Reflections on the Disciplinary Credibility of Business History

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Can a change of nomenclature generate a new approach that may help reconceptualise the story, the history of Indian business? Business studies must take the archive much more seriously than it does, not as an inert repository of facts, and engage with the historical method with much greater rigour. Unless the practice and protocols of history writing are considered seriously and their location understood, it would be impossible for business history to have the productive conversation that it seeks.

This article takes its cue from a recent seminar that was convened under the auspices of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad to celebrate the life and labour of Dwijendra Tripathi (1930–2018), the late and distinguished faculty at the institute. Tripathi spent the greater part of his life researching the business history of India, giving it very definite contours and providing the discipline an identifiable mandate. Trained in the United States (US), he was probably more responsive than most scholars to the ways in which business history had emerged in the very specific context of management studies and institutional economics. The question of location was not unimportant as it meant business history did not immediately grapple with the range of questions and methodological challenges that history had to confront in the wake of either the linguistic turn or from the larger project of social sciences.

Tripathi himself preferred to see business history as a form of social history and not economic history, which had assumed specific configurations depending on the institutional location it thrived in. For him, the analysis of business communities in India, of the relationship between state and business, of the strategies that business groups adopted for staying afloat and for expansion particularly during challenging political conditions, of detailed histories of business families and firms (the monographs on Kasturbhai Lalbhai and his entrepreneurship, and the Bank of Baroda being instances in point) constituted the staple of business history (Tripathi 1981). The method was squarely located within the discipline of history; it was primarily archival and the emphasis was on mining available archives and finding new ones to be able to tell a story of business and entrepreneurial initiative in the high noon of imperialism and thereafter. The writings fitted well into the existing corpus of work and gave business history a definite fillip, making it worthwhile to move beyond the narrow history of the rise and fall of a business firm, to consider a broader empirical focus on business in society that could serve as the basis for making broader generalisations.

Till the very end of his life and illustrious career, Tripathi battled for business history, urging a holistic approach and inviting suggestions for fortifying the discipline. And yet, as we survey the landscape today, we continue to debate on what makes business history different, or to put it differently, whether we can, as yet, identify a clear conceptual framework for the field.

In one sense, business history as it is projected, albeit with caveats, is both different and not so different from the concerns and mandates of economic history, whose practitioners often found themselves on opposite sides of a spectrum of raging debate about both methods of analysis and variables to be used, questions to be asked and conclusions to be drawn. The debates associated with India’s economic history were important. Besides the obvious entertainment value they provided to students in the late 1970s and 1980s who grew up devouring the pages of the Indian Economic and Social History Review, and accommodating the provocative views of Morris D Morris and the counterclaims of Toru Matsui and Tapan Raychaudhuri, there was a constant preoccupation with what should constitute the method of doing economic history. The rigour that the debates introduced into the field of serious economic history was immensely valuable as it alerted us both to the availability of facts and to the criteria for their selection. In one sense, this was not original, history as E H Carr reminded us decades ago. It was all about facts and interpretation, and no history could remain completely objective as it was a narrative crafted within a context by an agent whose location, politics and extent of empathy conditioned their practice. And yet, for economic history, especially of South Asia, the exercise assumed a new charge as its practitioners debated sharply about the legitimacy of certain questions.
asked or about the applicability of economic theory, as urged by Morris, to historical analysis.

For Morris (1963), inarguably the most influential and polemical among revisionist historians, economic theory could be a valuable and valid tool for posing questions rather than to adhere to a fixed ideological position, such as, for example, an imperialist or anti-imperialist framework for assessing economic change and performance between 1750 and 1950. For his critics, however, any interrogation that discounted the overwhelming impact of the colonial interlude made economic and/or social analysis suspect, not to speak of the inadequacy of source base that economic historians worked with for the 18th century, or of the tenuous nature of India’s national economy. In this, they had a point: the inadequate and fragmentary database was a major constraint that made broad formulations difficult, if not impossible. On the other hand, a supply constraint such as this, only served to augment the importance of narrative functions of history, where the selection and interpretation of fact became part of a nuanced and layered narrative exercise that aimed to understand the past in dialogue with the present.

Within the broader field of economic history, the emphasis on understanding relations of production or on identifying elements of capitalist potential in a pre-modern Mughal economy held attention, and there is no doubt that substantial research in the 1960s and 1970s helped generate important insights on the levels of trade and monetisation in premodern and early-modern India. It was within this field again that important studies emerged of trading communities, of indigenous organisations that fitted into the emerging colonial economy of the 19th century, of early indigenous indigence, of the formation of the bazaar as the intermediate sector of India’s economy sandwiched between European-controlled capitalist sectors and the world of subsistence of the Indian peasant, and subsequently, of the coming of modern Indian business and the capitalist class and their transfer of loyalties to the Indian nationalist struggle. That some of these writings could legitimately constitute the staple of business history was not in doubt, even if the champions of the discipline of business history, perched in spaces that lie outside the mainstream university with its disciplinary departments, may feel the need to give the field a more exclusive set of claims and features. The anxiety may well derive from the epistemic credibility of History outside traditional university departments and from the particular disciplinary expertise that practitioners of business history wield, and which, for some reason, sits uncomfortable with the practices that have been traditionally associated with the academic discipline of history.

**New Fields of Enquiry**

But, before we approach the subject of how business history has been and can be constituted as a separate subfield, it may be pertinent to consider the developments within the discipline of History itself, largely in response to new methodologies and new fields of enquiry that warrant a different mode of reckoning with the archive and reading it. The linguistic turn, the value of anthropological methods and methods of oral history, such as deep listening and thick description, forced history to come down from its hallowed archives and magisterial claims to consider new ways of accessing the past and presenting it.

These engagements produced some of the finest examples of social history, Shahid Amin’s *Gandhi as Mahatma* (1989) and Sumit Sarkar’s *The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur* (1989) being important instances in point. That these new interventions in social history, most solidly expressed in subaltern studies, did undoubtedly strip economic history of its appeal, is without doubt; but equally salient is the impact that it had on the actual writing of socio-economic history, of law and related institutions—Sudipta Sen’s *The Empire of Free Trade* (1998) and Ritu Birla’s *Stages of Capital* (2009) being instances in point. For maritime history as well, a field that emerged out of a larger economic history template and sought to experiment with a new conceptual framework deriving new heuristic categories (littoral society, peddler thesis, globalisation, connected and integrated histories), new and exciting possibilities of tracking the social life at sea, of maritime radicalism and piracy, of

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the social and economic value of correspondence in maintaining trade networks materialised, all of which were duly attentive to the economic and material realities of the times, and yet tracked historical experience that was markedly different from the reductive critique that economic history dwindled in.

The important question then for us to reflect is how business history has evolved in the recent past, especially in relation to South Asia. Do we simply see an enumeration of the same concerns and the same topics that go on to make up the corpus, namely, that of trade and commerce in historical perspective, organisation and family forms, diaspora and entrepreneurship, stacked in order to relate a story of Asian business—of the dynamic Chinese dragon and the slow but steady Indian elephant? Or has business history thought out a new conceptual framework for itself, posing a number of significant questions to make it relevant to a framework for itself, posing a number of steady Indian elephant? Or has business history been more active than others in trying to grapple with the field. In 2014, there was a panel discussion at the IIM Bangalore, where the prospects for business history were debated and discussed and ideas solicited for reviving business history, wherein the potential of business history as a discipline for multidisciplinary work on capitalism and its myriad manifestations was endorsed (Kumar 2014). If early economic history in India emerged in response to India’s poverty and backwardness, business history was framed in terms of resilience and strategic adjustment to historical contingencies. The task was not easy for sources continued to be elusive and even if available, needed to be read with great rigour. Given the diversity of the panel members, it was natural that the suggestions ranged from general issues of enquiry to more specific problems of regional differentiation, caste and business behaviour and the challenges in studying contemporary history. The timing of this panel was coeval with the publication of several general books on Indian business (the Penguin series edited by Gurcharan Das), some biographies of business start-ups and business people that featured in public events like the Bangalore Bizlit festival, as well as with some well-researched books on Indian business. While these developments in itself were not expected to cohere into a field or a disciplinary subfield, these were definite and appreciable signs of a renewed engagement with business history as a specialised field of enquiry and research.

It was, therefore, with some anticipation that I attended the recently concluded international conference on business and economic history at IIM Ahmedabad (29–31 August 2019) that included a galaxy of scholars with a known reputation for solid work, a doctoral students’ workshop that allowed us to respond to a range of research that was subsumed under business history, and a number of panel discussions. I was both expecting clearer iterations of concepts and methods as well as some debate about the teaching of business history in very different and dispersed locations. The paper presentations were excellent, even if they did not adhere to a particular methodology that set them apart as specimens of business history; what was striking was the range of issues covered, the range of disciplines that generated valuable understanding of business and banking practices, entrepreneurial decisions and commodity histories, thus guaranteeing a wide palette of colours for business and economic history. Where there remained an element of disquiet was related to the actual teaching of the subject of business history and the pedagogical choices that lay before the community. There were candid suggestions about the need for dropping the “history” element from business history; somehow the word history was a turn off for students, who could be persuaded to pursue the subject if only the H word was not mentioned. Needless to say, this was a surprise, not because of the long term delegitimisation that the subject has suffered, but because of the obvious paradox of our current situation when everyone ports to write history and is confident that they can do so—whether from the vantage point of cultural studies, literature or sociology, or from journalism and popular history writing. Even more striking was the reference to how social history, more specifically, the subaltern studies initiative had produced casualties in the field of economic history writing and how, therefore, it was now imperative to rescue it and reclaim for it a narrative that was not tainted by post-colonial predicaments.

Protocols of History Writing

Both these sets of observations set me thinking about “what a history” and whether the time had come for us to think about a change of terminology. If one were to recast the exercise in terms of business studies that could engage with historical scholarship that has helped process substantial information, and one that was especially eligible for serving as a basic scaffolding for building a story of business, entrepreneurship, transformation, etc, would we generate new conceptual insights that go beyond fact, interpretation or formulaic analysis? If practitioners and pedagogues of business history find the academic discipline of history tedious, irrelevant and unsatisfactory for pedagogic reasons, and if they find the practice of history as it has evolved too promiscuous for their understanding of economic history, then clearly the field has reached a cul-de-sac. Can a change of nomenclature generate a new approach that may help reconceptualise the story, the history of Indian business? To what extent then can the field insulate itself from the methodological churnings within the discipline of history? My own sense is that it cannot, and that it needs to take the archive much more seriously than it does, not as an inert repository of facts, and engage with the historical method with much greater rigour, especially as it has chosen to distance itself from economic...
history as practised by economists! Unless the practice and protocols of history writing are considered seriously and their location understood, it would be impossible for business history to have the productive conversation that it seeks either with facts or with interpretation. That would go for economic history too—new approaches can hardly be invented by simply detaching historical analysis from social contexts or even from legacies of power that we inherit.

What was evident in course of the deliberations and heated exchanges over the three days was that economic history still sees itself as a subfield of economics just as business history, enmeshed with the IIMs in India, sees itself as a subfield of management studies, which in itself is a concoction of various disciplines. The one concession that business history makes is in its stated preference for the archive, but which is treated somewhat unproblematically given its assumptions of History being equal to archives without the interpretive dimension that historians are familiar with. Another underlying assumption is the sacrality assigned to numbers, which is equated with empiricism on the one hand and conveniently detachable from the actual reality of power and politics on the other. This has meant that business history has been found wanting in grappling squarely with caste, gender, and yes, colonialism, compared to the nuanced studies that history, anthropology and sociology have brought to the table.

The key then to the business historical project and its resurrection would appear to lie in a closer appreciation of the archive, and how it is constituted. Admittedly, the conference engaged with this in a fruitful manner involving archivists to speak on their collections and on the potential this had for all kinds of history. One hopes that in amplifying the conversation with the archive—texual, oral, family, form—business history will find the stability it seeks. Perhaps, the solution lies in articulating diverse approaches dispensing with old–new dichotomies, and as Stephanie Decker et al (2015) writes, “to foster the development of a variety of reflective methodologies in business historical research” and thereby come to a manifesto like the one Boldizzoni (2011) set out for economic history.

REFERENCES


Morris, D Morris (1966): “Trends and Tendencies in Indian Economic History,” The Indian Economic and Social History Review.

