

BHARAT KI CHHAP: A companion book to the film series, by C. Shah, S. Paranjape and S. Manorama. Published by Comet Project, Price not stated.

One of the most neglected areas of scholarship is the study of the history of science in India. For a country which gave humanity the concept of zero and had developed a systematic, holistic system of treating ailments almost 2 millennia ago, this paucity of any detailed study of the development of science in India is indeed shameful. Notable exceptions like D.P. Chattopadhyaya, D.D. Kosambi and Dharmapal notwithstanding, most of the work in the field has been in the nature of compendia of facts, without any overall perspective or any attempt to place the scientific achievements in their historical context.

The book under review is a modest attempt to change the dismal academic scenario in the study of history of science. It is a companion volume to the film series "Bharat Ki Chhap", which itself was an extremely creative and pioneering attempt to explore the history, science and society of the sub-continent. In a very innovative way, the series tried to make the viewer aware of the evolution of our society, from Neolithic times to the present, with special reference to the development of science in various ages. The format was not the traditional one of the media just transmitting information to the passive viewer, but instead in the best traditions of documentary, the program encouraged the viewer to ask questions and develop a critical perspective. The book continues in this spirit of engaging the reader.

As the authors mention in the Introduction, the ".book is not about finding ultimate solutions, [but] about ideas that have stimulated us,....". The book is divided into 13 parts corresponding to the thirteen episodes of the series. Each part has a short introduction and a summary of the episode. In the film, several "sutradhars" or narrators were used who explored the subjects, asking questions and bridging the gap between experts and the audience. Here again, these narrators contribute their own thoughts and ideas about the topics covered in the various episodes.

The topics cover an amazingly large canvass; from the theories of the demise of the Harappan civilization to the current debate on development and science, from Aryabhatta to the effect of the Industrial revolution on Indian society. There is a wealth of information but more importantly, there are a lot of questions and queries. These help to orient the reader into adopting a similarly critical outlook. The ancient themes are interwoven with contemporary concerns thus emphasizing the need for a study of history to understand the present. Though the style of some of the writing is somewhat self conscious, the overall effect is very refreshing. There are a lot of good illustrations and photographs to supplement the written material. The nature of the book is such that footnotes would be inappropriate but the need for suggestions for further reading or bibliography is certainly there. This would enhance the value of the book as an educational tool.

The study of history of any society is primarily a study of the productive forces in that society. The study of productive forces leads us to inquiring about the level of technology and this involves an understanding of the nature of control over technology and so on. Thus any serious attempt to understand human history has to be almost by definition a holistic one, incorporating archaeology, linguistics, science, and a variety of other fields. Though one is still waiting for the likes of Joseph Needham to carry out a systematic and detailed study of Indian science and civilization, this book is a very welcome one. It is an excellent educational tool, besides being a thought provoking general read.