who could easily reach out and gain access to the inner world of these leaders, their role in, and their view of, the nationalist movement. All of this was available in print.

Interestingly, one very big initiative in this direction was taken by the British government in the 1960s. In June 1967, the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson made the following declaration from the floor of the House of Commons: "In view of the great interest now being shown in historical circles in the last days of the British rule in India … [there would be published] documents from the India Office records on the Transfer of Power and the events leading up to it."[8] This was to be an independent project, undertaken by professional historians and funded by the government, but without any undue or unwarranted political interference by it. The India Office, located in London, was a great repository of official documents relating to India. Over the next decade, twelve big volumes consisting of all the notes and correspondences between the Viceroy and the Secretary of State (in charge of the India Office), between the Viceroys and Governors, fortnightly reports, and all the other important official documents on Indian politics produced between 1942 and 1947 were published. Each volume is divided into separate themes and contained nearly seven hundred documents.

Thus, researchers studying the climactic years leading to India's freedom and Partition got easy access to over eight thousand official documents on British thinking and policy making. The *Transfer of Power (ToP)* volumes contained

[8] Forward by Nicholas Mansergh, Editor-in-Chief, *The Transfer of Power 1942-47*, (Documents on the Constitutional Relations between Britain and India), Vol. I, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1970, IV.

very useful information on the principal episodes of the 1940s such as the Cripps Mission, the Quit India movement, India's entry into the Second World War, Bengal Famine, Simla Conference, the elections of 1946, Cabinet Mission, the Interim government, and the crucial period of Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, paving the way for Independence and Partition. The publication of the *ToP* documents greatly facilitated research on the major developments in Indian politics in the 1940s. There was a great spurt of scholarly works on this period in the 1980s. The easy availability of such a large number of important documents created a new interest in the 1940s and gave a boost to research pertaining to this period. Many new books started coming out from the late 1970s onwards, making good use of the *ToP* documents.[9] Interestingly, it was quite possible for two scholars to consult the same documents and arrive at entirely different conclusions.[10]

There were, however, some very serious shortcomings with the *ToP* volumes. By their very nature, the documents were limited to official, institutional accounts. They also contained the story of India's Independence from the British vantage point. This was implicit in the very name that was chosen for the series– the *Transfer of Power*. It saw Indian Independence as a mutually agreed-upon transfer of power from the British to Indian hands. The 'transfer of power' was a catchword that projected Indian independence as the result of a series of constitutional initiatives undertaken by the British since 1917, eventually leading to the transfer of power. In such a scheme, there was obviously no place for the anti-imperialist nationalist movement and its role in wresting independence from the British. This was nothing short of a blinkered perspective, which excluded the nationalist movement from the very frame in which the plot of Indian independence was set up.

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[9] Some of the important works are R.J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps and India, 1939-45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945); Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-47* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[10] Such was the case with Ayesha Jalal and Bimal Prasad. Both the scholars used the *ToP* documents and assigned a great causative value to the Second World War in completely changing the political equations involving the British, Muslim League and Congress. Yet they arrived at very different and contrasting conclusions regarding the constellation of factors that went into the making of the demand for Pakistan. See Bimal Prasad, *The March to Pakistan* (Volume III of the three-volume series on *Pathway to India's Partition*), (New Delhi: Manohar), 2009, 139-52, and Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, 57.

A significant corrective to this blinkered British-centric view was sought to be undertaken by the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), a body set up by the Indian government in 1972 to promote historical research and documentation. The ICHR decided to compile and publish a series of volumes containing documents on the struggle for independence. The series was to be termed quite appropriately as *Towards Freedom (TF)*, which was to be the answer to the *Transfer of Power*. As was evident, the approach in this series was to see Indian independence not as a gift from the British, but as the result of the prolonged anti-imperialist nationalist struggle. Thus, *ToP* and *TF* became the templates for two rival perspectives on how to look at Indian Independence in 1947.

The *TF* series was different from the *ToP* in some crucial respects. First, the TF compiled the documents on Indian independence starting from the year 1937, when Congress contested elections to the provincial assemblies and formed governments in seven provinces. The *ToP* had treated 1942 as the starting point with the Cripps Mission, which was sent by the British government to resolve the Indian deadlock. Second, the *TF* did not see the period 1937-47 as merely one dominated by the imperialist-nationalist encounter. The series also contained documents on peasant movements, workers' struggles, women's question and various other popular struggles. In other words, the documents collected by the *TF* were to be much more diverse and multi-stranded. They were to focus on the popular dimensions of the struggle, not just the constitutional one. Third, it was also hoped that various important sources, available in Indian languages, would be translated into English and made accessible to the researchers.

The organisation of the *TF* volumes was done differently from the *ToP* volumes. The documents were to be assembled both thematically and chronologically, separately for each year. There was to be a general editor for the entire series. But the editorship of each year was assigned to a different historian. Prof. S. Gopal was the first General Editor, and after his death, Prof. S. Bhattacharya took over. The orientation of each volume differed in accordance with the thematic preferences of each historian. By contrast, the entire *ToP* series was edited by Nicholas Mansergh, a historian at the University of Cambridge. It was clear that the *TF* was a much more ambitious

project compared to the *ToP*, which was confined only to the documents available at the India Office. This was done in accordance with the fitness of things, as the major records of the nationalist movement were obviously available in India.

For various reasons, including a shortage of funds and government interference, the *TF* volumes took much longer to be completed, compared to the *ToP*. The first volume of the series appeared in 1985 and the last one in 2016, three decades later. The *ToP* volumes had been completed in a period of 12 years, from 1970 to 1982. Also, whereas the editors of the *ToP* volumes enjoyed complete freedom and encountered no obstacles from the British government, this was not the case with the *TF* volumes. The pendulum of fate of the *TF* volumes kept swinging from support to neglect to opposition, with the change in government at the Centre. Often, the volumes were withdrawn from the Press and subjected to outside scrutiny. There were times when the project ran out of funds and faced the prospect of either being shelved or closed. In the end, the project was declared closed in 2016, even though some crucial volumes for the years 1942 and 1947 were yet to be published.

IV

The story of two different ventures in the documentation of Indian independence is both interesting and instructive for the students of history. Making of the archives is not an innocent and neutral act of simply organising and storing important knowledge. A whole range of assumptions, *a priori* ideas, and perspectives and vision cast their shadows on how that knowledge is organised, the conceptual categories it is grouped under, and the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The students and researchers of history must know that when they enter the archives, they enter a field where a large number of decisions have already been taken, ultimately shaping the course of their research. It is a bit like joining a game of chess in which the first three or four moves have already been made and, as a result, have foreclosed some possibilities while creating openings for others.

However, it is also true that beyond a point, facts cannot speak for themselves and depend on the mediation of the researcher. In this sense, considerable autonomy and initiative rest with the researcher. The world of history writing,

with all its contestations and subjectivities, has also established rules, norms, conventions, procedures of enquiry and methodological preconditions. They both discipline and facilitate historical enquiry. The world of social sciences may be contentious in some crucial respects; it is not entirely devoid of consensual dimensions. Both the *ToP* and the *TF*, spread over some twenty thousand documents, contain some very important clues to a very crucial phase of Indian history. Their true potential is yet to be fully realised. It is hoped that the prospective contributors to the *RTA* would turn to these volumes and unearth important facets of India's social transformation during the 1930s and 1940s.

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