



What do Indians Need, A History or the Past?

A challenge or two to Indian historians

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Abul Kalam Ghulam Muhiyuddin was born in Mecca in November 11, 1888. He is known to us and all the school children in India as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. He is a 'maulana' because he had a lineage of Muslim scholars or 'Maulanas'. He is also called 'azad', meaning free, because, we are told, he adopted this pen name as a mark of his "mental emancipation from a narrow view of religion and life". I am not a Muslim. Therefore, I am not a '*maulana*' either. Yet, I share his lineage, which is also that of '*azad*'. The word '*azad*', in Persian, indicates a 'free man', not a slave, which is what my shared lineage with Abul Kalam is. I address you in this spirit, which also suggests the content of my talk: Think freely and not as slaves. What does 'history' mean today and how should we think about that subject as free men and women? I shall talk about the kind of slavery we are living in and also briefly indicate a possible direction for freedom. Of course, freedom is chosen and cannot be imposed. I would like to help you discover that choice, one of being an '*azad*' yourself.

This talk not only attempts a critical unravelling of categories or thought structures with which we function but it also takes the risk of offering an alternative path for theoretical reflection. There is hardly any serious theoretical engagement in the discipline of history in India. The discipline of history is dominated by an empirical study of the past which circulates in the guises of social, cultural, economic, Marxist, subalternist, dalit, feminist, etc. Nowhere does one see any foundational critical interrogation of conceptual categories.

Consequently, the talk aims at advancing a critical thesis by taking into account the sediment of intellectual proclivities of Indian academics and institutions. It is not a conventional historical reflection about gathering facts about a demarcated period. I focus on the categories through which we think and practice our disciplines and discourses in our institutions. In this sense, this is a novel initiative by ICHR. The talk (a) unravels the dominant conceptual frames and (b) advances a theoretically viable alternative. Thus, it has far reaching institutional and discursive implications. However, I do not spell these out in the course of this talk.

I largely focus on what is called these days as the "documentary" paradigm of history, namely, those that emphasize 'evidence' like document, inscription, fossil, artefact etc. as the sources of truth. This approach has come under critique in the name of the "interpretive" turn. The interpretive turn claims to move beyond the fixation on facts and embrace the hermeneutical tropics (from the word 'tropes'). I ignore discussing this 'hermeneutic' approach for reasons of length and space.

This talk has two parts. In the first part, I talk of our enslavement to a set of religious conceptions. In the second, I share with you some of my reflections about the directions we could

choose to take, if we intend to be free or *azad*. In the conclusion, I think aloud about what has been accomplished.

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Today, both in India and abroad, we see the emergence of a *new intellectual trend*: based on painstaking research, to write an accurate history of India. What is *new* about this? In one sense, as I shall explain later, this attempt is not novel; in another sense, which too shall be explained, there is something very new in it. I will talk about both in the course of answering the question raised in the title of the talk, which contrasts ‘the past’ with ‘a history’. This contrast needs explication because historiography is seen as a ‘factual recording of the past’. Yet, I am going to contrast the product of historiography, ‘a history’, with something called ‘the past’.

However, this story is complicated: it has at least two beginnings, two middle points and one common end. There are many branches to this story and, as though this is not enough, I will even talk of an alternative. In a way, to an Indian audience, this should not pose a problem: the story of *Mahabharata* is not unitary; there are stories within stories with multiple narrators and voices, and many synchronous and asynchronous events. I am not a Vyasa to keep you captivated by my narration, even though I wish I were. Compared to his epic, this article is shorter; even though, relative to normal articles, it is long. Its scope too is narrower, when compared to the sweep of *Mahabharata*. However, these are my failings. I hope you are still Indian enough to find the time to give me a hearing and have not yet become all hustle and bustle that marks the ‘modern’ society.

A first beginning

A few thousand years ago, two intellectual movements existed simultaneously in the Ancient Greek society. The first, with a venerable past, was exemplified by the bards: these were the story-tellers, who moved from town to town recounting Greek legends and mythologies. The bards drew reasonably large crowds wherever they went; they did not merely entertain the audience by recounting Homer and other respected poets but also, through the act of story-telling, addressed the actual problems of their society. They told stories of long ago: Ulysses and the Sirens, Cyclops and Zeus, and about Jason and the Argonauts. The characters in such stories were both human and divine; some among them faced insurmountable challenges; their deeds were, therefore, considered heroic. The poets, it was said, rightly immortalized them. The bards cherished telling such stories and the crowds loved hearing them.

And then, there was another group as well. For the sake of convenience, let us call them philosophers (those who loved wisdom). We know the names of many such; one of them, the

most well-known, is Plato. This philosopher was not happy, either with the bards or with what they did. He felt that they incited the crowd to unsavoury behaviour based on irrational feelings. Instead of inculcating reasonableness, Plato thought, these bards pandered to the emotions of people. Emotions were always bad advisors, especially if it concerned matters of polity. He opposed educating the children (who would be the future Athenians) by teaching legends and mythologies to them because such stories, according to Plato, always exaggerated, distorted and lied about the past. In fact, Plato envisioned an ideal state that would ban all the poets and bards into exile; such a state, ruled by a philosopher-king, would be *the polis* to live in because it alone cultivated reason among its citizens. He opposed 'myth' to 'history', and 'emotions' to 'reason'. He believed that not myths but history should guide the behaviour of the civilized Athenians. He saw the bards as 'orators' and counterposed 'rhetoric' (the art of *speech*) of his time to 'reason'. Oration cultivated demagoguery (that which appealed to the irrationality and the emotions of the crowd) and thus poisoned the youth, whereas philosophy cultivated reason.

These two tendencies were apparently each other's rivals in the Athens of so-long-ago. However, before either of the tendencies could gain dominance, the Greek civilization collapsed. In the future, the torch lit in Athens would be carried only partially by the Roman Empire.

A second beginning

We now move the tale forward by a few centuries. At that time, the Roman Empire included many parts of what we now call the Middle-East. Romans had also conquered Judea, a nation of people called the 'Jews'. Like all other nations of the world, the Jews too had a story about their own past. Their story told them of the travails of the Jews comprising of twelve tribes, who were scattered among other nations as a punishment. The punisher is the entity 'God' and He punished the Jews for forgetting Him, the 'God of Israel'. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the creator and sovereign of the Universe, and the Jews were instructed to keep the Law He gave them. He instructed them too in the difference between Himself (the 'True' God) and 'gods' of other nations and peoples, and revealed Himself in Mount Sinai. Being the merciful God that He is, He also promised the children of Israel that He would send down to earth a messenger, who would unite the Jews together again.

This caricature of a story about the Jewish past will do for the moment because what is interesting here is not the story itself but *the attitude* of the Jews towards it. Unlike the Greeks of yesteryears, most Jews believe that theirs is *a true story*. In fact, they do not consider this as a story at all: to them, it is *the factual chronicle of events on earth*. In other words, their account of their past, these Jews believe, is history. God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – did

punish the Jews; God did promise to send His own messenger ('the promised one', *Christos* is a Greek word) to earth, and that this messenger will come because God is Righteous and thus always keeps His promises.

In the course of time, some Jews began to proclaim the arrival of such messengers of God. Many said that the Messiah had come to earth at God's behest to save the children of Israel. The most well-known group among them crystallized around the person and acts of Jesus of Nazareth. Believing that Jesus was the Christ (the announced, the messiah, the anointed), this group tried to persuade the Jews about his arrival. Most of the Jews did not buy the idea that Jesus was the Christ. Largely rejected by the Jews, this group then proclaimed that Jesus had come to earth not just to save the Jews *but to save the entire Humankind*. The Jewish accounts of their past, their history, had already spoken of the Original Sin, Eternal Damnation, Hell and Heaven. The Christians (i.e., those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ) took most of it over but accused the Jews of heresy and of a signal failure to understand their own scriptures. They believed that Judaism was dead and would soon be replaced by Christianity, a creed professed by the Christians, i.e. those who proclaimed the arrival of the messenger of God, his death on the cross for the sins of mankind and his resurrection three days later. This was the 'Good News' that the Christians proclaimed to the world at large.

This too is a caricature of Christianity but, again, I want to draw your attention to not only how the Christians looked at these chronicles but also to how they were and are *compelled* to look at it.

The early Christians believed that their story about the Jewish past was not just their history but also the history of mankind. Every event that was chronicled in the Old Testament Bible, from Adam and Eve through the Garden of Eden and the Flood to Noah's ark, they believed, narrated the facts and events on earth. Adam did commit the Original Sin (as it is narrated in the Old Testament Bible) by thirsting after the knowledge of good and evil, and the children and descendants of Adam (the entire humankind) do carry this burden. The Christians claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ; he was crucified by the Romans; he did rise from death three days later and promised humankind 'salvation', if they followed him. Those who did not, the disciples of Jesus maintained, would be eternally damned to Hell, the Biblical Hell, ruled by the Devil.

Apart from the Jews, who were sceptical and dismissive of the claims of Jesus to Christhood, the Christians also confronted the intellectuals of the Roman Empire. Among other things, these intellectuals found that the Christians were making ridiculous claims about 'God', 'the Devil' and Jesus of Nazareth. Though they tolerated the Jewish customs and traditions, they

never accepted that the story of the Jews could be seen as the history of humankind, the way Christians did. In Christians, they not only found a silly sect that claimed that some entity called 'God' could create whatever He wanted just by 'willing' it into existence but also a new group that made ridiculous assertions about resurrection after death. Jesus must have been a magician, they thought, who merely pretended to die while convincing the gullible that he was 'really dead'. Who had ever heard of someone coming to life after death? Among other things, they thought that Christians were simple minded fools, who ran away from all discussions on these matters and tried to 'convert' only the children, slaves and women. (None of these three, the Romans thought, was able to 'reason' the way a mature citizen could.)

Caught between the hammer and the anvil, the Christians had to insist more and more vigorously that they were telling the truth. *Theirs was not a story or a myth but history.* It was not just the past of the Jewish nation without it being the history of the whole of humankind. The Christian God was not merely the 'God of Israel', the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, but also 'the God' of the whole of humankind. He became the generic 'God': singular, unqualified, and unique. He was 'God'. He created the Cosmos; He is the Lord and Master of the World; He is the Sovereign and the fountainhead of all morality. His Will was the Law and, as His creatures, we have to obey Him.

Why, then, do different nations have and worship different 'gods'? This was easily explained: all these 'gods' were 'false'; as followers and lieutenants of the Devil, these false gods lead mankind towards destruction. They were vagrant 'spirits', the *daimones* of the Greeks from which the English word 'Demons' is derived. The Greeks, of course, did not think of their gods either as vagrant spirits or as the followers of the Biblical Satan or the Devil. Neither did the Romans. However, the Christians added their own spin to the Greco-Roman thought and, with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, they also gained political power.

In other words, according to Christianity, the Biblical story is the 'true' history of the whole of humankind. Jesus of Nazareth had to be a real, historical person crucified by the Romans. The Christians believed furthermore that the stories that other peoples and nations told about their multiple pasts were just that: myths and legends but not history. Bible was the History. It was the history of the humankind. Period.

The first middle point

There are two middle points I want to talk about. The first is the cognitive attitude one assumes with respect to looking at the past of a group. The second is about the attitude one has to the

multiple ways in which human groups have, in fact, looked at their own pasts. Let me begin with the first.

Consider what happens when you look at actions and events in the world as expressions of God's will. Assume too that this will intends something with such actions and events and that this 'something' also pertains to the future of human kind. Because, as human beings, our perspective about the present is more limited than our ability to gather records about the past, we can write fuller chronicles about the past. Furthermore, these narratives are important for discerning God's plan in the events of the past. Such knowledge is extremely crucial to determining the course of actions in the future, as far as we human beings are concerned. The Early Christians discovered very soon that the world was not going to come to an immediate end, an end which they hoped to see. Consequently, their problem became: what did God (and Christ) intend with human 'history'? In the events of the past, which was Christ acting in human history, they were provided with signs that required interpretation. In so far as God's will is revealed in the world (including in human history), it became the task of men to study the world to find out what God intends. God's will is also revealed in the chronicles of the human past. However, it is imperative to studying God's revelation that one studies what *actually happened* in the past. Only when we study the past as it actually occurred, only then could we hope to decipher what God intends for the human kind. An imaginary past is no substitute for an accurate rendering of the same. Not merely is such a past no substitute; the situation is even worse: by studying false chronicles about the past as though they were true, one endangers the very possibility of the salvation of the human soul.

The Bible, however, had already chronicled the human past. What was new, after Jesus Christ, was the emergence of the Christian Church. Consequently, one needed to chronicle the history of this institution as something that fulfilled God's plan on earth in much the same way one chronicled the coming of Jesus of Nazareth as the culmination of the strivings of the nations. Eusebius, the famous Church historian, accomplished both: one in his writings on the history of the Church and the other by showing how the 'wise' and 'noble' of the pagans from other cultures had actually, if only implicitly, anticipated the arrival of the Messiah.

It was left to St. Augustine to come up with the definitive framework from within which to study the human past. This philosophy of history suggested looking at the growth of the Christian *ecclesia* as the historical expression of God's plan. This community of believers (the Christian *ecclesia*, the community of Saints and Sinners that is), to Augustine and his followers, was bigger than any empirical society of Christians at any given moment of time. It incorporated the entire set of believers, past, present and future. It was a grand philosophy of history that

once and for all set the foundations for answering the question: *how 'ought' one to study the past?* Even more important than this fact is the following: he would transform a very counter-intuitive attitude into a trivial 'but, of course!' The last sentence needs some explication.

Consider the following question: why talk about the past at all? Or, why do human communities feel the need to talk about the past of their communities? These and analogous questions are raised in order to make the human situation representable to those who live. Why represent the past and present it to ourselves at all? An answer to this question requires appealing to some kind of an idea about what it is to live as a human being, what we aim at in life and why. Because we are interested in human flourishing ("live a good life", whatever 'good' means in this context), we need to think about ourselves as beings with some kind of a past. In other words, one looks at the past for the sake of living well and flourishing in the present. In most groups that have evolved into cultures, some kind of an implicit consensus is present regarding what human flourishing is, that is, what it means to live a good life. This consensus is as general and as abstract as the question itself ('human flourishing means to be happy'). In this sense, each human group has some kind of story about its past.

However, St. Augustine formulated questions about the past within a Christian theological framework. That is to say, he formulated a theological question as though the query about the past was indissolubly connected with the 'truth' of a story about the past. As I have outlined earlier on, to the Jews and the Christians, it was imperative that their claims about the past are 'true'. If such claims were false and the humankind acted in the present on the basis of these falsehoods, its future was eternal damnation. Thus, to St. Augustine, it was very obvious that there was only one attitude possible with respect to the past. Such an attitude sought the 'true' past: it was an attitude that answered the question "*how 'ought' one to study the past?*"? One 'ought' to study the past in such a way as to find the true past. This 'true' past had to be found through a painstaking *study* (of scriptures and the writings of the early church fathers), said Augustine, because mankind has been deceived into believing the lies told by the Devil about the human past. In short, because lies about the past abound in human communities (these 'lies' are, of course, the stories that human groups have about their own multiple pasts), one needs 'the truth'. The Bible was the only repository of this 'truth', as far as Augustine was concerned.

The 'truth' that St. Augustine sought can never be proved or disproved by any kind of research in the 'archives'. His 'truth' was about the Christ nature of Jesus of Nazareth and about the Bible. His predecessors had established that Jesus of Nazareth existed and their theologies had proved that he was The Messiah. Therefore, he claimed that one 'ought' to study the past

on the basis of this knowledge. Now the question is this: What sense does it make to take over his theological question and try to garnish it with 'secular' sounding dogmas?

Because 'truth' is what all human beings like to seek, today it has become obvious to talk as *though* one seeks truth while one studies the past. Two important issues need to be understood here. There is, first, the question why study the past at all? There is, second, the problem of what 'truth' means in this context.

Consider the first issue. Why 'study' the past instead of recounting your community's story about the past? I mean, why are we not satisfied in recounting *Ramayana, Mahabharata, puranas*, etc. as our stories about our past? What do we need to study and why? To these questions, there is a plausible sounding answer: 'we need to know whether these stories are true'. Ask again why: Why do we need to know whether these stories are true? After all, as we believe, these stories have been in circulation for millennia and they have adequately and admirably met the needs of our ancestors (and most of our contemporaries as well) in their quest for human flourishing. So, what extra reasons exist to 'study' the past?

Here is the first possible answer, which takes the form of a question: what if our stories about the past turn out to be false? Let me answer it with a counter-question: so what? What does it matter whether what we believe about our past is true or false as long as it helps us in human flourishing? One can choose truth above falsehood if (a) truth about the past helps us live better as human beings and (b) falsehood damages us. Is this the case? Has it been shown to be the case? Without answering these questions, one cannot provide good reasons to study the past.

Here is a second possible answer that attempts to sidestep the issue: "we need to know the truth about the past because only as such do we have knowledge about the past. We do not need to justify this knowledge about the past any further because, surely, knowledge is its own justification." However, this answer too does not work. Why?

Answering this question brings us to the second issue. You see, the only intelligible notion of truth we have today makes 'truth' into a property of sentences, that is, into a linguistic property. (That is to say, it is only *of sentences* that we can say whether they are true or false.) Even though we do use the notion of truth in multiple other ways (when we say of someone that 'he is a true friend' or when we say 'only truth is the real' and such like), these are not adequately fleshed out. In this sense, we can say that there are such repositories of truth in existence today: the multiple telephone directories in the world. Such books are embodiments of 'the truth' about the world. Consequently, 'the truth' which the historians seek could only be the

analogues of the current telephone directories. While one does not have any objection to collecting factoids about the past, what have these to do with 'knowledge', except in a trivial sense of that word?

One might disagree by pointing to 'historical explanations'. Do these not constitute knowledge? *No, they do not.* In the first place, all such explanations are *ad hoc*: one does not generate knowledge by sucking some explanation out of one's thumb to 'account' for the facts already collected, no matter how large that set of facts might be. Second, such explanations do not explain: they merely insinuate some kind of connection between facts and some implicit thesis. Third, invariably, such a thesis is some or another commonsense variant (or a garden variety) of psychological or sociological 'explanation'. Fourth, the assembled facts cannot, in any way, testify to 'the truth' of the implicit thesis. As a consequence, except for being *ad hoc* stories about the past, such 'explanations' do not even clarify the nature of 'historical explanations'.

In fact, there is a radical disjunction between what the historians think they are doing ('seeking explanations about the past') and what they do (collect factoids). When he seeks 'the truth' about the past, neither the historian nor his reader knows whether he has found it or even why it has to be 'found'. The 'archives' of the historian is not some kind of 'collective memory' of the humankind. It is what it always was: a collection of records that sits in a library shelf slowly gathering dust.

The second middle point

In 1160, Peter Comestor – the then chancellor of Notre Dame of Paris – wrote *Historia Scholastica*, a book that enjoyed tremendous popularity in all parts of Europe. As an appendix to his sacred history, Peter condenses some of the 'mythological' material into a series of short chapters, or *incidentiae*. In these, he looks at some of the 'mythological' figures in the following way: Zoroaster, for instance, invented magic and inscribed the seven arts on four columns; Isis taught the Egyptians the letters of the Alphabet and showed them how to write; Minerva taught several arts, in particular weaving; Prometheus probably instructed the ignorant or fabricated automata. All these mighty spirits, suggests Peter Comestor, are worthy of veneration, as are the patriarchs, and for the same reason: they have been the guides and teachers of humanity, and together stand as the common ancestors of civilization.

This way of looking at stories about other people's past represents one end of the spectrum. At the other end stands a disparaging attitude towards all such narratives. For instance, this is exemplified by Sir Babington Macaulay, in his famous minutes concerning the need for a British education system in India:

It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that *all the historical information* that has been collected to form all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England...

The question before us is merely whether when we can patronize ... *sound history*, (or) we shall countenance, at the public expense, ... *history, abounding with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long* – and geography, made up of seas of treacle and butter (cited in Keay, John, 1981, *India Discovered*. London: Collins, 1988: p. 77, my emphasis).

In the spectrum that I am constructing for the purposes of this piece, these two attitudes reveal two faces of the same coin. One face looks at the tales of the past of peoples and their cultures as disguised historical narrations but discovers some ‘kernel’ of truth in such narrations. It assumes, in a manner of speaking, that other people somehow did not know how to compose historical narratives (or did not care to do so) and that one has to ‘interpret’ these stories to extract the ‘truth’ from such stories. This is how, for example, the European intellectuals looked at the Greek myths during the Italian Renaissance. The Greek legends talked of human virtues but that these narratives represented such virtues (like courage, bravery, generosity, justice, etc) in the form of ‘heroes’ and ‘gods’. So, one had to ‘sympathetically’ read the myths and the legends of the Ancient Greek society to really understand what they are trying to say.

The ‘heroes’ of the European Enlightenment, by contrast, exemplify the second face of the coin. In their ‘*Quarrel with the Ancients*’, they were vitriolic in their assessment of the achievements of the Ancient Greek society, especially their myths and legends. Opposed to these myths and legends, which were mere stories and products of wild human imagination, stand ‘facts’ and ‘history’. One merely reads these stories for ‘entertainment’; to ascribe to them any other status is to live under an illusion. They were lies about the past which the poets constructed. The Ancients, with the exception of historians like Thucydides for instance, really produced myths and legends. Instead of enlightening us about ‘what the past was really like’, these stories deceive us.

Common to both these attitudes is the idea that we ‘ought not’ to take these stories about the past seriously. Such stories are not about the past; these are merely products of the human imagination. Only historiography can teach us about the past and, if we care about the past at all, we should care about ‘history’. In other words, what these two attitudes say is the following: they claim that our stories about the past are not *about anything real*. They do not speak about objects or events in the world. If we are perceptive enough, these stories tell us something

about the world of the authors *indirectly*; they do also *tell us* about the nature of human imagination. In and of themselves, these stories are really *about nothing*. If this is true, huge questions open up which they never even address: why did people from earlier generations produce all those stories? Why, instead of talking about the world, did they write only fiction? If Thucydides could write empirical history, why would Valmiki or Vyasa not be able to do the same? And so on.

There is something else too that unites them: the belief that they hold the key to the past and that they know how the past 'ought to' be studied. To Comestor, his theology had given him the certainty; to people like Macaulay (and the enlightenment thinkers), it was equally obvious that they knew how to study the past, whereas the earlier generations did not. Do not read them amiss: the 'heroes' of the enlightenment were not defending some or another scientific orientation for appreciating the human past. Much like that of Peter Comestor, *theirs too was a theological attitude*. In which way?

One of the bones of contention between the Catholics and the Protestants was about 'miracles'. The Catholic Church believed that miracles occurred in the world: in fact, to this day, the Catholics believe that transubstantiation occurs during the Holy Mass, where bread and wine are transubstantiated into the flesh and blood of Christ. They further believe in the intervention of deceased saints in the world: in fact, they attribute miraculous powers to some shrines and relics as well. Arraigned against them and this attitude towards miracles were the Protestants: they denied any such interventions, attributed miracles only to the Godhead and had withering contempt for the beliefs about the powers of shrines and relics. In short, their theologies persuaded the Protestants to look at the human past as something that required a different kind of study than even those which the Catholics engaged in. At best, the human past consisted of merely those deeds which human beings could perform. Nothing 'supernatural' occurs in human history; after all, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (and the miracles he performed) had nothing to do with human beings. The Bible records all the interventions of God (these, after all, are the 'miracles') and anything else is a mere human addition to the human past. Any talk of miracles outside of what is recorded in the Bible reflects the disease of the human mind. If anything at all, the history of humanity chronicles their corruption; it is a story of their fall, foibles and follies. The human past is and 'ought to be' a mere record of what human beings could do and, 'in truth', have achieved. Human history does not edify; at best, it disappoints. Any human flourishing that we might want is not provided by stories about the past. Such stories merely lie and mislead. The 'history' of the human past is merely a chronicle of the kind of creatures we are. *To think that narratives about the human past can teach us*

how to live or how to be happy or how to flourish as human beings is to assign to historiography a power that it does not possess and could never hope to possess.

Only God's Grace, which is what 'true religion' is, can pull us out of the misery that the human past, present and future is. It is the task of the 'true religion' to tell us what happiness is and how to reach it. To think differently is to arrogate the status and power of God to human beings. The enlightenment thinkers merely reproduced (garbed, of course, in the 'secular' fashion appropriate to their times) this theological stance towards the human past. Macaulay is a child of this Protestant attitude to the human past. What we call today as a 'historical attitude'; our ideas about why study the human past; how we 'ought to' do that; these are all solidly rooted in Protestant Christianity. That is, it is both Christian (thus partially shared by the Catholics and the Protestants alike) and Protestant.

The common end

Under the colonial rule, the British aggressively pushed their beliefs onto us. They quizzed us about our past in ways we were not used to before. Taking our multiple stories, epics and *puranas* as though they were historiographies, they derided us for believing in their 'truth'. Our intellectuals, whose story under the colonial rules is a sad story of succumbing to what they did not understand, broadly took the only two paths available to them: either deny the truth of such stories or try and show that these stories were 'true' chronicles of the past. It did not occur to these intellectuals to study the culture of these colonizers and figure out what kinds of questions the colonizers were asking. They merely assumed that the attitudes of the colonial masters were exemplifications of reason, rationality and scientificity. In the first phase, our intellectuals accepted the absence of historiography in the Indian traditions and set out to solve that lacuna by writing histories of India. Of course, these were based completely and totally on the 'philosophy of history' that the Europeans sold at steeply discounted prices on the Indian continent. In the second phase, they joined the Europeans in deriding the Indian traditions and their stock of stories about the past. In the third phase, they simply took over the European historiography of India and went on to garnish it with Indian spices, which merely meant adding new 'empirical details', as and when one 'discovered' them. In this sense, the attitude of writing a history of Indian culture and civilization, based on a meticulous 'study' of the past *is not anything new*. It is an old knee-jerk reaction to the Protestant critique of the Indian culture and traditions.

What do these historiographies accomplish? They teach us, for instance, that the *Mahabharata* war could have taken place, except, of course, it was probably a war between a collection of

tribes. It is merely the poetic exaggeration that has provided us with a description of epic proportions. So, in all probability, these historians assure us, there was some kind of a war, somewhere in the north of India about a few thousand years ago. As far as Krishna lifting the mountain with his little finger or about Ghatotkacha fighting the war with 'the magic' of the Rakshasas, they do not even bother to hide the snigger: of course, it is all either nonsense or mere poetic exaggeration. Surely, we know that no human individual can lift the mountain with his little finger and, in all probability, the 'Rakshasas' was the name of another tribe, which, perhaps, was neutral in this tribal war. In other words, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (and all our stories about the past) are merely disguised historiographies or lies and exaggerations of our incompetent ancestors ('incompetent' because they could not even do what Thucydides did or the Chinese did so many thousands of years ago) which only the current generation of historians can decipher.

In one sense, until recently, the damage was limited. It was limited because this group of historians shared the deep, Nehruvian contempt for Indian culture and her traditions. They strutted in the enclaves of elite universities, flew to international conferences to present their papers there and, generally speaking, felt much above the rest of the Indian 'masses' steeped in ignorance and superstition. Not knowing about their own profound ignorance of the origin, nature and meaning of these 'scientific' questions, these historians were content to reproduce whatever their Metropolitan masters wanted. They had built a wall of separation between their 'secularism' and the 'religiosity' of the Indian masses.

Today, especially in the last decades, the picture has changed drastically and alarmingly. It is important for us to understand this latest development.

Both British 'liberalism' and the Nehruvian 'secularism' brought another reaction into existence in India. We are familiar with one kind: the kind that derides Indian culture, her traditions and holds the West as the picture of perfection. These people have been dominant in the press and the universities for over a century. But, I want to talk about its antipode: a tendency that too is a child of British Protestantism, Christian to the core, but one which borrows from other strands available in European Christianity.

This tendency goes the other way: it claims that our stories about the past are literally our histories. We too have historiographers from the past, we too know 'the truth' about our past, what we say about our past is the literal 'truth' and they are not poetic lies or exaggerations. *Enter the Sangh Parivar.*

The Sangh Parivar, actually, is a confluence of at least two orientations. On the one hand, it intuitively reacts to the Christian descriptions of Indian culture. It senses that there is something profound about Indian culture, her traditions, her multiple stories about the past, and so on. It senses too that there are various ways of being on earth and that the Christian and the Muslim ways of 'being-in-the-world' are but two out of many different ways. And it reacts with incomprehension as well, while listening to the criticisms of the *religiously founded* 'secular' criticisms of everything Indian. It cannot accept selling Christian ideology as the best exemplar of 'scientific' approach to the past. But, it too is profoundly and deeply ignorant of western culture.

On the other hand, for reasons I am not fully clear about, the Sangh Parivar does not have many intellectuals in its midst. It has many ideologues instead. Lacking the ability to do intellectual research, these ideologues pick up whatever is readily available. Two such things are readily available: nationalism and the Christian stories about history. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar have picked them both.

These two things, when mixed together, are catastrophic in nature. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar might do what centuries of colonialism tried but could not accomplish: destroy the Indian culture and her traditions irreplaceably and irrevocably. They might do that while truly believing that they are 'saving' the Indian culture and her traditions. Let me explain why.

Our multiple stories about the past, among other things, provide us with a deep connection to a collective past. We read or hear the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and we feel that Rama, Duryodhana, Dharmaraja, etc were our kings. When we participate in the festival of Deepavali, we open our doors to Bali, a rakshasa, as the greatest king we ever had. We feel connected to Sita, Draupadi and Abhimanyu. We have wept when we heard the story of Ekalavya; we feel touched by Karna's fate; we get angry at Shakuni and Dushyasana. We want brothers to be like Rama and Lakshmana. We feel *connected to all these people* in a myriad of ways and our connection is deeper than our connections to great grandfathers, whom we have never met (in all probability). In short, we feel part of that genealogy which these multiple stories present as our collective past.

As children, we have often wondered where these people lived and what languages they spoke. Did Krishna speak in a local language, Sanskrit or something else totally? In which language did Yaksha ask questions to Dharmaraja? How did Sita or Hanumantha speak to Ravana? How did the rishis and the kings from Kambhoja communicate with those from Jambudwipa? Are the nagas of today the descendents of Arjuna, is the Mathura near Delhi also the place where Krishna lived? Are the vanaras that helped Rama, the ancestors of those monkeys that we see today? And the Yugas; what are they actually? Is the treta and the

dwapara yuga merely how the earth was so many hundreds of thousands of years ago? And so on and so forth.

As we grew up and learnt our geographies and sciences, we did try to combine both: how could there be treta yuga when our species is hardly 50,000 years old? How could Bhima really have the strength of 10,000 elephants and Duryodhana merely 9999? How could Dharmaraja 'walk' to Swarga and, if he did, why could Trishanku not do the same? And so on as well. We went to our elders with these questions seeking answers, which were no answers at all. Yet, they satisfied us. Over a period of time, we stopped asking these questions. Not because we knew the answers or that they were unanswerable. But we stopped asking such questions because we learnt, in whichever way we did so, that these were not the right questions to ask. *To grow up as an Indian is to learn that these stories should be treated differently than claims from our geography lessons.* That is to say, *we learnt that 'the truth' of these stories are independent of our acceptance of these stories as our stories* and as stories about 'our collective past'. Whether or not some story about our past took place on earth or not, such a 'fact' is utterly irrelevant to accepting these stories. This attitude works as long as we are not brought up with the idea that the ground for accepting such stories is their 'historical truth'.

What happens when people make claims that 'rama sethu' exists, Ayodhya is situated somewhere in northern India and such like? What happens when such 'historical' claims begin to find their way into people's consciousness?

In the early phases, there is happiness and euphoria. Not because we can now say, "ah, after all, everything that the *Ramayana* says is true". But because we feel our connections to the past have taken on tangible presence. We feel that we recognize these empirical markers because we have always been familiar with them. Dwaraka, Brindavana, Kurukshetra, Ayodhya... these are our cities and our past. Suddenly, there is exhilaration: it merely requires a few days journey to go to Kurukshetra! We can go to Mathura and walk around in Brindavana! However, this is merely the first phase. What happens in the subsequent phase when this claim is pushed further, as it is invariably going to be?

Consider the following scenario. It becomes common 'knowledge' that the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas was a tribal war, fought somewhere in the north of India some three thousand years ago. And that 'rakshasa', 'vanara' merely named some or another tribe in India. Krishna was a dark-skinned upstart from some tribe; Rama was a king somewhere up north; Draupadi was a daughter from yet another tribe that practiced polygamy, and so on. In short, we discover that our epics and *puranas* are badly written historiographies that chronicle the lives of ordinary human beings like you and me. We discover what we knew all along: it is

not possible to train the monkeys that swing from tree to tree to build a bridge between India and Sri Lanka.

Then the 'Dalit' and progressive intellectuals turn up. They tell us that some or another Brahmin poet merely described the work of the 'slaves' of a human king called 'Rama' as the work of 'monkeys'. By calling these slaves as 'monkeys', they add, the 'upper-caste' proves yet again its disdain and contempt for and the oppression of 'the Dalits'. As has been typical of the 'Aryans', the Brahmin priests were not even willing to consider such 'slaves' as human beings. The same argument would then get applied to the Danavas and Rakshasas: we 'discover' that the 'Dravidians' were the Rakshasas and the Danavas of our epics.

Do not mistake the point I am making here. No factoid or even a set of factoids will ever lend truth-value to these claims. They would be mere surmises and guesses. But they will get pushed across as 'scientific' and 'historical' hypotheses that very soon end up becoming 'facts' about the Indian past. They will acquire the same status that the 'Indological' truths have today. For instance, which intellectual in the world challenges the claim that 'Buddhism' battled against 'Brahmanism'? Almost none. How many know of the circumstances that produced this 'guesswork' or even about the amount of Christian theological baggage required to sustain this claim? Alas, hardly any.

In exactly the same way, with such stories accompanying the growth of a new generation, which one of them will ever want to become a Bhakta of Rama, Krishna or Anjaneya? How many will go to their temples or even build them? When they grow up in the knowledge that 'kurukshetra' names a place somewhere in North India where the local tribes from the region fought a war during 500 B.C.E; when they grow up in the knowledge that a tribe called 'Nagas', from some remote part of India, also figure in an imaginary epic whose authoritative critical edition is published by some or another University Press in the US; when they 'know' that the local events in some remote city (Bikaner, Ayodhya...) were presented to their credulous forefathers as 'the history' of India; when they know all these and more, what would be their connection to what we consider as our past today?

Perhaps, they would even end up being ashamed of their past and of their stories about the past: such stories confirm the worst that the world has told about India. Indian culture and her 'religions' were created to inflict massive injustice on fellow-human beings. 'Hinduism' would, of course, be the main culprit.

We are almost past the first phase in this development. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar are beginning to initiate the subsequent phase. Instead of asking questions about the nature

of 'historical truth'; instead of studying the religious culture where such questions originate from; instead, that is, of understanding the relationship between stories about the past and human communities, the ideologues of the Sangh Parivar want to establish the 'historicity' of our epics and stories. In the process of pushing this Christian theme, these ideologues might end up achieving what Islam and Christianity have always desired: destruction of the 'pagan' and 'heathen' culture that India is. What the Muslim kings and the Evangelical Protestants could not achieve over centuries, the ideologues from the Sangh Parivar might achieve in a matter of decades.

In order to destroy the past of a people, all you need to do is to give them history. What is called 'history' today is a secularization of the Christian religion. Christianity, Islam and Judaism are hostile to anything different from themselves, especially, to the 'Pagan and heathen'. This hostility persists in its secularized varieties as well. Hence the hostility of the so-called 'scientific' historians of the last so many decades to Indian culture and her traditions. The ideologues of the Sangh Parivar too, in their utter and total ignorance of the western culture, are pushing a Christian religious theme on to the Indian culture. Where explicitly Christian and Islamic attacks on the heathen culture of India failed, there, if not thought through, this attack might end up succeeding. The saddest thing of it all is this: the Sangh Parivar genuinely believes that it is helping the Indian culture. Its ideologues are not doing that; they might contribute to the destruction of Indian culture.

So, it appears, the questions facing us are these: *do we need a history that Christianity has written, or do we need to retain our past? What do Indians need?* Before answering these two questions, we need to understand what we have, which is '*itihasa*'. But what is that exactly? What does it mean to speak of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *puranas* as 'our past' or as our '*itihasa*'? How do they relate to Indian culture? I take up these questions now.

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Let me begin the second part with the following dialogue between a Swiss-German and a young Balinese (from Bichsel, Peter, *Der Leser, Das Erzählen: Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen*, 1982, Darmstadt und Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag. Pp. 13-14, my translation and italics):

When I discovered, or when it was explained to me, that Hinduism is a pedagogical religion, namely, that in so far as the best "good deed" of a Hindu consisted of explaining something or the other, I lost my inhibitions and began with questions...

A young Balinese became my primary teacher. One day I asked him if he believed that the history of Prince Rama – one of the holy books of the Hindus – is true.

Without hesitation, he answered it with “Yes”.

“So you believe that the Prince Rama lived somewhere and somewhen?”

“I do not know if he lived”, he said.

“Then it is a story?”

“Yes, it is a story.”

“Then someone wrote this story – I mean: a human being wrote it?”

“Certainly some human being wrote it”, he said.

“Then some human being could have also invented it”, I answered and felt triumphant, when I thought that I had convinced him.

But he said: “It is quite possible that somebody invented this story. *But true it is, in any case.*”

“Then it is the case that Prince Rama did not live on this earth?”

“What is it that you want to know?” he asked. “*Do you want to know whether the story is true, or merely whether it occurred?*”

“The Christians believe that their God Jesus Christ was also on earth”, I said, “In the New Testament, it has been described by human beings. But the Christians believe that this is the description of the reality. Their God was also really on Earth.”

My Balinese friend thought it over and said: “I had been already so informed. I do not understand *why it is important that your God was on earth, but it does strike me that the Europeans are not pious. Is that correct?*”

“Yes, it is”, I said.

Consider carefully the claims of this young Balinese. (A) Even though the narrative of events could have been invented and written by a human being, his ‘holy book’ remains true. (B) He does not know, or is not even interested in knowing, whether Rama really lived but that does not affect the truth of the *Ramayana*. (C) He draws a distinction between a true story (not just

any story, nota bene, but his 'holy book') and a chronicle of events on earth. (D) Finally, it remains his 'holy' book despite the above or precisely because of it.

That is to say, he is indifferent to historical truth and suggests, in the italicized parts of the dialogue, that it is not a proper question to ask; even if it is the invention of a human being and even if it is historically unfounded, the story *retains its truth*. He correlates impiety with believing in the truth of the Biblical narrative. As I would like to formulate it, not only is the young Indonesian drawing a distinction between a story and a history but is also suggesting that the historicity of the *Ramayana* is irrelevant to its truth. His stance, I would like to add, is also the stance of many, many Indians, even if subject to some changes during the last few decades.

In a way, in the West and elsewhere, we do talk about stories in an analogous fashion. When the Sherlock Holmes Society disputes whether the famed detective ever really said "Elementary, my dear Watson", the dispute is not whether Sir Arthur Conan Doyle ever wrote such a sentence but whether Sherlock Holmes ever said such a thing. In this sense, we do talk about the 'truth' or 'falsity' of stories (the way the Indonesian does), even where we know that there is no historical truth to them. In the case of this Indonesian, or the Asian, who believes in his 'holy books', the situation is more complicated: in his culture, the *Ramayana* is 'true' even when it is not clear what the status of the book is. Perhaps it is fiction; perhaps it is not. He neither knows nor cares. To know that the Bible is historical, suggests this Balinese, makes the Europeans impious. *Impiety is to believe that one's 'religion' is historically true!* Many questions emerge, if we read this dialogue carefully: how does the Balinese understand the "historical"? Does the notion make any sense in his mode of going about in the world? Or, is he inferring the "value" of this term from his interlocutor's account of the Christians?

We can say that Sherlock Holmes did not exist, and still argue that it is true that he lived in 221B Baker Street. When we discuss the truth of fictional objects, we know that we are talking about fictions. The "truth" here is unverifiable but experientially accessible; "fiction" can "touch" us. The question about how we can analyse our disputations about the truth of an object or an event in fiction is different from expressing indifference regarding the status of the narrative itself. The first is familiar to us; there are interesting attempts in both literature studies and philosophy of logics to analyse them. I want to draw attention to the second: it does not seem to matter whether the *Ramayana* is true or not; whether it is fiction or fact. The 'ontological' status of the content of the text is irrelevant to its truth.

To understand this situation properly, we need a contrast. Let me, therefore, ask the question: How similar is the stance of the Indonesian regarding the *Ramayana* when compared to the attitudes with respect to the *Bible*? In the last decades, a "narrative criticism" is observable in

theological circles. Many advocate that we look at the Bible in its entirety as a series of stories; yet others focus on the New Testament in an analogous fashion. Especially under the influence of the 'deconstruction' movement and 'post-modern theology', the Greek distinction between *mythos* and *logos* has come under attack and criticism. Are the problems I am trying to formulate comparable to these and allied tendencies?

Because much more requires to be said in this context than I can possibly do now, let me rest content with making just two points.

Whatever the intellectual fashion in Biblical scholarship (or in New Testament studies), we must not forget that they are responses to the historical problems posed by Biblical exegesis. The 'narrative turn' is one answer to the problem of the historicity of Jesus and the truth of the Gospels. Even these narrativists, today in any case, would not dream of taking the stance (as Christians, *nota bene*) that the existence of Jesus on earth is irrelevant to the truth of the Bible. In fact, this turn is predicated on the historical veracity of the New Testament Bible.

Suppose someone says the following: Jesus might or might not have existed; he might be The Saviour or he might not be; he might have asked Peter to found the Church or he might not have; the Gospels might be the fictitious invention of some four people or it might not be. As far as he is concerned, any of the above possibilities could be true, and the truth or falsity of none of the above affects his belief in the truth of the Gospels. How could we understand such a person? Probably, The Holy Bible is not 'holy' to him; perhaps, he sees the Bible as a moral tract or a story-based philosophical treatise on the human condition. Whether or not such an attitude is justified, we know that he cannot really be a Christian.

There is a second point. Even where the Gospel is seen as a story, it becomes an object of investigation as a text. Only as a text can the Bible provide 'knowledge' (of whatever kind). Such an attitude suggests that knowledge is primarily textual in nature. Consequently, even the narrative turn – if and where it does turn radical – requires knowledge of the text. Further, it will look at the text of the Bible as a story, and will talk about the way the Gospels talk about the world, man and society without, however, being able to look at stories in other ways. That is to say, stories are treated as knowledge-claims about the world.

The difference, with respect to the Indonesian, lies along these two lines: to him, the story of Rama does impart knowledge but without it being a knowledge-claim about the world. And to him, stories are 'true' not because they are 'fictions' and even less because they are historical facts. In that case, what is the nature of such stories and what is the attitude of those who make these stories their own? In simple terms, how do we make sense of this Young Balinese

or those many Indians who would agree with him? What is the nature of “truth” involved in the Indonesian’s claim about Rama?

On a metaphor and ‘truths’

To begin answering these questions, a metaphor could prove useful. Consider a dominant metaphor in Indian culture. Used by the literate and the illiterate alike, it is about ten blind men: while touching and feeling ten different parts of an elephant (tusk, tail, snout, ear, trunk, leg, toenails, skin, back and underbelly), they carry on maintaining that an elephant is that part which he happens to be touching. Such, the wise tell us, is the nature of our disputation. Disputation about what? I will keep the answer in abeyance for the time being but let us say for now that it is about ‘the world’. Coming to grips with this metaphor, however, requires a short philosophical detour through discussions about the nature of ‘truth’ in Indian intellectual traditions.

Only for the sake of keeping this detour short, simple and accessible, let me draw on the current claims of Indology and Hinduism studies. These claims postulate rivalry, competition and strife between multiple Indian traditions. Let me create an anachronistic spectrum of Indian traditions where the *Advaitic* tradition stands at one end of the spectrum with the Buddhist traditions at the other end. Both operate with the idea that there are two kinds of truths (*Satyadvaya*): the ‘Conventional’ (*Vyaavahaarika*, or *Laukika* or *Praapanchika*) and the ‘Ultimate’ (*Paaramaarthika*).

The conventional truths are true claims about the entities that exist in the world. In some senses, this notion of truth dovetails with what is called the ‘semantic conception’ of truth or, equally often, the ‘Aristotelean conception’ of truth. The conventional truth further includes the ‘pragmatic conception’ of truth. In other words, the semantic and pragmatic conceptions of truth are parts of the conventional conception of truth. This truth is always and only about existing entities (which include objects, events, situations or whatever else) in the world.

However, what is the world and what exists there? The world is everything that was, is and shall be. It includes everything: from primordial matter to ghosts and spirits, if they exist. The ‘world’ is the most inclusive concept we have to accommodate entities that existed, that exist now and shall exist in the future. What exists though? The answer to this question cannot be provided by a philosophical fiat, but only by knowledge. Only knowledge tells us what there is in the world, and this knowledge is always limited, ‘perspectival’ and hypothetical. Knowledge is, in some senses, about empirical properties of the world, as we sometimes use that term. Also, what constitutes knowledge is itself a question in knowledge and both the question and

the answers to it are human. As our knowledge of the world evolves, so does our understanding of what human knowledge is. This human knowledge tells us that the world itself is subject to all kinds of changes. Our conventional truths are contextual and evolving: what we believe to be true at some time might turn out to be false later. These truths, like the world about which they are true, are in flux, to use a well-known metaphor. In simple terms, the conventional truths are context dependent and conditional in nature. This is how we must understand our present day claims about such entities as 'super strings', 'dark matter' and such like. We hypothesize the existence of such entities currently; they might or might not exist, but that is something we shall know only as knowledge evolves.

Here is the first sense in which the dominant metaphor is suggestive. It tells us that our knowledge of the world is always partial and while partial descriptions are true, they remain partial. They are true of those parts that our knowledge describes but none of these parts tells us what 'the elephant' is. However, what is this 'elephant', if not a sum of the parts? A knowledge of systems theory of today tells us that the previous question is not proper: the relationship between an elephant and the organs is a part-whole relationship, i.e. that it is a *mereological relation*. A description of the parts of a system, even when such descriptions are true, does not give us a description of the system itself.

Consider now the fact that while the blind men do have tactile access to parts of an elephant, they have access to the elephant as a creature. Thus, we have access to 'something', whose nature we do not know yet. But, in terms of the metaphor, we do not know what the 'elephant' is except for the parts about which we have some true descriptions. In and of itself, that need not create any problem because we can generate hypotheses about that entity which has these parts. However, this requires that we know that these partial descriptions, *and only these partial descriptions*, are descriptions of one and the same entity. However, as blind men, we do not know that: what if there are more than ten blind men some of whom are touching parts of a cat, others parts of a table and yet some others the parts of an automobile and so on? Are we to assume that they are touching one and the same entity or different entities? How can we know that?

One possibility is to appeal to human reason. That is to say, if the hypothesis is logical and it explains in a consistent fashion that which we access, then this hypothesis can be considered possibly true. (In this sense, I think there is also the syntactic conception of truth in the Indian traditions.) If there are many such hypotheses then that does not show that only one of them is 'true' (even though each adherent to a particular hypothesis thinks that way) because we have no knowledge about the nature of the objects but only some ill-understood access to

them. If we confine the debate to the metaphor, that is, agree that the discussion is about what the 'elephant' is, we can recognize that a similar debate has taken place in the western intellectual tradition. This is the discussion between the nominalists and the realists (to use one set of labels) about the nature of Universals: what is the ontological status of terms like 'elephant', 'Green', etc.? Does 'green' refer to a world of 'colour' or are green objects merely similar with respect to their property of having a colour? Here, given that the proponents in the debate are trying to answer the same question, we can assume that their theories or hypotheses are rival and competing theories.

Consider now the possibility that this discussion about the elephant and other objects have been going on for some time and that these groups of blind men have evolved criteria to arrive at some kind of consensus about the criteria they use to settle their disagreements. Now, there arrives another group of blind men, who have managed to use knives but without having a tactile access to the surfaces of the objects they have dissected or cut through. Some have dissected an elephant, yet others have failed to saw through its tusk, some have skinned a cat and some others have tried to cut through the table or the automobile and so on. These two groups meet to discuss about the nature of the items they have access to. To keep the discussion simple, let us assume that both groups have reached a consensus about the separateness of these objects. However, their hypotheses about the nature of the objects that the second group has access to diverge radically from the hypotheses that the first group has. To the first group, it is obvious that the entities they have tactile access to are neither soft (tissues) nor mushy (internal organs) and definitely not like liquids (blood). That is to say, the second group of hypotheses goes in a direction that is antithetical to what their knowledge tells them about their access. To the second group, the hypotheses of the first group also contravenes their knowledge. How should they decide what their debate is now about? Is it about the ontological status of the 'elephant' (or about the ontological status of the 'cat' or 'the automobile')? Are they rival hypotheses and competitor theories or merely true descriptions of different levels of what they access?

They agree that their hypotheses about the accessible but ill-understood objects are different. They could then either agree that all their different hypotheses are true because they are merely different true descriptions of the different 'levels' of the objects they have access to. Or, they might believe in the opposite: that these are rival or competitor theories. No matter how they decide at a later date, how could they linguistically indicate *their current situation*? That is, how to indicate that the conflict they now have is also about 'the domain' these objects inhabit?

In a sense, this problem is easily solved. They make a distinction between object and meta-level discussions. Let us say that they agree that the discussion about 'the world' is at a meta-level, whereas their disputes about 'elephants' and such like are at an object-level.

Let us now say that in both these groups of blind men, some people discover that next to the objects and their properties they access tactilely, they can also access some *properties* that are not accessible through their sense organs. That is, they discover that the presence of properties that, using our language, can be called *emergent properties*. Now, suddenly, huge questions open up that have to do with the status of these: (a) Are there emergent properties in the world? (b) Do they have effects on objects and events in the world? (c) If objects in the world have such properties, does 'the world' itself manifest one or more emergent properties?

Some of these blind men also devise many practical ways to access these properties. Any blind man, if he is willing to follow one of these ways, can testify to accessing these emergent properties. Many people describe their access and, even if they do not call them 'emergent', they develop hypotheses to account for their manifestation. These hypotheses, though each is consistent, contravene every object and meta-level consensus, both about the objects in the world and the nature of such a world. *How is this discussion to be identified and separated from the earlier discussions?* That is, how do these people now indicate that (a) the newly proposed hypotheses are consistent; (b) what these hypotheses postulate are accessible to human experience; (c) these hypotheses, at the same time, speak about properties that contravene everything they individually or as a group know about the world and the objects therein?

Indian traditions identify and separate such discussions from disagreements about both the objects in the world and about the world. They call the latter as disagreements regarding conventional truth. They separate these from debates about 'the emergent properties' by speaking about Ultimate Truth. This domain of the ultimate truth is the domain of '*Adhyatma*', to use a Sanskrit word. (For the time being, and only for the time being, I will use the word '*adhyatma*' without explicating its meaning. However, I will come back to this issue soon.) Are we or are we not accessing this domain of Adhyatma too when we access the world?

Herein, then, lies the peculiarity of the adhyatmic domain. As human beings, we can experientially access it. Conceptually, when one attempts to describe such experiences, it contravenes our knowledge of the world. It is practically accessible in the sense that one can devise different practical methods to access it and even experiment with ways of accessing it. One could even identify, in a variety of ways, the different degrees of access that one has to this domain. We face but two choices to understand this: either dismiss Adhyatmic domain as delusional and

confused or attempt to make sense of this domain and our purported access to it. The first approach makes the entire Asian culture into a delusional culture. I prefer the second option.

Taking the second option requires introducing a philosophical distinction that I cannot argue for in the course of this talk. Let me say objects that populate the world *exist*. Here, all and only those objects *exist* that have material or energetic substratum. Our natural and social sciences study existing objects and formulate hypotheses about them. Let me call the *adhyatmic domain* as the *domain of the real*. In so doing, I am introducing the distinction between ‘existence’ and the ‘real’: *what is real does not exist and what exists is not real*.

About the distinction

Two issues need tackling when distinctions in natural languages are made: (a) one has to show that the distinction is cognitively fruitful and that (b) it has some linguistic plausibility. Let me begin with the second issue first.

The distinction between the real and existence is not as artificial as it looks at first sight. Often, even in English, we ask whether something ‘really’ exists or not, where the word ‘real’ qualifies existence. Mirages exist but they are not considered real, the Lyle-Müller illusion exists but the uneven lengths of the lines are not real, the Sun’s revolution around earth is observed to exist but it is not real etc. That is to say, we often make the distinction (in our daily language) between the ‘Real’ and ‘Existence’, even if we, equally often, run these two words together. I am making this point not to suggest that Adhyatma is akin to earth’s revolution round the sun or whatever but merely to indicate that there is some kind of linguistic plausibility in this case.

Is the distinction between the real and existence also made elsewhere in western thought? In a sense, yes. God is the real in Christianity. Human beings, according to this religion, cannot talk about God using only human reason. God has to reveal Himself to us and aid us further in our search for Him. He is the Truth we are searching for but this truth cannot be described using only human knowledge. That is the real, as such. However, the relation between the Real and Existence is a matter of discussion, even if it occurs within the framework of the Bible: that issue is about the transcendence and the immanence of God or the Real. In all the three Semitic religions, *the Real is sometimes drawn into existence*. It is about the reality of existence that western thought and religion is preoccupied with, at times. Consequently, their concerns are different from those of the Indian traditions.

Of course, to make the distinction between the real and the existence coherent, we need to speak about many other things as well: (a) the relationship between the entities that could exist but do not (e.g. leprechauns, witches and flying pigs) and the real, (b) the relationship between

the Universals and the domain of existence and so on. However, this task need not detain us for the moment.

All I am suggesting for the moment is that the Indian traditions also make the distinction between real and existence and my proposal is merely to keep this distinction stable for the time being. Henceforth, I shall use the word '*adhyatmic truth*' instead of 'Ultimate truth'. Thus there are two kinds of truth: *the Adhyatmic truth and the conventional truth*. When used with respect to sentences, this distinction suggests that the sentences about the real and existence differ with respect to their property of being truth-or-falsity-bearers (or as bearers of truth values).

This is just about the only philosophical apparatus we need in order to begin making sense of the young Balinese, of some aspects of Indian culture and the Indian notion of '*Itihasa*', which is often translated inaccurately as 'history'.

On Itihasa

'Itihasa', a compound Sanskrit word, is normally split as *iti+ha+aasa*. It is also translated as 'so-it-happened' or 'thus-it-veryly happened'. From such translations, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that 'Itihasa', as a word, picks out literature that chronicles the past or that it is history of the 'bygone era'. Equally often, *Amarakosha* (sort of Sanskrit lexicon) is trotted out in order to provide a definition that confirms this translation. I do not want to discuss how Amara brings in the discourse on Itihasa in his lexicon because I am not interested in definitions and etymologies at the moment, even though they have to be tackled at some stage, but would like to begin instead with some oft noticed facts and a question that is rarely raised.

The facts: the *Chandogya Upanishad* speaks about itihasa as the fifth Veda, placing it next to the four Veda's; Shankaracharya mentions that recitations of itihasa was part of certain major rituals; the classical Indian poetics lay down the rule that *Mahaakaavays* ('ornate poetry', as the Orientalists term it) and *Naatakas* (drama) draw on itihasa to work out their themes; to this day, performing arts in parts of India (*Talamaddale, Yakshagana, etc.*) follow this rule... And so on.

The question is very simple: why should any of these foregoing facts be the case? That is, how do we explain or even understand the above facts? Why should Indians find a recitation of their own history as important as the Vedas or so important that they make it a part of major rituals? Simply referring to such practices elsewhere in the world, where people recite lore and legends in the performance of some rituals (usually, such references are either to 'primitive' people or to 'archaic' practices that survive even in the 'modern' world), does not suffice. The problem simply becomes both huge and distasteful. If we do not do this, then the answer

should comfort Indian historians: their books on Indian history will surely be sold in millions, if not in billions. All they have to do, in order to eke out a comfortable living, is to negotiate fat royalty contracts with book publishers! Indians would then recite 'history' while performing their rituals. However, jests apart, how to answer the question I raised?

Let us begin with the translation of the word: let us accept the conventional translation of itihasa as 'thus it happened'. Now the question is this: *what is being picked out by the referential word 'thus' or 'iti'?* If you look at, say, the *Mahabharata as a standalone text* and make use of the western conventions of telling a story, the conclusion is obvious: 'thus' picks out a story that is yet to be narrated. Under these conditions, that the Mahabharata is considered as 'Itihasa' and that this word picks out the story narrated in the text become obvious.

However, Sanskrit is not English and India is a culture that is different from the West. 'Iti' in Sanskrit is a meta-linguistic word that picks out what has already been linguistically spoken. This word does the work in Sanskrit what "disquotational" marks (also called 'scare quotes') do in English. In this language, it is a typographical mark; in Sanskrit, it is a word in language. *'Iti' is a meta-level linguistic reference to an object-level discourse.* Even to this day, this convention operates in Indian languages: often letters end with 'iti' where the word picks out what has been already written. Itihasa compositions are detours through which access to what has preceded them is made possible. From this, it follows that 'itihasa' texts are not standalone texts; they have never been that. When we call the Mahabharata an itihasa text, we are actually saying that it refers back to something else that has been already said and that its discourse is at a meta-level regarding what has already been said at an object-level.

When compounded by other words (ahaasa) or by a name, the word also identifies what follows. The stories of Mahabharata are called itihasa because the iti prefix refers also to something other than the story. Iti does not refer to the conclusion or the moral purport of the story. Iti is at the beginning of the story; the story merely illustrates what has preceded it. Therefore, unless we figure out what this 'iti' is, we cannot understand the itihasa tradition. Here is my hypothesis: *Adhyatma is the only possible reference of iti.* That means *itihasa is a story that illustrates Adhyatma or imparts Adhyatma through an elucidation.* That is why it has such an exalted place in the Indian intellectual traditions and not because Indians are narcissists, who revel in repeating constantly their own histories to themselves.

When people from other cultures came to India and studied her culture, they brought together some native cultural elements and categories in a different way. They split things apart, as it suited their way of describing the world, which are united in India. They could not understand that Mahabharata and Itihasa had to be situated in a particular context, namely the Adhyatmic

context. Itihasa was compared with a genre familiar to the Western culture; they could be seen as mythologies or histories. As a result, Itihasa became 'history'; the whole of Mahabharata and Ramayana stood for the ancient Indian historiographical traditions. 'Absurd and fantastic' stories of the itihasa traditions led them to search for a factual/historical core of these traditions. These efforts also strengthened the Western notions of a heathen India, which was described using different frameworks: the theological, the empirical, the philological, the romantic, and so on. Western scholarship has tried to come to grips with Itihasa as literature, religious text, history, so on, but none of these fits Mahabharata.

As a result, Adhyatma was split apart from itihasa: one was the domain of religion and another became the domain of history. Educated Indians inherited such discourses. Thus, Itihasa stopped making sense to the western educated Indians, who were informed only by the Western interpretations. They see Mahabharata as an epic written by someone called Vyasa, or by multiple authors over millennia, with interpolations and interpretations by different Brahmin groups with vested interests. It thus acquires a loose structure of *katha* (story) and *upakathas* (sub-stories) knitted together to oppress the 'Dalits' in India. This book, however, is anything but empirical history. No one has attempted to explain the function of this book in a culture that produced it, except in terms of intellectual weakness that produces fantastic stories guided by the malefic desire to oppress the 'Dalits'. At best, it exhibits the naïve historical consciousness of Indians, or functions as a source for the reconstruction of life and thought of ancient Indians, or providing ideals and morals for our life. As far as the latter is concerned, no one has been able to provide a coherent picture of the morals of this book as a whole. At worst, it embodies Brahminical conspiracy.

If we are not prepared to consider Itihasa as one more example for the heathendom of the Indians, we have to explain why Vyasa or Valmiki or other authors composed these books the way they are today. It is generally held by philologists and Indologists that Mahabharata contains a bunch of interpolations made by totally unrelated authors from different ages rendering its structure loose and chaotic. Such understanding has led to the critical editions of the Mahabharata text. But these critical editions will not solve our problem.

To proceed fruitfully, we have to begin with the fact that itihasa tradition survives in multiple forms among Indians. Mahabharata, in whatever form it exists today, is itihasa because it is structured for a particular purpose. It prepares the ground carefully and knits the stories and *upakhyanas* (discourses) systematically together into a structure. The stories become itihasa when they find place within this structure. Mahabharata, as it is today, is a product of the creativity of itihasa tradition over millennia. Creativity has to work under certain cognitive and

epistemological conditions, if it has to be productive. Otherwise, creativity does not distinguish itself from delusional expressions, whether oral or written. *Mahabharata works under constraints laid down by Adhyatmic reflections*. It works within that structure. That is why it is creative. People just did not add new stories randomly. If Indians did that, why did they not interpolate pornographic pieces, or any such irrelevant parts into Mahabharata? Of course, Mahabharata had enormous scope for pornography; yet, there is not a single description of Draupadi's body, whereas, in *Kumarasambhava*, Kalidasa describes the body of none other than Siva's consort Parvati. That must be because pornography obviously violated some cognitive condition that Mahabharata was working with. That condition can be identified by my hypothesis without appealing to the Victorian moral values that dominate the universe of educated Indians today: *Adhyatma is not concerned with a description of the empirical world of existence*. That is why Pornography is irrelevant to Mahabharata. One could ask whether or not the war is empirical. The answer is simple: Mahabharata does not describe war but merely identifies it as a reference point for what requires saying.

We can now begin to see the purpose of these books in our culture, their popularity in the subcontinent and elsewhere, the reasons for their survival and how they get reproduced in multiple languages and forms to this day. *Talamaddale* and *Yakshagana*, to take two extant performing arts as examples, are two such forms reproducing Itihasa as living experience. Why would it seep so deep in Indian culture, unless it is intimately connected to something that said how one should live on this earth? *Talamaddale* uses the Mahabharata stories as a discourse about adhyatma. Thus, the itihasa tradition is still alive in daily life. Why illustrate adhyatma through a story unless adhyatma is deeply intertwined with these stories? Each must be supporting the other. The stories must embody adhyatma. Adhyatma is not a moral of the story that comes at the end. Adhyatma comes before, not after the stories. What is the story then? Story is an illustration. That is why itihasa is 'Thus it happened' or, even, 'thus it is imparted generationally'.

Itihasa as a site of learning

Talamaddale, a performing art, does precisely this. How can people listen to intellectual discourses for hours and be fascinated by it when it takes the form of performing arts? Mahabharata is simply a background for this performance; as a story, it hardly plays a role. It simply sets the context to a learning process. If such is the case, itihasa has nothing to do with a past event, either in the sense of 'past' as a time period or as a temporal domain separated from the present. It has no references to the facts of the past and plays no function in preserving the memories about past events. The reference is to something else. *It is a learning process*

through stories about adhyatma. If one sees this, one will realize the unity that itihasa and adhyatma are. The scholarship of the last four hundred years has pulled them apart to make this division a fact of the commonsense today. There appears to be no connection between the Mahabharata and what Shankara has written, say *Brahmasutrashya*. One appears as philosophy and the other as *kavya* (poetry) or as a story or as an expression of our primitive sense of history.

How does Itihasa help adhyatmic learning? What the Mahabharata does is to put the latter in the form of a story. Instead of developing a theory, it puts that in the form of a story. So you must know how to read (and listen and see) this story, you must know how to understand the story. You must know how to practice the story. And you must know how to perform the story. When you are following a story of Mahabharata, watching a *talamaddale* or *yakshagana performance*, you are actually thinking. *Talamaddale* teaches you how to think. It does that by transforming adhyatma into *anubhava* (translated as 'experience' in English).

Two groups of people defend Mahabharata as a true story about the world. One group in Indian society talks of the historical truths of Mahabharata. These are our modern historians, who fight about whether or not Itihasa is true. However, there is another section in Indian society, which, much like our young Balinese, is not bothered about historical truth of Ramayana or Mahabharata. Yet, they defend the idea that Itihasa is 'true' nonetheless. How do we make sense of this second group?

The Real and the Existence again

Perhaps, the best way of making sense of these people is to introduce a problem. Consider the following well-known *shloka* (verse) from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*:

Asato Ma Sat Gamaya; Tamaso Ma Jyotir Gamaya; Mrityor Ma Amritam Gamaya...

Here are the usual translations of this: *Lead Us (me) From the Unreal (ignorance) To Real (truth); Lead Us (me) From Darkness To Light; Lead Us (me) From Death To Immortality...*

Let us focus only on grammar in this case and forget what 'Sat', 'asat', etc. mean. That is to say, let us discuss how to 'translate' the Vibhakti'-s in this case.

Should we translate the above as 'From X to Y' or 'Through X to Y'? That is, why cannot the verse be translated as:

Lead Us Through the Unreal To Real,

Lead Us Through Darkness To Light,

Lead Us Through Death To Immortality...?

There are two issues that we need to answer here: (a) Is the second a grammatically defensible translation (given that 'from' and 'through' are also different vibhakti'-s in Sanskrit)? (b) What is involved in this translation issue?

Consider the sentences of the following type: 'I came from Delhi'; 'The boon came from Shiva', etc. Both can also be said to presuppose (or imply, depending upon the precise nature of the question and answer) that I came 'through' Delhi or that the boon came 'through' Shiva. Coming 'through' Delhi could be implied in coming 'from' Delhi, if the train passed 'through' the city of Delhi; or 'from' Delhi could be implied if I was coming from elsewhere other than Delhi. The same applies to the boon 'from' Shiva and so on. In other words, how we translate the vibhakti'-s depend upon something else other than the grammatical rules, in the sense that one could translate it either way without violating the rules of grammar. Thus, if grammar is neutral with respect to either of the two translations, why have generations of sanskritists consistently translated the vibhakti'-s only as 'from' and not as 'through'?

In Christian and Western thought, these terms are opposites: real vs unreal; truth vs ignorance and so on. "Even though one walks the valley of death, one does not fear death", because the Lord is our Shepard, as the Bible puts it. God leads us away from Death towards immortality. God leads us away from Darkness into light. And so on. Is this also the case in Indian culture?

Consider this: it is only through and in *Samsara* (Worldly life) that we can hope to achieve '*moksha*' (liberation). If we are not in worldly life, we cannot achieve liberation. Each of us, in worldly life, is afflicted by *avidya* (ignorance) and only through this ignorance (i.e. realizing that we are afflicted by ignorance is how we arrive at knowledge) can we hope to reach *vidya* (knowledge); only through this world, which is *asat*, (the Unreal), can we reach *Sat* (the Real). Therefore, there is no break or opposition between these realms; one is needed to reach the other, i.e., only through the one can we reach the other. Therefore, 'through' is a better translation of the vibhakti than the 'from', even though our English books on Sanskrit grammar tell us the opposite, reserving them for separate vibhakti'-s.

Mahabharata clothes Adhyatmic truth as conventional truth. It is through the conventions of the daily life that you get access to Adhyatma. In fact, the latter is realizable only in worldly life. That is what these stories do: help reach the adhyatma through convention. The whole of Mahabharata is only about our lives but it is telling us about adhyatma and is a passage way.

That is why it is of *sat* or the Real. That *statement about sat is satya (truth)*. Daily life is transient and not real but part of existence, the intransient is real or *sat*.

Take the example of the Balinese about the truth and historicity of Ramayana. What is 'truth' in this context? Ramayana is about the Real. There cannot be true or false descriptions of the Real; one can only have such descriptions about the domain of existence. Yet, itihasa talks of the Real. The itihasa stories do so disguised as descriptions of the world. That is to say, stories talk of Adhyatma by using some recognizable reference points, which only help in understanding the story. They are not providing true or false descriptions of these recognizable figures and places, they are cognitive aids to understanding. There might have been a Rama and Ayodhya in India, but the Ramayana does not describe either Rama (an empirical figure) or Ayodhya (an empirical place). That does not mean that these two are fictional entities either. They are real. In so far as these were empirical entities, one could 'localize' Ayodhya in some region in India. At the same time, Rama and Ayodhya (as the Real) are everywhere and, thus, also nowhere. Any discourse about the Real ('sat') is the Truth (Satya). Thus, the Balinese and the Indian traditions suggest that the Ramayana is True because it is of the Real (about the *Sat* therefore, it is Satya or truth). But it does not matter to this Balinese whether Rama lived somewhere and somewhen, whether someone invented the story and wrote the book or not. Ramayana is true, in any case.

Of Adhyatma

Finally, the time has come to speak a bit about Adhyatma. However, keep in mind the earlier metaphor about the blind men and the elephant. As one such blind man, I am only advancing one hypothesis about Adhyatma even though I believe that it is able to account for the multiple descriptions of adhyatmic experiences and incorporate several other extant hypotheses.

In the first part of this talk, I said that stories of human pasts are required for the sake of human flourishing in the present. Here, I have brought itihasa in connection with adhyatma. This suggests that adhyatma is very closely linked to human flourishing. Indeed so.

The simplest understanding of adhyatma is this. *Its concern is human happiness*. As Indian traditions see it, happiness (or *Eudemonia*, to use the Aristotelean term; '*Ananda*' to use a Sanskrit term) belongs to a realm that is different from the 'pleasure' and 'pain' that we experience. The latter have to do with the kind of creatures we are. 'Happiness', the Indian traditions claim, *transcends* the duality of pleasure and pain. Unlike these feelings, which are transient by nature, happiness is not fleeting. After all, when we 'search' for happiness or we wish our loved ones 'happiness in life' we are not seeking something fleeting or transient. Putting a

duration on happiness is linguistically absurd: imagine wishing your loved one that s/he be happy for 'one hour, thirteen minutes and twenty three seconds'. Instead, you wish that they be happy all their lives. In other words, happiness cannot be a transient state of affairs.

However, everything in this world of ours is transient. There is no human trait, property, feeling or achievement that is not transient. In that case, happiness cannot be a human trait, property, feeling or achievement. Yet, we want to be happy *in this life* and we wish people happiness in their lives. From this, it follows, unless the entire human kind lives under delusion, that happiness is 'attainable' or 'reachable' in the course of our lives. Human beings can 'search' for happiness and 'find' it as well. But that does not entail that happiness is an object in the world because objects too are transient and subject to decay and disintegration.

The Semitic religions take one route, whereas the Indian traditions have taken another route. Both agree that happiness cannot be an object in the world, but they alter their courses thereafter. The Semitic religions claim that happiness is unlike any object in the world and, therefore, it is outside this world. It is God, the real, and we seek Him, when we seek happiness on earth. Because He is happiness, only a union with Him can make us happy. We are indeed deluded, say these religions, when we seek happiness on earth. It is the devil who seduces us into believing that one can attain happiness on earth. Such a wrong belief makes us confuse happiness with attaining objects in the world and the devil induces such beliefs in us. It is thus that we believe in money, status, power, sex, etc. as providers of happiness.

The Indian traditions accept the fact that each one of us has a different idea of what happiness is and that only the individual under question can judge whether or not s/he is happy. For them too, happiness belongs to the real, but the real can be accessed only through existence. Happiness does not exist, but is real (unlike 'God' who is real but also exists). Even though there are difficulties in accessing the real, it can be accessed. Consequently, the Indian traditions focus on identifying the difficulties we face and attempt to teach us how to overcome those difficulties. They do not define either factually or normatively what 'happiness' is, which is what the Semitic religions do. Both, however, agree that you access happiness when you access the real.

Adhyatma is the real. Adhyatmic statements are true because of this. Only stories can talk about it in a disguised form. Through life you reach adhyatmic truth. Itihasa is a way of talking about the real by illustrating adhyatma. 'Iti' refers to adhyatma as that which goes before the story is told. What goes before is illustrated and disguised as a description of the world. That is, itihasa provides the possibility of access to adhyatma by disguising the latter as a descrip-

tion of the worldly being. This hypothesis explains why one confuses itihasa with the description of the world (because itihasa is so disguised). Adhyatma is conventionally neither true nor false; therefore, only stories can talk about adhyatma because, as I have argued elsewhere about the role of stories in India, they are neither true nor false. They are learning units in a specific culture or within a specific configuration of learning. Because they are disguised as descriptions of the world, one can learn how to go-about in the world. Thus, the world is the medium through which to reach the adhyatmic truth or the real.

Unlike the discourse of history, which makes the past completely external to a human being, Indian stories can be taken up by any individual from any context and can use them to reflect upon their own lives and experiences. Any context can be transformed into any other context. One uses *talamaddale* to shed light upon anything human, be it power, money, status, etc. It is thus that these stories become the story of the person using it. However, as I have said repeatedly, to go to *Adhyatma* we need to go through the worldly life.

Though much more needs to be said than what I have, the length of this talk forces me to confine myself to making just one more point. Let us look at the consequence of the above paragraph to the relationship between the real and the existence. According to the Indian traditions, *existence undergirds the real*; to the Semitic religions, by contrast, *the Real (God) is the foundation of existence*. In one case, a proper understanding of the nature of human beings would help us reach the Adhyatmic; in the other case, God, the Real, who is inaccessible to unaided human reason, is the foundation for understanding human beings. In this sense, there can be no science of happiness (i.e. there can be *no science of Adhyatma*) because there can only be sciences of existence and adhyatma is real. Theology, by contrast, is the only 'science' of religion we have, where we speak in analogies about the real. In India, the variety of adhyatmic practices requires to have generated sustained reflections and experimentations about human beings, which they have, even though we are unable to recognize them because we have grouped such reflections as 'religious' or 'spiritual'. However, when theology generates such reflections, Indians have no problems in recognizing 'sciences', including the so-called 'scientific history'. Such an attitude has huge implications for understanding knowledge and cultures. The so-called 'progressive', 'secularist' and 'Dalit' intellectuals peddle that attitude in India today. To grasp the resulting tragedy properly, we need to formulate it in more general terms and in the form of a contrast.

What were European intellectuals engaged in during the last two thousand years? It is almost impossible to answer this question without relating to the history of Europe; still, we can say that they produced theologies, philosophies, fine arts, and natural and social sciences. The list

is so varied, so diverse and so long, that one does not know where to begin or how to end. Perhaps the most interesting theories about human beings, their cultures and societies, which we use today, are products of European intellectuals. So, too, are the institutions and practices that we find desirable: democratic institutions and courts of law, for instance. The sheer scope, variety, and quality of European contribution to humanity are overwhelming.

What were Indian thinkers doing during the same period? The standard text-book story—which has schooled multiple generations, including mine—goes as follows: the caste system has dominated India; women have been discriminated against; the practice of widow-burning still exists; corruption is rampant; most people believe in astrology, karma, and reincarnation. If these properties characterize the India of today and yesterday, the question about what the earlier generation of Indian thinkers was doing gives rise to a very painful realization: these thinkers were busy instituting and defending atrocious practices. Of course, there is our Buddha and there is our Gandhi, but that, apparently, is all we have: exactly one Buddha and one Gandhi. When the intellectuals of one culture—the European culture—were challenging and changing the world, most thinkers from another culture—the Indian—were, to all purposes, sustaining and defending undesirable and immoral practices. If that portrayal is true, the Indians of today have but one task, which is to modernize India; and Indian culture has but one goal: to become like the West as quickly as possible.

This is what the tragedy is about. This is the ‘history’ narrated by ‘progressive’, ‘secular’, ‘Dalit’, ‘subaltern’ historiographers and intellectuals. But, to follow this strand any further would take us away very far. Let me, therefore, return to my theme and sum up the difference between history and itihasa this way: all that human beings learn from history, as has been said, is that we do not learn from history. However, itihasa is the past and we learn to behave in the present only because of the past. One is external to you and it is about ‘others’, the other is internal to you, and it is about you. From history, you learn almost nothing. And you can live without it. But you cannot have the same relationship to the past.

Hence my reading of ‘*Asatoma sadgamaya ...*’ as ‘*through darkness lead me to light...*’ The classical reading puts it as ‘away from darkness...’ Either of these two possible meanings changes one’s relationship to the world accordingly. Therefore, it is not a question of grammar, but a question about modes of being in the world. The classical reading of the above verse is a biblical story, where darkness and light are separate, where one cannot lead to the other, where the Devil hinders human beings from reaching God. The Bible speaks of opposition between these. In Indian culture, by contrast, without worldly life there is no liberation. There

is no Semitic Devil in India, thus also no Semitic God either. In that case, why are Indian 'thinkers' so enamoured by a notion of 'history' that secularizes Christian thought that they end up selling it as 'scientific history'?

III

In Christian historiography, there is little or no connection between us and our past. This separation is not 'modern', as many historiographers claim. It dates back all the way to the Semitic story about the burden called the 'past' that we carry on our shoulders even before we are born. Our empirical past is like a book to be read that reveals God's plan. Humans have no other business with this past. Thus, what a Christian has to do is to read theological truths in the human past. The 'modern' historiography is the bastard child of this theology.

After the age of enlightenment, which further continued to secularize Christianity (albeit the Protestant version), even though the historians claimed to have come out of the religious historiography, the ultimate aim of history writing remained a quest for historical truth, which was only possible through a factual account. Thus historical facts, objectivity, historical laws were considered to be the defining properties of historical knowledge. Therefore, they are hotly debated as philosophical questions. The objective separation of the past from the present, a sense of time and chronology, continued to govern the sense of history. Indian traditions were criticized for lacking the sense of history precisely because they did not countenance these elements. Attempts were made in India to cull out 'facts' from the so-called Indian mythologies (Mahabharata, Ramayana etc.) to know the true history of India through the method of historical criticism. The histories of enlightenment, romanticists, utilitarians, Marxists, post-colonials and so on provided the exemplary texts for this practice.

However, when it came to practice, as the post-modern thinkers rightly point out, the modern historiography presents different contemporary ideological trends in the guise of facts of the past or as objective descriptions of the past. What, in fact, we witness in such attempts are re-descriptions of the Western world view in the name of facts of the past. Such descriptions have made inroads into the traditional Indian modes of relating with the past. Thus, the Indian past was recast in the Western frameworks and concepts like religion, self, ethnicity, nation, etc. The Westerners tried to understand India's past through categories like religion, mythology, history, literature, etc. as a result of which most of the Indian literal and oral traditions, which looked overwhelmingly mythological, were investigated for historical facts. These traditional stories could occupy only two places: either they could be historical facts or myths. This caused a distorted understanding of the traditional texts like Mahabharata. The organic role of Indian

stories in the living process of people, their multiple ways of making sense were no more accessible to the historians and new generation of educated Indians who were informed by this history.

What happened is that when Westerners started studying Mahabharata or Ramayana, they recast the story of these epics by putting them in the genre of traditional historical account. In that process, they severed these from their adhyatmic context or content. These stories are basically crafted to illustrate the adhyatmic truths. The adhyatmic content of the epics was severed and cut off from these stories and put in the category of religion; therefore even Adhyatma ceased making sense. The traditional Indians related with the Itihasa tradition that these epics basically are through a unifying experience of these two. However, the educated Indians ceased making sense of either of the two, therefore lost their memory of how to relate with itihasa. To the 'modern' mind, Adhyatmic Gurus became the 'god-men' of India, figures of ridicule or leaders of 'cults' or 'sects'. The only possible intellectual engagement they could now have to these texts is to either fight for establishing the historicity of these epics or relegate them to the status of myths or strive for some convenient hybrid of the two.

Conclusion

What have I done in the course of this talk? I have explicated a theoretical alternative by talking about itihasa and adhyatmic sources. This is a counterpoint to the theological framing of history and historiography that I foreground in the first part. Precisely because of this, there is a danger that the talk becomes inaccessible or misunderstood. The Indian sources, since they are not familiar to some, could be easily targeted by the same people as an expression of 'Brahmanism'. In some milieus in India, the intellectual poverty is so enormous that any use of Indian language-terms dangerous and is seen as evil. However, this possibility does not bother me.

The talk has tried to develop a theoretical account by focusing on just two critical terms: past and truth. It shows how these two terms are looked at by two different cultural traditions. I now leave it to the learned public to engage critically with this attempt further.

Before I do so, however, a small point about my shared lineage with Maulana Azad has to be made. It must be clear what 'Azad' is, not merely as a word but also in deed. It is to strive for intellectual freedom and undertake the required effort to leave conceptual slavery behind. Many Indian historians are completely bewitched by their self-representation that they are being 'scientific', when all they do is sell discounted goods at retail prices or even mark them up. They would do well, instead, to reflect independently and critically on their experiences of the world. Such is the hall mark of an 'Azad'. This is my tribute to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.