



---

History and the Nationalization Of Hinduism

Author(s): PARTHA CHATTERJEE

Source: *Social Research*, SPRING 1992, Vol. 59, No. 1, Religion and Politics (SPRING 1992), pp. 111-149

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970686>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Research*

JSTOR

# History and the Nationalization of Hinduism

BY PARTHA CHATTERJEE

HISTORY IS TODAY, not implicitly but in the most explicit way possible, the pretext for violent political conflict in India, a conflict which threatens to tear apart what was for several decades taken to be the consensus about the fundamental character of the nation-state which the constitution calls "India, that is Bharat." For almost three years now, the most contentious debate that has preoccupied the very center of organized political life in India, as distinct from the continuing insurgencies in Punjab, Kashmir, and Assam which to a large extent have been kept to the margins, is a dispute over the status of a certain mosque in a small town called Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The reason why this dispute continues to produce such shattering reverberations in the central corridors of Indian politics is that it has become implicated in the increasingly powerful claims now being made by the organized proponents of political Hinduism. The central demand of this political campaign, spearheaded by the Bharatiya Janata party and a "cultural" organization called the Viswa Hindu Parishad, is that the past, present, and future of the Indian nation be constituted around a notion of *hindutva*, Hinduness.

I will not go into the question of why this case, which as a legal dispute over the proprietorial status of the mosque has existed unresolved for more than fifty years, should have acquired such a momentous significance at this particular time

**SOCIAL RESEARCH, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Spring 1992)**

in Indian politics.<sup>1</sup> I will also not discuss here the complex question of the evolution of “communalist” politics in India, the contradictions in the politics of “secularism” and the problematic involvement of the state and the “secular” political parties in the politics of religious identity.<sup>2</sup> My focus in this paper will be on the construction of the historical claims of *hindutva*.

My argument will be that such claims become possible only within the modern forms of historiography, a historiography which is necessarily constructed around the complex identity of a people-nation-state. To the extent that the genealogy of modern historiography in India is deeply implicated in the encounter with British colonialism, these historical claims of political Hinduism are also a product of the contestations with the forms of colonial knowledge. Finally, I will show that many of the themes that run through the contemporary rhetoric of Hindu extremist politics were in fact part and parcel of the historical imagining in the nineteenth century of “India” as a nation. This implies that with respect to the fragile consensus over “nationness” in India today, the tendency which emphasizes the singularity of a historically constituted national formation called “India, that is Bharat,” a singularity often demanded by the need to legitimize the centralized apparatuses of a modern nation-state, will always have available for its sectarian use the common resources of a single “national” history of “the Hindus.”

I will use as my material a set of school textbooks on Indian history from nineteenth-century Bengal.<sup>3</sup> None of these books

<sup>1</sup> For details on the dispute, see S. Gopal, ed., *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Issue* (Delhi: Penguin India, 1991); J. C. Aggarwal and N. K. Chowdhry, *Ram Janmabhoomi Through the Ages: Babri Masjid Controversy* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent discussion of these issues, see Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Northern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> I have made a fuller discussion of these sources in my essay “Itihāser uttarādhikār,” *Bāromās* (Calcutta) 12 (April 1991): 1–24. Large parts of the present article are translated from this earlier essay.

were written by major historians, and none claimed any great originality in historical interpretation. But for that very reason they are good indicators of the main features of a commonly shared discursive formation within which Indian nationalist historiography made its appearance.

But before I present this material from the middle and late nineteenth century, let me begin with a text from the very early years of the century. This will give us an idea of how radical a transformation was effected in the forms of recounting the political events of the past.

### *A Puranic History*

The first three books of narrative prose in Bengali commissioned by the Fort William College in Calcutta for use by young officials of the Company learning the local vernacular were books of history. Of these, *Rājābali* (1808) by Mrityunjay Vidyalankar,<sup>4</sup> was a history of India—the first such history in the Bengali language that we have in print. Mrityunjay (c. 1762–1819) taught Sanskrit at Fort William College and was the author of some of the first printed books in Bengali. When he decided to set down in writing the story of “the Rajas and Badshahs and Nawabs who have occupied the throne in Delhi and Bengal,” it does not seem that he had to undertake any fresh “research” into the subject; he was only writing down an account that was already in circulation at the time among the Brahman literati and their landowning patrons.<sup>5</sup> His book was, we might say, a good example of the

<sup>4</sup> Mrtyuñjaya Śarmaṇah, *Rājābali* (Serampore: Baptist Mission Press, 1908) [hereafter R]. All translations from the Bengali sources are mine.

<sup>5</sup> R. C. Majumdar has discussed some of the dynastic lists in circulation among prominent landed families in eighteenth-century Bengal in Rameschandra Majumdar, “Samskr̥ta rājābali grantha,” *Sāhitya pariṣat patrikā* 46 (1953): 232–239. I am grateful to Gautam Bhadra for this reference.

historical memory of elite Bengali society as exemplified in contemporary scholarship.

The book starts with a precise reckoning of the time at which it is being written:

In course of the circular motion of time, like the hands of a clock, passing through the thirty *kalpa* such as Pitṛkalpa etc., we are now situated in the Śvetavarāha kalpa. Each kalpa consists of fourteen *manu*; accordingly, we are now in the seventh manu of Śvetavarāha kalpa called Vaivasvata. Each manu consists of 284 *yuga*; we are now passing through the one hundred and twelfth yuga of Vaivasvata manu called Kaliyuga. This yuga consists of 432000 years. Of these, up to the present year 1726 of the Śaka era, 4905 years have passed; 427095 years are left.<sup>6</sup>

The calendrical system is also precisely noted. For the first 3044 years of Kaliyuga, the prevailing era (*śaka*) was that of King Yudhiṣṭhira. The next 135 years comprised the era of King Vikramāditya. These two eras are now past:

Now we are passing through the era of the King called Śālivāhana who lived on the southern banks of the river Narmadā. This śaka will last for 18000 years after the end of the Vikramāditya era. After this there will be a king called Vijayābhinandana who will rule in the region of the Citrakūṭa mountains. His *śaka* will last for 10000 years after the end of the Śālivāhana era.

After this there will be a king called Parināgārjuna whose era will last until 821 years are left in the Kaliyuga, at which time will be born in the family of Gautabrāhmaṇa in the Sambhala country an *avatāra* of Kalkideva. Accordingly, of the six eras named after six kings, two are past, one is present and three are in the future.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever one might say of this system of chronology, lack of certitude is not one of its faults.

Mrityunjay is equally certain about identifying the place where the historical events in his narrative take place:

<sup>6</sup> *R*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>7</sup> *R*, p. 8.

Of the five elements—space (*ākāśa*), air, fire, water and earth—the earth occupies eight *ānā* [i.e., half] while the other four occupy two *ānā* [i.e., one-eighth] each. . . . Half of the earth is taken up by the seas, north of which is Jambudvīpa. . . . There are seven islands on earth of which ours is called Jambudvīpa. Jambudvīpa is divided into nine *varṣa* of which Bhāratavarṣa is one. Bhāratavarṣa in turn is divided into nine parts (*khaṇḍa*) which are called Aindra, Kaseru, Tāmaparṇa, Gavastimata, Nāga, Saumya, Vāruṇa, Gandharva and Kumārikā. Of these, the part in which the *varṇāśrama* [caste] system exists is the Kumārikākhaṇḍa.

The other parts [of Bhāratavarṣa] are inhabited by the *antyaja* people [those outside caste].<sup>8</sup>

Thus *Rājābali* is the history of those who ruled over the earth in which there are seven islands of which the one called Jambudvīpa has nine parts of which Bhāratavarṣa is one, etc., etc. Where does this history begin?

In the Satyayuga, the Supreme Lord (*paramēśvara*) had planted in the form of an Aśvathva tree a king called Iksāku to rule over the earth. The two main branches of this tree became the Sūrya and the Candra *vaṁśa*. The kings born in these two lineages have ruled the earth in the four *yuga*. Of these, some were able to acquire the greatest powers of righteousness (*dharma*) and thus ruled over the entire earth consisting of the seven islands. Others had lesser powers and thus ruled over only Jambudvīpa or only Bhāratavarṣa or, in some cases, only the Kumārikākhaṇḍa. If a king from one lineage became the emperor (*samrāṭa*), then the king of the other lineage would become the lord of a *maṇḍala*. The accounts of these kings are recorded in the branches of knowledge (*śāstra*) called the Purāṇa and the Itihāsa.<sup>9</sup>

A few things may be clarified at this point. In Mrityunjay's scheme of history, the rulers on earth are, as it were, appointed by divine will. They enjoy that position to the extent, and as long as, they acquire and retain the powers of righteousness. By attaining the highest levels of *dharma*, one could even become the ruler of the entire earth. We may wish, in order to distinguish this variety of history-writing from those with

<sup>8</sup> *R*, pp. 4–6.

<sup>9</sup> *R*, pp. 6–7.

which we are more familiar today, to call Mrityunjay's narrative a Puranic history. Mrityunjay would not have quarreled with this description, not because he was aware of the distinction we are making but because *purāṇetihāsa* was for him the valid form of retelling the political history of Bhāratavarṣa.

We cannot, however, accuse the discipline of Puranic history of being sloppy in its counting of dynasties and kings. "In the 4267 years since the beginning of the Kaliyuga, there have been 119 Hindus of different *jāti* who have become *samrāt* on the throne of Delhi."<sup>10</sup> The count begins with King Yudhiṣṭhira of the *Mahābhārata* who heads a list of twenty-eight Kṣatriya kings who ruled for a total of 1812 years. "After this the actual reign of the Kṣatriya *jāti* ended." Then came fourteen kings of the Nanda dynasty, starting with "one called Mahānanda born of a Kṣatriya father and a Śūdra mother," who ruled for a total of five hundred years. "The Rājput *jāti* started with this Nanda." After this came the Buddhist kings:

Fifteen kings of the Nāstika faith, from Vīravāhu to Āditya, all of the Gautama lineage, ruled for four hundred years. At this time the Nāstika views enjoyed such currency that the Vaidika religion was almost eradicated.

We then have a curious list of dynasties—nine rulers of the Mayūra dynasty, sixteen of the Yogi dynasty, four of the Bairāgi dynasty, and so on. Of course, there are "the Vikramādityas, father and son, who ruled for ninety-three years." We are also told of "thirteen kings, from Dhī Sena to Dāmodara Sena, of the Vaidya *jāti* of Bengal who ruled for 137 years and one month"—from, let us remember, "the throne in Delhi"! The rule of the 'Chohān Rājput *jāti*' ends with

Pr̥thorāy who ruled for fourteen years and seven months. . . . This is as far as the empire (*sāmrajya*) of the Hindu kings lasted.

After this began the *sāmrajya* of the Musalmans. From the beginning of the empire of the Yavanas [Muslims] to the present

<sup>10</sup> R, p. 10.

year 1726 of the Śaka era, fifty-one kings have ruled for 651 years three months and twenty-eight days.<sup>11</sup>

What is interesting about this chronology is the way in which its dynastic sequence passes ever so smoothly from the kings of the *Mahābhārata* to the kings of Magadha and ends with the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II, “of the lineage of Amir Taimur,” occupying the throne in Delhi at the time of Mrityunjay’s writing. Myth, history, and the contemporary—all become part of the same chronological sequence; one is not distinguished from another; the passage from one to another, consequently, is entirely unproblematical. There is not even an inkling in Mrityunjay’s prose of any of the knotty questions about the value of Puranic accounts in constructing a “proper” historical chronology of Indian dynasties which would so exercise Indian historians a few decades later. Although Mrityunjay wrote at the behest of his colonial masters, his historiographic allegiances are entirely precolonial.

It would therefore be of some interest to us to discover how a Brahman scholar such as Mrityunjay describes the end of “the Hindu dynasties” and the accession to the throne at Delhi of “the Yavana emperors.” Our curiosity is aroused even further when we discover that the story of the defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan at the hands of Shihabuddin Muhammad Ghuri takes the form of a Puranic tale. The story is as follows.

Prithviraj’s father had two wives, one of whom was a demoness (*rākṣasī*) who ate human flesh. She had also introduced her husband into this evil practice. One day the demoness ate the son of the other queen who, taken by fright, ran away to her brother. There she gave birth to a son who was called Pṛthu. On growing up, Pṛthu met his father. At his request, Pṛthu cut off his father’s head and fed the flesh to twenty-one women belonging to his *jāti*. Later, when Pṛthu became king, the sons of those twenty-one women became his

<sup>11</sup> *R*, pp. 12–3.



feudatories (*sāmanta*). “Because Pṛthu had killed his father, the story of his infamy spread far and wide. Kings who paid tribute to him stopped doing so.” In other words, Prithviraj was not a ruler who enjoyed much respect among his subjects.

It was at this time that Shihabuddin Ghuri threatened to attack Prithviraj:

When the King heard of the threatening moves of the Yavanas, he called a number of scholars learned in the Vedas and said, “O learned men! Arrange a sacrifice which will dissipate the prowess and the threats of the Yavanas.” The learned men said, “O King! There is such a sacrifice and we can perform it. And if the sacrificial block (*yūpa*) can be laid at the prescribed moment, then the Yavanas can never enter this land.” The King was much reassured by these words and arranged for the sacrifice to be performed with much pomp. When the learned men declared that the time had come to lay the block, much efforts were made but no one could move the sacrificial block to its assigned place. Then the learned men said, “O King! What the Supreme Power (*īśvara*) desires, happens. Men cannot override his wishes, but can only act in accordance with them. So, desist in your efforts. It seems this throne will be attacked by the Yavanas.”

Hearing these words, Prithviraj was greatly disheartened and “slackened his efforts at war.” His armies were defeated by Shihabuddin, who arrived triumphantly at Delhi. Then Prithviraj

emerged from his quarters and engaged Śāhābuddin in a ferocious battle. But by the grace of Īśvara, the Yavana Śāhābuddin made a prisoner of Pṛthurājā. On being reminded that Pṛthurājā was son-in-law of King Jayacandra [Jaichand, ruler of a neighboring kingdom, had already collaborated with Muhammad Ghuri], he did not execute him but sent him as a prisoner to his own country of Ghazna.<sup>12</sup>

Let us remember that in Mrityunjay’s scheme of history, dynasties are founded by the grace of the divine power and kingdoms are retained only as long as the ruler is true to

<sup>12</sup> This account is in *R*, pp. 109–110.

*dharma*. The Chauhan dynasty was guilty of such heinous offenses as cannibalism and patricide. That Prithviraj had lost divine favor was already revealed at the sacrificial ceremony. His defeat and the establishment of “Yavana rule” by Muhammad Ghuri were, therefore, acts of divine will.

Half a century later, when Puranic history would be abandoned in favor of rational historiography, this account of the battle of Thanesar would undergo a complete transformation. English-educated Brahman scholars would not accept with such equanimity the dictates of a divine will.

Mrityunjay has a few more things to say about the reasons for the downfall of the Chauhan dynasty. These remarks are prefaced by the following statement: “I will now write what the Yavanas say about the capture of the throne of Delhi by the Yavana Śāhābuddin.”<sup>13</sup> Mrityunjay then goes back to the earlier raids into various Indian kingdoms by Nasruddin Sabuktigin, father of Mahmud Ghaznavi:

When Nāsrudin came to Hindustan, there was no harmony among the kings of Hindustan. Each thought of himself as the emperor (*bādśah*); none owed fealty to anyone else and none was strong enough to subjugate the others. On discovering this, the Yavanas entered Hindustan. The main reason for the fall of kingdoms and the success of the enemy is mutual disunity and the tendency of each to regard itself as supreme. When Sekandar Shah [Alexander] had become emperor in the land of the Yavanas, he had once come to Hindustan, but seeing the religiosity and learning of the Brahmans, he had declared that a land whose kings had such advisers (*hakim*) could never be conquered by others. Saying this, he had returned to his country and had never come back to Hindustan. Now there were no more such Brahmans and, bereft of their advice, the kings of this country lost divine grace and were all defeated by the Yavanas.<sup>14</sup>

Mrityunjay’s accounts of the Sultanate and the Mughal periods were very likely based on the Persian histories in circulation among the literati in late eighteenth-century Bengal. It is pos-

<sup>13</sup> *R*, pp. 112–113.

<sup>14</sup> *R*, pp. 121–122.

sible that some of these texts contained comments on the disunity among Indian kings and perhaps even the statement attributed to Alexander. But the argument that it was because of the failings of the Brahmans that the kings strayed from the path of righteousness and thus lost the blessings of god was undoubtedly one formulated by Mrityunjay, the Brahman scholar. It was the duty of the Brahmans to guide the king along the path of *dharma*. They had failed in that duty and had brought about the divine wrath which ended the rule of the Hindu kings and established the rule of the Yavanas. We will see later that as the role of divine intervention in history becomes less credible, this story of the fall acquires in the modern writings the form of a general decay of society and polity.

But we are anticipating. We need to note, for purposes of comparison, Mrityunjay's account of the destruction by Mahmud Ghaznavi of the temple at Somnath. The main details of the story are the same as those that would appear in later histories, for they all come from Persian sources such as the *Tārīkh-i-Firishta*. But Mrityunjay mentions one "fact" about the idol at Somnath which is never to be mentioned again:

There was a very large sacred idol called Somnath which was once in Mecca. Four thousand years after the time when the Yavanas say the human race was born, this idol was brought by a king of Hindustan from Mecca to its present place.<sup>15</sup>

Mrityunjay's source for this information is uncertain, but it is never to be mentioned again by any Bengali historian.

Two Mughal emperors are subjects of much controversy in nationalist historiography. Let us note what Mrityunjay has to say about them. On Akbar, Mrityunjay is effusive. "Since Śrī Vikramāditya, there has never been in Hindustan an emperor with merits equal to those of Akbar Shah."<sup>16</sup> Apart from having a deep sense of righteousness and performing all his

<sup>15</sup> R, p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> R, p. 195.

duties in protecting his subjects, Akbar also had, according to Mrityunjay, an additional merit:

Because of his knowledge of many *śāstra*, his spiritual views were skeptical of the doctrines of Muhammad and were closer to those of the Hindus. The kings of Iran and Turan often complained about this. . . . He did not eat beef and forbid the slaughter of cows within his fort. To this day, cow-slaughter is prohibited in his fort.<sup>17</sup>

On Aurangzeb, on the other hand, Mrityunjay has this to say:

He became very active in spreading the Muhammadi faith. And he destroyed many great temples. Many ceremonies of the Hindus such as the worship of the sun and of Gaṇeśa had been performed in the fort of the Badshah since the time of Akbar; [Aurangzeb] discontinued these practices and issued new rules invented by himself.

He then adds:

Although he destroyed many great temples, he was favoured by the divine powers at Jvālāmukhi and Lachmanbālā and made sizable grants of land for the maintenance of those temples. He later lived at Aurangabad for twelve years and, on being cursed by a Brahman, died uttering horrible cries of pain.<sup>18</sup>

Where kings acquire kingdoms and hold power by divine grace, the business of arriving at a verdict on the character of rulers has to be negotiated between kings and gods. The only role that the ordinary *prajā* (subject) has in all this is in bearing the consequences of the actions of these superior entities. Of course, the *prajā* knows the difference between a good king and a bad one, which is why he praises a ruler such as Akbar. And when Aurangzeb dies “uttering horrible cries of pain,” perhaps the *prajā* shudders a little at the ferocity of divine retribution, but in the end is reassured by the victory of *dharma*. In all this, however, the *prajā* never implicates himself

<sup>17</sup> R, pp. 191, 194.

<sup>18</sup> R, p. 221.

in the business of ruling; he never puts himself in the place of the ruler. In recalling the history of kingdoms, he does not look for a history of himself.

If it was ever suggested to Mrityunjay that in the story of the deeds and fortunes of the kings of Delhi might lie the history of a nation, it is doubtful that he would have understood. His own position in relation to his narrative is fixed—it is the position of the *prajā*, the ordinary subject, who is most often only the sufferer and sometimes the beneficiary of acts of government. It is from that position that he tells the story of Prithviraj's misdeeds or of Akbar's righteousness. But the thought would never have occurred to him that because of the associations of "nationality," he, Mrityunjay Vidyalkar, a Brahman scholar in the employment of the East India Company in Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, might in some way become responsible for the acts of Prithviraj or Akbar. *Rājābali* is not a national history because its protagonists are gods and kings, not peoples. The bonds of "nation-ness" have not yet been imagined which would justify the identification of the historian with the consciousness of a solidarity that is supposed to act itself out in history.

### *History as the Play of Power*

This framework changed radically as the Bengali literati were schooled in the new colonial education. Now Indians were taught the principles of European history, statecraft, and social philosophy. They were also taught the history of India as it came to be written from the standpoint of modern European scholarship. The Orientalists had, from the last years of the eighteenth century, begun to "recover" and reconstruct for modern historical consciousness the materials for an understanding of Indian history and society. The English-educated class in Bengal, from its birth in the early decades of the nineteenth century, became deeply interested in this new discipline of Indology.

But, curiously enough, the new Indian literati, while they enthusiastically embraced the modern rational principles of European historiography, did not accept the history of India as it was written by British historians. The political loyalty of the early generation of English-educated Bengalis toward the East India Company was unquestioned, and in 1857, when most of northern India was in revolt, they were especially demonstrative in their protestations of loyalty. And yet, by the next decade, they were engaged in open contestation with the colonialist interpretation of Indian history. By the 1870s, the principal elements were already in place for the writing of a nationalist history of India. It is interesting to trace the genealogy of this new history of “the nation.”

In 1857–58, with the inauguration of the University of Calcutta, a set of translations were produced in Bengali, for use in schools, of histories of India and of Bengal written by British historians. The translations ended with a eulogy to the blessings of Providence which had chosen the East India Company to bring to an end the anarchy and corruption into which the country had fallen.<sup>19</sup> Only ten years later, however, in 1869, a book of questions and answers based on the same English textbooks had the following entry:

Q. How did Clive win?

A. If the treacherous Mir Jafar had not tricked the Nawab [Siraj-ud-daulah], Clive could not have won so easily.<sup>20</sup>

A Bengali textbook of 1872 tells the story of the betrayal of Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah in much greater detail. Siraj, it says, was a tyrant, but, contrary to the canards spread by the English, he was not responsible for the “black hole of Calcutta.” Although his general Mir Jafar betrayed him at Plassey, his other generals fought valiantly:

<sup>19</sup> For instance, Ramgati Nyayaratna, *Bāṅgālār itihās, pratham bhāg, hindu rājādiger caramābasthā abadhi nabāb ālibarddi khānr adhikār kāl paryyanta* (Hooghly, 1859), pp. 179–180.

<sup>20</sup> Ramsaday Bhattacharya, *Bāṅgālā itihāser praśnottar* (Calcutta, 1869), pp. 110–111.

If this battle had continued for some time, then Clive would surely have lost. But fortune favoured the English, and weakened by the betrayal of Mir Jafar, the Nawab was defeated and Clive was victorious.<sup>21</sup>

Not only in gaining an empire, but even in administering one, the English resorted to conspiracy and force. In the period before and after Clive, says the same book, “the English committed such atrocities on the people of this country that all Bengalis hated the name of the English.”<sup>22</sup> Because of his intrigues, Hastings “is despised by all and is condemned in history.”<sup>23</sup> In 1857, just as the soldiers committed atrocities, so did the English:

At the time of the suppression of the revolt, the English who are so proud of their Christian religion wreaked vengeance upon their enemies by cutting out the livers from the bodies of hanged rebels and throwing them into the fire.<sup>24</sup>

Even the end of the mutiny did not bring peace:

In no age do the poor and the weak have anyone to protect them. When the disorder died down at other places, a huge commotion began in Bengal. In the areas of Bengal where indigo is grown, the English planters became truculent. The cruelties they perpetrated on the poor tenants will prevent them for all time from being counted among human beings.<sup>25</sup>

It was in fact in the course of writing the history of British rule in India that English-educated Bengalis abandoned the criteria of divine intervention, religious value, and the norms of right conduct in judging the rise and fall of kingdoms. The recent history of Bengal demonstrated that kingdoms could be won and, what was more, held by resorting to the grossest acts

<sup>21</sup> Kshetranath Bandyopadhyay, *Śisūpāth bāṅgālār itihās, bargir hāṅgām haite lārḍ nārthbruker āgaman paryānta* (Calcutta, 1872), p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

of immorality. The modern historiography seemed to validate a view of political history as simply the amoral pursuit of *raison d'état*.

A popular textbook published in the 1870s portrayed the political success of the British in India as the result of a cynical pursuit of power devoid of all moral principles. Of Clive's intrigues, it said, "Most people criticize Clive for these heinous acts, but according to him there is nothing wrong in committing villainy when dealing with villains."<sup>26</sup> The new revenue arrangements of 1772 are described as follows:

'The land belongs to him who has force on his side.' It is from this time that the Company stopped being a revenue collector and really became the ruler. If the Emperor [in Delhi] had been strong, there would have been a huge incident over this. But there was nothing left [to the Empire]. Whatever Hastings decided, happened.<sup>27</sup>

History was no longer the play of divine will or the fight of right against wrong; it had become merely the struggle for power. The advent of British rule was no longer a blessing of Providence. English-educated Bengalis were now speculating on the political conditions that might have made the British success impossible:

If this country had been under the dominion of one powerful ruler, or if the different rulers had been united and friendly towards one another, then the English would never have become so powerful here and this country would have remained under the Musalman kings. Perhaps no one in this country would have ever heard of the English.<sup>28</sup>

The book ends with a list of the benefits of British rule. And yet it is clearly implied that this does not establish its claims to legitimacy: "In any case, whatever be the means by which the

<sup>26</sup> Krishnachandra Ray, *Bhāratbarṣer itihās, imrejdiger adhikārkāl*, 9th ed. (Calcutta: J. C. Chatterjee, 1870; first ed. 1859), pp. 43–44.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.



English have come to acquire this sprawling kingdom, it must be admitted that infinite benefits have been effected by them to this country.”<sup>29</sup> We have almost reached the threshold of nationalist history.

A book published in 1876 has this announcement by its author in the preface: “I have written this book for those who have been misled by translations of histories written in English.”<sup>30</sup> The extent to which European historiography had made inroads into the consciousness of the Bengali literati can be judged from the following comment on relations between the European colonial powers:

The English and the French have always been hostile towards each other. Just as the conflict between the Mughals and the Pathans is proverbial in India, so is the hostility between the English and the French in Europe. Thus it was beyond belief that in India they would not attack each other and instead drink from the same water.<sup>31</sup>

The book ends with the following sentences:

Having come to India as a mere trader, the East India Company became through the tide of events the overlord of two hundred million subjects, and the shareholders of the Company, having become millionaires and billionaires, began to institute the laws and customs of foreign peoples. In no other country of the world has such an unnatural event taken place.<sup>32</sup>

### *Elements of a Nationalist History*

Talking of Mrityunjay, I said that his position with respect to the political events he was describing was that of an ordinary subject. One could say the same of the authors of the textbooks I have just mentioned. But these “subjects” were very different

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> Kshirodchandra Raychaudhuri, *Samagra bhārater samkṣipta itihās* (Calcutta, 1876).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

entities. In the seventy years that had passed, the creature known as the educated Bengali had been transmuted. Now he had grown used to referring to himself, like the educated European, as a member of "the middle class." Not only was he in the middle in terms of income, but he had also assumed, in the sphere of social authority, the role of a mediator. On the one hand, he was claiming that those who had wealth and property were unfit to wield the power they had traditionally enjoyed. On the other hand, he was taking upon himself the responsibility of speaking on behalf of those who were poor and oppressed. To be in the middle now meant to oppose the rulers and to lead the subjects. Our textbook historians, while they may have thought of themselves as ordinary subjects, had however acquired a consciousness in which they were already exercising the arts of politics and statecraft.

Simultaneously, the modern European principles of social and political organization had become deeply implanted in their minds. The English-educated middle class of Bengal was by the 1870s unanimous in its belief that the old institutions and practices of society needed to be fundamentally changed. It is useful to remind ourselves of this fact, because we often tend to forget that those who are called "conservative" or "traditionalist" and who are associated with the movements of Hindu revivalism were also vigorous advocates of the reform and modernization of Hindu society. Whatever the differences between "progressives" and "conservatives" among the new intellectuals in the nineteenth century, they were all convinced that the old society had to be reformed in order to make it adequate for coping with the modern world.

This becomes clear from reading the most commonplace writings of minor writers in the second half of the nineteenth century. A completely new criterion of political judgment that is employed in these readings is, for instance, the notion of "impartiality." We have a text from 1866 by an author who is undoubtedly a "traditionalist Hindu," because in a chapter on "The Treatment of Young Women" he recommends that

“whether indoors or out, no young woman should at any time be left alone and unwatched.”<sup>33</sup> Yet he is opposed to polygamy and the practice of dowry. In a chapter on “The Subject of Political Loyalty,” this traditionalist writes:

In the days when this country was under the rule of the Hindu *jāti*, the arbitrariness of kings led to the complete domination by a particular *jāti* over all the others. That *jāti* wielded the power to send others to heaven or hell. . . . When the kingdom was in the hands of the Yavanas, they treated all Hindus as infidels. In all respects they favoured subjects belonging to their own *jāti* and oppressed those who were Hindu. . . . The principles of government followed by the British *jāti* do not have any of these defects. When administering justice, they treat a priest of their own *jāti* as equal to someone of the lowest occupation in this country, such as a sweeper. . . . No praise is too great for the quality of impartiality of this *jāti*.<sup>34</sup>

One step further and we get the next argument in nationalist history: the reason why Hindu society was corrupt and decadent was the long period of Muslim rule. The following is an extract from a lecture at a reformist religious society in 1876:

The misfortunes and decline of this country began on the day the Yavana flag entered the territory of Bengal. The cruelty of Yavana rule turned this land to waste. Just as a storm wreaks destruction and disorder to a garden, so did the unscrupulous and tyrannical Yavana *jāti* destroy the happiness and good fortune of Bengal, this land of our birth. Ravaged by endless waves of oppression, the people of Bengal became disabled and timid. Their religion took distorted forms. The education of women was completely stopped. In order to protect women from the attacks of Yavanas, they were locked up inside their homes. The country was reduced to such a state that the wealth of the prosperous, the honour of the genteel and the chastity of the virtuous were in grave peril.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Tarakrishna Haldar, *Camatkār svapnadarśan* (Calcutta, 1868), pp. 134–136.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Bholanath Chakravarti, *Sei ek din āi ei ek din, arthāt bañger pūrbba o barttamān abasthā* (Calcutta: Adi Brahma Samaj, 1876), p. 10.

Half of nationalist history has been already thought out here. In the beginning, the history of the nation was glorious; in wealth, power, learning, and religion it had reached the pinnacles of civilization. This nation was sometimes called Bengali, sometimes Hindu, sometimes Arya, sometimes Indian, but the form of the history remained the same. After this came the age of decline. The cause of decline was Muslim rule, i.e., the subjection of the nation. We do not get the rest of nationalist history in this lecture I have just cited because, although the speaker talks about the need for the regeneration of national society, he also thinks that its possibility lies entirely in the existence of British rule:

There are limits to everything. When the oppressions of the Musalmans became intolerable, the Lord of the Universe provided a means of escape. . . . The resumption of good fortune was initiated on the day the British flag was first planted on this land. Tell me, if Yavana rule had continued, what would the condition of this country have been today? It must be loudly declared that it is to bless us that *īśvara* has brought the English to this country. British rule has ended the atrocities of the Yavanas. . . . There can be no comparison between Yavana rule and British rule: the difference seems greater than that between darkness and light or between misery and bliss.<sup>36</sup>

However, even if this lecturer did not subscribe to it, the remainder of the argument of nationalist history was already fairly current. I have before me the eighteenth edition, published in 1878, of *The History of India* by Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay.<sup>37</sup> Tarinicharan (1833–1897) was a product of colonial education, a professor at Sanskrit College and a social reformer. His textbooks on history and geography were extremely popular and were the basis for many other lesser-known textbooks. His *History of India* was probably the

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>37</sup> Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay, *Bhāratbarṣer itihās*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1878; first ed. 1858); hereafter *BI*.

most influential textbook read in Bengali schools in the second half of the nineteenth century.

I will recount here some of the stories from Tarinicharan's history in order to point out how the materials of Hindu-extremist political rhetoric today were fashioned from the very birth of nationalist historiography.

### *The Construction of a Classical Past*

The first sentence is striking:

India (*bhāratavarṣa*) has been ruled in turn by Hindus, Musalmans and Christians. Accordingly, the history of this country (*deś*) is divided into the periods of Hindu, Muslim and Christian rule (*rājatva*).<sup>38</sup>

We have passed from the “history of kings” to the “history of this country.” Never again will *Rājābali* be written; from now on, everything will be the “history of this *deś*.” This history, now, is periodized according to the distinctive character of rule, and this character, in turn, is determined by the religion of the rulers. The identification here of country (*deś*) and realm (*rājatva*) is permanent and indivisible. This means that although there may be at times several kingdoms and kings, there is in truth always only one realm, which is coextensive with the country and which is symbolized by the capital or the throne. The *rājatva*, in other words, constitutes the generic sovereignty of the country, whereas the capital or the throne represents the center of sovereign statehood. Since the country is *bhāratavarṣa*, there can be only one true sovereignty which is coextensive with it, represented by a single capital or throne as its center. Otherwise, why should the defeat of Prithviraj and the capture of Delhi by Muhammad Ghuri signal the end of a whole period of Indian history and the beginning of a new

<sup>38</sup> *BI*, p. 1.

one? Or why should the battle of Plassey mark the end of Muslim rule and the beginning of Christian rule? The identification in European historiography between the notions of country or people, sovereignty and statehood, is now lodged firmly in the mind of the English-educated Bengali.

On the next page, we have another example of the modernity of this historiographic practice. "All Sanskrit sources that are now available are full of legends and fabulous tales; apart from the *Rājatarāṅginī* there is not a single true historical account."<sup>39</sup> The criteria of the "true historical account" had been, of course, set by then by European historical scholarship. That India has no true historical account was a singular discovery of European Indology. The thought had never occurred to Mrityunjay. But to Tarinicharan, it seems self-evident.

We then have a description of the inhabitants of India:

In very ancient times, there lived in India two very distinct communities (*sampradāy*) of people. Of them, one resembled us in height and other aspects of physical appearance. The descendants of this community are now called Hindu. The people of the other community were short, dark and extremely uncivilized. Their descendants are now known as Khas, Bhilla, Pulinda, Sāontāl and other primitive [*jaṅglā* = of the bush] *jāti*.<sup>40</sup>

There were others who were the products of the mixing of *sampradāy*. Thus the first three *varṇa* among the Hindus are said to be twice-born, but the Śūdra are not entitled to that status. "This shows that in the beginning the former were a separate *sampradāy* from the latter. The latter were subsequently included in the former community, but were given the status of the most inferior class."<sup>41</sup>

There is also a notion of the gradual spread of "the Hindu

<sup>39</sup> *BI*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *BI*, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> *BI*, p. 4.

religion” from the north of the country to the south. This spread is the result of the expansion of the realm:

The south of the country was in the beginning covered by forests and inhabited by non-Hindu and uncivilized *jāti*. Rāmacandra was the first to hoist the Hindu flag in that part of India. . . . To this day there are many popular tales of the ancient colonization of the south by the Hindus.<sup>42</sup>

The image of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* holding aloft the modern symbol of national sovereignty came easily to the mind of this English-educated Bengali Brahman a hundred years ago, although the votaries of political Hinduism today will probably be embarrassed by the suggestion that Rama had subdued the inhabitants of southern India and established a colonial rule.

Since there is a lack of authentic sources, the narrative of ancient Indian history is necessarily fragmentary. Gone is the certitude of Mrityunjay’s dynastic lists; Tarinicharan states quite clearly the limits to a rational reconstruction of the ancient past:

European historians have proved by various arguments that the battle of Kurukṣetra took place before the fourteenth century B.C. For a long period after the battle of Kurukṣetra, the historical accounts of India are so uncertain, partial and contradictory that it is impossible to construct a narrative from them.<sup>43</sup>

The narrative he does construct is not particularly remarkable, because he follows without much amendment the history of ancient India as current at the time among British writers on the subject. The only comment that is interesting in these chapters of Tarinicharan’s book is the one he makes on Buddhism:

<sup>42</sup> *BI*, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> *BI*, pp. 16–17.

[The Buddha] became a great enemy of the Hindu religion, which is why Hindus describe him as an atheist and the destroyer of *dharma*. Nevertheless, the religion founded by him contains much advice of the highest spiritual value. He did not admit anything that was devoid of reason (*yukti*). No matter how ancient the customs of a *jāti*, if stronger reasons can be presented against the traditional views, then the opinions of at least some people are likely to change.<sup>44</sup>

What is interesting here is that the reasonableness of the religious views of Buddhism is not denied. On the contrary, it is presented as a rationalist critique from within “the Hindu religion.” Otherwise, in accordance with the criterion of periodization, the period of the Buddhist rulers would have had to be classified as a separate period of ancient Indian history. Now it is given a place within the “Hindu period.”

Although the historical sources for the ancient period are said to be fragmentary and unreliable, on one subject there seems to be no dearth of evidence. That is “the civilization and learning of the ancient Indians.” This is the title of Chapter Six of Tarinicharan’s book. The main argument is as follows:

What distinguishes the giant from the dwarf or the mighty from the frail is nothing compared to the difference between the ancient and the modern Hindu. In earlier times, foreign travelers in India marveled at the courage, truthfulness and modesty of the people of the Arya *vamśa*; now they remark mainly on the absence of those qualities. In those days Hindus would set out on conquest and hoist their flags in Tatar, China and other countries; now a few soldiers from a tiny island far away are lording it over the land of India. In those days Hindus would regard all except their own *jāti* as *mleccha* and treat them with contempt; now those same *mleccha* shower contempt on the descendants of Aryans. Then the Hindus would sail their ships to Sumatra and other islands, evidence of which is still available in plenty in the adjacent island of Bali. Now the thought of a sea voyage strikes terror in the heart of a Hindu, and if anyone manages to go, he is immediately ostracized from society.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *BI*, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> *BI*, p. 32.



Ancient glory, present misery: the subject of this entire story is “us.” The mighty heroes of ancient India were “our” ancestors, and the feeble inhabitants of India today are “ourselves.” That ancient Indians conquered other countries or traded across the seas or treated other people “with contempt” is a matter of pride for “us.” And it is “our” shame that “the descendants of Aryans” are today subordinated to others and are the objects of the latter’s contempt. There is a certain scale of power among the different peoples of the world; earlier, the people of India were high on that scale, while today they were near the bottom.

Not only physical prowess; the achievements of ancient Indians in the field of learning were also universally recognized:

In ancient times, when virtually the whole world was shrouded in the darkness of ignorance, the pure light of learning shone brightly in India. The discoveries in philosophy which emanated from the keen intellects of ancient Hindus are arousing the enthusiasm of European scholars even today.<sup>46</sup>

It will be noticed that the opinion of European scholars in this matter is extremely important to Tarinicharan. In fact, all the examples he cites on the excellence of ancient Indian learning—in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, logic, and linguistics—were discoveries of nineteenth-century Orientalists. By bringing forward this evidence, Tarinicharan seems to be suggesting that although Europeans today treat Indians with contempt because of their degraded condition, Indians were not always like this, because even European scholars admit that the arts and sciences of ancient India were of the highest standard. This evidence from Orientalist scholarship was extremely important for the construction of the full narrative of nationalist history.

That Tarinicharan’s history is nationalist is signified by

<sup>46</sup> *BI*, p. 33.

something else. His story of ancient glory and subsequent decline has a moral at the end: reform society, remove all of those superstitions which are the marks of decadence and revive the true ideals of the past. These false beliefs and practices for which Indians are today the objects of contempt did not exist in the past because even Europeans admit that in ancient times “we” were highly civilized:

Today we find Hindu women treated like slaves, enclosed like prisoners and as ignorant as beasts. But if we look a millennium and a quarter earlier, we will find that women were respected, educated and largely unconstrained. Where was child marriage then? No one married before the age of twenty-four.<sup>47</sup>

Ancient India became for the nationalist the classical age, while the period between the ancient and the contemporary was the dark age of medievalism. Needless to say, this was a pattern heartily approved by European historiography. If the nineteenth-century Englishman could claim ancient Greece as his classical heritage, why should not the English-educated Bengali feel proud of the achievements of the so-called Vedic civilization?

### *Narrative Break*

The chapter on “The Civilization and Learning of the Ancient Indians” closes Tarinicharan’s history of ancient India. He then takes the reader outside India—to Arabia in the seventh century. It might seem reasonable to ask why it should be necessary, if one is to talk about a change of historical periods in twelfth-century India, to begin the description from seventh-century Arabia. The answer to this question is, of course, obvious. But implicit in that answer is an

<sup>47</sup> *BI*, p. 33.

entire ensemble of assumptions and prejudices of nineteenth-century European historiography:

Muhammad gave to his followers the name *musalman*, i.e. the faithful, and to all other humans the name *kafir* or infidel. . . . Directing his followers to take the sword in order to destroy the *kafir*, he said that God had ordained that those Muslims who die in the war against false religion will go to paradise and live in eternal pleasure in the company of doe-eyed nymphs. But if they run away from battle, they will burn in hell. The Arab *jāti* is by nature fearless and warlike. Now, aroused by the lust for plunder in this world and for eternal pleasure in the next, their swords became irresistible everywhere. All of Arabia came under Muhammad's control and only a few years after his death the Muslim flag was flying in every country between Kabul and Spain. Never before in history had one kingdom after another, one land after another, fallen to a conqueror with the speed at which they fell to the Muslims. It was impossible that such people, always delirious at the prospect of conquest, would not covet the riches of India.<sup>48</sup>

The ground is being prepared here for the next episode, which will result from the clash of this distinct history of the Muslims with the history of Indians. This distinct history originates in, and acquires its identity from, the life of Muhammad. In other words, the dynasty which will be founded in Delhi at the beginning of the thirteenth century and the many political changes that will take place in the subsequent five centuries are not to be described merely as the periods of Turko-Afghan or Mughal rule in India; they are integral parts of the political history of Islam.

The actors in this history are also given certain behavioral characteristics. They are warlike and believe that it is their religious duty to kill infidels. Driven by the lust for plunder and the visions of cohabiting with the nymphs of paradise, they are even prepared to die in battle. They are not merely conquerors, but “delirious at the prospect of conquest”

<sup>48</sup> *BI*, pp. 36–37.

(*digvijayonmatta*), and consequently are by their innate nature covetous of the riches of India.

It is important for us at this point to note the complex relation of this new nationalist historiography to the histories of India produced by British writers in the nineteenth century. While James Mill's *History of British India*, completed in 1817, may have been "the hegemonic textbook of Indian history" for European Indology,<sup>49</sup> for the first nationalist historians of India it represented precisely what they had to fight against. Mill did not share any of the enthusiasm of Orientalists such as William Jones for the philosophical and literary achievements of ancient India. His condemnation of the despotism and immorality of Indian civilization was total, and even his recognition of "the comparative superiority of Islamic civilization" did not in any significant way affect his judgment that until the arrival of British rule India had always been "condemned to semi-barbarism and the miseries of despotic power."<sup>50</sup> Nationalist history in India could only be born by challenging such an absolute and comprehensive denial of all claims to historical subjectivity.<sup>51</sup>

Far more directly influential for the nationalist school texts we are looking at was Elphinstone's *History of India* (1841). This was the standard textbook in Indian universities and was the most widely read British history of India until Vincent Smith's books were published in the early twentieth century. The

<sup>49</sup> Ronald Inden has recently made this point with much force: *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 45–46.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of Mill's comparative treatment of the Hindu and Muslim periods in Indian history, see J. S. Grewal, *Muslim Rule in India: The Assessments of British Historians* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 64–97.

<sup>51</sup> Romila Thapar has argued that Mill's *History* nevertheless remained influential for Indian writers because "it laid the foundation for a communal interpretation of Indian history and thus provided the historical justification for the two-nation theory." His severe condemnations "led to a section of the Orientalists and later to Indian historians having to defend 'Hindu civilization' even if it meant overglorifying the ancient past." "Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History," in Romila Thapar, Harbans Mukhia, and Bipan Chandra, *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969), p. 4.

reason why nationalist readers found Elphinstone more palatable than Mill is not far to seek. As E. B. Cowell, who taught in Calcutta and added notes to the later editions of Elphinstone's *History*, explained in a preface in 1866, a "charm of the book is the spirit of genuine hearty sympathy with and appreciation of the native character which runs through the whole, and the absence of which is one of the main blemishes in Mr. Mill's eloquent work."<sup>52</sup> In this spirit of sympathy, Elphinstone wrote entire chapters in his volume called "Hindus" on "Philosophy," "Astronomy and Mathematical Science," "Medicine," "Language," "Literature," "Fine Arts," and "Commerce." He also began his volume on "Mahometans" with a chapter called "Arab Conquests A.D. 632, A.H. 11-A.D. 753, A.H. 136" whose first section was "Rise of the Mahometan Religion."

Another source often acknowledged in the Bengali textbooks is the series called *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*.<sup>53</sup> Compiled by Henry Elliot, and edited and published after his death by John Dowson between 1867 and 1877, these eight volumes comprised translated extracts from over 150 works, principally in Persian, covering a period from the ninth to the eighteenth century. It was a gigantic example of the privilege claimed by modern European scholarship to process the writings of a people supposedly devoid of historical consciousness and render into useful sources of history what otherwise could "scarcely claim to rank higher than Annals." The technical qualities of the scholarship of Elliot and Dowson were to be questioned in subsequent decades,<sup>54</sup> but with the substitution of English for Persian as the language of the state,

<sup>52</sup> "Advertisement to the Fifth Edition," in Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*, 9th ed. (London: John Murray, 1905), p. vii.

<sup>53</sup> H. M. Elliot, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*, ed. John Dowson, 8 vols. (London: Trübner, 1867-77).

<sup>54</sup> The most detailed criticism was in Shahpurshah Hormasji Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History: A Critical Commentary on Elliot and Dowson's History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, 2 vols. (Poona, 1939; Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1979).

it was through their mediation that the Persian sources of Indian history would now become available to the modern literati in Bengal.

The assumptions which regulated the selection and translation of these sources was quite explicitly stated by Elliot:<sup>55</sup>

In Indian Histories there is little which enables us to penetrate below the glittering surface, and observe the practical operation of a despotic Government. . . . If, however, we turn our eyes to the present Muhammadan kingdoms of India, and examine the character of the princes, . . . we may fairly draw a parallel between ancient and modern times. . . . We behold kings, even of our own creation, slunk in sloth and debauchery, and emulating the vices of a Caligula or a Commodus. . . . Had the authors whom we are compelled to consult, portrayed their Caesars with the fidelity of Suetonius, instead of the more congenial sycophancy of Paternulus, we should not, as now, have to extort from unwilling witnesses, testimony to the truth of these assertions. . . . The few glimpses we have, even among the short Extracts in this single volume, of Hindus slain for disputing with Muhammadans, of general prohibitions against processions, worship, and ablutions, and of other intolerant measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and confiscations, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them, show us that this picture is not overcharged, and it is much to be regretted that we are left to draw it for ourselves from out of the mass of ordinary occurrences. . . .

The fact that even Hindu writers wrote “to flatter the vanity of an imperious Muhammadan patron” was, Elliot thought, “lamentable”:

. . . there is not one of this slavish crew who treats the history of his native country subjectively, or presents us with the thoughts, emotions and raptures which a long oppressed race might be supposed to give vent to. . . .

<sup>55</sup> “Sir Henry Elliot’s Original Preface,” in *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. xv–xxvii.

Elliot also drew for his readers the conclusions from his presentation of these extracts:

They will make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of our rule. . . . We should no longer hear bombastic Bábús, enjoying under our Government the highest degree of personal liberty, and many more political privileges than were ever conceded to a conquered nation, rant about patriotism, and the degradation of their present position. If they would dive into any of the volumes mentioned herein, it would take these young Brutuses and Phocians a very short time to learn, that in the days of that dark period for whose return they sigh, even the bare utterance of their ridiculous fantasies would have been attended, not with silence and contempt, but with the severer discipline of molten lead or impalement.

Ironically, when the young Brutuses and Phocians did learn Elliot's lessons on Muhammadan rule, their newly acquired consciousness of being "a long oppressed race" did not stop with a condemnation of Islamic despotism; it was also turned against British rule itself.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, European Indological scholarship seemed to have agreed that the history of Hinduism was one of a classical age—for some the Vedic civilization, for others the so-called Gupta revival in the fourth to the seventh centuries—followed by a medieval decline from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries.<sup>56</sup> For some, this decline was itself the reason why the country fell so quickly to the Muslim invaders. In any case, the theory of medieval decline fitted in nicely with the overall judgment of nineteenth-century British historians that "Muslim rule in India" was a period of despotism, misrule, and anarchy<sup>57</sup>—this, needless to say, being the historical justification for colonial intervention.

For Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century, the pattern of classical glory, medieval decline, and modern

<sup>56</sup> The point is discussed in Inden, *Imagining India*, pp. 117–122.

<sup>57</sup> On this, see Grewal, *Muslim Rule*.

renaissance appeared as one that was not only proclaimed by the modern historiography of Europe but also approved for India by at least some sections of European scholarship. What was needed was to claim for the Indian nation the historical agency for completing the project of modernity. To make that claim, ancient India had to become the classical source of Indian modernity, while "the Muslim period" would become the night of medieval darkness. Contributing to that description would be all the prejudices of the European Enlightenment about Islam. Dominating the chapters from the twelfth century onward in the new nationalist history of India will be a stereotypical figure of "the Muslim," endowed with a "national character": he will be fanatical, bigoted, warlike, dissolute, and cruel.

*Muslim Tyranny: Hindu Resistance*

The story which begins with the birth of Islam in Arabia does, of course, shift to India, but this happens in stages. Tarinicharan gives long descriptions of the Arab invasions of Sind and the successive raids by Mahmud Ghaznavi into different Indian kingdoms, all of which take place well before the establishment of the so-called Slave dynasty in Delhi in the early thirteenth century. These descriptions have a similar pattern which can be clarified by looking at three examples: Tarinicharan's accounts of the invasion of Sind by Muhammad Ibn Kasim, of Mahmud Ghaznavi's attack on Punjab, and of the victory of Muhammad Ghuri at Thanesar.

Muhammad Kasim began his war on Dahir, the king of Sind, in 712:

Fortune favoured him. A ball of fire thrown by his soldiers struck King Dahir's elephant which panicked and fled from the battlefield. Dahir's troops, thinking that their king had given up the battle, fell into disarray. Later it will be seen that even when Indians had every chance of victory, similar misfortunes often



led to their defeat at the hands of the Muslims.<sup>58</sup>

It must be noted that what Tarinicharan calls “fortune” (*daiva*) and “misfortune” (*durddaiva*) are not the same as the *daiva* that was divine intervention in Mrityunjay’s narrative. Misfortune here is mere accident, a matter of chance. There is no suggestion at all of any retribution for immorality. It is the misfortune, not of kings, but of “Indians,” that despite deserving to win, they have repeatedly lost because of accidents:

Finally, after displaying much heroism, [King Dahir] was killed at the hands of the enemy. His capital was besieged, but Dahir’s wife, displaying a courage similar to her husband’s, continued to defend the city. In the end, food supplies ran out. Deciding that it was preferable to die rather than submit to the enemy, she instructed the inhabitants of the city to make necessary arrangements. Everyone agreed; everywhere, pyres were lit. After the immolations [of the women], the men, completing their ablutions, went out sword in hand and were soon killed by the Muslims.<sup>59</sup>

Later, we will get similar stories of defeat in battle. Two features are worth our notice: one, the courage of Hindu women in resisting aggression, and the other, the death in battle of Hindu men as a ritualized form of self-sacrifice. We thus have narrative indices such as “everywhere, pyres were lit” and “completing their ablutions . . . killed by the Muslims.” The corresponding index for Muslim soldiers is “driven by the prospect of cohabiting with doe-eyed nymphs . . . etc.” The contrast is significant.

<sup>58</sup> *BI*, p. 38. The same description occurs in Elphinstone, *History*, pp. 300–301, minus the last comment.

<sup>59</sup> *BI*, p. 38. These details also appear in Elphinstone, *History*, p. 301, where the source mentioned is James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or the Central and Western Rajput States of India*, ed. William Crooke (London: Oxford University Press, 1920; first ed. 1829–32). What is a story from Rajut folklore in Tod, having entered modern historiography in Elphinstone as the slaughter of a “Rājput tribe by the Mahometans,” becomes in Tarinicharan an episode in the history of the resistance by “Indians” to Muslim conquest.

Tarinicharan tells another story about Kasim which is part of the same narrative structure:

On completing his conquest of Sind, Kasim was preparing to drive further into India when the resourcefulness of a woman became his undoing. Among the women who were captured in war in Sind were two daughters of King Dahir. They were not only of high birth but were also outstandingly beautiful. Kasim thought they would make appropriate presents for the Khalifa and accordingly sent them to his master. The ruler of the Muslims was bewitched by the beauty of the elder daughter and began to look upon her with desire. At this, she burst into tears and said, 'It is a pity that I am not worthy of receiving the affections of someone like you, because Kasim has already sullied my *dharma*.' Hearing of this act of his servant, the Khalifa was enraged and ordered that Kasim be sown in hide and brought before him. When this order was carried out, the Khalifa showed Kasim's corpse to the princess. Eyes sparkling with delight, she said, 'Kasim was entirely innocent. I had made the allegation only in order to avenge the deaths of my parents and the humiliation of their subjects.'<sup>60</sup>

To the courage of Hindu women is added another element: intelligence. And parallel to the story of self-sacrifice is created another story: vengeance on the enemy for the death of one's kin.

Let us move to the beginning of the eleventh century and the period of Mahmud of Ghazna:

Of all Muslims, it was his aggressions which first brought devastation and disarray to India, and from that time the freedom of the Hindus has diminished and faded like the phases of the moon.<sup>61</sup>

Tarinicharan mentions some of Mahmud's qualities such as courage, foresight, strategic skill, and perseverance, but

<sup>60</sup> *BI*, p. 39. The story occurs in Elphinstone, *History*, pp. 303–304, which is undoubtedly the source for Tarinicharan. There is a much more detailed account in an extract from "Chach-nāma, or Tarikh-i Hind wa Sind" in Elliot and Dowson, *Own Historians*, vol. 1, pp. 209–211, in which in the end the princess rebukes the Khalifa for passing such peremptory orders against an innocent man.

<sup>61</sup> *BI*, p. 41.

ignores the fact, discussed in Elphinstone, that Mahmud was also a great patron of arts and letters:

Although he was endowed with these qualities, he was also a great adherent, at least in public, of the Musalman religion, a bitter opponent of the worship of idols and an unyielding pursuer of wealth and fame.<sup>62</sup>

This was another trait of the so-called “Muslim character”: where faith in Islam was a reason for war, it was not true faith but only an apparent adherence to religion.

Mahmud moved against King Anangapal of the Shahiya dynasty:

‘The Muslims are determined to destroy the independence of all of India and to eradicate the Hindu religion. If they conquer Lahore, they will attack other parts of the country. It is therefore a grave necessity for all to unite in suppressing the *mleccha* forces.’ Saying this, the King [Elphinstone writes the name as Anang Pál; Tarinicharan does the same] sent emissaries to all the principal Hindu kings. His appeal did not go unheeded. The kings of Delhi, Kanauj, Ujjain, Gwalior, Kalinjar and other places joined with Anangapal. Masses of troops arrived in Punjab. Worried by this sudden increase in the strength of the opposition, Mahmud decided, for reasons of safety, to halt near Peshawar. The Hindu forces increased daily. Hindu women from far away sold their diamonds, melted down their gold ornaments and sent supplies for war. . . .<sup>63</sup>

King Anangapal is unlikely to have had the historical foresight to anticipate that the fall of Lahore to Mahmud would lead to “the destruction of the independence of all of India.” Needless to say, these are Tarinicharan’s words. But by putting them on the lips of the ruler of Punjab, he turns this story into a war of the Hindu *jāti*: “the kings joined with Anangapal,” “the Hindu

<sup>62</sup> *BI*, p. 42.

<sup>63</sup> *BI*, pp. 43–44. All of these details, once again, are in Elphinstone, *History*, pp. 320–321, where the authority cited is David Price, *Chronological Retrospect, or Memoirs of the Principal Events of Mahomedan History*, vol. 2 (London, 1821).

forces increased daily,” “Hindu women from far away sent supplies,” etc. But then came the stroke of misfortune:

A fire-ball or a sharp arrow flung from the Musalman camp struck the elephant of the Hindu commander Anangapal. The elephant, with the king on its back, fled from the field of battle. At this, the Hindu soldiers fell into disarray.<sup>64</sup>

This episode too ends with a story of vengeance, but this time of another variety:

The king of Kanauj, who had collaborated with Mahmud, became an object of hatred and contempt in the community of Hindu kings. Hearing this, the ruler of Ghazni entered India for the tenth time to help his protégé. But well before his arrival, the king of Kalinjar performed the execution of the king of Kanauj.<sup>65</sup>

Needless to say, this too was a ritual; hence, it was not just “an execution,” but the “performance of an execution.”

On Muhammad Ghuri, Tarinicharan says that his soldiers were

inhabitants of the hills, hardy and skilled in warfare. By comparison, the Hindu kings were disunited and their soldiers relatively docile and undisciplined. Consequently, it was only to be expected that Muhammad would win easily. But that is not what happened. Virtually no Hindu ruler surrendered his freedom without a mighty struggle. In particular, the Rajahpūta were never defeated. The rise, consolidation and collapse of Muslim rule have been completed, but the Rajahpūta remain free to this day.<sup>66</sup>

Not only did the Hindu kings not submit without resistance, but after the first attack by Muhammad they even “chased the Muslims away for twenty *kroś* [forty miles].”<sup>67</sup> On his second attack, the treachery of Jaichand and the unscrupulousness of

<sup>64</sup> *BI*, p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> *BI*, p. 46.

<sup>66</sup> *BI*, p. 53.

<sup>67</sup> *BI*, p. 54.

Muhammad led to the defeat of Prithviraj. This account by Tarinicharan bears no resemblance at all to the narratives of Mrityunjay. There is also a story of revenge at the end. A hill tribe Tarinicharan calls Gokṣur (Elphinstone calls them “a band of Gakkars”) had been defeated by Muhammad; one night, some of them managed to enter his tent and kill the sultan in revenge.

With the establishment of the Sultanate, the story of the oppression of Hindus by intolerant rulers will be repeated a number of times. For instance, Sikandar Lodi:

Sekendar prohibited pilgrimage and ritual bathing in the Ganga and other sacred rivers. He also destroyed temples at many places. A Brahman who had declared that ‘The Lord recognizes every religion if followed sincerely’ was called before Sekendar, and when he refused to discard his tolerant views was executed by the cruel ruler. When a Musalman holy man criticized the prohibition of pilgrimages, the king was enraged and shouted, ‘Rascal! So you support the idolators?’ The holy man replied, ‘No, that is not what I am doing. All I am saying is that the oppression by rulers of their subjects is unjust.’<sup>68</sup>

Tarinicharan’s barbs are the sharpest when they are directed against Aurangzeb. “Arāñjib was deceitful, murderous and plundered the wealth of others.”<sup>69</sup> “His declaration of faith in the Musalman religion only facilitated the securing of his interests. . . . In truth, Arāñjib would never forsake his interests for reasons of religion or justice.”<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, Tarinicharan has praise for Akbar, although his reasons are interesting:

Akbar attempted to eradicate some irrational practices prescribed in the Musalman religion. He also tried to stop several irrational practices of the Hindus. He prohibited the ordeal by fire, the burning of widows against their wishes and child-marriage. He also allowed the remarriage of widows. . . .

<sup>68</sup> *BI*, p. 83. These stories appear in Elphinstone, *History*, pp. 409–410.

<sup>69</sup> *BI*, p. 220.

<sup>70</sup> *BI*, p. 173.

Orthodox Muslims were strongly opposed to him because of his liberal views on religion. Many called him an atheist.<sup>71</sup>

Thus it was not his impartiality in matters of religion but rather his use of the powers of the state to reform both the Hindu and the Muslim religions that makes Akbar worthy of praise.

*History as the Source of Nationhood*

It is remarkable how pervasive this framework of nationalist history became in the consciousness of the English-educated middle class in Bengal in the late nineteenth century. In its literary and dramatic productions as well as in its schools and colleges, this narrative of national history went virtually unchallenged until the early decades of the twentieth century.

The idea that “Indian nationalism” is synonymous with “Hindu nationalism” is not the vestige of some premodern religious conception. It is an entirely modern, rationalist, and historicist idea. Like other modern ideologies, it allows for a central role of the state in the modernization of society and strongly defends the state’s unity and sovereignty. Its appeal is not religious but political. In this sense, the framework of its reasoning is entirely secular. A little examination will show that, compared to Mrityunjay’s historiography which revolved around the forces of the divine and sacred, Tarinicharan’s is a wholly secular historiography.

In fact, the notion of “Hindu-ness” in this historical conception cannot be, and does not need to be, defined by any religious criteria at all. There are no specific beliefs or practices which characterize this “Hindu” and the many doctrinal and sectarian differences among Hindus are irrelevant to this concept. Indeed, even such anti-Vedic and

<sup>71</sup> *BI*, 141.

anti-Brahmanical religions as Buddhism and Jainism count here as “Hindu.” Similarly, people outside the Brahmanical religion and outside caste society are also claimed as part of the Hindu *jāti*. But clearly excluded from this *jāti* are religions like Christianity and Islam.

What then is the criterion for inclusion or exclusion? It is one of historical origin. Buddhism or Jainism are “Hindu” because they originate in India, out of debates and critiques that are internal to Hinduism. Islam or Christianity come from outside and are therefore foreign. And “India” here is the generic entity, with fixed territorial definitions, which acts as the permanent arena for the history of the *jāti*.

What, we may ask, is the place of those inhabitants of India who are excluded from this nation? There are several answers that are suggested in the historiography we are looking at. One answer, which assumes the centrality of the modern state in the life of the nation, is frankly majoritarian. The majority “community” is Hindu; the others are minorities. State policy must therefore reflect this preponderance, and the minorities must accept the leadership and protection of the majority. This view, which today is being propagated with such vehemence by Hindu-extremist politics, actually has its origin more than a hundred years ago, at the same time that Indian nationalism was born.

The other answer, which also makes the distinction between majority and minority “communities,” is associated with what is called the politics of “secularism” in India. This view holds that in order to prevent the oppression of minorities by the majority, the state must enact legal measures to protect the rights and the separate identities of the minorities. The difficulty is that the formal institutions of the state, based on an undifferentiated concept of citizenship, cannot allow for the separate representation of minorities. Consequently, the question of who represents minorities necessarily remains problematic, and constantly threatens the tenuous identity of nation and state.

There was a third answer in this early nationalist historiography. This denied the centrality of the state in the life of the nation and instead pointed to the many institutions and practices in the everyday lives of the people through which they had evolved a way of living with their differences. These historians argued that the true history of India lay not in the battles of kings and the rise and fall of empires but in this everyday world of popular life whose innate flexibility, untouched by conflicts in the domain of the state, allowed for the coexistence of all religious beliefs. The principal difficulty with this view, which has many affinities with the later politics of Gandhism, is its inherent vulnerability to the overwhelming sway of the modern state. Its only defense against the historicist conception of the nation is to claim for the everyday life of the people an essential and transhistorical truth.

None of these answers, however, can admit that the Indian nation as a whole might have a claim on the historical legacy of Islam. The idea of the singularity of national history has inevitably led to a single source of Indian tradition, viz. ancient Hindu civilization. Islam here is either the history of foreign conquest or a domesticated element of everyday popular life. The classical heritage of Islam remains external to Indian history.

The curious fact is, of course, that this historicist conception of Hindu nationalism has had little problem in claiming for itself the modern heritage of Europe. It is as rightful participants in that globalized domain of the modern state that today's contestants fight each other in the name of history.