The Concerned Indian’s Guide to Communalism

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The history of the twentieth century in the subcontinent will be remembered, among other things, for the rise of communal ideologies to a position of prominence in national politics. If in the middle of the century Muslim communalism succeeded in establishing an Islamic state in the form of Pakistan, the coming to power of a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India at the end of the century reflects the resurgence of Hindu communalism—for at the heart of the BJP lie the organizations which are working towards the establishing of a Hindu state in India. Why there should have been a growth and a resurgence of communal ideologies has to do both with contemporary politics and with political ideologies which are based on a belief in a particular view of the Indian past. The interpretation of history is therefore central to these ideologies. Those that do not accept the particular historical interpretations foundational to a communal ideology are dismissed as distorters of Indian history. What is not recognized is that the Hindutva view of history, or its counterpart of the two-nation theory, are in effect the distortions, for they are still rooted in the colonial explanations of Indian history of the nineteenth century, and refuse to accept that historical analyses and interpretations have moved.
in new directions, and none of these would support either the Hindu or the two-nation theory.

Much of what I have to say in this essay will be concerned with recent perspectives of Indian history. My focus is on the way in which we have constructed and used the concept of communities in the history of India and more particularly in the history of the last one thousand years. This has generally taken the form of imposing on historical events the theory that Indian society consisted of two hostile, monolithic communities—the Hindu and the Muslim. Such a view does not even attempt to consider the possibility of different historical approaches to the study of communities in history. The continuing imprint of communal ideologies in our public life obstructs a diversity of views.

The viewing of Indian history in terms of two monolithic communities identified by religion has its origins in nineteenth century colonial interpretations of Indian history, where not only were the two communities described as monolithic but they were also projected as static over many centuries. This is of course not to deny that the labels were used earlier, but to argue that they were used in a different sense, and their use has its own history which has yet to be investigated in detail. My intention is to observe how those to whom we give a primary association with Islam, were initially perceived in India and the way in which such groups were represented as part of this perception. This was far more nuanced than is allowed for in the concept of monolithic communities and these nuances require exploration. The representation in turn had an impact on what have been described as the multiple new communities which came to be established. The newness was not because they were invariably alien; on the contrary they often incorporated earlier ways of community formation into the new communities. This links the first millennium AD to the second. The continuities did not have to be literal but could have been conceptual and while the nature of change in some situations was new, in others it could well have followed earlier patterns.

The definition of the Muslim community extends to all those who claim adherence to Islam and the adherence is said to be demonstrated by a clearly stated belief and form of worship, which through conversion confers membership on a large body of believers, a membership which also assumes the egalitarian basis of the association. The perspective of the court chronicles of the Sultans and the Mughals was that of the ruling class and this perspective broadly endorsed the above definition and reinforced the projection of a Muslim community, a perspective in which the Hindu—as defined by such literature—was seen as the counterpart. It is as well to keep in mind that this is the current interpretation of these texts and although some of these sources may conform to the view from the windows of power, not all do so. Therefore, although sometimes carrying political and even theological weight, this view was nevertheless limited. As the articulation of a powerful but small section of society, it needs to be juxtaposed with other perspectives.

The notion of a Hindu community evolves from a geographic and ethnic description gradually giving way to religious association. The Hindu community is more difficult to define given the diverse natures of belief and worship, making it the amorphous ‘Other’ of the Muslim community in some of the court chronicles. The crystallization of this perception occurs when erstwhile Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Lingayats and others begin to refer to themselves as Hindus, rather than by their earlier separate labels—which in most cases is a late occurrence. Communities of the subcontinent have in the past been diverse, with multiple identities, and the attempt to force them into unchanging, static entities would seem to contradict the historical evidence. With the modern connotation of a religious community, both terms have come to include even in the interpretation of the historical past, all manner of
diverse societies across the subcontinent, for some of whom convergence with the formal religion is, if at all, of recent origin.

The idea of two distinctive segregated civilizations, the Hindu and the Muslim, in conflict with each other, was assumed in colonial scholarship. References to the Hindu and the Muslim nation are common in the works of Orientalist scholars. Thus James Mill differentiated the Hindu civilization from the Muslim, which gave rise to the periodization of Indian history as that of the Hindu, Muslim and British periods. It crystallized the concept of a uniform, monolithic Hindu community dominating early history as did the Muslim equivalent in the subsequent period, with relations between the two becoming conflictual. These notions were in a sense summarized by Christian Lassen who, in the mid-nineteenth century, attempting to apply a Hegelian dialectic, wrote of the Hindu civilization as the thesis, the Muslim civilization as the anti-thesis, and the British as the synthesis.

Part of the insistence on the separateness of the two civilizations was the assumption that those who came with Islam had been regarded even by earlier Indians as alien, in fact as alien as the Europeans. This however was an erroneous perception of earlier historical relationships. Those associated with Islam had come through various avenues, as traders, as Sufis and as attachments to conquerors. Their own self-perceptions differed, as did the way in which they were perceived by the people of the land where they settled. For a long while in India, they were referred to by the same terms as were used in earlier times for people from west and central Asia, suggesting that their coming was viewed in part as a historical continuity. And there are good historical grounds to explain such a continuity.

The Arabs, Turks, Afghans and Persians were familiar to northern and western India, since they were not only contiguous peoples but linked by trade, settlement and conquest, links which went back, virtually unbroken, to many centuries. Central Asia was the homeland of the Shaka and Kushana dynasties which ruled in northern India at the turn of the Christian era and later of the Huns who came as conquerors and became a caste. In Iran, the genesis of the languages spoken there and in northern India were Old Iranian and Indo-Aryan, which were closely related languages as is evident from examples of common usage in the Avesta and the Rigveda. Persian contacts with India were initially through the Achaemenids— who were near contemporaries of the Mauryas—and later through the Sassanids, closer in time to the Guptas. Territories in Afghanistan and the north-west were alternately controlled by rulers from either side of the passes. Ashokan inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic in Afghanistan attest to Mauryan rule; later dynasties with bases in the Oxus region and Iran brought north-western India into their orbit. Trading links were tied to political alliances. Close maritime contacts between the subcontinent and the Arabian peninsula go back to the time of the Indus civilization and have continued to the present.

There is therefore an immense history of interaction and exchange between the subcontinent and central and western Asia. The change of religion to Islam in the latter areas does not annul the earlier closeness. Interestingly even the Islam of these areas was not uniform, for there were and are strong cultural and sectarian differences among the Muslims of central Asia, Persia and the Arab world, differences which can in some cases be traced to their varying pre-Islamic past, and which influenced the nature of their interaction even within the Indian subcontinent.

These were contiguous people whose commercial and political relations over a long past, sometimes competitive and hostile and at other times friendly, were well recognized. Many had settled in India and married locally. One of the clauses of the treaty between Chandragupta Maurya and...
Seleucus Nikator has been interpreted as a *jus conubii*, freedom for the Greeks and Indians to intermarry. Such marriages doubtless gave rise to mixed communities of new castes and practices, a process that did not cease with the arrival of Muslim Arabs and others. Similarly Indian traders and Indian Buddhist monks who lived in the oasis towns of central Asia were also to be found in ports and markets in west Asia, and were agencies of cross-cultural fertilization. Manichaeism for example drew on this and became a major religion in the early Christian era, largely because it was an amalgam of Mahayana Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity and elements of central Asian shamanism. The dialogue between Indians, central Asian Turks, Persians and Arabs was a continuing one, irrespective of changes of dynasties and religions or of trade fluctuations. This dialogue is reflected for example in Sanskrit, Greek and Arabic texts relating to astronomy, medicine and philosophy, and in the presence of Indian scholars resident at the court of Harun al’ Rashid.

The coming of the Europeans and the colonization of India by Britain was an altogether different experience. They came from distant lands, were physically different from the residents of the subcontinent, spoke languages which were entirely alien and in which there had been no prior communication; their rituals, religion and customs were alien; and above all they did not settle in India. The assumption that the west Asian and central Asian interventions after AD 800 and that of the British were equally foreign to India, in origin and intent, would, from the historical perspective, be difficult to defend.

Historically, therefore, it makes little sense to speak of the period from c. AD 1000 to the recent present as a thousand year of foreign rule. The territorial boundaries of today did not exist in those days and dynasties which had their origins in clans and families based on what we now call the Indo-Iranian borderlands and Afghanistan or the Arabian peninsula, can hardly be called foreign once they settled in the subcontinent and made it their home. Those coming from the borderlands were continuing the tradition of the Shakas, Indo-Greeks, Kushanas and Huns, all of whom have left their imprint on Indian culture, an imprint which is acknowledged and has been internalized. Initially what was new about the Turks, Afghans and Mughals was their introduction of Islam: but even this developed an Indian version, observed by the majority of Muslims in India. Arab settlements and their intermarriage with local communities has resulted in the growth of a large number of new communities such as those along the west coast—the Bohra, Khoja, Navayat and Mappilah. Inevitably even their religion is different from orthodox Islam and is a mix of Arab Islam and the religious observances of the communities among which they settled.

Colonial interpretations of the Indian past were often contested by Indian historians, but the periodization was accepted in essentials. This was implicitly the acceptance of the idea that the units of Indian society were communities defined by single religions, requiring therefore that monolithic religious identities be sought and established in history. This view coincided with the incubation of the nation-state. All nationalisms use history, some more evidently than others. Essential to nationalist ideology was also the attempt to locate and define a national culture, often equated with that of the dominant group. Inevitably other cultures get excluded in this process. But the historian also acts as a remembrancer, reminding the society of the histories that are not always apparent up front.

When communalisms become visible on the political stage, as they were from the early years of this century, there is not only a contestation between them on the question of identity, but also a conflict with the earlier anti-colonial nationalism. The separation of the indigenous and the foreign emerges as a contentious issue and is taken back to the beginnings of
Indian history. Communal historiographies attempt to construct a religious identity into a monolithic community, claiming that only their interpretations of the past which support such a monolith are valid. Religion is sought to be restructured in order that it can be used for political mobilization. There is inevitably a confrontation between historical evidence and its logic, counterposed with resort to a fantasized past, in what are projected as conflicting histories.

I would like to illustrate this by taking up one central issue, now contested, of the period prior to the modern in south Asian history. The question of identities has hinged on the definition of communities as solely religious communities, Hindu and Muslim in the main, and projected as generally hostile to each other. The assumptions have been that the Hindus and the Muslims each constituted a unified, monolithic community, and were therefore separate nations from the start, and that religious differences provide a complete—even though mono-causal—explanation for historical events and activities in the second millennium AD. The reconstruction of this history is largely based on court chronicles and texts where political contestation is often projected in religious terms, to the exclusion of other categories of texts which allow of a different reconstruction. Now that historians working on the second millennium AD are using other sources such as Sanskrit inscriptions and texts in regional languages and in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabrahmsa, the picture which emerges challenges the theory of monolithic, dichotomous communities.

My objection to the use of blanket terms such as 'the Hindus' and 'the Muslims', in historical readings, is that it erases precision with reference to social groups and is therefore methodologically invalid and historically inaccurate. It fails to differentiate between that which is more pertinent to religious history and that which relates to other aspects of life even if there had been an overlap in some situations. To explain the events of the time in terms only of an interaction between groups identified either as Hindus or as Muslims is misleading as a historical explanation. Some continuities in historical processes are arbitrarily broken by this usage and at the same time it is difficult to observe historical changes. Questioning the existence of such monolithic, religious communities, therefore, has extensive historiographical implications quite apart from whatever challenges it may pose to current political ideologies.

The argument that the notion of community was always defined by a single religion even in the pre-Islamic past has been countered by the evidence of sources other than Brahmanical normative texts. Such sources relate to diverse social groups and depict a different social scene. Theoretical interpretations emphasizing the nature of relationships between socially diverse groups and focusing on access to power, whether through economic or other disparities, have also changed the contours of pre-modern history. The many studies of caste, clan, village, town, language and region have encouraged a diversified view of past identities. Caste as varna, earlier thought to be a definitive identity, is now being recognized as intersected by identities of language, sect and occupation, perceived in the past as factors of segregation. Each individual, therefore, had varied identities, of which some might overlap, but which interfered with the consolidation of a single, monolithic, religious identity, even in societies prior to the coming of Islam.

For Orientalist scholarship the construction of what came to be called Hinduism was a challenge, the religion being different from the familiar perspective of religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The latter were founded on the teachings of historically recognized prophets or of a messiah, with a theology and dogma, a sacred book and some ensuing deviations which took the form of variant sects. Yet the religious articulation which we recognize as constituting the religions which came to be called Hinduism did not
subscribe to these features. Of its many variant forms, some were deviations from earlier beliefs and practices but others had an independent genesis. The juxtaposition of religious sects did result almost through osmosis in similarities which introduced some common features, but the diversities remained. Hence the preference in some recent scholarship for the phrase 'Hindu religions', rather than Hinduism. Because of this flexibility and decentralization, the religious identity was frequently closely allied to caste identities and since these incorporated occupation and access to resources, there were factors other than belief alone which governed religious identities. This is equally true of other religions in the subcontinent.

In the context of what we have come to label as Hindu and Muslim communities, I would like to consider briefly some facets of the initial perceptions of the one by the other. These are far more nuanced and socially graded than is allowed for in the concept of monolithic communities, and these nuances require further exploration.

The term 'Hindu' as referring to a religion is initially absent in the vocabulary of Indian languages and only slowly gains currency after it comes to be used in Arab and Persian writing. This is quite logical, given that earlier religious identities were tied to sect and caste. Membership was not of a specific religion, binding groups across a social spectrum and a geographical space, as was the case with Buddhism. Possibly this was part of the reason for the eventual rejection of Buddhism. The use of a single term to include the diversity would have been bewildering, and adjustment to this usage would have required a long period. When and why it came to be a part of the self-perception of what we today call the Hindus, needs to be historically investigated. Terms such as 'Muslim' or 'Musalman' are also not immediate entrants into the vocabulary of Indian languages after the arrival of Islam. Prior to that a variety of terms are preferred and these have their own history. The Arabs, Turks, Afghans and others are most frequently referred to variously as Tajika, Yavana, Shaka, Turushka and mleccha. There is therefore an attempt to associate the new entrants with existing categories and these labels are therefore expressive of more subtle relationships than we have assumed. The categories gave them an identity that was familiar and interestingly provided them with historical links, emanating from Indian connections with western and central Asia in the past. The use of these terms was at one level a continuation from the earlier past. What is striking is that initially none of these terms had a religious connotation. It would again be worthwhile to locate when this connotation was acquired in cases such as Turushka and its variants, which many centuries later included a religious identity.

Inscriptions subsequent to the eighth century AD refer to Arab incursions from Sind and Gujarat into the Narmada delta. The Arabs are referred to here as Tajikas. The Rashtrakuta king had appointed a Tajika as governor of the Sanjan area of Thane district. He carried out conquests on behalf of his Rashtrakuta overlord and is also recorded as granting a village to finance the building of a temple and the installation of an icon. Arab writers of this period refer to Arab officers employed by the local kings as well as settlements of Arab traders, and in both cases they had to work closely with the Rashtrakuta administration.

The term Yavana was originally used for Greeks and later for those coming from west Asia or the west generally. The Sanskrit word yavana is a back formation from the Prakrit yona, derived from the west Asian yavana, referring to the Ionian Greeks. It was used in an ethnic and geographical sense. Buddhist texts speak approvingly of the Yavanas. Some became Buddhists or were patrons of Buddhism. There was also a curiosity about Yavana society which it was said had no castes but had a dual division of master and slave. A major brahmanical text of the time—the Yuga Purana of the Gargi
Romila Thapar

Samhita—was, on the other hand, hostile to the Yavanas,\textsuperscript{12} even though some Yavanas declared that they were Vaishnavas. Perhaps this hostility grew out of Alexander's brutal attack on the Mallolı\textsuperscript{13} and the later resentment against Indo-Greek rulers in India patronizing what the brahmana authors regarded as heretical sects. The Yavana rulers were given the status of vratya kshatriyas or degenerate kshatriyas; those who were grudgingly given what was an apology for kshatriya status or those who, although born of kshatriyas, had not married women of an equal caste.\textsuperscript{14} This was an example of providing a caste ranking for what was initially a ruling class which came from outside caste society. More devastating was the statement that by failing to perform the required rituals as prescribed by the brahmanical norms, the Yavanas together with various others had fallen to the status of shudras.\textsuperscript{15}

Turks and Afghans are referred to as Yavanas in multiple inscriptions. This was an indication of their being from the west and to the extent that they are differentiated they are alien, but nevertheless not all that alien since there was already a status and an identity for them in the existing system. It enabled them to be included later in the scheme of how the past was conceptualized, as for example in one eighteenth century Marathi chronicle.\textsuperscript{16} Such texts were partial imitations of the earlier tradition of maintaining king-lists, as in the Puranas and the vamshavalis or chronicles. With the establishment of Maratha power, there was the need for writing 'histories' to legitimize this power. As has been pointed out, the legitimizing of Maratha rule also required legitimizing the preceding Mughal and Turkish rule, which these texts refer to as the rule of the Yavanas.

But this was not a simple matter, for it had to conform to the vamshavali tradition. The earlier vamshavalis had linked contemporary rulers genealogically to the ancient heroes of the Puranas. Something similar would have to be done for these more recent Yavanas. It was therefore stated that a certain text, called the Ramala-shastra, contained the history of the Yavanas. We are told, in true Puranic style, that this text was first recited by Shiva to Parvati and then through Skanda, Narada and Bhrigu to Shukra, the last of whom told it to the Yavanas. It is Shiva who sent Paigambar to earth and there were seven paigambars or wise men, starting with Adam. This is of course reminiscent of the seven Manus with which Puranic chronology begins. The paigambars came to earth during the Kali-yuga. They started their own era, based on the Hijri era and different from the earlier Indian samvat era. They renamed Hastinapur as Dilli and initiated Yavana rule. They are thus located in time and space and provided with links to the earlier past in accordance with the established earlier vamshavali tradition.

The prime mover in this history is the deity Shiva and this makes any other legitimation unnecessary. Since the Yavanas had the blessing of Shiva, Pithor Raja Chauhana could not hold them back. The establishment of the Maratha kingdom also took place at the intervention of the deity. This kind of adjustment which emerges out of upper caste interests may also have been in part a response to the necessary change in the role model. Those claiming to be kshatriyas were now not approximating the lifestyle of their ancestors to the same degree as before, but were increasingly imitating the appearance, dress, language and lifestyle of the Mughal courts, as is evident from painting and literature. The culture of the elite had changed and there was a noticeable degree of accommodating the new. The importance of such accounts lies not in their fantasy on what actually happened, but in the fact that they provide us with a glimpse of how a historical situation was being manipulated in order to correlate a view of tradition with the problems of contemporary change. This might enable us to assess the nature of the ideological negotiation which conditioned such perceptions.

The term Shaka was the Sanskrit for the Scythians, a
people from central Asia who had ruled in parts of northern and western India around the Christian era. The reference to Turkish and Afghan dynasties as Shakas suggests a historical perception of place and people, a perception both of who the rulers were and how they might be fitted into the history of the ruled. A Sanskrit inscription of AD 1276 may illustrate this. It records the building of a baoli and a dharmashala in Palam (just outside Delhi) by Uddhara from Uccha in the Multan district. The inscription, composed by Pandit Yogeshvara, dated vikram samvat 1333, begins with a salutation to Shiva and Ganapati. It then refers to the rulers of Delhi and Haryana as the Tomaras, Chauhanas and Shakas, the earlier two having been Rajput dynasties and the last being a reference to the Sultans. This is made clear by the detailed list of Shakas, that is, the Sultans of Delhi up to the current ruler Balban, who is referred to as a nripati samrat and whose conquests are described with extravagant praise. His titles mix the old with the new: nayaka was an earlier title and Hammira is thought to be the Sanskritized form of Amir. In the eulogistic style of the earlier prashasti tradition, Balban’s realm is said to be virtually subcontinental—an obvious exaggeration. This is followed by a fairly detailed family history of the merchant in the traditional vamshavali style. He was clearly a man of considerable wealth. Other sources inform us that Hindu merchants from Multan gave loans to Balban’s nobles when the latter suffered a shortfall in collecting revenue. The identity of the Sultan is perceived as a continuity from earlier times and the identity of the merchant is in relation to his own history and occupation, and perhaps the unstated patronage of the Sultan. The sole reference to religion is oblique, in the statement that even Vishnu now sleeps peacefully, presumably because of the reign of Balban.

A Sanskrit inscription from Naraina (also in the vicinity of Delhi), dated vikram samvat 1384 or AD 1327 follows the same format. We are told that in the town of Dhilli, sin is expelled by the chanting of the Vedas. The city is ruled by Mahamuda Sahi who is the chudamani, the crest-jewel of the rulers of the earth (a phrase used frequently in Sanskrit to describe a king), and is a shakendra, the lord/Indra of the Shakas. This may well be the rhetoric of sycophancy; nevertheless the juxtaposing of Vedic recitations to the rule of Muhammad bin Tughlaq carries its own message. The identification with the Shakas is at one level complimentary since the earlier Shakas were associated with the important calendrical era of AD 78, still in official use.

Another term is Turushka, which was originally a geographical and ethnic name. An interesting link is made with earlier Indian historical perceptions of central Asia, when Kalhana, in his twelfth century history of Kashmir, the Rajatarangini, uses the term retrospectively. He refers to the Kushanas of the early centuries AD as Turushkas, and adds ironically that even though they were Turushkas, these earlier kings were given to piety. Here perhaps the points of contrast are the references in two twelfth century inscriptions to the Turushkas as evil—dushtaturushka—or to a woman installing an image in place of one broken by the Turushkas. Familiarity with the Turks was also because they competed with Indian and other traders in controlling the central Asian trade, especially the lucrative silk trade between China and Byzantium and the horse trade closer home. The initial attacks of the Turks and Afghans were tied into local politics, what Kalhana refers to as the coalition of the Kashmiri, Khasa and mleccha. The entry of the Turushkas on the north Indian scene is in many ways a continuation of the relations which had existed between the states of north-western India and those beyond.

Kalhana writes disparagingly of the king Harshadeva of Kashmir ruling in the eleventh century. He is said to have employed Turushka mercenaries—horsemen in the main—in his campaigns against local rulers, even though the Turushkas were then invading the Punjab. The activities of Harshadeva,
Romila Thapar

... demolition and looting temples when there was a fiscal crisis, leads to Kalhana calling him Turushka. But he adds that such activities have been familiar even from earlier times. However, the looting of temples by Harshadeva was more systematic, for he appointed Udayaraja as a special officer to carry out the activities, with the designation of devotpatanayaka, the officer for the uprooting of deities.

Alberuni writing soon after the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni, states that Mahmud destroyed the economy of the areas where he looted. The historically relevant question would be to enquire into the degree of devastation and the memory of the disruption. An interesting case is that of the temple of Somanath associated with such a raid. Curiously Bilhana, referring to his visit to Somanath later in the same century, makes no mention of Mahmud's raid. Even more interesting is the evidence of a bilingual inscription in Sanskrit and Arabic from Veraval-Somanath of AD 1264. It records the acquiring of a large area of land for the building of a mosque by a ship's captain from Hormuz, Nuruddin Firuz, during the reign of the Vaghela-Chaulukya king Arjunadeva. The mosque is referred to as a mifigiti—probably derived from masjid—and is described as a dharmasthana. The land was acquired through the agreement of the local pancha-kula, a high level administrative body whose membership included the Shaiva priests presumably of the Somanath temple, the merchants, and the elite of the area. The maintenance of the mosque was also arranged through the purchase of the estates of various temples. No mention is made of the raid of Mahmud on Somanath. Were memories surprisingly short or was the destruction of the temple exaggerated in the Turko-Persian accounts? Or were the profits of trade—doubtless the lucrative horse trade of Gujarat—of surmounting concern for the priests and elite of Somanath? Or were the Arab and Persian traders from the Gulf treated in a friendly fashion, and differentiated from the Turushkas since the latter were political enemies whereas the former were contributing to local prosperity? It is interesting that they are not all bunched together and referred to as 'Muslims' as we would tend to do today.

Finally we come to mleccha, the most contentious among the words used. It has a history going back to around 800 BC and occurs originally in a Vedic text—and is used for those who could not speak Sanskrit correctly. Language was frequently a social marker in many early societies. The use of Sanskrit was largely confined to the upper castes, and gradually the word mleccha also came to have a social connotation and referred to those outside the pale of varna society—those who did not observe the rules of caste as described in the dharmashastras. When used in a pejorative sense it included a difference of language and ritual impurity. The category of mleccha was again a well-established category but used more frequently by upper castes to refer to those from whom they wished to maintain a caste distance.

It has been argued that the term mleccha was essentially one of contempt for the Muslim. More recently it has been stated that the demonization of the Muslim invaders in using the term rakshasas for them and invoking the parallel with Rama as the protector, was part of the Indian political imagination of the twelfth century. But the 'rakshasization' of the enemy—irrespective of who the enemy was—has been a constant factor with reference to many pre-Islamic enemies and going back to earlier times. To read the Ramayana into the political imagination of northern India as specific to the confrontation with the Turks, and the personification of the Turushkas as evil because they were Muslims, is to read the sources out of context and to make attributions which are not apparent. Sayana's commentary of the fourteenth century AD refers to the dasas of the Rigveda as rakshasas and asuras. Inscriptions of this period freely use the terms rakshasas and Ravana for enemies who are Hindu.
In later centuries, the reference to some Muslims as mlecchas was an extension of the term to include them among the many others who were denied varna status. This usage is more common in sources which come from the upper castes, such as Sanskrit texts and inscriptions, and was more easily used for the lower castes who were, even without being Muslim, marginalized, moved to the fringes of society and treated with contempt. The term itself included a multiplicity of peoples and jatis but generally it referred to those who were not members of a varna.

Nevertheless there is a marked ambivalence in the use of the term. In another Sanskrit inscription of AD 1328 from the Raisina area of Delhi, reference is made to the mleccha Sahavadina seizing Delhi. But he is praised for his great valour in what is described as his burning down the forest of enemies who surrounded him.34 If in this context mleccha had a contemptuous meaning, it is unlikely that a local merchant would dare to use it for the Sultan. The same ambiguity occurs in earlier texts. Thus the sixth century astronomer Varahamihira states that among the Yavanas (referring to the Hellenistic Greeks), knowledge in astronomy had stabilized and therefore they were revered as rishis even though they were mlecchas;35 and a seventh century inscription from Assam refers to one of the rulers, Shalastamba, as the mleccha-adinatha.36 Thus the context of this term varied but it was generally a social marker. The identification of what were regarded as mleccha lands and people could also change over time.

Social markers are frequently forged by those who demarcate themselves sharply from others and this tends to be characteristic of the upper levels of society. The usage of mleccha is no exception. Among castes, brahmana identity has a considerable antiquity and was created out of an opposition initially to the kshatriyas as is evident in the Vedic corpus, an opposition which was extended to the heterodox teachings of the kshatriyas in the Shramanic sects, and then to the non-brahmana in general. The dichotomy of the brahmana and the shudra was common to virtually every part of the subcontinent. References to the coming of the mleccha creating a social catastrophe of a kind expected of the Kali age as described in the Puranas was frequently invoked whenever there was a political crisis.35 The insistence that the brahmanical ordering of the world had been turned upside down on such occasions was repeated in brahmanical texts each time this ordering was challenged.

The social distinctions implicit in these terms applied to people of various religions. Connotations used in the last thousand years changed with time, application and context, and the mutation of meaning requires analysis. The less frequent use of Yavana and mleccha for Europeans had been pared down in meaning by the nineteenth century. Some uses of these terms were mechanisms for reducing social distance, others for enhancing it. A major indicator of social distance was caste. Among castes which we now identify as Hindu, there was the separation of the dvija or twice born from the shudra and even more sharply from the untouchable. Muslim society segregated the Muslim from central and western Asia and the indigenous convert. Even if this was not a ritual segregation, it was an effective barrier, and possibly encouraged the local convert to maintain certain earlier caste practices and kinship rules. At the level of the ruling class, the culture of the court influenced all those who had pretensions to power, irrespective of their religion. Further down the social scale, caste identities often controlled appearance and daily routine. Caste identity, because it derived so heavily from occupation and the control over economic resources, was not restricted only to kinship systems and religious practices. The perception of difference therefore was more fragmented among the various communities than is projected in the image of the monolithic two.

Those from across the Arabian Sea who settled as traders
along the west coast and married into existing local communities, the Khojas and Bohras of western India, the Navayats in the Konkan and the Mappilahs of Malabar, assumed the customary practices of these communities, sometimes even contradicting the social norms of Islam. Because of this their beliefs and practices were distinct even from each other, influenced as they were by those of the host community. Today there may be a process of Islamization which is ironing out these contradictions, but in the past there has been much uncertainty as to whether these practices could be viewed as strictly Islamic. There have been marked variations in the structures and rules governing family, kinship and marriage among communities listed as Muslim in the subcontinent. These have quite often tended to be closer to the rules associated with the Hindu castes in the region.

The process of marrying into the local community is unlikely to have been free of tension and confrontation in the initial stages. The orthodox among both the visitors and the hosts would doubtless have found the need to adapt to custom and practice on both sides that were not palatable. But their presence today as well-articulated communities speaks of the prevalence of professional and economic concerns over questions of religion. Their continuing historical existence points to the eventual adjustments of both the host and the settlers.

Even on conversion, the link with caste was frequently inherent. A multiplicity of identities remained, although their function and need may have changed. Not only was the concept of conversion alien to Indian society, but conversion to Islam remained limited in India as compared to Persia and central Asia. Possibly one reason for this was that those who introduced Islam could not break through caste stratification. If conversion was motivated by the wish for upward mobility, then even this did not necessarily follow. Conversion in itself does not change the status of the converted group in the caste hierarchy. Even converts have to negotiate a change, and the potentiality for such negotiation would depend on their original status, or else they would have to evolve into a new caste; a process which has been observed for the history of caste society over many centuries. At the same time, conversion does not eliminate diversities and there would be a carry-over of earlier practices and beliefs. Caste ranking continued to be important to marriage and occupation, for a radical change in caste ranking would have involved confronting the very basis on which Indian society was organized.

Reports as recent as a century ago point to the continuing role of caste even after conversion. The Gazetteer of Bijapur District in 1884 is an example. The Muslim population was listed here as consisting of three categories: Muslims who claim to be foreign, indigenous Muslims but descended from migrants from north India, and the local Muslims. Those claiming foreign descent list their names as is usual, as Saiyid, Shaikh, Mughal, Pathan; insist that they are Urdu speaking and strictly Sunni; and many of them held office in the local administration. Like the scribes of earlier times, some had sought administrative positions in the emerging kingdoms. The second group, working in a more menial capacity, claims to have come from north Indian communities such as Jat cultivators, or from the trading communities of the west coast and identified themselves by their earlier caste names. They too maintained that they were Sunnis. Their languages varied, some using Urdu and others Marathi and Kannada, with some even preferring Tamil or Arabic.

The third group, with the maximum number in the district, was in many ways dissimilar. They were local converts, some of whom took on jati names that had come to have a subcontinental status and connotation, such as Momin and Kasab, but many had retained their original jati names such as Gaundi, Pinjara, Pakhali, and so on, and identified themselves by the same name which they had used prior to conversion.
The jati name was associated with the occupation as had often been so from earlier times. Their occupations as the poorer artisans and cultivators ranked them at the lower levels of society and tended to conform to those which they had performed as members of Hindu castes. Their Urdu was minimal because they used Kannada and Marathi. Most of them are described as lax Sunnis, not frequenting the mosque and instead declaring that they worship Hindu deities, observe Hindu festivals and avoid eating beef. The avoidance of beef may have been to distinguish themselves from untouchables who had no restrictions on eating beef. The social and religious identity of this third group would seem to be closer to that of their Hindu caste counterparts than to that of Muslims of higher castes. From the thirteenth century there was intense Sufi activity in the area, but nevertheless—or possibly because of the openness of certain schools of Sufi teaching—groups such as these could keep a distance from formal Islam. This was the larger majority of those technically listed as Muslims, who, perhaps because of their lower social status and therefore distance from formal religion, were untouched by fatwas.

This picture was not unique to Bijapur and can be replicated for other parts of the subcontinent. Such groups can perhaps be better described as being on the intersection of Islam and the Hindu religions. This gives them an ambiguous religious identity, in terms of an either/or situation. Were they Hindus picking up some aspects of Islam or were they Muslims practising a Hinduized Islam? Did caste identity have priority in determining the nature of the religious identity, and did these priorities differ from one social group to another?

Groups such as the third category mentioned above receive little attention from historians of religion since they cannot be neatly indexed. The same was true of their status in the historical treatment of Hinduism. The study of groups which enter liminal spaces is recent and here too there is frequently a focus on the curious religious admixtures rather than the social and economic compulsions which encourage such admixtures. But in terms of the history of religion in the subcontinent, such groups have been the majority since the earliest times and have lent their own distinctiveness to belief and to the practice of religion. On occasion, when they played a significant historical role, attempts would be made to imprint facets of the formal religion onto their beliefs and practices. History is rich in demonstrating the mutation of folk cults into Puranic Hinduism. For example, the hero who saves cattle from raiders was worshipped by the pastoralists of Maharashtra, but eventually emerges at Pandharpur, patronized by the Yadava dynasty, as the god Vitthoba, associated with Vishnu. This was also one reason why belief and worship across the subcontinent, even when focusing on a single deity, was often formulated differently, except at the level of the elite who differentiated themselves by claiming adherence to forms approved of by brahmanical orthodoxy.

The evolving of Hindu religions, with specific rituals and practices often emerging from particular castes or regions, was a process which did not terminate with the arrival of Islam, nor did it turn away from Islam. The dialogue between Islam and earlier indigenous religions is reflected in various Bhakti and Sufi traditions, which have been extensively studied in recent years. Groups still further away from formal religion provide yet another dimension. Since the indigenous religions did not constitute a monolith and registered a range of variations, there was a range of dialogues. These were partly the result of such movements having a middle caste and *shudra* following, even if some of their prominent members were brahmans. Formal religious requirements were often rejected in such groups, but not in entirety. Where a few showed familiarity with philosophic doctrine, others broke away from such a dialogue. Attempts to Sanskritize the Bhakti tradition both in texts recounting the activities of the *sants*
and in modern studies, have been cautioned against.

The famous Hindu-Turk Samvad of Eknath written in the sixteenth century in Maharashtra is the imagined dialogue between a brahmana and what appears to be a Muslim maulana, with an undercurrent of satire in the treatment of both. The language used by each for the other would probably cause a riot today! The attempt is at pointing out the differences between facets of what were seen as Hindu and Muslim belief and worship, but arguing for an adjustment in daily life. The crux of the debate states, 'You and I are alike, the conflict is over jati and dharma' (v.60). The pre-Islamic interweaving of religion and social organization was not broken and the process of using new religious ideas to negotiate a social space continued. It is worth noting that in the seventeenth century Shivaji was writing in a political vein to Jai Singh about the grave danger facing Hindus, chiding him for his support to the Mughals and offering him an alliance. This would be an indication of the perception at elite levels being different from those at other levels and largely conditioned by factors of statecraft and political policy. Eknath's reading of the situation is a sharp contrast.

This also becomes apparent in common cultural codes symbolizing an altogether different level of communication. For example, the imagery and meaning encapsulated in the depiction of riding a tiger and therefore who rides a tiger, becomes a powerful symbol. For those who live in the forests, the tiger is the mount of the forest deity such as Dakhin Rai in the Sunderbans. For caste Hindus, the goddess Durga rides a tiger. Among Nathapanthis, the natha was depicted as riding a tiger and using a live cobra for a whip. In Sufi hagiography, the Sufi often rides a tiger and sometimes meets another Sufi riding a wall. At the shrine of Sabarimala in Kerala, the deity Ayyappan rides a tiger. In many rural areas there is to this day an all-purpose holy man who rides a tiger and is variously called Barckhan Ghazi or Satya-pir and is worshipped by all, irrespective of formal religious affiliations. This bond, or even the subconscious memory of a bond binding a range of peoples, had no formal definition. These were not individual deviants from conventional religions. This was the religious articulation of the majority of the people in such areas. When we arbitrarily attach such religious expression to either Islam or Hinduism, we perhaps misrepresent the nature of these beliefs.

The existence of parallel religious forms, some conflicting and others cohering, has characterized Indian society. Some of these distanced themselves from all orthodoxies and attracted those who participated in what might be called forms of counter-cultures, preferring the openness of the heterodox. Their ancestry can perhaps be traced through a lineage of thought and behaviour going back to the wandering vratyas, the rogues with matted hair and the mendicants regarded with disapproval in an Upanishad; the siddhas claiming extrasensory powers, the Natha yogis, and some among the gurus, the pirs and faqirs. This was not invariably a confrontation with those in authority, but it was a statement of social distancing. Such distancing meant that even those who were disapproved of, were not necessarily silenced. The absence of sharply etched religious identities among such groups, gave them a universality, which was their source of strength. But it was also responsible for history neglecting to recognize their significance. This relates directly to the question of whose history are we writing?

Religious expression, if treated only in formal terms and indexed according to established religions, leaves us with a poverty of understanding. For, together with the formal there is the constant presence of the informal and of beliefs unconstrained by texts. These were often forms of legitimizing widespread popular practice which adhered neither to the formal requirements of Islam nor of Brahmanic or Puranic Hinduism. They could be, but were not invariably
manifestations of peaceful coexistence, or even attempts at syncretism.

Concepts such as those of composite culture or syncretism are only partial explanations and refer to particular situations. Syncretism would apply, for example, to Akbar’s attempts at reconciling variant religious activities and beliefs by propagating a religion of his own making, or to Eknath in his formulation of a dialogue between the Hindu and the Muslim. Akbar’s efforts were in part a crystallization of the earlier Indian tradition where royalty bestowed patronage on a variety of religious sects, some even hostile to each other. Akbar’s implicit acceptance of a religious pluralism, irrespective of how he formulated it, was significant even to the subsequent interweaving of religion and political policy, although this was not characteristic of every aspect of religion during this period.

There were aspects of life in which religion was an identifier but there were also many other aspects in which more broad-based cultural expressions, evolving over time and through an admixture of various elements, gave an identity to a social group. These are the ones which need to be investigated. Associated with this is the multiplicity of various causes for particular historical events ranging over political expediency, economic control, ideological support, social associations, religious practices and custom, the exploration of which provide variations in the ordering of priorities among causal connections.

Composite culture presupposes self-contained units in combination or in juxtaposition. In the history of Indian society such units would be jatis, sects, language groups and groups with a local identity, and would have a history in some cases going back to pre-Islamic times. The juxtaposition would not have been between formal religion, Hinduism and Islam—as is generally argued—since this again presupposes the notion of the monolithic community, but between variant articulations among the many constituent units of society. These units would have to be historically identified, an exercise which requires a sensitivity to the problems of writing the history of those on the intersections of varied religious expression.

The concern would be with both social dissonances and social harmonies, and a need for adjustment. Occurrences of religious conflict were not unknown, but were more frequently associated with the attitudes of formal religions for whom the conflict was rarely confined to religious factors. It arose more frequently from competing claims to patronage and resources. Perhaps the existence of the parallel, informal religions played a role, not in preventing conflict, but in ensuring that intolerance was contained and remained at the local level, as it had done even in earlier times.  

The relationship between segments of society, even those identified as Hindu or Muslim, would take the normal course of jostling for social space and social advancement. This would have involved diplomacy and management or on occasion conflict of a violent kind, particularly where established statuses were being challenged by newly evolved ones, using the patronage of authority. But the conflict at levels other than those of the ruling class was localized. Friends and enemies were demarcated less by religion and more by the concerns of social and economic realities. Cultural transactions and social negotiations were common but were bound by the degree of proximity to the structure of power.

To unravel the creation and modulation of religious identities is a far more complex process than the chronicling of religious activities. I have tried to argue that it is linked to social identities and historical perceptions, which in turn hinge on access to resources and power, or alternatively, to a deliberate distancing from these. I have also tried to suggest that if we move away from the notion of monolithic communities we begin to see the historical potential of understanding how identities may actually have been perceived at points in time, and their multiple manifestations and
functions. Exploring the perceptions which people had of each other in the past is not merely a matter of historical curiosity, for it impinges on the construction of current identities. An insistence on seeing society as having consisted for all time of monolithic religious communities derives from the contemporary conflict over identities. Yet, historically, identities are neither stable nor permanent. Inherent in the process of historical change is the invention and mutation of identities. And the identities of the pre-colonial period would seem to have been very different from the way in which they have been projected in our times.

Readings of the history of the Indian subcontinent have been changing in many significant ways with the utilization now of a different set of additional sources and with new interpretations which are asking a different set of questions from those of the historiography of the nineteenth century. The colonial perspective of monolithic communities is being replaced by more detailed and nuanced studies of social groups and their historical articulations as well as their inter-linkages—social, religious, political and economic. The writing of history has to that extent become far more specialized, technical and professional. New sources ranging from archaeology to inscriptions and a variety of texts have been added to the data which earlier focussed largely on court chronicles. Textual criticism and the evaluating of the social context of a text and the assessing of inscriptions as data, require professional expertise. This involves more than just the knowledge of their language. Historical analyses of socio-economic data require some understanding of the formulations of the social sciences, such as a familiarity with economic theories or sociological theories. Technical expertise is also called for in reading archaeological reports and making historical generalizations on the basis of these.

The Hindutva insistence on continuing to see the last thousand years as the history of two monolithic communities in conflict is merely a continuation in endorsing the colonial historiography of the nineteenth century and using it to support a current political ideology. The research of many historians of different schools of historical thought is now indicating a very different picture, where there are on occasion situations of contestation and on other occasions, situations of assimilation. This calls for a range of historical explanations. Inevitably this creates a divide between those who are involved in historical research and those who are merely toeing the line of the Hindutva ideology. Only the brashness of 'born-again Hindu' journalists who propagate this ideology encourages them to dismiss the research of over half a century of Indian and non-Indian scholars working on Indian history and attempt to replace it with their own historically baseless fulminations.

Yet there is an audience for this brashness. In India there are still many who believe that historical explanation is a free-for-all and every one has a right to insist on the validity of their views on the past, however ill-informed they may be. Yet the same people who know little about history but hold forth on what happened in the past and how, would hesitate to demonstrate their ignorance on matters pertaining to economics or sociology. This is paralleled in the sciences where there is the same casualness in holding forth on animal and plant behaviour, but a much greater hesitation when it comes to the properties of matter as determined by physics or chemistry.

Nor is this attitude limited to Indians in India. Some of the more pernicious views on communities and the Indian past are expressed by those Indians in the diaspora who cling even more fervently to the Hindutva ideology. This ideology provides them with a compensation for being a minority in the country of their adoption. Indians settled in the white world, however wealthy and established they may be professionally, do not command the social, cultural and political resources of the white elites among whom they live. This has
led some to adopt a ghetto mentality and attempt to package Hindu religion and culture in a marketable form as provided by agencies such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad, which encourages them also in the fond belief that Hindu culture has a superiority far exceeding all other cultures in age, in quality and in unbroken continuity. They are unaware that these are issues which are not now at the forefront of historical discussion. Historians are no longer concerned with evaluating cultures, or measuring longevity; they are concerned with trying to understand the making and functioning of a culture.

Since the understanding of the Indian past among such diasporic Indians is out of date, it is not surprising that their understanding of the First World is equally out of date. Many have now taken on the role of cold war warriors and defenders of McCarthyism, using the once familiar rhetoric about ‘commies’ and ‘pinkies’, and endlessly tilting at a windmill which they see as the communist bogey. The current policy of the First World of targeting Islam as the post-cold war enemy feeds into the anti-Muslim project of Hindutva.

The intervention of Hindutva from the diaspora not only finances the diffusion of a history which is no longer acceptable, but makes a bid thereby to give respectability to communal ideology in a situation where the diasporic Indian is seen as the role-model by the Indian middle class. Those who support the Hindutva ideology but are not settled in India can at a safe distance indulge in the assertion of this identity, since they are not affected by the killing of Muslims in riots, the raping of Christian nuns or the dire threats to dalits and tribals who have converted to Christianity. The intervention of groups from the diaspora in the movement for Khalistan aggravated the agony of the Punjab. The terrorized lives of Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir is a phenomenon not unrelated to organizations of south Asian origin outside the subcontinent.

The tragedy is that actually the study of the past sends us very different messages but we choose not to read them.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the Zakir Hussain Memorial Lecture in Delhi. I would like to thank K.N. Panikkar and Muzaffar Alam for comments on an earlier draft.
4. This is demonstrated in the debate over the history of the Ramjanmabhoomi at Ayodhya. S. Gopal (ed.) *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, Delhi, 1990. See especially, K.N. Panikkar, ‘An Historical Overview,’ p. 22-37. The pamphlet published by the Jawaharlal Nehru University historians entitled *The Political Abuse of History*, is concerned with the same issue.
10. R. Thapar, ‘The Image of the Barbarian in Early India’ in R.


15. Manu X.43-44.


22. Ibid. VIII. 887.

23. Ibid. VII. 1095, 1149; VIII. 3346.

24. Ibid. VII. 1091.


26. *Vikramankamlevacarita*, XVIII.


42. In the Sundarbans the tiger and its manifestations such as Dakhin Rai the tiger-god, Bonobibi the goddess of the forest, or Ghazi Sahib, are universally worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike and the mythologies which accompany this worship have diverse Hindu and Muslim sources as also does the chanting at the *puja*. For an account of the continuity of this worship to this day, see S. Montongomery, *Spell of the Tiger*, New York, 1995.

43. Maitri Upanishad 7.8.