

SUBALTERN STUDIES AND ITS CRITICS:
DEBATES OVER INDIAN HISTORY

A SUBALTERN STUDIES READER 1986–1995. Edited by Ranajit Guha. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Pp. xxii, 303.

NATIONALISM, TERRORISM, COMMUNALISM: ESSAYS IN MODERN INDIAN HISTORY. By Peter Heehs. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. x, 174.

WRITING SOCIAL HISTORY. By Sumit Sarkar. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997; Oxford India Paperback, 1998. Pp. x, 390.

THE FURIES OF INDIAN COMMUNALISM: RELIGION, MODERNITY AND SECULARIZATION. By Achin Vanaik. London: Verso, 1997. Pp. 374.

Indian history has apparently never had it so good. By the middle part of the nineteenth century, the Hegelian proposition that India was a land singularly bereft of history had attained a widespread consensus among British commentators on India. Macaulay and James Mill were entirely convinced that Indians were incapable of writing history, and a hundred years later Edward Thompson, the father of the late E. P. Thompson, penned the remark, with the supreme confidence that it was a self-evident truth, that “Indians are not historians, and they rarely show any critical ability. Even their most useful books . . . exasperate with their repetitions and diffuseness.” Assured that Indians were unlikely ever to become adept at the historical craft, Thompson added for good measure that they were “not likely to displace our account of our connection with India.”¹ Less than twenty years ago, only a handful of Indian historians, most of them scholars of ancient India, had a reputation extending beyond their own country, and much of their energy, when they were not engaged in more arcane research, was expended in writing textbooks for use in Indian schools. Today, by contrast, Indian historians have hogged the limelight; they occupy positions at leading universities in India, the United States, and Britain.

In the late 1970s, Ranajit Guha, then known only for a study of the ideological aspects of the permanent settlement of land revenue in colonial Bengal,² gathered a number of younger historians around him, and the initial fruits of their collective labor appeared as two volumes, published in quick succession, with the enticing title of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Oxford, 1982 and 1983). In retrospect, the success of this endeavor—ten vol-

1. Edward Thompson, *The Other Side of the Medal* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1926), 27-28.

2. Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1963; reprint ed., Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981).

umes of *Subaltern Studies* have appeared so far, the first six under Guha's editorship—might appear rather remarkable, considering that Guha offered, in his programmatic note, the prosaic critique that the study of Indian history had been strangled by "elitism," both of the "colonialist" and "bourgeois-nationalist" variety, and that henceforth history would have to engage with the "politics of the people."³ Doubtless, some monographs had been written on peasant rebellions, but the real question, Guha suggested, is how far various subaltern groups, whether women, peasants, outcastes, the working-class, tribals, the downtrodden, or other marginalized people who had been relegated to the periphery of Indian society, had been able to make history and constitute their politics as an "autonomous realm." If it should seem something of a mystery why the historians of the "Subaltern School" were to acquire such a following, one might consider their recourse to the somewhat exotic idea of the "subaltern," a word that even an informed reader would reasonably associate with the military. As readers were to surmise, subaltern history promised more than "history from below": the very idea of the "subaltern" had been captured from Gramsci, and the "Subaltern School" historians would also build upon the semiological analyses of Jakobson and Barthes, the post-structuralism of Foucault, and the critique of Enlightenment epistemologies associated with Derrida, Lyotard, and others. For Indians who might have been distressed that the theoretical trajectories which were finding a receptive audience in the Western academy were somehow passing them by, subaltern history must have seemed a godsend, offering not only new insights into Indian history, but a bridge to critical reformulations of the European past and the intellectual traditions of the West. Moreover, as Guha's trenchant analysis of colonial documents was to show, the enterprise of finding documents that authenticated the experience of subalterns and claimed to complete the historical record, such that subalterns might no longer complain of not being adequately represented, was not deemed to be of paramount importance; indeed, Guha sought to establish how insurgency might be read from the gaps, fissures, interstices, and rhetorical strategies that marked dominant discourse. In this manner, subaltern history was clearly to be distinguished from a host of other phenomena to which it is sometimes linked by innocent and conservative academics, such as multiculturalism and ethnic history.

A little more than five years after the appearance of the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, the entire enterprise had acquired enough of a following that an anthology, which culled articles from the first five volumes, was to appear for the American market. Introduced by Edward Said, and co-edited by Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* brought the work of the historians of colonial India, which could scarcely be described as having generated widespread interest until then, to the attention of postcolonial theorists, "colonial discourse" analysts, and those interested in the literature and history of colonized societies. Thus the blurb to *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, the volume

3. Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," reprinted in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 37-43.

presently under review, which is an anthology of selections from later volumes of *Subaltern Studies* as well as other publications, states that the “most famous members” of the collective—Spivak and Partha Chatterjee are mentioned by name—“were instrumental in establishing the discipline best known as postcolonial studies.” Indeed, it is for the consumption of the burgeoning postcolonial academic industry that this volume appears to have been devised, rather than for the use of historians themselves, since Ranajit Guha, in his introduction to the anthology, makes no attempt even to suggest what differentiates *Subaltern Studies* from other trajectories that partake of “history from below.” Since *Subaltern Studies* now bears the dual imprimatur of authority and radical dissent, the history that Guha furnishes of the collective is written in a heroic mode, and located, somewhat disingenuously, when we consider the intellectual genealogies of members of the collective, in humble and even trying origins (xiv). *Subaltern Studies*, as Guha himself states, arose out of the disillusionments of the three decades following independence: the hopes of the young, which relied upon the nation-state for their fulfillment, had dissipated in the wake of the national emergency invoked by Indira Gandhi in 1975, and the suppression of the Naxalite movement, which for all its faults and embrace of violence sought to place considerations of justice and equity at the center of political action. Certainly Guha could have offered a more substantive account of the relation between the advent of a new school of history, Indian historiography, and Indian politics.

Guha states that the collection is “representative” of the “intellectual range spanned by the project,” but no attempt is made to explain, much less defend, the selection. What is “representative,” anyhow? And “representative” for whom? Since the volume, like its predecessor, is clearly intended for the American market, and particularly for those with no intrinsic interest in Indian history, one might be forgiven for presuming that the selections veer towards those which establish connections between Indian history and the critiques of modernity and its master narratives, but on closer examination the majority of the selections are shown to be detailed readings of Indian history. The selections might be described as demonstrations of subaltern history; but Partha Chatterjee’s essay on middle-class Bengali women is not so easily accommodated under this rubric, while Dipesh Chakrabarty’s important and widely discussed essay on “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” considers how, even at its most reflective, the narrative of history is tethered to the nation-state, with “Europe” remaining the “sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on” (263). Doubtless Guha’s *Reader*, which carries articles from nearly all members of the original collective, can also reasonably be construed as taking up the story first enumerated in the earlier anthology, but this intent is seriously compromised by an erasure of the collective’s own politics. No narrative of *Subaltern Studies* could possibly be complete without an account of the partial dismemberment of the collective, the cogent critiques to which it has been subjected from diverse intellectual circles in India, and the decomposition of *Subaltern Studies* into widely divergent streams.

Nowhere in his introduction does Guha mention Sumit Sarkar, a founding member of the collective and one of its most prolific and original voices, and now one of the most vociferous critics of Subaltern Studies's enchantment with postcolonial theory and postmodernism. Ever concerned with the *silences* of elitist discourse, Guha would do well to ponder on the ominous manner in which Sumit Sarkar has been excised from the memory of the collective, though Sarkar is, of course, well equipped to speak for himself. In *Writing Social History*, a collection of nine essays on Indian history and historiography, Sarkar further elaborates on his critique, the contours of which he set out in an article in 1994,⁴ of subaltern history and, more broadly, historical studies in the Saidian mold. His preface to the present collection sets the tone for the entire work, deploring the "shift from social history to forms of cultural studies largely abstracted from 'material' contexts, and the accompanying displacement of Marxism, whether orthodox or revisionist, by a variety of postmodernistic (and postcolonial) moods" (vii). Though Sarkar holds no brief for Orientalist scholarship, he argues insistently and vigorously that historical works influenced by Derrida, Foucault, and particularly Edward Said, have induced their own forms of homogenization (viii, 17). He says of colonial educational policy, for instance, that it was not "quite the monolith . . . that is sometimes assumed nowadays" (249), and similarly disputes the assumption, which he claims informs the work of his former colleagues in the collective, that Indian historiography since the nineteenth century has invariably been nothing more than the history of the nation-state (20).

Though Sarkar describes the two long essays on the nineteenth-century Bengali social reformer Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and his contemporary, the mystic Sri Ramakrishna, as constituting the "core" of his book (viii), the other essays, particularly the polemics against late subaltern history and the postmodern turn, furnish a much better clue to Sarkar's own ideological dispositions and the theoretical underpinning of his recent work. It is only the slightest exaggeration to suggest that for Sarkar, the trajectory of historical reasoning once took us from Ranke to Marx, and from Marx it has now moved to Said, though this marks a regression rather than progression, especially since Said's mantras are said to have been uncritically adopted by his followers (37). A newer positivism has replaced the older dogmas: where for Ranke the "fact" was everything, Sarkar suggests that for the postmodernists ideology alone is of consequence. If Rankean history was little more than political history, Sarkar finds the tendency, in the writings of Partha Chatterjee, Gyan Pandey, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, to characterize Bengali (and more broadly Indian) history writing as state-centric similarly reductionist. Indeed, Sarkar observes that Indian historians had "a fairly remarkable and precocious interest in social and cultural history" at a time when the Rankean disposition had made such interests disreputable in the Western academy (24, 31, 38). Most of all, Sarkar finds the Saidian-inspired histories to be in agreement with the earlier histories in the Rankean or imperial

4. Sumit Sarkar, "Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writing of Modern Indian History," *Oxford Literary Review* 16 (1994), 205-224.

mold in their insistence on the decisive rupture created by colonial rule: where imperial histories were prone to view colonialism as having brought civilization to the natives and so fundamentally altered the old order, postcolonial discourse characterizes colonialism as the imposition of a Western power-knowledge nexus upon a society that knew little of exploitation and oppression (105). According to Sarkar, imperial and postcolonial histories are equally beholden to the oppositions of East and West, spiritual and material, and the like (95-97).

To understand what kind of history Sarkar finds salutary, progressive, and a credit to the historian, one can do no better than turn to his two essays on the "Decline of the Subaltern" and E. P. Thompson. Sarkar's account of the birth of Subaltern Studies, in which he played a not inconsiderable role, stresses the fact that the members of the collective, while critical of "orthodox Marxist theory and practice," still retained a socialist and Marxist outlook (83). The histories of various subaltern groups, and their modes of resistance, were central to the early work of the collective, but by the late 1980s, as the work of Foucault and Said started to become hegemonic, and the Soviet Union showed signs of fragmentation, Marxism came increasingly under assault and was dismissed not only as irrelevant but as a species of Eurocentrism. "Radical, left-wing histories" were replaced by "cultural studies and critiques of colonial discourse"; resistance was construed as being ineffective against the totalizing power of the colonial state; the colonized subjects were seen as capable of producing only "derivative discourses"; and the "dialectical search for contradictions within structures," which Sarkar describes as central to Marxist analysis, was abjured for a "unitary vision of the modern bureaucratic state as the sole source of oppression" (5, 84, 90). Sarkar argues that E. P. Thompson, mindful of the difficulties in conventional Marxist analyses of "class," had arrived at such seemingly paradoxical formulations as "class struggle without class"; and similarly Subaltern Studies had eschewed a rigid economic class analysis, signified to some extent by its deployment of the term "subaltern." Yet, Sarkar contends, a shift occurred in Subaltern Studies, which he attributes to the influence of Partha Chatterjee (and Ashis Nandy outside the collective), from "subaltern" to "community," such that "late Subaltern Studies" came to embody little more than a "vague nostalgia" which identified the authentic with the indigenous, and located both "in the pasts of an ever-receding community, or a present that can consist of fragments alone" (108, cf. also 42, 91, 98-101).

What hampers true historical work, which is attentive to "context" rather than the "fragmentary," is the postmodernist's fetish for the "fragment" and the nativist's hankering for an idealized past (45).⁵ Thus one of Sarkar's favorite words of abuse, though he is scarcely singular in this respect, is "romantic": in essence, Sarkar views Nandy, his former colleagues in the collective, and a great many others who have purportedly fallen for the view that precolonial commu-

5. Sarkar's ire, with respect to the postmodernist emphasis on "fragments," falls on Gyanendra Pandey, "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today," *Representations*, no. 37 (Winter 1992), 27-55, as well as Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

nities knew nothing of power relations, certainly nothing of communal conflict, binary thinking, and the kind of witch hunts that characterize European history, as guilty of romanticizing the past (for example, 60, 220, 251). Valorizations of “indigenous community values” are, Sarkar asserts, inattentive to precolonial hierarchies and forms of oppression, and to the histories of subordinated groups, such as women, the lower castes, and peasants (43). Against all this “culturalism” Sarkar opposes the work of E. P. Thompson, noting that “many of the moves away from ‘Thompsonian’ social history have been simplistic and retrogressive” (51). Thompson’s writings come across in Sarkar’s essay as exemplary demonstrations of the power of historical analysis: culture is “never abstracted from material conditions, or from relationships of power” (54), and the contrast with Said is established by considering how Thompson, for instance in his analysis of the idea of the “rule of law,” was able to show the manner in which it was simultaneously an instrument of the ruling class and open to “occasional appropriation by subordinated groups” (59).

Doubtless, some of Sarkar’s criticisms are not without merit, but he is scarcely the first historian or critic to have remarked on the unease of cultural studies, particularly in its American variant, with considerations of class and yet broader questions of political economy. The observation that much of Partha Chatterjee’s work ends up becoming a set of reflections on various “great” men, thus harking back to nineteenth-century political histories, is one from which other Indian historians have also derived much satisfaction.⁶ Sarkar adverts to matters that have been debated endlessly in the American academy, and on occasion one gets the distinct impression that he simply transplants these debates onto the Indian scene. As I shall suggest later, Sarkar eschews what could have been a far more substantive critique of late Subaltern Studies and colonial discourse analysis for some largely hackneyed observations made familiar by the “culture wars” and, to use his own words, a rather “romantic” and “nostalgic” homage to Marxism. In so doing, he points the way to his own blind spots. Thus he describes himself as “troubled” by E. P. Thompson’s relative silence on matters pertaining to gender, but Thompson’s inexcusable indifference to Britain’s empire in virtually all of his writing, all the while that he was devoting himself to studies of subordinated elements in British society, is shrugged off with the remark that “Hobsbawm apart, the great masters of British Marxian historiography have admittedly written little on Empire” (65). Apparently the offense becomes less a matter of concern when other Marxist historians can be described as guilty in a similar vein. Sarkar makes no attempt, though he could have taken a lesson or two from Gauri Viswanathan’s exploration of the same lacuna in the work of Raymond Williams,⁷ to understand what Thompson’s indifference to considerations of imperialism might mean for any assessment of his work.⁸ Likewise, he constantly derides the argument which

6. See, for example, Ramachandra Guha, “Subaltern and Bhadrakol Studies,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 (19 August 1995), 2056-2058.

7. Gauri Viswanathan, “Raymond Williams and British Colonialism,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 4, no. 2 (1991), 47-66.

8. A similar shortcoming is encountered in the anthology edited by Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

points to Thompson's and Marxism's Eurocentrism, but makes no attempt to engage with it, presumably on the grounds that Marxism now constitutes the universal legacy of humankind. Marx's contemporaries were indifferent to India, when they were not contemptuous of it, but Marx went far beyond them in his assessment of India's "idyllic village communities" as having "restrained the human mind within the smallest compass"⁹: he had a theory of history, ironclad in his view, which accounted for India's deplorable state. Thus Marx opined that "whatever may have been the crimes of England"—why "whatever," as if there was any doubt of the atrocities perpetrated by the British?—"she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution" which was destined to overthrow the "solid foundation" of Indian despotism.¹⁰ Sarkar's universalisms, strikingly, are invariably derived from the modern West, and one has the inescapable feeling that he thinks of England's work in India as yet unfinished. That Marxist histories have been entirely complicit with the agendas of development and modernization, which have had none-too-happy consequences for most Indians, is an issue that Sarkar fails to address, unforgivably so considering his professed interest in the emancipation of the subaltern classes.

Historians who were always inclined to view Subaltern Studies as a pompous and dressed-up version of "history from below" will delight in Sarkar's observation that E. P. Thompson clearly suffices as the exemplar of conscientious history. Sarkar is scarcely required to be an astute observer of the American academy, but considering the intensely polemical nature of many of his observations, it is surprising that he seems to be unaware how far many historians were eager that an Indian school of history should not be allowed to take center stage in contemporary historical studies.¹¹ Though Sarkar derides the subaltern historians for their ready embrace of postmodern and postcolonial fashions, it is a considerable irony that his own brand of critique has now become almost *de rigueur* for historians who wish to see themselves as grounded in something more than what one historian of premodern India, Richard Eaton, describes as the "amorphous, obscurantist" field of "cultural studies."¹² Sarkar's book might appear to convey the impression that he is the "Lone Ranger" of modern Indian history, but in fact he is joined by many American historians of India—Robert Frykenberg, Lynn Zastoupil, Eugene Irschik, and Dane Kennedy, among others¹³—who characterize Said's intellectual framework as totalizing, supposedly without the aware-

9. Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857–1859* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958), 20.

10. *Ibid.*

11. It is instructive that the *American Historical Review*, which not incorrectly can be described as the flagship of the profession in the United States, devoted the greater part of one of its recent issues (December 1994) to subaltern studies and its increasing influence, for example in the Latin American and African fields.

12. Richard Eaton, "(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India," *Journal of World History* 11 (Spring 2000), 60.

13. Robert E. Frykenberg, *History and Belief: The Foundations of Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 287-303; Dane Kennedy, "Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24 (1996), 355-356; Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

ness, which by contrast Sarkar always finds present in E. P. Thompson, that control and domination were never absolute, and that everywhere communities offered resistance to regimes of power by strategic and imaginative interpretations of local traditions and customs (58).

Certainly, judging from Achin Vanaik's *The Furies of Indian Communalism*, Sarkar has found a number of soulmates who are disenchanted with the post-modern and specifically postcolonial turn of late Subaltern Studies. Vanaik's canvas extends beyond recent Indian history and scholarly writings on religion and communalism to an examination of the political contexts behind the resurgence of militant Hinduism. The concluding chapter, for instance, describes the "communalization of the Indian polity" (296-360), which Vanaik attributes to the disappearance of the "Nehruvian consensus" (301), the decline of the centrist Congress party, and the inability of any secular political formation to fill the vacuum. Jawaharlal Nehru embraced the four principles of "socialism, democracy, secularism, and non-alignment," all of which suffered a precipitous decline in the last two decades; in a longer list of "specific internal reasons" for the demise of the Nehruvian consensus, Vanaik mentions a great many other political and economic developments, such as the growth of an indigenous industrial elite that looked for greater collaboration with foreign capital, the rise of a "criminalized lumpenized business class linked to the black economy," the advent of an increasingly consumerist middle class, the emergence of regional political formations, and so on (301-302). It is striking, though there shall be occasion to reflect further on this, that nothing of "culture" or "religion"—such as an intellectual and cultural disenchantment with secularism, or a widely held view that the effects of development have not only been vastly uneven, but have been such as to put into serious jeopardy a diverse array of local cultural traditions—finds a place in Vanaik's analysis, and that ultimately Vanaik's understanding of modern Indian history remains that of the conventional political scientist who knows little of politics beyond political parties, electoral alignments, vote banks, and center-state relations. True, elsewhere in the book Vanaik strays into apparently more complex questions, and an entire chapter is devoted to the question of how far, if at all, "Hindu communalism" can be viewed as a species of fascism. Vanaik is right in pointing to the immense historical and theoretical difficulties in accommodating militant Hinduism under the rubric of fascism, but no one other than orthodox Indian Marxists ever attached much credence to fascism as an explanatory paradigm for Indian communalism. Thus what is really an inter-

1994); and Eugene Irschik, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). This brief and by no means complete list obviously excludes the so-called Cambridge school historians of India and their supporters. The point here is to establish how even American historians of India, who in a manner of speaking might be viewed as observing a certain neutrality between the two opposed paradigms of the Cambridge and Subaltern Schools, have in recent years joined in the assault on Said. Their critiques, however, do not have the sophistication of Aijaz Ahmad's observations on Said: "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 30 (25 July 1992), Section on Political Economy, 98-116, reprinted in *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).

nal, quaint, and strikingly irrelevant debate in Indian Marxist circles is elevated to a subject of immense importance.

As with Sarkar, one cannot doubt Vanaik's profound attachment to the idea of secularism, or the sincerity with which he defends the Indian attempt to forge a secular state in the two to three decades following independence. While his attack on Hindu communalism is entirely laudable, Vanaik has no patience for the view that not every critique of Hindu communalism must emanate from the standpoint of secularism. Since his readings of history are much less nuanced than those of Sarkar, his intolerance for critiques of secularism is all the more extreme, and he adopts the elementary view that those who critique secularism are by default friends of communalism. Thus, in his account Ashis Nandy and many of the historians of late Subaltern Studies are explicitly equated with those who have a "crude construct of Hindutva," though he concedes that the "arguments of the proponents of anti-secularism and anti-modernism are often highly sophisticated" (12). The persuasiveness of their ideas is enhanced, Vanaik argues along the lines of Sarkar, "in a milieu marked by the decline of Marxist intellectual influence, the rise of post-modernist thinking and the current dilemmas of liberal modernism" (12), and insistently Vanaik refers to the pernicious influence of "post-modernist and anti-modernist strands of thinking" (for example, 4, 17, 107).

Much of the immense debate on what "postmodernism" is is lost on Vanaik, nor does he recognize that the more astute critics speak of postmodernisms in the plural. Nowhere in the book does he show any understanding of postmodernism, beyond observations about postmodernism's critique of Enlightenment notions of rationality and its decentering of master narratives, but this is not surprising considering that he fails even to recognize the distinction between poststructuralism—which furnishes epistemologies to contest the received ideas about representation, objectivity, and the subjects of history—and postmodernism—which makes ontological claims about the radically changed nature of reality in the modern world. Vanaik's lumping together of "postmodernist" with "anti-modernist" strands of thinking betokens a failure both of imagination and the analytical faculty: thus Gandhi, Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Edward Said, and present-day Hindutva ideologues, whose predecessors loathed Gandhi and, in a manner of speaking, engineered his assassination, are all described as molded from the same clay. To be logically consistent, Vanaik should have added to that list of villains the large number of secular, modernizing Indians of the middle class who, in common with rank Hindu communalists, secretly rejoiced in Gandhi's assassination. The old man had doubtless done some good, but his relentless critique of modern civilization, industrialization, and technicism, indeed the nation-state system, was an impediment to India's progress and advancement as a nation-state.

A similar kind of instrumentalism informs Vanaik's understanding of history, or how else can we understand his description of China as an example of a country that underwent a "successful socialist revolution" (31)? If China's literacy rate is better than that of India, and a greater number of its people have been lift-

ed out of destitution, as indeed they have, then we have the criteria for success. Never mind that in the “Great Leap Forward,” not less than twenty-five million people were sacrificed in the name of China’s modernization and development, and that the reduction of China’s population growth rate has come at the expense of the female child. In the name of progress, as Marx himself assured us, some atrocities can be tolerated: so long as a certain theory of history is held up as inviolable, particular histories are of little consequence.

The limitations of Vanaik’s critique of Subaltern Studies and other strands of recent Indian critical writing become even more apparent upon a closer examination of a few specific arguments that first emerge in chapter three and receive their developed treatment in chapter four, which accounts for nearly a third of the book and sustains a relentless assault on Vanaik’s intellectual adversaries. Vanaik dismisses out of hand notions of Indian “civilization” or even Indian “culture”; according to him, one can speak only of civilizations *in* India (131), or of a cultural space or zone in India (135). From there he proceeds to the argument that there never was any real “composite culture” in India, and thus to the rejection of the idea that there was a substantial synthesis of Islam and Hinduism, or that the Indian past can be described as syncretic, pluralistic, and tolerant. On the one hand, he argues that if at all there was a “cultural synthesis,” it was at the level of elites (136); on the other hand, the mere existence of various religions side by side is represented as akin to the pluralism of plant life, since pluralism in this instance can scarcely be viewed as a form of tolerance (114). (Had Vanaik known more of biology, he might have understood that within an ecosystem not all plants fare equally well: the banyan tree does not let anything else grow underneath it, and many plants crowd out other species. Thus the observation that “plant life is plural” is not wholly intelligible.) Indeed, like all the other good things of life, “pluralism” and “tolerance” are construed as specifically European—and more particularly Enlightenment—virtues, since they emerged “after the rise of individualism and individual rights” (113). It is no secret that all European narratives were agreed, until the recent critiques of colonial discourse began to emerge, that the individual in India never existed as such; indeed, the individual in India is still presumed not to exist. But all the attendant problems of following this argument to its logical conclusion are ignored by Vanaik; nor is it any less a problem that the same Enlightenment Europe which Vanaik deems to be the lodestar of human history originated the most pernicious theories of racial superiority, the civilizing mission, and so on. Vanaik’s answer to the “anti-modernists” is that even the categories they presume to resurrect from the hoary Indian past, such as pluralism and tolerance, were in fact born in modernity, and that consequently their critiques of modernity are mere posturings. To believe otherwise, he says apropos of the work of Partha Chatterjee, is to “slide into culturalism and through it towards even greater sympathy for indigenism” (187).

Vanaik contends that Hinduism generated a “mystique of tolerance”; further, it is this mystification which allows Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, and some other influential antimodernists to critique the received version of secularism,

which calls for the separation of religion and state, by incorrectly postulating an Indian variant of secularism that rests upon the idea of religious tolerance (145). He supposes that one can point to the obvious intolerance implied by the caste system to infer that a similar intolerance existed in the religious domain (146), which amounts to saying, in the modern context, that a racist must perforce be a sexist and a religious bigot. Much of the purported historical segment of Vanaik's book proceeds on the basis of inference: thus, the extremely long, varied, and complicated history, extending to several hundred years, of Hinduism's reach outwards to Southeast Asia is dismissed with the observation that "there is no way, for example, that Hinduism could have spread to Southeast Asia to become as influential as it did for centuries without such conversion" (147). Not a single piece of evidence is furnished by way of substantiating this claim; in a book with seventy to eighty pages of notes, Vanaik cannot spare a single citation in defense of this claim. Since Vanaik knows that religions often gain adherents by conversion, and that Islam did so in India, he presumes that this must be true for Hinduism. Again, he avers that "Brahminism and many a 'Hindu sect' have engaged in conversion" (147), but this declaration is likewise issued as a fiat. Vanaik says of Hindus that "the will to convert existed" but they were prevented from doing so by "Hindu social arrangements": now he dons the mantle of omniscience, while pretending that the possible relationship between these social arrangements and the absence of conversion would be merely a sociological rather than religious phenomenon. One suspects that many Hindus would point to Vanaik's eagerness to out-Muslim the Muslim and so deflate arguments about the exceptionalism of Islam as a characteristic gesture of the tolerant Hindu!

To state that Vanaik's book is disappointing is an understatement. Curiously, and ominously, Vanaik ends up embracing nearly every argument found in communalist histories. Thus, in his view the history of India can only be written as a history of the domination of religion over other spheres of life, and as the history of the separation of religions. Vanaik asks for the strict separation of church and state, and so does the communalist in his own fashion: recall the oft-voiced allegation by Hindutvavadis that secularists in India have seldom been better than "pseudo-secularists," and that secularists like Vanaik do not champion a common civil code for every Indian. The communalist, while professing to be dismissive of Western culture, is sworn to modernity, as is the Indian secularist, though this is often done so with the predictable proviso that modernity has its own trajectory in India (12). Vanaik's attitude towards Western social science is, in the fashion of the communalist, at once cavalier and reverential: Durkheim, Charles Taylor, Weber, and Giddens are all paraded in turn, as though they were modern-day Ganeshas who had to be invoked before the intellectual exercise could be launched, but when evidence is really required Vanaik's command of history most obviously fails him.¹⁴ Vanaik's obvious belief in the efficacy of Western social sci-

14. Ganesh is the God of Learning, as well as the harbinger of auspiciousness; he is also invoked at the commencement of cultural and academic enterprises. He is often shown in popular prints as a learned scribe, with a book and pen in one of his hands.

ence has more than a touch of comedy: if physical anthropology can find a safe refuge in India, there is no reason to suppose that he is not that perfect specimen about whom Macaulay had expressed great hope in 1835, when he asked for a class of Indians who would be English in taste, intellect, and feeling, indeed in everything but blood.¹⁵

Setting out to demolish what he calls the “Myth of Cultural Integration” (89), Vanaik betrays what might be described as one of the central difficulties of the Marxist critique of late Subaltern Studies, namely—as shall presently be seen—its inability to contend with myth, and its positivist endorsement of a sharp distinction between “history” and “myth.” Peter Heehs, in his short collection of essays entitled *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism*, is more sensitive to these considerations, though unfortunately much the greater part of his book is a futile exercise in attempting to establish that the attainment of Indian independence was as much an achievement of the “revolutionary” movement as it was of Gandhian nonviolence. The first four essays offer little more than a connected narrative of the activities of Aurobindo Ghose [later Sri Aurobindo] and his fellow Bengali “extremists,” “terrorists,” or self-proclaimed revolutionaries in the first two to three decades of the twentieth century. Heehs claims that far too much attention has been lavished on what he erroneously describes as Gandhian “passive resistance,” that the revolutionaries have not been given their due, and that Bengali terrorists, despite some acquaintance with terrorist and anarchist movements in Europe, were essentially home-grown products. He considerably exaggerates the neglect from which these “terrorists” purportedly suffer, and cannot be unaware that a large hagiographic literature has developed around the figures who presented armed resistance to British rule in India. Once in a while Heehs offers an empirical finding of considerable value, such as his observation that the revolutionaries made inflated assessments about the membership in their secret organizations (23), or that the revolutionary groups were singularly unsuccessful in their attempts to assassinate European officials (30), but he neither pursues these observations nor finds any irony in the fact that most of the bomb-throwers more often hurt themselves, usually while putting together bombs from manuals, than the British officials whom they so much loathed. Their patriotism, as Gandhi himself conceded, was scarcely in question, but they knew little of the ways of warfare or guerrilla activity, and a gun in the hand of a Bengali was as much of an anomaly as vegetarianism might be in the life of a Texan cattle rancher. Indian revolutionary activity was something of a sadly comical affair, a parody of masculinizing nationalism. Heehs foregoes the more pertinent questions: for instance, why accept the designation of “revolutionaries” for rebels who clearly accepted the European narrative of Bengali effeminacy and attempted to create a mystique of hyper-masculinity around themselves? What, exactly, was so transformative in the thought or practices of Indian “terrorists”?

15. Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education” [1835], in *Selected Writings*, ed. with introduction by John Clive and Thomas Pinney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 249.

However, as various scattered remarks and the last two chapters of the book suggest, Heehs is attuned to developments in Indian history, the debates surrounding Subaltern Studies, and the politics of Indian historiography. His tone, unlike that of Sarkar and Vanaik, is never polemical, and the careless reader might overlook his softly stated but nevertheless firm critique of Sumit Sarkar, whose work he equates with that of colonial administrators. As Heehs avers, the views of Indian Marxist academics show a remarkable convergence with those held by colonial writers, who were similarly united in their condemnation of “the mixture of religion and politics” they found in such Indian nationalists as Bipinchandra Pal, Aurobindo, and later Gandhi (104). There is a widespread and largely unexamined presumption, Heehs remarks, that “religious nationalism leads to communalism” (105). He takes the argument one step further still: Sarkar, Vanaik, and other secular Indian intellectuals indubitably have an immense difficulty in accepting religious faith as a valid category of knowledge. Heehs could have noted that this problem is encountered in *Subaltern Studies* from the very outset, but *Subaltern Studies* does not bear the burden of his critique of left-wing writing in India.

Though Heehs’s work does not take us very far in developing an explicit critique of *Subaltern Studies*, there are intimations of a critique that would take us beyond the Marxist orthodoxies of Sarkar and Vanaik. On the question of categories of knowledge, one wonders why the historians and scholars of the *Subaltern Studies* collective, whether in the early 1980s or at the present moment, still evidently view India as the place that furnishes the raw data, and Europe as the site of “theory”? They are at ease with the theoretical formulations of Althusser, Derrida, Lyotard, Barthes, Jakobson, and Foucault, but the day when they might derive some of the philosophical underpinnings for their arguments from Indian logic or the literature of the puranas seems extraordinarily remote. They have deployed Foucault in much of their work, and though queer studies has now marked its arrival in Indian studies,¹⁶ it is doubtful in the extreme that any Indian historian, whether of the *Subaltern School* or any other persuasion, would think of using a Gandhian politics of the body, or the complex history of Indian eunuchs,¹⁷ to interpret Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. India remains, regrettably, the empty field on which the fertile European mind sets to do its work. This limitation is common to Sarkar and his former friends in the *Subaltern Studies* collective.

Heehs offers the useful suggestion that the debate on communalism has been dominated by “rival historical schools” and that far more insight would be gained if the historians were attentive to the work of cultural psychologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists (124, 134). But it is his observations on “history” and “myth” which alert us to one of *Subaltern Studies*’ greatest failings. As he rightfully remarks, “myth and history are often considered antithetical modes

16. See, for example, Paola Bacchetta, “When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers,” *Social Text*, no. 61 (Winter 1999), 141-166.

17. Vinay Lal, “Not This, Not That: The *Hijras* of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality,” *Social Text*, no. 61 (Winter 1999), 119-140.

of explanation,” and “myth” to most historians means little else except what is evidently false (142). The separation of myth and history was already present in an incipient form in Thucydides and classical Greek thought, but it is the Enlightenment which not only pushed the distinction between *mythos* and *logos* to its extreme, but which construed history as the factual (and hence “true”) account of the past of a people, or more specifically those people who could be conceived as the proper subjects of a proper nation-state. Myth had to be banished from the account of “what really happened”; it was. History came to be tethered to the nation-state, and as the nation-state became the only form of political community which people could imagine for themselves, the ascendancy of history as one of the preeminent discourses of modernity was assured.

The points, if they had to be encapsulated provocatively as cryptic formulations, are quite simply the following: India did at one point make a civilization-al choice of forsaking discourses of history, and it has lived comfortably with that choice until very recently. All attempts, whether inspired by nationalism, Marxism, or the desire to argue that Indian modernity is predicated on different trajectories, to furnish India with historical narratives of its own kind are pointers to the increasing encroachment of history upon the fundamental and deliberate ahistoricity of the Indian sensibility, as well as to the secular and modernizing Indian’s unease with those peripheral—but numerically preponderant—sectors of Indian society who resolutely fail, indeed refuse, to speak in the language of history. History, which has ever satisfied its advocates with the clichéd thought that it banishes that amnesia which would otherwise be the source of oppression, is itself predicated on two forms of amnesia. As I have argued, history set itself the mandate of railroading people into acceptance of the nation-state as the fulfillment of human destiny, as the natural, inevitable, and most desirable form of political collectivity. Doubtless, the nation-state has come in for more than its share of incisive criticism by Subaltern historians and others, but no past or present member of the collective has dared to resurrect the civilizational discourses by means of which alone the worldviews of Indians can be comprehended and respected as “subalternist” discourses. Second, history has, so to speak, occluded its own history, made us unaware that it was at one point fathered and mothered by myth, and that myth remains, especially in large parts of the world that are not yet overdeveloped, one of the numerous modalities by means of which the past is often accessed, and a future is imagined which is not merely the present of the West. Subaltern history, whether of the Marxist, postcolonial, or post-modern variety, has not even begun to broach these questions, and perhaps that is the direction towards which it should move if it really wants to claim the mantle evoked by its name.

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