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## Provincializing the West: World History from the Perspective of Indian History

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### I. *The World in Indian Thought: Prolegomenon Towards a History*

It is a truism, nevertheless often contested, that for much the greater part of their history Indians, and especially Hindus, never had an interest in writing history or in thinking historically. To admit this is not to surrender to the Hegelian proposition that India had no history to speak of, that it was always outside the orbit of history, nor is it to accept the Orientalist dogma that, lacking a history, the Indians could not be considered a rational people and consequently were bound to be placed almost at the bottom, a notch or two above African savages, in the scale of civilization.<sup>1</sup> Even less should the view that Indians never bothered much with history be associated with those formulations that easily content themselves with a description of the Hindu worldview as rooted in indifference to the 'real' world and 'linear' notions of time. It has been one of the tragedies of recent interpretative work on India that the historian, unable to conceptualize the ahistorical features of the Indian sensibility as anything other than a 'lack', continues to

<sup>1</sup> I am adverting here to the writings of James Mill, Thomas Babington Macaulay, and others, and have discussed this question at much greater length in my paper, 'History and the Possibilities of Emancipation: Some Lessons from India', *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Special Issue: Historiography of Civilizations (June 1996), 95-135. Macaulay's view might be taken as representative: writing in 1835, in a document which was intended to lay down the colonial government's educational policy, he thought it 'no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than that which may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England'. See his 'Minute on Education', reprinted in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. William Theodore de Bary, 2 vols. (New York, 1958), ii. 46.

write the history of the ahistorical in India as a form of prehistory and primitivism.

Considering the supreme indifference of Indians to their own history, one scarcely expects that they would have bothered with the rest of the world or with the enterprise of 'world history'. Indeed, very little thought has been given to understanding what the 'world' may have meant to Indians in the period before the European powers began to make their presence felt in India. Secular Indian intellectuals note with considerable shame that a more or less precise chronology of Indian history begins with the aid of an exogenous source, namely the recording by Greek and Latin writers of Alexander's invasion, so-called, of India in or around 332 BC.<sup>2</sup> This mighty event appears to have made no impression upon Indians, considering that no mention of it is to be found in any Indian text until well into the Christian era; indeed, until the advent of modern historical scholarship, the accounts by the second-century AD historian Arrian continued to be the main source for Alexander's military campaigns in India. At most one might push the beginning of a verifiable chronology to the birth or death of Buddha, but this owes everything to the historical sensibility of the Buddhists rather than the Hindus.<sup>3</sup>

The Arab geographer Alberuni, who was a member of the court of Mahmud of Ghazni and accompanied the invader on at least one of his numerous predatory visits to Hindustan, around AD 1000, was inclined to attribute the poor state of historical and geographical knowledge among Indians to their arrogance, since they believed themselves to be possessed of superior knowledge in every respect.<sup>4</sup> One could even take the view, commonly encountered in the writings of Bernard Lewis, Paul Johnson, Elie Kedourie, David Landes, and other like-minded scholars, that whatever the faults and evils of the West, intellectual curiosity remains the defining characteristic of the European and his descendants.<sup>5</sup> As James Blaut has observed in a recent study of

<sup>2</sup> Harihar Das, 'The past is present. And absent', [Sunday] *Times of India* (11 July 1993), 17.

<sup>3</sup> This point is also made by E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton, 1996), 218 n. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Alberuni's India*, ed. and trans. Edward C. Sachau (London, 1888; reprinted Delhi, 2 vols. in 1), ii, 10–11.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Bernard Lewis, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *Atlantic Monthly* (Sept. 1990), 47–51.

prominent Eurocentric historians, there is a 'still widely held belief in the unique "rationality" of Europeans'.<sup>6</sup> Since it has become difficult to defend colonialism, not that the attempt has been altogether abandoned,<sup>7</sup> it is at least possible to say that no civilization ever displayed the insatiable curiosity about the rest of the world that is encountered among the Europeans. Among Hindus, according to the received view, the problem is compounded: curiosity about the rest of the world was positively discouraged, and those who dared to cross the *kala pani* or ocean faced the ostracism of their community. A great many Hindus born in the nineteenth century, none as eminent as Mohandas Gandhi, recorded the consequences of defying the apparent prohibition on overseas travel. Gandhi himself faced the disapprobation of his caste brethren when he insisted upon departing for England to become qualified in law, and was served a writ of excommunication by the caste council of his elders; upon his return to India a few years later, he had to undergo acts of expiation, and even then a segment of his caste community refused to admit him into their midst.<sup>8</sup> In extreme circumstances, where the penalized person refused to display the appropriate signs of repentance and was without the capacity to maintain some degree of financial independence, such outcasting was calculated to jeopardize the purported offender's right to life and livelihood. If travelling was one of the principal modes by means of which knowledge of the world was acquired, then Indians seemed to have disavowed this mode of accessing world history. This representation of Indian social life and intellectual production sits well, of course, with the view that Indian village life had remained largely unaltered over two millennia or more, and that historically Indians never moved very far from their village roots. Vegetating in the teeth of time, as Marx put it, these idyllic village communities would in all likelihood have

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians*, vol. 2 of *The Colonizer's Model of the World* (New York, 2000), 16. Andre Gunder Frank, in *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, 1998), similarly argues that 'Europe did not pull itself up by its own economic bootstraps, and certainly not thanks to any kind of European "exceptionalism" of rationality, institutions, entrepreneurship, technology, geniality, in a word—of race' (p. 4).

<sup>7</sup> David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (vol. 1, 1927; vol. 2, 1929; 2nd edn., 2 vols. in 1, Ahmedabad, 1940), 27–30, 65–6.

remained the 'solid foundation of Oriental despotism', restraining the 'human mind within the smallest possible compass', had not the evil genius of the English intervened to put Indian society on the road to history.<sup>9</sup>

It is not sufficient by way of a possible rejoinder to suggest that even in the West, world history finds its first incipient form in the writings of the French encyclopaedists of the late eighteenth century, and that its disciplinary origins can be traced no further back than Spengler and Toynbee. Gibbon never aspired to be a historian of the world; most of the famous British historians, from Hume to Trevelyan and Macaulay, confined their labours largely to British history. Nevertheless, a very substantial body of world travel literature began to emerge in Europe in the sixteenth century, and certainly nothing even remotely resembling it can be found in Indian literature, though Arab history and literature are not so barren in this respect.<sup>10</sup> The Indian merchants living in Moscow in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries about whom Stephen Dale has written appear not to have penned their observations of Russian society.<sup>11</sup> Even Indian accounts of travels within India are few and far between, and one suspects that the travel narrative of Dean Mahomet, a subaltern officer in the army of the East India Company, derives most of its celebrity from its singular status as an Indian travel narrative of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Indian historians are indebted to visitors to the country from Central Asia and Europe,<sup>13</sup> and most particularly to Chinese travellers who from

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The British Rule in India', in *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-59* (Moscow, 1958), 20. In a subsequent piece, penned over a month later in July 1853, Marx and Engels wrote: 'Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history.' See 'The Future Results of the British Rule in India', *ibid.* 32.

<sup>10</sup> The Arab historian, al-Masudi, who was born between AD 893 and 898, was widely travelled and visited Spain, Russia, Ceylon, China, Syria, Egypt, and India among other places; five centuries later, Ibn Batuta (1304-1378 ?) would become the most famous traveller of the medieval period. Both left detailed accounts of their visits to India; they, alongside Alberuni, were among the more famous Muslim travellers to India. See Ahmad Shihoul, *Al-Mas'udi and His World: A Muslim Humanist and his Interest in Non-Muslims* (London, 1979); and Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (2nd edn.; Leiden, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750* (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Michael H. Fisher (ed.), *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey Through India*, introduction by the editor (Berkeley, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> There are dozens of well-known European travel narratives of India, but see also Richard Foltz, 'Two Seventeenth-Century Central Asian Travellers to Mughal India', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd Series (1996), 367-77.

time to time—most notably, Fa-hien in the fifth century and Hsuan-Tsang (Chwen Chuang) in the seventh century—furnished extensive narratives of their sojourns in India,<sup>14</sup> but I am not aware of any Indian travel narratives of China,<sup>15</sup> much less of any that the Chinese find indispensable for a study of their own history. The supposition that this must be on account of the prohibitions placed upon caste Hindus, to which I have already adverted, must be dispensed with at once. Since at least the thirteenth century, and possibly earlier, Indians were part of a vast trading network that has been described by Janet Abu-Lughod as a pre-European expansion world system.<sup>16</sup> The links between India, China, and South-East Asia went much further back, but, as recent scholarship has indubitably established, trading began to acquire distinct patterns by the eleventh century. 'Indian merchants from the Coromandel [or Tamil] Coast', writes Abu-Lughod, 'were actively journeying eastward in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries', and twelfth-century Chinese accounts mention pearls, coral, betelnuts, cardamoms, and cotton products among the items that were shipped from the ports which had fallen under Chola suzerainty.<sup>17</sup> The Coromandel ports had been important since almost the beginning of the Christian era. However, if Greek vessels called at these ports often and the Tamilians seldom ventured westwards, it has not much to do with the attribution by E. H. Warmington of a difference between 'western' and 'eastern' minds and energy,<sup>18</sup> but rather with the role of Tamil merchants in making their ports terminals where goods were gathered from afar and from where they were then transported by Greek vessels to the world outside.

With respect to the west coast of India, an even more

<sup>14</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, in *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi, 1981; 1st edn. 1946), speaks of the 'two-way traffic between India and China', but the Indian monks who travelled took Buddhism to China, and do not appear to have left behind any record of their travels in China (pp. 192-7).

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Batuta spent several years in China in the mid-eighteenth century as the ambassador of the Sultan of Delhi, but he was an Arab, not an Indian.

<sup>16</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 269.

<sup>18</sup> E. H. Warmington, *Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India* (2nd rev. and enlarged edn.; New Delhi, 1974), 6, as cited by R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300* (Delhi, 1996), 180.

dramatic story can be told of Indian merchants and their reach to the outside world. Amitav Ghosh has evoked the world of the west-coast merchant and his place in the Indian Ocean trading network with extraordinary subtlety in *In an Antique Land*,<sup>19</sup> which Ghosh was prompted to write after he chanced upon a letter written in AD 1139 by a merchant, Khalaf ibn Ishaq, then resident of Aden, to a fellow merchant by the name of Abraham Ben Yiju, who made his home in Mangalore, north of Calicut and Cochin. The twelfth-century documents with which Ghosh began to work furnish us with arresting traces of the hybridity of language and dialect, the written and the spoken word, Hebrew and Arabic, and Muslims, Hindus, and Jews: that world begins to look more cosmopolitan and fluid than the late twentieth century, yet another reminder that the postmodern may well have prefigured the modern. Ben Yiju's trading partners included Arabs, Persians, Tulus, Gujarati Banias, and Ismailis, and Ghosh states with prescience that 'in matters of business, Ben Yiju's networks appear to have been wholly indifferent to many of those boundaries that are today thought to mark social, religious and geographical divisions'. The world inhabited by the Indian Ocean traders was indeed very expansive.<sup>20</sup>

Remarkable as is the story narrated by Ghosh, it is well to remember that the locus of action there is the south-west or Malabar coast of India, and that further north, in the promontory bordered by the Gulf of Kutch and the Gulf of Cambay, Gujarati merchants had long since acquired those trading instincts, business acumen, and sailing skills which had carried them to the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and the east coast of Africa, and which are still in ample evidence today as one ponders over the contemporary spread of the Gujarati diaspora.<sup>21</sup> Classical sources suggest that Gujarati merchants may have been present in Egypt in remote antiquity, and their presence in the ports of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, along the Arabian littoral, and on the east coast of Africa, where there seems to be some evidence of Indian settlements from around

<sup>19</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (New Delhi; London, 1992; New York, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Compare K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> For one contemporary popular account of the Patels among the Gujarati diaspora, see Steve Zwick, 'Who Are All These Patels?', *Reader* [Chicago] 29, no. 19 (11 Feb. 2000), 1, 28-31.

the tenth century, is well documented. By the late Middle Ages, they appear to have gained dominance in the trade with East Africa, and obtained control over the ports in the opposite part of India, that is along the Coromandel coast. Melaka [Malacca], which Sanjay Subrahmanyam describes as 'perhaps the most conspicuous port-city and state created in the fifteenth century', was dominated politically by the Gujaratis until the late fifteenth century, and he has no hesitation in terming Gujarat the 'linchpin of the western Indian Ocean trade'.<sup>22</sup> One can reasonably conjecture that the Gujarati merchants, characterized as a 'forgotten thalassocracy', left their imprint upon large parts of the portion of the world that seemed to matter before Europeans became ascendant, and that they knew a great deal about this world. One does not hear of any caste prohibitions among Gujarati Hindus and Jains which constrained their travels, and the adverse consequences of violating caste norms by overseas travel seem to bear an inextricable relationship to the advent of European colonialism in India, rather than being grounded in what is presumed to be the intrinsic conservatism of the Hindus.

The Indian Ocean trade, and the long history of maritime, political, and cultural relations of India with south-east Asia, eastern Africa, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean, suggest that India was admirably open to the 'world' before the arrival of Europeans. But Indian civilization clearly furnished other pretexts for arriving at some conception of the 'world'. Buddhism, let us recall, was already a 'world religion' before Christianity had been born, and it is emissaries from India who first took the teachings of Buddhism to China, Sri Lanka, and south-east Asia. It is no exaggeration to speak of a Buddhist network, of which India was a principal nodal point before the precipitous decline of Buddhism in the land of its birth in the latter part of the first millennium. An even more arresting conception of India's engagement with the 'world' is suggested by one Indologist's formulation of what he terms the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' from AD 300 to AD 1300. The immense temporal magnitude of this 'cultural formation in the premodern world' is

<sup>22</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Of Inmarat and Tijarat: Asian Merchants and State Power in the Western Indian Ocean, 1400 to 1750', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37/4 (Oct. 1995), 757, 763.

matched by its transregional geographic reach: as Sheldon Pollock notes, in the greater part of the area from Gandhara in present-day Afghanistan to as far east as Annam (south Vietnam) and central Java, Sanskrit became the premier instrument of political and public expression. Though the imperial work performed by other cosmopolitan languages such as Latin, Arabic, Persian, and Chinese is well recognized, Sanskrit also created its own world, a 'new kind of vast zone of cultural interaction, what some might name an ecumene'.<sup>23</sup> Much like the Gujarati thalassocracy, the Sanskrit Cosmopolis remains an immensely complex and comparatively little known world cultural formation.

## II. *Europe as the Lodestar of History: The Diminishing Horizons of 'World History' in Colonial India*

In so far as they do think about the 'world', even Indian intellectuals who pride themselves on their repudiation of provincialism have habituated themselves to the idea of a bi-polar world of India and the West. This is the condition of colonized people everywhere, and in recent years the idea of the 'West' itself has, among some segments of the population, become reduced to 'America'—or to what are commonly perceived as appendages of America, such as Australia and Canada. (Indeed, middle-class Indians view Australia and Canada as America without the infernal problems of America, but we need not be detained by these considerations.) Nor should one ascribe this view merely to the great unwashed, the aspiring middle classes in the underdeveloped world, and the intellectually uninitiated, since this tendency is commonly found among the overwhelming majority of those scholars who describe themselves as comparativists. The field of 'comparative history' means, in general, little more than contrasting India with Europe, or Latin America with Europe, or Africa with Europe, or China with Europe and America. Europe or the West is the constant reference point in such endeavours, and the scholar's nationality or geographic specialization, usually in a

<sup>23</sup> Sheldon Pollock, 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology', in Jan E. M. Houben (ed.), *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language* (Leiden, 1996), 199.

single country or small region, generally provides the other pole of study. The subaltern historians of India, who have acquired a reputation for their theoretical sophistication, the range of their intellectual interests, and their rigorous critique of the political and social structures of colonialism, predictably deploy the intellectual findings of Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Gramsci, and others in their work; but even the monographs that are cited are almost invariably drawn from the field of European history.<sup>24</sup> Some comparative historians have, obviously, gone so far as to consider India in relation to Africa in 1900, or to contrast decolonization in India and Indonesia, but in such instances the frame is self-evidently furnished by European colonialism. It is not altogether surprising that the broadest comparative framework, outside the work of those immersed in world systems theory and the histories of the trading worlds of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, is still entertained by scholars who work in the history of the British or French empires, as though the mandate of the now deceased empires had passed down to the scholarly caretakers of these empires.

There is nothing in the history of India before the period of European expansion which would enable us to understand how the Indian conception of the world gradually became so narrow as to exclude all but Europe. India had maritime relations with large parts of the world for several centuries before the Portuguese arrived on the west coast five hundred years ago, and I have not even made any reference so far to the extensive land relations with China, central Asia, and west Asia. Yet, as I have suggested, it is not Indians alone who are predisposed to thinking of their history as largely inconsequential and stagnant in the extended period that, following the model of European history, is referred to as 'medieval'. As one Japanese historian has written:

the majority of Japanese even today believe that the politico-cultural universe of the Edo period was fundamentally determined by the closure of the country. They also think that the opening of Japan can be reduced to the development of exchanges with the West, following the birth of the Meiji regime. It is hard for them to imagine that Japan

<sup>24</sup> For greater elaboration of some of these points, see Vinay Lal, 'Subaltern Studies and Its Critics: Debates over Indian History', *History and Theory*, 40 (February 2001), 135–48.

developed in relation with other Asian countries, since they are hardly used to appreciating Asian cultures.<sup>25</sup>

The narratives which posit, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam says, 'a surprisingly static vision of Asia before the European impact' will become increasingly hard to sustain.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it is necessary to revisit the proposition, which has nothing behind it but colossal ignorance, that whatever the evils of colonialism, it had the salutary effect of bringing India out of the morass of degradation and stagnation into which it had sunk and opening it to the energizing and uplifting winds of the West. Multiculturalists will make a virtue even of colonialism.

The integration of India into the orbit of world history and the Euro-American modern world system cannot be said to have begun on an auspicious note. In the late fifteenth century, the Arab and Indian hegemony over the Western Indian Ocean trade networks was effectively contested by the Portuguese. Had the Portuguese incursion into Indian territories merely signified the replacement of one set of hegemonies by another hegemonic power, there might have been nothing to bemoan the arrival of the Europeans. Such was the cosmopolitanism of India's west-coast traders—Bohras, Ismailis, Jains, Parsis, Armenians, various Hindu castes, Moplahs, Arabs, among others—that the presence of a new element in the trading zones would have been scarcely noticed, but for the fact that the Portuguese, unlike all the other parties to the trading network, refused to abide by the tacit understanding that, notwithstanding the occasional acts of piracy that took place in the Indian Ocean, the various nations would not attack the ships of competing parties. On the other hand, in the Mediterranean, Abu-Lughod remarks, 'a perpetual state of naval warfare existed from the ninth century onward, and commercial ships, therefore, always traveled in military conveyances'.<sup>27</sup> This is the world that the Portuguese inhabited; this is the world that they sought to bequeath to Indians, as enlightened Europe's first gift to the underdeveloped East. Purveyors of

<sup>25</sup> Yuko Tanaka, 'Le Monde comme représentation symbolique: Le Japon de l'époque d'Edo et l'univers du mitate', *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 50/2 (1995), 281, cited by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies* 31/3 (July 1997), 735.

<sup>26</sup> Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories', 741.

<sup>27</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 275.

an impoverished worldview and morality, the Portuguese imagined that Indians were similarly bereft of civilized norms of behaviour. Not only did the Portuguese claim the sole right to navigate the seas, they interdicted the ships of the Zamorin or ruler of Calicut, shelled the coast with artillery fire, and took hostages to ensure their safe passage. In the severe but not unreasonable judgement of the notable historian K. M. Pannikar, 'the Portuguese [in India] recognized no principle save that of strength', and their singular contribution to Indian society appears to have been to introduce a new threshold of cruelty and barbarous conduct. They certainly had no goods to offer to the Indians. 'The Portuguese of the 16th and the 17th centuries', Pannikar states boldly, 'had nothing to teach the people of India except improved methods of killing people in war and the narrow feeling of bigotry in religion.'<sup>28</sup>

Though the British assiduously and with considerable success sought to cultivate the view that an exceptional divide obtained between them and the Portuguese, in the history of the Indian encounter with the Portuguese lies the template, admittedly with some modifications, for all histories of European expansion in India. If the Portuguese assumed the Indian Ocean trade was subject to the same forms of terror and lawlessness that prevailed in the Mediterranean, so the British, accustomed to endemic religious warfare in Europe, presumed that relations between Muslims and Hindus were unfailingly characterized by unremitting hostility and violence. They even inferred a corporate 'Hindu' identity when one scarcely existed. Doubtless, there were instances of Hindu-Muslim animosity, and the Portuguese must have deemed themselves fortunate to find in the king of Vijayanagar a ruler who shared their disdain and hatred for Muslims;<sup>29</sup> but this is not the same as averring that Hindus and Muslims had been set on a path of mutual destruction since Islam established itself in India. However, from the standpoint of ascertaining how it is that the Indian conception of the world was so radically diminished, it is the British triumph of arms in the mid-eighteenth century which bears the closest resemblance

<sup>28</sup> K. M. Panikkar, *Malabar and the Portuguese, Being a History of the Relations of the Portuguese with Malabar from 1500 to 1663* (Bombay, 1929), 170–1, 212. Ch. 1 of the author's better-known *Asia and Western Dominance* (London, 1953), 21–54, appears to be a highly condensed but revised version of the earlier book.

<sup>29</sup> Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 31.

to the Portuguese ascendancy in the Malabar coast. It is comforting for Indian nationalists to suppose that the Indians had no answer to the naval guns of the Portuguese or to the firepower that the East India Company could command in the mid-eighteenth century, and that the technological prowess of the Europeans in each instance assured their victory. Nehru was inclined to attribute European triumphs to their superior administrative and bureaucratic skills;<sup>30</sup> others have pointed to the repeated inability of Indians to present a united front of resistance against the encroachments of foreigners, and the presence of 'collaborators' among their ranks. Both the English and the Portuguese, as is commonly known, found Indian allies. Yet the accounts call for a radical revisionism, and both in Malabar and Bengal we are confronted with all the signs of the defeat of a pluralistic and syncretistic civilization by a nation-state that acted with the singular intent characteristic of all parochial political formations. No previous political power in India had the ambition to cast Indian society entirely into the mould of its own choosing; none presumed to act with the complete confidence that its own history was the only worthwhile history; and certainly none so systematically deployed social engineering, derived from a mechanistic conception of the world, permanently to 'fix' the nature of Indian society.

The details of British ascendancy and expansionism in India need not be rehearsed here, except to point to the consequences of the spread of British institutions and the ideology of imperialism for India's relations with the rest of the 'world'. There was not much of a 'world' to speak of, since British rule appears to have had the effect of erasing the consciousness of India's earlier, more democratic, and certainly more complex engagement with Asia. The most remarkable part of the story, namely the near excision from Indian memory of links to other parts of the globe, and the suspension of other civilizational dialogues, has seldom been told. The received view, to the contrary, is that as Indian élites in the nineteenth century begin to make their way to England, and on occasion to other parts of Europe, their conception of the world was immeasurably expanded. One cannot doubt that this brought them to an awareness of their

<sup>30</sup> See, in particular, the discussion in Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi, 1946), 276-81.

own abhorrent social practices and the immense limitations of their social worlds, just as it opened them up to more vigorous and sustained traditions of learning and intellectual enquiry. By the late nineteenth century, the cream of the modern Indian intelligentsia in Bengal, where the British presence had been most dramatically and effectively institutionalized, was being educated in Britain, and it is to this period that the first substantive accounts of life in Britain by Indians can be dated.<sup>31</sup> But it is just as indubitably clear that educated Indians—and Bengalis in particular—resolutely refused to look beyond Britain and Europe, and their intellectual outlook appears to have been shorn of any reference to India's numerous civilizational pasts, including those pasts which had been dialoguing with Africans, Malays, Chinese, Persians, Afghans, Turks, and numerous others for several centuries. It is the crushing defeat inflicted upon Russia by Japan in 1905 that, for instance, seems to have first brought Japan into the orbit of Indian intellectual and political life. The 'extremists' among the Indian nationalists, as the British described them, imbibed from Japan's triumph the lesson that a nation-state that acted with determination and the force of arms could earn a place in world history. Indian nationalists are still acting out this scenario, as the resurgence of Hindu militancy and India's attempt to earn a place in the 'nuclear club' suggest, but that story cannot be told here.

This evacuation of the 'world' from world history was all the more complete because the mantle for the supposed reawakening of India fell upon the Bengalis. For nearly 150 years, before the British shifted their capital to Delhi in 1911, and before Gandhi subtly effected a change in the politics of the Indian National Congress that would have the effect of considerably mitigating the impact of Bengal upon nationalist politics, the

<sup>31</sup> There is a longer history of Indian visitors to Britain, first documented by Harihar Das, 'The Early Indian Visitors to England', *Calcutta Review*, 3rd Series, 13 (1921), 83-114; a more extended account is to be found in Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (London, 1986), and Shampa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identity, 1880-1930* (London, 2000). For the twentieth century, one can turn to other (largely untapped) documents in an effort to understand what Europe and the wider 'world' may have meant to Indians. I have in mind, for instance, the thousands of letters written home by some of the million Indian soldiers who served in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere. For a selection of this correspondence, see David Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18* (Hampshire, NY, 1999).

political, social, and intellectual life of the country was largely centred upon Bengal. In the waning part of the nineteenth century, various centres of intellectual activity and political resistance began to emerge in present-day Maharashtra, but the hegemony of Bengal is not questioned by historians. Though Bengal had a syncretistic culture,<sup>32</sup> the Bengalis could not claim on behalf of themselves that history of inter-Asian relations, much less relations with Africa, that had so decisively shaped the cultures of India's west coast. Moreover, there was almost nothing to mediate the resounding and totalizing impact of British institutions and intellectual practices upon them. Bengal's encounter with Europe, in other words, produced anxieties from which the Gujaratis and other people of the west coast had been largely free. It is these anxieties that have determined the contours of Bengali modernity from the time of Rammohan Roy and Bankimchandra Chatterji in the nineteenth century down to Nirad Chaudhuri, who dedicated his autobiography to Pax Britannica with the observation that it had given Indians the only taste of political and intellectual freedom they had ever known,<sup>33</sup> and R. C. Majumdar, the doyen of the previous generation of Indian historians, who dedicated one of his works 'To the Memory of BENGAL THAT WAS by One who Has the Misfortune to Live in BENGAL THAT IS While the CROAKING AHOM [Assamese] FROGS Kicked with Impunity the DYING BENGAL ELEPHANT and the PEOPLE AND GOVERNMENT OF INDIA Merely Looked On'.<sup>34</sup> For at least six generations, Bengali modernizers have behaved as though the world revolved around Calcutta and England; and since the advent of mass air transportation, the tendency to bypass the rest of the world has received much encouragement. One suspects that often before the Bengali is even a Bengali he is an Anglophile.

In this respect as in many others, Gandhi, a figure of disdain among the great majority of Bengali intellectuals, may have been closer to the truth when he once remarked that

<sup>32</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley, 1993); Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Nirad Chaudhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (Berkeley, 1957).

<sup>34</sup> R. C. Majumdar, *Glimpses of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta, 1960), upper case in the original. I am grateful to Dipesh Chakrabarty for drawing my attention to this work.

Rammohan Roy was, in the long timespan of Indian history, something of a 'pygmy'.<sup>35</sup> His remark outraged most Bengalis, who have been accustomed to viewing Rammohan as the 'Father of Modern India', but the entire question of the Bengal Renaissance, as it is customarily described, must be revisited if we are to understand how Rammohan, while doubtless initiating the 'great awakening', led Indians into another kind of slumber. The present generation of scholars who have habituated themselves to the task of finding Orientalist traces in the writings of Indian nationalists have predictably found in Rammohan the makings of an Orientalist, but that is scarcely the most objectionable part of Rammohan's intellectual legacy. Even someone with Rammohan's intellectual perspicacity and sensitivity scarcely understood the encumbrances he had placed upon himself, and his followers and admirers, whether in Bengal or elsewhere, are scarcely inclined to renew India's conversations with cultures outside the West.

It is surely no accident that of the three Indians who in the previous one hundred years most inhabited an expansive conception of the world—Gandhi, Tagore, and Nehru—none embraced the course of what I have described as Bengali modernity. The Bengalis never let Gandhi forget that he was a Gujarati *bania*, but he had little use for their jejune enthusiasm for Britain and Europe. He alone was singularly unimpressed by the claims advanced on behalf of industrial civilization, and as for the much-vaunted lessons of history, he resolutely held on to the view that European history was wholly uninspiring for anyone who was dedicated to the principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence). In a characteristic moment, Gandhi had written: 'I believe that a nation is happy that has no history.'<sup>36</sup> The case for Nehru is perhaps less easily argued, when we consider that, with respect to the intellectual and material progress made by the West, he apparently believed that India would do well to industrialize rapidly, worship at the altar of science, and shape a society in accordance with rational principles of social organization. Yet Nehru had an extraordinarily ecumenical conception

<sup>35</sup> Gandhi in *Young India*, 13 Apr. 1921, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols. (New Delhi, 1958-94), xix. 477.

<sup>36</sup> M. K. Gandhi, 'My Jail Experiences-XI', *Young India* (11 Sept. 1924), reprinted in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, xxv. 128.

of the world, one scarcely encountered among his peers in the West, or even among contemporary secular Indian intellectuals, much less the Hindutvavadis. His *Glimpses of World History*,<sup>37</sup> a rambling and labyrinthine account of the world written as a series of letters to his daughter Indira, roves over the entire world, and neither Europe nor even India is privileged in that narrative.<sup>38</sup> Nehru's foreign policy, likewise, was intended to steer India away from the Euro-American nexus, and his advocacy of non-alignment, which is conventionally seen purely as an expression of his desire that India should not be a party to the Cold War, must be viewed in relation to his ambition to resuscitate and strengthen those civilizational links that India had had in the past with Asia and Africa. Nehru also, let us remind ourselves, hailed from Kashmir—here India met with Afghanistan and central Asia, and here Sufism, Buddhism, Tantrism, and Shaivism together pointed to a pluralistic conception of the world long before that possibility had even been entertained in most other places. As for Tagore, his work offers a deep engagement with the folk, the non-modern, and the ahistorical; it manifests a deep encrusting in the Indian mythos. Though the Bengali middle classes hold Tagore in deep veneration, they have largely ignored his discourses on the profoundly violent course of Western civilization.<sup>39</sup>

### III. *Incommensurability and the Future of World History*

The prospects for the writing of world history in India cannot be described as promising or healthy. There is clearly no precedent for such an enterprise, but that can be no reason for disowning the attempt. The difficulties, this essay endeavours to suggest, run much deeper and can be put forth baldly as a set of simple propositions. The Indian sensibility is largely ahistorical, and the greater number of Indians still do not converse in the language

<sup>37</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History: Being Further Letters to his Daughter, Written in Prison, and Containing a Rambling Account of History for Young People* (London, 1934; reprinted New Delhi, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Vinay Lal, 'Nehru as a Writer', *Indian Literature*, no. 135 (Jan.-Feb. 1990), 20-46, esp. 23-31.

<sup>39</sup> The hagiography by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (New York, 1996), misses all the contradictions and ambivalences.

of history; moreover, the recourse to historical records, and from thence to scientized history, may well be calculated, as the dispute over the Babri Masjid showed, to aggravate social and political tensions, particularly when historical discourse shows itself incapable of accommodating faith and religiosity. However, since historical thinking is clearly ascendant among the middle classes, some may see there an opening for world history. Considering that the interpretation of Indian history is at long last largely an Indian affair, dominated by schools in Delhi and Calcutta rather than by historians in Britain or the USA, Indian historians may well feel emboldened to widen their canvas. There is already, for example, a substantial body of Indian historians whose work focuses on French and Russian history. But does that take us any closer to world history?

The conception of the 'world' to which Indians subscribed narrowed after British dominion over India was established, and the process greatly accelerated under the modernizing tendencies associated at first with the Bengal Renaissance, and subsequently with the embrace of the paradigms of Western modernity, including the ideas of the nation-state, development, and big science, by most of the nationalist intelligentsia. Some might argue that a greater awareness in recent years of the far-flung Indian diaspora has at least the potential to widen the notion of the 'world' held by middle-class Indians, though it is telling that the Indian diaspora began to evoke the interest of Indian scholars mainly after Indians in the Anglo-American world began to acquire influence and the affluence of the Indian Americans became evident. Had the Indian diasporic population been confined to Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, and other largely 'inconsequential' places, it is doubtful whether the Indian diaspora would have become as large and respectable a field of study as it is now poised to become. There is nothing on the horizon to suggest, then, that a world history under Indian dispensation would not become, as it generally does everywhere, a history of the West energizing the rest of the world, with doubtless some appropriate digressions on the greatness of the Indian past.

My own wish is to advance the much stronger argument that, at least in the present circumstances, the enterprise of world history, from whatever angle it is attempted, must be disowned

and repudiated. This is not for the reasons commonly advanced against the professional study of world history, extending from the unusual demands it makes upon its practitioners, such as fluency in a number of (preferably diverse) languages, to the superficial generalizations to which world histories are often prone. I have sufficiently interrogated, from the perspective of Indian civilization, the terms 'world' and 'history' to show the difficulties that lie ahead in the way of Indians who would wish to write world histories. There is, of course, a considerable body of literature, drawn from social history, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and folklore, to suggest why 'writing' is not merely an innocuous form of representation. Oral cultures still predominate in most of India, and, as A. K. Ramanujan's work suggests, Indian folklore displays evidently counter-hegemonic tendencies, rejecting and even mocking commonly accepted notions of caste hierarchy and the supposed learning of the Brahmins.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that writing is as much associated with history as orality is with myth, though our understanding of this must be immensely complicated by the awareness that Indian myths are grounded in a body of written literature just as history has traditionally lacked a written corpus. Are those who write world history attentive to the hermeneutics of writing? Under what circumstances does history become a mode of forgetting? What do we begin to understand of history when we also view it as a mode of obliterating certain pasts and homogenizing the future? The most popular and still dominant models of world history, which take as their centrepiece the history of Europe and the history of Europe's impact upon the rest of the world, foreclose the various pasts of people, those pasts which are resistant to the designs of an encroaching modernity which claims a singular universality for itself. The lesser developed, let us recall, have not yet arrived at the year 2000; by the time they do so, those who are now part of the present wave of globalization will have moved on to yet loftier planes. As far as I am able to judge, 'world history' informs the greater part of the people in the world that the only history they have is to catch up to someone else's history, or else they themselves will become history. Such a history has every potential to be a form of

<sup>40</sup> Introduction by Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes to section on folklore in Vinay Dharwadker (ed.), *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi, 1993), 349.

'cultural genocide', politically disempowering, and destructive of the ecological plurality of knowledges and lifestyles.

Clearly, we must ask who we write world histories for, and with what intent. Like a great many enterprises which are conceived with at least partly a noble impulse—and doubtless that is how many of its practitioners think of it, fired by the desire to expand the contours of historical knowledge, encourage multicultural education, understand the diverse modes through which culture is expressed, and so forth—world history presents itself as an endeavour to increase what in popular parlance is called 'cross-cultural understanding'. To be sure, one can use more elevated language to describe its ambitions, from the comprehension of history as a form of conflict resolution to an awareness of history as a celebration of diversity.<sup>41</sup> I have no doubt that world history will even begin to be used, if that day has not already dawned, as part of what in management circles is known as 'diversity training'. In the present state of affairs, keeping in mind the enormous inequities in the world system, the vastly different conditions under which research is conducted and produced in the North and the South, and the dominance of modern knowledge systems, there can be no more desirable outcome than to reduce the contact between cultures and reject certain kinds of conversations. In the totalizing conditions of modern knowledge, perhaps best encapsulated now in the primacy accorded to historical knowledge, the intellectual and political imperative—from the standpoint at least of a civilization such as that of India which on the ground has always been pluralistic—must remain one of increasing incommensurability. To deny the South this choice, to compel it to enter the stream of world history whose teleological centre is the Euro-American world, would be the clearest sign of a resurgent colonialism masquerading as ecumenism.

<sup>41</sup> One of the most eminent practitioners of world history, reflecting on his long engagement with world history, recently wrote of it: 'I commend it to you as a worthy and fascinating pursuit, apt for our age, and practically useful inasmuch as a clear and vivid sense of the whole human past can help to soften future conflicts by making clear what we all share.' See William H. McNeill, 'The Changing Shape of World History', in Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, and Richard T. Vann (eds.), *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities* (Oxford, 1998), 40.