

# Jacques Le Goff's Presence in India: A Very Personal Tribute

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## Abstract

This paper pays a scholarly and personal tribute to Jacques Le Goff from the perspective of Indian historians. The introduction of the “New History” into India is traced back to its origins, showing the importance it had for the evolution of India’s scholarship in history and the personal bonds that were created in course of time between Indian and French historians, with a special focus on Jacques Le Goff.

In February 1988, when New Delhi transits from severe winter to glorious spring, and the city is awash in flowers and a soothing sun, the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), organized an international seminar on New History (*Nouvelle histoire*). A large delegation of renowned historians from Europe arrived to participate in it. Maurice Aymard, Peter Burke, Marc Ferro, Carlo Ginzburg, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, and Michel Vovelle were part of the delegation with Jacques Le Goff as the informal head and the seminar’s star. The seminar was held at the famed India International Centre, adjacent to the sprawling Lodhi Gardens, home to several tombs of the fifteenth and early sixteenth-century ruling dynasty, the Lodhis.

This was Jacques Le Goff’s first visit to India. He was accompanied by his wife Hanka, for whom it was a private visit. Le Goff and Hanka made a repeat private visit the very next year, so private indeed that we came to know of it only after they had returned home.

What had made Jacques Le Goff the chief attraction for Indians even as his fellow delegates were all very distinguished scholars? We have to traverse a long distance to understand this.

History teaching in Indian universities was until around the mid-1950s confined to a recounting of the deeds of great men, and very infrequently women, in the past, much as it was elsewhere around the world, give or take a couple of decades. Mostly this was memorization of the accession of rulers to the throne, their battles, administrative measures, their deposition or death and the beginning of the next reign. It had given the discipline a bad name among students who found it hard to remember the numerous names and dates that they thought history was all about. The study of history was also tied up with the colonial legacy of the British empiricist tradition which insisted on sticking to ‘facts’ and going wherever these led the historian: ‘don’t let your imagination wreck

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the sanctity of facts' was implicitly writ all over. Of course, the 'facts' were usually selective and did not always lead to the same end. The British had introduced the European tripartite division of historical time of ancient, medieval and modern into Indian history except that, starting with the very influential James Mill's *History of British Rule in India* (1817–18), the nomenclature was altered to Hindu, Muslim and British periods. It was only in 1903 that the familiar ancient/medieval/modern triad was first applied to Indian history by a British historian, Stanley Lane-Poole, although the application was purely nominal, for the temporal division coincided with Mill's classification. For the 'modern' period, first the English East India Co.'s Governors and Governors-General and, after 1858, as the British Crown took charge of India as its colony, the British Viceroys substituted for the earlier indigenous kings. However, from the early twentieth century onward an alternate historical perspective on colonial rule began to evolve, gradually becoming a powerful driving force of India's freedom struggle. I happened to be an undergraduate and then postgraduate student at India's premier University, the Delhi University, during the second half of the 1950s and this was by and large the sort of history teaching we were subjected to.

But a change was also emerging at around the same time, although this too was inspired by developments in the Anglo-Saxon world. It came in the form of a wave of Marxist persuasion. The mastermind of this change was D. D. Kosambi, actually a statistician by profession, who had also inherited knowledge of Sanskrit from his family. He was a loudly self-assertive Marxist, rather contemptuous of all existing historiography in and about India, especially classical India. At one stroke of the pen, as it were, with the publication of his first book, *An Introduction to the Study of Ancient India* in 1956, a paradigm shift had taken place, displacing the stories of what he had once called 'megalomaniac kings and queens' and substituting for these the notion of class and class struggle and societal transformations. A new vista had opened up. Several other eminent historians followed in his footsteps covering all periods of India's past and this seemed to have become the new norm for the lesser mortals to follow, if with a much lower level of erudition.

The 1960s and 70s were teeming with this new historiography and the world of history teaching in India was in a ferment. One consequence of it was a second look at the school, college and university's syllabi of history. India's front ranking historians undertook to write new textbooks for schools and the universities began to undertake reviews of their own syllabi.

JNU, named after Independent India's first Prime Minister and founding father of post-Independence India's basic structures – economic, political, educational – Jawaharlal Nehru, was established in 1969–70, some five or six years after his death when his daughter, Indira Gandhi, was the Prime Minister. The University was meant to be off-beat, an experiment. Unlike the Delhi University, which had around 40 constituent colleges where undergraduate or Bachelor level teaching was done according to syllabi formulated by the University and postgraduate or Master level classes were the responsibility of the University's Departments, in all imparting education to around a hundred thousand students, JNU, located at the other end of the sprawling metropolis, was to admit some two thousand students to its own single campus and impart mainly post-grad education and research training. The syllabi were to be formulated afresh, not copied from other universities or repeating what the faculty members themselves had been trained in. Faculty appointments began in 1970 and 1971, a vast stretch of land was allotted in what was then New Delhi's 'Wild West' (actually located in the South West) for its campus, and students were to come in in 1972. The faculty was given over a year to devise a new system of teaching and its corresponding new courses. Even the nomenclature of Faculties and Departments was replaced by Schools and Centres.

It was in this context that the Centre for Historical Studies got going. With some very renowned historians at the higher end and some young and promising scholars on the lowest rung with a good number in-between, regular discussions about the structure as well as the nature of courses began

in earnest, with Wednesday morning fixed as the regular meeting day. It was felt that, unlike the faculty members' own training and the prevalent institutional restraints, the emphasis here should be on a minimum of lectures to students and a maximum on their own reading, writing and discussion among themselves, although in the presence of a teacher. All of it would be graded to ensure that it was taken seriously. All this within the framework of a genuine semester system, itself quite new to the Indian education system.

This was still the time when Marxism hung heavy in the air and its influence on the structure of courses was quite visible, although very few among the faculty were committed Marxists. When the batches of students came in, the excitement with the new system among them was palpable, for it was both a break from the kind of history they had learnt in their undergraduate courses as well as the method of letting them find and evolve their own argument instead of repeating what they had read in books and heard in lectures. To allow their own creativity free rein was almost intoxicating. A large measure of freedom for teachers to revise and innovate their courses and students to make choices and discover and articulate their own minds was almost enchanting.

Students were still required to choose a period of study from ancient, medieval and modern history for specialisation, which was a legacy of the old and almost universal system. But unlike the old legacy, they could access some courses in alternative disciplines like Sociology, Economics, etc. and some courses in European or Far Eastern History. But all of them, irrespective of their 'specialisation' were to equip themselves with the main currents of ancient, medieval and modern history not of India alone but around much of the world, and acquire at least a nodding familiarity with the concepts which underlie historical inquiry. Four such compulsory courses were framed for them: Ancient Society, Feudalism, Capitalism and Colonialism, and Historical Methods. It fell to my lot to frame, teach and develop the course on Feudalism. This turned out to be a great learning experience, almost preparing me for my own professional evolution. The JNU experiment in devising new courses was to set off a cascade effect in the history syllabi in Indian universities.

For the first decade and a half, the course discussed the concept of Feudalism, its provenance and its empirical grounding. All of it brought Europe into the focus. By way of comparison medieval India was similarly analysed. However, some of the terms of the debate were reframed. For me, the system of agricultural production in the two societies was the crucial entry point into the problematic and this involved the study of respective ecologies, social forms of labour utilisation and the forms of appropriation of producers' surplus whether as labour, produce or cash and the consequent dynamics that paved the way for transition to the bourgeois mode. It also brought home to me the basic difference between the historical processes in medieval Europe and medieval India, resulting in my essay, 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?', published in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* in 1981. The problematic was Marxist at its core, although it still failed to satisfy other Marxist historians. Understandably. However, it led to a wide international debate for over a decade in the pages of the journal and a special issue, also published as a book.

The course on Feudalism brought in the French historians whose work was often the benchmark. It also brought me in touch with French historians personally, ones whose works I had read with great admiration. As chance would have it, a bond began to evolve between Maurice Aymard and myself; Maurice, being in charge of the Franco-India programme at the magnificent institution Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (MSH) in Paris and later on its Administrateur, generously invited me to the MSH for a month or two almost every year from around 1980 to spend time in its fabulous library and to interact with French historians, besides practising the French language, which I had started learning at JNU.

Thanks to the MSH I was able to establish personal, durable contacts with some of the front ranking French historians and other intellectuals, as well as historians from other countries similarly visiting Paris. It was a privilege to be accorded a warm welcome repeatedly by Georges Duby,

Michelle Perrot, Guy Bois, Michel Vovelle, Jacques Revel, Étienne Balibar, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and many others; every conversation with them not only greatly enriched my understanding of history, not to mention the superb French dinners going into the small hours, but added to my stock many of their books given to me with their compliments. It was, however, Jacques Le Goff with whom I had the great good fortune to have the most lively and closest contact, next only to my contact with Maurice Aymard, who had accepted me as a virtual honorary member of his immediate family.

Jacques Le Goff's affection for me was overwhelming, coming as it did in the wake of my growing familiarity with his work. If Georges Duby had introduced us first to the study of land and labour in the medieval West, and then moved on to the realm of ideas and the mind, Le Goff launched us straight into the 'tertiary' stage of *Annales* historiography, if such a category exists. My first introduction to his work was through his magnificent essay, 'Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages' in his book *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, first published in English in 1980, the French original having appeared just three years earlier. The essay brought home to us the relativity of time in the historical context; it also introduced us to the objective reality of mindscapes as a variable in historical explanation. Gradually, as one's familiarity with his other works in the same book and elsewhere grew, the old Positivist/Marxist notion of a given objective reality outside of human subjectivity began to get moderated. The realization that history was not driven by impersonal structures alone and that human consciousness too had the energy to alter human life in the past – and the present – was beginning to materialize before us. It was a challenging qualification of Marx's statement as set out in the Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.' Le Goff's finesse as an intellectual would not let him pitch one against the other; instead he established an interactive relationship between them, with the mind as the entry point, even as he denied any determining role to either. True, Le Goff was not the only historian to relativise the relationship; but he stood tall among them.

The other essays in *Time, Work and Culture* amplified the grandeur of Le Goff's innovative mode of studying history. Indeed, the title of the original French version of the book, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge* (For Another Middle Age) evocatively highlights the departure he was making. While every essay in the anthology had the stamp of a scholar with a mind of his own, the one on Time stood out for its multidimensionality and the amazingly complex tracing of the argument, even as Le Goff kept lamenting his inability to pursue all the strands that led to or emanated from it.

New vistas were unfolding, far more subtle and complex than those encapsulated in the mode of production; these were the vistas of the mind. One realized that it is after all in the mind that history is first recorded before it is transcribed onto paper or in metal. Which is not to assert that history is a mere figment of the imagination with no real grounding. That would be absurd. Indeed, Le Goff lays emphasis on the historicity of historical 'facts' as distinct from those lodged in memory, individual or collective, even as '[m]emory is the raw material of history' in his words. In *History and Memory*, he sharply observes: '... the discipline of history, which has recognized ... variations in historiography, must nevertheless seek to be objective and to remain based on the belief in historical "truth".' Clearly, he was unwilling to traverse the whole distance with Post-Modernism. However, historical 'truth' for him was to be qualified with quotation marks.

Soon Le Goff's other writings made their appearance, although we in India had mostly to wait for their English translations, which kept some of his best generally out of our reach, sometimes for a short time and at others for much longer. For my part I was trying hard to polish up my French enough to enable me to read books. His *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, which boldly redefined the very term 'intellectual' by anachronistically envisioning an essentially twelfth-century urban context for it, first published in French in 1957, had to wait until 1993 to appear in English; and

the magnificent *Medieval Civilization* similarly had to wait a quarter century for the translation in 1988. Even as the latter has a chapter on 'Material Culture' – not its best – it is the very layered exploration of inter-relationship between folk and elite cultures (rather ambiguous terms), between pagan beliefs and Christianity etc. that makes the book a landmark. Fortunately, his other brilliant book, *The Birth of Purgatory* was translated in three years and the University of Chicago Press published it in 1984. It highlighted the profound mutations in the religious culture of the Christian Church in interaction with cultures more material in nature, such as the growing significance of money and profit in society. It is fortuitous that the magnificent history journal, *Past and Present*, which was also transgressing many firmly laid out intellectual boundaries and was highly influential in France, as elsewhere, was making up for some of the lost time.

The growing familiarity with Jacques Le Goff's work and that of other eminent French historians brought home to us in India an alternate perspective on the study of history. Time spent at the MSH went a long way in reorganising my own thinking. Around the mid-1980s the embassy of France in India received a highly educated and very refined Cultural Counsellor, Vincent Grimaud and his partner, Danièle Wozny, who together envisioned a programme of bringing French intellectual traditions to India through translations of the best of French intellectuals' writings into English in India and published there. Each such endeavor would involve collaboration between an academic from a French institution and another from India. Two volumes entitled *French Studies in History* were thus published between 1988 and 1990 by a leading publisher, Orient Longman (now Orient Blackswan), New Delhi. The volumes comprised some three dozen articles of the most distinguished of French historians from Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre to Georges Duby, Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. And of course Jacques Le Goff. Maurice Aymard and I were the joint editors of the volumes, though most of the work was done by Maurice and he, with his characteristic generosity, allowed me also to append my name to them. We picked up existing translations from their publishers and got others translated by professional Indian historians who also knew French. The first of the two volumes was sub-titled *The Inheritance* and the second *The Departures*, the division indicative of developments within the terrain of French historiography.

It was in this context that the Seminar on New History was envisaged. I happen to have been the Chair at my Centre at JNU then and offered to organise it. For preparations, I was commissioned to visit France to invite and persuade French historians to participate. This is how I met Jacques Le Goff in his bureau at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, on top of the MSH offices. I was a little uncertain of my reception by a legendary intellectual. Le Goff's broad smile as I entered his office put me entirely at ease. As I laid out the outline of the Seminar to him, his readiness, indeed enthusiasm, to accept the invitation gave me a glimpse into the humane aspect of the great man.

Meanwhile, my course on Feudalism at JNU had begun to undergo a metamorphosis. The way it had evolved over the first decade and half or so appeared too restrictive. It left out of purview huge chunks of society's experiences in the past. Gradually, it began to be more inclusive, and was renamed the Medieval World. Many of the themes which 'Feudalism' had left out were incorporated now; a good number were from Le Goff's writings. Therefore, when the Seminar was held and Le Goff arrived on stage, the applause from an audience of about 300 plus was thunderous.

Sometime in 1996–97, some of us thought of launching a genuinely international journal of medieval history edited and published from New Delhi. The existing journals around the world which carry 'medieval' in their titles mostly cater to a regional history of the medieval world, i.e. Europe. This includes the venerable *Speculum*. We, on the other hand, envisaged the *Medieval History Journal* that would encompass the entire medieval universe spatially, thematically and temporally, each with open boundaries. Jacques Le Goff was among the first we approached with an invitation to join the Advisory Board, along with Georges Duby. Both gave their assent readily

and wholeheartedly and SAGE Publications undertook its publication with assistance from MSH. The inaugural issue was out in April 1998. By then Georges Duby had passed away; it was our misfortune that he did not see even the first issue. Le Goff, however, contributed to it a superb article on Duby's evolution as an outstanding medievalist. He continued to extend help to the MHJ by contributing articles and book reviews and by agreeing to peer review papers we had received. Besides his contributions, his very presence among the distinguished members of the Advisory Board lent a lustre that was most precious. Alas, death has snatched it away from us.

Over the past three odd decades, history writing in India has undergone a sea change and I can speak more confidently about medieval India on which the influence of French tradition, most prominently of Jacques Le Goff, has been tangible. From class structures and their mutually antagonistic struggles, the focus has moved to the subtler areas of cultural motifs, where class too is a variable. In some ways, history writing in India has crossed a second major threshold in the last half century. For one, history no longer appears to be a search for The Truth, but more like 'truth' as in Le Goff's words; hence malleable, for the mind as the first repository of history is also the major source for its recovery. Under Le Goff's influence, though not his alone, the constitution of problematics reflects the transformation. If the agrarian system, expropriation of the peasants' surplus, 'Indian feudalism', trade and technology and the like were the dominant motifs earlier, post-1980s time, usually a subject of philosophical speculation, attracted some very persuasive historical explorations although on lines at variance with Le Goff's; literature, hitherto left to literary historians or scholars of fine arts, has increasingly drawn the attention of scholars of social history resulting in some major reconsiderations of received wisdom; bazaar gossip is no longer dismissed as good amusement, but studied as a manifestation of counter culture vis-à-vis court culture; the relationship between folk culture and court culture is opened up to serious scrutiny; language itself is turning out to be a fascinating demarcator of phenomena under study; inter-personal relations within the habitat and gender identity of polities have left us with some challenging hypotheses. And so forth.

It would be an overstatement to attribute all this departure in the study of history to any one individual, even Jacques Le Goff. History as a discipline, like other disciplines, has witnessed enormous, if cumulative dynamism, almost like a torrential movement around the world in the past several decades, and a great deal of effort by many scholars has contributed to it. Amongst them, some stand head and shoulders above others, as the movement's leaders who leave an indelible stamp on it. Jacques Le Goff is one such colossus.