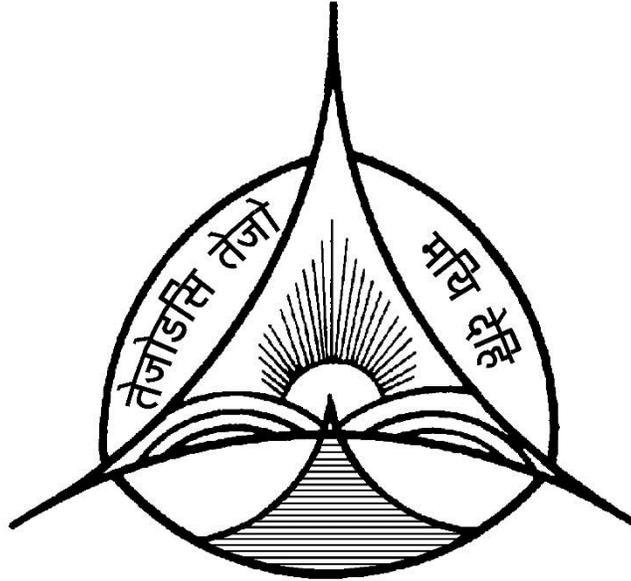


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**COLONIAL HERITAGE, POSTCOLONIAL SOCIETY AND ACADEMIA:
A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR ROMILA THAPAR**

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Introduction

Prof. Romila Thapar is Professor Emerita of History at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is one of the prominent public intellectuals of our times, and has won the prestigious Kluge Prize for the Study of Humanity in 2008. She has taught at several universities globally and was recently invited by the JNUTA to deliver a teach-in on 'The Nation and History: Then and Now.' This interview took place at Prof. Thapar's residence on 26 April, 2016.

Taisha Abraham: What do you think has contributed to the fundamental changes in societies' core institutions today?

Romila Thapar: Well, I think changes have been growing over the years and one indication of this is that in a sense, we have lost track of the kind of society we want. I can only compare it with the time when I became an adult and then entered professional teaching in the 1960s, when we were deeply aware of the fact that the latent question was, 'what kind of society do we want to build?', and the values were very strongly iterated and reiterated.

Slowly we moved away from that, and some of us complained that the society we had envisaged was not coming about, and some of us kept quiet. Then suddenly, we came to a turning point and this was neoliberalism in 1991, when all those values that we had earlier associated with building a society seemed to become unimportant. New ambitions came in, some perfectly understandable, such as the security of a job and a reasonable income, basic facilities and that

kind of thing, and there were other changes not understandable but very much part of the neoliberal value system—make as much money as you can, do it as fast as you can, the only thing that matters is who you know in society who can help you in this ambition.

What is worrisome is that these kinds of ideas come out of a section of society that is insecure, and I think that the competitiveness that neoliberalism brought led to those who succeeded doing very well, but those who did not succeed led to an enormous insecurity and lack of confidence, which then led to saying, 'I'll grasp anything I can get never mind about values'. And I think this is part of the reason why we now have a dominant society (I'm not saying that the whole of society is like that), but we do have a dominant society that is given to money, to connections and to religiosity. By the latter I mean showing a kind of religious front often as a means of demonstrating wealth. You may not be more religious actually, but you pretend to be. It creates a kind of make-believe world, which is in many ways irrelevant to India today.

Sandhya D. Nambiar: Do you think that in this moment of change and transition, the university could be a transformative space for the reworking of certain received ideas and notions, and be an emancipatory space in thought as well and praxis?

RT: One must remember that universities are the apex of the educational system, and the educational system itself is reflective of society. You can't have an educational system that has no reach, has no contact, or doesn't reflect what society is thinking. On the other hand, when you get to the university level, the university is the one space in every society, or should we say the one space in every society, where ideas are explored, discussed, debated, thought out; where you can have all kinds of supposedly wild ideas but discuss them.

You sort yourself out in those four years that you are at the university, then you get a job and things begin to change. So the university plays a very crucial role, both in self-exploration and in an exploration of the world that you're living in, and that I think is absolutely fundamental to the functioning of the university.

I would also say that in this country the problem is not just university education, it is the entire concept of education. And I think that one of the problems has been that we have never taken it sufficiently seriously, as a method of development, and a method of bringing society up to date, as a method of giving shape to the vision that we have of society. In a sense the only people who labour hard are those of a very narrow vision of education, specific not to advancing knowledge, but to making people think in a single, limited way, even if it is erroneous; those who have an idea of how they want to straight-jacket society, as for example the RSS's vision of a Hindu *Rashtra*.

They have a distinct vision of a Hindu *Rashtra*, and they've done their best on every occasion when they've had the chance to intervene, to try and change education in support of the concept of a Hindu *Rashtra*. Other people, liberals, have tended to be rather laid back about it, and said that it's all free and everybody can have their ideas, which is perfectly correct. But in that process, what we have lost out on is giving emphasis to the content of education—what is education meant for? We have paid very little attention to primary and secondary education that I think is fundamental, because if you produce substandard students at that level (class XII), and I'll explain in a moment what I mean by substandard, then it affects university education. Obviously the students you are recruiting at the tertiary level will also be substandard.

What I mean by substandard is that the purpose of education consists of a range of requirements, such as literacy, acquiring information, exploring that information in terms of what is the knowledge that it gives us, and questioning that knowledge in asking, 'is this really up-to-date knowledge? Is this the kind of knowledge that is going to explain the world to us or is this knowledge that closes the world?'

The understanding of and challenge to knowledge has to be fundamental in any educational system. What we've done is that we've reduced education to literacy (just about), a little bit of information—yes, students that studied up to the secondary school level may be able to point out to a few places on a map, or give you a few dates in history or something like that, although even

that may be doubtful. And there it stops. Then there's a rush for grades. Which means in order to get your numbers, all that you do is to read made-easies, you have model question papers, you learn how to answer them. And the information you're getting is not information that you get about such-and-such subject, but students at school are told, "this is the question, this is the answer. You simply have to learn this by heart." And it's sometimes what I call "catechismic education"—question/answer, question/answer, you are told the question and the answer. You can't question it, you can't challenge it or disagree with it. So you end up with people who really are ill-educated. They are not properly educated, and therefore they have problems when they go to university. One sees this in any good university. If you suggest, well let's give them a year of training in how to think, they get very offended, and say why should we? we know how to think. But in fact, they don't know how to think.

That is a major problem, although not altogether unexpected. I have a very cynical answer as to why I think this exists. Ultimately it is politicians who determine educational policies. Many politicians are often frightened of an educated electorate, although they may not admit it, because an educated electorate will ask questions. This may also explain why the budget for education, which in the long run is crucial, is frequently cut to a minimum and there is no outcry against this.

So you just go on providing education as and how it comes and you call it what you like. And one of the symptoms of this is that in the last few years, starting off some years ago, the focus has been on not just university education, but also post-university education. It's the highest level of research and training. It's the IITs and IIMs and Central Universities, that's where the focus has been. Now this is a lop-sided focus because until you produce a generation of students who are capable of thinking independently, you undermine your university education. Therefore, how many of our five hundred plus universities can even be remotely called universities? How many of them are worth the paper on which that degree is given? Just a small number. And so, why are we squandering our resources? Why are we throwing away money without paying any attention to the content of the education system and how a proper education is to be imparted?

Now, what I fear is that this kind of education will continue under the present regime because independent thinking people are not at a premium. They want people who will simply follow the orders they are given. So I don't see any letting up on this problem in a hurry.

SDN: And a symptom of that was what we saw recently with the devaluing of PhDs and the idea of continuing education itself. In many ways it seems that this kind of education is not really geared or directed towards any knowledge formation. It is simply to create perhaps dead labour, to suit market requirements. So is there any way we could return to the idea of knowledge being held in common?

RT: You see, for that, what you need is an academic assessment of the education system, not a political assessment, which we've often been doing. Our Education Commissions, even where academics have made suggestions, have been eventually evaluated by political requirements and not by academic needs. Even among academics, the sad thing one notices, and I've been talking about it at length, is that academics tend to give in very easily. Whatever the Ministry says, they tend to follow without questioning its implications.

An example of this is in some ways an inexplicable document that the Ministry of HRD put out on higher education, in which it was argued that all Central Universities will be brought under one umbrella administration, the courses and the syllabi will be identical, and teachers will be centrally recruited and posted to the universities. Now I expected that there would be a huge uproar from the academic community all round the country, but there was a limited uproar by a handful of academics. I can't understand the silence but for the fact that it's just very convenient. If you have a job—and these days an academic job is well paid—if you have a job, why do you stick your neck out saying I won't teach this, and I won't teach that, and I would prefer the course to be like this? It is better to just quietly go on teaching whatever you're told to teach! There's a sense of, I don't know how to express it, but a sense of convenience, and I don't know if it's defeatism, because if it was defeatism, people would at least quietly object, and surreptitiously teach things. But when there's no objection and there's no surreptitious introduction of the idea of questioning information, then you know that academics are products

of this education system, and they just go on perpetuating it. One knows this by asking questions when one is invited to speak, and one notices the kinds of answers one gets from those who are teaching as well as from the students.

But I think that's a very big problem. Imagine forty-three Central Universities, supposedly the pace-setting universities, teaching an identical syllabus. Have those that propagate this idea the faintest understanding of what education and knowledge is about? When we started JNU, for example, the brief we were given by the then Vice Chancellor G. Parthasarathi, was that he did not want the repetition of any syllabus in any Indian university. You take time off, he said, and think of new courses, of new syllabi, and preferably interdisciplinary courses. We finally produced in the Centre for Historical Studies a course structure that was totally different. And it worked! And it's still working with periodic changes, and it's producing good historians. But the thing is that you have to have people who think differently in the universities, and this is going to be difficult if you take the education chain as it exists, and recruit from that chain without encouraging people to think independently. It's not that people don't want to think. It's a question of thinking of a new course that tries to analyse a topic differently and discussing it with specialists. But that is seldom done. The preference is for teaching the same on-going course, and generally little addition or change is made to how it was initially structured.

This kind of thinking requires a lot of reading on the subject and this in turn requires good library facilities with the availability of books and research journals. Not every university or college is properly equipped with relevant books and journals.

TA: Would you say that in the act of so-called governance, the politicians are really telling universities what they ought to be doing? The HRD Ministry document that you were talking about is an example in point.

RT: Well, bound to be. Because it's the kind of document that no self-respecting body of academics would produce, however uninterested they may be in the content of education. It's not the kind of document that comes from an academic body.

TA: Would you then agree that the universities are being used to produce and reproduce ideologies that suit political ends rather than critique political and social formations?

RT: Universities matter, because universities are the kind of places through which you spread your propaganda. That's the level at which you capture the young generation and you spread your propaganda through what you teach and how you teach. That is why universities are very important. It's the place where ideologies of all kinds should be, if they are not discussed, and distinctions made between those with purely political ends and others who consider the all-round development of a society. But apart from that, it is also the place where advances in knowledge are made apparent.

Maya John: Do you think that the experience of colonialism and its certain after-effects on the masses of the country in the postcolonial period make it imperative for us to live always in a nationalist time. In other words, 'We the People' cannot be framed other than in the frame of nation. Does the right-wing assault make it necessary for us to become 'good' nationalists or create a left-wing variety of nationalism? Is the paradigm of nationalism so overarching that there can be no escape?

RT: Nationalism occurs at a historical moment. I am in agreement with historians who would say that there is a particular point in a society—in the history of a society—when it begins to think about the representation of people, about democracy, often representation more than democracy, industrialisation, etc. In the case of European nationalism, it coincided with the growth of capitalism and colonialism, which was an entirely new experience for the world.

Similarly, colonialism was experienced in India and other parts of Asia and Africa as a disjunction from the past. The response to that was a national movement because that was the first time that people began to see themselves as a nation. It is a historical moment. It is a major historical change.

I love quoting Eric Hobsbawm on this, who writes that the relationship of history to nationalism is the same relationship as that of the poppy to the opium addict. It's essential, it's the source.

Now history has never been treated like this before. Nationalism is a phase in the history of a country, or a society more than a country. It creates a nation. It gives rise to a sense of physical territory, to certain symbols, and it also creates—what is missing in the current discussion on nationalism—a sense of constructing a new society. Such a society is one in which there is representation, in which every person is a citizen, so one is no longer primarily a member of a religious community or a caste, or whatever it may be, but one's identity is that of a citizen of a country, of a nation. This is a new experience and it is an experience that we had when we went through the national movement and became independent.

Unfortunately, in the years after that there has been much less emphasis on the rights of the Indian citizen and much more emphasis on the rights of Hindus, Muslims, Brahmins, and this, that, and the other. That notion of citizenship has now faded with identity politics becoming central, but it has to be brought back. That is the foundation of nationalism. And the next foundation is the kind of society that you create. So, it is not enough to go about waving flags and shouting 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' and 'Vande Mataram'—these are slogans. They are not what constitutes nationalism since anyone can shout slogans. Nationalism is a much greater commitment to the nation. You have to understand what nationalism means. It means the creating of a self-respecting, dignified nation; where the citizen has rights and can exercise them whenever needed. The basic rights of every citizen are to food, education, health, employment and access to social justice. That is nationalism. Every citizen should have these rights not just in theory as we have them today, but in practice, which is what we have still to achieve as a nation.

The demand for these rights and their being established is what constitutes nationalism. And that is why slogans do not get us anywhere. Because nationalism comes at a certain historical moment, it is not a permanent entity. As societies grow and change, and take up new economies, new polities, development of different kinds, and so on, there will be new ideas coming up as to what a particular citizen wants. And those ideas have to be discussed and if agreed upon have to be given space, which is why one doesn't rush to always condemn the new values that are coming up. One criticises these new values not to destroy them, but to understand and assess them; one seeks to understand why these new values (if you can call them values) are taking

over. And it is the business of the social scientist to table his/her understanding of why the change in values is occurring.

Now in this process it is quite possible that several decades from now there may not be all that much nationalism—there may be some other ‘ism’. I don’t know. I mean, historians don’t predict the future. But it is important to understand that nationalism is not the end of history. It is what we are experiencing at the moment. We must understand what it means. We must take society along with that understanding. I would reiterate that the understanding of nationalism means defining a society where the citizen is primary, where citizens’ rights are endorsed and are guaranteed. That for me is nationalism.

MJ: So given what you just explained, will there be a post-nationalism and do you think the current crisis of postcoloniality is taking us to that moment?

RT: At the moment we are not moving towards it because the slogans of nationalism that are being projected are not of nationalism but of a community identity. These have taken over and are dominating the idea of nationalism today. The discussion on what is national and anti-national has taken a form that really doesn’t relate to the essentials of nationalism. Whether one shouts pro-Kashmir or anti-Kashmir slogans, is not the essence of one’s nationalism. One can be a committed nationalist and yet have views that differ from those of the current government whichever one it may be. Shouting slogans of any kind is not in itself the test of nationalism. Commitment to the nation demands much more. It lies in the making of a society that sees itself as a unity of citizens, who are of equal status, have the right to debate and discuss this unity, and that gives to every citizen the entitlement to human rights.

SDN: With the recent spate of charges against universities, that institutions are wasting tax payers’ money, and a larger neoliberal logic at work in the larger social scape, could there be an extension of the idea of the university itself, in what Henri Giroux had termed ‘public pedagogy’, since university spaces seem to be increasingly in danger of simply becoming state apparatuses?

RT: Public pedagogy is important both for the university and for society. Every institution has to justify its existence and society must understand what a university is teaching and why. We were able to have teach-ins at JNU because there was solidarity among students and faculty on insisting that we have those teach-ins and through them provide some explanation of what we are teaching and how we understand the world around us. And I must say they were an eye-opener in the sense that every one of us who participated either as speaker or audience felt that this was something that all universities should be doing. Now all universities won't do this because the attitude of, and towards, most academics is that they are just doing a job. Many teachers have the attitude of, 'I go there, I do my regular teaching whatever is required of me, and I don't have to do anything more than that.' They don't see that as educationists they have an extra responsibility. So to ask that there be an extra-curricular activity of teach-ins on subjects would be something that only some universities would be able to do.

But I think it's an excellent idea. And let me tell you also, the two things I was reminded of the evening I was asked to speak at the teach-in on Nationalism and History—my thoughts went back to the beginnings of JNU, where we discussed these ideas furiously and frantically because we had to work out new courses and new syllabi. I was also reminded of a time a little earlier in 1968, where I had been for a short while in England and in France when the big student movement took place. And I kept saying to myself that that was a much bigger movement than ours. There you had university after university involved, students barricading the streets in Paris, for example, and it went on for weeks.

Some of the barricades allowed people through, others even became violent in stopping people from doing what they were doing. But the students and faculty were not carted off to jail by order of 'the authorities'. Students and teachers were allowed to have their say in public. And there was discussion after discussion, which was where the idea of the teach-in began, with the student movement of 1968. And it was such a sane attitude! Nobody turned around and condemned the Sorbonne or Oxford University or Cornell or Berkeley or wherever there were protests, as there were in these universities, and said 'shut down the University!' as people here said about JNU. It was treated as a lengthy discussion that went on for months since it was

allowed to go on and it became increasingly peaceful. If the police is brought in, then of course there is bound to be a confrontation. Today, the great hero of the Paris barricades, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, has faded from the scene.

But I'm not saying that these activities fade from the scene, I'm saying that they lead to other kinds of thinking, some of it quite useful. Universities did begin to rethink their syllabi and courses in some subjects, in part as a result of the critiques put out by this movement. The movement and the events connected with it were analysed and debated by those involved in the universities and by public opinion. It was taken seriously as all such movements should be. The same thing happened in Oxford, in Cornell and so on. People began to say that there's something that we're missing out on in our educational system and that has to be brought back, and that was brought back. And slowly and quietly some of the syllabi changed, not merely because the students demanded a change, but because the academics began to question the nature of the knowledge that was being taught and asked themselves whether it was up-to-date and providing answers to current questions. So one comes back to the question of what is information, what is knowledge, how do you question knowledge, what is meant by critical inquiry? These are the fundamentals of education that nobody here in authority gives attention to. For them education is just bare literacy. And anyone who questions that is regarded as being radical and difficult.

MJ: Recently it has been argued that more inclusive admission policies in JNU have allowed students from marginalised communities to develop a stake in the university system. Does that explain the fact that JNU has become both a site for a right-wing assault, as well as a formidable site of resistance against it?

RT: Yes, that is largely so. In fact, when JNU started in 1971, which was long before the reservation policy was adopted, the university had a policy of recruiting a small percentage of students from what were called 'economically backward areas' and giving them a tiny edge in access to education. And so, right from the start we had students coming in small numbers who were underprivileged. There was an attitude that developed among them which was very positive—which was that it was good to be in JNU because they felt they had a reasonable

chance of a proper learning. I remember in the beginning teaching students who had a problem with the English language, who were trying to make sense of the interdisciplinary teaching and courses, and teachers had to do a lot of tutoring and sitting with them after hours to guide them further on what to read, how to understand various perspectives, etc. The tutorial system was very, very effective because you could discuss and explain why an essay had a faulty argument. That kind of personal attention was very effective in building up this feeling in JNU, where students and teachers developed the approach that they were in this exercise of education together. A lot of discussion used to take place and as teachers we encouraged students to stop us during lectures if they didn't understand or agree. This became a very effective way of learning since teachers were forced to be up-to-date and on their toes, and encouraging students to ask the fundamental questions of 'why' and 'how.' In this regard, the JNU system— not just the courses and syllabi—has always been different, i.e., in the way teaching has been carried out, the semester system instead of the system where students have to give a hefty exam at the end of three years, etc. All this made a lot of difference in terms of inculcating an atmosphere of reading and questioning.

I remember a research methodology class in which when I was discussing the difference between a historical fact and fiction, a student from Bengal—now an eminent historian—stood up, pulled out Mao's *Red Book* and started reading from it in Bengali. There was stunned silence all round and I was sitting there and thinking how do I handle this, what do I do? I just sat and listened and after twenty minutes he finished reading and sat down. I asked him why he read out what he did and why he thought it was important for the class discussion. And he started talking, and we finally ended up with a very interesting discussion on what is a historical fact. This would not be allowed anywhere else. Because we allowed and still allow or encourage this feeling that you can discuss your ideas, JNU became the kind of place that had a very different atmosphere. So yes, when you get a political party coming to power that has very definite ideas about establishing a particular kind of nation, and what it wants to teach the younger generation is motivated by a strong ideological programme, such a party will pick on institutions that are liberal and open, and try and force them to change and reduce them to pedestrian institutions. One can see the

predictable pattern. They picked, for example, the premiere film institute; they picked JNU, the Central University at Hyderabad and Jadavpur University; they pick on places where they think there is a space for liberal opinion in what is being taught and discussed. They want to clamp down on that. So one could almost draw up a list of institutions that are likely to be attacked.

TA: Academics have a role to play in creating a counter-discourse to what is going on. Functionally, how does one do this in a democratic manner? What can academics do structurally across universities to counter dictatorship? Do academics also need to do some self-analysis of the baggage they bring with them or the forces they are moulded by?

RT: First, academics have to be made aware of the fact that they can say no to an order that comes from the Ministry of HRD, and they have the right to say no. Whether or not they succeed in rolling back the change is another matter. But at least register protest. That is something that academics have to be told. They are not fully aware of the consequences of not protesting when they think something wrong is being done. Second, the representation of academics in all academic bodies of a university has to increase even at the expense of non-academics, and they have to insist that their decisions count for more than what is ordered by 'the authorities'. Yes, having people from governing bodies, well-wishers and so on is okay. But those who are specialists in education should have priority, not those who are the patrons of the university, often professionally engaged in unconnected activities.

Fundamentally it is an institution that is concerned with teaching and research. So people concerned with teaching and research have to be the backbone of whatever academic bodies there are. The thrust has to be that the university is an autonomous institution. Unfortunately the colonial hangover in this country determines that no government-funded body ever thinks of itself as an autonomous institution. It keeps on imagining that it has to take orders from the powers that be. And this has been our problem right from the beginning, for the last sixty odd years. So the emphasis on the autonomy of the institution is extremely important. It doesn't matter if in the beginning mistakes are made. It doesn't matter who takes over the teachers' association or students' association, as long as the principles of autonomy are observed. This

means of course that some such associations will find it difficult to retain umbilical links with political parties. This is part of the process of evolution and of learning. If there is a body of academics in that institution who are responsible and who understand what academia is all about and the function of the university in the process of learning, these activities will get righted on their own, as they have done in other institutions elsewhere in the world. So one shouldn't worry too much on that count.

But emphasis on the autonomy of the university, on who represents the university, on the fact that academic decisions and the regulation of activities should ultimately be taken by the faculty and the student representatives and not by the ministries or the government is crucial. The reputation of a university is not based on its administrators duly following government directives, but on the faculty and researchers and what comes from their teaching and research. This idea has to be pushed hard, and it's tough to do so given that there is always resistance from those who govern us, and more so in the present situation where the turning of universities and specialised institutions into teaching shops is becoming all too clear.

SDN: We've seen that in the different institutions such as in HCU, Jadavpur, JNU, it's the students who have led from the front. Could one imagine that there is a new kind of *dissensus* and new kind of student emerging?

RT: I think there's a new kind of student, yes. There are two kinds of students. One is a student who feels that given the economic changes that have taken place, he/she has a right to a job. And therefore when the jobs are not forthcoming, what is the value of university education. And so there is a questioning from that point of view—high competition, high insecurity, unemployment. What is this student body going to do? How will it articulate its frustration? Will it just take it lying down? Will it be happy with a little economic improvement or will it come on frontally? The other thing that has happened is that the underprivileged students have become much more articulate. They are larger in number than before, their presence is greater in the universities. They are demanding the rights that Indian citizens should be demanding. And I think that that is probably going to be something of a turning point. Now what will the authorities do with it? Will

they try and squash it, as they have tried to do in the instances where Dalit groups took the lead? Or will they understand that this is a perfectly legitimate aspiration that applies not only to Dalits, but to all underprivileged groups. The idea is not to keep making concessions, allowing certain caste groups to be educated, but the time has come to examine the function and purpose of education, and to ensure its pedagogic and academic credibility.

One hardly hears anyone talk about the Indian citizen in current times. There needs to be a consciousness of what citizenship means. Citizenship has obligations, both from the state and the citizen. They are mutual obligations. Those are never discussed. In all the clamour over nationals and anti-nationals, nobody talks about these mutual obligations. Yet they are fundamental to a nation. Until citizens understand what their rights and duties are, there will not be a proper sense of citizenship. That's very important. Slogans do not convey the essentials.

TA: Do you think the problems we're facing today in universities is pointing to a crisis of postcoloniality?

RT: I think it is pointing to a crisis, and it can be called a crisis of postcoloniality in a certain sense. It is to some degree a dependence on the institutions of colonialism without examining how many are still valid for the immense historical change that has occurred in India over the past century. We've never since independence really discussed what it is from the colonial period that we want to continue with and what it is that we wish to get rid of. The institutions of representation have changed but the administration, laws, structure of governance remain much the same as in colonial times. The recent discussion on sedition, for example, makes it so clear that we really haven't worked out the legal position on these matters as required by an independent nation. We're still functioning at many levels as if we are a colony, except that the coloniser has changed.

We need to reconsider those laws that are incompatible with an independent secular democracy. We need to rethink the aims of administration. Ideally there should be all kinds of administrative services to protect the citizen, to safeguard the rights of the citizen. Today what is happening is that, from the administrator to the policeman, we hear more frequently of such administration

harassing the citizen rather than protecting the citizen. The various functionaries of the administration are not so concerned about this since most are only following orders given from above. This is a reversal of the meaning of a functioning general administration. Administering a society means ensuring law and order, but doing it to help and protect the citizen against attacks of any unsavoury kind from any other person no matter how well-connected the person may be. What are we safe-guarding and whom are we safe-guarding ourselves from? This is a question we need to ask those who are the administrators of our society and its protectors. Those who are meant to protect us often merely follow orders from above, as they were trained to do in the colonial period.

To understand the historical change, we need to comb through our laws and decide which to keep and which not, and this not by dictatorial fiat but by widespread public discussion. That I think would go quite a long way in reassuring people about what is meant by citizenship. A newly formulated civil code, even-handed and applicable to all citizens, replacing the multiple codes currently in practice, would make recourse to law more accessible and underline the equal status in citizenship. This may reduce the unnecessary killing of women and Dalits as offenders of caste codes.

In the case of education, I do think that we really need to think not just in terms of ten plus two, three versus four, and that kind of thing. We need to think in terms of what are the ways in which we can upgrade primary and secondary education. This means a huge outlay on schools and on training teachers. Teacher training is fundamental to changes in education, because what happens today, is that many school teachers, and many in colleges too, are teaching out of compulsion, not having found a better job. Teachers have to be made proud of the fact that they're teachers and are in a profession that is respected.

One keeps hearing about our great civilisational heritage—where is it being demonstrated in the institutions of today? It is the reverse. The teacher is the least respected person. So we need to start training teachers to think differently about what they're teaching, about their role in society, which is a major aspect, and in turn we have to teach society to respect teachers. Again it's a

change of mindset. This means that instead of constantly cutting the educational budget, it should be increased. A good education helps build a foundation among citizens that can be relied upon and respected. That is absolutely essential.

MJ: In a certain sense the crisis of postcoloniality can be seen as emerging soon after ‘the old colonialism’ ended. At the most the crisis was kept in abeyance while internally it was magnifying itself. Do you see any difference between the early postcolonial period and our contemporary time in the way the academic community is responding in general, and the student movement in particular?

RT: I think that’s an important issue. I would like to go back a bit to my own experience and say that those of us who grew up in the last phase of the national movement were obsessed with two things in particular – One was the question of identity after independence, and the other was envisaging the society for independent India. We understood ourselves to be Indian citizens and needed to explain this identity. One didn’t think twice about one’s identity as an Indian and only as an Indian. All the other identities were secondary. It was instinctive to take a strong position on the question of one’s identity being that of an Indian citizen and of its being rationally determined and secular.

But we perhaps did not imprint this identity to sufficient effect. Identity in various forms has of course become a large interest among thinkers in postcolonial times. Those who have thought about it have observed the complexities of postcolonial identity—the mix of the early past, the colonial past and the present, and yet not ignoring the future. It has slowly been infected by other identities becoming more prominent, although varying in time and place. These were identities of religion, caste, region and language. The British insisted on the identity of religion being primary and spoke of the two nations—the Hindu and the Muslim. This converted nationalism into a religious identity and was dutifully appropriated by the communal politics of the 20th century. It surfaced with pain and horror at the time of partition when the country was split into two.

Initially, the experience of democratic secularism in the first two decades of independence kept the political use of the religious identity somewhat under control. But when that experience weakened—and we still have to understand why this happened—the religious identity took a political form and became gradually stronger. The two religious nationalisms, as some people call them, or communalisms as others call them, or even pseudo-nationalisms according to yet others, evolved around the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. Subsequent to 1947, the Muslim League, having succeeded in establishing Pakistan, defined by some as an Islamic state, the Hindu Mahasabha's ideology that evolved into the RSS, is waiting to convert secular democratic India into a Hindu *Rashtra*. The argument is based on colonial interpretations of Indian history, that many postcolonial historians have demonstrated as being false, and an insistence that a religious majority has primacy as citizens. So this is a crisis that we face as literally part of postcolonialism because it comes out of the colonial understanding of India and its history. There were other significant movements that did not claim to be national movements but were attempts to reach towards a more democratic society. Language was an issue in the 1950s with objections to the imposition of particular languages weakening the importance of regional languages. This was sorted out by creating linguistic states.

There have been other significant movements that are not attempts at national movements, but are attempts to empower those who have been traditionally underprivileged—Dalits, Adivasis and women. Ambedkar had argued forcefully for the rights of the Dalits, a group severely victimised in the past. The Dalit movement gradually fought for and found a public space and has now become a presence that is significant in the politics of many states. So strong has been the hold of caste in Indian society since early times that every religion in India, whether indigenous or imported, has maintained caste distinctions to some degree, but the most rigorous segregation was that of the Dalit groups in every religious community.

The Adivasis were segregated by their way of life and lived separately and hardly any were converted to the formal religions. There were agitations in the North-East after independence and today areas of Central India are in turmoil.

Some attempts were made to associate women in the national movement, largely in symbolic actions. After independence there was some inching out by various women's groups. But subsequent to the 1980s there was much activity around women's rights as equal citizens and the empowerment of women. It has now found its own voice and interestingly, its presence in many universities.

And so what we're facing today are multiple contestations—not unexpected in a vibrant society constituted of many strands of culture and thought. As a postcolonial society, we can now reconstruct ourselves in a much more reasoned way, so that everybody has the rights that they can claim as citizens, and not just in theory.

TA, SDN, MJ: Thank you very much Prof. Thapar on behalf of *The JMC Review*.

RT: Thank you.