

The essays in *Insights and Interventions* is a fitting tribute to Uma Chakravarti's rather unconventional but, firmly committed, career as an academic and activist. It is precisely because it is difficult to put Uma into a mould that makes her contributions to the discipline of history specifically and the social sciences in general, all the more special. This collection therefore aptly captures, in a very sensitive but academically profound manner, the multifaceted dimensions of the scholarly work that Uma Chakravarti has been engaged in. The book begins with a crisp introduction by the editor, Kumkum Roy which highlights the trajectory of Uma's evolution as a scholar and what her research work signified for the discipline of history and ancient Indian history in particular. The book is divided into three parts. It opens in Part I with 'Debates' and has three essays by V. Geetha, Sharmila Rege and Rashmi Paliwal followed by an interesting Part II on Three 'Narratives' by Bharati Jagannathan and finally, we have Part III which is aptly titled 'Texts and Tradition' with essays by Naina Dayal, Meera Visvanathan and Kumkum Roy. This division befittingly explains that the book is indeed meant to be read by those interested in writing and reading history in terms of an ongoing dialogue brought in by

INSIGHTS AND INTERVENTIONS: ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF UMA CHAKRAVARTI

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scholarly interventions from time to time and more importantly, that history must necessarily engage with different types of narratives. Further, one tends to erroneously assume that engagements with contemporary movements and insights gained from such collaborative conversations that enable a crossing of disciplinary boundaries are to be compartmentalized in a separate domain. This collection suggests otherwise. It is this interesting interplay of ancient text, contemporary debates and conversations and story as narrative drawing on deep sensibilities rooted in us that define the character of the book.

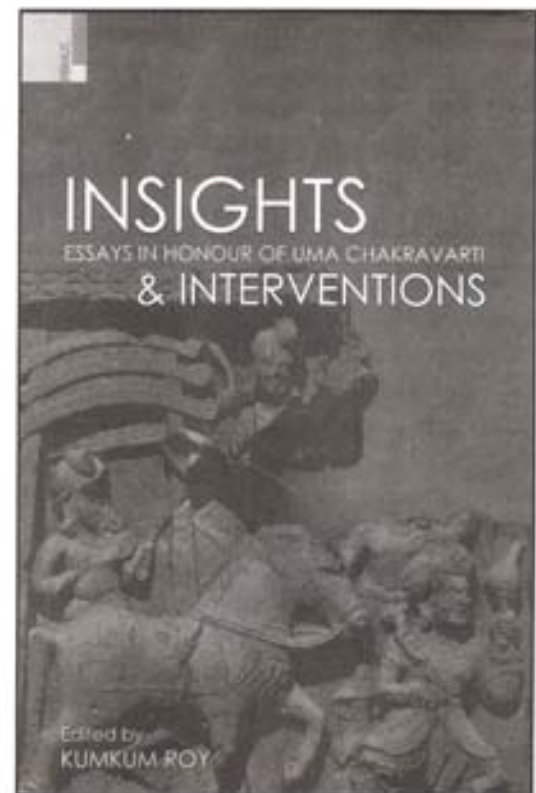
When one looks at 'debates' in forging different approaches to history writing, one usually has in mind the theoretical perspectives that each school of history writing tries to use to overcome the other's point of view. Rather than doing this, the three essays in Part I in fact are self-reflective. In Geetha's piece we find how this is entwined with Uma's growth as a historian which, in turn then becomes a mode for us to reflect on

Dialogue With History

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how in becoming a historian during the heyday of Independent India, one was either necessarily entwined in the way the nation-state was being perceived or, more fundamentally, on pointing out the lacunae that existed in this meta-narrative of the nation. Uma had poignantly brought out for us the image of the 'Vedic Dasi' and forced us to ask questions about what had happened to her in our historical narratives. Geetha now tells us that she continues to 'haunt' (p. 36) us in our respective attempts to write 'nationalist histories' and becomes a metaphor for her to explore 'Other Missing Women' by taking a close look at the Self Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu during the early twentieth century. In this extremely nuanced and well-written article, Geetha ensures that both Uma and the Vedic Dasi remain central to her endeavour so that they continue to alert us to historical erasures on the one hand, and determined action on the other.

Conscious attempts to carve out a space for women's studies and its engagement with institutions, disciplines and ourselves as social scientists is discussed in all seriousness and minute detail in Sharmila Rege's essay. She provides a very competent definition and institutional history of women's studies in our country over the last couple of decades since the nineties not without highlighting the various stages that involved along the course, significant dialogues, clever strategies, entangled negotiations and even discordant moments. One could not have asked for a more timely essay on this subject and I would suggest that this needs to be made compulsory reading in women studies departments/centres all over the country for, many such centres and programmes, now entrenched into the university system, seem to have forgotten the essential core of what women studies entails. Like Geetha, Sharmila too draws our attention to the way Uma Chakravarti drew on her insights as an activist to understand the relationship between the women's movement and women's studies. The most significant part of this essay is the way the new challenges of institutional expansion and an intellectual thrust brought in due to the necessity of playing to market demands or external forces in the last decade or so, has often led to women studies at their worst being mere 'training centres'. Sharmila ends



with hope that entails in her words creating 'New conversations, "dialogues" and comparative frameworks across different locations and imaginaries—social, geographical, institutional, and epistemic' which 'can disrupt an established understanding of power and knowledge in women's studies' (p. 70).

From the institutional and the pan-Indian to the personal and the localized, Rashmi Paliwal in the third essay in Part I brings to us 'Conversations on Caste'. One finds that the style of this presentation is through actual conversations that Rashmi had with various individuals belonging to different 'caste' groups during her work with Eklavya. These interactions draw our attention to a very pertinent element in research, namely, how does one incorporate personal experience into our research enterprise. This is something that Uma Chakravarti too had endeavoured to address in her understanding of the operation of 'caste' in early India through her use of the *Jataka* stories—something that till then had not been considered valid sources of information for history writing. Rashmi makes us uncomfortable, curious, reflective and uncertain as to how critical elements of caste reality in all its exclusionary aspects, through personal narrations can be woven into our academic discourse—something that needs to be addressed but

can only be done if we also simultaneously address the way the historical foundations of the discipline have been constructed.

How should historians approach 'story' as a way to study the past? Part II of this collection is solely on Narratives in the form of stories revolving around individual, social and cultural experience woven around key elements that define the way we access our traditional symbols and ethics. In some sense this is critical to the way we define our retrieval of the past but as trained historians this also entails that we be cautious in the way we do so. Each of the stories Bharati Jagannathan weaves are located in our present, in our disturbing present and very deeply entangled in our everyday lives. They reflect on issues of violence, justice, order and revenge, all very pertinent and central issues for us to address today as they were in the past. Accessing the histories of these issues must necessarily mean that we read literature in a different way—not delving into it for getting 'facts' of history but rather, understanding how such narratives handled the human condition. In support of the inclusion of a section on 'Narratives' in the collection one could force ourselves to 'rethink' the way we do history, harking to one of De Certeau's (Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, p. xv) ideas that since the 'real' of the historical past is a consequence of representation, the 'breadth of literary imagination' could also convincingly bring out the textures of history, its intricate patterns in symbols, actions, events and lived experiences of men and women in times gone by.

Part III brings us to a more familiar terrain, namely, that of easing out from different types of ancient texts, historical trajectories of change and substance. They, however, use different genres of the ancient Indian textual tradition to make their respective argument. Naina Dayal and Meera Vishvanathan focus on an extremely important aspect of tradition, namely, its transmission over time. It is often erroneously believed that either tradition had remained static, or that it was never questioned. Taking a close look from within the text Dayal shows how the Valmiki Ramayana was recited, received and performed in ways that over the ages brought in news aspects to storytelling. With her deep reading of one event, namely, of Kusha and Lava's performance at the Ashvamedha, she raises a significant point that in the midst of story-telling important events are asserted that have a social and religious relevance to both the knowledgeable as well the ordinary hearers of the story. Though contestation is not explicit in this format, it nonetheless tells

us of the nuances adopted by the ancient writers to bring in difference of opinion.

Meera Vishvanathan in her essay tells us more explicitly about the ways in which contestation was possible within the interacting, but different traditions, that existed side by side. To exemplify she takes part of a text, namely the *Purusha Sukta*, rooted in cosmology but most commonly seen as the origin of the caste system. Vishvanathan lays bare the structure, meaning and formulation of this verse alongside revealing how it was critiqued by later commentators, especially from within the Buddhist tradition. The point being emphasized is that transmission and dissemination of a verse in different contexts is something that historians have hitherto ignored and herein lies the significance of this essay that must be read by all interested in understanding the persistence of caste in our society and also, to learn that there were several critics of it in the past.

Last but not least, this section ends with, rather appropriately, friendship—a fitting culmination to this collection. This is yet another piece that looks closely at stories but firmly in a way to retrieve historical insights. The *Jatakas* are used to exemplify a variety of friendships. This exploratory essay on a theme that has hardly been addressed by historians and is a subject of analysis that takes us to the realms of understanding not only human nature but sensibilities portrayed in the use of animal characters in some of the stories mentioned by Kumkum Roy. Though Roy rightly points out that the stories represent 'starkly gendered traditions' that 'yet remain to be transgressed and transformed' (p. 181), it is also important to note that the way friendship and love is presented in the stories goes beyond the limited boundaries of the real world and thus the blurring of the boundaries between the human and animal universes is integral to them.

This book provides a unique space in which intellectual interests outside the en-

trenched boundary of history and ancient history as a discipline can be nurtured and yet connected with the discipline. Over the years, Uma Chakravarti's work has generated a productive tension between rigorous scholarly work and involvement in social movements. This collection aptly captures this spirit. A prominent idea many of the essays in the volume espouse in their different contextual concerns is that dissent is crucial for creative conversation between the past and the present. While it does justice to remembering Uma's work, its self reflective mode in doing so does not allow the authors to chalk out frames for the future. Would this mean only following on paths laid down for us? Has not the twentieth-first century thrown up academic dilemmas emerging out of current political practices and contentious contemporary issues that would require struggles as well as theoretical work of a totally different kind? A generation of scholars has now emerged only handling online version of ancient texts, debating the control of knowledge in cyberspace, or those now generated in social media. How would these challenges be faced by future historians and social scientists? These are challenges that would firmly put us on a separate stage of both activism and multiple methodologies emerging out of divergent intellectual concerns and forms of data generation—'Insights and Interventions' of another kind that were not of course meant to be the focus of this book, but those that should alert us to the intervening with them in ways that the present group of scholars has done for what were issues central and disturbing during the twentieth century and grappled with in the life and work of Uma Chakravarti.

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