“The Historian in the World”
Presented by the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute
Featuring John Hope Franklin and Romila Thapar
Moderated by Srinivas Aravamudan

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Srinivas Aravamudan: I want to start off by thanking Dean McClendon very much. This is of course an exciting opportunity to bring, as he said, two very distinguished historians together to discuss things across major continental differences and different periods in history. I want to thank him very much. I mean, Dean McClendon is a chemist by training and his presence here is a testament to the kinds of conversations we can have at Duke.

I also want to thank the Department of History for cosponsoring this event as well as, of course, The John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary and International Studies, which is the larger center, or the consortium within which we sit, as the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute.

To start off this conversation, I wanted to ask a question that would lead to Dr. Franklin and Dr. Thapar to start talking to each other. I think this is the obvious point where we could begin, that is the fact that here on my right is a leading historian of ancient India and here on my left is a very leading historian of the modern United States.

How do historians talk across specialties? What are the methods, goals, and visions concerning the practice of history that you can share and talk about with each other, despite the fact that you work on such different fields? That's probably a place to begin.

John Hope Franklin: Well, one of the fortunate features of the historian’s life is that he feels close to historians not merely in his own subject matter, but across lands all over the world.

I would think that despite the fact that I work in the last two centuries, this would not make it impossible for me to grasp, understand, and profit by students of much earlier periods. There is a common experience that one has, whether he's working in 19th century United States or 1,000 years earlier or 2,000 years earlier. There's a remarkable degree of similarity in the approach, in the criticism, and in the conclusions that one reaches, whether he is working earlier or later.
So the fact that Romila Thapar is the historian of ancient India, ancient Near East, ancient Asia, does not place her beyond the kin of someone like me, who could listen indefinitely for comments, conclusions, points of view that I find common to my own.

I want to say, welcome, Romila, because I can learn so much from you. And I hope that I can keep up with what you have to say. I put on my racing shoes so that I can race from Ancient Europe and Asia to modern America with too much in reach of myself. [laughter]

SA: [to Romila Thapar] Do you have your racing shoes on?

Romila Thapar: I have my racing shoes on. [laughter]

I'd like to start—it's partly an answer to the question—but I would very much like to say that for me, this is a moment of both pleasure and privilege.

We were familiar with John Hope Franklin’s work, familiar in the sense that those who worked on the modern period actually read the books and then discussed the contents with us. So we knew that your work deals with the whole question of inequalities in society and how they are reflected in history. And that's a view that many of us are interested in.

You know, all societies have inequalities. So there is that discussion of general themes. I'm really absolutely delighted and very honored that I'm having this conversation with you.

I think that there are a couple of points that I would like to make. One is that until about a century or a century and a half ago, historians probably didn't talk to each other because history, early on, was a narrative. You wrote about something and you discussed it as a narrative. It had a chronological feel to it. It had a sequential discussion, and so on.

And consequently, unless you were particularly interested in that narrative of that area or people or society, you wouldn't take the time to read it. But the big change comes when historians begin to move towards not just narrating what happened, but explaining why it happened. When the how and the why questions come in, and explanations of sort, that is when there is this cross-cultural conversation, possibly to a greater extent than before. And I would very much like to emphasize the fact that what we're interested in is really the explanations of situations.

Therefore, it doesn't matter whether I'm working on ancient India or on medieval China, or whatever it may be. These are common problems of how the problems come into existence and how do people then set about trying to explain them.
As John Hope said, the big emphasis is on method now. You have to follow a method, you have to be quite sure of your evidence, you have to be sure of how you're analyzing it, the kinds of generalizations you make, that kind of thing. It's become much more exact. Historical writing has become much more exact than it was, say 100 years ago.

And the counterpoint to that of course is there's a huge popular imagination, which is also insisting that its view of history not be pushed aside. And so there is a certain tension developing between historians and this popular imagination of history, all of which I think is an interesting departure from history, the way we knew it a century ago. This makes it intellectually certainly much more interesting.

The other point I would like to make on the question of historians speaking across borders and boundaries: the onus is generally on the non-Western historian to read what Western historians are writing. There's much less of an emphasis within the tradition of Western historical writing of wanting to read what non-Western historians are writing.

And I think that this is something that needs to be, well, not corrected, but it's something that we need to be aware of. That, you know, we have to know what the theoretical positions are in the West, but West is not interested in what our theoretical positions might be, except for a handful of people. [Romila Thapar laughs] So this is broadly one of the things which I think tend to separate, as it were, the histories of parts of the world.

**JHF**: I think I have a tentative explanation for that. It's not satisfactory. It's merely to say that, at least, I recognize what you're talking about.

I think it rises from the fact that in the middle of the 19th century, we discovered scientific history. And we thought that was something we had the title to. It was our discovery, not yours. It was something we brought out to the light, and this gave us a kind of advantage over people who were working in some dark, dismal area centuries ago.

And it contributed not merely to our understanding—sometimes superficial understanding—of what was going on, but it contributed to our sense of superiority, if I may say so. That is the feeling that we know how to do it, even if you don't know how to, poor you. That suggests that there is an air of arrogance and sense of superiority, because we found the way, the “scientific way,” and you haven’t.

And that's, from my point of view, unfortunate, because I think it drives us to go down a narrow path of arrogance and of conceit and of a sense of understanding of the past that is, at best, narrow, and perhaps also erroneous.
I frequently look at my contemporaries, my colleagues, and I tend to feel that they have “discovered the way of the light” and therefore they are not terribly interested in what you found by digging around in the earlier period. We know what to do. We know how it's done. And this gives us not only an advantage, but a light, which you don’t have.

0I think that's unfortunate, but it's I think true. I'm trying to really explain what the problem seems to be in thinking of the earlier historians and the later ones. We are terribly conceited about what we have done, what we have discovered the last hundred years, which is nothing in the history of the world.

SA: I was wondering if I could ask both of you, who are talking about the difference between narration and explanation [gestures toward Romila Tharper] and then the question of scientific method, [gestures toward John Hope Franklin] to account for the connection between history and political identity, which is happening in different locations.

And what I mean by that is history is both used as well as abused to account for various things, for both political aspirations as well as grievances. And by this I mean, of course, religious identities, racial identities, caste, nationalism—other kinds of ways in which identities are being both produced by history and also explained by historical discourse. And how would you say that impacts what history is? Because it's often so much the bone of contention, when political groups or political processes seize upon history as the way of justifying themselves against other groups.

RT: Well, I think that the question of political identity and history is something that we have become much more aware of now that we have been working on historiography. Because prior to the examination of the historiographical tradition of a society or a group of historians and so on, there was a tendency to say, well, this is history, this is narrative, and this is the way it is.

But now there is much more emphasis on who is the historian who's writing. And what is the historian’s position on the subject that he or she is dealing with? Which I think is extremely important. I think that historiography is quite rightly becoming more and more central to historical studies, but this is of course a particular bias of my own because I tend to work on subjects related to historiography.

But I think it's also had, in my field for example, an impact on the way we look at texts. For example, the tendency has always been that, yes, modern texts have a political ideology. And it's quite apparent to us when we read them because we know the modern condition. And so we can see where the texts are coming from and what they're trying to say.

But the attitude towards ancient texts always was that, oh no, they're completely apolitical. You just read them and take what they say and that's it.
But that's now changing in the sense that we are now asking the same questions of the texts of the ancient period. Who's the author, who's the audience, who's his patron, what agenda does he have, what's the line he or she is trying to sell? This begins to apply to earlier periods as well.

And this then raises … I mean, here I’m speaking very much from the Indian context, but we always did have this attitude that ancient texts are not political. That they are above all these identities and ideologies and so on. But now that it's being questioned, it creates the kind of problem that Srinivas was referring to, that there is a politicization of the reading of history as well. And that happens in the sense that some people will say, oh yes, such and such a text is written from a Buddhist perspective. And then you begin to read it in that particular way, which you've never done before. And then you'll begin to see layers of, you know, ideas, ideologies, meanings—all of this coming in, which hadn't existed earlier.

And I think that for people like us that come out of a colonial situation—and in some ways, there are parallels to the kind of work that you've been doing, John Hope—what was our inheritance? It was a colonial interpretation of Indian history and then there was a nationalist interpretation of Indian history. The two sometimes overlapped, and sometimes they were completely separate and opposite.

So when we began to write history about 50 years ago, we were faced with the fact that we had to look at the whole identity that had been built up politically by nationalism and ask ourselves, is this a valid identity? Does history support this identity? Or do we have to look at other identities which might be more important from the past?

Consequently, the question of identity today, and its links to history, has become a very political question.

**JHF:** One of the things that I've noticed is that in viewing the past, historians tend more recently—you can tell me whether that is true of the earlier period—but they more recently tend to view the past from a set of assumptions and presuppositions that may or may not be applicable, but that's the way they do it.

So you have a historian who views history as an economic development. You have another one who says that well, that's not the way you look at it. You look at it from the point of view of the social classes and the way in which they approached a problem.

Or you look at it from the point of view of the political interpreters, who view history in terms of the structure of government and the role of government, whether it’s the king or the congress, or whatever role of the political powers in the development of the historical process.
One thing seems to me to be terribly important. And that is that we have to be certain—as certain as we can be—that this influence is not undue. That it’s not overstepping the bounds of reason, and that sort of thing. Because you can easily find yourself in a pocket, or a straitjacket, where you interpret everything as an economic development, or as a political development, or as a social development. And I think that's one of the pitfalls of the historian, whether he's writing about the early period or a more recent period. And it's something that I think we have to guard against, be aware of, be sensitive to, even as we look at any part of the past that we happen to be viewing.

SA: Maybe I can move us to something even more specific, because there's a way in which I was imagining that you might both actually give us a couple of anecdotes of problems you've faced with this issue of history and political identities.

Now I know that both of you have had, I'm sure, regrets about being embroiled in controversies around the writing of history textbooks. [speakers smile] I know a little bit about the details in each case, but I'm not sure I want to recount them for the audience.

But do you have regrets about getting involved in that? Or to what extent does the historian have to be a monitor to say whether the content of high school textbooks, or even elementary school textbooks about history, say what they ought to say—or are these issues too local? When do you intervene? How do you intervene? Or do you intervene?

JHF: I don't think these issues are too local. What I do think is that we tend to, as a general public now looking at textbook writers and textbooks themselves, we tend to think that, well, this textbook is written by John Jones and therefore… he's a left winger, or a right winger, and I don't want my kids reading that material. And so you find yourself embroiled in a political morass, which might not be very attractive.

My own experience has to do with the California textbook problems of the 1960s, when the textbook commission… and let me say a word about that.

When you have a textbook commission, and several states still do—California’s one, Texas is another—when you have a textbook commission, you have some limitations established by that commission as to what you can do or what you cannot do. I'm not certain that that's [better] or worse than what you have in other instances, where you have a group of people in the community deciding what ought to be in the textbook. When you reduce the problem of writing history to a committee, with regards to what that committee is, you’re going to have problems which are going to be difficult to eliminate.
In the case of California—in my own experience in the 1960s—someone in California declared that the 8th grade American history textbook was not any good. They were going to eliminate it and sent out calls for people to submit manuscripts of a better history.

Well, there were three of us that decided we could write a better history than anyone had written for California or for anywhere else as a matter of fact. And so we undertook to do that.

Now there were many approaches. The announcement went wide all over the country. Anyone could participate, could submit a manuscript. There were manuscripts submitted, revised manuscripts that put all the revision after the index of an earlier edition. [laughter]

You see what I mean. They said, well, we've got a good textbook and what we really want is it to be brought up to date, and we’ll put something in there about Blacks, Latinos, or whatever. So we’ll put it in there, even if we have to submit the same text we had, but put something in at the end, at the very end. I couldn't imagine that was done.

There were others who felt that their textbook was all right, but that they need to bring it up to date. And so that's what they did: they brought it up to date.

But the group that I was with, the two colleagues that I was with, felt that the textbook were from page one impossible, difficult, dishonest, whatever—inaccurate. And we decided to write a textbook that would be completely revised.

We tried so hard not to take an approach that was an economic viewpoint, a political viewpoint, but an approach that would help the children understand what had gone on in the country. Sometimes it would be economic development, sometimes political, but we were determined to do that.

We were determined also to make certain that the objective would be to tell the story accurately, to be accurate in every conceivable way and not to bring in interpretations that would say that there was a bad man standing over here and doing something that was undermining the culture and what not. Be honest, be straightforward, be accurate.

And so we submitted our text and the textbook commission was very much impressed. I think not so much that we were so good, but the others were so bad. [laughter] You know, you don't submit a textbook with the revisions being after the index for the last edition. That wouldn’t make sense to anyone. They didn't know anything about writing a textbook or any kind of book—a notebook as far as I’m concerned.
So we came out very well and before people knew it, our textbook had been approved. Now that it was approved, of course then the textbook is laid out in every community in California. A copy of that book is laid out for the general public to see what their children would be studying next year.

We didn't have anything to do with it after we submitted it. But we had children acting normally, Latino children playing with the other children and studying the United States history—studying not merely about what happened in New England but what happened in New Mexico as well. Or what happened in Virginia and so forth. And people thought that was just outrageous. Outrageous. And they began to start a movement to try to prevent this book from being used, and the efforts were extreme and great and enthusiastic and energetic.

Our book was called Land of the Free and they had Land of the Free committees organized all over the state. There were Land of the Free caravans that went to Sacramento for the purpose of blocking the execution of the textbook. It was unbelievable. And the Land of the Free committee would even have mass meetings, in which they would have throngs of people coming in and then they would have a slideshow. They would put on some pictures from the Land of the Free, and people would start booing, especially if white and Black children are playing together, and that sort of thing.

In one instance, they put up a picture of me. Well, people did not know that I was not white until they saw the picture on the screen. Then there was a great outcry. That took their breath away. And when my picture appeared, they began to read the Communist Manifesto as if there were some connection between my appearance and the Communist Manifesto. And the result was that people thought the world was coming to an end or something. [laughter]

And it was too late to prevent the adoption of the book, or the use of the book for four years. But the book never achieved any acceptability from the time it was used first. Some children were deprived of the opportunity to study U.S. history. We didn't know that it could be an elective, but parents elected their children out of the classroom. They did not want their children to be in the same room with Land of the Free. And some children were taken out of schools, some were punished as a result of being truant, and all the other things that could happen.

And at the end of four years of constant battle and difficulty, [our textbook] was eliminated.

Now that's an extreme example of a kind of history writing and historical controversy about textbooks. I think it's most unfortunate and I think it set back the whole course of independent writing of texts for a generation or more.
But it does indicate some flaws in our procedures that make it extremely difficult for the public to participate in the whole process of using historical materials for teaching purposes. And although I retired from that field, I continue to fret and worry about the process. For certain, there has not been any significant improvement in the process in this country.

I would be interested to know whether you have any better situation in Asia, but we continue to need better textbooks for our children. They can come out of better interpretations of history generally. But if we continue to feel that these books should not reflect society and society’s needs and interests, then the effort I think will be in vain.

SA: So your answer is, resoundingly, that the local things such as a state textbook can be such a flashpoint for everything that's important about history, and I'm sure it would be interesting to hear you [to Romila Thapar] talk about your textbook controversies.

RT: Yes, it’s amazing. It's a perilous situation with us. I mean, I spent half my life defending the right of having good textbooks and it started off in 1961, '62.

SA: The same time.

JHF: [chuckles] Same time.

RT: I was asked by UNESCO to evaluate the textbooks that were used in the schools in the union territory of Delhi. And I was horrified. They were absolutely appalling—really appalling, disgusting books with no history, just a lot of chatter. [laughter]

And so I wrote this report to UNESCO saying it was a really desperate condition and I didn’t approve of this kind of thing. And they sent it to the Indian education ministry. And the education ministry then set up a committee of historians to go into the writing of textbooks.

It was quite useful, but unfortunately most of them were the kinds of historians who were busy with other projects. So the textbook became a kind of very subsidiary issue. And there was a tendency in those days for historians to look down upon the writing of school textbooks.

I remember that when I got a letter from the ministry after all this, saying, “We revamped the committee and we want to bring out our own textbooks under the organization of the National Council for Educational Research and Training,” and would I write two books for Class Six and Class Seven, which is 12-year-olds and 13-year-olds?

And my first reaction was, oh no, I'm doing research in history, publishing serious history. I’m not going to write school textbooks. And then I thought about it and thought about it. And I
thought, well, this is where the whole thing begins. So obviously [the textbooks] have to be good.

And I now am absolutely committed to the fact that historians have to take part in the discussion of school textbooks in particular.

And not just textbooks, but also school teachers—discussions with school teachers as to how to change the teaching because a lot of what goes into textbooks gets outdated. And unless you have a panel of historians who are constantly looking at the textbooks and saying, “Now, this bit of evidence is out of date. We have to drop it,” it goes on being repeated.

And if I may give you one example, two centuries ago, a philologist who knew Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek, came across a name in a Greek text. When Alexander came to India for his campaigns through northwestern India, he had some Greek writers with him, and one of them wrote about a young man called Sandrokottos, who met Alexander. He was a very arrogant young man and organized a resistance against Alexander. But anyway, Alexander came and went and didn’t leave any trace of his coming and going as far as India was concerned.

And William Jones, when he looked at this text, he thought, who could this be? And from the rules of philology, he equated him with Chandragupta. “Sandrokottos”—it does relate.

So they said this was the bedrock of Indian chronology, because of course colonial writing is absolutely insistent on having a chronological point for everything, and so this was argued.

Now the complication was that there are two very well-known Chandraguptas. One is Chandragupta of Maurya dynasty ruling in the fourth century BC, and the other is Chandragupta of the Gupta dynasty in the fourth century AD. And there's a difference of 800 years between them.

So if you say Sandrokottos met Alexander, and he was Chandragupta of the Maurya period, you’re confirming this by the Greek sources which tell us the year when Alexander came to India.

But there was a kind of ultranationalist group who said no, no, this is not the first Chandragupta, it’s the second. So we have to push Indian history back by 800 years! [laughter]

And when I was going through these textbooks, they were still saying that there is this ambiguity. It could be this, the first one or the second one, and we may have to push Indian history back by 800 years.
Now, in the meantime, there was other evidence discovered, which made it absolutely foolproof as to what the date of the Maurya was. It was inscriptions evidence. I won’t go into the details, but it made it foolproof that this Sandrokottos was the first Chandragupta.

But there were still textbooks saying, it is thought that it is the first, but it could be the second. And there are all sorts of theories that are put out these days about how we, Westernized Indian historians, are giving wrong chronologies by saying that Sandrokottos was Chandragupta Maurya, and it should be the second Chandragupta.

Anyway, this kind of thing comes up in textbooks and it is absolutely necessary that it be corrected. After all, what is knowledge about? Knowledge is about being up to date in the field that you're working in.

So anyway, when this committee was set up, we all got together, we wrote books, and mine went into action and were prescribed in '65 and '66, many, many years ago.

And they went on. There was a little bit of discussion about some things that people didn't like and every 10 years we would revise them, do a complete revamp, and so on.

And then we had a situation where when the previous government came to power, the Bharatiya Janata Party government, largely dependent ideologically on a Hindu religious nationalism. They said that these textbooks were not appropriate because in other words, they were too secular. They didn't actually glorify the ancient period as being a great period of Hindu articulation. And not that we denied this, but we also put in caveats as to how one judges these articulations.

So there was a battle royale, in which they first said that they were going to cut out bits and pieces of our books. And we said, fine, if you want to do that, take away the name of the author, because we don't want anything to be changed and our names to be carried on the books.

Then there was a great opposition to the books in Parliament. And we had the dubious honor of being very roundly abused day after day by members of Parliament. And when I say roundly abused, I mean they really did descend to the lower depths of what they called us. And we couldn’t respond because they claimed privilege. They made these statements in Parliament and we couldn't contradict them.

Anyway, this battle went on. And what was interesting was that it then became a public debate. And that was something that we insisted on because up to that point, the argument always was: “A fact is a fact. You have a historical fact. How can you debate it?”
What was not understood was that the historian was concerned precisely with *explaining those facts*. How did these “facts” come to be facts? What happened? And in that explanation, there are different interpretations and these interpretations were constantly coming up and hitting each other frontally.

But when we made it into a public debate, I think that was the first time it was realized that history as a social science is a matter of interpretation. And then you have to go back to the basics of the historical method, which is the reliability of the evidence, the logic of your causal analysis, and the rationality of the generalization that you're making. But basically, your evidence has to be absolutely foolproof.

And this debate went on. They removed our textbooks and put in a new lot, which were completely politically inspired. But anyway, a year later, that government fell and the present government was voted in. So the textbooks that had been written by supporters of the BJP were removed and a new lot of textbooks are now coming in.

Which, as far as history goes, are really a great improvement. They’re a great improvement, even on my books that I wrote, which was a long time ago, because history changes.

But the interesting thing of course is that now we're stuck with a position where if in 2009 we have another election and this government is voted out, and the previous lot are coming back in, then the textbooks will change again.

So what some of us are arguing about is to please make the body that is publishing these textbooks an autonomous body. So that irrespective of changes of government, you have committees in those disciplines, which vet the textbooks. And once the textbook is prescribed, then it continues, irrespective of what happens in Parliament and which government comes in.

But so far nothing has happened and one’s hoping something will happen in the next couple of years before the next election so that at least if nothing else is secure, the textbooks will be secure.

But it is very interesting and California came up again. Most recently, the debate was precisely between the California textbook committee and a group of people representing what they called Hindu opinion, arguing that the representation of India and Hinduism in the textbooks was incorrect. And was, in fact, insulting to the Hindu community here.

And there was quite a battle on that. And finally, the committee said, right, we will appoint three or four historians who will guide us about the correctness or not.
But the argument—and this is of course an argument that really concerns the diaspora more than anything else, and it's the same in England—the argument is that these groups represent not the discipline of history but the civilization of India. And therefore, they have a right to dictate what should go into the textbooks.

Now, this is really a very touchy issue, and I don't know which way it's going to go. It's going to come up again. I believe in Texas, they’re preparing for another battle there.

But on the Indian front what has happened is that people were aware of this debate and realized the importance of having textbooks that were distanced from particular ideologies in as much as history can ever be totally distanced.

I don't think it can. I think every historian does have an element of bias, and the better historian makes quite clear what her bias is. The lesser historians try and hide the bias, but there is a bias, I think.

JHF: That brings us, brings me, anyway, to an area, which I think we must do something with, and that is the extent to which one’s culture and one’s experience influences the way in which one writes history. And I'm thinking here of the enormous influence that can be wielded and that is often wielded by one set of values or another.

Let's say, take the economic field for example. There are historians who want to interpret everything in economic terms and their writing then becomes a kind of light that is shed on a particular kind of development or evolution, namely economic growth.

There’s another group that pays no attention to that and thinks history can be written in terms of the political developments of our society and they pay little attention to the economic developments.

And there's another group. It takes the view that history is understood, that we merely look at the evolution of the individual groups of people that make up a society and what we get then is interpretations of history that are to some extent—to a considerable extent—narrow and imprecise, and show little vision of the way in which history has developed. I think that's one of the dangers too that we have when writing or rewriting history, and mainly the extent to which a group of individuals or a line of thinking blurs everything else, and brings that interpretation to the fore. And it may or may not be a satisfactory or even a rewarding interpretation.

We have the economic view of history or the political view of history or the social view of history, and there are many who feel that one or the other will tell the story, will interpret the story, and I think that probably is almost never true.
SA: I should mention that at some point we'd like to get the audience into the conversation, maybe in 10 or 15 minutes. And we're circulating some index cards, so if you could write a question out, they will be passed up eventually. That would be nice, just because I know there might be many, many questions … rather than just relying on the randomness of the first person who raises their hand.

So to connect with what you [gestures to John Hope Franklin] were just saying now, but going back to some of the earlier points of the discussion, and having listened to the anecdotes, both of yours, which are really rich and interesting anecdotes about what happened around textbooks, and you know, the controversies around that.

There seems to be this real, inevitable problem that I think both of you are touching on, which is that there is a tension between history as some kind of objective account of what happened, and why, and the forces, and so on. And then the political partisanship or bias of the historian, who might … and in your cases, I like the fact that you're both, for instance, historians who believe in and promote social progress—both of you in different ways and in different contexts.

Now, not every historian might want to participate politically in an overt way, but nonetheless, the explicitness in both your instances of being “socially progressive,”—you can use that term in a very broad sense—isn't that a good thing? And what's wrong with claiming that as a badge of courage?

I'm not a historian, you see, and so maybe I'm not as worried about pure objectivity in the way that some people are, but maybe I'm naive. So I'd love for you to tell me whether historians should be for social progress or not. But what does that mean, then, to the whole question of bias and objectivity, because there could be those that say, “I'm against social progress, but I'm a historian who believes that this happened, rather than that.”

Which I don't like to hear, but maybe, you know, is there a way around that problem? Ignore me if I'm causing trouble. [laughter]

RT: Well, to say should historians go along with social progress is in some ways to simplify it.

SA: Okay.

RT: One doesn't consciously sit down and say, “I'm going to write this history because it's going to support social progress.” Because anyway, I mean, my definition of social progress may be totally different from yours. So I have to define what it is that I'm trying to defend whilst I'm writing this book.
If I may again go back to another example, we in Indian history have a major problem, which is a bequest of the colonial period. Colonial historians, and one amongst them, the first major historian, a man called James Mill, periodized Indian history and he divided it up into the Hindu civilization, and the Muslim civilization, and the British period. I'm surprised he didn't say Christian civilization, but anyway. [laughter]

Now this periodization was based on the religion of the dynasties. That is as long as you had dynasties that were broadly Hindu and Buddhist, that was the Hindu civilization period. Then the moment they switched to becoming Muslim dynasties, that was the Muslim period. And then of course, the British arrived, and everything's hunky-dory. [laughter]

What this did, unfortunately, was that it made historians see history in terms of Hindu and Muslim. So every time there was a crisis, it was said it was the Muslim invaders.

And you know, we went around the bend saying, “But you know there were invasions and campaigns and conquests long before Muhammad existed, let alone the Muslim invaders.” But no, this was the way it was all explained. And medieval history in India from about 1200 to 1700 has been totally riddled with this notion that every act of disappointment, every failure, has to be attributed to the Islamic invasions.

Now, what happens then is, and this is partly the notion of social progress amongst those who are extreme ultra-religious nationalists. They say, yes, we have to return to the glorious ancient period. And you can't question the ancient period, you know, we had everything. All the knowledge that exists in the world today is to be found in the texts of the ancient period.

So this really does make it very difficult to decide what one means by social progress, and we have spent … I mean, one of the reasons why people like me are bitterly attacked is because we have been trying to annul this periodization and say it's meaningless. Social progress for me, for example, lies in taking up a problem from the ancient period or the medieval period and saying, “Let me analyze it, and see.”

Precisely in terms that you [gestures toward John Hope Franklin] were suggesting, of economic factors, social factors, religious factors. I mean we are riddled with the kind of religious periodization which many of us have been questioning simply on the grounds that there are other things in life, which are equally important.

So I think that's a tough question about social progress. I think it varies from historian to historian.
Srinivas: [to John Hope Franklin] Would it be fair to say there's an analogy of the religious aspect in the way that American history is often racialized, which you have addressed?

JHF: I suppose so. I don’t think I have a problem with that.

Of course, I don't think that the average historian would regard this as a proper division or periodization of American history. They might say, that's all right for Franklin, you know, he works in that field. But I think that race has always been such a factor in the history of this country that it wouldn't be bad to have a racial interpretation of the history of the United States.

That might be unfair, but I am so persuaded now that as we look even at the colonial period, and especially at the colonial period, that the motives and modus operandi, as far as that’s concerned, of the British was to develop an economy based, to a considerable extent, on African labor.

And then the maneuvering from that point on was to be certain that this labor supply was unaffected by other things, that it would continue to flow with great ease.

I can envision an interpretation of the U.S. history along that line. I don't know that I'm ready to undertake it myself, but I think it's there and it ought to be explored more than we have explored it. And if we come down on the side of a racial interpretation of U.S. […]

[Recording cuts here.]

SA: […] transnational history, or oceanic history trying to connect, say, the history of the U.S. Instead of that, do something like a Black Atlantic history. Some people have talked about this. Or a history of the Indian Ocean rather than a history of India or the state formation.

And so I had a question to you about whether you think we can’t escape the nation state, because that's where people still largely live, even though we keep thinking we're beyond the nation state. But as far as I've checked we haven't really gotten beyond that, even though people sometimes overstate that we need to be talking about other countries and other places, which of course are important.

JHF: I’m of the view that there is a place in the history of this country and in the history of other countries, perhaps, for a sharper focus on the major influences and factors. And to see whether or not that is the pivotal or critical point in the history of that country

I made reference to race as a factor here. In the Atlantic Monthly, some of you might have seen the 150th anniversary edition of the Atlantic Monthly, which comes out monthly, and they’re celebrating its founding in 1857. And they speak of the American idea, the notion being that you
can interpret this country's history in terms of an idea that evolves from the 17th century to the present.

I challenged that in my little contribution, pointing out that, I mean, if the American idea is so great, what about all these problems we have? [JHF chuckles]

And maybe we should go back and think of another way of looking at this country’s powerful and dominant forces. I'm not all sure the American idea is anything to be proud of, or to celebrate, in view of the fact that we are in the situation we find ourselves in today.

And this brings me back around to the view that maybe we need to have another kind of interpretation of it, as a major factor in dominating the history of this country from the 17th century to the present. Maybe it’s race, maybe it’s politics, maybe it’s economics, but I’m not certain that it’s all of them.

I'm not certain that it's one over the other. But it needs a lot of thinking, a lot of hard thinking, and analysis, discussion, and it needs some conclusions that I have not reached myself, even.

RT: This is of course a question that we are constantly discussing in India. The definition of the nation, and how does the historian relate to the nation.

I think of one of the things that we, at least, [gestures toward self] have to keep in mind is that when histories are written during periods of nationalism—and they frequently were in certainly most of the ex-colonies—there was a tendency to look for a single, unitary statement. The history was single, it was unitary, it was uniform. Everybody was included in, without necessarily discussing who everybody was.

The view that was presented in nationalism was very much the view of those who were commanding the nationalist movement. They were the people involved.

What has happened now after 50 years of post-nationalist history is that we're discovering that there are in fact multiple histories of the Indian subcontinent. There isn't just one history, and the multiplicity is because, you know, it's a very long history. It’s 5,000 years, which is sometimes very difficult to get ahold of, because it slips out all the time. You don’t know where you’re heading for.

But there are multiple groups that have been powerful, have held power, have expressed themselves, and have left monuments and statements behind. So what does one do with this, then, in addition to the whole nationalist venture, which, of course, has to be kept together. And
if historians are going to write, they must somehow seek a history that pulls it together. But this is rather different from the old-fashioned nationalist historical writing.

The other problem is, of course, that a lot of interest is now being taken in regional histories. And when you consider the size of the subcontinent, and you consider that these regions, what we call the states of the Indian Union, are really virtually like Europe.

So they're all busy now. They're discovering new kinds of evidence. There's a lot of archaeological work. There are lots of texts that are being discovered. And there is a tendency to write regional histories rather like the format of the nationalist histories.

And this runs into problems where people say, “That format doesn't suit us.” If you take Northeast India for example, which is largely tribal communities, they say a lot of Indian history makes no sense to us because we haven't experienced that past. It's been experienced in the rich agricultural lands, and the core regions, and so on. In the extreme peripheries, it hasn't been experienced. Now how does one correlate that experience into the mainstream experience? This in many ways a rather difficult project.

And I do know from my own experience, having written this book on early Indian history, that I was constantly saying to myself, “Have I got everybody in, have I got right? Will people object to my saying this about this group of people and that about that group of people?” And so on.

It is a problem I think that is tied into the question of nationalism, and how nationalism unfolds in multicultural societies, which I think is a difficult problem.

**JHF:** It's not all together unlike what we have in this country.

**RT:** Yes, absolutely.

**JHF:** When you think of the American idea, when you think of America as a nation, when you think of the history of the South—which is not United States history in a real sense.

Or when you think of the history of the industrial North—that’s not the history of the South or the West. And the same is true of the West and Southwest. So it's difficult to think in terms of national history when the sections are so powerful themselves as to defy the definition of a nation state.

So that's a point to grapple with, and it stands right in the way of understanding the United States as a unitary history. It’s very difficult to think in those terms when you’re focusing on the history of the South or the Northeast or whatever.
SA: As I was saying, we're going to move on to the audience questions very soon. But I'm going to now ask you to speed up the answers, and answer this question sort of as a one-sentence answer, so we can move onto other questions. [laughter]

JHF: My answer’s “yes and no.” [laughter]

SA: The question is the following. I eschewed the introduction, which I think was a very good thing, by giving it to [the audience] in print, so we can hear both of you talking to each other, rather than hear someone tell everyone how distinguished you both are.

But one of the things that actually is really important to mention to the audience is that both of you were distinguished Kluge professors at the Library of Congress, where you first met, if I'm correct.

And Professor Thapar was distinguished Chair in the Countries and Cultures of the South—I think that’s how the Library of Congress defined this first Chair. And Dr. Franklin was later then the Kluge [Prize Winner in 2006]. I mean, after you got the Kluge Chair, when you first met [Professor Thapar].

Now the point I was trying to get at, the one sentence answer … Both of you clearly love talking to each other, which is why I thought this would be a great conversation to stage. And I think it's been wonderful.

But I have a question: what area of history do you wish you had studied, other than what you have already studied?

[to John Hope Franklin] And you can't say ancient India because that’s … [laughter]

RT: [laughs] Why not?

SA: … it'll be diplomatic and I know you're [gestures toward John Hope Franklin] very diplomatic.

Is there an area of history you wish you’d studied? Something else?

JHF: I was gonna say modern India and I can’t say that now! [laughter]

SA: But actually, that makes sense!
JHF: In my many visits to India, I became more and more engaged in the history of India. I wish I had studied it. But since you reject my … [laughter]

SA: No, I didn't reject your answer! I accept your answer. I think it makes perfect sense, from what you were saying about multicultural, multi-religious, you know, multi-ethnic societies and so on. I think so many interesting things that would connect.

But you were going to bring up another topic.

JHF: I was just gonna say it was the profound confusion I experienced on my first visit to India that made me think that I could spend the rest of my days and days of some other people trying to understand India and its history. And I never had an experience so humbling as the experience of going to India. And I've been there seven or eight times now and I'm more confused than ever.

RT: You're not the only one! [laughter]

JHF: And I'm not just saying this in the presence of Romila Thapar. It's the thing I would love to know more about and I wish I'd studied it.

RT: It would have been marvelous, I must say, to have someone like you come along and study modern India.

I don't know, I'm quite happy with having done ancient history for a variety of reasons, but the only thing is, I think, if I had my life over again, I would probably have been more of an archaeologist than a historian for the simple reason of the exposure that I have had to archaeology. I had joined excavations for many seasons. I remember one, particularly in a city in Rajasthan called Kalibangan, where I worked for three seasons with the archaeological survey.

The thing that really shook me was—and this is a silly story, but still—we were digging a room, and there was a wall that cut across. And these were all mud brick houses, you know, you make the brick, you dry it in the sun, and then you start using it. They're not burnt brick.

And as I was excavating this end of the wall, there was a brick that showed up, and when you're really down to detailed excavations, you're using almost surgical knives, rather than anything else, because it's so delicate. This brick showed up and it had the impression of the fingers of a hand on it.

Obviously, the person who was making the brick put pressure on the brick before it had completely dried so that impression was there. And I looked at it for a moment, and then I put
my hand into that impression. And I suddenly thought, my god, this is happening after three and a half thousand years, that there is communication between someone and myself through this brick.

And I was, you know, it was like more of an epiphany. I suddenly realized how important it is to be able to tangibly see the objects that we used in the past, and I wish I'd done a little more of that instead of sticking to texts.

SA: Okay, now one of you has written an autobiography.

RT: Not me! [laughter]

SA: By the way, we're going to have a reception in about 10 or 15 minutes, when we get to the audience questions, and there are books by both Dr. Franklin and Dr. Thapar outside for sale, so please do take a look. We didn't get the whole library because there wouldn't have been room to display all of them, but we do have a couple by each of them that we thought you might want to purchase and they will be, I think, happy to sign them for you, if you want them to do that.

But this is the last question that I'm going to ask, okay, and it may be a talk for each of you, and I don't want you each to give a talk now, because we'll go to [audience] questions. But what do you think about … Why did you [gestures toward to John Hope Franklin] write an autobiography, very briefly, and how does that connect with being a historian? And why have you [gestures toward Romila Thapar] not written an autobiography, and how does that connect with your being a historian?

RT: Because I’m still writing history. [laughter]

SA: [to John Hope Franklin] That was fighting words, I think! You’d better respond to that.

JHF: Well, I was inclined to … At my age, I said, this is ancient history. [laughter] I thought I would record it!

SA: Do you want to continue with that? I'm just going to get some of the questions. Please go ahead, sorry.

JHF: No, that's my answer. I thought I ought to record the ancient history that I was probably more familiar with.

SA: Some of these questions are so long, I’m almost … Well, here's one, and they’re all very good. I’m just trying to read the handwriting.
“Why do we put so much emphasis on the pastness of the past? As if such narrative, whatever its outcome may be, will be emancipatory to the present?”

That raises the question: what is the role of history?

**JHF:** Well, it seems to be that the question almost answers itself, mainly that you have to—*you have to*—know your past in order to understand the present, and certainly what the future might be. And I don't mean your past or my past, as I was writing an autobiography. I mean, *the past*, as Romila Thapar has looked at it and as many of you might have looked at the past. The dark dim past, which has a powerful impact on who you are today and I can't imagine anyone not being fascinated, interested in, and curious about the past.

If not in personal terms, in terms of the impact of that past on your surroundings, and everything that you experience today, that other people experience today. Whether it’s ancient-ancient or just ancient history, I think that you have to be interested in it.

**SA:** We have many, many questions here. And of course, we're not going to be able to get to all of them, but—and you know, you would of course be more than welcome to approach our speakers at the end of the conversation—but let me get at a couple more.

There's someone here who is asking … sorry, I just misplaced this …

“What are the qualities that distinguish the historians you most admire from the rest of the scholars in this field?”

I thought there was an intriguing, but very difficult question to throw at you both. [laughter] What are the best qualities of a historian?

**RT:** I would say the best qualities in a historian are, first of all, the ability to assess the evidence that is being used.

You know, the historian is not somebody who just picks up the text or picks up an object and says, “Therefore it was this.” You have to start off with a fair amount of *suspicion* and ask yourself why this particular object interests you or why this text interests you.

There’s that. The other thing I think is really going back to what John Hope was saying about these different kinds of history. You have economic determinism or religious determinism or social determinism, or whatever it may be. I think that the historian has to weigh these particular factors and see which one has to be given priority.
I have problems with people who say, “oh, yes, here's a bit of history, and here's a list of causes to explain that event or that person, but I don't think that it has any priority. I think all causes are of equal value.” That to me is nonsense. I don't think that's historical writing at all. The historian has to prioritize the causes that are being put forward.

And in a sense that comes out of the explanation that historian is giving. You can tell from the explanation whether there is a bias in this direction or that direction. And the good historian is the historian able to separate himself from this bias or herself from this bias, which is very, very difficult, as in all writing. It's almost like destroying yourself.

But being able to answer these questions that explain the past in a way that is really quite fulsome and not limited to any particular kind of determinism.

SA: What do you think?

JHF: I have nothing to add. I agree with that wholeheartedly.

SA: Okay, here's a question that is very interesting.

“When I was in school in the ’50s and ’60s, history curriculums were mostly about government and military adventures. We did not learn about the performing arts, visual art, and architecture and sports heroes, like Dempsey and Tunney. What lacks do you remember, and is the situation better now?”

What lacks such as these do you remember, and is the situation better now? Or do we still talk only about government and military adventures?

JHF: Well, I think that would depend on the historian, and it would depend on where you are, and what kind of history you take. These days, you can take a course in intellectual history, which would not have much to do with these soldiers and so forth, and might be focusing entirely on writings of someone.

I’m at a loss to understand what the problem is. If a person is taking a general history course, he might have some complaints about what is covered. But if he's shopping around in rich curriculum, he could find some things that deal with …

SA: Cultural history, social history, etc.
Maybe I will end with this last question, because, you know, we could be here until midnight, I'm sure. But we have a reception and we have other things. I think this is an interesting one going back to the autobiography question that I think might be a good place to end.

And here's someone trying to answer the question for you and asking you if you agree, so I don't know what you would say about this:

“The reason that Dr. Franklin wrote an autobiography was because his community of friends and scholars—and many of us are members of this community—desired it so fervently that he had to agree. Does Dr. Franklin agree? And is this a significant reason for the historian to write an autobiography?” [laughter]

**JHF:** There were people who were pressing me, urging me. I don’t deny that. But I had at least another reason, and that was that I have been categorized so much as an African American historian, or as a historian of African American history.

And I spent a good deal of time trying to explain to my readers and people who were curious about me that I was trying to do more than that. I was trying to put the history of this country into a proper context, and trying to put people in this country in a broader context than they thought of themselves.

There are forces that affect African Americans that don’t affect others, I suppose. But there are not forces that are generally loose in this country that don't affect African Americans also. And I have tried to indicate to my readers that I'm not just an African American, that the history which I’ve experienced is not just African American history. It’s more, it’s broader, it's more challenging and more exciting and more interesting. And more general.

And that's the main reason I tried to write about myself, but it’s not about myself. It's called *Mirror to America.* I wanted not merely myself, but other people to look in that mirror and see what they see. And if they’re honest about what they see, they might not be as happy as they were before they looked in the mirror.

[applause]

**SA:** I think that will be a wonderful place to end this extraordinary conversation. Please join us. We have a reception. We have books that are outside that you could buy and have signed, and please stay and speak to Dr. Franklin and Dr. Thapar. I'm sure they'd be willing to answer your questions.
I want to thank the audience. I couldn't go through all the questions, obviously, but it was really good to do it this way because we've connected [the questions] with the conversation. And I really want to thank both Dr. Franklin and Dr. Thapar.