

Writing social history / Sumit
Sarkar; New Delhi: Oxford
University Press, 1998 (1-49 p.)

PART ONE

1

The Many Worlds of Indian History

Introspection about their own location in society has not been too common among Indian historians. Our historiographical essays tend to become bibliographies, surveys of trends or movements within the academic guild. They turn around debates about assumptions, methods, ideological positions. Through these, historians get pigeon-holed into slots: Neo-colonial, Nationalist, Communal, Marxist, Subaltern. The existence of not one but many levels of historical awareness attracts much less attention. But outside the world of metropolitan centres of learning and research there are provincial universities and colleges, schoolteachers, an immensely varied student population, and, beyond these, vast numbers more or less untouched by formal courses, yet with notions about history and remembrances of things past, the nature and origins of which it could be interesting to explore. What is neglected is the whole question of the conditions of production and reception of academic knowledge, its relationships with different kinds of common sense.¹ We lack, in other words, a social history of historiography.

This problem of levels has become exceptionally acute in India in recent years, with the growth of right-wing Hindu communal forces, and the multiple responses to the Mandal proposals for affirmative action in favour of 'backward' castes. In very different

¹ Which, as Gramsci reminded us, must be understood as a 'collective noun', and as 'a product of history and a part of the historical process. . . . "Common sense" is the folklore of philosophy, and is always halfway between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science and economics of the specialists.' Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971), pp. 325-6.

ways, both these sets of developments have in effect projected views of Indian history at variance with what generally holds sway in today's high-academic circles. More specifically, I have in mind the debate around the Ramjanmabhumi issue, where well-established academic knowledge has had to confront, not too effectively, one kind of organized and largely manufactured common sense. Secular historians refuted, with ample data and unimpeachable logic, the justifications put forward by the Hindu Right, for its eventually successful campaign to demolish a four-hundred-year-old masjid at Ayodhya. They undeniably had the better of the intellectual – and human – argument. Yet for a decisive year or two the views of the leading historians of the country, most notably scholars at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, had less impact than pamphlets of the order of *Ramjanmabhumi ka Rakta-ranjita Itihas* (Bloody History of the Birthplace of Ram). This, however, was very far from being a simple triumph of age-old popular faith over the alienated rationalism of secular intellectuals. Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) pamphlets, and audio and video cassettes, systematically combined an ultimate appeal to faith with a battery of their own kind of historical facts: quotations from (real or spurious) documents, a certain amount of evidence fielded by archaeologists of some stature, a parade of alleged facts and dates about precisely seventy-six battles fought by Hindus to liberate the birthplace of Ram from the evil 'descendants of Babar'. 'Faith' was deployed as the final weapon usually only when such 'historical' arguments were seen to be in danger of total refutation.²

What this VHP quest for historical facticity revealed was that history of one kind or another has come to occupy a position of exceptional importance in a variety of Indian discourses, but that in the moulding of many such histories the best scholars often have a very limited role. Historical consciousness, even when fairly organized, systematic, and far from spontaneous, evidently cannot be equated with the thinking of professional historians alone, still less with that of its highest echelons. Both the importance of history and its multiple levels require further probing.

Some 'presentist' explanations, relating to the conditions of

² For analysis of the 'historical' literature of the Ramjanmabhumi movement, see Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi', in S. Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation* (New Delhi, 1991), and Pradip Kumar Datta, 'VHP's Ram: The Hindutva Movement in Ayodhya', in G. Pandey (ed.), *Hindus and Others* (New Delhi, 1993).

production and dissemination of historical awareness in today's India, are fairly obvious, and helpful – up to a point. The leading members of the historians' guild write and teach mainly in English for easy inter-regional and international communication. The majority of universities and colleges, however, have switched over to Hindi or regional languages, translations are far from abundant, and the historical common sense of the bulk of students and teachers is determined much more by textbooks of very poor quality, or media influences. After independence, history, and particularly narratives of the 'freedom struggle' or the 'national movement', became a major means of legitimizing ruling groups in the postcolonial nation-state through claims of continuity with a glorious past. A very eclectic range of 'national heroes' therefore had to be projected as knights in shining armour, abstracted from real-life contradictions and contextual pressures. Through the media and the majority of schools, the message that has been constantly broadcast is that history is valuable because it stimulates pride in one's country. The other meaning of history, in these days of 'objective' tests and proliferating quiz culture, is of random facts and dates that have to be efficiently memorized. Patriotism and quiz culture combine to ensure a very low priority, in the bulk of history-teaching, to techniques of critical evaluation of narratives about the past and the development of questioning attitudes. History, in other words, tends to become hagiography, and this opens the way towards giving hagiography the present-day status and aura of history. Sometimes the links with current chauvinistic developments are even more direct, most notably through the enormously popular state television screening of the *Ramayana*, just before the Ayodhya movement got into its stride. The epic heroes were presented there as national figures, and Ram returned to Ayodhya in triumph amidst wildly anachronistic twentieth-century slogans of 'Long Live Mother India'.

But a merely presentist explanation will not take us very far. The centrality of history today, as well as its markedly multi-level features, are not universal or natural phenomena. They are evidently related to the ways in which history came to be taught, written, and exceptionally valorized under colonial and then postcolonial conditions. My essay, then, will have to go back to the nineteenth century, when specifically modern ways of thinking about history are generally supposed to have begun in India. My own area of competence, as well as the early location of colonial power and cultural influence, justify a primary focus on Bengal material.

There is a second reason, too, why a retrospect, at once historiographical and social-historical, is relevant for my argument, and once again the polemics around Ramjanmabhumi provide a point of entry. The importance given to apparently scientific history, complete with facts, dates and evidence, as well as the central assumption of Hindus and Muslims as homogenized blocs existing fundamentally unchanged across a thousand years, expose the 'tradition' deployed by the Sangh Parivar as overwhelmingly invented, moulded by colonial and postcolonial conditions and influences. No great effort is required to recognize it to be as 'modern' as its secular-rationalistic Other. Our glance back at colonial Indian historiography will incidentally confirm that the 'history' used by the Ramjanmabhumi movement was not any spontaneous welling-up of folk or popular memories, but made up of bits and pieces from the academic wisdom of an earlier generation of nationalist historians, as orchestrated by a very modern political machine. A generalized critique of post-Enlightenment modernity and Orientalizing colonial discourse, therefore, might seem to offer an effective ground for the rebuttal of Hindutva's claims to indigenous authenticity. More generally, the moods stimulated by Edward Said's *Orientalism* which have been transplanted to South Asia by Partha Chatterjee and the later volumes of *Subaltern Studies* have provided for many intellectuals an overall framework that combines the virtues of apparent radicalism with a satisfactory distance from the Marxism of yesteryear, now widely assumed to be finally and deservedly dead.

Many of the essays in this volume express my sense of disquiet with this current turn in South Asian scholarship. Very briefly, at this point: what had started as an understandable dissatisfaction with the economistic reductionisms of much 'official' Marxism is now contributing to another kind of narrowing of horizons, one that conflates colonial exploitation with Western cultural domination. Colonial discourse analysis abstracts itself, except in the most general terms, from histories of production and social relationships. A 'culturalism' now further attenuated into readings of isolable texts has become, after the presumed demise of Marxism, extremely nervous of all 'material' histories: the spectre of economic reductionism looms everywhere. Colonial-Western cultural hegemony, secondly, tends to get homogenized, abstracted from internal tensions, and presented as all-pervasive, virtually irresistible within its own domain — those touched by it become capable of only

'derivative discourses'. A total rupture then has to be presumed between pre-colonial and colonial, and a temptation sometimes develops to make the former a world of attractive *ur*-traditions, of innocence confronting Western power-knowledge.³ A more fundamental methodological problem is the abandonment in practice of any quest for immanent critique through the elision of possibilities of mutually conflicting groups taking over and using in diverse, partially-autonomous ways, elements from dominant structures and discourses. What is ignored, in other words, is precisely that which had been central to Marxist analysis: the dialectical search for contradictions within structures. If modern power is total and irresistible within its own domain, autonomy or resistance can be located only in grounds outside its reach: in a 'community-consciousness' that is pre-colonial or somehow untainted by post-Enlightenment power-knowledge, or in fleeting, random moments of fragmentary resistance. These become the only valid counterpoints against the ultimate repository of that power-knowledge — the colonial or postcolonial 'nation-state'. We have moved, then, from perspectives in which relationships between capitalist imperialism and multiple strands within anti-colonial movements had constituted the basic framework, to one where the post-Enlightenment modern state is counterposed to community. Questions of exploitation and power have been collapsed into a unitary vision of the modern bureaucratic state as the sole source of oppression.

These caveats, summarized in a telegraphic manner, represent some of the problems I have been encountering in my own thinking and research, and I intend to elaborate them in specific historical contexts, as, hopefully, invitation to dialogue rather than confrontational polemic. An exploration of colonial and postcolonial historical consciousness, vital for understanding today's many worlds of history, can be useful also as the first of these contexts. A framework grounded in the assumption of pervasive colonial cultural domination has naturally paid considerable attention to the development of 'modern' attitudes towards history, and in fact this provides at first sight exceptionally

³ The 'derivative discourse' argument was elaborated by Partha Chatterjee in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi, 1986). In a seminal text published three years before, Ashis Nandy had sought to 'justify and defend the innocence which confronted modern Western colonialism and its various psychological offshoots in India.' *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi, 1983), p. ix.

suitable material for a colonial discourse approach.⁴ I hope to show that the assumptions I have just catalogued tend to be restrictive, even when deployed on such a favourable site. In part, then, I will have to go over already familiar material, but hopefully making new points and sometimes arguing the case for fundamental departures. Three temporal cross-sections appear particularly relevant: the apparently total early-nineteenth-century rupture with which 'modern' Indian historiography began; late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century crystallizations of 'nationalist' and 'communalist' historical assumptions and methods; and today's predicaments.

II

Pre-colonial India, with its very long traditions of written culture, produced numerous texts of recognizable historical intent or value: Puranic king-lists, dynastic chronicles, histories of castes and religious sects, biographies of holy men, genealogies of prominent families. As elsewhere, there were evident links between the quantum of such texts or documents and levels of organized, bureaucratic power. Thus, ancient Indian historiography, not surprisingly, never attained the stature of that of China with its unique bureaucratic continuity, and historical accounts became much more numerous under the Delhi sultanate and the Mughal empire. (Islam, with its single Hizrat era, also brought in a new chronological certitude.)

Yet it remains undeniable that the impact and imposition of Western historiographical models through English education and British Indian scholarship created a widespread sense of a *tabula rasa*. Pre-colonial texts, since then, have always figured as 'sources' to be evaluated by modern Western canons, not as methodological influences. In 1958 a competent survey of history-writing in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal could assume that 'we had to start from scratch'.⁵

A convenient and much-used initial benchmark for examining this rupture is provided by Mrityunjoy Vidyalkar's *Rajabali*

(*Chronicle of Kings*, Serampur, 1808).⁶ Its author was an orthodox Brahman commissioned by the British authorities to write the first overall historical survey in Bengali prose, to serve as a language text for Company officials being trained at Fort William College. The text began by expounding, in a manner totally unselfconscious and free of defensive apologetics, the standard Brahmanical concept of time as cyclical, with Satya, Treta, Dwapar and Kaliyuga endlessly succeeding each other. The moral trajectory across the four-yuga cycle was always imagined as inevitably retrogressive, and the present (invariably, in these texts, the Kali-yuga) was the worst of times, characterized by overmighty Shudras and insubordinate women. Time, in other words, was never abstract, empty duration: it was relevant primarily for moral qualities assumed to be inseparable from its cyclical phases. The principal role of the yuga-cycle in Brahmanical discourses, from the *Mahabharata* down to Mrityunjoy, was to suggest through dystopia the indispensability of right caste and gender hierarchy. The two have been necessarily imagined as interdependent, for purity of caste lineage is vitally related to male control over the reproductive capacities of women, ensured through marriage, within the permitted boundaries.

For the rest, *Rajabali* was a compendium of king-lists, many of them soon to be discarded as mythical by modern historians. The striking feature, for anyone trained in Indian history in the ways that became standard from around the 1820s, is really a notable absence. Mrityunjoy displayed no awareness at all of any breaks between 'Hindu', 'Muslim', and 'British' periods, but remained content with awarding good or bad marks to kings with a fine indifference to religious identities. The recurrent criteria, incidentally, for immoral behaviour are *strayinata* (subordination to women) and *nimakbarami* (being 'untrue to one's salt', i.e. violating obligations of loyalty and obedience, and thus implicitly weakening proper hierarchical relationships). The link with standard Kaliyuga notions of disorder is fairly obvious.

As in the bulk of pre-colonial history-writing, the predominant note in *Rajabali* was didactic, with exploration of the uniqueness of historical situations less important than teaching obedience and morality through archetypes. A ninth-century Jaina text had described *Itihasa* (history) as 'a very desirable subject . . . it prescribes *dharma* [right conduct]', and even Kalhana, much praised by modern

⁴ Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and Its Implications* (Calcutta, 1988); Partha Chatterji, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton and Delhi, 1994), Chapters IV, v.

⁵ B.P. Mukherji, *History*, in a collection entitled, significantly, for my argument, *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance*, ed. A. Gupta (Calcutta, 1958).

⁶ It has been used in that way recently by both Ranajit Guha, and Partha Chatterjee, *op. cit.*

historians for his unusually critical treatment of sources and striving for objectivity, claimed that his *Rajatarangini* would be 'useful for kings as a stimulant or a sedative, like a physic, according to time and place.'⁷

The contrasts with histories that English-educated Indians started writing after around the mid nineteenth century are obvious enough. British rule brought with it clocks and a notion of time as linear, abstract, measurable in entirely non-qualitative units, an independent framework within which events happen.⁸ The other major change was the imposition of the ancient/medieval/modern schema which had become standard in the post-Renaissance West. James Mill transplanted this into India by dividing the subcontinent's history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. By the time of Nilmoni Basak's *Bharatbarsber Itihas* (History of India, Calcutta, 1857), which may serve as our second benchmark, the yuga cycle is mentioned only in a brief, defensive preface, after which the author quickly passes on to a periodization that distinguished the 'Age of Hindu Empires' from 'Muslim Kingdoms'.

Yet I think it is important to resist bland, homogenized presentations, both of pre-colonial notions of time and history as well as of the colonial rupture. It is now generally recognized that the cyclical/linear binary is not absolute, for duration, or sequentiality, is common to both.⁹ High-Hindu cyclical time, for

⁷ R.C. Majumdar, *Ideas of History in Sanskrit Literature*, in C.H. Phillips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon* (London, 1961), p. 21.

⁸ I have found very helpful Moishe Postone's recent suggestion that a concrete/abstract distinction is more relevant than the conventional cyclical/linear binary. Elaborating a suggestion of E.P. Thompson ('Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38, 1967), Postone argues that the concrete time of a pre-capitalist societies 'was not an autonomous category, independent of events, it could be determined qualitatively, as good or bad, sacred or profane.' It 'is characterized less by its direction than the fact that it is a dependent variable.' Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 200-16, *passim*.

⁹ Combinations of the two have been noticed in places and times as far apart as present-day Bali and pre-colonial Yucutan. Balinese notions of duration exhibit features of both cyclicity and linearity. The *Chilam Balam* texts of Yucutan described endless cycles marked out by specific moral qualities, but the Mayans also had chronicles of ruling dynasties which were entirely linear. L.E.A. Howe, 'The Social Determination of Knowledge: Maurice Bloch and Balinese Time', *Man*, New Series, 19, 1981; Nancy M. Farriss, 'Remembering the Future, Anticipating the Past: History, Time and Cosmology among the Maya of Yucutan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29, iii, July 1987.

instance, encompassed an element of linearity, for within a *mahayuga* the successive downward movement of Satya through Treta and Dwapar to Kali was taken to be irreversible. The polarity between concrete and abstract time is perhaps more fundamental, but here again further distinctions within both might become necessary. Thus, generalizations of the order attempted by Mircea Eliade about a 'myth of the eternal return', supposedly characteristic of an undifferentiated 'Hindu' world or even of 'traditional civilization',¹⁰ really rest upon an unproven assumption of homogeneity. That we know little – virtually nothing, in fact – of notions about time among pre-colonial peasants or lower-caste people is surely no ground for assuming that they must have invariably internalized the highly Brahmanical and hierarchized values which are inseparable from formulations of the four-yuga cycle that have come down to us. One needs to be open, rather, to the possibility of work or task-oriented times, which could vary greatly in precision according to specific requirements. The *purohit* and astrologer needed a precise fix on certain 'time points' to determine auspicious ritual moments or make predictions.¹¹ Rural labour processes, in contrast, demanded little more than a grasp over general seasonal and daily rhythms.

Even at more philosophical or speculative levels, some scholars feel that Brahmanical texts indicate the presence of not one but several layers in pre-Islamic Indian notions of time. Raymondo Panikkar, for instance, refers to a tradition called Kalavada where time is placed above all gods and identified with images of death as supreme leveller of all distinctions, human and even divine. He considers this to have been 'a widely-held popular view, belonging probably to the less Brahmanic stratum of Indian tradition'.¹²

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Paris, 1949, trans., London, 1955), Chapters I, II, IV.

¹¹ The concrete time of medieval European monasteries, Postone points out, had its own, specific notion of time-discipline, through 'a series of time points, which marked when various activities were to be done.' This, however, is quite distinct from capitalist forms of time-discipline, where 'commensurable, interchangeable, and invariable' time-units become 'the measure of activity.' Once again, it is the concrete/abstract distinction which is crucial. Postone, pp. 203, 209.

¹² Raymondo Panikkar, 'Time and History in the Tradition of India: Kala and Karma', in L. Gardet, et al. (ed.), *Cultures and Time* (Paris, 1976). The *Mahabharata*, interestingly, associates this view with Bali, a demon (Asura) chief defeated by Indra, the king of the gods: 'In Time's course many thousands of

Orthodox Brahmanical denunciations of Kalavada often associated it with materialism, *nastika* views, and an epistemological position called *pratyakshyavada*, according to which sense impressions constituted the sole criterion of valid knowledge or proof.¹³ Such views were lumped together in dominant philosophical discourse as the tradition of Lokayata, said to have been founded by Carvaka. (One, evidently pejorative, meaning of Lokayata, incidentally, is 'that which was prevalent among the common people'.) Quite remarkably, Mrityunjoy's *Rajabali* at one point interrupts its placid chronicle of kings with a two-page diatribe against *nastika* views which once again associated the extreme empiricism of *pratyakshyavada* with Kalavada: 'like trees in a mighty forest, the world appears and disappears by itself, subject only to time.'¹⁴

Kaliyuga, we are always told, will end in an apocalyptic manner, with universal destruction (*yuga-pralay*), or, alternatively, the coming of Kalki-avatar (the last incarnation of the high-god Vishnu), after which another identical cycle will commence. In yet another interesting shift or variation, however, the apocalypse, and in some ways the entire framework of four-yuga cycles, seems to have become somewhat downgraded over time. Yuga-pralay was pushed far out into the future, and so in practical terms the key message became one of enduring the inevitable evils of 432,000 years of Kaliyuga through tightened-up rules of caste and patriarchal discipline. The endless cycles themselves came to be considered part of the world of *maya* (illusion, or, more exactly, inferior order of reality) in the increasingly dominant philosophy of Vedanta.¹⁵

Indras and deities have been swept off yuga after yuga. . . . Time has no master . . . wealth, comforts, rank, prosperity, all fall a prey to time . . . All things that proudly raise their heads high are destined to fall down.' *Mahabharata*, English translation by Pratap C. Roy, ed. Hiralal Haldar (12 vols, Calcutta, n.d.), vol. IX, pp. 140-56.

¹³ *Nastika*, often taken today as the equivalent of an atheistic position, meant more precisely in Indian philosophical traditions the denial that revealed texts (*sruti*, i.e. the *Vedas*) have the status of valid proof (*pramana*) in philosophical arguments. The extreme empiricism of *pratyakshyavada* entailed such a denial, and could lead also to the rejection of belief in gods or the immortality of souls. Debiprasada Chattopadhyay, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (New Delhi, 1959, 1978), Chapter 1. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. III (London, 1961), pp. 512-50.

¹⁴ Mrityunjoy Vidyalkar, *Rajabali* (Serampur, 1808; Calcutta, 1905), pp. 11-13. Mrityunjoy attributed the origin of these views to an Asura king.

¹⁵ For a more detailed account of Kaliyuga and its variations, see Chapter 8 below.

The relevant points, in considering the importance of these varied notions of time for perceptions of history, are that none of the alternative frameworks hindered the construction of narratives about the past connected to specific purposes, such as the glorification of dynasties, families or religious traditions; but neither did they require, or stimulate, a sense of overall social process or interest in its possible causes.¹⁶ The central high-Hindu ideal was the individual breaking out of the bondage of *karma* (endless rebirth, in which merits and sins accumulated in previous lives rigidly determined one's status in life, and therefore one's *dharma*, in the sense of appropriate rituals and duties). Unlike Christianity or Islam, with their notions of a day of judgement common to all, the idea of salvation here was not community-based, and so the conception of universal causality implicit, in a way, in the doctrine of *karma*, applied only to individuals. It did not lead to any interest in the causes of aggregate phenomena. The yuga framework did involve a sense of a moral texture common to an era, but then its lineaments and causes were already known: being fore-ordained, divinely determined, or related to the quality of kings — i.e. to the *lila* (game, or play), as it was said, of time, gods or kings. The purpose of history remained, therefore, a combination of royal propaganda and the teaching of *dharma* with examples, and its place in education, we shall see, seems to have been negligible or non-existent.

Historical texts became much more abundant under the Delhi sultanate, the Mughals, and their successor states, but it is doubtful whether there was a fundamental break with regard to the aims and presuppositions of history-writing. The Persian narratives are often impressive in the careful attention they pay to specific — usually military-administrative — events, and even to their secular, 'secondary' causes. Yet the overall aim remained, as earlier, a combination of exalting the rulers with religious and moral teaching via examples. 'Interest concentrated on how far a man conformed to an ideal prototype, not how far he diverged.'¹⁷ The dominant Islamic conception of time as 'piecemeal vision of . . . a sequence of instants . . . which are the signs and spaces of God's intervention' also did

¹⁶ Pre-colonial histories, Ranajit Guha has argued, consequently tended to be 'made up of discrete moments, recovered synchronically as the occasion required.' Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and Its Implications* (Calcutta, 1988).

¹⁷ P. Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India* (London, 1960, 1966), pp. 113, 118.

not encourage, on the whole, any total view of history as diachronic social process.¹⁸

We may now be in a better position to evaluate the precise extent and lineaments of the 'break' brought about in the ways of constructing the past by colonial rule and English education. In the making of British Indian historiography, and 'colonial knowledge' in general, an important dimension of genuine curiosity and excitement, as a vast and varied subcontinent was opened up to the Western gaze, went along with fairly obvious links with the logic of colonial power. The British, as utterly alien rulers, needed to know something about the traditions and 'prejudices' of their subjects; extraction of revenue, dispensation of justice, and maintenance of order all demanded knowledge of past administrative practices; meticulous enquiry into possible causes became standard practice after every rebellion. The power-knowledge theme is very self-consciously present in much official writing: Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891), for instance, claimed that an ethnographic recording of the customs of people was 'as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of rights of its tenants.'¹⁹

Notions of time, now assumed to be linear and abstract (i.e. no longer primarily perceived in terms of moral quality, as Kaliyuga had been), methods of collecting data and assessing its reliability, and, above all, levels of efficiency in the processes of accumulating knowledge had altered dramatically through the incursion of the post-Enlightenment West with its novel and expanding resources of bureaucratic power; less so, possibly, the basic motivations of more effective governance and legitimation of authority, which may not have seemed very novel to, say, Abul Fazl. Power-knowledge far antedates the modern West, as Umberto Eco so delightfully reminds us in his *The Name of the Rose*, set in a medieval monastic library where control over dangerous knowledge is defended through murder.

What *was* new was the unprecedented importance and reach that history quickly acquired in colonial times. History became the principal instrument for inculcating the stereotypical dichotomy between the backward, immobile Orient as contrasted with the dynamic, Christian and/or scientific West, thus simultaneously buttressing British self-confidence and reminding Indians of their lowly place in the world's scheme of things. Foreign rule, conversely, soon

¹⁸ L. Gardet, p. 201.

¹⁹ H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1891, 1981), p. vii.

provoked a search for sustenance in past glories, real or imagined, as well as efforts to use history to probe the causes of present-day misfortunes. History thus came to acquire a new centrality in the concerns of the Indian intelligentsia, for it became a principal 'way of talking about the collective self, and bringing it into existence.'²⁰

This much is well known, and hardly in need of restatement. Very much less explored, but perhaps more significant, is the vastly extended *reach* of history. While the transition from manuscript to print obviously enlarged the potential readership of history books, the subject itself came to acquire a totally new position in structures of formal education. These structures themselves simultaneously became more crucial, for the links between formal education and respectable jobs, professions, and careers were now tighter than ever before. It was no longer possible, for instance, under colonial 'law and order' for military adventurers to carve out kingdoms for themselves, while recruitment to administrative posts became dependent on examinations. It had been possible for an Akbar to remain virtually illiterate: not so for the meanest colonial Indian official or clerk. The restriction of alternative opportunities (of independent business enterprise, for instance, particularly in Bengal, with its overwhelming colonial economic presence) further enhanced the centrality of formal 'liberal' education. This became indispensable for a self-consciously 'middle-class' existence, one which combined the material and cultural resources for entering high schools and colleges with a need for income from jobs or professions. Such need was less acute for the really big zamindars or businessmen, and impossible to satisfy for the vast majority of peasants.

The place of history in the new educational system thus needs some explication. Derozio, we know, taught History to Hindu College students, and is said to have inspired 'Young Bengal' through 'examples from ancient history of the love of justice, patriotism, philosophy and self-abnegation.'²¹ But surprisingly little is known about the mundane details of college courses and texts, and there is a need to explore the patterns of change and continuity involved in the displacement of traditional *pathshalas*, *tols* and *madrasas* by the

²⁰ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995), p. 108.

²¹ Pyarichand Mitra, *Biographical Sketch of David Hare* (Calcutta, 1877), p. 27, quoted in my 'Complexities of Young Bengal', *Nineteenth Century Studies*, October, 1973; reprinted in Sumit Sarkar, *A Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta, 1985), pp. 20-1.

modern classroom ordering of space, time, and methods of teaching.²² The new interest in Western education stimulated by colonial discourse analysis remains content, far too often, with yet another critique of Macaulay's Minute.

For elementary education, however, Kazi Shahidullah's *Pathshalas into Schools* does provide some illuminating details, based on a diligent study of the surveys of Francis Buchanan and William Adam. The traditional pathshala had concentrated on providing an eminently practical training in language, arithmetic and accountancy, while the few written texts (manuscripts) were of a religious, moral, or grammatical kind: history of any sort seems to have been conspicuously absent. The early Bengali printed textbooks provided free to pathshalas by the School Book Society from 1817 onwards, in contrast, 'covered a variety of subjects like History, Geography and Astronomy'. The publications of the Serampur missionaries meant for schools, similarly, included *Dig Darshan*, 'a miscellaneous collection of Truths and Facts covering history, science and ethics', and *Historical Anecdotes* took its place next to *Aesop's Fables* as reading lessons 'illustrative of justice, fidelity, probity and humanity'. To take a final example, the hundred-odd vernacular village schools set up in some Bengal districts by Hardinge's orders in 1844 were to have a curriculum of 'vernacular reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history of India and Bengal.'²³ The missionary juxtaposition of Aesop with historical anecdotes is an important indication that history of one sort or another was now being given an exalted place in general education, even outside its position as a distinct subject. The pattern continues, and quite emphatically so: school textbooks for teaching Hindi today, for instance, tend to contain an enormous amount of crude 'historical' tales for inculcating a patriotism often difficult to disentangle from Hindu-communal assumptions and values.

History, then, acquired a new and vast pedagogical and intellectual domain in the nineteenth century. Content-wise, however, it would be misleading to assume a simple, unambiguous or complete rupture, a leap from 'myth' to positivistic 'objectivity'. In fact the assumption

²² Work like Barbara Metcalf's study of the transition from madrasa to the Deoband seminary (*Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, Princeton, 1982) needs to be followed up. See now, however, the useful collection of essays, Nigel Crook (ed.), *The Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia* (Delhi, OUP, 1996).

²³ Kazi Shahidullah, *Pathshalas into Schools* (Calcutta, 1987), pp. 15, 25, 29, 33.

so often made that the culture imposed through Western education was always rationalist and invariably dominated by 'post-Enlightenment' values seems in need of some questioning. An earlier historiography had hailed such rationalism as harbinger of a Bengal (sometimes Indian) 'renaissance' or 'awakening'. The critique of colonial discourse which today has largely displaced that old consensus inverts the value judgement but otherwise maintains a basic continuity through its assertion of a total rupture.²⁴ There was nothing particularly rational (or secular), surely, about the oft-repeated formula of British rule in India being an act of divine providence. Again, the missionaries used modern Western science to undermine the 'superstitions' of the Hindus, but their overall aim was conversion to another, not noticeably more rational, religion. Here I must add that I find Dipesh Chakrabarty's assertion in a recent article — that 'missionaries did not perceive much contradiction between 'rationalism and the precepts of Christianity' — difficult to understand. Chakrabarty refers in particular to Alexander Duff, and cites M.A. Laird (1972) as the source for his reading of the Scottish missionary.²⁵ Duff's own *India and India Missions* (Edinburgh, 1839), in striking contrast, recounts how much effort he had had to make to persuade the pupils of Derozio to accept the Reformation as their model in place of 'the terrible issue of French illumination and reform in the last century', and how happy he was when Krishnamohan Banerji's conversion to Christianity indicated that 'avowed atheism' was on the decline.²⁶

The myth of Kaliyuga vanished quickly from formal Indian historical writings or textbooks, but it continued to enjoy a vigorous if interestingly modulated life in other texts and contexts right down to the early twentieth century. *Kaliyuga*, I have argued elsewhere, became a whole language for expressing resentments about the new discipline of time being imposed under colonial rule in clerical office-work (*chakri*). It thus provides an important entry point into

²⁴ A similar continuity is noticeable in the focus, in 'renaissance' and 'Saidian' writing alike, on the high literati alone. For elaborations of this argument, as well as some efforts at developing an alternative approach, see Chapters 5 and 6.

²⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Radical Histories and the Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of Subaltern Studies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxx, 14, 8 April 1995, p. 752.

²⁶ Alexander Duff, *India and India Missions* (Edinburgh, 1839), pp. 629, 667, cited in my 'Complexities of Young Bengal', *Critique of Colonial India*, pp. 20, 26.

a level of colonial middle-class life largely ignored so far by historians.²⁷ A recent thesis has emphasized the intertwining of what, by strict Enlightenment-rationalist standards, should have been dismissed as myth, with positivistic facticity in much nineteenth-century Bengal history writing. Nilmoni Basak may have been embarrassed by notions of cyclical time, but his *Nabanari* (4th ed., Calcutta, 1865) could still lump together two historical with seven mythical or legendary figures in biographies of exemplary women.²⁸ And Sudipta Kaviraj has drawn our attention to the combination of 'real' and 'imaginary' histories in the writings of major late-nineteenth-century figures such as Bankimchandra and Romeshchandra Dutt. Dutt, India's pioneer economic historian, was also the author of historical romances about Rajputs and Marathas, while Bankimchandra made several attempts to reconstruct bits and pieces of Bengal's past on the basis of carefully sifted evidence. Bankim, Kaviraj suggests, came to feel that 'the rational discourse of fact-gathering' could provide inadequate grounds for the kind of *itihasa* that 'Bengalis' needed if they were to become 'men', or in order to constitute themselves into a collective self: hence there was a shift in Bankim's later writings to the 'mythic discourse' of the historical novel.²⁹

This collective self, however, was for Bankim almost invariably Hindu, and pitted usually against Muslims, in language that sometimes turns downright abusive. This is a feature that Kaviraj seems disinclined to probe, but it does seem to suggest a high degree of the internalization of the tripartite schema in its most anti-Muslim form.³⁰ The far-reaching impact of James Mill's periodization of

²⁷ See Chapter 6, 'Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial Bengal', and Chapter 8, 'Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and His Times'.

²⁸ Indira Chowdhury Sengupta, 'Colonialism and Cultural Identity: The Making of a Hindu Discourse', Chapter II (unpublished thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, 1993). I am very grateful to Ms Sengupta for allowing me to read her thesis.

²⁹ Kaviraj, pp. 124, 131.

³⁰ Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Bankim did not accept an idealized, golden-age view of the ancient 'Hindu' period, and went so far as to suggest that the conditions of the Shudras might have been worse in independent Aryan India than under British rule. Paradoxically, this recognition of discordances within the Hindu fold seems to have stimulated his passionate search in the 1880s for an imaginary history of Hindu war against an externalized Muslim Other. See the critical, yet nuanced, discussion of Bankimchandra in Tanika Sarkar, 'Bankimchandra and the Impossibility of a Political Agenda', *Oxford Literary Review*, XVI, 1-2, 1994.

Indian history provides at first sight a particularly telling instance of a 'derivative discourse' which lives on even today in many Indian textbooks and syllabi, inadequately concealed by a nomenclatural change ('medieval' in place of 'Muslim', but still beginning from the establishment of the Delhi sultanate). That the implications of this have often been communal is equally obvious. Even at its most innocuous, the translation of ancient and medieval into Hindu and Muslim assumed the existence of homogenized entities, supposedly unified by religion, as the basic building blocks of all pre-colonial history. In addition the stigma, commonly attached to the middle term in the ancient/medieval/modern schema evolved in post-Renaissance Europe, deepened when the British transplanted it into India. Islam had been the great enemy of Christendom, the British had displaced Mughal emperors, the 1857 revolt and the Wahabi movement seemed to indicate Muslims to be on the whole more dangerous than the Hindus, and meanwhile Orientalist scholarship claimed to have discovered a glorious 'classical' age of early Hinduism (which was embodied in a language generically related to Greek and Latin). Many of the central propositions of mainstream nationalism and Hindu communalism (and, with values inverted, of its Muslim alter ego) can thus be shown to have originated in colonial discursive patterns.

But how much, really, do such origins explain? Marc Bloch warned historians many years ago of the 'idol of origins', the tendency to assume that 'a beginning . . . is a complete explanation.'³¹ If histories written within the Saidian mould homogenize, they also often tend to impose closures by suggesting ready answers to issues that could have developed into interesting inquiries. Even in cases where the derivation is undoubted, we need to ask further questions as to what is (and sometimes is not) being accepted or internalized, by precisely which groups, and why. Western critiques of the conditions of Hindu women acquired an early resonance in Bengali middle-class circles: much less so the equally trenchant attacks on caste and high-caste oppression. The tripartite schema and the related myth of centuries of Muslim tyranny were very quickly taken over, but not the fairly common missionary or utilitarian denunciation of all Indian culture which was embodied, in its most notorious form, in Macaulay.

An incidental reference in Rajat Kanta Ray's recent account (in Bengali) of politics and society around 1757 can provide an example

³¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (1954; Manchester, 1963), pp. 29-35.

of the kind of inquiry that has remained foreclosed,³² both in the earlier 'Bengal Renaissance' historiography and in its current Said-inspired inversions.³³ Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay's *Maharaja Krishnachandra Raysva Charitra* (1805), the second biographical work that we have in Bengali prose, contains a very early example of the Muslim tyranny myth that would become near-ubiquitous in so much nineteenth-century Bengali Hindu writing. Rajiblochan's hero Krishnachandra, the powerful zamindar of Krishnanagar (Nadia district), is shown to be taking a leading part in a conspiracy of Hindu zamindars, court officials, financiers and Mir Jafar to seek the aid of the English in overthrowing Nawab Sirajuddoula. A clearly formulated desire to end 'Yavana' misrule is attributed to the Hindu plotters (who, curiously, are described as openly displaying their anti-Muslim motivations in front of Mir Jafar). As Rajat Kanta Ray points out, more contemporary texts, whether in Persian or English, or the odd Bengali village poems referring to Plassey, are totally silent about any such self-consciously Hindu conspiracy to overthrow Muslim tyranny (as distinct from the misrule of a particular nawab).³⁴ Rajiblochan's text, interestingly, precedes the organized spread of English education, and for that matter Mill's tripartite schema of Indian history. It combines adulation for the Krishnanagar Raj family with flattery of the English as liberators from Muslim misrule, and seems to demand location in a milieu of high-caste Hindu literati transiting from zamindari to Company patronage. Rajiblochan had a family connection with the Krishnanagar Raj, and had then been recruited, along with other Nadia pandits, by William Carey to work for the Bengali printing press set up by Baptist missionaries at Serampur — from where he followed his master to Fort William College, established by Wellesley in 1800.³⁵ It may not be irrelevant to note that Maharaja Krishnachandra is remembered as a very major patron of orthodox Brahmanical culture, and that his power base was in a region (Nadia) notorious in the eighteenth century and beyond for its multitude of heterodox lower-caste sects: Kartabhaja, Sahebhdhani, Balarami, and many others.³⁶ It is tempting to suggest a link, therefore,

³² Rajat Kanta Ray, *Palasir Sharayantra o Sekaler Samaj* (Calcutta, 1994).

³³ See below, Chapter 6, for a discussion of the 'renaissance' debate.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–7 and *passim*.

³⁵ Brojendranath Banerji, 'Fort William Colleger Pandit', pp. 28–9, in *Sahitya-Sadhak-Caritmala*, I (Calcutta, 1942).

³⁶ Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Sahebhdhani Sampraday Tader Gan* (Calcutta, 1985).

between the easy acceptance of some key aspects of Anglo-Indian historiography, projecting the British as saviours of Hindus from earlier Muslim misrule, and possible late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century efforts at reasserting high-caste power. These came to be closely associated with the eventually more secure zamindari and tenure-holdings of post-Cornwallis Bengal, and the new importance of the 'liberal' professions — entry to which became restricted to the products of bhadraklok-dominated higher education. For such a strata — privileged, benefiting in many ways from foreign rule, yet increasingly aware of a humiliating colonial dependency — the thought that British rule was a great improvement on 'medieval Muslim tyranny' could provide considerable solace as well as a safe and distant site for locating a largely imaginary history of Hindu prowess against — not British, but Muslim — invaders.

That colonial history, developed primarily to sustain and ratify British rule, quickly became the ground for contradictory and limited yet powerful assertions of patriotism is a well known and quite undeniable feature of nineteenth-century Bengali intellectual history. Yet some minutiae of dating and language indicate that it still puts the framework of derivative discourse under some strain. Partha Chatterjee feels impelled to add the phrase 'curiously enough' to the fact that 'the new Indian literati, while it enthusiastically embraced the modern rational principles of European historiography, did not accept the history of India as it was written by British historians'.³⁷ Ranajit Guha pushes the moment of autonomous assertion forward to Bankimchandra's historical essays of the late 1870s and early 1880s. Chatterjee, through a survey of school textbooks, brings it back to the 1860s. Neither mention the plenitude of very similar material in the proceedings of the Derozian Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge (1838–43), i.e. emerging precisely from a group often accused of being, quintessentially, denationalized Anglicists, who in Guha's framework should have displayed 'unquestioning servility to the ruling power'.³⁸ Pyarichand Mitra's *State of Hindoostan under the Hindus*, for instance, combined warm references to the 'Xattries' (Kshatriyas) as 'great warriors', akin to 'the Rajpoots and Marhatas who are but their descendants', with much celebration of ancient Hindu cultural glory. Such Hindu nationalistic themes had been inserted, it goes without saying, into the general tripartite

³⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, 1993; Delhi, 1994), p. 88.

³⁸ Ranajit Guha, pp. 17–18.

framework of ancient Hindu glory/medieval Muslim tyranny and decline/ modern reawakening, and other contributors to the SAGK proceedings extended the formula to conditions of women and the history of the Bengali language.³⁹ A decade later Nilmoni Basak, who had also been a member of that Derozian society,⁴⁰ likewise accepted without question Mill's periodization, but then launched into a bitter attack on British writings on Indian history for denigrating Hindu achievements. A trend-setting feature of Basak's *Bharat-varsher Itihas* was the effort to shift the focus within the 'Hindu' period from politics to culture and religion. Relegating to a closing section the 'brief description' of Hindu kingdoms – difficult to reconstruct, full of fables, without a firm chronology – Basak embarked upon an enthusiastic account of theories of statecraft and law, religion, literature and science, even Hindu colonies and cultural influences allegedly in places as far distant as Bali and Peru.⁴¹

These are matters of detail, relevant only for their symptomatic value: far more crucial are the constraints and closures late-Subalternism is imposing through its key assumption of statism as the root of all evil in modernity. The corollary often drawn is that modern history-writing is necessarily state-centred: it is either narrowly political in subject matter, or looks at other processes from the point of view of the making or unmaking of states. Several recent essays by Gyanendra Pandey, in particular, assume almost as a matter of course that all post-Enlightenment historiography has been the 'grand narrative' of the nation-state – till, presumably, the present moment of liberation achieved through the contemplation of 'fragments'.⁴² For Partha Chatterjee, similarly, the important thing about late-nineteenth-century Bengali history textbooks is that in them 'history had become merely the struggle for power'. 'Hindu nationalism', it seems, is unacceptable for Chatterjee (and Pandey)

³⁹ Pyarichand Mitra, *State of Hindoostan under the Hindoos*; Maheshchandra Deb, *A Sketch of the Condition of Hindoo Women*; Udaychandra Addya, *Bangla Bhasha Uttamrupa Shikshakaraneer Abashyakata*, in Gautam Chattopadhyay, *Awakening in Bengal in Early Nineteenth Century: Selected Documents*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 94, 131, 156, 178–80, and Appendix, i–ii.

⁴⁰ See the list of members of the SAGK in Chattopadhyay, pp. lxiv–v.

⁴¹ Basak, Preface, and Chapters 2–7. Mrityunjay's text in contrast had been entirely about kings.

⁴² Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, 1991, and 'The Prose of Otherness', in *Subaltern Studies VIII* (Delhi, 1995).

in large part because 'like other modern ideologies, it allows for a central role of the state in the modernization of society – in this sense, the framework of its reasoning is entirely secular.'⁴³ This position is close to that of Ashis Nandy, who has been critiquing Hindutva for a number of years now from a consistently anti-secular standpoint.

I have many differences with such assertions, which I intend to elaborate in several of the essays that follow. For the moment, my concern is only with the homogenizing silences they impose on colonial Indian, and specifically Bengal, historiography. For, a striking feature of much late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Bengali history-writing and thinking about the past was precisely its persistent critique of state-centred, merely political, histories. This was a critique, further, that at times deployed arguments uncannily close to some in common use today, for central to it was the assumption that statism was a principal instrument of modern Western cultural domination. Such recurrence appears both significant and worthy of exploration.

The valorization of culture over narratives of kings and wars in Pyarichand Mitra or Nilmoni Basak had been a response to the paucity, at that time, of firm, chronologically grounded data about the ancient or 'Hindu' period, which was consequently then in some danger of being dismissed by British scholars as having no history – in the sense of worthwhile past politics. An absence of information about dynasties and wars had become much less of a problem by the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, and yet it was then, and most notably in and around the Swadeshi years, that *samaj* (society, community) came to be regularly counterposed to *rashtra* or *rajshakti* (state, the political domain). The real history of India, it was repeatedly asserted, was located in the first, not the second, for *samaj* embodied the distinctive qualities peculiar to the genius, culture and religion of the Indian people.

In moves – the theoretical lineages of which go back to Herder – romantic nationalisms in many parts of the world have often identified value and authenticity with difference, with what is supposedly distinctive and unique to a particular language, culture, or history. A politics of identity grounded in the recognition of such difference has thus been repeatedly counterposed to that of equal dignity and universal rights – to borrow the terms of a

⁴³ Chatterjee, *Nation*, pp. 91, 110.

seminal recent analysis by Charles Taylor.⁴⁴ The specific contexts for its flowering in late-colonial Bengal still require investigation, but there certainly were connections with what, many years ago, I had described as a 'constructive swadeshi' trend during the movement against the Partition of Bengal. This valorized autonomous self-help efforts in indigenous enterprise, education and village organization over the politics of both 'Moderate' and 'Extremist' varieties, and was embodied most notably in the writings and activities of Rabindranath Tagore and Satish Mukherji (editor of *Dawn*, founder of the Dawn Society, and key figure in the national education movement of the Swadeshi years).⁴⁵

The appeal of the state/society disjunction at this specific historical conjuncture was clearly related to intelligentsia disillusionment both with 'improvement' under colonial hegemony and initiative, and the possibilities of oppositional politics of what had widely come to be termed the 'mendicant' kind — a dual loss of faith that was not always accompanied by enthusiasm about the new politics of the extremist or terrorist varieties. Certain structural features of colonial rule also provided a basis for the conceptualization of samaj as autonomous from rashtra, and identifiable in the main with religious community rather than territorial nationhood. Census classification and enumeration helped to consolidate community boundaries defined in terms of religion and caste, while colonial justice made personal and family laws into distinct religious domains within which textualized norms of high-caste or ashraf social behaviour were sought to be universalized in unprecedented ways.⁴⁶ In census and

⁴⁴ Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, 1994).

⁴⁵ Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi, 1973), Chapter II, and *passim*.

⁴⁶ Warren Hastings laid down in 1772 that 'inheritance, marriage, caste and other religious usages or institutions' were to be administered in different ways to Hindus and Muslims, according to the 'Shaster' and Islamic jurisprudence respectively: *pandits and ulema were therefore appointed to aid British Indian courts in a system which continued till 1864. In form, this was a continuation of Mughal practice which had been marked by a similar duality in Diwani, as distinct from Nizamat, adalats, where Muslim criminal law prevailed. 'But by far the greater part of litigation was never brought before Muslim officials, but was settled by recourse to traditional methods of resolving disputes, which differed according to the caste, the status in society, and the locality of the parties.'* J.D.M. Derrett, *Religion, Law, and the State in India* (London, 1968), pp. 229, 233. For a specific instance of the legal homogenization brought about under British

law alike, 'colonial knowledge', it needs to be added, was not just a Western superimposition: such an interpretation gravely underestimates the extent and significance of inputs from relatively privileged Indian groups with autonomous interests and inclinations.⁴⁷

The focus upon samaj as counterposed to politics could acquire alternative stresses, logically distinct even though quite often intermingled within the same activity or text. One strand was clearly populist, and manifested itself through appeals to the urban bhadralok to re-establish links with rural life. Concrete efforts in that direction included village reconstruction initiatives, attempts to promote elementary education and cottage crafts (as distinct from Swadeshi textile mills or an alternative, Calcutta-based 'national' university), and the gathering-together of invaluable collections of folk literature, songs and fairy tales.⁴⁸ Yet samaj was simultaneously all too often conceptualized in Hindu, high-caste gentry, and paternalist terms, and these were the nuances that the term itself tended to carry over from earlier usages.⁴⁹

Both tendencies can be seen at work in extensions of constructive swadeshi moods into historical retrospects. An initial consequence of the valorization of samaj as actual or potential site of autonomy

rule, in this case actually restricting the rights of lower-caste women even while implementing an undoubtedly progressive legislation, see Lucy Carroll, 'Law, Custom and Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856', in J. Krishnamurti (ed.), *Women in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1989).

⁴⁷ The Bengal Census Report of 1901 provides a concrete example of such an input in a crucial area. E.A. Gait interpreted Census Commissioner H.H. Risley's instruction to classify castes in each region 'by social precedence as recognized by native public opinion' to mean that 'the decision must rest with enlightened public opinion and not with public opinion generally.' But 'enlightened opinion would inevitably mean the views of highly educated Hindus, i.e. overwhelmingly of upper-caste men. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of claims for higher status by subordinate castes were summarily rejected by the Bengal Census Report. *Census (India)*, 1901, Volume I.1, p. 538; *Census (Bengal)*, 1901, vol. vi, pt 1, pp. 354, 378-84.

⁴⁸ Two striking examples would be Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakumar Jhuli* (Grandma's Tales, published in 1907), and Dineshchandra Sen's discovery of the Mymensingh folk ballads. For an account of the many dimensions of constructive swadeshi, see *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 10.

⁴⁹ The Bengali word *samaj* referred to collectivities or gatherings of particular castes (in the sense of *jatis*, and more particularly, sub-divisions of the latter) or religious sects (e.g. Brahma 'Samaj') before its late-nineteenth-early-twentieth-century extension to signify also more wide-ranging notions of society or community.

was a fairly remarkable and precocious interest in social and cultural history: very different, really, from the supposed British colonial prototype, for it developed precisely around the time when the turn towards professionalized accuracy on the Ranke model was making such themes disreputable in Western academic scholarship. The two main areas of original research were ancient Indian culture and religion and, in Bengal particularly in the wake of the Swadeshi upsurge, regional and local histories as well as extremely important surveys of the development of Bengali language and literature. Here, pioneering use was made of vernacular literary texts, oral folk traditions, artistic works, and a very wide range of cultural artefacts. To take one remarkable instance: Dineshchandra Sen's *Brihat Banga*, published in 1935 as the fruit of two decades of labour, began with a declaration that 'the social, artistic and religious evolution of a civilization does have some relationship with political history, but the connection is not necessarily always close or vital.' A later chapter argued that wanderings among the common people, and studying their patterns of life, crafts and traditions, could often reveal more about true history than poring over inscriptions or written texts. It went on to illustrate this proposition through inferences teased out from peasant ways of learning measurements and predicting the weather, folksongs, and the material culture of boatmaking, house-construction, the weaving of quilts, and the preparation of sweets. For Sen, it appears at times, the true repositories of Bengal's culture have been plebeian, low-caste people bound up with everyday material production, not the Brahman bearers of high Sanskrit learning. The weakening of that high-culture-bearing strata under Pathan rule is presented, most uncharacteristically, as a boon which opened the way for the development of the Bengali language.⁵⁰

If Sen's populism, probably inspired by one kind of reading of Vaishnava traditions, represented an effort at a kind of peoples' history, there was also the slightly later and much more carefully crafted initiative of Niharranjan Ray (*Bangalir Itibas*, Calcutta, 1949). This attempted a veritable total history of pre-thirteenth-century Bengal, with sections on ecology, economic conditions, land relations, caste and class structures, statecraft, religion, culture, and everyday life. Ray, too, had spent years wandering through Bengal's countryside, but as a Left-nationalist activist, and his work reveals signs of Marxian influence.

⁵⁰ Dineshchandra Sen, *Brihat Banga*, 2v (Calcutta, 1935; repr., 1993), pp. v, 895-946.

It must be added immediately, however, that Niharranjan Ray and even Dineshchandra Sen were hardly typical of the bulk of writings built around the *rashtra/samaj* dichotomy. A local history like Jogendranath Gupta's *Bikrampur Itibas* (Calcutta, 1909) would be a much more representative example. Gupta enumerated in great and loving detail the past and present achievements of the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* in what was one of its classic heartlands. No one would guess from reading his book that more than half the population of the region he was writing about were Muslims, or that, among the Hindus, Namashudras considerably outnumbered the Brahmins, *Baidyas* and *Kayasthas* combined. The *bhadralok* history of *Bikrampur* was emphatically not about people like them.⁵¹ As Niharranjan Ray pointed out in the Introduction to his *Bangalir Itibas*, '*samaj*' had generally been understood 'in a very narrow manner', excluding the plebeian strata, even by those who had grasped what Ray reiterated as the key feature of pre-colonial Indian life: its centring around '*samaj*', not '*rashtra*'.⁵²

Partha Chatterjee's detailed account of writings about history in colonial Bengal does make fleeting reference to a trend in early nationalist historiography which 'denied the centrality of the state in the life of the nation'. The general framework he has adopted leads him to locate 'the principal difficulty with this view, which has many affinities with the later politics of Gandhism', in 'its inherent vulnerability to the overwhelming sway of the modern state.'⁵³ Other kinds of vulnerabilities, of the sort implicit in the silences of Gupta's history of *Bikrampur*, appear more obvious and vital to me, at least so far as Bengal historiography is concerned. The clearest evidence for them comes from more general or programmatic statements about history conceived in terms of the state/society disjunction, made during the Swadeshi years by Rabindranath Tagore and Satish Mukherji.

Rabindranath wrote often about history between 1901 and 1912,

⁵¹ For some details of Gupta's book, as well as census data about the religious and caste composition of the *Bikrampur* region, see my 'Kalki-avatar of *Bikrampur*: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI* (Delhi, 1989).

⁵² Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itibas: Adiparba*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1949, 1980), pp. 2, 5.

⁵³ The reference extends over two paragraphs in a forty-page analysis of 'The Nation and Its Pasts', and 'Histories and Nations', in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, pp. 76-115.

and these essays provide rich indications of a mind grappling with a *rashtra/samaj* framework, and then in important ways going beyond it through an auto-critique of some of his own earlier assumptions: a complicated and contradictory process that attained abiding literary form through *Gora* (serialized between 1907 and 1909). *Bharatvarsher Itihas* (1902), probably the best known of Rabindranath's historical essays, used an interesting language that pressed the politics/culture divide towards a Muslim/Hindu dichotomy which is never explicitly avowed in the text. Thus the narrative of wars and invasions, proclaimed by Tagore at the beginning of this article to be no more than a bad dream – not genuine, valuable, history – is immediately defined by him to have extended 'from Mahmud's invasions to the imperial boasts of Lord Curzon'. 'In the darkness caused by the storm and thunder of Mughal and Pathan, our ancient temples had to cover their heads, while the marbled, ornate tombs of the mistresses of Sultans soared to kiss the stars.' The general denigration of statecraft, it seems, does not extend to the wars and conquests of a Samudragupta, while the exaltation of culture quickly slips into a firmly Hindu mould.⁵⁴

In *Nababarsha* and *Brahman*, two other 1902 essays published a few months before *Bharatvarsher Itihas*, Rabindranath spelled out what was then his notion of ideal Hindu samaj, in terms explicitly, even aggressively Brahmanical and patriarchal. (A combination that seems almost inseparable: we may recall the conflation of over-mighty Shudras and disorderly wives in the dystopia of Kaliyuga.) Inequality is inevitable in all human societies, he argued, but India has given appropriate respect to 'low and high, women and men'.⁵⁵ He counterposed the entire society of gentlefolk (*bhadrasampraday*) who should be given *dwija* (twice-born) status, to those considered 'Shudras', in ancient India as well as today – 'Santals, Bhils, Kols, bands of sweepers' – for in a proper samaj 'neck and shoulders must not be lowered to the level of the ground.' 'We want to become *dwijas*, not *feringhees*', whereas today there was the danger of all Brahmins degenerating into 'a vast society of tired clerks worn out by excessive work'.⁵⁶ And, still on the theme of the necessary inequality of

humankind, Rabindranath in his *Nababarsha* essay attacked the 'modern wife' who, in imitation of the West, feels ashamed of 'serving' her husband and children. In the Indian tradition, however, 'sweeping the floor, bringing water, preparing food, eating after everyone else . . . considering even husbands without any exceptional qualities akin to gods' have been rightly taken to be the hallmarks of the 'grihalakshmi', the embodiment of true feminine grace and beauty.⁵⁷

Rabindranath, as is well known, soon moved away from most of these positions. The Hindu-Muslim riots in East Bengal in 1906–7, and the failure of the Swadeshi movement to enthuse the bulk of the peasantry, set him thinking about the problematic features of the samaj he had briefly idealized. Tagore, after about 1907, developed a powerful and consistent anti-communal critique, and by 1909 was condemning the samaj based on hierarchized caste difference as a 'gigantic system of cold-blooded repression'.⁵⁸ The repudiation of gender inequality was, perhaps less sharp or consistent, but still a short story like *Streer Patra* (1914) stands in utter and total contrast to the passage I have just quoted.

For a more consistent elaboration of the implications of a Hindu communitarian ideology grounded in hierarchy we need to turn to Satish Mukherji and his *Dawn*. Mukherji's 'The Question of Caste' (*Dawn*, August 1903) proclaimed axiomatically 'that in all ages and by virtue of a law of nature, there shall be inequalities and distinctions between man and man.' He reminded those who objected to caste as being hereditary that property, too, descended 'from father to son'. Admittedly, an element of flexibility enabling some promotions or demotions on the basis of merit was advisable to allow 'proper placement and chance of transfer': but this necessarily presupposed 'a group who can make the needed choices'. The Brahmins, Mukherji concluded, have the best qualifications and traditional expertise for this job of guardianship. Thus a mildly reformist criticism of caste was neatly co-opted into a defence of

(p. 393) extremely significant, and will be discussing its significance in Chapters 6 and 8. Late-nineteenth-century modulations of the Kaliyuga myth, we shall see, are important primarily as an entry point into representations of this clerical world.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁵⁸ Letter to Myron Phelps, 4 January 1909, reprinted in *Modern Review*, August 1910. For more details about the change in Rabindranath's views after 1907, see my *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, pp. 62, 82–91.

⁵⁴ *Bharatvarsher Itihas* (Bhadra 1309/1902), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. IV (Calcutta, 1940, 1975), pp. 377, 379.

⁵⁵ *Nababarsha* (Baisakh 1309/1902), *ibid.*, p. 373.

⁵⁶ *Brahman* (Asar 1309/1902), *ibid.*, pp. 395, 401–2. I find this counter-positioning of proper hierarchy to the miseries of contemporary clerical life, where 'the Brahman has to work with lowered head in the office of the *sahib*'

Brahmanical order. Only through caste hierarchy, *Dawn* editorials and articles repeatedly proclaimed, could 'progress' be reconciled with 'order' or 'stability'. The editorial for the November 1900 issue, for instance, urged the need to understand the specific 'laws' of India's 'social evolution'. It admitted the need to overcome 'the present *inertia* of Indian society in many matters in respect of which its hands are free, e.g., social, educational, religious and industrial', but emphasized that this should be done only through pursuing 'a course that is consistent with *stability*'.⁵⁹ The language reminds us that Satish Mukherji had some connections with a Positivist group in late-nineteenth-century Bengal which had inflected the doctrines of Comte in a highly conservative, Brahmanical direction. As so often, caste and gender hierarchy were seen as interdependent, and in March 1903 *Dawn* gave great prominence to the views of the 'eminent Hindu Positivist, the late Jogendrachandra Ghosh, Zemin-dar', that India's progress 'must be securely based on continuance of the traditional family system'.⁶⁰ The Bengal Positivists, I will argue in a subsequent chapter, provide an illuminating case study of the ways in which specific aspects of colonial structures and discourses (legal recognition of a sphere of community-based personal law, and fragments of Comtean theory) were used as resources to reaffirm Brahmanical hegemony.⁶¹

Dawn regularly counterposed Brahmanical and patriarchal order against the incessant competition and 'gospel of enjoyment' of the West. It related the craze for increasing 'consumption per head' to the 'undue importance attached to the *doctrine of rights*', as manifested, in its opinion, notably in the advance of democracy in Victorian England.⁶² Its very first issue emphasized the need for India 'to steer clear of the Labour Problem of Christendom'.⁶³ The anti-capitalistic note is quite striking, but so is the precise angle of attack as revealed

⁵⁹ Italics in original. 'Indian Social Evolution and Reform' (*Dawn*, November 1900). See also 'Principles of Social Order: The Static Aspect' (Editorial, *Dawn*, March 1900) which reiterated that 'all progress is built on Order and — is delusive, and even mischievous, when it is not built on order . . . '.

⁶⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this Positivist-cum-Brahmanical inflection of the *rashtra/samaj*, see Chapter 9. The pioneering, and still the most detailed study of Comte's Bengali disciples is Geraldine Forbes, *Positivism in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1975).

⁶¹ Chapter 9.

⁶² 'Social Movements Round a Centre' (anon., *Dawn*, August 1897).

⁶³ 'The Situation in India: A Problem and an Illustration' (anon., *Dawn*, March 1897).

by the kind of (totally inegalitarian) *samaj* or community being posited against it. And here, it has to be added, the anticipations in *Dawn* of some very contemporary trends become really startling. An article entitled *Western Ideal of Nationalism* (unsigned, but probably by Satish Mukherji) in *Dawn*, June 1911, contrasted the 'Western' notion of 'political nationalism', focussed upon the 'development of men's activities as *members of a state*', with the Hindu ideal of community based on regulated, hierarchized difference. The unity sought by Hindu society was not something 'homogeneous', but based on *dharmashastras* that laid down differentiated 'standards of righteous conduct adapted to various and varying . . . classes and divisions of people'. Unity came also from 'allegiance to the framers of these Laws, who form a distinct spiritual order. . . . ' Western 'political nationalism', in contrast, sought 'a homogeneous political existence' through 'a suppression of all diversity'. Mukherji traced its origins back to 'France during the Revolutionary epoch of the eighteenth century', and in particular to 'the French Encyclopaedists . . . who in the name of equality and fraternity had preached a *jehad* against all that men and nations held sacred.' Such ideas, the article implied, had been imposed on India by Bentham and Mill, with a minor modification that substituted utility for the 'goddess of Reason'. Large parts of this essay, one is tempted to comment, could walk into a contemporary anti-'Orientalist' collection with a minimum of editorial updating: they counterpose, in remarkably clear language, an ideal of cultural difference premised on internal hierarchy against notions of universal rights which are felt to be homogenizing.

But of course the argument was anything but purely indigenous or traditional: even a cursory glance through the issues of *Dawn* indicates a striking degree of derivation from that other, more insidious kind of Orientalism that patronizes and praises, instead of denouncing, an equally essentialized Orient. A Cambridge don, Oscar Browning, was quoted with great approval for his statement that his Indian visit had taught him 'to tolerate *purdah*, and to have an admiration for caste',⁶⁴ while many of the strongest assertions of patriarchal values come from the pens of Annie Besant and Sister Nivedita.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Dawn*, July 1903.

⁶⁵ Thus Annie Besant argued in an article entitled 'The Education of Hindu Youth' (*Dawn*, June 1897) that passing the matriculation examination was useless for Indian girls, who should be trained rather in 'devotion and piety'. Any imitation of the West with respect to the education of women could 'break up

Assertions of values that otherwise would have been considered socially retrogressive are quite often explained or even justified today as valid responses to the all-pervasive colonial authority and interference. It therefore becomes important to note that the *Dawn* variety of 'constructive swadeshi' was not conspicuously anti-colonial, so far as politics was concerned. Indeed, the politics/society disjunction in this case permitted at times a rather remarkable degree of loyalism. In February 1898 *Dawn* justified Satish Mukherji's Bhagavat Chatuspathi (a 'Hindu Boarding Religious Institution' to train students 'under a system of Hindu discipline') in part on the grounds that 'in this way alone could we live happily amongst our rulers, and setting an example of lofty character repay them tenfold the debt which we owe them for the era of uninterrupted peace and tranquility which India had not enjoyed for many and many a day until she came by the dispensation of an All-wise Providence under British overlordship.' That was 1898: thirteen years later, after the storms of Swadeshi had come and gone, Satish Mukherji was hailing the 'transcendental importance' of the visit of the King-Emperor, and arranging to present George V with a full set of the copies of his *Dawn*.⁶⁶ The important point that seems to emerge is that the refurbishing, or invention, of ideologies of Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchy under colonial rule did not necessarily flow from anti-colonial impulses alone: more internal compulsions and power relations also deserve attention.

I have been emphasizing a precocious, if in many ways problem-ridden, thrust towards social history. A qualification that needs to be made at this point is that such tendencies had developed

the family system, drive the women out in the world to earn their living, make them competitors with men An earlier essay by Besant on Hindu women (1894), which *Dawn* reprinted in October 1901, had extolled the charms of chaste widowhood. It admitted that Hindu ideals of womanhood could have no place in the West, but pleaded, in a classic statement of one kind of Orientalism: 'Leave the Hindu woman untouched by Western thought, and do not destroy a type just because it is unique . . . We have women enough, who are brilliantly intellectual and competent: let us leave unmarried the one type which is the incarnation of spiritual beauty.' Nivedita, too, was full of admiration for the 'nun-like qualities' of the Hindu widow, and felt that 'there are few great relationships in human life like that between a Hindu man and his mother.' (*Dawn*, May 1903.)

⁶⁶ 'The Imperial Visit' (*Dawn*, December 1911). For the presentation of *Dawn* to George V, see Haridas and Uma Mukherji, *Origins of the National Education Movement* (Calcutta, 1957), p. 249.

primarily outside the world of the professional Indian historian, which in any case took quite some time to constitute itself. University departments began systematic research in history rather late, as they had been primarily examining-cum-teaching bodies till the early twentieth century, and an all-India organization of the historical profession (the Indian History Congress) was floated only in the 1930s. As had happened in the West a generation or two earlier, the turn to the Ranke model of academic precision and strictly archive-based history placed a heavy premium on political-military-administrative narratives. The tone was set by the major British Indian surveys: Vincent Smith's *Oxford History of India* (1919) and the Cambridge History series published during the inter-war years, while among Indian historians Jadunath Sarkar emerged as the most respected and influential scholar through his predominantly political works on the Mughal empire and the Maratha kingdoms.⁶⁷ A state-oriented Indian history had thus come to dominate academia now, largely displacing social-cultural interests⁶⁸ – without however fundamentally modifying many of the underlying premises of that other kind of work. Thus the more abundant and precise data that had now become available about the ancient (or 'Hindu') period led to dynastic histories marked often by an uncritical preference for alleged periods of 'imperial unity', particularly the Guptas, Asoka Maurya remaining a bit suspect because of his Buddhist affiliations. Imperial unity, however, ceased to be such a plus point if the rulers happened to be Muslims, for, as in nineteenth-century historical novels, the wars of sections of Rajputs, Marathas, and Sikhs with centralizing Muslim rulers were generally given the status of national struggles. Another revealing discrepancy consisted in a variation across time of the degree of attention professional historians were prepared to give to social-cultural matters. Ancient Indian civilization and culture still attracted a lot of attention in syllabi and research alike, quite often in highly apologetic, even revivalist forms. Similar themes were much less studied or taught for the 'Muslim' period, except by a few firmly

⁶⁷ Jadunath Sarkar, however, had the imagination, flexibility and grace to hail Niharranjan Ray's book as a landmark in what he declared would be increasingly recognized as the 'highest' kind of history: social history. See his preface to the first edition of *Bangalir Itibas*, p. x.

⁶⁸ In Bengali-language works, too, the new political focus was exemplified in Ramaprasad Chanda's *Gaur Rajmala* (Rajshahi, 1912) and Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay's *Banglar Itibas* (Calcutta, 1914).

anti-communal nationalist historians who tried to highlight 'syncretic' Bhakti-Sufi movements and foregrounded Akbar against Aurangzeb.⁶⁹

One curious feature of history-writing about the 'modern' or colonial period prior to the 1950s needs some emphasis. Nationalist historiography developed on sites some distance from what, on logical grounds, should have been its proper location: the rich and growing traditions of contemporary anti-colonial movements. There was virtually no professional research on such themes (or on 1857) till some years after independence, and the history of colonial India consequently remained very much a narrative of viceroys, Afghan or Burmese wars, and administrative and 'constitutional' reforms. Home Department files or private papers for recent years were largely inaccessible, most academic historians worked in government-controlled or financed institutions, and with the rise of mass nationalism (as well as revolutionary terrorism and Left formations) the factor of censorship (and, more often, self-censorship) had probably become much more important than in the more placid late nineteenth century. Even the critique of British Indian economic policies worked out by Moderate Congress intellectuals like Naoroji or R.C. Dutt seldom entered standard history textbooks: certainly I cannot recall such themes in my college courses, a decade after 1947. The social-historical impulse also tended to wither away for the colonial period, with the major exception of the middle class studying its own cultural origins in an increasingly self-adulatory manner through the renaissance myth. Caste and religion in colonial times were probably felt to be divisive themes, from the perspectives of countrywide unity and anti-British struggle.

Through silences and stresses alike, the bulk of late-colonial Indian professional historiography came to have a tilt that was strongly Hindu, as well as North Indian. The alternatives that sometimes emerged within that same milieu were based on simple inversions of mainstream assumptions, and hence did not mark any qualitative break. Thus there were occasional writings which glorified Muslim rulers, eras of pan-Islamic grandeur, and powerful Southern or regional dynasties, in equally uncritical ways. What remained fairly ubiquitous were views from the top: whether Northern, Southern, or regional, Brahmanical/high caste or *ashraf*. By far

⁶⁹ An obvious example is Tarachand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* (1922; reprinted Allahabad, 1963).

the most influential model, of course, was that of a fundamentally harmonious 'Indian' civilization and culture, all too often implicitly identified with 'Hindu' traditions of alleged catholicity, with an underlying Brahmanical or high-caste slant. In a simultaneous move, the sting was sought to be removed from inconvenient questions of gender oppression by postulating a Vedic or ancient golden age of learned and respected women subsequently shattered by foreign, usually Muslim, intrusions.⁷⁰

There were some signs of an inversion of a more fundamental kind. In Maharashtra and Tamilnadu, in the wake of powerful lower-caste movements, alternative versions of history were constructed which stood the theory of the assimilative spread of 'Aryan' civilization on its head, and projected a counter-myth of Northern-Brahmanical foreign conquest and tyranny over the indigenous '*babujan samaj*' of intermediate and low castes. The Shivaji projected in Jyotirao Phule's ballad about him in 1869 was primarily a Kunbi-Maratha folk hero distinguished by concern for peasants, while *Ghulamgiri* (1873) dismissed 'fictions' about his 'freeing the motherland from *Mlecchas* and protecting Brahmins and cows' as 'false religious patriotism'.⁷¹ In the 1920s, the Chamars of Punjab would use the recent discovery of Harappan civilization to develop a similar anti-Brahmanical Aryan rhetoric.⁷² Even in Bengal, much less known for its caste politics, the thrust towards *bhadralok*-dominated social and regional histories of the Swadeshi and post-Swadeshi years actually coincided with a quite independent stream

⁷⁰ Traces of this myth can be seen already in a paper on the conditions of Indian women presented to the Derozian Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge (Maheshchandra Deb, *A Sketch of the Condition of Hindu Women*, reprinted in Gautam Chattopadhyay). It attained the status of a historical commonplace through Altekar's *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation* (1938). Two excellent recent critiques are Uma Chakrabarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi, 1989), and Kumkum Roy, 'Where Women are Worshipped, there the Gods Rejoice': The Mirage of the Ancestress of the Hindu Woman', in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (eds), *Women and the Hindu Right* (New Delhi, 1995).

⁷¹ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (Cambridge, 1985), Chapter 10; *Collected Works of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Volume I (Slavery)* (Bombay, 1991), p. 26.

⁷² Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-Century Punjab* (California, 1982).

of tracts. These expressed lower-caste grievances and aspirations, and constituted for them, sometimes, imagined pasts built out of selective appropriations from elite myths and histories. Thus the Rajbansi claim to Kshatriya status could be buttressed through the Brahmanical myth of the destruction of Kshatriyas by Parashuram,⁷³ while the metrical biography of the founder of the Matua sect which had laid the foundations of the Namashudra movement in Faridpur laid claim to the anti-caste heritage of the Buddha (and Kabir) a generation before Ambedkar.⁷⁴ Alternative historiographies like these have been generally, and symptomatically, ignored by academic scholarship. Today they seem on the point of becoming a formidable force, as an opportunist BJP-BSP (Hindu upper-caste and trader with Dalit, lower caste) alliance in Uttar Pradesh breaks down partly through Dalit insistence on celebrating, precisely in the state where Ayodhya is located, an anti-Brahman leader of far-off Tamilnadu who had publicly burned pictures of Ram on Madras beach in 1956.⁷⁵ Implicit here is a very different way of imagining, not only the subcontinent's pasts, but perspectives of national unity or integration.

III

I have been emphasizing the differences within late-colonial Indian historical thinking, in particular a contrast between social-historical impulses mainly generated outside the formal historical profession, and statecraft-oriented narratives written from within its confines. Certain features common to both appear equally significant, however, when looked at from today's perspectives, and in terms of their conditions of production and dissemination. These demarcate the late-colonial situation quite sharply from the many historical worlds of today, and consequently offer a vantage point for a brief review of contemporary opportunities and predicaments.

There were two notable absences. The Asiatic Society and the

⁷³ The ancestors of the Rajbansis, it was claimed, were Kshatriyas who had taken refuge in the wilds of North Bengal to escape the wrath of Parashuram, and had subsequently forgotten their high-caste origin and customs. Harakishore Adhikari, *Rajbansi Kulpradip* (Calcutta, 1908).

⁷⁴ Tarakchandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita* (P.O. Olpur, Faridpur, 1916). For a more detailed discussion of such alternative constructions, see Chapter 9.

⁷⁵ For details about Periyar's burning of images of Ram, as well as his other violent attacks on the Ramayana, see Paula Richman, 'E.V. Ramaswami's Reading of the Ramayana', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Delhi, 1994).

Anthropological Survey apart, official funding for pure research, detached from pedagogy, hardly existed, and there was very little of today's accelerating globalization which has made trips abroad for degrees, research or seminars an important part of the more prestigious kinds of academic life. Opportunities for any kind of higher education were more restricted and therefore even more class-cum-caste defined than today, given the far fewer universities and colleges. Within this smaller educated community, however, the hierarchical divisions between research/teaching, university departments/undergraduate colleges/schools, metropolitan/provincial universities seem to have been somewhat less sharp. Repositories of books, manuscripts, art objects and cultural artefacts were often built up by autodidacts, gentlemen with access to local resources and antiquarian interests but little formal academic training: a zamindar, lawyer or schoolteacher could sometimes contribute as much or more as a university professor. For Bengal, one thinks immediately of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, many local libraries, and the Varendra Research Society, the latter located in a small North Bengal district town (Rajshahi) yet enjoying at one time an academic prestige which it would be difficult for any non-metropolitan centre to emulate today. Another example of this relative absence of internal hierarchization within a smaller educated elite is provided by the career of Sir Jadunath Sarkar (1870-1958). A Rajshahi zamindar's son, Jadunath's formal degrees were in English, and till retirement he combined research with the teaching of History, together sometimes with English and Bengali, mainly to undergraduate students (at Ripon, Metropolitan and Presidency Colleges in Calcutta, followed by Patna and Cuttack, and then briefly at the Benaras Hindu University). Jadunath became internationally renowned but never went abroad.⁷⁶

Late-colonial histories, then, were generally written by teachers for students or general readers. Very many of the topmost professional scholars also produced textbooks, and most of them published original works both in English and in indigenous languages. There was therefore much less of a gap than is evident now between the best and the worst or even average histories. But it would be dangerous to romanticize: inadequate funding for full-time research, confinement within national or regional parameters in the absence of opportunities for wider contacts, the restrictive aspects of a

⁷⁶ Biographical data taken from S.P. Sen (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. IV (Calcutta, 1974).

nationalist paradigm shot through with unstated class and high-caste assumptions (quite often sliding into communalist attitudes), all exerted a price. The 'best' scholarship of those times, with rare exceptions, appears unacceptably limited, parochial and unself-questioning today.

Post-independence historiographical developments, in contrast, have been marked by a dialectic which simultaneously enhanced standards vastly at elite levels, while paying far too little attention to histories being taught to the majority of college and school students as well as diffused through other means among the general public. Advanced historical research has come to have as its intended audience one's academic peer-group, research students of the best universities, and, increasingly, international conferences. Meanwhile the now very seriously dated historiography of a past generation has kept on getting reproduced and disseminated, in diluted and crude forms, at other, inferiorized and neglected levels. Thus has come to be constituted a 'common-sense' — using that term in the most negative of Gramsci's several different formulations⁷⁷ — open to appropriation and orchestration by organizations such as the Sangh Parivar.

There has certainly been a qualitative transformation in the work of the leading practitioners since the 1950s, bound up with very significant shifts in basic approaches and choice of research questions. In ancient and medieval Indian historiography, where the changes have been most obvious, work from the late 1950s has focussed on themes like 'social formations',⁷⁸ debates about the existence and nature of Indian feudalism, or the possibilities of

⁷⁷ Gramsci, who always made clear that for him there could never be 'just one common sense', quite often emphasized its 'fragmentary, incoherent, and inconsequential' aspects, as a kind of bricolage of residues from the high cultures and 'prejudices from all past phases of history . . .' But it could also include elements evolving from below, as it were, from shared experiences in labour and in social relations, with an embryonic oppositional potential. Assertions of lower-caste identities through imagined histories have obviously no intrinsic superiority in sheer academic terms over dominant-caste constructions, but they do seem to include elements of common-sense of the latter kind. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (New York, 1971), pp. 323-7, 419-25. See also the helpful comments of E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991, 1993), pp. 10-11.

⁷⁸ The major breakthrough, of course, was D.D. Kosambi's *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1956).

capitalistic developments in pre-colonial times. Inscriptions and land grants have been probed, no longer primarily for information about kings, dynasties or conquests, but for the inferences that could be teased out from them on broader socio-economic relationships and questions of state formation. Impressive detailed studies of medieval agrarian, artisanal or commercial structures have similarly taken the place of old-fashioned dynastic and military histories.

Ranke, then, has been displaced in considerable measure by Marx. The specific direction of this change owes much to the overall conjuncture of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by a strong and apparently growing Left presence in Indian political and intellectual life. Mere enhancement in research opportunities obviously cannot explain it, nor was it just a question of wider international contacts. It was not mainstream British or American historiography, not even writings on South Asian themes, but a journal like *Past and Present*, the 'transition debate', and the work of historians like Hill, Hobsbawm and Thompson — often sought to be marginalized by academic establishments in the West — that appeared most stimulating to Indian scholars exploring new ways of looking at history.

The new history had been iconoclastic in the 1960s; today, in leading universities as well as in the Indian History Congress (though hardly elsewhere), it has been functioning as a kind of establishment for almost a generation. This provokes, nowadays, a certain legitimate impatience about the occasionally simplified and restrictive nature of its applications of Marxism, and attempts at more wholesale repudiation are not unlikely, given the context of the collapse of socialist regimes and the sharp Right turn in recent world and Indian politics. It is important, therefore, to retain a sense of the sheer distance that separates the post-Kosambi or post-Irfan Habib historical world from what had preceded it, even while developing the qualities of self-criticism vital for any living tradition of radical historiography.

An aspect of this 'shift in the paradigm',⁷⁹ one which has not been much emphasized but is particularly relevant for my present argument, is the rupture with a conventional nationalist historiography which, when transposed into ancient or medieval times, all too often had become indistinguishable from communalism. To cite only a few obvious instances: the casualties of the transformation

⁷⁹ Romila Thapar has used this phrase to describe the impact of Kosambi: 'The Contribution of D.D. Kosambi to Indology', in Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India* (Delhi, 1992).

at times, it is true, by Left studies of class struggles of workers and peasants. But once again socio-cultural dimensions tended to get marginalized, as simplified Leninist frameworks gave priority to a combination of economic pressures and 'external' organization, and tended often to get lost in debates on the correctness or otherwise of party strategies.

The would-be social historian of modern India had perforce often to turn for guidance to social anthropologists. But that too has been a domain full of problems, where conservative attitudes have often blended with structural-functionalist premises to produce an abundance of bland, tension-denuded categories. Thus all kinds of caste mobility, including radical protest, have been grouped together under one label, 'Sanskritization', indicative primarily of the most assimilative kind of change. A parallel instance would be the 'jajmani system', where elements of mutuality in relations between the Brahman ritual expert and the householder have been extended to the rather different transactions of peasants and artisans, even landholders and agricultural labourers.

That the standard anti-colonial nationalist model, at least in its more totalizing, unmediated versions, can be constrictive is indicated by the fact that much interesting and stimulating recent work has been taking place outside, or in a tangential relationship to, its boundaries. Take for example the notable growth areas of economic history, and studies, often over the long-term, of the grossly neglected South. The framework of abrupt and cataclysmic late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century economic decline that still works fairly well for some regions of early colonial penetration (most notably, Bengal) does appear somewhat less helpful, for other areas. (A work like Chris Bayly's *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*,⁸² however controversial at times, cannot be dismissed as simply neo-colonialist.) The rapidly growing genre of environmental or ecological history, to take a second example, often has to work with scales of time that need not coincide with conventional periodizations. Parts of the South, again, seem to have had patterns and rhythms of their own: looking outwards commercially towards and across the Indian Ocean rather than inland, and marked in the inter-War years more by lower-caste assertions (and in some regions by Left movements) than mainstream Gandhian nationalism or Congress and League politics.

⁸² C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge, 1983; rpt. Delhi, 1993).

There developed, in the 1970s and early 1980s, a conjuncture during which conventional nationalist and Left-nationalist premises seemed on the point of more direct challenge, even decisive overthrow. As in the 1950s, a changed overall context was crucial. Its constituent elements included the (slightly delayed) academic fall-out from worldwide moods of *radical optimism characteristic of the 1960s and early 1970s*, and the rise within India of a variety of extreme-Left tendencies which combined disillusionment with organized Marxist parties with hopes of an impending peasant revolution. As the prospects of radical change withered, there was a proliferation of volunteer groups engaged in constructive work at the grassroots, while women's movements with self-consciously feminist perspectives emerged as a novel and permanent element in the Indian scene. Meanwhile, lower-caste protests were gathering strength, forcing, after the Mandal flare-up in the mid-nineties, considerable rethinking among Left activists who had for long underestimated its autonomous appeal. History-writing was modified in this changed conjuncture in two more or less parallel but largely unconnected ways: the sudden popularity of 'histories from below' (early *Subaltern Studies*, of course, but also quite a lot of work outside and sometimes preceding it),⁸³ and a quantum leap, virtually from scratch, in women's studies, increasingly informed by feminist approaches.

The first wave of Indian feminist scholarship — original, powerful, but nowadays largely neglected or forgotten — questioned the triumphal narrative of *unilinear advance in the 'status of women' through male-initiated nineteenth-century social reform*, followed by women's participation in Gandhian, revolutionary-terrorist or Left-led movements. More nuanced and ambiguous patterns were suggested, emphasizing the contradictions of reform and the ways in which nationalism could have displaced the women's question and recuperated patriarchal ideologies and structures, even while opening up public spaces for women, and there were interesting efforts to relate shifting gender relations to detailed studies of socio-economic processes.⁸⁴

⁸³ I attempted a survey-cum-analysis of the early moves towards histories from below in *Popular Movements and Middle-Class Leadership in Late Colonial India* (Deuskar Lecture, given at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1982; published Calcutta, 1983); see particularly p. 74, fn. 3. Like my *Modern India 1885-1947* (Delhi, 1983), I had drafted this lecture before reading *Subaltern Studies I* (Delhi, 1982).

⁸⁴ I owe this assessment of early feminist historiography to Tanika Sarkar — 'Women's Histories and Feminist Writings in India: A Review and A Caution'

Meanwhile, there was a spate of research publications on tribal, peasant and labour movements, as well as a few pioneering, sympathetic studies of lower-caste initiatives in large part independent of, or even hostile to, mainstream nationalism. The generalizations that emerged from some of this work were not dissimilar at times to those being worked out independently by historians of women. An inverse relationship was suggested between moments of popular, specifically peasant, autonomy, and Gandhian nationalism in its more organized forms and phases. *Subaltern Studies*, in particular, began with a programmatic statement simultaneously critiquing the elitism of both colonialist and nationalist historiographies.⁸⁵ The habit of looking at history solely from the top downwards, in terms of leaders mobilizing the masses through ideals, charisma, or manipulation, it was cogently argued, has often coincided with economic assumptions: both had combined, even in Left historiography, to obstruct efforts at studying the consciousness and culture of subaltern groups.

I have argued later in this volume that the possibilities that had opened up a decade or so back, the chances of a social-historical breakthrough, have today become restricted once again, and that this, too, has happened in contexts both worldwide and specific to India.⁸⁶ For the moment I will merely suggest a connection between such closures and a paradoxical kind of nationalist recuperation associated with critiques of colonial discourse, particularly in the dominant strand within today's *Subaltern Studies*. Paradoxical, both in terms of the starting point of that project, and because the critique of official, state-centred nationalism has not been given up. But a two-fold displacement has occurred: from colonial domination to Western cultural conquest; and from subaltern, usually peasant, consciousness (often marked by the centrality of religion, but not detached from questions of class, exploitation, and power) to affirmations of community consciousness in effect defined by religion and abstracted from indigenous power relations (other than

(Plenary Session Address, Seventh Berkshire Conference, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, June 1996), forthcoming. A fine example of this earlier work is J. Krishnamurti (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (Delhi, 1989), consisting of essays published several years earlier in the *Indian Social and Economic History Review*.

⁸⁵ Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I* (Delhi, 1982).

⁸⁶ See Chapter 3 below.

those embodied in that alleged quintessence of post-Enlightenment rationality, the bureaucratic nation-state). The adoption of the single criterion of subordination or otherwise to modern Western power-knowledge is not too distant, surely, from the familiar digits of cultural nationalism. And the related tendency to valorize all assertions of indigenous community values is likely to inhibit sympathetic explorations of a vast range of initiatives by or on behalf of subordinated groups: women, lower-castes, Left-led peasant and workers movements, all of which have selectively appropriated elements from Western ideologies. Later chapters will provide instances of how such inhibitory pressures are already at work, even in the writings of scholars with undeniably radical values.⁸⁷ Histories from below have ceased to be in vogue, being displaced by a focus on colonial or elite discourses, and feminist studies of the nineteenth century often dwell obsessively on the limitations of West-inspired reform initiatives.

A clarification may be needed at this point. I am far from suggesting any rupture with basically anti-colonial parameters in writing the history of colonial India. Colonial exploitation and domination of course constituted the central set of relationships during these centuries. In so far as its cultural manifestations have been highly productive of undifferentiated illusions of progress, modernity or reason, the critique of colonial discourse does have its uses — though more perhaps in the West, and in English Literature circles, than in the specifically historical world of South Asia, where many of its findings sound rather familiar. There remains a need to recognize nuances and mediations, variations in the extent of colonial cultural or other domination across times, regions, social spaces, and the possibility of earlier tensions (around caste and gender, notably) being reproduced in ways no doubt conditioned by the colonial presence, but not uniquely determined by it. The traditional, orthodox-Marxist way of looking at the colonial world in terms of a series of class-determined oppositions to an alliance between imperialism and a subordinated feudalism rightly appears problem-ridden, stilted, and reductionist today. But it did provide some space

⁸⁷ A major example would be certain significant silences in Partha Chatterjee's comprehensive recent work, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Delhi, 1994). Chatterjee's subsequent article, 'Secularism and Toleration', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxx, 28, 9 July 1994, is the clearest embodiment so far of the slide from subaltern through peasant to religious community. For a more detailed discussion, see Chapter 3.

for distinguishing between varieties of nationalism in terms of their social perspectives and composition. A glance back at the pages of a journal like *Dawn* suggests that we are today in some danger of unwittingly reproducing the assumptions and values of a particularly narrow and elitist cultural nationalism. What is required, perhaps, is some equivalent of the 'doubled' (or better, multiple) vision socialist-feminist historians have been struggling to attain. Gender in capitalist societies cannot be understood in total separation from class: it has repeatedly proved disastrous to collapse the one into the other.⁸⁸

Much more is at stake here than merely academic historiography. I have argued elsewhere that the shift towards criteria of indigenous 'authenticity' and 'community' can constitute, however unwittingly, certain dangerous common discursive spaces, for already some of the more sophisticated ideologues of Hindutva have started using similar categories and arguments.⁸⁹ My glance back at non-statist, samaj-oriented patriotic histories should raise some doubts also about the strategy, often advocated nowadays in the spate of writings about communalism (provoked by recent developments), of postulating traditional catholicities against the homogenizations being projected by Hindutva or Muslim fundamentalist groups: 'authentic community-consciousness', so to say, against 'communalisms' ultimately attributable to colonial discourses.⁹⁰ A journal like *Dawn*, for instance, carefully kept away from the communal numbers game that had begun in Bengal soon after the decline of the Swadeshi movement,⁹¹ argued that homogenization was contrary to the true spirit of Hinduism and an offshoot of Western cultural domination, and yet quite aggressively asserted high-caste, patriarchal values.

⁸⁸ Joan Kelly, 'The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory', in Judith Newton, Mary Ryan and Judith Walkowitz (eds), *Sex and Class in Women's History* (London, History Workshop Series, 1983).

⁸⁹ Sumit Sarkar, 'The Anti-Secularist Critique of Hindutva: Problem of A Shared Discursive Space', in *Germinial: Journal of Department of Germanic and Romance Studies*, Delhi University, vol. 1, 1994. See also Chapter 3.

⁹⁰ That, roughly, seems to be Gyanendra Pandey's argument in *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, 1990).

⁹¹ See the pioneering discussion of this theme in P.K. Datta, "'Dying Hindus": Production of Hindu Communal Common-Sense in Early 20th Century Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 June 1993. *Dawn* seems to have carefully side-stepped the question of the alleged decline of Hindu numbers in Bengal as compared to Muslims, raised by U.N. Mukherji in 1909: see the unsigned essay 'Who are Hindus and Who are Not', in *Dawn*, January, February, June 1911.

Such assertions were actually more blatant at times in catholic, non-communal texts that were not primarily engaged in efforts to build Hindu unity against the Christian or Muslim Other. Projects for such unity, in partial contrast, on occasion seemed to demand assimilative caste reform: U.N. Mukherji, once again, provides an excellent Bengal example.⁹² The emergence, already around the Swadeshi years and on a vastly enhanced scale today, of alternative lower-caste histories and conceptions of solidarities makes the reiteration of indigenous, undifferentiated community-values highly problematic. Their concordance with contemporary feminist values would be as difficult.

Much of the appeal of late *Subaltern Studies*, as well as some of the criticisms it has evoked, flow from its apparent affinities with aspects of postmodernism – or more precisely perhaps with what has come to be called postcoloniality. These include the centrality of anti-Enlightenment rhetoric, the oscillation between 'community' and 'fragment', and an occasional toying with moods of epistemological uncertainty. Postmodernisms in recent years have swung sharply between what can amount to affirmations of identity-politics (as counterposed to the allegedly homogenizing politics of universal and equal rights going back to the Enlightenment), and celebrations of hybridization, of identities disintegrating as globalization intensifies.⁹³ I have argued in another chapter that I find the one pole as unacceptable as the other, particularly in post-Ramjanmabhumi India, but also that the parallels with postmodernism, whether drawn in admiration or as critique, I believe to be based in large part on misrecognitions.⁹⁴ Rhetoric against other people's metaphysical totalities apart, there has been very little, really, in late *Subaltern Studies* of reflexive, self-doubting moods and methodological disquiet raised by the problematizations of language in recent years. This to me is a matter of some regret, for such reflexivity can have considerable value. It has helped to make an increasing number of historians far more self-aware and questioning about the representations they use

⁹² See Chapter 9 for some elaboration of this argument.

⁹³ For two recent critiques of this 'tendency . . . to waver constantly between the opposing polarities of cultural differentialism and cultural hybridity', see Aijaz Ahmad, 'The Politics of Literary Post-Coloniality', from which I have taken the quoted passage (*Race and Class*, 36, iii, January-March 1995), and Terry Eagleton, 'Where do Post-Modernists Come From?', *Monthly Review*, 47, iii, July-August 1995.

⁹⁴ See Chapter 3.

as their 'sources', the categories they employ, and the rhetoric implicit in their writings, and much fine work is being done nowadays dancing, as it were, at the edges of relativism.

Yet it is difficult to deny that a complete surrender to relativistic positions tends to become self-contradictory, being far easier to apply to other people's positions than to one's own. Paradoxically, it can also become a kind of soft option: if all statements are really on the same level, what matters is presentation, display, command over up-to-date style, not the toil of hard research or genuine auto-critique. Charles Taylor has argued recently that extreme subjectivism ignores the fundamentally dialogic nature of human life, language and knowledge, its development, always, through interaction and exchange.⁹⁵ A dialogical imagination, further, need not necessarily abstract from power relations, though that has happened at times in some readings of Mikhail Bakhtin. What it necessarily emphasizes are the non-monologic, social, conditions of production of consciousness. The effort to develop a social history of historical awareness acquires, then, an added significance. It can point towards ways of recognition of the reflexive turn that do not have to succumb to complete subjectivism.

I have argued implicitly throughout this essay that an exploration of the social conditions of production of history cannot afford to remain a merely intellectual project. It needs to become part of wider and far more difficult efforts to change these conditions. The paradox of postcolonial front-ranking historiography has been that the affirmation of socially radical values and approaches (unimaginable for old masters like Jadunath Sarkar or R.C. Majumdar, for instance) has been accompanied by more, rather than less, elitism in structures of historical production and dissemination. Late *Subaltern Studies*, as the first Indian historiographical trend to achieve an international prestige largely prior to, and in excess of, its reputation within India, is peculiarly open to a critique in terms of its 'politics of location'. But of course elitism operates within academic structures inside the country too, and at many different levels. Residence, or even language — writing in Hindi or other indigenous languages rather than in English — will not automatically eliminate hierarchies.

The marginalization of the JNU historians' manifesto was a reminder that there has been relatively little sustained or effective attempt to spread the methods, findings, and values of even the

⁹⁵ Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition'.

more India-rooted, post-1950s Left-nationalist historiography beyond 'higher' academic circles. The spread-effects of History Congress sessions, the possibly more effective state-level conferences conducted through regional languages, sporadic translation efforts, and occasional refresher courses, remain fairly limited, and the possibilities of democratic dialogue often get further restricted, even within these limits, by the prevalence of hierarchized structures and attitudes. And it is surely symptomatic that the high degree of interest in Western Marxist and radical historiographies has never been extended to include efforts to learn from 'history workshop' experiments. In Britain, Germany and some other Western countries, these have sought to go beyond the academic guild through extra-mural adult and workers' education initiatives. They have encouraged workers and other ordinary folk to write or speak about their experiences and memories, and tried to form groups of local 'barefoot historians'.⁹⁶ In India, however, with the important and honourable exception of gender studies, which has offered considerable opportunities at times for fruitful interaction between activists and academics, research and teaching tend to remain highly hierarchized even among Left intellectuals.

The contrasting experiences of two efforts at preparing school textbooks can serve in conclusion as indicators of problems — and possibilities. In the schools where they have been in use, the National Council of Education, Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks commissioned in the mid-1970s from front-ranking (and mostly Delhi-based) historians have certainly helped to eliminate the blatant communal bias at the level of prescribed texts (through not necessarily from actual teaching),⁹⁷ and outdated histories have been displaced to some extent by the findings and approaches of post-independence research. But their impact has been reduced by over-

⁹⁶ It is seldom remembered that E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* originated as lectures to adult education classes for Yorkshire workers. The *History Workshop Journal* contains abundant information about extra-guild initiatives, emerging from British New Left and socialist-feminist movements. For the less known but important West German developments in the 1980s, see Alf Ludtke's Introduction to Ludtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life* (Frankfurt, 1989; Eng. trans., Princeton, 1995), and Geoff Eley, 'Labour History, Social History, Alltagsgeschichte: Experience, Culture and the Politics of the Everyday — A New Direction for German Social History?', *Journal of Modern History*, 61, June 1989.

⁹⁷ RSS-run schools in Delhi often use NCERT textbooks, no doubt interpreting them in their own way.

burdened syllabi, bureaucratic management, and a concentration on providing 'correct' factual information and interpretation rather than imaginative pedagogical presentations. The texts were written by university scholars with little possibility of contact with secondary education: inputs through discussions with schoolteachers, difficult to organize for such a centralized, Delhi-based project, seem to have been minimal.

A decade or so later, the Eklavya volunteer group was able to work out much more interesting and innovative history texts and teaching methods through sustained grassroots work in the not particularly propitious atmosphere of Hoshangabad's small town and village schools in Madhya Pradesh. There were consultations with metropolitan historians (the initiators of the history textbooks project were themselves JNU graduates), but also repeated rounds of discussions with local schoolteachers. Eklavya history texts contain less factual detail than the NCERT books: combined with constant attention to teaching methods, they do seem geared towards much more classroom discussion and creative assimilation.⁹⁸ Eklavya recently organized a teaching-cum-research seminar of Madhya Pradesh college teachers, and has had plans for collecting historical material through its far-flung and socially diverse local contacts. Money of course remains a very major constraint, for Eklavya, unlike most NGOs today, has so far kept away from all international funding agencies.

Such experiences are a reminder that what is needed is not just more effective channels of communication through which high academic wisdom can be disseminated downwards, but efforts to democratize also the production of historical knowledge, to work towards a new kind of historical culture. There is a need to pioneer ways of developing interaction among researchers, teachers, and activists drawn from, or working among, diverse social strata. On

⁹⁸ The ancient Indian history textbook, to take a specific example, includes a number of stories, some taken from the Jatakas and other texts, others invented. A story set in a hunting-foodgathering community is followed by questions as to what its members would do if hunters fail to find game. Initial responses, I was told, often suggest going to the market, or, more commonly, borrowing from the mahajan. Further classroom discussions can then highlight what is and is not possible in a particular historical situation, thus introducing basic notions about the logic of a social formation far more imaginatively and effectively than any formal definition. Incidentally, I recall being amazed by the level of animated discussion in an Eklavya village class – admittedly in one of their best schools.

a long-term scale, collaborative research works and textbooks could emerge, enriched by multiple social and pedagogical experiences, and based on a mutual reformulation of perspectives.

I know this will sound hopelessly utopian, and particularly so because any suggestion for moving beyond the professional guild tends to get equated with some form of 'going to the people', which is then dismissed as unrealistic for the vast majority of academics. What I am suggesting as beginnings are far more modest things. There seems no reason, for instance, why participants at the many seminars that are constantly being held in cities like Delhi should not include at least some schoolteachers. The hierarchical divisions between scholars at research institutes, university teachers, and those working in undergraduate colleges are visibly deepening: surely something should be done to reduce these barriers. One way could be informal discussion groups – inevitably middle class, perhaps, but still including people other than academics: for history, surely, is a subject in which intelligent interest does not demand great professional knowledge. I can recall some groups like these, one of them consisting of trade union activists, as well as dedicated efforts to bring out a historical journal in the vernacular, from the Calcutta of my youth, and no doubt there have been many such instances elsewhere. Small beginnings: but surely we can agree that the many worlds of Indian history must not be allowed to fly totally apart, as the social base of producers and intended audiences of front-ranking South Asian scholarship narrows, even while reaching out towards global horizons.