Homo Ahistoricus: Reading Disavowals of History in Colonial South Asian Writing

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ABSTRACT

*Homo Ahistoricus* reads selected texts produced by the “natives” of British India which show signs of “disavowal” of history as a form of knowledge. It contextualizes these texts as responses to the colonial effort to produce historical subjects among the colonized. In recent postcolonialist reappraisals of historiography, history as a genre of Western origin has been challenged. Romila Thapar, V. Narayana Rao, and others, have claimed that history, in non-Western contexts, can be found scattered in various heterogeneous genres. Enriched by such insights, this dissertation examines instances where the boundaries of history (as a constative genre) were violated and literary forms were used to sustain an anticolonial “politics of truth.” Such violations are further demonstrated by the fact that in the course of writing history, some authors reserved the right to read the archives at hand by means and methods that fell beyond the strictures of history as an empirical discourse. The dissertation has two parts, each containing two chapters. Part I of the dissertation is called *The Question of Ahistoricity*. First, it deals with the colonial reformulation of the modern concept of history for legitimizing the political dependence or tutelage of the colonized. How this happened is demonstrated through some key texts of modern Philosophy of History. And then, in the second chapter, the variegated responses of postcolonial scholars to the colonial attempts to represent the colonized as ahistorical are analyzed. Part II of the dissertation is called *Disavowals of History*. First, it deals with the uses of mimeticism in the anticolonial historiography of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), where more than the truthful historical portrayal of the past, mining certain archives for the establishment of an ideal (to be emulated by nationalist subjects) gains importance. In the final chapter some texts by Haraprasad Shastri (1853–1931) are analyzed where attempts are made to portray Dalits as historical subjects. The dissertation concludes by reflecting on the politically enabling aspects of these disavowals and comments on what this history of disavowals may mean for the postcolonial rethinking of historical discourse.
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INTRODUCTION

Is “history” a legitimate discourse for postcolonial critical purposes, despite its previous employment as a colonialist epistemic tool? This question might appear redundant if we assume that there is a post-Orientalist consensus in the academy on the question of history. Ever since Edward Said’s work appeared in the late twentieth century, scholars have mounted relentless investigations and debunkings of the colonialist foundations of the Western episteme. But such investigations have used historical criticism as their tool. Since history has served the postcolonialist aim of unmasking the Western strategies of domination and subordination of the globe so well, would it not be right to claim that its status as an useful method of acquiring knowledge informing critical perspectives of postcolonial studies is secure and beyond reproach?

In the Saidian critique of Orientalism, the occasional Western attempt to represent the non-Western world as history-less has been indicted. Substantial scholarly effort has been made to lay bare the ideologies that make the Orient “synonymous with stability and unchanging eternity.”¹ Therefore, advocates of postcolonial thought, which largely stems from Saidian criticism, often find it necessary to use history against such essentialist metropolitan discourses. And still, in our post-Orientalist world, instead of an universal enthusiastic embrace of history as a critical tool, some have expressed their abiding skepticism and hesitated to adopt history as a discourse or a discipline, so much so that historian Arif Dirlik used the phrase “disavowal of history” to mark the tendency in contemporary thought to elevate “culture” as the site where

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Western hegemony must be challenged. But if in postcolonial studies history is both loved and hated, both used and yet undermined, what accounts for this paradox? In Dirlik’s words, “Even where claims are made these days to premodern and, therefore, pre-‘historical’ ways of knowing, they fail to convince because their own efforts to refute a modernist historicism are conditioned by a self-consciousness about their own historicity.” Dirlik provides a presentist explanation for this phenomenon. Postcolonialism and globalism, two discrete epistemic tendencies allegedly engaged in the disavowal of history, are both joined in his analysis as consequences of the “multiculturalist redefinition of global power.” Even as Dirlik concludes by warning us of the pitfalls of culturalist disavowals of history, we are left wondering if the paradox he brings to our attention is adequately explained by acknowledging the hegemonic rise of multiculturalist ideology and the political expediency of conforming to it.

The foremost aim of this dissertation is to examine this paradox, not just as it figures in the contemporary commentaries on historiography, but as a phenomenon that itself has a history. With this aim the dissertation turns to the career of “history” in British India where previous attempts to disavow history lie. We examine here the colonial instances of disavowal of history alongside postcolonial valorizations of such disavowals and this lets us rescue postcolonial thought’s ambivalent take on history from being misperceived as either a mere passing fashion or the result of the stranglehold of multiculturalism as an ideology.

3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 25.
My focus on acts of disavowal as opposed to positively defined epistemic formations calls for a clarification. Since this dissertation merely examines certain responses to the colonial epistemic injunction to write history, it is not a work on colonial historiography. Conventional studies of historiography do not consider such subjective responses to the formation of history as a mode of knowledge, nor, for that matter, do these studies bring into the scope of their discussion the interpellative capacity of history as a discourse or its performative effects on concrete subjects. In contrast, this dissertation attends to discursive productions by individuals who were targets of history’s interpellative mechanisms and yet travelled between genres noncommittally, flouting the established rules of history as a constative discourse and asserting often in the process the right to use the name “history” unconventionally. I seek to follow the itinerary of these travels and understand the behavior that could appear as either modes of intransigence or intellectual changeability.

**Ahistorical Man**

In this dissertation, the term *homo ahistoricus* signifies the subject who disavows history, the subject who is celebrated, for instance, in historian of religion Mircea Eliade’s work on the philosophy of history. My term is a made-up, generic name for the subject variously described by Eliade as the archaic man, the primitive man or the traditional man. In his work *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, Eliade argues that there are insurmountable cultural differences between civilizations stemming from the Abrahamic faiths and other (traditional/

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archaic) civilizations. When the English edition of the book, translated and revised from an earlier French edition, came out in the 1950s, an awareness of the pitfalls of Orientalist or culturalist essentialism was yet to arrive in the academy. However, many of Eliade’s ideas have survived to the post-Saidian era. A number of his key concepts have resurfaced in the works of some contemporary scholars who are neither ignorant of nor opposed to Said’s critique of the discourses portraying the Orient in essentialist ontological terms. To explain further the appeal of Eliade’s discourse on the ahistorical man, I cite here some of the key features of his historico-philosophical claims that seem to have survived the post-Orientalist onslaught.

The question of differential ontology, for example, is at the heart of Eliade’s reflections on history. Eliade occasionally opposes “History” to “Myth” in his work, but this is not just a genre-based distinction. He offers a complex argument in which we discern two ontologies at loggerheads: “The chief difference between the man of the archaic and traditional societies and the man of the modern societies with their strong imprint of Judeo-Christianity lies in the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insist that he is connected only with History.”6 The traditional man’s connection with the cosmos is achieved by repetition of certain gestures, embedded in myths, that destroy the sense of “irreversibility” of time or events, as the rites performed bring about “periodic regeneration of time.” The archaic societies—Eliade’s shorthand for all societies that could be posed against Christian and post-Christian, modern European societies—cope with the trauma of catastrophic events, or perhaps preempt traumatizing effects, by ritualistically reenacting the time of creation and thus bringing into being a new time. In contrast, the modern

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man must accept history as the absolute horizon of existence, as a limit one cannot go beyond. This boundary is what makes the modern man less creative than the archaic man. The much-celebrated freedom of the modern subject in making his or her future appears in Eliade as its reverse: an absolute subjection to the irreversibility of history, a fundamental inability to undo what is done, and therefore a total helplessness in coping with the trauma of history.

Eliade’s “archaic man” or the “anhistorical man” represents the irreconcilability of the East and the West or modernity and the premodernity, he appears akin to *homo hierarchicus*,7 anthropologist Louis Dumont’s late-twentieth-century term for a man who upholds the principle of hierarchy. The Indic *homo hierarchicus* plays a foil to the *homo aequalis* of Europe underscoring the exceptionality of the modern Western love of equality. Similarly, ahistorical man, as defined by Eliade, escapes the injunction to adopt history, a modern Western discourse. *Homo hierarchicus* has been widely criticized by scholars in India and beyond as patently supporting an essentialism concerning India that precedes Dumont by several centuries. *Homo ahistoricus*, like *homo hierarchicus*, appears to be just another Orientalist cliché pitting, for example, the historical Judeo-Christian West against the ahistorical peoples of the Orient.

My use of the term *homo ahistoricus* in this dissertation thus seeks to raise the stakes, functioning as a reminder of the tightrope walk that we perform when dealing with the concept of ahistorical man. Although it masquerades as a neutral, purely scientific description, the term is actually a site where the otherized subject of the West is interpellated. When we deal with such ideas, the pitfalls of Orientalist essentialism are not far from us— yet treating the idea as an

orientalist commonplace robs us of the opportunity to investigate why ahistorical man, or the idea of ahistoricity has found defenders even amidst the post-Orientalist consensus in the academy.

This split consensus is an intriguing phenomenon. However, while understanding what motivates some postcolonial historians and theorists to defend *homo ahistoricus* is important, it is also necessary to save the subject who disavows history from becoming an exemplar undergirding culturalist essentialism. In the post-Cold War era, scholars have predicted a future in which conflicts will be fueled above all by irreconcilable cultural and civilizational differences. Samuel P. Huntington’s theorization of global conflict in terms of the “clash of civilizations” is one of the frequently cited culturalist theories of recent times, that envision

8. Culturalism is a term that is variously used in contemporary academic writing. The uses of “culturalism” can range from describing the “inability or unwillingness to tolerate cultural differences” as a precursor to racism, (as in George M. Fredericson’s employment of the term) to labeling “a cultural eclipse of politics” (as in Jon Cruz’s work). In one of Arif Dirlik’s essays culturalism is marked as distinct from the “radicalism of cultural activity”; Dirlik comments: “To argue the radicalness of the question of culture is not to propound culturalism, that ideology which not only reduces everything to questions of culture but has a reductionist conception of the latter as well. . . . Culture is not only a way of seeing the world but also a way of making and changing it. The first sense refers to the manner in which we usually understand and use the word, and it also signifies the cornerstone of culturalist ideology.” According to Dirlik, this first sense, however, is a mystical sense of culture. As opposed to this mystical sense of culture, he urges us to reassert the sense of “culture as activity” to emphasize the potential of turning cultural activity into “liberating practice.” This negative portrayal of “culturalism” is not uncommon. In his study of the Afro-Brazilian cultural movement, Movimento Negro, Michael George Hanchard characterizes culturalism in the following manner: “Culturalism freezes or hypostatizes cultural practices, divorcing them from their histories and the attendant modes of consciousness that brought them into being.” Andrew Sartori uses culturalism to signify the Bengali discourses on culture, which represent a “systematic misrecognition” of the “global structures of capitalist society.” My use of the term in this dissertation is to signify the tendency to de-emphasize political explanation of events in favor of cultural explanation, prominent in writings upholding the “clash of civilizations” thesis. But this tendency, regrettably, can also feature in some works of postcolonial theory. For the many uses of culturalism cited here, see the following texts: George M. Fredericson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 7. Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 201. Arif Dirlik, “Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice,” *Cultural Critique*, 6 (1987):13–50. Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio De Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 21. Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 5.
geostrategic divisions arising along the cultural fault lines. The Eliade thesis on history, since it considers “history” a cultural preserve of certain communities, may well be pressed into the service of reinforcing the culturalist presumptions that undergird the Huntington thesis. Hence, even as we reject Dirlik’s explanation for postcolonial thought’s ambivalent relationship with history, if we pay heed to his warning about culturalism, it may allow us to critically examine the assumptions of the Eliade thesis in its many variations.

**Perils of Culturalism**

Many scholars have pointed out the factual imprecisions of the Huntington thesis or arguments of similar kinds. But these are not my sole motivation for contesting culturalism pressed into the service of historical explanation. The emphasis on cultural or civilizational difference as an overriding cause of contemporary geopolitical antagonisms—a cause that endures in the long term and remerges after other intermediate, ideological causes for the divisions of the world disappear—produces another notable corollary: it downplays the role of past colonialism or present neocolonialism in producing global geopolitical divisions. In the *longue durée* history of intercultural conflict, modernity or modernization itself appears to be less important than the emergence of the West as a cultural bloc several centuries prior: “Western civilization emerged in the eighth and ninth centuries and developed its distinctive characteristics in the following centuries. The West was the West long before it was modern. The central characteristics of the West, those which distinguish it from other civilizations, antedate the modernization of the West.”

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Such a long chronology of Western civilization and its essential difference from non-Western civilizations contribute to an understanding of history in which the modern imperialist ambitions of the West are rendered comparable to premodern attempts to establish empire and colonialism as a modern phenomenon fades into relative insignificance. An instance of this kind of culturalist apologia for modern imperialism can be found in an essay by historian Bernard Lewis, who used the phrase “clash of civilizations” a few years before it was popularized by Huntington. In his attempt to explain anti-Western sentiments in contemporary West Asia, Lewis writes:

Is imperialism, then, the grievance? Some Western powers, and in a sense Western civilization as a whole, have certainly been guilty of imperialism, but are we really to believe that in the expansion of Western Europe there was a quality of moral delinquency lacking in such earlier, relatively innocent expansions as those of the Arabs or the Mongols or the Ottomans, or in more recent expansions such as that which brought the rulers of Muscovy to the Baltic, the Black Sea, the Caspian, the Hindu Kush, and the Pacific Ocean? In having practiced sexism, racism, and imperialism, the West was merely following the common practice of mankind through the millennia of recorded history. Where it is distinct from all other civilizations is in having recognized, named, and tried, not entirely without success, to remedy these historic diseases. And that is surely a matter for congratulation, not condemnation.¹⁰

By brushing off arguments against imperialism in this manner, Lewis turns to irreconcilable cultural differences between Christianity and Islam to explain anti-Western ideologies in the Muslim world. Lewis explains the controversy after the publication of the novelist Salman Rushdie’s work *The Satanic Verses* as a “clash of civilizations” or a “historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage.”¹¹


11. Ibid., 67.
These examples are cited here to underscore the fact that some culturalist accounts of history can be, and indeed have been, used to downplay the role of modern imperialism in shaping our cultural and political present. Thus, regardless of its constative validity or the lack thereof, Eliade’s emphasis on history as a cultural preserve of certain communities can easily fall prey to culturalist appropriations of a kind that would ignore the role of colonialism in forming the ideas that make up our contemporary notions of historicity or ahistoricity. In the Eliade thesis, colonial projects to form modern disciplines like history— and to form modern subjects who are compliant with colonial epistemic assumptions—find no mention. This omission of colonialism and its effects make the Eliade thesis akin to the Huntington thesis.

**Focalizing Colonial Experience**

While culturalist essentialisms minimize the role of colonialism or the epistemic presumptions of the empire in representing certain cultures as “ahistorical,” many of the recent critics of historical discourse and its avowed claim to be scientific have more often than not ignored the colonial career of history in creating knowledge. And yet, the career of history as a modern discourse unfolded alongside the career of modern empire, and understanding its imperial implications lead to a different critique of history than those previously offered.

The aspiration of the proponents of “scientific history” to uphold history as a discourse that purely and solely conveys facts about the past was famously expressed in the nineteenth century in Leopold von Ranke’s minimalist rhetoric as “er will blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen,” or “it merely seeks to show, what in fact happened.” This Rankean principle held

sway among professional historians for the most of the two past centuries. However, in the last
decades of the twentieth century, an awareness of the indispensable role of language in the
making of historical discourse emerged, subsequently called the “linguistic turn.”13 The late-
twentieth-century works responsible for the linguistic turn explained the structure of history as a
discourse. They brought into focus history’s “ineluctably poetic nature”14 or the inseparability of
historical narration from “imaginary narration.”15 Critics like Hayden White or Roland Barthes
effectively called into question the ambition, nurtured by historians since the nineteenth century,
to make history a scientific discipline, unencumbered by any extraconstative concerns.

While scholars acknowledge the contribution of these late-twentieth-century structuralist
and poststructuralist critics of history, a caveat must follow our recognition. Scientific history
came into its own in the 1800s, but this heyday of scientific history coincided with the high noon
of colonialism. History’s elevation into a constative discourse par excellence proved useful in
legitimizing modern empire as a global practice of power. The criticism of history after the

13. Linguistic turn is an expression used by Richard Rorty in the title of an edited volume, which focused
on “the “various ways in which linguistic philosophers have viewed philosophy and philosophical method
over the last thirty-five years.” The expression, however, is used more extensively in historiographical
contexts, especially to mark the paradigm shift in the study of history brought about by Hayden White’s
work. Elizabeth A. Clark’s History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn places the epistemic
shift brought about by White’s work at the centre of its concerns. F.R. Ankersmit devotes the first chapter
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E. Clark, History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn (Cambridge, MA :Harvard University
29-31.


linguistic turn paid less than sufficient attention to this colonial career of history. This lack has made it harder for us to acknowledge that the “noble dream” at the “very center of professional historical venture,” the idea that factual description of the past can be obtained, was also the ideological fodder that fed the imperial civilizing mission of the modern era.

History’s role in undergirding the imperial project figures prominently in two instances. The first is James Mill’s *The History of British India* (1817), Book II, Chapter I, and the second is Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education,” circulated in British Parliament in 1835. Mill’s *History* makes use of several essays on Indian chronology produced by British researchers and published in the first few volumes of the journal *Asiatic Researches*, to prove that Hindus lack a sense of history. When these essays on chronology appeared, and subsequently, when Mill’s *History* was published, the biblical view of chronology, or what was called “mosaic chronology” was still in use. Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833) was yet to be published and the advent of geological “deep time” and its acceptance in the academic world were yet to materialize. In this supposedly “prescientific” era of the

16. Note that in *Metahistory*, White refers to a host of thinkers, from both continental and Anglo-American traditions, who worked on historiography and historicophilosophical themes, and says that “the historical consciousness on which Western man has prided himself since the beginning of the nineteenth century may be little more than a theoretical basis for the ideological position from which Western civilization views its relationship not only to cultures and civilizations preceding it but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space. In short, it is possible to view historical consciousness as a specifically Western prejudice by which the presumed superiority of the modern, industrial society can be retroactively substantiated.” Many postcolonial critics agree with this general statement on the possibility of uncovering “historical consciousness” as a prejudice propping up the sense of Western superiority. Yet White’s analysis rarely leaves the familiar territory of the nineteenth and post-nineteenth century Europe. The effects of historical discourse on the colonized do not become even a peripheral concern for White. See White, *Metahistory*, 2.


understanding of antiquity, a genre sprung up comparing Western chronologies inspired by the biblical narrative and the chronologies derived from the Sanskrit Puranik literature; it judged “Hindu chronology” to be deceptive or wrong. While William Jones, the father of comparative philology, was convinced that the Brahmans “to aggrandize themselves, have designedly raised their antiquity beyond the truth,” 19 others following in his footsteps either express a more stern disapproval of the Puranik chronologies as “absolutely repugnant to the course of nature, and human reason,” 20 (Captain Francis Wilford) or blame at once the “fancy” of “the Brahmens and poets” and the “ignorance of modern Hindus” for producing “one mass of absurdity and contradiction” 21 in place of an acceptable chronology (John Bentley). Based on these prior assessments Mill launches his onslaught against the chronology and the ancient history of the Hindus, but he finds fault with most other “oriental nations” too: “As a boastful and turgid vanity distinguishes remarkably the oriental nations they have in most instances carried their claims extravagantly high. We are informed in a fragment of Chaldaic history, that there were written accounts, preserved at Babylon, with the greatest care, comprehending a term of fifteen myriads of years. The pretended duration of the Chinese monarchy is still more extraordinary.” 22 Mill however expresses concern over the special treatment the Westerners appeared to have given to the “Hindu statements” as they have “almost universally been regarded as very different from the fictions of an unimproved and credulous people, and entitled to a very serious and profound

investigation.” He thus goes on to contradict this favorable judgment by demonstrating why these “Hindu statements” should be placed “beyond the sober limits of truth and history.” If the lack of a genre dedicated to writing history is blamed, in part, for the absurdity of the Hindu legends, a further portion of the blame falls on the Brahmins, whose agency in designing fables contrary to history Mill highlights:

This people, indeed, are perfectly destitute of historical records. Their ancient literature affords not a single production to which the historical character belongs. The works in which the miraculous transactions of former times are described, are poems. Most of them are books of a religious character, in which the exploits of the gods, and their commands to mortals, are repeated or revealed. In all, the actions of men and those of deities are mixed together, in a set of legends, more absurd and extravagant, more transcending the bounds of nature and of reason, less grateful to the imagination and taste of a cultivated and rational people, than those which the fabulous history of any other nation presents to us. The Brahmens are the most audacious, and perhaps the most unskillful fabricators, with whom the annals of fable have yet made us acquainted.

The lack of a “Hindu” genre dedicated to history, which Mill points out as a mark of profound inferiority, was to become a staple in the colonial discussions of the Indian past, but most notably the theme was to form one of the foundations on which the introduction of “English education” in India was to be legitimized. Here, a brief consideration of the nineteenth-century English Whig politician and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education,” produced in 1835 in his capacity as the legal member of the Supreme Council of India, is instructive. Macaulay argues in favor of replacing Arabic and Sanskrit in the colonial

23. Ibid., 141.
24. Ibid., 142.
25. Ibid., 144.
curriculum with English-language education. In the course of Macaulay’s argument, he brings into focus the absence of works of history in Sanskrit literature:

It will hardly be disputed, I suppose, that the department of literature in which the Eastern writers stand highest is poetry. And I certainly never met with any orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England.26

Hence, history in Macaulay’s “Minute” is the field that shows the utmost divergence between the achievements of the colonizers and the colonized and bears testimony to the absolute superiority of the Westerners in the domain “where facts are recorded.” Macaulay refers to the “great revival of letters among the Western nations at the close of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century” only to warn us of the inability of the Indian classics to play a role commensurate to the role played by Greek and Latin in the European Renaissance. Sanskrit is presumed inferior not only to Greek and Latin but also to Norman French or Old English. History, for Macaulay, is the department where the absolute inferiority of Sanskrit literature is readily identifiable:

Had our ancestors …neglected the language of Thucydides and Plato, and the language of Cicero and Tacitus, had they confined their attention to the old dialects of our own island, had they printed nothing and taught nothing at the universities but chronicles in Anglo-Saxon and romances in Norman French, --would England ever have been what she now is? What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our

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tongue is to the people of India. The literature of England is now more valuable than that of classical antiquity. I doubt whether the Sanscrit literature be as valuable as that of our Saxon and Norman progenitors. In some departments—in history for example—I am certain that it is much less so.27

In contrast, Macaulay points out, English abounds with works of “historical composition, which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed, and which, considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equaled.”28 In Macaulay’s “Minute,” correcting the absence of history in India hence becomes one of the key justifications for cutting off Indian subjects’ ties with the classical tradition in Sanskrit. Henceforth colonial modernity establishes itself on the firm footing of subject formation through education, conveying the British idiom of improvement to the English-educated subjects of the empire. Historian Ranajit Guha reminds us that, in the articulation of power in British India, the idiom of improvement appears as a mode of persuasion to inspire collaboration with the state and functions as a means to convince the middle-class to support colonial policies.29

This ideological context makes the act of disavowing history fertile ground for analytical attention. The reformed Hindu subjects of the empire, who are formed by English education and are expected to take the indispensability of the knowledge of history to heart, sometimes do not show a firm determination in dealing with the past in terms laid down by the protocols of history. Such disavowals, however, often cannot be construed in purely essentialist, culturalist terms.

Social theorist Ashis Nandy suggests the difficulty of a purely culturalist explanation when he

27. Ibid., 176.
28. Ibid., 174.
comments that M. K. Gandhi left “hardly a sentence to suggest that he believed in fundamental or irreconcilable differences between cultures.”30 But Nandy has also pointed out that Gandhi was averse to history as a mode of knowledge. Since Gandhi’s cultural influences were eclectic, though he had “affirmed primacy of myths over historical chronicles,”31 using the Eliade thesis to explain the Gandhian response to history is difficult. Moreover, if we examine Gandhi’s opposition to history carefully, we will find that his antihistory stance was not as unequivocal as it has sometimes been assumed. This ambiguity puts the application of the Eliade thesis in the colonial context in jeopardy.

Consider, for instance, Gandhi’s take on history in *Hind Swaraj*. In the chapter “Satyāgraha-Ātmabal” (“Passive Resistance”), the possibility of finding historical precedence for *Satyāgraha* (truth-force: literally, a strong inclination for truth) or Ātmabal (soul-force: the Gandhian alternative to violence in political action) is ruled out. Nonviolence, or the human inclination to be nonviolent does not have a history, at least in the sense in which the Westerners understand that word:

*History (histri)*,32 as we know it, is a record of the wars of the world, and so there is a proverb among Englishmen that a nation which has no history (*histri*), that is, no wars, is a happy nation. . . .

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32. The original text lexicalizes “history” here into Gujarati “histri” (િહ#ટરી) indicating that, Gandhi makes a distinction between history and the *Itihāsa*. *Itihāsa is* the Sanskrit term that is usually used to translate the English expression “history” into modern Indian vernaculars.
Hundreds of nations live in peace. History (histrī) does not, and cannot, take note of this fact. History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul…History (histrī), then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. Soul-force, being natural, is not noted in history.33

But the absence of a history of soul-force does not imply, for Gandhi, that one has to repudiate the pedagogic function of nationalist history. Hence the nationalist subject must be informed about the Indian deindustrialization effected by colonial policies and, in the chapter called “Machinery,” Gandhi draws his readers’ attention to R.C. Dutt’s economic history. History is also pressed into service in the diagnosis of the root cause of subjection of India. In the section called “Why was India Lost?,” Gandhi holds Indians themselves responsible for their loss of sovereignty. Here, once more, history furnishes the evidence for what went wrong:

Who assisted the Company’s officers? Who was tempted at the sight of their silver? Who bought their goods? History34 (Itihās) testifies that we did all this. In order to become rich all at once, we welcomed the Company's officers with open arms. We assisted them. If I am in the habit of drinking Bhang, and a seller thereof sells it to me, am I to blame him or myself? By blaming the seller shall I be able to avoid the habit? And, if a particular retailer is driven away, will not another take his place? A true servant of India will have to go to the root of the matter.35

Gandhi does not unequivocally repudiate testimony of history and its role in the pedagogy of the nationalist subject. Like some other figures discussed later in this dissertation, Gandhi is caught up in a web of disavowal of history, or in an oscillating structure, which exemplifies more than just a rejection of history, shifting between acceptance and rejection.

34. Although Gandhi uses “Itihās” here as opposed to the lexicalized “histrī” in the earlier instance, his intended referent is the late-nineteenth-century nationalist narrative of the colonization of India, by R.C. Dutt who did not hesitate to use “history” (i.e., a genre of Western origin).
35. Ibid., 71-72.
A Note on Disavowal

The significance of the expression disavowal is substantial—this is not simply a word of everyday, ordinary usage but also a key theoretical term used in psychoanalytic literature. Sigmund Freud uses disavowal (verleugnung) to characterize the fetishistic behavior that accompanies castration anxiety. However, Freud bases the human tendency to disavow unpleasant reality in a much larger terrain than what could be construed as narrowly pathological, as he attributes the origin of acts of disavowal to the splitting of the ego as a defensive mechanism of the subject facing a hostile environment. This split makes acts of disavowal more than just simple rejection of ideas or the external reality. Historian Sybille Fischer, who has used disavowal as a concept to explain nineteenth-century reactions to the Haitian Revolution, reminds us of the paradoxical nature of acts of disavowal insofar as they are, in Freud’s words, “half measures,” and hence “disavowal is always supplement by an acknowledgement.” If we take “disavowal of history” in this theoretical sense, we can highlight the paradoxical behavior of the subject who disavows history.36 This dissertation argues that this paradox need not only be acknowledged as it figures in contemporary thought but that a past can be uncovered where it made its appearance before.

By throwing into relief the acts of disavowals of history by colonial modern subjects, I seek to depart from two prevalent trends in the study of history as an epistemic formation. First, this dissertation seeks to depart from the formalist criticism of history that gained prominence in

the late twentieth century in the wake of the publication of Hayden White’s *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973). Such formalist methods of critiquing history, although useful for rendering visible the closures operative in historical discourse, do not venture into studying the actual subject who is expected to produce history or the concrete subject who is formed by historical discourse. Because of the internalist readings of texts that characterize formalism, neither a social or political context where the historical texts are introduced, nor their reception or efficacy in subject formation can be judged.

Second, this dissertation also seeks to depart from the culturalist critique of history that relies on the assumption that history, as a discourse of Western origin, necessarily buttressed the colonial state and promoted its ideology. Ranajit Guha’s *History at the Limit of World History* (2002) is perhaps the best known example of this critique. If we adhere to the argument presented in the culturalist critique, we would be bound to admit that since history cannot be disarticulated from its Western, statist, colonialist origin, the subjects repudiating history must be culturally preprogrammed to do so. In the same vein it would seem that the subjects who take to historiography, partially if not fully, repudiate their indigenous culture—a culture that presumably cannot assimilate history as a mode of knowledge. Either way, if we accept the conclusions that follow the culturalist analysis of history, we lose sight of the specifics of the colonial-modern responses to the injunction to write history. By using the critically nuanced concept of disavowal, and thereby avoiding a reductive reading of the colonial-modern subject’s
response to history as an epistemic enterprise, we can assess the acts of repudiation of history in terms of their strategic significance within the colonial “politics of truth.”\textsuperscript{37}

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to undo the evacuation of the political that besets formalist as well as culturalist analyses of history as a form of knowledge. The way in which political is involved in a “politics of truth” takes center stage in this analysis, and it also seeks to bring into focus the role of the literary in sustaining the colonial-modern subjects’ attempts to contest the injunction to write history. The acts of disavowal of history in the colonial-modern context turn out to be politically enabling. The dissertation documents and analyzes these enabling violations of codes of history.

What Is at Stake?

The colonial experience with historical discourse remains relevant to the present rethinking of history’s relevance as a discipline. Our present moment is marked by a triumphalist proclamation of the defeat of late-twentieth-century poststructuralist skeptics who, allegedly, undermined the discipline of history. In the words of historian Joan W. Scott, “It is fashionable these days to talk about poststructuralist theory in the past tense, as a disruptive moment that once threatened to undermine the discipline of history, substituting fancy French distractions for serious empirical investigations. Orthodox disciplinarians, along with journalists, politicians and public

\textsuperscript{37} I am using this phrase in its Foucaultian sense. See Michel Foucault, “What is Critique,” trans. Lysa Hochroth in \textit{The Politics of Truth}, eds. Sylvere Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1997), 32. Hereafter \textit{The Politics of Truth}. I do not intend to claim that the injunction to write history elicited only one kind of response from the colonized. There were many among the colonial-modern literati who embraced historical discourse unreservedly and became prominent ideologues in favor of the scientificity of the modern historiographical method that evolved in Europe. The colonial injunction to form subjects of history thus did not necessarily or always, wholly or partially, fail. For an illustrious example of how that injunction succeeded see Dipesh Chakrabarty, \textit{The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth} (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 2014.
intellectuals, have declared this theory to be dead.”³⁸ As an antidote to the ongoing “conservative revolution” that “seeks to discredit critique as disruptive, discordant, even disloyal,” Scott makes a plea to reinforce and protect “history as critique” in its late twentieth century form.³⁹ Although Scott makes no mention of the colonial experience with history in her defense of the poststructuralist critiques of history, let us say here that resisting “the trivialization and denunciation” of the “linguistic turn” is greatly helped by a discussion uncovering the erstwhile ties between empire and empiricism, between history as a mode of knowledge and colonial governmentality.⁴⁰

The French theorist Michel Foucault’s project of “history as critique,” upheld by Scott as a model, instructs us to lay bare the “structures of rationality which articulate true discourse and the mechanisms of subjugation which are linked to it.”⁴¹ Foucault, significantly, does not trace back the emergence of “critique” to the canonical texts of Immanuel Kant but to a general “critical attitude” that predated Kant by several centuries and has had many discrete articulations since Kant. The emergence of this critical attitude is explained by Foucault as an effect of the governmentalization of the state, beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing to the present day, which produced the resistance of the governed—articulated not in terms of seeking an absolute negation of the role of the government, but rather as an attitude that has been

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³⁹. Ibid., 21.
⁴⁰. Ibid., 20.
inseparable from the question of “how not to be governed [comment ne pas être gouverné]”\textsuperscript{42} This critical attitude involves individuals claiming the right to dissent in the face of the governmentalization of the state: “ [I]f governmentalization is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right [le sujet se donne le droit\textsuperscript{43}]to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.”\textsuperscript{44} Thus critical historians who seek to follow in Foucault’s footsteps must deal with the question of subject-formation and the role governmentality plays. The complicity of history, especially as a nineteenth-century discourse, in aiding and abetting colonial governmentality and reinforcing its program of subject formation, therefore, is a theme that the proponents of “history as critique” cannot afford to ignore. Only by acknowledging this complicity and reinventing a historiographical practice at variance with its former function as a tool in colonial governmentality can history become adequate to the task of critique.

In consequence, the urgency of studying colonial-modern disavowals of history can scarcely be overstated. These half measures, which sought to reserve the right to relate the past and relate to the archive at hand by going beyond the set protocols of historical discourse, exemplified in their own terms a “critical attitude,” without thereby necessarily falling into a pattern that got consolidated into a counterhistorical genre. But what lessons do these

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{42} Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que la critique?,” \textit{Bulletin de la société française de philosophie}, 84, 2 (1990): 39.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{44} Foucault, \textit{The Politics of Truth}, 47.
\end{flushleft}
intermittent colonial-modern attempts, responding to the injunction to write history, have for us? In these contradictory discursive strategies of the foregone anticolonial era, what are the elements that can be redeemed for the contemporary postcolonial rethinking of history? A project of history as critique for our era must begin by seeking an answer to these questions, and in this dissertation, by revisiting the colonial-modern responses to the injunction to write history and reassessing them, I attempt in my own terms to sketch a response.

Traditional discussions of historiography tend not to deal with the reception of history as a form of knowledge or with the response historical discourse generally elicits, focusing instead on the stylistic or paradigmatic differences between different kinds of history-writing. As a result the conventional mapping of historiography fails to shed light on how history as a discursive formation calls to and forms the concrete subject who can, in turn, adopt historical discourse as a tool for understanding and interpreting the world. Hence, these historiographies are of limited use in the colonial context where the claim to valid historical knowledge served as a crucial justification of the imperial tutelage and the response from the colonized was registered in heterogeneous modes and discourses. Aware of the limitations of traditional historiography in assessing the response to history as a mode of knowledge, this dissertation departs from the standard accounts and considers the reception of history not just in the domain of constative discourse, but also as a territory in which the literary is put to work in the task of excavating the archive and narrating the past.
Chapter Outlines

The first chapter discusses what constitutes a colonial regime of historicity. It charts a history of the emergence of a specifically colonialist concept of history and points out its idiosyncrasies. For this purpose, it considers how “making history” and “writing history” were related in the philosophies of history of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries and claims that the relationship between these two aspects of historicity was transformed in the wake of the rise of colonialism in the early nineteenth century. The chapter ends with the observation that such a transformation was crucial for justifying colonialism and forming colonial subjects.

The second chapter provides a critical survey of postcolonial criticisms of Western portrayals of certain non-Western cultures as “ahistorical.” Most of the authors discussed in this chapter deal with South Asian societies and cultures, but their arguments contesting the Western view of history and its complicity with discourses legitimizing colonialism have relevance beyond their domain of expertise. The chapter groups these contestations under two headings: nominalism and culturalism. I discuss the similarities and differences between these two sets of criticisms, and the chapter ends with the suggestion that to grasp the complex nature of responses of the colonized to historical discourse, neither of these categories suffice, though both provide insight.

The third chapter considers the historiography of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), the father of the nationalist discourse in India and the foremost literary figure in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. It seeks to prove that although Bankimchandra declared his allegiance to the rules of historical discourse as formulated in the nineteenth century, in his
attempt to write a historical biography of the Hindu avatar Krishna he introduced additional rules
for reading a traditional archive of Hinduism. These additional a priori rules made it possible for
Bankimchandra to incorporate those sections of the traditional archive that he deemed not
amenable to history. They also allowed Bankimchandra to establish Krishna as a model for
emulation. Bankimchandra’s mimeticist strategy proved useful for forming the subjects of
emergent nationalism, leading him to author a discourse on the past that was unlike the historical
discourse originating in the modern Occident.

The fourth chapter discusses the literary oeuvre of Haraprasad Shastri (1853–1931), a
renowned Sanskritist and expert on Buddhism. Haraprasad stands out among the literary and
scholarly figures of the late nineteenth century for his portrayals of caste conflicts in Indian
society. Hence, caste is a prominent theme in all three of Haraprasad’s novels. The chapter
provides an analysis of Haraprasad’s fiction with a special focus on his third novel Bener Meye
(1918–1919). Bener Meye deserves special attention as in its preface Haraprasad repudiates
historical discourse, giving the novel a polemical edge. The chapter investigates why
representing caste required Haraprasad’s repudiation of historical discourse. This rejection of
history may seem perplexing as Haraprasad made use of an archive in his novel that was not
wholly impenetrable to historiographic treatment. It is significant, however, that in the preface to
the novel, Haraprasad calls attention to the inadequacy of history for portraying subjectivity.
Taking its cue from such comments, the chapter investigates the larger epistemic conjuncture that
conditioned Haraprasad’s rejection of history.
The dissertation ends with a coda in which, through a brief retrospective review, I clarify the connections between the chapters and the order of their logical succession. Here I seek to articulate what the colonial-modern disavowals of history, which make up the subject matter of the last two chapters of the thesis, might mean to our era.
PART I - The Question of Ahistoricity
Chapter 1. What Was the Colonial Regime of Historicity?

On April 11, 2015, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi marked the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle at a World War I memorial in northern France. Later that day, at a reception in Paris organized by members of the Indian diaspora, he expressed his remorse that in contemporary India, the sacrifice of the soldiers of Indian origin who participated in World War I had nearly been forgotten. He then warned of the consequence of neglecting the memory of war heroes: “If a society forgets history, it also loses the capacity to make history. Only they make history who know and understand history.”

We may consider this statement connecting remembering, knowing, or understanding history and making history to be an inconsequential commonplace, used by the prime minister to justify his commemoration of a difficult past. After all, by the second decade of the twentieth century nationalist sentiments in British India were already on the upswing, and yet, over a million Indians were fighting overseas to defend the empire from its European rivals. British-imperial military history, the early-twentieth-century imperialist fervor in Europe, and the British use of the Indian soldiers in a European imperialist war—these would perhaps seem more relevant to Modi’s speech than his statement on history. And yet, quite apart from the difficulties of a postcolonial nation’s coming to terms with the troubling features of its colonial past, Modi’s words offer us an intriguing snapshot of popular philosophizing that reveals more about the

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ideological status of historical discourse than even the usual theoretical elaborations may afford. They call attention to the performative dimension of history, which allows for history to be used in forming subjects who can (claim to) make history.

This performative dimension of history, though effortlessly conveyed by Modi, is often underplayed (if not ignored) in the traditional scholarship on historiography, which remains focused on the stylistic and methodological niceties of the textual traditions of history. Nevertheless, the predication of “making history” on the knowledge of history is no small matter. I contend that it is crucial for understanding how historical discourse operated in the colonial world. Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot theorizes two separate “sites of historicity” that make up the idea of history as it is currently used. One of the two sites is occupied by the agent/actor/subject of history and the other by the narrator of history. Together these make the production of history as a form of knowledge possible. Trouillot calls attention to the fact that while these sites may overlap, they are not identical. Those who wield power, intervene in historiography by taking advantage of the fissure between the two sites, as the second site of historicity which produces history as knowledge can be put to use to deny or suppress the first site of historicity, which is shaped by actors or subjects.

Modi’s statement formulaically connects Trouillot’s two sites of historicity, though the relationship here is more precise, and knowing history here conditions making history. However, in this chapter, I do not concern myself with Modi’s view of history per se, nor do I deal with the larger Hindu-supremacist vision that informs his notions of the past, present, or future. Rather, I

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intend to show that his predication of making history on knowing history can be traced back to colonialist epistemic presuppositions. In addition, I will also show that the idea of ahistoricity, as it came to be employed in the nineteenth century, owed its existence to the ways in which the relationship between these two sides of historicity was imagined.

What do I mean by the *colonial regime of historicity* referred to in the title of this chapter? I borrow the expression *regime of historicity* from historian François Hartog’s *Régimes d’historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* [Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Temporal Experiences] (2002). Hartog distinguishes between “historicity” and “history” in this work by calling attention to the metahistorical presuppositions that inform historiography without being reducible to historiography. Moreover, by adding the word *regime* to the term *historicity*, Hartog reminds us of the other uses of the word regime—that is, the uses made in the political or dietary contexts.47 I wish to retain both the macro (i.e., political at the level of state-formation) and micro (i.e., self-subjectivation by means of a regular course of action) senses of *regime* in my use of *the colonial regime of historicity*, as I intend to show that colonialism simultaneously employed its presuppositions concerning historicity to justify its rule and to produce the subject who finds his or her reason for being inextricable from ideas justifying colonial rule. The colonial regime of historicity hence connects historicity, colonial rule, and subject formation, forming the problematic dealt with in this chapter and the dissertation at large.

Hartog draws examples from non-European cultures, but he does not shed light on the regime of historicity that colonial thought had sought to establish. The Trouillotian view of

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historicity, I submit, is very helpful in this context. While Trouillot’s take on historicity is not wholly commensurate with Hartog’s usage, both consider historicity a broader category than history as a genre or science. However, Trouillot’s foregrounding of the two sites of historicity in his analysis of the production of history proves to be particularly useful for postcolonial reassessment of historiography. I intend to demonstrate that his two sites were brought together by nineteenth-century discourses in a specific way to render colonial rule legitimate. But before dealing with the emergence of history as a colonialist instrument in the light of Trouillot’s theory, let us briefly visit the historical event that inspired him: the Haitian Revolution.

In the early nineteenth century, a revolution took place in Haiti, formerly the French colony of Saint-Domingue, that led to the abolition of slavery and the establishment of a postcolonial state governed by the emancipated African slaves. In the words of Nick Nesbitt, historian of the French Caribbean, these emancipated slaves were “directly influenced by French thinkers such as Diderot . . . and the Jacobin articulation of the undivided ‘Rights of Man,’ while further radicalizing in turn an Enlightenment that refused to address Africans as full subjects of human rights.”

And yet several authors have also pointed out that the enthusiasm generated by this radical turn was short-lived, as Haiti was soon thrust into a neocolonial relationship with the dominant states in the nineteenth-century world order.

This reversal has encouraged, over the years, those who have sought to erase the memory of slave victory. Trouillot calls attention to the role historiography played in this erasure. While the Haitian Revolution remained unstoppable as it happened, thanks to the limitations of even the

most radical antislavery discourses of the Enlightenment-era Europe, the historiography produced subsequently has vastly underplayed its significance in world history. Trouillot attributes this instance of the silencing of history to the nineteenth century ideological context:

“The nineteenth century was, in many respects, a century of retreat from some of the debates of the Enlightenment. Scientific racism, a growing but debated strain of Enlightenment thought, gained a much wider audience, further legitimizing the ontological nomenclature inherited from the Renaissance. The carving up of Asia and above all of Africa reinforced both colonial practice and ideology. Thus in most places outside of Haiti, more than a century after it happened, the revolution was still largely unthinkable history.”

Based on the fact that the Haitian Revolution has been widely ignored in the works of history until recently, Trouillot constructs a theory about how power (shorthand for those who control the means of production of historiography) plays a key roll in acknowledging or denying history that is made by actors/subjects/agents in the form of written history. While Trouillot comments on the divergence that may appear between the history that is “made” and the history that is “written,” he does not offer us a historical account of the changing relationship between these two sides of historicity. I believe, however, that his theorization offers us a base from which we can build such an account. One way to understand

49. Trouillot, Silencing the Past, 95.

50. Trouillot uses the term production of history, rather than writing of history, and he is of course correct to use production since history can, strictly speaking, be produced by various means that fall beyond the conventional definition of writing. The production of history can involve lectures given by historians, films or videos made by them, and so on. But I use history-writing for one of the sites of historicities discussed by Trouillot, first as a convenient shorthand for all the means that are deployed by historians to produce history as a discursive formation, and second to acknowledge the fact that writing still remains the dominant mode of producing or narrating history in the world of scholarship.
the remaking of historical discourse along the lines of colonialist ways of knowing is to look into
the changing relationship between the two historicities of Trouillot’s description.

I do labor here under the assumption that history as it was perceived at the threshold of
modernity and the history that eventually became a tool in the colonialist knowledge system
were, to a significant degree, distinct epistemological exercises. I therefore agree with the
authors who think a distinction can be drawn between the eighteenth-century European
discourses that did not endorse colonialism fully and the nineteenth-century West’s full-fledged
“turn to empire.” Among these authors, Sankar Muthu is perhaps the most pro-Enlightenment
historian of recent times. In his *Enlightenment against Empire* (2003) Muthu makes a case for
the hitherto ignored anti-imperialism that surfaced in the works of Enlightenment thinkers. His
account of eighteenth-century anticolonialism highlights, primarily, the contributions of three
authors, Denis Diderot, Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottfried Herder whose anti-imperialism can
be ascribed to the departure from the tenets of natural rights theory dominating prior political
thinking. The anticolonialism of these authors has gone unnoticed because of our inability to
distinguish their thought from what transpired in the nineteenth century: “It is perhaps by reading
popular nineteenth-century political views of progress, nationality, and empire back into the
eighteenth century that ‘the Enlightenment’ as a whole has been characterized as a project that
ultimately attempted to efface or marginalize difference, a characterization that has hidden from
view the anti-imperialist strand of Enlightenment-era political thought.”\(^{51}\) While Muthu’s project
limits itself to the eighteenth century and leaves us only with a glimpse of the changes that were

to occur in the nineteenth century, in *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (2005). Jennifer Pitts undertakes a detailed study of the shifts that characterized nineteenth century European thought, decidedly generating unreserved endorsements of European imperialism.

Pitts’s work demonstrates that in the nineteenth century, the success of liberalism in England and France inspired, paradoxically, a proempire stance on the part of some eminent thinkers. In France, the Bonapartist victory and the establishment of the July Monarchy led to further French conquest of Algeria, which had started under the restoration regime. Alexis de Tocqueville then endorsed colonial subjugation in the course of his parliamentary career, as he sought “to promote actions that would engender in the people a sense of national greatness.”

In England, the struggle for the extension of suffrage generated a discourse on the boundaries necessary to limit franchise to the “worthy.” In this context, John Stuart Mill characterized the English working classes in many of the same terms he used elsewhere to describe the “semi-barbarous” people of India. Pitts thus offers us a more expansive account than Muthu’s, minutely charting nineteenth-century departures from the Enlightenment discourses on empire and contextualizing these shifts against the backdrop of domestic politics in England and France.

While both Muthu and Pitts tell us about the nineteenth-century “turn to empire,” they do not deal with the transformations that historical discourse underwent in tandem with the larger political and epistemic transformations that saw a gradual upswing in imperialist tendencies.


53. Ibid., 253.
These were not just stylistic changes, nor is it possible to reduce them to specific, changing methodological criteria. I intend to show that the changes that the rise of colonialism effected in the epistemic domain of history were registered at the conceptual level—that is, at the level of transcendental or a priori assumptions.

The History of “Single-Site Historicity”

Trouillot uses single-site historicity to mark the modern tendency, on the part of professional historians, to monopolize narration of any event deemed historical. Thanks to such monopolization, theorists of history have traditionally failed to take into account the other site of historicity. This site involves sociohistorical processes in themselves, and not their narration; it is a site occupied by those who make history.

Although Trouillot does not mention Reinhart Koselleck’s work in his discussion of single-site historicity, some of Koselleck’s ideas can help us enrich this observation concerning the rise of historians’ guild. Take for instance his comment on the semantic shift of the concept of history in the late eighteenth century. In German-language discourses of that era, the term Geschichten gradually replaced Historie as a signifier for history, with an attendant change in meaning:

The naturalized foreign word Historie—which primarily meant a report, an account of what had occurred, and in a specialized sense identified the “historical sciences”—was rapidly displaced in the course of the eighteenth century by the word Geschichte. Since around 1750, the turn from Historie toward Geschichte is detectable and emphatic enough to be statistically measurable. But Geschichte principally signified an event, that is, the outcome of actions either undertaken or suffered; the expression referred more to an incident than to an account of it. . . .Geschichte assumed the sense of history and drove Historie out of general linguistic usage. As history (Geschichte) converged as event and
representation, the linguistic basis was laid for the transcendental turning point leading to the historical philosophy of idealism. *Geschichte* as the context of action was incorporated into its knowledge.54


The convergence of the two meanings of history— history as event and history as narration—led to the dissolution of the earlier meaning of history expressed through the Ciceronian saying “history is the teacher of life.” Koselleck’s observation is significant as it directly bears on the problematic that Trouillot foregrounds. While Trouillot seeks to distinguish analytically between the two senses of history for underscoring how one sense of the term may usurp the place of the other, Koselleck explains to us how the convergence of (or perhaps confusion between) the two terms is essentially constitutive of the modern sense of history.

Neither Trouillot nor Koselleck says anything about how the merging of the two senses contributed to history’s refashioning as a colonialist tool. But Koselleck certainly offers clues that we can follow to discover how this came to pass. He tells us that the new meaning with which history was endowed facilitated the “transcendental turn,” and hence prepared the ground


for the idealist philosophy of history. This idea, as it emerged in the late eighteenth century and continued to flourish in the nineteenth, might offer us instances of how the new “history” came to be used. If, sometime between the Age of Enlightenment and the nineteenth century, history was reconceptualized to legitimize colonialism, we should be able to locate that reconceptualization in the works of the authors who contributed to such a philosophy of history.

With this hope I turn next to two of the most influential authors of the idealist tradition, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1830). Although both made contributions to Geschichtsphilosophie, Kant’s work belonged to the intellectual milieu of the late eighteenth century, while Hegel was the quintessential nineteenth-century thinker. While there is no dearth of scholarly reflections on these philosophers, no one has provided a Trouillotian reading of their work on historical philosophy. I therefore take it for granted that, for the moment, an effort can be made in this direction. Between Kant’s Allgemeine Geschichte [general or universal History] and Hegel’s Weltgeschichte [world history] how did the relationship between making history and writing history change?

Kant’s History

In the wake of postcolonial criticism, the key Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant’s work has been scrutinized for signs of complicity in ideological projects that lent support to the European attempts at world domination. Much has been uncovered that seems unflattering, the most egregious being Kant’s propagation of a global racial hierarchy wherein the white-skinned

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people were marked as the best specimen of humanity.\textsuperscript{56} But at the same time some authors have brought into focus the anticolonial pronouncements of Kant found in texts like \textit{Zum ewigen Frieden} [Towards Perpetual Peace] (1795) and \textit{Die Metaphysik der Sitten} [The Metaphysics of Morals] (1797). Perhaps as a result of these contradictions, two understandings of Kant have arisen in the past few decades. Some scholars have written strongly worded indictments of Kant as one of the early proponents of scientific racism and an apologist for colonialism.\textsuperscript{57} On the other hand, in view of the egalitarian principles he steadfastly adhered to in his late moral and political theory, some scholars have made attempts to absolve Kant of these accusations.\textsuperscript{58} I do not intend to take sides in this debate on Kant’s culpability. I focus here only on one major essay dealing with the philosophy of history: “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht” [“Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim”] (1784). Though this essay is already much commented upon and debated, some facets have not previously been sufficiently explored.


\textsuperscript{57} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called attention to the fact that “the axiomatics of imperialism” are inscribed in Kant’s work, as the “native informant” remains foreclosed, and his or her “lack of access to the position of narrator is the condition of possibility of the consolidation of Kant’s position.” Unique to Spivak’s reading is that instead of taking on Kant for the racism evinced in his essays on anthropology, Spivak lays bare some of the “anthropological moments” that appear in Kant’s third \textit{Critique}. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, \textit{A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward the History of a Vanishing Present} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,1999), 19–37. For a recent analysis and criticism of Spivak’s reading of the third \textit{Critique}, see Daniel Carey and Sven Trakulhun, “Universalism, Diversity, and the Postcolonial Enlightenment,” in \textit{The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory}, Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa eds.(New York: OUP, 2009), 240–280.

“Idee” is from Kant’s critical phase (1781–1804) and it clearly reiterates and elaborates upon some of the themes Kant raised in his first *Critique* (1781). Toward the end of that *Critique*, Kant provides a summary of what motivated his philosophical project in the form of three consecutive questions: “What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?” It is the third question that led Kant to author his philosophy of history. While reason, according to Kant, contains the answer to the second question *a priori*, action according to moral precepts can actually take place and hence have an empirically registered history. And yet the gap between the world of appearances (the actual world) and the moral world (the world as it ought to be) makes it necessary for humankind, guided by practical reason, to constantly strive for moral improvement. A philosophically designed history is useful in this project of rendering the world perfect, as it can provide teleological assurances that improvement is indeed possible. History thus enters the philosophical scene as a motivational discourse, as a means to adduce examples for empirically sustaining teleological schemata.

In “Idee,” the teleology Kant uses to promise mankind a better future is natural (or physical) teleology. Nine consecutive propositions and accompanying comments argue that since the internal and external structures of animals appear purposive, human existence—also a part of nature—is also purposive (First Proposition). In the same vein, humanity will fulfill its purpose over time by perfecting the natural predisposition that is unique to it, namely, its use of reason (Second Proposition). But this fulfillment can only occur when social antagonism is administered under a civil constitution guaranteeing the greatest degree of freedom for all (Fifth

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Proposition). Such constitutional rule, however, can only be actualized very late in history (Sixth Proposition) owing to the fact that such a constitution “requires correct concepts of the nature of a possible constitution, great experience practiced through many courses of life and beyond this a good will that is prepared to accept it.” And this constitutional rule cannot merely be internal to a state but must extend to the relations between the states and hence must constitute a commonwealth (Seventh Proposition).

In the first seven propositions of “Idee,” assuming a teleological nature allows us to hope for a global republican future. These propositions do not lend themselves so well to a Trouillotian reading as the last two propositions, which are concerned with the present (the Age of Enlightenment) do. In the Eighth Proposition Kant speaks of the chiliasm of philosophy (die Philosophie könne auch ihren Chiliasmus haben), that is, its attention to rationalist prophecy. But he also mentions that such chiliasm “can itself promote its realization” (selbst beförderlich werden kann). Teleological thinking is thus necessary for its ability to promote self-fulfilling rationalist prophecies. The significance of this observation makes us confront the Trouillotian theme. While Kant mentions the need to find empirical support for predictions based on teleologically oriented history, he also mentions, at the same time, that “in our case” [in unserem Falle] (i.e., in the Age of Enlightenment) actualization of such predicted futures can be hastened.

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“through our own rational contrivance ”61 (durch unsere eigene vernünftige Veranstaltung).62 The question of producing a teleologically oriented history and teleologically oriented agency hence become intertwined. Writing history and making history find their meeting ground. Such coming together of the two sites of historicity is given further justification in Kant’s last proposition. Since it connects teleology with history and history with agency, it is worth quoting here at length:

A philosophical attempt to work out universal world history according to a plan of nature that aims at the perfect civil union of the human species, must be regarded as possible and even as furthering this aim of nature. It is, to be sure, a strange and apparently an absurd stroke, to want to write a history in accordance with an idea of how the course of the world would have to go if it were to conform to certain rational ends; it appears that with such an aim only a novel could be brought about. If, nevertheless, one may assume that nature does not proceed without a plan or final aim even in the play of human freedom, then this idea could become useful. 63

[Ein philosophischer Versuch, die allgemeine Weltgeschichte nach einen Plane der Natur, der auf die vollkommene bürgerliche Vereinigung in der Menschengattung abziele, zu bearbeiten, muß als möglich und selbst für diese Naturabsicht beförderlich angesehen werden. Es ist zwar ein befremdlicher und dem Anscheine nach ungereimter Anschlag, nach einer Idee, wie der Weltlauf gehen müßte, wenn er gewissen vernünftigen Zwecken angemessen sein sollte, eine Geschichte abfassen zu wollen; es scheint, in einer solchen Absicht könnte nur ein Roman zu Stande kommen. Wenn man indessen annehmen darf: daß die Natur selbst im Spiele der menschlichen Freiheit nicht ohne Plan und Endabsicht verfahre, so könnte diese Idee doch wohl brauchbar werden.] 64

And in what ways could this idea be useful? First, by means of contributing to our hope for a better future, a recurring theme throughout “Idee” and indeed much of Kant’s political

64. Kant, “Idee,” 22.
philosophy in general. But in this Ninth proposition, Kant presents a surprising use for his teleological doctrine. He connects the two sites of historicity of Trouillot’s description by referring to the distant and yet certain cosmopolitan future. In this cosmopolitan future, how would humanity “begin to grasp the burden of history that we might leave behind for them after a few centuries”\(^65\) \((\textit{wie es unsere späten Nachkommen anfangen werden, die Last von Geschichte, die wir ihnen nach einigen Jahrhunderten hinterlassen möchten, zu fassen})\)?\(^66\) It would obviously adopt the cosmopolitan perspective in its quest for history. This idea builds to a very important concept that connects this yet-to-be-written history with the present actors who might desire to find place in that history. The desire for honor \([\textit{Ehrbegierde}]\) that the heads of state and their servants have can be redirected at “the sole means by which they can bring their glorious remembrance down to the latest age”\(^67\) \((\textit{auf das einzige Mittel zu richten, das ihr rühmliches Andenken auf die späteste Zeit bringen kann})\).\(^68\) Kant thus sutures the history of the future and the agency of the present by outlining the role that the desire of the actors plays in mediating between the present and the future: the making of history and the writing of history.

Kant’s two sites of historicity remain connected, but neither gain undue prominence. While historiography plays a motivational role in enabling the agent in the contemporary world to shape a desirable future, the subject agent of history is able to influence the historiography of the future by his conduct. Perhaps the most important characteristic of Kant’s thinking is that an

\(^{65}\) Kant, “Idea,” 22.

\(^{66}\) Kant, “Idee,” 24.

\(^{67}\) Kant, “Idea,” 23.

\(^{68}\) Kant, “Idee,” 24.
object of enquiry like prehistory is hard to imagine within its boundaries. This is not because Kant’s argument concerning cosmopolitan history does not resolutely exclude nature and instead is grounded in an understanding of natural teleology. Instead, it is because history for Kant is inseparable from the human condition. This is clearly stated in the introductory section of “Idee”:

Whatever concept one may form of the freedom of the will with a metaphysical aim, its appearances, the human actions, are determined just as much as every other natural occurrence in accordance with universal laws of nature. History, which concerns itself with the narration of these appearances, however deeply concealed their causes may be, nevertheless allows us to hope from it that if it considers the play of the freedom of the human will in the large, it can discover within it a regular course.69

The introductory passage quickly segues into focalizing the inaugural questions of teleology, but before it does so it shows attentive readers what Kant means by history. It is the “appearances” of the “freedom of the will” or the “human actions” in general that make up, for Kant, the subject matter of historical narration. He includes no injunction to restrict history to a chronological bracket; nor does he add an attempt to mark off a territory untouched by history. Within this Kantian framework, neither the “end of history” nor Mircea Eliade’s celebration of the “ahistorical man” can make sense.

**Hegel’s History**


What course did the relationship between writing history and making history take after Kant’s attempt to suture the two by means of a teleological doctrine? Hegel is the towering figure of the philosophy of history in the nineteenth century. His engagement with the idea of the philosophy of history was much more extensive than that of Kant, especially if we consider the volume of work he produced on that theme. Hegel’s views on history have been discussed so widely and for so long, that indeed any attempt to discuss the matter again may seem to the readers like flogging a dead horse or slaying a deceased dragon. And yet, a look at Hegel’s history through Trouillot’s lens can provide insight.

Borrowing ideas from Trouillot’s work on the “silencing” of the Haitian Revolution, scholars have recently argued that Hegel had a role to play in the erasure of the event. Intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss has called attention to the likelihood that Hegel was influenced by the events of the Haitian Revolution. She reveals contemporary pieces of evidence that confirm that the idea of the so called “master-slave dialectic” in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) [*The Phenomenology of Mind/Spirit*] was derived from the unfolding events of early-nineteenth-century Haiti. Although the Haitian Revolution remained unacknowledged in Hegel’s work by name, the fact that the outcome of the dialectic was portrayed to be in favor of the slave demonstrates that Hegel derived lessons from the outcome of a real-life conflict of his contemporary world. Hegel’s radical phase, however, receded decades later, when he took up the task of producing a philosophy of history. According to Buck-Morss, “Notoriously condemning

71. Postcolonialist or similar criticisms are currently in vogue. See, for instance, Teshale Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011). In Ranajit Guha’s work, Hegelian *Weltgeschichte* appears synonymous with the modern enterprise of historiography and Hegel is criticized for legitimizing colonialism. See Chapter 2, for details.
African culture to prehistory and blaming the Africans themselves for New World slavery, Hegel repeated the banal and apologetic argument that slaves were better off in the colonies than in their African homeland. . . . This disposition, however, was not the most striking in his lectures. Rather, it was the brutal thoroughness with which he dismissed all of sub-Saharan Africa, this ‘land of children,’ of ‘barbarity and wildness,’ from any significance for world history, due to what he deemed were deficiencies of the African ‘spirit.’”

Although I agree with Buck-Morss’s statement, I think she does not emphasize the crucial point that the “prehistory” to which African culture was condemned was Hegel’s own creation. Unlike many prior descriptive uses of the term, for Hegel prehistory was an expression derived by theory. To understand its theoretical precision, I argue, we need to read Hegel through Trouillot’s conceptual lens. Hence, I ask how did Hegel’s philosophy of history link Trouillot’s two sites of historicity?

How did making history relate to writing history in Hegel? In his lectures, Hegel commented in clear terms on the significance of using the German word Geschichte to signify history:

In our language the term History unites the objective with the subjective side, and denotes quite as much the historia rerum gestarum, as the res gestae themselves; on the other hand it comprehends not less what has happened, than the narration of what has happened. This union of the two meanings we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events. It is an internal vital principle common to both that produces them synchronously.

[Ge schichte vereinigt in unserer Sprache die objektive sowohl als subjektive Seite und bedeutet ebensogut die historiam rerum gestarum als die res gestas selbst; sie ist das


Geschehene nicht minder wie die Geschichtserzählung. Diese Vereinigung der beiden Bedeutungen müssen wir für höherer Art als für eine bloß äußerliche Zufälligkeit ansehen: es ist dafür zu halten, daß Geschichtserzählung mit eigentlich geschichtlichen Taten und Begebenheiten gleichzeitig erscheine; es ist eine innerliche gemeinsame Grundlage, welche sie zusammen hervortreibt.\textsuperscript{74}

This (presumed) necessary simultaneity of the production of history in both sites would be unthinkable in a Kantian definition of history. But the Hegelian suturing of the two sites (or the two sides, “\textit{die objektive sowohl als subjektive Seite},” as Hegel would have preferred it) of historicity does not end with claiming merely this simultaneity. Significant political-theoretical corollaries follow from this Hegelian assumption.

Most notable, in Hegel’s explanation, both the sides of \textit{Geschichte} are tied to the state, which is assumed to be the sole institutional site of the production of history. Hegel here presents us with a narrow legalistic conception of history. The writing of history (\textit{historia rerum gestarum}) and the making of history (\textit{res gestae}) necessarily coincide because the only legitimate subject matter of history is provided by the laws promulgated by the state. Hegel spares no effort to highlight that it is not just any activity of the state, but rather its strict legal functioning that becomes amenable to historical narration. To use Trouillot’s expression again, in his attempt to connect the two historicities, what Hegel offers is “single-site historicity.” The subjective and the objective sides are fused into one indistinguishable site where \textit{Geschichte} is produced.

These comments made by Hegel in the introductory part of his \textit{Lectures} leave us with the impression that while Hegel fuses the two historicities by making the legal promulgations of the state the only resource for historical narration (and thereby severely restricts what history as

\textsuperscript{74} Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, \textit{Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte} (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 83. Hereafter \textit{Philosophie der Geschichte}. 46
deeds may mean), he never emphasizes a logical or a chronological priority of *historia rerum gestarum* over *res gestae*. In Latin such a priority would sound simply paradoxical and untenable. And yet, later in his *Lectures* while discussing the lack of history among the Indians, Hegel springs a surprise:

> History fixes and imparts consistency to this fortuitous current—gives it the form of Universality, and by so doing posits a directive and restrictive rule for it. It is an essential instrument in developing and determining the Constitution—that is, a rational political condition. . . . It is because the Indians have no History in the form of annals that they have no History in the form of transactions (*res gestae*); that is, no growth expanding into a veritable political condition. 75

[Die Geschichte fixiert diese Zufälligkeit, sie macht sie stehend, gibt ihr die Form der Allgemeinheit und stellt eben damit die Regel für und gegen sie auf. Sie ist ein wesentliches Mittelglied in der Entwicklung und Bestimmung der Verfassung, d.h. eines vernünftigen, politischen Zustandes…Weil die Inder keine Geschichte als Historie haben, um deswillen haben sie keine Geschichte als Taten (*res gestae*).d.i. keine Herausbildung zu einem wahrhaft politischen Zustande.] 76

Here Hegel emphasizes not so much the simultaneity of the two historicities as the priority of the one over the other. The (presumed) lack of an “authentic” (wahrhaft) political condition of the Indians, both ancient and modern, is blamed on their inability to write history. Hegel thus predicates politics (the ability to shape history in actuality) on writing history. He uses a metaleptic reversal that goes against the order of succession that a realist theory of historiographical production would posit. 77 In a realist explanation of historiography, an event first takes place and then is reported by historical prose. In contrast, for Hegel, making history

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77. For an account of the realist theory of historiography, see Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge:2004), 255.
instead of preceding writing history and being its precondition, appears to be dependent on the prior existence of historiography.

It is this metalepsis that allows Hegel to formulate his theory of prehistory. Prehistory is not merely a descriptive category in Hegel but a concept invested with a precise political meaning. In his view prehistory is what is prepolitical. This idea is bluntly reiterated in the Lectures. Consider the following observation:

The spread of Indian culture is prehistorical, for History is limited to that which makes an essential epoch in the development of Spirit. On the whole, the diffusion of Indian culture is only a dumb, deedless expansion; that is, it presents no political action. The people of India have achieved no foreign conquests, but have been on every occasion vanquished themselves.  

Das Sichverbreiten des Indischen ist vorgeschichtlich, denn Geschichte ist nur das, was in der Entwicklung des Geistes eine wesentliche Epoche ausmacht. Das Hinausgehen Indiens überhaupt ist nur eine stumme, tatlose Verbreitung, d.h. ohne politische Handlung. Die Inder haben keine Eroberungen nach außen gemacht, sondern sind selbst immer erobert worden.

The fact that Hegel said this in the early nineteenth century, when the Indian subcontinent was increasingly brought under the rule of the East India Company, might inspire some postcolonial rage, but we should be careful not to miss the crucial aspects of Hegel’s theory of history that are expressed. Because the Indians have no political deeds [Handlung] they are “deedless” [Tatlose] and hence cannot be considered historical. However, Hegel says elsewhere that because Indians do not have “history in the form of annals” [Geschichte als Historie] they have no “history in the form of deeds” [Taten]. The Hegelian theory of prehistory depends on the valorization of history in the written form. Those who do not have the means to write their deeds are prehistorical.

78. Hegel, Philosophy of History, 159.

A thorough discussion of the philosophy of history forms a useful foundation for an exploration of the anticolonial epistemic politics engendered by the injunction to write history. This injunction was given by both Hegel and the authors who directly responded to colonial administrative exigencies and participated in the formation of the colonized (or the soon-to-be-colonized) world. To Hegel’s credit, he united the arcane world of philosophy and the quotidian world of colonial administrative or ethnographic discourses. However, as Buck-Morss has suggested, while later works of Hegel become more erudite, their views on Africa become more bigoted. Hence, while the Lectures on the Philosophy of History from the 1920s are extremely rich with empirical detail, they are also dismissive of the role of Africans in world history: “What is clear is that in an effort to become more erudite in African studies during the 1820s, Hegel was in fact becoming dumber. He repeated his lectures on the philosophy of history every two years from 1822 to 1830, adding empirical material from his reading of the European experts on world history. It is sadly ironic that the more faithfully his lectures reflected Europe’s conventional scholarly wisdom on African society, the less enlightened and more bigoted they became.”

Buck-Morss’s observation holds true for India—or indeed any other region of the world Hegel considered prehistorical. Philosophy here caught up with colonialism more completely than it had for Kant. I emphasize, however, that the decision to place the Africans beyond the pale of history was neither incidental nor merely a result of some narrow, racist prejudice that Hegel might have harbored. Rather, his ideas were connected to how he reconceptualized the

interdependency of the two sites of historicity, whereby the priority of making history to writing history was denied.

In the era of postcolonial criticism’s ascendance, citing the most glaring examples of Hegel’s bigoted representation of non-Western cultures is easy. My intention, however, is to avoid the widespread bashing of Hegel that is currently fashionable. Instead, I seek to point out precise shifts in the concept of history and why these proved useful for, or alternately, were representative of, a colonialist perception of the past. It is also crucial here to acknowledge that both Hegel and his contemporaries, insofar as they implied that an important foundation of politics is historiography, did more than just “silence” non-Western histories. Alongside this “silencing” or repressive role, their injunction came to play a generative or productive role. By connecting historiography to politics and making the former a condition for the latter, a program for the colonized to engage with history-writing was scripted as a necessary precondition for arguing for their sovereignty. This idea was the foundation of the colonial regime of historicity.

The rest of this dissertation highlights the instances in which the injunction to write history did not lead the colonized to adopt history as the nineteenth-century West had defined it. The admonition and its effects became divergent. The resistant subjects of the empire sometimes resorted to curious strategies that, while responding to the call to write history, also breached the constative boundaries of historical discourse. Thus, the Hegelian formula for relating the two sites of historicity failed to elicit a predictable response. Before examining some of these responses, I turn to the contemporary scene and recount in the chapter that follows the criticism that the colonial regime of historicity has generated in our postcolonial era.
Chapter 2. Postcolonial Responses to Ahistoricity

Historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in his Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (1982) states, “For those reared and educated in the modern West it is often hard to grasp the fact that a concern with history, let alone the writing of history, is not an innate endowment of human civilization.” Yerushalmi also claims that the Jews had been the first to have found “meaning in history” and offers us the case of India as the striking counterexample, as a kind of foil to the Jewish love for history, a love eventually inherited by the other Abrahamic faiths. Yerushalmi’s thesis on “ahistoricity” of non-Abrahamic cultures might astonish us with its generalizing sweep and its nonchalant use of a long-standing stereotype, but it also reminds us of an idea that, although born out of the initial ethnological encounters between the colonizers and the colonized, has survived to our time and age.

And yet, this thesis founding one of the idiosyncrasies of India (along with other non-Abrahamic cultures) on ahistoricity has been bitterly disputed within the enclaves of postcolonial scholarship. At the center of these debates lies the question of colonial experience. What role did colonial ideological closures play in depicting certain cultures as “ahistorical”? This is a question that is often prominently posed in discussions seeking to decolonize historiography. At the same time, however, some of the postcolonial discussants have found the cultural aversion to history, supposedly found in certain non-Western settings, to be admirable. In the introduction, I took note of the paradox implicit in such postcolonialist valorizations of ahistoricity but also

suggested that such a paradox is not merely a contemporary phenomenon but has a history that the dissertation seeks to recuperate and investigate. This chapter starts us off on our recuperative journey by providing a survey of a selection of contemporary writings that showcase the aforementioned paradox. These writings primarily deal with the portrayal of India as the most outstanding of the ahistorical cultures and seek to lay bare the imperialist presuppositions that inform such a portrayal.

The scholars whose works are surveyed in this chapter are represented here as belonging to two discrete contending sides. On one side stand those who trace back the origin of the idea that depicts certain cultures as ahistorical to colonial epistemic idiosyncrasies. For instance, they would tend to say that in colonial writings Indians were often deemed ahistorical since a narrow notion of history, tied to the eponymous genre of Western origin, was used to measure the historicity of Indian traditions. I use the title “nominalist critique of history” to name their

82. There are many accounts of the historic division between Nominalism and Realism in philosophy. For a recent history of the career of Nominalism in medieval philosophy see William J. Courtenay, *Ockham and Ockhamism: Studies in the Dissemination and Impact of His Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1–90. For a note on the use of nominalism in early modern political philosophy see William Sacksteder, “Some Ways of Doing Language Philosophy: Nominalism, Hobbes, and the Linguistic Turn,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, 34, no. 3 (1981): 459-485. I am, however, using nominalism in the sense it is used often in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Consider, for instance, the use of nominalism in Frederick Jameson’s *Postmodernism the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). In this work nominalism is identified with the tendency to privilege immanence over transcendence. Jameson draws our attention to one of the current literary-critical trends: New Historicism. In so far as New Historicism as a critical movement of sorts is an assortment of strategies without a clear unity of a project, a new historicist is someone who is considered by others to be a new historicist. The “external labeling” of someone as belonging to a certain group with no real “conceptual or ontological status” would be deemed to be a nominalist practice. But theoretically this might lead to quite dramatic denials of transcendent categories: “It follows, to take only the most dramatic examples of such denial of the transcendent, that social classes do not exist, or that, in literary history, concepts like ‘modernism’ are crude substitutes for that very different and qualitatively discriminate experience of reading an individual text (about which there is no longer even any point in identifying it as somehow ‘modernist’). Contemporary thought and culture are in this sense profoundly nominalist” (to expand a diagnosis Adorno made about the tendencies of modern art), Postmodernism more thoroughly so than anything that preceded it.” See Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 185.
strategy, which involves attaching new and heterogeneous referents to the signifier history by 
rescuing it from its attachment to a particular referent, namely, the Western genre\textsuperscript{83} of history.

Part I of this chapter is devoted to the nominalist critique. On the other side of the debate stands a 
group of scholars who effect an axiological reversal and consider ahistoricity to be potentially 
good and liberating. History to them appears to be a discourse of unfreedom, a statist discourse 
specifically deployed for justifying colonization. I call their account “the culturalist critique of 
history” as they also tend to advocate the view that history as such, as a genre or temporality, is 
specific to certain cultures. Although still current, the culturalist critique is relatively old since in 
its contemporary avatar it first appeared in the 1950s. Part II of this chapter provides a review of 
the culturalist critique.

\textsuperscript{83}. The use of nominalist arguments in genre-criticism has been pointed out by Theodor Adorno in 
*Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Adorno refers to nominalist arguments that contest universal validity of 
(aesthetic) genres. Adorno draws on Benedetto Croce’s insights on the matter: “Art has been caught up in 
the total process of nominalism’s advance ever since the medieval *ordo* was broken up. The universal is 
no longer granted art through types, and older types are being drawn into the whirlpool. Croce’s art-
critical reflection that every work be judged, as the English say, on its own merits raised this historical 
tendency to the level of theoretic aesthetics. Probably no important artwork ever corresponded completely 
to its genre.”[Kunst ist einbezogen in den Gesamtprozeß des vordringenden Nominalismus, seitdem der 
mittelalterliche ordo gesprengt ward. Kein Allgemeines ist ihr in Typen mehr vergönnt und die älteren 
werden vom Strudel ergriffen. Croces kunstkritische Erfahrung, jedes Werk sei, wie es englisch heißt, on 
its own merits zu beurteilen, trug jene geschichtliche Tendenz in die theoretische Ästhetik. Wohl nie hat 
ein Kunstwerk, das zählt, seiner Gattung ganz entsprochen.] See, Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 
Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 273. Nonetheless, in his discussion, Adorno is not too keen to grant nominalism 
legitimacy as he is not ready to do away with the universal as such: “The relation of the universal and the 
particular is not so simple as the nominalistic tendency suggests, nor as trivial as the doctrine of 
traditional aesthetics, which states that the universal must be particularized. The simple disjunction of 
nominalism and universalism does not hold. . . . The genres are no less dialectical than the particular. [Das 
Verhältnis von Allgemeinem und Besonderem ist nicht so simpel, wie der nominalistische Zug es 
suggeriert, auch nicht so trivial wie die Lehre der traditionellen Ästhetik, daß das Allgemeine sich 
besonders müsse. Die bündige Disjunktion von Nominalismus und Universalismus gilt nicht. . . . Nicht 
weniger dialektisch sind die Gattungen als das Besondere.] See ibid., 275–76; German Edition, ibid., 
275–76. It is unnecessary for our purpose here to comment on Adorno’s criticism of Croce’s nominalism. 
Instead, it is important here to acknowledge that using nominalist arguments to contest boundaries of the 
established genres is nothing new and we see something similar is taking place in the current discussions 
of historiography. 

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I. The Nominalist Critique

Setting “Textures” against a Genre

Velcheru Naryana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (2001) is one of two recent works that dispute the colonialist claim that “historical consciousness” was a colonial gift, delivered at the doorstep of ahistorical civilizations. Furnishing empirical evidence from precolonial South India, this work claims that prior to colonization,

history in South India has been written in many genres and that writing history is not a matter of strict adherence to formal characteristics and types. In this respect, the comparison with the emerging Western historiography of the modern period is important. In Western Europe, history did emerge as a relatively fixed and stable genre, even before the positivist turn of the nineteenth century. This genre had clear formal features, a characteristic frame, and a relatively clear-cut method; sources relating to the past were collected, sifted through and organized, ranked for their reliability, and eventually set out in prose narratives. The choice of prose was eventually thematised; from the time of Hegel onwards, Western historians insisted that no other medium was suited to a history claiming to embody truth.  

As opposed to this prosaic turn in historiography in the West, the authors of *Textures* claim that in early modern, precolonial South India no single genre was “allotted to history writing.” What instead happened was a sort of grafting of the factual within fictional or performance genres. There was a cultural “ecology” that sustained a community of listeners. These listeners picked up signals from the text being performed and knew how to separate the factual from the fictional.

A lot of emphasis is placed in *Textures* upon the regimes of reception that sustained transmission of factual statements through texts that were neither purely fictional nor entirely factual. The textual signs or the “markers, shifters, syntax, lexical choices, evidentials, density and intensity of expression, structured gaps and silences, metrical devices, various phono-aesthetic indicators, and finely calibrated suggestions of the domain of a statement’s intended application and potential meaning,” which happen to switch on the mode of factual reception in the addressees’ mind are called by the authors “textures.” An easy recognition of these textures is prevented when the cultural ecology that holds the text, the performer, and the listener in a unity gets affected by external events of political and other kinds. Thus the “integrity of the relation between the teller or writer and his audience” is the key to maintaining a tradition that is dependent on a “demographically or culturally fragile,” “listening community.”

The incommunicability of the historical elements specific to a genre, to a new community previously unexposed to the conventions of that genre, is not a feature specific to pre-colonial South Indian traditions alone. The authors of *Textures* assume that it is a universal trait:

> Each community writes history in the mode that is dominant in its own literary practice. By the same token, newly ascendant or powerful cultures may deny history to the communities they seek to dominate, and historicity to their texts. What constitutes history is not a given, in some universal sense, but practices specific to time and place. Such practices may war with one another; in the process, the history of the losers may itself be lost.\(^{86}\)

With such assertions the idea of texture, as a subgeneric entity communicating history within a text of the dominant genre of an era, gets elevated to a general theory of historiography. This

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85. Ibid., 5–6.
86. Ibid., 5.
theory then illuminates for us what colonialism did with the past of the colonized. Colonialism
de-recognized the historicity of the Indian texts across the board, as it did not find in them the
history in the prosaic form, the preferred mode of history writing of the colonizing West. This, in
short, is the thesis of *Textures*.

In certain ways *Textures* presents an argument about the historicity of precolonial Indian
texts that can be traced back to historian Romila Thapar’s work analyzing the *Iītāsa-Purāṇa*
tradition. Thapar contested the view that historical consciousness is expressed in a form clearly
recognizable as a specific genre and offered us the “geological analogy of a particular vein
embedded in rock.” The historical consciousness lies hidden in sources that tend to conceal it.
And hence uncovering historical consciousness “requires a distinction between what might be
termed ‘embedded history’—forms in which historical consciousness has to be prised out—and
its opposite, ‘externalized history’—which tends to bring embedded consciousness into the open,
as it were, and to be more aware of its deliberate use of the past.”87

Although borrowed from Thapar, the argument of *Textures* makes the notion “embedded
history” more complex. *Textures* refuses to accept that “embedded history,” when used in the
specific sense of “textures,” is any less historical than what Thapar calls “externalized history.”
But this rather remarkable novelty faces criticism on many counts. In an essay in response to
*Textures*, philologist Sheldon Pollock questions the idea of the “cultural ecology” or the stable
regimes of reception. He formulates for us the key question the authors of *Textures* avoid asking
in their analysis: “This is what we seek help in grasping: what premodern Indian readers
themselves understood to be the interpretive protocols of different genres. Where *Textures*

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purports to know when a text is mythic or literary and when it is historical, what we want to know, at least in the first instance, is what those readers may have believed.”

We are reminded of the fact that a clear distinction between fact and fiction escaped even modern theorists like Roland Barthes (who once doubted that narrations of the past “really differ in some specific trait in some indubitably distinct feature from imaginary narration”) and hence such a distinction cannot be assumed in an a priori manner. Seen from Pollock’s critical perspective, the strict adherence to the fact/fiction distinction in the argument of *Textures* turns out to be its Achilles’ heel.

This nongenological accounting of history is nominalist in so far as it attaches the name “history” to heterogeneous textual elements. However, in *Textures* the possibility of a nominalist account is suggested but also withheld. This withholding is clear where the sanctity of the factual is asserted. The application of the name history, although freed of a reference to a steady genre, remains tied to what is (presumably) uncontroversially factual. In contrast, this rigid fact/fiction distinction that secures history in its autonomy, does not figure in Romila Thapar’s work on historiography, where the question of nominalism figures more prominently.

We now turn our attention to Thapar’s analysis of pre-colonial historiography.


89. Ibid., 371.

90. I use the term *genology* in this dissertation in the same sense it is used in genre studies. For a recent use of the term see Fiona J. Doloughan, *Contemporary Narrative: Textual production, Multimodality and Multiliteracies* (London: Continuum, 2011), 88. Also see *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (New York: Routledge, 2014), xiii.
The Nominalist Turn

Romila Thapar’s *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (2013) further consolidates the non-genological appraisal of history introduced by the authors of *Textures*. There are significant differences between *Textures* and *The Past Before Us*. However, in a certain way, what Thapar effects is a more radical reiteration of the basic argument of *Textures*.

91. It is apt here to introduce a note comparing the nominalist strategy of historiographical analysis we see in use with the formalist strategy that is used by Hayden White. White’s analysis of history’s “deep structure” does not begin by acknowledging the possibility that “history” might have been a contested signifier or that the use of “history” as a signifier—reserved solely and exclusively as a name for a genre of Western origin—can be contested. Consequently, White’s formalism runs the risk of hypostatizing history as a form of imagination that has an underlying “deep structure”: “My own analysis of the deep structure of the historical imagination of nineteenth-century Europe is intended to provide a new perspective on the current debate over the nature and function of historical knowledge. It proceeds on two levels of inquiry. It seeks to analyze, first, the works of the recognized masters of nineteenth-century European historiography and, second, the world of the foremost philosophers of history of that same period. A general purpose is to determine the family characteristics of the different conceptions of the historical process which actually appear in the works of the classic narrators. Another aim is to determine the different possible theories by which historical thinking was justified by the philosophers of history of that time.” See White, *Metahistory*, 2. Please note the empirical and rather arbitrary boundaries of White’s analysis of the “deep structure” of historical imagination. First, it is chronologically limited to the nineteenth century. White also makes use of what seems to be a purely fleeting category of “recognized masters.” These restrictions are not self evident, nor do tropological analyses call for such arbitrary restrictions. Tropes are not (it is needless to add) limited to forming or structuring what can be deemed “canonical.” In so far as tropes are inseparable from language and its functions, tropes are inalienable from discourses as such. Since he makes such questionable axiomatic assumptions, White runs the risk of hypostatizing history as a thing fully graspable in terms of specific formal criteria as he searches for “an ideal-typical structure” of the “historical work”: “[C]onsidered purely as formal verbal structures, the histories produced by the master historians of the nineteenth century display radically different conceptions of what ‘the historical work’ should consist of. In order, therefore, to identify the family characteristics of the different kinds of historical thinking produced by the nineteenth century, it is first necessary to make clear what the ideal-typical structure of the ‘historical work’ might consist of. Once such an ideal-typical structure has been worked out, I will have a criterion for determining which aspects of any given historical work or philosophy of history must be considered in the effort to identify its unique structural elements.” See White, *Metahistory*, 4. It is crucial to point out again that a tropological analysis per se does not necessitate the search for an “ideal-typical structure.” Moreover, in so far as acts of naming are productive of tropes, a nominalist analysis cannot be antithetical to a tropological analysis but must be considered as complementary. Let us recall here what the literary critic Paul de Man said in the context of his discussion of Irony: “There is first a performative, the act of positing, the original catachresis, which then moves to a system of tropes; a kind of anamorphosis of tropes takes place, in which all the tropological systems are engendered, as a result of this original act of positing.” Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press,1996),176. Such acts of positing, preceding the generation of tropological systems, are important moments to consider in an analysis of colonial and postcolonial appropriations of history. Without denying the functioning of tropological systems, what should be considered equally if not more important, nonetheless, is the necessity to shed light on the nominalistic processes of positing and appropriating the name “history” that allows for any tropological system to emerge and govern historical discourse.
Thapar’s analysis—somewhat akin to Pollock’s argument mentioned earlier—underscores the changeability of the fact-fiction divide through time. Hence, in her treatise on “Historical Traditions,” she avoids defining history as a concept. A move from “History” to “Historical Traditions” is evidently a move from “history” as substantive to the adjective “historical.” The primacy given to figuring the immanent criteria for recognizing history is the key to understanding Thapar’s argument in *The Past Before Us*:

To argue over whether a particular society had a sense of history or not on the basis of our recognition of the presence or absence of a particular kind of historical tradition—one which has been predetermined as being properly historical in perpetuity—seems somewhat beside the point. It is more purposeful to try and ascertain what each culture regards as its historical tradition and why it does so; and to analyze its constituents and functions as well as assess how it contends with competing parallel traditions.92

This purposeful gesture of using history in a sense that seeks to refer to a plurality of traditions is a radical departure from the perspective of those who would prefer a narrow view of history while adhering to a strictly genre-based definition of history. Thapar’s opening move is to shift history’s referent from a “genre” to a “consciousness.” However, since there can be no direct access to a form of consciousness called “history,” we are bound to deal with the actual mediations of this presumed consciousness leading us to a heterogeneous mixture of discourses; hence the recourse to the idea of tradition.

Perhaps the most surprising move made by Thapar lies in the subtle gesture of including what she calls “believed past” in the domain of history. This is where, I submit, Thapar

definitively parts company with the authors of *Textures*. The idea is introduced at first to draw a line between the philosophies of history and what Thapar calls historical traditions:

An awareness or confirmation of a philosophy of history may make historical narrative more purposeful. But such a narrative does not thereby necessarily express greater historical veracity. . . . On the other hand, a historical tradition may not concern itself with either divine purpose in history or any other philosophical notion of history and yet be an authentic record—if not of actual events, certainly of believed assumptions about the past.  

With such inclusion of belief in her analysis of history, the rigid adherence to the distinction between fact and fiction is also set aside and Thapar’s “history” becomes complex enough to include what cannot be recognized as pure constative discourse from the perspective of the historians interested to uphold the sanctity of facts. This move beyond what is merely constative has useful consequences. For instance, the texts that are least recognizable as history, as they lack not only a universal framework of a genre but also lack any discursive autonomy per se, can now be included in Thapar's discussion under the rubric “embedded history”:

Embedded history is not recognizable as history. Nevertheless, what it does reveal is a certain perception of the past which provides evidence for the existence of historical consciousness. Consequent to this, references specifically claiming to be historical—to persons and events in earlier times—can lead to the germination of a historical tradition. These projections of the past increasingly relevant as legitimating strategies to societies and groups aspiring to power when they are in situations of conflict. . . . Because these societies comprised multiple competing groups, such narratives of the past were functionally necessary as ideological and hegemonic counterparts of their competition for supremacy. 

The uses of “strategy” and “functional necessity” here, like “believed past” mentioned earlier, tend to bring out the extraconstative nature of what she calls historical consciousness as opposed

93. Ibid., 5.
94. Ibid., 112.
to history. “Legitimacy,” Thapar reiterates later, “was based on events that were believed to have been historical.” ⁹⁵

Thapar herself does not use the term “performative” as opposed to “constative” to characterize the heterogeneity of discourses brought by her under the term “historical consciousness” (as opposed to history as a stable and abiding genre). However, she cites purposive uses of the past to substantiate the term “historical consciousness,” and this allows us to suggest that she tracks the performativity of certain discourses narrating or citing the past — that is, the ability of certain discourses on the past to perform beyond merely stating what is factual. Consider, for instance her discussion of the “believed pasts” in *Mahabharata*’s “embedded histories”:

It was possible to appropriate the literature of the earlier stage and adapt it to contemporary needs through interpolations. The continuity of the text required the retention of some sections so that an ancient authenticity could be claimed… …Narratives of the heroes, culled as a category outside ritual compositions, were now made to absorb a sacred ambiance. Bhagavatism was being embedded in the epic. Why this was done was in part to control the believed history of the heroes to preach a new sectarian religion by converting them into representing and endorsing it. ⁹⁶

In this way, “historical consciousness” was manifested through interpolations and alterations of the classical texts, intended to have specific ideological effects on the reader or the audience. If this is true for “embedded histories,” we would be mistaken to restrict this to “embedded histories” alone.

According to Thapar, when “historical consciousness” in early India underwent “externalization” and the genres dedicated to purposeful representation of the past appeared, the

⁹⁵. Ibid., 142.
⁹⁶. Ibid., 168.
utility of the past for various political projects in the present came to be recognized. However, this does not mean that a transition was made by the society into the production of history as constative discourse. Instead, “there was now the realization that if the past was to be put to work for the present, it would have to be ordered into a usable pattern.”

Similarly, the inscriptions or the praśastis, another genre instantiating “externalized” history, did not completely depart from the preceding forms: “Some prasastis read almost like a continuation of the descent lists in the Puranas, linking them to embedded historical tradition as well as being a claim to respectability. As against caritas, they were not restricted to one major figure and central event. The underlying concern was to tap the past for credibility and ensure future recognition.”

The functional and performative uses of the past, therefore, continued even when “recognizably” historical genres appeared.

These instances demonstrate that Thapar in The Past Before Us, abandons “history” as an “universal.” Instead in her analysis we find various instantiations of history without a necessary criterion to definitively bind them all, except perhaps the discursive engagement with the past itself and how this engagement puts the past “to work” for the present. Hence we call Thapar’s

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97. Ibid., 555; Italics added.

98. Ibid., 553.
strategy, making “history” capacious and inclusive of different discourses, a nominalist strategy.99

II. The Culturalist Critique

In the light of the nominalist critique of hypostatization of history in the form of an identifiable and self-same genre, this section reexamines the contemporary arguments that valorize acts of repudiation of history. The authors who valorize such acts consider history to be more than a genre among others and introduction of historical discourse in the colonial world is considered by them as disruptive of a preexisting culture, or a way of life. I call this thesis culturalist critique, to convey the sense it attributes to history as a colonial epistemic import, essentially foreign to the indigenous culture. The culturalist critique has been formed and reformed for many years now, but it had its most influential theoretical articulation in the work of Mircea Eliade. It should be mentioned here that Eliade’s philosophy of history is based on generalized cross cultural comparisons and historical processes like colonialism and their effect on discourses mediating the representation of the non-Western world do not concern him. Yet, some of the authors who seek to articulate postcolonial critiques of history have found Eliade’s work useful.

99. Here Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s comment on Foucault’s use of “power” to refer to multiple, heterogeneous referents is useful to supplement our understanding of Thapar’s strategy. In her essay “More on Power/Knowledge,” Spivak deals with the problem that despite Foucault’s avowal of nominalism, some readers of Foucault turn “power” into a “naturalized referent.” However, she reminds us that this is due to the fact that while “the bestowal of the name power upon complex situation” by Foucault produces power “in the general sense,” the narrow senses of power bear “traces of the empirical entailed by the word in the history of the language.” Therefore, it must be acknowledged that when power is used in the general sense it is “not only a name, but a catachresis.” Borrowing Spivak’s characterization of nominalism as catachresis I am inclined to claim here that Thapar resorts to a reverse strategy of sorts. Thapar does not define for us the history in the general sense but stitches together various incommensurate empirical instances and names them “historical consciousness.” In Thapar’s work then it is only through catachresis that we vaguely arrive at a general idea of history. This allows us to call her a nominalist. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “More on Power/Knowledge,” in The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1998), 144–145.
In this section we take a look at the various contemporary iterations of the culturalist critique of history that bear, whether acknowledged or not, the imprint of Eliade’s reflections on ahistoricity.

**The Influence of Eliade**

In Eliade’s work, history is construed not primarily as a genre or a written discourse but as an ontology and an inheritance of the modern West. The division between the archaic societies and the modern societies are drawn sharp in Eliade’s discourse and their differences seem irreconcilable. In spite of such a polarized opposition between the two, according to Eliade, both the archaic and the modern temporalities have a common origin. This is discernible in the a priori condition that structures both the archaic (ahistorical) man and the modern (historical) man’s takes on temporality. The key role that “the terror of history” or the “irreversibility of events” plays in Eliade’s discourse makes it the point of origin of both historical and antihistorical temporalities. The sense of terror that historical time generates makes it necessary for the archaic man to preempt its traumatic effects by adopting remedial measures through ritual performances. The acceptance of “irreversibility of time” as the ultimate horizon of being, on the other hand, leaves the modern man helpless in the face of the trauma of catastrophic events, thereby reducing

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100. Consider, for instance, Eliade’s reading of the Greek thought, primarily in ontological terms. In spite of Eliade’s claim to write philosophy of history, the Greek genre of history is not mentioned by him: “This eternal return (the cyclical structure of time) reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming. Just as the Greeks, in their myth of eternal return, sought to satisfy their metaphysical thirst for the ‘ontic’ and the static...even so the primitive, by conferring cyclical direction upon time, annuls its irreversibility. Everything begins over again at its commencement every instant. The past is but a prefiguration of the future. No event is irreversible and no transformation is final.” See, Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 89. [Cet «eternal retour» trahit une ontologie non contaminée par le temps et le devenir. De même que les Grecs, dans le mythe de l’ éternel retour, cherchaient à satisfaire leur soif métaphysique de l’ « ontique » et du statique...de même le «primitif», en conférant au temps une direction cyclique, annule son irréversibilité. Tout recommence à son début à chaque instant. La passé n’est que le préfiguration du futur. Aucun événement n’est irréversible et aucune transformation n’est défine.] See Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l’éternel retour: Archetypes et repetition* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard,1969),108.
his creativity. Eliade thus presents in his work an analysis of the differential responses of two ontologies to the same phenomenon—that is, the foundational threat of historical temporality.

The Eliadian schema predates the rise of the intellectual trends like poststructuralism, postmodernism, or postcolonialism. Yet Eliade has survived as an intellectual provocateur to our age. Consider, for instance, François Hartog's *Croire en l'Histoire* [Faith in History] (2013), where Eliade is cited as some one who refused the modern regime of historicity. Hartog, however, reminds us that Eliade was not a trailblazer and that in the period after the World War II (1945-1970) there were many who thought in a manner comparable to him.101 And although Eliade was not unique in his opposition to the modern regime of historicity in the postwar Europe, his antihistory theory has had a far-reaching impact and found its way to some works of postcolonial historiography. The entanglement of history with trauma in Eliade’s analysis has inspired some scholars to portray the forgetting of history as opposed to its remembrance as salutary.

Following Eliade’s example, historian Vinay Lal has made a strong case for the virtues of ahistoricity as a kind of “willful amnesia.” History as a category of knowledge and history as catastrophe, both these inform Lal’s idea of history, discussed in detail in his book *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (2005). In fact, the second kind, history as suffering and catastrophe, is summoned to explain the absence of history as a category of knowledge in premodern India:

> Is it too much to conjecture that in the period before the coming of the Muslims, not only the cultural unity of India, but perhaps the very survival of its people was based on a purposeful forgetfulness? In what manner would the people of India have lived with the

burden of the knowledge that their country had repeatedly been subjected to the rule of foreigners? Modern man thinks of history as an aid to living in the present, but to the Indian history has the contrary effect of not enabling one to live in the present.¹⁰²

Much like Eliade and Yerushalmi before him, Lal opposes the presumed absence of history amongst the Hindus to the historical tendencies in proselytizing monotheistic faiths. “Does not history, and the development of a historiographical tradition, have something of a natural association with the notion of a personal savior and with proselytism?” asks Lal.¹⁰³ The cultural predilection for history is thus explained by Lal in roughly theological terms. However, instead of telling us what constitutes the category of history as a category of knowledge, Lal goes about the task of delimiting this category indirectly, by randomly citing texts that cannot be considered under the rubric history. Thus he refuses to confer the status of history to texts like Machiavelli’s *The Prince* or Kautilya’s *Arthaśāstra*. And yet, the absence of a clear definition of “history” does not lead him to demonstrate history’s indeterminacy as a fixed category. Instead, his valorization of rejection of history and endorsement of the “willful amnesia” of the subjects who disavow history prevents him from seeing that history has often been a contested signifier, an unacknowledged catachresis. In addition to borrowing from Eliade’s work, Lal’s theorization of historiography also draws much from political psychologist Ashis Nandy’s work. We turn next to Nandy’s critique of historiography which supports the key ideas found in the Eliadean schema.

¹⁰³. Ibid., 59–60.
History as Statism

Oftentimes historical discourse is contested in the postcolonial world for its complicity with the state as a repressive institution. This section discusses two well-known theorists who have sought to lay bare this presumed state-history nexus. One of them, Ashis Nandy, offers us an account debunking history from the perspective of an outsider to history. The second theorist to be considered, Ranajit Guha, is a historian and has been a long-standing critic of colonial historiography. The imprint of the Eliade thesis can nevertheless be discerned in both. Both Nandy and Guha, for instance, represent history to be a discourse of unfreedom from which human creativity offers us a way out. Nonetheless, significant differences between them can be pointed out. A pronounced antistatism is the point of convergence of these two discrete theorists’ views, but how their antistatatist critiques are articulated make their respective positions markedly distinct.

Ashis Nandy

Ashis Nandy’s presentation of history does not emphasize history’s existence as a genre. Nandy, though he uses the word ahistoricity to designate a way of being, is primarily interested in history as it has emerged since the time of Francis Bacon; his object of enquiry thus has a clear chronological outer limit. Nandy critiques a series of titles placed under the rubric History including the history establishing empirical certitudes, history defined by European Enlightenment, scientific history, history embodying the fear of transcendence, Hegelian history, et cetera. Given the long chronological range of the examples presented and their discursive

104. Scattered references to these various kinds of histories can be found in Ashis Nandy’s “History’s Forgotten Doubles,” in History and Theory, 34, no. 2 (1995): 44–66.
heterogeneity the most potent unifying strand to them is perhaps their supposed association with
the modern state. For Nandy’s critique to work, one has to necessarily assume modern history to
be a surrogate of the modern state. The critique of the post-seventeenth-century conventions that
make up history is thus a convenient substitute for the critique of the modern state. Nandy uses
spatial and territorial metaphors to express the relationship between history and ahistoricity and
this reveals how closely he sees history and the state to be related: “The conquest of the past
through history was still incomplete in the late nineteenth century, as was the conquest of space
through the railways” writes Nandy. But “millions have, since the days of Marx, dutifully
migrated to the empire of history to become its loyal subjects.” Thus, in the changed context
“ahistoricity” is perhaps “a form of wilderness that needs to be protected in these
environmentally conscious times.” 105 The spread of “historical consciousness” is thus likened to
a territorial conquest and hence, a priori, illegitimate. If history is a territory then individuals or
communities can inhabit either inside or outside its borders. Much like the borders of modern
states, the territory of modern history is represented by Nandy to be fixed and clearly delineated.
Thus millions of people who still live “outside” history can be brought within its realm and that
is the only solution that the historically minded people are able to offer to the “ahistoricals.”

Given this theorization of the post-seventeenth-century history as a longue duree stasis,
there is little opportunity to explore history’s nominalism from the stance Nandy offers. History,
which in Nandy’s discussion is delimited to modern history, is a methodological constant. If it is
a certain innovation in “scientific method” that determines what constitutes modern history, this

105. Ashis Nandy, Romance of the State: And the Fate of Dissent in the Tropic (New Delhi: OUP, 2008), 85.
method is assumed to inform all the discourses that bore the name history in the post-seventeenth-century era equally, and thus making any exception or dissenting appropriation of history impossible. On the one hand, Nandy portrays the modern state solely as a repressive apparatus; on the other hand, he represents history to be an unadulterated evil. History thus happens to be as much a catastrophe as the modern state.

Because of this comprehensive sweep, Nandy remains steadfast in rejecting all history and in celebrating the subjects who repudiate history. But his thesis falters when we use it to explain history as a colonial form of knowledge. If the domain of history excludes all the premodern cultures of dealing with the past indiscriminately, how is it possible that only some cultures are characterized as ahistorical while others do not face similar scrutiny and judgment? We would care to recall here the nominalist critique’s explanation of the selective exclusion of certain cultures from the domain of history. The nominalist critique bases such exclusions on the colonial epistemic presuppositions that denied the possibility of acknowledging the presence of history in those texts or traditions that were incommensurate with the standard Western genre of history. Such a nuanced account is ruled out by the generalizations that mar Nandy’s analysis. As Nandy portrays the conflict between the historical and the mythical as a universal dialectic that is an inevitable corollary of the rise of the modern state, his critique loses sight of the specificities of history as a colonial discourse.

*Ranajit Guha*

Ranajit Guha, renowned historian and the founder of the Subaltern Studies project, is another major theorist who considers historical discourse to be essentially statist in purpose. Guha, unlike Nandy, makes the colonial career of historical discourse his main object of critique. As a result
Guha’s engagement with historiography, when compared to Nandy’s, is patently more mindful of the specific historical details of British colonization of India. This section outlines Guha’s argument based on his most programmatic statement on historiography to date, delivered in his Italian Academy Lectures, later published as *History at the Limit of World-History*.

In this text, Guha analyzes the rhetorical moves made by Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1822, 1828, and 1830), with the intent to map out the convergences between the colonial historiographic discourse and the discourse of Hegel’s philosophy of history. But in Guha’s analysis even the minimum difference between Hegel’s discourse and the colonial historiographical discourse disappears:

> World-history made its way to the subcontinent as an instrument of the East India Company’s colonial project and helped it to set up the Raj. It played a vital role in the material as well as intellectual aspect of empire building: materially, by fabricating an elaborate historicist justification for the Company’s fiscal system in the subcontinent and its appropriation of the wealth of the land to finance its trade; intellectually, though rather less successfully, by trying to educate Indians to accept their subjugation under British rule as historical evidence of progress.106

Here the numerous colonial epistemic endeavors that began long before the appearance of Hegelian thought are portrayed by Guha to be Hegelian *avant la lettre* and no attempt is made to distinguish between the empirical histories of the colony and the speculative or philosophical history of the philosopher. Consequently, the critique of Hegel is made to stand in not only for the critique of colonial historical discourse, but historiography as such:

> Incorporated in World-history, we owe our understanding of the Indian past, our craft, and our profession as academics to this very revolution. We work within the paradigm it has constructed for us and are therefore far too close and committed to it to realize the need for challenge and change. No wonder that our critique has to look elsewhere, over

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the fence so to say, to neighboring fields of knowledge for inspiration, and finds it in literature, which differs significantly from historiography in dealing with historicality.\textsuperscript{107}

The revolution Guha refers to here, stemmed from the fact that through colonization Indians learned to narrate the past anew, departing from the conventions of \textit{Itihāsa} (the mytho-historical Sanskrit genre). This would have seemed less of a revolution had Guha considered the fact that there was already in place a vigorous Indo-Persian historiographical tradition before modern colonization took effect. But acknowledging this would have weakened Guha’s argument which seeks to prove that by participating in the culture of history-writing the colonized got coopted in the Hegelian discourse of World-history or engaged in the game authored by Hegel. As a corollary, in Guha’s version, modern historical scholarship as such appears to be hostage to the Hegelian concept of history. This is an useful shortcut for Guha, as by means of this questionable equation between Hegel’s history and history-writing as it is currently practiced, “we” can be made to feel the guilt of being complicit in the use of the same ideological schema that once directly served colonialism.

Given the foregoing assumptions, Guha finds the only way out of the “statism” of World-history in the search for an alternative to all existing historiography as such. Guha finds the inspiration for such an alternative in a late essay by Rabindranath Tagore. In “\textit{Sāhitye Aitihāsikatā}” (in Guha’s translation: “Historicality in Literature”) Tagore appears critical of petty historically minded critics of his work:

Tagore’s critique of historiography in his last statement on the subject is addressed, therefore, to those “pedantic historians” who have narrowed down history in its scope and those literary critics who “wander about so extensively” in history as to rob it of all specificity. “Off with your history!” (dur \textit{hok ge tomar itihas}) is what he would like to say.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 5.
to them. For this so-called history serves no purpose other than to displace the poet from the center of his own creativity. Speaking from that center it is his intention to try and make a case for the marriage of literature and historiography so that the creative insights of one can enrich the other.\textsuperscript{108}

Guha’s is not a simple glorification of creativity. He logically bases his case for the “marriage between literature and historiography” on the need to oppose a notion of history borrowed from the pages of Hegel. Hence from Guha’s lectures one may get the impression that Hegel attempts to undermine the role of creativity in history. The creative genius Rabindranath Tagore, on the contrary, is someone whose example Guha urges historians to follow as he steers clear of the statism implicit in history by emphasizing his own creative insights, which offer a better grasp of the historicality of the experience of the quotidian.

Cultural critic and historian Rosinka Chaudhuri, in an essay critical of Guha preaching creativity to historians, speculates at length on what Rabindranath Tagore might have meant to express through his antihistory polemic.\textsuperscript{109} She recreates laboriously the context in which the exchange between Buddhadev Basu, the new generation poet, and Tagore took place and sheds light on Tagore’s later rescinding of the claims made in “\textit{Sāhitye Aṭṭihāśikatā}.” It appears from Chaudhuri’s research that Tagore had offered to withdraw his belligerent stance against the historically minded critics, urging his adversaries to do the same. Thus, although the essay assumed a deliberately polemical tone, its claims were later abandoned.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 90-91.

While Chaudhuri’s contextualization of Tagore is helpful, she does not explain what motivated Guha to misread Tagore. The motivation to read Tagore as a history-repudiating figure stems from Guha’s intention to make the creative individual a bulwark in the battle against state. And here, it seems, Guha gets somewhat caught up in the Hegelian logic after all. Could one not read Guha’s attempt to offer poetry or creative prose as a substitute for history (albeit a

110. It is appropriate here to point out that it would be hard to find an argument in Hegel that is disparaging of either poetry or of individual creativity per se. One has to read the first few pages of Hegel’s Lectures on Fine Arts to find a certain comparison already emerging between historiography and art or Guha’s “over the fence,” “neighbouring field of knowledge.” Works of art cannot be called deceptive compared to historiography as “the latter has not even immediate existence but only the spiritual pure appearance thereof as the element of its portrayals, and its content remains burdened with the entire contingency of ordinary lives and events, complications and individualities, whereas work of art brings before us the eternal power that governs history without this appendage of the immediate sensuous present and its unstable appearance.” [...Die Geschichtsschreibung hat auch nicht das unmittelbare Dasein, sondern den geistigen Schein desselben zum Elemente ihrer Schilderungen, und ihr Inhalt bleibt mit der ganzen Zufälligkeit der gewöhnlichen Wirklichkeit und deren Begebenheiten, Verwicklungen und Individualitäten behaftet, während das Kunstwerk uns die in der Geschichte waltenden ewigen Mächte ohne dies Beiwesen der unmittelbar sinnlichen Gegenwart und ihres haltlosen Scheines entgegenbringt.] This unstable appearance, Hegel would later say in his Lectures, is what gives historiography its prosaic character. Hegel elaborates on a veritable hierarchy of representations where actuality is best represented by philosophy followed by art, and historiography comes last in the series: “But, if the mode in which artistic forms appear is called a deception in comparison with philosophical thinking and with religious and moral principles, of course the form of appearance acquired by a topic in the sphere of thinking is the truest reality; but in comparison with the appearance of immediate existence and of historiography, the pure appearance of art has the advantage that it points through and beyond itself, and itself hints at something spiritual of which it is to give us an idea. Whereas immediate appearance does not present itself as deceptive but rather as the real and true, although the truth is in fact contaminated and concealed by the immediacy of sense.” See G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans.T.M. Knox, vol. 1(Oxford: OUP,1988), 9. [Wird nun aber die Erscheinungsweise der Kunstgestalten eine Täuschung genannt in Vergleichung mit dem Denken der Philosophie, mit religiösen und sittlichen Grundsätzen, so ist die Form der Erscheinung, welche ein Inhalt in dem Bereiche des Denkens gewinnt, allerdings die wahrhaftigste Realität; doch in Vergleich mit dem Schein der sinnlichen unmittelbaren Existenz und dem der Geschichtsschreibung hat der Schein der Kunst den Vorzug, daß er selbst durch sich hindurchdeutet und auf ein Geistiges, welches durch ihn soll zur Vorstellung kommen, aus sich hinweist, dahlingsegen die unmittelbare Erscheinung sich selbst nicht als täuschend gibt, sondern vielmehr als das Wirkliche und Wahre, während doch das Wahrhafte durch das unmittelbar Sinnliche verunreinigt und versteckt wird.] G.W.F. Hegel,*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,1989), 23. Nonetheless, Hegel would disallow the historian to step beyond the zone of contamination. That, he would claim, is a privilege of the poet. The poetic here is an improvement of the prosaic, and it is the philosopher’s task to transcend even the poetic and arrive at the philosophical. The cause for confusion perhaps lies in the fact that Hegel employs two separate concepts, Historiography and World-History in two distinct senses. Guha makes it possible in his account for Hegel to speak to Tagore only by collapsing the distinction. It is as if both Hegel and Tagore speak of the same history in their respective contexts.
better one!), as an attempt to redress a sense of lack, which the Hegelian World-history produced in the first place? Here lies the origin of Guha’s injunction against historiography. Guha’s attempts to save creative reception of historicality from the appropriative clutches of history makes sense because we submit to the formula that history is the discourse of the state, no less and no more. Guha therefore ends up admitting this key Hegelian assumption as an axiomatic foundation of his critique. The nominalist critique, in contrast, saves us from such an assumption as it seeks to contest the idea that “history” is a stable signifier or a stable and selfsame genre.

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While the nominalist critique of history concentrates on critically examining and questioning the genological boundaries of history, it pays scant attention to the question of subjectivity. In a similar vein, the proponents of the culturalist critique tend not to consider the possibility that history, instead of merely being a specific signifier naming a specific genre, might actually have been a contested terrain without a stable or fixed referent. Hence, the nominalist and the culturalist critiques of history leave us with a sense of impasse rather than a promise of resolution. Yet, if we are careful we may discern what is common to both these critiques: an adherence to what I am inclined to call the “repressive hypothesis” of historiography. The idea that history in the colonial world played a repressive role is apparent in either of these positions. The nominalist critique considers that the colonial definition of history led to the repression of indigenous forms of history that were incommensurate with history as a genre of Western origin. The culturalist critique, on the other hand, considers history to be a foreign import that reinforced the repressive colonial state. Such a repressive hypothesis, however, prevents us from discovering the interpellative dimension of history in colonial
modernity. In other words, if we accept the tenets of the repressive hypothesis, we may end up ignoring the role historical discourse played in producing the colonial subject, and hence its productive rather than prohibitive role.

What could possibly resolve this deadlock? The answer lies in the past. In the colonial era, the need was felt to contest history as defined by the nineteenth-century West. Consequently the injunction to adopt the Western definition of what counts as history was rejected by several anticolonial thinkers. A certain plasticity, nonetheless, can be attributed to some of these thinkers who fought the colonialist claims in the epistemic domain. They did not, necessarily, choose between the options of contesting the signifier “history” or repudiating “history” as such. In so far as “disavowal” signifies half measures, the anticolonial responses to the question of history evince that repudiation of history was often supplemented by catachrestic uses of the name “history.” When these past instances are taken into account, the present hiatus can be portrayed in a different light. What now looks like two exclusive ways of contesting history were employed in the past not so much as incompatible strategies but as parallel means by the colonial subjects engaged in contesting history as a colonial-epistemic tool. Therefore, what seems like a veritable cul-de-sac is in fact our portal to the world of the colonial-modern subject.
Part II - Disavowals of History
Chapter 3. Mimeticism and the Historiography of the Hindu Ideal

For many years now historians have argued that anticolonial nationalisms cannot be considered simply imitative of Western nationalist models. Partha Chatterjee’s much-cited criticism of Benedict Anderson’s thesis (about the West evolving a model for nationalism that was later adopted elsewhere) began with a note of despair: “History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.” But then Chatterjee offered a rebuttal to Anderson by suggesting that anticolonial nationalisms divided social institutions into two domains, namely the inner and the outer, the inner sphere being the location where the yet-to-emerge nation declares its sovereignty.111 Thanks to such idiosyncrasies of anticolonial thought, nation was brought into being as an imagined community in the imagined “inner sphere” where nationalism as a creative project was launched. The argument implied, as long as our understanding of anticolonial nationalisms are modeled on our study of Western nationalisms, we are bound to miss out on the real story.

If, as Chatterjee suggested, the nationalists resorted to a division of the institutions into discrete spheres as a means to symbolically resolve the deadlock of colonial subjection, might they not have done the same with forms of knowledge that were considered to be foreign imports

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and moreover, at times, to be veritable tools to facilitate colonial domination? This chapter seeks to explore the aforesaid possibility with its specific focus on a nationalist history-writing project. Put in general terms, the question asked here is the following: how did the nationalists seeking to adopt history for anticolonial purposes resolve the deadlock? After all history in the late nineteenth century was an indispensable constituent of the colonial episteme, and yet, the nationalists required its use. Were there perhaps an “inner” and an “outer” domain to the knowledge of the past of the nation as well, with the “inner domain” being the territory of the nationalists where the rules of history as a constative discourse were suspended, curtailed or disavowed?

In this chapter I seek answers to these questions by examining some of the later writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–94), the foremost literary figure in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Why Bankimchandra? His enormous influence upon the anticolonial activists on the cusp of twentieth-century British India affords him a special place in the pantheon of nationalist thinkers. But he is also noted for his contribution in formulating a nationalist agenda for history writing. In some sense then, he was not only the father of nationalist thought in India but also the father of nationalist historiography. Later historians who adhered to a notion of scientific history and contributed to history’s professionalization accepted Bankimchandra as a pioneer as

they derived inspiration from his pronouncements.¹¹³ My purpose here, however, is not to merely to commemorate the inaugural moment of nationalist history. In fact, I do not consider here those essays by Bankimchandra, which, filled with incendiary anticolonial statements, exhort his readers to take up the task of history-writing. Instead, my intention is to investigate the strategies Bankimchandra adopted when he himself took up the historiographical task. Hence, I seek to ask, how did Bankimchandra, the quintessentially nationalist thinker, refashion history for the nationalist purpose? Did he merely submit to the colonial injunction to write history, or did he in his writings evolve a strategy to disavow that injunction?

The Hindu Ideal

Bankimchandra, having urged all his readers to take to the task of history-writing, lived up to his own words by undertaking a project to write a historical account of the life of Krishna, the Hindu avatar. The project resulted in a book called *Krṣṇacaritra*, one of Bankimchandra’s last published works and one among a series of works offering reflections on reforming Hinduism.¹¹⁴ However, inspired by the comparativist vision of his age, Bankimchandra did not consider it enough to merely establish Krishna as the subject of the history and thus in his project the task of founding

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¹¹³ For instance, Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay and Ramaprasad Chanda, two notable contributors to “scientific history” in the early twentieth century, both acknowledged Bankimchandra as a pioneer. Chanda once called Bankimchandra the *dikṣāguru* (a teacher of initiation), of the early twentieth-century Bengali historians. See, Rākhālādās Bandhopādhyāy “Aithāṣīk Gabeṣaṇāy Bankimchandra,” in, *Itiḥās Cintā*, edited by Kamal Caudhrī (Kolkata: Deys, 2010), 519–23. See also, Ramāprasād Canda, “Bankimchandra O Bāṅgālār Itiḥās,” in, *Itiḥāse Bāṅgālī* (Kolkata: Dey’s,1997), 46–61. I should add here an explanation as to why I have referred to the author Bankimchandra Chatterjee by his first name rather than his last. Here I have merely followed the vernacular convention. However, I have only followed this convention for referring to the two major authors I have discussed at length and not for every Bengali or Indian author making appearance in this dissertation.

¹¹⁴ Bankimchandra Chaṭṭopādhyāy, *Bankim Racanāvalī*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Dey’s, 2006), 261–474. In this dissertation I have discussed the final edition of *Krṣṇacaritra* which came out in 1892. The differences between the 1892 edition and the first edition (1886) are considerable and revealing. For the sake of brevity and focus I have refrained from commenting on the matter. Hereafter, *Bankim Racanāvalī*. 79
Krishna as the leading ideal in the world of competing religious ideals took precedence over the task of history-writing.

Accordingly, in *Krṣṇacarītra*, Bankimchandra advocated elevating Krishna over the other religious figures of renown by highlighting what he considered the superiority of Krishna’s conduct. While narrating the events leading to the slaying of Jarāsaṃdha, the archenemy of the Yādavas (Krishna’s kinsmen), he felt the need to justify Krishna’s involvement in a violent act of retribution. Krishna, despite being the savior of the fallen, mercilessly exterminated Jarāsaṃdha as a retribution for his evil deeds. It was, however, this bit of blemish, this enthusiastic participation in extirpating an evildoer from the world even at the cost of dirtying one’s hand, this was the quality that made Krishna or the “Hindu Ideal” [*sic*] superior in Bankimchandra’s opinion. Had the Roman emperor appointed Jesus Christ as the ruler of the Jews, Christ would surely have failed, as “he lacked the training of those faculties which were required for governance.”

Had the Jews elected Christ as their commander in a fight against the Romans for independence, in all likelihood, Christ would have fled the scene having advised his followers to, “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s.”

In Bankimchandra’s explanation, the reason why Christ or other such figures fell short of the criteria for superiority had to do with their engagement in specialized activities. Christ, for instance, was a master of ethical conduct but lacked the ability to fight. When subjects specialize

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116. Ibid., 394.
in certain activities, they neglect the baser (īтар kāṛya) tasks of life.\textsuperscript{117} Hence, in \textit{Dharmatātva} (The Theory of Dharma), another of his late texts on religion, Bankimchandra enumerated Christ and the Buddha as examples of specialized religious preachers who were inferior to Krishna. Bankimchandra scripted in this text, what he called, \textit{anuśīlantatva} (the theory of praxis) and chalked out as an integral part of this \textit{anuśīlantatva}, a theory of subjectivity that offered the abstract framework within which subjects were to be judged according to their ability to approximate a set of criteria for ideal conduct.

The theory of subjectivity that makes up the \textit{anuśīlantatva} divides the human-faculties in four parts, including three mental faculties, namely, the faculty of knowledge acquisition, the practical faculty, and the aesthetic faculty, and one physical or corporeal faculty. All these faculties requiring \textit{anuśīlān} or practice lead to happiness only when a certain balance is achieved between them in everyday conduct. The ideal human/ the human ideal must acquire such a balance. Bankimchandra named a host of figures from Indian mythology who each approximated in their everyday conduct the ideal of \textit{anuśīlāna} or praxis in their own specific ways and therefore were deemed by him to be placed above Christ or the Buddha:

The sage-kings like Jānaka, the divine sages like Nārada, and the brahminical sages like Vashishṭha, they all are the great ideals of praxis. Above them could be placed, Shri-Ramachandra,Judhisthira, Arjuna, Lakṣmaṇa, Devavrata Bhīṣma, and such Kṣatriyas, who are more perfect ideals. Christ and Śakyasimha are merely indifferent and pure religious preachers in loincloth.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 395. “Such all-qualities-endowed ideal man cannot dedicate his life to specific tasks. As, otherwise, the baser works remain unaccomplished or are unevenly accomplished.”

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 612.
Krishna was portrayed by Bankimchandra as a perfect candidate to occupy the place of the ideal as unlike Christ or the Buddha he lacked any special skill and this paradoxically enabled him to play a de facto ruler and a strategist throughout his life. In a book review published in the 1870s Krishna was compared by Bankimchandra to some key figures of nineteenth-century political history like the Count of Cavour and Otto von Bismarck.

Krṣṇacaritras reinforced this portrayal of Krishna as a master-strategist by referring to various episodes from the Mahābhārata. Without ever being a king he advised Ugrasena, the king of the Yādavas, and during the war of Kurukṣeta or through the sequence of events leading up to the war, Krishna acted as an advisor to the Pāṇḍavas without ever directly participating in the fighting. And yet when his personal physical intervention was required he emerged as a fighter who slayed evil kings and demons in closely fought battles. Krishna’s lack of specialization was hence not a privation but a corollary of his great versatility, allowing him to be compared to modern political figures as well as ancient spiritual icons.

How was the need to produce a history of the Hindu ideal enunciated? In Dharmatatva Bankimchandra emphasized the need for Religious History to explain the deeds of truly dhārmik (virtuous/pious) individuals. And in Krṣṇacaritras, he stressed the need for the recovery of the Hindu ideal in these terms:

Be it Christian Europe, be it Hindu India, the reality has turned out to be contrary to the ideals. The ideal man of Christianity is polite, timid, peace-loving ascetic; the contemporary Christians are precisely the reverse of this. Contemporary Europe is merely a camp of soldiers given to selfish pleasures. While the ideal man of Hinduism is an all-
round performer, contemporary Hindus are inept at all tasks. Why do we have such contrary effects? The answer is easy—in both the regions, the ancient ideals have been forgotten.¹¹⁹

A program for the recovery of the Hindu ideal was necessary as it is precisely the loss of such an ideal that caused the social degradation of the Hindus. But how was this recovery to be accomplished through historiography and how was it possible to reconcile the plenitudinous portrayal of the ideal with the finitude of the historical subject? Before venturing to answer these, let us go through the itinerary for this chapter.

The Itinerary

To critically grasp the significance of Bankimchandra’s act comparing Krishna, the Hindu ideal, and other religious figures as ideals, we must pay attention to the larger discursive context that allowed for such comparison. Here it is germane to remind ourselves of the links between colonialism and comparativism, observed and commented upon by scholars. Sheldon Pollock, among others, has suggested that colonialism’s relationship with comparativism “may signal causality no less than concomitance.” In his words:

If systematic comparative philology is a well-known and exquisite example, finding its origins at the very time and place of colonial contact, in late eighteenth-century Calcutta, we sometimes forget that nineteenth-century Europe is the high-water mark of historical-comparative studies across virtually all disciplines—ethnology, history, law, literature, mythology, religion. It is not news, but it also not inconsequential, that such projects were

¹¹⁹. Ibid., 395.
linked to the age of discovery and colonialism, and comparativism itself to the self-understanding of European supremacy.\textsuperscript{120}

Now, given this link, how do we contextualize Bankimchandra’s attempt to establish the supremacy of the “Hindu Ideal” and hence, of Hinduism? Part I of this chapter refers to some instances, chronologically prior to Bankimchandra, and authored by the Orientalists on the one hand and rationalist and freethinkers on the other, where Krishna and Christ came to be compared. I argue we can better understand Bankimchandra’s act of comparison and the departure it initiates only in the context of these antecedents. Part II offers an analysis of Bankimchandra’s historiography of the Hindu Ideal. But what lurked behind the facade of an avowal of history is a strategy that undercuts Bankimchandra’s commitment to the constative. Hence, an outline of his dual strategy is sketched out, where an oscillating movement can be discerned between playing by the rules of history and resorting to violations of its code.

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Bankimchandra’s demonstration of the superiority of Krishna vis-à-vis Jesus Christ (and others) was unsupported by an elaborate philosophical system. But the immediate influence on Bankimchandra had been the Indologists of different shades. He has been portrayed as someone who performed a simple reversal of the Orientalist problematic that portrayed the Oriental subject as essentialized and inferior.\textsuperscript{121} But I intend to demonstrate, the act of comparison that allows him to perform such a reversal (i.e., the comparison between Krishna and the other

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121} Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1993), 54–84.
\end{itemize}
religious figures of renown, especially Christ) had several antecedents in the discourse of the Orientalists and their interlocutors. I cite below some of these antecedent comparisons to situate Bankimchandra’s thought within a longer genealogy of scholarship.

The Specter of Comparisons: Christ and Crishna

In a series of lectures delivered in 1870, Friedrich Max Müller made his case for “Comparative Theology,” which he sought to make the foundation for the “Theoretic Theology” or the philosophy of religion. These lectures, later published under the heading Introduction to the Science of Religion, plead for a comparative study of religion, which should offer “the most charitable interpretation on the apparent absurdities, the follies … even the horrors of ancient religions.” Notably, such pleas took for granted the superiority of Christianity even as the readers were advised to employ the comparative method to redress the “complete miscarriage of justice” that had previously resulted in denigration of the non-Christian faiths:

By unduly depreciating all other religions, we have placed our own in a position which its founder never intended for it; we have torn it away from the sacred context of the history of the world; . . . and instead of recognising Christianity as coming in the fullness of time, as the fulfillment of the hopes and desires of the whole world, we have brought ourselves to look upon its advent as the only broken link in that unbroken chain which is rightly called the divine government of the world.122

It becomes apparent from this and other instances from his lectures that since Max Müller viewed Christianity as a fulfillment of a process initiated in pre-Christian religions, he was unable to consider Indian religions in nondiscriminatory terms. To him they were the parler enfantin of religion. To Max Müller, the survival Hinduism to contemporary era was a

remarkable fact. Hinduism was like a “half fossilized megatherion” that walked about “in the daylight of the nineteenth century.” Hence, in his lectures, comparative theology comes across as a project to eliminate the misconceptions harbored by Western scholars about non-Christian faiths by portraying these as belonging to the prehistory of Christianity; while Christianity itself is represented as the teleological fulfillment of the history of thinking the infinite instantiated in these prior imperfect systems.

The origin of Max Müller’s comparativism can be genealogically traced back to the latter half of the eighteenth century, when comparativist analyses of religion surfaced alongside comparative philology as a modern practice. But the sense of definite superiority of Christianity and the accompanying patronizing tone discernible in Max Müller’s discourse was not a necessary mainstay of previous attempts to compare religions. The instances cited below of the comparison between Christ and Krishna from the late eighteenth- and the early nineteenth-century era will convince us that while no ideological innocence can be assigned to them, Christianity’s self-assured superiority was not an indisputable fact. While the acts of comparison by the Orientalists of this era were meant to place the history of the Judeo-Christian traditions on a secure footing, the growing awareness of the variety and riches of non-Abrahamic faiths also allowed for the rationalists to question the originality of Christ or the authenticity of the Christian scriptures. Krishna’s alleged similarity to Christ, which came to be discussed repeatedly in the Orientalist texts, provided a resource for this rationalist criticism.

When William Jones, the founder of comparative philology, produced an essay in 1784 comparing the divinities of the East and the West, there was already in place a climate of

123 Ibid.
skepticism surrounding the representation of antiquity in scriptures, or the “Mosaik history.”

Jones, keen to prove his commitment to principles of impartial scholarly enquiry was ready to bring the authenticity of Judeo-Christian narratives to a crisis and was aware of the stakes involved:

> It is not the truth of our national religion, as such, that I have at heart: it is truth itself; and, if any cool unbiased reasoner will clearly convince me, that Moses drew his narrative through Egyptian conduits from the primeval fountains of Indian literature, I shall esteem him as a friend for having weeded my mind from a capital error…¹²⁴

The path to the discovery of the “truth itself” led Jones to establish a series of resemblances between the divinities of classical Greece and Rome, on the one hand, with the divinities of India on the other. Some of these notable parallels happened to be the following: the Roman God Janus and Ganeśa, both being Gods of wisdom; Ceres and Lakṣmi, both being Goddesses who ensure prosperity; Jupiter and Indra for their association with the sky; alternately Jupiter or Zeus is also compared with the three big Indian Gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Shiva; Bhavānī with Venus; Pārvatī with Juno; Dūrgā with Minerva as Pallas; the unarmed Minerva with Sarasvatī; Kālī with Hecate, et cetera.

While the explanation for various such resemblances of the classical and the Hindu divinities was sought in a period of pagan interconnections before any knowledge of “Mosaik history” appeared, Krishna appeared to be a complex figure with multiple layers to his life story, not easy to chronologically pin down. In the beginning, Jones dealt with Krishna’s resemblances with some of the classical divinities. After considering Krishna’s life story collated from the Mahābhārata and the Bhāgavata, Jones found it “impossible not to discover, at the first glance,

the features of Apollo.” Apollo known to have served Admetus by minding his herds of cattle
could be matched with Krishna’s role as a herdsman. Apollo as a dragon-slayer was reminiscent
of the episode of Kālīyadāmana. Even some of the epithets looked relatable as Govinda was
literally Nomios, and Keśava was Crinitas. Jones was avowedly someone who looked upon
“etymological conjectures as a weak basis for historical inquiries,” nonetheless he did not avoid
them altogether. Hence he suggested an etymological linkage that connected Apollo, Sol, and
Krishna to sun-worship. The idea was admittedly borrowed from Charles Vallancey, an expert on
Irish antiquity, who assured Jones that “CRISHNA in Irish means the sun.” Jones wrote, “I am
inclined indeed to believe, that not only CRISHNA or Vishnu, but even BRAHMA and SIVA,
when united, and expressed by the mystical word OM, were designed by the first idolaters to
represent the Solar fire.”¹²⁵ But this remained a weak assertion as Jones undercut his own
suggestion thus: “Phoebus, or the orb of the sun personified” was “adored by the Indians as the
God Surya.”¹²⁶

But such speculations aside, what bothered Jones were the discernible similarities
between the life stories of Krishna and Christ. The threat of too close an identification of Christ
and a pagan divinity had to be averted. Towards the end of the essay Jones asserted that the
“adamantine pillars” of the Christian faith are not moved by the result of “any inquiries into
Indian Theology,” and he added the following:

One singular fact however cannot be suffered to pass unnoticed. That the name of
Crishna, and the general outline of his story, were long anterior to the birth of our
Saviour, and probably to the time of Homer, we know very certainly; yet the celebrated

¹²⁵. Ibid., 262.
¹²⁶. Ibid., 262.
A poem, entitled Bhagavat, which contains a prolix account of his life, is filled with narratives of a most extraordinary kind, but strangely variegated and intermixed with poetical decorations….This motley story must induce an opinion that the spurious Gospels, which abounded in the first age of Christianity, had been brought to India, and the wildest parts of them repeated to the Hindus, who ingrafted them on the old fable of Cesava, the Apollo of Greece.  

Jones, it seems, was already aware that the comparativism of the kind he practiced posed a threat to the claims of authenticity of the Christian scriptures. Hence was his effort to explain that the supposed similarities between Krishna and Christ in terms of borrowings into the Indian tradition from the “spurious gospels,” an explanation that allowed Jones to keep Krishna and Christ at a safe distance from each other.

In the next few decades the hypotheses offered by Jones found some support among the later commentators but faced stiff challenges as well. First, the suggestion that the figure of Krishna might have had something to do with sun-worship reappeared in Comte de Volney’s (1757–1820) work, but unlike Jones, in Volney’s work, Christianity itself was considered an allegorical worship of the sun. Second, Thomas Maurice (1754–1824), a specialist on India with an ecclesiastical background, wrote a long essay on the “Brahminical Fraud” effected through the plagiarism of the Christian scriptures with the explicit aim of making Krishna a figure similar to Christ. It is possible to read Maurice’s essay as a defense of Jones’s position with elaborate speculations spun around it. Third, the idea that stories from apocryphal gospels were introduced to India was turned on its head by the radical freethinker Robert Taylor (1784–1824), who offered the alternative hypotheses that the real gospels themselves were derived from the pagan sources. Fourth, John Bentley (1757–1824) argued against the assumed chronological priority of...

127. Ibid., 273.
Krishna over Christ in his work on Hindu astronomy. Next, I briefly mention these specific instances—two of which were attempts by the religious radicals to appropriate Jones’s suggestions for undermining Christianity, and the other two were attempted denigration of the Brahmins as the supposed authors of the invented Hindu traditions by two renowned Indologists—illustrating how the problematic of the comparison of Christ and Krishna evolved.

1. Constantin-François Chassebœuf or Comte de Volney, was an Enlightenment thinker, a classicist, and an orientalist, who puts a clue appearing in Jones’s text to a radical use. Volney’s *Les ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791) is a text where a history of the future is foretold through a dialogue between the narrator and a ghost. The narrator, while touring through West Asia, comes across a ghost in the ruins near Palmyra. The ghost foretells of an assembly convened in the future to resolve religious contradictions. In this assembly the liberals confront the religious leaders from various communities with the claim that religious myths are merely allegorical representations of various celestial phenomena. Following this, a general debunking of all religions is carried out.

In Section XIII of Volney’s text, Christianity is called an allegorical form of worship. The title of the section, “Christianity, or the allegorical worship of the son under the cabalistical names of Chris-En or Christ and Ye-sus or Jesus” roughly gives away the argument. The orator in Volney’s text, who confronts the priests of various religious orders with criticisms of their beliefs, alleges that thanks to their Babylonian captivity the people of Judea borrowed the idea of the end of a six-thousand-year-long period of “the reign of evil” from the Persian and Chaldean sources and they matched it with their calculation of the time expired since the creation. With
this understanding they awaited the great Mediator and the final Judge:

This personage was so much the subject of conversation, that someone was said to have seen him, and a rumor of this kind was all that was wanting to establish a general certainty. Hence popular report was converted into an attested fact; the imaginary became realized; and all the circumstances of mythological tradition being compiled and linked with this phantom assumed the form of an authentic and regular history, which from henceforth it was nothing short of blasphemy to doubt.128

[on attendit le réparateur; à force d'en parler, quelqu'un dit l'avoir vu, ou même un individu exalté crut l'être, et se fit des partisans, lesquels, privés de leur chef par un incident vrai sans doute, mais passé obscurément, donnèrent lieu, par leurs récits, à une rumeur graduellement organisée en histoire : sur ce premier canevas établi, toutes les circonstances des traditions mythologiques vinrent bientôt se placer, et il en résulta un système authentique et complet, dont il ne fut plus permis de douter. ]129

The mythological tradition, however, continued sheltering the truth about the origin of Christianity. This is attested by the fact that the descriptions from the gospels when taken in a certain allegorical sense would lead to an unmasking of celestial or astronomical events. Hence Jesus being born of a virgin could be understood in the following terms:

By this was denoted the Sun, which at the precise moment that the Persian Magi drew the horoscope of the new year, was found in the bosom of the Virgin, in its heliacal rising on the eastern horizon; and which was accordingly represented in their astrological pictures under the form of an infant suckled by a chaste virgin…130

[Et par —là elles désignaient le soleil, qui, à l'époque du solstice d'hiver, au moment précis où les mages des Perses tiraient l'horoscope de la nouvelle année, se trouvait placé dans le sein de la vierge, en lever héliaque à l'horizon oriental, et qui, à ce titre, était


At this moment, seeking to further stress the fact that Christianity was one amongst the many allegorical cults of the sun, Volney’s protagonist resorts to citing a certain etymological link presumed to exist between the names Krishna and Christ, thanks to the stem “Chris” which appears in both the words; (the thought that this could be have resulted from an orthographic idiosyncrasy or existing conventions of transliteration does not occur to the speaker!):

These traditions went still farther specifying his astrological and mysterious names, stating that he was called sometimes, Chris or the Preserver; and this ye people of India, this is your God Chris-en or Chris-na; and this too, ye Christians of the Greek and Western Church is your Chris-tos, the son of Mary.

Whatever be the accuracy and veracity of such statements, what is crucial here is the visible departure from what Jones had intended. Christ does not remain discrete from Krishna or the divinities of a pre-Christian pagan past. Krishna and Christ, both figure in a chain of

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132. Language plays a crucial role in Volney’s project. Volney was conscious of the precious role etymology plays in his enquiry. After suggesting in an endnote a derivation of Deus and Theos from Greek thein, Volney says: “I know that such enquiries into etymologies have been much decried: but if, as is the case, words are the representative signs of the ideas, the genealogy of the one becomes that of the other, and a good etymological dictionary would be the most perfect history of human understanding.” Volney, “The Ruins,” 308. [Je sais que l'on a beaucoup décrié cette recherche des étymologies; mais si, comme il est vrai, les mots sont les signes représentatifs des idées, la généalogie des uns devient celle des autres, et un bon dictionnaire étymologique serait la plus parfaite histoire de l'entendement humain.] Volney, “Les Ruins,” 401.


resemblances and they are both derived from an origin lying outside them: the cult of sun worship.

2. Thomas Maurice, a poet, a scholar interested in Indian antiquity and an ordained priest was convinced that there was no truth to the proper names Krishna or Christ being in anyway related since:

between the names of Crishna and Christ there never existed the least affinity, except in sound: CRISHNA being a Sanscreet word literally signifying black, or dark blue, an appellative given, on account of his colour, to the incarnate deity of India; and CHRISTOS, I scarcely need add, being a Greek word, meaning anointed, in allusion to the kingly office of the Hebrew Messiah. Thus the Nile, in consequence of the dark appearance of its waters, is in Sanscrit books denominated the CRISHNA; and this suggestion of M. Volney is hence proved, like many others, to be utterly unfounded.135

Nonetheless there was a story of derivation to be told. The Brahmins undoubtedly played a major role in lifting certain events from the apocryphal and actual gospels and inserting them into the Bhāgavata Purāṇa accomplishing an “unprincipled spoliation” that was “never before exhibited in the history of any country or people existing.” St. Thomas’s preaching of Christianity, the trade links India had with the West Asian merchants and its very old link with Greece established since the time of Alexander’s conquest were cited as some of the channels through which the stories of true and spurious gospels infiltrated.

Maurice mentions in his work the major texts the Brahmins must have used to borrow certain elements from Christ’s biography into that of Krishna’s and these were the Gospel of Matthew and an apocryphal gospel in Arabic narrating the feats of the infant Christ or the Evangelium Infantiae. To lend support to his theory of derivation, Maurice argues against those

who held the first two chapters of Matthew to be spurious. In these early pages of Matthew is found the story of Herod’s massacre of the innocents paralleling Kaṃsa’s massacre of Devakī’s newborns. Maurice cites several instances from the *Evangelium Infantiae* as well to establish the idea that many of the feats of Krishna as a child bear similarity to its accounts. Even some of the childhood place-names associated with both the figures sound suspiciously homonymous to Maurice to have been mere coincidences. Just as Krishna’s childhood was spent in Mathura similarly the Arabic gospel mentioned a place called Matarea, near Hermopolis in Egypt, where the infant Jesus remained until the death of Herod.

The incredible accomplishments of Krishna as a child that intimate his superhuman abilities are traced back to observations appearing in the gospels. Thus the elevation of the Govardhana hill by infant Krishna is thought to be an allegorical elaboration on Mark 2:23, “concerning the possibility of removing mountains by the power of faith.” The Gopīs in the *Bhāgavata* too might have had something to do with allegorization based on a scriptural suggestion:

> The expression of ardent affection that occur in the Bhagavat are evidently of an allegorical nature, have reference to union of soul rather than body; and possibly, may all be founded on a perversion of those passages of scripture, which represent Christ, as the bridegroom of the church.\(^\text{136}\)

We should not miss here the precise purpose of Maurice’s argument. The proof of derivativeness of the Indian tradition was not addressed to the potential Indian readers but was an attempt to “annihilate one source of imaginary triumph” of the “schools of Voltaire and Volney.”

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136. Ibid., 104.
3. Robert Taylor was an evangelical-clergyman-turned-free-thinker in early nineteenth-century England who, like Volney, made a case for pagan origins of Christianity. In 1824, he established the Christian Evidence Society (CES) to contest the “suspicious origination” of the “pretended Divine Revelation” contained in Christianity and proposed in a manifesto that neither the authorship or chronology, nor the events or the people described in the Gospels can be proved to have actually existed. In the manifesto the Puranik accounts of Krishna and their similarities with the Gospels’ accounts are cited to demonstrate the derivative nature of the gospels.

In *Diegesis*, a text written while Taylor was incarcerated for blasphemy consequent to his publication of the manifesto, an elaborate defense of the cryptic manifesto is offered. Following Jones’s and Volney’s line of argument Taylor speaks there of “the irresistible apprehension, that the Christian Saviour, after all, is no more than what the Aesculupius, Hercules, Adonis, Bachhus, Apollo and Chrishna were; that is, an emblematic personification of the sun.” Accordingly, Taylor digs into all the available material for establishing resemblances between Christ and the divinities of disparate other provenances. The argument of pagan origins of Christianity is thus not limited to citing similarities between the Indian traditions and the gospels alone. The field of comparative mythology as such is brought into consideration.

Taylor, responding to a Unitarian opponent, sarcastically compares events from Krishna’s life (“my Chrish”) with those of Christ’s account from the gospels (or “their Chrish”):

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Does my Chrish spend a little of his leisure time with the milkmaids and rustic damsel in dancing, sporting, and playing on the flute? Why the very worst construction is put on it, and they declare that notwithstanding preaching to the contrary, he exhibited an appearance of excessive libertinism.

But their Chrish may have his sweethearts, Mary and Martha: his Magdalene, (none of the most reserved of ladies) his Joan and Susan and many others, who whatever other attentions they may have paid him “did also minister to him of their substance;” and scandal must not hint what it mustn’t hint.- Luke viii.3.

Does my Chrish breathe vain occasionally, or cut a throat or two, and encourage his disciples to do the like? Why ’twas bad enough, and God knows he was a scoundrel for doing so.

But does their Chrish order his “enemies that would not have him to reign over them to be brought forth and slain before him?” (Luke xix.27.) Why, that you know was only in the figurative language of the parable.\textsuperscript{138}

4. Such arguments based primarily on comparative mythology had to face not just the opposition of the Christian clergy but also that of the Orientalists who dealt with Indian texts. Taylor discussed at length the views of one of these Orientalists in his chapter on Krishna in the Diegesis. While Taylor in his anticlerical discourses mustered textual or narrative evidences from the Indian Puranik tradition, he was annoyed by the fact that John Bentley, the first author to bring out a book-length work on ancient Indian astronomy, tried to prove Christ’s chronological priority over Krishna by claiming to derive what was traditionally believed to be the exact date of Krishna’s birth from astronomical clues contained in an Indian text. However, for Bentley, this date was a mere ruse. Bentley sought to prove Krishna as a historical individual never did exist:

The fabrication of the incarnation and birth of Krishna, was most undoubtedly meant to answer a particular purpose of the Brahmins, who probably were sorely vexed at the progress Christianity was making, and fearing, if not stopped in time, they would lose all their influence and emoluments. It is, therefore, not improbable but that they conceived, that by inventing the incarnation of a deity nearly similar in name to Christ, and making some parts of his history and precepts agree with those in the gospels used by the Eastern

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 95–96.
Christians, they would then be able to turn the tables on the Christians by representing to the common people, who might be disposed to turn Christians, that Christ and Krishna were but one and the same deity…

This was, of course, a reworking of Jones’s hypothesis. Bentley did not approve of the chronological priority of Krishna over Christ, but he did see the influence of Christian traditions on the traditions narrating Krishna’s life. Bentley abandoned the theory of incorporation of Western influences in a preexisting Indian narrative. Instead he speculated that the figure of Krishna was invented by the Brahmins at a certain moment in history to ward off Christianization of India. For the self-serving Brahmins the invented figure of Krishna served as a substitute for Christ. Bentley’s recourse to such arguments, defending the claim to originality or the authenticity of Christianity, again demonstrates for us that the insertion of Christianity into a field of interreligious comparisons did not automatically secure a superior status or a historical priority for Christianity. Instead, the comparativism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century variety opened up a field of contestation where rationalist criticisms of Christianity had an opportunity to expand.

In Max Müller’s vision of comparativism, this underlying sense of fragility of the Christian tradition that requires a desperate defense disappears. In a review of a work by Charles Hardwick, a professor of divinity and a Christian advocate at Cambridge, exploring the “chief parallelisms and contrasts” between Christianity and other religions, Max Müller writes:

We need not be frightened if we discover traces of truth, traces even of Christian truth, among the sages and lawgivers of other nations. . . . A true spirit of Christianity would rather lead us to shut our eyes against many things which are revolting to us in the

religion of the Chinese, or the wild Americans, or the civilized Hindus, and to try to
discover as well as we can, how even in these degraded forms of worship a spark of truth
lies hidden somewhere.\textsuperscript{140}

By the time Max Müller publicized his agenda for a science of religion based on a comparativist
foundation, the British Empire had already turned into a behemoth with no contending power
posing any challenge to its expansive existence. Imperialist enthusiasm was in the upswing and
the days of mid-Victorian prosperity were yet to pass. Hence, the unshakable confidence of the
metropolitan rulers of this era, unsurprisingly, seeped into Max Muller’s discourse and the non-
Abrahamic faiths understandably appeared to him as “degraded” forms of worship, inspiring in
turn his rescue effort. Evidently then, Europe had come a long way, leaving far behind the era of
the likes of Volney and his fellow rationalists.

[II]

Now, turning to Bankimchandra’s act of comparison between Krishna and Christ (and others) we
should ask this crucial question: why did Bankimchandra perform a “reversal of the Orientalist
problematic” by confronting the claim of Christian superiority with the counter claim of Hindu
superiority, instead of resorting to the rationalist strategy of critically debunking all such claims?
This, however, should not cause much puzzlement. By the late nineteenth century, science as
such had become an instrument of empire, and rationalism earned the status of a ruse to
legitimize the Western domination of the globe. Being thus tainted, rationalism was not easily

disposable in the making of anticolonial ideology and a counterassertion of the superiority of the colonized became the order of the day.

It has been pointed out that nationalist discourse can be judged as autonomous in so far as “in agreeing to become ‘modern,’ [it] accepts the claim to the universality” of modern forms of knowledge while at once asserting “the autonomous identity of a national culture.” Bankimchandra being a quintessentially nationalist thinker, it is not altogether surprising that we see in some of his writings this structure of disavowal, instantiated by a simultaneous rejection and acceptance of “the dominance, both epistemic and moral, of an alien culture.” And yet, in the contemporary discussions of Bankimchandra’s discourse on history, the complications arising from the need to simultaneously accept and reject the epistemic dominance of the West, have sometimes been played down. Take, for instance, political theorist and historian Sudipta Kaviraj’s reading of *Krṣṇacaritra*. Bankimchandra appears as a consummate rationalist in Kaviraj’s account. So much so that Kaviraj prefers to read *Krṣṇacaritra* as primarily a work of theory “for its ‘historical’ arguments could easily be faulted even by Rabindranath Tagore, a person not known for his theoretical acuity, cf., his ‘Kṛṣṇacaritra’ in Adhunik Sahitya.”141 By taking Tagore’s criticism of Bankim as the point of departure and thence setting aside the historiographical arguments in *Krṣṇacaritra* for isolating its theory, Kaviraj is able to represent Bankimchandra’s argument in a schematic way. Lest the readers object to this, Kaviraj pleads that this is all for interpretative convenience:

My attempt to construct a more or less rigorous argument out of Bankim’s essay should not be misunderstood. It does not mean that he was in fact able to offer an entirely rigorous argument of the kind he was seeking. Nonetheless there are two reasons for us to systematize his views. First there is enough of an argument of that sort to be constructed. Secondly, it is precisely where the argument is not good, that we can understand him and his enterprise better, by simply shifting our question—from ‘is this argument right?’ to ‘why does he think like this?’—an elementary interpretive principle, unfortunately not observed very often. Making sense of a text is to understand not only its truths but also its errors.\textsuperscript{142}

As it is obvious Kaviraj does not rule out the inconsistencies in Bankimchandra, but constructs a coherent version regardless, as a matter of interpretative convenience. But this ignores the possibility that the inconsistencies, or the lack of rigor that Bankimchandra’s texts on religion elicit from time to time are significant in themselves and by ignoring them we lose the perspective on his essays that these imperfections would have enabled.

Rabindranath Tagore’s essay in \textit{Ādhunik Sāhitya} (Modern Literature) on the other hand appears to be mercilessly critical of the contradictions implicit in Bankimchandra’s historical portrayal of Krishna. In the essay, Bankimchandra is held accountable for failing to abide by the

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 91.
rules he had set for his own project. It is possible then to follow in Tagore’s footsteps and dwell on Bankimchandra’s inconsistencies rather than constructing a “rigorous argument” following Kaviraj. Even then, Kaviraj’s strategy to treat the erroneous moves of Bankimchandra as more than just errors and being constitutive of some sort of rationale comes in handy. Taking my cue from Tagore, the reading I attempt here is in pursuit of the inconsistencies in Bankimchandra’s argument. But I also seek to emphasize that these inconsistencies are not just fortuitous but that they have an underlying rationale that can be discovered.

To some extent, the inconsistencies found in, or between, Bankimchandra’s essays on religion can be explained by his need to be theoretically promiscuous. Bankimchandra was a Janus-faced theorist whose intended addressee was a heterogeneous audience. There are hints in his writings that tell us that he kept changing his interpretative strategies as per his expectations of the changing constitution of his audience. Take, for instance, his essays on *devatatva* (periodically published in the 1880s), offering a rationalist theogony of the Hindu divinities

143. Tagore’s criticism of Bankimchandra was not based on a non-cognitivist notion of truth that he sometimes valued: “Truth is far greater than tathya, that which is called fact in English. One has to retrieve truth from a heap of facts by means of the power of reason and imagination. Sometimes one finds in history a bunch of facts like dry fuel, but truth flares up with the help of the power of the poet’s imagination.” Tagore’s strategy to dispute Bankimchandra’s argument was based on challenging Bankimchandra’s inconsistencies. He appeared to be a more “severe rationalist” than Bankimchandra when he criticized Bankimchandra for leaving the question of the factuality of Draupadi’s polyandrous relationship with the Pāṇḍavas unresolved: “The marriage of Draupadī to five husbands is not a small matter; but if such a big event is a lie, and if that lie has found a place in the Mahābhārata Bankim has selected, this only serves to undermine truthfulness of that Mahābhārata and to reduce the historicity of Krishna. When we have just one witness, we can only trust a part of the testimony to be true when it is not adjacent to the lie.” Tagore’s strategy to dispute Bankimchandra’s argument was based on challenging Bankimchandra’s inconsistencies. He appeared to be a more “severe rationalist” than Bankimchandra when he criticized Bankimchandra for leaving the question of the factuality of Draupadi’s polyandrous relationship with the Pāṇḍavas unresolved: “The marriage of Draupadī to five husbands is not a small matter; but if such a big event is a lie, and if that lie has found a place in the Mahābhārata Bankim has selected, this only serves to undermine truthfulness of that Mahābhārata and to reduce the historicity of Krishna. When we have just one witness, we can only trust a part of the testimony to be true when it is not adjacent to the lie.” [রাবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর, *Ādhunik Sāhitya* (Calcutta: Viṣabhāratī, 1938), 71–72.]
worshipped prior to the (presumed) historical arrival of Krishna. Bankimchandra targeted these essays to just one kind of audience. It was addressed not to the orthodox traditionalists but to those Hindus who, having been subjected to Western influence, had lost their faith:

What is *dharma* must also be true, if there is untruth in Manu, in the *Mahābhārata* or in the *Veda*, it is still to be considered untruth and *adharma* and should be abandoned.

There are two issues with this claim. First, many would refuse to accept that in the Vedas et cetera, there is untruth or *adharma*. Refusing to hear such words a lot many will block their ears. I am not writing for this community. They at least have some dharma to support them. Those who have lost faith in Hindudharma, but have not adopted any other dharma, I am writing for them. They would not refuse what I am saying.

The other issue is the following: who will decide what is true and what is untrue in the Hindu teachings?144

In contrast, a few years later, in the inaugural chapter of *Krṣnacaritra* (1892), Bankimchandra expressed concern that his readers might contest his interpretation and that he would face “two hindrances from two sides,” namely of those who took anything written in Sanskrit to be incontrovertible and also of those who unquestioningly accepted the claims made by the Western

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scholars to be true.\textsuperscript{145} I intend to demonstrate Bankimchandra sought to respond in \textit{Kr\textsc{\textit{n}}\textsc{\textit{a}}\textsc{\textit{c}}\textsc{\textit{a}}\textsc{\textit{r}}\textsc{\textit{i}tr\textsc{\textit{a}}} to these hostile but mutually incommensurate responses he expected from his split-audience by adopting a complex strategy that made his argument internally inconsistent. It is not just the need to symbolically oppose Western epistemic dominance, but also the strategy to reach a wider audience that dictated Bankimchandra’s hermeneutic choices.

The rest of the chapter examines these changing tactics, beginning with a review of the essays on \textit{devatatva} (theogony). Chronologically prior to \textit{K\textsc{\textit{r}}\textsc{\textit{n}}\textsc{\textit{a}}\textsc{\textit{c}}\textsc{\textit{a}}\textsc{\textit{r}}\textsc{\textit{i}tr\textsc{\textit{a}}}, these essays elicit a strategy for establishing the monotheistic credentials of Hinduism, exemplified through its avatar Krishna. The interpretative choices of Bankimchandra in these essays make his argument about religion nearly indistinguishable from the comparativist accounts of the nineteenth-century European studies of religion.

\textbf{Bankimchandra’s Theogony}

In \textit{Vede Îś\textsc{\textit{v}}\textsc{\textit{ā}}\textsc{\textit{v}}\textsc{\textit{ā}}} (Monotheism in the Vedas), the penultimate essay in the series on \textit{devatatva or theogony}, the following statement appears:

> Whether we start with the Rigveda or the Šyāmā of Ramprasād, we are bound to reach the Dharma taught by Krishna. We must understand—there is one God and none besides. Whether we name him Indra, et cetera, or not, we name this very God. This is the dharma as taught by Krishna.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{145}“Now, in the course of my speculations, I will face two hindrances from two sides. On one side there is the belief that everything written in Sanskrit... offers us truth beyond disputation or suspicion. ...While this is the hindrance of one side, on the other side there is an even greater hindrance, Western scholarship.” [এক্ষণে যে বিচারে প্রকৃতি হইল, তাহাতে দুই দিকে দুই ধার বিপদ। এক দিকে, এ দেশীয় প্রতিভী সংস্কার যে, সংক্ষেপে ভাষায় যে কিছু রচনা আছে...সকলই প্রতিবাদ বা সনেহের অতীত যে সত্য, তাহাই আমাদের কাছে আশ্চর্য উপস্থিত করে। ...এই এক দিকের বিপদ। আর এক দিকে প্রকৃতির বিপদ, বিলাতী পাঠিতা ।] Chaṭṭopādhyaẏ, \textit{Bankim Racanāvalī}, 270.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 1039.
For Bankimchandra, this inevitability of arriving at the dharma of Krishna regardless of one’s point of departure was not just a matter of conviction. He took it upon himself to demonstrate why one must place one’s trust on Krishna as opposed to the other divinities in the Hindu pantheon. In this task Bankimchandra found an unlikely ally in Max Müller, a scholar who by his own admission knew little about the Puranik tradition. Bankimchandra opposed Max Müller’s characterization of the Vedic deities as Henotheistic (Henotheism being the category expressing the religious forms that are neither Polytheistic nor Monotheistic, but placed somewhere between these two). But when it came to the task of rationalist analysis of Hinduism, he borrowed the very discourse that was in use in Max Müller’s writings.

Bankimchandra was convinced that religion was indispensable for the preservation of society. Every religion had good elements contributing toward social improvement. But Hinduism had more of these elements than other religions. And yet establishing this was a matter of painstaking theoretical elaboration, as the essential Hinduism, which by Bankimchandra’s definition was the Hinduism compatible with the life and society in the modern era, was not to be immediately had from unredacted śāstrik (scriptural) texts. The essays on devatatva demonstrate the divergence between the Vedic deities and Krishna through placing them at different stages in an evolutionary process. This was not an account of Krishna as a historical figure, but Krishna as an ideal obtained by the Hindus as a consequence of constant spiritual refinement.

147. Ibid., 1035.
In his analysis, Bankimchandra takes recourse to some time-tested methods of the Orientalists for demonstrating the lower stature of the Vedic deities in the Hindu pantheon. One of these involved providing the etymological analysis of words and thereby unmasking their hidden meanings. Bankimchandra uses such etymological analyses for articulating the Vedic deities with nature worship:

How did the prevalent meaning of *devatā* come about? To understand this we have to consider carefully the word *devatā*. The one who is called *deva* can also be called *devatā*: “yo devah sa devatā” says Yāska, the author of Nirukta. Now consider the origin of the word deva. It derives from the root div. Shinning or kindling relate to this root. Whatever shines is deva. The sky, the sun, the fire, or the moon, all these shine. These are all devas if considered in the original sense. These are all glorified objects. This is why in beginning strotas or sūktaś were produced in praise of them. Eventually deva became a term for whomever the sūktas were made to praise.148

148. Ibid., 993.

149. Max Müller, Lectures, 214.

Now let us draw a parallel between this and a similar view by Max Müller:

Deva, as we saw, meant originally bright, and it was an epithet applicable to the fire, the sky, the dawn, the sun, also to the rivers, and trees, and mountains. It thus became a general term, and even in the Veda there is no hymn so ancient that deva does not display in it already the first traces of the general concept of bright, heavenly beings, opposed on the other side to the dark powers of the night and winter. Its etymological meaning becoming forgotten, deva became a mere name for all those bright powers…149
The arguments here are nearly indistinguishable. Where does the nationalist intervention take place then? The nationalist readaptation of Max Müller’s understanding of religion is effected through the introduction of a stage theory of the evolution of Hinduism. Hence, Bankimchandra does not mind emphasizing the lack of originality of the Vedic deities. For instance, he establishes resemblances between Ouranos and Varuṇa. The common racial origin of the Greeks and the Hindus is cited as an explanation for the common origin of these similarly named gods. Such comparisons also take off the some burden from the shoulders of those Hindus who are ashamed of the monstrosities appearing in the tales about some of the Vedic gods like Indra. This becomes evident in Bankimchandra’s take on the mythical episode of the seduction of Ahalyā by Indra, an object of scorn for the Western commentators, and considered a product of an imagination tainted with lax morals. Bankimchandra’s comparativist analysis allows this episode to be portrayed in a better light. The seduction story ends with Ahalyā’s husband cursing Indra, which leaves him with a deformed body with a thousand eyes. Taking his cue from Edward Burnett Taylor’s work, Bankimchandra compares this sahasrākṣa (the one-thousand-eyed) Indra with the śatākṣa (one-hundred-eyed) Argus Panoptes of Greece.

Having demonstrated such resemblances with the divinities of foreign provenances, Bankimchandra attempts to establish Indra as a universal deity. He cites some instances of Indra-worship in non-Indian, and more significantly for race conscious Bankimchandra, non-Aryan cultures. “To explain the origin of religion we must not consider the religion of the civilized, for their religion is old and has gone beyond its first stage.”\(^{150}\) To understand the origin we must

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150. Chaṭṭopādhyāy, Baṅkim Racanāvalī, 1022.
discuss the religion of the unicivilized (*asabhya*). But Bankimchandra is not troubled by the idea of having to cite instances of Indra-worship among those he did not consider civilized. The worship of “Dendid” among the Dinkas, the “Omakuru” of the Damaras and the “Tlalok” of the Aztecs, all these are occurrences of Indra-worship among the communities with no knowledge of Indian culture. Similarly, “Marang Buru” of the Kols and the Roman “Jupiter Pluvius” are mere iterations of Indra. The comparison of a Vedic figure here, with the divinities of the communities not considered civilized by him, is but for the purpose of propounding a universal stage theory of the evolution of religion. That these markedly variegated and different cultures all have their own Indra-like figures is not purely fortuitous. It is rather a symptom of an ascending evolutionary process of all religions regardless of the disparate cultural backgrounds.

Bankimchandra gives us an elaboration of these different levels or steps (*sopān*) in religious evolution. It is this stage theory that proves to be crucial for explaining the relationship between Krishna as the monotheistic ideal of the Hindus and the prehistory of such an ideal. The religiosity of the Vedas can only be assessed from the vantage point of the appearance of “iśvar.” Far from being unique in its evolution, the Vedic *dharma* goes through a multistaged evolution, finally reaching the idea of “iśvar”:

1. At first there was worship of the *devas*— in other words the bestowal consciousness upon the inanimate and its worship.
2. Worship of *iśvar* along with the deva-worship.
3. Worship of *iśvar* and the dissolution of the *devas* in *iśvar*. The final stage of the *vaidik dharma* is found in the Upanishads where the *devas* almost disappear; only the cheerful *brahma* remain existent. This dharma is very pure, and yet incomplete.151

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151. Ibid., 1035.
The process reaches completion in the fifth stage. This is the stage of the appearance of
Bhaktiśastra, propagated through texts like Gita. This is also the stage of the arrival of Hinduism
to the monotheistic ideal, Krishna.

The distance between the nature-worship and the evolved monotheism was crossed by
Hinduism in five stages. Christianity has no place in this evolutionary history of Hindu divinities
because it has nothing to offer to the colonized that they cannot already have from a religious
archive at their disposal. And yet this is minimally disruptive of the epistemic dominance of the
West. All Bankimchandra contributes here is a simple act of substitution. Krishna is made to
occupy the place of Christ. Let us conclude with the words of a nineteenth-century English
historian, John Robert Seeley, who authored a biography of Christ called Ecce Homo, and is
frequently cited as an influence on Bankimchandra. This is what John Seeley thought on nature-
worship:

I can conceive no religion as satisfactory that falls short of Christianity, but, on the other
hand, I cannot believe any religion to be healthy that does not start from Nature-worship.
It is in the free and instinctive admiration of human beings for the glory of heaven, earth
and sea, that religion, so far as religion is the name of a good and healthy thing, begins,
and I cannot imagine but as morbid a religion that has ceased to admire them.¹⁵²

It is evident here that Bankimchandra would have agreed with Seeley on the importance of

nature-worship in the early phase of a religious evolution but would have differed on the
teleological fulfillment of that evolution in Christianity.

**Mimeticism and the Subject of History**

While at times Bankimchandra’s evolutionary model for Hinduism matched, word-for-word, the
Western evolutionary model upholding the superiority of Christianity, his most substantial
historiographical work, *Krṣṇacaritra*, charted a course that markedly diverged from his essays on
*debtatva*. The suggestion that Krishna’s emergence as a figure of veneration was a result of
spiritual evolution of the Hindus is not contradicted in *Krṣṇacaritra*. But here, the focus of his
research being the life of Krishna, the question of establishing Krishna as a historical subject
becomes Bankimchandra’s prime concern.

In this matter, the traditional accounts of Krishna’s supernatural feats presented
Bankimchandra with an interpretative deadlock. To resolve this deadlock he offered in
*Krṣṇacaritra* what I intend to call a double derivation of Krishna as a historical or historicizable
subject. One of these derivations was rationalistic in the late nineteenth-century historiographical
sense. Consider, for instance the twelfth chapter of the first part of *Krṣṇacaritra*, called
“Unnatural or Supernatural” (“Anaisargik bā Atiprākṛta”), which argued for a blanket rejection
of the supernatural in the sources to be used for Krishna’s life history. Here Bankimchandra did
not outright debunk the uses of the supernatural but made a strong plea for skepticism:

> If you are told that palm fruits grow on mango trees, you should not take that on trust. You must ask them to show you that palm fruits actually grow on mango trees or demand that they explain it to you how such a thing may happen. And the man who claims that palm fruits grow on mango trees, if he claims that he has only heard about it without actually seeing such a thing, then doubting him becomes even more legitimate. For now
you do not have an eyewitness account. This holds true in the *Mahābhārata*. There is no proof of what is supernatural in there.\(^{153}\)

In the chapter entitled, “Is it Possible for God to Descend On Earth?” ("Iśvar Pṛthibīte Abatīrṇa Hoyā Ki Sambhab?"), Bankimchandra offered a scriptural justification of representing Krishna as a historical subject. Here, at the outset, he rejected the idea of a distinctionless God or a God without finite qualities. The inception of the avatars is possible as long as God is not *nirguṇa*. But Bankimchandra demonstrated that God’s descent was actualizable as well as a historically actualized idea not in terms of abstract logic or theological argumentation but by citing scriptural references. He found clues to establish this point in the *Gita*. For instance, he cited the words of Krishna himself justifying his human birth: “For the protection of the good/
And the destruction of evil doers/ For the sake of establishing righteousness/ I am born in every age.” \([परित्राणाय साधुनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम्। धर्म संस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे॥]\)

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154. Ibid., 297.
Bankimchandra added further that Krishna’s task of *dharmasःःṛakṣaṇa*, or the preservation of dharma, was not limited to slaying the demons. The human incarnation of Krishna was not primarily for the purpose to fight monsters in hand-to-hand combats. It was, however, to teach mankind the proper conduct for approximating an ideal of happiness. This argument foregrounding the divine imperative to teach humans the proper conduct for the attainment of happiness was the key to much of Bankimchandra’s strategy of suturing the theological with the historical. Since teaching the proper conduct through scriptural means or in abstracto was not enough for individuals to acquire perfection in their everyday existence, it was necessary for them to have an actual human ideal to follow. An infinite god, however, cannot be the ideal for the finite humans. This necessitates the descent of God on earth and there lies the reasonableness of the avatars. Bankimchandra derived the idea of the avatar as a mimetic ideal from the *Gita*: “Whatever the greatest man does/Thus do the rest/ Whatever standard he sets/ The world follows (anuvartate) that.”

If the key word *anuvartana* here leave us unsure about the mimeticist logic Bankimchandra took pains to delineate, let us consider another instance from *Kṛṣṇacaritra* presenting a claim about the humanity of Krishna:

> We have called him the ideal man. By this we assert that even if he had supra human abilities they did not evolve into actual powers. We said it is possible that God is born into the human world as the ideal human for the sake of edification of mankind. This being the case, he would only act as human endowed with human powers in this world. He would not perform any mundane or unusual deed with the help of his otherworldly strength. For the humans have no unusual power. Anyone who takes recourse to some

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155. Ibid., 298.
156. Ibid., 301.
unnatural power to perform cannot be a human ideal. How can man imitate a power that he does not have in the first place.\textsuperscript{157}

The message is clear. The finitude of the avatar is a sign of God’s benevolence as it allows men to learn from the acts of the divine in human incarnation. But this also makes the avatar coincide with the finite man, whose discourse concerns the world of finitude, or the world whose history can be written. Bankimchandra thus achieved a reconciliation of history and theology using mimeticism as a theme mediating the two opposed sides. But this happy coincidence of the historical and the scriptural in his theorization of historical subjectivity leaves us guessing as to what role it played in his determination of historical facts. Hence, the next section offers a review of Bankimchandra’s strategies to distinguish fact and fiction in his pursuit of historical Krishna.

**History and Allegory**

While Bankimchandra’s double derivation of Krishna’s historical subjectivity was, I am inclined to think, an attempt to offer an interpretation to satisfy both the traditionalists and modernists among his readers, such a priori arguments still needed to be supplemented by empirical substantiations. However, the determination of the facts of Krishna’s life was not a purely scholarly endeavor to Bankimchandra and he often accompanied this seemingly technical aspect of his work with his strident anticolonial polemic. Take for instance the following lines from the

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 383.
second chapter of the first part of *Kṛṣṇacaritra*. Bankimchandra here unreservedly inveighs against the stalwarts of nineteenth-century scholarship, including the likes of Albrecht Weber (1825–1901), William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), and James Fergusson (1808–1886):

In Europe and America some pundits have learned Sanskrit. They try to find history in old Sanskrit texts but they cannot tolerate the fact that powerless Hindus ruled by outsiders used to be a civilized nation and this civilization happens to be very old. Excluding a few of them, the rest are wholly dedicated to reducing the glory of ancient India. They are keen to prove that among the ancient Indian texts—excepting the anti-Hindu Buddhist texts—all that is found is either wholly lie or stolen from other nations.\(^{158}\)

As is obvious here, it was the thesis of derivativeness of Indian civilization that Bankimchandra was most wary of. Against this backdrop, his nationalist defense of Krishna’s historical authenticity sought to establish a secure chronology of Krishna’s life and also sought to save Krishna’s name from being reduced to a mere metaphor by scholars indulging in etymological analyses of the names of Hindu divinities. Both these were efforts to empirically demonstrate Krishna’s historical actuality.

Evidently then, Bankimchandra’s demonstration of such historical actuality was addressed, primarily, to the Europeans and the readers who were under the influence of European knowledge. Hence, his elaborate calculations to derive the date of the Kurukṣetra War were interspersed with a diatribe against Albrecht Weber. Weber had denied that the *Mahābhārata* was

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 270.
a text dating back to the pre-Christian era. Not only did Bankimchandra seek to dispute Weber’s suggestion, he was also infuriated by the fact that Weber had relied on the ancient Greek author Megasthenes’ testimony to back his claim. Thus, it was important for him to come up with a text of Indian origin refuting Weber’s claim and he saved the day by dating the Kurukṣetra War to 1430 BC based on a few clues buried in the verses of the Viṣṇupurāṇa. In spite of the intricacies involved in such calculations, and I deliberately skip here the tortuous details, the nationalist strategy of Bankimchandra here remained rudimentary—that is, countering the testimony of an European text with the testimony of an indigenous text.

The other strategy of Bankimchandra to defend Krishna’s historical particularity led him to oppose the Western scholars who had preferred to read Indian texts figuratively. Such figurative readings denied historical status to the prime characters of the Mahābhārata as their proper names were taken to be allegorical signs, impervious to literal readings. For instance, some Western scholars refused to accept the view that the Pāṇḍavas were historical figures as their names were not found in any early texts besides the Mahābhārata. This was an issue that Bankimchandra’s dating of the Kurukṣetra War could not lay to rest since even the scholars who accepted the historical status of that war (Bankimchandra counts Henry Thomas Colebrook [1756–1837], Horace Hayman Wilson [1786–1860], and Montstuart Elphinstone [1779–1859] among those who did) still disputed the status of the Mahābhārata as a historically authentic account. Christian Lassen (1800–1876), for instance, considered only the war between the Kurus and the Pāncālas to be valid without accepting any role played by the sons of Pāṇdu, the Pāṇḍavas in it. He also claimed that the names such as Arjuna and Krishna were mere metaphors of brightness and darkness, et cetera. Reacting to such views of Lassen, Bankimchandra offered a
general denunciation of the figural readings of Indian tradition attempted by the nineteenth-century German scholars:

We admit that in Hindu Śāstra—in the Veda, Itihāsa, Purāṇa and Kāvya—metaphors are predominant. There are many metaphors. We ourselves must raise in this book the instances of many metaphors... We also know that some people want to discount whatever found in Sanskrit literature or śāstra as metaphors whether they have actual metaphors in them or not. In the name Rāma one finds the verbal root ram and likewise in Sītā is found the root Si. Citing these, they have made Rāmāyaṇa into an allegory of cultivation. The German scholars, by taking recourse to a few of these roots have discounted all the suktas of Rigveda as mere metaphors of the sun and cloud. It is possible to explain away everything in the world in such ways.  

Bankimchandra thus had to valiantly prevent the proper name of Krishna from being appropriated and reduced to a metaphor. The defense he offered hinged on a certain sutra of Panini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, that recorded the rule to form the word Vāsudevaka (the devotee of the Vāsudeva or Krishna) thereby suggesting that Krishna was already an established divinity at the time when Panini authored his famous work on the grammar of Sanskrit. Bankimchandra followed this by more citations from Panini to demonstrate that the names like Yudisṭhira, Kunti, Arjuna, and Nakula too were in use during Panini’s lifetime. He meant to thus prove that there were other texts of sufficient antiquity beside the Mahābhārata to have named Krishna, the
Pāṇḍavas, and other such figures. Going against the Weberian hypothesis of Aṣṭādhyāyī being a relatively modern text, Theodor Goldstücker (1821–1872), another eminent German scholar of Sanskrit, had claimed that Panini antedated the advent of Buddhism and this had delighted Bankimchandra to no end. The evidence from Panini, he thought, offered the irrefutable proof of antiquity of the events narrated in the Mahābhārata.

It is essential to add here that Bankimchandra was not consistently opposed to figural readings of the sources dealing with Krishna’s life. What may look to us like an opportunistic streak in Bankimchandra, happened to be his tendency to read traditional religious texts as allegories whenever it served the cause of producing reformed Hinduism. Hence, resisting figural interpretations by the German scholars went hand-in-hand in his discourse with the justification of allegorical readings of the texts that he considered to be later introductions to the tradition, and hence inappropriable as authentic history. Thanks to such figural readings, Bankimchandra had no reservation to read the introduction of Radha in the later Puranik texts as insertion of a metaphor that in no way altered the facts of Krishna’s life. In one of the Belles Lettres of Bankimchandra we find a satirical dialogue between a certain bābāji (a holy man) and his disciple where the theme of allegorical aspects of Vaishnavism is brought up. Although the tenor of this literary piece is very far from his late essays on religious themes, Bankimchandra’s view on Radha as a figure is very well illustrated here:

Me: Who is Rādhā?
Bābāji: “rādh,” the verbal root.
Me: Leave the roots alone.
Bābāji: rādh dhatu sādhane, prāptau, tose pujāyām va. The one who propitiates Iśvara, the one who obtains him, the one who worships him is indeed the Radha. A devotee of Iśvara is a Rādhā. If you become a devotee, you shall be a Rādhā too.
Me: In that case she isn’t a Gopīnī?
Bābāji: Gopīnī is not the right word — it is Gopī. Who is a Gopī?
Me: A Gopī is a Gopa’s wife.
Bābāji: “Go” means earth. The pious are the caretakers of the earth and they are Gopa. Gopī is just the feminine of Gopa.

... 
Me: I see, these are all metaphors. Isn’t Krishna too a metaphor?
Bābāji: I firmly believe, the lord of the world himself descended to this world to establish dharma on earth. He is not a metaphor. But the producers of the Purāṇas established the allegory of dharma having placed him at the center of it.160

The figurative readings of the German scholars obliterated Krishna’s claim to an earthly existence. Bankimchandra’s figurative reading, on the other hand, sought to demonstrate that with time the original historical events of Krishna’s life came to be supplemented by texts that were commemorative elaborations of these original events. It was necessary, therefore, to refrain from reading these later texts as bare history. Following this principle, Bankimchandra was keen to emphasize the rich theological significance of some of the controversial episodes of Krishna’s life, like the Rāsalilā-episode (where Krishna participates in a dance with innumerable women)
narrated in several of the Puranas or the episode of Vastraharaṇa (where Krishna is seen stealing the clothes of women while they went skinny-dipping) from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

The turn from the literal to the figural in Kṛṣṇacaritra reveals two notable inconsistencies. On the one hand, Bankimchandra appears to reserve the right to resort to figurative readings of Indian tradition while denying the same right to the Western scholars. On the other hand, he includes in his account elaborate discussions of the Puranik episodes whose historical viability he had previously ruled out. But these inconsistencies seem less stark if we argue that Bankimchandra’s project for the recuperation of Krishna as the Hindu ideal was split into two simultaneous operations: historiographic and cathartic (cleansing). In Kṛṣṇacaritra these two operations, while not necessarily antithetical, remain only partially commensurate. Their incommensurability becomes visible whenever Bankimchandra’s historiographical effort fails to match his intention to purge the tradition of the elements that he considered inessential, or morally too reprehensible, to be retained in his project of reformed Hinduism.

Consider, for instance, Bankimchandra’s interpretation of the Puranik episode of Rāsalīlā. Despite claiming that such an episode never actually took place, Bankimchandra made use of the Rāsalīlā to illustrate some of his reformist theories on the Hindu tradition. Accordingly he claimed that the Rāsa-dance episode was nothing but an instance of the aesthetic faculty, which he considered to be an universal human faculty, being put to good use by Krishna and the Gopīs. Krishna (as the avatar) and the Gopīs (as devotees), however, actualize their use of the aesthetic faculty in different ways:

For Krishna it is enjoyment alone, but for the Gopīs it is tantamount to the worship of Īśvar. On one side we have the manifestation of the beauty of the anantasundar (the
possessor of eternal-beauty/Krishna) and on the other side we have the worship of the *anantasundar*. The best possible training of the aesthetic faculty happens if we orient it to the divine. In ancient India women were barred from the path of knowledge as the study of the Vedas, et cetera, were not allowed to them. For women the path of work is achieved with difficulty, but they had a special right to Bhakti. . . .Thus worshiping the evolving beauty of the *anantasundar* is the main means to the attain fulfillment in the lives of women. *Rāsalilā* is an allegory that contains the aforesaid theory.\textsuperscript{161}

This instance of figural reading allows Bankimchandra on the one hand, to subsume the *Rāsalilā* episode within his account of reformed Hinduism, and on the other hand it defends the episode from the moral scorn of those critics who, if reading its verses literally, would reject them for their erotic content. By making such episodes appear allegorical, Bankimchandra therefore allowed for them to be retained in the archive of reformed Hinduism in spite of their being extraneous to history per se.

Hence, following Bankimchandra in his pursuit of historical Krishna, we encounter a partitioned archive. On one side of the divide are placed texts that are subjected to historical reading, on the other side the sway of historical discourse is resisted by resorting to figural readings of texts. This imaginary partition secures the sanctity of the historical, while allowing the reformist iteration of the tradition on Krishna to overreach the boundaries of historical discourse. So far so good. But, as I will demonstrate next, the place for history that

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 327.
Bankimchandra sought to secure in his discourse would be undermined by his strategy for establishing Krishna as an ideal for nationalist emulation.

**History and the Mimeticist Imperative**

Bankimchandra, despite his anticolonial rhetoric, borrowed much from the Western scholars’ analyses of Indian traditions. His refusal to take *the Mahābhārata* as a coherent text, authored by a single individual, was inspired by critical philological analyses of Western provenance. The fact that *the Mahābhārata* was a multilayered text and interpolations of later times marked its corpus was suggested by the Sanskritist Monier Monier Williams (among others):

> The principle story, which occupies little more than a fifth of the whole, forms the lowest layer; but this has been so completely overlaid by successive incrustations, and the mass so compacted together, that the original substratum is not always clearly traceable. If the successive layers can ever be critically analyzed and separated, the more ancient from the later additions, and the historical element from the purely fabulous, it may be expected that light will be thrown on the early history of India, religious, social, and political—a subject still veiled in much obscurity, notwithstanding the valuable researches of Professor Lassen and others.\(^\text{162}\)

Bankimchandra, like Monier-Williams, considered the *Mahābhārata* to be a multiple-layered text, each layer having been a contribution of a chronologically distinct age. Interpolations introduced into the original text went unchecked due to the predominant culture of orality in Indian traditions. Also, thanks to its popularity, the *Mahābhārata* was used as a means to educate the masses, leading to purely altruistic insertions of extraneous elements into the original text.

In *Krṣṇacarittra*, Bankimchandra sought to find the “original substratum” of the *Mahābhārata* by separating “the historical element from the purely fabulous,” as was the Western epistemic injunction. However, the a priori rules that he set for himself for cutting

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through the overlay of “successive incrustation” of interpolations betrayed that the task of establishing Krishna as an ideal for emulation of the emergent nationalist subject took precedence over the task of producing a historically authentic account of Krishna’s life.

As a rationalist, Bankimchandra separated the original layer of the Mahābhārata from the later layers by setting aside the supernatural elements in the narrative as belated insertions. For instance, the fact that in certain parts of the Mahābhārata Krishna was portrayed as exercising his supernatural prowess, as opposed to the other parts where no supernatural ability of the Krishna was manifested, signified for him the existence of two discrete layers. As an a priori move the exclusion of the supernatural made the archive on Krishna appropriable as history. But following this Bankimchandra formulated additional a priori rules, apparently to further enable the separation of the historical layer of the epic from the layers later inserted into the text. However, these additional rules allowed him to exclude all that he considered unfit for emulation for the subject of reformed Hinduism. The recourse to historiography for Bankimchandra was therefore not just in response to the Western scholars’ denial of historical validity of the Indian traditions but was also an excuse for advancing his reformist agenda of cleansing the archive of what he considered was “inessential” in the Hindu tradition.

Bankimchandra’s use of aesthetic criteria for distinguishing the supposed primary layer of the Mahābhārata demonstrates for us that a mere rationalist a priori excluding the supernatural from the archive had proved insufficient for his project of portraying Krishna as an ideal for emulation. Take for instance Bankimchandra’s assertion that the original poet of the Mahābhārata was a good poet and the marks of interpolation therefore should be sought in the sections of the epic instantiating bad poetry:
In the works of the good poets we discern certain characteristics. In the *Mahābhārata* there are sections that are undoubtedly original— for without these being original the *Mahābhārata* loses its Mahabharataness— and their style of composition is everywhere of the same quality. If we find parts where such qualities are lacking and yet they have qualities that are contradictory to the qualities we mentioned earlier, then we should consider these sections having incongruous elements to be later interpolations.  

Equally remarkable was Bankimchandra’s recourse to what can be called literary-characterological assumptions for the sake of diagnosing interpolations:

That the poet of the *Mahābhārata* is the best of poets we do not doubt. The characters depicted by the best poets are usually wholly coherent. If somewhere we find an exception to this we should suspect that section to be an interpolation. For example, if we find that in a manuscript copy of the *Mahābhārata*, in sections, Bhīṣma has been described as an adulterer or Bhīma as a coward then we would be correct to assume those sections as interpolations.

The coherent and un-self-contradictory subject was hence considered by Bankimchandra to have been proper to the primary and historical layer of the *Mahābhārata*. Such characterological assumptions enabled him to cover up the dissonance between the aesthetically immaculate

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163. Ibid., 292.

164. Ibid., 292.
subject and the subject of empirical history while helping him to weed out what he considered to be unflattering in the portrayals of Krishna in *the Mahābhārata*.

Some of these portrayals depicted Krishna taking recourse to acts of subterfuge. Take for instance, the episode from the *Sabhā Parva* of *the Mahābhārata* that portrayed Krishna assisting the Pāṇḍavas in the slaying of Jarāsaṃdha. There were elements in this episode that Bankimchandra found exceptionable. The story went like this: Krishna, along with Arjuna and Bhīma, arrived in Magadha to confront Jarāsaṃdha who was a formidable enemy of the Pāṇḍavas. This took place at the time when Yudhiṣṭhira intended to gain suzerainty over the territory of his neighboring kings. However, instead of fighting a just battle with Jarāsaṃdha, the Pāṇḍavas and their ally Krishna took to a strategy of deception. They donned the disguise of *snātaka brāhmaṇa* (young Brahmins who have just completed their studentship). Also, when they came face-to-face with Jarāsaṃdha neither Arjuna nor Bhīma spoke, pretending to have undertaken a vow of silence, and Krishna spoke instead on their behalf. All these lies to keep their disguise intact inspired Bankimchandra’s caustic observation:

> What is the purpose of all these strategizing and chicanery? Why do the same Krishna and Arjuna we have for so long considered to be (our) religious ideals lose their elegance? If there was a purpose to this underhandedness then we might understand that for the fulfillment of their objective they played this game. Perhaps for the sake of destroying their enemy they adopted these strategies. But in any event we would have to admit that these were not saintly figures and Krishna’s personality is not as flawless as we had thought.\(^{165}\)

\[^{165}\text{Ibid.}, 388.\]
Nonetheless, Bankimchandra’s theory about the existence of several layers of *the Mahābhārata* saved Krishna from being disqualified as the ideal for emulation. He attributed the morally repugnant (and hence inimitable) act of subterfuge that appeared in this episode to the poet of the second layer of the *Mahābhārata*. Bankimchandra argued that the poet of this later layer intentionally overplayed Krishna’s skills as a super-strategist at the cost of undermining the avatar’s moral uprightness.

It should however be noted here that Bankimchandra was not merely concerned about Krishna’s portrayal as an actor engaged in violent acts of retribution but he was also wary, in certain cases, of portrayals that might appear to us to be wholly innocuous. Take, for instance, the episode narrating Yudhiṣṭhira’s performance of *Aśvamedha Yagna* (the Horse Sacrifice Ceremony) in the *Sabhā Parva*. Parts of this episode invited Bankimchandra’s disapproval for having depicted Krishna serving the Brahmins who had gathered for the occasion:

> It is hard to understand why Krishna was engaged in this task appropriate only for the servants. Was there no better work to perform commensurate with his stature? Or should we consider that washing the feet of the Brahmins is the greatest task in itself? Should we have to go about washing the feet of the Brahmin cooks having now accepted him as the ideal man? If that happens to be the case, we have to say emphatically, he is not the ideal man.

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[কথাটা বুঝা গেল না। শ্রীকৃষ্ণ কেন এই ভূতাৰ্থপৰ্ষোপী কার্য নিযুক্ত হইয়াছিলেন? তাহার ঘোষা কি কোন ভাল কাজ ছিল না? না, ব্রাহ্মণদের পাঠাতেই বহ মহৎ কাজ? তাহাদের আদেশপুরুষ বলিয়া ব্রাহ্মণকিংবদ্ধের পাদপ্রস্ফুক্তন করিয়া বেদনিঃত হইবে? যদি তাহি হয়, তবে তিনি আদেশপুরূষ নাইন, ইহা আমরা মুক্তকাষ্ঠ বলিব।]

166. Ibid., 399.
This reference to foot washing had brought Krishna close to Christ in the eyes of some of the Western commentators. For Bankimchandra, though, this was an instance of excessive humility and an embarrassing moment that, if not resolutely excluded, would interrupt his project of affirming Krishna as an ideal for nationalist emulation. Hence, he had to devise a strategy to excise the foot-washing event from what he considered to be the valid account of what happened. A verse from the Gita came in handy, backing up his claim that Krishna could not have acted obsequiously toward the Brahmins: “The wise see the same in a Brahmin endowed with wisdom and cultivation, in a cow, in an elephant, and even in a dog or in an outcaste.”

विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि । शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिता: समदर्शिनः।।

This pithy observation that one ought not to distinguish between the candālas (in the śloka quoted above the epithet svapāka is used instead of candāla, svapāka: one who cooks dogs; however, both words were used to name the outcastes in the Brahminical social imaginary), the animals and the Brahmins, was cited by Bankimchandra as a scriptural injunction that Krishna, he presumed, could not have contradicted. Hence, Bankimchandra claimed that the reference to Krishna performing foot washing must have been a later interpolation.  

Finally, the account Bankimchandra found most embarrassing was Krishna’s alleged complicity in the slaying of Droṇa, accomplished by means of deceit and trickery. This was an episode where Krishna advised the Pāṇḍavas to take recourse to a capital lie. When Dhrṣṭadyumna, an ally of the Pāṇḍavas, repeatedly failed in his attempts to slay Droṇa, Krishna came up with the plan to inform Droṇa deceitfully of his son Ashvatthāma’s demise, hoping thus

167. Ibid., 399.
to weaken his resolve. Ashvatthāma was one of the lucky few of the Kauravas who survived the war. Nonetheless, the deceitful proclamation of Aśvatthāma’s death had its effect and Droṇa relinquished the fight and was killed in consequence.

Bankimchandra attributed this instance of Krishna’s deceitful behavior, too, to a later layer of the Mahābhārata. Once more, literary-characterological considerations played a crucial role in his determination of the original layer of the epic. The fact that Yudhiṣṭhira and Krishna both took to deception on account of gaining a better foothold in their battle against Droṇa went contrary to, what Bankimchandra considered, the original portrayal of their usual “truthful” self. Likewise Bhīma, celebrated for his unparalleled bravery and strength was depicted in this episode to have spoken untruth into Droṇa’s ears instead of bravely taking him on in a face-to-face battle. Bankimchandra, thus having denied the good poet of the original Mahābhārata the right to depict contradictions in these actors, took the contradictions found in them as signs of interpolations.

These instances demonstrate that Bankimchandra’s interest to establish Krishna as a mimetic ideal led him to diverge from what were, by the nineteenth century, the established rationalist principles for the criticism of traditional texts. Take for instance Rammohan Roy’s comments on Krishna’s moral deficiency in the Mahābhārata:

Jurra-Sundh, a powerful prince of Behar, having heard of the melancholy murder of his son-in-law perpetrated by Krishna, harassed and at last drove him out of the place, of his nativity (Muthoora) by frequent military expeditions: Krishna, in revenge, resolved to deprive that prince of his life by frauds and in a most unjustifiable manner. To accomplish his object, he and his two cousins Bheema and Urjoona, declared themselves to be

168. Ibid., 447.
169. Ibid., 447.
Brahmuns; and in that disguise they entered his palace; where finding him weakened by a religious fast, and surrounded only by his family and priests, they challenged him to fight a duel. He accordingly fought Bheema, the strongest of the three; who conquered and put him to death, vid. Subha Purba or the 2nd Book of the Maha Bharuth. Krishna again persuaded Joodehisthir his cousin, to give false evidence in order to accomplish the murder of Dron their spiritual father— Vid. Dron Purba, or the 7th Book of the Maha Bharuth.170

Such debunking of Krishna as a traditionally revered figure was an inalienable part of Rammohan’s discourse advocating reforms in Hinduism. And yet, since in that phase of history nationalism was yet to surface, the reformist discourses like Rammohan’s embraced universal principles of rationalism unreservedly. This old-style rationalism, however, had to be set aside by Bankimchandra. The need to construct a reformed Hindu faith compatible with the rising nationalist aspirations led him to adopt a strategy of narrating the past that diverged significantly from what can be called, borrowing Kaviraj’s words, “simple and severely rationalistic.” If anything, Bankimchandra’s rationalism was inconsistent and severely self-contradictory. The fact that a mimeticist discourse was introduced by Bankimchandra alongside, or rather interspersed with, his historiography, and that this mimeticism interrupted and endangered his historically authentic account of Krishna, speak volumes about this anticolonial author’s difficult predicament: a predicament that implied a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the Western epistemic injunctions, and above all, the injunction to write history.

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All things considered, while Bankimchandra managed to press history into the service of nationalism, he also made way for the violation of its constative boundaries. In his project,

170. Ram Mohun Roy, A Second Defence Of The Monotheistical System Of The Veds; In Reply To An Apology For The Present State Of Hindoo Worship (Calcutta:1817), 56.
history facilitated the means to intervene into the traditional archive of Hinduism, and yet it proved inadequate for producing a tradition devoid of the “impurities” that his reformism sought to expurgate from the traditional archive. Hence, by putting together a mimeticist doctrine, Bankimchandra sought to circumscribe the traditional archive in ways that his allegiance to historical discourse per se did not sanction. It is this mimeticist doctrine that came to dominate Bankimchandra’s discourse and interrupted his effort to produce a purely factual account of Krishna’s life.

Bankimchandra’s mimeticism, and in effect, his unstated yet discernible disavowal of history has gone largely unnoticed. Since Bankimchandra was the author who sent out the call, “We have no history! We must have history!” —thus laying the foundation for a nationalist agenda for self-representation through history-writing, it has made sense to surmise that he sought to adopt the nineteenth-century Western model of history writing lock, stock, and barrel. In contrast, the foregoing chapter intended to bring to the readers’ attention the hitherto neglected, yet crucial and indispensable aspects of Bankimchandra’s historiographical agenda that elicited his taste for transgression. Metaphorically speaking, by way of establishing a mimetic ideal in the discursive domain specific to the past of the colonized, he was able to restrict the full sway of historical discourse. In this way, he saved a transcendental kernel for the nationalist past. Only by saving this kernel from the constative dominion of history, the nationalist subject—given to the emulation of tradition—was brought into being. A domain of autonomy, both epistemic and real, was thus charted.
Chapter 4. Scientific History and Casteized Pasts

“Bener Meye” is not history; thus this is not a historical novel. In this era of “scientific history” there is no history without petrified evidence to back it up. We are made of flesh and blood, we are not petrified and do not ever wish to be petrified. “Bener Meye” is a story as much as the next tale. But it doesn’t contain the tale of our age but of a time when Bengal had everything. It had elephants and horses, vessels and commerce, arts and crafts. The Bengalis read these days the novels on contemporary “Gaṅkātantra” (prostitution). Why not for a change read a book on ancient Sahajiyātantra?  

This is how readers are introduced to the now forgotten Bengali novel Bener Meye (Merchant’s Daughter) (1919) by Haraprasad Shastri (1853–1931), a renowned Sanskritist and a scholar of Indology. In addition to being a scholar and an author, Haraprasad was also a collector of

171. See Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsamgraha, vol.1, eds. Satyajit Caudhuri et al. (Calcutta: Paścim Banga Rājya Pustak Parśat, 1981), 198. Hereafter Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsamgraha, 1. The term Gaṅkātantrik Upanyās seems to be a jibe provoked by the rise in popularity of the contemporary Bengali authors like Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) who dealt with the theme of prostitution in their novels. In the same periodical where Bener Meye appeared, an essay was serialized with the title “Gaṅkātantra Sāhitya” (Nārāyan, B.S.1326: 232). This essay discussed representations of prostitution in modern literature as a contribution of Realism and Romanticism. By using the term Gaṅkātantrik Upanyās in Bener Meye’s preface, Haraprasad seems to have acknowledged the fact that novels of an earlier era, historical novels of the kind Bankimchandra wrote, had undergone a decline by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century. One of Haraprasad’s contemporaries, historian Rakhaldas Banerjee noted in an essay on Bengali historical novels the following: “After Bankimchandra’s death historical fiction failed to attain success in Bengal. In the contemporary era of narratives there is little care for historical novels, so much so that Bankimchandra’s historical literature too have lost some of the acclaim it used to once have.” [বক্তিতান্ত্রিক মূল্যায়ন পর ঐতিহাসিক উপন্যাস বাঙালী মনে ব্রতিষ্ঠ লাভ করে নাই। ঐতিহাসিক কথা সাহিত্যের যুগ ঐতিহাসিক আধারের অন্য নাই, এমনকি বক্তিতান্ত্রক ঐতিহাসিক রচনার কিংবা পরিবর্তন যাত্রা হারাইয়াছে।] Haraprasad’s suggestion to the Bengali readers to read something different is thus explained by these changes in readerly taste. For Banerjee’s take on Bengali Historical Novels, see “Aitihāsik Upanyās” in Itiḥās Cintā, ed. Kamal Caudhuri (Kolkata: Dey’s, 2010), 519–23. All translations from Bengali in this chapter, unless otherwise mentioned, are mine.
unpublished manuscripts of the precolonial era and brought to light many works, Sanskrit and vernacular, previously unknown to modern scholarship. Now, without delving further into Haraprasad’s life and work, as we reflect on the foregoing preface to Bener Meye, several things that are being said in it apropos of history strike us as strange and arresting. For instance, it is implied in the preface that the story that Haraprasad is about to tell can be confused with history and hence the timely warning to the readers. And it is also suggested that history and especially “scientific history” and living, concrete subjects share an antagonistic relationship thanks to scientific history’s preference for pāthure pramāṇ (literally: petrified evidence, which meant in Haraprasad’s context, the evidence based on difficult-to-counterfeit stone inscriptions). The assertion that “we are made of flesh and blood,”— the very antithesis of inert and lifeless stone with which historians are obsessed—paratactically foregrounds the disjunction between the subject and history, thereby turning the preface from a general disclaimer to an emphatic repudiation of history as such in its post-Rankean incarnation.

Then again, if we delve into the context that occasioned this preface, we will find that by means of this disclaimer-turned-repudiation Haraprasad did not mean to juxtapose “history” and “story” as two exclusive domains. Instead, the warnings delivered to his readers will appear to us as somewhat disingenuous if we are made aware that Bener Meye inserted itself, as an interloper, into a debate that developed between two epistemic events: the colonial state’s turn to ethnography as a means to secure British imperial dominance in India and a certain disciplinarization of history under the rubric of scientific history. Hence, the repudiation of scientific history and the references to “stone” as well as “flesh and blood” in the preface hence
were more than just what they seem to be. They were used, I claim, as a call to attention to a larger context.

In the late nineteenth century, the British-Indian colonial state’s use of ethnography in the census operations made caste into a universal category for classifying the subject population. This led to a renewal or refocalization of caste-consciousness in the colonial society. Haraprasad’s prominence in the intellectual milieu of the late nineteenth-century India (as a scholar with great philological expertise in Sanskrit and other less widely known languages) meant that he was ideally suited to play the role of a learned native informant yoked to service the colonial-governmental machinery in its fact gathering exercises. Accordingly, the father of the colonial decennial census, Herbert Hope Risley (1851–1911) recruited him, among others, to contribute inputs for enhancing the administrative knowledge of the caste system.\(^{172}\) Haraprasad’s work as an informant for colonial administration, hence, can be tracked through the archive and read as his complicity in the colonial project of “recasting” India — that is, making caste into a symbol of the Indian civilization.

And yet alongside this history of collaboration, you can track the history of Haraprasad’s participation in the vernacular public sphere where anticolonial nationalism was born and nurtured. Here too we find caste as a recurring theme, especially so in Haraprasad’s works of fiction. When Haraprasad started his literary career, a decidedly modern awareness of caste was in the air. The renewal of caste-consciousness facilitated by colonial ethnography came to be manifested through disparate efforts to produce monographs on caste histories. In *Bener Meye*,

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when Haraprasad opposed scientific history through fiction, he risked establishing a common cause with those who sought to treat the traditional caste-based genealogical accounts as valid history. Haraprasad’s view on caste was, however, far more nuanced than an easy equation with the other casteist discourses of this era may suggest. It is, however, a matter of regret that while Haraprasad’s role as an informant feeding the ethnographic hunger of the colonial state has been cited and discussed in postcolonial scholarship, little attention has been paid to how he responded to the colonial epistemic moves in the realm of imaginative works, the realm of his authorial autonomy.

Here it is germane to recall the paradigmatic response of anticolonial ideologies to the real and the epistemic dominance of the West. Often, an imagined inner social sphere was posited by the ideologues of anticolonial nationalism for debating social issues and carrying out social reforms, free of interventions from the outer sphere constituted by colonial institutions. For a comprehensive understanding of how anticolonialism worked against the backdrop of the colonial ethnography of caste, this inner sphere, constituting the cultural world of the colonized, must be explored as much as the outer sphere, where the governmental ethnographic operations were carried out. Thus, beyond the colonial-administrative archive, in the narratives where Haraprasad came to terms with India’s conflictual past, another genealogy of caste remains to be disinterred.

Given this context, the antihistory fury expressed in the preface to *Bener Meye* was, I propose, an effect of the inevitable collision of the two imaginary social spheres, represented in the epistemic domain through two different sets of discourses. The alternate genealogy of caste that Haraprasad authored in his vernacular literary works was threatened by scientific history’s
attempt to debunk, in general, the popular—as opposed to the properly scientific—ways of charting the history of caste. The preface under consideration thus has an emblematic quality. On the one hand it offers clues to unpack the dynamic that drove Haraprasad’s literary project; on the other hand it exemplifies, in a nutshell, the epistemic deadlock that colonial modernity inexorably generated. Hence it serves as a *locus classicus*, not only for coming to grips with the short-term conjuncture that occasioned it but also for understanding the larger reality that ultimately grounded this conjuncture itself.

**The Itinerary**

We will return later in this chapter to the task of unpacking, in greater detail, Haraprasad’s antihistory stance. But we must first prepare the ground for understanding Haraprasad’s act of posing fiction against history by way of a detour through his first two novels which, by working up narratives from the classical tradition in Sanskrit, portray caste as a source of endemic social antagonism. But we should note here that Haraprasad’s turn to caste as an overarching theme in his fiction did not take place in an ideological vacuum. Instead, Haraprasad had to operate in this regard against the formidable tide of Hindu revivalist thought of the late nineteenth-century milieu. Haraprasad once stated in clear terms his displeasure with the revivalists:

> The great agitation produced about twelve years ago by the so-called Hindu revival movement has come to an end, and at this moment quiet prevails. The first introduction of English education into Bengal produced a strong tendency towards Christianity. The tendency continued unabated for twenty years; then there was a rage for Brahmoism... Then came the Hindu revival movement... During all these three great religious agitations the ancient learned Brahman families kept quite aloof. They looked on the storm that was raging all around, with indifference and a feeling akin to contempt. Now
the storm has abated, and silence and peace have resumed their reign, some of the genuine Bengal Pandits are making their voices heard.173

This, however, was not by any means a predictable response. From Haraprasad’s reminiscences we learn of his deep admiration for Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the foremost of the authors who belonged to the reviver camp. Yet, this personal admiration did not translate into an ideological inheritance of Bankimchandra’s reviverist thought. Although Haraprasad never made public his differences with Bankimchandra during the latter’s lifetime, he did express disapproval with certain aspects of his mentor’s work years after the latter’s passing:

In the fourth stage of his career Bankimbabu started transmitting in small doses ‘dharma’ through his books. Ānandamāṭ (1884), Debī Caudhurānī(1884), Sītarām (1887) happen to be books of this kind. But using literature to spread religion spoils the art. This is why these books have less literary value. It is true that Ānandamāṭ has become popular, but not as literature, as something else.174

Haraprasad’s rejection of the reviverist discourse was already apparent in his first novel Bālmīkīr Jay (Triumph of Valmiki) (1881). By making caste-antagonism the principal theme in its plot, Haraprasad took on what was at best an embarrassment for the revitalists and at worst a taboo. Subsequently, in his second novel Kāncanmāḷā (serialized in 1882, published as a separate volume in 1915), the first Bengali novel to have turned on the theme of history of Buddhism, the caste theme once more played a pivotal role. However this time it was the portrayal of caste

174. Ibid., 740.

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antagonism against the backdrop of history as opposed to mythology that interested Haraprasad.

In Part I of this chapter, I examine these early attempts to chart a course for literature that willingly avoided the neo-Hindu themes that were in vogue. In Part II, I turn once more to what I have called the *locus classicus* of this chapter, the antihistory pronouncements of Haraprasad in *Bener Meye*, and analyze the novel itself in the light of these pronouncements. Finally in Part III, a short analysis is attempted of the larger context of colonial epistemic contestations upon the genealogies of upper caste origin to which Haraprasad responded by means of his novelistic oeuvre.

[I]

**The Puranik Allegoresis of the Modern**

Haraprasad’s first novel has a theme that is neither historical nor furnished by the events of contemporary colonial society. In this novel something like a prehistory of Rāma, the Hindu avatar and the hero of the epic Rāmāyaṇa, gets written, which nonetheless helps us to place Haraprasad in post-Hindu revivalist ideological arena. Haraprasad adapts the story of two leading Puranik figures of two different castes fighting against each other for domination into a modern allegory, and “fraternity” is portrayed in the novel as the egalitarian ideal motivating the contending forces who take up the task of transforming the world, often through violent and belligerent means. The novel concludes by narrating how the poet Vālmīki came to create Rāma as an ideal and a unifying icon in his poetry as a response to irresolvable social conflicts provoked by caste divisions.
The difficulty of calling this literary work a novel was apparent to its early critics. Brajendranath Seal (1864–1938), the renowned philosopher, called *Bālmikir Jay* a “prose rhapsody” and a “real advance in method and design upon the transfiguration of subjective egoism with which Babu Rabindranath Tagore’s lyrics are replete.” Seal also noticed that the reworking of the Rāmāyaṇa in the novel was not in the neo-Hindu interest but was rather due to the fact that the Puranik theme it dealt with lent “itself with peculiar ease to neo-romantic treatment.” The specific reworking of the Puranik in his literary debut set Haraprasad apart from the dominant style of the era set in place by Bankimchandra, and the boldness of

175. *Haraprasād Šāstrī Racanāsaṅgraha*, 1, 570–573.
Haraprasad’s initiative is thrown into relief by the fact that Bālmikīr Jay was at first partially serialized in Baṅgadarśan, the journal founded and edited by Bankimchandra.176

Bālmikīr Jay has at its core the story of the conflict between Viśvāmitra, the Kṣatriya leader, and Vaśiṣṭha, the great Brahmin sage, as narrated in the Bālakāṇḍa of Vālmīki’s Rāmāyaṇa, one of two great Sanskrit epics. The key event takes place in Vaśiṣṭha’s hermitage. The dispute erupts over Viśvāmitra expressing his intention to own Vaśiṣṭha’s wish-fulfilling magical cow Śabalā: “But listen, eloquent sage, for I have something to say. Please give me

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176. For Bankimchandra’s reaction to this novel see Ibid., 555-563. In his critical review of the novel, Bankimchandra struggled to find an appropriate category to place the work in: “Although I have taken up the task of a critic, I am sadly unable to point out in which specific class of literature this book belongs. It is not written in prose, so the critic cannot call it poetry. I can tell for sure that this is not a play, as it is not arranged dialogically. But I cannot call it a novel as it has no heroes or heroines, does not depict love affairs, courtships or weddings. Neither does it have deception, skirmishes, or bloodletting. It talks about Vaśiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra but it is not a Purāṇa; it describes conquests and still it is not Itihāsa; it gives an account of creation but it is not science; it speaks of stars and nebula though it is not astrology; it speaks of turning humans into beasts but it is not ‘Origin of Species.’ Haraprasad Shastri has surely created an unnamable thing of an unknown form.”

But I cannot call it a novel as it has no heroes or heroines, does not depict love affairs, courtships or weddings. That the work escaped the established literary categories was but one of these aspects. The educated readers, he thought, would find allegories in Haraprasad’s tale, but these allegories were seamlessly woven into the narrative and hence obliterated the signs of distinction between the allegorical and the literal. The title page of the first edition of the novel had a caption in English accompanying the title: “The Three Forces, (Physical, Intellectual, and Moral).” Bankimchandra made snide remarks about this English caption. Why did Haraprasad have to borrow these foreign terms when in the Indic context the three guṇas, namely the sattva, the rajas, and the tāmas (embodied also in the so-called Hindu trinity of Viśnū, Brahamā, and Maheśvara,) already expressed these ideas? Bankimchandra ended the review with appreciation for Haraprasad’s use of language by calling Bālmikīr Jay the “brightest jewel” of the Bengali language. However his discomfiture with its key aspects was clearly expressed too. That the work escaped the established literary categories was but one of these aspects. The educated readers, he thought, would find allegories in Haraprasad’s tale, but these allegories were seamlessly woven into the narrative and hence obliterated the signs of distinction between the allegorical and the literal. The title page of the first edition of the novel had a caption in English accompanying the title: “The Three Forces, (Physical, Intellectual, and Moral).” Bankimchandra made snide remarks about this English caption. Why did Haraprasad have to borrow these foreign terms when in the Indic context the three guṇas, namely the sattva, the rajas, and the tāmas (embodied also in the so-called Hindu trinity of Viśnū, Brahamā, and Maheśvara,) already expressed these ideas? Bankimchandra meant to specify? But in the modern era this trinity had lost significance as these figures were reduced to mere devatās and a new trinity had therefore to be established. In spite of Haraprasad’s narration being based on a Puranik theme, which could surely be faulted for obliterating the distinction between the real and the allegorical, his tale offered us the new trinity of Vaśiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra and Vālmīki. This, according to Bankimchandra, was the contribution of Bālmikīr Jay. But regardless of the words of appreciation scattered through his review, Bankimchandra expressed his emphatic disagreement with some key elements of the novel. The interpretive lens through which he looked at Haraprasad’s work had the mark of his late thought, caught up in his engagement with the neo-Hindu thematic. It is this thematic that at the last instance was irreconcilable with the ideas Haraprasad conveyed in the novel.
Shabala in exchange for a hundred thousand cows.”\textsuperscript{177} When Vaśiṣṭha refuses to give up his prized possession, Viśvāmitra attempts to take the cow away by force and a battle ensues between the warriors conjured up by the wonder-cow on one side and Viśvāmitra on the other; and soon enough we find Viśvāmitra, defeated and dejected, engaged in the performance of austerities trying to acquire the power that would allow him to take on his arch-rival again. This is the Puranik story at the heart of \textit{Bālmīkir Jay}. Haraprasad however reworks this myth by introducing a modern-utopian theme which provides him with an alibi for narrating the story anew and makes it pliable.

An event is inserted, nonexistent in the original version of the myth in question, that at the outset allows the principal agents of Haraprasad’s tale to script their agenda. \textit{Bālmīkir Jay} begins with the scene of an encounter with a class of celestial beings or “Ṛbhūs.” One fine morning, a song sung by a chorus of Ṛbhūs penetrates the consciousness of Viśvāmitra, Vaśiṣṭha, and Vālmīki and move them to such an extent that they set out in the search of the means to actualize “universal fraternity.” By introducing the quest for such an egalitarian ideal as the crucial theme of his novel Haraprasad dignified the petty skirmish amongst the sages of the Puranik story and made it bigger than a mere bloodletting over the cow as the coveted prize:

Of all, only three had understood the meaning of the song. These three were moved by the song and arrived at the Himalaya peak tracing its origin. All three are like a crown to


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India. Until the time India survives, Hindu dharma survives and there remains an appreciation in this world of greatness, these three names would be remembered.¹⁷⁹

The incidents that unfold from here on make up the story of profound disagreements between the trio, Viśvāmitra, Vālmīki and Vaśiṣṭha on the means of actualizing the ideal of fraternity. Yet, Vālmīki remains mostly behind the scenes while the conflict between Vaśiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra constitutes a larger chunk of the narrative.

The conflict is fueled by the respective caste prejudices of Vaśiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra. In the second chapter of the novel a conversation takes place between the two. Vaśiṣṭha resolutely expresses his view on Viśvāmitra’s world-conquest which he considers ineffective or futile: “I want to ask, is it possible that through world-conquest a sense of fraternity is engendered? Do men start considering each other brothers?” Viśvāmitra replies: “I believe nothing besides a world-conquest can establish unity and fraternity on earth.” But Vaśiṣṭha then comes up with a radical solution, which is trapped within his casteist worldview:

Here lies the solution; force cannot achieve the unity of mankind. As long as men think independently they could not be unified by any means. Thus what is necessary above all is to stop the flow of free thought. It should be ensured that the lowborn should not think freely.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹. Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsāmgraha, 1, 7.

¹⁸⁰. Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsāmgraha, 1, 17.
This unabashed bragging of Brahminical prejudice annoys Viśvāmitra to no end leading eventually to his attempted seizure of the wonder-cow and his spoliation of the Vaśiṣṭha’s hermitage. A war ensues where Viśvāmitra has to concede defeat given the inexhaustible reserve of fighters the wonder-cow has at her disposal. But this defeat nonetheless strengthens his resolve to perform austerities with the view to acquire the title and the status of a Brahminical-sage. When the gods or the devatās try to appease him by offering the title of Rājarṣi or the kings-sage as opposed to his coveted Brahmaṁṛṣi, in an act of contemptuous defiance of the Brahma himself he creates a cosmos of his own.

This is also a key moment of divergence from the Rāmāyaṇa story where the inspiration to create a new heaven comes from the fact that Triśāṅku, a man of Ikṣvāku lineage, who having been cursed by the sons of Vaśiṣṭha was turned into a candāla or an outcaste, entreats Viśvāmitra to use his extraordinary power to make him ascend to heaven in his bodily form. But when Indra disallows Triśāṅku’s ascent, Viśvāmitra creates a new set of heavenly constellations to make good on the promise he made to Triśāṅku and responds, “I will create another Indra, or perhaps the world should be without an Indra.”

The divergence effected by Haraprasad’s text lies in portraying Viśvāmitra’s creation as an object that

181. “Now, at that very time, there was a descendant of the Ikshvaku dynasty known as Trishanku. He had conquered his senses and spoke the truth. Once, Raghava, he conceived the following plan: ‘I will perform a sacrifice such that I shall rise, in my own body, to the highest realm of the gods.’” See Valmiki, Boyhood, 297.

182. Valmiki, Boyhood, 309.

183. Krishnacharya and Vyasacharya, Balakanda, 216.
functions merely to assuage his ego instead of serving as the means to realize the salvation of a pariah. Viśvāmitra’s loneliness as a creator and his reduction of the act of creation into an expression of personal hubris leads eventually to the destruction of his cosmos and his fall from grace.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings, what is significant for us is that Viśvāmitra creates a living alternative to the caste society of the old world of Brahma. The only thing that is given the status of the sacred in this world is “Reason” as such:

Viśvāmitra believed that Brāhmaṇas were not generated out of the mouth of Brahma; they attained Brahminhood only by exercising the higher faculties of mind. Later they became shameless as their selfish tendencies became dominant. Thus to make everyone equally intelligent Viśvāmitra built many schools and colleges. There were no specialists imparting higher education of morals or administration, everyone were to teach these in unison. Reason was the only God to be worshiped. All were devoted to the Goddess of Reason.184

This primacy of “Reason” in Viśvāmitra’s creation made this new world a happy place but it left the creator himself lonely, without the company of fellow humans who could empathize with him. Dissatisfied, Viśvāmitra set out to execute his most daring feat ever. He attempted to transport a city, Kānyakubja, from the earth’s surface into the world of his own. But this time he failed miserably as all the inhabitants of Kānyakubja died from the trauma of leaving the earth’s

184. Haraprasād Śāstri Racanāsamgraha,1, 34.
atmosphere. By now, Viśvāmitra was a spent force. Denied any help by Brahmā he vengefully decided to launch his weapon toward the center of the brahmāṇda (cosmos) but this only resulted in the disintegration of the world he had created and whose existence was ultimately conditional upon preservation of his power. Soon enough this led to Viśvāmitra’s ultimate undoing. He lost consciousness and fell toward the earth, eventually landing in the sacrificial pit or the fire alter of a Yagna performed by Vaśiṣṭha.

When Vaśiṣṭha realized that his arch-rival had lost all that he had possessed in the spiritual and the material realm, he was moved to pity. Seeing such a compassionate aspect of Vaśiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra thus spoke: “Today seeing me in danger you have been moved to tears. I never cried when I saw you suffer. Today, seeing your compassion my eyes are for the first time wet.” It is thus the sense of pity for others, not self-pity, that brought the fratricidal war between the Brahmins and the Kṣatriyas to a definitive end. This moment was the moment of Vālmīki’s triumph as he was the sole figure in this narrative who had understood the value of compassion early enough to have given up brigandry and had resolved to spread the message of peace in a world torn apart with caste strife.

The denouement followed next. Brahmā, at the end of the episode of Viśvāmitra’s resurrection informed the three sages that for the sake of establishing mankind’s unity in the world Nārāyaṇa, the god himself would appear on earth as an avatar. Brahmā thereupon entrusted all three of the sages to script the agenda for this imminent divine intervention in the lives of the mortals. Viśvāmitra, Vaśiṣṭha, and Vālmīki, all three having retired to Vaśiṣṭha’s hermitage, reflected on setting the agenda for Rāma’s arrival on earth. The plan for the Rāmāyaṇa was thus scripted. Vālmīki having set the agenda for Nārāyaṇa’s avatar emerged triumphant. The
universal fraternity, the path to which Vālmīki had imagined by way of compassion, came to be actualized through the rule of Rāma.

This denouement may appear to instantiate the limitation of Haraprasad’s social vision. It may seem that the triumph of Vālmīki can only be construed as the triumph of a brand of social conservatism that in late nineteenth-century India sought to resolve social dissensions by scripting hegemonic ideologies tethered to variegated Puranik references. Yet, despite this conservatism, Haraprasad’s work was already charting a different course. This was made evident by the fact that a figure like Bankimchandra, engaged in excavating the Sanskrit Puranik literature and rendering the Puranik amenable to his nationalist ideology, was deeply troubled by Haraprasad’s portrayal of the Rāmāyaṇa episodes. Haraprasad’s departure from the revivalist discourse,185 was registered, if not recognized, in Bankimchandra’s reaction to Bālmīkir Jay.

185. A close literary forerunner for Bālmīkir Jay was Bhudev Mukhopadhyay’s Puspāṅjali (1876). Mukhopadhyay had foregrounded Puranik conventions in this work. Haraprasad once expressed his admiration for Puspāṅjali in the following words: “Bhudev babu’s language is inimitable; it represents essentially the best of the language spoken of the old societies of Bhattacharya-Brahmin pundits and Kathaks. The inhabitants of Bengal should imbibe the essence of this language. Puspāṅjali is a marvelous thing.” [তুনোর বারুর ভাষা প্রচীন ভট্টাচার্য ব্রাহ্মণের ভাষা প্রতিষ্ঠিত ও কথক সমাজের ভাষা যে ভাষা কথিত ছিল, তন্মধ্যে যাকে কিছু প্রচীনতার ভিত্তি ছিল, সে সমুদায়ের সারসংগ্রহ, অনুকরণীয়। ইহার ভাববলী ভক্তবলীর অস্কিঞ্জীয় গ্রন্থ থাকা উচিত। পুঃপাঙ্জলি একখানি অমৃত পদার্থ।] By rejecting Bankimchandra’s turn toward a Hindu nationalist project and praising Mukhopadhyay’s language for its antique authenticity, Haraprasad had chalked out a place outside the Hindu revivalist fold and outside the literary boundaries his mentor had set. Haraprasād Śāstri Racanāsāmgraha, 2., 520-21.
In his review of the novel, Bankimchandra debunked the idealization of Vālmīki. He expressed doubt about the moral persuasiveness of the very idea of fraternity that all the major figures in the novel sought to actualize in their specific ways. However, the universalism implicit in the invocation of fraternity did not escape Bankimchandra’s notice and he found an echo of the agenda of Haraprasad’s trio in contemporary world history. Thus the peace established by the almighty British Empire, Bankimchandra thought, was a modern instantiation of what Viśvāmitra claimed to do in his attempt to establish fraternity by conquest or bāhubal. The argument for employing bidyābal or the power of knowledge as a means to establish fraternity was, in Bankimchandra’s view, somewhat akin to the way of the Christian priests advancing their evangelizing mission by means of the spread of education in the various colonies. And the third method—that of Vālmīki—was equated by Bankimchandra with what was employed over the ages by a class of religious preachers that included Śākyasimha, Socrates and Christ. Theirs was

186. While Bankimchandra, who promoted Haraprasad’s literary career, was wary of the unreserved allegorization of traditions, Haraprasad’s drew inspiration from Mukhopadhyay who valued the allegories embedded in the Puranas. He wrote in his introduction to Puṣpāṇjali, “It is a fact that of the figures mentioned in this book, Vedavyāsa, Mārkandeya, the devī and others, some engage in one-thousand-year long austerities, some move around imperceptibly and some manifest their forms becoming distinct from the existing divinities. But one should think that Vedavyāsa represents love for one’s own race, Mārkandeya represents multitude of knowledge and the devī represents the motherland; then one would not feel that these descriptions are otherworldly.” Mukhopadhyay then elaborated on his distinct indigenous style: “almost twenty years passed since I wrote a story following English conventions. From that time on I harbored the wish to write a book based on old indigenous conventions. But the making of English novels is unlike that of Puranik tales.”

187. Ibid., 556-57.
the method of persuasion by means of words. These wordsmiths took to mere bākyabal or the power of words in their effort to spread the egalitarian message of fraternity.

Given Bankimchandra’s disagreement with the idealization of Christ-like figures in his later years, it is hardly a surprise that he rejected outright Haraprasad’s representation of Vālmīki as the triumphant ideal. Bankimchandra’s rejection of egalitarianism in the later years of his life, expressed not only through his refusal to reprint “Sāmya” (Equality), an essay he authored propagating the equality of all castes and social classes, but also in a note he appended to his Dharmatatva justifying caste hierarchy, go a long way toward explaining his disagreements with Haraprasad’s act of promoting egalitarianism through a Puranik allegory.

In contrast, Haraprasad’s public statements on Bankimchandra’s later works often appear deferential. Krṣṇacaritra, for instance, was praised by Haraprasad in 1891 for enabling the Bengali youth “to appreciate ancient India much better” by freeing them from their dependence “either on the Pundits of India, or on western Sanskrit scholars.” In spite of such habitual expressions of appreciation of Bankimchandra’s view of the tradition, Haraprasad, still in his early years as an author, ventured outside the ideological parameters that was set by Bankimchandra’s revivalist thought. It is not a matter of small significance that Bālmīkir Jay (1881) was serialized in that journal one year prior to the publication of Ānandamaṭh (The Abbey of Bliss), the premier Hindu nationalist novel. And alongside the serialization of Ānandamaṭh in the pages of Baṅgadarśan, Haraprasad’s second novel, Kāñcanmāla started appearing. Haraprasad’s second novel was the first Bengali work of fiction that adapted a story from Buddhist legends in a novel in Bengali. And in this pioneering piece of Haraprasad’s fiction, casteized subjects once again made their appearance.
Toward Historical Topos: Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw an efflorescence of Buddhist themes in Bengali literature. This efflorescence was partly inspired by the publication of Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879), a biography of the Buddha in verse. But we would be wrong to assume that this was a case where the Victorian literati’s interest in Buddhism was merely transmitted into the colonial domain. For Arnold’s work was based on *Lalitavistara*, a famous text of the Mahayana tradition edited and published by Rajendralal Mitra (1824–1891) using a manuscript from Brian Broughton Hodgson’s collection of Sanskrit Buddhist texts; the texts were brought from Nepal and bequeathed in parts to several institutions with the Asiatic Society at Calcutta acquiring the lion’s share.

*Amitābha* (1895) by Nabinchandra Sen (1847-1909) was one of the several popular works published in the wake of Arnold’s popularization of Buddhism. Sen, who was one of the principal champions of Hindu revivalism in the late nineteenth century, attempted in *Amitābha* to use the rising interest in Buddhism to the revivallist ideology’s favor by portraying the Buddha as

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188. Girish Ghosh, one of the playwrights to take up the Buddhist theme, in his *Buddhadev Carit* (1887) acknowledged his source of inspiration by dedicating that work to Edwin Arnold. There was a spate of books of a similar kind coming out in the 1880s including Kṛṣṇakumar Mitra’s *Buddhadevcarit o Bauddhadharmer Samksipta Bibaran* (1882), Rāmdās Sen’s *Buddhadev, Tānhār Jibānī o Dharmanīti* (1887) and Saraccandra Sarkār’s *Sākyāsimha Pratībhā vā Buddhadevcarit* (1888). Perhaps the best known of this genre was Navīncandra Sen’s *Amitābha* (1895).
an avatar of Viṣṇu. Haraprasad’s portrayals of Buddhism, however, were of a different nature.

To a near contemporary like Seal, Haraprasad’s work Bālmikīr Jay represented a “neo-Romantic” trend of literature that had to be separated from the “neo-Hindu type.” This was at variance with Seal’s characterization of Nabinchandra Sen who, in Seal’s judgment was at once a neo-Hindu and a neo-Romantic. I should add here that, with respect to these two authors’ takes on Buddhism, a similar differentiation holds true.

From our understanding of the context, it is safe to assume that Haraprasad’s adaptation of a Buddhist theme for his second novel was facilitated by his involvement in the scholarly work that Rajendralal Mitra had engaged him in. This was the work of producing the descriptive catalogue of the texts bequeathed by Brian Broughton Hodgson to the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Mitra himself thus mentions Haraprasad’s involvement:

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189. *Amitābha’s* preface is instructive in this respect. In the preface, Sen intended to disabuse Hindus of what he considered to be a misconception: “Until now Hindus have much disliked Buddhadev. The dislike is of such a measure that the Hindus of Western territories believe that even a singular utterance of Buddhadev’s name would reduce their spiritual merit. The English-educated, too, believe that Buddhism is separate from Hinduism and the two are so antithetical that the Brahmins expelled the former from India forcibly. I have not been able to grasp the reason for such a belief.” [Amitābha’s* preface is instructive in this respect. In the preface, Sen intended to disabuse Hindus of what he considered to be a misconception: “Until now Hindus have much disliked Buddhadev. The dislike is of such a measure that the Hindus of Western territories believe that even a singular utterance of Buddhadev’s name would reduce their spiritual merit. The English-educated, too, believe that Buddhism is separate from Hinduism and the two are so antithetical that the Brahmins expelled the former from India forcibly. I have not been able to grasp the reason for such a belief.”]

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190. Nabinchandra Sen cited Rajendralal Mitra’s research on Buddhism in Orissa, documented in *Antiquities of Orissa* (1875, 1880) in support of his argument concerning the unity of Hinduism and Buddhism and added that “the Buddhists belong to one branch of the many branches of Hinduism. Consequently, more than two-thirds of humanity follows Hinduism. – Faced with this fact, which human or Hindu soul can help not being awestruck by the greatness and universality of Hinduism? Even in this fallen state India is the world’s teacher of dharma.” [Nabinchandra Sen cited Rajendralal Mitra’s research on Buddhism in Orissa, documented in *Antiquities of Orissa* (1875, 1880) in support of his argument concerning the unity of Hinduism and Buddhism and added that “the Buddhists belong to one branch of the many branches of Hinduism. Consequently, more than two-thirds of humanity follows Hinduism. – Faced with this fact, which human or Hindu soul can help not being awestruck by the greatness and universality of Hinduism? Even in this fallen state India is the world’s teacher of dharma.”]
It was originally intended that I should translate all the abstracts into English, but during a protracted attack of illness, I felt the want of help, and a friend of mine, Babu Haraprasad Shastri, M.A., offered me his co-operation, and translated the abstracts of 16 of the larger works. His initials have been attached to the names of those works in the table of contents. I feel deeply obliged to him for the timely aid he rendered me, and tender him my cordial acknowledgments for it. His thorough mastery of the Sanskrit language and knowledge of European literature fully qualified him for the task; and he did his work to my entire satisfaction.\textsuperscript{191}

In the contents page of \textit{The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal} the entries authored by Haraprasad are acknowledged by placing the initials H.P.S. by the titles. From this it is apparent that Haraprasad Shastri wrote neither the entry on \textit{Bodhisattvāvadānakalpatā} by Kṣemendra nor the entry on \textit{Aśokāvadāna}. These two formed a part of Hodgson collection and each was duly summarized in Mitra’s catalogue. Regardless of which entries he authored, his prior familiarity with \textit{Kalpatā} or the \textit{Aśokāvadāna} is evident from the fact that \textit{The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal} came out in 1882 and Haraprasad’s second novel started appearing in the journal \textit{Baṅgadarśan} in the same year. It is likely, therefore, that while working as an assistant to Mitra, Haraprasad came across the story of Kuṇāla and decided to adapt it for his second novel \textit{Kāñcanmālā}.

We have already noted that in \textit{Bālmīkir Jay}, Haraprasad’s novelistic enterprise remained noncommittal to the prevalent realist ethos. This held true in his second novel as well. If Haraprasad’s strategy in the first novel has been to give the supernatural full play while transforming the traditional and the canonical by subtly reorienting the plot toward articulations of a modern thematic, in the second novel he implemented a similar strategy of adoption/alteration of the traditional and the canonical as he chose to refrain from the realist imperative of

\textsuperscript{191} Rajendralal Mitra, \textit{The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal} (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), xlii.
censoring the supernatural. It takes a careful reading of Kāñcanmālā to appreciate the nuances of the authorial intervention into the raw material of the ancient texts like Aśokavadāna and Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā that made possible remaking these tales as unyielding to the dominant realist ethos and yet remaining distinctively modern. Whatever else Kāñcanmālā was in the 1880s, it was not an innocent excavation of the past for preserving a story that might sink into oblivion unless salvaged by a learned author.

Kāñcanmālā narrates the tale of the queen Tiṣyarakṣitā who was enamored of Kuṇāla, her stepson. Kuṇāla did not requite the queen’s love for him, leaving the queen humiliated. Enraged, Tiṣyarakṣitā planned an elaborate revenge and punished Kuṇāla for his unyielding stance. All these events took place with the emperor Aśokā in the throne, and yet he failed to save his son from the violent punishment meted out at the queen’s behest. This is the bare skeleton of the narrative that is common to Kāñcanmālā and its Sanskrit sources. Haraprasad nonetheless introduced crucial differences in his novelistic retelling of the story.

Keeping with our focus on Haraprasad’s portraiture of the caste theme we can cite here how in Kāñcanmālā the casteized subject appears through the representation of the desirous queen Tiṣyarakṣitā. In a text like Avadānakalpalatā the poet Kṣemendra portrays the young queen as a generic woman, attributing her transgressive desire to her gender. Kuṇāla spurns the queen’s overture by castigating the women as such as the cause of evil in the world:

Women by nature become the cause of evil
And adultery is all the more dreadful,
If mistakenly in a quarrel a lover is called “mother”
Till death does a man refrain from touching her.

[ जात्या स्त्रियः पापनिमित्तभूता]
In the same vein the incestuous queen herself justifies her desire for her stepson in generic terms staging her own longing for Kuṇāla as an innate disposition of her gender:

Their hearts verily desire new affections and they are filled with excessive curiosity, Women, by nature, have eyes which are covetous of beauty in this world.

Haraprasad’s authorial intervention, in contrast, makes it harder for the reader to encounter the generic subject of gender who driven by her innate disposition merely acts on impulse.

In Kāñcanmālā we find the figure of the queen casteized. Queen Tiṣyarakṣitā’s lower-caste origin (as the daughter of a barber) is chronicled, which explains to the reader her predicament. The tale begins in medias res but in a backward glance, narrates the story of Tiṣyarakṣitā’s relationship with Ašoka. When prince Ašoka in his youth was stationed at the hermitage of the Ājīvika-sage Piṅgalavatsa (who is depicted in the Buddhist traditions as to have predicted Ašoka’s eventual accession to the throne), he met Tiṣyarakṣitā for the first time. As a

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192. P.L. Vaidya, Avadanakalpalata of Ksemendra, vol. 2 (Darbhanga: 1959), 353. Translations from this text are mine.
193. Ibid., 350.
barber’s daughter Tiṣyarakṣitā loathed her lowly origin but now she saw her big chance to move up in society. Tiṣyarakṣitā seduced Aśoka into sex. After the news of their cohabitation spread, Piṅgalavatsa persuaded Aśoka to marry Tiṣyarakṣitā. The barber’s daughter thus became a queen, but later suffered from profound disaffection as the marriage turned sour.

Tiṣyarakṣitā is depicted as a go-getter throughout the novel; she is not merely desirous of Kuṇāla but also a strategist dealing with the niceties of court-politics. She uses the existing power-equations deftly to obtain her ends and emerges through decidedly devious means as the de facto sovereign. Thus unlike what is found in the Sanskrit sources, we find Tiṣyarakṣitā striking an alliance with Aśoka’s trusted aide Radhagupta for ensuring the defeat of the other claimants to the Mauryan throne so that Aśoka can finally become a king. In a weak moment when Aśoka restrains himself from acting against his brother Suśīma, Tiṣyarakṣitā’s exhortation reenergizes him:

Suśīma along with his victorious army came and surrounded Pataliputra. Aśoka became restless as he reflected on the question of propriety of conflict with his brother. As he was unable to make up his mind on the right course of action, Tiṣyarakṣā came and had a conversation with him. Discerning the king in a restive state she said, “My Lord! Had I been in your place I would have pared off each and every tree in the garden.”
Tiṣyarakṣā’s resolve to pare off each and every tree in the garden, produced in effect a certain resolve in Aśoka. He replied, “Barber’s daughter! Here I go, I will not set down my axe until there is a single tree left standing.”194

194 Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsaṃgraha, 1, 115.
If this is unlike Tiṣyarakṣitā as she appears in the Sanskrit texts, her proximity to Aśoka and her ability to use the instruments of state is frequently showcased in Haraprasad’s novel. So much so that Tiṣyarakṣitā flaunts her skills as a kingmaker while wooing Kuṇāla:

Don’t you see Kuṇāla, if you accord me some space at your feet I will prove beneficial to you. You know that king Aśoka is devoted to me. I promise to secure your inheritance of this great Magadhan Empire. You are aware that thanks to your more than one hundred brothers you stand only a slim chance of inheriting [the throne]. You know that you have enemies among the king’s employees. All the Hindus hate you and many of them actively seek to assassinate you. You have no friend. Someone as virtuous and righteous as you usually lacks friends. Thus, if you want a friend and if you want your inheritance, grant me what I beg of you. You should know that I hold Aśoka raja’s life within my clenched fist. If you wish I can get you your inheritance as soon as tomorrow.195

Haraprasad’s novel is thus more than a tale of a queen harboring incestuous desire. Instead, the queen is a strategic player in the Mauryan domain to begin with, and the personal for the queen becomes political when her ability as a political strategist is pressed into the service of wreaking vengeance on her former love interest and later bête noire, Kuṇāla.

195. Ibid., 101.
The sovereignty of the queen happens to be an emphatic theme in the novel. Hence there are two parallel plots in Haraprasad’s novel. In one of the plots the queen is a spurned lover of her stepson and wreaks vengeance on this erstwhile love interest by using the sovereign power. In the other plot, we find the story of a lower-caste women’s quest for power that not only makes her a queen but also a de facto sovereign. Although these two plots intersect, they do have different beginnings and differential vectors. Thus Tiṣyarakṣitā’s interest in Buddhism, although not out of true devotion and through-and-through instrumental, serves two discrete purposes. One of them is to gain enough power to punish Kuṇāla using the punitive means at the imperial administration’s disposal, and the other one: to be the supreme authority in the empire as such. This redoubling of aims complicates the portrayal of Tiṣyarakṣitā in the novel as opposed to her portrayal found in the Sanskrit texts where she is driven by the sole aim of punishing Kuṇāla.

*Kāñcanmālā* narrates the story of Tiṣyarakṣitā’s becoming the de facto ruler of the Mauryan Empire along with the gradual emasculation of the emperor Aśoka. In *Aśokāvadāna* there is an episode where as a reward for Tiṣyarakṣitā’s service during Kuṇāla’s near-fatal illness she is granted kingship for a period of seven days which she then uses to punish Kuṇāla. In the novel, though this illness episode is narrated, it is preceded by a long gestation period when Tiṣyarakṣitā gradually gains in influence over the Buddhist *saṅgha*, thereby earning a bigger say in Aśoka’s administration; Tiṣyarakṣitā is eventually rewarded by Aśoka with the right to play the sovereign for a period of one year. Tiṣyarakṣitā uses this year to stir up a revolt in Taxila with the help of the disaffected Brahmins of the Maurya domain.

Alongside this focus on Tiṣyarakṣitā’s ability as a skillful and conspiring strategist, Haraprasad throws into relief the role of the Brahmins who were at work to weaken the empire
that patronized Buddhism. This is then another aspect of Haraprasad’s novel that allows him to portray casteized subjects. Thus one way Tiṣyarakṣitā becomes a favorite of the *samgha* is by uncovering a Brahminical conspiracy to burn down the local Buddhist monastery: Kukkuṭrām.

When Tiṣyarakṣitā overhears Aśoka’s chief queen and a Brahmin coconspirator in conversation, she reports the queen to the king, and yet, protects the Brahmin conspirator Kuṇjarkarṇa. Consequently this Brahmin minister helps her to execute her punishment of Kuṇāla. Brahmins, although operative throughout the narrative in key roles, are not given any characterological depth whatsoever. They are deployed in their functional capacity and encountered only as conspirators, driven almost by their visceral hatred of the Buddhists.

In Haraprasad’s portrayal of the two caṇḍāla figures—casteized subjects who are ordered by the Brahmin administrator of Taxila to gouge out Kuṇāla’s eyes— get a somewhat better treatment than the conspiratorial Brahmins. In the Sanskrit texts although the caṇḍālas are mentioned, they are depicted to have refused to perform the punitive act:

> Finally, then, they spoke to Kuṇāla and brought him the order. Kuṇāla had it read aloud, and calmly told them to carry out fully the royal command. [Reluctantly,] they summoned the candle and ordered them to gouge out Kuṇāla’s eyes. But the caṇḍālas made anjalis and said, “We can’t do it, because: Only a deluded man who would try /to take the beauty from the moon could pluck out the eyes/ from your face which is like the moon.” Kuṇāla then offered them, [as payment, his costly] diadem, and asked them to tear out his eyes in exchange for it, but they protested saying, “Such an act will inevitably result in bad karma.”

> Finally, a disfigured man, endowed with the eighteen uglinesses, came forward and offered to pluck out the prince’s eyes; he was taken right up to Kuṇāla.196

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As is evident, here the entrance of the caṇḍāla remains an episode. In Kāncanmālā, in contrast, the caṇḍāla presence acquires the dimension of a subplot within the novel, far exceeding its episodic punctuality. Unlike in Aśokavadāna the caṇḍālas in Haraprasad’s novel do not refuse to put Kuṇāla’s eyes out and yet Kuṇāla willingly submits to the ordeal, displaying extreme forbearance. This transforms, in effect, one of the two caṇḍālas engaged in the act. The combination of guilt and the sense of respect that Kuṇāla’s composure in the face of great adversity inspired, turns him into a Buddhist.

Toward the end of the novel a chance encounter takes place between this Buddhist caṇḍāla and Kuṇāla’s wife, Kāñcanmālā (portrayed in the novel as a paragon of Buddhist virtue and as a foil of Tiṣyaракṣitā). Clueless about her husband’s terrible fate and subsequent imprisonment, Kāñcanmālā sets out on a journey to figure out his whereabouts. On her way to Taxila she finds herself taking care of the injured in a battlefield and chances upon a team of people similarly engaged. This team was headed by the Buddhist caṇḍāla. Kāñcanmālā learns from him about the calamity that befell Kuṇāla, and then with his help, reaching the Taxila-jail, she manages to free Kuṇāla along with the other Buddhist prisoners. At the very end of the story

the Buddhist caṇḍāla donates his eyes to restore Kuṇāla’s eyesight. A scientist who is rather anachronistically introduced into the novel transplants these eyes, which makes it possible for Kuṇāla to see again.

That Haraprasad did not find it necessary to censor the key supernatural episode of the two Sanskrit sources—the restoration of lost eyes by supernatural means—is worthy of our attention here. This takes place immediately after the caṇḍāla makes a gift of his eyes to Kuṇāla. Reiko Ohnuma, in her study of the Buddhist Jātaka stories, reminds us that as that the Jātaka-tradition foregrounds Bodhisattvas and their corporeal sacrifice. She adds that within Jātaka tradition such recuperation of the lost body parts by the power of virtue of the Bodhisattvas is a common topos in what she calls the “gift-of-the-body genre.” Such restorations often take place when the Bodhisattva’s will to sacrifice everything for the needy is put to a test by the king of Gods, Śakra or Indra.¹⁹⁸ When the Bodhisattva passes such a test, the sacrifice required of the Bodhisattva is rewarded by the restoration, miraculously, of what had been given away selflessly and with forbearance. Although Ohnuma restricts her definition of the “gift-of-the-body-genre” to some of the Jātaka stories, she draws our attention to the fact that the stories that feature restorations of what had been previously lost hold out the promise that selfless acts of sacrifice or giving is later rewarded in equal measure. These stories thus appear akin to the Avadāna stories where the actors are represented in a Buddhist devotional context and are shown to perform meritorious acts of giving to the Samgha. Unlike the inimitable sacrifices of the Bodhisattvas in

the *Jātaka* tradition, the *Avadāna* stories showcase acts that represent giving away things for the Buddhist cause and are meant to inspire emulation.\(^{199}\)

In *Āśokāvadāna* and in Ksemendra’s adaptation, Kuṇāla’s eyes are restored by the power of his own virtue. This is how it is narrated in *Āśokāvadāna*:

> O king, I don’t feel the slightest pain, for although it is a severe injury, there is no suffering in my mind. If indeed it is true that I have only kind thoughts for my mother who was directly responsible for my blindness then by the power of this statement of truth, may my eyes be restored at once! And as soon as he had thus spoken, his sight returned and his eyes regained their former splendor.\(^{200}\)

]\[राजन्ने मे दुःखलयोपस्सिति कश्चिद्तीव्रापकरेः।
मनः प्रसन्नं यिद् मे जनन्यां ययोद्दृढः मे नयने स्वयं हि।
तत्तेन सत्येन ममास्तु तावन् नेत्रद्वयं प्राक्तनमेव सच:।।
इत्युक्तमात्रे पूवार्िधकप्रशोभिते नेत्रयुग्मे प्रादुर्भावः।]^{201}\]

It is Kuṇāla who is brought close to the Bodhisattva ideal in this way as the power of his truth or the merit earned through forbearance restores his eyes miraculously. Readers of Haraprasad would note the crucial displacement that is effected in *Kāṅcanmālā*. The restoration of Kuṇāla’s vision there takes place through the skillful surgery of a scientist who transplants the eyes donated by the Buddhist caṇḍāla. The virtue earned therefore was first of the untouchable, formerly the executioner:

\(^{199}\) Ibid., 73–75.


\(^{201}\) Mukhopadhyay, *Āśokāvadāna*, 123.
As soon as Kunal got his eyesight back he called the caṇḍāla and asked, “I hope it was not too painful for you donating your eyes!” The caṇḍāla then narrated his prior life story. The king hearing this broke out in tears. At last he (the caṇḍāla) said, “If I can’t give up my eyes of flesh for the one who has given me the eyes of knowledge, I would surely be considered wicked.” Through this true speech the caṇḍāla got back his eyes same as before.  

Clearly this evinces a narratorial intervention that makes the untouchable approximate the Bodhisattva ideal. The script of the Buddhist canonical tale concerned exclusively with foregrounding the piety of Aśoka and Kuṇāla is thus changed and made malleable and responsive to modern concerns.

The story of Haraprasad’s engagement with the theme of the Aśokan rule and the Maurya decline continued beyond this novel. In 1910, in an essay called “Cause of the Dismemberment of the Maurya Empire,” Haraprasad asked: “Why is it that the military despotism, so well-established, disappeared only forty or fifty years after the death of the greatest Indian monarch, whose memory is cherished with affection all over the Buddhist world, and who is regarded as a great and good ruler all over the world?” Any discerning reader of his 1882 novel could accurately guess his answer: the Maurya decline was a result of a Brahminical resurgence manifested through Puṣyamitra Śuṅga’s coup d’état. The Brahmmins in the Maurya domain reacted to the fact that they were the class that Aśoka “wanted to reduce to the common folk.”  

202. Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāśaṃgraha, 1, 185–86.
And yet in this essay proffering a historical hypothesis, the caṇḍālas or the barber’s daughter-turned-queen found no mention. The restrictive parameters of historical discourse was thus registered in Haraprasad’s work as writing history implied exclusion of the traditional stories that he had earlier found it necessary to narrate. These stories contained heterogeneous portraiture of social agents and offered an inventory for the modern fiction writer to draw from and yet were of no use to historical discourse.

Perhaps what rankled Haraprasad, the novelist, was the imperative of historians to circumscribe a larger archive to constitute a rarefied collection of documents amenable exclusively to historical discourse. And yet, if there was indeed an antihistory sentiment brewing in Haraprasad, it remained unstated in Kāñcanmālā. But in his third novel which came out after a long hiatus, there was remarkable explosion of disapproval of the historical method. We have already seen that in his cryptic preface to Bener Meye an opposition between history and subjectivity is stated but left unexplained. It is necessary therefore to call attention to the fact that Haraprasad’s third novel was also born under curious circumstances. By way of probing these circumstances the next section throws into relief Haraprasad’s opposition to history and further unpacks the theme we have set out to explore: the theme of disavowal of history against the backdrop of colonial modernity.

[II]

The Posthistorical Novel

Haraprasad’s act of opposing the subject to history in the preface of his third and final novel Bener Meye, calls attention to a larger context of anticolonial contestations of colonial-epistemic
presuppositions. Haraprasad hence invites us to look beyond the novel itself into an interstitial space between fiction and a constellation of other discourses. In the light of Bener Meye’s preface it is worth noting that, while analyzing Haraprasad, some Western models for judging historical fiction may strike us as woefully inadequate. Take, for instance, the work of György Lukács, the premier literary critic to have studied the genre of Historical Novel. Lukács, in his great work *The Historical Novel* does not consider the possibility that the career of the historical novel in the non-European world might be something other than a formulaic repetition of the history of that genre in the capitalist West. This limitation of vision cannot, however, be blamed on a lack of goodwill on Lukács’s part. He surely appears eager in *The Historical Novel* to free the oriental subjects from what—in this post-Saidian age— we would call the Orientalist portrayal:

> Up to now oriental subjects have necessarily been of an exotic and eccentric character in bourgeois literature. The importation of Indian or Chinese philosophy into the declining ideology of the bourgeoisie could only increase this exoticism. Now, however, when we are contemporaries of the heroic liberation struggles of the Chinese, Indian, etc., people, all these developments flow concretely into the common historical stream of the liberation of mankind and are therefore portrayable in literature. And in the light of this common direction the past of these peoples is illuminated in a new way or at least can be so illuminated through the work of their important writers.\(^{203}\)

This passage encapsulates the key idea that Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* propounds. This idea suggests that the historical novel proper, or the classical historical novel, can appear only when “truly” popular movements actualize. In other words, the classical historical novelistic imagination is parasitic upon a specific social and political development, first seen in postrevolutionary Europe. With the French Revolution, history “for the first time” was made

into a “mass experience.” The acceleration of time between 1789 and 1814 made the “historical character” of the European nations apparent.204

Had Lukács’s theory—mass movements as the necessary and sufficient condition of the historical novel—been incontrovertibly true, Haraprasad would not have had reservations about calling his work a historical novel. After all, the year of Bener Meye’s publication, 1919, was also the year of Gandhi’s Rowlatt Satyagraha, the beginning of the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat and an extraordinary year of anticolonial mobilization. And yet around the time when the movements led by Gandhi appeared on the scene and allowed for the Indian liberation struggle to join “the common historical stream of the liberation of mankind,” Haraprasad felt

204. If we take into account a contrasting view here, we should mention Alessandro Manzoni’s (1785–1873) On the Historical Novel (Del romanzo storico). He found the genre lacking any “logical purpose.” Manzoni had his own historicist logic, which appears in his langue duree account of how history has fared in the world of fiction, in his pamphlet criticizing historical novel. Manzoni showed little toleration for those who intended to mix historical facts and fiction. Hence, he rebuked Machiavelli for citing passages from Livy indiscriminately. That Machiavelli quoted dialogues from Livy in spite of these being fictional bothered Manzoni. He suggested instead the following: “It is precisely this indifference toward the positive reality of historical facts, this intellectual pursuit of whatever may be interesting even if it is only verisimilar, and stopping there, that I wanted to show in Machiavelli, as a famous example of a quite common attitude. But since this attitude was not based on reason, it could not go on indefinitely.” But it was not just abstract reason that forebode tough times for the historical novel. The vicissitude of taste also had a role to play in the process. Public tolerance declined for the bad historical novels of the eighteenth century which only made a “pretense of invoking history,” “almost as a joke.” (Manzoni, On the Historical Novel, 106). Hence, there was a change: “To an extent, the public (in which professional critics naturally figured prominently) demonstrated, whether by criticism or simple neglect, that it would no longer tolerate extreme alterations of history, thereby forcing writers to include more actual history and greater historical detail. To an extent, the writers themselves, whether by reflecting on their art in the abstract or simply sensing more keenly than ever the critical importance of historical truth in the practice of writing, found new ways to give it prominence in their works….But then the demand for historical truth that, for reasons both independent of art and within art itself, continued to grow in the process just described, led to still newer needs and a search for still newer solutions. Each successive solution was a fact, none the fact. Each adjustment was progress; none was, or could have been, the destination. For nothing (and we always return to this point) can be the final destination on the path of historical truth but, relatively speaking of course, total and pure historical truth. When parts are alike, improving one strengthens the whole; when they are not alike, improving one destroys it.” (Ibid., 80). Hence unlike our twentieth-century critics of the historical novel, to this nineteenth-century author the historical novel appeared nearly destroyed or at least moribund. The interest of the reading public was in history itself. The natural corollary of the popularity of the historical novel was to replace it with history proper. Thus, Manzoni rejected the historical novel in clear terms. See Alessandro Manzoni, On the Historical Novel, trans. Sandra Bermann (U. of Nebraska: Lincoln, 1984).
obliged to repudiate the category of historical novel and indeed history itself. What Lukács missed in his analysis was, of course, the different senses of history in play in the colonial context. To “make history,” in the sense of participating in popular movements and to “have history” in the form of a historiographic tradition were separate things. Epistemic contestations on the question of history was thus a task in itself, to be carried out alongside the task of “making history” by means of participating in anticolonial movements.

Persuant to the contestatory colonial context, the dominant theme in the preface of Bener Meye happens to be Haraprasad’s emphatic rejection of any allegiance to scientific history, which is focalized, moreover, through his distanciation from pāṭhure pramanā. The term “pāṭhure,” although an adjective, metonymically points us to scientific history and its search for the corroboration of textual statements with evidences of another kind: the stone or metal-plate inscriptions that were considered less likely to be forged than the documents produced by other traditional means. Yet, we would be too quick to assume from such a statement that Haraprasad was a persistent voice in opposition of the use of inscriptions evidence in history. In fact, there were moments when the contrary was the case. For instance, only a few years before Bener Meye’s appearance, he unequivocally underscored the importance of inscriptions evidence in the preface to the novella Pāśāṇer Kathā or The Stone’s Story (where “the stone” is made to narrate human history from a fictional extrahuman perspective) by his student Rakhaldas Banerjee (1885–1930). His turn against inscriptions in Bener Meye thus had the suddenness of an

205. Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, Pashaner Katha: A Historical Romance (Calcutta, Bengal Medical Library, 1914).
event and hence, as I have already mentioned, was a call to attention to a larger epistemic context rather than a wholesale rejection of the inscriptive evidence as such.

This larger epistemic context is registered in some of his essays on Buddhism where he debunks the skepticism of the scientific historians. Take, for instance, the following reference to the controversy surrounding a curious figure called Ādiśūr: “The five Brahmins came to Bengal during Ādiśūr’s time. We have not found any copper plate inscription issued by Ādiśūr— hence the scientific historians think there could not have been a king named Ādiśūr. But in real life it is hard to tolerate such an excess of science.” But what did it mean to reject scientific history in the context of a disputed historiographeme concerning a king who might (not) have been? A digression follows here, that helps us to chart an answer to the foregoing question and allows us to connect Bener Meye to some contemporary historiographical concerns and reflections.

Who was Ādiśūr, the king? In the past few years, researchers have shed some light on the controversy that brewed in the early twentieth century surrounding Ādiśūr, a figure who was believed to have reigned in Bengal sometime in the past, (various estimates place him either in the pre-Pala era or in the era that immediately followed the decline of the Palas, the dynasty that ruled from the eighth to the twelfth century C.E. in Eastern India), and was thought to have been instrumental in making possible the migration of some notable Brahmin families from north India. There were caste-genealogies of precolonial origin—often suspected to be forged

documents—that narrated the tale of Ādiśūr and the said migration of the distinguished Brahmins. Kumkum Chatterjee, a historian who dealt with Mughal east India, has recently discussed at length the early twentieth-century debates on the historical validity of the tales of Ādiśūr as well as the genre of traditional genealogies of upper-caste social origin. Chatterjee broaches her discussion in the following way:

The controversy took the form of an intense and acrimonious debate about a king named Adisur, who was believed to have reigned several centuries ago. The resulting dispute divided a segment of Bengal’s scholarly world into two mutually antagonistic camps during the 1920s and 1930s. This debate was not a discreet disagreement among scholars, but rather a public airing, conducted primarily through the medium of print, and therefore accessible to a literate middle-class reading public. The controversial King Adisur thus serves as an entry point into a dispute that reveals the connections between history and nation-making in a colonized society, on the one hand, and engages with the relationships among different visions of history, on the other.207

Of the two camps mentioned here by Chatterjee, Haraprasad belonged to the one that refused to invalidate the historical uses of caste-genealogies. To some extent Haraprasad’s support for this group can be attributed to his concerns as an archive-builder. In spite of his occasional disagreements with historians, Haraprasad played a significant role in rewriting the history of Bengal by expanding and reconstituting the traditional archive. His discovery of Rāmacaritam, a text that provided an account of the reign and exploits of the king Rāmapāla (1077-1133 C.E.) made available to the historians of the Pala dynasty a crucial source to work on. Even more celebrated is his discovery and publication of several Buddhist-tantric poems that were identified by him to be the earliest specimens of Bengali in use. This discovery had a lasting significance, as what Haraprasad called compositions in “ancient Bengali,” found a permanent place in the

canon of historical Bengali. In the preface to the volume where he made his discovery public, he mentioned two other collector-scholars who either followed his lead or helped him in his search for Bengali manuscripts. These two were Dineshchandra Sen (1866–1939) and Nagendranath Vasu (1866–1938). It is quite natural then that Haraprasad stood by his comrade-in-arms Vasu, who was a prolific writer of many elaborate volumes on caste-history and who was the main target of criticism of the scientific historians by the early twentieth century.

But there was also something about his own research that was at work in Haraprasad’s readiness to accept the Ādiśūr legend. Haraprasad, in his writings, made mention time and again of the initial personal quest that fueled his search for old Bengali manuscripts. The quest in question was to prove that the worship of Dharmaṭhākur, prevalent among the traditionally disadvantaged castes, was a remnant of once dominant Buddhism of ancient Bengal. This was

208. We should add that Haraprasad’s stance against scientific history can only be understood if we portray it against the backdrop of colonial governmentality that generated renewed interests in caste identities. A reharnessing of caste genealogies in Bengal was no doubt inspired by H. H. Risley’s project of acquiring data on castes and tribes; the first compendium produced indicated each caste’s position in the overall hierarchical social order. The caste histories produced around this time thus documented the response of a section of the colonized literati to the colonial state’s underwriting of an official account of the surviving caste order. That such an effort came into conflict with the concerted effort of a new group of historians to self-proclaim as practitioners of scientific history is only a part of a larger story. The disagreements with the governmental accounts of caste were often expressed in clear terms by the proponents of caste history. Umeścandra Gupta, a turn-of-the-century historian who upheld the Vaidya claim to a high caste status, is a case in point. Gupta addressed at least two adversaries in his multivolume Jātitatva Vāridhi [Published in two volumes: 1. Vaidya-Kāyastha Mohamudgar (Kolkata: 1902); and 2. Vallāl Mohamudgar (Kolkata: 1905)]. In these volumes he claimed to establish the legitimate caste status of the Vaidyas in contradistinction to what he perceived to be the Kāyastha attempts at self-promotion by means of spurious arguments and fabricated evidence deployed to prove the lowly origin of the Vaidyas. But while he took notice of the deplorable attempts of his caste-adversaries, Gupta did not lose sight of the mistakes made by H. H. Risley in portraying caste hierarchy. The intention to contest Risley’s account is voiced at the very beginning of Gupta’s Vaidya-Kāyastha Mohamudgar: “Honorable Risley Sahib has produced a huge book on ‘Jātitatva’ or the theory of caste. But it is not a flawless work. Since it is by a British author it will soon attain the validity of the Vedas. Hence we will be obliged to speak of the faults that book has.” [মাননীয় মিছিল সাহী একখানি তাঁত্ত্বিক গ্রন্থ লিখিয়াছেন। অথচ বিয়ায়ি রধাধুম নাহ। কিন্তু উহা হিন্দু কীট, কার উহার আত্মন হইয়া নির্ণিত হইল। তাহ উহার সম্পবন্ধে কথা বলিতে ইচ্ছা না।] See, the Preface of Vaidya-Kāyastha Mohamudgar.

209. Haraprasād Śāstri, Discovery of Living Buddhism in Bengal (Kolkata: 1897).
indeed a caste-history, albeit of a different kind, as no written genealogy was to be found of the popular religiosity of groups traditionally pushed by the upper castes to the bottom of the caste hierarchy. How did lending support to modern historiographical uses of the traditional genealogies, which in the early twentieth century were still offering fodder for upper-caste polemics, become an integral aspect of Haraprasad’s project of writing a history of religious practices of the traditionally downtrodden, Dalits? The answer lies in the general historical plot Haraprasad assumed to be true, a priori. The event of Brahminical reassertion in eighth-century India against the prevailing Buddhist dominance has a key role to play in this plot:

Whether or not there had been a king called Ādiśūr, one cannot reasonably deny that there were five Brahmans who came to Bengal at some time and their descendants have become (Brahmins of) Rāṛhiya and Varendra class. But one may ask, when did they come? The old manuscripts of the Ghaṭak say it was 

\[ \text{vede vanāṅga sāke, in] 654 Shaka Era i.e. 732 C.E.} \]

when they migrated to Bengal and this fact one has no reason to doubt, for this is the time when a big movement was taking place throughout India. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa was propagating \text{vaidikdharma} again by writing a commentary on \text{Śabarabhāṣya} of Mimaṃsasutra. The great poet Bhavabhūti was his disciple. At that time he was the leader of the Brahmans of Kanauj. Kanauj was then the capital of a very valorous king who followed the Brahminical dharma. Hence it is no wonder that a few Brahmans would appear from there to propagate Brahminical dharma in non-Brahminical Bengal.\textsuperscript{210}

\[\text{[আদিপূর রাজা থাকুন আর তাই থাকান, কিন্তু পাঁচজন ব্রাহ্মণ যে এককালে বঙ্গ দেশ আসিয়া বাস করিয়াছিলেন এবং তাহাদের বর্ণনায়ারা রাজরাজেশ্বরী ও রাজধানী হইয়া উঠিয়াছেন, একথা সত্যের করিবার কোন কারণ দেখি না। তবে স্থিরঃ কথা যাহতে পারে, সেটা কোন কালে? প্রাচীন ঘটনার পুনরাত্মক বলে, বেদ ব্রাহ্মণ শাস্ত্রকে অর্থাৎ ৭৩২ খ্রিস্টাব্দে তৌহারা বাংলায় আসিয়া একথা অবিন্যাস করিবার কোন কারণ নাই; কারণ তখন সম্ভবত হরতার্থিক একটা ঘটা আবশ্যক ছিল। কুমারিরান্ধ মিমাংসা সূত্রের শব্দ ভাষায় এক চিহ্নিত লিখিত পুনরায় বৈদিকধর্ম প্রচারের চেষ্টা করিয়াছিলেন। মহাকাব্য ভবভূতি তাহারই শিষ্য ছিলেন। তিনি তখন কান্তজৰ ব্রাহ্মণগণের নেতা। হরনার তথ্য একজন প্রবল পরাক্রম ব্রাহ্মণ মহারাজার রাজধানী। সূত্রাং সংখ্যায় হইতে যে কয়েক জন ব্রাহ্মণ আসিয়া অবস্থান বজ্জন্যে ব্রাহ্মণার্থের প্রচার করিবান, তাহা আর বিচিত্র কি?} \]

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Haraprasād Sāstrī Racanāsangraha}, 3, 486.
Haraprasad’s readiness to believe in this grand plot of history portraying confrontation between the neo-Brahminicals and Buddhists made the Ādiśūr-legend especially appealing to him. Hence, the legend appears time and again in the history textbooks written by Haraprasad. Although he acknowledged, sometimes, the obscurity that shrouded some aspects of the story, he rarely expressed any doubt about its overall veracity. Consider, for instance, the following passage from a textbook he produced in 1895:

The earlier history of Bengal is lost in obscurity. . . . Its first civilization was Buddhistic. Some of the greatest Buddhist philosophers and reformers were born here. The first Hindu king of Bengal was the great Adiçur; but his history and that of his descendants are enveloped in obscurity. He is said to have been eighth in the ascending line from king Çaçanka who was a contemporary of Harshavardhan. If that be the case, he must have been a great feudatory of the Gupta emperors, which agrees with the story, that he brought five Brahmans from Kolanc in Kanauj, for the purpose of propagating Hinduism in Bengal. His capital was Karnasuvarna, modern Kansona, in the district of Murshidabad. As the families of Brahmans increased, their descendants spread on both sides of the Ganges in Raḏh and in Varendra. It was sometime before the Brahmans of these two places, though descended from the same five, became so distinct in their character, the intermarriage between them was prohibited; but by the middle of the ninth century the Raḏhis and Varendras had become absolutely distinct. Varendra was held by the Pal kings, but Raḏ does not appear to have ever been in their power; and perhaps, the descendants of Adiçur still ruled there.211

211. See Hara Prasād Śāstri, “Chapter 3: The Kingdom of Bengal,” in History of India (Calcutta: 1895).
Haraprasad thus made a popular legend into a fact of history and Ādiśūr was given a definitive place and time in the royal genealogies of India. Passages like the one above recur in several textbooks produced by Haraprasad. From these one might surmise that from the 1890s onward Haraprasad upheld the account of Ādiśūr as historically valid. Yet what specific role it played in *Bener Meye* is a matter of deliberation.

The Ādiśūr legend makes its sudden appearance in the middle of *Bener Meye* like a valued historiographeme, with seemingly little import to the novel itself, and yet something the author fails to let go of. It may appear, given the minimalist use of the legend in the novel, Haraprasad might easily have excised the segment while leaving the plot of his novel intact. Despite the sense of irrelevant excess that is conveyed, the segment proves to be a nodal point in a novel that refuses to efface its connection to an exterior epistemic domain. The reference to Ādiśūr keeps the novel tied to the polemics exchanged between the proponents and the opponents of caste history, preventing the reader from treating his text as a historical novel proper. *Bener Meye* thus turns out to be more or less a historical novel:

Brahmin’s of Rāṛhiya class were of five gotras. The king Ādiśūr asked the king of Kanauj Yaśovarmā to send five Brahmins in the year 732 C.E. The reason was that a vulture once perched on top of the roof of his palace. At that time this was considered an ill omen, a disruption, and a supernatural phenomenon. Hence, thinking that aversion of this evil

212. Consider for contrast the following passage from a textbook in Bengali by Haraprasad. Here the doubts and obscurities are less apparent: “In the beginning of the 8th century A.D. there was a king called Ādiśūr who ruled in Bengal. Some say a vulture once fell into his house and thus he sought to perform oblation. One needs Brahmins to perform oblations. Hence he brought 5 Brahmins from Kanauj in 732 A.D. and became a bit of a Hindu. Right after this in Bengal and Bihar unrest broke out. At that time the subjects of Bengal and Bihar got together and elected Gopāl, a hero, as their king.” [Śāstrī, *Pratham Śikṣā Bhāratvarṣer Itihās*: *Trīṭya o Caturtha Mān* (Calcutta: 1912), 75–76.]
would be necessary for the well-being of the kingdom, Ādiśūr asked for five Brahmins for a ceremonial oblation. . . . The king gave the descendants of these five Brahmins many villages. A Brahmin belonging to the Vātsya gotra got a village called Kanjibilvī. In that village Brahmins had many descendants and they also acquired fame. And then the kings gave the Brahmins four or five more villages nearby. These were named Talbari, Caturtha Khanda (Cotkhand), Piśāckhaṇḍa, Rāṇḍala, and Hījalvan. All these villages had Kulin residents. The guy who got Piśāckhaṇḍa had two sons. One of them died without any issue and the other one was our Maskarī.213

The person referred to here as Maskarī, later reintroduced as Bidhubhūṣaṇ Pharpaṅe, is brought into the novel at first as a minor character but later plays a crucial role by staging the abduction of Māyā, the daughter of a wealthy Buddhist merchant; he thus helps the pro-Brahmin camp to put the blame on the Buddhists. The abduction of Māyā triggers a series of events that lead to the outbreak of a war and subsequently, the downfall of the Buddhist order in circa tenth-century Bengal.214 The Ādiśūr story is narrated here to give Maskarī, the Brahmin in disguise as an itinerant entertainer, a genealogy that makes his anti-Buddhist tactics appear natural. As if the seed of the Buddhist decline was already sown with the coming of the five Brahmins, whose

213. Haraprasād Śaśṭrī Racanāsangraha, 1, 318–19.

214. The novel begins with a date: 922 Śaka Era. Haraprasad thus meant quite obviously to assign a chronological location to his story. See ibid., 199.
descendants would in time come to enjoy royal patronage of a Hindu dynasty with their elevation through the institution of Kulinism.215

If the Ádiśūr legend functions in the upper-caste genealogies as a pointer to the obscure origin of Kulinism in Bengal, it has the same function in the story in Haraprasad’s novel. It appears as a description accompanying a historical figure who is portrayed as providing leadership to the Hindu camp, plotting and executing the transfer of power by fomenting a civil war in a Buddhist kingdom of South-Western Bengal.216 This figure, namely Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva is another of the links the novel retains to the debate on the traditional genealogies. There was one and only one inscription—discovered in the nineteenth century—that informed of the past existence of Bhavadeva. But one was enough to generate controversy. Nagendranath Vasu took the stone-inscription that narrated the life and work of Bhavadeva as evidence he could cite to


216. Haraprasad calls the ruler of this Buddhist kingdom, “Bāgdi Raja.” Bāgdi being the name of a Dalit community of Bengal, Haraprasad associates Buddhism with what he hypothesizes as the once extant sovereignty of the outcastes in Bengal. This is a significant piece of information given Haraprasad’s larger interest in uncovering the historical conjuncture where anti-Brahminism of the lower castes was manifested through setting up anti-Brahminical Buddhist states, subsequently brought down by Brahminical resurgence.
support the validity of the Ādiśūr story. Not surprisingly, in the eyes of those opposed to Vasu’s endeavor, like, for instance, Ramaprasad Chanda (1873–1942), this very inscription was an evidence that disproved the already incredible claims about the veracity of the Ādiśūr tale.

217. See Nagendranath Vasu, Banga Jātiya Itiḥās, Rāhariya Brāhmaṇ Bibaaraṇa (Kolkata: Dey’s, 2004), 264–65. Nagendranath Vasu uses a fact mentioned in this inscription—of Bhavadeva Bhaṭṭa’s family’s association with the village Siddhāl—as a proof that before the advent of kulinsm, Brahmans received state patronage and acquired villages which became hereditary possessions. These villages were mentioned in genealogies and each Brahmin lineage was named according to the villages where it domiciled, i.e., each came to be called grāmi or gaṇī (গানী). Here’s what Vasu writes: “It is surprising that some are even saying ‘Only Kūlins were assigned villages, but the Śrotiyas got their identity as gaṇis based on where they settled.’ This is not right. There is no good reason to deny that the king of Śūr-lineage gave fifty-six villages and based on their settlements in these villages the name grāmi or gaṇi was obtained . . . That the Śrotiyas obtained villages from the king much before Kulism was established and that from these villages their gaṇis originated, are attested to by all old books of Kulácāryas (the keeper of genealogies) and old stone inscriptions. We get to know a few things of the Śrotiyas of Siddhal-gaṇi, belonging to Śāvarṇa gotra, from the praṣasti of Sri Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva, inscribed in the Ananta-Vāsudeva temple of Bhubanpeswar in Orissa. This inscription was produced sometime in the 10th or the 11th century.”

218. See Ramāprasād Canda, Gaur Rājmālā (Calcutta: Dey’s, 2005), 74–75. Chanda says: “It is not possible to reconcile the facts of Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva’s lineage in Bhubanpeswar Praṣasti with the story of Ādiśūr settling Brahmin families in Bengal . . . Vācaspatis’s statement about the Brahmins of Śāvarṇa gotra from the Siddhāl village makes me think that the Śrotiyas of Śāvarṇagotra were residing in that village since time immemorial. The legend that contemporary Rahriya and Varendra Brahmins cite to trace their origin back to Vedagarbha or Parāśāra must not have been current earlier. For had the legend been known before, Vācaspati would have mentioned it in his praṣasti. Since there is no confirmation of the fact that Ādiśūr brought the Brahmins of Śāvarṇagotra in the Bhubaneswar Inscription of Bhavadeva, there is reason for doubting the historicity of the Ādiśūr story. Until a copper plate inscription or a stone inscription removes this effort to recover the history of Ādiśūr from the contradictory evidence of Kulaśāstras will be futile.”

[This image has been cropped or is not visible, and the text ends abruptly.]
The famous “Bhubaneswar Inscription” that narrated facts about Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva was already a contested sign when Haraprasad reclaims and restores the subject of that inscription Bhavadeva in *Bener Meye*, portraying him as an agent of change. Bhavadeva appears in the novel as a brilliantly strategizing Brahmin who pulls the right strings at the right time for laying the mortal blow upon the Buddhist power and paves the way to Hindu resurgence. We are in a familiar territory here. It is this grand plot that has been the mainstay in Haraprasad’s work, fictional and nonfictional. For him this was the overarching plot of pre-Islamic India as such, the main socio-political dynamic of the ancient regime, the Hindus pitted against the Buddhists and vice versa.

In spite of Haraprasad’s penchant for such a plot involving religious conflict, what ensures the victory of the Brahminical camp in *Bener Meye* is not an ideological or doctrinal superiority of the Hindus vis-à-vis the Buddhists. We might say a certain materialism is discernible in the author’s decision to make the Hindu victory incumbent upon the support of the merchants as a class. This support furthermore is demonstrated to have been determined by their opposition to a certain operational idiosyncrasy of the Buddhist monastic orders. The Buddhist system of monasteries, the narrator reminds us, subsisted on annexing the possessions of the lay population by inspiring propertied individuals to renounce their social connections and join the monastic order.

The hunger of the Buddhist monastic order to acquire lay property comes to be portrayed as the plot of *Bener Meye* begins to thicken. The “bener meye” or the merchant’s daughter Māyā, still young and impressionable, is widowed as her husband, himself a merchant’s son, dies of tuberculosis without leaving an heir behind. This event makes Māyā, the renowned and wealthy merchant Bihari’s daughter, a lucrative prey for the Buddhist Samgha of Sātgāñ or Saptagrām.
The Samgha plans to acquire Bihari’s wealth by persuading Māyā to become a nun, thereby acquiring her inheritance. But the persuasion goes in vain as words reach Bihari’s ears and he starts to devise a strategy to counter the monastic machinations. Bihari’s trepidation appears in the following passage set in free indirect discourse:

So if they can drag Māyā to Saṃgha, not only Māyā’s husband’s movable and immovable properties but also the heirship of Bihari’s possessions will go to Saṃgha, thus the two big endowments of the Dhanīṣ and the Duttas would go to Saṃgha. Hence the mendicants of all sects are attempting to take Māyā to Saṃgha. Whichever group succeeds in this effort will be hailed by all. Bihari comprehends this, hence his great fear and preparation. Sātgān has a Buddhist king. Who knows whether or not the king himself would try to drag Māyā to the Saṃgha that enjoys his patronage? Hence Bihari prepared for war.219

Bihari’s plan leads him to declare his allegiance to the Brahminical societal order. A grand alliance against the Buddhist king Rūṇāraṇa of Sātgān (Rupāraja) is put together by the merchants who join forces with notable Brahmins like Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva. An allusive reference to tantric practices and their immorality appears in the scene depicting a conversation between Bhavadeva and Bihari. But here, too, the question of saving the property of the merchants from falling to the Buddhists gets mentioned time and again. This is how Bihari’s first meeting with Bhavadeva ends:

219. Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsamgraha, 1, 248–49.
“Tell me Biharī, who should inherit your property in your absence?”
“Whatever your lordship instructs I shall follow. I will do according to what you all decide without any hesitation or doubt. The saddharmīs are dishonest libertines to begin with. Moreover, the group led by Lui Siddhā is involved in such immoral deeds that even the prostitutes behave better in comparison. I can’t tolerate these people grabbing two big endowments of the merchants! . . .” 220

Biharī’s criticism of the Tantric groups and practices appears here to be his strategy to ingratiate himself with Bhavadeva with the ultimate aim of saving his possessions from a resource hungry monastic order. The Brahminical support is sought to adopt two male children in order to secure the lines of succession in the two prominent merchant families that lack natural descendants.

Here it is a sacerdotal class rather than the monarch or the state that secures a rule of property for Bengal.

**Pax Brahminica**

The ideological message that is being conveyed here can found by attending to our main Brahmin protagonist, Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva. Bhavadeva was an attractive figure to Haraprasad for the multiple public roles he was acknowledged to have played from the “Bhuvaneshwar Stone Inscription” and some other old texts bearing his name. But before we briefly elaborate on these, we must recall the fact that the Ādiśūr legend represented a confluence of two kinds of powers of premodern Bengal. The existence of this king, or the alleged existence of the same, was important to the caste-historians because there were several precolonial texts from the

genealogical tradition, some of them allegedly forged, which spoke of Ādiśūr. There was thus a certain traditional injunction to take this tale for true. In retrospect, however, we should add that the Ādiśūr legend, regardless of its veracity, represented an event that showed a sort of interdependency between a class of migrant Brahmins and a local ruler. The migration of the Brahmins from Kanauj was not purely contingent but was required and even sanctioned by an erstwhile ruler of Bengal. The story thus conveyed the need felt by some to ascertain sovereign legitimacy for sacerdotal classes traditionally, and this explains, regardless of the veracity of the story, how Ādiśūr came to acquire a stubborn existence in the genealogies that formed the archive of the caste-history writers.

Unlike Ādiśūr, the actual existence of Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva was not disputed. But quite like the Ādiśūr story, the documents that named Bhavadeva, conveyed a story of confluence of two sources of power: the sovereign and the sacerdotal. Haraprasad makes use of this confluence in his novel. So Bhavadeva, who wrote texts like the Karmāṇuṣṭhāna-Paddhati (that dealt with the procedural matters of conducting Brahminical ceremonies) or the Prāyaścitta-Nirūpaṇam (that dealt with the expiation rites and their procedures) is portrayed in Bener Meye as a figure who administers the everyday lives of ordinary Hindus. At the same time, however, based on descriptions provided by Prāyaścitta-Nirūpaṇam that calls Bhavadeva a sāṃdhivigrahika or the minister of war and peace,221 and the “Bhuvaneshwar Stone Inscription” that calls him a

counselor or a minister of the king Harivarmadeva. Bhavadeva is portrayed in the *Bener Meye* as a counselor to a king.

For Haraprasad, Bhavadeva was thus an ideal figure, not only to play the key role in the novel in forging a Hindu alliance posed against the Buddhist kingdom of Rūpārājā but also simultaneously to play the role of a peacemaker, helping the triumphant Hindu king to transition from the role of a conqueror to the role as a governor. After the defeat of Rūpārājā, Bhavadeva makes a plea for religious tolerance to the Hindu king before entering the great Buddhist monastery or the Mahāvihara of Saptagrām:

Guruputra handed over the keys of the Mahāvihāra to Harivarmā. As Harivarmā was about to enter the Mahāvihāra, Bhavadeva stopped him and said, “You should see to it that no atrocities are committed at this sacred precinct. You know that an overwhelming majority of your subjects are Buddhist. This is their place of worship. You should rather return the keys to Guruputra. . . .”

What follows from this moment demonstrates that Haraprasad interested himself as much in narrating the story of how peace was attained postwar as he was interested in the build-up of the interreligious war. What is significant though, is that the agents of war turn out to be the agents

222. The following is the text from Bhubaneswar Inscription, which tells us of his connection with the Varman king Harivarmadeva: ।

223. *Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsangraha*, 1, 297–98.
of peace once the battle was won. Attaining peace becomes a task that the prominent Brahmin figures in *Bener Meye* assign themselves.

Thus Maskarī, the cunning Brahmin who stages Māyā’s abduction and plays the catalyst to the war effort refuses to partake of the spoils of war but finds means to plan and execute events to celebrate peace. At the session held by the triumphant Hindu king for distributing the conquered territories, Maskarī springs a surprise on the king and his entourage:

“Maskarī, what do you want?”
“My lord, I want you to hold court.”
“But aren’t we holding court now?”
“But this is a session of your ministers, for the purpose of discussion on royal-administration.”
“What sort of session do you want?”
“I want that our lord, the king of kings, to preside over an assembly where the pundits of Śāstra and Kāvyā will arrive. My lord, you will examine their work and reward them with prizes. Along with the pandits we should also invite the artists and they should display their artworks and skills to our lord of lords, who will then test their skills and confer awards upon them.”

"মহারাজাধিরাজ, আমি এই চাই, আপনি রাজসভা করেন।"
"এখন তো আমরা রাজসভাই করিতেছি।"
"এ মন্ত্রিসভা--মন্ত্রিগণ সভা--রাজকীয় সভা--"
"
"ভূমি আবার কিরুপ সভা চাও।"
"আমি চাই, মহারাজাধিরাজ সভাপতি হইয়া বসিবেন; দেশবিদেশে হইতে শান্তি ও কার্য পঞ্জিত আসিয়া উপস্থিত হইবেন। আপনি তাহাদের কার্য ও গ্রন্থ পরীক্ষা করিবেন ও তাহাদের পুরস্কার দিবেন। পন্ডিতদের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে কল্যাণের ও আসিবেন এবং নানা কলায় আপনাদের নির্পুণতা দেখাইবেন, মহারাজাধিরাজ তাহাদের কারিগরি পরীক্ষা করিয়া পুরস্কার দিবেন।"

Maskarī is granted his wish and he is thus able to recast the conqueror-king into a governor-king by arranging for Harivarmadeva to preside over the arts festival. This festival functions as a sort of denouement to the novel. This denouement stands out as it signals that Haraprsasad’s strategy

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all along was to reach this end to his story, symbolizing a cultural reconciliation of the Hindus
and the Buddhists.

Here we should pause and take a moment to reflect on how Haraprasad’s stance against
history served him as a narrator. The fictional backdrop of *Bener Meye* allowed Haraprasad to
produce a vast canvas strewn with disparate cultural references amid which Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva’s
work was made to appear vivid and epochal. Yet, we should recall the fact that Bhavadeva was a
figure whose historical existence was not contested. Haraprasad’s antihistory rhetoric was of
little or no use in preparing the ground for the portrayal of Bhavadeva per se. The same cannot
be said, however, of Bhavadeva’s adversaries: Ruparaja, the Bāgdi king, and the other contenders
in favor of the Buddhist social order that he fights to defend in *Bener Meye*.

Haraprasad casteized the Buddhist past of Bengal by identifying Buddhism with his
imagined Bāgdi kingdom. Buddhist sovereignty and the sovereignty of the outcastes were
portrayed as intertwined in *Bener Meye* and this portrayal was on uncertain historical grounds.
There was indeed no document, not to speak of inscriptions, that chronicled the decline of a
Bāgdi kingdom in medieval southwestern Bengal, wrought by an epochal resurgence of
Brahminical sovereignty. And yet, it is telling that Haraprasad felt it necessary to portray the
Bāgdis as sovereign participants in shaping the course of history. Fiction, thus enabled for
Haraprasad to imagine and depict, what we would call today, a form of Dalit historical agency.

**The Finale**

*Bener Meye*’s denouement reminds the readers, yet again, of Haraprasad’s rhetorical staging of
fiction and scientific history in contrary terms. We know that as an archivist-scholar Haraprasad
spent years tracking down, editing and publishing obscure texts, which resurfaced through his effort and formed parts of the traditional canon—retrospectively constituted by the colonial scholarship. The foremost of these texts was a collection of songs discovered by Haraprasad in 1907 and celebrated by him as the earliest documented specimen of Bengali. These songs, edited and published by Haraprasad in 1914, are accommodated in *Bener Meye* as they come to be cited in the finale of the novel. A piece of Haraprasad’s own contribution in the making of the nationalist archive is thus embedded by Haraprasad within the grand plot of the history of millennial religious conflict, which often was made to appear by him, as is the case in *Bener Meye*, as a proxy for the history of caste conflict.

Haraprasad, the archivist-scholar, must have faced the inevitable impasse of having to performatively declare a certain archive as a cultural inheritance of the present while at the same time claiming it to have originated in a past that was irrevocably lost, leaving almost no trace of its link with the present. It is interesting however that in his fictional supplement to this lost past, Haraprasad chose to associate his discovery of old Bengali with, what in retrospect can be called, dalit-religiosity as well as sovereignty. By embedding in *Bener Meye* the songs he thought were the oldest specimens of Bengali, Haraprasad laid bare his relationship with a past that was significant to him beyond the question of truth and beyond the question of its subsumption within history as a constative discourse. Hence was his recourse to fiction.

In *Bener Meye*, the festival that marks a ceremonial closure to the interfaith/intercaste warfare takes place one year after the Hindu victory. Among the participants named in the episode, we find some of the authors of “ancient Bengali” previously introduced to the

contemporary readers by Haraprasad’s 1916 book. 226 We also find the erstwhile enemies, the merchant’s daughter Māyā and the Guruputra, the Buddhist monk, facing-off against each other. Both these figures speak the same “Bengali” as they sing their songs, a Bengali that is made up of the words found in the “ancient Bengali” songs discovered by Haraprasad. Bener Meye thus ends on a note of reconciliation expressed through the celebration of a language that sutures the victor and the vanquished into one community.

The differences, however, remain at the level of content. While Māyā’s poem is praised for the avowal of her melancholy, the melancholy of a young widow, the monk’s poem is viewed as an expression of his concupiscence and almost gives away his desire to obtain Māyā as a Tantric consort, a desire that was already known to some and was not too well-guarded a secret.

This is how the audience reacts to Māyā’s song:

For a while the audience was held spellbound and the melody reverberated in their ears. But as the spell of her tune gradually receded the audience increasingly got engrossed in reflecting the meaning of her words. When at last this spell too was broken all in unison said bravo. Compliments were conveyed from both sides. The Hindus as much as the Buddhists came forward with praise. 227

The song of Guruputra had the opposite effect. The narrator explains why:

226. Some of the names that appear among the participants are cited from the list of poets collated in Haraprasad’s book on ancient Bengali: Caṭilpād (the 15th name in the annotated list that Haraprasad provides in his publication), Vīṇāpād (the 22nd in the list), Sarahapād (or Sararuhavajra, the 9th name in the list). See ibid., 22–36.

227. Haraprasād Śāstrī Racanāsangraha, 1, 386.
No one failed to comprehend what this song meant. Guruputra is sitting on a boat, adrift at sea. He is dying of thirst having no access to drinking water. Unable to quench his thirst, he is left with no option but to look around and his thirst only deepens. He is on the verge of death at the end. Although the woman he intends to make his Śakti (his tantric consort) is visible to him, she is unwilling to participate in his practices. As a result his life remains vacuous.

The Song ended. Bihari was left red-faced. Māya was visibly embarrassed. The whole audience was taken aback. Everyone from Satgañ felt insulted. Guruputra didn’t think this is what he would have to face. They gave him a prize and he returned to his seat. No one from the audience said a word of praise.

Tantra’s association with concupiscence thus faces condemnation at the end of the novel. A hint is thereby dropped about the social rejection of Tantric Buddhism and the role it played in the historic decline of Buddhism in India. This decline for Haraprasad was a fact and he made no effort to reverse the outcome of history in his novel. And yet, Haraprasad ensured that in his work of fiction, achieving peace would involve imagining cultural rehabilitation of the Tantric songs as an artistic oeuvre worthy of ecumenical praise. The two Brahmin strategists of Bener Meye, Bhavadeva and Maskarī, orchestrate the peace-process leading to the transfer of power. The final closure is attained by forming a cultural consensus undergirded by a language that is common to all.

228. Ibid., 387–88.
The novel, although it ends on a less dramatic note than it begins, would make some readers revisit the beginning to reflect again on its emergence, not as a mere addition to an already impressively stocked library of Bengali historical novels but as a work of fiction that was inserted into a contemporary polemic concerning historical discourse. Haraprasad, by declaring that his novel should be left out of the class of historical novels, does not close off its relationship to history. Paradoxically, Haraprasad’s declaration makes the careful reader pay more attention to the question of history than usual.

In a certain sense Haraprasad’s gesture of repudiating history repeated a gesture made by colonial administrators when they rejected their native subjects’ accounts as so many lies and instituted the image of history-less Indian. Some of these native subjects learned to live with the idea of having no history and gathered up the strength to say: “Count me out.” Is this repetition a mere pathological internalization of colonial strategies of subject formation? Given the minutiae of Haraprasad’s strategy to deal with history in Bener Meye, the answer to this question is a resounding no. Haraprasad’s ceremonial rejection of history in the preface was not about preparing ground for simply excluding history from fiction. In spite of his invective against scientific history’s valorization of pāthure pramāṇ in the preface of Bener Meye, Haraprasad himself based much of the novel on the fragments of information gleaned from a stone inscription. To some readers this may strike as the consummate paradox of the novel. But here we should remind ourselves that Haraprasad, like many other colonial-modern thinkers dealing with history, was involved in an act of disavowal, where rejection of history was followed by its
unstated or tacit acceptance. The structure of this disavowal, while discernible internally in
Haraprasad, extended beyond his work as it also subtended the arguments advanced by some of
the other defenders of traditional genealogies. We turn now to these other acts of disavowal.

**Scientific History: The Proponents and the Opponents**

Kumkum Chatterjee, perhaps the only contemporary historian to work on the early twentieth-
century controversy surrounding the historical veracity of the Ādīśūr legend, has claimed, “the
debate among the two groups of scholars suggests that—discursively, at least—the battle lines
between them were clearly drawn.”

Drawing such sharp divisions between the combatants reifies the arguments offered by the various scholars and deflects, I argue, our attention from the
politics of disavowal that was at play at this epistemic conjuncture. Departing from Chatterjee’s
view, I call attention here to the fact that the discursive distinction between the proponents and
the opponents of scientific history was not as clearly marked as has been supposed and, at times,
it is indeed difficult to portray these two groups as inviolably separated.

Take for instance the case of literary historian and archivist Dineshchandra Sen, who in
Kumkum Chatterjee’s analysis is portrayed as a prominent voice against scientific history.
Despite Sen’s opposition to the principles of scientific history, he was far from an unequivocal
proponent for the traditional genealogies. Sen was acutely aware of the bias that the focus on
caste issues inevitably introduced in the works of the historians dealing with such traditions.

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229. Kumkum Chatterjee, The King of Controversy: History and Nation-Making in Late Colonial India,
Thus *Vallālacarita*, a text recounting events from the Sena era (11th–12th century C.E.) and used by the contemporary authors interested in caste-history was considered by Sen to be a *sāmpradāyik grantha* (a text pertaining to a specific community, biased in favor of its self-representation, et cetera). Sen was critical of *Vallālacarita*’s preoccupation with explaining the lower status conferred by King Vallāla on a specific caste-group, the Suvarṇaṇik. Sen also never denied the problem of forgery that made the traditional genealogies unfit to be used as historical sources. Last but not least, on the question of historical validation of the legend of Ādiśūr, Sen was much more ready to doubt the legend’s veracity than some other noted authors. Sen’s example leads us to ask whether or not the divide between the proponents and opponents of scientific history, or alternately put, between the proponents and the opponents of

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230. Haraprasad together with his collaborators brought out the first Bengali translation of this Sanskrit text. See *Vallālacaritam*, eds. Haraprasad Shastri et al. (Comilla: B.S.1322).

231. Dineschandra Sen, *Brihat Banga*, vol.1 (Kolkata: Dey’s, 1993), 460–61. The same ambivalence is apparent in Sen’s praise for Durgacaran Sanyal, a social historian who accepted the Ādiśūr legend unquestioningly. Sen thought Sanyal’s work fared better compared to the histories based on forged texts of caste genealogies. Durgacharan Sanyal identified Ādiśūr with Śūrasena, the Vaidya commander of the Pala king Madanapāla’s armed forces, Sandal argued that Vaidya rule began in ca. 944 Śaka Era. He was quite emphatic about identifying the caste of the Śūra rulers as Vaisya and rejected the thesis that the Śūra or the Sena rulers were Kṣatriyas. This must have made him likeable in the eyes of the Vaidya writers like Umeshchandra Gupta and Dinescandra Sen, since they too were in search of a glorious past of the Vaidyas. See Durgacandra Sanyāl, *Bāṅgal Sāmājik Itihās* (Calcutta: Model Publishing House, B.S. 1410), 28–29.

232. Sen was much more careful than both Nagendranath Vasu and Haraprasad Shastri when it came to claiming the historical status of Ādiśūr. See Sen, *Brihat Banga*, 462. “After Harṣavardhan’s death Kanauj became a big center of the Brahmins. In India wherever the need for new-Brahminism was felt, Kanauj’s depot replenished such need. The Vaidiks were usually brought from the Deccan, thus there is no doubt that in the exclusively Buddhist Bengali society a need was felt to bring the Brahmins from outside for the purpose of initiating new-Brahminism. . . . That Ādiśūr was the name of an actual king, this we do not believe. . . . Some early king of the Sūr dynasty brought them (the Brahmins)—this was the rumor. It is in this way that the name Ādiśūr originated.”
the traditional genealogies was only occasional and intermittent. Were there, perhaps, other processes at work that undercut the stable consensus that informed either of the groups involved in the epistemic battle over the existence of a fabled king?

A Deconstructible Divide?

One way of figuring out what separated the proponents and the opponents of either scientific history or traditional genealogies is to focus on what sort of rules of evidence were adopted by each of the groups as valid. Regarding this, the view of Akshaykumar Maitreya (1861–1930), a

233. In the matter of delimiting the rules of evidence, the name that stands foremost is that of the historian of Mughal India, Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958). Sarkar played no direct role in the scientific historians’ charge against the traditional genealogies and yet he deserves mention here for his clearly stated position on scientific history. See Jadunāth Sarkār, “Itihāscarcār Prāṇālī” in Itihās, n.s., 5, issue 3, (B.S.1377): 229-240. Sarkar wrote in 1915: “History stands on the stony plinth of truth. If truth remains undetermined, if we put up a fanciful image of the past or give up after merely having drawn a partial picture, then we would remain in the world of imagination. . . . We should not make a distinction between the pleasant and the unpleasant truth, nor between the truth which is generally accepted and that which is posed against the current opinion. Even if truth hurts our patriotic pride, we should accept it.” Alongside this he equated in this essay his preferred “scientific” method with the method that is usually adopted in the courtroom for witness-verification. Much of his suggestions to the aspirants of scientific history have to do with zeroing in on the first person account of the witness. It is true that, strictly speaking, the archive of the caste-histories of this era did not match his criteria. Nonetheless, that was the shortfall of the archive in question. When it came to conforming to the general ethos of being an impartial judge while dealing with the documents, this was not, in principle at least, foreign to the practitioners of caste-history themselves. The caste-rivals being the addressees of the individual caste-historians had to be proven wrong and convinced otherwise by constantly avowing one’s allegiance to truth and by citation of bona fide (and nonetheless disputed) documents. For a detailed account of the life and work of Jadunath Sarkar see Dipesh Chakrabarty, The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).
historian who took up the cause of nationalist history as well as scientific history, is noteworthy, more so because he headed the Rajshahi based “Barendra Research Society” which led the charge in the scientific historians’ battle against the proponents of the traditional genealogies. Let us attend here to Maitreya sermonizing historian’s neutrality in 1914:

Before one starts accumulating facts one must put a harness on one’s prejudices and must sacrifice one’s preferences and likings. One must be generous enough to subject one’s personal, communal, or patriotic hopes and wishes to an order of proof. Love for one’s country, patriotism, love of one’s faith, these are great dispositions of human heart — truth, however, is an ideal still higher. Failing to accept this the contemporaries of Galileo incarcerated him. . . . Although we lack the strength to imprison anyone these days, we can surely end up imprisoning our own ability to judge. We must get involved in researching the facts and carefully avoid such a predicament. Whatever is true, we must acquire the intellectual force to be able to uphold it humbly.

234. This is how Maitreya explains history as science: “History is based on proof. But all the the proofs of history are indirect proofs. Thus at the first glance history’s difference with the sciences based on direct proofs is considerable. But no matter what exact kind the proofs are, considering the commonality of method, history has been accepted as a type of science.” See Akshay Kumar Maitreya, “Itihās Śākhāpatir Abhibhāsa” in Akshay Kumar Maitreya Smārakgrantha, eds. Samīr Pātra and Śekhar Bhaumik (Kolkata: Ashadip, 2012), 142-161. Hereafter “Abhibhāsa.”

Now could we possibly surmise from what we know of the historians interested in using traditional genealogies, that they would have opposed, in abstract terms, what this renowned protagonist of scientific history preached? If we flip through the pages authored by the advocates of traditional genealogies, we might be surprised to find how far some of their epistemic premises matched those of the scientific historians. The concern with forgery is a case in point.

Proponents of scientific history repeatedly pointed out that some of the traditional genealogies were forged documents. But we would be mistaken to assume that the problem of forgery troubled only the scientific historians for there is evidence to demonstrate that it was a problem that equally concerned those who were intent to use genealogies for history-writing.

Take, for instance, the vociferous defender of Vaidya superiority, Umeshchandra Gupta, who pleaded with his opponents to desist from forgery:

Help me God to remain on the path of justice and truth. And my plea to the Kayastha brethren is that they should not take offense from the unpleasant truth that my book speaks of. I will write history, thus I couldn’t please everyone, always. They too should benevolently judge the importance of my work and treat me mercifully. They should refrain from executing or making others execute forged documents. In this enlightened age forgery does not look good.

Here, if we take Gupta at his word, we would have to admit that his awareness of unreliability of the traditional genealogies was no less than that of the advocates of scientific history. This also

236. Rameścandra Majumdar, Baṅgiya Kulaśāstra (Kolkata: 1973).
237. See “Kāyastha Prakaraṇ,” in Umeścandra Gupta, Baidya-kāyastha Mohamudgar (Kolkata: 1905?).
brings us to the question of consensus. What allows us to portray the proponents of traditional
genealogies as a coherent group? In a climate where colonial governmentality fostered intense
caste rivalry there was a widespread acrimony internal to the camp of those who wrote caste-
history. The fear of forgery expressed by Gupta thus calls attention not only to the overlaps
between the views held by the proponents and the opponents of scientific history but also to the
危机 of consensus within the community that valued the traditional genealogies.

A similar lack of a consensus can be discerned among the proponents of scientific history
on the questions concerning interpretative strategies, the method of dating inscriptions, et cetera.
An example illustrative of this point is the attempt by Rakhaldas Banerjee to date the
“Bhubaneswar Stone Inscription” in his work Bāṅgālar Itihās 238 (History of Bengal). Banerjee
disagreed on this matter with the authors of the Varendra Research Society. A prominent member
of this society, Ramaprasad Chanda (1873–1942), had argued that the twelfth century A.D.
should be considered the terminus post quem for dating this inscription. Banerjee, however,
considered this estimate to be erroneous. Expressing doubts about Chanda’s paleographical
knowledge, he offered a revised estimate that roughly matched the date that Nagendranath Vasu
had suggested. Hence the scientific historians and their adversaries, both failed to attain in-house
consensus on key epistemic questions.

238. See Rākhaldās Bandyopādhyāy, Bāṅgālar Itihās (Kolkata: Dey’s, 2008),183-84. To be fair to
Banerjee we should note here that while he disagreed with Ramaprasad Chanda on the dating of the
“Bhubaneswar Inscription” he also debunked Nagendranath Vasu’s reading of the inscription, considering
it to be too speculative to be backed by actual evidence.
A Priori Equivalences and Equivocations

While we cannot depict the proponents of the traditional genealogies to have reached an overarching consensus, we can still point out certain recurring statements in their works that set them apart from the proponents of scientific history. However, what separated the two camps had less to do with differential epistemological presuppositions than the discernible tendency to disavow “history” as a discourse of Western origin on the part of the advocates of the traditional genealogies. In other words, the opposition to scientific history rarely produced a coherent discourse, articulating a principled opposition to the modern/Western historiographic practice. Instead, history remained a term to be claimed and attached to certain valued traditions. History as a Western discourse was thus denied and affirmed at the same time, decidedly leaving us with a conceptual muddle to deal with. I intend next to call attention to this simultaneity of affirmation and denial, instantiated in the works of three different authors from the anti-scientific-history camp. The examples cited appeared in 1865, 1907, and 1933. In these instances we encounter a standardized defense of the traditional genealogies that was left nearly untouched by the passage of time.

In 1865, the Brahmin pundit Lalmohan Vidyanidhi brought out a volume on caste-history called *Sambandhanirnay*. In that work, perhaps for the first time, the traditional genealogies were treated as indigenous histories. In Lalmohan Vidyanidhi’s statements on separating out what is “essential” and historical from a tradition replete with metaphors and hyperboles, one may hear the reverberations of Bankimchandra’s agenda of separating the wheat of history from the chaff of allegory:
These days many people are heard saying that there is no history of the Indian Aryans. Those who say there is no history it is impossible to convince them otherwise. . . . But I can tell those who believe that we used to have history that we lost history thanks to our own neglect. Otherwise we would not have lost it. Dear reader, you may discover signs of history in the Vedas. Take a look at the Puranas, read some Tantra, and you will come to understand many history related matters. One cannot deny of course that there are metaphors and hyperboles in places. We may construe what is essential in them. Obtaining the essential would lead us to history. . . . Today we are raising this in the context of the contemporary discussion on Sambandhanirṇay. With this topic there is a complete confluence of history (sampūrna samsrava).239

We should pay attention to the historical context here. Sambandhanirṇay appeared more than a decade prior to Queen Victoria’s formal assumption of the title of Empress of India. Those were early days still for the career of scientific history in the colony. Yet, the colonialist indictment of the history-less natives already elicited a response that would later become paradigmatic. The response came in the form of a rhetoric of equivalence that attached the name history to the genealogical tradition a priori, that is, without subjecting it to an empirical procedure of verification.

We can see this rhetoric of equivalence gathering force later, for instance, in the work of Nagendranath Vasu. In an essay published in 1907 Vasu sought to disabuse the “common people” of the colonialist notion that Bengal lacked history. His essay begins with a rhetorical query:

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239. Lalmohan Vidyanidhi, Sambandhanirṇaya or A Social History of Principal Hindu Castes in Bengal (Calcutta: 1875), 1–7.
Common people believe that history-writing started in Bengal with the expanding might of the British lion. Some people even say that Marshman and Stuart have obliged us by writing the history of the land of our birth. The renowned author of “Annals of Rural Bengal,” Mr. Hunter has expressed despair that not even one Xenophon or Thucydides-like figure was born to confer knowledge of this fertile land of Bengal served by seventy million people! Could this be true?

Vasu did not leave the readers hanging with this query unanswered. Soon enough he emphatically reassured his readers that there was indeed an indigenous tradition of history-writing, worthy of being celebrated. What was perhaps most notable in Vasu’s response was that he implicitly endorsed the Western discourse of history as a model against which the indigenous traditions had to be measured up. Here, the reference to Bengal’s Xenophon and Thucydides lays bare the rhetoric of equivalence that Vasu adhered to:

Is it true that in our land of birth no one like Xenophon or Thucydides was born? I can say with a sense of pride that in Bengal hundreds of Thucydides-like figures were born, hundreds of Xenophons too. We can find instances of their work if we care to find.


241. Ibid., 2.
What Vasu proudly claimed to be indigenous histories were the traditional genealogies of upper-caste origin.\textsuperscript{242} And yet he thought that these offered a way out of the straitjacket of political history, and instead of merely filling up a lack in the Indian tradition it actually revealed a lack on the part of the “refined Europeans”:

At what time, due to what religious revolution, which specific lower castes were raised along the ladder of hierarchy? We have enough of social history to talk about such things. Having observed society’s movements, courses, and rules hundreds of Bengali Xenophons had noted down the ancient history of the Bengali samāj. That is the general history whose need has been felt by the refined European scientists, and yet, Europe still has not got the chance to write it, i.e., something that the other nations lack we do possess. This is a matter of great pride.\textsuperscript{243}

\textsuperscript{242}. Here we should point out that there were some authors who were less confident about equating the genealogies with history. Take for instance the major caste-history author, Umeshchandra Gupta, who in the multivolume \textit{Jñātātva Vārādhi} (1902–05) lamented the absence of historiography among the Hindus and wrote about his difficulty in finding out the true account of the Sena rulers of Bengal: “Muslims, who were only domiciled for about five hundred years in this land, produced contemporary histories, and even the English who are of a recent import have produced dozens of histories and have taught us the names of our ancestors. But we, although residents here since time immemorial have failed to produce even fragmentary histories, let alone a continuous one. What could be a matter of greater regret? Who are we, where were we, where did we arrive, what names do we bear, who is the son of whom? If only the Sena kings had written about these things before meeting their fate, we would not have faced as much confusion to figure out their origin, as we happen to do now.” See “Preface” in \textit{Vallāl Mohamudgar} (Calcutta: 1905).

\textsuperscript{243}. That is the general history whose need has been felt by the refined European scientists, and yet, Europe still has not got the chance to write it, i.e., something that the other nations lack we do possess. This is a matter of great pride.
While for decades the Europeans had indicted Indians for not producing history, Vasu thought that he turned the tables on them by uncovering an archive that not only refuted the European argument but actually improved the nationalist defense by claiming the genealogies to be equivalent to social history. This was an attractive defense and was reiterated more than twenty years later in a monograph by Kshitindranath Thakur.

In 1933, years after the major exchanges between the advocates and the opponents of historical uses of the traditional genealogies had already taken place, Kshitindranath Thakur in his work emphasized the uniqueness of the Indian condition which fostered the growth of social history as opposed to political history. In a section entitled “The Lack of State History” this was succinctly expressed:

Presently what we consider history is the history of the state. These days, those books alone are considered histories that narrate wars, annexations and such things. We have acquired this idea (of history) from the Westerners. The volcanoes of the Western Hemisphere have not stopped spewing around the all-consuming fire of war. . . .For a long time now Indians have taken to ahimsādharma (principle of nonviolence) and as a result Indians are disinclined to take up arms. It is also to be admitted that destiny has made it impossible for us to take up arms even if we wanted to. This is why we truly lack a state history. . . .

[ইতিহাস বলিতে বর্তমানে প্রধানত রাষ্ট্রীয় ইতিহাসই ধরা যায়। যে সকল গ্রন্থে সংগ্রাম, রাজারূপ ব্যক্তি বর্ণিত থাকে, সেই সকল গ্রন্থে আজকাল আমাদের নিকটে সাধারণত ইতিহাস্যুরঃ পরিচিত হয়। পাশ্চাত্য ভূখণ্ডের আগেও পরবর্তি সংগ্রামের সর্বসম্ভাব্য অর্থ চর্চন্দ্রিকে বিক্ষিপ্ত করিতে আজও বিরত হয় নাই। ... বহুকাল যাবতু অহিংসাধর্মের চর্চায় অভ্যন্ত ইহোর ফল আজ সাধারণত ভারতবাসী ঐতিহ্যবাচক শ্রুতির প্রয়োগে অনিন্দ্যুক। আবার, ভগবতু বিধানে আমাদের এমন অবস্থাও থাকিয়াছে যে, ইহা কিরিলেও ক্ষ্টয়বাচক প্রয়োগে আমাদের অধিকারই নাই। এই কারণে, আমাদের দেশে রাষ্ট্রীয় ইতিহাসের বড়ই অভাব...]

244. Kṣitindranath Thākur, Ādiśūr o Bhaṭṭanārāyan (Kolkata: 1933), 113–114.
Predictably perhaps, soon came a reassurance, the same reassurance Vasu had offered his readers. The following section, “There is no Dearth of Social History,” argued that in contrast to political history, social history surely was once abundant “in our country.” This contention made it possible for Thakur to lend legitimacy to the traditional genealogies that were by this time greatly discredited as viable sources for history-writing. However, what seems unique about this defense of the genealogical tradition is that by suturing the question of violence with history and non-violence with what is traditional, it makes us recall Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*. Coming from an author writing in the wake of the Gandhian transformation of anticolonial politics, the discernible influence of Gandhi was not unusual. What was remarkable, however, was the fact that by this time the rise of B.R. Ambedkar as a Dalit leader had already disturbed the Gandhian hegemony to a considerable extent. When judged in the light of the rising politics of Dalit

245. The ironic aspect to these celebrations of abundance of indigenous social history was that all the authors arguing historical validity of the caste genealogies were obsessed with proving a singular, originary event involving a king. This event was of course the arrival in Bengal from Kanauj of five Vedic Brahmins who were invited, supposedly, by the king Ādiśūr. The sanction of a sovereign was necessary, whether this sovereign be mythical or historical, for those who instituted kulinism or for those who in the modern era were engaged in writing a history of kulinism based on the genealogical tradition. Here we should also cite some of the responses that did not directly assume the stance of declaring kulajis to have been histories. As early as 1877, Parvatisankar Roychowdhuri, who produced a monograph to contest the famous Indologist Rajendralal Mitra’s identification of the Sena kings as Kṣatriyas (in an essay that came out in 1865), calls the attempt to resolve the issue of caste origins to be “itihās śīmaratī,” or falling beyond the boundary of history: “Given there is an absence of proper history, we have no other recourse but to depend on descriptions from *kāvyāśāstras* imagined by the poets, legends which have been handed down, kulaji-literature, copperplate inscriptions, and stone inscriptions. Although these apparatuses are not entirely dependable and *kāvyāśāstra* and popular rumors distort the events or overstate them, impartial researchers could still uncover the trunk (the real event) by chopping away the branches (the distortions). Consequently, despite the books of the Hindus being vague or corrupted by overstatements, they often properly report the gross aspects.”[*ব্রুতঃ ইতিহাস অভার করি-কলিত কারা শাক্ত, লোক পরমারাগত বিনাশীকৃত, কুলগুজন্য, তাহেরল না প্রতি-নিষিদ্ধ বর্ণবাদির আচার প্রলোচনা তা উপাদানে নাই। যদিও এই সকল উপকরণরূপে সম্পূর্ণরূপে আংর্বা থাকলে কলিত করিতে পারা যায় না, এবং তাহেরল না জন্মকর্ণ প্রদান দ্বারা ধনী বিশ্ব কার্যকর বিশ্ব অথবা অতিক্রিয়তায় ইতিহাস রায়, তথ্য নির্দেশ অনুসিক্ততাতু গণ গবেষণার হেন কলিত কারা অন্নকৃতির করিতে গেলে। ফলতঃ হিন্দুস্থানের সকল প্রস্তুত অথবা অতিক্রিয়তায় সৌষ্ঠব দৃষ্টিহীনতা হলুদ হাতকৃতি কলিতে হেন অন্নকৃতি কারা গণ গবেষণায় হেন করিতে গেলে।* Roychowdhuri does not present the *kulagrantha* tradition to be historically valid. However, he puts the onus on the researchers to separate the corn of history from husk of the vagueness of the Hindu texts. See Parvatishankar Roychowdhuri, *Adisura and Ballala Sen: A Historical Investigation of the Ambastha Kings of Bengal* (Kolkata: 1877), 1-2.
assertion, Thakur’s defense of the genealogies of upper-caste origin appears to us to have been completely out of tune with the political reality of his time. Nevertheless, what is also germane here is that by more or less reiterating what Vasu had already said, Thakur demonstrating the signs of being as much caught up in a web of disavowal as his predecessor. On the one hand, he was voicing a rejection of history as a narrative of violence produced by the West; on the other hand he was using the title “social history,” no less a Western epistemic construct than “political history,” to name the genealogies in question.

When judged against the backdrop of these instances, Haraprasad’s motivation to repudiate history appears to have been somewhat distinctive. Haraprasad’s defense of the Ādiśūr legend was not merely to maintain the claims of the traditional genealogies against the critical onslaught of the proponents of scientific history. Such a defense instead can only be understood in the broader context of Haraprasad’s effort to casteize the narratives gleaned from various Indian traditions. The oppositions staged by Haraprasad between history and the story and history and subjectivity (recall, “We are made of flesh and blood. . . .”) were not mere throwaway comments. Instead, the whole of Haraprasad’s novelistic oeuvre resonated with the rhetoric encapsulated in the preface of *Bener Meye*. In all three of his novels, the actors bore the burden of their caste-identity and participated in caste-struggles. And yet, the portrayals of these casteized subjects were often unsupported by documents that yield to history. A case in point is the non-Brahmin adversaries of Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva in *Bener Meye*. While scientific history affirmed the existence of Bhavadeva, it was only Haraprasad’s work of fiction that enabled the portrayal of a Bagdi-king upon whose removal depended the future of the emerging Brahmin-leadership. We should recall here that in 1919, the year *Bener Meye* was published, B.R.
Ambedkar submitted his statement on the “Untouchables” to the Southborough Committee, whose members looked, on behalf of the colonial state, into the demands by the Indian politicians for popular franchise.²⁴⁶ The entrance of a section of the Dalits into the arena of electoral politics was on the horizon. By recognizing the political agency of the outcastes in Bener Meye Haraprasad made a move that was in tune with the emerging political reality. Yet, we should remind ourselves that this was nothing new coming from a figure like Haraprasad. In his readiness to portray caste-based identities he was always more perspicacious than his contemporaries, more prescient. And, given the larger canvas of Haraprasad’s critical engagement with the past, his criticism of history had differed from the minimalist, nominalist strategy of using “history” to refer to traditions that were unverified or unverifiable by the historical method. Still, when considered in terms of generality of tactics, his repudiation of history was not entirely unrelated to what some other authors were resorting to. For like in these other cases, history remained as an inventory of references that Haraprasad embedded in his work, failing to expunge them, bag and baggage.

Coda: Otherwise than History

I began with the question of disavowal of history and how it figures not only in some postcolonial responses to history as a discipline and a discourse but also how we can uncover a history of acts of disavowal of history. This overture then led us to consider historical discourse as an instrument of subject formation. By acknowledging such a performative role of historical discourse we stepped beyond the terrain of the usual discussions of historiography and also beyond the prevalent criticisms of the realist explanations of the genesis of historiography coming from the camp of the “constructivists.”

In Chapter 1, the question of history’s performative ability to form subjects continued to keep us company. Here I borrowed ideas from historian Michel-Rolphe Trouillot who distinguished the two sites of historicity, the historicity of the actor and the historicity of the narrator, from which we derived the shorthands history-making and history-writing. This distinction, I argued, is a crucial distinction and that the principles that govern the relationship between the two sites in various discourses on history and historiography have not remained unaltered since the inception of modernity. For instance, unlike in the philosophy of history of Kant, in the philosophy of history authored by Hegel, history-making was predicated on history-writing. This conceptual move effected a valorization of written history, and enabled Hegel to establish the Western genre of history as the sole mark of historicity. While on the one hand this can be read as an attempt to deny agency to the non-Europeans, I claimed that this was also a script for producing the colonial subject, who faced the injunction to write history to recover sovereignty and acted upon it. Nonetheless, since Hegel reiterated faithfully the colonial
pronouncements concerning the ahistoricity of the colonized, I claimed that the Hegelian predicates of sovereignty on historiography provided the conceptual foundation to the colonial regime of historicity. The first chapter thus allowed us to establish the context for the analysis that followed.

In Chapter 2, I turned from this early colonial moment to the postcolonial phase and reviewed the scholars who respond to the colonial regime of historicity. I showed that their responses adhere to two distinct principles that I organized under two headings: nominalism and culturalism. Both positions assume that colonialism played a repressive role vis-a-vis the representations of the past by the colonized. The nominalist critique of history argues that colonial discourses sought to uphold the Western genre of history as the only valid mode of representing the past and consequently delegitimized those precolonial modes of representing the past that deserved to be called history. The culturalists, in contrast, question the very idea of universalizability of history as a mode of knowledge and valorize those thinkers of anticolonial history who are considered to have repudiated history entirely. For the culturalists, thus, the universalization of the historical mode of knowing was necessarily repressive of other modes of relating to the past that do not amount to history. I argued at the end of the chapter that neither of these two versions of the “repressive hypothesis,” taken in isolation, would allow us to discover the world of colonial subjects and the epistemic negotiations that took place in that world. Nonetheless, as I demonstrated in the later chapters, insights gleaned from both positions help us understand what the colonial subjects made of historical discourse. For both culturalist repudiations of history and the nominalist strategy of using the name “history” unconventionally characterized the responses of the colonized to the colonial injunction to write history.
The last two chapters examined works by two writers who responded to the injunction to write history. They brought into focus Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s mimeticist uses of the past aimed at producing the nationalist subject and Haraprasad Shastri’s attempts to use the archive of Buddhism for portrayals of the political subjectivity of the outcastes. The oscillating structure of the responses of these authors, wherein the importance of writing history was both accepted and rejected at the same time, was examined. In the writings discussed, the need to produce the historical subject through textual work and the requirement to conform to the formal rules of historiography often worked at cross purposes, producing in effect, strategies for disavowing history. This again threw into relief the importance of the two sites of historicity of Trouillot’s description and called attention to the fact that at certain conjunctures these two sites might be posed against each other.

**What Is at Stake?**

While acknowledging the discontinuity between the two sites of historicity helped us to map the terrain of contestations of historical discourse in colonial modernity, its significance for the rethinking of historiography and the philosophy history in our age is considerable and extends beyond the discursive limits of colonial discourse studies and postcolonialism. To illustrate this point, let me take recourse here to some ideas of a philosopher whose work had perhaps the greatest impact in late twentieth century milieux: Martin Heidegger.

In his best known work *Sein und Zeit*, [Being and Time] Heidegger suggests a distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichtlichkeit*. The question of this distinction comes up in Heidegger’s discussion of the existential origin of *Historie* or historiography and its ontological possibility in
the Geschichtlichkeit or the historicity of Dasein. The relationship between historicity and
historiography that Being and Time proposes is however more complicated than what the idea of
a theory of causal origin of history-writing communicates. This becomes apparent when
Heidegger foregrounds an asymmetry between historicity and historiography. While the theory
of ontological genesis of historiography necessarily assumes prior existence of historicity,
historicity by itself does not necessarily give rise to historiography. Heidegger states this crucial
point in no uncertain terms: “Historicity does not necessarily need historiography.
Unhistoriographical ages are as such not also automatically unhistorical.”247 [“Diese bedarf
nicht notwendig der Historie. Unhistorische Zeitalter sind als solche nicht auch schon
ungeschichtlich.”] 248 The assumption underlying this assertion makes possible for Heidegger to
complicate the connection between historiography and historicity to such an extent that the two
can occasionally be portrayed as antagonistic. This antagonism appears when historiography is
posed against the “authentic historicity” (eigentlichen Geschichtlichkeit) of Dasein. 249

While Heidegger’s distinction between historicity and historiography can be fully
grasped only against the backdrop of Being and Time and the rest of his philosophical oeuvre, in
the context of this dissertation, I am inclined to read this distinction through a Trouillotian lens. I
submit, what Heidegger suggested concerning the possibility of antagonism between historicity
and historiography can also be deduced from what Trouillot tells us about the two sites of
historicity. Since historiography can be employed for the purpose of denying historicity of the

249. Ibid.
actors who take part in historical processes, we must acknowledge that a radical disjunction between the two sites of historicity can always emerge. In the colonial context, this discontinuity appeared to be antagonistic as the historicities of the emergent political subjects of a postcolonial future were secured, at times, by partially repudiating history as a constative discourse. The archives that were not strictly amenable to history thus became useful in the projects of subject formation undertaken by anticolonial thinkers.

The colonial experience thus foregrounds for us an actualization of the possibility that the two sites of historicity might work at cross purposes. It also reminds us of the problems that arise out of, what Trouillot calls, single-site historicity: the presumed or real dominance of the professional historians’ guild in the process of historiographic production. The dominance of the guild is strengthened by the claim that historiography is the only guarantee of historicity; a claim that had a special place in the colonial episteme. Studying the colonial literati’s disavowals of the injunction to write history is therefore of great contemporary relevance as it helps us rethink the questions of history, historiography and the philosophy of history in the context of the conservative revolution that has gathered force in the Post-9/11 world of academia.

Historian Joan W. Scott, wary of the damages done by the rise of conservatism in the epistemic domain of history, has given an urgent call to combat the “trivialization and denunciation of the ‘linguistic turn’ ” by means of strengthening history-writing as critique that can, potentially, offset the attempts to “return to traditional disciplinarity.” Even as I agree with Scott’s suggestion, I would like to end this dissertation by suggesting that the critical historians can ill afford to deny the sites of historicity that remain outside the boundary of the

250. See “Introduction.”
academy. And in so far as these historicities are actualized by means of repetitions of what is archived or archivable and yet inappropriable as constative discourse, critical historiography should enable itself to understand these repetitions and their mechanism and the potential that they may harbor for subject formation. History as critique, hence, should critically undo the predication of history-making on history-writing and should reaffirm that historicity cannot be denied to those who did not write history, and perhaps, whose histories would never be written by individuals, groups, or guilds in possession of the means to produce historiography.


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