(Re)Imagining India: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Colonial Historiography

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Abstract

The differences between Indian and British (by and large, the Western) historiography have been much discussed in post-colonial academia. The leitmotif that the early Indians were preoccupied with imagination was reinforced through and through to the point of celebration. But was the predominance of imagination so unique to the pre-colonial Indian practice of historiography? With the recent upsurge of revisionist historiography, old scholarships are again being summoned from academia to the public domain to deconstruct the long-held constant. This paper critically examines the historiography of the nineteenth century and especially nineteenth-century Bengal to revisit this question and, in doing so, considers deconstructive forays into history, particularly Alan Munslow and Ethan Kleinberg's reflections, to develop its argument.

Keywords: Historiography; Ancient Indian History; Orientalism; Indology; Nineteenth Century; Colonial Bengal

Introduction

Post-colonial historiographers have often associated – perhaps rightfully, although within a limited scope – Western historiography with rationality and early Indian historiography with imagination. The birth of 'history' in the Indian context can be traced back to nineteenth-century Bengal. It is commonplace in academic thought that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, one of the early Bengali/Indian novelists, put the act of history writing by Indians into motion as early as the 1880s. However, the discourse withstood significant turbulence throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Amateur Bengali historians without academic training found it convenient to see history writing as a continuation of many early forms of literary practices. These infusions and transgression of genres were proved to be rejuvenating, and the era – despite the lack of scholarly apparatuses – precipitated a large number of texts on historicity, historiography and history in general[1]. The newly discovered discipline sparked remarkable interest among the Indian intelligentsia. A reading of this complex set of texts on history, coming from both the coloniser and the colonised, can shed light on the genealogy of historiography of the nineteenth century.

In the critiques of early Indian history writing, what comes under vilifying criticism and staunch generalisation was the bias for the historian's adherence to a mythological, quasi-historical (and somewhat mythopoeic elements of medieval court poet-historians) nature of textuality that had little to do with ideas of the Enlightenment or the Hegelian dialectic of

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teleology that had a significant influence on the discipline. In favour of the non-chronological, cyclical nature of Indian narratives, post-colonial historians argue with the grandiosity of Hindu philosophical treatises[2], and by doing that, they keep the binaries of East-West, cyclical-linear or mythical-historical intact[3]. Their argument fails to challenge Utilitarian James Mill's idea of the East as static, as opposed to the progressive West, which justified Britain's civilising mission. When stripped of its philosophical connotations, the fusion of myth with archaeological evidence was deemed redoubtably unscientific; as Siddharth Satpathy, describing Amos Sutton's account of Odia history puts forward comprehensibly:

> Real history (*satya itihasa*), Sutton declares it as a rule (*bidhana*), begins precisely where the wonderful statements of imaginary history (*kalpita itihasa*) come to an end. He invites his reader (*ehi samkshepa brutantara padhua*) to judge dispassionately (*bibechana karibaku*) as to whether what is written in many traditional Oriya narratives (*pothi*) about the past is acceptable (*grahya*). They have, for instance, inflated calendars: thirteen kings of ancient Orissa have allegedly ruled for three thousand years between them. And this is something, he submits, a reasonable man (*subuddhimanta loka*) will of course find improbable (*asambhaba jnana karibe*). (2015, 250)

This passage shows how imagination and the inclusion of mythology were exclusively associated with the *kalpita* (Imaginary) nature of Indian historiography. The rift between the two forms of narrating history has been established and reiterated as a 'fact' by Sutton. However, the statement, considering the richness of archives and a plethora of texts before the emergence of scientific historicism in colonial India, is proved to be slightly misplaced and in modest need of supplementation.

Before venturing further into giving many more instances of this flaw, it is important to outline the theoretical framework of the article. As it has already been suggested, the commingling of the factual and the imagined in Indian historiography is more productive as opposed to the West's usual tendency to categorise, classify and regulate. This essay intends to bring a deconstructive approach to history and historiography to bear on the topic in discussion, only to demonstrate how history writing in India, often fusing elements of myth, folklore and memory, can question the very foundations of history writing while at the same time enriching and broadening the discourse of Indian historiography. Hayden White, in his 1973 book *Metahistory,* importantly laid out a framework that placed emphasis on the constructed nature of history writing in the West. In White's opinion, the task of a historian is to arrange the chronicle into a "hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements" (1973, 7), thereby highlighting the constructed nature of history. As Alan Munslow writes:

> For White, because the past is invented or imagined rather than found, history the first time around does not conform or correspond to a pre-existing narrative or story…. Narratives are not detached vehicles for transmitting past realities, nor less can historians discover the true narrative of the past in the evidence of human intentions and beliefs. (2006, 149)

A deconstructive understanding of the past not only entails the "reconstruction of a historical event" (Kleinberg 2017, 17) through imagination in order to construct a "compelling argument and narrative" (17), it also reveals the "authorial choices" that become crucial in

Hayden White's work (17). A deconstructive analysis, as opposed to a purist's intervention or an orthodox thinker's recourse to ontological realism, betrays an "unheimlich realisation" (49), that the "past inhabits an uncanny that both is and isn't" (49). As Kleinberg further argues:

> The deconstructive approach is especially warranted when dealing with actors or events traditionally rendered outside the realm of conventional history to make what was absent present and what was illegible legible…. The deconstructive approach could employ conventional Western historical strategies in one session but place them in tension, and even conflict, with regional understandings of "history" that place the Western approach in question. Here, one could imagine a history of Nepal that looks to Western historiography but also to Nepalese Chronicles (*vamshavali*). (2017, 148-9)

In doing so, even if the West is partially regarded as a norm, it is set in constant tension with non-European modes of thinking and beliefs, thereby negating the omnipotence of Western ideas of history and historiography. This article makes the argument that this deconstructive approach has a great potential for rethinking Indian, and especially nineteenth-century colonial historiography. This not only supports, and in a sense bolsters the claims made in postcolonial historiography but also turns the whole practice of historiography in nineteenth-century India on its head by underlining the attempts to seek a history that is predicated on presence, on a stable and definitive ground so as to overcome the fear about settlement, grounding and the 'origin'. Now, let me return to the examples to illustrate my point.

It is important to note that during the early nineteenth century, in the infancy of archaeology, numismatics, and science as a discipline, ancient Indian history became a site of contestation (and imagination) for both the Indologists and the colonial historians. Before the widespread circulation of Mill's gigantic three volumes of *The History of British India* (1817), precursor and prototype of all rationalist histories to follow, partly historical (sometimes, partly theological) accounts by East Indian servants such as John Zephaniah Holwell's[4] (1765-1771), Luke Scrafton's (1763) did not discard the ancient Sanskrit *Purana* and *Dharma* (mythology and religion) while historicising India. Their writings reflected the East India Company's strategy of maintaining symbiotic relations with Indians until the 1820s. However, these marginal accounts did not find the place they deserve in contemporary discourse on modern Indian historiography. "Perhaps now", long after the decline of the empire, Romila Thapar writes, "a history of the changing interpretation of ancient India can be written" (1968, 318). It will be noted that this is what Kleinberg describes as the fear of instability and subsequent rejection and repression in the historical profession, which is exposed by deconstruction (2017, 17). In the early days of the Empire, ancient Indian history was often interpreted by European historians through the Hindu *sruti* (heard), *smriti* (remembered), and *nyaya* (logic) scriptural sources, either with reverence or impudence. Throughout the nineteenth century, their reading endured significant transformation: "As the genuine respect and love for the orient of William Jones gave away to the cold utilitarian scrutiny of James Mill, and then to missionary contempt, the picture changed" (Prakash 1990, 386). However, the fact that Victorian (and Romantic) historians were divided into as many paradoxical positions regarding the reconstruction of the past of England and larger Europe as their Eastern counterparts was often omitted from the study of Indian historiography. J. W. Burrow, in his book *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, highlights these divisions of Victorian histories – Macaulay's Whig tradition, Strubbs' Tory heritage, of the Democrat's, and the Imperialists – and how the resurgence of mythologies, epic literature contributed to the establishment of

"the imaginary institution of Great Britain"[5] as "clearly some Victorians found a pleasurable excitement in the prospect of being one with Nineveh and Tyre" (1981, 68).

The contrast may seem out of place in this discussion, but a deconstructive analysis reveals that Western historiography has always had a wistful relationship with poetry since the early modern age—the beginning of imperialism and the rediscovery of Hellenic literature. So, it would be suitable for poetry to return from exile if she could defend herself – this fissure in Plato's *The Republic* allured Elizabethan statesmen to defend poesies. The forerunner of this movement was Sir Philip Sydney, the leading poet of the Elizabethan age, who announced:

> And even historiographers (although their lips sound of things done and verity be written in their foreheads) have been glad to borrow both fashion and perchance, weight of the poets. So, Herodotus entitled his history by the name of the nine muses, and both he and all the rest that followed him either stale or usurped of poetry their passionate describing of passions, *the many particularities of battles which no man could affirm, or, if that be denied me, long orations put in the mouths of great kings and captains, which it is certain that they never produced.* (1989, 214; emphasis added)

Victorian England, even with the 'utilitarian' vigour and prowess, could not brush aside the influence of poets like Thomas Percy, James Macpherson, or D.G. Rossetti while rewriting the past ("which no man could affirm"). "Paradoxically", J. W. Burrow claims that "the growing interest in the barbarian mythologies and epic literature of Northern Europe in the later eighteenth century seems to have owed something to the Enlightenment's impulse to categorise and compare" and "in the light of a retrospective patriotism, to draw on the imaginative, poetic heritage of one's race could seem appropriately inspiring and therapeutic" (1981, 114-115). It is worth noting that the Introduction of the *Ancient History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771) was written by the Scottish poet James Macpherson. Prominent historians such as Benjamin Thorpe and J. M. Kemble worked on *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon archive, the chronicles in the early nineteenth century. This convergence and the erection of English historical enterprise located in different geographical areas indicated its borrowing of materials from ancient ballads to folk poetry and epics of antiquity, sometimes of minor significance, which was not solely a feature of the colonised Indian – and Bengal as a precursor – historiography. This narrative contract with poets was then also spread by Victorian historians to construct the (imaginary) past as History, and it also influenced early Indian scholars like Dinesh Chandra Sen or Haraprasad Sastri in their methodology.

Some colonial writers carried the white man's burden in their annals since they thought "the silent millions who bear [their] yoke have found an annalist" (Hunter 1868, 6). To them, "in modern India, no leisurely and lettered class has yet been developed to conduct such research" (11). The change in attitude owes much to the changing socio-political relationship between the British East India Company and the Empire. The Hindu intelligentsia was dissatisfied with the colonial state of affairs due to legal reforms such as Macaulay's famous English Education Act of 1835 and The Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829, which criticised Hindu scriptures and traditions openly. They were suspicious that an anglicised education system would corrupt the ethics and values of Hindus. This dissatisfaction gave rise to a Hindu national consciousness, and it is needless to say that with the decline of the Mughal empire, Indian Islamic scholarship was gradually marginalised and discarded by European and Hindu scholars. In the same period, there was a sharp increase in the publication of false, disparaging,

propagandist historical records by many civil servants. These accounts can be found in numerous journals, diaries, and memoirs still preserved in colonial archives, and they call for a detailed chronological historical analysis. In contrast, early Western Indologists and sympathetic oriental scholars saw ancient Indian and Sanskrit scriptures and mythologies as a way to understand the history of the Aryan race and its connection to the European language group. They believed these could potentially fill in the missing link to the Indo-European Heritage. Romila Thapar traces the lineage of this historiography in her essay "Interpretations of Ancient Indian History." Thapar believed that the spread of interest in oriental studies was not only influenced by pioneering orientalists like Max Muller and William Jones or the establishment of the Asiatic Society (1784) but also by the work of emerging scholars such as Charles Wilkins, H.T. Colebrooke, and H.H. Wilson. These scholars conducted rigorous research, contributing to the growing enthusiasm for oriental studies. However, it cannot be denied that in the coloniser's archive, "Indians figured as inert objects for knowledge," where the audiences were predominantly Europeans (Prakash 1990, 384). The early Hindu histories, written by a specific elite intellectual group in the nineteenth century, have been heavily criticised for being a bourgeois endeavour that contributed to the creation of fictional nationalist boundaries. Hindu history consists of texts primarily authored by Hindu intellectuals, characterised by the recognition of a mythological pre-Vedic past. These histories engaged extensively with the ancient history produced by Europeans. Nevertheless, later nationalist historians, in their desperate attempts to be authentic, tried to break the tradition by writing over this 'anxiety of influence,' although they hardly succeeded.[6] However, from a cultural standpoint, there was a certain mutual respect between the Hindus and the early British colonisers, which was reflected in the writing of history. For example, Mrityunjay Vidyalankar's *Rajabali* (1808), arguably the earliest historical account written by an Indian – an unwavering chronology of ancient India from the time of Judhisthira to Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II ensuring the Puranic tradition –was imitated by the European scholars and officials (Chatterjee 1993, 82).

The most influential of the early British historians must be J. C. Marshman, who, along with his father, Joshua Marshman, published the first Bengali magazine and later became the official Bengali translator to the Government. He was one of those amicable British officials who had a close relationship with social reformers in Bengal. His influence on Bengali intellectuals can be compared to James Tod's romantic history of Rajputana, widely accepted by Hindu nationalists for its heroic portrayal of Hindu kings. Marshman anthologised *The History of India* (1842) at the request of the University of Calcutta for the honours course studies. His history of Bengal was unrivalled for a long time. His contribution was so impactful in Bengal that Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, responsible for standardising Bengali prose, translated his text on Bengali history himself, followed by Ramgati Nyayratna (at Vidyasagar's behest). It was Marshman's chronological order, not James Mill's, that was followed by Bengali historians such as Shree Hiralal Chakravarty and Shree Kedarnath Dutt. The preface of one such account reads: "Marshman Sahib has toiled hard to collect the history of the country in English, but since many people are ignorant of the language, I have translated it in Bengali for their benefit" (*my translation*). This translation project was interconnected and can be inferred from the title of a book by Major G. T. Marshall, who was the secretary and examiner of the prestigious Fort William College. The title was *A Guide to Bengal, being a Close Translation of Ishwar Chandra Sharma's Bengallee Version of That Portion of Marshman's History of Bengal, Which Comprises the Rise and Progress of the British Dominion, with Notes and Observations.*

Apart from other Indian adaptations, such as the Hindi translation by Rev. J. J. Moore, the book also had numerous respected editions and abridgements in the West. The table of contents of Marshman's book is quite uncharacteristic of modern histories of India; chapter one begins with "Boundaries and Divisions of India", "Early History and Chronology" followed by "The Mahabharut: The Pandoos and the Kooroos", "the Battle of Kooroo Kshetru", "Kingdoms of Uyodhyu and Mithila", "Events recorded in the Ramayun", and "the Conquest of Ceylon by Ramu."[7] The contempt with which James Mill declared "the wilderness and inconsistency of the Hindu statements evidently place them beyond the sober limits of truth and history" (1817, 98) and "[only] rude nations seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretension to a high antiquity," (91) was softened in Marshman: "the history was compiled by the poets, who drew imagination for their facts, and the chronology was computed by astronomers, who have made the successive ages of the world to correspond with the conjunctions of the heavenly bodies" (1867, 2). In his version, "Hindoo writers assign fifty-seven reigns to the period between Ikswakoo and *Ramu, the great hero whose deeds have been immortalised in the great epic of Valmeeki?*" (6, emphasis added) or "*the next great war celebrated in another Hindoo epic, the Muhabharut*" (7, emphasis added), he seems confident about the underlying factuality of the epic. Even for Mounstuart Elphinstone, a much weighty and erudite historian, who comes next in the sequence, the expedition of Rama, "when stripped off its fabulous and romantic decorations", "is the best testimony of the events which it celebrates" (1841, 397). Taking into account the precision and thoroughness of the *Mahabharata*, Elphistone adjudicated that "the story of 'Mahabharat' is much more probable than that of the Ramayana", and he also went on to conform to the fact that the battle of Kurukshetra took place "probably fourteenth century before Christ" (399). Following Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay's account in the 1858 edition of *History of India*, it can be conjectured that this European agreement regarding the historical time frame of Mahabharata was in circulation for an even more extended period.

Regardless, the paradigm shift was inevitable with the exponential growth of archaeology in the early twentieth century.[8] Vincent Smith, in his preface to *The Early History of India*, quoted Goethe's maxim at length to clarify the new episteme: "The historian's duty is to separate the true from the false, the certain from the uncertain, and the doubtful from that which cannot be accepted" as he observed, Indian history has often relied too much on belief and guesses, without enough careful verification of evidence or facts (1914, 4). The accentuation of the phrases "connected narrative" or "authentic evidence" gradually acquired a more significant impression in historiography. Albeit native literature still fulfilled the requirements for being the source of Indian history but only socio-culturally; as Smith perspicuously stated: "the great Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, while of value as traditional pictures of social life in the heroic age, do not seem to contain matter illustrating the political relations of states during the historical period" (10). In the same vein, Tagore, in his 1904 foreword to Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Ramayani Katha*, acknowledged that the historical (*Oitihasik*) essence of the Indian epics lies in its sociology, not in the chronology. This enterprise eventually ceases with E.J. Rapson's five-volume *Cambridge History of India* (1922–1937), which became the benchmark of historical scholarship on India later on. For Rapson, the Sutras, epics and law books were mere *sahitya* and never a source material of history. The discovery of Mohenjo-Daro, the great ruins of the Indus Valley Civilization, which fundamentally altered the currency of ancient Indian historiography, was credited to R.D. Banerjee in 1922. The University of Calcutta established the first postgraduate department for modern and medieval

history in 1919. Many other universities followed suit by creating history academic departments during the 1920s. After that, any mythological claim without archaeological evidence was deemed unsuitable as a historical fact. It was only then "that English-educated Bengalis abandoned the criteria of divine intervention, religious value, and the norms of right conduct in judging the rise and fall of kingdoms" (Chatterjee 1993, 90) and "the narratives of these Hindu storytellers […] under Western traditions of historical scholarship would not be considered 'proper' history" (Ghosh 2007, 215). The debate, however, lost relevance with the advancement of academic prose by Jadunath Sarkar, G. S. Sardesai, and later with the Cambridge and the Marxist schools of historiography.

As can be observed, the remnants and fragmented paths of nineteenth-century Indo-European historiography provide an intriguing illustration of polyphony and heteroglossia, inviting scholars to reinterpret the politics and semantics attached to the texts. The gaps and ambivalences present in historical texts can now be examined with more autonomy and enthusiasm by a revisionist historian based on the recent trend of "unarchiving history" in social scientific research. By adopting a deconstructive approach to the past, especially by taking cues from Hayden White, Alan Munslow and Ethan Kleinberg, the notion of a hypothetical division between Western rationality and Indian poetry is challenged, serving as the object of critique. It not only revealed the constructed nature of both history and history writing but also deconstructed the historian's attempt to find a definitive ground to overcome the fear borne by history's shifting, constantly changing terrain, especially in the context of nineteenth-century colonial India. In the process, an attempt is made to revisit a supposedly closed chapter in historiography. Further research exploring the convergence and clash of different academic perspectives is anticipated, where the lyrical nature of history will be revealed through an unbiased examination of historical records.

Notes

1. See, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty's insightful comment: "The origins of modern historical writing in India have deeply to do with the ease with which authors, both European and Indian, blended different genres from the very beginning of colonial rule." Dipesh Chakraborty, "The Birth of Academic Historical Writing in India", in The Oxford History of Historical Writing, eds. Stuart Macintyre et al., vol 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 520.
2. For instance, following Gauriya Vaisnava theology, one of the five sects of Vaishnavism flourished in medieval Bengal, the nature of time in history could be explained with the dual axes of gati (flow) i.e., Calagati (diachronous, similar to the forward motion of river current) of Occidental history and Hradagati (synchronous, akin to the perpetual motionlessness of a lake) of Oriental history.
3. Relating to this proposition, see Ranjan Ghosh's comments: "What Chinese or Western historiography takes to be universals may not always be the right criteria by which to judge the Indian way of historical meaning generation. Unlike the Chinese, who have left well-attested historical treatises for posterity, Aryans are said to have left behind myths, and in several cases of transmutation, we have history as a blend of fact and 'imagination'." See Ranjan Ghosh, "India, Itihasa, and Inter-Historiographical Discourse", History and Theory 46, no.2 (May 2017): 210-217.
4. These comments from Holwell may be cited: "Let us next fee how far familitude of doctrines, preached first by Bramah, and afterwards by Christ, at the distinct period of above three thousand years, corroborate our conclusions; if they mutually support each other, it amounts to proof of the authenticity and divine origin of both. Bramah preached the existence of one only, Eternal God, his first created angelic being, Birmah, Bishnoo, Sieb, and Moisasoor; the pure gospel-dispensation teaches the one and only, eternal God, his first begotten of the Father, Christ; the angelic beings, Gabriel, Michael, and Satan, all these corresponding under different names, minutely with each other, in their reflective dignities, functions and characters." See John Zephaniah Holwell, Interesting historical events, relative to the provinces of Bengal, and the empire of Indostan, 1766-1771 (London: Printed for T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1766-1771), 72.
5. To evoke contrast, I altered the title of Sudipta Kaviraj's distinctive essay, "The Imaginary Institution of India", Subaltern Studies VII, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992): 1-39.

6. See, in particular, Kshirodchandra Raychaudhuri's remark as quoted in Partha Chatterjee's The Nation and Its Fragments: "I have written this book for those who have been misled by translations of histories written in English." See Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 91.

7. See John Clark Marshman, Abridgment of the History of India from the Earliest Period to the Present Time (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1893), xi.

8. Most importantly, The Archaeological Survey of India was founded by Sir Alexander Cunnigham, a Bengal Statesman, in 1861. However, it was William Jones' Asiatic Society (1784) which can be credited with the first 'proper' scientific historiography in Modern India.

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