“India” Before the Raj: Space and Identity in South Asian History

The birth of the nation in South Asia is inextricably linked to the sundering of our past and our communities along religious lines, a fracturing rehearsed endlessly in the bloodbaths of repeated partitions, riots and pogroms, in the banality of daily Lynchings. For South Asians today, “India” before the Raj is indeed a foreign country. Let me recount a tale from this faraway land, which cannot be located on modern maps, to show how wondrously strange it is.

On 1st April 1597, Gonçalo Toscano was arrested in Portuguese India.1 The Inquisition classified Toscano by “caste” as being “Muslim [mouro], originating from Balaghat [a range of foothills in present-day Maharashtra], freedman [forro], single,” and about twenty-three years of age. Some nine years before, after being baptized and due to certain disagreements he had with “his friend,” a certain Matheus Carvalho, he had left the city of Bassein [Baçaim] to return to his hometown of Kalyan [Galiana, near Thane].2 There, his mother convinced him of his error in converting to Christianity. Gonçalo admitted to learning two Muslim prayers, identifiable from the mangled Portuguese transcription as a portion of the sūrah al-fātiha, the opening chapter of the Qur’ān, and the sūrah al-ikhlāṣ, declaring the absolute unity of God. Gonçalo himself confessed to being unable to explain the prayers “in our language.” He also returned to Muslim practices of praying at the mosque, performing ablutions and observing the fast of Ramadan. This was recorded with an obsessive attention to the minutiae of ritual practice, reflecting perhaps a narrow inquisitorial concern with confessional boundaries rather than Gonçalo’s own devoutness.

In the third session of his interrogation, on 8th May, Gonçalo revealed that, while living in his mother’s house, he had accompanied his relatives on pilgrimage to the gumbad [gamote, lit.

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1 Processo de Gonçalo Toscano, 1597, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (ANTT), Tribunal do Santo Ofício, Inquisição de Lisboa, Processo 4931.

2 Given Toscano’s status as a freedman, Carvalho may well have been his former owner, with whom he continued to have a client-patron relationship, a common occurrence in Portuguese India.
domed house] of the Chishti saint Syed Muhammad Yousuf al Hussaini, popularly known as Bande Nawaz Gisudaraz, “he with the long tresses” (d. 1422). The saint had come to settle in Gulbarga at the invitation of the Bahmani sultan, Taji ud-Din Firuz Shahi, who sought to make the Deccan an Islamic cultural center independent of Delhi. Gisudaraz was the first Sufi to use the Dakkan vernacular, composing a life of the Prophet in the language, Mi’raj al-’ashiqin, for the instruction of the masses. As such, the saint continued to hold great popular appeal in the Deccan in this period. At the dargah, the inquisitorial scribe recorded, Goncalo had fallen to his knees and laid offerings that he had carried on the saint’s tomb. In the days while he remained there, he went every day to the tomb with his mother, but insisted he only prayed to ask for riches. In the same session, he also admitted to learning the sahadah, the Islamic creed whose meaning he was able to convey roughly to the inquisitors as “there is only God and Mohammad and there is none other greater.” In the fourth interrogation, of 12th May, Goncalo also admitted to having married a Muslim girl at some point.

For two years, Goncalo declared, he persisted in these errors before repenting and returning to his friend, who took him to an inquisitor in Bassein. After he completed the penitences ordered by the rector of the Jesuit College of Sao Paulo, Goncalo stayed with his friend for three years as “a true Catholic.” Then, a Hindu sailor denounced him to the captain of the fortress of Bassein, Joao Gomes de Azevedo, as a highwayman. The sailor carried him off to the Moors, knowing that the captain had ordered Toscano to be captured. He was left to wander for some five or six days in hiding through the orchards of the city and then “through the Devil’s temptation,” he passed to the camp [arraial] of the Moors, intending to become Muslim. There, he advertised himself as a Portuguese, and was dressed in the same Christian costume [traj o da christao] he had worn for the past six days and despaired of finding anyone to feed him. Eventually, he was brought before the captain of the Moors, to whom he revealed his parentage and how he had come to flee Bassein in order to become Muslim. The captain ordered him to dress as a Muslim, with a cap and robe, and over the next fifteen days, he accompanied the Moors three times to “fight the Christians,” before he was sent as a prisoner with “ten or twelve others of the cavalry” to Ahmadnagar.

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There, Toscano was presented to the Nizāmshāhi sultān in the same Portuguese clothes in which he was discovered, and recounted the tale which had roused the suspicion of the Moorish captain that he was, in fact, a spy for the Christians. He was then confined to a fortress for three months, during which he lived publicly and observantly as a Muslim. One night, finding the fortress open, Gonçalo escaped dressed as a yogi [Jogue]. He wandered alone through many lands for some three or four months until, arriving in the city of Diu, he came to find himself with the Capuchins, to whom he gave an account of his life. The following day, he was commanded to appear before the Portuguese captain, who apprehended him for fighting against the Christians on behalf of the Moors. He then languished in prison for more than a year, until the Inquisitor passed through the city. When Gonçalo was presented to him, he was handed over to the local archpriest [vigário da vara, lit. vicar of the rod], who demanded a bond in exchange for freeing him from the stocks. One day, while accompanied by the bailiff, on the pretext of stopping to drink a little water, Gonçalo ran down the street and again escaped to the land of the Moors. On his third interrogation he revealed the reason for this impetuous bid for freedom: while imprisoned in Diu with a Hindu “sorcerer,” the latter gave Gonçalo a small amount of some roots and herbs to place in a silver ring, telling him that it would aid him in escaping within fifteen days. Though Gonçalo wore the ring for two months, to his increasing rage, he remained imprisoned. When he came to realize he had been deceived, he planned a more worldly means of escape.

In the land of the Moors, he returned to Muslim vestments and customs. Yet his former faith continued to prick his conscience. Meeting some Portuguese renegades in the employ of the Moors, he learned from them that he would only find a legal remedy for his situation by appealing in Rome. (The inquisitors pressed him on the identity of these Portuguese “turned Moors” during the sixth session of his interrogation of 14th May.) Accordingly, dressed as a yogi again, he determined to go to Surat and take a boat to Mecca - though his intention was to convey to the inquisitors his intention of going to Rome, the ambiguity of his planned route, along the path of the Hajj, is notable. At this juncture, the armada arrived from Diu, and Gonçalo was discovered by some soldiers. He told them about his plans to go to Rome. He was told that the archbishop primate was in Daman and had the power to absolve him. Toscano then requested the captain of the armada to hand him over only to the archbishop. On this understanding, he accompanied the armada to Diu, where he was handed over to the Capuchins.
From there, he went to Bassein where he presented himself to the archbishop and briefly told him how he came to be a Moor. Lacking time, Toscano claimed he could not tell the whole story and was thus imprisoned yet again. He thus threw himself upon the mercy of the Inquisition, seeking pardon as an “ignorant weak boy and miserable, blind sinner, deceived by the Devil.”

As his repeated interrogations suggest, the inquisitors found his bizarre story deeply suspicious, with each session revealing yet more instances of crossing boundaries, both confessional and political. (The intense pressure he must have undergone between these sessions to confess further transgressions remains undocumented in the archive.) Yet the one striking motif in all his sessions was Gonçalo’s repeated declarations of faith in the Virgin Mary, a theme he stuck to even when reversing his claim that he had remained Catholic in his heart at all times. A fascinating coda to the inquisitorial trial revealed the reason for his faith: on 10th June, his spiritual guardian informed the Inquisitors that Gonçalo had confessed to him that, during his second time among the Moors, he was invited to accompany a group to burn down the church of the Madre de Deus in Palle. The Franciscan Paulo da Trindade, in his monumental account of the spiritual conquest of the Orient composed in Goa around 1630/1636, described it as the most important of the churches in the town [cassabê] of Bassein: “there is a Lady of extreme beauty, the best finished and most perfect that is known in India, who is crossed with a sword, in whom the inhabitants of the city have a lot of devotion, and many go on Saturdays to hear the mass of the Lady, taking olive oil and candles as offerings.”

It was here that God allowed Gonçalo to witness a miracle: the Virgin with her infant son in her arms and a red rose in her hand appeared to him before his very eyes beneath a tree. Behind her, an entire squadron also appeared. Gonçalo appeared not to have been alone in seeing this apparition, for all the Moors, seeing this, were frightened and turned around. This miracle had confirmed in him, it seems, a lifelong devotion to the Virgin. Yet, here again, confessional ambiguities abound: not only is the red rose redolent with Islamic symbolism, the Virgin is equally venerated in Islamic culture as in Catholicism. Indeed, the Virgin provided an important cultural bridge between European missionaries in early modern India and its Islamic elites: Christian and Muslim theological differences in the tradition of the Virgin was an important area of religious disputations staged at

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the Mughal court, allowing both rapprochement and the marking of confessional difference, while visual representations of Mary became an important focus of local engagement with European traditions of art.\(^5\)

Gonçalo Toscano — devotee of Virgin Mary and Bande Nawāz Gīsūdarāz, sometimes Muslim warrior, occasional good Catholic, cunningly-disguised yogi, who once sought the pope’s benediction via a voyage to Mecca — is unlikely to be any modern South Asian’s idea of an ancestor. What might his picaresque life reveal to us about the history of South Asia before British colonialism? With all the usual caveats regarding the reliability of archival documents produced in hegemonic institutions as sources for subaltern lives, Toscano’s trial leads to two important observations regarding the ways in which nationalist paradigms obscure pasts. Firstly, the reification of political boundaries entailed by the modern nation-state blinds us to the porosity and fragility of such boundaries for polities that preceded its advent. Toscano, slipping back and forth between the Deccan sultanates and the Portuguese *Provincia do Norte*, serves as a salutary corrective to our geographical imaginations that are too often shaped by modern fictions of power. Secondly, it underscores the importance of considering the difference between elite projects of enforcing boundaries— both spatial, as in fortified borders and other forms of licensed pathways such as the Portuguese system of *cartazes* in the Indian Ocean, and social, in the sense of consciously articulated and policed structures of identities— and the ways in which subaltern subjects negotiated these projects.\(^6\) It is this latter point that remains the unfulfilled promise of present historiography on South Asia before the British Raj.

I deliberately eschew the characterization of this historiography as pre-modern or pre-colonial, in part because these terms themselves are central to debates within a field that struggles with the entangled teleologies of modernity and colonialism. It is a struggle that

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reflects the central contradiction of nationalism in postcolonial places like South Asia, in which the quest for indigenous genealogies for the modern nation is confounded by the inescapable coincidence of European colonialism and the advent of modernity. (The relative paucity of research on European settlements in South Asia beyond British high colonialism has only skewed our understanding of European imperialism and colonialism. The Anglophilia of the field since the 1990s, as the study of South Asian history has declined in both continental Europe and South Asia itself, has exacerbated this tendency.)

In the current context of resurgent nationalist politics in South Asia, the complexities of South Asian history are being deliberately—and violently—excised to fit narrow nationalist paradigms. The 2015 assassination by Hindu nationalists of the octogenarian scholar Malleshappa Madivalappa Kalburgi—whose most important work was on the twelfth-century Śaiva thinker Basava's critique of the caste and gender hierarchies and ritualism of the dominant Śrōtrīya brahmins of medieval Karnataka—is emblematic of the violence claiming scholars who resist communitarian and nationalist narratives across South Asia. Less dramatic but equally pernicious has been the systematic distortion of historical narratives for nationalist ends in South Asian textbooks since independence, culminating recently in the Hindu nationalist campaign to remove references to the Mughals in Indian textbooks at the state and national level.

Yet, the intensity and violence of political conflict over history ironically underlines what all historians know: the past, as Arjun Appadurai once said before his turn to post-modernism, is a scarce resource and cannot be infinitely moulded to contemporary purposes. Thus, South

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7 Scholarship on the Portuguese, French and Dutch in South Asia that moves beyond the frame of imperial history to take seriously the local context of these settlements is beginning to address this lacuna. For the case of the Portuguese, the pioneering work of D.D. Kosambi, Michael Pearson and George Scammell which emphasized indigenous agency in the making of Portuguese India bore fruit, particularly in the work of Goan historians like the late Teotonio da Souza, Celsa Pinto and others. For a recent example of this approach, see Rochelle Pinto, “The Foral in the History of the Comunidades,” Journal of World History, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2018): 185-212. Another strand of scholarship has taken the pioneering work of scholars such as Ashin Das Gupta, Phillipe Haudrère, Sinnapah Arasaratnam and Om Prakash on the economic and trade history of the European companies to mine the same archives for cultural history. See for example, Markus Vink, Encounters on the Opposite Coast: The Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka State of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Danna Agmon, A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).


Asian pasts before the Raj are not reducible to neat nationalist teleologies. Indeed, the historical transmutation of texts and narratives demonstrate precisely the convoluted genealogies of contemporary communal constructions of the medieval past, built through accretions of narrative layers, each directed to a coeval political purpose that has now been forgotten. By the same token, communities have constructed usable pasts for themselves in the context of the modern nation-state out of the fragments of half-forgotten history. Little wonder then that past-making itself has been a central preoccupation of South Asian historiography.

The context of resurgent nationalism in South Asia has shaped the questions and tenor of historical research, particularly with regard to a renewed focus on religion. In an illuminating historiographical essay, Daud Ali pointed out that the original temporal divisions of South Asian historiography bore an explicitly religious inflection: colonial constructions of a ‘golden age’ (usually identified with either the Mauryan or Gupta empires) required a corollary period of medieval decline, before the renaissance of the colonial modern. “For most,” Ali wrote, “the Turkic conquests and establishment of the Delhi Sultanate between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries…provided a convenient occasion for this decline.” This association continued despite the adoption of a secular terminology of “ancient,” “medieval,” and “modern” in post- 

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independence university departments, where research continued to be organized along religious lines of Hindu/Buddhist, as opposed to Muslim pasts. Not until the rise of social history in the late 1950s did this religious focus give way, as Marxist scholars elaborated a theory of ‘Indian feudalism.’ When scholarship on the vibrant trade and urban density of medieval India discredited feudalism as a historical model, anthropological and sociological theories animated new research. The preoccupation with the apparent lack of centralized bureaucratic structures in medieval South Asia eventually gave way, by the end of 1980s, to a more positive interpretive model, in which localization and regional state formation in the post-Gupta period were seen as the proliferation rather than devolution of state structures in a continuous process from below. At the same time, the Aligarh Muslim University-led school of research into the Mughal period advanced a model of military-fiscalism which upended the image of Muslim decline with a robust view of the Mughal state. In different ways, these dynamics disrupted the (colonial) classification of South Asian pasts along religious lines.

With the rise of identitarian politics and the opening of the Indian autarchy in the 1980s to the forces of global neoliberalism, the focus on economic and social history retreated. Instead, cultural and global historical frameworks, including the introduction of the explicitly teleological notion of the early modern in South Asia, came into vogue. In the process, two major changes are discernible in the historiography. Firstly, religion returned as a central category of historical

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14 On the colonial bifurcation of an Indian past, which laid the foundation of the communal interpretation of Indian history, see Brajdlal Chattopadhyay’s lucid discussion in Representing the Other: Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims (9th-14th century) (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998): 16. This is precisely the dangerous and disturbing methodological and political trap Ananya Vajpayee’s work falls into, particularly when we consider that the only figure outside the pale of “Indic tradition” in her construction is the Dalit leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Needless to say, no Muslim thinker even figures in her pantheon of modern representatives of “Indic tradition.” See Ananya Vajpayee, Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

analysis. Secondly, new and more extensive spatial frameworks defined the horizons of research, to which I return below.

It is no accident that a major theme of recent scholarship has been the investigation of identity formation, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. In response to the alarming rise of militant Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, which legitimates its exclusionary claims precisely through a changeless and eternal view of a unified Hindu tradition, one strand of scholarship denied that the category ‘Hindu’ had any meaningful pre-colonial referent. In this view, Hinduism as a unified religion is an artifact of the British colonial experience. Even as Protestant missionaries examined indigenous cosmological worlds and found them deficient in the minimal features of a Christian notion of religion, orientalists advanced a view of an ancient and unchanging Vedic tradition. Whether through the self-serving machinations of brahminical native informants or as an act of defiant appropriation in the face of colonial domination, colonial subjects came to internalize a view of a unified and unchanging faith, the sanātana dharma, even as they elaborated a new religion. This strand of scholarship, unsurprisingly in vogue among historians of the colonial period, refuses the essential unity implied by the term ‘Hinduism’ as either the invention of tradition among modern believers, or as the misguided effect of a scholarly bias (itself a historical legacy of Eurocentric conceptions of religion) towards finding coherence or unity where none exists.

Historians of the pre-Raj period are more skeptical of the notion that such categories as “Hindu,” let alone caste, were solely colonial inventions. Recent exploration of the early

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19 The most pernicious outgrowth of the postcolonial strand of scholarship has been the denial of caste as a feature of pre-Raj South Asian life. See for example, Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). *Longue durée* studies are particularly valuable in showing the obvious untruth of this position: see for example, Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and
modern European constructions of Hinduism, beyond the relatively late British tradition, has shown that many outsiders did in fact observe a certain unity in the religious phenomena of South Asia. From the emic viewpoint, Andrew Nicholson has argued that, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, indigenous philosophers and doxographers began to treat the diverse philosophical teachings derived from the Upaniṣads, epics, purāṇas and the six philosophical schools (saṃdarśana) as a single whole.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the presence of Islamic rule played an important role in the consolidation of a Hindu identity. In a classic essay, Cynthia Talbot argued that in the fluid frontier context of the medieval Deccan where “[n]either the parvēnī Andhra warriors of the fourteenth century, nor the Turkic intruders of the Delhi Sultanate, relative newcomers to Islam, had much stature as authority figures,” discursive constructions drawing on ancient symbols of their respective religions—whether brahminical images of the struggle against demons and the godless or Islamic ones of jihād—served to shore up their own shaky claims to legitimacy. As Talbot demonstrates, at a time when regional and linguistic identity were increasingly important in political self-fashioning, religion was far from the primary motivation of elite competition and conflict. Such discourse instead reflected strategies aimed at consolidating community allegiance in a military frontier.

Talbot’s striking thesis soon found corroboration: Brajdulal Chattopadhyay’s analysis of Sanskrit epigraphic and textual sources, notably, revealed not homogeneous religious communities but ethnic groups of diverse origins functioning as traders, looters, rulers and administrators, invoking past terminologies for others or coining new ethnic terms depending on

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20 The far longer and non-British European tradition of documenting and classifying native religion in the subcontinent remains relatively overlooked in the scholarship. For welcome exceptions, see Will Sweetman, Mapping Hinduism: ‘Hinduism’ and the Study of Indian Religions, 1600-1776 (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003); Carolien Stolte, Philip Angel’s Dox-Autos: Vaisnava Mythology from Manuscript to Book Market in the Context of the Dutch East India Company, c. 1600-1672 (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012); Ines G. Żupanov and Angela Barreto Xavier, Catholic Orientalism: Portuguese Empire, Indian Knowledge (16th–18th Centuries) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).


socio-political context. Denying the Hindu nationalist construction of medieval Muslim rule as a historical injustice against the non-Islamic majority that must be righted by the modern nation-state, medievalists instead presented nuanced studies of competitive religious identity-making. Notably, they have shown that the cultural borrowing and even bivalence that resulted from encounter did not preclude the rhetorical assertion of religious difference as a political strategy of ruling elites in frontier zones. This emphasis on the political nature of royal decision-making in matters of religion has also characterized studies of the north Indian heartland.

Beyond ruling elites, as various excellent studies have demonstrated, brahmins, who had undoubtedly lost land, endowments and patronage during the initial conquest, quickly accommodated themselves to Muslim rule. In the dynamic social context of emerging state bureaucracies, they vigorously contested competition to their social status from other, particularly scribal, castes. Their symbiotic relationship with royal power, in which they served as reliable agents in exchange for the kingly adjudication necessary to maintain corporate

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23 Chattopadhyay, *Representing the Other?* As a point of comparison, see also Sunil Kumar, “Politics, the Muslim Community and Hindu-Muslim Relations Reconsidered: North India in the Early Thirteenth Century,” in Rajat Datta, ed., *Rethinking a Millennium: Perspectives on Indian History from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century. Essays for Harbans Mukhia* (New Delhi: Aakar, 2008).


identity, thus continued in both Hindu and Muslim domains, particularly in the south. Later, as regional powers sought to articulate their growing independence from the Mughal empire, the brahminization of court culture again reinscribed the power of the caste.

At the popular level, excellent studies that eschew the binary paradigm of either reifying identity or emphasizing syncretism show the complexity and multivalence of past religious cultures. The lines of research engendered by Simon Digby and Richard Eaton’s pioneering work on Sufism from the 1970s have been especially fecund in this regard, as has been the study of bhakti, to which I return below. These studies challenged problematic divisions between an elite “classical” or literary culture, and popular cults in conceptualizing religious history in South Asia, showing how subaltern religiosity was absorbed, appropriated and accommodated in elite cultural production—and could thus be read back into the archive.

Ironically, much of the historiography on religious history in South Asia demonstrates precisely how the contemporary emphasis on religion as the defining wedge of South Asian identity politics is historically misleading. Dovetailing with Talbot’s insight regarding the importance of linguistic and regional identity in particular, Sheldon Pollock noted that, by the

27 Rosalind O’Hanlon and Christopher Minkowski, “What makes people who they are? Pandit networks and the problem of livelihoods in early modern Western India,” Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2008): 381-416; Sumit Guha, “Serving the barbarian to preserve the dharma: The ideology and training of a clerical elite in Peninsular India, c. 1300-1800,” The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2010): 497-525. Kesavan Veluthat’s important corpus has demonstrated the importance of the temple as an institution in early medieval South India, particularly in comparison to the north, itself a major factor in cementing brahminical dominance. See the essays collated in The Early Medieval in South India (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

28 This fact has long been recognized for the Peshwa dynasty of the Maratha polity but has recently been demonstrated more generally across South Asia. See, for example, Susan Bayly, Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Monika Horstmann, Visions of Kingship in the Twilight of Mughal Rule (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Academie van Wetenschappen, 2006).

turn of the first millennium, a new vernacular political order was emerging in South Asia that displaced an earlier Sanskrit “cosmopolis”:

To participate in Sanskrit literary culture was to participate in a vast world; to produce a regional alternative to it was to effect a profound break—one the agents themselves understood to be a break—in cultural communication and self-understanding. It was in conscious opposition to this larger sphere that these intellectuals defined their regional worlds. They chose to write in a language that did not travel—and that they knew did not travel as easily and as far as the well-traveled language of the older cosmopolitan order.³⁰

In Pollock’s description, this was a secular political process, centered on court elites. As Christian Novetzke’s brilliant study of the emergence of Marāṭhī as a linguistic public shows, however, these languages were also vehicles of a new form of sacrality.³¹ This was centered not on brahminical intellectual culture and ritual, but on bhakti, which laid open the possibility for any devotee to establish a connection to the divine through intense personal devotion regardless of social status, particularly caste.³² As such, Marāṭhī became the site for the expression of the quotidian concerns of the common person. Indeed, the brahminical adoption of this new vernacular reflected the political force of a critique of social inequity and exclusion, which inaugurated a nascent public sphere in the region—even as brahmin participants in this sphere subtly reinscribed caste and gender hierarchies in this new language.³³

Novetzke cautions us against looking to the archive of religion in South Asia as an easy recourse to countering contemporary intolerance and social exclusion: the emancipatory or even revolutionary potential inherent in the spiritual promise of Marāṭhī bhakti went hand-in-hand with a subtle discouragement of concrete social change. Contrast this, for example, with Elaine Fisher’s view of early modern Hinduism, which she argues produced an emic form of pluralism, irreducible to Western secularism or cosmopolitanism, allowing the toleration of genuine

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³¹ It is notable that in Pollock’s seminal edited volume on South Asian literary cultures, Marāṭhī was conspicuous by its absence. See Sheldon Pollock, ed., Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).


difference without reduction to a homogenizing universalism. These historiographical tensions reflect contemporary divisions in India on the place of Hinduism in a modern republic, beyond the homogenizing majoritarianism of Hindutva. This ranges from outright rejection, particularly in the tradition of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s famous articulation of the impossibility for the Dalit political subject to remain in the Hindu fold, to a more sanguine view, which sees in the pluralism of the enormous range of beliefs and practices lumped under “Hinduism” an indigenous alternative to colonial legacies of secularism.

This brief survey, while by no means exhaustive, should convey the richness of the past three decades of scholarship on South Asian religious culture before the Raj. I turn now to the second major trend in the historiography — one not of theme, but of scope. Even as South Asia opened up to the world economy after the (neo)liberalization of India in 1991, scholars viewed South Asian history in new spatial frames that exceed the geographical contours of the subcontinent. This broadening of focus partly resulted from the changing center of gravity of the field itself: this was the era in which Indian universities suffered their first concerted assault on funding, leading to the continued decline in departments of social sciences and humanities. Similar trends were apparent in other South Asian countries. Simultaneously, traditional centers of Indology and South Asian history declined in Europe. By contrast, the American academy, driven by the increasing presence of the first generation of legally-born South Asian-American students in university classrooms, began to increase its investment in South Asian history.

In this institutional context, the impetus for the scalar change in South Asian historiography has come from two sources. The first, and older strand, is an outgrowth of the turn towards trade, and away from agrarian studies, in economic history. Building on the pioneering work of scholars like Ashin Das Gupta, KN Chaudhuri, Sinnapah Arasaratnam and Michael Pearson, economic historians who viewed South Asia in the broader context of the Indian Ocean — prime among them, Sanjay Subrahmanyam — reoriented the field to look beyond the polities of the South Asian interior. Port-cities, mercantile diasporas and trading companies, and oceanic empires provided new ways of framing South Asian history that

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stretched the field beyond the confines of the geographical contours of the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{35} As economic history fell out of favor throughout the 1990s, this new spatial framework persisted through the cultural turn. One of its most important effects was to undo the colonial binary of Europe and the rest implicit in much of global history, particularly its comparative variant, and in South Asian history itself. (Again, this was mediated in no small part by Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s own turn towards cultural history and the resulting articulation of his notion of connected history.\textsuperscript{36})

A second historiographical thrust expanded the spatial scale of South Asian history through a more abstract approach to imagining past political community. Here, Sheldon Pollock’s landmark survey of Sanskrit culture, mentioned above, provided a provocative new thesis for temporally and spatially reframing early South Asian history. The Sanskrit cosmopolis—undergirded by language and not religion, ethnicity or empire—remained a remarkably stable political and cultural order across Asia for much of the first millennium of the common era, before the emergence of new, explicitly local ways of articulating power in vernacular languages. (Though Pollock does not make this leap, it may also help us understand the remarkable stability of caste as a total social fact in South Asian life from the Gupta empire onwards: it is difficult to ignore the social effects of the spread of Sanskrit on its original community of users, the brahmins, or not to suspect that it continued to provided them the socio-literary capital that helped consolidate brahminical \textit{varna} ideology across South Asia.) Not only


did Pollock’s thesis animate historical studies of South Asia’s literary cultures, it also provided a paradigm of the “cosmopolis” for other self-reflexively translocal languages of power, particularly Persian, for reframing South Asian history.37

The turn towards cosmopolitan or global frameworks was also, however, a turn towards the history of elites. This is not peculiar to South Asian historiography: as Jeremy Adelman recently noted, the “cosmopolitan self-yearnings,” not to mention the class position, of historians themselves are reflected in the unexamined elitism of much of global history.38 Amidst rising discontent with neoliberal globalization and a global turn towards populist nationalism, the critique is uncomfortably apt for the South Asian scholarly community. Many of the scholars mentioned here who adopted this global framework, including myself, are diasporic intellectuals, whose professional success in the context of a rapidly adjunctifying academe in the global North and a disappearing professoriate in the humanities in the global South are stark testament to globalization’s inequalities.

Fortunately, critiques of these expansive and elite spatial frameworks are beginning to emerge in South Asian history.39 The rich tradition of fine-grained social history favorably positions historians of South Asia to reorient themselves. One hopes, for example, that the relative paucity of non-elite women’s history beyond the Raj will be addressed in the coming


years.\textsuperscript{40} Emerging English-language scholarship on the pre-Raj history of the lower-castes is another vital corrective in the field.\textsuperscript{41}

Yet we must not assume that non-elite peoples are confined to ‘local’ spaces that are inexorably absorbed into elite systems of power, constructed as translocal in dimension.\textsuperscript{42} Gonçalo Toscano’s repeated transgressions of the spatial and confessional boundaries that both indigenous and European elites sought to enforce are a potent reminder of the ways in which subaltern subjects evade fixed identities and positions to negotiate landscapes of power. To seek subaltern lives in the interstices of the local should impel us to continue to seek new spatial frames for South Asian history and to resist reading back into such gestures a reflection of elite cosmopolitanism. As climate change, conflict and hunger drive the most vulnerable among us to cross the same national borders that elites routinely and legally traverse, recovering the histories of both spatial and social mobility of subaltern subjects is vital. It is also how historians of the pre-Raj world may continue resisting the caging of South Asian pasts into the lockbox of national, and by implication religious, borders.

For historians of South Asian nationalisms and nations, remembering pre-Raj “India” in all its complexity is vital to fighting the erasure of histories inconvenient to nationalist myth-makers. This is not in the service of academic pedantry: these erasures are increasingly precursors to the violent excision of the living communities who are the bearers of these pasts from the body politic of South Asian nations today.

\textit{Further Reading:}


\textsuperscript{41} See for example, Milind Wakankar, \textit{Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia} (Routledge, 2010)

\textsuperscript{42} Emerging histories of slavery in South Asia is a promising area for such historiographical innovation. See, for example, Richard Eaton and Indrani Chatterjee, eds., \textit{Slavery and South Asian History} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Shadab Bano’s important corpus, beginning with “India”’s Overland Slave Trade in the Medieval Period”, \textit{Proceedings of Indian History Congress, 58th session}: 315-326.