



## The story of connected history

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**From Vasco de Gama to 11 September 2001, a collection of articles reveals the diversity of registers and themes the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam looks at. Demonstrating a keen sense of sociological observation and a vast culture, what most surprises his readers is his critical mind and freedom of thought.**

Reviewed: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Is Indian Civilization a Myth?*, New Delhi, Permanent Black (distributed by Orient Blackswan), Raniket, 2013, 262 p.

Despite a first translation of Ranajit Guha<sup>1</sup> published at the end of the 1980's (that went almost unnoticed when it appeared), it has taken French academic circles about twenty years to pay attention to the Subaltern studies movement. Today they seem to want to avoid the same delay concerning the idea of connected histories.

The expression being now commonly used in the cultural media, it is difficult to ignore the existence of what is now a historiographic trend. It is not to be mistaken on the academic market, say its defenders, with the now abundant (though more so in English than in French) productions of macro history. The reason for this rapid interest is probably the fact that the most brilliant and prolific promoter of this new history, Sanjay Subrahmanyam<sup>2</sup> a specialist of 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian history, was research director at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris for seven years, from 1994 to 2000. He then went on to pursue his research first in Great Britain, Oxford, then in the United States, at the University of California, Los-Angeles, which provided an audience and colleagues more open, the author writes, to the practice of a profession still tightly confined within a national or at best European intellectual framework. He was the inaugural speaker at the 2011 Rendez-vous de l'histoire conference in Blois, the theme of which was the East; in 2012 he received the Infosys foundation (one of the leading Indian multinational IT companies) award for his work as a historian, and now Sanjay Subrahmanyam returns to France where he has been elected to the Collège de France to occupy a new chair called "Global history of early modernity". The Indian university world is buzzing with this nomination, which for some flatters national intellectual pride and for others, is a source of jealousy, since it is the first time that a researcher coming from and trained in a (so-called) emerging country gains access to the Collège to France. This nomination coincides with the publication in India of an anthology of

<sup>1</sup> Ranajit Guha, « Caractères fondamentaux de l'insurgence paysanne dans l'Inde coloniale » in Roland Lardinois (éd.), *Miroir de l'Inde. Études indiennes en sciences sociales*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences l'homme, 1988, pp. 251-267.

<sup>2</sup> See Anne-Julie Etter & Thomas Grillot, « Le goût de l'archive est polyglotte. Interview with Sanjay Subrahmanyam », *La Vie des idées*, 27 January 2012. URL : <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Le-gout-de-l-archi-est.html>.

texts by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the first edition of which was immediately reviewed<sup>3</sup>. When the news of the author's ascension to this prestigious French institution of knowledge was released, the edition also sold out.

His book's success is due maybe to the fact that he reaches out to an audience that goes far beyond the specialists of a specific cultural area and a single discipline, ie the professional historians concerned with South Asia. The work is in fact a collection of nineteen articles published in magazines, weeklies or even dailies, in India (*Outlook, India Today, Telegraph, Economic Times*), Great Britain (*Times Literary Supplement, London Review of Books, The Guardian*) and in France (*L'Homme, L'Histoire*), completed by an interview given to the Portuguese review *Cultura. Revista de História e Teoria das Ideias*. These relatively recent publications were published between 2001 and 2010, apart from one article dating back to 1995 and taken from a collective work dedicated to the history of The Delhi School of Economics where Sanjay Subrahmanyam studied when at Delhi University.

### Connections between history and literature

The articles gathered in this book are of different styles and deal with diverse themes. Reviews make up a first group, hardly surprisingly concentrating essentially on works of a historical nature. Topics are as varied as the comparative macro history of the development of the West and the East (a genre that has been very much in vogue over the last fifteen years), the idea of empire, Vasco da Gama, to whom Sanjay Subrahmanyam dedicated a biography (translated much later into French), or the history of the Thugs, the community that worshipped Goddess Kali and strangled their victims with a scarf before robbing them, and whose practices haunt the imagination far beyond Colonial India as revealed by the fictional hero *Indiana Jones*. He also discusses the historiography of Subaltern Studies, or even the theory of great providential men, as illustrated by the example of Winston Churchill, who served in the British army in India at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam allows himself a few forays beyond his specialist territory. First there is a chronological incursion into contemporary history when he looks at Ramachandra Guha's socio-political synthesis of independent India. He also looks at current times, with an essay on the future of Indian democracy by the American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, a professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, reputed for her work as a Hellenist – two works written for the general public. There are also some disciplinary incursions however, when the historian examines the American anthropologist James C. Scott's work on the tribal populations from the High plateaus of South East Asia's resistance to State domination, whose theses are reminiscent of those put forward in Subaltern Studies.

More startling though, are the reviews of works dealing with literature, that form a second group seemingly distant from the historiographic paths Sanjay Subrahmanyam generally treads. All the more so as the figures he looks at can be either authors from the pantheon of world literature, like Salman Rushdie, for his book *The Satanic Verses*, and the Nobel Prize winners, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and V.S. Naipaul, or popular authors from a totally different category. An example of this is Aravind Adiga, the Indian author writing in English, best

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<sup>3</sup> Srinath Raghavan, "Master of Centuries. The irascible brilliance of Sanjay Subrahmanyam", *Caravan*, 15 July 2003 (<http://caravanmagazine.in/books/master-centuries>).

known for the internationally successful novel, *White Tiger* for which he won the Booker prize in 2008.

Beside these *recensios*, other articles deal with current affairs, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, the changes they brought about in the representation of the United States as a country marked by Christianity, or the Indian State's abandon of studies devoted to the humanities or social sciences, that can only be saved, Sanjay Subrahmanyam tells us, by philanthropic foundations and large Indian industrial groups (one wonders whether the company Infosys does not provide him an illustration of this). The notion of secularism, not to be confused with the French term *laïcité*, was the object of a lively debate with the famous Indian psycho-sociologist and essayist, Ashish Nandy. The author does not hide the fact that he has little regard for what he thinks are his colleague's approximations, with a vision of India that seems to him to be marked by a reactionary romanticism and an "anti-science, anti-modernity and anti-technology feeling" from which, he adds, several authors of the Subaltern Studies group are not exempt<sup>4</sup>.

The article Sanjay Subrahmanyam dedicates to V.S.Naipaul focuses on a critique of the Hindu and nationalist representation of India. The author's historical and sociological knowledge of modern India is used to objectivise Naipaul's viewpoint. Born to one of the families from the Gangetic plain that was close to the Hindu reformist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before he emigrated to the West Indies, Naipaul, a « child of the Indian diaspora » patched together a form of nostalgic neo Hinduism hostile to Islam. His approach shows an affinity with the ideology of the Hindu nationalist parties of contemporary India whose genesis draws from the same sources as reformed Hinduism.

I am not a specialist of connected history, although I am familiar with several of the subjects discussed in this collection of *varia*. Nonetheless, I read this short-chaptered book like a novel, captivated by the author's narrative talents, the joy of his writing, his sense of sociological observation, the culture he reveals and most of all, by a critical mind and freedom of thought and expression quite foreign to us in French academic circles. Sanjay Subrahmanyam does not seem to care about reputations or institutional positions, too often the basis for ready-made reputations despite assertions that are in no way original and which would otherwise go unnoticed, by publishers in the first place, if their authors did not have a name that would most likely sell and be talked about. In other categories, apart from Ashish Nandy, Martha C. Nussbaum and Aravind Adiga provoke Sanjay Subrahmanyam's brilliant irony. Nussbaum's book, writes the latter, full of good ideological intentions directed towards the downtrodden of this world, belongs more to the traditional genre of philosophical "travelogue", exotic and superficial, informed mainly by privileged discussions with Amartya Sen and the expatriate Bengali intellectuals of Chicago, the "suburb of Kolkata". A story of the dazzling social ascension of one of these deprived people from Bihar who will stop at nothing, not even blood crime, Adiga's novel is nowadays on the list of every Western traveller who wants to discover the underbelly of a country that does not shine for everybody, contrary to the slogan *India shining* that the Hindu nationalist right tried to delude everyone into believing. Sanjay Subrahmanyam dedicates a few abrasive pages to the commonplaces that structure this novel and particularly to the impossible literary dilemma a number of English language authors are faced with: how does one make the point of view of a hero who

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<sup>4</sup> For a comparison with the situation of Indian studies in France see, Roland Lardinois, *Scholars and Prophets. Sociology of India from France in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries*, translated from the French by Renuka George, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2013, particularly chapter 10 "The Avatars of Scholarship on India", p. 389-431 (*L'invention de l'Inde, entre ésotérisme et science*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2007).

only expresses himself in a regional variety of Hindi, a language not spoken by the authors of these novels, credible in English for a Western audience.

### **An unusual career path**

The interview and the three autobiographical articles that conclude the book provide information about this historian's atypical intellectual trajectory and university career in the Indian diaspora. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, born in 1961, was the youngest of a family of senior civil servants and teachers. His father, a member of the Indian Administrative Service, was an influential strategy and defence specialist. The author's brothers are also civil servants and diplomats; the eldest is India's ambassador to China. The background is Tamil, Brahman, as he notes with a certain distance, to partially explain his lack of tolerance for dogs (particularly in Paris). Although Sanjay Subrahmanyam studied at the prestigious St Stephens College, Delhi University, he does not spare the bourgeois dilettantism of his fellow students or the mediocrity of certain teachers. After obtaining a Masters degree, he joined Delhi School of Economics, reputed for the excellence of its teachers, prepared a doctoral thesis on the economic history of South India from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that he defended in 1987, and then began a career as an economics teacher in this establishment. In order to understand Sanjay Subrahmanyam's trajectory, we would have to position him in the field of historical studies as it was in India in the 1980's. When we read the description he provides, we understand that the field of options available seemed quite limited to a young researcher yearning for innovation and with a mind far too independent to submit to the lethargy of a bureaucratic and university world, where each school solidly defends its positions and its posts. His presentation of the opposition between Subaltern Studies, where the work was often more innovative in its intentions than in its objects, he says, and the so called Cambridge school, satisfied with its colonial sources in the English language, reveals a distance and a humour that we cannot really imagine coming from a French historian commenting on conflicting interpretations of the French Revolution between supporters of Albert Soboul and François Furet.

One would be tempted to involve Sanjay Subrahmanyam in a debate, for example, around the idea of civilisation arising in the first article. Replying in the affirmative, but implicitly, to the question "is Indian civilization a myth?" the author questions the uses of this notion in Indian historiography since colonial times and notes that "Western orientalist" have had their share of responsibility in the invention of this idea. This is most certainly the case, particularly in certain cases the author refers to. The study of historiographical uses of the notion of civilisation, however, requires us to move away from any kind of anachronism in order not to project the contemporary uses this idea is invested with upon the past, while the idea should be analysed as a historical category. Nonetheless, the problem is that the notion of "Western orientalist" is as devoid of meaning as the categories East and West that Sanjay Subrahmanyam also quite rightly criticises. Since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indian studies in Europe (England, Germany<sup>5</sup>, France) and in the United States, for example, have followed different institutional, intellectual and ideological trajectories and it would be a mistake to gather the scholars of different disciplines (grammar, philology, philosophy, history) and their work under a single label of Western orientalism. In addition, to accuse

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<sup>5</sup> See Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, *Archives of Origins: Sanskrit, Philology, Anthropology in 19th Century Germany*, Translated from French by Dominique Bach and Richard Willet, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2013 (*L'archive des origines. Sanskrit, philologie, anthropologie dans l'Allemagne du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, préface by Charles Malamoud, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2008).

wholesale these so called Western orientalist of having ignored India's foreign inheritance, Islam to start with, is hardly relevant for scholars whose object of study was ancient India, let us say between Ashoka (4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC) and the Gupta dynasties 4<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) or the history of Buddhism and not India during early modernity.

In the interview that concludes this volume, Sanjay Subrahmanyam returns forcefully to the idea, just as erroneous, he insists, according to which historical knowledge would be foreign to an Indian "civilisation" that would have borrowed this idea from the Europeans, as for example Ashish Nandy or Ranajit Guha also claim. To a certain extent, Sanjay Subrahmanyam's work aims to refute this viewpoint and his ideas are convincing as far as the periods in question are concerned<sup>6</sup>. Here, however, we probably reach the limits of such historiographic questioning of this connected history of South Asia. It is as if the lessons drawn from the study of early modernity were valid for the whole of Indian history. However, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam<sup>7</sup> says, the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock underlines that in ancient India there are no classical treatises dealing with history as a system of knowledge. We can take the argument further by looking at philosophy, an area of study far removed from any so-called positive<sup>8</sup> history. Even in ancient India studies, notes Madeleine Biardeau<sup>9</sup>, history is not absent, but present in the history of the texts. Of this scholarly space all that is left, in sum, are the conflicts of interpretation these texts gave rise to in their time. This point begs for discussion – but this would lead us out of early modernity and into a specialist debate.

Seeming to constantly adopt a position against the grain of Indian history, Sanjay Subrahmanyam's approach can be somewhat heretical; he never expresses the ideas we expect on the subjects he deals with. We can rejoice at seeing the Collège de France consecrate this historian whose iconoclastic approach is always highly stimulating.

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<sup>6</sup> See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *Texture du temps. Écrire l'histoire en Inde*, translated from the English by Marie Fourcade, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2004 [2001].

<sup>7</sup> See Anne-Julie Etter & Thomas Grillot, « Le goût de l'archive est polyglotte. » *art. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> For an overview see Thomas R. Trautmann, *Does India Have History? Does History Have India?* Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Occasional Paper, History and Society, New Series, 4, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> See Madeleine Biardeau, « Philosophies de l'Inde » in *Histoire de la philosophie*, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, specifically pp. 96-107.