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Source: *History and Theory*, May, 1995, Vol. 34, No. 2, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics (May, 1995), pp. 44-66

Published by: Wiley for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2505434>

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HISTORY'S FORGOTTEN DOUBLES¹

ASHIS NANDY

ABSTRACT

The historical mode may be the dominant mode of constructing the past in most parts of the globe but it is certainly not the most popular mode of doing so. The dominance is derived from the links the idea of history has established with the modern nation-state, the secular worldview, the Baconian concept of scientific rationality, nineteenth-century theories of progress, and, in recent decades, development. This dominance has also been strengthened by the absence of any radical critique of the idea of history within the modern world and for that matter, within the discipline of history itself. As a result, once exported to the nonmodern world, historical consciousness has not only tended to absolutize the past in cultures that have lived with open-ended concepts of the past or depended on myths, legends, and epics to define their cultural selves, it has also made the historical worldview complicit with many new forms of violence, exploitation, and satanism in our times and helped rigidify civilizational, cultural, and national boundaries.

I

However odd this might sound to readers of a collection on world history, millions of people still live outside “history.” They *do* have theories of the past; they *do* believe that the past is important and shapes the present and the future, but they also recognize, confront, and live with a past different from that constructed by historians and historical consciousness. They even have a different way of arriving at that past.

Some historians and societies have a term and a theory for such people. To them, those who live outside history are ahistorical, and though the theory has contradictory components, it does have a powerful stochastic thrust. It will not be perhaps a gross simplification to say that the historians’ history of the ahistorical—when grounded in a “proper” historical consciousness, as defined by the European Enlightenment—is usually a history of the prehistorical, the primitive, and the pre-scientific. By way of transformative politics or cultural intervention, that history basically keeps open only one option—that of bringing the ahistoricals into history.

1. This is a revised version of the Opening Address at the World History Conference, organized by *History and Theory* at Wesleyan University, March 25, 1994. I am grateful to Giri Deshingkar and the participants in the conference for their criticisms and suggestions.

There is a weak alternative—some would say response—to this position. According to their modern historians, the idea of history is not entirely unknown to some older civilizations like China and India. It is claimed that these civilizations have occasionally produced quasi- or proto-historical works during their long tenure on earth, evidently to defy being labelled as wholly ahistorical and to protect the self-respect of their modern historians. These days the historian's construction of the ahistoric societies often includes the plea to rediscover this repressed historical self.²

The elites of the defeated societies are usually all too eager to heed this plea. They sense that the dominant ideology of the state and their own privileged access to the state apparatus are both sanctioned by the idea of history. Many of their subjects too, though disenfranchised and oppressed in the name of history, believe that their plight—especially their inability to organize effective resistance—should be blamed on their inadequate knowledge of history. In some countries of the South today, these subjects have been left with nothing to sell to the ubiquitous global market except their pasts and, to be salable, these pasts have to be, they have come to suspect, packaged as history. They have, therefore, accepted history as a handy language for negotiating the modern world. They talk history with the tourists, visiting dignitaries, ethnographers, museologists, and even with the human rights activists fighting their cause. When such subjects are not embarrassed about their ahistorical constructions of the past, they accept the tacit modern consensus that such constructions are meant for private or secret use or for use as forms of fantasy useful in the creative arts.

On this plane, historical consciousness is very nearly a totalizing one, for both the moderns and those aspiring to their exalted status; once you own history, it also begins to own you. You can, if you are an artist or a mystic, occasionally break the shackles of history in your creative or meditative moments (though even then you might be all too aware of the history of your own art, if you happen to be that kind of an artist, or the history of mysticism, if you happen to be that kind of a practitioner of mysticism). The best you can hope to do, by way of exercising your autonomy, is to live outside history for short spans of time. (For instance, when you opt for certain forms of artistic

2. A creative variation on the same response is in works like Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, N. J., 1992). Obeyesekere argues that history can be part-mythic and myths part-historic, that is, there is no clear discontinuity between the two. His narrative, however, seems to suggest that he dislikes the mythic-in-history and likes the historical-in-myths.

The young scholar Shail Mayaram pushes Obeyesekere's argument to its logical conclusion in her *Oral and Written Discourses: An Enquiry Into the Meo Mythic Tradition*, unpublished report to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (Delhi, 1994), 6:

"No civilization is really ahistorical. In a sense, every individual is historical and uses his/her memory to organize the past. . . . The dichotomy between history and myth is an artificial one. History and myth are not exclusive modes of representation."

In this paper I reject formulations that impose the category of history on all constructions of the past or sanction the reduction of all myths to history. I am also uncomfortable with formulations that do not acknowledge the special political status of myths as the preferred language of a significant proportion of threatened or victimized cultures.

or spiritual exercises, perhaps even when you are deliriously happy or shattered by a personal tragedy. But these are *moments* of “freedom” from history, involving transient phases or small areas of life.)

At one time not long ago, historical consciousness had to coexist with other modes of experiencing and constructing the past even within the modern world. The conquest of the past through history was still incomplete in the late nineteenth century, as was the conquest of space through the railways. The historically minded then lived with the conviction that they were an enlightened but threatened minority, that they were dissenters to whom the future belonged. So at least it seems to me looking back upon the intellectual culture of nineteenth-century Europe from outside the West. Dissent probably survives better when its targets are optimally powerful, when they are neither too monolithic or steamrolling nor too weak to be convincing as a malevolent authority. As long as the non-historical modes thrived, history remained viable as a baseline for radical social criticism. That is perhaps why the great dissenters of the nineteenth century were the most aggressively historical.

Everyone knows, for instance, that Karl Marx thought Asiatic and African societies to be ahistorical. Few know that he considered Latin Europe, and under its influence the whole of South America, to be ahistorical, too. Johan Galtung once told me that he had found, from the correspondence of Marx and Engels, that they considered all Slavic cultures to be ahistorical and the Scandinavians to be no better. If I remember Galtung correctly, one of them also added, somewhat gratuitously, that the Scandinavians could be nothing but ahistorical, given that they bathed infrequently and drank too much. After banishing so many races and cultures from the realm of history, the great revolutionary was left with only a few who lived in history—Germany, where he was born, Britain, where he spent much of his later life, and the Low Countries through which, one presumes, he travelled from Germany to England.

Times have changed. Historical consciousness now owns the globe. Even in societies known as ahistorical, timeless, or eternal—India for example—the politically powerful now live in and with history. Ahistoricity survives at the peripheries and interstices of such societies. Though millions of people continue to stay outside history, millions have, since the days of Marx, dutifully migrated to the empire of history to become its loyal subjects. The historical worldview is now triumphant globally; the ahistoricals have become the dissenting minority.

Does this triumph impose new responsibilities on the victorious? Now that the irrational savages, living in timelessness or in cyclical or other forms of disreputable nonlinear times, have been finally subjugated, should our public and intellectual awareness include a new sensitivity to the cultural priorities, psychological skills, and perhaps even the ethical concerns represented by the societies or communities that in different ways still cussedly choose to live outside history? Are they protecting or holding in trust parts of our disowned selves that we have dismissed as worthless or dangerous? Is ahistoricity also a

form of wilderness that needs to be protected in these environmentally conscious times, lest, once destroyed, it will no longer be available to us as a “cultural gene pool” that could protect us from the consequences of our profligate ways, in case the historical vision exhausts itself and we have to retrace our steps? Before we make up our mind and answer the question, let me draw your attention to what seem to be two of the defining features of ahistorical societies.

This is not an easy task. It is my suspicion that, broadly speaking, cultures tend to be historical in only one way, whereas each ahistorical culture is so in its own unique style. It is not easy to identify the common threads of ahistoricity; I choose two that look like they are relatively more common to illustrate my point. The task is made even more difficult for me because I want to argue the case of ahistoricity not on grounds of pragmatism or instrumentality (of the kind that would require me to give a long list of useful things that ahistoricity could do for us) but on grounds of diversity, seen as a moral value in itself, especially when it is located in the worldview of the victims.

The major difference between those living in history and those living outside it, especially in societies where myths are the predominant mode of organizing experiences of the past, is what I have elsewhere called the principle of principled forgetfulness. All myths are morality tales. Mythologization is also moralization; it involves a refusal to separate the remembered past from its ethical meaning in the present. For this refusal, it is often important *not* to remember the past, objectively, clearly, or in its entirety. Mythic societies sense the power of myths and the nature of human frailties; they are more fearful than the modern ones—forgive the anthropomorphism—of the perils of mythic use of amoral certitudes about the past.

Historical consciousness cannot take seriously the principle of forgetfulness. It has to reject the principle as irrational, retrogressive, unnatural, and fundamentally incompatible with historical sensitivities. Remembering, history assumes, is definitionally superior to forgetting. Unwitting forgetfulness, which helps a person to reconcile with and live in this world, is seen as natural and, to that extent, acceptable. Adaptive forgetfulness is also seen as human; human beings just cannot afford to remember everything and non-essential memories are understandably discarded both by individuals and societies.

The moderns are willing to go further. Since the days of Sigmund Freud and Marx, they recognize that forgetfulness is not random, that there are elaborate internal screening devices, the defenses of the ego or the principles of ideology, that shape our forgetfulness along particular lines. As understandable is unprincipled forgetfulness, the kind Freud saw as part of a person's normal adaptive repertoire, even though he chose to classify it under the *psychopathologies* of everyday life, presumably because of the non-creative use of psychic energy they involved.

But principled forgetfulness? That seems directed against the heart of the enterprise called history. For historians, the aim ultimately is nothing less than to bare the past completely, on the basis of a neatly articulated frame of refer-

ence that implicitly involves a degree of demystification or demythologization. The frame of reference is important, for history cannot be done without ordering its data in terms of something like a theme of return (invoking the idea of cultural continuity or recovery), progress (invoking the principle of massive, sometimes justifiably coercive, irreversible intervention in society), or stages (invoking the sense of certitude and mastery over the self, as expressed in an evolutionary sequencing of it). The aim is to unravel the secular processes and the order that underlie the manifest realities of past times, available in ready-made or raw forms as historical data — textual and graphic records, public or private memories that are often the stuff of oral history, and a wide variety of artifacts.³

Because, as an authentic progeny of seventeenth-century Europe, history fears ambiguity.⁴ The ultimate metaphor for history is not the *double entendre*; it is synecdoche: the historical past stands for all of the past because it is presumed to be the only past. Hence the legitimacy of psychological history as a subdiscipline of history has always been so tenuous. Psychoanalysis at its best is a game of *double entendre* loaded in favor of the victims of personal history — the pun is intended — but it has to be sold to the historically minded as a technology of analysis that removes the ambiguities human subjectivity introduces into history.

The enterprise is not essentially different from that of Giambattista Vico's idea of science as a form of practice. There is nothing surprising about this, for the modern historical enterprise *is* modeled on the modern scientific enterprise,

3. Speaking of the Partition of British India and the birth of India and Pakistan, Gyanendra Pandey ("Partition, History and the Making of Nations," presented at the conference on State and Nationalism in India, Pakistan and Germany [Colombo, 26–28 February 1994]) asks: "Why have historians of India (and Pakistan and Bangladesh) failed to produce richly layered, challenging histories of Partition of a kind that would compare with their sophisticated histories of peasant insurrection; working class consciousness; the onset of capitalist relations in agriculture; the construction of new notions of caste, community, and religion, . . . and, indeed, the writing of women's autobiographies. . . ? Or, to ask the question in another way, why is there such a chasm between the historian's history of Partition and the popular reconstruction of the event, which is to such a large extent built around the fact of violence?"

Pandey goes on to answer: "The answer lies, it seems to me, in our fear of facing . . . this history as our own: the fear of reopening old wounds. . . . It lies also in the difficulty that all social science has faced in writing the history of violence and pain. But, in addition, it inheres . . . in the very character of historian's history as 'national' history and a history of 'progress.'"

Could Pandey have added that, when faced with a trauma of this magnitude, when the survival of communities and fundamental human values are at stake, popular memories of Partition have to organize themselves differently, employing principles that are ahistorical but not amoral? Do the historians of South Asia have a tacit awareness that they are in no position to supplant memories which seek to protect the dignity of the one million or so who died in the violence and the approximately five million who were uprooted in ways that would protect normal life and basic human values?

4. On the fear of ambiguity as a gift of the Enlightenment, see Donald N. Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essay in Social and Cultural Theory* (Chicago, 1985). On the psychological and cultural correlates of ambiguity, once a popular subject of research in psychology, see for instance, Anthony Davids, "Psychodynamic and Sociocultural Factors Related to Intolerance of Ambiguity," in *The Study of Lives: Essays in Honour of Henry A. Murray*, ed. Robert W. White (New York, 1963), 160–178.

whether the historian admits it or not. This is not the scientization that leads to the use of experimental methods or mathematization—though even that has happened in a few cases—but to an attempt to make history conform to the spirit of modern science (as captured more accurately, I am told, by the German word *Wissenschaft*). I know that the idea of scientific history has acquired a certain ambivalent load ever since the great liberator of our times, Joseph Stalin, sent twenty million of his compatriots marching to their death in the name of it, with a significant proportion of the historically minded intelligentsia applauding it all the way as a necessary sacrifice for the onward march of history. But it is also true that to the savages, not enamored of the emancipatory vision of the Enlightenment, the orthodox Marxist vision of history was never very distinct from that of its liberal opponents, at least not as far as the molar philosophical assumptions of its methodology went. These assumptions owed much to the ideas of certitude, reliable and valid knowledge, and the disenchantment of nature to which Sir Francis Bacon gave respectability. (It is the same concept of knowledge that made history in the nineteenth century a theory of the future masquerading as a theory of the past. More about that later.)

In recent decades, there has been much talk about history being primarily a hermeneutic exercise. It is now fairly commonplace to say that there can be no true or objective past; that there are only competing constructions of the past, with various levels and kinds of empirical support. The works of a number of philosophers of science, notably that of Paul Feyerabend, have in recent years contributed to the growing self-confidence of those opposing or fighting objectivism and scientism in history.⁵ Contributions to the same process have also been made by some of the structuralists and postmodernists, Louis Althusser being the one who perhaps tried the hardest to bypass history. The antihistorical stance of postmodernism, not being associated with the ahistoricity of the older civilizations, has even acquired a certain respectability.⁶

There have also been attempts to popularize other modes of time perception built on some of the new developments in science, especially in quantum mechanics and biological theory, or on the rediscovery of the older modes of knowledge acquisition, such as *Zen* and *Yoga*, and on theories of transcendence celebrated in deep ecology and ecofeminism. As important has been the growing awareness in many working at the frontiers of the knowledge industry, though it is yet to spread to the historians, that the historical concept of time is only one kind of time with which contemporary knowledge operates, that most

5. For instance Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1978); and *Science in a Free Society* (London, 1978).

6. For a pithy critique of postmodernism's anti-history from the point of view of the non-West, see the series of essays by Ziauddin Sardar, "Surviving the Terminator: The Post-Modern Mental Condition," *Futures* 22 (March, 1990), 203–210; "Total Recall: Aliens, 'Others' and Amnesia in Post-Modernist Thought," *Futures* 23 (March, 1991), 189–203; "Terminator 2: Modernity, Post-Modernism and the 'Other,'" *Futures* 24 (June, 1992), 493–506; and "Do Not Adjust Your Mind: Post-Modernism, Reality and the Other," *Futures* 25 (October, 1993), 877–894.

sciences and now even a few of the social sciences work with more plural constructions of time.

Many will see all this as an exercise in self-correction, as an attempt to correct the excesses of what could be called a history modeled on the Baconian concept of science; some will identify this as an effort to incorporate into the historical consciousness crucial components of the moral universe of the ahistorical (both are implied in the work of a number of psychologists venturing new psychological utopias—*eupsychias*, Abraham Maslow used to call them—in the wake of the breakdown of some of the postwar certitudes in the late 1960s). A few cynical ones though will continue to say that the effort is nothing less than to capture, for preservation, what according to the moderns are the necessary or valuable components of the worldview of those living outside the post-seventeenth-century concept of history, so that the people who have kept alive the art of living outside history all these centuries can be safely dumped into the dustbins of history, as obsolete or as superfluous.

The second major difference between the historically minded and their ahistorical others is the skepticism and the fuzzy boundaries the latter usually work with when constructing the past. One thing the historical consciousness cannot do, without dismantling the historian's self-definition and threatening the entire philosophical edifice of modern history: it cannot admit that the historical consciousness itself can be demystified or unmasked and that an element of self-destructiveness could be introduced into that consciousness to make it more humane and less impersonal.⁷ In other words, while the historical consciousness can grant, as the sciences do, that historical truths are only contingent, it also assumes that the idea of history itself cannot be relativized or contextualized beyond a point. History can recognize gaps in historical data; it can admit that history includes mythic elements and that theory terms and data terms are never clearly separable in practice, that large areas of human experience and reality remain untouched by existing historical knowledge. It can even admit the idea of reversals in history. But it cannot accept that history can be dealt with from outside history; the entire Enlightenment worldview militates against such a proposition. As a result, when historians historicize history, which itself is rare, they do so according to the strict rules of historiography. It reminds me of one of the fantasies Freud considered universal, that of one's immortality. The human mind, Freud believed, was unable to fantasize itself as dead; all such fantasies ended up by postulating an observer/self that witnessed the self as dead. All critiques of history from within the modern worldview have also been ultimately historical.

7. Actually, history has thrived on such impersonality—according to some a core value of modernity. On the role of impersonality in modern knowledge systems, see Tariq Banuri, "Modernization and Its Discontents: A Cultural Perspective on Theories of Development," in *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture and Resistance*, ed. Frédérique Apffel Marglin and Stephen Marglin (Oxford, 1990), 73–101.

Part of the hostility of the historically minded towards the ahistorical can be traced to the way the myths, legends, and epics of the latter are intertwined with what look like transcendental theories of the past. Historians have cultivated over the last two hundred and fifty years a fear of theories of transcendence. And in recent centuries, what was once avoidance of the sacred and apotheosization of the secular has increasingly become an open fear of those who reject or undervalue the secular or who choose to use the idiom of the sacred. This fear is particularly pronounced in societies where the idiom of the sacred is conspicuously present in the public sphere. As some of the major political ideologies have reentered the political arena in the guise of faiths, posing a threat to the modern nation-state system globally, the nervousness about anything that smacks of faith has taken the form of an epidemic in territories where history reigns supreme. Confronted with the use or misuse of theories of transcendence in the public sphere, historical consciousness has either tried to fit the experience within a psychiatric framework, within which all transcendence, even the use of the language of transcendence, acquires perfect "clarity" as a language of insanity; or it has reread what look like transcendent theories of the past as a hidden language of *Realpolitik* in which all transcendence is merely a complex, only apparently ahistorical, political ploy.

Why have historians till now not seriously tried to critique the idea of history itself? After all, such self-reflexibility is not unknown in contemporary social knowledge. Sociology has produced the likes of Alvin Gouldner and Stanislaw Andreski; psychology Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Ronald Laing, and Thomas Szasz.⁸ Even economists, usually defensively self-certain, have produced the likes of N. Georgesçu-Roegen and Joseph Schumacher; and philosophers, enthusiasts of philosophical silence and the end of philosophy.⁹ Some of the self-explorations have turned out to be decisive to the disciplines concerned, others less so; some are exciting, others tame; some are explicit, others implicit. But they *are* there.¹⁰ Historians have sired no such species. Occasionally, some have tried to stretch the meaning of the term "history" beyond its conventional definition; one example is William Thompson's *At the Edge of History*, which at least mentions the possibility of using myths as a means of "thinking wild"

8. Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (London, 1971); and Stanislaw Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (London, 1972); Rollo May, *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (Princeton, N. J., 1962); Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton, N. J., 1968); Ronald Laing, *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1970); Thomas S. Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness* (London, 1971); and *The Myth of Mental Illness* (London, 1972).

9. N. Georgesçu-Roegen, *Energy and Economic Myths* (New York, 1976); J. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (New Delhi, 1977); and *Roots of Economic Growth* (Varanasi, 1962); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. C. K. Ogden and F. P. Ramsay (London, 1922); and Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," *Objectivity, Relativity and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), I, 175-196; and "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), II, 9-26.

10. So much so that in anthropology, I am told, graduate students in some universities are more keen to do cultural critiques of anthropology than empirical studies of other cultures.

about the future by reversing the relationship between myth and history.¹¹ Usually, however, when historians talk of the end of history, from Karl Marx to Francis Fukuyama, they have in mind the triumph of Hegelian history.

There have also been critics of ideas of history, direct or indirect, from outside history. Ananda Coomaraswamy, philosopher and art historian, is an obvious early example, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (the philosopher of science, who has built on the traditions of Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, and René Guénon) is a more recent one.¹² And the present-day structuralists and post-structuralists also can be thought of as critics of the idea of history itself.¹³ But there has emerged no radical criticism of history from within the ranks of historians. The histories of skepticism, à la Richard Popkin, have not been accompanied by any skepticism towards history as a mode of world construction. Or at least I do not know of such efforts. Recently, in an elegant introductory text on history, Keith Jenkins sharply distinguishes between history and the past, but refuses to take the next logical step – to acknowledge the possibility that history might be only one way of constructing the past and other cultures might have explored other ways.¹⁴ It is even doubtful if Jenkins himself considers his essay anything more than an intramural debate, for *all* his thirty-five odd references come from mainstream European and North American thought.

I have also run across papers written by two sensitive young Indian historians who come close to admitting the need for basic critiques of history: Gyan Prakash and Dipesh Chakrabarty. The latter even names his paper “History as Critique and Critique of History.”¹⁵ On closer scrutiny, however, both turn

11. William Irwin Thompson, *At the Edge of History: Speculations on the Transformation of Culture* (New York, 1972), 179–180.

12. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers*, ed. Roger Lipsky (Princeton, N. J., 1977), vols. 1 and 2; Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self*, transl. M. Pallis (London, 1968); and *Logic and Transcendence*, transl. M. Pallis (New York, 1975); René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, transl. Lord Northbourne (Baltimore, 1972); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (London, 1978); and *Islamic Life and Thought* (London, 1981).

I hope the rest of this paper will not be now read as a convoluted plea for perennial philosophy, though I have obviously benefited from the critique of history ventured by such philosophy. Mine is primarily a political-psychological argument which tries to be sensitive to the politics of cultures and knowledge.

13. For instance, Anthony Giddens, “Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and the Production of Culture,” in *Social Theory Today*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), 194–223; 212–213:

“The methodological repression of time in Saussure’s conception of *langue* is translated by Lévi-Strauss into substantive repression of time involved in the codes organized through myths. . . . Foucault’s style of writing history . . . does not flow along with chronological time. Nor does it depend upon the narrative description of a sequence of events. . . . There is more than an echo of Lévi-Strauss in Foucault’s view that history is one form of knowledge among others – and of course, like other forms of knowledge, a mode of mobilizing power.”

14. Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London, 1991). See esp. 5–20.

15. Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Indian Historiography is Good to Think,” in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor, 1992), 353–388; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “History as Critique and Critique of History,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (14 September 1991), 2262–2268; and “Post-Coloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the ‘Indian’ Pasts,” *Representations* 37 (Winter, 1992), 1–26.

out to be hesitant steps towards such a critique; at the moment they are powerful pleas for alternative histories, not for alternatives *to* history. Vinay Lal's two unpublished papers, which explore the entry of modern history into Indian society in the nineteenth century, both as a discipline and as a form of social consciousness, and one of Chakrabarty's more recent papers, go further.¹⁶ Lal's paper, "The Discourse of History and the Crisis at Ayodhya," comes close to being an outsider's account of history in India. And Chakrabarty acknowledges that "insofar as the academic discipline of history—that is, 'history' as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university is concerned, 'Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on." The paper goes on to say: "So long as one operates within the discourse of 'history' at the institutional site of the university it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between 'history' and the modernizing narratives of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation-state. 'History' as a knowledge system is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation-state at every step."¹⁷

All three historians are exceptions and even they are basically pleading for what Sara Suleri calls "contraband history." All three leave one with the hope that some day their kind will reactivate their own cultural memories and bring in an element of radical self-criticism in their own discipline. Radicalism may not lose by beginning at home.

But the question still remains: Why this poor self-reflexibility among historians as a species? I suspect that this denial of the historicity of history is built on two pillars of modern knowledge systems. First, Enlightenment sensitivities, whether in the West or outside, presume a perfect equivalence between history and the construction of the past; they presume that there is no past independent of history. If there is such a past, it is waiting to be remade into history. To misuse David Lowenthal's imagery, the past is another country only when it cannot be properly historicized and thus conquered.¹⁸ And the regnant concepts of human brotherhood and equality insist that all human settlements must look familiar from the metropolitan centers of knowledge and, ideally, no human past must look more foreign than one's own. On and off I have used the expres-

16. Vinay Lal, "On the Perils of History and Historiography: The Case, Puzzling as Usual, of India," ms., 1988; see also his "The Discourse of History and the Crisis at Ayodhya: Reflections on the Production of Knowledge, Freedom, and the Future of India" (1994, unpublished ms). The latter goes further in its critique of history as a cultural project and its relationship with violence in the context of the Ramjanmabhumi movement in India, something to which I turn towards the end of this paper briefly and from a slightly different point of view.

Is it merely an accident that so many of the critics of history I have mentioned in this paper are South Asians or have a South Asian connection? Is it only a function of my own cultural origins? Or is it possible that, pushed around by powerful traditions of both modern history and the surviving epic cultures in their part of the world, many South Asians are forced to take, sometimes grudgingly, a more skeptical stance towards history?

17. *Ibid.*, 19.

18. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985).

sion “imperialism of categories” to describe the ability of some conceptual categories to establish such complete hegemony over the domains they cover that alternative concepts related to the domains are literally banished from human consciousness. History has established such a hegemony in our known universe. In that universe, the discipline is no longer merely the best available entry into past; it now exhausts the idea of the past. In what psychoanalysis might someday call a perfect instance of concretization, it is now *the* past. (Everyone has a right to one’s own clichés, C. P. Snow says. So let me give my favorite example of such a hegemony from my own discipline. When intelligence tests were first devised there was much discussion in the psychological literature on the scope and limits of these tests. Scholars acknowledged that the tests were an imperfect measure of human intelligence, that they were sensitive to, and influenced by, personal and social factors; that their reliability and validity were not closed issues. Over the decades, doubts about the reliability and especially the validity of intelligence tests have declined to nearly zero, though a debate on them raged for a while in the late 1970s.¹⁹ Today, virtually every introductory textbook of psychology defines human intelligence as that which intelligence tests measure. IQ, once a less than perfect measure of intelligence, now defines intelligence. Other such examples are the hegemony of development and modern science over the domains of social change and science respectively. It is almost impossible to criticize development today without being accused of social conservatism of the kind that snatches milk from the mouths of hungry third-world babies. It is even more difficult to criticize modern science without being seen as a religious fundamentalist or a closet astrologer.)

History not only exhausts our idea of the past, it also defines our relationship with our past selves.²⁰ Those who own the past own the present, George Orwell said. Perhaps those who own the rights to shape the pasts of our selves also can claim part-ownership of our present selves. Historians have now come to crucially shape the selves of the subjects of history, those who live only with history. In the process, they have abridged the right and perhaps even the capacity of citizens to self-define, exactly as the mega-system of modern medicine has taken over our bodies and the psychiatrists our minds for retooling or renovation. We are now as willing to hand over central components of our selves to the historians for engineering purposes as we have been willing to hand over our bodies to the surgeons.

Second, the absence of radical self-reflexibility in history is in part a product of the gradual emergence and spread of the culture of diaspora and the psy-

19. Paradoxically, that debate, centering around Cyril Burt’s ethical lapses, only consolidated the status of the tests as *the* measure and operational definer of intelligence.

20. The moderns like to build their selfhood on the past that looks empirical and falsifiable. But it can be argued that the unsatiated search for a touch of transcendence in life is, as a result, only pushed into weird psychopathological channels and finds expression in using or living out history with the passions formerly elicited by myths, without the open-endedness and the touch of self-destructiveness associated with myths. Later on in this paper I shall give an example of this from the backwaters of Asia, but the reader can easily think up similar examples from his or her surroundings.

chology of the exile as a dominant cultural motif of our times.²¹ The modern world has a plurality of people who have been uprooted – from their pasts, from their cultures, and from less impersonal communities that often ensure the continuity of traditions. Modern cosmopolitanism is grounded in this uprooting. Not only have state- and nation-formation, empire-building, colonialism, slavery, pogroms, the two world wars, ethnic violence taken their toll, perhaps more than anything else, development combined with large-scale industrialization and urbanization have contributed handsomely to such uprooting. These are the “historical dislocations” that mark out, according to Robert Lifton, the “restless context” which “includes a sense of all the unsettled debts of history that may come ‘back into play.’”²²

While direct violence produces identifiable victims and refugees, social processes such as development produce invisible victims and invisible refugees. To give random examples from this century, the United States began as a nation of uprooted immigrants. Just when it began to settle down as a new cultural entity, its farming population came down from more than 60 per cent to something like 5 per cent in about seventy-five years. Likewise Brazil has acquired a plurality of the uprooted within two decades by going through a massive transfer of population from rural to urban settlements, probably involving as much as 60 per cent of the population of the country. Independent India, which has seen colossal ethnic violence and forced movements of population during its early years, and China, which has seen in this century millions of refugees created by a world war and a series of famines, are going through similar changes at the moment. They are producing invisible refugees of development by the millions. The dams, especially the 1500 large dams built in India in the last forty-five years, presumably along with the associated major development projects, have by themselves produced nearly 22 million refugees.²³ As in the case of the environment, the sheer scale of human intervention in social affairs has destroyed cultural elasticities and the capacity of cultures to return to something like their original state after going through a calamity.²⁴

This massive uprooting has produced a cultural psychology of exile that in turn has led to an unending search for roots, on the one hand, and angry, sometimes self-destructive, assertion of nationality and ethnicity on the other. As the connection with the past has weakened, desperate attempts to reestablish this connection have also grown. Paradoxically, this awareness of losing touch with the past and with primordial collectivities is mainly individual, even though

21. Nikos Papastergiadis, *Exile as Modernity* (Manchester, Eng., 1993).

22. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resistance in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York, 1993), 131.

23. Gayatri Singh, “Displacement and Limits to Legislation,” in *Dams and Other Major Projects: Impact on and Response of Indigenous People*, ed. Raajen Singh (Goa, 1988), 91–97; see 91.

24. Cf. Robert Sinsheimer’s certainty principle, which he proposes as the inverse of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, is particularly relevant to this argument. The uncertainty principle has to do with the effect of observation on the observed; the certainty principle with the effect of observation on the observer. Robert Sinsheimer, “The Presumptions of Science,” *Daedalus* 107 (1978), 23–25.

it uses the *language* of collectivity. It has to use the language of collectivity because the community has in the meanwhile perished for many who are a party to the search. I have in mind something like what Hannah Arendt used to call the search for pseudo-solidarities in European fascism of the 1930s.²⁵

The attempt to define history and give formal history a central place in our personality repertoire—in its conventional or dissenting sense—has its counterpart in our organized efforts to institutionalize history as the only acceptable construction of the past. History manages and tames the past on behalf of the exile, so that the remembered past becomes a submissive presence in the exile's world. The objectivity and empirical stature of history is supposed to give a certitude that alternative constructions of the past—legends, myths, and epics—can no longer give. The latter used to give moral certitude, not objective or empirical certitude; history gives moral certitude and guides moral action by paradoxically denying a moral framework and giving an objectivist framework based on supposedly empirical realities. This is what Heinrich Himmler had in mind when he used to exhort the SS to transcend their personal preferences and values, and do the dirty work of history on behalf of European civilization. He had excellent precedents in Europe's history outside Europe. His innovativeness lay in the Teutonic thoroughness and self-consistency with which he applied the same historical principles within the confines of Europe.

It is this that makes history a theory of the future for many, a hidden guide to ethics that need not have anything to do with the morality of individuals and communities. History allows one to identify with its secular trends and give a moral stature to the "inevitable" in the future. The new justifications for violence have come from this presumed inevitability. In these circumstances, psychology enters the picture not in the sense in which the first generation of psychohistorians believed it would do—as a new dimension of history that would deepen or enrich historical consciousness, but as a source of defiance of the imperialism of history. A practicing historian, Richard Pipes, has come close to acknowledging this possibility, if not in a professional journal at least in a respectable periodical. Pipes may be a distinguished retired cold-warrior and a pillar of the establishment, but in this instance at least he has chosen to identify with those uncomfortable with history, both at the center and in the backwaters of the known world:

. . . history may be meaningless. The proposition merits consideration. Perhaps the time has come, after two world wars, Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, to abandon the whole notion of history, writ large, as a metaphysical process that leads to a goal of which people are only dimly aware. This concept, invented by German idealist philosophers in the early nineteenth century, has often been described as a surrogate secularized religion in which the will of history replaces the hand of God, and revolution serves as the final judgment. As practitioner of history writ small, I, for one, see only countless ordinary individuals who materialize in contemporary documents desiring nothing more

25. Hannah Arendt, Interview with Roger Errera, *New York Review of Books* (26 October 1978), 18.

than to live ordinary lives, being dragged against their will to serve as building material for fantastic structures designed by men who know no peace.²⁶

There is just a hint in Pipes' essay that part of the answer to this passion for "grand history" lies in psychology, perhaps in psychopathology.²⁷

II

In a well-known paper on the crisis of personal identity, psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson, whose name is associated with some of the most serious efforts in the once-trendy disciplinary domain called psychohistory, mentions a news report on a "smart-alecky" youth, fined twenty-five dollars for reckless driving. While in the court, the boy interrupted the judge to say, "I just want you to know that I'm not a thief." Provoked by this "talking back," the judge immediately increased the sentence to six months on a road gang.²⁸ Erikson suggests that the judge here ignored what may have been a "desperate historical denial," an attempt to claim that an anti-social identity had not been formed, because the judgment was not sensitive to the reaffirmation of a moral self that transcended in this instance the history of a moral lapse.

Can this story be reread as a fable that redefines the role of psychology in relation to history? Can we read it as an invitation to ponder if the reaffirmation of a moral self in the present by the young man should or should not have priority over the historical "truth" of his rash driving? Can his historical denial be read as a defiance of history itself? Does his cognitive defiance have at least as much empirical and objective "truth" value as the proven history of his bad driving? Is all history only contemporary history, as Benedetto Croce suggested, or is all history psychological history — diverse, essentially conflictual, internally inconsistent constructions of the past that tell more about the present and about the persons and collectivities "doing" history? Is Erikson even *empirically* flawed because he cannot, or would not, exercise his hermeneutic or exegetic rights beyond a point? Is the unwillingness to exercise these rights fully or to share them with other civilizations determined by the same forces that we are usually so keen to invoke when we embark on historical analysis? I shall address these odd questions in a very roundabout way, not necessarily to answer them, but to tell the outlines of a story about history in what was once an unabashedly ahistorical society.

Most Indian epics begin with a prehistory and end, not with a climactic victory or defeat, but with an ambivalent passage of an era. There is at their conclusion a certain tiredness and sense of the futility of it all. The Mahabharata does not end with the decisive battle of Kurukṣetra; it ends with the painful awareness

26. Richard Pipes, "Seventy-Five Years On: The Great October Revolution as a Clandestine *Coup d'Etat*," *Times Literary Supplement* (6 November 1992), 3–4; see 4.

27. *Ibid.*, 3.

28. Erik H. Erikson, "Youth: Fidelity and Diversity," *Daedalus* 93 (Winter 1962), 5–27; see 22.

that an age is about to pass. The victorious are all too aware—in the words of Yudhiṣṭhira, who with his brothers has ensured the defeat of the ungodly—that they have gone through a fratricide and their victory in a war, fought in the cause of morality, is actually a glorified defeat. Even god Kṛṣṇa, the lord of lords, dies a humble death, his entire clan decimated, his kingdom destroyed.

The first nonwestern psychoanalyst, Girindrasekhar Bose (1886–1953), who happened to be an Indian and like me a Bengali, wrote, among other things, a huge commentary on ancient Indian epics, *purāṇas*, which is now entirely forgotten, even in his native Bengal.²⁹ On the face of it, the commentary has so little to do with psychoanalysis that even the sensitive commentators on Bose, such as Christiane Hartnack and Sudhir Kakar, have mostly ignored it.³⁰ The book perhaps looks to them to be an attempt to construct a genealogy, which is also what it seemed to me when I first read it.

Reared in the culture of nineteenth-century science, particularly its easily-exportable positivist version, Bose was in many ways an unashamed empiricist and experimentalist. That culture of science had entered India in the middle of the nineteenth century along with the European concept of history. A new space for this concept of history was created in Indian consciousness by the manifest power of the colonial regime, its self-justification in the language of science and history, and by the Enlightenment values slowly seeping into the more exposed sectors of the Indian elite, either as tools of survival under the colonial political economy or as symbols of dissent against the traditional authority system. On one side were the likes of James Mill who mentions in his *History of British India* the “consensus” that “no historical composition existed in the literature of Hindus” and that the Hindus were “perfectly destitute of historical records”; on the other, there were Indian modernists like Krishna Mohun Banerjea who internalized Mill’s estimate and Gibbon’s more general belief that “the art and genius of history [was] . . . unknown to the Asiatics” and that the mythological legends of India showed that the Indians had a sense of poetry, but such legends could not be confused with “historical compositions.”³¹ At first, it seemed that the Muslims were better in this respect. After all, Alberuni *did* say, even if politely, “Unfortunately the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, . . . and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling.” But soon it became obvious to the moderns, in the language of one H. M. Elliot, who wrote a voluminous history of India, that Muhammedan histories were no better than annals.³²

29. Girindrasekhar Bose, *Purāṇa Praveśa* (Calcutta, 1934).

30. Christiane Hartnack, *Psychoanalysis and Colonialism in British India* (Berlin, 1988; unpublished Ph.D dissertation); Sudhir Kakar, “Stories from Indian Psychoanalysis: Context and Text,” in *Cultural Psychology*, ed. James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt (New York, 1990), 427–445.

31. Lal, “On the Perils of History,” 1–3.

32. *Ibid.*, 2. Could it be that things looked different in the Islamic cultures for a while to some historians of India because for a long time the ruling dynasties of India had been Muslim? Was the earlier reading of South Asian Islam as historically minded based on the assumption that dominance and successful statecraft required a “proper” sense of history?

By the time Girindrasekhar Bose was writing his commentary on the Indian epics, the favorite lament of many Bengali thinkers was: *Bāngālī ātmavismṛta jāti*—the Bengalis are a people who have forgotten their self. By this was meant that the Bengalis did not have a self based on history, that the traditional depositories of Bengal's awareness of her selfhood and past—its myths, folkways, shared and transmitted memories—were no longer legitimate to the important sections of the Bengali elite. It was this westernized elite, not the whole of Bengal, that felt it was *ātmavismṛta*, truly orphaned without a proper history. It was now looking for a different kind of construction of the past, the kind that would not humiliate them *vis-à-vis* their historically minded rulers.³³

Yet it became obvious to Bose, after working on the subject for a while, that no modern western historian could do justice to the *purāṇic* texts, for the modern West had lost access to certain forms of consciousness that were necessary for a more open, creative reading of the texts. If traditional India did not have access to the Enlightenment's idea of modern history, Europe also lacked access to the Indian traditions of constructing the past.³⁴

Now, Bose was no ordinary nationalist trying to revalue Indian classics; he had accepted psychoanalysis as *the* mode of understanding his society as well as the cultural products of his society, including texts such as the *purāṇas*. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, he was the first nonwestern psychiatrist and psychologist to do so; he began adapting the main principles of the young discipline to his culture in the first decade of this century, when hardly anything of Freud was available in English. In fact, he emerged so early in the career of psychoanalysis that he was accepted, apart from August Aichorn and of course Freud himself, as a training analyst on the basis of his self-analysis. I

I am not the right person to answer this question but it is pretty clear that the new sense of history spread unevenly in India. It became a deeper passion among the Brahminic castes—after all, history did require written texts at a time when oral histories were not fashionable—and castes aspiring to a Brahminic status (such as the Bhadrakols of Bengal, traditionally considered peripheral to the mainstream Brahminic culture but now closer to power in the pan-Indian scene due to their colonial connection). History also became a passion with those Brahminic communities that had opted for the Kṣatriya vocations of statecraft and bureaucracy, which previously contributed to one's power but not to caste status. These vocations now contributed to one's status because of the revaluation, under the colonial regime, of the Kṣatriyas as martial and masculine and therefore, as true indigenous rulers of people in India. Two examples of communities gaining from their non-traditional vocations and opting for history with a vengeance in colonial times are the Chitpvan Brahmins of Maharashtra and the Ngar Brahmins of Gujarat.

33. Surendranath Banerjea handled the situation the way many modern Indian historians would like to handle it. After asking whether it was imaginable that a great civilization did not have proper histories, he concluded that histories did indeed exist in India but could not survive the social upheavals in the country, the carelessness of the Brahmins, and the tropical climate. *Ibid.*, 6.

34. It was certainly not an accident that the new enthusiasm for history in India was accompanied by a fear of a return to the Indian past. While the new acquaintance with history created an awareness of and a tendency to celebrate some aspects of the European past—especially the legitimization of modern science in India, as in Europe, proceeded on the basis of a systematic invocation of the beauties of Europe's Hellenic traditions—any similar attempt to invoke the Indian past immediately triggered and continues to trigger accusations of retrogression or atavism. Gradually the idea that some pasts were more equal than other pasts came to be successfully institutionalized in India's westernized elite's newfound historical consciousness.

suspect that Bose became aware of the implicit politics of knowledge within which his work was getting located only after beginning his work on the epics of India.³⁵ It was as a psychoanalyst dealing with case *histories* that he deciphered some of the distinctive rules or techniques that the epics-as-*histories* followed.³⁶ He was a “student of pastness itself,” as Ivan Illich describes the vocation.³⁷ Bose came to the conclusion that the *purāṇas* were themselves a form of history.³⁸ That formulation must not have been easy to arrive at when the Indian elite were desperately trying to create within Indian civilization a place for history as the moderns understood it.

If Bose were living today, would he talk of the *purāṇas* as alternative history or as alternatives *to* history? Do we have to interpret the *purāṇas* into history? Or should we, those who have lived through the blood-drenched history of this century, learn to cherish the few who would rather interpret history into *purāṇas* to get out of the clutches of history? Should Bose have been sensitive to the closeness of psychoanalysis to the language of myths and its ability to be a critique of history, including case *history*, at the end of the twentieth century? Let me attempt some part-answers to these questions, too, by telling a story.

The “religious” violence triggered by the Ramjanmabhumi movement in India reached its climax on December 6, 1992. As we know, on that fateful day a controversial mosque at the sacred city of Ayodhya, which many claimed was built by destroying a temple that stood at the birthplace of Lord Rama, was demolished by screaming, angry volunteers eager to avenge a historical wrong.³⁹

What was the nature of the history around which so much bloodshed has already taken place and what is the status of that concept of history which has so frequently been invoked by Indian historians to clinch the argument on Ramjanmabhumi one way or the other? Why did the same history not move millions of Indians for hundreds of years, not even the first generation of Hindu nationalists in the nineteenth century, not even, for that matter, the founders and ideologues of the same parties that are today at the forefront of the temple

35. Bose, *Purāṇa Praveśa*, 212–213.

36. For instance, among the interpretive principles Bose deciphered was *atiyukti vicāra*, analysis of *atiranjana* or the stylized exaggerations of the Indian epics which put up the back of James Mill, as a part of the narrative mode of the *purāṇas*.

37. Ivan Illich, “Mnemosyne: The Mold of Memory,” in *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978–1990* (New York, 1992), 18:

“For the historian, the script is a vehicle which allows him to recover the events or perceptions that the document was meant to record. For the student of pastness itself, the script has a more specific function. For him, the script is a privileged object which allows him to explore two things: the mode of recall used in a given epoch, and also the image held by that epoch about the nature of memory and therefore of the past.”

38. Bose, *Purāṇa Praveśa*, 179.

39. Rama himself, though a venerated deity in much of South and South-East Asia, has been open to diverse forms of veneration and recognition within Hinduism itself. The two main sects of Hindus, Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivites, see him differently, with the former only granting him full divinity. There are versions of Ramayāna, the epic that tells the story of Rama, where he is the villain and there are even temples dedicated to the demons Rama fought against.

movement? Though they always claimed to be ardent devotees of the idea of history, none of them ever demanded the return of the Babri mosque to the Hindus on grounds of history: neither Balkrishna Munje, nor Keshav Hegdewar, nor Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, not even Lal Krishna Advani and Murali Manohar Joshi, the present leaders of the movement.⁴⁰

The two questions I have raised, you may have noticed, do not lay any emphasis on the ongoing debate in India on the “truth” about the Ramjanmabhumi. They are concerned neither with the archeological and historical evidence on the controversial mosque nor with the ongoing legal battle on the judicial status of the territoriality of the birthplace of one believed to be an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu but treated by some of his newfound political disciples as a venerable, now-dead national leader. Admittedly, the debate on the subject, particularly its style, reveals much about the psychological and cultural realities that frame the problem *today*, even if not in the sense the protagonists believe. Was there a temple which was destroyed by the builders of the Babri mosque? Is this Ayodhya really the Ayodhya of Rama? The questions *are* important for the secularized Indians, not for the millions who have trudged to the sacred city for pilgrimage over the centuries. Can we provide at least some vague clues to the point of view of the majority to whom the idea of history itself was once an encroachment on the traditional constructions of the past and some of whom have now opted to enter the dominion of history? I shall give my response as unambiguously as I can.

History is not the anthropology of past times, though it can come close to it. The growing popularity of anthropological history gives a false sense of continuity between the two disciplines, for they are separated by a deep political chasm: victims of anthropology talk back in some cases and in many other cases retain the potential for doing so; the subjects of history almost never rebel, for they are mostly dead. In the first instance, the worst affliction is colonial anthropology, in the second the civilizational *hubris* that claims that not merely the present but even the past and the future of some cultures have to be reworked. The main tools in that redefinition till now have been devaluation, marginalization, and liquidation of memories that cannot be historicized and, in the case of cultures that locate their utopias in the past, narrowing the range of alternatives “envisionable” within the cultures. In cultures where plural visions of the future derive from plural visions of the past, unqualified historicization has opened up new possibilities of violence to eliminate plurality, directed both outwards and inwards.

40. Almost all the main leaders of the movement have come from modernist sects that explicitly attack Hindu idolatry. Till the movement succeeded in bringing to power a party committed to their cause in the state where Ayodhya is located and the new cabinet made a symbolic appearance at the Ayodhya temple, almost none of the major leaders had found time in seven years to visit the temple. For details of the Ayodhya case I have depended on Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram, and Achyut Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality: Ramjanmabhumi Movement and the Fear of the Self* (New Delhi, forthcoming).

In the controversy on Ramjanmabhumi, volumes have been written by scholars, journalists, and partisan pamphleteers to prove either that there was a temple where the Babri Masjid stood since the sixteenth century or that there was no such temple. Shorn of verbiage, the Hindu nationalists have claimed that the Muslims are temple-breakers; the Muslims have denied that they are so. Two minor parties involved in the dispute are the secular and Hindu nationalist historians; they care for neither temples nor mosques, except for archeological, aesthetic, or political reasons. Some of India's respected historians such as Romila Thapar, S. Gopal, Bipan Chandra and Harbans Mukhia have said it all on behalf of their tribe, the secular historians, when they wrote that there was no historical proof that Rama was ever born, certainly none that he was born in the present city of Ayodhya. And one of their main opponents, the historian S. P. Gupta, whose ambition once was to do his doctoral work in history under Thapar, has said it all on behalf of the Hindu nationalists when he claimed that he was in the archeological expedition to Ayodhya led by B. B. Lal when he was not. Both Thapar and Gupta share the belief that the conflict in Ayodhya is about historical truths and the rectification of historical wrongs which can only be solved by objective, scientific history.

On the whole, it will not be an over-simplification to say that the secular historians either claim that Hindus are also temple-breakers—they allegedly broke Śaivite and Vaiṣṇava temples in sectoral clashes as well as Buddhist and Jain temples—or that the Muslims are not temple-breakers, at least in this instance.⁴¹ (Recently the secularists, fighting their gut reaction to Hinduism as a repository of superstitions and atavism, have added for political reasons a third angle to their viewpoint, namely that the Hindu nationalists are not true Hindus, “true Hinduism” being what the secularists find out from the traditional texts and from the writings of Hindu religious leaders through modern or post-modern textual analysis.) The Hindu nationalist historians—who claim, fittingly, that they are “positive” or genuine secularists, unlike the “pseudo-secularists” who disagree with them—demand that Indian Muslims own up to their heritage of temple-breaking and iconoclasm and atone for it by admitting that the disputed mosque should have been handed over to the Hindus for demolition or relocation in the first place and the destruction of the mosque in December 1992 was a nationalist act.⁴²

The Muslim responses to these demands have ranged from massive protests to violent and nonviolent resistance to even early local offers to hand over the

41. See for instance, S. Gopal, Romila Thapar, and others, *The Political Abuse of History* (New Delhi, n. d.), pamphlet; also, Romila Thapar, Harbans Mukhia, and Bipan Chandra, *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History* (New Delhi, 1969), pamphlet.

42. See for instance, Arun Shourie, Harsh Narain, Jay Dubashi, Ram Swarup, and Sita Ram Goel, *Hindu Temples, What Happened to Them (A Preliminary Survey)* (New Delhi, 1990); Koenaad Elst, *Ramjanmabhumi Versus Babri Masjid: A Case Study in Hindu-Muslim Conflict* (New Delhi, 1990); and *Negationism in India: Concealing the Record of Islam*, 2d ed. (New Delhi, 1993).

mosque to their neighbors.⁴³ But one possible position has not been taken: no Muslim in India has claimed till now that the Muslims broke temples *and* are proud of that past as a measure of their piety. Nor has any Muslim affirmed the right to break temples or even retain mosques built on demolished temples. No Muslim has sought protection for the Babri mosque without insisting that the mosque had *not* been built on a razed temple or without insisting that what Muslim marauders did in India was what marauders always do and such vandalism had nothing to do with Islam and that, in any case, the past was now truly past. This has been associated with a spirited denial of the accusation that they are temple-breakers. Strangely, both the *dharmaśāstras*, especially the epic vision of the *smārta* texts—the vision in which the heritage of the Ramayaṇa is located—and the living traditions of everyday Hinduism, exemplified above all by a majority of the Hindu residents of Ayodhya, have customarily considered that denial an important moral statement; to them, that reaffirmation of a moral universe by the Muslims may be more acceptable than the high-pitched evangelism of the Hindu nationalists.

Traditional India not only lacks the Enlightenment's concept of history; it is doubtful that it finds objective, hard history a reliable, ethical, or reasonable way of constructing the past. The construction of time in South Asia may or may not be cyclical, but it is rarely linear or unidirectional. As in some other cultures and some of the natural sciences, the Indian attitude to time—including the sequencing of the past, the present, and the future—is not given or preformatted. Time in much of South Asia is an open-ended enterprise. The power of myths, legends, *itihāsas* (which at one time used to be mechanically translated as primitive precursors of history), and *purāṇas* may have diminished but is not yet entirely lost.

Elsewhere I have classified nonhistorical reconstructions of the past under the rubric of mythography, but it may not be an appropriate term, though politically it does seem to protect the dignity of reconstructions that are the farthest from the contemporary idea of history.⁴⁴ But whatever name or names we give to such projects, they remain part of a moral venture. What a contemporary mythographer in the West like Erikson has to establish in the guise of a clinical interpretation or the likes of Joseph Campbell in the guise of an environmentally sound practice, many of the not-entirely-recessive traditions of constructing the past in India take for granted as a part of everyday life. They take seriously the affirmation of the Indian Muslims that they are not temple breakers, that there exist textual injunctions in Islam against even wor-

43. I found out from a local leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad during a field trip to Ayodhya that the local Shia leaders had offered, at least twice, to relocate the mosque and the local Hindus were willing to accept the offer. But the all-India leadership of both the Hindu nationalists and important sections of the Muslim political leadership refused to countenance such a compromise. The local Hindus and Muslims had no right to decide an issue that involved all the Hindus and Muslims of India, some of the latter said.

44. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (New Delhi, 1983).

shipping in a mosque built on forcibly occupied land. The marauders who broke temples are already in their minds marauders who “coincidentally” happened to be Muslims, and I suspect that most of their Hindu neighbors outside the reach of history have accepted that formulation. (After all, an altogether different concept of the past moved even the fiery nineteenth-century religious and social reformer, Vivekananda, from whom a majority of Hindu nationalists claim to trace their ideological lineage. As philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi tells the story, towards the end of his life, seeing evidences of desecration of Hindu temples by successive invaders in Kashmir, Vivekananda asked in anguish in a temple of Goddess Kali, “How could you let this happen, Mother, why did you permit this desecration?” Vivekananda himself records the answer Kali whispered in his heart: “What is it to you, Vivekananda, if the invader breaks my images? Do you protect me, or do I protect you?”⁴⁵)

The conventional truth value of or empirical certitude about the past is not particularly relevant from this point of view. Because once the principle of non-destruction of the places of worship of other faiths is accepted in present times, the past is “constructed adequately,” the moral point has been made, and the “timeless truths” reaffirmed.

Collingwood or no Collingwood, for some ahistorical cultures at least, all times exist only in present times and can be decoded only in terms of the contemporaneous. There is no past independent of us; there is no future that is not present here and now. And therefore the model of decoding is subject to the morality of everyday life, not to the various derivatives of the Baconian worldview. This is the humbler “secular” counterpart of Coomaraswamy’s proposition, made on behalf of Islam and, for that matter, the major religious worldviews, that “time . . . is an imitation of eternity.”⁴⁶

In modern India, to the extent it has got involved in the controversy over the mosque at Ayodhya, history, not Ayodhya, is the terrain for which the “secularists” and the Hindu nationalists fight. Both want to capture and correct it. The former want to correct the intolerance that, they feel, characterizes all faiths; the latter want to correct the intolerant faiths and teach their followers a lesson.

Secular historians assume that the past of India has been bloody and fanatic, that the Hindus and the Muslims have been fighting for centuries, and that the secular state has now brought to the country a modicum of peace. They believe that the secular faiths—organized around the ideas of nation-state, scientific rationality, and development—are more tolerant and should correct that history (despite the more than 110 million persons killed in man-made violence in this century, the killing in most cases justified by secular faiths, including Baconian science and Darwinism in the case of colonialism, biology in the case of Nazism, and science and history in the case of communism). The Hindu nationalists

45. Ramchandra Gandhi, *Sitā’s Kitchen: A Testimony of Faith and Inquiry* (New Delhi, 1992), 10.

46. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity* (Bangalore, 1989), 71.

believe that, except for Hinduism, most faiths, including the secular ones, are intolerant. But they do not celebrate that exception. They resent it; it embarrasses them. They, therefore, seek to masculinize Hinduism to combat and, at the same time, resemble what according to them has been the style of the dominant faiths, which the Hindu nationalists see as more in tune with modern science and technology and, above all, scientized history.⁴⁷ At the same time, they insist that the history produced by their opponents, the Indian secularists, is not adequately scientific. They believe, as their historically minded opponents do, that there is an implicit science of violence that shapes history and history itself gives us guidance about how to tame and use that violence for the higher purposes of history through the instrumentalities of the modern nation-state. Like their opponents again, the Hindu nationalists are committed to liberating India from its nasty past, by acquiring access to the state in the name of undoing the past with the help of the same kind of history. The secular historians have done it in the past; the Hindu nationalists are hoping to do so in the future.

In this “historical” battle, the two sides understand each other perfectly. One side has attacked only pseudo-secularism, not secularism; the other has attacked the stereotypy of minorities, never the “universal” concepts of the state, nationalism, and cultural integration that underpin the colonial construction of Hinduism that passes as Hindutva. It is a Mahābhāratīc battle between two sets of illegitimate children, fathered by nineteenth-century Europe and the colonial empires, who have escaped from the orphanage of history.

When modern history first entered the Indian intellectual scene in the middle of the last century, many accepted it as a powerful adjunct to the kit-bag of Indian civilization. Like Krishna Mohun Banerjea, they felt that Europe had transcended its wretched past by acquiring a historical consciousness and India, which showed a “lamentable want of authentic records in . . . literature,” could do so too.⁴⁸ The domination of that consciousness has now become, as the confrontation at Ayodhya shows, a cultural and political liability. In a civilization where there are many pasts, encompassing many bitter memories and animosities, to absolutize them with the help of the European concept of history is to attack the organizing principles of the civilization. This is particularly so, given that the South Asian historians, though otherwise a garrulous lot, have produced no external critique of history, perhaps not even an authentic history of history. They have sought to historicize everything, but never the idea of history itself. For historicizing the idea of history is to historicize the historians themselves. As I have said, such self-confrontation has not been the strong suit of historians; there are very poor checks in history against the violence and cruelty that may follow from uncritical acceptance of the idea of history.

47. See for instance Gyanendra Pandey, “Modes of History Writing: New Hindu History of Ayodhya,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (18 June 1994), 1523–1528.

48. Krishna Mohun Banerjea, “Discourse on the Nature and Importance of Historical Studies,” in *Selection of Discourses Delivered at the Meetings of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge* (Calcutta, 1840), vol. 1, quoted in Lal, “On the Perils of History and Historiography,” 1.

Bertholt Brecht, I am told, strongly believed that the past had to be bared to settle all accounts, so that one could move towards the future. The traditional Indian attitude to the past, as in many other such societies, is a spirited negation of that belief. That negation resists the justificatory principles on which modern, organized violence heavily depends. Provincial European intellectuals like Brecht had no clue that the construction of the past can sometimes be, as in some of the little cultures of India, guided not by memories alone, but by tacit theories of principled forgetfulness and silences. Such constructions are primarily responsible to the present and to the future; they are meant neither for the archivist nor for the archaeologist. They try to expand human options by reconfiguring the past and transcending it through creative improvisations. For such cultures, the past shapes the present and the future, but the present and the future also shape the past. Some scholars feel responsible enough to the present to subvert the future by correcting the past; others are as willing to redefine, perhaps even transfigure, the past to open up the future. The choice is not cognitive, but moral and political, in the best sense of the terms.

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