August 20, 2016 happens to be the fifth death anniversary of Ram Sharan Sharma, a doyen of Indian historian and architect of Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR). Born on Sept.01, 1920 in Barauni village of Begusarai district (Bihar), Professor Sharma was the embodiment of humility and scholarship in his persona. In early life, he came in contact with peasant leaders like Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and progressive scholar Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan which inspired him to work for social and economic justice to downtrodden. From his association with national movement leader Dr. Sachchidanand Sinha, Prof Sharma imbibed the determination to fight imperialism and all sorts of oppression. But the thing which influenced his historical writings most was his adoption of Marxism.

R. S. Sharma was a strong believer in the application of ‘Historical Materialism’ of Karl Marx to the study of ancient India. His major assumptions pertaining to state formation, pace of urbanisation, processes of socio-economic changes, feudalism etc. are rooted in his conviction that ‘surplus production’ was the primary determinant factor in all these currents of ancient Indian past. In fact, R S Sharma enriched the Marxist historiography of early India to great extent. It is in this context that Marxist historians regarded him as the greatest historian of India after D. D. Kosambi1. But Prof. Sharma did not embrace Marxism in toto. K.M. Shrimali has rightly observed-

“Though a Marxist in his methodology and orientation, Prof. Sharma was neither a strict doctrinaire nor a propagandist... He has the conviction to take on orthodox Marxists. Marxism for him was not a substitute for thinking but a tool of analysis that required a considerable skill to unfold historical processes. No wonder, he could comment on S. A. Dange’s understanding of historical development in terms of unilinear progression in his ‘India From Primitive Communalism to Slavery’ (1949) that the book shows more schematicism than scholarship”2.

R. S. Sharma was a historian of investigative and analytical mind. He had the ability and competence to approach varied sources of ancient Indian history –literary texts, epigraphy, inscriptions, coins, archaeological remains etc. ‘Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India’ (1985) is the fine example of not only materialistic
interpretation of early India but also of the remarkable blending of archaeological and literary sources.

R.S. Sharma did not discard myths and rituals found in Indian texts, while reconstructing social history of early India. His methodology was to put such myths and rituals in specific temporal and spatial contexts and thereby infer historical meaning from them. Romila Thapar while paying her tribute to Prof. Sharma noted that

“R S Sharma was among a small group of historians who in the 1950s broke new ground in the study of ancient India. One pioneering development was expansion in the range of sources, from using texts alone to supplementing them with archaeological data and introducing data from inscriptions. R S Sharma’s second major contribution was in using analytical method to examine the data”3.

R S Sharma was not obsessed with any set models of historical studies. He adhered only to the ‘factual exactitude’ and was open to admit the findings of his data – analysis. His study of processes of social changes did not prevent him to attack even the methodology of materialistic interpretation, which he himself had applied. He opined that the reason for not focusing on social progress was the prevailing notion that Indian people are inert and unchanging...Those who have been exponents of materialistic interpretation of history have paid little attention to the fact of social change because they followed Marxian idea about the stagnation of Asiatic society in the pre-Industrialization era4. This shows that Prof. Sharma was professionally honest historian and seemed to exemplify the Rankean cornerstone of history-writing that the task of historian is only to show ‘what actually happened’.

R S Sharma was a historian of versatile talent. He had equal mastery over various areas of ancient Indian history-political, social and economic and their interlinks. While studying political aspects, he moved ahead from typical dynastic history and applied holistic approach to analyse ancient Indian polity. This methodology is reflected very subtly in the chapters like ‘Theories of Property, Family and Varna regarding the Origin of State’, ‘Taxation and State Formation in Northern India in Pre-Mauryan Times’, ‘Varna in Relation to Law and Politics’ (C.B.C. 600 –A.D. 500)” in his well researched book- Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India (first edition in 1959, Delhi).

Professor Sharma was extremely critical of caste and gender consideration in the organisation of ancient Indian, polity, judiciary and legal system. Condemning the repugnance meted out to lower Varna in penal laws, he commented “It sounds shocking to the modern democratic mind to learn that Baudhayan, Apastamba and Manu prescribe the same fine for killing a Sudra as for killing a dog”5. But the critical mind did not stop professor Sharma from admiring the good features of ancient Indian polity. He did a comparative study of modern definition of state whose constituents are sovereignty, government, territory and population with Saptanga theory of
Kautzila which enumerated Swami, Amatya, Janapad, Durga, Kosa (mainly in the form of taxes), Danda (army) and Mitra. Professor Sharma opined

“Since these ingredients (army and taxation) are not clearly mentioned in the modern definition, it sounds to be abstract in contrast to the ancient definition, which was concrete and eminently practical. In the ancient definition, no attempt was made to cover the reality by the use of abstruse phrases, which often obscure the real meaning”6.

Professor Sharma’s commitment for downtrodden reflected in his historiography of early India. Long before the Subaltern Studies claiming to be ‘History form the below’ emerged in 1980s and onwards, His ‘Sudras in Ancient India: A Social History of the Lower Order Down to c.AD 600 was published in 1958. This was the thesis of professor Sharma which later was published in form of book including its Hindi translation ‘Shudron Ka Pracheen Itihas’ to address the need of wider readership. While working upon the book, R.S. Sharma followed a path meant for true historian and substantiated his arguments on the basis of fact finding. He refrained from embracing any political line about the Shudras or Dalits/Harijans. He did not agree to the idea that Dharmashastras have no historical importance as source material, because the authors of these books were hostile to Shudras. Instead, he argued that like Dharmashastras, there has been tendency of class legislation in the law books of other ancient societies7. An honest historian should not set aside the any sort of source material terming them biased; instead he must peep into them to look for their historical value. In his study, professor Sharma answered many questions regarding the origin, status, role etc. of Shudras and also their relation with other Varnas in ancient India. He found that sections of Aryans and pre-Aryans who lost their land and cattle in the internal and external conflicts reduced to labouring position and later they were recognised as fourth Varna or Shudras in the post- Vedic period8. K. M. Shrimali writes that

“answers provided by R. S. Sharma to these questions have occupied the centre-stage in the debates on early Indian social history in the last more than six decades. Apart from convincingly demonstrating the absence of signs of ‘slave society’ (as understood by orthodox and straight-jacketed doctrinaire Marxists), this monumental monogram on India’s toiling masses underlined the dynamics of Indian society and demolished the myth of its alleged static and vegetative character”9).

Indian Feudalism (1965) is another prolific work of R. S. Sharma. Through this work, he advanced studies of D. D. Kosambi on ‘Feudalism’; however he differed with the latter on certain points. Kosambi had proposed the concepts –a) Feudalism ‘from Above’-when centralised states created local rights by grants and concessions and b) Feudalism ‘from Below’- when landowners developed from within the village (to stand) between the state and the peasantry. There seems an echo of Marx’s formulation about capitalists emerging from above (merchants) and below (craftsmen)10. Professor Sharma adopted a different method and studied the feudalism changing at different stages of ancient India. His book betrays the rise and growth of
feudalism in politico-economic aspects, covering the period of about 900 years the second century A.D. to the twelfth century A.D. When *Indian Feudalism* aroused sharp reactions about the applicability of any feudalist model to Indian context, Prof. Sharma came out with another work of fundamental importance, *Urban Decay in India* (c.300-1000) in 1987. This book using the vast archaeological data demonstrated the rise and fall of urban centres in Ancient India, and thereby reinforced his theory on feudalism. His *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation* (2001) was further an attempt to refute the objections point by point on his theory of feudalism. This was the grace of R. S. Sharma that he accepted the criticism and responded to it academically with his painstaking research. Thus, studies on socio-economic aspects were deepened and understanding of ancient Indian past was broadened. R. S. Sharma himself had written in ‘Introduction’ of *Indian Feudalism* in 1965 that if the book is able to create interest about the subject (feudalism) among scholars of Indian history, he would feel successful in his efforts.

R. S. Sharma refused to accept popular –religious notions and placed arguments only supported by sound historical evidence. His *Ancient India* (1977) was banned in 1978 for its criticism of historicity of Krishna and the vents of *Mahabharat* epic among others. He came out in the support of his book *In Defence of ‘Ancient India’* (1979). His views over Ayodhya-Ramjanmabhumi issue invoked sharp reactions. His ideas over the Aryan question caused intense debate among the historians. He, as many other like-minded historians believed that Aryans were the outsiders the claim that Aryans created Harappan civilisation is baseless. This theory has been challenged vehemently by another school of historians/archaeologists who exalt the idea that Aryans were the indigenous people and they were the makers of Harappan civilisation.

The challenge to the interpretive models does not lessen the importance of historian. The history writing by its very nature is dynamic process. Therefore, objectivity has always been an ideal for historians. Level of availability of sources, his/her access to those source material and theoretical models –all these bring subjectivity to the interpretation of past. The actual legacy lies in applying the new methodologies, exploring the new areas of research and producing the literature of fundamental value which stimulate the coming generations to undertake similar effort either to support or oppose his/her predecessor. R. S. Sharma stands true to this criterion.

Professor Sharma was a great institution builder. He was the founding chairperson of Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) from 1972-1977 which is till date serving as a promoting platform for research in history. He was president of Indian History Congress in 1975. He became the Deputy-Chairperson of UNESCO’s International Association for Study of Central Asia from 1973-1978. He served as member of University Grants Commission (UGC) and National Commission of History of Sciences in India. He streamlined the teaching-pattern and syllabus of
Patna University and Delhi University, where he taught. He had many awards and fellowship from various institutions to his credit. Despite being a stalwart in academia, R. S. Sharma remained a very humble figure in dhoti-kurta clad. The ‘Introduction/Preface’ part of all his books is replete with acknowledging the contributions starting from his mentors like A.L. Basham to very novice working in the discipline of history. He always encouraged the young scholars to grow. Under his guidance, historians like D.N. Jha and Suvira Jaisawal among many others groomed and now they are the reputed names in the Indian historiography.

REFERENCES

[8] Ibid., pp.38.
[12] For detailed study, see Bhagwan Singh’s The Vedic Harappans (Aditya Prakashan, New Delhi), 1995 and Pracheen Bharat ke Itihaskar (Sasta Sahitya Manal Prakashan, New Delhi), 2013.