

1857:

The ICHR announces its programme and an inaugural conference.

1857 has become a metaphor for struggle against foreign rule in India. This symbolic significance was enhanced by the perception from the other side of that confrontation: to the contemporary British it was a warning signal and in later times its memory a stern reminder that large chunks of India had to be re-conquered in 1857.

While powerful and richly funded agencies of the government are celebrating the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of 1857, in the light of their perceptions, what is the statement that a body of professional historians like the ICHR will like to the general public through ICHR programmes and projects?

It has been decided that the ICHR will initiate a cluster of projects aiming to promote historical studies on 1857 and dissemination of research findings in scholarly discourse (through research projects and conferences involving historians from different parts of India, collection and publication of sources focusing specially on the relatively neglected non-English narratives and documents, reprint of standard works on the subject, and publication of new research in monographs and collections) as well as popular media (exhibition of photographs and other visual material, compilation of an album as a byproduct of the exhibition, popular works in Hindi and regional languages, etc.). These programmes are being planned by a committee of the ICHR consisting of Professors D N Tripathi, Irfan Habib, Arjun Dev, J V Naik, Imtiaz Ahmed, Iqbal Hussain,, Dr Amar Faruqui, Dr Pramod Mehra, the Member Secretary ICHR, and myself. (Other members may be co-opted later). I write to you now as the coordinator of this committee at their request.

The First Conference:

The complex of projects outlined above begins with **a conference in New Delhi in December 2006 on the *Historiography of 1857***, with a view to review the past debates and the present state of knowledge about the events of 1857 and the long term processes in mid-19th century colonial India which forms its historical background. We propose a wide-angled perspective on the mid-19th century because, arguably, to isolate the events in the sepoy army and the battle fields from the long term socio-economic and political processes and the civil disturbances around the time of the uprising in the army will impede our understanding of the meanings of the struggle of

1857. In fact it was such an act of isolation which engendered the view that it was no more than a Mutiny. Moreover, the proposed conference will focus attention on the various debates generated by important historical writings on the occasion of the centenary celebrated in 1957 and since then – debates on the causative factors, the conflicting motivations and ideologies, the nature and significance of the rebellion, the relationship between regional events and the supra-regional macro-perspective, the bases of solidarity between communities participating in insurgency, etc. The conference will also aim at recovering the indigenous voice in the discourse of 1857 as well as the experiences of the common people: hence an emphasis on establishing access to non-English sources which were rather neglected in the debates at the time of centenary celebrations in 1957. While these may be some of our concerns at the conference, it is not possible to anticipate how the participant scholars will fill up the agenda of the conference with their contributions.

It will be useful to organize the conference in the form of a few panels focusing upon the following themes in the historiography of 1857:

1. Contemporary memoirs and eye-witness accounts and other proto-historiographic writings, written chiefly by the British.
2. Contemporary indigenous narratives in Indian languages.
3. The dissenting voice in contemporary Europe: the radicals (Chartists, Positivists) and Socialists (e.g. Marx) and their critical view of imperialism and the so-called ‘Mutiny’.
4. Official ‘Mutiny Histories’, from J W Kaye, G Malleson onwards, as part of colonial historiography.
5. Early twentieth century Nationalist response to colonial historiography: 1857 as ‘the first war of independence’.
6. Mid-twentieth century historiographic revisions: the centenary of 1957 and Indian historians in debate.
7. The socio-economic turn: ‘the peasant armed’ in focus in the recent decades.
8. Regional history and the subcontinental macro-perspective: civil disturbances in mid-19th century and the sepoy uprising.
9. Military history: the sepoys versus the British in the eyes of military historians.
10. The Rebellion in state-theory: Mughal sovereignty and the Colonial state in historical writings.
11. 1857 in folk-ballads and popular memory.
12. Historical fiction and interpretations of 1857.

13. New sources documenting 1857.

Contributions to the conference will not be restricted by these rubrics but it helps to have some thematic categorization of papers presented, both for purposes of discussion and publication.

Other programmes in 2007-08:

The ICHR committee mentioned above is engaged in planning the programme of activities following the inaugural conference on Historiography of 1857 in December 2006. The agenda includes at least four regional historical conferences in different parts of India between January and May 2007, culminating in a celebratory event in Delhi in May 2007; an international conference in December 2007; publication of research papers presented in the conferences and reprinting old sources, particularly those in Indian languages; exhibition of photographs and artifacts of 1857. These activities will continue through 2007-08. The committee will welcome suggestions from historian colleagues towards the enrichment of the programmes contemplated.

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya.