1

Introduction

For long stretches in the past, historians and geographers collaborated when analysing or recounting the enduring facts about societies and civilisations. In these earlier times they brought diverse skills to the task, and the absence of rigid disciplinary divisions was a help. Humans and their natural surroundings were seen as interacting and influencing each other in bringing about long-term social and natural transformation.

But with the passage of time this collaboration became an unequal partnership. The increasing confidence of humans in their ability to alter and improve circumstances placed history in a dominant position. New theoretical perspectives accorded to history the increasingly exclusive privilege of narrating and elucidating the human saga. To geography, on the other hand, fell the muted task of providing physical props for this enactment.[1] The notion of spaces – particularly central to geography – came to be gradually and unfortunately disregarded by many of the social sciences as these were practised in the English-speaking world.

In critical social theory, too, the idea of space seemed to represent something dead and inert which contributed to society only as much as man purposefully chose to take from it. With the theoretical prioritisation of history over geography, scholars ignored the fact that their "lifeworld" was "creatively located not only in the making

[1] Soja 1990: 14. He points out how such thinking created a perspective wherein "An already-made geography sets the stage, while the willful making of history dictates the actions and defines the story line."

of history but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space . . ."[2] By the early years of the twentieth century, the idea of spatiality had been pushed to the fringes of the intellectual arena.[3] Territories and regions came to be regarded even more explicitly as the physical background or theatrical stages upon which historical actions were performed. Yet the enduring link between space and human relations could hardly be ignored. Thirty years ago, Lefebvre pointed out that "Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. Their underpinning is spatial."[4]

One of the difficulties was, however, that history-writing had come to be a way of articulating national aspirations and asserting the primacy of the nation-state over its regions. In Europe, the roots of national and cultural unity were now traced to an ever more distant past. Regions and provinces became reduced concerns, seen as best left to lesser historians. Modernisation created national markets and the autarky of regions was gradually weakened. National political centralisation overshadowed local governance. Provincial loyalties yielded to the assertiveness of national cultures.[5] Regional scholarship, with its emphasis on local identity and political divergence, now seemed antiquated and reactionary.

Yet the relationship between the nation-state and regional history is not necessarily antagonistic. Regional political processes can be "constitutive – not always imitative – of the politics of the nation-state."[6] It is therefore important to see how regions differ from nation-states. In this context Foucault says: "It is surprising how long the problem of space took to emerge as a historic-political problem. Space used to be either dismissed as belonging to 'nature' – that is,

[2] Ibid.: 11, 25.

[3] Ibid.: Soja sees this arising partly from the rejection of the physical environment as a determinant of social processes. Society and history were seen as functioning autonomously, based on the theoretical assumption that human geography was only part of the "physical background of society".

[4] Lefebvre 1991: 404.

[5] Applegate 1999: 1163.

[6] Ibid.: 1172.

the given, the basic condition, 'physical geography', in other words a sort of 'prehistoric' substratum: or else it was conceived as the residential site or field of expansion of peoples, of culture, a language or a State."[7] Regions, because of their predominantly geographical nature, are perhaps closer to being an assertion of "physical geography". Explicitly demarcated borders of nation-states, on the other hand, are seen as an artefact of the political imagination. But the matter is immensely more complex, for regions too are the product of human engagement with the environment, not merely nature's platform. Equally, nation-states are not wholly the result of national aspirations but are powerfully forged by the forces of historical geography.

A series of conceptual shifts enabled regional scholars to proceed beyond geographical description and environmental determinism. The idea of a region moved closer to social anthropology and thus offered a valuable "frame of reference for the study of social phenomena and processes."[8] A region or area was no longer defined through "objective attributes"; it was, in fact, the "dynamic relationship existing between an area and the social processes and ideologies that give it meaning",[9] and was "thought of as such by its residents",[10] even in some manner created by people "in their experience and in their imagination."[11] This purposeful relationship of people with regions was essentially how Knight perceived the nature and transformation of territories: "In a sense, territory is not; it becomes, for territory itself is passive, and it is human beliefs and actions that give territory meaning."[12] To give such meaning to a territory was by no means easy. Lefebvre famously wrote: "It is not the work of a moment for a society to generate (produce) an appropriated social space in which it can achieve a form of means of self-preservation and self-representation, a social space to which that society is not identical, and which is its

[7] Foucault 1980: 149.

[8] Moore 1938: 474.

[9] Murphy 1990: 532.

[10] Feldhaus 2003: 4.

[11] Ibid.: 5, 211. She further argues that "People bring regions into being by moving across the landscape."

[12] Knight 1982: 515.

tomb as well as its cradle. This act of creation is, in fact, a process."[13] The changing and evolving character of processes makes the empirical study of such changes doubly complicated.

Differences obviously exist between the outsider's "etic" viewpoint and the insider's "emic" understanding. Nevertheless, points of convergence are possible to find.[14] More complex, however, are the divergent theoretical perspectives that emerge from the different academic disciplines. For regional geographers, "the roles of region and society are reversed: region as institutional shape, is the object; society is its property or attribute."[15] The challenge lies in adopting a multidimensional perspective of a region, one that combines spatiality with several other social variables. Even then, it would be almost impossible to describe a region in all its aspects.[16] For practical reasons, therefore, regions have been delineated on the basis of "convenience". The scale or size of the region chosen and the purpose of the study have, therefore, been the two main considerations.[17]

In her presidential address to the Panjab History Conference in the mid 1970s, Romila Thapar dwelt upon the "scope and significance of regional history". She suggested that this was particularly relevant in the study of interludes between the collapse and rise of empires.[18] Regional history in India could therefore be seen as "a corrective to the earlier tendency to generalize about the subcontinent . . ."[19]

[13] Lefebvre 1991: 34.

[14] Mandelbaum 1982: 1459. Mandelbaum attempts to resolve the problem by arguing that the "two types of regions" the different viewpoints generate are "not totally separate realities".

[15] Hoekveld and Hoekveld-Meijer 1995: 159.

[16] McDonald 1966: 518. He argues that "In many respects, the idea that a region is susceptible to total definition has been . . . an illusion which has led to a great deal of geographic nonsense."

[17] McDonald 1966: 524.

[18] Thapar 2004: 318. She argues that "The interest in regional history assumes greater historiographic potential, potential with which we are perhaps as yet not altogether fully familiar."

[19] Ibid.: 318.

These "inter-imperial" phases also saw the socio-political reordering of regions that once constituted the empire. The periodic fragmentation of imperial power encouraged the emergence of provincial elites and regional identities.

There was another dimension to the issue: the growth of nationalist writing in India had probably kindled interest in regional history, which had then encouraged a wide range of differing interpretations and explanations. New socio-political groups and identities emerged in response to subcontinental developments. Regional historians highlighted the significance of provincial events. But the larger context that stimulated their work was history written on a national scale.[20]

Such a development was not unique to India. The United States, too, witnessed the tendency, though "by the end of the 1960s, the study of national character and the respect for national myths was collapsing, not only in history but also in the other social sciences. The principal writers of consensus history were falling silent . . ."[21] Consequently, studies of the cultural diversities of the major regions of the United States declined.

The interlinkages between historiographies at different levels are fairly evident. The idea of the nation had certainly stimulated regional histories. Yet regions were not merely sites upon which national-level ideologies and processes were played out. Regional histories, while being influenced by a larger national history, were also equally a rejoinder to it. By implication, regional and national histories came to be mutually constructed.

In approaching their work as a political construct, regional historians often particularised national developments to accommodate provincial sensitivities. As a result, their histories resonated deeply within regional cultures. This engagement with mainstream developments could be either confrontational or participatory, depending upon the shifts in power equations in the region. Popular memory, has the ability to refashion historical characters or depict events in a different light. It therefore contributed substantially to the emergence of regional narratives and alternative histories. Precolonial events

[20] Ibid.: 317, 318.
[21] Higham 1994: 1298.

and political entities of subcontinental significance shaped regional traditions in the different parts of the subcontinent. Mewar's resistance to Mughal rule, for instance, and the long-drawn Sikh and Maratha struggle in the seventeenth century are an important part of popular historical memory in some parts of India. It is a memory enlivened by regional heroes who successfully defied imperial functionaries shown as being tyrannical and oppressive. Both in victory and defeat, Mughal power and its imperial image had a large presence in regional historical consciousness. Subsequently, under colonial rule and in recent times, too, national-level historiography has influenced regional historiography. The grand narrative and regional accounts have always been closely connected.

However, even counter-narratives and alternative histories were accounts of dominant politico-cultural elites, albeit at the regional level. Though the lesser or subordinated sections of society were indispensable in the emergence of a broad regional identity, they remained peripheral to the creation of the assertive regional consciousness which overshadowed the undercurrents that are invariably a part of historical processes. As a result, Rajasthan's history has largely been about the military exploits of Rajput rulers rather than the story of communities such as the Bhils, Meenas, Jats, and Gujjars who (together with the Rajputs) collectively gave the region its fundamental social character. Folklore in Maharashtra recalls the inspiring struggle of Shivaji and his Maratha warriors against Aurangzeb, but relatively little is written about the unstinted support they received from other sections of society that contributed critically to the growth of Maratha power. Here a word of caution is necessary. Historians and chroniclers have always been fascinated by dramatic events, military contests, the glory of victory, and the grandeur of power. This was the predisposition that the Subaltern Studies historians had originally set out to redress by unearthing many of the numerous smaller stories that collectively constituted the history of the nation.

Do we then need to replicate the Subaltern Studies endeavour for the regions? Subaltern scholarship had questioned and enriched the dominant national narrative by highlighting regional and local accounts. Does it follow that influential regional narratives too should

incorporate the hitherto muted stories of communities lower in the social hierarchy? If writing a better history of the nation requires the inclusion of perspectives and contributions of the subordinated, should the history of regions not also require the same? It is hardly in doubt that provincial elites stifled weaker voices by dominating a region's history and defining its culture. As a result much has remained untold. More recently, thus, social scientists have examined minor cultural traditions more closely to provide a more inclusive picture.

Regional historians impeded by the lack of historical sources may possibly be prompted to adopt some of the research methods of the other social sciences. There is a need to go beyond political history and examine region-specific economic rationalities, repressed subcultures, and marginalised social practices and beliefs. Some pointed questions too need to be asked. Who speaks for the region and by what authority? Does the region have only one voice? Are there murmurs that one must try harder to hear and understand? What meanings can be attributed to the silences? In asking such questions, a more nuanced history becomes possible, one in which the social, the cultural, and the political are closely entwined. Such a history looks at the pervasive nature of power and its ability to permeate every relationship. It may moreover connect diverse polities to each other through a layered and complex arrangement, even if not all of them necessarily form a cohesive system.

Ecological historians have shown that ecology has always been a powerful influence on human history. In fact, most ecological histories have highlighted ecologically defined regions rather than political entities. Worster sees the history of a region as the history of "evolving human ecology". "A region", he says, "emerges as people try to make a living from a particular part of the earth." A region's history was about how a people "acquired" it, "perceived" it and "tried to make use of it".[22] Long term socio-economic processes that gave societies their divergent characteristics were the result of this interaction between man and nature. The question of how historical developments are perceived has, in fact, become a matter of growing

[22] Worster 1994: 27.

interest. More recently, scholarship in cultural studies has fostered a history-writing wherein "culture" has replaced "social" as a more inclusive term. The idea of culture seems to encompass questions embedded in the concepts of gender, race, ethnicity, language, and a host of other things that are sometimes quite intangible.

Along with the writing of large-scale histories of civilisations that was at times seen as a measure of serious scholarship, case studies and research on micro-regions, too, have remained a lively aspect of historical research. Local histories and the studies of specific and specialised nature are frequently very rich in description and detail. Collectively, they can more meaningfully explain some of the larger historical developments. Their grounded empirical nature can help support a vigorous theoretical framework to understand relatively abstract socio-economic processes.

The essays in this book explore aspects of history, religion, and culture in a part of the western Himalaya that today constitutes the Indian province of Himachal Pradesh. Before 1947, this area included British-governed Kangra and Shimla districts, and over two dozen principalities. The territories under the British were extensive and administered along norms established in the rest of Punjab province. Most principalities, on the other hand, were rather small and autonomously ruled by hereditary rajas and petty chieftains. Some chiefships were so tiny that they comprised only a few scattered villages. Notwithstanding their colonial government, the customary cultural practices and agro-pastoral system in the British districts were the same as in those of the neighbouring "native" states. Despite their indirect exposure to Mughal and Sikh rule, and subsequent subjection to intrusive colonial government, mountain societies clung doggedly to many age-old socio-political institutions. The latter were very important and integral to what these societies regarded as a sense of being.

The fact that the mountains were usually seen as peripheral frontier territories gave mountain people far greater freedom than those living

in closely regulated "core" areas. The state's ability to intrude upon mountain societies was constrained by various factors. Geography was the most obvious and important of these. It accounted for the difficulty of access as well as the meagre resources that the state could possibly obtain from such areas. As a result, the administrative apparatus and institutions of political control in these frontiers were different from those in the plains. So was the manner in which life was organised. Even in states where formal institutions of governance existed – as in Chamba – there was much that escaped their purview. The ruler's pretensions to authority, approved by Brahmanical pronouncements, rested ultimately upon power that was disaggregated across communities. Loyalties stretched to the limit by a difficult terrain required periodic renewal. The political balance was always precarious and the state treaded softly in the countryside.

Some rulers of Chamba – situated in the far western mountains of the region – made land grants to temples and Brahmins. Grantees were explicitly given the income and resources of land in some villages where royal control was firmly established. But these grants reveal little about distant territories where the royal writ compromised with powerful local elites and where socio-religious institutions asserted the latters' autonomy. Inscriptions on large and elaborately carved memorial stones placed at natural springs by local *ranas* and feudatories are an important measure of their influence in distant places.

Historians of the region have few historical records to go by. This gives rise to several questions that a scholar justifiably asks. Did the state not have adequate means to maintain detailed records? Was the nature of mountain economy and society inherently incompatible with methodical record-keeping? The mountain villages of Himachal were primarily sustained by agro-pastoralism. Systematic transhumance was used to exploit the natural resources of a vast and difficult area. The constant movement of animals and people across political borders was a necessary part of such an economy. Resources were shared by people of different states that were in any case too small to provide adequately for their own population. Furthermore, transhumant agro-pastoralists were difficult to tie down. They could easily evade government monitoring of their products and income. They were not

however entirely nomadic and possessed permanent houses and cultivated land to which they returned at certain times of the year. The state, therefore, enumerated the households and demanded a fixed amount of labour and payment in kind from each household. It was a rudimentary system and inexpensively harnessed the meagre surplus yielded by a difficult terrain to a hard-pressed peasantry. The task was, nevertheless, difficult and the Himalayan peasant was assertive enough to compel the ruler not to push too hard. Some of the essays in this volume are about how the rulers and the ruled made the system work and yet episodically tested where the limits lay.

The virtual absence of written sources makes it difficult to write a formal documented history of the region. The few political accounts available are in the form of poorly dated royal genealogies or panegyric compositions of heroic achievements in warfare and conquest. Petty rulers saw little sense in employing a professional bureaucracy to maintain official records in any meaningful detail. It was immeasurably easier to use the force of tradition to secure the consent of the peasantry than to try and coerce it into obedience. The latter was a risky gamble. Tiny mountain communities scattered across the landscape were guided by a collective memory of tradition and history, some of it specific to their village. These communities followed their respective customs and beliefs. But they did not exist in isolation. Numerous small traditions were linked to each other and were components of a network of widely understood myths and legends. From time to time, more expansive narratives were also created to serve a larger socio-political purpose and re-created differently as and when another occasion so required.

What does history mean to a society that sees as much – or more – value in the spoken word as in the written? How is one to understand people who regard collective memory as historical record and for whom past and the present virtually coexist in daily life? If oral traditions are the means by which a society understands the world and also explains itself to others, do they serve the purpose of history? Must historical research mean the relentless search for an elusive "objective" truth? Several similar questions have engaged scholars over the years. Some works (specially to do with the use of oral sources)

have been very influential in defining the field.[23] Historians, however, have been rather wary of working with disciplines and methods that do not lend themselves to a sufficient level of chronological rigour. Yet the need to write the histories of societies that seemingly lack historical sources has never been more pressing. In an increasingly connected world, closer interaction has revealed the different ways in which humans have understood and experienced their surroundings. History as a means of remembering and recounting such experiences over time, too, has been diversely perceived.

It is not, however, my purpose here to engage in a theoretical or methodological discussion on this subject. While that is immensely important, my focus in this book is on using the available sources to create a historical understanding on a range of subjects pertaining to material and cultural life in the western Himalaya. The essays dealing with political economy and the "rational" organisation of material life seem strikingly at variance with the apparently "superstitious" beliefs that so strongly influence cultural practice. But people in the region never saw this as contradictory in the past: nor do they see them as such today. Ignorance and backwardness are not the reasons for this. After its creation as a distinct political unit of the Indian Union, Himachal Pradesh made impressive progress in almost every social indicator of development. Incomes are higher than the national average. The number of hospitals and educational institutions, in particular, has increased impressively. Literacy levels are amongst the highest in the country. However, none of this has diminished the faith of village communities in their local gods or weakened their own ability to implement collective decisions. Religion and rationality have hardly ever worked together. Therefore, the continued authority of village deities to decide important matters of secular (sometimes even political) concern in large parts of Himachal seems a bit of a puzzle. Perhaps, village folk do not see the religious and the secular as discrete domains, but as fluid components of a single sphere.

[23] It is not possible to mention the enormous amount of work that exists on the subject. However, the work of Vansina 1965 seems to have been particularly influential amongst historians.

Did centuries of dealing with the political power of the raja and the religious authority of the state deity nurture in the Himalayan peasant the skill to negotiate the precarious space between these two aspects of daily life? Though an attempt has been made here to provide some answers, the last word on the matter is still a long way off.