

**Appointment of Professor Romila Thapar to the Kluge Chair at the
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
An Open Letter of Protest**

Date: 29 April 2003

To: Prosser Gifford, Director of Academic Programs, LOC.

Dear Dr. Gifford,

I am writing this open letter to protest the appointment of Dr. Romila Thapar to the Kluge Chair at the Library of Congress. At the very outset, I want to emphasize two things –

First, my complaint should not be construed as an attack on academic freedom. On the contrary, as a member of an American minority community, my concern is about due process and that it give an equal voice to the minority community on par with other Americans. As you can judge from the tremendous response to an on-line [petition](#), the community is voicing its distress and sadness at the appointment of Professor Thapar to the Kluge Chair.

Second, I do not suspect the intentions or motivations of the committee that seeks to appoint Professor Thapar to the Kluge Chair. However, as an informed member of the Indian diaspora, I sincerely urge you to reconsider the appointment.

My objections have been organized as follows –

- A. Prof. Thapar's Lack of Required Skills
- B. Her Political Affiliations with Indian Communists
- C. Perceptions and Fears of the Indian American Community
- D. The Objectives of the Kluge Chair Center and the Library Of Congress

I can provide you detailed documentary evidence for all my claims if you so desire. This is merely a *brief* letter.

A. Prof. THAPAR's LACK OF REQUIRED SKILLS -

The appointment of an applicant to the Kluge requires that the person be familiar with the literary, epigraphic, linguistic and archaeological sources which provide the primary data for this research. Unfortunately, Prof. Thapar does not come equipped with those skills and knowledge.

1. Linguistic Skills: From her own public admissions, we know that Prof. Thapar is ignorant of classical languages of India – Pali/Prakrit, Tamil.¹ Her knowledge of Sanskrit, the lingua franca of literate communities in ancient India, is quite rudimentary. Of the four linguistic groups of India viz., Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Indo-Aryan,² she has little or no familiarity with the first three, and a fragmentary knowledge of the last. As a result, she is unable to do any reasonable linguistic analysis in her writings.

The Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), with which she has been affiliated with for most of her career, had actually scuttled efforts to teach the classical languages of India within their premises, on the grounds that teaching Sanskrit will promote Hindu revivalism! Her own aversion towards Sanskrit is well known and documented.

Next to English, considerable core/fundamental research on ancient India has been written and published in German, citations of which are largely conspicuous by their absence in her writings.³

It may be noted that Prof. Thapar has not translated even one published ancient Indian text *ab initio*, she has merely ‘translated’ some passages from texts such as Bhagavata Purana,⁴ which already have dozens of existing translations.

2. Insufficient Knowledge of Literary Records: Several major Indian texts from the ancient period still lie untranslated, and most existing translations were done as much as a century ago. Much philological data has emerged in the last century, and fresh translations are needed to provide students with a more modern and robust perspective. Prof. Thapar’s own lack of the required linguistic skills forces her to ignore the non-translated texts. Instead, she is known to rely on the available outdated

¹ She has written some articles that involve Classical Tamil Poetry. However, she has completely relied on fragmentary translations in these articles. In her recent book "Early India" (OUP, 2002), RomilaThapar has incorrectly claimed that the caste system was introduced into the Tamil country (that is the southern part of peninsular India) in the 7th century A.D. during the Pallava rule. If she had had any detailed knowledge of Tamil language and Sangam literature or if she had read seminal research works that have been published over the past 100 years on this subject matter by eminent scholars like U.V.S.Aiyar and K.A.N.Sastri, she would have known otherwise. She would have known that the Sangam literature itself portrays a Tamil society that had the varna (popularly known as the caste) system well integrated into its social structure. Not only this corpus, but even some anthologies and commentaries on them had been put together by the 7th century A.D. Also, by the 6th century A.D. a new genre of bhakti (devotional) works had been compiled in Tamil and the poets of these compositions were patronized by the Pallava kings. It is my concern that Thapar would propagate very false notions about Early India in general, and the South in particular, because she doesn't possess the requisite skills needed to pursue any research in this area. The primary of those skills being a knowledge of Tamil language and an intimate familiarity with its literary and epigraphic tradition. A respectable position as the Kluge chair should rather utilize the services of a competent scholar.

² There are also other languages such as Nahali, which do not fall into any of these categories. It may be assumed safely that Prof. Thapar has no clue about these ‘isolates’. Obviously, she cannot use the field of historical linguistics for her research in any meaningful manner. This is big drawback especially when she writes on the Vedic period.

³ In recent years, she has started dropping names such as “*Der Rgveda*, K. F. Geldner” and so on, but the mode of referencing leaves the reader clueless as to what sentences in the referenced book are meant.

⁴ Contained in her book *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*. Kali for Women, New Delhi [2002]

translations of ancient Indian texts and inscriptions – a fact noted by many friendly scholars.⁵

For non-translated texts, she tends to rely on old ‘Indices’ such as the *Vedic Index* from 1912. These indices and concordances are quite outdated and considered unsatisfactory by scholars doing state of the art research. In fact, a recent review⁶ of one of her writings (*From Lineage to State* to be specific) alludes that her ‘analyses’ are akin to ‘theorising in empirical vacuity’, precisely because of her non-familiarity with the primary literary sources from ancient India.

Her own lack of familiarity with these sources is compounded by her total disdain for the utility of such studies. A recent review of her writings quotes her as saying – “*there is nothing to be learnt from the ancient literature of India that has not already been learned*.”⁷ I wonder if a scholar with such an attitude, coupled with incompetence in the required area can do serious research on historical consciousness in ancient India. *Non-translated and/or non-published texts, inscriptions and other literary records from ancient India are typically not referenced in her writings even though she can easily access them from Indian libraries and manuscript collections.*

3. Lack of skills in Paleography, Epigraphy and Related Fields: Inscriptions from ancient India are encountered in a myriad scripts. Mrs. Thapar cannot read more than 1 or 2 of these scripts. There do exist sources such as *Epigraphia Indica*, which give the text of these inscriptions. However, it is well known that the volumes are not updated regularly. Moreover, serious scholars often prefer to visit the sites of these and examine the evidence afresh.⁸ Her critics have shown that Prof. Thapar has actually managed to distort even the evidence available from the *Epigraphia Indica*.⁹ Many Indian texts are still in manuscript – there are an estimated four million manuscripts in Indian libraries. These texts are often written in scripts that are no longer used. Prof. Thapar cannot read these manuscripts, and especially where the texts have not been published/translated yet, this is a serious lacuna. *It may be noted that Prof. Thapar has not edited a single Indic text directly from manuscripts.*

4. Incompetence in Archaeology: Prof. Thapar participated in two small archaeological excavations about 35 years ago, but thereafter, she has not benefited

⁵ For instance, even her recent admirer, Professor Michael Witzel has noted that in her *History of India* [1966], she has merely excerpted data from the *Cambridge Ancient History* and Rhys David’s *Buddhist India*, both of which were written around the beginning of the 20th century (See page 86 of Michael Witzel. 1995. ‘Early Indian History: Linguistic and Textual Parameters’, in George Erdosy (ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia*: 85-125. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin. Elsewhere, he has suggested that Thapar has used the Puranic data uncritically in her writings.

⁶ R. N. Nandi’s *Aryans Revisited*, Munshiram Manoharal, New Delhi [2002], page 10, fn. 20. On page 20, Nandi shows how excessive reliance on piecemeal indexing by the *Vedic Index* has lead Thapar to draw false conclusions in her *From Lineage to State* – a text that is recommended reading at the JNU history courses, and is often held by her as an exemplary publication, to be reprinted in all her later anthologies.

⁷ See Sudhanshu Ranade’s ‘History – Make it or Break it’ in *The Hindu*, 22 April 2003. It was available at <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/br/stories/2003042200030300.htm>

⁸ One could give here the example of Harry Falk, who walked to the Asokan inscriptions in situ before writing his book *Schrift im alten Indien* [1993]

⁹ See <http://www.bharatvani.org/books/htemples2/app4.htm> for an example.

from the immense amounts of archaeological data being unearthed by professionals in India year after year, especially in recent years. In fact, she and a few other fellow Marxist historians have been at constant loggerheads with the archaeological survey of India for almost a decade now, because newly emerging data tends to be at variance with Marxist paradigms of Indian history. Recently, she, along with a few other Marxist historians even advocated a total moratorium on archaeological excavations in India for the next couple of years because the Indian archaeology establishment is allegedly 'saffronized'¹⁰ and their work can boost sectarian tensions. In fact, it is these same set of historians who have thoroughly 'communalized' (the use of this word in Indian English approximates the meaning 'enhance sectarianism')! Needless to say, such an attitude is not conducive to enhancing our understanding of ancient India.

One could argue that the craft of a historian goes beyond the above four skills, and also consists in interpreting all these primary data. However, a lack of skills required to collect the primary data can never be substituted by finesse in interpretations. What is the use of parading ones skills in armchair twisting of fashionable socio-anthropological theories¹¹ if one is incapable of generating, collecting and comprehending *primary data*? Scholarly differences of opinion are to be expected in a field like history, especially when it pertains to ancient India. However, what cannot be disputed is that a competency in the above-mentioned fields is an absolute requirement for a historian of ancient India.

It may be noted that Prof. Thapar's publications are all secondary interpretations of selective and inadequate primary data. Her personal contribution in generating primary data of use to historians is practically nil.

Her disdain for traditional scholars of India, for archaeologists in India, and for the utility of learning Sanskrit and other classical languages and so on reflect an attitude which is not very suitable for a candidate aspiring to occupy the Kluge Chair.

B. POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS OF Prof. THAPAR - History as Political Propaganda:

The interpretations that Prof. Thapar gives to whatever primary data that can be handled by her, depends a lot on her own world view, and her resulting paradigms with regard to ancient India. This is where my second set of objections lies.

¹⁰ Saffron is a sacred color for Indic religious traditions. For Prof. Thapar and her colleagues however, 'saffronization' means imposition of Hindu right wing agenda on secular institutions. In my opinion, the way in which Prof. Thapar *et al* use Hindu symbols and sacred objects in a derogatory fashion reflects their aversion towards the manifestation of Indic religions and cultures in our daily lives. To help you understand this issue better, consider the historical fact that the Nazis gave such a bad meaning to 'Swastika' a sacred Indian religious and cultural symbol, that Indian Americans are often hesitant to display the Swastika during their religious functions in the United States because it might invite charges of neo-Nazi sympathies.

¹¹ Dilip Chakrabarti has also made this point *passim*, in his *Colonial Indology*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi [1997].

Prof. Thapar is a Marxist historian, and is acknowledged as such even by scholars of Marxism outside India.¹² Consequently, she has a very reductionist/narrow view of India's past. For instance, she tends to exclude or diminish the importance of non-materialistic aspects of our culture and civilization. But more than that, she has a very negative opinion of the Hindu religious beliefs and spirituality. Her disdain for the intellectual and spiritual contributions of ancient India is reflected in her vehement public opposition to the teaching of Yoga in Indian schools.¹³

A subtle hate-mongering against Hindus and Hinduism seems to be an underlying theme in her writings. Even the school textbooks (I read them as a Grade VI student because they were required reading, mandated by the State) are not free from this bias.¹⁴ The bias is manifested in many ways, to the extent that other scholars have alleged that Prof. Thapar has distorted primary historical evidence to suit political expediency. For instance, it is alleged that she has white-washed history when it comes to the rule of Muslim rulers in stamping out expressions of indigenous religious beliefs of Indians.¹⁵ While one can certainly appreciate her social concerns that cause her to do all this, a professional historian is expected to draw a line before historiography becomes fiction dictated by ephemeral political ideologies. But anyone who has drawn attention to these deficiencies is immediately abused as a Brahminist and what not, by her and her supporters.

'Nationalism' is a dirty word for Indian Marxism, and anything that could inspire Indians to feel pride in their culture is deprecated. Consistent with Indian Marxist ideology, she has tended to promote the antiquated colonial-missionary-racist paradigm of ancient India, even though she professes to do just the opposite. Scholars have noticed how her writings merely excerpt works from the colonial era peppered with politically correct jargon. Some scholars have even seen a strong parallel between her views and the Aryanist writings of the early 20th century.¹⁶

¹² Thapar is quoted as one of the Marxist historians in the entry 'Hinduism' of *'A Dictionary of The Marxist Thought'* (Tom Bottomore et al, 1983, Harvard University Press, p. 204). Ronald Inden, in his *Imagining India* [1990:pp. 154-156, 197] clearly refers to Thapar as a Marxist historian.

¹³ Addressing the "National Convention against Saffronization of Education" organized by SAHMAT on 4-6 August 2001 in New Delhi, Thapar argues that "Instead of further professionalising the subjects taught at school and college, they are being replaced with subjects that have virtually no pedagogical rigour, such as Yoga and Consciousness or cultivating a Spirituality Quotient. These cannot form the core of knowledge and replace subjects with a pedagogical foundation, although yoga can be an additional activity." The argument is spurious, because Yoga is being taught successfully in thousands of schools and other public and private institutions all over the world. The only opposition to the teaching of Yoga in European and N. American countries comes from close-minded Christian priests. The text of her talk at the SAHMAT sponsored Seminar is available on-line at <http://www.ercwilcom.net/~indowindow/sad/godown/edu/rtsefp.htm>

¹⁴ See my review of her NCERT textbook for Std. VI at <http://vishalagarwal.bharatvani.org/RomilaNCERTVI.doc>

¹⁵ As an example, see <http://www.bharatvani.org/books/htemples2/app4.htm> and <http://koenraadelst.bharatvani.org/articles/harshakashmir.html>

¹⁶ This back-door revival of the Aryan Invasion Theory by Thapar et al even in her earlier publications has not fooled many people. Speaking of an old publication of hers, for instance, Edmund LEACH [LEACH, Edmund. 1990. *Aryan Invasions Over Four Millennia*. in E. Ohnuki-

If the study of history in India is so thoroughly politicized these days, Mrs. Thapar must share a lot of the credit for the same. Born into aristocracy, she has been accused of leveraging her connections, and for promoting the hegemony of a small group of Marxist/Communist/Leftist scholars who have been thrusting the 'official' history of India on several generations since 1970's.¹⁷ For instance, her textbook for school children was mandatory reading for millions of students from 1966 to 2001! Consistent with the Indian Marxist political ideology, she has privileged one religion over the other. For instance, it suits Indian Marxists to glorify Islam, Christianity and Marxism and criticize Hinduism. Such tendencies are both clear and subtle in her writings. Her writings also tend to create an alarmist tendency amongst certain sections of Indian society, and give a boost to sectarianism, which ironically she derides.¹⁸

Prof. Thapar herself has been an advisor to the Leader of the Opposition Political Party of India, namely Mrs. Sonia Gandhi (President of the Congress Party), and is considered very close to her. She has repeatedly shared the dais with Communist leaders. Her alma mater is considered the Mecca of Indian Marxism, and leading lights of Communist terrorist movements of India and Nepal openly acknowledge their debt to that institute.¹⁹ Prof. Thapar has frequently made pointed attacks, in her public writings and in her speeches, against certain political parties and their leaders, particularly those belonging to the present ruling coalition in New Delhi. She has

Tierney (ed.), *Culture Through Time, Anthropological Approaches*. Stanford University Press: Stanford] remarks – “Why is this sort of thing so attractive? Who finds it attractive? Why has the development of early Sanskrit come to be so dogmatically associated with an Aryan invasion? In some cases, the association seems to be matter of intellectual inertia. Thus, Thapar (1969), who provides a valuable survey of the evidence then available, clearly finds the whole ‘movement of peoples’ argument a nuisance, but at the end of the day she falls into line.”

¹⁷ Dr. Nurul Hasan was a politician, the Education Minister appointed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Concerning him and his protégés, archaeologist Dilip Chakrabarti remarks (on page 13 of *Colonial Indology*. Munshiram Manoharlal: New Delhi, 1997) – “To thwart the strength of the old Congress party stalwarts, the then Prime Minister of the country, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, came to depend significantly on the support of the ‘left’ political parties, and recruited in the process to her cabinet a History professor, putting him in charge of education. This professor, an Oxford D.Phil with a firm belief in the ‘progressive’, i.e., ‘left’ ideas, was also the son of an important government functionary of British India and related by marriage to one of the powerful ‘native’ princely houses of the north. Till his date in harness as the governor of a left-controlled Indian state, he acted as the patron saint of a wide variety of historians claiming ‘progressive’ political beliefs and hoping for a slice of the establishment cake.”

¹⁸ See the relevant remarks at <http://www.bharatvani.org/reviews/millennium.html> . A constant refrain in her writings is that the ‘Upper-Caste Hindus’ are somehow conspiring to oppress everyone else. While such a fantasy converges with the frequent outpourings of Islamists, Christian Missionaries and Communists in India, it may be pointed out that the leading lights of Indian Marxism (Thapar included) are themselves all of ‘Upper-Caste’ Hindu origins. In fact, a section of the Dalit movement in India today rejects this Marxist sponsored version of ‘secularism’ and ‘Social Engineering’ precisely because of the suspicion that Indian Marxists are prolonging ‘upper-caste hegemony’. A detailed discussion of this facet of Indian politics is beyond the scope of the present letter.

¹⁹ See ‘I learnt the ABC of Marxism at the JNU’ in *The Statesman*, 4 April 2003.

doggedly refused to condemn the large scale doctoring of history textbooks by the Communist ruled state governments of India,²⁰ and has in fact sided with the ideologues of these political parties.

Worst yet, she has constantly associated herself with an Indian organization called SAHMAT, whose office has been located right within the New Delhi branch of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).²¹ SAHMAT is well-known for its anti-Americanism, and is at the forefront of anti-US demonstrations periodically. Mrs. Thapar frequently uses their platforms for making attacks on certain Indian politicians, contributes to their publications and has her own pamphlets sponsored by them.

Prof. Thapar is most welcome to subscribe to a particular political or religious ideology. The problem arises when her scholarly work becomes merely a subterfuge for political propaganda. It is impossible, in the eyes of the average Indian, to separate 'Thapar – the Historian', from 'Thapar- the Politician'.²²

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in the interest in ancient Indian culture and religion amongst all sections of the Indian society. Newer technologies that have democratized education and dissemination of knowledge, have promoted this trend. Prof. Thapar has, however, expressed negative views on these trends quite often. In a publication ten years ago, she notes with disdain that Indian scholars in the west use 'the computer' to facilitate their research. In a recent publication, she wonders if there should be state control on the Internet and media in India.²³ And in interviews, she has lamented often that the 'barrier to entry' for professional historiography has gotten lowered in recent years. Such an elitist mindset for a scholar wedded to Marxist historiography is somewhat paradoxical, and disturbing to me.

²⁰ Examples of these can be seen at <http://www.bharatvani.org/shourie/eminenthistorians1.html> in the article 'Not just Whitewash, Hogwash too'. Thapar has NEVER condemned the distortions of history textbooks in Communist ruled states of India.

²¹ See the on-line article 'CPI(M), SAHMAT left Homeless', in *The Hindu*, 06 February 2002, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2002/02/06/stories/2002020606000100.htm>

²² The association of Thapar with Marxist historiography is an open secret in India. An article in the *Times of India* (New Delhi edn.) dt. 24 February 2002, calls her a 'hardcore Marxist'. Her interpretations of ancient India are treated in the sections on Marxist historiography by Shankar Goyal in his '*Recent Historiography of Ancient India*', Kusumanjali Prakashan: Jodhpur (1997). Ravi Shanker Kapoor, in his *More Equal than Others – A Study of the Indian Left*, Vision Books: New Delhi (2000), which discusses the tyrannical Marxist intellectual hegemony in independent India, also classifies Romila Thapar as a Leftist historian (p. 140).

²³ "In theory, if Internet and information technology are not controlled by the state then those with access to them will claim to be free of the fear of becoming closed minds. They will be however, only a fraction of the population. Will the kind of knowledge pursued by this fraction ensure a society committed to the freedom of the individual and humanist values? Technological proficiency by itself is no a sufficient safeguard against the increasing tendency in India to be comfortable with the soft underbelly of fascism and not recognize it for what it is..." pp. xxvii-xxviii in *INDIA, Another Millennium?* Ed. By Romila Thapar. (Viking: New Delhi, 2000). And pray, how could one safeguard media from fascism? By appointing Romila Thapar to the board of Prasar Bharati (as was actually done by sympathetic politicians in the past), an apex government body controlling and guiding the government communication media!

C. PERCEPTIONS OF THE INDIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Prof. Thapar's writings have also unfairly tarnished the illustrious Indian community in the United States. She has suggested often, without much provocation, that members of the community promote fundamentalism in India, and that they fund cranks and support fringe scholars rather than promote genuine scholarship.

All this perhaps explains why the on-line [petition](#)²⁴ protesting her appointment has drawn such a massive response. In a matter of 4 days, the petition gathered 1400+ signatures. It would be reasonable to assume that most of the supporters of this petition are from the US, given the low depth of penetration of the Internet in India. Some of the recurring themes in the protest notes of the signatories of the petition are: *'She is anti-Hindu'*, *'She is anti-India'*, *'her historiography is flawed'*, *'She is a Communist'*, *'She would be a strain in US Tax \$'*, *'She represents colonial historiography'*, *'She is a CIA plant to ensure Western hegemony over India'*, *'She has promoted various forms of terrorism in India (directly or indirectly)'*, *'She is anti-USA'*. Clearly, some of the above allegations are outlandish, to say the least. For instance, I am aware that the Kluge Chair has been endowed with private funds, and so her employment would not draw my tax dollars. Nevertheless, the extreme display of emotions by many of the protestors is disturbing, even to me, who would have preferred a totally academic mode of objecting to her appointment. I would have hoped that the Library Of Congress had appointed a less controversial, and more accomplished scholar to the Kluge Chair.

As a response to this petition, Marxist and Communist groups immediately swung into action, and must have faxed you letters in support of Prof. Thapar's appointment. That merely vindicates my assessment of her as a largely 'political' scholar. I hope the Library Of Congress does not seek to promote particular Indian political parties and ideologies by appointing a person like her. The petitioners are being labeled as 'Right Wing Hindus' and what not – a total mockery of our Constitutional Right of Freedom of Speech. Unfortunately, some well-meaning but ill-informed American academicians, swayed by their commitment to 'Academic Freedom' have also chimed in.

As is the case with immigrants from all the countries of the South, there is an undercurrent of opinion in the Indian community that the US tends to plant its "stooges" on Third World countries to further its own interests. I believe that Prof. Thapar's appointment to the Kluge Chair will precisely promote such perceptions, at least in a large section of the Indian American community. Given Prof. Thapar's frequent political activities, Indian Americans might even feel that the Library of Congress is trying to promote particular political parties in India at the cost of others by appointing her to the Kluge Chair.

Since Prof. Thapar and some of her colleagues in India are well known to have been thrust from the top by Left and Left-of-Center governments, her appointment to a

²⁴ Available at <http://www.petitiononline.com/108india/petition.html>

prestigious chair in the United States is bound to provoke some amusement, if not outright derision.

One cannot also overlook the constant charge of the people of Third World Countries that the West patronizes the new ‘informers’ from the developing nations to promote their own interests. Prof. Thapar’s appointment to the Kluge Chair is again being perceived in the same manner by the petitioners, as I have elaborated above.

Coupled with all these factors is the sense of insecurity of a typical minority community in the United States. Post 9-11, it is being urged that we should try to understand our neighbors better. We ought to learn more about non-western cultures so that such unfortunate incidents are not repeated. Since Prof. Thapar has portrayed Hindus in particular and India in general in a negative light, it is feared that her presence in the US will only serve to strengthen the negative prejudices against India, Indians and Hinduism in the minds of the general American public.

We are a peace loving minority community contributing a lot to the realization and enrichment of the American dream. Therefore, we are very concerned that the Library Of Congress has appointed a person who will distort the general American perception of who we are or who we were.

D. THE KLUGE CHAIR AND THE Library Of Congress:

Please permit me to comment on the objectives for the establishment of the Kluge Chair.

It has been stated by the LOC in its appointment announcement (dt. 17 April 2003) that –

“Through a generous endowment from its namesake, the Library of Congress established the John W. Kluge Center in 2000 to bring together the world's best thinkers to stimulate, energize, and distill wisdom from the Library's rich resources and to interact with policymakers in Washington, D.C. The Kluge Center houses five senior Kluge Chairs (American Law and Governance, Countries and Cultures of the North Countries and Cultures of the South, Technology and Society, and ModernCulture); other senior-level chairs (Henry A. Kissinger Chair, Cary and Ann Maguire Chair in American History and Ethics, and the Harissios Papamarkou Chair in Education); and nearly 25 post-doctoral fellows.”

I believe that an occupant of the Kluge Chair named ‘Countries and Cultures of the South’ ought to possess good skills in the areas mentioned by me in Section A above. Moreover, he/she is expected to promote a genuine knowledge and understanding of the ‘countries of the South’ that is free of western hegemonistic discourse, and is rooted in indigenous traditions. Otherwise, the activity of that ‘thinker’ occupying this chair would be a mere arm-chair theoretical exercise, not rooted in the ethos of his/her own country, and having no basis in the thinking of the Indian masses. I fail to understand how Prof. Thapar meets these requirements.

The announcement on the appointment of Prof. Thapar states –

“Through a generous endowment from its namesake, the Library of Congress established the John W. Kluge Center in 2000 to bring together the world's best thinkers to stimulate, energize, and distill wisdom from the Library's rich resources and to interact with policymakers in Washington, D.C.”

Further, the information [web-page](#) on Kluge Chairs says –

“...the only obligations during their residency will be to help craft and participate in some meetings or conversations open to Members of Congress and congressional staff, and to offer at least one public presentation for the broader public policy community in Washington.”

Given Prof. Thapar’s left-of-center political affiliations, and her skewed understanding of ancient and modern India, is it desirable that she should guide US policy-makers on India? Many in the Indian American community believe her to be an anti-Indian (!), and therefore she does not seem to be a good choice for the chair. How can a scholar, closely associated with anti-American movements in India, be trusted to guide US policy-makers correctly?

The announcement refers to her credentials in the following words –

“The author of many seminal works on the history of ancient India, her volume of the Penguin History of India has been continuously in print since 1966. Her latest publication is "Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300." Other recent works are "History and Beyond," "Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History," and "History and Beyond." In her published works, Thapar has pioneered both the study of early Indian texts as history and the integration of the critical use of archaeology with written sources.”

I want to point out that two of the three books mentioned above are merely collections of her old essays, which suffer from the faults that I have alluded to in Section A and B above. In recent years, one has not seen any significant genuine original academic output from her (other than ‘*Early India*’²⁵, a revision of an older book of hers after almost four decades) and much of her fresh publications have been political pamphlets, and politically loaded articles in elite-read English newspapers and brochures of SAHMAT. The claim that she ‘pioneered’ the integration of archaeology with written sources is often repeated, but does not stand to scrutiny. It is not out of place here to mention that Prof. Thapar is quite resourceful when it comes to publishing the same article of hers in 4-5 different books! As an example, her tribute to the father of Indian Marxist Historiography, titled ‘*The Contribution of D. D. Kosambi to Indology*’, has been published in three of her books (‘*Interpreting Early India*’, ‘*History and Beyond*’, and ‘*Cultural Pasts*’) and in a journal.²⁶ And a

²⁵ A critical review of her recent book by Dr. Sanjay Subrahmanyam is available on-line at <http://www.hinduonnet.com/lr/stories/2003040600110200.htm>

²⁶ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, 1977-78, Nos. 52-53

recent article of hers on Aryans has already appeared in four volumes with little or no variation.

The announcement further lists her several achievements-

“During her illustrious career, Thapar has held many visiting posts in Europe, the United States and Japan. She is an Honorary Fellow at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. She has honorary doctorates from the University of Chicago, the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris, the University of Oxford and the University of Calcutta.”

I do not wish to counter this claim, because objections to the same will necessarily be subjective in a large measure. Suffice it to say that according to her critics, this has a lot to do with the hegemony established in the writing of history in her own home (India) through means, fair and foul. It has been alleged that an intricate power play has ensured that students from the Center for Historical Studies (of which Prof. Thapar is a founding member) in New Delhi and other similar institutions patronized by her and her colleagues (who have been permanent fixtures in their governing committees) are able to get into institutions in the West, from where they are able to invite their erstwhile mentors. I am sure you will agree that such tactics are detrimental to academic freedom, and to a free blossoming of academic enquiry. The support for her in a section of the American academia has complex reasons, but in any case it is at total variance with the wishes and aspirations of a large section of Indians and Indian Americans.

The current collaboration between certain scholars in South Asian studies, who are based in the USA and in Europe, with Marxist historians in India is a matter for further study and is better left out here. I can do no better than citing an excellent on-line essay named '[The Axis of Neo-Colonialism](#)'.²⁷ In Nazi Germany, all inconvenient views were eliminated from public and academic discourse after being branded as 'Jewish'. In current 'academic' discourse on Indology and South Asian Studies, all dissenting voices are similarly being stigmatized by attaching labels such as 'Hindu fundamentalists', 'Hindu right wing' and 'Indian nationalist'. We know what happened in Nazi Germany. An open discussion of issues is often preferable to the 'tyranny of labels'.

I am not claiming that all of Professor Thapar's publications are sub-standard. In fact, some of them have been quite good and ground breaking. However, given her four decade long academic career, they are quite few and far in between.

I want to emphasize once again that I am speaking as a member of the Indian American Community, who was forced to study Prof. Thapar's textbooks as a child,

²⁷ *The Axis of Neo-Colonialism*, by Rajiv Malhotra [2002], available at <http://www.sulekha.com/column.asp?cid=218625>

and who grew up to realize, as many others, how we had been subjected to a biased and prejudiced presentation of our own culture and civilization as children. I have the utmost respect for freedom of American academe, and wish that Indian academe was similarly free and productive. Please do not permit a renowned and fair organization such as the Library of Congress to be a party to this travesty. The Kluge Chair was better left vacant.

Unfortunately, in your announcement today, you have endorsed her appointment with the following words –

"In brief, our response is that we are most pleased to have an Indian historian of Professor Thapar's distinction with us at the Library of Congress. Her many books already in the collections of the Library of Congress testify that her work is sympathetic to the ancient Indian and Hindu historical and cultural traditions in highlighting their variegated and undogmatic quality, and in making clear the complexity of Indian civilization."

The first part of your response is of course along predictable lines. You are entitled to your estimation of her work. However, I do question your last claim. How did you decide that her work is "sympathetic to the ancient Indian and Hindu historical and cultural traditions...."? I see no objective evidence that the affected parties, namely (representatives of) the Indian American, Indian or Hindu communities have endorsed her appointment.

Let me leave it at that, and move on. I have read practically all of her existing publications. And now I look forward to reading the fruit of her 'cutting-edge' research on 'historical consciousness in Ancient India' at the Library of Congress.

Sincerely yours,

Vishal Agarwal