

Chapter Two

The Colonial Construction of the Indian Past

Twenty-five centuries ago before Babylon was struggling with Nineveh for supremacy, before Rome was founded by Romulus, or Tyre was planting her colonies; before Greece had contended with Persia, or Cyrus had added lustre to the Persian Monarchy, Benares had risen to greatness, if not to glory. And even now when most or all of these cities are obliterated by the ravages of time or sunk in the dust of ages, her temples and stately shrines remain, and it would be little less than a shame to Britain if those ancient relics should fall by the ruthless hand of the modern vandal and utilitarian.

—An American correspondent in a Chicago paper, June 1891¹

The *historical* character of communalism (or nationalism) must come after the *historical* character of the past has been established. The past is historical not only in the obvious sense that the past makes up history. It is historical also in the sense that ‘history’ itself—the ‘past’ recalled—is *constructed*. The modern history of India, in this sense, was first written in colonial times and by colonialists. It was colonialist writers who established the pattern of the Indian past pretty much as we know it today. And in that pattern, sectarian strife was an important motif.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant strand in colonialist historiography was representing religious bigotry and conflict between people of different religious persuasions as one of the more distinctive features of Indian society, past and present—a mark of the Indian section of the ‘Orient’. This particular reading of Indian history was distinguished not only by its periodization in terms of the European experience ('ancient', 'medieval', 'modern'), nor simply by its use of communal—more specifically, religious—categories to differentiate these periods of Indian history (or, at least,

¹ Cited in *Navayuga*, 18 June 1891, in *Report on Native Newspapers* (hereafter RNP), Bengal 1891, week ending 27 June 1891, p. 674.

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the first two of them: the 'Hindu' and the 'Muslim'). The historical reconstruction was characterized also by an emptying out of all history—in terms of the specific variations of time, place, class, issue—from the political experience of the people, and the identification of religion, or the religious community, as the moving force of all Indian politics. The communal riot narrative served to substantiate this reading of history.

Towards the end of the 1920s the Government of India drew up elaborate lists of Hindu-Muslim riots that had occurred in the country in the recent past. From one of these, we learn that there were 112 serious 'disturbances' between 1923 and 1927 which left approximately 450 people dead and 5000 more wounded. The year 1929 produced a carnage in Bombay, 1931 one more in Kanpur. Official statistics put the number of casualties in Bombay at 184 killed and 948 wounded. In Kanpur several hundreds were killed (for a casualty list of the same order, a government memorandum observed, one had to go back to the 'grave Benares riots' of 1809) and about 80,000 people are said to have left the city by rail alone on the first day of a conflagration that raged for three days.² The record of Hindu-Muslim strife was also extended further back, to the beginnings of colonial rule, as one can see from Table 2:1.

It is not difficult to add to these official lists. For the period 1800 to 1920 alone, a recent study speaks of 'riots and communal conflicts in many North Indian cities in the 1830s and again in the 1850s' and refers to Hindu-Muslim strife in Lucknow, for instance, in 1843, 1853 and 1856.³ There are records of clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Bareilly in 1837 (in addition to the riots of 1871–2 mentioned in Table 2:1); in Faizabad-Ayodhya in 1856; and, to take the two most important cloth-producing centres of Azamgarh district as another example, in Mubarakpur in 1813, 1834, 1842 and 1904, and in Maunath Bhanjan (or Mau) in 1806 as well as on several occasions from the 1860s onwards.

Again, the bloodshed at the Baqr'Id in 1893 in Azamgarh and

² India Office Library and Records; hereafter IOL: L/P & J/7/132, 'Communal Disorders' (Memorandum prepared by the Government of India for the Indian Statutory Commission, 1928), and 'Notes' of 19–20 May 1931.

³ C. A. Bayly, 'The Pre-History of "Communalism"?'

Table 2:1. Government Statement of Major Hindu–Muslim Riots, 1800–1920

<i>Year</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Observation by Officials</i>
1809	Banaras	'Grave Benares riots'; several hundred persons killed, some 50 mosques destroyed
1871–2	Bareilly	'Serious riots'.
1885	Lahore & Karnal	
1886	Delhi	'The great riots'.
1889	Dera Ghazi Khan	
1891	Palakod	
1893	Azamgarh	'Grave outbreaks over a large area of country'.
	Bombay	'Very serious Muharram riots'; 80 persons killed.
1910	Peshawar	
1912	Ayodhya-Faizabad	
1913	Agra	
1917	Shahabad	'Baqr' Id disturbances which recalled the Azamgarh disturbances of 1893 and which are among the most serious which have occurred at any time since the British connection with the country'.
1918	Katarpur village (Saharanpur district)	30 Muslims killed, 60 or more injured; all Muslim houses in the village burnt.

SOURCE: L/P&J/7/132; *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission, volume iv* (1930), pp. 96–7.

other districts of eastern U.P. and western Bihar led to violent conflict between groups of Muslims in Bombay, Junagadh and Rangoon as well.⁴ Bombay was witness to another round of fighting between Hindus and Muslims at the Muharram of 1911, and

⁴ Burma was administered by the Government of India until 1935: hence

there was a serious riot in Calcutta in 1918—partly it appears in retaliation for the Hindu attacks on Muslims in Shahabad district the year before.⁵

If this is the sometimes neglected history of Hindu–Muslim strife before the 1920s, evidence of Hindu–Muslim ‘riots’ can also be found for the pre-colonial period. Scholars have written of riots in Gujarat in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and again of ‘sporadic’ local conflict in Banaras, for example, from the 1750s.⁶ Indeed the list of Hindu–Muslim riots in colonial and pre-colonial India lengthens all the time with lengthening research—as indeed it must if ‘riots’ are what one is looking for.

It is possible for the researcher, however, to do more than just look for riots or simply delineate their differing contexts (though colonialist historiography was not particularly guilty of the latter crime). It is possible, and necessary, also to ask how reports of sectarian strife were received by contemporary and subsequent observers, what meanings were derived from them, what place they were assigned in different representations of the changing colonial world. How did colonialist observers ‘read’ the history of Hindu–Muslim strife that they dug up in the course of their attempts to come to grips with Indian society? This is the question that I take up in this chapter through a close examination of the evidence relating to the ‘grave’ Banaras riots of 1809, which figure prominently in colonial diagnoses of the social and political condition of India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

reports of riots in Rangoon appear together with the reports of riots in different parts of India.

⁵ J. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, pp. 320–1; J. Masselos, ‘Power in the Bombay “Moholla”, 1904–5’, *South Asia*, 6 (December 1976); K. Macpherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918–35* (Wiesbaden, 1974), pp. 37, 40.

⁶ S. A. A. Rizvi, *Shah Waliullah and His Times* (Canberra, 1980), p. 197; L. Subramanian, ‘Capital and Crowd in a Declining Asian Port City: The Anglo-Bania Order and the Surat Riots of 1795’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 19, 2 (1985); Bayly, ‘Pre-History of “Communalism”’, p. 197. In regard to Banaras, however, it is worth pointing out that officials making detailed enquiries after the 1809 outbreak reported that there had been no notable outbreak of violence between Hindus and Muslims in the city for the previous hundred years.

II

The colonialist choice of Banaras as representative of India is scarcely surprising. Along with maharajas, tiger-skins and snake-charmers, 'Suttee', 'Thugee' and female infanticide, 'Banaras' has loomed large in the westerner's picture of India from a time pre-dating the colonial era. Banaras was the Mecca of the subcontinent, repository of the unfathomable secrets of the Hindus. The place that Aligarh was to occupy in the attempted reckoning of Muslim politics in the first half of the twentieth century was already, before that period, occupied by Banaras in the attempt to reckon with the great, ancient and chaotic Hindu civilization that was said to be India. As the Rev. M. A. Sherring put it in 1868 with reference to the history of Banaras which was, in his view, 'to a great extent the history of India': 'While its career has been of long duration, it has not been of a character to awaken much enthusiasm or admiration. It cannot be said that either the moral, or the social, or even the intellectual, condition of the people residing here is a whit better than it was upwards of two thousand years ago. . . .'⁷

One vitally important part of the history of Banaras was captured, in the colonialist account, by the Hindu–Muslim riots that broke out in that city in October 1809. The *District Gazetteer* of Banaras compiled in 1907 introduces the 1809 riots as follows:

The only disturbance of the public peace [in Banaras during the first half of the nineteenth century] occurred in 1809 and the following year, when the city experienced one of those convulsions which had so frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Musalman sections of the population.

This comment is followed by a one-and-a-half-page description of the events of 1809, after which the compiler of the *Gazetteer* remarks:

A curious sequel of the riots was a feud that sprang up between the military and the police. This originated, no doubt, in religious differences, but these appear to have been dropped in the course of time and a long succession of affrays ensued, with Hindus and Musalmans indiscriminately mingled on either side.

⁷ Rev. M. A. Sherring, *Benares: The Sacred City of the Hindus* (1868, reprinted Delhi, 1975), pp. 342–4.

The entry goes on as follows:

The trouble subsided with a partial reorganization of the city police in October 1810; but before peace had been restored fresh riots arose with the introduction of the house-tax under Regulation XV of 1810, and it was again found necessary to station troops throughout the city to repress the popular disorder till the withdrawal of the obnoxious measure in the ensuing year.⁸

This was the distilled account, as it were, of the history of Banaras in the troubled days before the soothing influence of British rule and their sense of fair play had 'civilized' the city. It was an account that was carried into the assessment of the constitutional and political condition of India in the 1920s and 1930s, and it has found its way into the history books.⁹ Thus, a memorandum drawn up for submission to the Indian Statutory Commission of 1928 pointed to the 'grave Benares riots' of 1809 as evidence of the usual state of Hindu–Muslim coexistence, describing them as 'one of those convulsions which had frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Moslem sections of the population'.¹⁰

This particular description is of course lifted straight from the account contained in the *Banaras Gazetteer* of 1907, quoted above. Notice that scarcely a word is altered in the text: and yet the change of context completely transforms the statement. What applied to a *particular city*—the experience of 'convulsions' in the past and the 'religious antagonism' of the local Hindus and Muslims—now applies to the country as a whole. Banaras becomes the essence of India, the history of Banaras the history of India.

What makes Banaras stand in for India in this instance is more

⁸ H. R. Nevill, *Benares: A Gazetteer, being vol. XXVI of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Lucknow, 1929; Preface dated December 1907), pp. 207–9.

⁹ Cf. M. McPherson 'The Origin and Growth of Communal Antagonism, especially between Hindus and Muhammadans, and the Communal Award' in J. Cummings, ed., *Political India* (London, 1932); R. Coupland, *The Constitutional Problem in India* (London, 1944), pt. I, p. 29; A. S. Altekar, *History of Benares from Pre-historic Times to the Present Day* (Banaras 1937), pp. 67–8; K. N. Shukul, *Varanasi Down the Ages* (Patna, 1974), pp. 281–2.

¹⁰ L/P&J/7/132, 'Communal Disorders'.

than the 'typical' character of Banaras as a habitation, or the 'representative' character of the strife of 1809 (if 'typical' and 'representative' have any meaning in this context). It is the magnitude of the riots of 1809—the 'grave Benares riots', paralleled, we are told only after a century and a quarter, in the Kanpur outbreak of 1931—and the fact that they are among the first to be recorded in the colonial period, i.e. most nearly contiguous to pre-colonial times. This is a point to which we shall return.

It is necessary first to examine how the Hindu–Muslim strife of 1809—that significant 'fragment' of the history of India—was reconstructed in some of the earliest accounts of the Banaras riots of 1809. One can construct an interesting table by putting together the information regarding some of the basic features of the 1809 riots as these are presented in the contemporary reports of colonial officials and the major published accounts up to the *Gazetteer* of 1907 (see Table 2:2).

Plainly, there is not a great deal of agreement here even about the bare 'facts' of the incident, although every one of these accounts (barring the first, which is in a special category) was authenticated by the claim that it was based on the original government records or information supplied by officials who were in Banaras at the time. Heber notes that he obtained his information from the Acting Magistrate, W. W. Bird himself, who gave Heber 'a far more formidable idea of the tumult than I had previously formed'.¹¹ Mill's *History* refers to his use of 'personal information and ms. records'.¹² William Buyers' description of the 'War of the Lat', as he calls it, is based largely on Heber's account which, he writes, 'is no doubt more authentic than the common native reports of it... as he had the facts from Mr Bird, and other gentlemen, who were at that time in office at Benares, and had, themselves, the difficult task of quelling the tumult'.¹³

However, the purpose of the comparisons presented in Table 2:2

¹¹ R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824–25, vol. I* (London, 1828), p. 323.

¹² J. Mill (and H. H. Wilson), *The History of British India* (in ten volumes), vol. vii (London, 1858), p. 335.

¹³ W. Buyers, *Recollections of Northern India* (London, 1848) p. 273 (emphasis added).

Table 2:2. Some 'Facts' Regarding the Hindu–Muslim Conflict in Banaras, October 1809

Source	Date of Outbreak	Site of the Initial Outbreak	Immediate Cause	Casualties	Role of Police & Military	Special Features of Protest
1 Ms. Colonial Government records (1809–10)	20–24 Oct 1809	Lat Bhairava	Pollution of Lat Bhairava following dispute over attempted conversion of a Hanuman shrine at the site from mud into stone.	28–29 killed; 70 wounded	Connivance and 'highly criminal' conduct of police; military alone preserves order	Brahmins and 'superior orders' of the Hindus fast at riverside from evening 20 Oct. Persuaded to abandon fast on 23rd–24th morning, Gosains assemble in protest at Ghats.
2 Heber (1824)	?	Lat Bhairava	Breaking down of the Lat	—	Temper of the sepoys was 'extremely doubtful' but they held true	Fasting at the riverside by all the Brahmins in the city, amounting to many thousands' for 2–3 days after the 'rumour' was quelled.
3 Prinsep (1825–30)	1805	Lat Bhairava	Frenzy excited by Muhamarram lamentations	—	—	—
4 Mill (1845)	21–23 Oct 1809	Lat Bhairava and the Imambarah	Altercation between Hindu and Muslim worshippers, leading to injury to the Imambarah and demolition of a makeshift	About 20 Muslims killed; 70 people wounded	'The Sipahis, although of both persuasions, discharged their duties with perfect impartiality and military steadiness:	'The Brahmans and principal inhabitants' fasted at the riverside 'night and day, during the continuance of the disorder'; persuaded with some difficulty

	Hanuman temple in the same precinct	mixed, had early taken part in the conflict according to their respective creeds.	to abandon this on 23 Oct.
5 Buyers (1848)	—	Lat Bhairava	Clash between Holi 'procession' of Hindus and Muharram pro- cession of Muslims
6 Gazetteer (1907)	Oct 1809	Aurangzeb	Friction over the mosque leads to a 'sudden' outbreak
		mosque on the site of the old Vishwanath temple	Several hundred killed
			Nothing worthy of special note during the 'riots'. But 'a curious sequel' was a feud between the military and the police, which 'origi- nated, no doubt, in religious differences'.

SOURCES: India Office Library and Records, London, Bengal Criminal Judicial Proceedings for 1809 and 1810; R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824–25, vol. 1* (London, 1828); J. Prinsep, *Benares Illustrated (3 series of drawings)* (London, 1831, 1832, 1834); J. Mill (and H. H. Wilson), *The History of British India* (in ten volumes), vol. vii (London, 1858); W. Buyers, *Recollections of Northern India* (London, 1848); H. R. Nevill, *Benares: A Gazetteer, being vol. XXVI of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Lucknow, 1922; Preface dated Dec 1907). Among other major colonial writings of the period, the Rev. M. A. Sherring, *Benares, the Sacred City of the Hindus* (1868; reprinted Delhi, 1975) and E. B. Havell, *Benares: The Sacred City* (London, 1905) agree in almost every particular with Buyer's account of 1848.

is not simply to point out the discrepancies to be found in the earliest and most 'authoritative' accounts of the 1809 outbreak, although these are striking enough. It is to suggest that even the 'bare facts' of the situation were *constructed*—and constructed out of the prejudices, biases and 'common sense' of the writers.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to an examination of the principal features of this construction. I shall try, first, to trace the steps whereby differences on major points of fact may have crept into the colonial accounts of the Banaras events of 1809. How did *figures* of 28 or 29 people killed and 70 wounded, which Mill put at about 20 Muslims killed and 70 wounded,¹⁴ get inflated so dramatically in the *Gazetteer* of 1907 and the Government memorandum of 1928 to 'several hundred' killed? How did the *site* of the initial outbreak shift from the Lat Bhairava, in the open area a mile outside the limits of the city, to the Bisheshwar (or Vishwanath) temple in the very heart of it? What accounts for the displacement of the 'cause' of the conflict from the pollution and breaking down of the Lat Bhairava, to the 'frenzy' excited by Muharram lamentations, to a clash between Holi and Muharram processions, to 'friction' over the mosque built by Aurangzeb at the Gyanvapi, the site of the Vishwanath temple?

Secondly, I shall argue that the reconstruction of the Banaras riots in colonialist discourse, in its successive recensions spread over a hundred years or so, amounts to the making of a narrative form of strategic importance for the analysis of Indian politics. This is a form of representation of communal riots which assumes, over time, the importance of a master narrative and acts as a sort of model for all descriptions, and hence evaluations, of communal riots in official (and, I might add, nationalist) prose. In the colonial case, this communal riot narrative, as we have called it, is simultaneously and necessarily a statement on the Indian 'past'.

III

In order to examine the basic features of this narrative, we may analyse the colonial accounts of the 1809 Banaras riots under three broad headings: (1) the question of 'origins' or 'causes'; (2) the

¹⁴ Mill apparently took note only of the casualties reported during the worst phase of the violence on 22 October 1809.

identification of rival crowds and the description of collective actions; (3) the reduction of these actions to a law-and-order problem, a part of the history of colonial administration. The concern with 'origins' is evident from some of the earliest reports on the Banaras riots. This is how the matter is dealt with in a detailed letter written by the local Magistrate, W. W. Bird, to the government less than a week after the suppression of the violence.

At the site of the Lat Bhairava where, according to this report, a mosque and Imambarah¹⁵ had been erected in the days of Aurangzeb, there was also a mud construction which housed an image of Hanuman. A Nagar Brahman tried to convert this shrine into one of stone in fulfilment of a vow. This was resisted by Muslim weavers who worshipped there, on the ground that the stone construction would be an encroachment on 'the masjid which surrounds the Laut'. The Hindus and Muslims involved in the dispute agreed to wait until after the Dasehra holidays, which ended on 19 October 1809, and to then refer the matter to the court. However, on the evening of 20 October, 'the Joolahirs [Julahas, Muslim weavers], instead of referring, assembled suddenly at the Laut to decide their differences in person' and committed 'those indignities' (i.e. the pollution of the Lat Bhairava) that led to the riots of 21 October.

Early on the morning of the 21st, the report goes on to say, large numbers of Hindus 'of all cast[e]s, especially Nagirs, Goshaiens, and Rajepoots' gathered and, after some hesitation, did some damage to the Imambarah that stood adjacent to the Lat. Upon this, Muslim weavers from the vicinity marched to the Lat and upset some of the images erected round about it. Tempers rose and the local police, both Hindus and Muslims, 'partook of the infection'. The Kotwal, a Muslim, succeeded through his personal exertions in holding off both the Muslim and the Hindu party for a while. However, 'at length the Joolahirs collecting in considerable numbers armed with swords and clubs, hoisted a standard, and exclaiming Imam Hoosein and beating their breasts, marched towards the city.' They were reported to be heading for the Bisheshwar or Vishwanath temple, 'the principal place of Hindoo

¹⁵ Other reports speak of a mosque that extended into an Idgah, and that is what exists at the site today.

worship in the city'. But they were defeated on the way in a battle at Gai Ghat where a very large crowd of Hindus had assembled: two or three Muslim Julahas were killed or wounded in this encounter. Upon this, the assembled Julahas 'with great precipitation' retraced their steps and threw down and broke the Lat Bhairava. 'The effects of this outrage on the minds of the Hindus will be readily conceived'.¹⁶

This account, which we need pursue no further for the moment, perhaps provides a few clues as to where the later colonial writers got their ideas about the origins of the 1809 outbreak. Heber's view that the breaking down of the Lat was the immediate provocation for the riots comes naturally enough, for this was perhaps the moment of maximum fissility when things might have gone in any direction: after this, what was a fairly localized clash became a general fight over large parts of the city, and this moment may well have stood out in Bird's recollections when he talked to Heber fifteen years after these events.

Prinsep seems to have been the originator of the view that Muslim lamentations at the Muharram were responsible for the tension that led to the outbreak (see Table 2:2). It is possible that he obtained this idea from the report that, on 21 October 1809, a large body of Julahas marched towards the Vishwanath temple 'armed with swords and clubs, [carrying] a standard... exclaining Imam Hoosein and beating their breasts'.¹⁷

'Muharram' refers to the ten-day period of mourning in the eponymous first month of the Muslim year which Muslims, especially Shias, observe in memory of the martyrs Imam Hasan and Imam Husain who lost their lives in battle at the Karbala. While orthodox Sunnis are supposed to take no part in this ritual, in the past Muslims of all persuasions, and indeed large numbers of Hindus too, in villages and small towns all over India joined in the processions of *tazias* (replicas of the tombs of the martyrs) and participated in the recitations of the story of their sacrifice. This public statement of community grief reaches its height on the last

¹⁶ (IOL), Board's Collections, vol. 365 (F/4/365), no. 9093, W. W. Bird, Acting Magistrate, Benares—Dowdeswell, Secretary to the Government, Judicial Department, 30 October 1809 (Consultn. no. 23 of 5 December 1809).

¹⁷ Ibid., para 4.

two or three days of the mourning period, when the processions become larger, the competition between different groups (each presenting their own laments and recitations) sharper, and the exhibition of sorrow takes on an extreme physical dimension. ‘One of the most impressive religious spectacles in India’, Crooke wrote in the 1890s, ‘is . . . the long procession of Tazias and flags which streams along the streets, with a vast crowd of mourners, who scream out their lamentations and beat their breasts till the blood flows, or . . . sink fainting in an ecstasy of sorrow’.¹⁸

Prinsep described these same proceedings from what he had seen of the ‘Procession of the Tazeeas’ in Banaras in the late 1820s. For ten days in Muharram, Muslims clad in green and black, ‘their trappings of woe’, commemorate the martyrdom of Hasan and Husain, he observed. ‘The piteous tale is chaunted [sic] in the current language by people hired, apparently, for their strength of lungs, who work themselves and their audience by degrees into a phrenzy of grief; tearing their hair, beating their breasts, and crying “Hoosyn, Hoosyn”, until quite exhausted’.¹⁹ This was not unlike the Banaras Magistrate’s description of the Julahas’ march towards the Vishwanath temple on 21 October 1809, ‘armed with swords and clubs, [carrying] a standard . . . exclaiming Imam Hoosein and beating their breasts’.

It was perhaps this superficial resemblance that led Prinsep to conclude: ‘It was under such a state of excited zeal [owing to Muharram lamentations] that a congregation at the Lat’h Imambareh, in 1805 [sic], was urged by some fanatic preacher to overthrow and defile the pillar and images of Hindoo worship at that place’.²⁰ In any event, we have no other evidence of a Muharram procession having been taken out at this time. A ‘Muharram’ procession, in any case, there could not have been, for Muharram on this occasion happened to come three-and-a-half months later, in early February 1810.

Here, in Prinsep’s hands, ‘Muharram’ becomes a metaphor for the representation of the Other. This public exhibition of grief,

¹⁸ W. Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India* (1897; Karachi, 1972), pp. 263–4.

¹⁹ J. Prinsep, *Banares Illustrated* (3 series of drawings) (London, 1831, 1832, 1834), Note on ‘Procession of the Tazeeas’.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

like its obverse the carnivalesque celebration of joy, is the kind of dramatized and ritualized behaviour that stands for the primitive—once found in the West, still widespread in the Orient. It is that aspect of Oriental life that is furthest removed from the restrained, privatized, 'civilized' life of modern Europe. It is volatile as well: insurgency and violence lurk just beneath the surface here; it is all too easy for the primitive to get out of control. As Crooke put it,

One of the most difficult duties of the Indian Magistrate is to regulate these [Muharram] processions and decide the precedence of its members. The air rings with the cries of these ardent fanatics, and their zeal often urges them to violence directed against Hindus or rival sectaries. But the English Gallio is no judge of such matters, and his anxieties do not end until he has steered without conflict or disturbance the howling crowd of devotees through the stifling city lanes into the open fields beyond, where the mimic sepulchres of the martyrs are supposed to be flung into a tank or buried.²¹

Or the Rev. C. P. Cape:

The annual celebration of the death of Husain undoubtedly helps in some Indian cities to accentuate the differences between the Shias and the Sunnis; and the Deputy Commissioner congratulates himself [again the singular form, testimony to the universality of the statement] if Muharram has passed off peacefully. In Bombay, British artillery and infantry have been requisitioned [when? every year?] to keep the excited crowds in order and to patrol the streets at night. . . . When this festival occurs at the same time as the Holi, the authorities in certain towns know that, unless great care is taken, there may be serious disturbance.²²

Thus: Muharram (Muharram/Holi) → Excitement → Violence. Since these are the steps, an outbreak of violence such as that in Banaras in 1809, makes the colonial observer look for 'Muharram' as the 'cause'—and find it! Prinsep finds 'Muharram' in his search for the origins of the riot, Mill and Buyers the compound 'Holi-and-Muharram'.

²¹ Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces*, p. 264.

²² Rev. C. P. Cape, *Benares: The Stronghold of Hinduism* (London, n.d.), pp. 109–10. Cf. J. Masselos, 'Change and Custom in the Format of the Bombay Mohurrum during the 19th and 20th Centuries', *South Asia, new-series*, v, 2 (December 1982), who notes (p. 48) that nineteenth-century colonialist observers looked at Muharram as 'a grand spectacle of religious passion'.

A similar metaphorical function is performed by the religious sites of the Hindus and Muslims. All the nineteenth-century accounts of the Banaras events of 1809 point to the significance of such sites and the 'irrational' attachment of the 'natives' to them (as to idols, cows, rivers, trees, what have you). Heber's account of the *dharna* that followed, or in some versions accompanied, the riots of October 1809, provides adequate illustration:

The holy city had been profaned; the blood of a cow had been mixed with the purest water of Gunga, and salvation was to be obtained at Benares no longer. All the brahmins in the city, amounting to many thousands, went down in melancholy procession, with ashes on their heads, naked and fasting, to the principal ghats leading to the river, and sate [sic] there with their hands folded, their heads hanging down, to all appearance inconsolable, and refusing to enter a house or to taste food. . . .²³

In the same way, the colonial accounts dwell on the double sanctity—to Hindus and to Muslims—of the sites over which the disputes of October 1809 are supposed to have arisen. The Kapal Mochan ground, where the Lat Bhairava stood, was one of several places in the city where buildings sacred to the Hindus and the Muslims respectively stood adjacent to one another. Aurangzeb, they tell us, had ordered the demolition of a number of temples and the construction of mosques 'with the same materials and upon the same foundations', in Prinsep's words, 'leaving portions of the ancient walls exposed here and there as evidences of the indignity to which the Hindoo religion had been subjected'.²⁴

Among these constructions, perhaps the most widely talked about was the Gyanvapi mosque built under Aurangzeb's instructions at the site of the old Vishwanath temple. Colonial observers in the nineteenth century were agreed that this spot was 'the chief source of friction' between the Hindus and Muslims of the city; 'a constant source of heart-burnings and feuds both to Hindus and Mohammedans'; 'a monuments of Moslem pride and intolerance and of Hindu humiliation in former times'.²⁵ The extraordinary sanctity accorded to the Vishwanath temple was testified

²³ Heber, *Narrative*, vol. I, p. 325.

²⁴ Prinsep, *Benares Illustrated*, p. 11 of chapter entitled 'Benares 1830'.

²⁵ *Benares Gazetteer*, p. 207; Sherring, *Benares: The Sacred City*, p. 52; Buyers, *Recollections*, p. 256 respectively.

to by the interesting observation in the Magistrate's report of 21 November 1809 that the rumour of an intended Muslim attack on the Vishwanath 'was at first not credited. It was too extravagant for belief'.²⁶

These assessments regarding the destruction of temples and the construction of mosques in their vicinity at several places in Banaras, the resulting bitterness and friction, and the special sanctity attached by the Hindus to the principal temple of Vishwanath, perhaps help to explain both the shifting of the initial site of the 1809 outbreak in some of the later colonial writings and the *Gazetteer*'s exceptional account of its proximate cause. Mill, who obliquely suggested some link between the violence of October 1809 and the coincidence of the 'moveable feasts' of the Hindus and Muslims, went on further to write of friction at the sites where Muslim religious buildings had been erected near old temples as the context for the conflict in 1809.²⁷ The semantic field from which one may draw for an explanation of Indian politics ('riots') has been laid out. It is up to the individual writer to pick out the mixture of elements that best fits a particular case.

The Rev. C. P. Cape, a less careful historian than Mill, referred to the clash of the Muharram and Holi 'festivals', and then proceeded to write with such vagueness about the site of the outbreak that it becomes impossible to tell the exact location of even the buildings he specifically names; indeed it becomes clear that in his reckoning one place was as good as any other as an excuse for the violence. The Muslims were defeated in 'some street fighting' that broke out owing to the alleged clash of Holi and Muharram processions, Cape wrote. They then 'revenged themselves by retreating into a courtyard of Aurangzeb's mosque and broke down the Lat of Shiva, which the Hindus held in high esteem. The Hindus pulled down a mosque, and then the military intervened'.²⁸

There is no way of knowing from this account whether 'Aurangzeb's mosque' refers to the mosque built adjacent to the Lat Bhairav (which no one referred to by this name), or whether Cape believed that the Lat was in fact located in the great mosque built at the

²⁶ F/4/365, E. Watson, Magistrate-Government, 21 November 1809.

²⁷ Mill, *History*, vol. VII, pp. 336–7.

²⁸ Cape, *Banares: The Stronghold*, p. 110.

Madhavrai ghat with its minarets towering over the city (which is still called the Alamgiri masjid) or in the Gyanvapi mosque built by Aurangzeb at the site of the Vishwanath temple (which was in fact the mosque attacked and partly demolished by Hindu rioters on 22 October after the felling of the Lat Bhairav on the day before). But the point is that, for Cape's purpose, it really does not matter. Processions clash: street-fighting follows: the defeated party retreats and despoils a sacred structure: the other party pulls down a mosque: the military intervenes. This is the structure of a tale. Evil clashes with evil. Good intervenes. Order is restored.

It is not very difficult to see, in this light, why the compiler of the Banaras *District Gazetteer*, writing around the same time as Cape, and more directly concerned to make a general statement regarding the benefits of British rule, should suppose that the worst instance of Hindu-Muslim strife in Banaras in the nineteenth century must have originated at the site of their most obvious quarrel, i.e. the spot where the Vishwanath temple and the Gyanvapi masjid stood cheek by jowl; or again why he should assume that such an instance of fighting over such a sensitive spot amongst such a fanatical people must, inevitably, have claimed 'several hundreds' of lives.²⁹

What the colonial accounts sought to do was to give the violence of 1809 a cause and the cause a name (fanaticism, irrationality), thus emptying it of all other significance, including, as we shall see, its dangers for the colonial state. For the point of the exercise was a deeper one: it was to describe the 'native' character, establish the perverse nature of the population and the fundamental antagonism between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. This may be inferred from a glance at certain other features that recur over and over again in colonial writings on the Banaras events of the early nineteenth century: the emphasis on ethnic and doctrinal signs for the identification of rival crowds; the construction of a diachrony into which

²⁹ Since then, this colonial account, considerably amplified, has been widely accepted. K. N. Shukul, *Varanasi Down the Ages*, p. 281, speaks of major riots both in 1805 and 1809, accepting the dates given in both Prinsep and the *Benares Gazetteer*; Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (London, 1983), p. 197, attributes the 1809 riots to the attempted construction of a shrine between the Gyanvapi mosque and the Vishwanath temple, the clash of the Holi and Muharram festivals and the destruction of the Lat Bhairav.

these events fitted; and the description of violence as a means of describing native character.

IV

The colonial obsession with ethnic and doctrinal signs for the identification of rival crowds is perhaps best illustrated by the *Banaras Gazetteer's* remarks on the military-police feud that followed the riots of 1809. We have already noted the *Gazetteer's* contention that this feud 'originated, no doubt, in religious differences'. There is nothing, however, in the original correspondence of the Magistrate, the military commanders and other people in Banaras at the time, to suggest even remotely that the clashes between military and police personnel in 1810 had anything to do with religious matters.

If there was a connection with October 1809, it was that the behaviour of the police at that time had rendered the name of the police, in Bird's words, 'generally obnoxious, but particularly to the Sepoys, whose meritorious conduct entitled them in a manner to feel contempt for the cowardice of the police'.³⁰ When the military guard was finally withdrawn in 1809 and the police restored to their normal functions in Banaras, sepoys going into the city reportedly poked fun at the police. Some of them also persistently defied a magisterial order against the carrying of arms in the streets of Banaras. The incidence of disputes between military and police personnel on account of these pin-pricks increased in August and September 1810. As the season of *melas* associated with the Dasehra celebrations approached, the civil authorities were understandably perturbed about the possible consequences of such quarrels between the two arms of the law and the state, and they urged their military counterparts to ensure strict discipline.

That—the approach of an important religious festival and the apprehensions aroused by it—was the extent of the 'religious' dimension to this feud, which degenerated in the course of time, as the *District Gazetteer* has it, into 'a long succession of affrays... with Hindus and Muslims indiscriminately mingled on either

³⁰ (IOL) Bengal Criminal Judl. Prog., Range 130, vol. 22, Bird-Dowdeswell, 13 October 1810 (Consultation no. 46 of 24 October 1810). The rest of this paragraph is based on the same consultation.

side'. The failure of the indigenous population to conform to the colonial stereotype of Hindu and Muslim crowd (or for that matter, individual) behaviour could only be 'indiscriminate'.

It is perhaps one of the important features of colonialist writings on Banaras 1809 that such crude representations first became fixed here and accepted as self-explanatory categories. The process of thinking through stereotypes can be seen evolving even in some of the earliest reactions to the events of 1809–11. Consider the contemporary officials' reports on the great anti-house tax *hartal* of December 1810–January 1811. This extraordinary act of protest was described as follows in a letter from the Banaras Magistrate, dated 28 December 1810:

An oath was administered throughout the city both among the Hindus and the Mohammedans, enjoining all classes to neglect their respective occupations (until the tax was withdrawn). . . . The Lohars, the Mistrees, the Jolahirs, the Hujams, the Durzees, the Kohars, the Bearers, every class of workmen engaged unanimously in this conspiracy . . . during the 26th, the dead bodies were actually cast neglected into the Ganges because the proper people could not be prevailed upon to administer the customary Rites.³¹

To which Mill added, colourfully: 'the very thieves restrained from the exercise of their vocation although the shops and houses were left without protection—the people deserting the city in a body.'³²

In trying to make sense of this staggering popular protest, the officials turned to their experience of 1809 and their 'common sense' about the dynamics of the local society. 'Men of all classes and description, from the highest to the lowest, whether Mohammedans or Hindoos, Jolahirs, Raujpoots and Goshains included, were all of one mind, and engaged by oath to promote the common cause', Bird wrote in January 1811.³³ The echoes of 1809 are clear.

³¹ Board's Collections, vol. 323 (F/4/323), no. 7407, Bird-Dowdeswell, 28 December 1810. Many of the letters and documents from this volume that are referred to here are also reprinted in Dharampal, *Civil Disobedience & Indian Tradition. With Some Early Nineteenth Century Documents* (Varanasi, 1971).

³² Mill, *History*, vol. VII, p. 334. For an important recent account, see Richard Heitler, 'The Varanasi House Tax Hartal of 1810–11', *IESHR*, ix, 3 (September 1972).

³³ F/4/323, no. 7407, note on verbal communication made by Bird to Macdonald at conference held at Mr Brooke's house on 13 January 1811.

Then Brahmins, Rajputs and Gosains were seen as being the most active elements on the Hindu side, and Julahas on the Muslim side. Now, those who have risen are described as 'Muhammedans (and) Hindoos, Jolahirs, Raujpoots and Goshains included'. Following the same logic, the commander of the troops stationed at Banaras expressed the fear that the Rajputs, Gosains, 'Muslims' and other 'fighting cast[e]s' [sic] might take up arms, especially if the blood of Brahmins or other 'religious orders' were spilt.³⁴ The Magistrate spoke of how the 'religious orders' had exerted their full influence in favour of the agitation and 'men of rank and respectability' encouraged the huge crowds;³⁵ and Heber later wrote of *dharmpatris* issued by 'the leading Brahmins' as being central to the process of mobilizing the people.³⁶

In all this, the colonial observers neglected the evidence that they had before them of the very different sections of local society that formed the vanguard of the rising in 1810–11 as compared to 1809. The Rajputs, who are described as the 'moving spirits' behind the Hindu actions in 1809,³⁷ hung back in 1810–11: indeed, on the latter occasion, many Rajput landowners assisted the colonial authorities in their attempts to disperse the crowds.³⁸ And while many of the 'leading native inhabitants' and 'religious orders' of Banaras were certainly involved in the anti-house tax agitation, they appear to have conceded the leadership, at least in the initial stages of the protest, to artisans, skilled workers and other sections of the lower classes.

I have quoted earlier the first detailed report regarding the crowds that had assembled, which listed the Lohars, Mistris, Julahas, Hajjams, Darzis, Kohars and Kahars as the 'seven classes of people' who, '*attended by multitudes of others of all ranks and descriptions*', gathered in the vicinity of the city.³⁹ The Lohars, in particular, were singled out as prime movers of the uprising. 'The Lohars, who

³⁴ Ibid., Macdonald-Bird, 12 January 1811, and note on conference held at Mr Brooke's house on 18 January 1811.

³⁵ Ibid., Bird-Dowdeswell, 4 January, 8 January and 28 January 1811.

³⁶ Heber, *Narrative*, vol. I, p. 327.

³⁷ *Banares Gazetteer*, p. 207.

³⁸ F/4/323, no. 7407, Bird-Dowdeswell, 8 January 1811, and Dowdeswell-Bird, 11 January 1811.

³⁹ See n. 31 above. Emphasis mine.

originally assembled for another purpose, soon took a principal part in the conspiracy, and have collected here in great number from all parts of the Banaras province', Bird reported on 2 January 1911.⁴⁰

W. O. Salmon, the Collector, confirmed this in a communication to the government on the same day:

If one party be more obstinate and more determined upon extending the mischief than another, the Lohars, or blacksmiths, may be so charged, for they were not only the first to convoke the assembly of their near brethren, but they have far and wide called upon other Lohars to join them with the intent that no implement of cultivation or of harvest (which is fast approaching) be either made or mended, and thus that the zemindars and ryots may be induced to take part with the malcontents, in short that the whole of the country shall directly or indirectly be urged to insist on the repeal of the tax. *With these Lohars almost all other cast[e]s, sects and persuasions are in League*, and I am informed under a most binding oath amongst each other.⁴¹

Many of the most familiar features of Orientalist knowledge are already in evidence here: the typecasting ('fighting cast[e]s' like 'Rajputs', 'Gosains', 'Muslims'!), the centrality assigned to the 'religious orders', the charge of manipulation by élite groups or 'leading native inhabitants'. This reductionist tendency naturally influenced colonial descriptions of crowd action as well. Consider once more Cape's matter-of-fact statement on the 1809 riots: Holi and Muharram clash. There is 'some street fighting'. The defeated 'Muhammadans' revenge themselves by retreating into 'Aurangzeb's mosque' and breaking down the Lat Bhairava. 'The Hindus' pull down a mosque. And then, the military intervenes. The message is transparent: *this is the natural order of things in this society*. The sequential order is fixed, as an order of mimesis; and it is accepted by all colonial writers for the writing up of such events.

It is the same understanding that informs the *Banaras Gazetteer*'s, and thence the Government of India's 1928 remarks on what followed the breaking down of the Lat Bhairav in Banaras in October 1809:

⁴⁰ F/4/323, no. 7407, Bird-Dowdeswell, 2 January 1811.

⁴¹ Ibid., Salmon-Secretary, Government of India, Revenue Department, 2 January 1811 (emphasis added).

Great crowds of Hindus attacked the mosque of Aurangzeb, set it on fire and put to death every Muhammadan of the neighbourhood who fell into their hands. The entire city was given up to pillage and slaughter, and order was not restored by the troops until some fifty mosques had been destroyed and several hundred persons had lost their lives.⁴²

Another expression of the essentializing process noticed above is found in the colonial writers historicization of the Banaras events of 1809. Given the nature of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', 'Hinduism' and 'Islam', a violent conflict between the two was always on the cards. The riots of 1809 are represented as part of a continuum, a tradition: 'one of those convulsions which had frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Moslem sections of the population'. Or as Francis Younghusband put it in a book entitled *Dawn in India*, published in 1930, 'the animosities of centuries are always smouldering beneath the surface'.⁴³

Judging by colonial accounts of the strife in Banaras, 1809 sees only a development in degree, an intensification. 'Towards the close of 1809 an open rupture could no longer be delayed' (Mill). 'The ill-will between the rival religions [sic] culminated in a sudden outbreak of great intensity in October 1809' (Nevill).⁴⁴ In certain instances, the tradition of conflict is seen as growing out of an actual historical experience—in the Banaras case, Aurangzeb's iconoclasm. Thus in a 'Handbook' on Banaras published in 1886, the Rev. J. Ewen notes that the Lat Bhairav stands on a site appropriated for Muslim worship in Aurangzeb's time but continues to be used by Hindu worshippers as well. He then simply adds: 'The dispute between the parties reached a climax at the end of the last century [sic].'⁴⁵

An 'ill-will' that exists from the mid-seventeenth century, if not earlier, 'culminates' for no obvious reason, 'reaches a climax' in a 'sudden' outbreak of rioting in 1809. In this kind of history, 'violence' always belonged to a pre-colonial tradition: the imposition of British rule, the displacement of an earlier balance of power,

⁴² *Benares Gazetteer*, pp. 207–8.

⁴³ F. Younghusband, *Dawn in India* (London, 1930), p. 144.

⁴⁴ Mill, *History*, vol. VII, p. 336; Nevill, *Benares Gazetteer*, p. 207.

⁴⁵ J. Ewen, *Banaras: A Handbook for Visitors* (Calcutta, 1886), p. 40.

or even the intellectual, condition of the people residing here is a whit better than it was upwards of two thousand years ago...'. In other words, they *had no history*. However, Sherring goes on, 'while I look with profound regret on much of the past history of India, I look forward to its coming history with strong hope and confidence'.⁴⁸

The *Gazetteer* of 1907 also set off this 'past' history of Banaras against what Sherring called its 'coming' history. 'The history of Benares during the first part of the nineteenth century is mainly a record of administrative development under British rule. The only disturbance of the public peace occurred in 1809... [etc.]'. James Mill had made the same point much earlier, when he wrote that the maintenance of peace and order in that city was 'for some time' a 'troublesome' and 'imperfectly' accomplished task. But the 'unrelaxing firmness' of British rule, a 'better knowledge of the British character' and the 'improving intelligence' of the Indians (no less!)⁴⁹ 'lightened the labour'—presumably the divinely ordained British task of bringing 'law and order' to these domains—so that ten years after 1809, 'Benares was regulated with as much facility as any other city in the territories of the Company'.⁵⁰ The altered speed of time here is striking. The 'pre-history' of Banaras, like the history of all India before the coming of the British power, is chaos. And then, within ten years, 'history' supervenes, order is established.

The representation of all popular politics as a problem of law and order, and their assimilation thereby to the history of the state, is a commonly observed feature of colonialist writings on India. In Banaras 1809, it is worth noting in this context, the origins of Hindu–Muslim strife were seen as lying not only in the peculiar religious sensibilities of the people but also in an 'unwarranted' act of assembly on the part of the Muslim weavers. The dispute over the consolidation of a Hanuman shrine at the Kapal Mochan was apparently followed by an agreement between local Hindu and Muslim leaders to wait until the Dasehra holidays ended on

⁴⁸ See n. 7 above.

⁴⁹ Compare Sherring's statement on the intellectual stagnation of the Indian people for two thousand years, in the preceding quotation.

⁵⁰ Mill, *History*, vol. VII, pp. 338–9.

19 October 1809 and then refer the matter to the court. However, on the evening of 20 October, the Magistrate's report tells us, 'the Joolahirs, instead of referring, assembled suddenly at the Laut to decide their differences in person'⁵¹ and took those actions that led to riots on the following day.

Nine months later, while discussing measures that might be adopted to prevent a recurrence of such disturbances, the Magistrate wrote to the government: 'The disturbance [of October 1809] is found to have originated in the abuse of that privilege which the Natives have been permitted to enjoy, of assembling among themselves to deliberate on questions of common interest. I found it expedient to prohibit all assemblies of this nature without previous application to the police. . . .'⁵² So that along with its disarming of the population of Banaras in 1809, the colonial regime also at this very early date imposed strict limitations on the right of assembly of the subject people.

The colonialist accounts of the anti-tax agitation of 1810–11 are no less instructive in this respect. We find a great deal of writing on the extraordinary caste solidarity, the diversity of castes involved and, as we have noticed, the 'leadership' of the religious orders and the use of religious injunctions, that went into the making of this remarkable dharna and hartal. Having established the ethnic identity and the religious motivation of the crowd to their own satisfaction, the officials then turned to their other major concern—the question of law and order. One official observed that 'instead of appearing like a tumultuous and disorderly mob, the vast multitudes came forth in a state of perfect organization: each caste, trade and profession occupied a distinct spot of ground, and was regulated in all its acts by the orders of its own punchayet'.⁵³ But the dispersal of the assembly, an active assertion of people's power, was nevertheless a matter of the greatest urgency. The Magistrate's report of 20 January 1811 is couched in familiar terms: 'It becomes every day an object of greater importance to disperse the people,

⁵¹ F/4/365, Bird-Dowdeswell, 30 October 1809, para 3 (emphasis added).

⁵² *Ibid.*, para 7 (emphasis added).

⁵³ *Selections of Papers from the Records of the East India House relative to Revenue, Police, Civil and Criminal Justice under the Company's Government in India*, vol. II (London, 1820), p. 89.

and compel them to put an end to their *sedition and unwarrantable proceedings*'.⁵⁴

There is a return here to precisely that sequential order that we mentioned earlier. Law and order is indeed the only kind of 'order' that is allowed to emerge out of the colonial writing up of the Banaras events. The appropriation of all of this history to the history of the state proceeds by glossing over, underplaying, even omitting significant areas of the people's, not to mention the state's, experience and activities. Of the two parts that go to make up the story of a riot in the colonialist account—the circumstances and manner of its outbreak, and the process of its suppression—it is only the first that survives as a major presence, an example, in later colonial writings. The significance of the second part increasingly lies in its brevity—what appears as the clinical efficiency of colonial administrative practice. Notice, for instance, the Banaras *Gazetteer*'s silence over police inefficiency and the possibility of military disloyalty in 1809. The contrast in this respect with the earlier colonial writings is remarkable (see Table 2:2).⁵⁵ The immediate reports 'from the front' in 1809 and 1810 expressed serious concern over the collapse of the police force and the possible repercussions on the military. The police were pronounced guilty of a 'most culpable neglect of duty' and 'highly criminal conduct'; 'both Hindus and Mahomedans composing it' 'exerted themselves to inflame the passions' of their co-religionists.⁵⁶ The military sepoys luckily held firm: but there was considerable anxiety among civil and military officials in Banaras at the time as to which way the wind would blow.

For about twenty days in October and November 1809, the sepoys were not allowed time off to bathe, dress, or prepare their food. 'It was deemed advisable', wrote the Magistrate, 'considering the delicate nature of the service they were engaged in, to prevent them as much as possible from communicating with the people. For

⁵⁴ F/4/323, Bird-Dowdeswell, 20 January 1811.

⁵⁵ Cf. also Sir John Malcolm's discussion of the 'alarming' nature of the opposition to the Government in Banaras in '1812', as in Dacca, Bareilly and other places a few years later, in his *Political History of India from 1784–1823 in Two Volumes* (London, 1826), vol. I, pp. 577–80.

⁵⁶ F/4/365, Bird's letters of 6 and 11 November 1809.

this purpose they were provided with *mithai* [local sweetmeats] that they might be at all times within the control and observation of their officers.' On 21 November 1809, when a reinforcement of troops arrived from Danapur, the authorities withdrew a good many sepoys from the city, but it was still thought advisable to retain the entire contingent of European officers 'to prevent all intercourse between the Sepoys and the people'.⁵⁷

It was as if all this had been completely forgotten by the end of the century. Nevill's *Gazetteer* of 1907 referred to the sepoys in passing as having restored 'order' in Banaras after some fifty mosques had been destroyed and several hundred people killed. Nevill did not so much as mention the police in his description of the events of 1809. There was not the faintest suggestion here that these forces could have done anything but obey orders, that they were—even in the earliest years of British rule—anything more than cogs in a well-oiled colonial machine that arrived fully assembled and functioned with perfect efficiency from the moment of its installation. ('The history of Benares during the first part of the nineteenth century is mainly a record of administrative development.')

Mill had of course admitted otherwise; the maintenance of peace and order in Banaras was 'for some time' a 'troublesome' and 'imperfectly' accomplished task. But the 'unrelaxing firmness' of British rule, a 'better knowledge of the British character' and the consequent improvement in the intelligence of the 'natives' had cured all that. Here Mill and Nevill occupy the same ground. Firmness, Character, Intelligence. These are the hallmarks of British rule; this is the history of the 'perfect' state that is the colonial regime in India. What the nineteenth-century colonial writings on Banaras seek to do, almost without exception, is to promote a picture of the colonial state as a wise and neutral power, ruling almost without a physical presence, by the sheer force of its moral authority. By the end of the nineteenth century this is established with the aid of a few blind spots: the colonial regime pretends to have no allies, no local collaborators (Mill, by contrast, had

⁵⁷ Bengal Criminal Judl. Progs, Range 130, vol. 19, Bird-Dowdeswell, 11 July 1810 (emphasis added); F/4/356, Macdonald's letter of 31 October 1809; and F/4/365, Watson-Government, 21 November 1809, para 15

mentioned the opportune intervention of the Maharaja of Banaras in 1810–11) and a minimal armed force.

These blind spots are of course nothing compared to those that came to mark the history of the political activities of the colonized as told by the colonizers. One gets some idea of the extent of the distortion of that history from the omission of any meaningful reference to the dharna of 1810–11 from the *Gazetteer's* summary of the history of Banaras in the early nineteenth century. I have earlier quoted Heber's account of the 1809 dharna involving 'all the brahmans in the city, amounting to many thousands'. Other accounts report the participation of the 'superior orders', the 'principal inhabitants', the Gosains, and so on. According to Heber, Bird who was 'one of the ambassadors [of peace]' on this occasion, recalled that 'the scene was very impressive and even awful. The gaunt squalid figures of the devotees, their visible and apparently unaffected anguish and dismay, the screams and outcries of the women who surrounded them, and the great numbers thus assembled, altogether constituted a spectacle of woe such as few cities but Benares could supply'.⁵⁸

In his account of the Banaras events of 1809, Heber devotes nearly as much space to this dharna as he does to the incidents of violence and rioting, and his account is followed closely by later colonial writers like Mill and Buyers, Sherring and Havell. Not so by the compiler of the *Gazetteer* of 1907, who does not mention the dharna at all. The *Gazetteer* is equally dismissive of the anti-house tax agitation of 1810–11, during which (by Heber's account) Banaras witnessed a dharna 'exceeding', as 'spectacle', even the dharna of 1809.⁵⁹

Heber is sufficiently moved by what he learns of the popular protest in 1810–11 to devote several pages of his journal to a discussion of the agitation against the house tax. He writes without reservation of the strength and unity of the rising. After elaborating what he understands of the traditional Indian practice of dharna, the Bishop notes: 'Whether [or not] there is any example under their ancient princes of a considerable portion of the people taking this strange method of remonstrance against oppression [sic]... in

⁵⁸ Heber, *Narrative*, vol. I, p. 325.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 325–6.

this case it was done with great resolution, and surprising concert and unanimity'.⁶⁰

Heber's comments on the apprehensions of the Government also merit quotation:

The local government were exceedingly perplexed. There was the chance that very many of these strange beings would really perish, either from their obstinacy [in fasting], or the diseases which they would contract in their present situation. There was a probability that famine would ensue from the interruption of agricultural labours at the most critical time of the year. There was a certainty that the revenue would suffer very materially from this total cessation of all traffick. And it might even be apprehended that their despair, and the excitement occasioned by such a display of physical force would lead them to far stronger demonstrations of discontent than that of sitting dhurna.⁶¹

Even in this 'sympathetic' colonial account, however, it is the colonial regime that emerges as the hero of the tale. Of the two sides involved in this confrontation, one is made up of an emotional population—'strange (obstinate) beings' with 'strange methods', seething with 'anguish', 'dismay', 'despair'. Their 'remonstrance against oppression' too is in a sense passive. For in comprehending protest as despair, Heber relates the event to 'being' rather than to social and political circumstances, to unreflective response rather than deliberate action.

The active part in this confrontation is performed by those who make up the other half of Heber's history. The point is best made in the Bishop's own words. The 'wise and merciful' conduct of the officials stationed in Banaras who refused to do anything to provoke the crowds into violence, and the 'wisdom' of the 'Supreme Government' in repealing the 'obnoxious tax'—nothing said here about who imposed the tax and what made it 'obnoxious' in the first place—'ended [the] disturbance which, if it had been harshly or improperly managed, might have put all India in a flame'.⁶²

In the less sympathetic colonial account contained in the *Banaras Gazetteer* of 1907 and carried into the reports of the Indian Statutory

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 326–7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 328–9.

Commission and other authorities, the colonial regime becomes the exclusive subject of modern Indian history. The *Gazetteer* devotes precisely five lines to the anti-house tax movement of 1810–11, less than one complete sentence: ‘... before peace had been restored fresh riots arose with the introduction of the house-tax under Regulation XV of 1810, and it was again found necessary to station troops throughout the city to repress the popular disorder till the withdrawal of the obnoxious measure in the ensuing year’.⁶³

It will be noticed that the history of the state makes its entrance here almost bashfully. What we are presented with is a caricature of all that belongs to the history of the community, which succeeds in assimilating the life of the community to the development of the colonial administration—‘peace’, ‘law’ and ‘order’. The reduction of the history of society to the history of the state is complete.

Let us quickly re-read the *Gazetteer’s* summary of the history of Banaras for the first half of the century.

- ‘The only disturbance of the public peace occurred in 1809 and the following year’. Notice ‘and the following year’. Does this refer to a conflict that lasted from 1809 well into 1810? Or, what is more likely in the circumstances, to a more extended state of being?
- ‘A curious sequel’ to the 1809 strife was a military-police feud that ‘originated, no doubt, in religious differences, but these appear to have been dropped in the course of time and a long succession of affrays ensued, with Hindus and Muslims indiscriminately mingled on either side’. ‘Curious’ perhaps because Hindus and Muslims had got so confused about their identities as to mix with one another; but of course this made no difference whatsoever to the essential ‘irrationality’ of their feuds, nor to their form which could only be ‘affrays’, ‘riots’, ‘convulsions’.
- ‘The trouble subsided with a partial reorganization of the city police in October 1810; but before peace had been restored fresh riots arose. . . .’ Surely a novel understanding of the term ‘riots’ and how they occur or, rather, ‘arise’! Nothing remains in the five-line entry on the 1810–11 events of the great crowds

⁶³ *Banares Gazetteer*, p. 209.

that gathered, the manner of their gathering, the remarkable mode of their protest, the consultation and decision-making, the perplexity and fears of the government and, one need scarcely add, the feelings of the people of Banaras when they were confronted with the new house-tax. The entry reverts, instead, to the theme of violence and disorder as the normal state of affairs and the consequent need for British intervention to establish peace and orderly behaviour.

Here, all political action undertaken outside the domain of British administrative initiative is represented as a 'convulsion'. Politics before the era of English-style constitutions in India is banished to the domain of the irrational, indeed the pre-political—'spontaneous', un-'conscious', 'fanatical'. It is a tradition that historians are still struggling to relinquish.

We may read on:

- 'Nothing' occurred in Banaras after 1810–11 that was 'worthy of record' until the 'riots of 1852' (when some Nagar Brahmans organized protests against an alleged proposal to introduce common messing arrangements for prisoners in the jail, and clashes occurred with the police).⁶⁴

Astonishingly, given the evidence of its ability to smell out a 'riot' in the most unlikely of places, the *Gazetteer* has nothing to say about the events of 1891 in Banaras; perhaps the entry on the history of the city had already become too long. But Crooke, writing a general account of the *North-Western Provinces of India* in 1894, made up for this lacuna: 'Only three years ago, the weavers of Benares, always a turbulent, fanatical class, took advantage of a quarrel over an almost deserted Hindu shrine, with which they had no possible concern, to spread rapine and outrage through the city'.⁶⁵ Once again, this remark is made in the course of a discussion of Hindu-Muslim conflict, and it is worthwhile to note what some of the other surviving evidence from this period tells us about 1891.

At the back of this particular incident lay the opposition of a large

⁶⁴ See (IOL) NWP, Criminal Judl. Progs, Range 233/vol. 36, no. 1466 of August 1852.

⁶⁵ W. Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India*, p. 187.

section of the Hindu population of the city, including many prominent citizens and even a few municipal councillors to the proposed demolition of all or part of a temple dedicated to Ram in order to clear the ground for a water-pumping station. A Temple Protection Committee was set up, the Sujan Samaj (or 'Respectable People's Society') took up the cause, 'thousands' of applications were sent to the Collector and numerous meetings held between November 1890 and April 1891 to protest against these plans. It was the refusal of the authorities to pay any heed to these popular representations, the acquiescence of the majority of the Indian municipal councillors in the authorities' plans, the closure of one of the two roads leading to the temple and, finally the demolition of the temple steps and the commencement of digging all around its walls even before a 'final decision' had been taken on the question of demolition, that led to the violence of 15 April 1891.⁶⁶

There is evidence that this protest was connected, at the start, with the desire to ward off further taxation, and to the fairly widespread opposition to the administration's ham-handed implementation of its new water-supply scheme which affected not only Banaras but other cities like Agra and Kanpur as well.⁶⁷ The prevailing condition of food scarcity and high prices, adding as it did to the hardships of the lower classes,⁶⁸ appears to have fuelled the

⁶⁶ This discussion is based on the fairly detailed reports found in the RNP for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, and for Bengal, in 1891; and L/P&J/6/301, no. 907 of 1891. See also K. N. Shukul, *Varanasi Down the Ages*, pp. 289–94, and Vijayshankar Mall, ed., *Pratapnarayan Granthavali*, part 1 (Kashi, 1958), pp 410–13. The role of the municipal councillors, and public reaction to it, is discussed further in Chapter 5 below.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., *Hindustani*, 22 April 1891 in RNP, NWP & O, w.e. 30 April 1891, pp. 301–2; *Hindustani*, 29 April 1891 in ibid. of 7 May 1891, pp. 315–16; *Azad*, 8 May 1891 in ibid. of 14 May 1891, pp. 333–4. Also the Chicago newspaper's comment, cited in the epigraph to this chapter, which goes on to say: 'Water-works are very useful to all cities, but here [in Banaras] at least they can scarcely be compensative for so venerable and so great a sacrifice, apart entirely from the prospective danger from disturbing the fierce prejudices of the large native population' (see n. 1 above).

⁶⁸ The large community of Muslim weavers in Banaras was said to have been especially hard hit at this time owing to the fall in demand for their rich fabrics and the prevalent high prices of all kinds of food grains; see L/P&J/6/301, no. 907 of 1891. RNP, NWP & O for April and May 1891 contains many comments on the extent of distress among the lower classes generally.

people's anger further. But added to all this was another, perhaps deeper concern. The proposal to demolish the Banaras temple came in the wake of the demolition of a Hindu temple in Darbhanga the year before, and hard on the heels of the Age of Consent Bill.⁶⁹ Coming together, these developments generated growing fears of a new government policy aimed at undermining Hinduism (and Islam), and heightened the agitation among Banaras Hindu and Muslims.⁷⁰ The attempted demolition of a mosque in Shyambazar (Calcutta), which led to violent protest in that city within a month of the Banaras riots, would only have confirmed these fears.

There is nothing in the official or unofficial records of the time to suggest that a Hindu-Muslim clash occurred in Banaras in April 1891, over the question of the Ramji temple or any other matter. On the contrary, one contemporary newspaper after another spoke of the local Muslims' sympathy with the Hindus and noted the participation of many Muslims in the anti-Government actions of 15 April.⁷¹ What the *Hindustani* of 27 May wrote about the Shyambazar, Calcutta, riots could, with Hindu and Muslim numbers reversed, easily have been written about the Banaras riots: these were not Hindu-Muslim riots, as alleged by

⁶⁹ For the anti-Consent Bill agitation, see Amiya Sen, 'Hindu Revivalism in Action: The Age of Consent Bill Agitation in Bengal', *IHR*, vii, 1–2 (July 1980–January 1981).

⁷⁰ See RNP for NWP & O, and for Bengal, from April 1891 onwards, e.g. article entitled 'The Destruction of Our Religion Under British Rule' in *Bharat Varsha* (Bithur) for May, in RNP, NWP & O, w.e. 23 July 1891, p. 512. The *Brahman* (Kanpur monthly) for March remarked that attempts would probably soon be made to destroy 'the most famous and sacred temples' of Vishwanath (Banaras), Jagannath (Puri) and Badrinath. Therefore, Hindus should protest strongly against the proposed demolition of the Banaras temple and appeal to Parliament if necessary, and 'the Musalmans and other Indian communities' should support them; *ibid.*, w.e. 7 April 1891, p. 257. The *Azad* (Lucknow) of 8 May 1891 noted that the Muslims of Banaras joined the Hindus in their protest because they knew that they were sailing in the same boat: 'a Muhammadan mosque might anyday be treated in the same way as the Hindu temple'; *ibid.*, w.e. 14 May 1891, p. 333.

⁷¹ In addition to the references in n. 70, see *Bharat Jiwan*, 13 April 1891 in *ibid.*, of 21 April 1891, p. 282; *Hindustani* of 22 April 1891, *ibid.*, 30 April 1891, p. 302; *Hindustani* of 27 May 1891, *ibid.*, 4 June 1891, pp. 386–7, which also notes that sixty-three Muslims were arrested for participation in the riots; and also numerous reports in RNP, Bengal for the same period.

officials (Crooke, in the case of Banaras), but 'between the Musalmans assisted by a number of Hindus on the one side and the police on the other. . . . Nothing could be more preposterous than to call the rioters bad characters. . . .' Their entreaties to save their religious building having been ignored, 'they [had] resolved to sacrifice their lives on its behalf.'⁷²

In the Banaras case, indeed, the Magistrate of the city spoke of the 1891 outbreak as the result of a 'league or covenant' between Muslims and Hindus for the future 'mutual protection' of their religious buildings which might be threatened by the extension of water-works and drainage schemes. As it happened, even this suggestion of the Magistrate was questioned by the acting Commissioner in his report on the riots. He acknowledged that the Muslim weavers were in difficult circumstances and had recently assembled in strength at the collectorate to demand some relief. 'But the remonstrance of the Julahas about the high prices, though made by a large crowd', he wrote, 'was not made in any spirit of lawlessness'. And

there is no evidence whatsoever to connect them as a body [emphasis original] with these outbreaks. Muhammadans were undoubtedly to be found in the crowd of rioters, as is only natural (*sic*); but we may safely assert that had the Julahas as a body joined the Hindus, the results would have been far more serious. An excited Muhammadan mob is one of the most dangerous elements in society, and bad as things were in the late disturbances, experience tells us what fearful scenes might have been enacted had the industrious but poverty stricken Julahas joined the well-nourished lazy crowd of 'badmashes' who live on the pilgrims and toil not. . . .⁷³

Here, the senior official reveals a marvellous ability to challenge the facile logic of his subordinate without throwing away any of the underlying assumptions—the elements—of colonialist knowledge about Indian society: those 'most dangerous' Muslim mobs that create 'fearful scenes', the badmash or criminal elements that abound in great cities like Banaras, 'rumours such as are always

⁷² RNP, NWP & O, w.e. 4 June 1891, p. 391.

⁷³ L/P&J/6/301, no. 907 of 1891, J. H. Wright, Offg. Commissioner—Chief Secretary, Government of North-Western Provinces and Oudh, 28 April 1891, para 9.

afloat throughout the length and breadth of Indian cities'.⁷⁴ It was out of such ingredients, found in all official reports, and out of official 'common sense' about the people they governed, that Crooke concocted his statement regarding the 'turbulent and fanatical' weavers of Banaras who spread 'rapine and outrage through the city' in 1891.

One could go on. But this much of the writing on nineteenth-century Banaras should suffice to indicate that a methodical reordering of Indian history was in process as the colonial regime set out to systematize its knowledge and consolidate its power.

VI

It is perhaps unnecessary to multiply instances to show how widely this process of the rewriting of Indian history occurred. However, I shall briefly cite two other examples from the Bhojpuri region and one from outside to illustrate how the structure of the master narrative appears again and again in the writing up of the history of Hindu–Muslim relations, which is taken to be the history of the community *tout court*—the Indian 'past'—at least in northern India. The first of these examples comes from the Shahabad district of Bihar. It is one of the 'Notes' contained in a (Secret) 'Supplementary Report to the Government of India regarding the Origin of the Bakr-Id Disturbances of 1917' in that district.⁷⁵ The note is dated 31 May 1919 and is written by an official who was posted in Shahabad for a few months in 1893 on special duty in connection with the anti-cow-killing agitation.

The author invites attention to the 'curious parallel' between the events of 1893 and 1917. In both years, the riots began in the Patna district, but though they were sufficiently formidable there, they never reached anything like the widespread violence and rapid extension of those in Shahabad . . . on both occasions, the Dumraon Raj, alone of all the great Baronial families of Bihar, was deeply implicated to the point of moral conviction, though short of actual proof. . . . Though the disturbed area during 1893 was comparatively small in Shahabad itself, the disturbances covered all the territories of the Dumraon Raj on the north bank of the Ganges in the districts of Ballia and Azamgarh of the United Provinces.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, para 8.

⁷⁵ (Bihar State Archives, Patna) Political Special Dept, file no. 223/1919.

He notes further that the great zamindars of Tirhut, Darbhanga, Ramgarh, Bettiah, Hathwa, Tikari and so on, who were acquitted of complicity in the riots of 1893, 'are either Brahmins or Bhumihar Brahmins. Dumraon on the contrary is a Rajput.'

In 1893, the official goes on to say, the Maharaja of Dumraon's involvement was partly accounted for by personal interest. Brahmins and cow-protectionists were said to have persuaded him that 'his inability to beget a son was due to "the complaint of the cow".... The Maharajah of Rewa (since dead), who married the late Maharajah [Dumraon]'s daughter, was a fanatical supporter of anti-kine-killing propaganda, and had even made himself conspicuous within British territory in this connection.⁷⁶ It is believed that he has since blackmailed the present [Dumraon] Zemindar'.

There is a fascinating stitching together of motifs here. 'Personal interest' is a compound of a raja's deep desire for a son, the extraordinary influence of a son-in-law (from a related princely family), and the use of blackmail. In the events of 1917, however, it would appear that Dumraon was moved more by his ambition to be the undisputed leader of the zamindars of South Bihar. 'The late Maharajah of Dumraon was utterly uneducated and boorish, a man of very limited knowledge and intellect. The present man is of a far superior type [*sic*], socially and intellectually, and it may well be believed that his thoroughly experienced European Manager, Mr Wilson, was able to do a good deal to steady him and to open his mind to the reality of facts.' But in 1917, the war was not going too well for Great Britain, and Dumraon may well have feared that his traditional rivals, the Jagdishpur zamindars, might not only enrich themselves but add considerably to their status by taking a leading part in the anti-cow-killing agitation. 'On the whole, therefore, . . . there is every ground to believe that the [Dumraon] Raj played exactly the same part as in 1893, i.e., every facility was given to the movement, and the Raj sowars and officials not only did not obstruct but took an underhand part in it, while at the same time every precaution was taken to keep the Maharajah's personality out of the matter. . . .'

⁷⁶ Though no larger than Dumraon and other similar zamindaris in Bihar and Bengal, Rewa was a small princely state in central India (now Madhya Pradesh).

Finally, the note suggests, in both 1893 and 1917 'Extremist politicians' had a hand in the agitation. The Nagpur Congress of '1892 or 1893 [sic] . . . was followed immediately by a meeting in the same Pandal in support of the agitation against kine killing, and the riots of the following year were consequently attributed to the decision then taken.' In 1917, as in 1893, Extremist politicians used 'the unquestionably genuine feeling among Hindus on the subject of the cow, as well as . . . the lawless instincts of the disorderly portion of the population, notably in districts like Shahabad and Saran which had formerly been favourable recruiting grounds for the Army.' Ras Bihari Mandal, an important local Extremist, 'headed a large organisation of Goalas, of whom there are many in the affected areas, and who are notoriously as prone to dacoity and rioting as the Rajputs of that area.'

The history of the 1917 strife in Shahabad is here reduced to the machinations of big zamindars and a few 'extremist politicians'. The motives of these 'ringleaders' are to be found not only in their personal ambitions, but also in their *essential character* as a caste or community. Ras Bihari Mandal is a man of 'rascally private character and low birth'. The present Maharaja of Dumraon, in spite of his western education and the steady influence of a thoroughly experienced European manager, is after all 'a Rajput'.

The circumstances, the consciousness, the aspirations of the people of western Bihar disappear without a trace, except in so far as the Hindus in general have an 'unquestionably genuine feeling' about the cow, which can be fanned into flames at will; and certain communities are cogenitally prone to lawlessness: 'the disorderly portion of the population, notably in districts like Shahabad and Saran which had formerly been favourable recruiting grounds for the Army',⁷⁷ and the Ahirs or Goalas 'who are notoriously as prone to dacoity and rioting as the Rajputs of that area'.

The specificity of the historical experience of 1917 is also wiped out. 1917 was no different from 1893. In both these instances, the riots began in Patna district (it is not at all clear why this is taken to be so significant) and spread in a far more virulent form to

⁷⁷ Cf. the Bihar Governor's observation in 1942 on the 'notoriously . . . criminal district of Saran, in N. Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power, 1942–47: volume II 'Quit India'* (London, 1971), p. 789.

Shahabad. In both, the Dumraon Raj was deeply implicated (although the 'disturbed area' in 1893 was 'comparatively small in Shahabad itself'). In exactly the same way, the organization and activities of extremist nationalist politicians were behind the riots on both occasions.

A very similar line of argument is put forward in a comparison of the 1874 and 1893 riots in Bombay, in a despatch of 26 October 1893 from the Bombay Judicial Department to the Secretary of State for India in Council. On both occasions, the despatch notes, the first group to turn to violence were the Muslims and the scene of the outbreak was near the Jama Masjid. However, the outbreak of 1893 was on a much larger scale. On 13 February 1874 officials dispersed the gathering with comparative ease, and the crowd broke up with apparently no plans of further violence, for it was not till the 15th that further trouble occurred near the Muslim cemetery.

The outbreak in 1893 was more 'serious', 'widespread' and 'uncontrollable' than that of 1874. The dispersal of the crowd that initially attacked the Hanuman Temple would appear 'to have had the effect of arousing the Muhammedan population of the city generally; and, as will always happen on such occasions, the criminal classes . . . were not slow to avail themselves of the confusion. Much of the looting, and probably some of the deaths, are due rather to the depredations and violence of these classes than to religious excitement'. And so on.⁷⁸

Before discussing these accounts further, it may be well to take up our final example of colonialist writings on communal riots in the nineteenth century. This piece of writing relates to a small habitation, not far from Banaras and like it a centre of handloom production conducted in the main by Muslim weavers, but in every other respect vastly different from that great Hindu pilgrimage centre. Established probably in the eighteenth century at the instance of some Sheikh Muslim zamindars of the neighbourhood, the weaving *qasba* of Mubarakpur in Azamgarh district was a place of no special sanctity or great renown. The parallels between the colonialist writing up of the history of the people of Mubarakpur and their reconstruction of the history of Hindu-

⁷⁸ (IOL) L/P&J/6/362, no. 10 Judl. Dept., Bombay—Secretary of State in Council, 26 October 1893.

Muslim relations in Banaras are, therefore, all the more striking.

The two-page entry on Mubarakpur in the 1909 *Gazetteer* of Azamgarh district records that the qasba had a population of 15,433 people in 1901, of whom 11,442 were Muslims and 3,991 Hindus. It then proceeds to sum up the 'past' history of social relations in the locality as follows:

The Muhammadans [of Mubarakpur] consist for the most part of fanatical and clannish Julahas, and the fire of religious animosity between them and the Hindus of the town and neighbourhood is always smouldering. Serious conflicts have occurred between the two from time to time, notably in 1813, 1842 and 1904. The features of all these disturbances are similar, so that a description of what took place on the first occasion will suffice to indicate their character. In 1813 a petty dispute about the inclosing within the grounds of a Hindu temple of a little piece of land near a Muhammadan *takia* [*tazia*] platform was followed first by the slaughter on the spot of a cow by the Muhammadans and then by the defiling of the platform and of a neighbouring *imambara* with pig's blood by the Hindus. The Muhammadans retaliated by cruelly murdering a wealthy Hindu merchant of the place named Rikhai Sahu, by plundering and burning his house and by defacing a handsome temple which he had erected. Hereupon the whole Hindu population of the vicinity rose and a sanguinary battle ensued in which the Muhammadans were overpowered after many had been killed and wounded on both sides. The inhabitants of the town fled and the place was given up to plunder for some days till a magistrate arrived with troops from Gorakhpur and restored order. Similar disturbances occurred in 1893–94 and punitive police were quartered on the town for several months.⁷⁹

Let us note first that this history of Mubarakpur appears as part of a notice on a small and fairly 'ordinary' place in a district gazetteer or handbook; whereas the history of Hindu–Muslim strife in Banaras that we have examined earlier in this chapter appears not only in the *District Gazetteer* and other histories of Banaras but in more general historical statements on British rule and on continuing Hindu–Muslim 'disturbances'.

As regards the entry on Mubarakpur, I have written elsewhere of the fact that the alleged 'disturbances' of 1893–4 in the qasba

⁷⁹ D. L. Drake-Brockman, *Azamgarh: A Gazetteer*, being vol. XXXIII of the *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Allahabad, 1911), pp. 260–1.

exist nowhere except in the imagination of the writer of this notice (they are, in this respect, not unlike the 'Hindu–Muslim' riots of 1891 and the 'undoubtedly religious' origins of the military-police feud in Banaras in 1810, which we have referred to earlier).⁸⁰ In the next chapter, I deal at some length with the figure of the 'fanatical (or bigoted) Julaha' that appears in this passage as in Crooke's comments on Banaras. Here I shall refer only to the common structure of the colonial argument on the history of Indian society, whether this is represented in the qasba of Mubarakpur or the populous city of Banaras or, for that matter, the rural areas of Shahabad.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, point to note is the characterization of the 'past', the pre-British period, as essentially chaotic and unruly. In Mubarakpur, as in Banaras/India, the 'fire of religious animosity' was 'always smouldering'. In Mubarakpur, as in Banaras/India, as in 'districts like Shahabad and Saran' (with their 'disorderly . . . population(s) . . . notoriously prone to dacoity and rioting'), that was what the British administration—'enlightened', 'orderly', 'rational', 'experienced'—was up against from the beginning.

The communal riot narrative, as exemplified in these instances, ranges freely through time and space, unfettered by either. In it, all riots are the same—simply the reflexive actions of an irrational people ('fanatical and clannish' Julahas/Muslims, riot-prone Ahirs and Rajputs, 'the whole Hindu (or Muslim) population' that rises blindly when a religious building is attacked, or such an attack is beaten back, 'criminal classes' who take advantage of this; and so on). The geographical location of an outbreak does not appear to make very much difference, as I have already remarked in connection with Cape's identification of the site of the Banaras riot of 1809; the principal features of the narrative are the same for the qasba of Mubarakpur as they are for a *mohalla* in the city of Banaras or Bombay, as they will be for Shahabad or Kanpur or Calcutta. Nor does the date of a clash very significantly alter the plot: the changing conditions of state power are scarcely noticed after the early nineteenth century, the rise of new social identities and aspira-

⁸⁰ 'Encounters and Calamities: The History of a North Indian Qasba in the Nineteenth Century', in R. Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984).

tions is practically inconceivable, the emergence of new social and political movements appears only to feed into pre-existing loyalties and tendencies. It is well after the end of the nineteenth century that the stubbornness of colonialist historiography gives even a little in this respect.

Throughout the nineteenth century and for long afterwards, the colonial narrative on communal strife tends to proceed by identifying the 'first' major riot, that is, usually the first recorded after the establishment of British rule (1813 in the case of Mubarakpur, 1809 in that of Banaras), and then tracing a straight line through to the 'last'—which of course keeps changing with the date of the writing (1904 in the case of the entry on Mubarakpur in the Azamgarh Gazetteer of 1909; Kanpur 1931 in the Government of India file on 'Communal Disorders' prepared in the early 1930s).

In this mode of history writing one may take any two 'serious riots' and they will stand in for one another, irrespective of conjecture or locale. All that can be usefully compared is magnitude. For a casualty list of the same order as that in the Kanpur riots of 1931, one has to go back to the 'grave Benares riots' of 1809, even though, the official 'Note' adds, 'conditions were *presumably* so different then as to make the two cases not really comparable'.⁸¹ 'Presumably' is a significant word. In such a long time, a good deal ought to have changed. In this slow-moving country, however, it is remarkable how much goes on being just the same.⁸² So a description of the 'first' outbreak—1813 in Mubarakpur—suffices to indicate the character of all subsequent strife, just as 1893 more or less adequately explains what happens in Shahabad in 1917, and 1874 what happens in Bombay in 1893 (or 1911, or 1929).

Repeated metaphoric interventions make up for the lack of

⁸¹ L/P&J/7/132, 'Notes' of 19–20 May 1931 (emphasis added).

⁸² Hence the same 'Note' compares the pattern of rioting in Bombay and Calcutta and Kanpur. The Bombay riots of 1929, it says, 'originated in fights between oil-strikers and Pathans employed in their places and gradually developed into general murderous assaults by Moslems on Hindus and Hindus on Moslems. As in Calcutta in 1926 there was a second phase [of rioting in April-May 1929 after the initial outbreak in February] and a further resemblance with those riots (and those at Cawnpore) lies in the fact that the disturbances consisted of murders in side lanes rather than riots in the ordinary sense of the word'; *ibid.* (emphasis added).

consistent metonymic connections in the communal riot narrative.⁸³ In the absence of detailed description, it is the essentialist signs that represent Mubarakpur/Shahabad/ Banaras/India that enable the narrative to move along. Thus, 'fanatical and clannish' entities, 'disorderly sections of the population', communities 'prone to dacoity and rioting', 'fires of religious animosity', 'indiscriminate affrays'—these are the phrases that make for the history of Mubarakpur or Banaras or Shahabad in the nineteenth century as told by colonialist writers at the beginning of the twentieth.

This is of course *not* a history, to repeat a point already made, for evidently *nothing* ever changes in this community. The communal riot narrative cannot but be a history of the state, first because everything in it revolves around the question of 'law and order', and equally because if any change occurs in the local society it will occur, by this account, as a result of the efforts and the influence of the colonial state (for example, the education of the young Maharaja of Dumraon and the 'steadying influence' of his English manager).

An outstanding feature of this discourse is its distancing of 'us' and 'them'. In the communal riot narrative, as in colonialist discourse more generally, 'rioting', 'bigotry', 'criminality' are of a piece—the marks of an inferior people and a people without a history. Naturally, even the violence of the subject population is distinguished from the often unacknowledged but, in any case, 'controlled', 'rational' and 'legitimate' violence of the colonial state. 'Native' violence has parallels with the violence of the eighteenth- and even nineteenth-century European mob—hungry, displaced, turbulent—which also on occasion turns to rioting.

⁸³ Cf. R. Guha's comments on 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' discourse in 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency' in *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983). The metaphorical charge is high, as we have seen, even in 'primary' colonial discourse, the 'battlefront' reports of officials on the spot at the time of a 'riot'. But indexical interventions seem to increase significantly as the history is written up for a wider public, even if this is done within days of the outbreak in question. For an extraordinary example of such writing-up, see 'The Disturbances at Benares—August 1852', a contribution to the *Benares Recorder* made by the Commissioner of Benaras, E. A. Reade, in early August 1852, reprinted in E. A. Reade, *Benares City* (Government Press, Agra 1858), pp. 63–71.

(Happily, the promoters of this view at the turn of the century might have said, Europe was fast 'civilizing' its lower classes.) But the violence of the 'native' has other, specifically Oriental characteristics. It is a helpless, instinctive violence, it takes the form of 'convulsions' and, in India, these are more often than not related to the centuries' old smouldering fire of sectarian strife. That is all there is to the politics of the indigenous community. That is the Indian past.