

The History of History

Politics and Scholarship in Modern India

Vinay Lal

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for Bernard S. Cohn

scholar extraordinary,
radical democrat,
teacher,
friend

and
for
Ishaan Satej and Avni Sunaina
in the hope that
as they grow up they will
not eschew 'myths' for 'history'

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in Gautam Chattopadhyay, ed., *Awakening in Bengal in Early Nineteenth Century* (Selected Documents), Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1965), pp. 1–23.

42. An unfortunate example of the historian's intolerance for ahistoricism, in a book that is not otherwise without some insights, is Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 138–46.

43. Romila Thapar, 'Do We Need Consensus on History?', *India-West* (21 December 2001), p. A4.

44. Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', in *Subaltern Studies I*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 6–7.

45. Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism', *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994), p. 1482.

46. In 1924, while Gandhi was serving out a six-year prison term for sedition, he read Gibbon. Reflecting on historical and biographical literature, Gandhi observed that 'the dividing line between fact and fiction is very thin indeed' and that 'facts have at least two sides or as lawyers say facts are after all opinions. However I have no desire to engage the reader's attention upon my speculations on the value of history considered as an aid to the evolution of our race. I believe in the saying that a nation is happy that has no history. It is my pet theory that our Hindu ancestors solved the question for us by ignoring history as it is understood today and by building on slight events their philosophical structure. Such is the Mahabharata. And I look upon Gibbon and Motley [author of *Rise of the Dutch Republic*] as inferior editions of the Mahabharata.' See M. K. Gandhi, 'My Jail Experiences—XI', *Young India* (11 September 1924), reprinted in *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Iyer (3 vols), Volume I: *Civilization, Religion, and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 187.

47. Vinay Lal, 'Now Are We Men, Not Eunuchs?' *Humanscape* 5, no. 7 (Bombay: July 1998), pp. 6–9; revised version in idem, *Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi: Essays on Indian History and Culture* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2003), pp. 54–63.

1

The History of Ahistoricity The Indian Tradition, Colonialism, and the Advent of Historical Thinking¹

I

One day in 1838, a number of forward-looking Bengali men constituted themselves into a 'Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge.' Residents of Calcutta, then the capital of British possessions in India, these founders of the Society perhaps imagined themselves as the vanguard of a native elite that, taking inspiration from its colonial overlords, would do something to bring European learning to their countrymen. In the prospectus setting forth their aims and ambitions, these gentlemen admitted with great humility and shame the truth of the charge levelled by Europeans against Indians, 'that in no one department of learning, are our acquirements otherwise than extremely superficial'. The Society aimed to play its part in the elimination of the deficiencies in the knowledge of 'educated Hindus' and in the revival of learning in an ancient land. The three hundred native gentlemen gathered together on a morning in March gave their unanimous assent to these lofty goals.²

Two discourses on subjects various and sundry were delivered before members of the Society every month. The very first one, delivered by the Rev. Krishna Mohun Banerjea, was 'On the Nature and Importance of Historical Studies'. Its author expounded on the virtues of studying history and having 'clear views on the subject', for history—unlike the sciences—addressed itself to 'that principle of our moral constitution which may be termed faith, belief, or credulity'. The study of history provided intellectual gratification; it taught men how to distinguish between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood.

The Rev. Banerjea observed that the nations of the West, which once 'groaned under wretched degradation,' had risen by attending closely 'to the lessons of history'. Here was a novel theory to account for the rise of the West, upon which no historian, down to the present day, has bestowed any attention. Indeed, one could not reflect upon the past without imbibing 'important lessons', and the consequent detection of errors would secure 'the next [age] from returning into the same'. Hindus, particularly, were in want of that education which history supplied: their 'early education had a tendency to confound in one mass history and mythology—facts and fables—truth and fiction—receiving them all indifferently as true or else rejecting them all as wholly false—sweeping the gold away from the dross.' Such a situation had been brought about by the 'lamentable want of authentic records in our own [Hindu] literature', and though the mythological legends of India testified to the ancients' keen appreciation of poetry, such legends were not to be confused with 'historical compositions'.³

That Hindus were without much of a sense of the past, and prone to intersperse facts with fanciful tales, seems to have been a commonplace from at least the time of Alberuni, an Arab astronomer, mathematician, and geographer who had become a member of the court of Mahmud of Ghazni in 1017 AD, and likely accompanied Mahmud on one or more of his frequent raids into India.⁴ In what is doubtless the most famous passage in his voluminous account of Indian life and society, Alberuni observed that 'Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions, and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people. Their scattered remains cherish, of course, the most inveterate aversion towards all Muslims.'⁵ Judging from the extreme animus against Mahmud still harboured by many educated Hindus, one might be forgiven for thinking that the historical memory of the atrocities perpetrated by Mahmud, such as they might have been, had persisted among the Hindus for nearly a millennium.⁶ However, Alberuni had, most pertinently, noted as well that 'the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings, and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling.'⁷ Had Alberuni known that Mahmud's invasions of India would scarcely find an acknowledgement in Indian writings for centuries thereafter, he would have marvelled at his own

prescience. Inattentive to historical discourses, Indians appeared to have relegated Mahmud to relative obscurity. It is only in the nineteenth century that a nascent Indian historiography began to view Mahmud, with much encouragement from the British, as an inveterate foe of the Hindus and as a barbarian who inaugurated the blood-thirsty reign of Muslim monarchs.

Not just India, but large parts of the East, were alleged to lack historical compositions until comparatively recent times. To Gibbon, who opined that 'the art and genius of history has ever been unknown to the Asiatics', it was indubitably certain that no Arab historian had supplied as clear a narrative of the history of the Arabs as was to be found in the pages of his own *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Before 'the coming of Mahomet', the Persians had preserved virtually nothing of their history, and as a consequence they were in the dark even about events 'glorious to their nation'.⁸ As John D. Rogers has documented, a similar tenor of argument is to be found in early British writings on Sri Lanka. Robert Percival gave it as his opinion in 1803 that 'the wild stories current among the natives, throw no light whatever on the ancient history of the island', and he considered the Portuguese arrival in Sri Lanka in 1505 as furnishing the first authentic piece of information about that island nation, thanks to the documentation of the Portuguese themselves; and similarly a later contemporary, writing in 1821, viewed various Sinhalese chronicles as collections of legends: 'The Singalese possess no accurate record of events, are ignorant of genuine history, and are not sufficiently advanced to relish it.'⁹

Among the scholar-administrator types whose histories of India first emerged in the eighteenth century, and began to proliferate at an alarming rate as larger chunks of India came under their jurisdiction, it was nearly an article of faith to observe that not until the arrival of the Muslims did works resembling historical compositions begin to be written in India. Even then the accounts of the early Muhammadan conquests in India, and of the later Muslim dynasties as well as the Mughal Empire, were authored almost without exception by Muslims.¹⁰ But could these accounts deservedly be designated as 'history'? Sir H. M. Elliot, author of a voluminous history of India during 'The Muhammadan Period' constructed from the writings of Indian 'historians', declared emphatically that the 'Muhammadan histories' could scarcely claim to rank higher than 'Annals'. For the most part they comprised a 'dry narration of events' in strict chronological fashion, without any conception of how events could be

grouped 'philosophically according to their relations'. Having had no acquaintance with any political system other than absolute despotism, these 'historians' wrote only about 'thrones and imperial powers', about 'successive conspiracies, revolts, intrigues, murders, and fratricides, so common in Asiatic monarchies'; and they had not the slightest interest in illustrating the conditions under which the common people lived, the state of commerce and agriculture, the 'constituent elements or mutual relations' which characterize any society, the history of religious and social institutions, or indeed any aspect of 'civil history'. Of cause and effect the Muhammadan writers knew nothing; their reflections and suggestions, few to begin with, were of the 'most puerile and contemptible kind'; and, worst of all, the writers displayed an appalling immorality, for they 'sympathize[d] with no virtues', and 'abhor[red] no vices'.¹¹ If the Muslim histories of India could be dispatched into oblivion with such ease, then one shuddered to think of how entirely preposterous were the writings of the Hindus, who were not even remotely familiar with the conception of history.

'It is allowed on all hands that no historical composition existed in the literature of the Hindus.'¹² This observation, that runs like a refrain through British scholarship on India, acquired in the first half of the nineteenth century a sanctity that was to remain unquestioned until the advent of nationalism at the turn of the century. James Mill, in his *History of British India*, summoned no less than a dozen witnesses to support the contention that the Hindus were 'perfectly destitute of historical records', entirely indifferent to chronology, and not in the least inclined to make statements within the 'sober limits of truth and history'.¹³ Mill also drew attention to the lack of any work in Hindu literature on geography that was not patently 'absurd' and 'monstrous', a geography that was not, in the words of his contemporary Thomas Macaulay, 'made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter'.¹⁴ It is certainly the case that Sanskrit lacks a geographical literature. No work gives us any conception of India's neighbours; and despite India's cultural empire or presence in Indonesia, Cambodia, and other parts of southeast Asia, and its role in the Indian Ocean trading network, no Indian traveller left behind accounts that would give us a sense of the history and geography of these places.

Mill's opinions and criticisms of Indian 'literature', if indeed so dignified a word could be used to characterize the fictions of a people belonging to a 'rude age', were not dismissed as the ravings of a madman or as the predilections of a scholar knowledgeable only in

the Western classics. In his Preface to the 1858 edition of Mill's *History of British India*, the eminent Orientalist H. H. Wilson, cognizant of the immense influence that the *History* continued to exercise, endeavoured to repudiate Mill's dismissive observations about India with the remark that his characterization of Hindu society 'almost outrages humanity'.¹⁵ Some years later, the compiler of the great Sanskrit dictionary, Sir Monier-Williams, noting that Mill's history was 'still a standard work', expressed regret at the 'infinite harm' it had done by its 'unjustifiable blackening of the Indian national character', and he thought the superciliousness of 'young Englishmen' brought out to govern India owed much to its pernicious influence.¹⁶ Clearly, the *History of British India* had left a deep impression on the minds of Englishmen, and one man who was wholly susceptible to Mill's influence was Thomas Macaulay. As Law Member of the Viceroy's Council, Macaulay in 1835 penned the 'Minute on Indian Education', which had a decisive impact in determining British educational policies in India. Macaulay argued that educational funds would be put to better use in teaching 'sound Philosophy and true History' than Hindu astronomy, 'which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school', or a history 'abounding with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long', or a geography full of the most fanciful notions.¹⁷ Henceforth history would not merely comprise a distinct and honoured part of the curriculum in schools and colleges in India, but historical analysis became, as Gauri Viswanathan has suggested, the principal method 'of teaching colonial subjects to identify error in their own systems of thought and, simultaneously, confirm Western principles of law, order, justice, and truth'.¹⁸ While Mill's own history was to 'remain the hegemonic textbook of Indian history' throughout the nineteenth century, Indian classrooms were inundated with numerous other historical texts.¹⁹

The question remains: why should the absence of historical works in the literature of the Hindus, assuming this to be an observation of some veracity, have struck Mill and other Englishmen as a singularly important fact? To Mill it was demonstrably clear that as people emerge from a 'rude age', and reason begins to exert on human affairs a considerable influence, 'no use of letters is deemed more important than that of preserving an accurate record of those events and actions by which the interests of the nations have been promoted or impaired'.²⁰ An interest in history was, to the mind of Mill, the eminent mark of reason and culture, of a civilization instituted on rational principles and characterized by intellectual maturity. The Hindus

had not yet understood that a 'record of the past' could be used as 'guidance of [sic] the future'. As a Utilitarian, Mill was acutely conscious of the uses and lessons of history, a subject matter on which English and Indian school-children were routinely asked, until perhaps recently, to display their expository and analytical skills. Moreover, Mill, whose intellectual outlook was dictated not only by the Utilitarian ethos, but by the world view of Bacon and Newton, saw poetry and history—dealing with universals and particulars, according to Aristotle—as diametrically opposed to each other. Mill was not loathe to derive moral lessons from this purportedly great divide. 'The rude and untutored barbarian' admired, and wondered at, only those events in the past which could be 'remembered solely for the pleasure of those emotions': 'Exaggeration, therefore, is more fitted to his desires than exactness; and poetry than history.' 'All rude nations,' James Mill averred, 'neglect history, and are gratified with the productions of the mythologists and poets.' The conclusion was inescapable: as Hindus had failed to produce historical works, they were still barbarians.²¹ To Mill, as to other European intellectuals, the Greeks provided the needed contrast: whatever their foibles, and they too had indulged in such childish amusements as poetry and mythology, among the earliest luminosities of the Greek world were the historians Herodotus and Thucydides.²²

Why should, nonetheless, the attention of Englishmen in the period from the end of the eighteenth century to the aftermath of World War I have been riveted, when at all India was within the eye's gaze, upon the lack of historical works in Hindu literature? Why should that have been any more significant than, say, the fact that the ancient Greeks did not produce any grammarians, or certainly no one who would assume in the history of linguistics a place comparable to that occupied by Panini? What animated this predilection for history among Englishmen? The English middle classes in Shakespeare's time had already developed a considerable taste for history, and one historian of this phenomenon has gone so far as to state that the 'reading of history' was regarded by them 'as a virtue second only to an acquaintance with Holy Writ'. History furnished moral examples, and the lessons it provided could be used profitably in the service of the state; the didactic value ascribed to history coincided so 'precisely with the bourgeois conception of the utility of learning that histories were hailed as the perfect literature of the middle class'.²³ If an engagement with history was a measure of England's greatness, the dearth of history-reading in other societies, such as Ireland, was just

as surely a measure of their impoverishment, and even of their fitness to be enslaved: as one writer put it in 1578, the Irish were 'baereued of one of the greatest benefites, that giveth light and understanding, which is by reading of histories ...'.²⁴ The Irish and the Indians were evidently united by more than their common subjugation under the English.

This English interest in history would continue to persist, except that in the England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, history was seen as something entirely divorced from the imagination. The old Aristotelian distinction between poetry and history was very much alive: poetry dealt with what could be, history confined itself to facts. With the ascendancy of the New Science, 'natural knowledge' and especially mathematics were placed in sharp opposition to poetry. The *Philosophical Transactions*, established in 1665, was prepared to publish genuine pieces of knowledge 'free from the colours of Rhetorick, the devices of Fancy, or the delightful deceit of Fables'.²⁵ In the Augustan Age, even poetry became mathematical in the hands of Pope and Dryden. But the aftermath of the Augustan Age was, from the standpoint of the Evangelicals and the Utilitarians, unpropitious: the Romantic poets restored wicked poetry, unreason, and passion in all its monstrosity to dignity. This distinction, between poetry and history, unreason and reason, fiction and fact, became then the backdrop for Mill's fulminations in India. That Indians lacked a tradition of historical inquiry, and were devoid of respect for facts and reason, was equally illustrative of the degenerate tendencies of the Romantic movement. Observations about India had no necessary intrinsic interest for most Englishmen, but had a great deal to do with the dispute within England between conflicting ideologies; and it is even arguable that Mill's animadversions against India owed a great deal to his animus against Romantic poetry. The passion for facts among utilitarians, social reformers, and evangelicals moved by the spirit of 'improvement' had proceeded so far in the nineteenth century that Dickens was compelled to mock this development: thus Gradgrind, the school inspector in *Hard Times*, would ask for the establishment of Commissioners of Facts, delegated with the responsibility of instituting a regime of fact.²⁶

Nineteenth-century English thought, then, would be marked by a passion for facts and history, and this passion can be traced in the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, in essays by Carlyle ('On History', 1829) and others, and in such massive historical compositions as Macaulay's *History of England* (1849). The study of history was to

become institutionalized, and history was to enter Western discourse as an episteme, as the determining principle of all knowledge.²⁷ History as a formal course of study was introduced into universities, and the transformation of this study into a 'discipline' was marked by the formation of new associations devoted to the study of the 'past', such as The British Archaeological Association (1843), The Royal Historical Society (1868), The Society of Biblical Archaeology (1870), and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877), and the introduction of various scholarly and quasi-scholarly journals, most notably the *English Historical Review* (1886) and *Antiquary* (1880).²⁸ The *English Historical Review* boldly recommended itself to its readers in the inaugural issue with the observation that 'history, in an even greater degree than its votaries have as yet generally recognised, is the central study among human studies, capable of illuminating and enriching all the rest',²⁹ and Lord Acton was to assume a similarly elevated tone in his 'Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History', delivered at Cambridge University in June 1895: 'The science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the stream of history, like the grains of gold in the sand of a river; and the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes to the making of the future.'³⁰

As England showed the way to the future by enshrining the study of history and historical modes of thinking as characteristic of a vigorous and energetic civilization, so India was a pointed reminder of the ill-effects of lacking the historical sensibility. However, the disposition towards history was manifested not merely in the assault upon Indian traditions and the supposed peculiarities of Indians such as their lack of historical works, but also in the creation by the British, from the very outset, of a historical discourse about India and, *pari passu*, in the fixation on 'events', in the privileging of action—history being 'what happened', not what is imagined—over thought. The privileging of action in turn was manifest in the celebration of 'the man on the spot', that intrepid soldier or administrator enacting his role on the field of action, the field of history; conversely, Indians were perceived to inhabit a dream-like world, caught in the stupor of contemplation, averse to action. If this became the received view, how far did it inform the outlook of Indians ruminating about both their own past and the intellectual weaknesses of Hindu civilization? Was the observation about the lack of historical works in Hindu civilization generally accepted by Hindus, and what kind of speculations

did they entertain about this embarrassing phenomenon? How did Indian nationalists respond to the charge? Did the nationalist response consist essentially in marshalling data to the contrary, and in establishing, or fabricating, knowledge of the past based upon indigenous sources? Or did the nationalists ground their response in a differing epistemology, an epistemology that, if it did not consider history to be of little consequence, saw no reason to associate organically the spirit of historical inquiry with either the triumph of reason or faith in the idea of progress? Have the nationalist historians' attempts, which prevail to this day, to elevate the so-called *itihasa-purana* tradition to a tradition of historical inquiry conceived partially along scientific principles yielded different principles of historical inquiry, differing conceptions of history? How, finally, are we to interpret the significance of the British charge and, provided there is in it a kernel of truth, the significance of the lacuna itself? If history is full of 'lessons' for the present, which is the predominant popular conception of history, might not the lack of history be a more portentous guide?

II

At an address delivered in the early years of his political career, which spanned the period from 1875 to 1925, the Bengali nationalist Surendranath Banerjea, later viewed by the British as a voice of moderation, observed that anyone wishing to look into the Indian past encountered a 'difficulty of considerable magnitude' at the very threshold of his inquiry. In the whole field of Sanskrit literature, only one historical work, and that too from the late medieval period, was to be found. 'Are we then to conclude', asked Banerjea, 'that our ancestors, the great Aryans of ancient India, were ignorant of the art of historical composition and never wrote histories?' How could it be that 'the great Aryans of ancient India', who produced lasting works of philosophy, religion, poetry, drama, grammar, and law, were so deficient in the production of historical knowledge as not to leave behind a single historical work from the time of antiquity? Was it reasonable to suppose that people who were capable of such supreme achievements in the various branches of human knowledge were wanting in 'the simple art' of recording their past, 'the sayings and doings of their kings and queens'? How could progress have been made in the different branches of knowledge without some progress in the act of historical composition? Indeed, how was one to measure

the idea of progress at all without an idea of history? Was it thus not very probable that the Hindus had not been ignorant of historical knowledge? Fortunately to the credit of the country's ancestors, and 'for the good name of India', Banerjea could conclude that such histories had at one time existed, but they could not survive 'the revolutions and convulsions' which India 'had unhappily too often to pass through', the 'carelessness of the Brahmins', and 'the peculiarities' of India's climate.³¹

It is worthwhile dwelling on the reasons adduced by Banerjea for why histories authored by Hindus had not come down to the present age. If James Mill and Macaulay represented one side of Orientalist discourse, the other face of Orientalism, the burden of which in time was assumed especially by the nationalists, consisted in a glorification of the ancient Aryans and correspondingly in the denunciation of the non-Hindu, and particularly Islamic, elements of Indian civilization. Though self-avowedly a nationalist, albeit of the 'moderate' variety, Banerjea was echoing, inadvertently or otherwise, imperialist discourse. He observed that the 'Empire of the Kshatriyas' was followed in turn by that of the Muslims, the Mughals, the Mahrattas, and finally the British: the history of India was an unrelenting tale of depredations by foreigners who, enticed to India by the reports of 'her extraordinary wealth', 'grandeur and beauty', thundered down upon 'the fertile plains of Hindustan spreading death, destruction, desolation, on all sides around'. Amidst 'these destructive inroads' all traces of the Hindus' historical literature disappeared.³² Banerjea's contemporary, Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, was more explicit, and had no difficulty in establishing causation: as he ruminated, 'It is not certain why our ancient countrymen, who were so learned and had achieved so much did not write down any descriptions of the country. Some people say they probably wrote such descriptions, but just in case reading histories of the glorious past should inspire people to rebel, the Muslims destroyed these books together with other good books when they conquered this country.'³³

This essentially was the hypothesis advanced by Col. James Tod in his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829-32, 3 vols). Finding it improbable that the Hindus were ignorant of an art which was cultivated in other countries 'from almost the earliest ages', Tod came to the conclusion that 'the paucity of its [Hindustan's] national works on history' could be accounted for by considering 'the political changes and convulsions which [had] happened in Hindustan since Mahmud's invasion and the intolerant bigotry of many of his successors'.³⁴

Neither Tod nor Banerjea explained why historical works did not survive the depredations of invaders when a good many number of the sacred and law books of the Hindus did. Sacred books were commonly stored in temples; and if temples, as is generally argued, were the most obvious targets of attack, it is these books which would have been the first objects to have been destroyed or looted. Even if more care was taken to safeguard religious texts, it is not clear why historical records would have had less chance of surviving than other, if one may use what some would deem an anachronism, secular texts.

The reticence that Banerjea genuinely felt in unequivocally placing responsibility upon Muslims for shortcomings in Hindu intellectual traditions was, as we shall see later, not shared by some of his contemporaries. Banerjea was too close to the Orientalist critique of India, and far too enamored of the discourses of modernity and liberalism, to understand that the question is not whether certain discourses are indeed true or false, or whether or not the climate in India is truly inhospitable to the preservation of manuscripts, but rather what are the effects of such discourses. In his observation that the 'carelessness of the Brahmins' contributed to the loss of historical knowledge, Banerjea was voicing a favourite British construction of Indian caste society. No doubt Alberuni too had observed that 'the Indian scribes are careless, and do not take pains to produce correct and well-collated copies'.³⁵ More attention may have been paid by the Brahmin scribes to the transcription of religious texts than to copying historical works, but this would account more for the inaccuracies present in historical texts, not for their non-existence. This objection is of little consequence, however, and what is rather more arresting is the characterization of the Brahmin as the villain of the piece. When the British sought the reasons for the demise of the ancient culture of the Hindus, and the origins of their degrading practices, their ire fell upon the Brahmins, who had been entrusted from time immemorial with safeguarding the Hindu texts, sacred and profane, passing on knowledge from one generation to another, and regularizing religious customs and practices.

These Brahmins, the British believed, were venerated to the point of idolatry for their supposed learning. The Brahmins, whom one British overlord dismissed as an 'intriguing, lying, corrupt, licentious and unprincipled race of people',³⁶ would go to any extent to protect their privileges, keep the other castes ignorant, and prevent the British from contradicting their hegemony or attempting to enlighten the

common man. All Hindu texts, it was supposed, had been 'systematically Brahmanized for the purpose of bringing all the religious laws and usages of the different races of India into conformity with Brahmanical ideas', and the real nature of Hindu civilization was only to be revealed when the Brahminical overlay had been uncovered.³⁷ The scholar-administrator who ruled India, first as a servant of the East India Company, and later on behalf of the Crown, railed at the supposed pedantry of the Brahmins, their mindless devotion to the ritualistic act, and their scheming nature. The views of John Gilchrist, who played a not inconsiderable role in determining the shape of Hindustani, may be evoked as a typical instance of the British construction of the Brahmins (and, to a lesser degree, their Muslim counterparts). 'It is not at all improbable', wrote Gilchrist,

that the cormorant crew of Dewans, Mootsuddies, Sirkars, Nazirs, Pundits, Munshis and a tremendous roll call of harpies who encompass power here see with jealous solicitude every attempt in their masters to acquire the means of immediate communication with the great mass of the people who those locusts of the land conceive their lawful prey.³⁸

Thus the Brahmins became, at an early date, the hideous monster in the story of India's degradation, in the story of the demise and loss of her traditions. In more recent years, a respected American historian of India, wishing to account for why 'historical thought and scholarship' were not represented in ancient India in greater measure, put forward a theory which resuscitates the image of the Brahmins as a devious, conspiratorial people. Dismissing quite rightly the suggestion that the Puranas, the Jain and Buddhist chronicles, and other genealogical records can be said to furnish historical explanation, the late Burton Stein noted that three factors inhibited, indeed prevented, 'the writing and preservation of good chronicles or histories': the nature of the political system; the role of the Brahmins as custodians and carriers of Indian traditions; and the nature of the transmission of these traditions. Political power in India, argues Stein, was not highly centralized, nor was it exercised by formal political institutions; rather, it was extremely localized and vested in warriors or other elites wielding economic influence. Whatever may have been the prestige of the Kshatriyas, the warrior elite, the full force of their power could not be felt until it had been legitimized by the priestly elite. Stein further contends that as a large proportion of India's rulers came from 'social groups of low ritual status', the legitimizing function performed by the Brahmin priests was central rather than merely marginal to the stability of the political system

and the continuation of its traditions.³⁹ Inscriptions from medieval Andhra, for example, indicate that many local rulers of untouchable or tribal origins were content to refer to themselves as Sudras, members of the fourth estate; others elevated themselves to the rank of Kshatriyas.

The presence of good histories—and we are to remember that even in Europe history was, until comparatively recent times, an account of monarchs and the political and military triumphs and defeats of their reigns—and of reliable chronicles of ruling families, would have exposed both the low origins of the founders of these families and the priests' participation in the perpetuation of fraud. On the one hand, not only would the prestige of the ostensibly warrior elite have suffered, but their authority would have considerably diminished; on the other hand, the process through which the Brahmins, while supposedly acting to ensure political stability, were enhancing their own ritual power, would have become public knowledge. The Brahmin would cease to have a monopoly over ritual power and the transmission of traditions once the sources and modes of his authority had been revealed; and it is hardly reasonable to suppose that the Brahmins would have been willing progenitors and spectators of their own demise. Thus the Brahmins, so continues the argument, chose not to transmit historical knowledge. Their control over the process of transmission of knowledge and tradition was aided by the fact that knowledge was by and large transmitted orally, and this process itself was confined to the relationship between the guru and such male students as he had himself selected. Access to a guru was further restricted to students of ritually pure birth.⁴⁰ What knowledge would be transmitted was thus left entirely to the Brahmins' discretion. Stein concludes that 'a conspiracy hypothesis' is warranted to explain why Indians of the 'ancient and medieval periods' did not address themselves seriously to the 'critical study of their past', particularly the production of historical scholarship.⁴¹

We have returned, with Stein, to the speculations of the early scholar-administrators of India about the conniving Brahmins, to the fixation on caste and the sacred and timeless dichotomy of Brahminical ritual power and the temporal authority of the Kshatriyas. Although Stein brings to bear upon his subject all the paraphernalia of modern scholarship, his argument is not any more tenable. Stein admits that India is unique among 'ancient, literate and continuing civilizations' in that it lacked historically informed views about its own past, and even though his explanation of this anomaly rests upon the unique

Hindu system of controlled transmission of knowledge, in truth what we are offered is a commonplace realpolitik view. Stein's query about the Hindus' failure to produce historical scholarship about their past is not grounded in the attempt to discern whether the indifference to history was rooted in a particular epistemology and style of thinking, and whether the Hindus did, or did not, recognize history as a category of knowledge. Instead we have, doubtless in a more sophisticated form, the banal view that the victorious or dominant elites determine whether, and what kind of, history will be written. Even the more arresting part of his formulation, namely the notion that historical discourses might constitute a betrayal, or that such discourses can be disempowering (and not only a source of power as moderns would like to believe), does not propel him towards a more serious engagement with the politics and culture of historiography as a general field of study.

For Stein, as for some others, the question is not only the lack of a sound historiographical tradition in ancient and medieval India, but of the Hindus' critical awareness of themselves and of their past. The 'quality of social criticism and analysis' began to show a marked improvement, argues Stein, only after the introduction of European values to India and the challenge of European civilization to the Brahminical stewardship of India's intellectual traditions, while another American scholar of India notes with evident pride that India's colonial rulers were the engine of India's intellectual growth, as they 'both historicized the Indian past and stimulated a consciousness of history in the Indian intellectual'.⁴² India, on this view, produced many a Plato, the philosopher of the soul; but of the likes of Aristotle, the philosopher of the polis, the body politic, it had no one, nor was there any tradition of political theory. In Hindu India the tradition of analytical or critical inquiry was wanting and the 'lack of an apparatus of social criticism naturally prevented the growth of a tradition of historiography'.⁴³ The logical outcome of such a view would be the acceptance of an epistemology that allows space for historical inquiry and the historical sensibility and that, while it may not privilege history as a way of knowing, treats it as a distinct and legitimate category of knowledge. Is it not precisely this very accommodation that Hindu India refused to make? Is not the rejection of history as a way of knowing to be grounded in the existence of a different epistemology, indeed a different history, rather than in the quest for power, the reality of politics, and the perpetuation of deceit? Cannot the not-writing of history be a way of writing history, or perhaps more simply

be a mode of living with the present, an insistent and urgent reminder that history is another mythography?

III

In the writings of Bankimcandra Chatterji (1838–94), the first great Bengali novelist and a masterful essayist, we move closer to the aforementioned considerations, to an understanding, without being fixated on the categories of 'caste', 'Brahmin', 'Kshatriya', or bound by some theory of the elites or a fanciful 'conspiracy hypothesis', of why Indians produced neither historical literature nor scholarship providing an evolutionary, historical, and sociological view of India's religious and civil institutions. In his own time Bankim was best known as a writer of historical novels, the first practitioner anywhere in India of that genre, and this itself testifies to his interest in history and in reviving the historical sense among Hindus. In the preface to the fourth edition of *Rajsingha* (1893), which Bankim described as his 'first historical novel', he denied having written 'historical novels' previously. But elsewhere Bankim also conceded that the novelist uses his imagination 'to achieve the effects he desires', and though 'the novel cannot always take the place of history', 'occasionally the purposes of history can be accomplished in a novel'.⁴⁴ Bankim peopled his novels with characters drawn from history: Aurangzeb, Man Singh and his son Jagat Singh, Raj Singh, the emperor Akbar; but the incidents in which they were described as participants were only remotely, if at all, based on historical events.

In the later years of his life, Bankim turned from writing historical novels to theological treatises, perhaps an apposite shift considering that Bankim extended, as we shall see, the same veneration to history that many extend to theology. Even in the theological tracts, Bankim's interest in history was clearly manifest—indeed, it was paramount. Bankim engaged in the reconstruction of Hinduism from the three-fold perspective of laying the basis for a sound *dharma*,⁴⁵ investing the Hindu philosophical tradition and particularly the Bhagavad Gita with a religious and political significance appropriate to the designs of nationalism, and reviving the historical Krishna, the Krishna not of the *gopis* and the Vaishnava *bhaktas*, but that incarnated in the Gita and in India's martial traditions. His programme, if one may call it such, for making Hinduism more historical, and thereby more masculine and rational, wherein purportedly lay its future, was adumbrated in numerous essays and finally in a trilogy of three historical,

philosophical, and theological treatises: *Krsnacaritra*, 'The Life of Krishna' (1886), *Dharmatattva*, 'The Essence of Dharma' (1888), and the posthumously published *Srimatbhagvatgita* (1901).

The origin of Bankim's quest for a masculine Hinduism and a historical Krishna is to be found in the question which no intelligent Indian, and especially not a nationalist, could refrain from asking: why had India been a subject nation for most of its history? Bankim rejected the view, most assiduously propagated by the British, that Indians were weak, effeminate, and childish, averse to fighting. The image of the Bengali was encapsulated in his *dhoti*, which looked to the British like a big diaper, or so at least Robert Orme had thought in the late eighteenth century. In a 'purportedly historical' chapter of his novel *Durgeshnandini*, Bankim in contrast described 'Prithviraj [Chauhan] and other Rajput heroes' as 'resisting with matchless valour' the hordes of 'Mussulman soldierly' who burst upon India 'with new-born fanaticism and in all the pride of strength'. But these brave Rajput warriors, 'instead of combining their strength', 'fell to quarrelling with one another'. By 'virtue of reiterated efforts', the Mussulmans triumphed, and Delhi became the seat of their empire. But the Rajput warriors did not thereby become 'lifeless': they continued to challenge 'the Yavanas [on] the field and on many occasions put them to rout'.⁴⁶ Had not the Marathas and the Sikhs, Bankim would ask, contested power well into the first half of the nineteenth century? It was a travesty to describe Indians as a supine people, when in fact the bulk of Hindu people had 'never fought for or against anyone'. 'Hindu kings or the rulers of Hindustan', Bankim wrote in a piece entitled 'Why is the Indian Nation Enslaved?', 'have been repeatedly conquered by alien people, but it cannot be said that the bulk of Hindu society has ever been vanquished in battle, because the bulk of Hindu society has never gone to war.' Bankim affirmed the lack of solidarity amongst Indians as one of the chief causes of their subjection:

For more than three thousand years, Aryans have fought against Aryans, or Aryans against non-Aryans, or non-Aryans against non-Aryans—Magadh has fought Kanauj, Kanauj has fought Delhi, Delhi has fought Lahore, Hindus have battled against Pathans, Pathans against Mughals, Mughals against the English—all of these people have fought against one another and continually stoked the fires of war in this country.⁴⁷

Why had not the vast majority of Hindus fought for their liberty? Did they love liberty less than the Englishman? Or was their inaction attributable to the nature of the caste system, under which the duty of

fighting devolved solely upon the Kshatriyas? In the Hindu's attitude towards power, and in his espousal of the ideals of *bhakti* (devotion) and *vairagya* (renunciation) as ethical norms of conduct, Bankim found the second main reason for India's subjection. Although we cannot follow in detail Bankim's historical and philosophical exposition of the Sankhya system of thought, it suffices to note that both other-worldliness and fatalism, considered characteristic of most Hindus' disposition towards life, were described by Bankim as derived from Sankhya, with consequences much too dire: 'It is because of this other-worldliness and fatalism that in spite of the immense physical prowess of the Indians, this land of the Aryans had come under Muslim rule. And it is for the same reason that India remains a subject country till this day.' Social progress was checked and ultimately ceased to take place at all for the same reason. Knowledge was the goal of Sankhya philosophy; but what was the use of knowledge if it were divorced from power? Europeans worshipped at the altar of power, they were its devotees, and that was 'the key to their advancement'; Hindus, in contradistinction, were 'negligent toward power', and that was 'the key to [their] downfall'. As Bankim expressed it in a concise formula, "Knowledge is power": that is the slogan of Western civilisation. "Knowledge is salvation" is the slogan of Hindu civilisation.⁴⁸

What was originated by the Sankhya philosophers, and perpetuated over the centuries by all schools of Hindu philosophy and even Buddhism, was given a vigorous new thrust by the advocates of *bhakti*. The emasculation of India, and the people's ignorance of the martial traditions in which their remote ancestors had been bred, owed as much to the devotional fervour that first swept over India sometime in the ninth century and was prominent throughout Bengal between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, as it did to the 'various divisions' that obtained in that ancient land 'filled with various nations and societies like a honeycomb crawling with bees'.⁴⁹ Although Bankim was of the view that the poetry of Chandidasa, Vidyapati, and Caitanya could not anywhere be excelled, and was, along with comparable achievements in theology and philosophy, the hallmark of a Bengali renaissance as mighty as that which was later experienced by Europe, he deprecated this poetry for instilling in people devotion to god instead of pride in the nation. As he was to write in his essay on India's subjection, 'for various reasons a sense of devotion to community has been lost in India for a very long time. Because it has been lost, there has never been any national

accomplishment executed by Hindu society.⁵⁰ Clearly, it was not devotion itself, imagined as the opposite of intellectual reflection or of action, to which Bankim was opposed: he wished to turn the energy and strength which devotion generates towards the community, the nation-state, and history, away from oneself and God. Without the nation-state there was to be no history; and in the nation-state, Bankim almost seemed to be suggesting, lay the culmination of history.

For Bankim, the contradictory tendencies inherent in the Indian situation were best epitomized in the conflicting interpretations of Krishna that once obtained in India. Both in *Srīmatbhagavatgītā* and in *Kṛṣṇacaritra*, his sketch of the character of Krishna, he set out to establish the historicity of Krishna. If Krishna was not to be an object of contempt and ridicule—and what else could he be if he, one of the most popular of all Indian deities, were shown frolicking on the green with Radha, tantalizing the other gopis, squandering his time and energies in prodigious feats of sexuality, or amusing himself on the fields of Vrindaban with his playmates?—it was essential that the story of Krishna be secured on some historical foundation, be rendered compatible with canons of reason and common-sense, as well as with reasonable notions of divinity, and that Krishna himself be reinstated in his natural state of glory and dignity. Pointing to the predominant representations of Krishna—who ‘was a thief as a child—he used to eat stolen cream and butter; as a youth he was a philanderer [who encouraged the milkmaids to commit adultery]; in maturity, a swindler and a knave who slew Drona and others through deception’—Bankim asked with evident anguish, ‘Is this the nature of the Divine? He who is immaculate essence, who is the source of all purity, whose name removes impurity and evil; for him to perpetrate all sins on assuming human form: is this appropriate to that Divine Nature?’⁵¹

The Krishna of Caitanya and Vidyapati was, moreover, effeminate, of sickly pallor and romantic inclination: was this the Krishna that was to be upheld as a model of goodness, not to mention action, for Indians in their state of degradation? Then there was the other, historical Krishna, ‘who by the strength of his arms suppressed the enemy, who by the strength of his intellect united the country of the Bharatas, and who in his unique, selfless wisdom promulgated *dharma*’.⁵² The mythology of Vrindavan would have to be abandoned for the historical reality of Krishna counseling Arjuna to fight on the battlefield at Kurukshetra; and if the God of Caitanya’s Vaishnavism

was only Love, the god of a true Vaishnavism would be not only Love but ‘Infinite Power’. As the revolutionary sannyasi says in Bankim’s novel *Anandamath*, ‘Chaitanya’s Vishnu is all Love, our Vishnu is all Power.’⁵³

The ‘original historical account’ of the life of Krishna, Bankim believed, was contained in the original text of the Mahabharata, of which the Bhagavad Gita is a part. To uncover this ur-text, a European-like search for the Holy Grail, Bankim adopted formal and textual criteria, such as uniformity of conception and consistency of style, as well as the substantive criterion of rejecting as later accretions all accounts of ‘unreal, impossible and supernatural events’. As Partha Chatterjee has aptly stated, it is remarkable that, in order to show how exemplary the character of Krishna was as an ideal for modern man, Bankim should have felt that his discourse ‘required a demonstration of the historicity of Krishna’.⁵⁴ Bankim’s obsession with the ur-text, and his absolute fidelity to the norms of rationality and scientificity, is a pointed testimony to how far he subscribed to Orientalism, both as style of thinking and as a mode of scholarship. He betrayed an emblematically European anxiety, now widely on display amongst Hindutva ideologues, about origins. Bankim’s differences with the Orientalists were not epistemological but empirical: it was not the Orientalist’s historicism but his failure to abide by his own standards of scholarship that Bankim attacked with full vigour. It was his opinion that the tendency of European scholars to consider the Mahabharata as an ‘unhistorical’ work stemmed from their prejudice: if they wished to dismiss it as an admixture of the historical and the mythical, were they not bound to consider the works of Herodotus, Livy, and many other Greek and Latin historians as similarly comprised of the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’?⁵⁵

His arguments from the historical record of Megasthenes are a more interesting case in point. He adduced evidence from it in support of his hypothesis that even Alexander was intimidated by the military valour of the Ganga-Rary elephant troops and was induced to turn back: ‘Whether anyone believes or does not believe that Alexander ceased fighting through fear of the might and valour of the Bengalis, the witness is Megasthenes himself. We are not producing some new witness we have coached.’⁵⁶ But when Albrecht Weber pointed out that the Mahabharata could not have existed in the fourth century BC because Megasthenes made no mention of it, and Krishna therefore was not a historical character, Bankim dismissed this remark as ‘deliberate fraud’ on the part of Weber, who knew that only

fragments of Megasthenes' record had survived; moreover, it was fatuous to rely so heavily on Megasthenes, merely because he was European. With a brilliant, if ostentatious, reversal, characteristic of much of his work, Bankim disposed of Weber's objection: 'Many Hindus have visited Germany and written books [about that country]. In none of their works have I seen Mr. Weber's name. Does this then inevitably mean that Mr. Weber never existed?'⁵⁷

The defence of Hindu philosophy; the rejuvenation of India's martial traditions; giving Indians the knowledge of their true character, uncluttered by the fabrications of Muslim or British historians; bringing Indians to an awareness of themselves as Indians; the cultivation of a unitary nationalist consciousness: all of this was to be achieved primarily by reviving the sense of history, uncovering the historical past, digging into archives, and writing history anew. How had the 'Renaissance' come about in Bengal? 'Where did the nation get this sudden enlightenment? ... Why did the light go out? Perhaps it was because of the advent of Mughal rule ...' There was only one way to ascertain what had happened: 'Gather the evidence and find out all of these things.'⁵⁸ Yet, as he was to write elsewhere, 'Indians have no record of their exploits anywhere in writing. There is no chronicle of ancient India. Hence the military achievement of which they could take pride in has been lost.'⁵⁹ If chronicles had never been compiled, how was 'the evidence' to be gathered? No doubt written chronicles were not the only guide to the past: but surely the past could be created, invented, fabricated? What else had the Muslims and the British done? Encountering the Bengali in his present state of wretchedness, the British inferred that he had always been effeminate and cowardly; and the entire history of India had been constructed in a similar fashion. 'If a man is declared dead after having been beaten to death', Bankim's argument continues, 'the statement cannot be called a lie. But [he] who says that the Bengalis have always been of this character, that Bengalis were always weak, always cowardly, always effeminate, may lightning strike his head, his words are lies.'⁶⁰ The historical novel and the historical essay were Bankim's well-chosen forms to attempt the reconstruction of Indian history: the first allowed him the license to fabricate history, indeed to furnish, even in more exaggerated form, the same arguments that are found in his political and theological works without the kind of scholarly accountability that non-fiction might have demanded; and the essay in turn was his homage to the norms of rationality and objectivity, a medium for presenting 'evidence'.⁶¹

Bankim never doubted that there is a relationship between historical awareness of the past and pride in one's own country and its accomplishments. 'National pride lies at the root', he wrote in one seminal essay, 'of the creation of indigenous history and the improvement of people; history is the foundation of social science and social betterment. The misery of a people without history is endless.'⁶² Bankim would not have been one to agree with Alberuni's assessment of the Hindu as the most conceited of all peoples; rather, the Hindu was self-abnegating to such a degree that he never thought of leaving his mark on history. If one could not leave one's imprint on history, then of what use were historical records? In one remarkable passage Bankim explored this almost symbiotic link between a people's pride in its achievements and historical awareness, contrasting the attitudes of Indians and Englishmen in this respect:

If the English go out to shoot birds, a history is written of the expedition. But Bengal has no history! ... There is a specific reason why Indians have no history, Partly because of the environment, partly the fear of invaders, Indians are greatly devoted to their gods ... As a result of this way of thinking, Indians are extremely modest:

They do not think themselves the subjects of their own actions; it is always the gods who act through them. It is this modesty of attitude and devotion to the gods which are the reasons for our people not writing their own history. The Europeans are extremely proud. They think that even when they yawn, the achievement should be recorded as a memorable deed in the annals of world history. Proud nations have an abundance of historical writing; we have none.⁶³

The other-worldliness and fatalism of Hindu philosophy, on Bankim's view, engendered indifference to the collectivity that was the nation and to history as a guide to action; and once India ceased to have the historical recollection of its former greatness, and began to sing exclusively the praise of God, it became enervated. The vicious circle was not to be broken by standing by idly while the British wrote the history of India for Indians. 'When has the glory of any nation', asked Bankim, 'ever been proclaimed by another nation?' Whatever was known of Roman valor was known from Roman histories; the case for Muslim heroism rested on the records compiled by Muslim historians themselves. How could it be any different for the Hindus? Thus it was to the project of writing history, and thereby reviving an ancient land, that Bankim directed his vision; as he was to put it in a text where Bengal stood for India, Bengal must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal.

Who is to write it? You have to write it. I have to write it ... Anyone who is not a Bengali has to write it ... It is not a task that can be done by one person alone; it is a task for all of us to do together.⁶⁴

IV

The question of why a tradition of historical inquiry did not exist in ancient and medieval India has been, as we have seen, something of a quandary for students of Indian civilization. Bankim's analysis of why Indians produced no historical records, and the significance he attached to history as a mode of knowledge and as an expression of political and cultural unity, constitutes one kind of response to this question. It is Bankim's view which has triumphed. But I, like many others,⁶⁵ have dwelled on Bankim so long because not only was he the most articulate spokesman for the view that historicizing above all leads to 'objective' knowledge, and that a nation is forged and its longevity ensured when its citizens think historically, but also because there is much in his reasoning that is markedly different from other nationalist views. Bankim, for instance, made no half-hearted attempt to argue that a historiographical tradition flourished in India before the advent of Muslim rule or that the climate was not conducive to the preservation of historical manuscripts. Neither can Bankim be made to speak for professional nationalist historians, if we may consider R. C. Majumdar their representative voice. While admitting that 'lack of historical writings is the weakest point in ancient Indian literature', Majumdar stated that 'advanced ideas of historiography were not altogether unknown in India'. The *Rajatarangini*, a twelfth-century chronicle of the kings of Kashmir by Kalhana, a Kashmiri Brahmin, is mentioned in this vein by Majumdar and many others as an example of quite sophisticated historical literature. For Majumdar the problem was why the *Rajatarangini*, which would 'do credit to a historian of the twentieth century', stood in such singular and sinister (or should we rather say splendid) isolation, for Kalhana is 'the only historian that ancient India can boast of'. Elsewhere Majumdar argued that 'the problem we have to solve is not the lack of historical writings, of which we have a fair number of specimens, but the absence of finished products like the *Rajatarangini*.' Noting that Kalhana had four illustrious successors who carried the history of Kashmir down to the reign of Akbar, Majumdar held out the hope that these works, having withstood the test of time, had 'not disappeared' and would one day resurface.⁶⁶

Alongside Majumdar's attempts to argue for the presence of a tradition of historiography in Hindu India before the coming of the British must be placed the rather prodigious effort by nationalist and lately secular and anti-Orientalist historians over a period of over fifty years, and well before them by Orientalist scholars, to have the epics, Puranas, genealogical lists, and chronicles of kings accepted as historical works. The word for history in Sanskrit and the languages derived from it is *itihasa* (iti-ha-asa, 'so it has been'). It is pointed out that the Indian's concern for *itihasa* is manifest from the fact that the first explicit pronouncement on *itihasa* can be found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which is dated to the period 321–296 BC, but may be as much as three centuries later. According to Kautilya, 'the three Vedas, *Sama*, *Rik*, and *Yajus*, constitute the triple Vedas. These together with *Artharvaveda* and the *itihasa-veda* are (known as) the Vedas.'⁶⁷ The *Satapatha-Brahmana* likewise lists *Itihasa-Veda* among the scriptures to be read on the occasion of the horse sacrifice (*Ashvamedha*). Kautilya also tells us what constitutes *itihasa*: '*Purana*, *itivritta* (history), *Akhyayika* (tales), *udaharana* (illustrative stories), *dharmaśāstra* and *arthashastra* are (known by the name) *itihasa*.' *Itivritta* means occurrence or event; the Puranas are stories; *akhyayika* is a prose composition, 'a connected story or narrative'; and the *dharmaśāstra* and *arthashastra* denote the two classes of literature dealing with morals and material well-being, respectively. *Udaharana* means both 'narration' and 'stories', as well as 'example', and it is probably the last meaning which is implied, if we consider the conventional reading of history as teaching by example.⁶⁸

The comprehensiveness of the idea of history is further suggested by this well-known definition of *itihasa*:

*Dharmartha kamamoksanam upadesa samanvitam
Purvavritta kathayuktam itihasaṁ prachakshate*

[*Itihasa* is the narration of the past arranged in the form of stories, and conveying instruction in *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, the four human values.]⁶⁹

And Jinasena, the author of the *Jaina Adipurana* (ninth century AD), speaking of *itihasa*, which 'relates "what actually happened"', and is 'a very desirable subject', says that

it is also called *itivritta*, *aitihya*, and *amnaya* (authentic tradition). It is also described as *arsha* for it was composed by the rishis, *sukta* for it instructs through good and pleasant discourses, and *Dharmaśāstra*, for it prescribes *dharma*.

If history is narrative, stories, anecdotes, 'what really happened', example, moral instruction, and discourses on morals, wealth, pleasure, desire, and salvation, then what is it not? Far from illustrating how itihasa was privileged among forms of knowledge, or at least placed on an equal footing with the other forms of Vedic literature,⁷⁰ the very comprehensiveness of the definitions of history suggests that history was not conceived as a distinct branch of knowledge, encompassing as it did the study of man in relation to society and God and all the conceivable goals of life. There is no suggestion in the texts how the study of itihasa is different from the study of philosophy (*darsana*), religion, law, or a work such as Kautilya's *Arthashastra* itself, which falls within the domain of politics and 'economics', but surely is not history any more than is Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

If the conception of 'history' is itself so broad-minded, we may expect to find history in an equally large number of texts, and it is not surprising that the epics, hagiographies, the biographies of kings, genealogical lists, the Puranas, and various other kinds of texts have been considered, if not something akin to history, quite ripe for the extraction of historical method and historical fact. So, for example, one historian writes that 'the accounts of dynasties and genealogies given in the Mahabharata and the Puranas and the heroic poems composed by the court poets of ancient India do contain elements of historical data', while another has argued that authors of the Sangam age 'were endowed with plenty of historical sense'.⁷¹ The historicity of the Indian epics, as of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, must obviously lie in the fact that it is a later age looking back upon an earlier one, that the written text reflects an oral tradition of greater antiquity which supplied at least the kernel of the story. Almost any work from antiquity, especially an epic, can be mined for historical data, which however cannot substitute for historical explanation. None of the texts said to display the author's 'historical sense' reveal any understanding of causation in history; none demonstrate any familiarity with historical method and the 'rules' of evidence.

Even Herodotus, by contrast, set down his intention in the opening paragraph of *The Histories* 'to preserve the memory of the past ... and more particularly, to show how the two races came into conflict'. Greek and Chinese historical writings point, however minimally by the canons of modern historical scholarship,⁷² to conscious human behaviour, to cause and effect, by way of explanation of how a society changes over time. The conception of causation found in the allegedly historical writings from India is of the kind to which even

Gibbon on occasion subscribed, as for instance when, in explaining how an attack of gout prevented Bajazet from marching into central Europe, he observed that 'an acrimonious humour falling on a single fibre of one man may prevent or suspend the miseries of nations'.⁷³ More often the accidental factor is assimilated to the moral aspect—a kingdom prospers if the king is virtuous and pious; and if he rules the country according to his whim, if he is wicked and irresponsible, he suffers defeat in battles and his kingdom declines. There is also widespread in Indian writings the element of the 'supernatural': because the king is unjust and disrespectful to the gods, they do not come to his assistance; but if he is properly suppliant and god-fearing, they assist him in his battle against evil. It is by the grace of the gods that the world moves; and it because of them that evil is either combated or perpetuated. But with this we are not any closer to a causal explanation of human behaviour. No one can argue from Indian texts that human behaviour was not a subject of interest to their authors, but little in those texts suggest that the authors were critically alive to the historical mode of explanation.

James Mill, whose views of the literature of the Hindus are nothing short of absurd, was however not without reason in his ridiculing of attempts to describe the epics or indeed anything else in Sanskrit literature as tantamount to 'historical records'. 'A more intimate acquaintance with those grotesque productions', Mill noted of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, 'has demonstrated the impossibility of reconciling them with the order of human affairs ...'.⁷⁴ The phrase 'human affairs' is in this context indefensible, since, as a work of poetry and of the imagination, as a work with insights into morality and human psychology, the Ramayana is clearly reconcilable with 'human affairs'. Yet the qualifier ('order') preceding 'human affairs' also suggests that Mill, while perhaps even sensitive to the fictional history of the character of Rama, to the fact that the development of Rama in the Ramayana has its own history, could not but think of the Ramayana as lacking in historicity, as a text whose narrative was itself incapable of being located in time and which in fact pointed both to its own ahistoricity and its reliance upon the supernatural.

From Mill's judgment of the epics Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* cannot be exempted, if we consider that one monarch is said to have reigned for 300 years, and that the conquest of Ceylon is attributed to the god Varuna, who provided a passage to the Kashmirian troops by turning the sea into land.⁷⁵ While the *Rajatarangini* is more reliable in its genealogy and chronology than other chronicles, it is not essentially

different from other chronicles or from the Puranas. Since the Puranas have been made to shoulder so much of the burden of establishing the presence of a historiographical tradition in Hindu India, it would be useful to recall that of the five topics (*pancalaksana*) of which any Purana is constituted—*sarga* (creation of the universe), *pratisarga* (dissolution and recreation of the universe), *vamsa* (genealogies of gods and patriarchs), *manvantara* (the ages of Manu), and *vamsanucarita* (genealogies of the solar and lunar races of kings)—only the last could be said to have any historical content.⁷⁶ Although, as Burton Stein observed in 1969, 'the consensus among scholars' who have used the Puranas and other classes of literature with genealogical lists 'is that the useful genealogical information is frequently buried in myth and hopeless exaggeration', the Puranas continue to be mentioned as works embodying 'historical consciousness' even by such well-known historians of ancient India as Romila Thapar.

The *vamsanucarita* is described by Thapar as the 'historical epicentre of the itihasa tradition'. She argues that 'the genealogical core pertaining to those who were believed to have held power in the past' was carefully preserved because it 'purported to record the past' and would be used to adjudge the authenticity of 'future claims to lineage status'. This is the 'first phase' in the unfolding of Indian history; here 'historical consciousness was embedded and recorded the perception of the ordering lineages'. In the second phase, which begins in the second half of the first millennium AD, north India began to witness the evolution of the state and its gradual assertion to supremacy. There was 'a need for a recognizable historical tradition at this time': there were new claimants to power, not just the monarchs, but also landowners and clan chiefs vested with revenue rights who had to prove their status whenever necessary. That the historical tradition which was preserved had some teeth to it would appear to be demonstrated by the fact that though many ruling families had their claims to power conceded, their *varna* status, in the event that the historical tradition could not authenticate it, was denied to them. Ruling families which could not establish 'kinship links with earlier established lineages' continued to be called *vratya-kshatriyas* (degenerate). Thapar also shows that Stein's thesis, which seeks to ground the lack of a historiographical tradition in the need to hide the lower class origins of many of the ruling houses in India before the coming of the Muslims, is largely without foundation: 'The gradual increase [emphasis added] in references to *sudra* rulers would indicate that political power, although in theory restricted to *ksatriyas*, was in fact

open to any *varna*.⁷⁷ That ruling families were often of lower social origins was not an unknown fact and, more often than not, this fact could not be hidden. Conspiracies make for good spy thrillers; they are even a delight to the state seeking a warrant to oppress; they rarely make for good history.

Thapar has suggested that the emergence of the state, and the concentration of power in it, produces a need for historical writing. As the state grows, such functions as counting and categorizing come into their own, and similarly the state acquires the paraphernalia of historical writing and scholarship. Here we have a variation of the familiar argument, though Romila Thapar is scarcely an uninformed advocate of the nation-state, that unity of some kind is a prerequisite of historical awareness; and history thus becomes a record of the growth and activities of the nation-state. It is not enough that such unity be the unity of a common culture: it must be embodied in a political entity which gives everyone within its geographical ambit a common or shared identity. Where there is identity, there is also difference: and from the interchange of the two emerges historical awareness. The backdrop to Herodotus is the feeling of the Greeks against the Persians, just as what animates Thucydides is the Athenians' sense of how irreducibly different they are from the Spartans. Did Indians ever experience the feeling of being different from other people, say the Chinese? Well, perhaps not; but almost all historians are agreed, whatever they may think about Indians' feeling of themselves as Indians, that regional identities were strong throughout India's history, as they continue to be today. Bankim with great anguish asked: 'Bengalis, Panjabis, Telugus, Maharashtrians, Rajputs, Jaths, Hindus, Muslims—in all of this, who would be united with whom?'⁷⁸ If all these groups and countless others knew themselves only in their difference from others, why did not this situation give birth to multiple historiographical traditions?

But Thapar is not willing to settle for the tendentious argument that in ancient and medieval times India was never one and that Indians never knew themselves as Indians. Both the North and the South fell under Mauryan rule; 'Hindu institutions spread over dominant groups all over India'; and it is 'from this period', she has written elsewhere, that 'a political and social conception of India as a whole came into existence'.⁷⁹ Here too the question naturally recurs: if there is, as Thapar herself would argue, a natural connection between the evolution of the state and historical consciousness, or between a people coming into the fullness of their being and the emergence of

historical literature, then why do we not have histories from that time? And why must we accept the reduction of history into genealogy, for is that not what we are being offered? More significantly, if historical awareness originates through the forging of a common identity, and the suppression of other identities, might it not be too much of a price to pay? To bring Indians into history, does not Thapar, or for that matter anyone else, have to accept the epistemological primacy of the discourse that the British established for India? This discourse dictated that Indians would be brought into history, and gifted with one, by their imperial masters. The Indian historian like the nationalist is once again compelled to stake a position on the terrain established by that figure so familiar from the colonial dispensation, the scholar-administrator.

What, then, are the substantive differences between James Mill and Surendranath Banerjea, or between Bankimchandra and Romila Thapar or Burton Stein? Far too many, if the histories that comprise their scholarship are in question; and far too few, if their epistemological attachment to historical consciousness and historical truth is in question. To set forth in starkly plain terms the nature of the debate, and the questions that are at issue, we have to only contrast these statements from two professional historians and specialists in historiography of the Indian subcontinent:

It used to be said that Ancient India produced little or no historical literature. It was even suggested that the ancient Indians lacked the 'historical sense' possessed by other peoples: that they were too religious to be interested in such worldly matters. We need not trouble ourselves overmuch with the analysis of such superficial misconceptions [1961].⁸⁰

To say that we had no historic sense would be to court disgrace. But we did lack that sense. I am ashamed to say that we lack that sense today [1962].⁸¹

Historians have differed over the question of what constitutes a historiographical tradition and what kind of literature can be considered historical. There has been disagreement over whether such a tradition ever existed in India: those who have replied in the affirmative have repaired to some text or the other in justification of their position; others who have been scornful of the proposition have adduced reasons of varying sophistication to account for India's allegedly glaring deficiency in this respect. But nowhere has the value of history been doubted; nowhere has anyone disputed history's claim to be a universally acceptable category of knowledge. It is not doubted that to be anyone one must be in history. Either one is in

history or one is doomed to extinction, stripped of ontological existence. Where for idealist philosophy being has nothing to do with history, now being cannot be conceived without history. What does the sound and fury signify?

V

'History may be servitude, History may be freedom.' To invoke these lines, from Eliot's *Four Quartets*, is not to turn towards the oracular, nor to substitute poetical truth for historical truth (whatever the merits of that disposition); indeed, we can be reasonably certain that they would surely have met with the approval of Bankim, whose writings suggest no particular propensity for oracular pronouncements. Bankim wanted to turn history into an agent of liberation. Much like Benedetto Croce and the Cambridge historian J. B. Bury a few decades later,⁸² Bankim subscribed to the idea that history was the story of man's progress and increasingly consummatory love affair with liberty. Macaulay's own *History of England* was nothing other than the history of English liberty under the law, for without law, as Macaulay and his contemporaries were predisposed to accept, there is neither liberty nor history. India, a lawless country, subject only to the law of the despot (which is no law), quite 'empty of law' as the Law Member, Sir Henry Sumner Maine, once put it, was also without history.

From the standpoint of Bankim, India too had to fall within the ambit of history as the history of liberty, although here, as elsewhere, Hindu philosophy no doubt presented formidable obstacles. Where the Western conception of evolution sees man moving towards a greater good and an increasingly perfect state of existence, from original sin to final redemption, Hindu thought postulates that the current age is the one most devoid of good. The first age, the *satya yuga*, is characterized by unadulterated truth; in the following two yugas, *treta* and *dvapara*, truth and goodness decrease in progressively greater amounts; and, finally, in the present age of *kali*, falsehood (*asatya*) and wickedness predominate. History cannot then be considered as the ascent of man but rather his continuing degeneration. The Hindu schema of four progressively deteriorating ages may well be dismissed as a mythical construct with no historical reality and with even less call upon the attention of the historian, but that would be to ignore the pivotal place of mythic constructions in the unfolding of history.

The reversal effected by Hindu thought, the characterization of evolution as the progression from authenticity to inauthenticity, is for example unequivocally articulated in the Indian grammatical tradition. 'The chief criterion of validity in the classical Paninian tradition', the linguist and Sanskritist Madhav Deshpande has written, 'is that every explanation must be in consonance with Patanjali's great commentary, the *Mahabhasya*.' Where there is a difference of opinion between classical authorities, the classical Sanskrit grammarians attached a higher value to the views of Patanjali (first century BC) than to the views of his great predecessors, Katayayana (third century BC) and Panini (fifth century BC) himself. But what is truly significant is that where Panini recorded dialectical variations and distinguished between those which were real and those which were optional, Patanjali and the rest of the post-Paninian grammatical tradition declared all dialectical forms to be pure options, and postulated instead 'the doctrine of eternality of language': linguistic usage was 'thought to be eternal and without beginning.' 'What has happened to "history" in this case?', asks Deshpande. "'Historical fact was victimized at the altar of formal consistency.'"⁸³ The same notion of authority is reflected in the dharmasastra literature and, as Sheldon Pollock has argued, in the philosophical system of Mimamsa. Commenting upon the Indian 'tradition's presumed lack of historical awareness', Pollock concedes that there is a 'general absence of historical referentiality in traditional Sanskritic culture', which he seeks to explain by the Mimamsa conception of the Vedas as a 'transcendent' body of literature, emptied of 'referential intention'. For a text to be linked genetically to the Vedas, which perforce was required by the intellectual tradition, it had to suppress the evidence of its own historical existence.⁸⁴

This linguistic eternalism, to return to Deshpande, must be understood 'in the context of the historical situation of the Mauryan era', when Brahminical culture was attempting to reassert its dominance in the face of threats from Buddhism, Jainism, and other non-Vedic and anti-Vedic movements. Brahminical culture and Sanskrit as they then existed were held to have been extant in the same form since the beginning of time: history did not exist. According to Deshpande, the problem of 'existence' was separated from the problem of 'attestation'. That some forms occurred in a particular text while others did not was thus a matter of accident; only 'eternal existence was the fact'. The Sanskrit grammatical tradition, then, embodies, if only in negation,

a certain conception of history.⁸⁵ Do we thus have a theory of knowledge which refuses to recognize the existence of history?

The theory that there is no history in a real sense was, to follow Deshpande's reasoning, articulated at a time of great change. Brahminical society was burdened with the task of countering various heterodoxies, but it was also 'facing the trauma of the Greek invasion' of India by Alexander. But of this purportedly traumatic event there is virtually no mention in Indian literature, and it is to Western historians, beginning with Arrian and Plutarch, that we must turn for a description of this encounter—an encounter that was, no doubt, multicultural! English historians, in particular, would much later describe Alexander's invasion as an event of monumental significance, a watershed in Indian history; Indian historians, down to the present day, as a very modern history of India concedes, can scarcely be bothered to factor Alexander into their narratives of antiquity.⁸⁶ Could Alexander's invasion have been such a 'trauma' for Brahminical culture if the Indian tradition could not be bothered to record even the mere presence of a world conqueror? But it may well be argued that it is precisely because Alexander's incursion into India initiated such a massive rupture in Brahminical society that its representatives and custodians failed to give it even a passing mention. History would purposefully be ignored much as dialectical variations had been ignored.

The question of change—and permanence—assumed a great share in Western and later nationalist explanations of why Indians were without a historical sense and failed to produce a tradition of historical inquiry. The view of India as a static society, with which the figures of Montesquieu, Hegel, Marx, and numerous others, not to mention the scholar-administrators who governed India, are associated is too well-known to require more than a cursory mention. 'Absolute Being is presented here [in India] as in the ecstatic state of a dreaming condition'; and the inhabitants of India, added Hegel, could not wake up from the 'magic somnambulatory sleep' into which they had fallen.⁸⁷ Marx, in turn, thought India was characterized by an 'undignified, stagnatory and vegetative life'. His verdict on Indian history was that such a thing didn't exist:

Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.⁸⁸

As a later Orientalist scholar, Arthur MacDonell, put it, 'early India

wrote no history because it never made any.⁸⁹ In India nothing much happened: invaders came and left, empires were toppled and installed, the arbitrariness of one monarch was replaced and matched by that of another: and underneath this all-life in the village communities of which India was composed continued as ever, unchanging, unmoving, oblivious of the passing of time. 'Vegetating in the teeth of time', the natives witnessed, without so much as the blink of an eye, the 'ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, and the massacre of the population of large towns'.⁹⁰ Change was only illusory, the veneer at the surface: permanence alone was permanent. Where there was no change, what would there be to record? And from whence would spring history?

No explanation that seeks to account for India's lack of a historiographical tradition has had so many adherents than the one which equates history with change. Allied to this cosmic view of unchanging India is the commonly held opinion that Hindu civilization is marked by unworldliness. Where the business of the individual is enhancing her chances of personal salvation, and where the individual is preoccupied with discovering the presence of God within herself or offering devotion to Him to the exclusion of understanding her relationship with other members of her society, a common unity cannot be forged. History is the collective memory of a people, of their common struggle for the achievement of the good, and such history cannot transpire when each person leads an other-worldly life, strangely uninterested in the profane world. The Indologists' India, moreover, reflects the principle of immutability, which is not conducive to historical inquiry, even at the level of interpersonal relationships. It is not just Indian society as a whole which does not show much movement; individuals too stay in their places within a determined and unalterable social order: and so history becomes well-nigh impossible. India's geographical isolation, and her immunity from change, must in the Orientalist view be considered the prime reason why a historiographical tradition was not developed in India before the advent of Islam.

Although the presence in India of Muslim works of history from around 1200 AD onwards is commonly known,⁹¹ the import of this development is perhaps less clear than it should be. Is it too much to conjecture that in the period before the coming of the Muslims, not only the cultural unity of India, but perhaps the very survival of its people was based on a purposeful forgetfulness? In what manner would the people of India have lived with the burden of the knowledge

that their country had repeatedly been subjected to the rule of foreigners? Modern man thinks of history as an aid to living in the present, but to the Indian history has the contrary effect of not enabling one to live in the present. Each civilization must find its way to eliminating the suffering that is born of existential dilemmas, of decay from within, and of oppression from within and without; and the latter was, one can perhaps speculate, best achieved by a *wilful amnesia*.

The first significant dent in the wilful amnesia of an entire civilization appeared with the establishment of the Islamic faith on Indian soil. The incursions into India by the Muslims followed that of the Sakas, the Pahlavas, the Kushans, and the Huns, but the Muslims, unlike their predecessors, brought with them a strong monotheistic faith. The sense of history also appears to have been first installed in some meaningful way among Indians with the coming of Islam; or, to advance a less daring claim, the advent of Islam in India and the emergence of historical writing display a certain simultaneity that cannot pass without observation. Among the great continuing world civilizations, the sense of history has generally been most evident in those characterized by a monotheistic faith and a strong proselytizing tendency. The most notable exception here would be China, which in the figure of Ssu-ma-chien produced a great historian as early as the first century BC, and has ever since shown itself fundamentally interested in practices of historical inquiry.⁹² If Chinese mythology is scarcely as rich and diverse as that of India, we are obviously tempted to ask whether myth and history were conceived in opposition, or whether mythology suffers when there is an enhanced view of history.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all monotheistic faiths, have been marked by an acute sense of history, and unlike Hinduism these are proselytizing faiths,⁹³ though the Hinduism of some Hindus, as subsequent chapters demonstrate, has now begun to acquire their characteristics. Where redemption is only possible through the acceptance of The Chosen One, the Saviour, and the rejection both of 'polytheism' and of the possibility of redemption through other avenues, the writing of history must become an imperative task. History records the triumph of that faith, its spread through vast spaces over a period of time, and the acceptance by the conquered peoples of the personal saviour as the redeemer of mankind. There is, for each of these faiths, only one possible history; and the eschatology is not the redemption of man by the Saviour but rather his redemption by history. Does not

history, and the development of a historiographical tradition, have something of a natural association with the notion of a personal saviour and with proselytism? Are we not at least pushed towards the thought that monotheistic faiths almost certainly have resorted to the idioms of historical thought and writing, while Hinduism has been indifferent, if not hostile, to the historical enterprise?

Let me, then, speculate further and move us as far away from the arguments conventionally furnished—extending from the hostility of India's climate to historical texts, the conspiratorial character of Brahmins and the intolerance of Muslim conquerors and rulers, to the supposed irrationality of Indians, their animadversion to facts and empirical positivism, and (in Hegelian terms) the stagnation of the Spirit—to explain the lack of historical literature in India until at least the coming of Islam, arguments all predicated on the assumption that to concede this lack is to accept that on the evaluative scale of civilizations, India must fare poorly. The acceptance of history is nothing but the narrowing of man's options, the submission of a people to the reigning ideas of the time, and the renunciation of multiple eschatologies for the exceedingly dubious benefit of being part of the global destiny of the human race. Though histories are increasingly being written in the plural, paradoxically their ascent leads to history in the singular. It is not that 'history may be servitude': history is servitude; and it is this view, which has found its greatest exponent in Gandhi—the real one, not his unpropitiously named namesakes who were bent on bringing India into the orbit of world history—which must principally account for why Hindu civilization chose not to produce a historiographical tradition. As the epistemological clarity of this position is best seen in the writings of Gandhi, and in the style of thinking and mode of action associated with his name, I shall turn to him, here (in the final section of this chapter) and elsewhere in this book, to explore the meaning of this profound indifference to history, and the possibilities of constructing an account of knowledge which allows little or no epistemological space to historical knowledge, historical writing, or even historical consciousness.

VI

For much the same reasons that Bankim was willing to accept history as a guide to action, Gandhi was not. Bankim's interest in history, the historical sense and historical evidence, was derived partly from a desire to demonstrate that the past of India, and particularly of his

native Bengal, was one of martial traditions and military prowess. His historical novels set out to establish that the various invaders of India, far from being allowed to enter and pillage the country without contest, were given battle at every turn. But Indians, when at all they had any knowledge of the past, gained that understanding from the accounts of Europeans, for whom non-resistance and cowardice characterized the response of Indians to alien invasions, indeed to the mere threat of violence. As Robert Orme, among the first British historians of India, put it in 1782: if a European sailor 'brandishes his stick in sport, [he] puts fifty Indians to flight in a moment'.⁹⁴ Indians had thus been induced to believe that violent resistance formed no part of their past.

Gandhi, on the other hand, displayed a rather more complex and ambivalent attitude to the question of whether violence had constituted a part of the people's response to oppression and injustice, whether inflicted by invaders or indigenous rulers. In Gandhi's Gujarat, various traditional forms of resistance, such as *hartal* (boycott), *hijrat* (migration), and *dharna* (sit-in; fasting; literally, being an 'obstacle'), were still being employed in the nineteenth century.⁹⁵ In his treatise of 1909, *Hind Swaraj*, cast in the form of a dialogue between the sceptic ('the reader') and Gandhi ('the editor'), Gandhi showed his awareness that 'passive resistance' had for a very long time been offered by the people to seek redressal of their grievances or to protest against the unjust rule of monarchs.⁹⁶ When asked by the imaginary reader whether there was 'any historical evidence as to the success of ... soul-force or truth-force', Gandhi replied that if history meant 'the doings of kings and emperors', then 'no evidence of soul-force or passive resistance was [to be found] in such history'. If history, he added, had the meaning—'it so happened'—given to the word in Gujarati (and other Indian languages), then 'copious evidence' could be supplied.⁹⁷ However, later, when he had the experience of many years of satyagraha in India behind him, Gandhi was to describe many of the methods of passive resistance, which he had earlier condoned, as forms of *duragraha* (the grasping on to falsehood) and coercion which were not any less forms of coercion on account of being non-violent. Whatever may have been the forms of resistance in the past, Gandhi knew only too well that his attempt to apply non-violence on a mass scale in India's fight for freedom and thereby to induce the social transformation of Indian society was altogether unprecedented. History could be no guide to action in the present; indeed, the very idea that battle had to be given to the

opponent non-violently required that history be ignored, or else the burden of the past would have been so overpowering as to render futile the enterprise at the very moment of conception. Gandhi rejected the notion, widespread even today, that there are 'lessons' to be learned from history. Perhaps the only lesson was that history itself had to be unlearned.

As history had serviced imperialism, so it could be wielded as an ideological weapon by nationalism. The study of history received its first impetus from nationalist sentiment, though, as Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha among others have documented, in Bengal the writing of history can be dated to the middle of the nineteenth century, to a time when nationalist feeling was at best merely incipient. The brutal suppression of the revolt of 1857-8 must have played some part in generating historical reflection. The study of history by Hindu nationalists and historians predictably began in earnest in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when nationalism was first emerging in force. Gandhi's rejection of the nationalist use of history is once again seen best by way of contrast with the historicism of Bankim. To Bankim's mind there was no doubt, as we have seen, that Krishna was a real, historical figure, and the Mahabharata a text with a historical core. The vast majority of Indian nationalists, and virtually all of the most important Hindu leaders with the exception of Gandhi, were of one mind with Bankim on this question. The mammoth interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita by Bankim's renowned contemporary, Tilak, can be adduced as evidence of this tendency; and neither is it surprising that the Gita, wherein Krishna induces Arjuna to accept the creed of the Aryan warrior, was the favoured text of Indian 'terrorists' or 'extremists'.⁹⁸

Gandhi, however, was just as firmly indisposed towards treating the Mahabharata as a historical record and accepting the historicity of Krishna. The Mahabharata, he wrote in 1924, 'is not to me a historical record. It is hopeless as a history. But it deals with eternal verities in an allegorical fashion.'⁹⁹ The original core of the Mahabharata was just as allegorical as the accretions; there was nothing historical about it. Gandhi developed his interpretation of the Mahabharata as an allegory, and of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas as the fight within the soul between the forces of darkness and the forces of good, in an extended commentary on the Gita.¹⁰⁰ As for the Krishna of the Mahabharata, there was not enough knowledge to warrant the conclusion that he 'ever lived'. 'My Krishna has nothing to do with any historical person', affirmed Gandhi.¹⁰¹ His secretary and close

personal associate, Mahadev Desai, describing Gandhi's attitude towards the Gita, was certain that 'no textual discovery' would 'affect by a jot the essence or universality of that message. The same thing may be said about questions of the historical Krishna.'¹⁰² Thus Gandhi distanced himself from interpretations of the Mahabharata which sought to establish its historicity and resuscitate Krishna as a historical figure who not only urged Arjuna to use his arms but was also not above using some chicanery to defeat the forces of evil.

Gandhi would have considered the resort to history as another facet of the attempt of educated Indians, and particularly of the modernizing and urbanized elite which constituted the vanguard, to enter into a race with the West. He saw very clearly how the programme to rewrite history, to turn Krishna into a historical figure and depict the Bhagavad Gita as a historical record of Krishna's teachings to Arjuna, had a hard, even cold-blooded, edge to it, a natural link with realpolitik and an exaggerated masculinity. Gandhi alone among Indian nationalists and thinkers recognized not merely that women have been evicted from history, but also that history has been a masculinist enterprise, and that history produces no notable truths about humanity, but rather *man's* truth.¹⁰³ Is it surprising that Veer Savarkar, a noted Hindu chauvinist who was suspected of having masterminded the conspiracy to murder Gandhi, first made his presence as a nationalist known by rewriting the history of the so-called 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857, terming it instead 'The First War of Indian Independence', and that he was an addict of history? As Savarkar was to say of the word that he has made (in)famous, 'Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as it is sometimes taken to be by being confused with the other conjugate term Hinduism, but a history in full.'¹⁰⁴ The assassin of Gandhi, likewise a history buff who understood Gandhi better than all those who dubbed him 'mad', felt compelled to extinguish the life of Gandhi because the old man, by introducing such fads as 'fasting' and obedience to the 'inner voice' into politics, was emasculating the nation; moreover, Gandhi's creed and policy of non-violence was an affront to history, which in 'a thousand years' had never been prey to a 'more stupendous fiction' than that fostered by Gandhi when he led Indians and the world to believe that non-violence was anything other than 'suicidal'.¹⁰⁵

Whereas the nationalists chose to exploit history for their own ends, Gandhi shunned it altogether: what was corrupt at the source was irredeemable. Almost nowhere else did he reveal himself to be so

characteristically Indian. In terms both epistemological and practical at once, the implication of this rejection of history was the abandonment of the notion that history has 'lessons' to offer to human beings and of the idea of progress, or at least progress as it was conceived by Enlightenment thinkers, colonial policy planners, and (though Gandhi did not live to encounter this breed) 'development experts'. History as it was practised when Gandhi was writing was still mainly political history, the history of kings and of the wars which they periodically fought, the history of cities sacked and rebuilt only to be sacked again. This no doubt deepened Gandhi's indifference to history. But how could doing history one way rather than another way, when the very idea was oppressive, have made a difference? Would the advent of social and cultural history, the explosion of women's history and the history of other marginalized and oppressed people,¹⁰⁶ and the quest (following Foucault) for the archaeologies of knowledge, have made history more palatable to Gandhi? History with a capital 'H' has enough detractors, and they have almost entirely wound up on the side of history with a small 'h'. And we must also ask apropos of these new developments in history: do they suggest that whatever may have been the reasons which induced Indians to forgo the creation of a historiographical tradition, such reasons do not exist any more? If history once oppressed, does it now liberate?

Gandhi would have welcomed the sentiments behind recent developments in historiography and the good intentions of their proponents. In his own, howsoever limited, way he tried to bring women into the public arena and into political life. He decried the use of history to propagate a hyper-masculinity; indeed, he consciously strove in the other direction of attempting to feminize Indian politics, as the introduction of both fasting and spinning, which came to acquire a complex web of meanings, into politics amply demonstrates.¹⁰⁷ Women were 'out of history'; but was Gandhi seeking, as are modern feminists, to write them back into history? Similarly he set up the untouchables and the lower castes against the higher—and if he didn't, as his more stringent critics would claim, it is remarkable that his Brahmin foes have generally viewed Gandhi with extreme hostility as a person whose conduct and social thinking were alike destructive of the social order. But it was not Gandhi's intent in challenging the authority of Brahminism that equality should come about by everyone being treated as a Brahmin: true equality would obtain when every Indian felt himself or herself to be an untouchable, and untouchability consequently lost its force in Indian society. The

political parity he sought to win for Indians 'was not done in the name of restructuring traditions but in the name of strengthening Indianness, Hinduism or dharma, all of which are supposedly collectivist-hierarchical in spirit'.¹⁰⁸ But where there is something almost profoundly ahistorical about how Gandhi set out to restructure Indian society and yet strengthen Hinduism and the *sanatana-dharma* (the eternal religion), the project of Bankim, Tilak, and others in achieving precisely the same ends entailed the glorification of a hyper-masculinity, the imitation of the West, and the fabrication of history.

I began with the query as to why India lacked a tradition of historical inquiry. In concluding with Gandhi I do not mean to suggest that there is a linear history to this ahistoricism at the end of which stands the Absolute Spirit, reincarnated not as Hegel but as Gandhi the Prophet. The past can be read from many objects; there can be many kinds of 'texts'. But it must be candidly admitted that the past of India cannot be read from historical records. A tradition of historical inquiry and writings has not existed in India until very recent times, and did not exist for very good and compelling reasons. Perhaps I have not sufficiently indicated that some contemporary historians, who can scarcely be accused of supporting either nationalist or colonialist interpretations of history, take strong exception to the characterization of pre-modern India as a civilization which lacked the historical sensibility, but their denunciation of a positivist conception of history is nonetheless itself contingent upon a positivist embrace of history, howsoever non-positivist and non-Eurocentric their conception of history may be. Thus Nicholas Dirks asks, following a quotation from a pronouncement in 1800 by a British official declaring that Indians are inattentive to 'History, or tradition', 'if it is true that India had no sense of history until the British introduced it', and why this assumption had not faced more 'critical scrutiny'?¹⁰⁹ Dirks points to the importance of caste histories and family chronicles, but his own study of Indian society and its notions of kingship relies on chronicles from the time *after* the British had made known their presence in India for several decades. Peter van der Veer similarly finds 'ridiculous' the notion that Indians should have 'lacked' a sense of history, but his mere assertion has no value beyond the expression of an anti-Indological sentiment, and significantly enough, he ends up admitting, following the argument of Pollock, that 'Hindu discourse often tried to avoid historical referentiality'.¹¹⁰ Neither can envision the possibility that a people may choose to opt out of history,

or—the softer version—that they may not desire to possess the sense of history. Agreement with the Orientalist argument that Indians did not produce a historical literature need not signify one's assent to the proposition that this must perforce be construed as a debilitating and unacceptable 'lack'.

In post-Independence India, and more particularly in the last couple of decades, a tradition of historical inquiry has developed in significant ways. The growth of such a tradition, with which this book is in substantial part concerned, is not necessarily a propitious development, and we have only to look at the revival of history in its crudest forms among the advocates of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement to understand how the aspiration to be possessed of a history has now entered the public domain and wrought havoc.¹¹¹ I have summoned Gandhi as an instance of why we should believe that the absence of historical inquiry suggests an acute presence of mind and why this lack, an allegedly grave fault, must be revalorized and turned to advantage. If it is claimed that universal history has given way to local and particular histories, that claim provides no relief when we consider that the discourse of history has become the new universal discourse of our times, supplanting even the long period of the hegemony of science. Science, however, was never without its detractors, and Europe had to suppress its own traditions of dissent. Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the race around the entire non-Western world to catch up with the scientific West does not nearly have the unanimous appeal it once did, and perhaps this race matters less today than it did even a few decades ago, when modernization theory prevailed, and the West, despite the anti-colonial struggles, could only be emulated for its achievements. However, we are now witnesses to the universal enthronement of history. Is there an educational system where history is not part of the curriculum, and is there a country where history textbooks are not the subject of acute debate and unrest? No sooner is a people faulted or pitied for having no history, for not having been part of history, than one of them sets out to write that glorious history of his or her people. Is there a people that does not want a history?

Contemporary narratives suggest that the civilization of the West is now largely postmodern and 'post-industrial'; it has entered the age of 'late capitalism', and at some point so will the rest of the world, unless that world has a suicidal intent to become history. What is transnational is not so much the leviathan corporation which pays scant respect to history and to the nation-state but certain categories

of knowledge, most particularly 'history'. Science never achieved the conquests which history is now positioned to accomplish. History is the new dogmatism; and as a dogma, as well as a mode of conquest, it is more unrelenting and total than science, which has had its detractors from the very beginning. What better instance of the totalizing tendency of history do we have than the manner in which Gandhi, who dismissed history to the periphery of human knowledge, has in turn been dismissed by history to the periphery of human knowledge? If Indian intellectual and cultural traditions, of which Gandhi was supremely emblematic, present something of an anomaly, that appears to be perfectly apposite for a civilization that has chosen to burn, not bury, its dead. To use the historian's jargon, the only 'lesson' history has to offer is that as the Indian tradition did without this historical sense, so might we. In a world where the most radical theories are sold on the market, and revolutions are managed by financiers and corporate executives, the abandonment of history may well be the only heresy that remains to us, for that defiance is nothing other than the defiance of the categories of knowledge which have become the most effective and insidious means of oppressing humankind today. This might be taken as a philosophical plea; but perforce the rest of the book will be conjugated in the historical tense.

ENDNOTES

1. A word of explanation is required for my use of the word 'history' in this chapter. By that term I seek to designate, least of all, 'what happened'; I am much less interested in the past as history. As the very title of this book, *The History of History*, suggests, I am largely concerned, in speaking of history, with historical writing and historical thinking, and thereby also a certain method of investigating the past, and with what is generally conveyed when we speak of the 'sense of history'. I also intend to suggest by this usage the ability to reason historically and to ground one's arguments in a historical sociology. In short, I am most interested in those usages of history which designate what is often termed the 'historical consciousness', or the historical sensibility.

2. See Gautam Chattopadhyay, ed., *Awakening in Bengal in Early Nineteenth Century* (Selected Documents), Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1965), pp. lv–lix.

3. Rev. Krishna Mohun Banerjee, 'Discourse on the Nature and Importance of Historical Studies', in *Selection of Discourses Delivered at the Meetings of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge*, Vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1840),

reprinted in Chattopadhyay, *Awakening in Bengal*, pp. 1–23; see esp. pp. 4, 7–8, 22–3.

4. For details, not always reliable, about Alberuni's life, see Sir H. M. Elliot, *The History of India As Told by Its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*, ed. (and continued) by John Dowson, 8 vols (reprint edn, Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, n.d.), 2:1–13. The introduction by Ainslee Embree to the abridged 1-volume translation by Edward Sachau, *Alberuni's India* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), pp. v–xix, is useful.

5. Edward C. Sachau, trans. and ed., *Alberuni's India* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1888; reprint edn, Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1964, 2 vols in 1), 1:22.

6. Cf. K. M. Munshi, *Somnath: The Shrine Eternal* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1953), p. 89.

7. Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, 2:10–11. The translation of Sir H. M. Elliot, working from a French version which he compared with the Arabic text, appears to be less adequate: 'The Indians attach little importance to the sequence of events, and neglect to record the dates of the reigns of their kings. When they are embarrassed, they are silent.' See Elliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, 2:10.

8. Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. li and x, p. 442, cited by James Mill, *History of British India*, ed. with notes by Horace Hayman Wilson, 10 volumes, 5th edn (London: James Madden, 1858), 2:48 n. 2. John Malcolm, in his *History of Persia*, 1: 273, wrote of the ancient Persians that he had never heard of any work by them 'in the ancient Pehlavi that could be deemed historical'. See James Mill, *ibid.*, 2:49.

9. R. Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon* (London, 1803), pp. 4–5, and J. Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon* (London, 1821), p. vi, both cited by John D. Rogers, 'Historical Images in the British Period', in Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 88.

10. See Mill, *History of British India*, 2:47–8.

11. Elliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, Original Preface by Sir Henry Elliot, pp. xviii–xxi.

12. Mill, *History of British India*, 2:47.

13. *Ibid.*, 1:114–5. Mill cited, among others, one Captain Wilford: 'The mythology of the Hindus is often inconsistent and contradictory, and the same tale is related many different ways. Their physiology, astronomy, and history, are involved in allegories and enigmas, which cannot but seem extravagant and ridiculous ...' ('Discourse on Egypt and the Nile', *Asiatic Researches* III.29). Another of Mill's 'authorities' was Major Rennel, a naval officer who served as a major in Clive's army, and went on to become Surveyor General of the East India Company Territories of Bengal: 'There is no known history of Hindoostan (that rests on the foundation of Hindu materials or records) extant, before the period of the Muhammedan

conquests' (*Rennel's Memoir*, Introduction, p. xl). Similarly Scott Waring, whom Mill described as an 'Oriental scholar of some eminence', said of 'Hindu mythology and history' that they appear to be buried in 'impenetrable darkness' (see Mill, *History of British India*, 1:116 n. 2 and p. 117 n. 1). H. H. Wilson, in his notes to the fifth edition of Mill's history, made a brave and well-intentioned but, as I shall argue later, fruitless and misdirected attempt to counter Mill's assertions about the poverty of Hindu literature, whether historical or otherwise. James Mill and H. H. Wilson represent the two faces of Orientalism, and as Ronald Inden has so aptly remarked, romantics like Wilson constituted a 'loyal opposition' to positivists like Mill. See Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 41–8.

Captain Wilford's allegation that among the Hindus 'the same tale is related many ways' is striking. It is extraordinary that 'the Hindus' should have had to defend themselves against such a charge. The supposition that there is, or ought to be, only one way of telling a tale is one that only 'Enlightenment' Europe was capable of harbouring. It is this hyper-rationality that induced, within European thinking and action alike, a singularity of purpose that, on the one hand, led to European colonialism and a display of self-aggrandizement such as had never been witnessed before, and on the other hand to a conception of knowledge that had no room for plurality of opinions, or for a plurality of modes of apprehending the world. After Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, no one can insist that there must be one way of telling a tale, and it is just as clear that the decentring of narratives, which one can accept as the principal contribution of postmodernism, is also one of the central strategies deployed in Indian texts. But this is a matter that I cannot take up here.

14. Mill, *History of British India*, 2:51; Thomas B. Macaulay, 'Minute on Indian Education', *Selected Writings*, ed. John Clive (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 243 (para 13).

15. Mill, *History of British India*, Preface by Wilson, 1:xii.

16. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, [Address to the National Indian Association], *Journal of the National Indian Association* (January 1878), p. 30.

17. Macaulay, *Selected Writings*, pp. 242–3.

18. Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 100–01.

19. Inden, *Imagining India*, p. 45.

20. Mill, *History of British India*, 2:46.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.

22. It is not my claim here that Thucydides, and much less Herodotus, were 'historians' in the sense in which that might be understood today: the intricacies of any such assessment, in the event, fall far outside the purview of this book. Even from the standpoint of a Mill, there was too much of 'myth' in the writings of these Greeks, and indeed Herodotus was full of fanciful and absurd notions, but no one would have been willing to allow that Herodotus

and Thucydides were *not* historians, albeit of widely varying calibre. The problems of claiming the Greeks as their true intellectual ancestors, as the fount of their civilization, is one that Europeans have scarcely addressed, and the emotional and intellectual disruptions that this enterprise would create are not such that Europeans are equipped to handle with equipoise. This appears to be demonstrated by the sharp controversy aroused by the publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985* (London: Free Association Books; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); see also Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, eds, *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

23. Louis B. Wright, 'The Elizabethan Middle-Class Taste for History', *The Journal of Modern History* 3, no. 2 (June 1931), pp. 175, 179.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 177, citing Barnabe Rich, *Allarme to England* (1578).

25. Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London* (1st edn, 1667; 4th edn, London: J. Knapton, J. Walthoe, etc., 1734). See also Richard Foster Jones, 'Science and English Prose Style in the Third Quarter of the Seventeenth Century', *PMLA* 45 (1930):977–1009, esp. p. 1002.

26. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 48–9.

27. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 367–73.

28. For an exhaustive study of the institutionalization of history, see Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians, and Archaeologists in Victorian Britain, 1838–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

29. Cited by Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and the 'Woman Question'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 4.

30. Quoted in Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A study in nineteenth-century intellectual history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 183.

31. S. N. Banerjea, 'The Study of Indian History', *Speeches of S. N. Banerjea, 1876–1880* (n.p.; n.d.), pp. 2–3.

32. *Ibid.*

33. P. Mukhopadhyay, *Balya Shiksha Banglar Itihas [A Children's History of Bengal]* (Habra, 1891), p. 20, cited by Indira Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 52.

34. See comment by K. S. Ramaswami Sastri, in K. A. Nilakanta Sastri et al., 'Historiography: India and the West', *Bulletin of the Institute of Traditional Cultures [hereafter BITC]* (Madras), Part 1 (1962), p. 299.

35. Alberuni's *India*, ed. Sachau, p. 18.

36. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *Report on the Territories Conquered from the Peshwa* [1821], excerpted in George W. Forrest, ed., *Selections from the Minutes*

and Other Official Writings of the Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay (London: R. Bentley, 1884), p. 260.

37. J. Talboys Wheeler, *The History of India from the Earliest Ages* (London: Trubner, 1869; reprint edn, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1922), p. 6, cited by Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, p. 125.

38. John B. Gilchrist, 'Preface', *A Dictionary, English and Hindoostanee* (Calcutta, part I, 1786; part II, 1790), p. xxvi, cited by Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', *Subaltern Studies* IV, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 302. Gilchrist was of the opinion that Sanskrit was a 'cunning fabrication' of the 'insidious Brahmans', an artificial language derived from 'Hinduwee' (see Cohn, pp. 304–05).

39. Burton Stein, 'Early Indian Historiography: A Conspiracy Hypothesis', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 6 (1969):41–60, esp. pp. 48–51. But cf. Romila Thapar, 'Society and Historical Consciousness: The *Itihasa-Purana* Tradition', in Romila Thapar and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, eds, *Situating Indian History—for S. Gopal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 353–83, esp. pp. 366–67.

40. Although undoubtedly the transmission of knowledge from a guru to a male student was a purely Brahminical affair, our understanding of this very process hinges upon the definition of a 'Brahmin'. There is no reason to suppose, as Stein does, that a 'Brahmin' necessarily signifies membership in a *jati* or *gotra* of ritually pure birth. The story of Satyakama [seeker of truth] in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (IV.4) is illustrative in this respect. Seeking to live the life of a student of sacred knowledge, Satyakama asked his mother of what family he was descended. She replied that she begat him in her youth when she 'went about a great deal serving as a maid', and did not know who had fathered him. When Satyakama came before Haridrumata Gautama and asked to be admitted as his student, he was queried about his family, whereupon Satyakama relayed the exact words spoken to him by his mother. The guru accepted Satyakama as his student, for he had not deviated from the truth, and no non-Brahmin (*a-brahmana*) would have done the same. There are other famous instances of Hindus of low social origins and even non-Hindus such as Kabir being accepted as students of sacred knowledge. The point is that, in principle, a Brahmin was a Brahmin not by virtue of birth but by his steadfast devotion to truth and the purity of his character. But by and large it is true, if the Dharmasastras be our witness, that the injunction against the Sudras learning, reciting, and hearing the Vedas was very strong. Manu said that the Brahmin who explained the sacred law to the Sudra would, along with the latter, sink into hell (*The Laws of Manu*, IV. 80; cf. III. 156 ff.); and Sudras would gain merit if they 'imitate[d] the practice of virtuous men without reciting sacred texts' (X. 127; translation of G. Buhler). The cultural politics of staking the definition of Brahminhood on conduct and behavior is scarcely unproblematic; from one standpoint, it is more

oppressive than the conventional and circumscribed meaning of 'Brahmin', which restricts this appellation to persons of certain birth, for on the more generous reading every person of good moral conduct must perforce be a Brahmin. This would, needless to say, not be acceptable to certain sections of Indian society, such as the Dalits or others harbouring anti-Brahminical sentiments.

41. Stein, 'Early Indian Historiography', pp. 41, 58–9. On traditions of Indian learning, see the collection edited by Alex Michaels, *The Pandit: Traditional Scholarship in India* (Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

42. Ibid., pp. 55–6, and David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773–1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 275.

43. Comment of N. Subramaniam, in K. A. Nilakanta Sastri et al., 'Historiography: India and the West', *BITC*, pp. 266–7.

44. See T. W. Clark, 'Bengali Prose Fiction Up to Bankimchandra', in T. W. Clark, ed., *The Novel in India: Its Birth and Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 65; and Vera Novikova, *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay: His Life and Works*, trans. Nishitesh Banerjee (Calcutta: National Publishers, 1976), p. 169.

45. I might note here that Sanskrit words occur in this chapter, and indeed elsewhere in the book, without diacritical marks; secondly, a number of words appear in two or more forms: within a quotation, the word is reproduced from the original without any alterations, but my own usage of that word may reflect the more common or modern transliteration.

46. Bankim Chatterjee, *Durgesa Nandini or The Chieftain's Daughter* (1880), trans. Charu Chandra Mookerjee, 2nd edn (Calcutta: The Classic Press, 1903), pp. 15–16. 'Yavanas' may be translated as 'foreigners' or 'barbarians'; it is a corruption of the word 'Ionian'.

47. 'Bharatvarsa paradin kena?' *Bankim Racnabali* [henceforth BR], ed. Yogesh Chandra Bagal, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1965), p. 239.

48. 'Sankhyadarsan', BR II:222–6, cited by Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986), pp. 56–7.

49. Bankim Chatterjee, 'Bharatvarsa Paradin Kena?', BR II:239.

50. Ibid., p. 240.

51. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna-Charitra*, trans. with introduction by Pradip Bhattacharya (Calcutta: The M. P. Birla Foundation, 1991), p. 21.

52. Bankim Chatterjee, *Dharmatattva*, BR II.

53. *Anandamath*, translated as *The Abbey of Bliss* by Nares Chandra Sengupta (Calcutta: Padmini Mohan Neogi, 1904), p. 97.

54. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, p. 59.

55. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna-Charitra*, p. 29.

56. 'Pracar', BR II:334, cited by Rachel R. van Meter, 'Bankimchandra's

View of the Role of Bengal in Indian Civilization', in *Bengal Regional Identity*, ed. David Kopf (Lansing, Michigan: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1969), p. 62.

57. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Krishna-Charitra*, p. 35.

58. 'Bangalar itihas sambandhe kayekti katha' ('A Few Words Concerning the History of Bengal'), BR II:339, cited by Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, p. 79.

59. Quoted in Novikova, *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay*, p. 91.

60. 'Pracar', BR II:333, cited by van Meter, 'Bankimchandra's View of the Role of Bengal', p. 69.

61. Notwithstanding the unnecessary, even absurd, stabs at Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee, the essay by Tanika Sarkar, 'Imagining Hindurashtra: The Hindu and the Muslim in Bankim Chandra's Writings', in *Making India Hindu*, ed. David Ludden (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 162–84, offers some useful insights into Bankim's novels and essays, and has the virtue of treating them together while suggesting modes of differentiating between the polemical strategies of the two genres (see esp. pp. 167, 172–81).

62. 'Bangalar itihas sambandhe kayekti katha', BR II:330.

63. 'Bangalar itihas sambandhe kayekti katha', BR II:330, cited also by Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, p. 82 n. 9.

64. Cited by Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and Its Implications*, S. G. Deuskar Lectures on Indian History (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi & Co., 1988), p. 1.

65. The literature on Bankim, some of it specifically devoted to his views on history, is burgeoning. Other than the essays of Partha Chatterjee, which are largely different versions of the same theme, there is the book-length study of Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), as well as Henry Schwarz's *Writing Cultural History in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). When Bankim wrote of Bengal, particularly in a nationalist vein, he generally meant India; on the other hand, by 'India' Schwarz really means 'Bengal', and the figures under scrutiny are Vidyasagar, Romesh Chandra Dutt, Bankim, Aurobindo, Dinesh Chandra Sen, J. C. Ghosh, Susobhan Sarkar, Ranajit Guha, Sumit Sarkar, and a few other intellectuals, all Bengalis. This conceit, which allows scholars to speak of India when their only interest resides in Bengal, or when their material is drawn exclusively from Bengal, has not been sufficiently addressed in the modern historiography of India. The omission of Jadunath Sarkar and R. C. Majumdar, perhaps the two most widely read historians in the country during their respectively long careers, from Schwarz's considerations tells another story of postcolonialism's selective (and generally predictable) engagement with texts, histories, and scholars. I myself take up Jadunath Sarkar and Majumdar in Chapter II.

66. See R. C. Majumdar, *Historiography in Modern India* (London and Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1970), p. 5; *Ideas of History in Sanskrit*

Literature', in C. H. Philips, ed., *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London: Oxford University Press), esp. pp. 27–8; and *Seminar*, no. 39 (1962), p. 15.

67. Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, trans. R. Shamasastri (8th edn, Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, 1967), p. 6; the subsequent quote is from pp. 9–10.

68. See V. S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 4th revised and enlarged edn (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), v. *itivrta* and *itihasa* (p. 245), *akhyayika* (p. 202), *udaharana* (pp. 269–70).

69. *Ibid.*, v. *itihasa*, p. 245; the translation into English is by Chidambara Kulkarni, *Studies in Indian History* (Bombay: Shri Dvaipayana Trust, n.d.), p. 3.

70. This is the view of R. C. Majumdar, 'Ideas of History', p. 13 and Buddha Prakash, 'The Hindu Philosophy of History', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 4 (October 1955), p. 495.

71. F. E. Pargiter, *The Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* (London, 1922), cited in *BITC*, p. 258; and comment by one Mr. Sanjivi, in *BITC*, p. 294.

72. Even Thucydides, whose value as an historian is seldom questioned, has been accused by F. M. Cornford in *Thucydides Mythistoricus* of having no clear conception of causation. See E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 114. How much more palpable is this 'flaw' in Kalhana, writing well over 1,500 years after Thucydides? It is not impertinent to note that at least a few modern thinkers have stressed the absence of any sense of 'historicity in general' in Greek thought: see Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 159.

73. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chap. lxiv, cited by Carr, *What is History?*, p. 128.

74. James Mill, *History of British India*, 2:48–9: 'An inclination at first appeared among the warm admirers of Sanscrit to regard the poems Mahabharat and Ramayan, as a sort of historical records.'

75. *The Rajatarangini*, trans. R. S. Pandit (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1953; reprint edn, 1968), Book III, verses 470 and 171.

76. No one Purana can be described as exhibiting in fine (or even coarse) detail all five of these distinguishing traits, but sometimes the *Vishnu Purana* is thought to most closely resemble the traditional definition. The Puranas can be described as a form of sectarian literature: some exhibit devotion to Vishnu; in others the devotion to Shiva predominates. Two introductory anthologies of Puranic literature are Cornelia Dimmitt and J. A. B. van Buitenen, eds and trans., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed. and trans., *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975). Of recent critical studies, the most insightful is Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

77. All quotations in this paragraph are from Romila Thapar, 'Society and Historical Consciousness', pp. 365–7.

78. 'Bangadarsan', *BR* II:240, cited by Van Meter, see note 48 at p. 69.

79. R. Thapar in *Seminar* (1962), no. 39.

80. A. K. Warder, in Philips, *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, p. 44.

81. K. K. Pillay, in *BITC*, p. 289.

82. Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* [1938] (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1941); J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Growth and Origin* [1932] (New York: Dover Books, 1955).

83. Madhav Deshpande, 'History, Change and Permanence: A Classical Indian Perspective', *Contributions to South Asian Studies* I, ed. Gopal Krishna (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 6–8; the last line is quoted from Siddheshwar Varma, 'Scientific and Technical Presentation as Reflected in the *Mahabhasya* of Patanjali', *Vishveshvarananda Indological Journal* 1, no. 1 (1966).

84. Sheldon Pollock, 'Mimamsa and the Problem of History in Traditional India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 4 (1989), pp. 603, 607–9.

85. Deshpande, 'History, Change and Permanence', pp. 8–9.

86. Cf. John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), pp. 70–1: 'Alexander the Great's Indian adventure, though a subject of abiding interest to generations of classically-educated European historians, is not generally an episode on which historians of Indian nationality bother to dwell. They rightly note that it "made no impression historically or politically on India", and that "not even a mention of Alexander is to be found in any [of the] older Indian sources".' The quotations are from Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 59.

87. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (reprint edn, New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 139–40.

88. Marx, 'The British Rule in India', in *The First Indian War of Independence 1857–1859* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n. d.), p. 20 and, in the same volume, 'Further Results of British Rule in India', pp. 32–8.

89. Arthur MacDonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (New York: Haskell, 1966 [1900]), p. 11.

90. Marx, 'The British Rule in India', in *The First Indian War of Independence*, pp. 15–22.

91. Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India: Studies in Indo-Muslim Historical Writing* (London: Luzac & Co., 1960; reprint edn with new preface, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), remains the principal study on Muslim historiography of medieval India.

92. My intent is scarcely to enter into a discussion of comparative historiography or the historical traditions of different civilizations. I am aware, for example, of the remarkable utilization of African oral traditions as history following the pioneering work of J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: Aldine, 1961) and *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison:

University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). The results of this strand of work have been more productive for East and Central Africa than for South Africa, perhaps because the written histories for South Africa, which came under European domination earlier than the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, are richer. In some contexts, certainly, writing and orality may have an inverse bearing on the production of histories or what might pass for histories. See Paul la Hausse, 'Oral History and South African Historians', in Joshua Brown et al., eds, *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 342–50. In a somewhat similar vein, though much less narrowly empiricist, is Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). But we must persist in asking: why should history remain the mountain-top? Is it enough that more climbers are permitted to take the stride, and that more routes are created, and kept open for longer periods? Does the repudiation of history take us straight to structural-functionalism?

93. As I point out elsewhere in this book, some scholars, such as Achin Vanaik and Sumit Sarkar, are not inclined to accept the description of Hinduism as a non-proselytizing faith; but that seems no reason to preclude, at least for the present, the more commonly accepted understanding of Hinduism as a religion that is generally inhospitable to the idea of conversion.

94. Robert Orme, 'Effeminacy of the Inhabitants of Indostan', *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire ...* (London: F. Wingrave, 1805; reprint edn, New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1974), p. 299.

95. Cf. Howard Spodek, 'On the Origins of Gandhi's Political Methodology: The Heritage of Kathiawad and Gujarat', *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (Feb. 1971), pp. 361–72.

96. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (reprint edn, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1962), p. 83. Gandhi himself initially rendered satyagraha as 'passive resistance', but later, realizing that the English phrase did not do the word justice, that there was nothing passive about non-violent resistance, he used the phrase 'non-violent resistance' and, more often, the word satyagraha itself to describe his method, teachings, and movement.

97. *Hind Swaraj*, p. 77.

98. There is no systematic treatment of the place of the Gita in nationalist writings; a small beginning, however, has been made in Dilip Bose, *Bhagavad-Gita and Our National Movement* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1981).

99. 'My Jail Experiences—XI', *Young India*, 4 Sept. 1924, reprinted in Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 1: Civilization, Politics and Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 183.

100. See Iyer, *ibid.*, 1:77–100; Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1946); and M. K. Gandhi, *Discourses on the Gita* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1960).

101. 'Sikhism', *Young India*, 1 October 1925, reprinted in Iyer, *ibid.*, 1:484–5.

102. Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 6.

103. Christina Crosby has addressed the intricate ties between the Victorian passion for history and the interest in the 'woman question' in *The Ends of History* (see note 29). My frequent use of 'man' in this chapter has been, thus, less unreflective than what some readers may have supposed.

104. Cited by T. C. A. Raghavan, 'Origins and Development of Hindu Mahasabha Ideology: The Call of V D Savarkar and Bhai Parmanand', *Economic and Political Weekly* 18, no. 15 (9 April 1983), p. 597.

105. Tapan Ghosh, *The Gandhi Murder Trial* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1976), see especially pp. 15, 212–36. Godse's speech in his defense, which took over five hours to deliver, was proscribed by the Government of India for well over twenty years. The text is available as Gopal Godse, *May It Please Your Honor: Statement of Nathuram Godse* (Poona: Vitasta Prakashan, 1977). The literature on the assassination, which has been growing rapidly over the years, is in the main devoted to enumerating the details of the conspiracy to murder Gandhi. Ghosh's sensitive study is an exception in this regard; more exceptional still is Ashis Nandy's article, 'The Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi', in *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), chap. 4.

106. For some of the current trends in history, and a brief account of the significant developments—such as women's history, microhistory, and postmodern histories—over the last twenty years, see the succinct monograph by Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1992); also useful, though slightly dated, is Juliet Gardiner, ed., *What is History Today ...?* (London: Macmillan, 1988). Jenkins' parochialism, more evidently on display in his *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), is breathtaking: no one would receive the slightest hint from his collection that practitioners of postmodern history exist outside the fields of European and American history, or that the work of postcolonial critics, working on histories of colonialism, might have some bearing on postmodern histories. It may have been of interest to Jenkins that one of subaltern history's most vigorous critics charges the practitioners of this school of Indian history with having drifted too far in the direction of postmodernism; but all this is quite foreign to Jenkins, who opts rather for the inclusion of such pedestrian pieces as an excerpt from Joyce Appleby, Margaret Jacob, and Lynn Hunt, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), which is at best an uninspiring defence of multicultural and inclusive histories. Put *Reader's Digest* and Benetton together and one gets Appleby and Company's totalizing history. I have discussed subaltern history in Chapter IV (see below); critiques of subaltern history from orthodox Marxist, feminist, and even postmodern positions, while not without interest, nonetheless share in the enthusiasm for 'history'. An interesting rumination on what many of these developments portend is to be found in Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts', *Postcolonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (1998), pp. 15–29.

107. On the question of fasting and the feminization of politics, see Vinay Lal, 'Gandhi's Last Fast', *Gandhi Marg* 11, no. 2 (July–September 1989), pp. 171–91.

108. Ashis Nandy, 'From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi's Cultural Critique of the "West"', *Alternatives* 3, no. 2 (June 1981), p. 184. The same paper, in a revised version, appears in Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 127–62.

109. Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, 2nd edn (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 55, 97.

110. Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 140–1.

111. See Chapter IV, and also Gyanendra Pandey, 'Modes of History Writing: New Hindu History of Ayodhya', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no. 25 (18 June 1994), pp. 1523–8. Pandey fails to reflect, however, on how it is that the 'new Hindu history' was able to come into place and gain the assent of many Hindus. Though he recognizes that the discourse of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement is postulated on ascribing a divine importance to Ayodhya (and in particular the contested spot) as the supposed birth-place of Rama, he does not take into consideration the epistemological and political consequences of staking a claim on the notion of 'place' rather than 'space'. It was the function of colonial discourse to collapse the notion of 'place' into the notion of 'space', and the renewed emphasis on 'place' constitutes a discursive challenge to the notion of 'space', though—as in the case of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement—this particular ascendancy of the notion of 'place' is hardly propitious. There are other similar problems in Pandey's important paper: Hindutva discourse is described as exemplifying a nationalist 'excess', as seen in the fixation on numbers and statistics, on grotesque figures as in the '1,74,000 Hindu lives' said to have been sacrificed before the supposed temple was brought down by Mir Bai. Pandey implies that such narratives are quite unbelievable; and though they may well be unbelievable, the question is whether such numbers are to be taken seriously, and if so, whether the only way to take them is to consider them as reflective of some 'real' conditions. If kings can be described in the Puranas as ruling for 600 years, or there can be 330 million gods and goddesses, or if the Kauravas can be described as being 100 in number, is this also the 'excess' of 'nationalist' narratives? What kind of interpretive strategy is required to understand the cultural logic of such 'excess'? What are the hazards of imposing upon the authors of the pamphlet literature on Ayodhya standards of veracity which bear a distinct relationship to different regimes of representation and truth?

2

Contours of the Past, Shape of the Future

The Politics of History in Independent India

In the fifty-some years since independence, Indian historians have undoubtedly assumed charge of their own history. Though historians—more so than archaeologists, anthropologists, professional philosophers, or linguists—can everywhere be public figures, in few countries have they acquired such a prominent public presence as they have in India. In the controversy surrounding the Babri Masjid, historians found that they had become ascendant among the class of intellectuals, called upon to verify or dispute the claims of both militant Hindus and their opponents; and in the aftermath of the destruction of the mosque in December 1992, they were transformed into editorialists, pamphleteers, and activists.¹ At issue was not merely the 'authentic' history of the mosque, but Hindu-Muslim relations in India and the rest of South Asia, the future of India as a democratic polity, and the idea of India as a composite culture. In the meantime, the advent of the 'subaltern school' of Indian history, comprised mainly of Indian historians clustered at a few universities and research centres in Delhi, Calcutta, and elsewhere, was to give Indian history not only an unprecedented international respectability, such as has ordinarily been reserved for developments in French or English history,² but an important place in various debates in postcolonial theory, postmodernism, and what is termed 'cultural studies'. Historians and scholars around the world have turned to the writings of the subaltern historians to pose questions about the politics of knowledge, the nature of 'elitist' history, the apparently frequent congruence