

## **An Inclusive Interpretation of Maratha History**

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***Abstract:** There was a band of scholars in Maharashtra who had preceded Sardesai in the field of Maratha history. They did not actually get down to the writing of history, but confined themselves to the collection of materials which would make the latter possible. Rajawade had brought out 22 volumes of collected material and Khare another 14 volumes. There were thus many volumes of original papers which had been carefully collected and edited. Sardesai also belonged to this tradition and he edited 45 volumes of the Selections from the Peshwa Daftar and brought out extremely valuable material for the future historians. It is in the reconstruction of history with the help of such material that Sardesai made a departure from his predecessors in Maharashtra. Collaborating with Sir Jadunath Sarkar and making up a team for which it would be difficult to find a parallel anywhere, he worked steadily for decades.*

***Key words:** G. S. Sardesai, Jadunath Sarkar, Maharashtra, Peshwa Daftar, Raghbir Singh.*

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### **Introduction**

A historian, a politician and a prince-Raghbir Singh inhabited several worlds. As a close associate of Jadunath Sarkar and G.S Sardesai, he was part of a generation of scholars who laid the ground for significant Indian historical research and analyses in the decades to come. This excerpt from T.C.A.Raghavan's work<sup>1</sup> looks at Singh's journey into the world of history

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and historiography, and his relationship with his mentors. The chapter offers, at once, a study of their personal lives, their politics, and how these intersected with, informed, and were influenced by, their scholarship.

The discipline of history has a part of its own. That is to say, the act of writing history is not quite as simple as recording facts, but also involves a process of interpretation, and such interpretations evolve with time. As the famed historian E. H. Carr said, History is a 'continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts'<sup>2</sup> Therefore, hidden behind every historical work is an indication of how the scholar (and the times that she, he or they lived in) has thought about and engaged with the past. T. C. A. Raghavan's contribution<sup>3</sup> attempts to fill this gap, by examining closely the relationship between three pioneering historians.

### **Comparative Analysis: Jadunath Sarkar, Raghbir Singh and G. S. Sardesai**

The first figure is Sir Jadunath Sarkar, a prolific historian and scholar, whose work in the early 1900s laid the ground for coming generations.<sup>4</sup> He had a close associate with Govind Sakharam Sardesai, who, through several *Riyasats* written in Marathi, assembled a history of India of over 1,000 years. In English, he is remembered for the three-volume *New History of the Marathas*. The third, arguably the least well-known, was Raghbir Singh who developed close relationships with the other two; first as a protégé and, later, as a friend. When Sardesai began his work on Maratha history, Sardesai was in the Gaikwad's service. In 4,000 closely printed Marathi pages he has told the complete story of the origin, expansion and fall of Maratha power spread over a period of 250 years. His three volumes in English *A New History of the Marathas* covers the same ground in 1,400 pages. His main work was monumental and outstanding in Maratha history. Sardesai's interests ranged over a wider field. The British *Riyasat* of Indian history he covered in Marathi in two volumes. Another two volumes were devoted to the *Musalmani Riyasat*.

There was a band of scholars in Maharashtra who had preceded Sardesai in the field of Maratha history. They did not actually get down to the writing of history, but confined themselves to the collection of materials which would make the latter possible. Rajawade had brought out 22 volumes of collected material and Khare another 14 volumes. There were thus many volumes of original papers which had been carefully collected and edited. Sardesai also

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belonged to this tradition and he edited 45 volumes of the *Selections from the Peshwa Daftar* and brought out extremely valuable material for the future historians. It is in the reconstruction of history with the help of such material that Sardesai made a departure from his predecessors in Maharashtra. Collaborating with Sir Jadunath Sarkar and making up a team for which it would be difficult to find a parallel anywhere, he worked steadily for decades.

When Sardesai visited Sir Jadunath at Darjeeling or Calcutta, it was for solving some knotty problem of editing or for publishing this or that collection, collected from somewhere in Kota, Gwalior or Nagpur. These two had no other interest in life but history. They planned their work together, each followed the line of action they had set and achieved admirable success in their joint effort. Opening of the *Peshwa Daftar* in Poona to research scholars and the publication of the 45 volumes of Selected Papers was perhaps the most outstanding achievement of the Sarkar-Sardesai team. The 14 volumes of English correspondence entitled 'Residency volumes were edited by different scholars, their planning and supervision was under the joint responsibility of the two. That Sardesai, the historian, was better respected and that his works were more closely studied at the Calcutta University than in the academic circles of Maharashtra might be considered curious, but it is a fact. This is because there are more students and scholars of Maratha history in the Calcutta University than in the Universities of Bombay and Poona put together.'

Raghavan's deeply detailed work looks not only at the professional lives of these three men but also, through painstaking research, reassembles their personal lives, their commitment to history and how their friendship facilitated- and influenced – their work. In doing so, the book offers a glimpse into the many influences and processes that converge to make a scholar.

In the world of academia, Singh was definitely an outlier, being the scion of a moderately-sized princely state called Sitamau (now in Madhya Pradesh). His turn towards history came as his father; Maharaja Sir Ram Singh recognised the increasing irrelevance of monarchies in the modern world. Raghubir Singh, however, when asked, would say that he studied history due to his family's 'tradition of literature and poetry'.

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Singh's family legacy undoubtedly influenced his work to a great degree. While his mentors approached the question of the rise and eventual decline of the Mughals and Marathas from a distance, for Singh these issues were a part of his 'personal inheritance-in terms of family and clan history'.

As a historian, he is most well-known for the work born out of his D. Litt. Thesis, *Malwa in Transition*. Raghbir Singh, consequently, was a strong proponent of regional, non-dynastic histories. He believed that 'regional history would be the building block for national history just as regional identities would reinforce the nation.' 'Just as Singh's family legacy influenced his work, there was considerable overlapping between his scholarship and his 'future activities as a politician and public intellectual'.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned above, his relationship with his mentors impacted his work greatly. Naturally, as his D. Litt. Supervisor, Jadunath Sarkar had much to say. We find in their correspondence had much to say. We find in their correspondence advice given by him on the minutes aspects, including grammar (for which Sarkar was a stickler). At the same time, he was also Singh's strongest advocate, as we see through the numerous instances in which he rose to his protégé's defence. Sarkar and Sardesai were also instrumental in helping Raghbir Singh to set up a research library in Sitamau. Recent research of Dipesh Chakraborty about the style and writings of Jadunath Sarkar may be summarised in this way:

Surveying more than 1,200 letters that two famous Indian historians, Sir Jadunath Sarkar (1870-1956) and his collaborator Govind Sakharam Sardesai (1865-1959), wrote to each other in the first half of the twentieth century, this book develops a two-tiered argument about the modern and academic discipline of history. At one level, it demonstrates how the basic concepts and practices of the discipline (such as those relating to historical evidence, historical truth, or even ideas of research and practices of achieving) were formulated in colonial officials' unwillingness to make official historical documents available to Indian researchers; it was also enabled by the fact that nationalist-Indians interested themselves in historical research long before history became a researchable subject in Indian universities. Sarkar, with fraught support from Sardesai, played a central role in introducing Indian researchers to Rankean models of historical research while indigenizing the model in significant ways. Sarkar and Sardesai's struggle to give early modern Indian history an

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academic form shows how unavoidable debates in public life shaped the discipline, even after historical study finally gained an academic status in India. Chakraborty also develops a larger proposition about the discipline of history generally, arguing that, being non-technical in nature, the discipline remains open to the pressures of its 'public life' in addition to those emanating from its 'cloistered' life in the university.<sup>6</sup> Shukla Sanyal has reviewed the work of Chakraborty in this way, 'A long-running strand in the works of Dipesh Chakraborty has been his concern to examine the epistemological, methodological, and ideological positions that underlie history writing. In his latest work, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth*, this concern moves to center stage, as the author explores the intellectual world of his protagonist, and, in the process, underlines the connectedness of Jadunath Sarkar's practice of history with the way he conceived of the discipline.'<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say the relationship was one-sided. As Sarkar and Sardesai neared old age Singh became a huge source of support for them. An indication of their closeness comes from their letters, where we find both Sarkar and Sardesai sharing their deepest worries and family troubles with Singh. He had become a trusted friend for both and, outliving them by several decades, was crucial in carrying forward their legacy. Much of what Sarkar and Sardesai researched in the fall of the Mughals and the rise of the Marathas and the final extinction of both powers formed Singh's personal inheritance- in terms of family and clan history.

While still a young man of twenty-two and possibly with little historical training, his first book *Poorva Madhyakalin Bharat* (Pre-Medieval India), was written in 1930 and published in 1931. The book is intended as a reflective look at the Delhi Sultanate — and is novel to the extent it looks at that period of history not in dynastic terms but in terms of broader social and military trends.

Raghubir Singh subdivided the sultanate history into five themes: Military Rule (1206-94), Progressive Governance (1254-1351); Religious Governance (1251-1388); Period of Weak Governance and Instability (1388-1450); and, Feudal Dominated Government (1450-1526). Such a conceptual disaggregation was intended to provide an overview of sultanate history consciously different from more conventional approaches exemplified by Ishwari Prasad's *History of Medieval India* -published in 1925 and which remained for decades later the standard work. Raghubir Singh's book shows the author as a serious young man who was embarking on a study

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of history with high motives. The opening sentence of the book is a quote from Leibnitz, 'The present began in the past.' But more novel are the reasons that he advanced for writing the book:

Readers have begun to see that historians have made two big errors. Firstly, those modern writers have not reflected on how values changed with the passage of time. Based on modern values they have judged the character and actions of medieval monarchs. Secondly, Western historians in writing the history of India have evaluated Indian monarchs on the basis of Western values. They thus showed our heroes in an unfavourable light and knowingly or unknowingly did a great injustice to India. Sarkar gave a strong endorsement to Raghbir Singh's book in the form of a testimonial: It strikes a new line by locating History not as 'a record of the crimes and follies of mankind' (Gibbon), but as a movement of humanity.

Following a brief visit to Sitamau by Sarkar and his family in October 1934 the relationship crystallized with Sarkar agreeing to act as research guide for Raghbir Singh's D.Litt. thesis. This resulted in Singh's best known work, *Malwa in Transition*. Sarkar's advice was characteristic: 'Collect the extant traditions ... of important families (or clans) and of towns too in different parts of Malwa.' Sarkar's advice and assistance stand out and explain much of the close relationship that developed between the two.

Singh was fortunate that his guide also had a converging interest in the first half of the eighteenth century and that there was so much overlap of manuscript sources. In 1933 and 1934 Sarkar himself was engaged with Volume II of his *Fall of the Mughal Empire*<sup>8</sup> which dealt with the period 1754 to 1771 covering Maratha expansion in the north, the battle of Panipat and developments thereafter in Delhi, Rajasthan and Punjab. Some of this, therefore, overlapped with the broad coverage of Raghbir Singh's study of Malwa. Sarkar's guidance also extended to the drafting of the thesis and to all matters of style and presentation. Thus, as Singh began writing, his guide wrote: 'Avoid verbosity by all means, adheres to a methodical arrangement of the matters of fact; terseness of expression and citation of authority should characterise every chapter. While sending the thesis to Sardesai, Sarkar wrote: 'This candidate's work gives me much hope for his future as a worthy recruit to our campaign of sound historical research', and said that Raghbir Singh's thesis comes up to the standard of Ishwari Prasad's thesis with this accidental difference, however, that Ishwari Prasad dealt with an unworked field (viz., the first Tughlaq) while portions of Raghbir's thesis were

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previously covered (though briefly) by Irvine and myself. But he has exhaustively treated this subject and fully utilized the new Marathi material and made important elucidations of provincial topography and dynastic history. For Singh the eighteenth century apart from being a century of anarchy was also a ‘century of revolutions’ as the ‘social and cultural map of India was completely changed’ and ‘many an old political entity was wiped off from the map of India’. This view was deeply embedded in Singh’s mind and repeatedly recurs both in his historical works as also in his future activities as a politician and public intellectual. In Singh’s treatment, the anarchy of the eighteenth century meant that his home region lost out in political, cultural and military terms and this was entirely on account of the Marathas.

*...with regard to Singh’s dual role, by reason of his birth alone, Singh had an intimacy with Rajput history and with the Rajput—Maratha interface which made him invaluable for Sarkar’s and Sardesai’s own research. Being a part of the fraternity of the ruling princes of central India meant also a close relationship and in some cases even friendship with the ruling houses of princely states such as Scindia, Jodhpur, Kota, Jaipur, Indore, etc., — the history of each of which figured substantively in Sarkar’s major research work of the 1930s and 1940s, namely, the Fall of the Mughal Empire.*

While this particular idea does not appear to have generated sufficient enthusiasm in Singh, Sarkar had in fact put his own reputation in getting him acknowledged as a major historian.

‘It would be an excellent thing if you undertake to edit one of the Poona Residency Correspondence volumes along with us. ... It would be a most important opportunity for making you known and appreciated by the scholarly world of Europe.’<sup>9</sup>

*Sarkar’s recommendation followed: ‘You should master the Persian language (historical prose only) sufficiently to make yourself independent ... and to be able to pick information out of MSS directly without having to wait for their being transcribed and translated.’ In January 1937, Sarkar pressed both points again — learning Persian, and ‘I anticipate that the career of Mirza Rajah Jai Singh will fascinate you so much that you will concentrate on him and, most probably continue the study of the dynasty of Amber up to 1698 and forget for a time your beloved Malwa.’*

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Raghubir Singh, however, continued to be associated with public issues to a far greater extent than either G.S. Sardesai or J.N. Sarkar or the other historians and scholars in their circle. As heir to the throne of a princely state, howsoever small, it was inevitable that Raghubir Singh would have a public life outside history, notwithstanding his passion for historical research and studies. His life as a historian, in fact, followed a complementary and parallel track of his role as the heir.

*Sarkar's efforts to establish Singh as a historian of repute in his own right in fact were many. He arranged for Raghubir Singh to speak at the 1937 session of the Indian Historical Records Commission and present in summary form the contents of Malet's letter book. Similarly, in September 1938 before the Kamshet meeting we have him advising Singh that a report on his manuscript collection would 'add greatly to the value of your speech'.*

*For scholars as driven as Sardesai and Sarkar, Raghubir Singh's public commitments, howsoever worthy, were nevertheless also costly distractions from historical research. While Sarkar is more forgiving of his protégé and favourite student, Sardesai often was not.<sup>10</sup>*

*Through the early and mid-1950s, although Sarkar had been regularly in correspondence with Singh the letters of the last few years show a gradual and unmistakable role reversal as the former student now becomes a principal support. The daily grind of frailty and old age worries about his family and further tragedies are a prominent part of the letters that Sarkar writes.<sup>11</sup>*

*Contacts between the circle of historians around G.S. Sardesai and Jadunath Sarkar continued after their mentors' death. S.R. Tikekar, Sardesai's devoted associate, and Raghubir Singh in particular wrote regularly to each other for over two decades- about old times and the masters, gossiping occasionally about the new history establishment that now called the shots but also occasionally discussing possible new projects.<sup>12</sup>*

### Conclusion

The Natnagar Shodh Sansthan (NSS) is a sterling example of archiving the pasts of diverse societies, cultures and communities of various ages, and specializes in documents and source materials on Medieval Indian and Anglo-Maratha histories as well as the provincial histories of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Malwa. The Library was born of the legacy of the cultivated and scholarly rulers of the erstwhile Sitamau State and their contribution to knowledge production. Owing to the reputation, role and importance of the Library in the academic life of historian,



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historians and scholars, the State Government of Madhya Pradesh, duly recognized the NSS as a 'Special Institution', which has been receiving regular grant-in-aid from 1975-76 onwards.<sup>13</sup>

Sarkar was proud of the Library's unique collection and commented that 'if ever a Central Institute of History is set up in free India, the Raghbir Collection will be its indispensable nucleus'.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, the NSS has embarked upon a mission to conserve and preserve old records, rare manuscripts and vintage books. Accordingly, an ambitious project to digitize and modernize the Library has been undertaken. The Institute also has a small publication unit which publishes books, journals and proceedings of important academic events from time to time. It organizes academic events and conclaves with annual national seminars, occasional public lectures and workshops, thereby turning it into a social space. The NSS has left its imprint on the sands of time, and is a source of inspiration for researchers, archivists and lovers of history.

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2. Indian History Collective, New Delhi, p.1. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* London, Penguin, 1961, reviewed by Alan Munslow in *Rethinking History: Journal of Theory and Practice*, 41a, February, 2023, p. 1. Carr's objectivist anchor is dropped here which has been reflected in his work in the way that there can be no objective historical truth (Carr, 1961, p. 26). Historians ultimately serve the evidence, not vice versa. Though, Carr argues, it is possible to draw a convincing line between the two.

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3. Raghavan, op. cit. reviewed by Shireen Moosvi, *Studies in People's History*, Sage, Vol. Vii, Issue 1, June, 2020, pp.96-97. Moosvi has said that Raghavan has now turned his attention to three historians of Mughal India, named in the title. Raghavan provides us with the biographies where their academic work receives the major emphasis. He actually brought into limelight the academic interests of the three men in the India of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sir Jadunath Sarkar was mainly concerned with the Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb and his successors; Sardesai with the Rise and Fall of Maratha Power; and Raghubir Singh, Maharaj of Sitamau with Malwa under the Mughals and the Marathas. Of the three, Sir Jadunath undoubtedly towers over the other two; that is revealed from their mutual relationship. Raghavan has dealt deep into their correspondence to trace how they co-operated with each other despite differences in interest and outlook. It is to be mentioned here that these three historians were contemporaries of Marc Bloch and R. H. Tawney; but it seems, according to Moosvi 'as if that wind from Europe never touched any of them. All these may be admitted, but one still admires the persistence and dedication of all the three men; and all of us should be grateful to Raghavan for bringing them back to life for us' ( Moosvi, op. cit. ).

4. He was also a major force behind the establishment of important institutions of History, such as, the Indian Historical Records Commission and the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

5. Raghavan, op.cit p, 56.

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