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Special Issue

on

Rewriting History II
Imperial and Indian History seen through Indian,
French and British Lenses



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CONTENTS

Introduction	84 - 86
<i>Geetha Ganapathy-Doré</i>	
Indian Historiography and the Changing Canon - Writing and Rewriting Historical Narratives	87 - 103
<i>Madhu BENOIT</i>	
An Oblivion of History: When Tagore warned Gandhi about the Dangers of Herd Mentality and Despotism	104 - 116
<i>Fabien CHARTIER</i>	
Rewriting History from Haiti and Paris: Anténor Firmin's African Voice	117 - 125
<i>Michel NAUMANN</i>	
Contesting Imperialist Metanarratives: The Colonised's Burden of Rewriting History and the Early Indian English Fiction	126 - 136
<i>Subhendu MUND</i>	
Rewriting the History of the British Empire: From New Imperial History to Environmental History	137 - 157
<i>Ingrid SANKEY</i>	
Notes on Contributors	158 - 159

Introduction

Corinne Alexandre-Garner and Geetha Ganapathy-Doré wish to sincerely thank the CREA (Centre de Recherches en Etudes Anglophones) of Paris Nanterre University, IDPS (Institut de droit public, sciences politiques et sociales) of the Sorbonne Paris Nord University and the Society for Activities and Research on the Indian World (SARI-France) and Prof. Mohanan Baskaran Pillai from the Department of Politics and International Studies, Pondicherry University for their staunch support to this project. Without the spirit of inter-university cooperation and solidarity, these volumes would not have seen the light of day in these difficult pandemic times.

History as a field of study owes much to Herodotus. The Father of History had stated that the purpose of his writing was to “preserve from decay the remembrance of what men have done” (Rawlinson, 1942, p. 1). The fact that his account of the conflict between the Persian Empire and the Greek city states was translated in English as both *Histories* (Godley, 1920) - the nine divisions of Herodotus's history having been named after the nine muses - and *The History* (Grene, 1987) points to the inherent tensions and inescapable relations between literature in the form of myth, legend, epic poetry, the novel and history on the one hand, and between the Master narratives and micro narratives that constitute history on the other.

Unlike diaries and memoirs which are testimonies embedded in individual memories, sagas that highlight the families, and annals, archives and chronicles which seek to record events in the order of their occurrence over a certain period of time, history seeks to articulate a critical distance from the matter it studies and find an underlying meaning in human struggles in order to make sense of the past. It was the Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn who pointed out that the historian had to be “speculative” and give “subtle explanations” of causes to fashion history into a new and original science (Vann, Britannica.com). As for biographies, they could be positioned at the intersection of the personal and the political, literature and history. In India, the genres of *itihasa*, *charit* (Chanda, Sahapedia.org) and *nama* explored history from the point of view of dynasties, kings and exceptional individuals. *Puranas*, including the *sthalapuranas* which centre on a place rather than a period, mix fact and fiction, but are still used as sources to throw light on history. Oral histories, which were earlier considered as not so reliable sources of history, have now been integrated into the discipline of history thanks to postcolonial approaches to history.

The contributions in the current issue are rooted in the 19th century when history became academic, i.e., associated with scientific rigour and the search for truth, in the Western world as well as in India. The colonial encounter and education in the English medium and training in universities gave rise to a range of Indian historians who could engage with the West on its own terrain. After the fall of empires - British and Russian, the definition of history, its very course, the writing of history, history as writing and the idea of rewriting history have been interrogated all over the world.

In the modernist interpretation of history, the American historian Hayden White had identified four Western Master narratives: Greek fatalism, Christian redemptionism, bourgeois progressivism and Marxist utopianism (White, 1987). White looked upon history as a literary artifice which included the prefiguration of the subject of the historical discourse. French historians had taken issue with both the definition of history as a narrative and the acceptance of the existence of totalizing narratives that endow ideologies with the legitimizing philosophy of history. Michel de Certeau thus defined history as a “combination of a social space, scientific practices and writing,” as opposed to the traditional way of “doing history” by imposing the will of reason upon the opaque social body (De Certeau, 1975, p.78).

François Lyotard proposed the idea of postmodern micronarratives that did not lay claims to the status of universal truth (Lyotard, 1986, p.34).

More fundamentally, the narrative identity of history was called into question by British historians as well as French historians from the *École des Annales* for whom using a narrative logic amounted to writing history from the surface because it was merely descriptive. Such an objection might have been largely due to the “displacement of the principal axis of historical investigation from political toward social history,” as Paul Ricoeur had observed (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 102). While Ricoeur held that historians could get to the heart of truth by writing a narrative, they advocated a problematization of history that would give it a more scientific dimension.

History as writing was not taken seriously until the linguistic turn that social sciences took in the 1970s and which resulted in the consideration of historic reality as text (Delacroix, *Universalis.fr*). The textuality of history meant that there was no such thing as objective history. Such a stand point opened the space for multiple and alternative histories. Concepts such as agency, subalterneity, counternational, empowerment entered the terminology of history. From the global history of Fernand Braudel, which is quite different from the method of world history, to the carbon history of the globalized world in the era of the anthropocene, the discipline has indeed come a long way in recent years.

The history of rewriting of history, on the contrary, is a troubled one. An example of nationalist rewriting of the history occurred in 1934 when Stalin called historians to change the ways of teaching of history in Russian schools by doing away with the Marxist interpretation. On 25th January 2006, Jacques Chirac, the then French president, announced the abrogation of the controversial Article 4 of the Law of 23rd February 2005 voted by French Parliament that had mentioned the “positive role of colonization” saying that it was not up to law to write history. In 2010, activists in the Texas Board of Education wanted to rewrite both the syllabus and the text books of history in the state schools to drive home their conservative view that the founders of USA and the framers of the constitution intended the country to be a Christian nation. In 2016, the Chinese protested against the omission of the Nanking Massacre in Japanese text books. In September 2020, the UK Department of Education characterized anti-capitalism as an extreme political stance and advised school teachers to refrain from using “resources produced by organizations that take extreme political stances on matters” (*gov.uk*). Official attempts to purge history of inconvenient truths are never accepted by historians. Similarly, they distinguish between denial of historical crimes against humanity from historical revisionism which does not deny “the actuality of events but reinterprets their causes and consequences” (*The Duke Chronicle*, 1991, p.7) thanks to the excavation of new archives or the discovery of new testimonies.

The current issue cuts across this much tilled field of the history of British Empire and the colonial and postcolonial history of India. Madhu Benoit's article makes the imperial, national and postcolonial historiographies of India dialogue with the construction of Indian identity. The conversation between Tagore and Gandhi analyzed by Fabien Chartier provides an insight into the making of Indian national history as well as an astonishingly simultaneous and honestly critical feedback on it by the Universalist mind of Tagore. The method here is as important as the message. Michel Naumann's revisiting of the Haitian intellectual Anténor Firmin's contrapuntal reading of Indian history and his construction of the Buddha as a dark-skinned inhabitant of India aims to decentre the Eurocentric orientation of historical research. Subhendu Mund's essay resuscitates the voices of some bold and early Indian writers of English who were the first to write back to the Empire long before that striking name for the postcolonial strategy of contestation was invented. The concluding article by Ingrid Sankey provides a critical overview of renewed and contemporary representations of the historical narrative of the British Empire with a special emphasis on India and South Asia.

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Indian Historiography and the Changing Canon - Writing and Rewriting Historical Narratives

Madhu BENOIT

Abstract

"History is a subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives" writes Dipesh Chakrabarty. This paper is focused on who crafts the historical narrative, how and why, in the Indian colonial and postcolonial context. Until the 80's, Indian historiography can be divided into two major currents: 'imperialist history' written by the colonial power, and 'nationalist history' which challenged colonialism and colonial legacies. Both currents belong to state-centered research, which was challenged by the 'history from below' school, as historical narrative became pivotal to the concepts of nationalism and citizenship. The ancient Indic civilization was constantly revisited to lend authenticity to each narrator's projection of India's identity and anchor it in India's own historicity. In this paper, I discuss the history of Indian historical narrative from the colonial period up to contemporary times, and the role historical writing/rewriting played in the construction of an Indian 'identity'.

Keywords: Indian historiography, communalism, colonial discourse, secularity, Marxist historiography, subaltern

"History is a subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives," writes Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008:98). This paper is focused on who crafts the historical narrative, how and why, in the Indian colonial and postcolonial context. Since the word historiography is often loosely used, let me clarify the term as I have used it. As opposed to history, historiography is not concerned with events in the past, but with the changing interpretations of the past – in short, the history of historical narrative, though, as demonstrated by Paul Ricoeur, the term 'history' is in itself misleading. History is not an *objective* narrativization of (a) past occurrence(s), but a *subjective* reconstruction of past events or situations, since the historian approaches a human past with an equally human experience (Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 173-90). It is less a question of 'telling what happened' than of 'explaining' what happened through narrative (White, 1973/1975, p. 143).

Hayden White calls history a "sort of mix of hard sciences and art" (White, 1973/1975, p. 136). If historical narrative is an art, it is an art that seeks to shape collective memory, through the events it narrates, and even more importantly, through the events it omits. It chooses in what manner and what form events should be remembered – or not remembered. This latter point, especially in the case of States that were former colonies, is crucial – as colonial history often creates an "official version that substitutes a part of the past for the whole" (White, 2007, pp. 235-237), masking embarrassing realities. Similarly, postcolonial history is frequently about 'unmasking' or filling in omissions.

Be that as it may, the study of Indian historiography clearly demonstrates how historical narrative reflects the changing cultural codes of its own episteme,¹ constructing a national identity which is constantly being restructured as the canon changes over the years. Until the 80's, Indian historiography can be divided into two major currents: 'imperialist history', or history written from the colonizer's point of view, and 'nationalist history', frequently marked by Marxism, which challenged colonial legacies. Both currents belong to state-centered research, which was later challenged by the 'history from below' school, or Subaltern Studies, as the Indian variant is known. This group rejects imperial theory, replacing it with postcolonial theory, contesting both nationalist and Eurocentric macro

narratives. They oppose imperial narrative on the grounds that it erases the multiple complex questions colonization poses for the colonizer and colonized alike, and nationalist history as being limited to the elite. These historians question the connection between history writing and the construction of identities.

With the rise of nationalism, historical constructions acquired major importance, as nationalists realised that the concept of a nation is a historical construction, and because history, the collective conscience of a nation, defines its identity. In India, these questions were especially pertinent as the colonial appropriation of history created a rupture in the Indian psyche. With India's growing awareness of itself as a nation, grew the realization of the link between history and identity, and the country felt the need to rewrite its own narrative. In 1880, the Bengali intellectual, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay famously declared "We must have a history!" (Khilnani, 1997/1999, p. 159). Historical narrative became the centre of divisions over the concept of nationalism. What was the Indian nation? What did being an Indian citizen entail? The ancient Indic civilization was constantly revisited to lend authenticity to each narrator's projection of India's identity, and to anchor it in India's own historicity.

In this paper, I will be discussing the history of Indian historical narrative from the colonial period up to contemporary times, and the role historical writing/rewriting played in the construction of an Indian 'identity'. I will be following the chronological order outlined above, beginning with Imperial history, then discussing nationalist histories, both secular and communal, before looking at historical studies in contemporary India.

Ranjit Guha, never one for mincing words, declared:

History was constructed to serve the colonial state: (...) its function was to erect that past as a pedestal on which the triumphs and glories of the colonizers and their instrument, the colonial state, could be displayed to best advantage. (Guha, 1989/1998, p. 211)

I propose to begin this paper by seeing how this worked.

The Raj Seen through Imperial Eyes

Imperial historical narrative as colonial discourse

Historical narratives written from the very inception of the Raj set up British imperialism as being beneficial to India. Since the first colonial historians were also servants of the East India Company,² this is hardly surprising. Their work legitimates British involvement in India by depicting a fragmented empire, ruled by a declining 'oriental despot' before giving way to British military supremacy. History was thus used to shape a discourse vital to the East India Company, as it is unlikely that India could have been held only at gunpoint. The link between discourse and power is subtler than the presence of army barracks, but imperial power relies as heavily on 'pastoral power' as on violence.

'Pastoral power', a term coined by Michel Foucault refers to the ethical code any given society expects its members to live by. As pastoral power depends on consensus by the individual members of a State, it is constructed through discursive practice, in this case historical narrative (Foucault, 1982/1983, pp. 208-226). In rewriting the history of India, the Company was reformulating India's ethical codes. The battle of identity politics had begun. Reshaping ethical codes both exonerated the colonizer and discredited the colonized country's culture, allowing the colonizing country to substitute its own, creating the 'rupture' mentioned earlier.

Imperialist history changed over the years, as the Raj grew and affirmed itself, but there can be little doubt that imperial historical narratives provided the hegemonic discourse required to buttress colonial conquest.

S. C. Mittal, in his overview of colonial historiography, named, aptly enough, *India Distorted*, concludes that British historical writings served the imperial cause:

The Indian administration under new political set-up required new interpretation.

The British conquest of India and the justification of the continuity of their rule got further strength with their theoretical assumptions. (Mittal, 1995, I, p. 183)

Sudipta Sen, tracing the trajectory of imperial historiography, concurs, giving the example of *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*; written in the 1830's by Mountstuart Elphinstone, governor of Bombay. Mountstuart's *History* abounds in constructed colonial stereotypes – the oriental despot, racial degeneration, etc. (Sen, 2002, p.54). Nevertheless, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya notes that Elphinstone's book became a standard text in Indian universities as of 1857, and continued to be used right into the 20th century (Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 21). But *The History of British India*, written in 1818 by the Utilitarian philosopher, James Mill remains the seminal imperial historical narrative of colonial India. Mill's book, written at the birth of the Raj, is seminal inasmuch as it represents a starting point for the theoretical repositioning of India in relation to Europe. For Mill, it was impossible to reconstruct India's past from native myth and legend, so he erased cultural traditions from his understanding of India, transforming India into a *tabula rasa* to be inscribed with Western rationality, or rational policies of social reform. The importance of Mill's *History* cannot be overestimated. It was a reference book for a large part of the 19th century, influencing thinkers like Marx and Hegel, and, perhaps more importantly, it was required reading for students at Haileybury, the East India Company's training college for all future British Civil Servants in India.

Mill had no personal experience of India, never having travelled to the country, speaking no indigenous language, and having no personal acquaintance with any 'native', all of which he did not consider to be a problem. Mill's *History* is thus a pure colonial construct, and generations of subsequent historians have bemoaned the book's lack of scientific rigour as well as its Hinduphobia, which had a harmful impact on generations of East India Company officials, but the book continued to inform British thought and action right up to the beginning of the 20th century. Contemporary historians, including Romila Thapar and Amartya Sen, have disproved several of Mill's theories, including his contention that Indians are an a-historical people.

That is not to say that Mill's book was the first to set up stereotypes of the sort which emerge later in Mountstuart's *History*. Others had preceded him – there was Alexander Dow's construct, the cruel Muslim despot, that of Robert Orme - the weak and superstitious Hindu, and so forth. The difference lies in the fact that Mill's *History* was published at a decisive moment in Indian colonial writing, and injected the imperial agenda into future histories of the Raj. Regrettably, Mill's book integrated the notion that Indian thought and culture could be mastered through 'closet study'. The works of the celebrated Sanskrit scholar Max Muller are perhaps the best example of this.

Mill's *History* not only opened the way for historical representations of India which converged with colonial objectives, but it converted India into the theatre for Britain's administrative experiments on the one hand, and a space requiring the civilizing influence of Western culture, on the other. Therefore his son, John Stuart Mill, was able to write that self-rule was the highest form of government, but that neither India nor Africa were yet ready for self-rule, with the obvious corollary that colonial rule could and would prepare them. Despite its defects, Mill's book was useful to the Company. The Orientalist School created by Warren Hastings had extolled ancient Indian culture – but Mill's book demolished it, creating the necessary intellectual vacuum required for the business of empire-building. I quote Ranajit Guha:

This demolition is an act of spiritual violence. It amounts to robbing the subject people of their past which is one of the principal means of their self-identification. It also prepares the ground for a substitution; the bad Hindu history could now be replaced by a good history in the making under colonial auspices (Guha 1989/1998:288).

It is impossible to give an exhaustive list of colonial historians in this article, but I shall briefly mention Vincent Smith's *The Oxford History of India* (1919). Smith, while avoiding Mill's crude value judgements, produced a text neatly anchored in the discursive practices of colonial rule; a discourse that underpins the works of both Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster. Smith follows the early Orientalist traditions of Warren Hastings and William Jones for whom Indian civilization meant the Brahminical/Sanskrit culture of Ancient India. The Orientalists, despite their genuine admiration for the 'golden age' of Hindu civilisation did not esteem modern Indian civilisation. They claimed that India had degenerated, and needed British encouragement to reconstruct her glorious past, thus rescuing it from the pernicious effect of a despotic Muslim regime. But this was ignoring the fact that Muslim regimes had been in place now for nearly eight hundred years, and that the 'invaders' in question had long since integrated *Hindustan*, or the land of the Hindus (Benoit, 2011, p. 112).

This dichotomous vision of India has underpinned all future representations of India to the present day. It certainly underpinned Vincent Smith's work. Such a view rejects the possibility of syncretism or assimilation (Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 5). Communal politics become injected into Indian historiography. In fact, Smith rejoins V.D. Savarkar³ in equating Indian unity with Hinduism and considering that Indian Muslims will be more in sympathy with an Arab or Persian than with a Hindu neighbour. But whereas for Savarkar⁴ this centrality of Hinduism implied nationhood and was the basis of the new nation state, Smith, as a colonial historian, thought in terms of cultural and not political unity. For Smith, political unity could be attained only through the British rule in India (Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 126).

The Centre/periphery dichotomy – British historiography sidelines Indian history

Catherine Hall, whose work focuses on the relationship between Britain and its empire places Thomas Babington Macaulay's immensely popular *History of England* (1848-1861) as the seminal text which originally banished the Empire to the margins in British historiography. Macaulay's *History* is in fact the British counterpart to James Mill's *History of India*, a book much admired by Macaulay. For Hall, Macaulay's *History* is paradigmatic inasmuch as it "sharply distinguishes between the nation – a place that could be at home with its history, and the Empire – a place for the peoples without history" (Hall, 2006/2009, p. 32). Right up to 1992 we find Dipesh Chakrabarty arguing: "There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories ['Indian, Chinese, Kenyan' etc.] tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'" (Chakrabarty, 1992, p.1).

Hall points out the paradox in Macaulay's history of an imperial race, for how can a race be imperial without an empire? (Hall 2006/2009:32). Dipesh Chakrabarty partly answers Hall's question with his wry comment:

Historicism (...) came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying 'not yet' to somebody else, thus relegating Indians, Africans, and other 'rude nations' to an imaginary waiting room of history." (Chakrabarty, 1992, p. 8)

Chakrabarty here is referring to John Stuart Mill's argument quoted.

I would not like to give a Manichean view of historical colonial writing, as there are instances of historical narratives which challenge the colonial construct, but they tend to be marginalized and difficult to find. For example, Romesh Dutt, an officer in the Indian Civil Services published *England and India – A Record of Progress During a Hundred Years, 1785 – 1885* in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Dutt, analyzing British Indian economic figures remarks: "in the midst of the exuberant prosperity of all parts of the British Empire, India alone sends us a tragic tale of poverty, famine and death" (Dutt, 1897, p. 133). There is also Edward Thompson's *The Other Side of the Medal* (1927), a devastating exposure of British atrocities during the 1857 rebellion.

Though one could hardly call the Cambridge School of historical writing on South Asia 'colonial', I have included it in this section as it inherits the mantle, as it were, of Eurocentric imperialistic historical narrative. The pluralistic approach of this school has provided much valuable research work on India. However, it has, with justice, been criticized, apart from its imperialist orientation, for relying more on British than Indian archives. It has also been reproached by the Subaltern Group with presenting a narrow and cynical approach to the study of natives in ending British Imperialism. Ranajit Guha accuses the Cambridge school of not being "concerned with the history of India at all. Its aim is to write up Indian history, after Mill, as a 'portion of the British History'. As such, it constitutes a misappropriation, a violence" (Guha, 1989/1998, p. 295). Having quoted Guha, I must in all honesty, confess my own debt to these scholars.

The Aryan myth – the past rewritten to suit the present?

I will conclude this overview of colonial historiography with a look at one of its major fallacies. Contemporary historians have deconstructed most colonial historical constructs, but one notion still continues to be debated, right into the 21st century – the notion of the 'Aryan race'. The origin of this theory can be traced to the work of William Jones and the Orientalist School. Though Jones did not elaborate a theory of the 'Aryan race' as such, several elements in his writings have led to this construction. Apparently Jones's line: "All those tribes of men . . . whether they speak the language . . . of Aryas," (Jones, 1799/1993, Vol. VIII, p. 65) coupled with an earlier reference to the Hindus who, in some early age, were "splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge" (Jones, 1799/1993, Vol. III, p. 32) gave rise to the powerful and far-reaching myth of an ancient invasion of the subcontinent by 'tribes' of the Aryan race.

Jones's remarks were developed into a full-fledged 'Aryan theory' in the 19th century, receiving sanction from eminent scholars like Max Müller, Auguste Pictet, Christian Lassen, and – the Comte de Gobineau. Modern historians contest the Aryan Race theory as a construct of 19th century Indological studies. Romila Thapar explains how archeological and linguistical findings refute the theory of an Aryan invasion: "There is virtually no evidence of the invasion and conquest of northwestern India by a dominant culture coming from across the border," (Thapar, 1992/2008, pp. 81-84). In a later work, she confirms that contemporary research negates the theory, as the Harappans were not Aryan (Thapar, 2014/2019, pp. 67-68). Hand in hand with the theory of an ancient glorious race went the canonization of certain texts, like The *Manavadharmashastra*, privileged by the Orientalist School, and considered as a blueprint for ancient Indian society. Whereas, The *Manavadharmashastra*, was a Brahmanical text, with a clear Brahmanical orientation, providing the fourfold varna system with divine sanction. Thus the structuring of Indian society around caste is linked to the Aryan race construct, as is the notion that identity in Ancient India was defined by religion.

The Orientalist rewriting of history was to indelibly mark the identity politics of India. The communalist appropriation of Ancient Indian civilisation, which espouses this view has been hotly contested by nationalists, for whom secularity is central to Indian identity.

Independent India Redefines its Own Past

Nationalism and identity politics

The preceding section looked at the two major strands in imperial historiography: the Orientalist School, which celebrated ‘Ancient India’ – or rather, their version of Ancient India which now required British help to burnish its tarnished glory, and the James Mill/Lord Macaulay School, which considered India ahistorical, a *tabula rasa*, which required British help if it were to make its debut into the civilized world. Indian historians rejected the *tabula rasa* theory, but the Orientalist School of thought continues to influence historical narrative. Nonetheless, as Indians wrested the pen from the colonizer to construct their own history, two major changes are noteworthy. The first ideological, as Nationalist historians categorically reject the ‘White Man’s Burden’ point of view; the second is more technical, as indigenous sources began to be used. From the very beginning, Nationalist historical writing divides into two tendencies – secular and communalist, a divide which defines the nation’s identity up to the present day.

The Nationalist secular school of historiography

The concept of a civilization based on the idea of ‘syncretism’ – a civilisation of assimilation, is a fundamental element in secular nationalist historiography. In 1909, the historian R.G. Bhandarkar observed:

The foreigners who came to India before the Mohamedans were absorbed so quickly and on such a large scale in Hindu social organization, that in modern society any attempt to decide who is Aryan and who a non-Aryan would be quite futile.”⁵ [...] we must also mix with the Mohamedans who were not absorbed in the same manner as other immigrants earlier.” (quoted by Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 38)

Bhandarkar’s creed was shared by several leading figures of the nationalist movement: M.K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, to name but the most well-known.

In his widely read *Hind Swaraj* (1909) Gandhi, discussing ancient Indian civilization *always* speaks of an Indian civilization, and *not* of a Hindu civilisation. This is not a coincidence –he writes:

Should we not remember that many Hindu and Mohammedans own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins? Is the God of the Mohammedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point (quoted by Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 48).

Like Bhandarkar, he insists on India’s ‘faculty of assimilation’, pointing out the deadly conflicts in the past between the Shaivites and Vaishnavas, the difference between the ‘Vedic religion from Jainism’; “but nevertheless they all belong to the same nation” (Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 49).

Rabindranath Tagore’s nationalism, like that of Gandhi, is based on a vision of “syncretic unification” which he considered the bedrock of the emerging Indian state.⁶ Like Gandhi, Tagore came to nationalist writing when, as a young graduate, he realized that the European ideal of ‘equality, liberty, fraternity’ he had been taught was not for Indians (Guha, 1989/1998, p. 279). By the 1920’s Tagore became increasingly unhappy with the role religion-based barriers were playing in destroying the syncretic civilization he believed in. Communal riots led him to write in 1926:

Straight-forward atheism is preferable to this terrible thing, delusion of religiosity. If you do not keep your eyes shut, you can see how disgusting is the satanic bestiality which wears the garb of religion.” (quoted by Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 77)

Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1936, noting the progressive deterioration of Hindu Muslim relations also warned that religion was being exploited to obtain sympathy from the people for “programmes and demands which had absolutely nothing to do with the masses, or even the lower middle class” (Nehru, 1936/1989, pp. 137-38). Nehru’s *Discovery of India* was written in 1944 in Ahmedabad Fort Jail⁷ on the very eve of partition, when Indian politics had failed this syncretic vision. In every page Nehru’s uncompromising secularism is clear:

Those [Indians] who professed a religion of non-Indian origin and coming to India settled down there, became distinctively Indian in the course of a few generations, such as Christians, Jews, Parsees, Moslems.” (Nehru, 1945/1960, pp. 31-32)

He reminds his reader that Ancient India was home to many religions: Hinduism in various shapes and forms, Jainism, Buddhism; Christianity and the Hebrew religions which probably reached India in the first century after Christ, followed by the Zoroastrians in the 7th century, and Muslims on the west coast and in the northwest (Nehru, 1945/1960, p. 135).

Nehru constantly hammers in this distinctive aspect of Indian civilization – assimilation, mixed blood, invaders who become citizens. For example, he notes that Ahmad Nizam Shah, the founder of Ahmadnagar (Maharashtra) in 1490, was the grandson of a Brahman accountant⁸ (Nehru, 1945/1960, p. 139).

It is thus wrong and misleading to talk of a Moslem invasion of India or of the Moslem period in India, just as it would be wrong to refer to the coming of the British to India as a Christian invasion, or to call the British period in India a Christian period” (ibid 141).

Nehru draws a clear line between the Moghuls who settle in India, and the British who remained foreigners, restructuring the country as per British needs, ensuring a clear flow of money and goods to the colonizing country. Nehru did not see cultures as “self-enclosed wholes” but as “overlapping forms of activity (...) mutually altering and reshaping each other” (Khilnani, 1997/1999, pp. 171-172).

David Ludden reminds us that it is extremely easy to forget

how radical the intellectual work of the early Indian nationalists was in its day. A third generation of nationalists, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi, built upon a long legacy of critical scholarship. Nehru used history to inform his politics, the way Gandhi used philosophy.” (Ludden 2002:6)

The nationalist commitment to history led to the creation of the Indian History Congress (IHC) in 1935, a prestigious association of professional historians devoted to the promotion of secular and scientific historical writing.

Marxist historians rewrite Indian history

Shireen Moosvi notes that though the Marxist influence in Nehru’s *Autobiography* is clear, “full scale Marxist writing came only later”

D.D. Kosambi's Introduction to the Study of Indian History (1956), which was essentially a Marxist interpretation of ancient India (Moosvi, 1998, p. 3).⁹ The shift to Marxist writing came in the 60s/70's. I would like to clarify that Indian Marxist historiography uses Marxist methodology, but does not agree with Marx's analysis of Indian history. Marxist historical narrative opposes political history to the reconstruction of social, economic and cultural history. Marxist historians analyse the means of production, distribution of the production resources, and the sharing of the fruits of production.

Means of production in the context of ancient India comprise land, pasture, labour power and tools used for artisanal and agricultural operations. Those who possess the means of production form the dominant class, and those who are dispossessed of these form the dominated class. Further distinction is caused by the sharing of the surplus. (Sharma, 2009, p.133)

Sharma notes that in ancient India, the surplus was divided by the state and the priests. So Marxist historiography is the study of who owns what, who produces, and who enjoys the produce.

The new school enlarged historical research to include social and economic history, religion, languages, literature, the arts and philosophy. Historians were now trying to construct "a larger picture of society" (Thapar, 2014/2019, pp. 3-4). Methodological tools change to include archeology and historical linguistics. Marxist historians reject several colonial constructions, in particular, periodization. James Mill had divided Indian history into three periods: Hindu Civilization; the Muslim civilization, and the British period. This division of Indian history as per religion was rejected as misleading, as it linked Indian identity to religion. Marxist historians deconstruct the colonial constructs of Oriental Despotism (Sharma, 2009, pp. 75-83) and the so-called absence of historical change in India, which, colonial historians argued, was manifest in the fact that all institutions were static until the coming of the colonial power. Sharma writes that the Orientalist image of a spiritual, mystic India meant that British archeologists concentrated on stupas, monasteries and temples. He quotes Stuart Piggot who wrote in 1945 that the static nature of Indian society meant that there could be no "organic evolution of institutions to changing human needs", "nor the gradual spread of higher standards of living" (Sharma, 2009, p. 237).

Marxists especially reject the Orientalist glorification of Ancient India, stressing the need for a clear-sighted vision of the past. R.S. Sharma points out the "gross social inequalities" of the period, for which he largely blames caste barriers (Sharma, 2009, pp/ 266-267).¹⁰ As the work of the Orientalists is based on Brahmanical texts written in Sanskrit, Marxists insist that they are limited to a portion of upper-caste Indian society, and cannot be considered representative of the whole of society. However, as Indian historians, themselves of the upper classes, are familiar with these texts, they continue to colour contemporary Indian identity. The modern view of Hinduism as a monolithic Brahman-dominated religion would seem to be a construct of the early Orientalists, given the plural nature of pre-Islamic India's socio-religious structure.¹¹ For Thapar, the notion that religion was the major identity marker in ancient India is historically contestable.¹²

This view of the 'golden age of the Hindus', contested by Marxists, forms the platform for Communalist historical narrative, which privileges one religion above another.

Brahmanical tenets reshape India's identity

Communal historical narrative, in opposition to secular nationalist history refutes India's composite culture on the assumption of an "an irreconcilable hostility between Hindus and Muslims from the very point that Islam arrived in India" (Moosvi, 1998, p. 3).¹³ The problem with this theory is that, as pointed out by Sunil Khilnani: "The Muslims of British India did not form a monolithic community with a single 'communal' identity or interest any more that the Hindus did"¹⁴ (Khilnani, 1997/1999, p.162).

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, of the rallying cry for indigenous historical narrative, was among the founders of this ideology. Bankimchandra's historical narrative contains various contestable principles: the British are philanthropists; Indian Muslims are invaders; Indianness is equated with Hinduism. He considered the West superior in the materiality of its culture – but India in its spirituality – by Indian spirituality he meant Hinduism. Bankimchandra is clearly Savarkar's predecessor.

The fundamentalist ideology called 'Hindutva',¹⁵ originally developed in 1920 by V.D. Savarkar, states that people living in India should consider it both their 'Fatherland' and their 'Holyland'. Thus Muslims, Christians and Parsees cannot be included as members of Hindutva, for though it may be their fatherland, their respective holy lands lie outside India, and their loyalties will be divided. On the other hand, Hindutva includes all forms of Hinduism, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs, thus creating a sort of 'pan-Hinduism'. Like Bankimchandra, he equates Indian civilization with Hinduism. This historical rewriting of Indian identity on the basis of religion is the ideology which forms the basis of the three major fundamentalist parties, known as the *Sangh Pariwar*¹⁶ (Family of parties): the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). At the moment the Modi-led BJP government is in power.

Though Savarkar saw national identity in strictly religious terms, he was an avowed atheist. I would like to add that despite his professed admiration of Hitler, he never envisaged a genocide of minorities. His idea was to eliminate other religions through conversion and assimilation. Commenting on *Hindutva*, Naheem Jabbar notes: "We have now left the field of history entirely and instead find ourselves in the realm of propaganda" (Jabbar, 2009, p.128). Similarly, Savarkar's last book, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History* (1963) is closer to propaganda than to history. Savarkar's notion of the 'Glorious Epoch' is when "warlike generations and the brave leaders and successful warriors" free the nation from the "shackles of foreign domination" (Savarkar, 1963, pp. 3-4). Propaganda becomes a 'national duty' if the Hindu race is to counter its history as a narrative of serial defeats" (Jabbar, 2009, p. 89). Savarkar expresses a desire to return to a

mythical or Puranic past in order to source those forces of violence, salvation, progress and hyper-masculinity which, he states, have been nullified by Buddhist 'reform' and later, with the Muslim and British conquests. (Jabbar, 2009, pp. 117-118)

Savarkar's religion based Indian identity politics separates the core, 'the majority' community, from the minority groups (Muslims, who constituted a quarter of pre-Partition India's population, 'tribals', Christians) who are relegated to awkward, secondary positions (Khilnani, 1997/1999, p. 161). This idea of 'Indianness' inspired the founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar, (also a Brahmin). The BJP explicitly declared allegiance to the Savarkarite idea of *Hindutva*. Khilnani points out that though the Gandhian Congress "adroitly marginalized the Savarkarite conception of Indian history and Indianness" it continues to inform Indian identity politics to this day. (*ibid*:161). This is ironical, because though *Hindutva* claims to represent indigenous Indian thought opposed to western interpretations of Indian history, it is, in fact, following colonial constructions formulated by British scholars like William Jones and Max Mueller.

B.R. Ambedkar rewrites caste history

As seen all the principal actors of the nationalist movement defined national identity by their various interpretations of ancient Indian civilization. Savarkar, following the Brahmanical interpretation of Ancient India, considered the caste system indispensable for the preservation of society. B.R. Ambedkar contests this in his own history, *Who were the Shudras*, a deconstruction of Hindutva, written in 1946. Ambedkar contests not only caste, but the entire Aryan theory, claiming it to be a Brahmin construction. Jabbar points out that "Ambedkar's alternative history of Hindutva is cast in identically Puranic terms, that is, in terms of kingship in Ancient India." Ambedkar underlines "the indispensable role the Shudras¹⁸ played in pre-history: they participated in the coronation of kings; they were kings

and ministers in the ancient epics of Puranic history” (Jabbar, 2009, pp. 148-49). This dichotomy in Indian nationalist historiography can be traced to the Constitution of India itself. Though the notion of secularism is inscribed in the Constitution, it is flawed: secularism in India does not mean, a separation of state, morals and education from religion; it means that all religions will be treated as equal by the state. But no provision has been made for majority/minority status. Identity and religion and history are irrevocably linked in this context.

Following in the wake of Savarkar’s *Hindutva*, Sikh nationalists would like the history of the Punjab to start with Guru Nanak; Maharashtra wishes to focus on Shivaji, as the nationalist macro narrative splinters.

The Subaltern Speaks

Challenging national narrative

Both postcolonial historiography and the ‘history from below’¹⁹ schools of history challenge state-centred history, as the monolithic view of historical narrative gives way to multiple narratives. This change occurred in the 1980’s, with the landmark visit of E.P. Thompson to India in 1976.²⁰ It inspired an Indian variant, the Subaltern School of Indian historical studies, which started in 1982, under the direction of Ranajit Guha.²¹ The ‘Subaltern’ group focuses on subaltern resistance which was not accommodated in nationalist discourse. Guha explains the project:

What clearly is left out of this un-historical historiography [nationalist history] is the *politics of the people*. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people. (Guha, 1988, p. 40)

For nationalist elites, subalterns were incapable of articulating the demands of the nation, and were relegated at best in the nationalist master narrative to the category of ‘peasant unrest’. The Subaltern school considers that on the contrary, the focus should be on the peasant, the worker, the tribal, and their place within the larger historiography of Indian nationalism, as the genuine political contributions of individual villages all over India were being written out from history in favour of a single national narrative.

In pursuit of this project, Sumit Sarkar’s *Modern India* gave worker and peasant movements more autonomous political space than any history text had ever done before. Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* depicted tribal revolts as completely separate from nationalism, inside a subaltern space. A more complex picture of Indian history comes into being. Similarly, the Subaltern group rejects imperial history, replacing it with postcolonial theory. Jacques Pouchepadass notes how, by the 1990’s, the Subaltern Studies project had expanded from historical narratives to writings concerned with social and cultural problems in contemporary society (Pouchepadass, 2004, p.68).

A theoretical dimension was added by scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who explored the language and textuality of discursive power.²³ Postcolonial theory rejects master-narratives that put Europe at the centre, and refuses to consider European culture as the yardstick by which all cultures are to be measured. This, to them, would be tantamount to ignoring individual cultures and their historicity, reducing the infinite diversity of human experience to a single historical mould (Pouchepadass, 2004, p. 69). These historians question the connection between history writing and the construction of identities. In his exploration of the famous ‘Black Hole of Calcutta’ narrative, The Black Hole of Empire – History of a Global Practice of Power (2012), Partha Chatterjee follows the history of the narrative from Howell’s Genuine Narrative (1757) to the present day, analysing the crucial role played by the Black Hole in subsequent histories of empire.

The incident expands with the Raj becoming the epitome of 'native' cruelty coupled with British heroism, and shrivels with the arrival of independence, inverting roles of colonizer and colonized, until finally the entire incident is reduced to an embarrassing memory.

The Battle of the textbooks

This tug of war between communalist historical narrative and secular historical narrative for defining Indian identity is nowhere so clearly demonstrated as in the 'Textbook Battle' of the second half of the twentieth century. In 1961 the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) was established to improve teaching methods. It is autonomous in theory, but dependent on Government for funding and choice of director. It began preparing its own textbooks. The historians Romila Thapar, Bipin Chandra, Ram Sharan Sharma, Satish Chandra and Arjun Dev were involved in the project. The first set was published end 1960's and used up to 2002. The historians concerned shared a "secular conception of nationalism that influenced the way they viewed and presented history" and their aim was to promote the building of a secular national identity (Guichard, 2010, p. 46).

In 1977, with the arrival of the Janata Party coalition, these textbooks "were considered anti-Indian and anti-national." The resulting debates underline the importance of the role played by history, and moreover, that of ancient history in constructing national identity (Thapar, 2014/2019, p. 85). The final result was the approval of the books by the relevant committee. The Nehruvian perception of Indian history is recognizable in these textbooks – the Orientalist view of a glorified Hindu past is discarded; religion is not given the central role; the ideals of tolerance and harmony are promoted. The Muslim League and Hindu communalist parties are held responsible for partition. The textbooks inevitably came in for criticism – Hindus were upset at the mention of the Aryans eating beef. With the BJP's arrival of power in 1998 (1998–2004), it decided to rewrite the textbooks, renewing its assault on the 3 Ms – or foreign influence: Macaulayism, Marxism and Minorityism (or Madrasas) and projecting a Hindutva version of history. Accent was to be put on indigenous knowledge (equated with Hindu knowledge) but the historians do not refer to the tribal people of India (*Adivasis*). Plus the Aryan theories set forth follow colonial constructs rather than indigenous historical research work. The battle ranged hotly between secularists and communalists.

When the BJP fell, and the Congress returned to power, the former secular textbooks returned in a revised form in 2004. The new Hindu religion-oriented textbooks introduced in 2002/03 were censured on the following points: poor quality, pedagogical problems, omissions (Gandhi's assassination by an RSS member - eventually a laconic correction was introduced), plagiarism (of American textbooks! Of Majumdar, a known communalist – and Thapar!) and for ideological distortions in the form of: over glorification of the Vedic period; Aryans considered as the original indigenous inhabitants of India, and not the *Adivasis*/Dravidians; representation of Muslims as enemies/invasers – the omission of all syncretic movements (the Bhakti cult, Sufism etc.).

Both secularists and communalists see history as a tool; all this historical writing/rewriting seeks to answer the same basic questions: who is an Indian? What exactly does the Indian identity mean? Are the Muslims cruel invaders and are therefore to be excluded from the nation, or were they tolerant rulers and therefore to be included? For example, when discussing the Mughal emperors, secular histories give pride of place to Akbar²⁵ and communal to Aurangzeb²⁶. A vital question concerns the Aryan theory: are the Aryans the indigenous people of India, or were they immigrants like the Muslims? Guichard points out that neither side stops to consider that today's Muslims might be full-fledged citizens even if their ancestors were intolerant (Guichard, 2010, p. 118). She also notes that both historical narratives represent voices which are "upper castes, urban and male," with a clear under-representation of "Dalits, *Adivasis*, women, peasants and the rural world as a whole." There is also a conflation of North Indian culture with all Indian culture (*ibid* 121-24).

These historical "black holes" have to an extent been filled by contemporary historical studies, which have sloughed

off the various formulas discussed so far, becoming more diverse and far-reaching. The micro-narrative has indeed replaced the macro-narrative. Thapar refers to 'new studies' – women's studies, social mutations and their reasons, environmental changes, regional history – "expressions of multiple cultural norms that cut across monolithic, uniform identities. This requires a reassessment of what went into making the identities that existed in the past" (Thapar, 2014/2019, p. 27). The multiple cultures and social layers of India are being explored, researched and documented – tribal societies, Indian labour movements, Sikhism, Dalit studies, the list is long, rich and varied.²⁷

Indian historiography and colonial Archives

I will conclude this historiography of Indian history with a brief reference to the role played by colonial historical archives. R. S. Mantena demonstrates how Indian historiography has come full circle. She revisits the early colonial period to "chart the ways in which colonial rule instigated profound shifts in the practice of history and history writing in south India" (Mantena, 2012, p. 1). Her book discusses exactly what the title claims – the origins of modern Indian historiography. It is focused on Colonel Colin Mackenzie's research work collecting historical sources, both texts and artifacts, in the Mysore region during the late eighteenth century.

Mackenzie was part of the Orientalist movement created by Warren Hastings (1774-1785), the first governor-general of India, in the first flush of colonization. As Mackenzie worked in collaboration with indigenous scholars, he had access to indigenous sources (Mantena, 2012, pp. 118-121). His work provides incontestable proof that Indians did in fact keep historical records, constituting a strong argument against British claims that the discipline of history was a European import. Colin Mackenzie's Archival Project and the Telugu Historical Record or the Mackenzie collection, as it came to be termed, was misunderstood and underestimated by subsequent British colonial scholars as the regime shifted from Warren Hastings to Cornwallis, and 'Native' sources were no longer considered trustworthy (*ibid* 142 -43).

Mantena explains the short-term impact the creation of colonial archives had on the practice of history in nineteenth-century India. "Colonial archives not only aided colonial historiography (writing the history of British colonialism) but they also destabilized Indian practices of history and assured the ascendancy of positivist historiography in nineteenth-century India;" (Mantena, 2012, pp. 84). The long-term impact of colonial archives has been to open new avenues to contemporary scholars. Contemporary research methods offer new readings of these archives in an attempt to read historical narrative in regional languages as legitimate conceptions of the past.

Whereas colonial reading practices saw Indian texts as essentially flawed, the new historical method nevertheless converted those very texts into historical sources – through processes of assessment and appraisal." (Mantena, *ibid* 182-83)

One such example is *Textures of Time – Writing History in South India, 1600-1800*, a collaborative work by V. N. Rao, D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam. The authors refute the notion that historical narrative was not part of pre-colonial Indian culture – other than myths, legends, literature, the Purana narratives, folklore (Rao, 2004, p.1). Their corpus consists of texts in Telegu, Tamil, Sanskrit, Marathi, and Persian, and archeologic findings. They suggest that possibly these texts are too rich in colour, too interesting, too alive to be taken for history (Rao, 2004, pp. 31-33). They point out that the Western format, positivist/prose – was not necessarily chosen by Indian historians; there was a mixing of genre which led to historical narratives being taken for literature. They insist that fact and fiction are easily separated by their texture. They examine what prose styles differentiates historical texts from non-historical texts. Their work leads them to conclude that there was no dearth of historians in 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in South India.

Conclusion

The final question to be addressed in concluding this paper is why is history so important? We have closely examined various recurrent themes in this brief overview of Indian historiography. The first is the importance attached to historical knowledge. There was Bankimchandra's cry: "We must have a history!" at the dawn of nationalism. We saw how much time, money and care was spent by the British on indigenous history from the outset of the Raj, when Warren Hastings set an explicit intellectual agenda toward recovering original and 'pure' Hindu social and political institutions from historical obscurity. Hastings' motivation was political, rather than ethical. Perfectly conscious of the need to stabilize the new colonial structure, Hastings famously declared:

every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state: it is the gain of humanity²⁸

revealing the thinly veiled and implacable imperialism behind his orientalism policy. Gauri Viswanathan comments: "what is most striking about this statement is the intellectual leap it makes from knowledge that is useful to the state to knowledge that becomes the gain of humanity" (Viswanathan, 1989, pp. 28-29). Hastings' statement underlines the Foucauldian link between knowledge and power which underpins the colonial historical narrative.

We have also seen how historical narrative is shaped not only by the historian's knowledge of past events, but equally by his/her own 'episteme'. In short, in the process of translating 'knowing' into 'telling', a given narrative will reflect the writer's own time as well as the historical period being discussed. This is important, as history is shaped by omission as much as by historical fact. To illustrate the point, consider the colonial practice of 'forced labour' – it has yet to be discussed in imperial history. Whereas it is central in the work of Subaltern Studies historian, Ranajit Guha. Guha writes:

The memory of pressgangs used to force villagers to build roads for the Company's army under the administration of Hastings continued to be evoked in folklore well into the nineteenth century. (Guha, 1989/1998, pp. 235)

The earlier omission of this historical fact is not about failure to narrativize reality, but differing political agendas. Imperial histories are concerned with the macro-narrative (the importance of roads for the imperial army), while subaltern historians are concerned by micro-narratives which reflect the tension between cultural hegemony and small pockets of 'counter-discourse' (rebellious peasant folklore).

This paper has also highlighted how the sceptre of colonial history continues to haunt contemporary historians with communalists and secularists locked in epic battles over the Aryan race, religion in ancient India, the question of caste, as the battle ranges over Indian identity. In short, who is an Indian? I pass the pen to Maulana Azad who declared in 1940:²⁹

"I am a Musalman and am proud of that fact. Islam's splendid traditions of thirteen hundred years are my inheritance. I am unwilling to lose even the smallest part of this inheritance.
(...)

I am proud of being an Indian. I am a part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality. I am indispensable to this noble edifice, and without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India. I can never surrender this claim.

(...)

It was India's historic destiny that many human races and cultures and religions should flow to her, finding a home in her hospitable soil, and that many a caravan should find rest here. Even before the dawn of history, these caravans trekked into India, and wave after wave of newcomers followed. This vast and fertile land gave welcome to all, and took them to her bosom.

(...)

This thousand years of our joint life has moulded us into a common nationality.”

Is it possible that Maulana Azad’s speech has become a swan song? Is India to be denied the right to draw upon the wealth of her pluralistic heritage? Time alone will tell. For the moment, Indian society is locked in the strait-jacket of her own ‘glorious past’, which hardly allows it to develop along the lines required by the entirety of India’s historical experience.

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Endotes

¹ I refer to Michel Foucault's concept of the episteme, that is to say the accepted patterns in which knowledge is thought to be obtained and arranged at a particular time, and which have varied throughout history.

² Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (1770); John Zephaniah Holwell, *Narrative of the Black Hole* (1766). Robert Orme, *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan* (1763) Orme was the official historian of the Company, with access to their records (Benoit 2011:41-43)

³ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1963), activist/politician.

⁴ When Savarkar was president of the Hindu Mahasabha party (a political party created in 1915 which did not support the Congress or the non-violent movement) during the 40's, he launched the idea of an independent *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation). Savarkar has been suspected of being involved with Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, but this was never proved. (wilki notes)

⁵ 'The Incorporation of Pre-Mahomedan Foreigners into the Hindu Social Organization' (Bhattacharya, 2011, p.38).

⁶ Tagore explained his views in his essay 'History of India' written in 1902, and expanded and revised up till 1908. He wrote a later essay, 'The Course of Indian History' 1912.

⁷ *Discovery of India* was written in 1944, published in 1946, and underwent several revisions up to 1956.

⁸ Ahmad Nizam Shah's father, Nizam-ul-Mulk was a Brahmin convert.

⁹ In India, D.D. Kosambi is considered the founding father of Marxist historiography. The senior-most scholars of Marxist historiography are R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, D.N. Jha and K.N. Panikkar. (Wilki).

¹⁰ Inaugural lecture of the Golden Jubilee Session of the IHC (Gorakhpur, December 1989),

¹¹ "Hinduism is perhaps better seen as a mosaic of religious sects rather than a single uniform religion along the lines of a monotheistic Judeo-Christian type of religion." (Thapar, 2019, p. 129)

¹² Religious communities in ancient India were divided into the brahmana and shramana (Buddhists, Jains).

¹³ *History and Culture of the Indian People* ed. R.C. Majumdar, published by the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan; *Freedom Struggle of the Muslims in the Indo-Pakistan Sub-continent*, ed. I.H. Qureshi. Both these works believe in the Two-Nation theory, the former implicitly, the latter avowedly. (Moosvi, 1998, p.3).

¹⁴ Thapar lists the various forms of Hinduism: Vedic Brahmanism, Puranic Hinduism, Bhakti, Tantrism, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Shaiva Siddhanta etc. "These are not comparable to the sects of Christianity or Islam as they do not relate back to a single sacred text or its narrative and its interpretation, but allow of alternative texts and rituals. Nor do they focus on a single monotheistic deity common to all." (Thapar, 2019, pp. 140-141).

¹⁵ *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* is an ideological pamphlet by V.D. Savarkar. 1923, 1928.

¹⁶ The Sangh Parivar aim at building a de facto Hindu rashtra, if not a de jure theocratic state.

¹⁷ Bhimrao R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was an Indian scholar/politician. Born an untouchable, he campaigned against social discrimination toward the untouchables (Dalits). He was Independent India's first Minister of Law and Justice, the chief architect of the Constitution of India, and a founding father of the Republic of India. Wilki.

¹⁸ Shudra is one of the lowest of the four varnas of the Hindu caste system and social order in India.

¹⁹ In India both schools include the same names.

²⁰ "History from below" is inclusive of voices traditional history ignores or marginalizes. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* exemplifies this approach.

²¹ The term Subaltern is taken from Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci's formulation which originally focused on the Proletariat but which under its new usage is representative of all the groups within a society that are denied an ability to share in power.

²² Some members of the Subaltern group: Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyanendra Pandey, Ramachandra Guha, Tanika Sarkar, Sumit Sarkar, Kapil Kumar.

²³ I owe many of my remarks on the Subaltern Group to David Ludden.

²⁴ These remarks are based for the most part on Sylvie Guichard's work.

²⁵ Akbar reigned from 1556 to 1605. He was famous for his policy of religious toleration.

²⁶ Aurangzeb reigned from 1658 to 1707. He abandoned his predecessors' legacy of pluralism and religious tolerance.

²⁷ See *Approaches to history: essays in Indian historiography*. (ed.) S. Bhattacharya. (2011).

²⁸ Hastings's letter to Nathaniel Smith 4.10.1784 quoted in P.J. Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge UP, 1970, p 189.

²⁹ Abdul Kalam Azad (just elected President of this National Assembly) Presidential Address to the Fifty-Third Session of the Indian National Congress, Ramgarh, 1940. This part is taken from the conclusion.

An Oblivion of History: When Tagore warned Gandhi about the Dangers of Herd Mentality and Despotism

Fabien CHARTIER

Abstract

Initiated by their mutual friend, the Anglican missionary, reformer and educator C. F. Andrews, the relationship between Tagore and Gandhi began in February 1915. During the 26 years of their correspondence, when their mutual respect and commitment to non-violence were never compromised, their dialogue and debate prevailed over any blind support or sterile admiration. Between 1919 and 1922, after the Amritsar Massacre, in full movement of non-cooperation, and while Tagore presents his university to the Western world, the disagreements between the two men, although marked by irony and double-meanings, grow intense. Tagore, the poet, proves the intelligence and strength of his political thought, while Gandhi, the leader and politician, demonstrates that when it comes to rhetoric, he is a master of words. It is during some of these exchanges that Tagore warns Gandhi that he is close to bad faith, that he is rewriting history or wants to rewrite it, that he leaves science aside in order to conquer a people with a view to offering them freedom. Differences between the two men will also be revived, crystallized by the political emergence of the controversial Bengali leader Subhas Chandra Bose.

Keywords: Tagore, Gandhi, Indian politics, herd mentality, nationalism

This paper owes much to Sabyasachi Bhattacharya who, in 1997, compiled and edited the book *The Mahatma and the Poet*, a mine of information about the correspondence, meetings, and debates between Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. However, Bhattacharya's edition, which requires neither reinterpretation nor rearrangement, provides a very detailed account of the subject as a whole, beyond the scope of this essay. As such, for present purposes, I have decided to pay special attention to particular aspects of their relationship: How important were the Indian and international contexts in their arguments and counterarguments? Were their respective long-term social visions pragmatic or utopian, modern or conservative? Do their imprints on history jibe with the reality of the past, or have the mythologies surrounding their figures superseded truth? What were Tagore's constructive criticisms of Gandhi's policy or character?

Arranged by their mutual friend, the Anglican missionary, social reformer, and educationalist, Charles F. Andrews, the first meeting between Tagore and Gandhi took place on 6th March 1915 at Santiniketan, where Gandhi had previously sent eighteen of the boys he had trained at Phoenix, South Africa. Following this six-day visit, Gandhi started addressing Tagore "Gurudev" (the Enlightened Teacher) – a few years later, it would be "the Great Sentinel" – while Tagore always kept to calling Gandhi "Mahatma(ji)" (the Great Soul). In 1915, beyond his voluminous literary output, Tagore was already skilled in the art of the rhetoric, and involved in Bengali politics. In particular, he had participated in the popular movement that followed the announcement of the Partition of Bengal of 1905. His patriotic commitment was active, yet traumatic and short-lived. As with the dubious tactics of the British rulers, he was just as much disillusioned with both the radical nationalists who, he felt, pervaded the swadeshi movement and perverted its genuine message, and a twenty-year-old *Indian National Congress* whose members, to him, were predominantly elitist high-caste Hindus serving their own interests, incapable of listening to the people's voice, let alone of conveying their views, and allaying their fears. Hence, in March 1915, it had been a decade since Tagore had vowed to stand aside from the political machine and horse-trading. This step back does not mean that he withdrew from the political scene entirely. Quite the opposite – some of his most politically- and socially-committed essays and serialized novels had just been published (for example, *Gora* in 1909), or were being sent for publication

(like the first chapters of *Ghare baire* (The Home and the World) in April 1915). World fame had unexpectedly fell upon him from Stockholm in November 1913 with his being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Soon his name was splashed across the frontpages of Western newspapers. Almost overnight he came to be considered one of the deepest mystical poets ever – or, at least, the most fashionable one. Depending on how quick publishing houses and translators were to react, *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings) became both a bestseller and a topic of discussion, inside and outside literary circles, at least until World War I broke out. On 3d June 1915, Tagore was granted a knighthood at a time when he was already determined to pursue his time-consuming, costly, and non-profitable educational project in rural western Bengal – an alternative to what was offered at governmental schools. Meanwhile, Gandhi, no sooner had he returned successfully from South Africa did he set up his Sabarmati ashram near Ahmedabad in May 1915. Politically, he became both Gopal Krishna Gokhale's *protégé*, and a key figure among the liberal leaders of the Indian National Congress. He would officially take the reins of the INC in 1920, giving it an unprecedentedly popular and national dimension, and making it a political threat to the British occupiers.

The debates between these two already influential thinkers and men of action were threefold. First, many physical encounters took place. The first and the last time they met, it was at Santiniketan; but they also saw each other at Sabarmati, and in no less neutral environments: for instance, on 31st December 1917 after the staging of Tagore's symbolic play, *The Post Office*, in front of INC leaders; or in Pune, at Gandhi's bedside when the latter was fasting near-unto death in September 1932. They also sent each other letters which, often made public, could read like demonstrations of rare intellectual intensity on political, religious, economic, sociological, or educational issues. These stimulating exchanges of ideas helped them both *and* their respective sympathisers and opponents to theorise and clarify their thoughts or sharpen their counterarguments. Clearly, Tagore, Gandhi, and their respective clans were less given to softening their respective positions towards some kind of half-hearted compromise. All of them were convinced of being on the right "path of Truth" and rarely, if ever, changed opinions. Between these two clans, and their visions, there were men like C.F. Andrews, W.W. Pearson, Romain Rolland, and later Jawaharlal Nehru, to quote only a few, who, admiring both, tried to make the best of their ideas.

If these organized meetings and forthright letters, then, might be likened to original shockwaves born of the encounter, they were not without secondary tremors, i.e. the interpretations and debates that they caused among intellectuals, policy-makers, and diplomats. Indeed, their arguments were commented upon within, and beyond, the Indian borders. They aroused the curiosity of both the elite and the common people, who were eager to see Tagore when he visited their country, and be acquainted with the latest news about Gandhi – was Winston Churchill's "seditious fakir" still in jail, fasting, walking 240 miles to prove to his countrymen that they could make their own sea salt, or calling for a British boycott? Not only did their dialogues and demonstrations animate domestic political life, but they also changed the way India was looked at from abroad during the interwar period, as many foreigners relied on them to get a better understanding of the contemporary political situation in India, as well as insight into how the colonized world was struggling and unravelling. Here is how Andrews and Rolland summed up Tagore and Gandhi's differences in April 1923:

[Andrews] describes them as belonging to two opposite types of Indian races: Gandhi, from Western India, comes from a race with little imagination but a great practical sense. Tagore is just the opposite. Their first topic for discussion was about idols. Gandhi defended them because, to him, the masses are unable to rise immediately to the level of abstract ideas. Tagore cannot bear when his people is being treated like a child as it has been the case for so long [...]. The second topic was about nationalism, which Gandhi defended. He says nationalism is necessary to reach internationalism, just like war is to reach peace (Rolland 1960: 41).

This remark might discomfort many readers who see Gandhi as a staunch advocate of ahimsa (non-violence), whatever the circumstances. Their perception may be due to how biographies and biopics have, willingly or not, canonized “Bapu”, as if he were the 20th-century reincarnation of the historical Buddha, or a new Messiah, forgetting that “the Father the Nation” was also – or therefore – a leader, a *freedom fighter* and an enlightened and shrewd tactician. Stereotypical, caricatural, and polemical though all these comparisons may seem, whether constructive – like in the case of Andrews and Rolland – or elegiac, they contain elements of truth.

In retrospect, it goes without saying that the ideals of the Mahatma and Gurudev were complementary rather than antithetical. A commonly-shared middle ground is that what unites them should be highlighted, rather than what distinguishes them. For decades, in India and Europe alike, this was what biographers did – presenting Gandhi as if followed by his people “as one man”, so to speak, until his assassination on 30th January 1948. They underestimated the significance of M.N. Roy, B.R. Ambedkar, S.C. Bose and other protagonists, who provided alternative points of view, and deserved greater attention. They refused to see, and remember, that Gandhi had enemies and critical observers, who had their followers but received less duty of memory and a less visible coverage on how they participated in India’s independence and reconstruction, either directly or indirectly. Other hagiographers made the same mistake, presenting Tagore as a unilaterally-respected man, whose fame and influence all over India, and throughout the world, had remained sacrosanct since 1913. Whether we like it or not, this is not true: in Bengal and in India, Tagore has always been a divisive, often-criticized, and misunderstood man.

Today, many Indian people (perhaps even a majority of them) make a mockery of Tagore’s ideas, just as some RSS members or BJP sympathisers reject Gandhi’s vision – a fact proved, as much, in the latest elections. Then, in many countries, Tagore is not as famous as he used to be a hundred, or even fifty years ago. In France, for example, his translations have, with much regret, been left to gather dust. Even in literary circles and universities, few people care about his novels, essays and poems, as if universality and atemporality had become old-fashioned. A reason for this exclusion is that generations of French readers have lacked biographical and background data that publishers failed to provide or put forward. Perhaps André Gide and Romain Rolland, in France, and W.B. Yeats, William Rothenstein and E.J. Thompson, in Britain, were right when urging the poet to inform his Western readers about his (extra)ordinary life and environment; and Tagore was wrong in advocating that private information was useless, and deprived the readers of their open-mindedness. In other words, text should speak for itself, and imagination or logic should do the rest. Maybe, for a time, it was true: what mattered was inciting the reader to create, look further, and possibly take action. *Gitanjali* was such an unidentified literary object that it titillated the curiosity and the hidden spirituality in the Western minds; but – just like epiphany is meant to lead to another stage – this could not last without injecting it with some rationality, explanation, and contextualization. Many translations, therefore, especially the novels including political insight, generated frustration. Tagore refused to facilitate the reading of his works. He refused, paradoxically, what he considered crucial for both a man and a nation to be free, that is, that to understand things in full capacity of judgement and autonomy, one needs transparent, factual, and relevant information. His autobiography, *My Reminiscences*, and later his son’s biography, *On the Edges of Time*, were not precise enough to fill either the absence, or the need. In England, critical biographies and introductions were slow in coming; while in France, just as well perhaps, they came even later than anywhere else, when Tagore was no longer fashionable, and took the shape of hagiographies insisting on the spiritual side of the poet, while downplaying the subtleties of his social and political involvement. Tagore lost control of his image and became – contrary to the personage he should be today, that is, one of the pillars, or guardians of India’s values – the object of collective fantasies and of phantasms, then a somehow rigid icon, and, finally, almost a nobody. The slow decline of Tagore’s reputation in countries like France, despite his genius being contemporary, illustrates that contextualisation and historical landmarks are prerequisites to making geniuses, masterpieces, and pioneering thoughts, last in the long term. As scholars, historians or biographers, we have to do better than this, or Tagore’s innovative ideas, which may help make the 21st-century world a more humane one, will be consigned to the dustbin of history at great loss to mankind.

In particular, current readers deserve more contextualization so as to understand why he allowed himself to unsettle Gandhi and criticize his ideas, no matter their mutual respect, and common objectives, as these disagreements are topical. Their differing perspectives stem from their standing at the top of two towers: a donjon and a watchtower. Because of their respective positions they saw the surroundings through angles that varied only a few degrees, and thus privileged some actions over others. These viewpoints on targeted priorities had a direct impact on their relationship and common discourse, as decisions had to be made quickly about what orientation had to be given to the people, within a nation that had to yet define its post-colonial founding pillars. These variations also had long-term consequences on how India has evolved politically and sociologically ever since. Indeed, what Gandhi promoted, decided, or helped to build during the interwar period resonated for decades and is still vibrating, since the basic foundations he established are presently being shaken and undermined. And the visionary, universal humanism that Tagore tried to put forward is still either being swept away, unheard of, in progress, or will take years to be implemented – depending on how optimistic the observer is.

In hindsight, it would be nonsensical and counterproductive to judge who was right or wrong in promoting such or such ideas. What is factual though is that these divergences of ideas kindled at a period (1915-1941) when unity behind one true leader was longed for, and required by, the Indian population at large. Not only did Tagore agree with this need, but he believed that Gandhi was the best person for the task. However, Gandhi and Tagore did not have an equal say. Tagore had far less authority and power at a national level, although, globally, he continued, for a while at least, to represent an intellectual alternative with whom it was easier to talk and possibly envisage a common future. Gandhi aptly assigned to Tagore the role of “Great Sentinel” for lack of his being his personal ambassador, and still less, his envoy to the West. A Sentinel holds a special position only if his commanding officer listens to what he reports. This asymmetry, or hierarchy, created frustration on the part of Tagore and among his sympathizers both in India and worldwide. Many letters he sent to Andrews and Rolland betray the writing of an author struggling to remain optimistic, or on the verge of depression, for being left aside or not taken seriously during this preliminary and constructive step that predates the liberation of India.

During the interwar years, the Indian people had to express solidarity, and be given the right impulse to choose by, and for, themselves, the best path to independence. The basic national values for a future without the English had to be selected, and clearly defined in advance, so that independence could be founded on a stable base. To Tagore, that preparation perhaps turned less on questions of Constitutional writing, institutions, and delimitation of borders, as of collective moral identity. What should be given priority: the independence of a country (Gandhi’s priority) or that of the minds (Tagore’s utopian humanistic one, which nothing but comprehensive education could guarantee)? Should India lay emphasis on unity or on diversity? liberty or equality? secularism or religion? tradition or reform? civil disobedience or an East-and-West synthesis, and a pan-Asian interreligious collaboration? If these notions were not mutually exclusive, an equilibrium ought to be found to build solid pillars for the emerging nation. And this is where giving *carte blanche* to just one man – even the greatest living soul – was unacceptable to Tagore.

Hence, for a little less than twenty-six years (taking into account the periods when either were sick, unreachable, retained abroad or deprived of liberty), Tagore and Gandhi debated these priorities. Their mutual respect never faded; non-violence was never questioned; plain-spokenness always prevailed over blind optimism or sterile admiration. If their open letters were examined as far as South America, Russia, France or Britain, it was certainly because both men were celebrities, Eastern philosophy had become *à la mode*, and the West was paying closer attention to uprisings in India, “the Jewel in the Crown”, as the British used to call their largest colony. But it was also Gandhi’s vivid reactivity, and Tagore’s ability to combine pragmatism, long-term vision and a sort of Universalist thinking, which made these letters so useful to apprehend pre-independent history. As for their metaphoric tone, it gives them a remarkable atemporality and contemporaneity. Pragmatism, above all, because, contrary to Gandhi’s wish, Tagore was not only (or strictly speaking) a poet, an artist, or a philosopher who should lay down his pen, lyre, or critical mind while politicians were debating as to which path to choose.

Tagore was, in his own, perhaps more sophisticated, way, a leader, a long-term freedom fighter, and an intellectual anchored in the real world. As his activities in Santiniketan and Sriniketan proved, besides his ability to meditate, take a measured look, and come close to the Divine, Tagore was also deeply suffused with the problems of his countrymen (the youth, women, the rural folk, *dalits* and the religious minorities in particular). Contrary to many of his contemporary and conservative *zamindars* and orthodox *brahmins*, to many romantic or mystic poets and men of letters (no matter their countries of origin), and to Euro-centric educators, he felt responsible for his people – far more than an elite to whom he recalled their educational and humanitarian duties. In a way, his fiction illustrates his fundamental will not to leave anyone dissatisfied, or disenfranchised, and to educate with no explicit morals. His lifelong commitment to give women, *dalits*, and farmers a proper education is another example that, for him, action mattered more than symbols and words at a time when a society is growing, as “the one who plants trees, knowing that he will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life”.

This quotation features among those first suggested when the word “Tagore” is searched for on the Internet – and, well, it is an untraceable one. This illustrates that, today, in a country like France, when the name of Tagore is searched for, it is not in accordance with what he did or denounced, but rather with quotations (that may, or may not, be his), given with no context or reference. This is not recent: Tagore’s thoughts have often been extracted and published in booklets gathering the so-called best Eastern or spiritual thoughts. These seemingly innocent books have contributed to the creation of a mystic, and mythical author, having little to do with history, whose novels are mostly forgotten. Similarly, Santiniketan no longer rings a bell and its founder’s distrust towards Gandhi’s *satyagraha* is ignored outside intellectual circles in Bengal, and where the Bengali diaspora is present. Let us reverse the roles and situations and wonder if, for an Indian reader, knowing the personal lives of Hugo, Voltaire and Rolland, as well as the respective political contexts when *Les Misérables*, *Candide* and *Au-dessus de la Mêlée* were written is mandatory to grasp their inherent literary, symbolic, humanistic and political values. Most certainly, without references to the political contexts and biographical notes, our Indian friend will fail to understand why these classical thinkers, who lived in exile during their lifetimes, are now inseparable from the current French national psyche – even if Rolland has lost, just as Tagore did, most of his lustre in France. Some lines, quotations and statements are universal; others are not, or are related to current events that must be recalled. Being able to feel the atemporal tone of a novel is fine; to be apt to apprehend several levels of reading is more instructive, especially when the events and issues seem so topical and burning that they merit consideration.

When dealing with Tagore and Gandhi, we are looking at a recent past, with a direct and indirect impact on what India is currently going through. Analysing their letters today is like studying a novel of anticipation, Orwell’s 1984, for example. Explicitly and implicitly, they talk about what some people endured in the past, and at the time of their writing, they foresee what these people will endure if they choose (or are forced to choose) one path over another, and they warn about the dangers of letting these frustrations fester, i.e. the repressed feeling of having been neglected, humiliated, and cut off from the Universe (*Brahma*). Those people are individuals belonging to minority groups. Among them, there is a subcommunity whose members have longed, and called, for an independence, that of the mind, and whose leader has been Tagore. Tagore’s letters to Gandhi, Rolland and C.F. Andrews may then read like *Die Welt von Gestern*, started in 1934, whose author, Stephan Zweig, examining the errors of yesterday anticipated the horrors of tomorrow. Now, this clairvoyance contained in Tagore’s letters may encompass the world’s history, its upheavals and tragedies, but they also present a rather dark perspective of the future history of India. Tagore warns his wisest contemporary, Gandhi, just like John the Baptist, the Precursor, warned Jesus Christ, the Messiah, less about the dangers coming from outside, as a Sentinel usually does, than from inside, India, and Her embodiment, Gandhi himself.

When a great man like Gandhi speaks and tells his truth, what is to be done of another great man’s criticisms of that truth? Is it right, wrong, a variation of truth? The “Sentinel” pointed his telescope anywhere he could: at Britain, where the sun was showing signs of setting, but also at the Japan where, blood-red-coloured, it was rising again;

at the capitalistic, materialistic, and sky-scraping USA, where, thus blocked, it became invisible; and at the countries where it caused drought, famine, and death. He gave himself the means to see the world clearly, at large, with its various cultures, promises and imperfections. Meanwhile, Gandhi had to stay focused on his country's current issues – otherwise, he would have got lost, and lost his people alike. They were both standing where they had to stand, in full respect for their personalities, skills, and priorities, and for the good of their people. But, through his magnifying glass, Tagore also foresaw that getting rid of the British was only one step towards national independence, more equality, a humanity more respectful of man – no matter the colour of the skin, religion, origin, cast, or gender – and nature. Independence was indeed like grafting, and planting a *bodhi* tree today. Its branches would become roots shaping a forest tomorrow: “*Swaraj* is not our objective. Our fight is a spiritual fight, it is for humanity. We are to emancipate man from the meshes that he himself has woven round him – these organisations of National Egoism... Man will find his *Swaraj*”, Tagore wrote to Andrews in May 1921 (Bhattacharya 1997:54). Maybe we focus too much on the political and environmental branches that hide the forest of ideas aroused by that polysemous quotation; but, what clearer, more contemporary, and encouraging message could a poet give to young generations than planting trees to help preserve their homes, nation and world? In other words, national independence – just like planting trees – is a preliminary step. Freedom is not even an end in itself; the end is to make that cherished freedom last for the survival and happiness of the coming generations, for Mother India and for Mother Nature, for no man, whoever he is, can place himself above Nature. *Atman* is, no more no less, *Brahman*.

The first sign of disagreement between Gandhi and Tagore emerged after the publication of the *Rowlatt Committee Report* of 1918 into subversive activities. The report prompted the writing of a bill which became law in March 1919, allowing the judgment of political cases without a jury. It led to a wave of protests and gatherings throughout India that culminated in the fatal Amritsar Massacre on 13 April 1919. While in 1918-1921 Gandhi kept on advocating large-scale civil disobedience, Tagore remained faithful to international cooperation and free thinking. Together with Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell and other luminaries, he co-signed the *Declaration of the Independence of the Mind*, a manifesto first published by Rolland in *L'Humanité* on 26 June 1919:

Intellectual workers, comrades scattered throughout the world, separated for the past five years by arms, censorship, and hatred of nations at war, now that the barriers have been let down and the frontiers have been re-opened, we address an appeal to you to form once again our fraternal union – a new union closer and stronger than the one that existed before.

Tagore found the *Rowlatt Act* outrageous. He set out his reasons plainly in a letter written to Gandhi on 12 April and published four days later in the *Indian Daily News*. Yet, concurrently, he warned him against demagoguery:

Power in all its forms is irrational, it is like the horse that drags the carriage blind-folded. The moral element in it is only represented in the man who drives the horse. Passive resistance is a force which is not necessarily moral in itself; it can be used against truth as well as for it. The danger inherent in all force grows stranger when it is likely to gain success, for then it becomes temptation. I know your teaching is to fight against evil to the help of the good. But such a fight is for heroes and not for men led by impulses of the moment (Bhattacharya 1997:49).

Tagore's doubts were not understood by the majority of his people who blamed him for not supporting Gandhi's policy unilaterally. Yet, in parallel with his criticism, on May 31, he sent to the Viceroy a letter through which he denounced imperialism, the violence of the authorities and the impunity of the officers, and waived his knighthood. This stance was misunderstood by many of his former British collaborators and the press, who took it for an act of insolence.

In other words, Tagore was being isolated because of his outspokenness, at the worst possible time, tactically, when his university, *Visva Bharati*, was being set up to welcome the best of the East and the West. Unlike Gandhi, Tagore was too plain and, perhaps, naive to be good at political tactics. Well-appreciated as a diplomat, as long as he remained a sort of *pundit*, or an apolitical cultural ambassador of India in the world, he was not assigned to decision-making.

The fundamental opposition between Gandhi and Tagore stems from the adage “the end justifies the means”. Tagore could never be content with such an idea, whereas Gandhi, while holding to his *ahimsa mantra*, seemed to accept it at face value during his unarmed fight. Gandhi would put constant pressure on the British rulers right up to their official departure, at long last, on 15 August 1947. To achieve this goal, according to Tagore, the very popular Gandhi sometimes stood on the brink of populism. Now, populism commonly means “a political philosophy supporting the rights and power of the people in their struggle against the privileged elite”. If so, Tagore applauded his so-called “populist” position. But populism is also “a political strategy based on a calculated appeal to the interests or prejudices of ordinary people”. To Tagore, this manipulation of the collective mindset, the exact opposite of the “independence of the mind”, could lead the *Mahatma* to exaggerated discourses or Manichean and unscientific approaches, in being, for example, exclusively negative or non-communicative about what the British (or whichever invader) had brought, and could bring, to India.

Tagore opposed dogma, asceticism, superstition and the wanton cultivation of a herd mentality, four methods that Gandhi used at crucial moments to achieve his nation’s political ends. Through blackmail and fasting-until-death, he often used his own life as a weapon of negotiation to force the British let up on their pressure, or repressive measures – another method that Tagore could not stand. The latter believed that, regardless of whether the British system was substantially guilty of the situation (the caste system, the *brahmin* orthodoxy’s apathy, and the nationalists’ acts of terrorism being blameworthy as well), Indian people were insufficiently educated to achieve national unity without safeguards. Equality of rights, inter-religious solidarity, education for all, were not automatically guaranteed should independence and democracy prevail. The setting-up of such safeguards was a priority.

Besides, encouraging the people to follow one man (great though his soul was) who, alone, would guarantee their unity and safety was not helping them to become responsible and mature. Despotism is “a form of government in which a single entity rules with absolute power and where respect and power are limited to specific groups” (Wikipedia definition). According to Montesquieu, a despotic government is one in which “a single person directs everything by his own will and caprice” (Montesquieu, 1777, p. 9). Despotism and dictatorship were potential dangers in the 1930s, with the rise of totalitarian movements. After all, even F.D. Roosevelt was being accused at the time of gliding towards despotism. Of course, to Tagore, Gandhi would never tyrannise his country. On the contrary, he would always be benevolent. However, he was not immortal and there was a risk that, he would show to less upright successors a wrong, autocratic, model to follow. Moreover, in the event of a national tragedy (the premature death of Her leader), India could plunge into a bloodbath and fanaticism:

I pray most fervently that nothing that tends to weaken our spiritual freedom may intrude on your marching line, that martyrdom for the cause of truth may never degenerate into fanaticism for mere verbal forms, descending into self-deception that hides itself behind sacred names” (Bhattacharya, 1997, p. 50).

Religious violence was commonplace, even in Bengal, the cradle of the cultural and philosophical revolution, a pioneering region in terms of its reflection on the issue of national identity and independence. So what about more illiterate regions, dependent on unscrupulous British rulers or *zamindars*? If the British implemented their “Divide and Rule” strategic Credo on the Indian soil, division and dependence should not become the *mantras* of a free India.

Tagore believed that his fellow countrymen were not prepared to handle a future without British supervision, unless priority was laid on mutual respect and an acceptance of diversity. India had grown one and unique thanks to the mingling of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists and others. No confessions should be left aside in council committees, the law-making process, schools, and history books. For God was too important to be relegated to a simple religious question. In this *in-vivo* experimental laboratory that is Santiniketan, secularism prevailing over religious *diktat*, rites and traditions, festivals are not linked to any one religion's holy days, but to the natural cycles of seasons. Similarly, in the Hindu community, no one should be left behind, an "outcast". Hence, in Santiniketan, Tagore provided *dalits* and Santali boys and girls with access to education, incidentally provoking the reluctance of many *Brahmin* parents to send their offspring to intermingle with low-caste or tribal pupils. To Tagore, Hinduism had to be reformed and its caste system abolished. It prevented equal access to learning, equality and freedom, and ostracised those who were not twice-born – which included pupils from other denominations.

As Tagore explained in his lectures and articles now assembled in *Towards Universal Man*, a new type of comprehensive education including Western and Eastern knowledge, innovative methods and contents, and, most of all, close contact with Nature was the open door to individual freedom. His open-air school, an updated version of the traditional *topavanas*, was also indebted to the principles of educationalists such as Maria Montessori, whom he met in 1916, several Swiss thinkers he met between 1920 and 1933, and Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, who supervised the rural reconstruction plan of Sriniketan before co-founding Dartington Hall School, whose principles resembled Santiniketan's: "no punishment at all; no prefects; no uniforms; no Officers' Training Corps; no segregation of the sexes; no compulsory games, compulsory religion, or compulsory anything else; no more Latin, no more Greek; no competition; no jingoism" (Young, 1982, p. 131). As his first essays on education testify, to Tagore, it has always been clear that, being free and open to others, a young adult became naturally aware of the universal balance, and his place in the Universe. A member of the *Brahmo Samaj*, influenced by the Upanishads and Unitarian principles, Tagore made the simple equation "*atman is Brahman*", a true state of being. This quest for unity is at the core of *Gitanjali*, omnipresent in his books whatever the genre (essays, poetry, plays and fiction), tone (ironic, argumentative, romantic or devotional) and topic (politics, romance, education, spirituality, etc.). Tagore positioned himself at the service of *atman* (the self), others (humanity) and *Brahman* (the Universe or ecosystem). Hence, just as his essays contain lyrical passages, his romantic poetry and spiritual essays often take a subtextual sociological or political dimension, and can read as pamphlets or treatises deprived of sanctimonious morality. They insist on individual freedom, the rights and duties that operate in society, and the creative act that is the act of "reading".

It was on both symbolic and pragmatic issues that the recommendations, and actions, of the Mahatma and Gurudev deferred. Between 1919 and 1922, in the midst of the non-cooperation movement, while Tagore was presenting his newly-born university to the West, though full of irony, subtlety and double meanings, their disagreements intensified on the question of boycotting British goods and services, in particular, governmental educational institutions. Clearly, since he dedicated much money and time to a sensible alternative, Tagore was a harsh critic of the British educational system. However, to him, a mediocre model remained better than no education at all. To let students ruin their academic life and future career on behalf of a symbolic boycott was nonsensical and counterproductive. In other words, Gandhi's call for a boycott was an invitation to commit collective intellectual suicide and create a national handicap. It went against Tagore's plan to gather the best of Eastern and Western cultures in a peaceful environment (*Visva Bharati's* motto, drawn from the Vedic text, being "where the world makes a home in a nest"), and to reduce backwardness and conservatism. Gandhi insisted that the boycott made sense because the training that Indian students received "rendered [them] helpless and godless" (Gandhi, 1 June 1921). Tagore considered it a dangerous approach for a unifying party leader to base his arguments on such unscientific and theocratic grounds, and call the sabotage of a source of learning an act, or the will, of "god." Other societies had burnt books on behalf of "truth". Clearly, this was not a model to follow.

Another question was the limits of the handicraft industry. Gandhi consider[ed] it a sin to wear foreign cloth, for the

"I must confess I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics," he wrote (Gandhi, 13 October 1921). Gandhi asked the Indian people to boycott, and discard their made-in-England textiles, and to make their own clothes from what they harvested. By doing so they would ruin British exports to India. Through experimentation, near Santiniketan, Tagore had enabled craftsmen to preserve traditional methods of production and boost their ability to trade their handmade products. Yet, to him, a widespread use of the *charkha* meant lagging another step behind, if entering the global economy and eradicating famine were among India's objectives: "The all-embracing poverty, which has overwhelmed our country cannot be removed by working with our hands to the neglect of science" (Tagore, September 1925). Each citizen of India should acquire knowledge to produce, or create, efficiently and intelligently, and belong to a societal structure where everyone had talents, skills, duties and rights protecting them. Some would spin; others would invent the new generation of tools descended from the British inventors.

In addition, if the Indian populace were not presented with the facts, confident in their leader and his actions, they would simply miss the symbolic dimension and think that their country gained independence, as if by magic, thanks to the charkha. At the end of the day, spinning the wheel on a daily basis was just as enslaving, and non-creative, a process as that which both Gandhi and Tagore denounced, i.e. the excessive use of huge machines in cities like Manchester:

"If the cultivation of science has any moral significance it is in its rescue of man from outrage by nature, not its use of man as a machine but its use of machine to harness the forces of nature in man's service." (Tagore: September 1925).

Even though Tagore was a mystic poet, his religious knowledge and spiritual belief never led him to the anti-scientific arguments used by Gandhi, whose distrust of industrial innovation made him, in many ways, a conservative rather than a reformer. And yet, for Tagore, the machine was not the panacea. In his satirical play *Mukta-dhara* (*The Machine*), published in 1922, the machine is compared to a vicious diversion of science. India should not follow the Western industrial path, just like it should not emulate imperialism and protectionism. As if in anticipation of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, *Mukta-dhara* criticizes the West for making use of machines for the purpose of domination and exploitation. Taylorism, and the detrimental lure of profit, just like social Darwinism and colonisation, were disastrous for society and mankind. However, the machine, if well-proportioned to the needs of humanity and Nature, could help farmers and workers to lead better lives and feed their families. Instead of importing them, India had to learn how to manufacture its cloths and produce its food, by adopting, or inventing, the appropriate tools.

Tagore, like a consultant, carefully weighed his ideas. At the outset, he took into account the exceptions, the marginalised minorities, whereas Gandhi, the leader of his nation, had to set the rules quickly for a majority consent. Their disagreement on the question of Hindi as a national language exemplifies their respective positions and visions. Although he promoted Bengali and made it the common language at *Visva Bharati* instead of English, and advocated Hindi as the national language at an inter-provincial level, Tagore contested its implementation before the provincial delegates reached any agreement on the issue. Institutionally, such decisions should be taken as part of a democratic process, not by a single man who could proceed by decree and possibly exclude regions and minorities. Later, when India became independent, parliamentary representation had to be given powers to decide on these issues. Furthermore, just as a good command of English did, so could the mastering of Hindi foment greater discrimination, increasing the already existing gap between the regions. Tamil for instance, should not be overlooked. Similarly, Urdu and Hindi know little difference, except their alphabet (nastaliq and devanagari). Making Hindi the official language could be seen as an attack on the Muslim minority.

Each time Gandhi was behind bars, from March 1922 to February 1924 for instance, Tagore refused to fan the flames of discord. Similarly, when travelling, he generally avoided harsh comments on his policy. However, in his absence,

Gandhi won many hearts and minds. Coming back from his unexpected and foolish call at Italy in January 1925, less worried about his own contradictions, Tagore was stunned by his friends and partisans' reactions. He, the enemy of repression, lured into what his fascist guests had let him see of Mussolini's policy, had not expected Gandhi to gain so much influence in their lives, even as far as making them change their views. He complained about it to Rolland on 26 February 1925, barely a week after his return:

"I return broken and exhausted. I come back to a country which is busy about many other things; not free at least to think of me or my ideals. I feel that I am unnecessary here, at least for the present. I am afraid my own people would continue to consider my ideals of international amity as premature, nay more, a poetic luxury which our age cannot afford to indulge in. But I feel at the same time I have a Country of my own, a friend of my own and collaborator and helper to my cause. I discover them all in one through you, through your profound friendship" (Guha, 2018, pp. 25-26).

Between 29th May and 2nd June 1925, Gandhi paid a visit to Tagore at Santiniketan and again tried to convince him of the importance of the *charkha*. In vain, while denouncing extreme productivity, Tagore would insist on the need to use modern tools in agriculture, and handicrafts, to put an end to famine. In May 1930, when Tagore was showing his paintings in France, and travelling throughout Europe, including Russia, Gandhi was arrested again. Again, Tagore defended most of Gandhi's arguments, and his guiding cause, but denounced his decision to fast until death if necessary. Gandhi was too important for the future of India and her children to put his life in danger. Therefore, when Gandhi got out of prison and ceased his fast in September 1932, Tagore was deeply relieved; yet, when he used the same method in April-May 1933, Tagore was hardly capable of hiding his irritation.

In February 1934, Gandhi claimed that the earthquake that had taken place in Bihar was a divine punishment in retaliation for the sins of his countrymen for not having put an end to "untouchability." No one could have agreed more than Tagore that the caste system was fundamentally inhumane, and a vector of inequality, but a natural disaster such as an earthquake was attributable to neither man nor God. In addition, Tagore opposed Gandhi on the question of birth control, which, he believed, was a default cure for famine, misery, and overpopulation in the long-term.

Gandhi was a tactician: he never turned his back when they disagreed. On the contrary, in March 1936, when *Visva Bharati* was overwhelmed by debts, he asked the industrialist Ghanshyam Das Birla to write them off, which Birla did. This godsend may have allowed Gandhi to neutralise Tagore, once more implicitly pointing at the sad reality that the survival of the most noble and innovative ideas requires money, diplomacy and compromise. A few years earlier, the British had proposed to help finance *Visva Bharati* – which Tagore had declined, refusing to become anybody's poodle.

Finally, in 1938-1940, Tagore was criticized by many of Gandhi's followers for supporting the radical nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, who had become the INC President in 1938, but was soon ousted from his position for being too aggressive towards Gandhi and other moderate leaders of the Congress. Tagore's apparently surprising choice has often wrongly been assimilated with insanity. Anyone who reads the poets' last stanzas cannot believe that he had lost his reason, however, even at the very end. It is tempting, thus, to see here further proof of Tagore's high respect for both provocation and democracy. When Netaji Bose ("the respectful leader") came and saw him on 2nd July 1940, Tagore gave him his blessing. He was also affected by the psychodrama taking place in the INC following the election, rather than any sense of disillusion with Gandhi. Indeed, the last time they saw each other in February 1940, in Santiniketan, fourteen months before Tagore's death, Tagore asked Gandhi to take care of *Visva Bharati*, his most concrete and fragile realisation, which Gandhi willingly did, protecting it financially. In 1951, it was made a central university, not by the Prime Minister of India or the executive, but by an Act of Parliament.

The early twentieth century was a time when anti-colonial History was in the making. The time might have come for

a new appraisal. Everyone agrees that Gandhi was at the centre of its writing: he became consequently the indisputable charismatic political leader of the INC, the Father of his nation and the embodiment of a civil disobedience philosophy and popular movement, whose success and repercussions went beyond the Indian borders and was a key of decolonization. However, Gandhi's central position should not make us – whoever we are – depreciate another key-figure, Tagore, Gandhi's contemporary fellow countryman, whose contribution for both India and the world was not less outstanding because, at the time, Tagore was writing a Universalist and atemporal and chapter, which might provide, if studied as it deserves, long-term sociological and environmental solutions and perspectives – again inside and beyond borders. Now that these two thinkers' dialogue can or should be read as part of Indian and world history, time has come, for the Indian people and others, to dive into it, to make or keep the home (India) and the (free) world places of unity in diversity.

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Rewriting History from Haiti and Paris: Anténor Firmin's African Voice

Michel NAUMANN

Abstract

Anténor Firmin was a Haitian politician and intellectual of the nineteenth century. His research was related to both his personal experience of the African Diaspora and his project to write a book that would contradict Gobineau's ideas on the theme of inequality between races. He argued against the theories of most anthropologists and developed the thesis of a Black ancient Egypt at the root of what was called the Greek miracle. These parts of his work are rather well known, but he also dealt with the theme of mixed races in India and fought a courageous battle against the Orientalists, who saw India as the creation of Aryan invaders organized into high castes that constituted the prestigious civilization of the Ganges and the subcontinent. Firmin evaluated the role of the White component of India against the role of the Black component and concluded that the latter was much more important. The purpose of this paper is to study this part of Firmin's works. After analyzing the status of High castes that showed that the Black race always prevailed in India, Firmin studied a very important character of History, Buddha, and came to the same conclusion. Buddha was more related to the Black component than the White. Firmin's research had, of course, its nineteenth century motivations, but what he said about Brahmanism and Buddhism anticipated the anticolonial rewriting of Indian history and the present rewriting of History connected with the protest against castes and the opposition of many historians to the Aryan myth.

Keywords: Firman, Buddha, Brahmin, Black, White

In the 19th century, Indian history was related to the Aryans and what was seen as their religion, Hinduism (sometimes called Brahmanism in relation to the priestly caste). Buddhism appeared and disappeared from this history without due sociological analysis of its relevance. In the view of many historians, Hinduism prevailed over Buddhism because it was the true heart of India. This essentialist approach was part of a larger western vision that considered that the past was nothing but a long and tedious search for the soul of each nation. The origin of each successful human group of the present was the beginning of a quest that the modern nation state was to fulfill. It was extremely convenient to work along those lines because the military and technological superiority of the Western Herrenvolk Democracies was obvious in the 19th century against declining empires (Ottoman, Persian Mughal, Chinese) and small primordial societies. A "fact" showed the superiority of the Western Aryan race: European and North American nations dominated three subdued continents (Asia, Africa, and Latin-America), treated the dark races as inferior in order to bring the non-Aryan people to a higher stage of development. The Indian Aryans were described as a mixed and degraded branch when compared to the White rulers of the world, but they were still seen as superior to the Afghan and Turkish Muslim rulers of India, a martial but uncultured race that could be used in colonial armies and protected by the colonial masters against the Hindu majority in tune with the colonial divide and rule strategy. History, race, nation, progress were the key-concepts of this vision of the world and colonial India.

If the Western vision dropped the argument of racial superiority in the second half of the 20th century, it still claims that their period of domination (19th-20th centuries) has established the principles of civilization: technology and rationality, the nation state, free trade capitalist economy, competitive individualism and liberal politics. The struggle of colonized people against the Western cognitive procedures ends neither with the Independence Day (decolonization) nor with the move from Western domination to universal interdependence (the neo-liberal world economic order since 1989). It has always been in the imperialist agenda to control the cognitive process and the process is still ongoing nowadays. In the 19th century, rational scientific knowledge was traced back from the Greeks to the Renaissance, erasing the Chinese, Indians, Muslims and the stateless societies.

The supremacy of one particular cognitive system is, therefore, connected with a particular historical vision of the development of knowledge. To surpass the Arab scientists, the Westerners had to impose the vision of a passive Muslim mind that could only deliver Greek sciences to the West without adding anything to Greek achievements.¹ Nowadays, the theory is that, if all contributed (China, India, the Muslim world, the Amerindians and even stateless societies), only the Western cognitive trend can get us into a future of high technological performance and complete mastery of human history and nature.

It is therefore a pity that school children and students are not acquainted with the works of Anténor Firmin who was one of the very first universal thinkers who dared to challenge the Western cognitive system. He argued against Gobineau's theories expressed in *De l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-1855) and, as a Haitian and a son of the Haitian Revolution (1804), he rewrote the history of Egypt one century before Cheikh Anta Diop who saw ancient Egypt as a Black civilization. His articles on India are not as famous as his stance on Africa, but they are worth reading as they anticipate the present day questioning by Dalits and new historians of the colonial version of Indian history. As a Haitian intellectual who worked in Paris and dealt with issues related to Africa and Asia, Anténor Firmin was really an ancestor of the future.

Anténor Firmin was born in 1850 in a very modest family of Cap-Haïtien and he studied in the local Lycée to become a teacher. He created a newspaper, *Le Messager du Nord*, and represented Haiti at the celebration of the centenary of Bolivar's birth. The Libertador of South America visited Haiti for help and he was very warmly welcome in the first African Republic out of Africa, a State created by the revolution led by Toussaint Louverture. As a member of the Société Française d'Anthropologie, he lived some years in Paris where he published his work against Gobineau: *De l'égalité des races humaines*.² As a disciple of Comte, he thought that concrete studies would eradicate the irrational belief in races and inequality. A candidate for the presidency in Haiti, he was defeated. As a minister he argued against the project of a US-military base in Môle Saint-Nicolas. To make him yield on this issue, Admiral Gerardi sent him Frederick Douglass, the Ambassador of the United States, hoping that the words of the Afro-American hero of the Abolitionist movement would convince the reluctant and incorruptible Haitian. It was in vain, Anténor Firmin refused the project. He dreamed of a confederation of Caribbean States including Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haïti, and he was, along with Blyden (Danish Virgin Islands), Benito Sylvain (Haïti) and Sylverster Williams (Trinity), one of the founders of Pan-Africanism and, according to Jean Metellus, the most advanced thinker of the group.³

Oruno D. Lara also recognized his importance in the organization of the first Pan-African Congress in London in 1900:

Firmin gave the Panafrican movement his sense of precision, his scientific competence, his political commitment. He was among the first thinkers to fight racist ideas that flourished and grew in the second half of the 19th century in Western Europe and in the United States of America. (Lara, 2000, p.12)

He read fast and in depth, he spoke French, English, Spanish, German, Italian, Greek and Latin fluently, and his universal culture, sharp intelligence and unprejudiced spirit force us to take into account not only his ideas about America, Africa and Europe, but also those about Asia and his chapter « Les Hindous et l'Arya » which is part of *De l'égalité*. This critical study of Indian History and colonial anthropology has two main themes and it is organized into two sub-divisions that reflect these themes: Brahmins and Buddha, two issues which are now most important in Historical research and history rewriting in India. The contradictions between castes are presently developing in the field of research as a criticism or a defence of past ideas about a highly civilized and creative Aryan Whiteness connected to language (Sanskrit) and Hinduism as the channels of intellectual and political achievements. It is exactly against this exclusive position as mainstream and substance that Anténor Firmin argued some one hundred and fifty years ago.

His approach is anthropological and from the start Firmin seems to stress the ordeal of doing research on mankind from a discipline created in the West:

Bacon after Aristotle; after Bacon, the Encyclopedia, Bentham, Ampère, Charma, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, as stars who shine on the path of humanity, are engaged on a task which is most difficult because it supposes a deep and universal knowledge. (Firmin, 2005, p. 2)

It's not only human diversity which makes the task almost impossible, but also the whole range of the moral and intellectual attitudes of the humankind and disciplines supposed to serve anthropology. A universal knowledge like Pico de la Mirandola's seems impossible nowadays especially because science as a whole does not exist anymore and each discipline seems to be the object of an everlasting tendency towards endless subdivisions: philology for instance became stylistics, linguistics, phonetics, phonology, socio-linguistics... Firmin finally comes to see society as a unifying focus to define anthropology: "Man needs other men to progress and even to understand himself" (Firmin, 2005, p. 7). Nevertheless, the definition of anthropology was drawn towards French rationality against German idealism. Firmin regretted this move and his own definition retains an open space which prevented his anthropology from being too close to natural history: "I see anthropology as the study of Man from the physical, intellectual and moral points of view through the various races of mankind" (Firmin, 2005, p.9). This definition seems to contradict the previous argument that puts society at the centre of his research, but this strange resurgence of the concept of race should be considered as the only path which leads towards the overcoming of racial features in order to emphasize the social and natural environment. If his study on races shows that no human race is superior to another, which is the hope of Anténor Firmin in his research, anthropology should have dropped this concept, but in 1885, while colonial powers were getting ready to invade Africa and their muddy ideologies were already invading the world, the great Haitian anthropologist could not use the shortcut that we, in the 21st century, can tread thanks to him.

In other words, anthropology was then polluted by ideas that he had to fight, revealing their confusions and contradictions. He fought against this by showing that ancient Egypt was an African civilization, by stressing the role of Africa in the growth of Greek civilization and also by stepping into the realm of the Orientalists in his short but enlightening study of ancient India.

Brahmins

We have seen that ancient Egyptians did not belong to the white race but to the Black race of Africa; this study shows therefore that the first civilization that we know was not the work of Caucasian people.

We can also prove that the White man's role in the Hindu civilization, the oldest after Egypt, is rather negative or at least very modest. That is what I am going to establish. (Firmin, 2005, p. 231)

First, Anténor Firmin evaluates Sanskrit's connection with Indo-European languages, a theory which gave birth to the myth of the conquest of India by Aryans who spoke languages related to the Indo-European family. He recalls the scramble to join this prestigious and mythical linguistic group. The process of including one language into it is compared to Procrustes' bed: "linguists would behead a prefix in these languages or add feet to them and suffixes" (Firmin, 2005, p. 231). What was at stake was to find a European cultural and racial basis at a time (1830-1848) when the European people shared a common democratic and nationalist set of values against "the Saintly Alliance of kings and emperors" (Firmin, 2005, p. 232).

The wild Aryans were the romantic warriors of tribes that shared holistic and communal values and Indo-European

languages the discourse of proud free men struggling against oppression and roaming the world in search of a motherland. Though researchers generally stick to the idea of Indo-European languages nowadays, they know that a human group does not always speak a language that was created by the group. Anténor Firmin would illustrate that disconnection as an African who spoke French and a Haitian who did not express his ideas in Creole. However relevant this classification of languages might be, it is irrelevant in people's lives and Anténor Firmin uses ironic words to describe this fashion:

What a relief for the descendents of Romulus, Arminius, Vercingétorix and all the members of the great Caucasian family to discover this unsuspected unity which they had ignored for centuries. They embraced one another with passion in the name of Arya. (Firmin, 2005, p. 231)

If language and race can be disconnected, who can be sure that the genius of Sanskrit is to be ascribed to a White Aryan race?

It has poems that are too elated but whose fresh, youthful, simple qualities are more charming and sweeter than Homer's poetry. The speculative ideas of this culture shone more than Europe and even Germany's philosophies. If Egypt has left works of architecture, carving and industry that the world could only partly improve without being able to vie with the rest, India, without such architectural monuments and carvings, has raised immortal monuments in her philosophical achievements and showed her gift for codes such as Manu's laws. We can, therefore, understand why so many Orientalists were eager to link the White race to a people who, over the centuries, had reached such a high intellectual level.

It would not be the first time that the Western mind would claim as its own the achievements of non-Caucasian peoples. It was done for Egypt and Ethiopia and by including Sanskrit in the Indo European family, the Whites classified an almost Black people like the Hindus in the same branch as the Whitest of White people. (Firmin, 2005, p. 233)

Actually, what fascinated the colonizers of India was her main flaw: castes. To make his point, Anténor Firmin quoted D'Omalius d'Halloy, a scientist who courageously opposed the habit of ascribing what is best in a civilization to the Whites. He argued that there was a secret bond between colonizers and high caste Indians who were supposed to be originally whiter than most colonized people:

What a wonderful idea that brings all social distinctions down to colour (varna)! No doubt that the White man would be the natural head of this hierarchy under which was bent the Dravidian shudra like Atlas under the weight of the whole world. (Firmin, 2005, p. 233)

Caste and Sanskrit were used to justify the colonial order as well as the White supremacy over the world.

What are the credentials of the highest caste to qualify as "Whites"? Anténor Firmin clearly says that they are very weak: "What is most important to me, is the fact that the Brahmins, the first caste in the hierarchy, the one that some people want to present as a White caste, is darker than a Mulatro" (Firmin, 2005, p. 234).

There are, of course, many black-skinned Brahmins not only in the South but also in the East and in fact in all parts of India. They may be lighter in colour than inferior castes because their intellectual and religious occupations keep them in the shade whereas the shudras and Dalits work outside, in the heat of the sun. Firmin concludes that "the

Hindus are not part of the white race” (Firmin, 2005, p.234). He does not deny that they come from a meeting of White and Black human groups, he knows that “One cannot deny the presence in India of two races of different origins” (Firmin, 2005, p.235); but their prevailing darkness shows that either the Whites did not prevail or perhaps did not invade India but came into India to live peacefully there instead of conquering it. They were just one component of a meeting of human groups who together created a mixed and complex culture on the Indian continent. The myth of an Aryan invasion is probably the consequence of a Western vision of races due to slavery and colonial conquests more than a serious study of the history of India.

Firmin bases this theory on historical reasons: the dates of the so-called invasion, that he would rather call a meeting, do not correspond to the dates for the birth of the first Vedic culture. He therefore thinks that “it is most likely that castes were created and formalized much later, when the two races had already reached a high level of fusion” (Firmin, 2005, p. 235). Manu’s laws about strict caste distinctions probably did not concern a division between Whites and Blacks and they were probably applied with more tolerance than the texts prescribe. Firmin knows too much about Indian history to forget some details that reveal a historical process somewhat different from strict laws:

Lomapada, of the Angas, King of the Aborigines of the South-East of Aryavarta, a Dravidian and a Black man, married the daughter of Ayodhia, an Aryan king after converting to Brahminism. Their children took the rank of sons of Brahmins and Kshatria warriors. Visvamitra, from the warrior caste, is raised, in the Ramayana, through science, modesty and charity to the dignity of a Brahmin. (Firmin, 2005, p. 236)

Some cases of discrimination show that Blackness was not more discriminated than Whiteness. Manu specified that blond individuals among the Hindu Aryas were not to marry high caste people and Firmin has strong evidence to suspect that the “Brahmanical society might have been closed to the White race” (Firmin, 2005, p. 236). In a culture of fusion, one element tends to dominate and Firmin has strong arguments to think that the Whites did not overcome the Black component. He nevertheless generously concludes that the question remains open because we need more precise studies but he reminds researchers that any achievement is not in itself a proof that the Whites prevailed. Some witnesses even see clear skinned-Brahmins as degenerated small whites. Firmin’s study of Brahminism rejects the Aryan myth and ascribes the civilization of India to a mixed people with a strong Black component. His comments on his readings of anthropological and historical research on India go hand in hand with a specific study of Buddhism.

Buddha

5

The second part of Firmin's study is dedicated to Buddha, but it is actually a continuation of his demonstration that India owes more to her Black component than to her Caucasian component. His argument starts with a reminder of his first part as well as the Orientalists' frame of mind:

No doubt that they believed in good faith and with a strong sense of scientific legitimacy that the Aryans were a white caste who led and occupied the top of the whole Indian social system. As they thought that this caste, the Brahmins, had an exclusive hold on intellectual activities, it was easy to conclude that all philosophical movements and all poetical productions came from the White and Aryan race, but this illusion ended when confronted to the light of contemporary criticism of this comforting belief. (Firmin, 2005, p. 237)

The card that Firmin was ready to play against the first Indologists came from his study of Buddhism:

It was a shock for the scientists to discover that, after all the statues raised by his followers, Buddha was represented as a Negro: he had a Reddish complexion, not a very handsome face

and frizzy hair. Those who accepted the Aryan myth were shocked because they had been the first to declare that Sakhiya-Muni was neither a sudra nor a vaishya but that he was from the highest origin as the son of Suddodhana, king of Kapilavastu. (Firmin, 2005, p. 238)

It is to be pointed out that Louis Langlès, the author of a respected and well-documented study of ancient and modern monuments in India, had already noticed the fact and challenged those who thought that doubting Buddha's high and white ethnic origin was an insult to the Caucasian races. Some argued by saying that curly hair was not frizzy hair and invoked the representations of Saint Mary as a Negro woman to identify her as Saint Mary the Egyptian or even the Great Goddess Isis whose cult was very popular in Alexandria during the centuries that followed the birth of Christ. In their view, there was no doubt that the Buddha was a Brahmin close to the Greek and German branches of the Aryan stock and a member of the Himalayan branch of the Aryans. Anténor Firmin retorted to these specialists that many human groups of South Asia have dark skins and frizzy hair and that Buddha could be one from one of these groups. (Firmin, 2005, p. 239).



Photo credit: Michel Naumann, Cambodia, 2014.

After all Christ, who was the son of a carpenter, is very often called Christ the King (le Christ-roi in French, Cristo Rey in Spanish) or even the King of kings. Buddha could at least be someone who had connections with the Dravidians although in the 19th century the Dravidians were classified as backward races. Nowadays the specialists see them as a great and important component of the Indian world and some high-flown foreign specialists of the Indus civilization very seriously consider the trading with the Middle East of these antique cities of the North-East as a Dravidian achievement.

Firmin thinks that the description of Buddha as a man with pink lips and curly hair invoked by some of his contradictors referring to the works of J.J. Ampère, author of *La science et les lettres en Orient*, comes not from the historical Buddha but from the tradition in some parts of the Buddhist world of spotting reincarnations of the founder of the creed by physical features such as “a clear skin, a golden complexion, a head shaped like a parasol, long arms, broad forehead and thin nose” (Firmin, 2005, 239). He stresses, instead of referring to post-Buddha traditions, that his birthplace, Kapilavastu, a city visited in the fifth century by the Chinese traveller Fa-Hieu and in the seventh century by a Chinese Buddhist monk, has a name that comes from the word *kapilan* which means dark-skinned and *vastu*, which means a place. The city of dark-skinned men is not known in India, but the meaning of the name points to the Deccan peninsula where, according to the French indologist Eugène Burnouf whom Firman has read, lived the Dravidians.

A non-Brahmin or a person of non-Kshatria origin could explain the originality of Buddha’s doctrine. Nowadays specialists stress the importance of the Iron Age that came late to India but nevertheless upset the social order of the region. Better tools produced ambitious and individualistic farmers who could rely less on village solidarity and more on better weapons as well as conquering and authoritarian rajas. In a less communal and more competitive society, people became more pessimistic and critical of the social and spiritual order created by the Brahmins. When a religion feels threatened, it can become more intolerant and cynical. In an attempt to stress their creed and reject new and foreign fashions, the Brahmins antagonized the traders. The prices paid for rituals provided by the priests became more expensive. The rajas raised taxes to the level of their increased ambitions. Intellectuals reacted by developing a rational, empirical and hedonist vision and religious people looked for reforms. Buddhism might have come with these innovations as a criticism of Brahmanism and Firmin was probably not wrong in ascribing to Buddha a non-conformist origin as someone born in the Deccan peninsula and as a member of a caste less prestigious than the Brahmins or the Kshatrias.

Black men or dark-skinned people who participated in the creative adventures of the mind in India might have been much more numerous than we can imagine as the facts about the origins and lives of many great thinkers are missing. We have texts composed by them but very few biographical details except in the form of myths. Another great thinker of India, Kapila, a name which means dark-skinned, created a very important rationalist philosophical school known as Sankhya. Buddhism flourished with an urge to go beyond illusions, ritualism and superstitions, to fight evil with a stern realistic point of view. The Buddhist monks were very often learned men with scientific qualifications, especially in medicine, which made them popular among poor rural people. Buddha’s creed grew along the path of Enlightenment. Firmin can therefore daringly but also with many strong arguments conclude: “To the Black race of Africa, hardly mixed with white blood, we can ascribe the first lights of rationalism in the Eastern world” (Firmin, 2005, p.240).

The universalist stance of Anténor Firmin, proved by his research on Africa and India, is very clear:

The more we study the past, the more the truth would be free from all the false colours of a prejudiced form of science, the more men would be disposed to agree about this dazzling reality: humanity is not composed of superior races and inferior races, all peoples can, under the same favorable circumstances and at given stages of their social evolution accomplish heroic deeds or wonderful works that reward them with the benefits of present glory and future immortality. (Firmin, 2005, p.240)

To those who stick to a racist vision of the world which invades science, he asks them to be more modest as representatives of the White race because when they state that there is only one human group leading the way towards progress, they think of themselves as Gods who set limits to the other races like the God of Israel who sets a limit to the abyss and orders “You will not step forward” (Firmin, 2005, p. 241). Firmin’s biblical reference is worthy of a commentary as this positivist anthropologist has not yielded to the rigid version of rationality that prevailed among Western scientists. His global vision is also a Christian vision. In setting limits to the abyss, God is justified because he gives life to those who do not trespass the limits that he sets through what we could call ontological laws. His prohibition is completely legitimate as it is the condition of the growth of life in His creation, but human beings, who set themselves as the Substance of Being to allow and prohibit, can only imitate God in a grotesque and destructive way: they give themselves as self-proclaimed Gods the right to prevent other human beings, whom they consider as agents of the forces of darkness, from being part of the growth of humanity and the creation. In doing so they distort the creation by creating a nightmare with borders, trenches, barbed wires, scorn and hatreds instead of fulfilling human hopes and dreams. The Devil is not a substance, just a despicable caricature of God because there is only one substance.

Firmin anticipated the end of racism and even of races because for him this concept has been brought about by racism and it would disappear with the evil it is attached to:

Race will never again be an issue. The concept is biological and fatalistic and it cannot be related in any way to the degree of ability of the many human groups present on the surface of the globe. No one should be told that there are many Africans who are more civilized, more intelligent and more educated than many Caucasians... Is it not a mistake to speak of superior races and inferior races? This mistake has given birth to the most despicable conceptions. Learned people and uncultured people regularly sacrifice their intelligence and their common sense when they use those words. In doing so they slowly and unconsciously create the most formidable obstacle to the growth of the feeling of human solidarity that is the strongest cause of progress and prosperity for the whole human race. We are bound to react and fight against this obstacle which is just a monstrous prejudice. (Firmin, 2005, p.403)

Anténor Firmin has proposed a rewriting of Indian history which is anti-colonial, anti-racist and opposed to what is now the mainstream, that is to say a focus on high castes, English and Hindi speakers, males and people of importance in the globalized capitalistic economic sector. The present opposition to the mainstream vision very often grows on territories that he once explored. He fully deserves the beautiful qualification of ancestor of the future.⁶

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Endnotes

¹ *A Short History of the World* written by H. G. Wells in 1922 insists on this supposedly passive Muslim mind and explains that only the Christian tradition of going against the pagan mainstream in Rome could produce characters who would defend the truth against all odds and produce a truly scientific knowledge. These views are not specific to Wells. They reappear (unfortunately) from time to time and even nowadays.

² Anténor Firmin. (1885). *De l'égalité des races humaines*, Cotillon, Paris. It was republished in 1985 by the publishing house Fardin in Port-au-Prince.

³ Jean Métellus, as the President of the Association des descendants d'esclaves noirs (ADEN), wrote a short presentation of Firmin's life, works and historical importance in the new edition of *L'égalité* published in 2005.

⁴ The title of the chapter is: "Les Hindous et l'Arya." (Anténor Firmin : *De l'égalité des races humaines*, Mémoire d'encrier, Montréal (Québec), 2005, pp 231-241.) It is the tenth chapter and it comes just after a longer chapter dedicated to Egypt and Ethiopia. The translation of all the quotations from French into English is mine.

⁵ In a letter dated on the 22nd of April 1831, V. Jacquemont sees White Brahmins as bandits more than pandits, a decay that he ascribed to arak.

⁶ This expression has been coined by Jean Ziegler and since has been used many times.

Contesting Imperialist Metanarratives: The Colonised's Burden of Rewriting History and the Early Indian English Fiction

Subhendu MUND

Abstract

*"We must leave it to Englishmen to tell the story for us": Shoshee Chunder Dutt (1825-85) wrote in his in 1872-73 autofiction *Reminiscences of a Kerani's Life* (The Young Zemindar, ed. Subhendu Mund, Sahitya Akademi, 2017, p.613). Kasiprasad Ghosh (1809-1873), one of the early poets, contested the earliest project of imperialist historiography by writing his "Critical Remarks on the Four First Chapters of Mr. [James] Mill's History of British India" (Government Gazette, 14 February 1828). Kavalī Venkata Ramaswami[e] Boriah historicised the Indian literary and cultural heritage through his *Biographical Sketches of Dekkan Poets* (Calcutta, 1829). Contrary to the general perceptions, the early Indian English literature demonstrated an acute awareness of the distortion of the history of their homeland and the writers of both fiction and non-fiction undertook rewriting/reconstructing history. Beginning with Dutt, the most prolific writer of the early Indian writing in English, the trend continued with the succeeding writers. Dutt himself wrote several histories (Bengal: *An Account of the Country from the Ancient Times*, 1874; *India: Past and Present*, 1876; *The Great Wars of India*, 1879; *Historical Studies and Recreations*, 1879) and fictionalised contemporary history in his novels (*Shunkur: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny of 1857*, 1874; and *The Young Zemindar*, 1885). Thus, the early Indian English writers sought to "write back" through their histories, fiction, biographical writings, even poetry. My article aims at demonstrating how the early Indian English writers sought to reclaim power and autonomy through their metanarrative accounts.*

Keywords: imperialist metanarrative, Early Indian English literature, writing back, Mill, Ghosh, Dutt.

"We must leave it to Englishmen to tell the story for us." – This is what Shoshee Chunder Dutt (1825-85) writes in his autofiction *Reminiscences of a Kerani's Life* (1872-73, p. 502). Dutt, who, in my opinion, deserves to be called the father of Indian English literature not only because of the vastness of the corpus of his writing or the length of tenure of his literary career (1843-85) but also because he epitomized the intellectual conflict of the colonial era and demonstrated a keen sense of history in his works, both imaginative and discursive. Although the most prolific and vocal among the nineteenth-century litterateurs in India, Dutt was neither the first nor the only one to have striven to "rewrite", to "write back".

It had been a favourite refrain of imperialists to say that India had no history, nor did its people have a sense of history. We all know that India had its own way of chronicling its histories, but it was an imperialist strategy to legitimize and perpetuate the colonizing mission of the British. In fact, they sought to convince their colonial subjects that they would write their history for them and restore their space in World Civilization.

In "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," Homi K. Bhabha describes "the difference of colonial discourse as an apparatus of power" and argues:

It is an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/ cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for a 'subject Peoples', through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited. It seeks authorization for its strategies by the production of knowledges of colonizer and colonized which are stereotypical but antithetically evaluated. The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. (1994, p. 70)

When Bhabha and the other postcolonialists evoke “the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin,” (ibid.), what instantaneously comes to my memory is James Mill’s (1773-1836) construction of India and its inhabitants in his iniquitous *The British History of India* (1816-17). Apparently, Mill himself was aware of his limitations as the historian of a country which he had never visited and none of the languages or literatures of which he knew to have firsthand knowledge about it; but he cleverly manipulated his shortcomings to showcase them as assets. He boastfully asserted that “a man who is duly qualified may obtain more knowledge of India, in one year, in his closet in England, than he could obtain during the course of the longest life, by the use of his eyes and ears in India” (1817, Preface, p. xv). Mill calls his work a “critical history ... a judging history” (1817, Preface, p. x), and avers:

It is evident that there are two, and only two, classes of objects which constitute the subject of historical judgment. The first is, the matter of statement, the things given by the historian, as things really done, really said, or really thought. The second is, the matter of evidence, the matter by which the reality of the saying, the doing, or the thinking, is ascertained. (1817, Preface x)

Unfortunately, the output does not show any respect to these premises. More than his ignorance, his prejudice made his otherwise commendable work of excellent scholarship a controversial one. There were sharp responses to Mill’s history in his homeland as well as in India. Some years later, to set things right, Horace Hayman Wilson, the well-known scholar, writer and translator, edited and published Mill’s *The History of British India* with his editorial and referential observations. In his Preface to the book, he writes,

In many instances, the intensity of his [Mill’s] prejudices has dimmed the clearness of his perception, and blunted the acuteness of his intelligence. However unconscious of deserving the imputation, he is liable to the censure which he has pronounced upon one class of candidates for popular approbation. (1858, p.vi)

Mill’s history became the tool the colonizers were looking for, and his contemporaries, including Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59)¹ showered praise on the book and even used it in their debates about the Indian empire (Naik, 2002). In Macaulay’s opinion, Mill’s book “has undoubtedly great and rare merit” (Macaulay, 1872, p. 502), and he has “employed a very different method of investigation with eminent ability and success” (Macaulay, 1872, p. 325). Soon Mill’s history gained the status of a canonical text; was included as a textbook for those who had to study about India and, of course, justified the civilizing mission of the colonizers. Although his findings and observations were not acceptable even in sections of his own compatriots, reportedly, the East India Company gained a lot from the book, and, in turn, Mill and his family enjoyed pecuniary benefits from it (Naik, 2002).

In his interview granted to Varghese, Bill Ashcroft observes, “all history is a story, a narrative, so the issue of the postcolonial people is to combat that dominant history, the colonial history which is the story of the West civilizing the world” (Varghese, 2005, p. 83). Mill’s book, in three volumes, became the “dominant history”, though there was another less known work which had paved the path for imperialist historiography. It was Alexander Dow’s (1735/6-1779) *History of Hindostan* from the earliest account of time, to the death of Akbar. In the Preface to his “Dissertation on the origin and nature of despotism in Hindostan,” Dow almost writes the keynote of a colonial agenda for the British:

Men of speculation may suppose that the security of property to the natives might infuse a spirit of freedom, dangerous to our power, into our Indian subjects. Nature herself seems to have denied liberty to the inhabitants of the torrid zone. To make the natives of the fertile soil of Bengal free is beyond the power of political arrangement.

The indolence which attends the climate prevents men from that constant activity and exertion, which is necessary to keep the nice balance of freedom. Their religion, their institutions, their manners, the very dispositions of their minds, form them for passive obedience. To give them property would only bind them with stronger ties to our interest; and make them more our subjects; or, if the British nation prefers the name – more our slaves. (1778, p. cxx)

However, Dow's work did not prove as influential as Mill's. There were numerous issues with Mill's history which, in spite of its "popularity", aroused deep resentment among the readers. The most blatant points were his absolute ignorance of India and his refusal to know anything about India firsthand; his predilections which made him use such derogatory terms as "rude", "savage", etc. for Indians in general and most importantly, formulate a dichotomy between Hindus and Muslims which eventually created a binary and laid the foundation of the "divide-and-rule policy." In his opening lines of the section on Hindus (Book II), he says,

Rude nations seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretensions to a remote antiquity. As a boastful and turgid vanity distinguishes remarkably the oriental nations, they have in most instances carried their claims extravagantly high. (1817, p.154)

His "observations" include such disparaging comments as "the low status of civilization among the Hindus" (1817, p. 396); "under the glosing exterior of the Hindu, lies a general disposition to deceit and perfidy" (1817, p. 467); just like the Chinese, the Hindus are "cowardly and unfeeling" (1817, p. 472), and "tainted with the vices of insincerity; dissembling, treacherous, mendacious, to an excess which surpasses even the usual measure of uncultivated society" (1817, p. 472); and "the Hindu, like the eunuch, excels in the qualities of a slave" (1817, p. 646). Besides, both the communities, Hindus and Muslims, were characterised by "The same insincerity, mendacity, and perfidy; the same indifference to the feelings of others; the same prostitution and venality, are conspicuous in both" (1817, p. 646). There are many more such "observations" which formed by whatever material – travelogues, memoirs, translations, official documents, obscure 'histories', and the like, mostly written by non-Indians, especially the British – was available to him.

The earliest critical response to Mill's history came from Kasiprasad Ghosh (1809-73) in 1827. Ghosh, an early Indian English poet (*The Shair and Other Poems*, 1830), had been a student of Hindu College of Calcutta, and was a protégé of David Lester Richardson (1801-65), his English Professor and Principal of Hindu College, and Henry Derozio (1809-31), his teacher. He was a very talented young man who wrote both in English and his mother tongue Bangla. He can be considered to be one of the earliest literary critics in Indian English. In December 1827, when he was given an opportunity to present an essay during a prize giving ceremony of Hindu College, he presented his essay entitled "Critical Remarks on the First Four Chapters of Mill's History of British India." Mill's history had become a much talked about book among the English-educated youth and Ghosh represented the voice of dissent of the Indian elite by making a scholastic critique of the controversial book. His "critical remarks" not only reveal his wide range of scholarship but also his commendable intellectual courage at such a young age by interrogating the claims of a book which had already attained great esteem among the rulers. Arguably, Ghosh's critique received the patronage of scholars, teachers and writers like Richardson and Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860) and a revised version of the essay was published in the *Government Gazette* (Calcutta) on 14 February 1828. Its excerpts with critical comments were published in the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India*³ in September 1828 under the title "English Composition by Hindus." In the opening lines, the anonymous contributor writes:

When Mr. Mill wrote his History of British India, he very probably never suspected that the pages of his work would be critically examined by a Hindu, distinguished for his acquirements

in the English language, and familiar with the classical and recondite learning of the west; and many of our readers will, no doubt, be surprised to meet with an attempt of the kind at so early a period as the present day. (1828, p. 317)

It is not desirable to go for a detailed analysis of the critique in the limited space of this article, but it is in the fitness of things to cite a few lines here which contest Mill's attack on the Hindu concept of astronomy and "Yugs" or Ages:

The statements of the four yugs are not the fictions of caprice, but they are truths concealed in astronomical calculations. Chronology, in those times, was very closely allied to astronomy; in fact, the latter was the base of the former science. The visible good which mankind derives from the beneficence of the sun and moon, the beautiful waxing and waning of the latter, the twinkling wonders of the firmament, and still more, their apparent motions in the vault of the heavens, are circumstances which naturally fill the simply curious minds with wonder and astonishment, and suggest the noble idea of regulating the motions of these heavenly bodies, and of stating the periods in which they revolve: thus the science of astronomy was founded. (1828, p.317)

Interestingly, in his "Autobiographical Letter," Ghosh writes that Horace Hayman Wilson² had encouraged him to write his critique (1834, p. 203). Wilson was the one who later published an edited version of Mill's History, in ten volumes, with his own input (1840-48). He writes in the Preface to his book: "the unfavourable views which Mr. Mill exhibits of the civilization and character of the Hindus, are always extreme, and are not infrequently erroneous and unjust" (1858, p. ix).

Mill's History (1817-18) had been a much talked about text and there were quite a few responses from India, though not all of the primary sources are accessible today. However, there is one noteworthy publication, Cavelly Venkata Ramaswamie [Boria]'s *Biographical Sketches of Dekkan Poets: Being Memoirs of the Lives of Several Eminent Bards, both Ancient and Modern, who have flourished in different Provinces of the Indian Peninsula; Compiled from Authentic Documents* (1829) which might have been written in response to Mill's History and the other 'scholarly' works of similar kind. As the rather long subtitle indicates, Ramaswamie historicizes the Indian literary and cultural heritage in his work, which contains eighty-eight entries on poets, philosophers and distinguished individuals, not all exactly from the *Dekkan* [South India]. Though he has not explicitly mentioned anywhere, Ramaswamie's encyclopaedic work which features most of the ancient, medieval and contemporary poets and writers can be seen as an act of "writing back." to the colonizers.

The next known critique came in 1841, from a group of young men educated at Elphinstone College, Bombay [now Mumbai]. Established in 1834, and named after Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859), a Scottish administrator and historian, who had taken the initiative of founding several educational institutions in Bombay, including the college named after him during his tenure as Lieutenant-Governor (1819-27). Interestingly, after his return to England in 1829, he refused his appointment as Governor-General of India, as he wanted to complete his two-volume *History of India* (1841). Although he had been in India for about 30 years, and had enough interaction with the people of the country and firsthand experience of their manners and habits, he too, like Mill, presented prejudicial opinions on Indians. Like Macaulay and other imperialist scholars, he writes that the "Bengalese" [*sic*], "though good-looking, are small, black, and effeminate in appearance; remarkable for timidity and superstition" (1843, Vol. I, p. 332). And this is how sums up his impression of Indians in general:

Their great defect is a want of manliness. Their slavish constitution, their blind superstition, their extravagant mythology, the subtleties and verbal distinctions of their philosophy, the languid

softness of their poetry, their effeminate manners, their love of artifice and delay, their submissive temper, their dread of change, the delight they take in puerile fables, and their neglect of rational history, are so many proofs of the absence of the more robust qualities of disposition and intellect throughout the mass of the nation. (1843, p. 381-82)

It is difficult to ascertain now how the newly educated Indians in general reacted to Elphinstone's *History of India*, but in the very year of its publication, three young men, under pseudonyms of 'A Hindu', 'A Second Hindu', and 'A Third Hindu' contested "James Mill's highly prejudiced and perverse account of Indian civilization" (Naik, 2002, p. 587). In a series of letters written to the *Bombay Gazette* (5 August 1841, 20 August 1841, 16 September 1841, 18 October 1841, 29 October 1841, 6 November 1841), and *United Service Gazette*, Bombay (29 October 1841), the correspondents vigorously counteracted to the Mill's submissions by copiously quoting from his History as well as the works of the other authorities. Bhaskar Pandurang Tarkhadkar (1816-47) [pseudonym 'A Hindoo'], in his letter of 5 August 1841, described the British as "a horde of foreign usurpers whose sole aim is to enrich themselves at the expense of its real masters" (Naik, 2002, p. 592). In addition to a hitherto unknown nationalist ethos in them, it was also evident that these young men were acutely conscious of the follies which the Indian society suffered from. This intellectual upheaval was soon followed by the publication of Ramakrishna Vishwanath's *Ilindusthanchi Prachin va Sampratachi Sthiti va Pundhen kai tyacha parinam honar ya vishayin vichar* [Thoughts on India's Past and present conditions and their impact on the future] in Marathi in 1843 which was "dedicated to the People of India". According to Naik, this work marked the beginning of the nationalist school of historiography in India (Naik, 2002, p. 592).

The responses to Mill's History could not have been many as there not many who could read English, except for those who had been students of a few colleges founded under the patronage of the handful of liberal intellectuals, both British and Indian. But the position it enjoyed as a canonical text by the imperialist constituency kept it alive for quite some time. Soon, there were many more histories of India written by administrators, academics, and the like; but it was evident that they tried to be a little more objective in their narratives. To this crop of histories were added memoirs, studies, essays, travelogues, etc. written mostly by those who were associated with either the East India Company or the British Government, such as Lord Macaulay. Macaulay went on disseminating the idea of India as a savage country with no history, literature or culture; and that its people were lazy, effeminate, cowardly, deceitful etc. Writings of this kind were seen in plenty at least till the 1850s, and after the so-called Sepoy Mutiny (1857), the British narratives got a lot to say against the Indians.

Although English education was officially introduced in India in 1835, by then quite a few schools and colleges had been founded where a limited number of Indians got English education. The first batches of such young persons were active since the 1830s and were exposed to English texts which were made available to them. More importantly, they were patronized by liberal-minded scholars and teachers like Richardson, Williams and Derozio. These early English educated youth were intensely aware of their position of coloniality as well as the inadequacies inherent in Indian life. While Ghosh and Tarkhadkar directly reacted with critical observations of Mill's History, Vishwanath came up with a full-length study, that too in Marathi, in an attempt to rewrite history.

By the late nineteenth century, a good number of nationalist histories were written and the historians sought to re-write their own history. Gyan Prakash rightly points out,

History and colonialism arose together in India. As India was introduced to history, it was also stripped of a meaningful past; it became a history-less society brought into the age of History. The flawed nature of history's birth in India was not lost on the nationalists who pressed the nation-state's claim to the age of history. (1992, p. 17)

Much before the advent of nationalist historiography by Indian historians, the early Indian English writers had started the project of re-constructing Indian identity through their narratives which obliquely resorted to rewriting history. After Governor-General Charles Metcalfe lifted restrictions on the press by virtue of Act XI of 1835, the relaxation continued till the Mutiny of 1857. During this period a number of periodicals came up which published articles on various subjects. There were quite a few fictional writings, translations and the like.

The early writers, vaguely uncomfortable about the colonial condition, and exposed to an organized kind of stratagem for the obliteration of the Indian past, wrote and published whatever they could to educate their foreign rulers about their country. One could argue that it was patriotism, not nationalism which made them write like in such a way. Patriotism is not nationalism, as Ashis Nandy argues, “patriotism is a pre-ideological state of mind, closer to our biological selves, and nationalism is an ideology” (Nandy, 2012, p.9). Indians knew ‘patriotism’ as all communities did, but it is important to note here that the early writers of Indian English, who were probably closely following the contemporary European history, were aware of the concept of “nation” and “nationalism” as ideologies. As early as 1845, Shoshee Chunder Dutt used the term “nation” in *The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century*.

... from the picture of fallen glory, and of the vicissitude of human greatness, the eye is attracted by the morning splendour of brilliant luminary. A splendid spectacle is presented to the eyes of wandering millions, of a nation emerging from the chaos of ignorance and slavery, and hastening to occupy the orbit on the grand system of civilization. (1845, p. 613)

Besides fictional works, poetry and other forms of writing, Dutt also wrote a number historical studies, though he kept saying that he was not a historian. Beginning with *The Times of Yore: Or Tales from Indian History: From the Invasion of Alexander to the Battle of Paniput* (1843), a quasi-historical narrative; he published such works as *Bengal: An Account of the Country from the Ancient Times* (1874), *The Ancient World* (1875), *India: Past and Present* (1876), *The Modern World* (1876), *The Great Wars of India* (1879), and *Historical Studies and Recreations* (1879). In his works, one can see him constantly in the act of re-writing history. He continued writing with the same nationalist zeal for about forty years, and in the process, sought to re-write history from the Indian point of view. He believed that the British Rule has not been “a quiet and peaceful one” because “the empire of the English is based on conquest” (1879, *The Great Wars of India*, p.10), and that “The government of a foreign people, however liked, will be borne so long as the people believe that it will, or can be enforced” (1876, *The Modern World*, p. 60). Though he does not ostensibly deviate much from the schema of Mill, he does not agree with his unsubstantiated observations. Without mentioning Mill’s name or his history, he goes on in his project of telling his history, not as a blind patriot but as a rational annalist. However, the nationalist in him comes out when he introduces *The Ancient World*: “We are all more or less anxious to know who those ancient nations were who lived and flourished when Europe was covered with forests and sprinkled over with savages” (1875, p.5). Further, as if answering back to Mill’s general indictments, Dutt says,

The division of the country among a large number of petty kings, each of whom called himself the sovereign lord of the universe, prevented India, as we have stated, from ever being a powerful empire; but, notwithstanding this, she [India] seems in her day to have become really very great in other aspects (social, moral, and literary), and long served as a model for imitation to a great part of the ancient world. From the remotest antiquity she was very generally regarded as the cradle of knowledge for the eastern, as Egypt was for the western world; and of the two, the Indian cradle was always the better esteemed. (1875, pp. 63-64)

In his poetry as well as in his fiction, history keeps flowing as an undercurrent. In *The Republic of Orissa*, he recreated the first armed rebellion against the British in Odisha (1817) and even used the names of the rebels as his characters. As he worked in the government secretariat in Calcutta, and was responsible for writing official reports, he had easy

access to documents, letters, notes and reports. That helped him as source material for writing his fiction on contemporary history.

It may sound surprising, but Dutt was a votary of war. His discourses on war in *The Great Wars of India* reveal his belief that war is essential for a nation's liberty and self-respect. Besides writing several essays on the subject, he was perhaps the first Indian to write a novel on what he calls "the Indian Mutiny" of 1857: *Shunkur: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny of 1857* (1874). He historicizes the Mutiny as the concluding part of this treatise on the great wars in the history of India. Significantly, his views on the Mutiny are similar to those of the nationalist historians. This is how Dutt summarises his study:

The loyalty of the sepoy came in no time to be confounded with servility; his faithfulness to his salt was quoted as a proof of his meanness. Cowardice could not be imputed to him, for he had fought as bravely for his masters as the soldiers drafted out of England at ten times his cost; but that faithfulness on which he prided was discredited and even condemned. His pay indeed was scanty as compared with that of his European comrade, but he did not mind that, what he did mind was that, while the prejudices of his European comrade were treated with respect, his own were laughed at, and his religion broadly abused (1879, *The Great Wars of India*, pp. 287-288)

For *Shunkur* and *Reminiscences of a Kerani's Life*, his autobiographical narrative, Dutt reportedly incurred the displeasure of the colonial government. In "A Few Autobiographical Remarks by Way of Preface," he informs the reader about "some official enquiries being instituted in respect to the statements contained in it [*Shunkur*]" (1883, p. xix). Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94) tells how *Reminiscences of a Kerani's Life* "created sensation in the official world and almost deprived its author of his pension" (1969, *Bankim Rachanawali*, p. 181).

In the same 'Preface', Dutt clarifies his position as an Indian writer in the following manner:

... the native annalist in particular has no duty more important, or more appropriate, than to give a truthful exposition of the condition and disabilities of his race, with all their attendant surroundings, irrespective of the pretensions and interests of any other class. The adulation of the governing classes, or even of the permanent power, was not exactly the work I had chalked out for myself, though I may honestly and confidently assert that I have not been wilfully, and certainly maliciously, disloyal to either. (1883, p.vii)

Mill's accusation of the Bengalis/Indians being "effeminate" and "cowardly"⁴ became another imperialist metanarrative which was perpetuated by a number of succeeding works by such British scholars/writers/colonial administrators as Lord Macaulay and George Warrington Steevens (1869-1900). In 'Warren Hastings', Macaulay says,

The physical organisation of the Bengalee [sic] is feeble even to effeminacy.... Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable. (1872, p. 611)

In 'Lord Clive', his observations are more astringent,

Whatever the Bengalee [sic] does he does languidly. His favourite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and, though voluble in dispute, and singularly pertinacious in the war of chicane, he seldom engages in a personal conflict, and scarcely ever enlists as a soldier. We doubt whether there be a hundred genuine Bengalees in the whole army of the East India Company. There never, perhaps, existed a people so thoroughly fitted by nature and by habit for a foreign yoke. (1872, p. 517)

Similar was the delineation of the Bengali by Steevens, a well-known British journalist and the author of *In India* (1899):

By his legs you shall know the Bengali.... The Bengali's leg is either skin and bone, the same size all the way down, with knobs for knees, or else it is very fat and globular, also turning in at the knees, with round thighs like a woman's. The Bengali's leg is a leg of a slave. (1899, p.75)

Ronojoy Sen, in his *Nation at Play: A History of Indian Sport*, chronicles the anxiety of masculinity in Bengal in the colonial era and talks about “nearly four decades of efforts at physical regeneration by Bengalis to shake off the ‘effeminate’ tag bestowed by the British” (2015, p. 94). Mrinalini Sinha's *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the Effeminate Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1995) interrogates and theorises this stereotyping, which had given rise to a typical colonial discourse of contempt.

Indian writers in English, especially the Bengali ones, sought to create counter narratives to foreground the strength and valour, the “masculinity”, of their compatriots. They wrote back, valorising their countrymen. Shoshee Chunder Dutt was the most vocal and aggressive among them. He created heroes of sorts in his stories and novels. So masculine are his narratives that there is hardly any major woman character in his fictional world. Nuleeny, the only woman in *The Republic of Orissa*, is a courageous fighter, who heroically saves her lover Jugoo but is killed by the enemy. Shunkur and Probhoo in *Shunkur: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny of 1857* and Monohur in *The Young Zemindar* represent the aggressive colonised who fight back.

One can notice a striking penchant for hero-worship in a number of romantic narratives re-constructed out of real life stories of “brave” Indians to demonstrate that Indian men are not cowardly and effeminate. These narratives are not without a not-so-hidden agenda of writing back to contest the metanarrative of colonial masculinity. One such early work is Charu Chandra Mukherjee's biofiction, *The Life of Tantia Bhil* (1890) which presents an Indian counterpart of the fabled Robin Hood. Mukherjee picks up the legendary Tantia Bhil [aka Tantiya Bheel/Tantiya Mama], a notorious bandit-chief belonging to the then Central Province as his subject and makes a folk hero out of him.

In yet another biofiction, Hem Chunder Dutt's Lieut. *Suresh Biswas: His Life and Adventures* (1899), the author re-creates the story of a real ‘hero’ from the contemporary life who perhaps existed only in popular imagination. Biswas (1861-1905) was an inhabitant of Nathpur in Nadia of Bengal, who left India in his adolescence and during his visit and stay in a number of countries became well-known for his bravery and courage. He was an animal trainer and keeper and circus entertainer, who eventually settled down in Brazil and rose to the rank of the second in command of the Brazilian army. In his person, Dutt finds an appropriate answer to the metanarrative of effeminacy. In his “Prefatory Note,” the publisher P. C. Dass claims that the book will be “interesting” to the readers as “there is not another Bengali, and for the matter of that an Indian, who has done so much to remove the stain on the national character” (1899).

In his Introduction entitled “Bengal and Bengalis,” Hem Chunder Dutt rationalizes by saying that the Bengali's loss of “physique and martial spirit” was because “they grew in spiritual worth” (1899, p. 49). He further argues:

Of course, we admit that it would be manifestly unjust to say with Macaulay, who, by the by, has now been thoroughly found out and discredited that the Bengalis were, or they are, a nation of slaves and cowards, without one redeeming feature in their national character. (1899, p. 49)

In this well-written and well-documented narrative, Dutt portrays his protagonist as a very brave and fearless person since his early life whose bravery was highly appreciated even in a foreign land. He cites a letter written by one Mr. Punando Limos – “one of the foremost citizens of Rio” (Dutt, 1899, p.184) - to Biswas's father on 12 March 1894 where he had shown his great admiration of Biswas as a soldier and as a human being. Limos recounts Biswas's bravery during the battle of Nitheroy in hyperbolic terms. When Biswas's platoon faced “a heavy discharge of

portable cannons which the enemies had with them,” Biswas reportedly exhorted:

Comrades, the enemies have revolver cannons and the distance is too near from us; the sons of our beloved Brazil have a heart that fears not to die, and you will see how a son of the holy land of Hindustan can be the master of these cannons in five minutes; prepare.... (185).

According to Limos, “the result was his victory” (1899, p. 185).

A close reading of the early Indian writing in English reveals its historic role in re-constructing Indian identity through conscious or unconscious rewriting of India’s history. Contrary to the general misgivings over the *merit* of the early writing, it can be said that it chronicles the birth and development of the idea of nationness and nationalism, not only through the works of fiction but also poetry, life writing, travel writing, and all other forms of literature. In the limited space of this article, I have picked up only two texts for discussion, but I can say in conclusion that the entire corpus of early Indian writing in English had been engaged in rewriting “to correct the distortion of colonial historiography” (Thieme, 1984, p. 146).

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Endnotes

1 So respectful had Macaulay become of Mill after his History was published that in his Critical and Historical Essays, he omitted the three essays/reviews where he had severely criticized Mill's "Essay on Government."

2 Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860), trained as a physician at St. Thomas's Hospital, London, came to India in 1808 as an Assistant Surgeon of the British East India Company but because of his knowledge of metallurgy, he became attached to the mint at Calcutta. On the recommendation of Henry Thomas Colebrooke, he was appointed as Secretary to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal (1811) where he continued as the Director from 1837 till his death. Wilson, an accomplished writer, translator and historian, has published his translation of Kalidasa's *The Meghaduta*, or, *Cloud Messenger* (1813), *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1819), *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* (1827), *Mackenzie Collection* (1828), *The Vishnu Puran: A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition* (4 Vols., 1840), *Rig-veda Sanhita*, *The History of British India from 1805-1835* (1844-1848), etc. He was appointed as the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit, Oxford University in 1832.

3 In "English Composition by Hindus," the name of Ghosh has been wrongly spelt as "Cassinath Ghose".

4 For more discussions on 'colonial masculinity' and the early Indian counter narratives. See, Mund, Subhendu, *The Indian Novel in English: Its Birth and Development* (New Delhi, Bhubaneswar: Prachi Prakashan, 1997); and *The Making of Indian English Literature* (Manohar, 2020).

Rewriting the History of the British Empire: From New Imperial History to Environmental History

Ingrid SANKEY

Abstract

In his 2003 book Navigating World History, Patrick Manning, Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, reminds us that while the past is well and truly over, history is both its description and interpretation. However, the description and interpretation of what no longer changes is transformed by each new generation of historians because new points of view modify old perspectives over the course of discoveries that enrich the knowledge and representations that we have of the past. The history of the British Empire is a perfect example.

Indeed, from the heroic tales of the imperial epic in the colonial era to the radical questioning of the postcolonial studies movement, including the Subaltern Studies, the historical narrative of the colonial past caused much ink to flow and sparked much debate and controversy resulting in many rewritings of a 'past that does not pass'. From this constantly renewed narrative, mixing history and memory, scientific rigor and ideological passions, a certain number of innovative fields of study have emerged, leading to new perspectives in our contemporary representations of this period of history which still seems to be topical in many ways.

This paper briefly examines two of these renewed views of New Imperial History and environmental history within the framework of the British Empire in general and of South Asia, and India in particular.

Keywords: Empire, Britain, India, globalization, environment, imperial connections

In his 2003 book *Navigating World History*, Patrick Manning, professor at the University of Pittsburgh reminds us that while the past is well and truly over, history is both its description and interpretation. However, the description and interpretation of what no longer exists changes and is transformed with each new generation of historians because new points of view modify old perspectives over the course of the discoveries that enrich the knowledge and representations that we have of the past.

The historiography of the British Empire is a perfect example of such reinterpretations. Indeed, from the heroic tales of the imperial epic during the colonial era to the radical questioning of the postcolonial studies movement, including the Subaltern Studies, we can say that historical narratives of the colonial past have caused much ink to flow and sparked much debate and controversy resulting in many rewritings of a 'past that does not pass'. From this constantly renewed narration, merging history and memory, scientific rigour and ideological passions, a certain number of innovative fields of study have emerged, leading to new perspectives in our contemporary representations of this period of history which still seems, in many ways, a prominent, pressing and sensitive subject. This paper sets out to examine briefly some of these renewed views within the general framework of the British Empire with a more specific focus on South Asia and India.

Like most of our modern fields of study, History as we know it today, was born at the end of the nineteenth century, in an era of dynamic state building. Therefore, the preferred unit of analysis that emerged to frame historians' narratives of the world's past was, and to some extent still is, the national scale. It is easy to acknowledge the obvious ideological background that has led most countries around the world to build national histories to back emerging national identities, at a time when another political unit, the Imperial one, was crumbling almost everywhere. Currently, the United Nations hosts hundred and ninety-three member states with the latest addition of South Sudan in 2011. All of them are national political entities.

Nevertheless, over the past decades, History, like many other fields of study, has had to adapt to a major paradigm shift that has enlarged the scope of its narratives from a national to a global scale. This new paradigm is what defines most of our contemporary representations of the world. We call it globalization. Of course, one may discuss endlessly over the validity or reality of such a broad and ill-defined concept and its consequences on various fields of studies, including the Humanities, but this goes beyond the scope of this paper. As world history emerged as a global alternative to the national narrative, it soon became obvious that a global perspective also had to include a transdisciplinary approach in its analysis in order to provide a truly global perspective on history.

Thus, broader units of analysis have been added to the nation state, such as civilisations, area studies, continents, language groups in an attempt to transcend the limits of the nation-state. Empires are such places and provide History teachers with examples of trade, travel, migration, conquest, religious and cultural interaction in almost every period that reach far beyond the limits of national state borders. This approach aims at enabling students to analyze events and phenomena with a broadened perspective and a less restricted focus besides introducing the complexities of writing historical narratives that manage to articulate the global and the local in a coherent and comprehensive analysis of past and present events.

Empires, by their size and contact with multiple and diverse areas, look like the perfect historical frame to display exchanges of all kinds and scales, an aspect sometimes overlooked by classical history. Imperial networks provided important linkages between diverse ecological zones and facilitated contacts between societies that had access to diverse resources. The richness and complexity of these cross-regional connections set the pattern for the globe-spanning interconnections we know today as globalization.

The amount of new theories that have emerged in the past decades are obviously too numerous for the scope of this paper which is not meant to be an exhaustive catalogue of these fascinating and innovative fields of historical research.

This article attempts to explore some of these new narratives in order to present some of the most stimulating and innovative ideas in this promising field of research. We shall mostly focus on how these new ideas apply to the more specific arena of the study and reassessment of the historical narrative of the British Empire with a particular focus on the notions of trans-imperial connections and how Global History enlightens previously overlooked processes of interaction and hybridisation across this imperial space. This paper will also discuss how some of these processes can be applied to the study of South Asia under imperial British rule and what new theories have emerged unveiling less known aspects of that complex historical period and its deeply controversial legacy.

Defining Empire

In 2015, Pierre Singaravélou chaired a debate between several prominent French historians in a series of yearly conferences given in the city of Blois near Paris, named “Les rendez-vous de l’histoire”. In an introduction to the roundtable-conference entitled “Empires, vectors for Globalization”, he recalled that the analysis of imperial expansions or globalizations since Antiquity provides historians with a better understanding of contemporary global processes.

However, he also acknowledged that the two concepts of Empire and Globalization were loaded words that were extremely connoted from a moral and political point of view and regularly exploited in various debates. He referred to the dangerous plasticity of the two terms and insisted on the necessity for historians to question these concepts to avoid teleological biases that might arise from the analysis of such complex phenomena. Singaravélou thus argued that empires could be defined as hierarchical political structures that bring together diverse populations and territories through military conquests and more or less restrictive forms of allegiance.

Nonetheless, this somewhat static definition of imperial systems has gradually given way to a more dynamic questioning of what makes empire. Empires can no longer be considered as active and coherent entities and it has been up to historians in recent years to test the effectiveness of these empires by analyzing the circulations and tensions, the processes of unification and disintegration that have affected these imperial formations.

This more dynamic definition allows historians to look at empires from a new angle. Empires are not only made of internal confrontations, external conflicts, violence, oppression and domination. They could also constitute crucibles of globalization, that is to say, induce greater interdependence between different regions and populations of the world. Indeed, globalization and empires alike seem to be defined by the innumerable circulations that characterize them. It is these circulations of men, goods, capital, information, knowledge and know-how that give substance to these two abstract concepts of empire and globalization.

We can therefore ask ourselves, as Singaravelou does, whether what we call empires are not above all giant systems that organize mobility on a large scale and if the need to make this mobility possible and to supervise it is not the very reason why these empires were born. (Singaravelou, 2015).

Besides, in another paper, Singaravelou adds that, like all European empires, the British Raj was talkative. It massively produced discourses and speeches about itself, and its records have greatly influenced the point of view of historians thereafter. Hence the great flawless and well-oiled story of an omnipresent and efficient colonisation. (Singaravelou, 2018, p. 119).

The analysis of the speeches or propaganda of the British Empire is comparable to the works of Sanjay Subrahmanyam on Vasco da Gama or that of Romain Bertrand on the Dutch empire in Indonesia. Working on indigenous sources enabled historians to compare, as they had never done before, those discourses or their absence thereof, to the historical narratives of the colonizers. Empires have always tried to present themselves as powerful and sovereign entities, even when their hold on various regions was loose and uneven.

The reassessing of such narratives brings new imperial histories to the fore. For instance, Singaravelou recalls that, in the nineteenth century, other non western political entities developed their own forms of imperial expansionism very similar to European imperialism. Everyone knows the example of Japan, but the Manchus in China, the Vietnamese and even the Comanches in North America all developed their own forms of imperial expansion as Singaravelou recalls.

He goes to explain that in the first years of the nineteenth century, and if we detach ourselves from the teleological vision determined by the end of the century, it is not the nascent territorial grip of the European overseas empires that holds our attention but the unexpected vitality of non-Western colonialism. However, if these imperial formations do not yet appear in school textbooks, some of them went so far as to delay European expansion as in the case of the Comanche empire which delayed for a while the western expansion of the United States in North America.

Singaravelou concludes that from North America to Southeast Asia and China, indigenous colonial logics and Western imperial dynamics are so intimately intertwined that it would seem artificial to separate them. However, if historians avoid any reductionist reasoning which would oversimplify non-European phenomena to the point of erasing their specificity, the global approach makes it possible to restore the dynamics of non-Western expansionisms during this “European century” (Singaravelou/Venayre, 2017, pp. 167-172).

An example of Eurocentric narrative of European Imperial expansion is provided by Serge Gruzinski, another contemporary prominent French Historian. In *L'Aigle et le Dragon : Démesure européenne et mondialisation au XVI^e siècle*, he tells the mirror stories of Spain's successful conquest of the New World as opposed to the Portuguese's

Portuguese's failure to conquer China. At a time when the different parts of the World became ever more connected the history of European overseas expansion in the age of what is commonly and heroically referred to as "The Great Discoveries," the historical narrative of the conquest of the New World has been emphasized in European historiography while the failed conquest of China has been obliterated.

Gruzinski concludes that China's resistance has eventually delineated the contours of the West, while the failed conquest of China by Europeans and the demise of the West in Eastern Asia have turned the Pacific into the limit between East and West (Gruzinski 415). Pierre Singaravélou and Serge Gruzinski are two amongst several French historians who have been contributing to the promotion of this new imperial and colonial historiography in the past decades. In the Anglo-Saxon world, we may refer, amongst many others, to the pioneering and innovative works of Jane Burbank, Frederick Cooper and John Darwin.

Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper are the authors of a book entitled *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*. In this book, they argue that the concept of nation-state is based on a fiction, that of homogeneity: a people, a territory, a government. Empires, on the contrary, arise from the extension of power across space and are therefore based on diversity. Burbank and Cooper's thesis is therefore as follows: unlike nation-states which value largely fictitious homogeneity, empires were based on diversity. Because of their ability to unite ethnically, linguistically or religiously different populations, imperial modes of government could have a lot to say about the art of governing in a multicultural context.

However, past empires also left a legacy that still lies heavily around us. As the historian John Darwin recalls "we live in a world that empires have made" to which he adds that "most of the modern world is the relic of empires" (Darwin, 2012, p.1). He also reckons that "few subjects in history evoke stronger opinions than the making of empire" and that "for all the ink spilt on their deeds and misdeeds, empires remain rather mysterious realms of myths and misconception." (ibid, p. xi).

The above mentioned statements are just a few examples among the numerous questions that have arisen since the development of new fields of study regarding the historiography of empires in general revisited through the lens of Global and or Connected History.

What is British Empire?

Let us now turn the focus on the historiography of the British Empire. How has this imperial political entity been redefined in the past decades?

We have been used to defining empires as strictly delineated political entities with a strong hierarchy. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives us the following definition of empire: a major political unit having a territory of great extent or a number of territories or peoples under a single sovereign authority. This definition seems quite relevant when applied to the British Empire.

However, when one refers to contemporary historiography, such a definition seems extremely basic and even, at times, irrelevant, when it comes to define the political entity that was the British Empire.

In his book entitled *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain*, John Darwin explains that for its first hundred years, there was no single vision of empire, but several. He argues that, at this stage of its history, the Empire was driven less by the state than by the personal ambitions of people with vastly different backgrounds and agendas, from fortune-seeking gentry to merchants looking for new markets, impoverished economic migrants and evangelical missionaries.

As time went by, the state was to take on more of the protection and ultimately the running of these overseas ventures, often reluctantly. Some of those ventures such as the gradual takeover of India by the East India Company were chiefly commercial projects that were dependent on private capital and private risk. As Darwin recalls, one of the major characteristics of the British Empire was the matchless adaptability of its builders and promoters and the hallmark of British imperialism was its extraordinary versatility in method, outlook and object.

Consequently, India experienced simultaneously different types of imperialism as the subcontinent was never fully conquered by Britain. If the three Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras fell under direct British colonial Rule, over 650 Princely States (about one third of the territory of India in the heyday of colonial rule in the end of the Nineteenth century), fell under the regime of Indirect Rule as a protectorate of the Paramount power (Britain).

In effect, the British excelled at recruiting local elites and interest groups as collaborators without whose consent little would have been possible. As Darwin puts it:

One of the most difficult tasks, but also one of the most vital, was settling the terms on which indigenous peoples and their leaders would become the allies, the clients or the subjects of empire. It is easily forgotten that across much of the world empire was 'made' as much if not more by local auxiliaries that 'empire-builders' recruited as by the imperialists themselves. (Darwin, 2012, p. xi)

This specificity of imperial rule shall be dealt with later in this article, as it has recently become the object of numerous historiographical rereading of the imperial history of India and the Indian Ocean under British colonial rule.

In addition, Darwin recalls that the structure of the Empire was also a very flexible one as it reflected the ups and downs of overseas ventures and conquests as they adapted to the evolving and ever changing geopolitical contexts of their time.

Between the 18th and early 19th centuries, four very different types of British Empires had begun to emerge. The first were the self-governing colonies in North America, the Caribbean and Australasia. The second political entity was India, an empire within the Empire, and the opportunity it provided for Britain to project power from the Persian Gulf to the South China Seas. The third type was made of smaller territories some of them acquired as way stations to India, some trade posts such as Hong Kong and Singapore and some maritime bridgeheads in East and West Africa with relatively ungoverned hinterlands. The fourth kind of empire was a more informal one in places such as Argentina and Egypt where British influence was exercised through trade, investment and diplomacy. These could include spheres of influence or fall under a form of economic imperialism.

As we can see, it is extremely difficult to find a good definition of the British Empire as there was no single vision of it nor was the project ever monolithic in practice.

Historians such as M. Darwin have tried to revisit the classical definitions of the British Empire to show how this political construct was complicated, paradoxical and, above all, of its time: "The result was an empire of hybrid components, conflicting traditions, and unsettled boundaries between races and peoples: a source of constant unease as well as extraordinary energy" (Darwin, 2012, p. xi).

In his *Very Short Introduction to the British Empire*, Ashley Jackson adds some interesting fresh perspectives to the definition of the British Empire. In his definition of the British Empire, he identifies several key characteristics which bring about new perspectives on some of what he defines as key characteristics of the British Empire. . Thus, according to him, the British Empire was an economic bloc and field of opportunity, a cultural universe, a system

of knowledge, a racial construction, a strategic and military system, a transformer of the natural world and the built environment and a constantly contested realm. He also identifies what he calls engines of expansion such as relative power vis-à-vis indigenous societies and great power rivals, the law of unintended consequences, the actions of individuals, organizations, and governments, maritime requirement, war, and strategy, trade and commerce, religion, settlement and migration.

Some of the specificities he identifies here are well known and debated but others are rather innovative and have recently been added to the debates about the definition of the British imperial construct.

The focus on the actors of the British Empire helps, therefore, shed a new light on the actions of individuals, organizations and governments. Jackson thus acknowledges that: “Whilst imperialism is a process, the British Empire was created by sentient human beings acting upon the world around them-Europeans, but also the indigenous people who treated with them, resisted them, traded with them, and allied with them” (Jackson, 2013, p. 58).

John Darwin couldn’t agree more as he recalls that ‘Empire’ is a grand word but it hides another less perceptible reality often obscured in contemporary analyses of Imperial building:

(...) behind its [Empire] façade (in every place and time) stood a mass of individuals, a network of lobbies, a mountain of hopes: for careers, fortunes, religious salvation or just physical safety. Empires were not made by faceless committees making grand calculations, nor by the ‘irresistible’ pressures of economics or ideology. They had to be made by men (and women) whose actions were shaped by motives and morals no less confused and demanding than those that govern us now. This was certainly true of the British overseas empire. Far from being the mere handiwork of kings and conquistadors, it was largely a private-enterprise empire: the creation of merchants, investors, migrants and missionaries. (...). It is not hard to see how much could go wrong. (Darwin, 2012, p. xi)

Besides, as Jackson acknowledges, the declaration of formal colonies often came at the end of a lengthy process of interaction between indigenous societies and colonial elements (the ‘men on the spot’) that had been operating for significant periods of time before formal rule was declared.

These operations, as in the case of the East India Company, had generally been to the detriment of indigenous societies and the benefit of the newcomers. Thus, “colonial rule, in this reading, was often at least partially caused by the need to halt and discipline uncontrolled elements of Europe’s invasion that had contributed to or caused instability and disruption” (Jackson, 2013, p. 61).

Such a reading, of course, may well apply to India when the rule of the East India Company was terminated and the British Raj was established in the aftermath of the events of 1857.

However, the Empire of shareholders was also an empire of adventurers. We may recall here the actions of Stamford Raffles who founded Singapore and was not rewarded by the British Government at the time because it threatened its former agreement of a status quo with the Dutch and the British trading community established on the island of Penang protested to the Government that the creation of a new trade-post at the other end of the Strait of Malacca was likely to generate too much competition which was bad for trade. Over time, Raffles’s acquisition was to prove an invaluable strategic and economic asset for the British Empire.

A similar story is that of James Brooke who became Sultan of Sarawak and started a dynasty of ‘white rajahs’ on the theco,

island of Borneo, but whose acquisition was not immediately regarded as important enough to justify its integration to the imperial construct.

As Jackson acknowledges, many actions and contacts that led to the creation of colonial situations did not have imperial expansion as their intention, which he calls the law of unintended consequences.

This apparently incoherent character of the Imperial construct was also apparent in the numerous governing bodies that were to rule over the Empire such as the various governments of India, the Viceroy, the Foreign office and India Office, the Navy, the Army, the Dominions and the settler's communities, and to some extent, the local rulers of the numerous protectorates, including the Indian Princely states.

Defining the British Empire is, therefore, near impossible, as we have seen and new narratives are likely to bring about a redefinition of that specific political construction. This is why Jackson concludes that, as the impact of the British Empire still lies heavily about us, the history of the British Empire per se is less important than the British Empire's impact on world history.

Probing the character, actions, and limitations of the 'fragmented colossus' that was the British Empire remains a richly rewarding form of historical enquiry, as well as being crucial to understanding the modern world. Whilst the 'assumed stability of colonial rule' can be challenged to present 'a picture of the British Empire as an ultimately precarious, shifting and unruly formation... quite distinct from its self-projected image as an orderly entity', the tangibility of Britain's presence in scores of today's nation-states was a more remarkable fact than the inevitable contradictions and weaknesses inherent in such an enormous, Heath Robinson-esque edifice. (Jackson, 2013, pp. 129-130)

One of the key characteristics of the British Empire defined by Jackson was that the British Empire was a 'constantly contested realm'. Effectively, from skirmishes to colonial wars, conflicts have become an important part of the historiography of the British Empire and have contributed to a re definition of the part played by the colonized in resisting imperial expansion.

Conventional historiographies usually present the building by the British of the strategic and military system that underlined the creation and expansion of the Empire. Some historians insist on the development of a system centered on the Indian Ocean in order to protect the strategic Routes to India, the Jewel of the Crown, from other European power rivals through maritime requirements, war and strategy, occasionally of the gunboat kind.

Rewriting the Empire

Revisiting some key characteristics of the British Empire

Recent historiography has chosen to show that Britain's colonial subjects were not merely victims of Empire but also agents whose resistance both contributed to their own liberation and shaped, in return, Britain's ideas about freedom. Thus, the question of indigenous response to colonial expansion has become central to the historiography of the British Empire.

Books such as *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* by Priyamvada Gopal and *The Trouble with Empire* by Antoinette Burton aim at demonstrating that far from being sporadic and isolated skirmishes at the margins of Empire, conflicts were part of the daily reality of colonial rule. These works reveal the agency of indigenous societies and analyze the limits of Imperial power.

Thus, they challenge the conviction that peace was a dominant feature of the British Empire embodied in the concept of “Pax Britannica” and re-evaluate the ability of the British Empire to rule unchallenged and fully subdue those who contested it.

In past decades, new historiographical perspectives have emerged in the field of History and have contributed to the development of new fields of research connected to contemporary issues which induce new and innovative perspectives on the past. One of the most interesting ones is Environmental History.

Colonial History and Environmental History

The growing connection between Colonial History and Environmental History is currently shedding a new light on our traditional understanding of past colonial events. This helped historians to redefine their perception of the past and frame new theories about historical events using concepts and practices that can be combined in order to produce innovative narratives of the past. These new ways of combining events can help produce a global picture of history thanks to narratives that take into account innovation and developments in various research fields including in sciences such as Biology and Climate science.

Alfred Worcester Crosby is commonly regarded by historians as one of the founding fathers of Environmental history thanks to his pioneering work entitled *The Columbian Exchange*, a term he coined in 1972. In this book, the historian tells the story of Columbus’s landing in 1492 through the ramifications it had on the New World.

In the 1970’s, his approach to history through biology was innovative and the book is now considered as a founding text in the field of environmental history. Thus, in an interview to the Smithsonian online magazine in 2011, Alfred Crosby argued that “A great deal of the economic, social, political history of the world is involved in the exchange of living organisms that transferred between continents, beginning in the fifteenth Century” (Gambino, 2011).

In his major book, the professor, who did not realize at the time that he was starting a revolution in historiography, recalls that the armies and the people of the New World were just decimated by imported diseases such as smallpox, malaria and all kinds of infectious diseases imported from the Old World. However, the reverse was less true as numerous parts of the Old World which included the Eurasian and African continents, had shared diseases for millennia, thus developing a sort of collective immunity that prevented large parts of the population from being seriously affected, at least at a large scale that would seriously damage their demography.

Besides, it is generally acknowledged by historians that syphilis, one of the rare diseases imported from the New World to the Old, did not seem to have had such a destructive impact on European, Asian and African populations at the time.

Following Crosby’s pioneering work, many historians have, since then, focused on these transdisciplinary approaches and the cross fertilisation brought to the field of colonial studies by Environmental history. Thus, the study of specific examples taken from Britain’s environmental interactions through its imperial conquest, expansion, development and management of its overseas territories’ resources in connection with disease outbreaks provided new insights into the history of the British Empire in particular and the phenomenon of European colonisation in the Modern Age at large.

One of the most famous among those historians was J. R. McNeill¹ whose book entitled *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1640–1914* was published in 2010.

In a research paper, published in *Environment and History* in 1999 and entitled “Ecology, Epidemics and Empires: Environmental Change and the Geopolitics of Tropical America, 1600-1825,” J. R. McNeill had already warned

that environmental change was likely to threaten world order in the coming decades. However, he reckoned that such developments were all but new.

Lately serious scientists, serious journalists, and even serious historians have warned us that environmental change threatens world order. New and deadly infections from tropical Africa, biodiversity loss around the globe, uneven population growth, intercontinental migrations and a host of other developments spell danger for unprepared people and institutions, and for peace and diplomacy. This may be so, but even if so, it is not new. It sounds a lot like the 17th century in the American tropics. (McNeill, 1999, p. 175)

In that same research paper, J.R. McNeill provides an impressive list of historical precedents. Focusing on the case of yellow fever, a disease previously unknown in the American tropics which was imported together with the African slave trade and prospered thanks to favourable conditions induced by the plantation system, as we shall recall in the second part of this paper, McNeill argues that the conditions of expeditionary warfare brought in “an influx of inexperienced immune systems” from Europe, which provided optimal conditions for the spread of the disease. However, he adds, rather ironically, that (ibid., p.179) “differential immunity made yellow fever partisan.”

Indeed, he contends that the most vulnerable populations to the disease were young adult white males who had grown up outside of yellow fever zones and whose ancestors had never been in contact with the disease. Yellow fever seemed to favour local populations over invaders and African, women and children populations over young adult European men.

However, the British were not just the victims of a discriminating and hostile environment. They soon learned how to make the most of the lush and bountiful tropical plants which was to become a source of major profit. A new and fast developing scientific field, botany, was to become an essential part of the make-up of the British Empire.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, Britain supported a diverse programme of worldwide scientific exploration. The quest for botanical knowledge, especially in identifying plants of economic value, had an important influence in determining imperial expansion. Botanical garden played a crucial part in the economic development of Empire and in transforming the environment of large parts of the world. A central institution, the Royal Botanical Garden at Kew, came to play a decisive role in imperial botany, plant exploration and exploitation. Throughout the 19th century, Kew developed a powerful influence at the colonial and India Office. It acquired an Imperial role at the centre of a new network of gardens in the colonies to act as centres for plant hunting and the assessment of fruit, vegetables, timber and other crops for cultivation and colonial development. Kew was also regarded as the prime international centre for the exchange of plants and seeds. Imperial botanic gardens multiplied from four in 1789 to ten in 1837 and up to one hundred in 1901. One of the prominent institutions in the Empire was the Royal botanical Gardens of Calcutta which helped the tea bush from China to India and Ceylon in the 1820s.

Tea plantations were thus developed throughout the Empire wherever the environment proved favourable such as in the Himalayan foothills around Darjeeling, in the Nilgiri Hills and around Periyar in southern India, in the Cameron Highlands in Malaysia and the tea hills of central Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and in the East African Highlands in Kenya and Uganda, amongst other places. Botanical gardens were also instrumental in the diffusion of coffee, sugar, cinnamon, sisal, tobacco, and many other plants. Smuggling was an important part of the activities of Imperial plant hunters. In the 1850s and 1860s, Dutch and British agents spirited seeds of the wild cinchona tree, the source of quinine, from the Andes and transferred the resulting seedlings to Java and India and in the 1870s a British planter succeeded in smuggling seeds of the rubber tree from the Amazon to Kew garden, and from there the seedlings were shipped to Ceylon, Singapore and Malaya (Headrick, 1996, p.4).

In addition to the economic benefit of these institutions, British settlers and expatriates also wanted attractions with ornamental plantings in imitation of 'home'. In Australia and New Zealand, some botanic gardens were likened to municipal public parks and some were closely associated with acclimatization societies, producing British ornamentals and other plants as part of transplanting national identity. Therefore, by the late 19th century, botanists had transferred almost every commercially interesting plant, whether wild or cultivated, to almost every place on earth where they could profitably be grown. This involved primarily a massive transfer from South America to South and Southeast Asia and the East Indies where conditions were favourable for labour-intensive estate agriculture (Headrick, 1996, p.4).

As Ashley Jackson interestingly sums up "the development of botanical gardens around the world marked the search for lucrative crops and valuable plants, as well as the desire to collect and classify all living things, to identify and to tame the 'exotic', to rationalize the seemingly irrational" (Jackson, 2013, p. 47).

As the Empire connected disparate lands, peoples and species in an unprecedented manner, one can easily understand that it had a profound impact on the diverse environments its various actors and promoters encountered. In effect, it led to a deep transformation of the natural world, for the better and the worse, as it oversaw an astonishing global transplantation and cross-fertilization as flora, fauna and microbes were promiscuously moved from one region to another, not always intentionally.

Native species were decimated as English plants and animals were introduced (rodents and livestock amongst others). Plants deemed useless were destroyed so productive ones could be grown on plantations. The use of nature was rationalised and agricultural activities were developed alongside plant and animal transfers, forestry, irrigation and flood control.

Land grabbing went hand in hand with colonial exploitation of all that the environment had to offer and was utilised and made profitable whenever possible.

Subject indigenous peoples were often dispossessed of their lands as in the Nilgiri Hills where they were their alleged predations were stopped so that forests could be scientifically improved. The result was increased timber felling for the market and land tax revenue for the colonial state.

Overall, the development of western farming methods in the growing of crops and the raising of cattle introduced major environmental transformations that were to have long lasting effects on the natural world and the populations of the colonised spaces. As Ashley Jackson recalls, the growing connections, imports, exports of plants and animals across diverse Imperial ecosystems greatly affected the balance of tropical environments and had deep and long lasting effects on the landscapes of the colonised lands.

Like other migrant peoples, wherever the British went, their cash crops, food crops, and livestock, went with them. The development of plantations, national parks, farmlands and pasturelands across the world was the direct result of European settlement and its commercial, agricultural, 'sporting', and conservation activities. Whilst shooting the game out of vast tracts of southern Africa, their imported rabbits wreaked havoc among Australia's grasslands and their tea and rubber plantations transformed landscapes in Asia and Southeast Asia. (Jackson, 2013, p. 47)

However, some more positive aspects could be noticed, as the expansion of cattle and sheep farming in Australia introduced colonial administrators to the problems of exploitation and control, thus paving the way for a more environmentally conscious development. Jackson argues that there was a constant tension between the desire to conserve and that to produce and profit.

The Empire could, therefore, claim some of the most important pioneering work in terms of environmental conservation and scholars and botanical gardens alike began to warn of the fragility and the exhaustibility of the natural world. Professional hunters even sometimes turned conservationists.

These pioneers were, of course, limited in number, but their work and ideas raised awareness and contributed to a growing, even if limited, consciousness of the scale of the environmental depredation that was taking place in the Empire and in the Metropolis.

Thus, a connected and trans-disciplinary approach to some aspects of the biological and landscape transformations induced by Imperial expansion bring about new historical narratives that highlight its numerous environmental impacts at the local and global scales.

Maritime and Imperial Connections

Another interesting idea is that of John Darwin in his latest book entitled *Unlocking the World: Port-Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam 1830-1930*.

In this study, Darwin traces the history of the great port-cities which emerged as the bridgeheads of the new steam-driven economy that emerged in the second half of the 19th century. He refers to them as agents of globalization.

In a chapter entitled 'The Maritime Raj', he refers to "a powerful landward bias towards histories of the conquest, consolidation and unravelling of the colonial regime and the effects of foreign rule on an overwhelmingly agrarian society." (Darwin, 2020: 215).

He then recalls that the British arrived to India by sea and that their bridgeheads were ports and coastal trading towns such as Madras (Chennai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai), which were the basis from which they extended their rule.

Although the British were somehow distracted as they started their inland conquests of the subcontinent and, over time, they reinvented themselves as an inland empire. The moving of their capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911, the Great rebellion of 1857 centred on the Upper Ganges Valley reinforced their preoccupation with North Indian interior. Besides, a paranoid fear of Russian designs made them focus on their North West Frontier Province and on Afghanistan which reinforced their interest for an inland history.

Therefore, as Darwin recalls, "The drama of this inland history makes it easy to lose sight of the second grand theme of India's colonial era: the role of its great maritime cities in reshaping its economy, politics and culture, and the centrality of steam power in expanding their reach" (Darwin, 2020, p. 218). Perhaps one of the most interesting rewritings of Imperial history in the past decades is the study of Thomas R. Metcalf of Imperial connections. As the system of Indentured labour has been extensively studied and debated, Metcalf argues that, in addition to the indentured, many Indians were drawn overseas by the opportunities of trade and commerce. Most of these emigrants came from the established trading communities of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu and had participated in the larger trading networks of the Indian Ocean for centuries. They even followed the indentured labourers in order to service their needs (Metcalf, 2007, p. 216).

In *Mercantile Adventurers: The World of East African Asians, 1750-1985*, Dana April Seidenberg recalls that in the late 1860s, the advent of steamship and shipping lines to all important East African coastal towns, potential Asian emigrants could travel to East Africa within a short time. While a few had been recruited in India to staff large

government offices as clerks, most came on their own by steamer. By the 1880s, British India Lines had established a regular route linking Bombay to Zanzibar and Durban, reducing the trip from Bombay to Zanzibar from more than three months to about a week. In the same decade, Indian immigration was accelerated by the Indian Emigration Act of 1883 permitting Indians to travel, without any restrictions to East Africa and elsewhere. Immigration was further encouraged in 1896 with the planning of the Uganda Railway (Seidenberg, 1997, pp. 20-21).

Metcalf refers to the Indian Ocean as a “British Lake” and an “Indian Ocean arena” in the 19th century as “flows of people, ideas and institutions, not to mention a vigorous trade, traversed its waters throughout the century (...) from Zanzibar to Singapore, from Durban to Basra to Penang, the port cities of the Indian Ocean rim and their hinterland, defined the Indian-centered imperial web of the nineteenth century” (Metcalf, 2007, p.9).

Metcalf agrees with Darwin that “The Raj comprehended the sea as well as the land.”

He further adds that residence overseas also encouraged Indians to conceive of themselves as Indians as they were freed from a colonial sociology of caste, family, clan and other numerous loyalties. Abroad, Indians came face to face with their nationality and a sense of “Indianness” (ibid., p. 3).

In his global history of the Nineteenth century, Jürgen Osterhammel recalls that “no other epoch in history was an age of long-distance migration on such a massive scale” and adds that, “between 1815 and 1914, at least 82 million people moved voluntarily from one country to another” (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 154). He further recalls that “the Indian migration was the only one that continued on a significant scale throughout the period” (ibid., p.159).

However, he argues that, although migration via contract labour was more controlled legally and politically and better recorded statistically than unregulated forms of emigration, the number of those who left as traders rather than workers should not be underestimated. It is now generally acknowledged that more than 29 million Indians and 19 million Chinese emigrated between 1846 and 1940 to countries around the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. This was a population movement as large as that from Europe to the Americas (ibid., pp.163-164).

These vast movements of population stimulated by unprecedented technological progresses (steamship, railway, and telegraph lines) that increased communications across the vast network that was the British Empire, came to an end after the First World War with the generalisation of border controls and passport regulations.

Indians never managed to secure the status they longed for – that of full citizen that treated all equally. They were always its subjects. Yet, however ambiguously, they were colonizers as well as colonized. Like the Irish perhaps, Indians have never found it easy to come to terms with their experience on both sides of the imperial equation. (Metcalf, 2007, p. 214)

Before 1800, the British need for personnel in India was very low because they enlisted Indian troops (Sepoys) on the spot. Jackson thus reports that

whilst it is often remarked that India was ruled by a small cadre of British servants- around about a thousand- what is seldom mentioned in the same breath is that the Government of India employed about a million Indians to assist them in their enterprise. (Jackson, 2013, p.18).

The system of working alongside indigenous junior partners applied consistently in most parts of the Empire and was called ‘Indirect Rule’. The term was first applied to African colonial administration. As Jackson adds, during their decolonisation struggles, nationalists needed to undermine these ‘traditional’ leaders and argue that new, representative ‘modern’ politicians-like themselves-were the way forward. (ibid., p. 20).

The invaluable support brought by the Indian princely elite through the system of Indirect Rule, the recruiting of Sikhs, Gurkhas and Sepoys in the Indian Army to wage colonial wars in different parts of the Empire, the recruiting of Indian assistants in administrations and the incentive given to Indian emigration as traders across the Indian Ocean thus created an Indian sub-imperial system. The Gurkhas are still, up to this day, a prominent institution that sends its new recruits (recruited in Nepal by the British Army) all the way to Singapore.

Legacy of Imperial History

In *The Birth of the Modern World*, C.A. Baily argues that, even if it is generally acknowledged that, after the Sepoy Rebellion, sexual relations between British men and Asian women were a thing of the past, things were not as simple. Although there is evidence of the slow imposition of racial boundaries in marriage and sex in India in the course of the 19th century, this should not be overstated. If it is generally acknowledged that the Anglo-Indian community may generally have been formed before 1820, large Anglo-Chinese, Anglo-Burmese communities came into existence after 1860. They played an important role in commerce and the service economies of much of southern and eastern Asia. In addition, the ancient practice of Muslim travellers contracting temporary marriages with foreign women continued to pin together the Arab, Indian and Muslim East throughout the 19th century (Baily, 2004, p. 236).

Consequently, we may conclude that the rewriting of the history of such a hybrid, porous and undefined political entity as the British Empire is far from being an easy task and that the recent focus on the actors of that great stage of imperial mobilities and hybridities make such a vast political entity ever more complex, paradoxical and fascinating. The legacy of the British Empire is also an array of incredible tales of connections between worlds such as the family story of Neera Kapur-Dromson. In a book entitled *From Jhelum to Tana*, she tells the story of her great-grandfather, Kirparam, who boarded a dhow in Karachi in 1898 and headed for the shores of Africa to work for a railway line being constructed there by the British. His decision was to change the family's life forever. Now a member of the Indian diaspora in East Africa, his great-granddaughter, Neera, married to a French diplomat, shares her life between Nairobi in Kenya, where her family lives, France, where she lives with her husband, and India. She recalls the questioning that arose in her family as Kenya was gradually moving towards independence in 1963.

On the eve of independence, 1, 80,000 Asians, most of whom lived in urban centres, calculated their gains and losses. Decisions had to be made fast. Considerably apprehensive about our future and those of our children, we Kenyan-Asians asked ourselves some important questions. Will we be regarded as foreigners in this land that gave us birth, a land that was adopted by our grandparents? Should we continue to stay on as they had done? Or should we choose the British passport? Until the eve of independence, Kenya, India or even Britain were possible 'homes'. (Kapur-Dromson, 2007, p. 379)

Thus, the question of identity became ever more pressing and, with it, the question of legitimacy: "Beyond the limits of geography, where space and time know no barriers, our identities are cast. Our individual histories shape us. Are we Indian? Kenyan-Indian? South Asian-African? Or just Kenyan?" (Kapur-Dromson 2007, back cover). She concludes that, with the passing of time, assimilation should be the path to follow in order to become a permanent and legitimate member of a country that had become a home after many generations:

"We are called Kenyan-Asian, South Asian Kenyans, Kenyan-Indians or Kenyans of Asian origins... but perhaps the term Kenyans should be sufficient." (Kapur-Dromson 2007: 407).

In August 1947, the British ended the 'Raj' and left India. Some stayed on. Over the next sixty years, they adapted to Modern India while always being conscious of their legacy, the inheritance of the 'Raj'. Some were British but the majority were Anglo-Indians. An article by Mian Ridge published in *The New York Times* in 2010 told the story of Sybil Martyr, an Anglo-Indian lady who had turned 96 years old. Like most Anglo-Indian women of her generation, she had lived all her life in India and had never been to Britain. She spoke only English and had learned enough 'kitchen Bengali' at school to speak to servants. Thus, as Mian Ridge recalls, the demise of the British 'Raj' was a

shock from which the Anglo-Indian community took decades to recover. Many of the better off left for new lives overseas and those who stayed lost the privileges to which they had become accustomed. Government financing for Anglo-Indian schools stopped in 1961 and, when hiring quotas that had assured jobs for Anglo-Indians were abolished, their inability to speak Hindi took a toll on their employment opportunities. The poverty and isolation that resulted haunt Anglo-Indian retirement homes.

However, there is hope as the fortunes of younger generations of Anglo-Indians are generally rising as their English skills and Western bearing make them attractive employees for multi-nationals and Indian outsourcing companies. Reflecting on the legacy of former empires, John Darwin wrote in 2008 that the legacy of empires is not easy to trace and remains deeply controversial, moreover as we have seen, when the political entity that was the British Empire proves so hard to define and is the subject of constant reinterpretations and rewriting of multiple historical narratives from multiple perspectives:

the shape of today's world cannot be explained away as the product of a global economy and its political and cultural side effects. Behind the variations of wealth and power, the divergence of institutions and values, and the differences in cultural and religious attachment that are still so visible in the twenty-first century world lies a much more complex history of competitive empire-, state-, and culture-building. But this is not a history that is easy to trace. It remains deeply controversial. (Darwin, 2008: 490)

However, the end and legacy of the British Empire is hard to evaluate as we have seen that it is a history that brings about conflicting and painful memories that need to be reassessed in the light of the new developing historiographies that have emerged in the past decades. Will the passing of time appease the tensions and debates brought about by this complex historical period and political construction? Darwin tries to put Britain's imperial era back into the depth of history in order to make some space for a more peaceful present:

We need, in short, a more realistic view of this contentious past to make sense of our times – and to begin to see them not as an everlasting 'present', but as a historical 'period', condemned like all others to change and decay." (Darwin, 2008, p. 491).

Let us now look at two excerpts that give us a more intimate perspective on the experience of mobility and the migrant's experience, whether colonisers or colonised. In *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, Engseng Ho traces the movement of an old diaspora across the Indian Ocean over the past five hundred years from Arabia to India and SouthEast Asia. He explores the transnational exchanges that enabled Hadrami Yemeni to become locals in all of the three regions.

Nowadays, the graves of the numerous diasporas that criss-crossed the Indian Ocean through the web of interconnections developed at the time of the British Empire can still be seen from Kenya to Malaysia and from Singapore to India.

This poignant testimony of the pains of exile and the growing attachment of generations of diasporic travellers to their new homelands thus acquires a universal value that echoes the experiences of Indian labourers and traders and that of British administrators, traders and settlers amongst others who willingly or forcefully were to spend their lives, until the end, on the shores of distant lands, thus sharing the universal and common fate of all mankind:

In a society of migrants, what is important is not where you were born, but where you die. This, if nothing else, makes a diaspora entirely different from a nation, both in concept and in sentiment. Persons belong to nations by virtue of being born into them. Individuals claim entitlement issuing from place of birth. The nation itself takes its name from the act of giving birth, *nasci*. For migrants, by contrast,

place of death is important because it often becomes the site of burial. Tombstones abroad acknowledge the shift in allegiance – from origins to destinations – that migrants take whole lifetimes or more to come to terms with. (...). A gravestone is a sign whose silent presence marks an absence. In this, the idea of a grave comprehends the many experiences of migration much better than that of “globalization”, which loudly shouts its presence everywhere. (...). In contrast to globalization’s industrial instantaneity, diaspora is of long duration. (...). How long do immigrants take to be assimilated? Some never are. Those who do, disappear. Absence, rather than presence, everywhere shapes diasporic experience. (Ho, 2006, pp. 3-4)

In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, a retelling of the siege of Lucknow at the time of the 1857 Rebellion, J. G. Farrell expresses the feelings of the Collector who survived the siege and is now leaving India forever.

Crossing for the last time that stretch of dusty plain which lay between Krishnapur and the railhead, the Collector experienced more strongly than ever before the vastness of India; he realized then, because of the widening perspective, what a small affair the siege of Krishnapur had been, how unimportant, how devoid of significance. (...). Perhaps by the very end of his life, in 1880, he had come to believe that a people, a nation, does not create itself according to its own best ideas, but is shaped by other forces, of which it has little knowledge. (Farrell 1993 : 371-374)

This passage captures the mixed feelings of the Collector as he is compelled to compare and contrast his own personal experience of India and its timeless history with his own personal memory of the siege of Krishnapur and assess the historical significance of an event that has changed his life as a sense of fatality and helplessness seem to pervade his thoughts with regards to the insignificance of human experience when compared to the overwhelming forces of History.

Connecting Human History with Natural History – History in an Interdisciplinary Perspective

Bringing fresh perspectives to the historiography of imperial history, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Amitav Ghosh try to de-center the historic focus on European overseas expansion and question the idea that the carbon economy should be the unique preserve and legacy of the dominant West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In his *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that climate change forces us to review long-standing ideas of history, modernity and globalization as he tries to question the kinds of universal ideas that humanities scholars have been reluctant to reconsider. In a research paper entitled “*The Climate of History: Four Theses*” written earlier, Chakrabarty underscores the implication that research on climate change has for contemporary discussions about history or about what the historian C.A. Bayly called the “birth of the modern world” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 198). He further adds

what scientists have said about climate change challenges not only the ideas about the human that usually sustain the discipline of history but also the analytic strategies that postcolonial and postimperial historians have deployed in the last [...] decades in response to the postwar scenario of decolonization and globalization. (ibid.)

One of the major concepts that Chakrabarty puts forward, thus, is that of the Anthropocene or what he refers to as the “scientific consensus that the present crisis of climate change is man-made” (ibid, p.201) which raises the question of the disjunction of human history from natural history.

Indeed, in the first of his four theses, Chakrabarty acknowledges the pioneering work of the French historian Fernand Braudel in his famous 1949 book *The Mediterranean* and praises him for his attempt to rebel against “historians who treated the environment simply as a silence and passive backdrop to their historical narratives” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 204). Even if Braudel acknowledged the importance of the environment in shaping human historical experience, in Chakrabarty's view it was A.W. Crosby who took the matter a step further by turning humans into “biological agents” of historical change, thus connecting them to the history of life on the planet.

Chakrabarty opines that the history of mankind has to be understood by contemporary historians in the context of climate change as human agency and its impact on the history of the planet itself. In the days of the Anthropocene, “the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she always has been. Humans now wield a geological force” (ibid., p. 206). He insists on the necessity for human beings to see themselves from two perspectives at once: the planetary and the global. This distinction is central to Chakrabarty's work as he sees the globe as a human-centric construction, while a planetary perspective intentionally decenters the human.

The word globe as it has appeared in the literature on globalization is not the same as the word globe in the expression global warming. The story of globalization has humans at its center and narrates how humans historically forged a human sense of the globe. Fields like world history and global history, for all their differences, have contributed to our understanding of this process. (Chakrabarty, 2019, pp. 5-6)

Therefore, according to Chakrabarty, Earth System Science, gives humans

a very long, multilayered, and heterotemporal past by placing them at the conjuncture of three (and now variously interdependent) histories whose events are defined by very different timescales: the history of the planet, the history of life on the planet, and the history of the globe made by the logics of empires, capital, and technology. (Chakrabarty, 2009, p.1).

Chakrabarty makes a distinction between Earth system scientists writing within the planetary or Anthropocenic regime of historicity and the global regime of historicity used by humanist and social science historians to deal with the theme of climate change.

In the latter regime, however, historians try to relate the Anthropocene to histories of modern empires and colonies, the expansion of Europe and the development of navigation and other communication and other communication technologies, modernity and capitalist globalisation, and the global and connected histories of science and technology (ibid., pp.1-2).

Another South Asian author, Amitav Ghosh, best known for his numerous and award-winning novels than for his non-fiction books, assesses the impact of climate change and the consequent challenges it raises in the field of the Humanities in his book entitled *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. He tries to explain therein our imaginative failure in the face of global warming and examines our inability—at the level of literature, history, and politics—to grasp the scale and violence of climate change. Ghosh refers to Dipesh Chakrabarty recalling that

historians will have to revise many of their fundamental assumptions and procedures in this era of human-induced climate change, in which “humans have become geological agents, changing the

most basic physical processes of the earth.” I would go further and add that “the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general.” (Ghosh, 2016, p.9)

In the second part of his book, Ghosh focuses on the impact of the notion of Anthropocene on the history of South Asia and tries to de-center the focus generally placed on Europe as the major agent in the process of climate change and generator of the Carbon economy following its early industrialisation. He argues that in most accounts of the Anthropocene and the present climate crisis, capitalism is very often the pivot on which the narrative turns. He also reckons that those historians are right to identify capitalism as one of the principal drivers of climate change. However, he sustains that this narrative often overlooks an aspect of the Anthropocene that is of equal importance: empire and imperialism.

While capitalism and empire are certainly dual aspects of a single reality, the relationship between them is not, and has never been, a simple one: in relation to global warming, I think it is demonstrably the case that the imperatives of capital and empire have often pushed in different directions, sometimes producing counterintuitive results.

To look at the climate crisis through the prism of empire is to recognize, first, that the continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it. It takes only a moment's thought for this to be obvious. (Ghosh, 2016, p. 87).

Yet, he finds it rather strange that these implications are rarely acknowledged and argues that the cause of such a silence is that the discourse around the Anthropocene and climate matters generally remains largely Eurocentric. This is reason why thinks that “the case for Asia's centrality to the climate crisis does need to be laid out in some detail” (ibid.). Recalling the well known argument that two major Asian economies have emerged late on the stage of global industrialisation, he stresses the fact that

Imperialism, however, was not the only obstacle in Asia's path to industrialisation. This model of economy also met with powerful indigenous resistances of many different kinds. While it is true that industrial capitalism met with resistance on every continent, not least Europe, what is distinctive in the case of Asia is that the resistance was often articulated and championed by figures of extraordinary moral and political authority, such as Mahatma Gandhi. Among Gandhi's best-known pronouncements on industrial capitalism are these famous lines written in 1928: “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. If an entire nation of 300 millions [sic] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 111).

According to Ghosh, this quote is proof that Gandhi, like many others, understood intuitively what Asia's history would eventually demonstrate:

that the Universalist premise of industrial civilization was a hoax; that a consumerist mode of existence, if adopted by a sufficient number of people, would quickly become unsustainable and would lead, literally, to the devouring of the planet. (Ghosh, 2016, pp. 111-112).

In this book, Ghosh clearly contributes to the debate regarding the responsibility of European imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and beyond. He acknowledges that “The climate crisis cannot therefore be thought of as a problem created by an utterly distant ‘Other’” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 57). His aim is obviously not to exonerate the West for its imperial past, but to raise awareness on the importance of Asian agencies in order to global warming, its causes and long lasting consequences, a global problem to be addressed by every human being in the name of a shared, universal and interconnected history.

The following quotation from Ghosh about how human history is being rewritten by the events of climate change seems to be a fitting conclusion to my study reviewing the changing perspectives of the history of British Empire and its legacy.

Although different groups of people have contributed to it in vastly different measure, global warming is ultimately the product of the totality of human actions over time. Every human being who has ever lived has played a part in making us the dominant species on this planet, and in this sense every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change.

The events of today's changing climate, in that they represent the totality of human actions over time, represent also the terminus of history. For if the entirety of our past is contained within the present, then temporality itself is drained of significance. [...]

The climate events of this era, then, are distillations of all of human history: they express the entirety of our being over time. (Ghosh, 2016, p. 115)

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Endnotes

¹ His father, James McNeill, who was another famous environmental historian, had previously entitled his major work dealing with similar environmental issues *Plagues and Peoples* in 1976.

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