

‘Erasure’ and ‘Reinstatement’ in Romesh Chunder Dutt’s Vision of India’s Past

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Foreword

After 1857, Empire in India was irreversible. Indians who had unsuccessfully taken up arms to overthrow the British regime had been fiercely repressed and slaughtered. There was no way out on the foreign presence. London took full control of Indian affairs in 1877, and the new colonial order caused great confusion among Indians. The foundations of the social, economic and political order had been deeply shaken by the conquest. The classical reference framework had collapsed, colonization had changed daily existence for better or for worse. The process of modernization was far from complete though — the caste system was still in place, transformations rendered possible by both the French Revolution and reform elsewhere on the European continent were mainly absent on the Subcontinent — India remained in many ways traditionally oriented. Timidly, a somewhat basic capitalist economy together with an embryo of civil society had slowly emerged. By 1901, famous activist Gokhale (1866–1915) estimated that modernity was egalitarian. The living conditions of the subjected people of India would sooner or later need radical, urgent improvement:

Modern civilization has accepted greater equality for all as its watchword, as against privilege and exclusiveness, which were the root ideas of the old world. And the larger humanity of these days requires that we should acknowledge its claims by seeking the amelioration of the helpless condition of our downtrodden countrymen.¹

The intellectual community in particular was deeply aware of the perennial nature of the changes imposed from outside. For many, the best response was to fully blend into the Empire following Queen Victoria’s 1877 promise of integration. Historians, for instance, adopted principles and techniques inspired by German Leopold von Ranke (Iggers, 1990). Ranke’s new way of remaking the past, otherwise called “universal” history, progressively gave Indians of the Victorian era a toolbox to be used in order to re-imagine their past according to the new imperial set-up. This is the hypothesis adopted in this article through the example of historian Romesh Chunder Dutt (1845–1909).

Introduction: Romesh Chunder Dutt, a “Universal Historian”

Dutt had studied in London, one of the first of his generation to succeed in the prestigious

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¹ Gokhale, p. 744.

competitive examination giving right of entry into the high colonial administration (*Indian Civil Service*). Shortly after completing a *Grand Tour*, the young idealistic Romesh Chunder writing an account of the European experience upon returning home in 1873 could only foresee some kind of “European” national destiny for the country of India, a new nation soon to be freed from foreign rule. But Dutt’s idealism quickly waned: he was appointed to the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta where he was a witness to one of the worst natural catastrophes he would ever experience, a life-event which haunted him for the rest of his life (Gupta, Mukherjee). In a social history book, *The Peasantry of Bengal*, Dutt denounced the iniquitous *latifundio* system then existing in Bengal as being a monstrous creation of an evil Europe set upon destroying traditional civilizations whose peasants suffered from the vagaries of nature. In 1877, in *The Literature of Bengal*, Dutt even honoured the intellectual tradition of the Bengali Renaissance branded as “Enlightenment” with no equivalent found in Europe! The work was of a literary, but also of a cultural, nationalist inclination, some kind of holistic vision so akin to the Rankean “universal” template.

Dutt was a genius of a kind. He tried his hand at classic historical works, wrote *à la Walter Scott* fiction, in either English or Bengali. In 1879, he published the story of the heroic adventures of Rajput Prince Maharana Pratap who had fought against Akbar, the Great Mughal — *Pratap Singh, the Last of the Rajputs: A Tale of Rajput Courage and Chivalry*. In 1879 and then in 1885 — the English versions were available some twenty years later, in 1902 and 1909 — he prepared the Bengali version of *The Slave Girl of Agra: an Indian Historical Romance* and *The Lake of Palms: a Story of Indian Domestic Life*. However, in his own words no fiction writer, at the end of a twenty-year contract in Bengal in 1889, Dutt planned a major *opus* on culture, *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*. In this book, he openly rejected the accusations made by Imperialist historians about the people of India — their legendary passivity, their perpetuating the caste system and their oppression of women. Dutt equally celebrated the Mullerian ethnic-linguistic Aryan myth and the various forms of specific resistance used when India had faced “barbarian” invasions. Constant comparisons with the ancient civilizations that gave birth to modern Europe were Dutt’s grand obsession.

After leaving Bengal, a newer, quieter, more serene period in Dutt’s life started when appointed a *Divisional Commissioner* in the province of Orissa in 1894 — once again, the first Indian to reach such a high position. There he wrote his memoirs, *Rambles in India during Twenty-Four Years, 1871 to 1895*, plus a collection of poems, *Reminiscences of a Workman’s Life*. It was thanks to this prestigious position that he obtained the right to sabbatical periods in England where he interacted with major figures in the Liberal Party and published several articles for *The Manchester Guardian*.

Dutt was eventually appointed a professor at *University College London* in 1898. The following year, he became president of the *Indian National Congress*. Winning recognition

from the highest officials of the colonial régime, he participated in the Famine Commission — the fruit of his work probably saving the lives of millions in the following half-century! Dutt had plenty of time for more inspired writing in London though. He published and translated more than a dozen books that he had in store. He also prepared a draft for a pioneering work in economics, *The Economic History of India*, thanks to the lectures he gave at UCL. He finally reorganised another landmark textbook, *England and India*.²

Dutt was one of the most influential figures of the Victorian Age in India, one of the largest contributors to the nationalist cause in the period prior to 1914. He was not just a historian or a senior official but also a translator, an essayist, a novelist, a poet, a storyteller, a hagiographer, a specialist of both literature and cultural-social history. Paradoxically, Dutt was nostalgic of traditions for ever lost. He was attracted to the modern idea of progress or to the dream of a better future for his starving compatriots. He was one of the best and brightest minds before WW1, writing mainly in English.

Dutt versus the Liberal Imperial Erasure of India's Past

Few of the most Enlightened European minds of the early 19th century had any sympathy towards India. Utilitarianists like James Mill (1773–1836), the father of philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), wrote the first textbook about the sub-continent. Mill's classic work dating from the Enlightenment period ranked the country as primitive compared to Europe, and claimed that Indians had had simply no history before Europeans reached its shores:

*Rude nations seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretensions to a high antiquity. As a boastful and turgid vanity distinguishes remarkably the oriental nations, they have in most instances carried their claims to the most extravagant height.*³

Indians were also branded by Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859) as having no learned tradition, no science worthy of respect, and no historical consciousness:

I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny

2 In total, Dutt wrote more than twenty books: a third of them devoted to the history, culture and civilization of India — among them, *The Literature of Bengal* and *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*; a third devoted to the heroes of Hindu history, the great epics or the heroines of novels that took place in India's distant past; a third connected to the economic and social history of India — the most famous being *The Economic History of India*.

3 Mill, p. 91.

*that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.*⁴

And in mainland Europe, even thinkers as radical as Marx argued that India had hitherto remained outside of the dynamics of world progress as its civilization was immutable, static and despotic:

*...we must not forget that these idyllic village-communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies.*⁵

However, for Indian intellectuals such as Dutt, there were huge contradictory elements in imperialist historiography — even if the more fundamental values of the Enlightenment were the driving force behind Mill's thought. This school's vision of universalism and imperialism was a contradiction in terms. Believing in inequality could therefore be associated to universalism. Similarly, being uncritically Anglophile became suspicious:

*We may also here expose the mistake of those of our countrymen, who in their warm admiration of English institutions believe a close imitation, or introduction into this country, of such institutions as a panacea for all evils.*⁶

In addition to the fact that the Enlightenment, even in its most knowledgeable and tolerant form, had proclaimed Western superiority on any other culture and the fact that even the most Anglicized of Indians had accepted their lower status, Dutt found it hard to understand the paradox of being an Indian and was in favour of reconsidering the ideological structure of the dominant discipline of history in the Imperial context as preventing any attempt to create a national tradition. It was simply impossible for any Indian to apprehend the idea of Empire the way Europeans understood it. Therefore there was only one alternative left to them.

The first possible outcome was to stop being enthusiastic about the modern idea of the Indian national project in order to promote solely the idea of belonging to the Empire. National pride would be somewhat sidelined in order for the idea of belonging to the Empire

4 Macaulay, *Minutes*.

5 Karl Marx.

6 *Peasantry of Bengal*, p. 188.

only to remain available. That is what intellectuals such as Banerjea had wanted in 1883, shortly after Victoria's coronation:

*God knows we are not sedition-mongers; we are loyal men; we are anxious to place broad-based the foundations of British rule in the hearts of her Indian people. I, for my part, regard British rule as providential, as one of the dispensations of the God of history. I am anxious for its permanence; and I have ventured to paint out the conditions, upon which its permanence may be secured. The days of Government by physical force are indeed past and gone. A new regime has dawned.*⁷

However, the idea of Empire in India had deprived itself of any emotional appeal through its constant postponing of reforms and had transformed itself into a simply unattractive expression of power. And even imperial *durbars*, like those of 1903 and 1911, were far from providing the magnetic power necessary to galvanize crowds!⁸ The remaining option was therefore to replace Mill's imperialist scheme with a functioning nationalist equivalent, that is to say, with some kind of narrative where national enthusiasm watered its roots in an ideal Indian civilization.

Dutt's Reinstatement of the Liberal Template for Modern India

Economist Dutt was well aware that the Indian farmers were totally ruined and that England benefited from the indirect effects of the famine:

*Englishmen will not contemplate these facts with complaisance. It is not gratifying to know that a country, possessing a rich and fertile soil, and a frugal and industrious population, is still subject to recurring famines after a century and a half of British rule. It is not pleasant to learn that, after an uninterrupted peace of forty years, the people of India show no signs of increasing prosperity and greater security from distress. And it is sad to contemplate that, in spite of a civilized administration, of the construction of railways and canals, of the vast extension of cultivation, and of the prosperity of foreign trade, India is still periodically desolated by calamities such as are unknown in Europe.*⁹

Liberal Dutt was opposed to Marx's mechanistic view of the tragic consequences

7 Banerjea, p. 49.

8 The Indian imperial project remained utopian and illusory. And for Indian subjects wishing to become full-fledged citizens of the British Empire, the same was also true especially after WW1 (Di Costanzo).

9 *England and India*, p. viii.

concerning the spread of capitalism in India. While Marx was horrified with the looting of India by the British, he was all the same convinced that the material transformation of the country would occur, due to the destruction of a fundamentally passive culture. Destruction released, through conflict, the forces that would drive the British out.

However, contrary to Marx, Dutt wrote in 1889 that “[Indians] *were, in this respect, far removed from the contemplative and passive Hindus of later days*”.¹⁰ Yet, he saw the history of his country as incorporating external influences with India regenerating itself through contact with other cultures — for example resulting in the abolition of *sati*. Being hostile to both conflict and the negative effects of British imperialism was little in the face of an India in full recovery which had always been on the path of progress. Rather, Dutt considered that India’s honest society was being rendered healthier, even more capable of overcoming the depredations of British imperialist drain of its wealth:

*In Bengal, where a Permanent Settlement was made with the Zemindars seventy years ago, the general progress of the country in wealth and prosperity, notwithstanding the depressed condition of the peasantry, caused by errors and omissions in the mode of making the settlement, has been most remarkable. Such errors in the existing state of our knowledge regarding the rights and interests of the subordinate occupants of the soil would not be permitted to recur.*¹¹

Politically, Dutt was a Liberal who wanted gradual improvement and change. The ultimate goal was for India to obtain political and cultural equality of status with Britain within the Empire. His inner contradictions were typical of the colonial era. As the president of the *Indian National Congress*, Dutt wished to keep intact the basic structure of the colonial administration in India (a model for Dutt), making only a few necessary adjustments:

*This is the simplest method of collection of revenue which suggests itself to a civilized people, and the Hindus, however rich in their literature and philosophy, carried few of the practical arts of life to perfection, and least of all the art of government.*¹²

British influence in India was actually for Dutt the true revolution. The colonial system was at times defective, but essentially fair and equitable despite some obvious shortcomings. British rule was in fact benevolent enough with its Indian subjects wishing to improve this system. Numerous references were made by historian Dutt to how indebted to England he

¹⁰ *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Indian Famines*, p. 152.

¹² *Peasantry of Bengal*, p. 18.

was. In *England and India*, he wrote:

*The object which we placed before ourselves in undertaking this little work was to show that the administration of India is determined by the current of opinions in England, that progress in India is stimulated by English progress, and that the history of India under British rule is shaped by those great influences which make for reforms in Europe. This is a fact which is often overlooked by the historians of India, but Indian history is unintelligible to us without this explanation. From the time of the great Pitt to the time of Mr. Gladstone, English influences have inspired the rulers of India; English history and Indian history have run in parallel streams.*¹³

In the Imperial context, Dutt strongly supported the Liberal ideology and thought the situation of India would improve. The idea of the greatest good for the greatest number represented a utopian distant future, but the Enlightened spoke on behalf of the weak. Generous but defective Europe directed and guided India. Each individual in India was on the path of progress, just like in other British colonies. Quite simply for Dutt, civilization meant nothing but progress toward freedom. However, Dutt highlighted to what extent the old Hindu philosophy was important. Modern society's duty was also to preserve and emulate the heroic ascetics of Hindu mythology.

Dutt's Reinstatement of "Hindu" History

One way or another, Dutt sought to reconcile the idea of belonging to the Empire and the pride of being Indian. To this end, he invented a specific strategy in order to show the inherited characteristics of modern India through its long history. Thus only, the future and the progress of a country could be properly prepared:

*The very shortcomings of Hindu civilisation, as compared with the younger civilisation of Greece or Rome, have their lessons for the modern reader. The story of our successes is not more instructive than the story of our failures.*¹⁴

Adopting the British or Western historicized model of Indian thought did not at all imply that Indian historians were endorsing either colonialism or Marx's concept of inertia. The study of the distant past offered Dutt many opportunities to set up the very foundations of a nationalist history since postulating that the nation — the invention of a national identity and a historic destiny for India — was based on an existing civilization, be it either

¹³ *England and India*, p. 120.

¹⁴ *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p.3.

religious or cultural or civilizational. Ancient India could then serve as a basis for containing both the hegemony of Britain and the decline of India:

*And the healthy joyousness which attended ancient Hindu celebrations has certainly lost nothing in the course of many centuries of foreign subjection and national decline.*¹⁵

As Dutt levelled strong criticism of the colonial system, he also insisted on the need for the freedom of his oppressed nation. British domination was henceforth neither inevitable nor necessary from the point of view of history. And for India to become a full-fledged nation, Dutt’s number one mission was to account for the reasons — external invasions mainly — which made this glorious civilization spiral into such an inferior status:

*But as these nations rose in their turn, that ancient civilization declined. After the tenth century Italy and India were the unfortunate battlefields of foreigners, — India of the Moslem and Italy of the Frenchman, the Spaniard, the Austrian.*¹⁶

R.C. Dutt had no doubt concerning the abstract idea of civilization. He declared that the history of India was that of a 30-century old history of culture and progress; it was also impossible not to be struck by the equal stage of development in European and Indian history at the end of the Ancient period. In spite of his expressing extremely high praise, esteem and judgment on British culture and the colonial regime, he developed both an objective judgement and a political strategy displaying nationalist ideas to an advantage — even if these open displays were modest from a radical nationalist point of view, they openly claimed that the prosperity of his country was not only due to foreign influences, be they British or Muslim:

*The task of mere conquest is easy enough, and in more recent times vast hordes of barbarians like the Huns and the Moguls have swept across the old world, almost from ocean to ocean. But the Hindus of the Rationalistic Age were less a conquering than a civilizing race.*¹⁷

True, the century of progress that India experienced through its contact with the history and literature of Europe and the Islamic world had benefited the Hindu intellect. However, it

15 *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p. 268.

16 *Three Years in Europe*, p. 310.

17 *Ancient India*, p. 79.

was thanks to India's unique ability to selectively absorb and synthesize foreign influences that was created a new culture not only equal but even superior to European culture:

*The British Conquest of Bengal was not merely a political revolution, but brought in a greater revolution in thought and ideas, in religion and social progress. The Hindu intellect came in contact with all that is noblest and most healthy in European history and literature, and profited by it. The Hindu mind was to some extent trained under the influence of European thoughts and ideas, and benefited by it.*¹⁸

A longtime associate of the British who were familiar with the answers provided by our Indian historian — the idea of “progress” was a highly prevalent concept in Dutt's work — he claimed that European thoughts and ideas had only reorganised the modern Hindu mind to a certain extent. By adequately choosing what was more controversial in the colonizers' culture, Dutt openly debated moral and intellectual superiority issues (Schwarz). Dutt can eventually be understood as a nationalist historian rekindling his readers' flame about India's glorious history of cultural resilience. Countering Mill's history of India as an integral part of British history, Dutt described the incomparable long phenomenon of Indian history that the English could simply not match:

*Herodotus tells us that the Indians were the greatest nation of the age, that they were divided into various tribes and spoke different tongues, that they procured great quantities of gold in their country, that India abounded in quadrupeds and birds larger than any other country, and produced wild trees which bore wool (cotton) from which the Indians made their clothing. Elsewhere he says, speaking of the Thracians, that they were the greatest of nations among men excepting only the Indians.*¹⁹

Dutt's Erasure of India's Muslim Past

Epic narratives and translations could play an essential role in national awakening. Dutt used them as possible remedies to the existing weakness of India. His narratives of the glorious heroes of the past allowed him to invent and fortify an emerging national community or manufacture collective memory much more than scientific history:

*Asoka is more famous than Charlemagne or Caesar.*²⁰

18 *Literature of Bengal*, p. 135.

19 *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p. 211.

20 *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p. 371.

Just like in Europe or Japan (Takenaka) during the second half of the nineteenth century, historians clashed between “scientific” historians versus “romantic nationalist” historians. Dutt experienced this confrontation within himself: he was not only a scholar of renown but an influential writer who provided the general public reading English with an historical consciousness thanks to stories, novels or adapted translations of the canons of the Indian tradition.

This particular aspect of Dutt’s thought is not to be overlooked especially as this part of his work has previously been studied in detail (Padamsee, Mukherjee, Schwarz, Iggers 2008). Dutt worshipped the principle of universalism, but greatly appreciated Hindu classic knowledge too. He cherished the opinion that if Indians were to be able to accommodate the Western experience in a positive manner — in particular the ideas of freedom, national solidarity and scientific thought — he also thought that the major mythological epics such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Ramayana* or the last *Vedas*, which made numerous references to heroes even bore historical truth, and that no other sources existed on the Ancient period. Dutt also wrote two stories on 16th-17th-century characters of the Indian historical pantheon prior to the British conquest. These folk heroes were rebels to the central authority of the Mughal emperor — Pratap Sinha fought Akbar; Sivaji fought Aurangzeb, his mortal enemy, an “alien” to Hindu India:

*Aurangzeb, on the other hand, was distinguished by a cold duplicity, a deep-seated distrust of all men, an intolerant, ungenerous and unsympathetic policy towards his subjects, which first alienated the Rajputs, then demolished the Mahomedan states of the Deccan, and ultimately wrecked the great empire which his great-grandfather had built up.*²¹

In his youth, Dutt had admired the most modest Europeans being proud of their national stories:

*Everyman in this country (GB) considers himself as a constituent of a great nation, prides himself on his nationality and the glory of the nation, and therefore keeps an eye on the welfare of his country.*²²

And he had developed a kind of worship for national heroes. For Dutt, if freedom was the highest value, using the concept of moral education thanks to the history of the heroes of the nation would provide ability to control its excesses. Friction and conflict in society would

21 *Civilization of India*, p. 116.

22 *Three Years in Europe*, p. 13.

decrease as a result, relations would become more peaceful and harmonious. The common ethical principles harboured by ancient Hindu knowledge would then serve as a superb way to enhance the moral principles of civilisation, even in a modern nation.

This is how attempts by Dutt to graft Hindu virtues from the Classics onto the worship of national heroes can be summarized. However, Dutt seemed convinced that human nature was the same at any time, in any place. He could not foresee differences existing with Ancient Hindu wisdom and its understanding of morals. At first glance, his attempt was similar to the idea supporting the fact that the Indians should master universal civilization as effectively and superbly as possible:

Ancient Hindu works are of a different character. If they are defective in some respects, as they undoubtedly are, they are defective as accounts of dynasties, of wars, of so-called historical incidents. On the other hand, they give us a full, connected, and clear account of the advancement of civilisation, of the progress of the human mind, such as we shall seek for in vain among the records of any other equally ancient nation. The literature of each period is a perfect picture — a photograph, if we may so call it — of the Hindu civilisation of that period. And the works of successive periods form a complete history of ancient Hindu civilisation for three thousand years, so full, so clear, that he who runs may read.²³

Promoting national sentiments or nationalism was eventually not Dutt's final quest. At the end of the day what he wanted was to design another form of universalism, namely a kind of Indian moral humanism. In short, for Dutt, the principle of European Universalism was not to be distinguished from the still much more ancient Indian intellectual tradition.

Dutt's Reinstatement of an Indian Muslim History

Romesh Chunder Dutt, an intellectual in a conquered and submitted India, tried to reconcile Western universalism and Indian nationalism. Did he succeed? The influence he had on his contemporaries provides a positive answer. However, his popularity among Indians at the time should not obscure the fact that a crucial issue remained hitherto unresolved in Dutt's thought.

Indeed, he was profoundly ambiguous in his pretension to defend Indian cultural identity in the name of Hinduism therefore rejecting a wide part of the non-Hindu past (mainly Muslim) of his country:

The Hindu student's knowledge of Indian History practically begins with the date of the Mahommedan Conquest, — the Hindu period is almost a blank to him. The

²³ *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p. 2.

school-boy who knows all about the twelve invasions of Mahmud, knows little of the first invasions and wars of the Aryans, who conquered and settled in the Punjab three thousand years before the Sultan of Ghazni. He has read of Shahab-ud-din Muhammad Ghori’s conquest of Delhi and Kanouj, but has scarcely any historical knowledge of the ancient kingdoms of the Kurus and the Panchalas in the same tract of country. He knows what emperor reigned in Delhi when Sivaji lived and fought, but scarcely knows of the king who ruled in Magadha when Gautama Buddha lived and preached. He is familiar with the history of Ahmadnagar, Bijapur, and Golkonda, but has scarcely heard of the Andhras, the Guptas, and the Chalukyas. He knows exactly the date of Nadir Shah’s invasion of India, but scarcely knows, within five centuries, the date when the Sakas invaded India, and were repelled by Vikramaditya the Great. He knows more of the dates of Ferdusi and Ferishta than of Aryabhatta or Bhavabhuti, and can tell who built the Taj Mahal without having the faintest notion when the topes of Sanchi, the caves of Karli and Ajanta, the temples of Ellora, Bhuvanesvara, and Jagannatha were built.²⁴

However, the history of the Indian Muslim presence was not really hidden in Dutt’s books, but remained insignificant compared to the rest of his work where there was massively pervasive proximity considering the Hindu past. Indeed, Sivaji, the Rajputs and the Marathas were given much more prominence than Aurangzeb or the Moguls for example. Out of seven of Dutt’s books, only one-third of his twenty or so volumes (*Civilization of India, Famine ... , Peasantry of Bengal*) took into account India’s Muslim heritage. In case Muslim heritage was mentioned, this was simply to underline the fact that the Deccan or the South of India were able to stay away from Muslim conquest for a long time and keep their purity.

Dutt was even more contradictory about the contribution of the Muslims when underlining the progress in the status of women in general, the caste system, the benefits brought through Muslim contact with India or the most cherished idea of the decline of India. Even if Afghans on the whole had a very good reputation in Dutt’s work, it is true that in general, not much referring to Muslims occurred. Was it due to the fact that there could have been lexical confusion on how to call “Muslims”? As a matter of fact, we cannot reproach Dutt with neglecting concepts which were mainly absent from use at the time — the word ‘Muslim’ only became used after 1906 or even more after WW1. Dutt used three or four words, common at the time (‘Mahomedan’, ‘Mogul/Moghal’ or ‘Moslem’ and ‘Mussalman’) but he could not employ words like “Islamic” or “Muslim”.

At the end of the day, if the Muslim past was of too little consequence from the quantitative point of view, it was impossible for Dutt to avoid paying a tribute to what

24 *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, p.xiv-xv-xvi.

happened in 700 years of India's past. Over the years, the Muslim past resurfaced in his most widely-read books, and references to Indian Muslim history could not but increase, especially in the textbooks (*Brief...*, *School History*). As a result, Akbar, Aurangzeb and the Mughals were given as much importance as Mahmud of Ghazni — as the major character in Indian history that schoolkids had to know about. Simply, for a time, Dutt rejected Muslim history for a more tilted view of India's past.

Conclusion: Dutt's Universal History, an Indian Form of Historicism?

My view in writing this essay was that, after looking at Iggers' definition of historicism (Iggers, 2012), one may have considered Dutt as the only Indian historian who had tried "domesticize" the historicist European tradition. Rather than focusing on a particular time and place like his predecessor and successors,²⁵ as a whole, Dutt had prioritized reflecting on history rather than making history. He had made the Ancient period the most important one in his writings and had invented a new philosophy of civilization, progress and fear of decline. He envisaged a totally new idea of a nation still living under the yoke of Europeans — by becoming the great visionary for a country in total upheaval and change. The view defended in this paper tried to offer a fresh approach to consider Dutt's work as part of global intellectual history.

Indeed, being traditionally considered as one of the intellectual stalwarts of Indian modernity who is still remembered today mainly for his thesis on the de-industrialization and economic drain under British rule, Dutt was definitely among the first Victorian intellectuals in the entire world to write the necessary nascent account of capitalism in India. I should also point out that his approach could not but have happened outside the Indian colonial context, India being at the center of the British capitalist world system. I shall perhaps add that the discipline of Economic History was probably born in India as Dutt's work preceded many other major works written in the West!

Therefore, when examining Iggers' definition of historicism, we saw that Dutt had adapted the ideas of European classical historicism to the Indian context. First, Dutt had used objective primary sources in order to establish not only political (*A History of Civilization in Ancient India*), but also economic (*England and India; The Economic History of India*) and social (*The Peasantry of Bengal*) or historical facts. Secondly, he had adopted a literary and dramatic approach in his textbooks and his various novels and epics. Third, his grand aim had always been to write a combined universal, civilizational and cultural *opus* (*A History of Civilization in Ancient India; The Literature of Bengal*). Finally, he had been constantly obsessed with providing his readers with the "big picture", as we would say today! Consequently, for all the reasons cited here, I will support the idea that Romesh Chunder Dutt was a historicist. However, if we look at the rest of Iggers' definition of historicism, I will

25 Bhandarkar about modern Deccan and Jadunath Sarkar about the Moghol era.

support the slightly different idea that Dutt was rather akin to some kind of late historicism.

Indeed, Dutt insistently stressed the importance of change in culture and society, especially in *The Economic History of India*. He never conceived scholarly monographs but reflected on history in general terms only, conceiving both a historiography and a philosophy of history in four of his works: *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, *A School History of Ancient and Modern India*, *Ancient India* and *The Civilization of India*. In Iggers' template, the latter is what would make Dutt a late historicist.²⁶

Dutt thought that only the historical sciences would be able to establish some hard truths on the state of his country and its superior capabilities of assimilation of foreign cultures — the so-called "Hindu Intellect".²⁷ I will therefore claim that the "Duttian" truth had evolved to the point of becoming the only truth in Dutt's times, considering Indian history to be of a uniquely "universal" nature. So was Dutt a champion of cultural relativism then? Was his "world-view" made up of irreversible "Hindu" progress — some kind of "Whiggish" view of history? Did his visionary scheme attack all firm principles of Western Universalism despite his belonging to the objectivist-positivist school of his time? This aspect of Dutt's work, that of relativism could be upsetting as supporting strict cultural superiority. But we may wonder if Dutt's relativism was a rigid withdrawal into a nostalgic, glorious view of the Hindu past.

In my view, Dutt was simply prone to restructuring and reorganizing historical events and situations according to a historicist template and apprehended single historical events in this perspective — *The Civilization of India; Three Years in Europe*. It was no contradiction that he wished traditions be maintained and was rather nostalgic about the past: proof of that was his conservative and romantic approach of heroines in fiction.

Dutt criticized and denounced imperialism — *England and India; The Economic History of India; The Peasantry of India* — even in British Liberal writings as Liberal imperialists opposed the objective assessment of Indians. His research focused on the unique evolution of culture, its transformation into a national culture through different eras — Ancient times in *The Civilization of India and A History of Civilization in Ancient India*; the modern period in *The Literature of Bengal*; the 18th century in *The Peasantry of India*; the 19th century in *England and India and The Economic History of India*. Dutt's work focused on the central State, less on society, but he attempted to elucidate the more obscure parts of history by pointing to what needed to be changed in both society and institutions — *Indian*

²⁶ Often, critics of Dutt's work have neglected or rejected that part of his work, branding it as uninteresting or being some sort of outdated, old-fashioned conclusions (Mukherjee). However, that part of Dutt's work is of utmost importance (Mukherjee reports that Dutt himself viewed these books as the core of his life *opus*), more than any fiction work or even more than his work on economic history, two genres for which he is mainly famous today.

²⁷ See Schwarz and *The Literature of Bengal*.

Famines; Open Letters to Lord Curzon: Famine and Land Assessment in India; Speeches and Papers on Indian Questions.

The issue of why Dutt rejected the multiple identities of India is to be left open though. This significant trait of this influential thinker is to be underlined. It is also important to understand that Dutt only partly failed in reconciling “Hindu” history and “Indian” history, which would soon be a real challenge for the future of the country. The complex contribution of numerous cultures through time and history, included the West, Islam or the rest of Asia and gave India the footprint of modernity. The study of Indian historiography and intellectual history thus demonstrates how historical thinking in that country has always oscillated between strict and open culturalism. These hesitations were already to be found in the work of Romesh Chunder Dutt, a most versatile culturalist historian from the end of the 19th century.

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