THE PAST AS PRESENT

FORGING CONTEMPORARY IDENTITIES THROUGH HISTORY

ROMILA THAPAR

Understanding our past is of vital importance to our present.

Many popularly held views about the past need to be critically enquired into before they can be taken as historical. For instance, what was the aftermath of the raid on the Somanatha temple? Which of us is Aryan or Dravidian? Why is it important for Indian society to be secular? When did communalism as an ideology gain a foothold in the country? How and when did our patriarchal mindset begin to support a culture of violence against women? Why are the fundamentalists so keen to rewrite history textbooks?

The answers to these and similar questions have been disputed and argued about ever since they were first posed. Distinguished historian Romila Thapar has investigated, analyzed and interpreted the history that underlies such questions throughout her career; now, in this book, through a series of incisive essays she argues that it is crucial for the past to be carefully and rigorously explained, if the legitimacy of our present, wherever it derives from the past, is to be portrayed as accurately as possible. This is especially pertinent given the attempts by unscrupulous politicians, religious fundamentalists and their ilk to try and misrepresent and wilfully manipulate the past in order to serve their present-day agendas. An essential and necessary book at a time when sectarianism, bogus 'nationalism' and the muddying of historical facts are increasingly becoming a feature of our public, private and intellectual lives.

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Forging Contemporary Identities Through History

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This book is for the youngest ones I know—Hamir, Safik, Amrit and Sujan —in the hope that when on becoming adults they read it, it may help them to decide on what is worth protecting in their heritage.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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THE MANY NARRATIVES OF SOMANATHA

The history of Somanatha has been dominated by a single narrative woven around the events that took place there at a particular point in history. Those of us who have examined other sources that also narrate events relating to Somanatha, feel that the single narrative does not tell us very much. So, when speaking on Somanatha, I would like to discuss three different categories of sources that give us three different narratives, that do seem to get integrated at the end. This is what some historians call the many voices of history. What we mean by this is that history should not be written only on the basis of one source of evidence, for, if there are other narratives about the event, the place, or the person, or are related to either of these, they have all to be examined. This is not because we think that only one narrative is giving a true description, but because we are interested in observing how various people saw the event. We maintain that by looking at the perhaps contradictory versions of the same event, it may be possible to understand more fully what might have happened, and how it was viewed both at the time and subsequently. It is worth looking at these various voices, because their narratives tell us about how a variety of people, depending on their interests, continued to perceive the event, or else had forgotten about it, and also why these perceptions sometimes differed. The context therefore is of central importance: who is narrating the story of the event and why; who constitutes the audience or the readership that the narrative is addressed to, and what is the purpose and meaning of the narrative.

This also becomes a demonstration of the change that has taken place in historical research in the last fifty years. We have moved from being concerned only with political and dynastic history to examining the broader dimensions of social, economic, religious and cultural history—and more particularly with how all these aspects interact with each other. This gives us a much richer and more detailed picture of the past.

The data I am using are not new. But I am juxtaposing whatever diverse historical information we have and seeing them in relation to each other. This is new. I am addressing three questions. What is the manner in which historians today assess the event and the sources, and how has this changed from fifty years ago, when the history of Somanatha was narrated in textbooks and later became a political slogan? Did the Turkish raid on a Hindu temple create a trauma among the Hindus as a reaction, as has been maintained by earlier historians, resulting in a permanent hostility between Hindus and Muslims? How did a supposed memory constructed about an event of a thousand years ago, become an issue in present-day politics?

We know that Mahmud, the Sultan of Ghazni, a principality in Afghanistan, conducted frequent raids into northwestern India partly to conquer territory but more than that to loot temples. In 1026 he raided the temple of Somanatha in Gujarat and broke the idol. Reference is made to this specific action in many Turkish and Persian sources, and some of the references contradict each other. Other sources lead historians to asking new questions that were not thought about earlier. Asking new questions is, as we all know, essential to the advance of knowledge. An event or a person in history can be treated differently from century to century, either because there is new evidence or because the evidence is being questioned in new ways. This changes how we look at the event. As historians, therefore, we have to be aware not just of the how we assess a past event in our times, but also the ways in which the event was interpreted through intervening centuries.

Many texts refer to the historical context of that period in Gujarat and its neighbourhood, but three categories of sources refer specifically to the Somanatha temple. These three representations differ as narratives and add to the interest and puzzle of the problem. They are accounts from Turko-Persian texts, some contemporary and some later; from Jaina texts of the period; and from Sanskrit inscriptions of the time. They date from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. Once I have examined these historical sources, I will analyse the debate on Somanatha in the British Parliament in the nineteenth century, and finally look into how the subject was treated soon after Independence in the twentieth century.

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The original temple dedicated to Shiva, dated to about the ninth-tenth century AD, was located at the port town of Veraval in Saurashtra. Many small rajas

were ruling in Saurashtra and were subordinate to the major dynasty—that of the Chaulukyas or Solankis—who were powerful during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries AD.

It was a period of much prosperity in the region, the wealth coming from trade, particularly maritime trade, with ports along the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. Veraval or Somanatha was one of the three major ports of Gujarat. The trade between Gujarat and West Asia across the Arabian Sea and up the Persian Gulf went back many centuries to Harappan times. Arab traders and shippers from the eighth century AD onwards settled along the west coast of India, and some worked as officers for the Rashtrakuta dynasty in the western Deccan. Those that settled in the coastal areas, married locally and founded many communities that today continue to thrive—such as the Khojas and Bohras in western India, and the Navayatas and Mappilas further south. Indian merchants were equally adventurous and set up businesses in Hormuz in Persia and in Ghazni in Afghanistan. They remained prosperous even after the eleventh century when there were raids and campaigns in the area.

The trade focused mainly on the importing of horses from west Asia and exporting metal, textiles, gemstones and spices, although other items were also exchanged. Investments in the trade came from individual merchants, from temple treasuries and from local administration. A large sum of money was also collected by the local administration at Somanatha as pilgrim tax from those who came on pilgrimages to Saurashtra. Some local rajas looted the pilgrims of their donations intended for the temples. Prosperity unfortunately leads to piracy. Judging by the inscriptions, the Chaulukya administration spent time and energy policing these attacks on pilgrims and traders.

Despite this, trade flourished. Gujarat in this period experienced what can perhaps be called a renaissance culture of the mercantile community. Rich merchant families were in political office, controlled state finances, were patrons of culture, were scholars of the highest order, were liberal donors to the Jaina sangha, and had temples built for various sectarian persuasions. Temples became the repositories of wealth. This wealth came as donations from patrons and pilgrims as also from the estates owned by the temples and from the commercial activities that they conducted.

This was the scene at the time of Mahmud's raid on the Somanatha temple in 1026. The prosperity of Gujarat was an attractive target as were the temples with their treasures. There are many accounts claiming to describe

the raid, some sober and some very fanciful. There is one sober contemporary reference and this comes from Al-Biruni, a central Asian scholar of the early eleventh century. Mahmud exiled him to India because he was critical of Mahmud's activities, arguing that his raids caused economic turmoil and the kind of disruption that results from any such raid. Al-Biruni spent many years in India, was deeply interested in the country and its culture, and left an incisive account of what he saw and learnt during this time. According to him the temple at Somanatha was renowned for its lingam that many came to worship. It was located by the seashore and built within a stone fortress, presumably to safeguard its wealth. Al-Biruni dates the temple to a hundred years before Mahmud, to the tenth century AD. The temple and its image were particularly important to sailors and to merchants, he writes, some of whom had contacts with places as distant as Zanzibar and China.

The accounts written in Turkish and Persian by those attached to the courts of the Delhi Sultans and other courts, make entertaining reading as they are exaggerated and often contradict each other. Let me relate some of their stories. A major poet of the Islamic world, Farrukhi Sistani, who claims that he accompanied Mahmud to Somanatha, provides a fascinating explanation for the breaking of the idol. According to him the idol at Somanatha was not of a Hindu deity but of Manat, a pre-Islamic Arabian goddess, and that the name Somnat was actually Su-manat, the place of Manat. We know from the Qur'an that Lat, Uzza and Manat were three pre-Islamic goddesses widely worshipped, and it was said that the Prophet Muhammad ordered the destruction of their shrines and images. Legend has it that the image of Manat was secreted away, presumably by a trader to Gujarat, and installed in a place of worship. Manat, in some accounts, is said to have been just a block of black stone so the form could be vaguely similar to a lingam; others say she had a female form. Some took this story seriously, others however denied it and insisted that the icon was of a Hindu deity.

We may well ask why this story of Manat was linked to the raid of Mahmud. The answer seems obvious. It gave greater prestige to Mahmud who in destroying Manat was carrying out what were said to be the wishes of the Prophet. He was therefore a champion of Islam. Although he raided many other temples, the raid on Somanatha received special attention in the accounts of his activities. It was also said that Mahmud wrote to the Caliph and boasted of his great deeds as a protector of Islam, and in return grandiose titles were bestowed on him. This established his legitimacy in the

politics of the Islamic world which was his primary ambition, the raids on India being largely to acquire the wherewithal for this ambition. This is a dimension that is overlooked by those historians who see his activities only in the context of northern India. And we have to remember that, as was common to all large empires, the empire of the Arabs also went through periodic crises. Such crises became points of intervention for the likes of Mahmud.

But Mahmud's legitimacy also derives from the fact that he was a Sunni Muslim, and therefore attacked the Shi'as as heretics. He desecrated their mosques at Multan and at Mansura in Sind. He claims to have killed 50,000 kafirs (infidels), and this claim is matched by similar claims to his having killed 50,000 Shi'as who were regarded as heretics. The figure appears to be notional as it is frequently repeated in various contexts. Mahmud's attacks on Hindus and Shi'as, was undoubtedly a religious crusade against them. But let us also remember that many of the places that he attacked, such as the Shi'a mosques in Multan and Mansura, were located in cities where traders were involved in the very profitable horse trade with the Arabs and the Gulf, as also with Central Asia. Both the Muslim heretics of Multan and the Hindu traders of Somanatha had substantial commercial investments with the Arabs. An inscription in Sanskrit from Peheva in Haryana records brahmanas trading in horses and making donations to temples from their profits of such large amounts that these could be recorded with pride. The historian therefore has to ask the question whether Mahmud, in addition to religious iconoclasm, was also trying to terminate the import of horses from Arabia into India via the western coast? This becomes a relevant question when we realize that the horse trade with central Asia went through Afghanistan and northwestern India, which was crucial to the wealth of the kingdom of Ghazni. Was Mahmud combining iconoclasm with trying to ensure a commercial advantage? As we know from history, rulers have always kept an eye on every possible chance of combining political and economic aggrandizement and have acted to enhance this.

In the subsequent and multiple Persian accounts—and there are many in each century—there is no agreement on the form of the image. Some say that the image was a lingam, other accounts contradict this and say that the image had a human form. This would also be important to determining whether it was the icon of Manat, a female goddess, or of Shiva, a male god.

The human form of the image leads to other stories. It is said that when the belly of the image was pierced, jewels poured forth. But then one wonders how does one pierce the belly of a stone image? Attar states that the image contained twenty mann of jewels, one mann weighing several kilograms; Ibn Zafir's account says that a gold chain weighing two hundred mann kept the image in place. Al-Qazwini has a more interesting description. He says that the image was made of iron and a magnet was placed above it, so it got suspended in space, which would certainly have been an awesome sight. But then again one wonders if a magnet would be able to raise such a large iron image? This link between an iron image and a magnet seems to have been popular at the time. In the *Rajatarangini,* Kalhana describes the same thing —an image of metal in a temple, suspended by the force of a magnet. So perhaps the chronicler took the idea from Kalhana. What is historically interesting is the manner in which the idea of a magnet and metal is employed in the context of an image in a temple. The age of the temple is taken back 30,000 years, to give it greater prestige, and thereby greater prestige for Mahmud as well. All these contradictions suggest that none of these writers really knew what the image was, and seem to have given descriptions based on rumour. And, as with all rumours, the fantasy increases with each retelling of the story.

More purposive writings of the fourteenth century are the chronicles of Barani and Isami. Both were associated with courts in India, one in the Delhi Sultanate and the other with the Bahmani kingdom in the Deccan. Both projected Mahmud as the ideal Muslim hero but somewhat differently. For Barani religion and kingship are twins, and the ruler needs to know the religious ideals of kingship, if he claims to be ruling on behalf of God. Sultans must protect Islam through observing the rules of the shar'ia and destroy both infidels and heretics such as the Shi'as. Mahmud who did both was said to be the ideal ruler.

Isami composed what he regarded as an epic poem on the Muslim rulers of India. This was in imitation of the famous Persian poet Firdausi's earlier epic on Persian kings, the *Shah Nameh*. Isami argued that kingship descended from God, first to the pre-Islamic rulers of Persia—in which he includes Alexander of Macedon and the Sassanid kings—and subsequently to the Sultans of India, with Mahmud establishing Muslim rule in India. Interestingly the Arabs, who had both a political and economic presence in the subcontinent prior to Mahmud, hardly figure in this history since the focus

was on Turkish Sultans. There is a difference of perception in these narratives as compared to the earlier ones. These perceptions need to be studied more carefully as they are a comment on the attitudes of the chroniclers.

Historians have to remember that court chroniclers often exaggerate or even twist descriptions of the activities of rulers in order to make a political point. Earlier, historians tended to take many such descriptions at face value, but today we are more ready to question the texts, and compare them with other contemporary sources. We are interested in asking questions such as why the events are being presented in particular ways, and why the presentations differ.

With the establishments of the Sultanates in Delhi and the Deccan, the representation of the role of Mahmud was also undergoing change. He was now not just someone who raided temples but was the one who showed the way to political power, and more particularly to the founding of an Islamic state in India. This is not historically accurate, for he did not found an Islamic state in India, but that was the view of the chroniclers. Pre-Islamic Persian rulers were also brought into the narrative in order to make the Sultanates legitimate. We must keep in mind that the Sultans in India were ruling over a society that was substantially non-Muslim. This may have made them less confident of their rule that in turn had to be covered up by narratives of their greatness. If they were not fully confident of the loyalty of their subjects, their courtiers would have to project them as great statesmen and praise their activities. This was common to politics at all times and was particularly so in cases where coming to power was through violent means. Violent deeds had to be justified, or whitewashed or forgotten, so as to make the perpetrators into heroes. History has many such examples, going back to pre-Islamic rulers. This gives the historian much to think about in terms of how violence is used in acquiring power, as well as the way in which court chroniclers justify it or disguise it.

Narratives of the event continue with still greater embellishments. Of the actual temple at Somanatha, the impression created is that it never recovered from the initial raid and ceased to be important as a temple. Yet every now and then some Sultan or other is said to have attacked the Somanatha temple and converted it into a mosque. Logically therefore, after the first of these attacks, the later Sultans in these many accounts, would be attacking a mosque. In a sense the claim ceases to be history and becomes rhetoric. Nor

does this stop Sanskrit inscriptions and texts from continuing to refer to it as a sacred, powerful and prosperous temple, up to at least the fifteenth century.

I have this far only referred to the Turkish and Persian chronicles, because up till now modern historians have largely used these texts in reconstructing the events at Somanatha. But the evidence that we have from Sanskrit sources of various kinds—such as Jaina histories of Gujarat and biographies of kings, or from Sanskrit inscriptions of brahmana priests, traders from Persia, and local kings—paint an altogether different picture.

An eleventh century Jaina poet, Dhanapala, mentions in passing Mahmud's campaign in Gujarat and his raids on various places including Somanatha. His boast is that Mahmud was unable to damage the icons of Mahavira in the Jaina temples because the icons were imbued with immense power, or as he expresses it: snakes (Mahmud) cannot swallow Garuda (Mahavira). This for him is proof of the superior power of Jaina images as compared to the Shaiva.

In the late twelfth century, a hundred and fifty years after the raid, during the reign of the famous Chaulukya king, Kumarapala, there is much activity around the Somanatha temple. Among the ministers of Kumarapala was Hemachandra—a respected and erudite scholar of Jaina religious history and of Sanskrit and Prakrit grammar. There seems to have been some rivalry between him and Bhava Brihaspati, the Shaiva Pashupata chief priest of the Somanatha temple. There is therefore a discrepancy between the statements attributed to the minister and to the chief priest.

A dynastic history of Gujarat, the *Prabandha Chintamani*, written by Merutunga in the fourteenth century, refers in some detail to the reign of Kumarapala the Chaulukya king, and his minister Hemachandra. We are told that Kumarapala wished to be immortalized. So Hemachandra suggested that the king replace the dilapidated temple at Somanatha with a new one. He says quite specifically that the temple had fallen into disrepair because it was located on the seashore and was damaged by sea spray. This is confirmed by many sculptures now housed in a museum near the site. Some show marks of the stone having been hacked but many are just worn out by weathering, and sea spray would have worn them out faster. When the new temple was being consecrated, Hemachandra accompanied the king into the sanctum and wishing to impress the king with the powers of a Jaina acharya, requested the deity of the temple, Shiva, to manifest himself. Shiva did so. Kumarapala was so impressed that he converted to the Jaina faith. The focus

is again on the superior power of Jainism over its rival Shaivism. It does seem curious that these activities that focused on the Somanatha temple, a couple of centuries after the raid, make no mention of Mahmud, nor is he linked to the dilapidated state of the temple. The miracle of the appearance of Shiva is the central point in the connection with Somanatha.

Some hints of raids come from another Jaina text of a different kind. In an anthology of stories, one story refers to the wealthy merchant Javadi, who went to the land called Gajjana, evidently Ghazna, looking for an icon. The ruler of Gajjana was a Yavana—a term by now used for those coming from the west. He allowed Javadi to search for the icon and when it was found, gave him permission to take it back. Not only that, but the Yavana ruler even worshipped the icon prior to its departure.

This is a story of reconciliation, and reconciliation therefore becomes the Jaina ethic that dominates the relationship. The Jaina sources underline their own ideology and argue that this accounts for the survival of Jaina temples. Attacks are to be expected in the Kaliyuga—the present age of evil. Wealthy patrons will restore temples and icons.

The third category of major narratives is the collection of inscriptions in Sanskrit from Somanatha itself, focusing on the temple and its vicinity. These again give us a very different perspective of Somanatha from that of the earlier two sources. Inscriptions of the twelfth century inform us that the king Kumarapala, appointed a governor to protect Somanatha. The protection was required to safeguard it against the piracy and against looting by local rajas. In the thirteenth century the temple and its vicinity had to be protected from attacks by the Malwa rajas. Yet the chronicles of the Sultans were claiming that it had been damaged by Mahmud and subsequently converted into a mosque.

In 1169 an inscription refers to the appointment of the chief priest of the Somanatha temple, Bhava Brihaspati. He was a Shaiva, hailing from Kanavj, and, as the inscriptions show, established a succession of powerful priests at the Somanatha temple. He claims to have been sent by the deity Shiva himself, to rehabilitate the temple. According to the chief priest this rehabilitation was required because it was an old structure, much neglected by wicked and greedy officers, and also because in the age of Kaliyuga, temples tend to fall into disrepair. Again no mention is made of Mahmud or later attacks on the temple and its conversion into a mosque.

Perhaps looting temples was not such a big deal. As we have seen in an earlier essay, Kalhana in the *Rajatarangini* records the looting and devastation of temples by a series of Hindu kings of Kashmir between the eighth and eleventh centuries who were trying to acquire financial resources. One of these, Harshadeva appointed a special category of officers, the devotapatananayaka—officers for the uprooting of gods—to supervise the looting of temples. In Gujarat, Bhava Bhrihaspati insists that it was he who persuaded the king to replace the older temple, thus contradicting the statement of Hemachandra having done so in the account of Merutunga.

In 1264, two and a half centuries after the raid, a long, legal document was issued in the form of an inscription with both a Sanskrit and an Arabic version and located in Gujarat. The document written by Nuruddin Firuz, a trader from Hormuz in Persia, records his acquiring land at Somanatha, to build a mosque. It begins with invoking Vishvanatha, a name for Shiva, but possibly also the Sanskrit for Allah, the lord of the universe. This juxtaposition of Hindu and Islamic elements is noticeable throughout the inscription. Was it a form of cultural translation? The document states that Nuruddin Firuz, the owner of a ship and a respected trader, acquired land in Mahajanapali in the town of Somanatha, to build a mosque. This is referred to as a dharmasthana, a sacred space. The land was acquired from the local raja, Shri Chada, son of Nanasimha, and reference is also made to the governor of Saurashtra, Maladeva, and to the Chaulukya-Vaghela king, Arjunadeva.

The acquisition of this land has the approval of the panchakula of the town of Somanatha. The panchakulas were powerful administrative committees established locally in various places and consisting of recognized authorities such as priests, officers, merchants and dignitaries. This particular panchakula was headed by the chief priest of the Somanatha temple, Virabhadra, and included the gentry of the town. The witnesses to this agreement of granting land for building a mosque are mentioned by name and described as the brihat-purusha, literally the ‘big men’. They were the Thakkuras, Ranakas, Rajas—titles of the landed intermediaries, and merchants from the Mahajanapali section of the city. Some of these dignitaries were functionaries of the estates of the Somanatha and other temples. The land given for the mosque in Mahajanapali was part of these temple estates.

The document lists the endowments for the mosque. These included two large measures of land which were part of the temple property from adjoining temples situated in the town of Somanatha; land from a matha or Shaiva monastery; income from two shops in the vicinity; and an oil-mill. The measures of land were bought from the chief priests of the temples and the men of rank attested the sales. The shops and the oil-mill were purchased from local people. One of these chief priests, Tripurantaka, appears again, twenty-three years later, in a number of inscriptions as a wealthy and powerful priest who built many temples in the neighbourhood. As with many Sanskrit votive inscriptions, this inscription too ends with the hope that the terms and conditions of the agreement may last as long as the moon and sun endure. The Arabic version of this inscription concludes with the hope that the local people will take to Islam, a sentiment that is tactfully omitted in the Sanskrit version!

The tone and sentiment of the inscription of Nuruddin are amicable and the settlement had been agreed to on all sides. The building of a mosque in association with some of the properties of the Somanatha temple, not by a conqueror but by a trader through purchase and a legal agreement, was obviously not objected to, neither by the local governor and dignitaries nor by the priests, all of whom were party to the decision. The mosque is thus closely linked to the erstwhile properties and the functionaries of the Somanatha temple.

This raises many questions. Did this transaction, two hundred or so years after the raid of Mahmud, not interfere with the remembrance of the raid if it was remembered by the priests and the 'big men'? Were memories short or was Mahmud's raid unimportant? These transactions would hardly support the idea of the local Hindus having been traumatized by the raid of Mahmud, leave alone this happening with all Hindus.

Perhaps the local people made a distinction between Arabs and Persians who came as traders, which made them acceptable, and the Turks or Turushkas as they are called in Sanskrit, who came as conquerors, which made them less acceptable. The Arabs who had come earlier as conquerors were limited to Sind and subsequently became more familiar as traders who settled along the western coast and gave rise to a number of local communities of mixed Arab and Indian descent and religion. Clearly they were not all homogenized and identified as 'Muslims', as we would do today. We need to separate the responses of particular groups of people as

determined by their needs. Hormuz was crucial to the horse trade therefore Nuruddin was welcomed. Did the profits of trade, with investments by traders, administrators and temple authorities overrule other considerations?

The Delhi Sultans were anxious to conquer Gujarat for its mercantile wealth and therefore there were battles. There is one very moving inscription dating to the fourteenth century, and in Sanskrit, which is from Somanatha itself. It begins with the Islamic blessing—bismillah-rahman-i-rahim. We are told that the town of Somanatha was attacked by the Turks. One of the townsmen, Farid who was a Bohra, and was the son of Bohra Muhammad, joined in defending the town, fighting against the Turks and on behalf of the local Hindu ruler, Brahmadeva. Farid was killed in the fighting and the inscription is a memorial to him.

To return to historical assessments of Somanatha, the popular view is that events such as Mahmud's raid created a permanent antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. This statement needs to be re-examined, because such statements are based on partial evidence. Obviously at the time of the raid there must have been much antagonism. But in the period after it, there were other voices that tell a different story. These voices have remained unheard by those writing on this subject.

How then have we arrived today at the theory that the raid of Mahmud created a trauma in the Hindu consciousness which has been at the root of Hindu-Muslim hostility ever since? Or to put it in the words of K.M. Munshi, writing in 1951,'For a thousand years Mahmud's destruction of the shrine has been burnt into the collective subconscious of the [Hindu] race as an unforgettable national disaster.'

As we have seen earlier in this book, the first mention of the 'Hindu trauma', as it has been called, does not come from any Indian source, but from the debate in the House of Commons in London in 1843, that is, eight hundred years after the event. The debate was on the question of the gates of the Somanatha temple. In 1842, Lord Ellenborough, the Governor-General of India, issued his famous 'Proclamation of the Gates' in which he ordered the commander of the British army in Afghanistan, to bring back to India the sandalwood gates from the tomb of Mahmud at Ghazni, believed to have been looted by Mahmud from Somanatha.

The proclamation raised a storm in the British Parliament and became a major issue between the Government and the Opposition. The reference to the gates was puzzling since no one had ever mentioned them in earlier

accounts. Many wondered if Ellenborough had made a mistake. Some of those who participated in the debate asked if Ellenborough was catering to religious prejudices? Others asked if there had been a trauma among Hindus after the raid which Ellenborough was trying to assuage? This seems to have been the germ of the idea—that there was a Hindu collective memory of the raid that resulted in regarding the Muslim as the enemy.

The chronicles written at the courts of the Sultans and the Mughals were taken to be reliable history by British writers, without any questioning of their ideological perspectives. However, such questioning is necessary to any reconstruction of history based on any chronicle, whether it is written in Persian, or Sanskrit, or Latin, or in any other language from any court; or for that matter the questioning of the agenda of any source is essential to its being used as historical evidence. Chronicles of that period are like state reports and often ideologically committed to praising those in power and who are patrons of the chroniclers. Furthermore, the colonial scholars who read these chronicles used them to support colonial policy in India. Among these policies were British attempts to insist that there had been, and continued to be, hostility between Hindus and Muslims since the coming of Muslims to India. Colonial rulers are known to have often resorted to this policy of creating hostility between the communities among their colonial subjects, as is evident from the history of many colonies in Asia and Africa. Creating and emphasizing antagonistic identities among colonial subjects, made it easier to control them. In propagating the greatness of Muslim rulers, the chronicles dramatized the power that these rulers had had over their subjects. Such exaggeration is also in part a style of writing in courtly literature. In Sanskrit inscriptions the portions praising the dynasty or the ruler are referred to as the prashasti or eulogy. Because it is a stylistic convention, the historian has to be cautious about accepting the veracity of the statement.

The account of the chronicler Ferishta, written in the seventeenth century, six hundred years after the event, describes the attack on Somanatha in so exaggerated a manner as to be almost implausible. Nevertheless, it was repeated by British writers in their accounts of the event written in the nineteenth century; moreover, they added the idea of a trauma. From there it went into the textbooks and came to be accepted as accurate history. The antagonism between Hindu and Muslim was also emphasized in the periodization of Indian history by James Mill. This periodization was strictly adhered to. So the convention was to use Sanskrit texts for writing Hindu

history and Persian texts for writing the history of the Islamic period after AD 1000. That would explain in part why inscriptions in Sanskrit were not widely consulted for the history of Somanatha since it was mainly a history from after AD 1000. As for the texts in Sanskrit, because they came from Jaina authors, they were not given the primary importance that they deserved. Yet, inscriptions and texts continued to be written in Sanskrit well after this period.

As we have seen, such a periodization is completely unacceptable to historians today. Change in history is registered on a far more extensive scale, involving the entire society, and does not refer to merely the religion of rulers. So it has been discontinued in current historical writing. Mill's book, *The History of British India*, was read extensively in the nineteenth century, not only in the universities but also by those who entered government service. It was again other British historians such as Eliot and Dowson, who propagated the idea that there was an innate hostility between Hindu and Muslim, and that there was a tyranny of the Muslim over the Hindu. To this was added the idea that the Hindu should be grateful to the British for conquering India and thus removing the tyranny of the Muslim. But tyrannical rulers, although infrequent, were known from all periods of Indian history. Tyranny was not limited to Muslim rule. Nor indeed was good government limited to any particular group of rulers.

This was the background to the discussion on the Proclamation of the Gates in the British Parliament. The gates were uprooted from Ghazni and brought back in triumph by the British army. However, on arrival they were found to be of Egyptian origin and had nothing to do with India.

But from this point on, Mahmud's raid was made into a central point in Hindu-Muslim relations. K.M. Munshi, as minister in the first independent government of India in 1947, led the demand for the rebuilding of the Somanatha temple. Having written a novel on the subject in 1937, entitled *Jaya Somanatha*, he wished to restore what he thought were the glories of Hindu history, but unfortunately his knowledge of the subject remained superficial. The novel was nothing more than an entertaining story. Like many of us he enjoyed reading the historical novels of Walter Scott and Alexander Dumas, which of course are not history but are fiction set in a historical period. He was also deeply influenced by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel, *Anandamatha.* On this, it is worth remembering the words of the historian R.C. Majumdar, who argued that Bankim Chandra's nationalism

was Hindu rather than Indian, with passionate outbursts against the subjugation of India by the Muslims.

Munshi insisted that despite the temple still standing, although in a dilapidated condition, a new temple had to be built on the site. This led in 1950 to uprooting the remains of the earlier temple to clear the ground for the new temple. A small segment of one corner was left to show that the new temple was built on the site of the old. What was removed from the site was quite substantial. It is now stored in neighbouring sheds that are called a museum. This shows neither respect nor concern for the ancient temple that had both religious and historical importance. The anxiety was merely to get rid of it and put up a new building at the site. The motive seems to have been more political than religious.

This action was against the policy of the Archaeological Survey of India that disallowed protected monuments to be removed. But Munshi was a minister so the policy was overruled. The remains of the old temple show some signs of desecration which may have resulted from Mahmud's raid, or from much later times, but there is as much damage through the effect of weathering, most likely from the sea spray. The early temple was replaced in about the twelfth century with a more elaborate structure. This may have been the rebuilding of the temple by Kumarapala. There is little evidence of later structures or major reconstructions. A rather nondescript dome of a subsequent period remained as part of the dilapidated temple, possibly as an attempt to convert it into a mosque.

On the rebuilding of the Somanatha temple in 1951, Munshi had this to say: '… the collective sub-conscious of India today is happier with the scheme of reconstruction of Somanatha, sponsored by the Government of India, than with many other things we have done so far.' The claim to sponsorship of the new building by the Government of India is wholly untrue, although many politicians today repeat this incorrect statement. It is on record that the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and some others, objected to the Government of India being associated with the project by Munshi, arguing that the Indian state was a secular state and could not therefore either finance or be the patron of the building of a temple. They had insisted on the temple being restored entirely as a private venture. Therefore a private trust was established that collected donations that were used to finance the building of the present temple. This introduces a further dimension to the reading of the event, involving the secular credentials of the state.

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What I have tried to show is, that even monuments have their own history, wrapped in narrative. This may vary according to who is viewing the monument and reading the narrative, and what is the nature of the event associated with it. I have referred to three categories of texts that deal specifically with the history of what happened to the temple at Somanatha. There are other texts that tell us about the persons who might have had distant associations with it, such as references in medieval epics or in the folk traditions of Rajasthan and the western Ganga plain. They are all written at different periods of time and refer to persons and events that have an indirect connection with the main story, but provide vignettes of other ways of looking at it. And I have also tried to show that each view can be quite different if not contrary to the other. In such a situation it is difficult to accept only one view as the accurate view. There has to be a critical assessment of all categories of evidence and an analysis of each, in order to understand the social and cultural dimensions of the past.

The plea that some views are based on memory, or the accumulated memory of many generations over a thousand years does not help us either. We all know that memories are constructed. We choose to remember certain things and forget others. We choose to remember fragments of the past in particular ways and imbue them with meaning that is often only pertinent to the present. And we have reasons for narrating a supposed memory which may not be what actually happened, but is what we would like to think might have happened. This is familiar to us in our individual lives. Memory for example seldom matches a photograph taken a few decades ago. And when we are speaking of a collective memory of a society, of many thousands of people, and of an event that happened a thousand years ago, it is even more unlikely to match the reality from the past and to tell us of what actually happened. In the case of Somanatha, the supposedly collective memory and the ‘trauma’ was constructed by the British debate in the House of Commons, and subsequently adopted by colonial historians as well as a variety of Indians to serve various political purposes.

Historians therefore have to be very cautious when reconstructing the past and more so when claiming that it derives from collective memory. Every tiny piece of evidence has to be fitted in like a jigsaw puzzle. And sometimes these bits of evidence come in a strange manner from unexpected places.

Ultimately, the historian is providing as complete a picture as is possible, on the basis of the evidence available at any one time; and is not claiming to be omniscient, but is at best presenting an understanding of the past, and of what might have happened. That even such an understanding is invaluable stems from the fact that we are all products of our pasts. We have therefore to do our utmost to understand the past as well and as fully as we can, and be sensitive to its nuances and its complexities. It is this that distinguishes the maker of myths from the historian.