

World History and Its Politics

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World history as we have it now is the pertinent form of knowledge for our times, taking its place besides other dubious labels such as multiculturalism, globalisation, multilateralism, and the new world order. This paper points out that it is in various ways one of the 21st century's pre-eminent forms of colonising knowledge – and all the more insidious in that it appears to be as benign and ecumenical an enterprise as one can imagine. An integrated history of one world sounds appealing, but we need to have a conception of many worlds, not just one world from the viewpoint of western exceptionalism.

1 Prolegomenon to the Analytics of History

In his early 19th century *History of British India*, a voluminous work that not only remained until the end of the century the standard narrative of the Indian past but also exercised an incalculable influence on the “heavenly born” British civil servants for whom James Mill's history was required reading, the father of John Stuart Mill set out to periodise Indian history.¹ By his time, the distinction between ancient, medieval, and modern was quite commonplace,² not even tempered by such phrases as “early modern”, and to an innocent reader Mill may not have appeared as effecting any kind of departure from the established template.

He characterised ancient India as “Hindu” and rendered medieval India as “Mahomedan”. In English, of course, the word “medieval” has since long had overwhelmingly pejorative overtones. The medieval represents not merely a chronological stage of history, but even more so a state of mind – a state characterised by the lack of reason, disregard for progress, and primitivism in thought, belief, and conduct. Mill would not at all have hesitated in associating the medieval period, apparently corresponding to Europe's “Middle Ages” or “dark ages”, predominantly with Islam. As Mill's history demonstrates, he was fully aware that north India had, in the second millennium CE, come firmly under Muslim rule, commencing at least with the Delhi Sultanate; and he may even have had some knowledge of Muslim sultanates in the Deccan, though like most colonial (and many contemporary) historians and commentators of India, he had fallen into the habit of supposing that the history of north India could effortlessly be passed off as the history of the entirety of India.

There were, as would be obvious to any student of Indian history, numerous grounds on which Mill's characterisation of ancient India as “Hindu” and especially medieval India as “Mahomedan” might have been cogently contested. Though Islam gained many converts, Saivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktoism, and other strands absorbed into what later became known as Hinduism continued to maintain a formidable presence. Medieval India was far from being congruent with Islamic India, and Mill would only have had to read the equally voluminous work, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829-32), of his contemporary, James Tod, to get a sense of how far the Hindu presence remained, for instance, in western India.³ Groups in certain strata of Indian society embraced Islam much more readily than other social groups. If later historians were inclined to think that north India had fallen under the iron grip of Muslim rule from 1200 onwards, many contemporary Islamic theologians doubted that India could be characterised as a land governed under the Sharia.

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Mill, moreover, made the mistake of assuming, and he was scarcely the only European writing on India who did so, that the periods of Indian history could be characterised by the religion of the rulers. Whatever the facile assumptions about the superior ratiocinative faculties of Europeans, there is little trace of logic in thinking that since the rulers of north India in the 13th century and thereafter were increasingly of Muslim faith, the people were to be characterised in like terms. Mill permitted his understanding of British and European history to furnish the terms of reference for studying the past of India, even as he adopted the view that the capacity to be objective and neutral is a trait only to be found among inheritors of the Judaeo-Christian civilisation of the west. Mill's periodisation obviously cannot account for the unique Indo-Islamic synthesis forged in the supposedly dark period of Indian history. With the characteristic confidence, indeed arrogance, that marks and mars colonial (and some neocolonial) narratives of Indian history, Mill and many of his contemporaries assumed that "the dark ages" of Europe were "dark" everywhere.

Mill was thus among those who contributed to the communalisation of Indian history. His prejudices were by no means exclusive, for in their racism and sneering hostility to others, Mill and his fellow Europeans were often catholic in their taste and inclinations. India was one among many "rude" and "barbarous" nations that peopled the earth; the Popish Irish, who were to be deplored for being ignorant and superstitious when they should have known better, occupied among the lowest rungs on the ladder of civilisation. Samuel Johnson had, after all, defined oats as something eaten by horses – and by humans, in Ireland. If Mill displayed an unremitting hostility to Islam, common to his ancestors and successors, he was even more vituperative in his condemnation of Hinduism as a barbarous religion of monkey gods and goddesses adorned with necklaces of human skulls. As Mill (1990) put it, in a chapter comparing "Mahomedan and Hindu Civilisation",

the nations, in the western parts of Asia; the Persians, the Arabs, and even the Turks; possessed a degree of intellectual faculties higher than the nations situated beyond them towards the east; were rather less deeply involved in the absurdities and weaknesses of a rude state of society; had in fact attained a stage of civilisation, in some little degree, higher than the inhabitants of that quarter of the globe.

Though, as I have suggested, there are many justifiable grounds for critiquing Mill, there is yet a more profound reason for viewing his writings with deep suspicion. Having designated the ancient and middle periods of Indian history as Hindu and Mahomedan, respectively, one can reasonably expect that Mill should have designated the modern period as Christian. By the time the first edition of Mill's history was published in 1818, substantial portions of India had fallen under British rule. The charter of the East India Company had initially put a brake on Christian missionary activities in India, but the East India Company Act of 1813 opened the country to missionaries. There is, moreover, no doubt that the Englishmen ruling India thought of themselves as representatives of a Christian power. When Charles Grant presented his tract, "Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain", to the Company's directors in 1797, it was a signal that the evangelicals had decided to join battle in turning British India into a fertile ground for

Christian proselytisation. Grant was candid in the declaration of his faith that nothing was more calculated to lift the superstitious and ignorant Hindu from his adherence to hideous customs than persistent exposure to Christianity. It was "repugnant to the past experience of Europeans", Grant wrote, to believe that the "obstinate attachment" of Hindus to their faith would prevent "their conversion to Christianity" (1813).

Template for the Rational

If Britain was a Christian power, and Englishmen in India saw themselves upholding the ideals of Christianity, Mill should have in all honesty characterised the modern period in India as "Christian", much as he rendered the ancient period as "Hindu" and the medieval period as "Mahomedan". He, however, termed the modern phase of Indian history as "British", and devoted two-thirds of his work to the history of the British in India.⁴ There is cunning of reason here that speaks volumes, even today, about the exercise of power in the Christian West. For Mill, as for the greater bulk of his intellectual contemporaries, Protestant Christianity furnished the template for a proper, rational faith. Quite predictably, all other religions, even Catholicism, were judged against Protestantism and found terribly wanting. Yet the pretence that inspires Mill, and permits him the sleight of hand, is one where modern Britain is seen as having transcended religion.

Mill was guided by several assumptions, beginning with the notion that religion was the predominant and inextricable element in the constitution of Indian society; whatever else might be said about India, religion and the battles over it had shaped its history. Second, the European Enlightenment had succeeded in establishing a division between church and state, and to be modern one had to embrace secularism. Third, cognisant of the fact that in Britain itself the evangelicals had come to occupy a significant space in the public sphere, Mill implicitly advocated a realist position that transformed religion into "the invisible hand". In principle, it was all well and good to argue that religion, a private affair, was to be banished from the public sphere; but fidelity to *realpolitik* demanded that religion function somewhat as the uncrowned king.

With this one example, I have sought to establish a number of fundamental principles. First, Europe's history invariably serves as the template for all history, whether we are least aware of it or writing history in opposition to Eurocentric history. What is true of Indian history is true of nearly every national history: the categories – ancient, medieval, and modern, as an illustration – that have informed the study of European society are assumed to be the natural categories through which one might interpret any history. I would like to underscore the phrase "national history", in part for the reason that history occupies a distinct place in the framework of the modern nation state. Moreover, we should recognise that there are traditions of non-European historiography that might have followed a different mode of periodisation but nonetheless betray some of those same features that we encountered in Mill's *History of British India*.

Older Tibetan chronicles, for example, suggest the presence of a historiographic tradition that divided the region's religious history into four phases, commencing with the "pre-history" of

Tibet before the arrival of Buddhism. The pre-history of Tibet is, predictably, rendered in Buddhist chronicles as a period when Tibetans were savages. This period is said to have been succeeded by two centuries, until the mid-ninth century, of enlightened rule under Buddhist kings, followed by a period of “darkness” when Buddhist imperial authority collapsed and adherents of the faith faced unrelenting oppression. In the late 10th century, however, Tibetan Buddhism would experience a renaissance.⁵ Though contemporary Tibetan histories might perhaps speak of a fifth phase, in which Tibetan Buddhism once again stands suppressed, this time under the firm rule of a communist regime that presents itself as the emancipator of a people living in “medieval serfdom”, what is notable is the tendency in the historiography of Tibet to render Buddhism as the opposite of “darkness” Mill, I suspect, would have understood the principle at work.

Second, an order of temporal linearity is explicitly or tacitly the informing principle of all contemporary history. As we move from the ancient age to the modern age, it is assumed that we also gravitate from slavery to liberty, from the religious life to secularism, and from a life embedded in community to individualism. In this narrative, the bitterest contemporary conflicts readily become relics of the medieval age. Thus the “fanaticism” of the Serbian nationalist, the Hindu fundamentalist, or the Islamic terrorist is something that the perpetrator of atrocities has been unable to leave behind in his halting and existentially troubled journey towards modern freedom. Third, the enterprise of history perforce condemns the people outside Europe to live someone else’s history, with consequences that have been seen across all domains of life. Europe’s past is the present of those living in India or Africa. When, at long last, the native arrives at the destination, it is only to discover that the European has moved on to another station, leaving only his baggage to be collected by natives.

Fourth, as a corollary of the above points, it becomes imperative to understand that much of history is not merely Eurocentric, but is European history. The histories of Latin America, Africa, or India are thus not merely ancillary histories, the limbs to the body of European history, rather they are illustrative of certain strands of European culture, thought, and sensibility that are invisible or only partially visible to Europe itself. We are reminded of those 19th century travellers who, on visiting India, Mexico, or the Maghreb, derived a peculiar satisfaction from having gained insight, as they imagined, into 16th or 17th century Europe, a Europe that could now only be encountered in Europe’s other. Fifth, the problem of Eurocentrism distorts not only the study of non-European cultures, but also the understanding of the contours of the history of Europe and the entire west. It is remarkable that most British histories of Britain still remain largely oblivious to the history of colonialism. It is recognised, of course, that Britain had an empire, but the bulk of British historians work under the impression that Britain’s overseas history had little bearing on British history, culture, and politics. There is almost a morbid fear that if attention were lavished on Britain’s colonies, the motor of British history might have to be construed as lying outside Britain.

To take another example, us exceptionalism, whatever its precise features, is a problem equally for those seeking to unravel the history of us history and culture as it is for those who have to

bear the brunt of us foreign policy or contend with us “soft power”. I once put forth publicly an admittedly immodest proposal that every adult around the world ought to be permitted to vote in the elections for the us presidency (Lal 2008). Since the fate of much of the world, and certainly of its most vulnerable, smaller, or (in the language of the us and its camp followers) “rogue” nations, rests so much on who is elected to the most powerful office of the world, surely the victims of the us war machine must be permitted to choose the agent of their destruction? Iraqis, Afghans, Libyans, Somalians, Pakistanis, surely these and many other nationalities must be permitted the dignity at least of being allowed the choice of being bombed into submission if not extinction by Barack Obama, Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney or Sarah Palin?

But us exceptionalism has also prevented Americans from embracing the awareness that they have been a people of plenty. They may imagine that it is their supposed addiction to democracy that revolutionises the world, but the us’ attraction to the world may stem from a plurality of other considerations, from the country’s aggressive claims of “manifest destiny” to its unusual success in fostering an amnesia about the multiple horrors of genocide, slavery, and institutionalised racism that are stitched into the fabric of American society. We ought perhaps, then, to insist that national histories, insofar as such histories are at all attempted, should never be left entirely in the hands of the citizens of the nation state in question. In the matter of national histories, nearly everyone is a nationalist.

2 The Eurocentric Wolf in Sheep’s Clothes

The perils of what are termed “Eurocentric history”, and some prospects for our emancipation from such problems, are, not so obviously, best gleaned by a reasonably lengthy account of the latest malaise in historiographic writing, namely, the recent renaissance, particularly in the us, of world history.⁶ The conference circuit in world history has witnessed rapid growth since the mid-1990s, job openings in this area have multiplied, and ambitious works in world history, such as Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997), David Landes’ *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (1998), and Niall Ferguson’s *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (2004), have garnered numerous accolades as well as an unusually wide readership. As the prolonged us recession diminishes the capacity of even the most affluent private universities to make new hires, or even replace those historians who have reached retirement, university history departments are increasingly looking to replenish their faculties with scholars whose expertise extends well beyond national history. Globalisation, the emergence of China, new polarities in world power, the rise of transnational civil society movements, and unprecedented information flows may be among the many factors that have given rise to a renewed appetite for world history.

At the University of California, a multi-campus initiative in world history was launched more than a decade ago, and among its first products is a series, published by the university’s press, called “The California World History Library”. Though the series

may be marked by an aspiration to cover the entire globe, by no stretch of imagination can many of the volumes, which are akin to monographs, be described as enterprises in “world history”. The second volume in this series, *Maps of Time* (2004), is described as a work in “big history”; and its author, David Christian, characterises his intellectual endeavour as having originated from his feeling that scholarship has been enervated by the fragmented accounts of reality that have been in fashion over the last two decades, and that historians can learn from scientists. If scientists no longer find the idea of a “grand unified theory” absurd or preposterously vain, why should historians shun grand narratives? Christian (2004: 9-10) argues that “large stories” can provide a “sense of meaning”, and that intellectuals who disavow “grand narratives” do so at the risk of rendering themselves insignificant.

Let us, for the moment, leave aside that Christian’s heady embrace of “grand narratives” is obviously precipitated by a profound disenchantment with the principal theoretical trajectories of the last few decades, many of which were in turn inspired by the desire that the grand narratives emanating from the traditions of western intellectual inquiry should be put into serious question, if not altogether jettisoned. What is striking is that Christian does not reflect on the other most obvious rejoinder, that the emulation of scientists has long been one of the principal problems in the social sciences; nor is there any degree of self-reflexivity on his part, or else he might have had to think about just how precisely an American trait it is to think big, all so that one might not be rendered insignificant.

California is, after all, a big state – with an economy that dwarfs most nations – in an equally big nation state accustomed to throwing its weight around the world. It may not be evident to everyone, but Americans like everything big, from the “big slurp” to Home Depot and Wal-Mart stores that are larger than a few football fields put together. Those who come from countries such as Sri Lanka, Fiji, or Mauritius are much less likely to think “big”, which is scarcely to say that someone from these countries may not be asking “big” questions. The late Epeli Hau’ofa of Suva, a thinker of much subtlety, asked profoundly interesting questions and put forward in his essay (1993) “Our Sea of Islands” the idea that Pacific islanders were connected rather than divided by the sea. I doubt, however, that he engaged in what Christian describes as “big” history.

My point, as should now be apparent, is that big history and world history have, in myriad ways, their own political economy. From Oswald Spengler onwards, world history has been a conversation in which colonised, and now underdeveloped, subjects have had no place, except, of course, as the objects of the wise discourse of knowing subjects. In big places one’s pretensions are likely to be big as well, and it is inconceivable, at least at the present juncture of history, that world history would emanate from Khartoum, Tripoli, Dhaka, Kuala Lumpur, or Lima. In most formerly colonised parts of the world, the struggle to decolonise received narratives and take possession of the past is far from over. In some cases, people have been unable to abandon colonial frameworks of knowledge, in others the desired “national” narrative is deeply contested by groups within the country, and

in yet other places most of the scholarly infrastructure required to rewrite history and have revisionist accounts widely accepted is still lacking. Indians may have taken charge of their history, as have (to howsoever lesser an extent) Africans of African history, but “world history”, which is generally represented as the playing field of more ecumenical minds, remains firmly within the provenance of the western scholar.

The paraphernalia of almost any kind of modern scholarship is vast, but much vaster still are the array of texts, in diverse languages, that a world historian might require and they seldom are available to those outside the western academy. We might say, from the vantage point of political economy, that world history does not merely restore Europe as the hegemon of history – a restoration occurring in the midst of much anxiety about the loss of faith in grand narratives, the nefarious influence of those French diseases of the mind that go under the name of poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the demotion of scientific history, and the infusion of interpretive frameworks that steadfastly probe the nexus of knowledge and power – but rather returns history to its “proper” home. This occurs, moreover, in spite of the fact that many of the most liberal practitioners and advocates of world histories are themselves critical of the Eurocentrism of what passes for world history, and have made, as they see it, genuine attempts to generously accommodate Africa, China, Japan, India, south-east Asia, and Islam within the orbit of “world history.”

Glimpses of World History

Let us think, then, of a world history emanating from some place other than a metropolitan centre in the west. Between 1930 and 1933, Jawaharlal Nehru penned nearly 200 letters to his daughter Indira that offered, to invoke the title of the subsequent collection, *Glimpses of World History* (1982). It is apposite that those chained within prison walls should indulge in large canvases, and everywhere the sumptuous history of prison literature offers striking reminders of the often inverse relationship of the narrowness of one’s lodgings to the catholicity of thought; but rarely has someone, confined to a prison cell by the colonial regime, been able to command as expansive a conception of the world as Nehru did in *Glimpses of World History*. Nehru made no pretense at being a historian; nor did he suppose that his letters would teach his daughter history. He did not even presume to offer an account of “world history”; his canvas may be large, but Nehru was sage enough to realise that he could only furnish “glimpses” of a vast past.

History’s practitioners seldom suppose that they are offering only “glimpses”, and “world historians” are quite candid that they are interested in the dissemination of the “big” picture. Nehru’s very title stands as a partial admonishment to those who take their “world history” too seriously. Yet he was clearly animated by other questions. How was he to convey to a 13-year-old girl the unspeakable horrors of famine in 19th century India, and sensitise her to the suffering of common people, and yet do so without filling her with “anger and great bitterness” for which there was time enough? He worried as well that he might have tarried too long on India, China, Russia, and Europe. Thus in one

letter he reminds Indira that he last treated the history of Cambodia when it was under Hindu kings, but that is no reason to suppose that “exciting things” did not take place there in subsequent decades to which he had been unable to give his attention.

As a relentless advocate of India’s cause, both before and after independence, Nehru was hardly a critic of the nation state system; and yet, as letters 129-34, where he allowed himself extended discussions of revolutions, literature, science, democracy, socialism, Marxism, and the growth of workers’ organisations, unequivocally show, he had foreseen the shortcomings of a world history centred on nation states. Like other colonised subjects, Nehru had been stirred by accounts of the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905; but, unusually for a nationalist of his time, he was determined that Japan’s triumph should not be construed as a model for India to emulate. “Japan not only followed Europe in industrial methods”, he commented, “but also in imperialist aggression. She was more than a faithful pupil of the European powers: she often improved on them” (1982: 457). There are moments, to be sure, when Nehru is writing as an Indian, or as an advocate of Fabian socialism. Yet he advises Indira, apropos of all the “isms” in circulation – “feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism” – that “behind them all stalks opportunism” (1982: 947). This was in 1933: Germany was arming itself to the teeth, pogroms against Jews had intensified, but Europe was still far from being on the verge of war. Nehru nonetheless wrote, as he put it, in “The Shadow of the War”.

Glimpses of World History is sweeping, literary, nuanced, playful, philologically minded – the word “Fabian”, Indira is informed, derives from the Roman general Fabius, who was not keen on engaging Hannibal in open conflict and sought to wear him down through attrition – and ecumenical, both in its conception of the “world” and “history”. This is the world history on which, growing up as a child in India, I was nurtured. It filled me with a vague desire that I should, sometime during the stage of fatherhood, do for my children what Nehru had done so admirably for Indira. Many years later, I was heartened to discover that my adolescent affection for this book was shared by more mature readers. British writer, journalist, and founder of the *Left Review*, Tom Wintringham (1949) gave it as his opinion that one could learn better English and better history by turning to the *Glimpses* rather than to Macaulay. But I have since also discovered that practitioners of world history in the academic establishment have received Nehru’s work with studied indifference. These same practitioners, while aware of the myriad ways – as an inspirational figure of anti-colonialism, as the first prime minister of an independent India, as a principled advocate of non-alignment, and as the supreme spokesperson in India for something like a humane modernity – in which Nehru calls attention as a world historical figure, appear to be entirely oblivious of his writings, especially *Glimpses of World History*. Even critiques of the Eurocentrism of world history seem unaware of Nehru’s unique foray into world history when it was far from being institutionalised as a subject of disciplined study.⁸

To the extent that world history has place for the likes of Nehru, it is as men of action rather than as originators of ideas. Even Mohandas Gandhi, in many respects the most arresting and

original figure of the 20th century, has suffered the same fate. The world histories have room for a sanitised Gandhi, the “apostle” of non-violence and liberator of India, but none for his brilliant and withering critique of modernity, or his prescient understanding that oppression will increasingly be exercised through categories of knowledge.⁹ No world historian has dared to place Gandhi, whose collected writings run to nearly 100 volumes, alongside Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci or Sigmund Freud since the easy supposition is that he is to be counted among the “doers” rather than the “thinkers”, and of course his slim manifesto of 1909, *Hind Swaraj*, is barely known to the torchbearers of western intellectual traditions. One wonders, indeed, whether world history even at its best does not, particularly with reference to history in the 500 years subsequent to the beginning of European expansion, implicitly endorse the crass supposition, which frequently receives succor from scholars and writers who purport to study the big ideas of our times, that the faculties of reason and reflection have been most developed in the west.

Tethered to the Nation

What conception of the “world”, then, does world history have? And, not less significantly, who is world history for, and what is the culture- and political-work of world history? In raising these questions, I am only marginally interested in certain predictable criticisms of world history, which, for all their worth, leave the political and epistemological project of world history unscathed. Large narratives are always susceptible to charges of generalisation, and most historians are barely equipped to write histories of nations, much less of the world. Indeed, even though figures such as H G Wells¹⁰ and, to take an example much closer to the interests of professional historians, Arnold Toynbee, acquired large public followings, the enterprise of universal history fell into disfavour in the aftermath of the second world war as it was seen to be deficient in scientific rigour and also inimical to national history. The last had found a new lease of life not only in the global south where anti-colonial resistance movements had succeeded in throwing off the yoke of colonial rule but also in countries such as the us, Germany, and the UK where different regimes of national consolidation had come into place.

One can certainly quibble with many world histories on the grounds that these are largely histories of the west, or of European expansion; or that they are disproportionately focused on the modern world and the supposed scientific ingenuity of the moderns. More subtle critiques of the enterprise of world history point out that world history still remains tethered to the nation state, often centring on the nation state of the historian, and that world history has no more been able to do without nation states than the United Nations can be conceived outside the nation state system. But even this objection has less force than is commonly imagined, and at least a few practitioners of world history have attempted to structure their histories around global exchanges.

One historian, Jerry Bentley (2003), has proposed a world history around “three realities of global experience and the relationships among them”: “rising human population, expanding technological capacity, and increasing interaction between peoples of different societies”. That such a history – for instance, the account of

cross-cultural encounters – may still be excessively predicated on nations and certain nation states is a criticism to which Bentley pays little attention. If world histories take the holocaust perpetrated upon Jews to be paradigmatic of genocide, if that holocaust is “the holocaust” standing forth in singular and sinister isolation, then why should we not suppose that European encounters with the world will become the template for cross-cultural encounters around the world? We are asked to accede to the view, following the immense pleasure taken by many in cross-cultural encounters, that since colonialism led the Europeans to “increasing interaction” with the world, it must have been a good thing – good at least for the Europeans, which is all that matters.

What did the “increasing interaction” between white men and Australian aboriginals, or between white men and native Americans, accomplish except the near decimation of those brought face to face with the representatives of European Enlightenment? The “increasing interaction” of what are termed “tribal” populations in Africa, India and the Amazon Basin, many of whom sit atop large reserves of mineral and forest wealth, coal deposits or natural gas reserves, with functionaries of the state, corporate raiders and other modern mercenaries has led to the rapid erosion of lifestyles cultivated over the centuries and levels of exploitation reminiscent of the plunder of the Americas.¹¹ When Bentley (2003) remarks that “generally speaking, the intensity and range of cross-cultural interactions have increased throughout history, albeit at irregular and inconsistent rates”, he wishes to lead us to the inescapable, if untenable, conclusion that these “interactions” have led the way to progress and a better and more integrated world.

From the vantage point of a historian of India, the history of what Bentley and many others describe as “cross-cultural interactions” looks very different to me. Recent studies have restored the Indian Ocean world to its rightful place as the site of great civilisations and fruitful economic, cultural, and social exchanges,¹² but even then no world history – as opposed to studies from specialists in Indian Ocean studies – that I am aware of has accorded any substantive recognition to the Gujarati thalassocracy from the 13th to the 16th centuries.¹³ Gujarati merchants roamed around the Indian Ocean for centuries,¹⁴ as early as the middle portion of the first Christian millennium, and were by the 13th century a permanent fixture in Malacca, Timor, Java, Sumatra, Kedah, Borneo, and the Moluccas, besides travelling to the east coast of Africa, Aden and the Gulf, and China. Though, to take another slice of history, north India came under the rule of Afghan kings in the 11th century, India’s interactions with Afghanistan, central Asia, and Iran were much older. One effect of European colonialism in India, the history of which until quite recently was habitually written as European cosmopolitanism running over native provincialism and medievalism, was to excise the memory of India’s long history of encounters, generally more productive and less exploitative, with central and west Asia, south-east Asia, east Africa, southern China, and the civilisations around the South China Sea and the Persian Gulf.

In 19th century Bengal, the world began to revolve around the twin poles of the middle-class society of Calcutta and the metropolitan capital of London. If the former provided the Bengali

bhadralok intellectual with emotional sustenance, his daily comforts, and the nurture of women, London was envisioned as the apotheosis of the intellectual and artistic life. “I had thought that the island of England”, Rabindranath Tagore recalled,

was so small and the inhabitants so dedicated to learning that, before I arrived there, I expected the country from one end to the other would echo and re-echo with the lyrical essays of Tennyson; and I also thought that wherever I might be in this narrow island, I would hear constantly [William] Gladstone’s oratory, the explanation of the Vedas by Max Mueller, the scientific truth of [John] Tindall [sic], the profound thoughts of [Thomas] Carlyle and the philosophy of [Alexander] Bain.¹⁵

Ways of Seeing

We need not dwell on Tagore’s disappointment, but should certainly ponder the persistence of this phenomenon today. It is my distinct impression that the world to most educated Indians means little more than India (and perhaps Pakistan) and the “West” (increasingly the us). When students in India apply for admission to overseas universities, they instinctively turn to the us. When the possibility for admission becomes remote for those equipped neither with wealth nor exceptional academic records, they turn their minds to Australia, Canada and even New Zealand. Australia is not part of the Indian imaginary, except as a place where one might possibly secure a quick MBA and a job offer. It may be that China, for obvious reasons, is slowly entering into their world view, but the possibility that Korea, Indonesia, Cambodia or Vietnam, to mention only countries in some proximity to India forming that mass which is dubbed Asia, ever evoking any interest among the Indian middle class is distinctly remote. I doubt if most educated Chinese entertain a picture of the world that is any different. The Chinese may be investing heavily in infrastructure projects all over Africa, indeed in nearly every nook and cranny of the world, but beyond China itself, the west remains the singular focus of their intellectual and cultural energies. Indian social scientists read their own kind and the work of their peers in the west, deriving their theories largely from academics in us universities; Chinese social scientists, in like fashion, know almost nothing of the world of Indian social science.

One could easily furnish other examples, ad infinitum. The conception of the world, to put it bluntly, has narrowed very considerably for most people around the world, and this is certainly true of nearly all formerly colonised peoples. This conception of the “world” and of “history” has also informed what is called comparative history. Thus, when comparative history is evoked, it generally means that one studies India and the west, Africa and the west, west Asia and the west, and so on. Rare is that historian who would do a comparative study of India and Korea (as two countries with significant histories of Christian evangelical missions), or the Caribbean and the Indonesian archipelago (as two examples of civilisational clusters revolving around the interplay of islands and seas), and so on. In comparative history, one axis of the comparison (the west) is taken for granted, and the other is generally determined by the national origins of the historian, or by the historian’s specialisation in one kind of national history or another.

Articulate and well-meaning advocates of world history such as Michael Adas have deplored the narrative of us exceptionalism.

He argues (2003) that this narrative cannot be reconciled with the “visions of America”, which he evidently shares, “as a model for the rest of humankind”. That the us – founded on slave labour, perpetrator of multiple genocides, and the best friend to countless despots – should rightfully be a “model” for anyone is itself a species, rather than contradiction, of us exceptionalism, but let such trivia pass. Other people at other times have thought of themselves as divinely ordained to free the world from oppression, or to bring light to the heathens and the blessings of civilisation to savages and barbarians, but Adas concedes that Americans have unfortunately been more inclined than others to view themselves as a people whose thoughts and deeds are guided by god.

Considering that American provincialism is proverbial around the world, who would want to disagree with Adas’ plea that world history can perhaps be the most useful antidote to the us inclination to be “out of step with time”? What place can there be for us exceptionalism in the era of globalisation? Yet the irony of calling for diversity, multiplicity of voices, and polyphonic histories in the us, even while it leads the world in stripping it of diversity under the aegis of globalisation, should not be lost on us. I see, however, little signs of such awareness in calls for world history, whose proponents appear to work with the notion that good intentions – not that we should grant that they are always propelled by good intentions – make for good outcomes. Thus when Bentley (2005) argues that critics of world history ignore the possibility that “through self-reflection and self-correction, scholars can deal more or less adequately with the problem of Eurocentrism”, he fails to understand that “self-reflection and self-correction” have themselves become the new form of the west’s exceptionalism. Whatever the faults and sins of the west, we have been assured, the west displays a unique capacity for self-correction and atonement. It is in this context that we might think of the epidemic of apologies in which we have been engulfed,¹⁶ not that any of those apologies has made an iota of difference to the many people in south Asia, west Asia, and Africa who have been at the receiving end of bombing campaigns and other inspired interventions.

Imperialism of Knowledge

It is not surprising that Bentley (2009) goes on to claim that post-colonial critics of world history “have overlooked the point that like modern science, professional historical scholarship opens

itself to examination and criticism from all angles, while myth, legend, memory, and other alternative approaches to the past make little or no space for criticism”. Here, in naked form, are mere reassertions of the orthodoxies about modern science and professional history that have held sway for generations. There is not the remotest awareness of the burgeoning literature in science studies that has effectively put into question the claims of modern science to monopolise knowledge, its apparent freedom from ideology, or its supposed fidelity to objectivity and notions of falsifiability. If self-correction amounts to nothing more than this, world history’s proponents have given almost every reason one might need to view their enterprise with deep suspicion.

It is another form of us exceptionalism to believe that what is good for the us is perforce good for every other nation. The us doubtless requires many antidotes to its ferocious exceptionalism, but that can be no reason for supposing that everyone should be invested in its problems. World history will now be foisted upon the rest of the world, and the world will most likely not be able to resist this development. Those who make the attempt will be castigated as retrogrades, parochial, acting in violation of the spirit of what, with feigned innocence, is termed the “international community”. Such is the imperialism of modern knowledge.

Advocates of world history might be puzzled that smaller or relatively insignificant nations – relative to the us, even India has been, and remains, quite insignificant, though the new forms of coolitude being championed by Thomas Friedman¹⁷ and others are calculated to put it within the orbit of the us and transform it into a useful member of the enlarged capitalist penumbra – are not grateful for entering into the horizon of “world history”, but one has only to remember the misfortunes of various nations when they fall under the gaze of colonising powers. World history is also the apposite form of knowledge for our times, taking its place besides multiculturalism, globalisation, multilateralism, and the new world order. It is thus one of the 21st century’s pre-eminent forms of colonising knowledge – and all the more insidious in that it appears to be as benign and ecumenical an enterprise as one can imagine. An integrated history of one world, our world, sounds appealing, but we need to have a conception of many worlds, not one world. There are many modes of comprehending the world outside history, and it is not sufficient to speak merely of diverse histories. But those are other stories, for other times.

NOTES

1 James Mill commenced work on the *History of British India* in 1806, the same year that John Stuart was born. The work, initially published in three volumes in 1818, was instrumental in procuring for him a position in the Office of the Examiner of Correspondence at the East India Company’s offices in London; some years later, John Stuart found employment in the same office. Both father and son rose through the ranks to occupy the post of Chief Examiner of Correspondence. See Bruce Mazlish (1975), *James and John Stuart Mill: Father and Son in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Basic Books). There is a view, encountered with much persistence, that countries such as India are hospitable to nepotism, but the case of the Mills is only one of many which makes one wonder if the British were any less amenable to

arrangements designed to confer favours and advantages upon family members. The history of Mill’s *History* is a subject in itself, but it is generally recognised that it occupies a unique place in 19th century historiography of India. For one assessment of Mill’s *History*, see Ronald Inden (1990), *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

2 On the history of this tripartite division, see William A Green (1992), “Periodisation in European and World History”, *Journal of World History*, 3 (1), pp 13-53. Mill was by no means the first person to write about the Muslim presence in India. Mahomed Kasim Ferishta, a Persian historian who came to Bijapur in 1589 and accepted the patronage of Shah Ibrahim Adil II, confined himself to the history of India under Muslim rulers, pre-facing his work with an extraordinarily brief summary of India’s history, including the Arab conquests of western India, prior to the invasions

of Mahmud of Ghazni. See John Briggs (1990), *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India Till the Year AD 1612*, translated from the original Persian of Mahomed Kasim Ferishta (1829; reprinted, New Delhi: Low Price Publications), 4 vols. Seid-Gholem Hossein-Khan, writing in the late 18th century, was similarly concerned only with the history of India under Muslim dynasties, except that his voluminous work was confined to a much smaller slice of Mughal history commencing with the death of Aurangzeb. See *The Seir Mutaqherin or Review of Modern Times Being an History of India Containing in General the Reigns of the Seven Last Emperors of Hindostan*, 4 vols (1789; New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990, being a reprint of the 1902 ed.).

3 Mill’s *History of British India* appeared in 1818, while the first volume of Tod’s *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* was published in 1829.

- Even the third edition of Mill's *History* was published in 1826, before the appearance of Tod's work; the fourth edition of Mill's *History*, in 10 volumes, was published in 1848, with notes and a critical apparatus by Horace Hayman Wilson, but Mill died in 1836. My point, obviously, is not to berate Mill for being oblivious of the work of Tod, but rather to ask why it is that Mill persisted in the characterisation of "medieval" India as "Mahomedan" when clearly there was enough evidence to warrant a different interpretation.
- 4 We may say that Mill's thinking was apparently informed by the same principle that led Thomas Babington Macaulay to declare that "a single shelf" of a "good European library" outweighed the "whole native literature of India and Arabia". Five decades of English rule, Mill would have said, were more important than the entirety of the Indian past. Mill could have had recourse to the argument that he had termed his work *History of British India*, and the reader could expect him to focus on British India; but that he devoted a volume to the Hindu and Islamic "periods" suggests that he had more than the history of the British in India in mind. How was he to establish the singularity, indeed achievements and blessings, of British rule except by contrasting the darkness under which Indians had suffered for the preceding three millennia or more?
 - 5 See Bryan Cuevas (2006), "Some Reflections on the Periodisation of Tibetan History", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, No 10, pp 44-55.
 - 6 Portions of this section are drawn from my 2005 essay, "Much Ado about Something: The New Malaise of World History", *Radical History Review*, No 91, pp 124-30.
 - 7 See, for example, Patrick O'Brian (2006), "Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History", *Journal of Global History*, No 1, pp 3-39, and Jerry H Bentley (2005), "Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History", *Journal of World History*, 16 (1), pp 51-82.
 - 8 See, for example, J M Blaut (2000), *Eight Eurocentric Historians*, Vol 2 of *The Colonizer's Model of the World* (London and New York: Guilford Press). I am aware of only one academic study of *Glimpses* in relatively recent years: David Kopf (1991), "A Look at Nehru's *World History* from the Dark Side of Modernity", *Journal of World History*, 2 (1), pp 47-63. For an earlier assessment of *Glimpses*, see Vinay Lal (1990), "Nehru as a Writer", *Indian Literature*, No 135, pp 20-46.
 - 9 For a more detailed exposition of these arguments, see Vinay Lal (2002), *Empire of Knowledge: Culture and Plurality in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press).
 - 10 Though H G Wells became renowned as the premier writer of science fiction in his lifetime, one should not underestimate the immense popularity of his *Outline of History*, first published in 1920. It sold in the millions, and Wells published his book, sometimes published with the subtitle of "The Whole Story of Man" and at other times as "Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind" in numerous revised editions over the next two decades, in 1939 for the last time. An abridged version, *A Short History of the World*, was published in 1922 and similarly was a bestseller for years. After Wells' death in 1946, new editions of *Outline* with notes by Raymond Postgate were published at frequent intervals, and the book still remains in print and is even available in a Kindle edition. The history of its reception is pertinent to my arguments at present: a committed socialist and free-thinker, Wells displayed no partiality for Christianity and as a consequence attracted considerable criticism from those, particularly Catholic intellectuals such as G K Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, who thought his ecumenism misplaced. In India, Wells' generous estimation of Ashoka was widely remembered and I recall encountering it in history textbooks during my schooldays. "Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history", wrote Wells, "their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines, almost alone, a star".
 - 11 Pdraig Carmody (2011), *The New Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge, Mass: Polity); Felix Padel and Samarendra Das (2010), *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminum Cartel* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan). The scale of the plunder described by Padel and Das dwarfs any of the "scams" or "corruption" scandals that have lately enraged many people in India. In the many discussions on the war against ethnic minorities that has been ongoing in Burma for several decades, it is seldom mentioned that the targeted ethnic minorities sit atop the bulk of the country's mineral wealth. Even most of the human rights reports on Burma, which are fixated on the fate of Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic process, have paid little attention to the political economy of the conflict. It is, however, not only in the global south that mining has become the site of the most exploitative practices. For a study of the relentless appropriation of natural resources in the US, see David Bollier (2002), *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth* (New York: Routledge).
 - 12 K N Chaudhuri (1990), *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP); Janet L Abu-Lughod (1989), *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford UP); M N Pearson (2003), *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge); M N Pearson (2005), *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History* (London: Ashgate Variorum); and Amitav Ghosh (1992), *In an Antique Land* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers).
 - 13 One world history that is somewhat attentive to Indian maritime traditions is Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (2001), *Civilisations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature* (New York: The Free Press), pp 337-42.
 - 14 See V K Jain (1990), *Trade and Traders in Western India, AD 100-1300* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers).
 - 15 Cited by William Halbfass (1988), *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press).
 - 16 See Vinay Lal (1999), "An Epidemic of Apologies", *Humanscape*, 6 (4), pp 38-41, and "What Sorry Means", *Times of India*, 15 March 2008, p 14.

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