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Reflections on Stereotypes in South Asian History

By Edith B. Lubeck

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For many students, regardless of age or educational background, the study of South Asian history seems a daunting task given the complex and often unfamiliar nature of the subjects under investigation. Of course, exotic and stereotypic images of snake charmers and mystics abound. It is often tempting to rely on mnemonically convenient formulae (caste defined and held as a constant, a given, over millennia) as the basis for instruction to reduce this material to manageable proportions. Although cultural "sound bites" may be easier for the secondary school student to digest when time constraints are great and the area of study is so disconcertingly new, the risks far outweigh the benefits. The best intentions of the history classroom are undone as historical time is compressed and dynamic modes of human interaction are reduced to a flat, two-dimensional plane. Threats against Muslims and Muslim-owned property in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have made crystal clear the importance of teaching the dangers of cultural stereotyping.

In the article that follows I scrutinize those paradigms that continue to hold a place of privilege in many textbooks despite fresh new research from numerous scholars working within the field of South Asian history over the past two decades. It is important to recognize that while curried aromas and vivid textiles enrich the learning environment, images of wandering mystics, snake charmers, fatalistic villagers, timeless and immutable caste structures and religious hatreds leave little room for contextualized investigation in the study of South Asian history.

Imagine, for example, the utter frustration of the Indian middle class, many of whom feel continuously "marginalized" by the seemingly impervious American desire to know only of superficials. Consider the following from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, written in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence by a senior writer at the time of publication: "India is rich in few things, but it teems with men of military age." An Indian graduate student recently affirmed that the question "Why do Hindu women wear a red dot on their foreheads?" continues to be the primary focus of inquiry.[1]

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Stereotype I: Imagining "timeless" village traditions, defined as fixed and unchanging over millennia (Hinduism and caste in particular) and viewed as a product of

Stereotype II: the subcontinent's geographical isolation, accepted as a given despite numerous invasions and constant contact with cultures beyond India's borders.

Even valuable surveys of Asian religions have relied on the following convenient but erroneous formula given formal expression in 1830 by Sir Charles Metcalfe, an East India company administrator serving as resident in the region of Delhi: ". . . the village communities are little republics, having nearly everything that they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindoo (sic), Patan, Mogul, Mahratta, Sikh, English, are all masters in turn; but the village community remains the same. . . ."[2] However carefully honed the individual perspectives of the civil servants who served the East India Company and later the British Crown (after the Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857–8), Metcalfe's formula fell within widely accepted bounds. James Mill certainly subscribed to this perspective in writing his *History of British India*, required reading for the East India Company's civil servants. The latter, in turn, frequently used the phrase "customs dating from time immemorial" in their administrative reports.[3] By the nineteenth century, particularly after the Charter Act of 1813 which opened the flood gates to evangelical and utilitarian influences in official Company polity, many of the British civil servants sailed to India with the hope that through their example, India would awaken from what they perceived to be the stultifying acceptance of the dictates of Brahman priests shored up by ancient social codes which had kept India in a state of moral and physical corruption since "time out of mind."[4] The panacea of English education would produce "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect," declared Sir Thomas Babington Macaulay, first law member of the government of India, in his oft quoted "Minute on Indian Education" (1835).[5]

Portrait of Charles, Lord Metcalfe
Company School (Calcutta artist), c. 1835
Image Source: http://www.martyngregory.com/China-Far-East.htm

Etching of Sir Thomas Babington Macaulay.
Source: Noel Collection Image Bank
http://www.noelcollection.org/noel/Duykinck/macaulaybwbig.html

Although scholars have long recognized the self-serving nature of these arguments and have therefore turned their focus to the dynamic nature of Indian historical change at all levels of society over the past five thousand years, it is unfortunate that the stereotypic image of stasis appears, either subtly or blatantly, in far too many textbooks used in secondary and undergraduate levels of instruction. This image of a subcontinent frozen in time, bound to so-called "medieval" strictures of caste and the dictates of kings and their ministers, is often paradoxically attributed to India's isolation-despite-contact with cultures beyond the borders. Ronald Inden notes that in *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru found acceptable the viewpoint of the Sanskritist Arthur Anthony Macdonell who held that "in *spite of* (stress is mine) successive waves of invasion and conquest . . . no other branch of the Indo-European stock has experienced an isolated evolution like this."[6] In the opening pages of the third and most current edition of the textbook

entitled *Religions of Asia*, a section is devoted to "India's Isolation and Stability."[7] The reader is presented with the perspective that geography has protected India from invasions, that "aside from" the Aryan migration and conquest, the Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Huns, Mongols, and even the British "did not radically transform the age-old Hindu social order. India's agricultural villages, the basic units of Hindu civilization, have always been too numerous and too remote to be forced into change."[8] To the contrary, although the term "subcontinent" continues to be used by most South Asianists, isolation is not a defining geographical, cultural, or psychological feature of this landscape.

New technologies are now being applied to the study of cultural contact and exchange. Recent DNA research has pushed this argument as far back in time as the period of late Pleistocene, suggesting two waves of migrations out of Africa and portraying India as a "major corridor" between Africa, Western Asia, and Southeast Asia. Most importantly for Vedic scholars, these tests may provide evidence beyond-the-text of a West Eurasian migration.[9] Recent data suggests that actual contact did occur and would have been responsible for the transfer of language (Indo-European) to the subcontinent. These results may shed new light on the Vedic texts: that is, on whether or not such a migration ever occurred as a physical reality. An alternative perspective has stressed the appeal that the "Aryan migration" thesis held for German and British scholars in the nineteenth century and focuses instead on the legacy of the Indus Valley civilization, since archaeological evidence supporting a migration of Aryan tribes is scanty at best. This periodization is defined by a gradual assimilation of Indo-European linguistic and cultural elements across the villages of north India, rather than an actual migration or conquest.[10] Further research will be required to determine whether DNA tests will fill this archaeological void.[11]

Dynamic cultural exchange across "borders" had a significant impact on rural and later urban communities, leading to the creation of complex patterns of trade as well as new social, religious, iconographic, and aesthetic forms of expression, which varied considerably from region to region, locale to locale. Consider, for example, long distance trade between the merchants of the Indus Valley Civilization and Mesopotamia; the Indo-European sacrificial rituals that would over time meld with indigenous practices to be internalized as yogic *tapas* (heat); Bactrian Greco-Roman influences in early Buddhist art, and in particular the first iconic representations of the Buddha; the martial traditions of northwestern India that trace to Scythian and Kushana ancestry; the spread of Buddhism to east Asia along the Silk Road and to Southeast Asia across the Indian Ocean following Emperor Ashoka's reign and on through the early centuries of the first millennium C.E.; the significance of Indian commerce within Indian Ocean trade, India's contributions to mathematics, science, and technology, which reached western Europe via the Islamic world; the connection that can be established between the trans-Saharan gold trade, the monetization of the medieval European economy, and the demand for Indian textiles and spices; and the impact of Asian commerce as well as Indian aesthetic traditions on the "making" of Europe. As the authors of *Religions of Asia* inadvertently argue through obvious internal contradiction, India has long been in direct and vigorous communication with the rest of the globe.

Contemporary portrait of Emperor Ashoka.
Image Source: http://www.freeindia.org/biographies/greatlkings/ashoka/

In fact, scholarship has been devoted for several decades to the exploration of those venues through which Asian influences had a profound impact on the development of Western forms of capitalist enterprise. Donald Lach, in 1965, wrote that "from 1500 to 1800 relations between East and West were ordinarily conducted within a framework and on terms established by the Asian nations. . . . The establishment of direct trade with the East also had the effect of reorienting commerce in Europe and of bringing the cities of the Atlantic seaboard directly in touch with the non-European world." According to Andre Gunder Frank, whose more recent findings are as stimulating as they are provocative, Asia in 1800 "produced some 80 percent of world output." According to Frank and other scholars, Asia was "much more productive and competitive than anything the Europeans and the Americas were able to muster. . . . The Portuguese, and after them Europeans generally, have 'bewitched' historians into devoting attention to themselves all out of proportion to their importance in Asian trade." It was only after 1800 that Europe began to "outstrip" the East.[12]

East India Company resident keeps a watcful eye on the puppet ruler Sarabhoji, c. 1825.

Collection of the Birmingham Libraries.

Source: *The East Indian Company: Trade and Conquest from 1600* by Anthony Wild. Published by Lyons Press, 2000.

Despite such rich evidence to the contrary, many textbooks used by high school and college students alike still rely on outmoded and misleading formulae. Although recently editions have appeared with appropriate revisions, not all texts have been liberated from misleading double-talk. In the sixth edition of *A New History of India*, the reader is informed on the opening page that the great traditions of Indian civilization, while absorbing influences from local customs, have lasted "epoch to epoch . . . enduring essentially through change."[13]

In sum, the isolated and timeless Indian village has never existed. Unrevised texts as well as videos such as the hagiographical survey of Rajiv Gandhi's prime ministership (1986–91)[14] which open with such pronouncements, reinforced by the swaying motion of bullocks along a village lane, can be put to effective use in the classroom as a basis for classroom dialogue about history as a field of study and about historiographical trends. (This from an astonished ninth grader in the first week of class: "You mean that historians study historians?!") As Gorden Johnson reminds readers, "only the Americas and the southern polar region are truly remote . . . it is important to recognize that the peoples of India are, and for thousands of generations have been, part of a larger human enterprise; and that as such, they have been influenced from beyond their frontiers even as they have changed from within."[15]

Stereotype III: Hinduism and Hindu "fundamentalism" are essential forms of belief and practice in existence for millennia.

Most historians today accept the thesis that pan-Indian identification with a single religious entity termed Hinduism was born of the interface between official British polity and the response of the Indian English-educated elite. Hindu*ism* appears to be a construct of the colonial era without prior lexical basis within indigenous traditions. The word Hindu itself has a complex history, deriving from the Indo-Aryan word "sindhu" (sea) applied to the Indus River by the Persians who then modified Sindhu to Hind. The Greeks and Latins received this term from the Persians and completed the transformation by creating the word India for all territories beyond the Indus. The Muslim conquerors of India applied the word Hindu to the inhabitants of the subcontinent.

Many scholars support the position held by Donald S. Lopez who contends that Hinduism, as one of the oldest recorded religions and yet a religion without a historical

founder, creed, or ecclesiastical hierarchy, is a set of diverse practices and beliefs identified by the British as a religious system only in the nineteenth century. The English-educated Indian elite quickly adopted the term as a counterweight to the Christian faith of the colonizers. Furthermore, the census, a decennial effort dating from 1871–2, further reified Indian social and religious forms, cementing the term Hindu as a pan-Indian term of religious identity.[16]

Hindu religious expression is complex and has long evolved, since 3500 B.C.E. if not earlier, not as a fundamental set of universally prescribed beliefs and practices, but rather as a flexible set of choices, a system comprised of many subsystems. Specifically, Hinduism encompasses diverse iconographic and ritual forms as well as complex philosophical systems that derive primarily but not exclusively from the legacy of

- Sacred Vedic oral traditions (*sruti*, Revelation) comprised of sacrificial rituals and hymns that over time were elaborated within complex cosmological systems, these in turn engendering intense metaphysical dialogue as well as monistic formulations as practitioners of yoga "internalized" through the "heat" of meditative practices the sacrificial function
- Legal and social treatises and manuals of instruction (*sastras* and *sutras*, identified as *smriti* or Tradition, Remembrance)
- The Epics (the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) and, equally accessible to all social classes, the 18 chief Puranas (legends, myths) within which the *Trimurti* (triple embodiment) of three deities—Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva (Shiva)—is articulated;
- South Indian forms of worship, closely linked to diverse geographical settings transformed into a social, psychological, and spiritual "interior landscape"[17]
- Devotional (*bhakti*) poetry and associated Hindu sects

Romila Thapar has emphasized that "medieval" devotional bhakti "cults" did not possess one historical frame of reference, a collectively shared memory that pointed to a primal, sacred ancestral source of inspiration. Furthermore, attitudes concerning rebirth, karma, and the afterlife, although commonly acknowledged, could vary widely from locale to locale. According to A. K. Ramanujan, the texts themselves are highly contextualized.[18]

The pluralistic school of thought in Hindu studies rejects the textual "centrism" of earlier anthologies such as Ainslie Embree's *Sources of Indian Tradition* (Second Edition). The latter suggests a core of Sanskritic sacred knowledge to which all Hindu traditions subscribed. In contrast, the pluralistic position stresses the tolerance and multiplicity of Hindu belief. In Robert Frykenberg's words, "there never has been, nor is there now, any world religion called Hinduism," unless this term refers to something "Native" to India.[19]

Stereotype IV: Caste hierarchical relationships were formed in the Vedic era under the influence of Brahman priests and have remained immutable over millennia. Caste is the "core" feature of Indian society.

The number of scholarly publications on caste is in inverse proportion to the minuscule number of textbooks designed for secondary and undergraduate education that do not privilege caste hierarchy as the "core" feature of Indian society. Most publications designed for a general audience fail to explore the evolutionary and fluid nature of this phenomenon.[20] It is not uncommon to find caste defined, without reference to historical context, as a hereditary group identity which delineates both marriage pool and occupation within a fixed, hierarchical ranking based on relative purity and pollution. The assumption is that Brahman priests have always held a position of dominance within a rigid system defined in textual terms, using the *Rg Vedic* hymn delineating the four sacred social categories (*varnas*) as well as Manu's *Dharma Sastra*.

It is emphatically stressed here that scholarly arguments for well more than a decade have offered alternative and contextualized perspectives on "warrior-centered manifestations of caste values" and, above all, the fluidity of intercaste relationships. The phenomenon of a Brahman-centered and formally delineated caste hierarchy only began to take shape as late as the eighteenth century, given further sanctity by the categorizing efforts of British administrators. A *rigid caste system* has not been the essential feature of Indian society "since time

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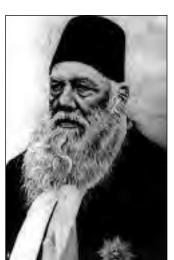
out of mind." Ronald Inden takes this position to the extreme, arguing for the significance of precolonial "subject-citizenries" under the medieval kingdom of the Rashtrakutras.[21]

The primary issue is not whether it is possible to identify a precolonial emergence of caste groupings, but rather to stress that these were components of shifting sociopolitical relationships that drew legitimacy not necessarily from Brahmanical frames of reference but also from engagement with kings (or kingship). In his book *The Hollow Crown*, published in 1987, Nicolas Dirks explored these relationships in the context of "the little kingdom" of Pukukkottai in southern India under the "old regime." He found that "Brahmanic values and institutions were mediated through the king"; it was kingship more than purity/pollution that determined the organization of castes, lineages, villages, and locality assemblies.[22] Susan Bayly carries this thesis forward through time, holding that a Brahman-centric caste *system* only gradually became manifest with the fragmenting of Mughal authority, dating roughly from the late seventeenth and on through the eighteenth century. She holds that as new kingdoms and polities formed in this volatile period, regional rulers such as the Marathas in western India established dominance as mediators of caste conflicts, reifying caste categories in the process. Within a few generations, these kingdoms (including some that were Muslim) became known for the "social refinement" of their Brahman populations, and in some regions, Brahmans rose to positions of political dominance. Kings and Brahmans together projected norms of "purity-consciousness," through mutual support of Hindu pilgrimage sites and temples and through the central role of Brahmans in royal rituals. "With at least qualified support from rulers, Brahman priests—together with scribes, ascetics and merchants who followed Brahmanical social codes—generated around themselves a distinctively caste-like society throughout the subcontinent."[23]

It was a result of this relatively recent process that Brahmans as scribes and interpreters so captured the attention of administrators under the East India Company. By the nineteenth century, under the Raj of Company and (eventually) Crown, interpretative discourse had become all the more complex as the British devised systems of revenue collection which drew from Mughal administrative practices, promulgated reformist social regulations, wrote massive official ethnographies, and after 1871–2 produced decennial censuses. The latter notoriously turned social, linguistic, and religious differences into "objective" categories for the purpose of monitoring the "progress" of British administration.[24] Although consensus on the nature of caste was never fully reached, with stress variously placed not only on Brahmanical standards of rank, but also race, environment, or region, these scholar-administrators contributed to the further development of a "caste-conscious social order," as evidenced by Sir Herbert Risley's census of 1901.[25]

Muslim authorities likewise possessed certain cultural and religious perspectives as well as administrative expertise which captured the attention of Company servants. Eaton notes, for example, that when Robert Orme in 1763 linked "languor" to the "inelastic atmosphere of the climate" in Bengal, he was assimilating Mughal perceptions long present in India. In the *Akbar-nama* of Abu'l fazl, Akbar's chief advisor, the climate of Bengal is identified as the primary cause for the "corruption of men."[26] The combination of the British zeal for interpreting, categorizing, and recording ethnographic "data," British selectivity after 1857–8 concerning which groups could safely be permitted to have access to imperial centers of authority, initiatives undertaken for the redress of grievances by

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Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.
Image Source: *Story of Pakistan: The Web Site.*
http://www.storyofpakistan.com/
person.asp?perid=P001

nationalist and subaltern leaders, and the decision to gradually open legislative councils to Indians sparked the creation of new forms of public dialogue. After the violence of 1857–8, and once British retaliation had subsided, Sir Sayyid (Syed) Ahmad Khan (1817–98) initiated the "Aligarh movement" and founded the Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, encouraging Muslims who mourned the loss of Mughal authority to cooperate with the British with whom he was regularly called into consultation. That Muslims were granted not only reserved seats but also the right to vote as a separate electorate by the Indian Councils Act of 1909 (the Morley-Minto Act) is one example of the competing claims for religious or caste recognition that began to shape new group identities under the British Raj.[27]

Well aware of the value of British official reports and favors, diverse communities awaited the outcome of each census to carefully orchestrate efforts to achieve specific social and political goals. Efforts to achieve upward social mobility through the establishment of caste associations were often successful. One example is that of the low ranking south Indian Shanar caste who climbed palmyra trees to tap the sap for production of toddy. The Shanars first came to the attention of the British during a "breast cloth controversy" sparked by the efforts of Christian missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century to clothe Shanar women, in contravention of the dictates of the Hindu elite. Such strictures were demanding: Shanars were required to walk thirty-six paces from a Nambudri Brahman, for example. Carrying umbrellas, using shoes, and wearing gold ornaments were also forbidden. Shanar women could not clothe the upper part of their bodies. By the twentieth century, to elevate their social status and derive benefits through competition for newly opening legislative seats within the Madras Presidency, the Shanar changed their caste name to Nadar and successfully established a new caste identity by forming a publicly visible, politically savvy, and economically successful caste association.[28]

Similarly, the creation by the Indian elite of various associations for social reform furthered this "reorienting" or refinement of social expectations and values. Such organizations as the Unitarian-inspired Brahmo Samaj under Ram Mohun Roy (1772–1883) and the Arya Samaj, founded in 1875 by Dayananda Saraswati who called for a revival of Vedic social and religious traditions, contributed to the formation of new social perceptions as opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and religious self-assessment were presented with the introduction of English as the medium for higher education.

For those not protected by these relatively new forms of collective group action, the late nineteenth century was a period of financial uncertainty for many Indians whose sources of income were now subject to the vicissitudes of the global market. Such uncertainty, according to Peter Mayer, may have engendered in north India another dimension of caste that until recently has been considered a timeless phenomena: *jajmani* relations. Largely as a result of the anthropological classic *Behind Mud Walls*, the jajmani system has long been thought to be an integral component of caste hierarchical ranking, a timeless set of relationships defining hereditary rights and responsibilities between lower caste service providers (barbers, washermen, potters, etc.) and the *jajman* or patron who employed Brahman priests and other artisans. Mayer's thesis is that these "dyadic" relationships were forged by Untouchables and artisans only in the late nineteenth century as their village-wide, shared responsibilities vanished, particularly in villages held in

collective village tenure.[29] According to Mayer, until the early twentieth century, there are no travelers' reports, no official British references, no terms of reference in revenue glossaries, and no elaboration of jajmani relations in official studies of castes and tribes.[30] Just as "Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes," and as a result, "Africans built tribes to belong to,"[31] so the image of timeless jajmani relationships is an anthropological invention, derived from sacred texts rather than verifiable, historical evidence.

Another example of caste both misperceived and excessively perceived as the core component of the India psyche has been brought into question by Mattison Mines. His concerns pertain to Louis Dumont's seminal paradigm, accepted without serious debate for several decades, that Western individualism stands in marked contrast to the ritual responsibilities and formal obligations that govern daily life for the "Homo Hierarchicus" of the Indian caste system.[32] According to Mines, championing equality or social liberty is not a defining mark of individual expression in India. Furthermore, too much wealth gained through successful individual initiative is often taken as a sign of venality and corruption.[33] From his study of Indian merchant headmen within the Chettiar caste in the late eighteenth century, Mines has determined that it is through the ability to command the loyalty of supporters through master/client relationships, within which apparent denial of self-interest is of paramount importance, that the spirit of individualism can indeed be found.[34]

Stereotype V: Conflict between Hindus and Muslims is endemic in South Asia.

Through print and visual media it is common knowledge that animosities between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs reached tragic proportions (estimates range from one to two million deaths) at the time of Partition in 1947, that the status of Kashmir has long been a source of conflict between India and Pakistan, and that the threat of nuclear war was all too real along this border in the 1990s. Less well understood is that the nationalists did not speak with one voice, that 83 of the 600 delegates attending the third annual session of the Indian National Congress in Madras were Muslim, and that many nationalists "proudly" claimed "the Indo-Islamic past as an integral part of the Indian inheritance."[35] The tendency to portray action at the village level as purely reactive (the nationalist elite versus the mob) rather than conscious and contingent, varying by local customs and political relations,[36] draws inspiration from the same narrow perceptual field as the common stereotype of an absolute divide between Muslims and Hindus. Stereotypes do abound in popular depictions of the nationalist movement, particularly given the bloodbath of Partition. Arguing against such constructs, Tapan Raychaudhuri noted that India has never had wars of religion involving the civil population, "unlike Europe."[37] It is important to stress that diabolical music did not play each time that Muhammad Ali Jinnah entered a room, as Richard Attenborough's film "Gandhi" (1982) would have the audience believe. In fact, a controversial thesis has suggested that Jinnah used the threat of partition as a bargaining chip in his bid for control of what he hoped would remain a unified subcontinent.[38]

Gandhi, 1946.
Image Source: *Gandhi*. Published by Phaidon Press Inc.
© 2001 Phaidon Press Limited.

Gandhi was well aware of the painful effect that British racial and religious condescension had produced "in the Hindu psyche," and he countered with such powerful symbolic formulations as the wearing of Indian-made cotton cloth (*khadi*) and the associated use of the spinning wheel, his skillful conjoining of religion and politics through carefully designed forms of nonviolent resistance, and his support for education in Indian languages, while embracing diverse religious and social communities, women and Muslims very much included.[39] His use of Hindu symbolism led many Muslims to wonder whether an

In recent years, the "fundamentalist" and at times violent, call for Hindutva as the ideal of a Hindu nation-state has been fueled by social, economic, and psychological pressures and has little to do with the quietist goals or other historically diverse forms of Hindu ritual and belief. Similarly, Muslim scholars eschew the term "fundamentalist."

independent India would understand the universal intent in Gandhi's call for *Ramarajya* (rule of God). Still, "many Muslim friends" in Calcutta turned to him for protection as violence escalated in August 1947, and Gandhi insisted that he had no intention of ever being swept off his feet by any one religious current; he included the Muslim *shahada* in his prayer meeting at Valmiki Mandir on April 1 of that year.[40] Gandhi was assassinated not by a Muslim but by a member of a Hindu extremist group whose slogan has endured decades later: "Hindustan Hinduka, nahi kisika baap ka" (Hindustan belongs to the Hindus, not to anybody else's father).[41]

The colonial legacy should not be forgotten. The diverse communities vying for power and prestige, particularly after 1857–8 (although Hindu-Muslim riots had occurred in the early nineteenth century), created a foundation for the communal tensions which have exploded in recent decades. Particularly volatile have been issues pertaining to the implementation (1990) of the Mandal Commission's recommendations to enlarge the list of castes for whom government jobs and educational opportunities have been reserved through affirmative action guidelines (called "protective discrimination" in India under principles established by the Indian Constitution), legal protection for Muslim women (the "Shah Bano case" of 1985), and the destruction of the Babri *masjid* (mosque) by Hindu militants in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.[42] As in the period of nationalist struggle, there are many nonreligious motivations for these tensions. Recent acts of violence have had much to do with the fears of unemployed upper caste Hindu youth, the alienation of affluent Indian communities abroad, social trends toward consumerism that place additional pressures on the educated middle class (small traders and clerks, lawyers, teachers, doctors, and contractors, in alliance with wealthy farmers), competition between those with varying degrees of privilege within the elite whose employment opportunities and status are determined, for example, by access to English-medium schools (with the affluent numbering between 150 to 200 million, or approximately one fifth of India's population), the rapid growth of population, and the impact of television. In addition to these concerns, Sumanta Banerjee turns to Sartre for the phenomenon he called the "poor man's snobbery," a phrase applied to the anti-Semitism of the poor in Europe and relevant to communal violence in India, according to Banerjee, given the physical and psychological tensions associated with both low social status and grinding poverty. (Approximately 300 million out of a population of more than 1 billion fall below the poverty line.) From his comparative analysis of six cities, published this year, Ashutosh Varshney has found that for India's urban population, the presence or absence of "vigorous associational life" (for example trade unions, professional associations, film clubs, and political parties) is the "key determinant" for peaceful or "riot-prone" relationships between Hindu and Muslim communities.[43]

Akbar Ahmed pleads with Muslims to imagine history from a Hindu perspective, and with Hindus to recognize that the invader was but one "face of Islam" to which the scholar and saint must be added.[44] This contextualizing underscores the limitations of the term "fundamentalist." As has already been stated, "Hindu fundamentalism" is an oxymoron, a political construct formed initially from the Hindu elite's agonizing self-assessment in the face of Christian certainty of purpose and belief as well as the British penchant for categorization. In recent years, the "fundamentalist" and at times violent, call for Hindutva as the ideal of a Hindu nation-state has been fueled by social, economic, and psychological pressures and has little to

Akbar Ahmed.
Image Source:
http://www.duplain.com/Dr_
Akbar_Ahmed.htm

do with the quietist goals or other historically diverse forms of Hindu ritual and belief. Similarly, Muslim scholars eschew the term "fundamentalist." The reader is instructed through John Esposito's acclaimed survey, *Islam, The Straight Path* that "Islam . . . has been mediated through many interpretations and applications throughout its history. . . . The many faces and forms of Islam raise two fundamental questions: Whose Islam and What Islam."[45]

There are many historical counterweights to these images of competition and conflict, and these alternative perspectives deserve recognition not merely because they appear so infrequently in American newspapers and television, but because they place religious strife within a larger cultural context than is commonly recognized. That context owes much to the legacy of Hindu and Muslim cultural contact and exchange. Since the first Muslims arrived as traders along the west coast prior to the Muslim conquest of Sind in the eighth century C.E., disparate religious communities have strived for mutual understanding through peaceful dialogue. At the grassroots level, from the twelfth century onwards and beneath the "umbrella" of Muslim rule, Hindus joined Muslims in prayer at the village tombs of Muslim sufi saints, recognizing in the traditions of the three great "medieval" Sufi orders textured forms of religious expression that resonated well with Hindu devotional longings (bhakti). Such contacts produced exquisite poetry rich in social commentary, as sung today in religious and social gatherings. Hindus and Muslims served in each others' armies, giving rise to Urdu (the Turkish word for "camp") as a blend of Perso-Arabic script, Persian, Arabic, and Turkic vocabulary, and grammatical forms deriving from Sanskrit. Particularly outstanding are the *ghazals* (Persian and Urdu poetry following certain rules of rhyme) of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1796–1869). Mughal painting was enriched by Hindu artistic traditions, with Indian artists from traditional centers of painting constituting the majority in Emperor Akbar's studios, where Persian, Indian, and European themes were reinterpreted and synthesized. From the Delhi Sultanate through the Mughal empire, Muslim rulers adopted Hindu architectural forms, beginning with mosaic in sandstone, marble, and schist, and, later, kiosks (*chhatri*), balconies, eaves, columns and lintels.[46] Such architectural elements are visible in the abandoned Mughal imperial city of Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's capital from 1571 to 1585; although designed to give evidence of Akbar's Islamic piety,[47] the Great Mosque enclosing the tomb of Shaikh Salim Chishti in Fatehpur Sikri has Hindu pillars. Similarly, Islamic gateways, vaults, domes, and battlements entered Hindu architecture.[48]

Indeed, loyalty to locale or region, or to a sense of shared ancestry, or to India as a nation, often complements or transcends religious identity. Peter Gottschalk recorded villagers' interpretations of a frequently recited narrative related to the precolonial history of Muslim control in the region of Arampur, Bihar. He found that memories for Hindus and Muslims often cohere around a shared sense of village community and that religious differences, in evidence through the weightedness given Hindu or Muslim elements within this well-known story, can exist without escalating to a level of conflict.[49]

Religious identity then, like caste, is one of many elements that give direction and meaning to daily life. Essentializing any one social, religious, or cultural component as "core" may defeat the best intentions to infuse the history classroom with a sense of human agency. Linking texts to specific historical contexts, recognizing the significance of the choice of lens through which these contexts have been viewed, will allow the mind of the history student, in Rabindranath Tagore's words, to be led forward "into ever-widening thought and action."[50]

Recent scholarship points to new and challenging options for exploring South Asian history in both secondary and undergraduate education. Abandoning exotic Orientalist perceptions and definitions, however mnemonically convenient or efficient they may seem given time constraints within the school calendar, or general apprehension about the subject matter or persuasiveness of stereotypic commentary in the media, will open valuable possibilities for sophisticated historiographical investigation and debate. There is great value in encouraging students to recognize that perceptions of caste require contextualization and that caste relationships were not historically immutable "since time out of mind." It is equally productive to understand that Hinduism has long represented, as a system of subsystems, a set of choices that evolved over five thousand years and yet were only circumscribed within a single pan-Indian faith as a product of colonial and nationalist dialogue. It is instructive that fatalism has been placed in appropriate context by ample evidence of Indian entrepreneurship and by the daily struggle for survival of the subaltern whose agency in history is now the focus of much scholarly attention. Textbooks are beginning to reflect the outstanding scholarship that has moved discussion of these and other complex topics along new and challenging trajectories.

Snake charmers, turbans, saris, mystics, the Taj Mahal (which is more Persian than Indo-Muslim), and fabulous cuisine will certainly entice all but the most reticent student. Then let meaningful historical dialogue create a bridge between American institutions of learning at all levels and the people of South Asia so that the "twain" shall finally meet with intellectual dignity and in global partnership. ■

NOTES

1. "The Birth of India and the End of Empires," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (August 10, 1997) B4; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 93. Also, Sumanta Banerjee,"'Hindutva'—Ideology and Social Psychology," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1–19, 1991; Binod Khadria, "GATT, GATS and Ethnocentricity in MNCs," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1–19, 1991.

2. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 70; Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 204–6.

3. Sheldon Watts castigates James Mill in *Epidemics and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 175. For subaltern perspectives on the plague and British policy: David Arnold, "Touching the Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague, 1896–1900," *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 390–426.

4. Watts, 178.

5. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

6. Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 55.

7. John Fenton et al., *Religions of Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 22.

8. Ibid.

9. Michael Bamshad et al. "Genetic Evidence on the Origins of Indian Caste Populations," *Genome Research* (11:2001) 994, 1000, 1001, courtesy of the University of Utah and the NEH World History Institute, summer 2001.

10. For the alternative periodization (a late Harappan Localization Era, 1900–1300 B.C.E., followed by a Post-Indus Regionalization Era, 1200–300 B.C.E.) see Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 174.

11. Bamshad, 995; Although he argues that the genetic impact of the Aryans would have been "negligible," these findings reinforce the position held by Michael Witzel, "Early Indian History: Linguistic and Textual Parameters," *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*, offprint, George Erdosy, ed. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 113.

12. Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 1, Book I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 166, 172, 179; Watts, 175.

13. Compare the revised fifth edition, page 59, to the fourth edition of John McKay, Bennett D. Hill, John Buckler, ed., *A History of World Societies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, fourth edition, 1996), 314, 65; Wolpert, 3.

14. "Rajiv's India," Show #101, International Syndications, Inc., Jack Anderson File, Dub 1:3:86.

15. Gordon Johnson, *Cultural Atlas of India* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Andromeda Oxford Ltd., 1996), 17.

16. Donald S. Lopez, *Religions of India in Practice* (New Delhi: Munshirarn Manoharlal, 1998), 5–7.

17. A. K. Ramanjan, *The Interior Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1967), 167.

18. Romila Thapar, "Imagined Religious Communities?" *Modern Asian Studies* (23, 2: 1989), 216; A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," *India through Hindu Categories*, McKim Marriott, ed. (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1990), 47.

19. Robert Eric Frykenberg, "The Construction of Hinduism as a 'Public' Religion: Looking Again at the Religious Roots of Company Raj in South India," *Religion and Public Culture*, Keith E. Yandell and John J. Paul, ed. (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 3, 7, 17.

20. In contrast, Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler place particular stress on the gradual development of these structures, although caste distinctions are said to have emerged as "prominent characteristics of Aryan India." *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2000), 67.

21. "Until the emergence of British colonial rule in southern India the crown was not so hollow as it has generally been made out to be. Kings were not inferior to Brahmans, the political domain was not encompassed by the religious domain. Indian society, indeed caste itself, was shaped by political struggles and processes." Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4; Inden, 227.

22. Dirks, 283, 249.

23. Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 64–5.

24. Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 8.

25. Although occupational categories replaced *varna* as the basis for classification in 1871, Risley preferred religion and race, using nasal index as a valid indicator of social rank. van der Veer, 148; Bayly, 97–143.

26. Richard Eaton, "(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India," *Journal of World History* (11: 1, 2000), 75.

27. K. Sarwar Hasan, excerpt from *The Genesis of Pakistan* (Karachi, 1950) in *Gandhi: Maker of Modern India*, Martin Deming Lewis, ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965) 44; Wolpert, 264.

28. Robert Hardgrave, "The Breast Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (5: 1968) 173, cited in Cohn, 139–43.

29. Peter Mayer, "Inventing Village Tradition: the Late Nineteenth Century Origins of the North Indian 'Jajmani System,'" *Modern Asian Studies* (27, 2: 1993) 385.

30. Ibid., 367–74.

31. Ibid., 387.

32. "Let us now consider . . . what man as a member of a caste can teach us about man as an individual, about ourselves." Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 236.

33. Mattison Mines, "Individuality and Achievement in South Indian Social History," *Modern Asian Studies* (26, 1: 1992), 132–4. The English found that the Indian artist could "out-do all the Ingenuity of Europe" in the seventeenth century. *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Dhanna Kumar and Tapan Raychaudhuri, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 294.

34. Ibid., 134.

35. Wolpert, 258; Tapan Raychaudhuri, "Shadows of the Swastika: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Hindu Communalism," *Modern Asian Studies* (34, 2: 2000), 269.

36. Shahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, UP, 1921–2," in Guha and Spivak, 312, 316, 331.

37. Raychaudhuri, 275.

38. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 260–3. This image of Jinnah "playing poker for high stakes" has been called the "RoboQuaid" (construct) in Akbar S, Ahmed, *Jinnah, Pakistan, and Islamic Identity: the Search for Saladin* (London: Routledge, 1997), 19, 30–1.

39. Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 86–7; Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 39.

40. Stanley Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 232, 240.

41. Raychaudhuri, 264.

42. Ahmed, 38; Marshall Bouton and Philip Oldenburg, *India Briefing: A Transformative Fifty Years* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 224.

43. Banerjee, 98–9. Raychaudhuri, 270–1; Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethic Conflict and Civil Life: Hindus and Muslims in India.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 281–2.

44. Ahmed, 36–7.

45. John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 223.

46. Hermann Goetz, *The Art of India* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1964), 227.

47. John Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 30.

48. Goetz, 222, 227.

49. Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 110–1; Varshney underscores the point that chronic Hindu-Muslim conflict is not pendemic: for the period 1950–95, nearly all of rural India and eighty-two percent of the urban population did not tend toward violence. Varshney, 6–7.

50. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1971), 50.

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