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Some Uses of History: Historiography, Politics and the Indian Novel

Alex Tickell

A foundational assumption of conventional literary history is that like any other cultural or physical institution the novel can be plotted through a more or less linear trajectory of formal change. In other words, within the disciplinary project of the literary history it is assumed that 'history' will describe a certain temporally structured developmental narrative about how the novel has evolved (in this case in an Indian national context). Yet a history of the novel is not quite the same thing as a study of the novel in — or in relation to — history, nor does it always give us the scope to ask questions about how literature interacts with or intervenes in history. Rather than placing the Indian novel in a literary-historical frame then, this essay argues for the equal importance of understanding how Indian fiction reflects on history. How, for instance, does the Indian novel relate to variant (and highly culturally specific) modes of *knowing* history? How has it supported particular historiographies and interpretations of history? And how does the novel position itself textually in relation to contested or overwritten historical narratives?

A.K. Ramanujan's poem 'Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day' from the collection *Relations* (1971; 2004) promises some answers to these questions and suggests, somewhat whimsically, that Indian 'uses of history' might be localised and culturally specific. Structured in three stanzas, the poem presents three culturally specific 'uses' of history: in the first of these vignettes of historical consciousness, set in Madras in 1965, bank clerks, waiting in the rain to get 'the single seat / on the seventh bus' remind themselves of the religious devotees who waited, more patiently, for a ceremonial gift from 'Old King Harsha' and, as they eventually give up and begin to walk home, console themselves with the measured reflection that 'King Harsha's / monks had nothing but their own two feet'. In the second stanza, which moves the poem's setting to Egypt 'every summer', Ramanujan pictures Indian Fulbright scholars, 'faces pressed against the past / as against museum glass' in a Cairo museum, amazed at the sight of 'mummies swathed in millennia / of Calicut muslin'. In a final stanza, dated 1935 and now set in the Germany of the Third Reich, a Professor of Sanskrit on a cultural exchange becomes lost in night-time Berlin and is reduced to a 'literal turbaned child' in his struggle to read the German signs and street names around him, until he 'suddenly comes home' when he sees 'the swastika / on the neighbour's arm / on that roaring bus from a grey / nowhere to a green' (Ramanujan 2004: 74–5).

Ramanujan's poem cannot offer us anything like a comprehensive schema for thinking about Indian literary-fictional engagements with history, but its distinctive emphasis on utility, on history as something to be *used* creatively, reminds us of the complex historical reflexivity which informs the contemporary Indian novel. Moreover, Ramanujan's poem is a fitting starting point here because the different stages or examples of historical consciousness elaborated in each stanza could also be said to rehearse and foreshadow, unconsciously, some of the predominant modes by which Indian novelists have engaged with history in their writing. Thus in the following pages, 'Some Uses of History' will provide the opening for a series of connected readings of exemplary Indian novelistic engagements with history and historiography. As we will see, Ramanujan's own interventions into Indian narrative history will also become relevant in the closing discussion of strategic contemporary Indian fictional responses to medieval history.

In part, the sustained historiographic preoccupations of the Indian novel which will be charted below can be explained in terms of a postcolonial critical awareness of history's capacity to be used as a discursive support for colonial rule; a way of narrating the colonised out of an integral active role in Indian history and into a static, marginalised part in British 'overseas' history. It is exactly this sense of the exclusions of a European version of India's history that Arundhati Roy points to in *The God of Small Things* (1997) when the protagonists, two Syrian-Christian children who associate history with an actual deserted plantation house near their own family home in Kerala, are told by their diffident Oxford-educated Uncle that history is a house they are shut out of: 'we can't go in' Chako explained, 'because we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows' (Roy 1997: 53). In Indian¹ novels written in the last three decades, this distinctive suspicion of ethnocentric/Eurocentric history intersects with a postmodern historicism, in which the transcendent truth of historical grand narratives is challenged, giving way to a sense of history as provisional, fragmentary and genealogical. As critics such as Linda Hutcheon have argued, postmodernism generated new literary responses to history in formal innovations such as historiographic metafiction through which history could be manipulated as a parallel, more or less fictional, text (Hutcheon 1988).

This is not the place to review the well-rehearsed and increasingly dated debates over alliances and disconnections between the postcolonial and the postmodern, except to underline the fact that in both a suspicion of historical truth-claims has given rise, for markedly different reasons, to forms of fiction that subvert, pastiche and/or metafictionally intervene in history. In contemporary post-liberalisation India, the older temporal frames that structured critical paradigms of the postcolonial and postmodern seem, in any case, to be blurring irrevocably. As Rana Dasgupta notes, in cities like Delhi there is no longer a sense that India is configured differently to a culture of late modernity or has to 'catch up' with a more technologically advanced west; instead urban centres like Delhi and Mumbai now present a vision of networked hypermodernity that increasingly looks towards possible global futures rather than back towards a belated, time-lagged or post-dated past (Dasgupta 2014: 45). This is not to suggest that history is no longer relevant, or that inequality no longer exists, but to note that in this new urban-global incarnation, older, established historical narratives will be forced to adapt to the accelerated cadences of India's present.

Claiming History

Parsing the first stanza of 'Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day', Ramanujan's poem appears not to offer much initial purchase on the question of how the Indian novel has developed historiographically: the opening stanza simply recounts what might be called a moment of poetic consolation, in which Madras office clerks put up with the petty miseries of commuting and decide not to wait for a bus, but to walk home instead. Their shared historical memory of 'Old King Harsha' is a reference to the Buddhist monarch Harsha or (Harsa) who reigned over much of north India from 606–647 CE and was a Sanskrit poet and patron of the arts. His reign was distinguished by his generosity: he set up charitable institutions in his kingdom and allegedly donated food to Brahmins and Buddhist monks daily, as well as holding assemblies at Allahabad every five years where he distributed treasure. In a poem about history, the reference is playfully reflexive in its gesture to a historical Indian sovereign who promoted poetry; as a way of thinking about the historiographic preoccupations of the novel, Ramanujan's opening stanza reminds us of what might be called an 'epic historical consciousness' in early nationalist fictions.

Simply put, this epic imaginary, like the anti-colonial economic historiography it accompanied, mined Indian history for politically enabling or culturally affirming connections with the present. In

¹ The designation of the 'Indian' novel is notoriously fraught. Many successful contemporary novels are written by authors who, although they have a cultural or family connection with the subcontinent, live elsewhere. For the purposes of this essay 'Indian' novels describe works set in India, or with an imaginative investment in Indian cultures, rather than texts written by authors resident in India.

the process it adapted a rational historicism, and read colonial histories of India closely for evidence of a national agency. The best-known example of this fervent turn to history is the nationalist author and father of the Indian historical novel, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who famously demanded that India 'must have a history' and whose seminal Bengali novel *Anandamath* (1882) fictionalised an eighteenth-century *sanyassi* rebellion, chronicled in William Hunter-Wilson's *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), as an allegory of nationalist awakening. The fascination with history continued in historical romances like K.K. Sinha's *Sanjogita: or the Princess of Aryavarta* (1903) and in the well-documented influence of works like James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829) which stands behind and informs a number of contemporary Indian historical fictions (Mukherjee 2000: 59). As Sudipta Kaviraj notes, in late nineteenth-century Bengal the new nationalist historicism coincided with a gradual 'disenchantment' with the world through scientific and increasingly rationalised intellectual influences and thus the contemporary development of self-consciously 'historical' Indian fiction involved a substantive reconceptualising of the role of literature as a specialised vehicle for imaginative thought (see Pollock 2003: 548).

Yet the initial, nationally-inflected preoccupation with history in the early Indian novel is not straightforward, and the 'rational' separation of history and epic/myth is transgressed in some fictions as myth is co-opted to a national imagining. We see this process clearly in what I have called elsewhere 'informative romances' (Tickell 2003; 2012), such as Sarath Kumar Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny* (1909) in which the hero, the eponymous prince Bharath, seeks his own destiny as both a real political ruler and also as the transcendent reincarnation of the Hindu God Krishna. (The novel appears to waver in its political investment in myth by retaining reincarnation as a possibility.) A differently-presented blurring of history and myth occurs in Raja Rao's nationalist novel *Kanthapura* (1938) which is a virtuoso stylistic evocation of a village community in south India brought into history with the arrival of the nationalist moment, which at the same time narrates the contemporary history of the national struggle (led by Gandhi) as a form of devotional epic. It could be argued that in his novel Rao presents anti-colonial agency as a complex negotiation between history as a paradigm of political sovereignty and history as *itihās*, the generic term for epic narratives like the Ramayana that combine history and myth.

Ramanujan's temporal juxtaposing of King Harsha's monks and Madras commuters *circa* 1965 seems to tread the same path as these earlier nationalist novels in its distinctive consolatory return to the past in order to bolster a civilisational confidence. Western-style modernity, the poem suggests, has not brought the Madras bank clerks the kinds of advancements (in public transport at least) that Nehru's post-independence vision of a modern hydro-electrified India promised, but in the face of this potentially demeaning developmental realisation, history returns the clerks to a magisterial vision of their cultural past, reminding them of the largesse of earlier Indian kings. Yet, the implied equivalence of King Harsha's 'ten-thousand' monks and modern bank clerks also subtly disrupts — 'provincialises' in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words (2000) — Eurocentric models of national history as a linear continuum. Like the monks, the clerks have 'nothing but their own two feet', a statement that connects them (or more accurately returns them) to the traditions of religious pilgrimage so deeply scored into India's cultural landscape, but also makes them the inheritors of a form of self-reliance reminiscent of the great politically inflected pilgrimages of the nationalist movement.

Recovering Buried History

The second stanza of 'Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day' presents the reader with a different relationship of past to present, prefiguring, I will suggest, a later historiographic mode in the Indian novel. Set in an Egyptian museum and undated, this section of Ramanujan's poem is both literally and figuratively archaeological in the sudden discovery made by the museum-going Indian Fulbright scholars. Looking at the Egyptian exhibits, they suddenly become aware of the ancient trade routes between Egypt and South India in the 'millennia' of bandages, made of muslin imported from the Malabar coastal town of Calicut, which have been used to wrap mummified remains, and

the scene is thus a startling poetic expression of Walter Benjamin's famous point about the irretrievability of certain histories and the danger that 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' (1992: 247).

In relation to what we have been calling the historiographic preoccupations of the Indian Novel in English, this moment is highly significant because it finds an equivalence in a post-independence shift beyond the boundaries of a cultural nationalism, and towards a renewed attention to that which is effaced or renarrated in the process of achieving national independence. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, reviewing the politics of the contemporary Indian novel, relates these changes to the well-documented disillusionment with national politics which some commentators have seen as a key characteristic of the 'postcolonial' condition, but also cites Salman Rushdie's political critique of the Indira Gandhi regime in *Midnight's Children* (1981) as a crucial moment in the self-positioning of Indian novelists. In the latter work, Rushdie was able to stage himself, authorially, in a newly adversarial relation to the state and thus, as Sunder Rajan argues, 'no longer was the postcolonial writer limited to anticolonial resistance - he was now an adversary of his own government, no less' (Sunder Rajan 2011: 210).

In relation to a novelistic historical consciousness, this new interrogative or adversarial stance was not simply the result of a claimed cultural/political dissidence; it developed equally from a celebratory cosmopolitanism and a migrant aesthetics (also often associated with Rushdie) which had little time for the parochial nativism of national allegiance. A further contributing factor in the disillusionment of Indian authors with the claims of nationalist history was a troubled cross-regional awareness of the personal and social costs of Indo-Pakistani Partition and the continuing traumas and historical erasures precipitated by the splitting of the subcontinent. The novelistic response to Partition is covered elsewhere in this volume, but we must touch on it briefly here because of its shaping influence on the literary-fictional conception of history.

In Amitav Ghosh's early novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the uncanny effects of Partition in Bengal are registered in its traumatic, translated family histories and in Ghosh's attention to the routine effacements and amnesias occasioned by newly exclusive national histories. Another contemporary work that bears comparison with Ghosh's writing in its close metahistorical engagement with the past is Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995) which sees its protagonist travel back in time, to 1942, to encounter a version of the past that allows a 'counterfactual' questioning of the inevitability of the subcontinent's national destinies. Here again an interest in overwritten or effaced histories also has a particular origin in the traumatic process of national division during Indo-Pakistani Partition. As Priyamvada Gopal notes of the negotiation of history and memory in works like Kesavan's, 'what has to be remembered and reinhabited [in this novel] are the heterodoxies and syncretism of the past, not the Past Perfect, but the past in its dynamic untidiness, porousness' (Gopal 2009: 88). Recalling some of the more formally ambitious Indian novels written in the 1980s and 90s, it becomes clear that a highly creative adversarial revision of national history and the new sensitivity to a dynamic or porous past are further nuanced by changes in the disciplinary focus of history in India, and the influence of the Subaltern Studies historians (a group inspired by the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, which sought to recuperate a subaltern agency from history that had hitherto had been dominated by colonial and elite national interpretations).

Again, it is Amitav Ghosh's writing, especially his genre-blurring historical travelogue *In an Antique Land* (1992) — a work which brilliantly rewrites an archival research project on textual references to a South Indian slave found in the twelfth-century archival depository of a Cairo synagogue. Drawing on material which Ghosh had published as a historical essay in the Subaltern Studies series under the title 'The Slave of Ms. H. 6', and in an article for *Granta*, 'The Imam and the Indian', *In an Antique Land* is at once the most methodologically historical of Indian Anglophone literary works and the most subtly literary exposition of the Subaltern Studies agenda. In fact critics have been quick to register that it is this generic grafting of the literary and historical, allied with a scrupulous attention to the travelling archival text, that has enabled Ghosh to avoid, here, the

strategic essentialism which has often been seen as a conceptual flaw of the Subaltern Studies approach (Dixon in Khair 2003: 35).

As an extended reflection on the forgotten ebb and flow of cosmopolitan trading communities and migrants across the medieval Levant and Indian Ocean, *In an Antique Land* is notable in its historical tracing of the same trade routes (albeit at a later point) which Ramanujan alludes to in his Cairo museum stanza. In both, the epistemic structure of history is read against the grain, and the taken-for-granted national and religious divisions of the modern world are made strange in a highly political process of social-anthropological defamiliarisation. The 'fragment' or leitmotif is also important here (Elias 2011: 35) as Ghosh writes out of a sense of the textuality of his archival source, but with none of the overburdening investment in the single anecdote or metaphor-laden trace which makes postcolonial theoretical work produced contemporaneously prone to the same generalisations and interpretative manoeuvres as some New Historicist criticism. The richness of Ghosh's historiographic intervention, then, inheres in his use of seemingly traditional historical approaches to reconfigure conventional, ethnocentric assumptions about cultural history and its boundaries.

History under Threat

The final stanza of Ramanujan's poem adds a chillingly ironic note to the historical 'uses' that preceded it. The vulnerable and disorientated Sanskrit professor who appears here, stumbling through 1930s Berlin, is reminiscent of W.H. Auden's characterisation of his own second-war generation, which has been reduced to a kind of troubled childishness by the imminent conflict: 'we are / Lost in a haunted wood / Children afraid of the night / Who have never been happy or good' (Auden 1940). Searching for familiar signs in the alien world around him, the Indian academic 'comes home' in another of Ramanujan's moments of recognition as he suddenly 'assimilates' the Nazi swastika on the arm of a fellow bus-passenger. Again this part of the poem could easily be read as a figurative evocation of how cultures travel, and how even the most un-assimilating nationalisms are cross-fertilised by other histories. But the portentous signifying political weight of the swastika-aramband demands more than this reading: it indicates the much more malignant uses to which history can be put in the service of politics.

Earlier, we noted Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's critical insight that one of the singular shifts in political alignment to mark the Indian novel of the Rushdie era was the self-fashioning of the Indian novelist as dissident — or at least as a commentator critical of the State. For Sunder Rajan this literary politics is effectively different from the kinds of writing produced in more hard-line non-democratic states because although 'it is not a negligible politics' Indian authorial dissidence 'must not be aggrandized as a writing that risks repression by the state' (2011: 212). This is a fine distinction about the political contexts of the novel in India, and helps to elucidate the position of the liberal author-intellectual, but it also risks passing too quickly over those instances in India's recent past in which the Indian novel has tackled, directly, issues of governmental repression and forms of cultural-historical censorship. In the context of a revisionist ethno-nationalist history associated with the *sang parivar* or 'family' of political groups on the Hindu Right, particularly, the stakes involved in intervening in history in alternative or creative ways are significantly increased and the dialogic possibilities of the novel take on a somewhat greater urgency.

A novel which conveys something of this urgency in its title is Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2004). Hariharan's novel spans a precise two-month period, August to October 2000, a window that is significant because it is framed historically by the BJP-coalition government, the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) of 1998–2004. When it was elected, the BJP coalition fostered an already widespread populist Hindu majoritarianism in contrast to which non-Hindu identities were increasingly presented as threats against the integrity of dominant Hindu culture, and this tendency found its most terrifying expression in the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002, in which the Muslim community was targeted by Hindu gangs with the alleged sanction of the police and the state administration. The latter event provides the ultimately redemptive conclusion to another

contemporary Indian novel with a complex and nuanced awareness of history, M.G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song* (2009). As they both enter into a close dialogue with the new interpretations of history promoted by the BJP-led coalition at the turn of the millennium, Hariharan's and Vassanji's novels demand a parallel reading, as the conclusion to this rough diagrammatic account of Indian literary historiography.

Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* tells the story of an unassuming Delhi-based history professor, Shiv Murthy, who suddenly finds himself targeted by members of a shadowy Hindu nationalist cultural watchdog group, the *Itihas Suraksha Manch* or 'history protection group', who have taken offence at his coursework and accuse him of distorting Indian history². Shiv works for an 'open' university and his collision with the forces of contemporary Indian politics is intensified by the sequestered nature of academic work in which he has little direct contact with his students and is prey to all the familiar alienations of bureaucratised higher education: 'he no longer teaches students' but 'co-ordinates resources for his educational clients' (Hariharan 2004: 6). In the course of the narrative, Hariharan's middle-aged protagonist faces the old dilemma of principled resistance versus quietist self-preservation. This moral challenge coincides with the absence of Shiv's wife, who is away visiting their daughter in the United States, and the arrival in his home of the daughter of an old friend, the spirited and politically engaged undergraduate Meena, who has broken her leg and who, in the process of convalescence, uses her contacts to organise popular support for Shiv's cause. As the crisis over Shiv's interpretation of medieval Indian history deepens, his relationship with Meena becomes more involved, although ultimately it never becomes an actual affair, resolving, instead, into a subtler mutually-enabling platonic bond.

In Times of Siege is fascinating as a metahistorical work because it rewrites a well-known episode from the governmental record of the BJP coalition: its controversial revision of the Indian school curriculum. When the BJP came to power as part of the NDA in 1998 it presided over a scheduled educational review, and used this as an opportunity to push through plans to 'Indianise, nationalise and spiritualise' the national curriculum. The Hindu Right, through its volunteer paramilitary wing the RSS, already promoted a communalised version of history in its own Saraswati Shishu Mandirs and Vidya Bharati schools (Mukherjee et al. 2008: 18) The results were not felt in Indian society until 2000, when the coalition released its new Curriculum Framework (Joshee in Arthur et al. 2008: 182). This promised a new emphasis on (communal) civic training, but the planned programme of civic instruction never materialised (ibid.). Instead, it was in the teaching of history that the new reforms had their greatest impact: all previous school history textbooks were scrapped because they were deemed to have too 'Western' an outlook, and replaced with books that conformed to the Sangh Parivar's historical perspective. Secular historians quickly pointed out that the new textbooks were factually inaccurate, misleading and biased towards a chauvinistic Hindu version of history, and these critics, some of whom were eminent scholars, were subsequently branded 'anti-Hindu Euro-Indians' and their work scapegoated as 'intellectual terrorism unleashed by the left' (Mukherjee et al. 2008: 37). The BJP's hold on curricular policy decreased after the electoral defeat of the NDA in 2004, but a powerful lobby group still routinely targets histories it sees as offensive to Hindus.

In Hariharan's novel, the educational-historical plot involves a course book 'lesson' Shiv has written about the twelfth-century poet-leader Basava or Basavanna, who was one of the greatest exponents of the medieval Virasaiva or Lingayata sect, and sought to reform Hinduism through his rejection of caste and his emphasis on personal spiritual observance. Basava acted as prime minister in the central Indian court of king Bijjala, but entered self-exile when his Virasaiva followers were

² At the time of writing, the historical research of the American academic Wendy Doniger has come under similar attack. In 2010 Doniger's book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009), was the subject of law suit brought by a Hindu group, the Shiksha Bachao Andolan (Save Education Campaign), against Doniger's publishers, Penguin, for its alleged distortions and factual inaccuracies. Penguin has now agreed to destroy all available copies of Doniger's book. See <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/12/wendy-doniger-book-hinduism-penguin-hindus>. Accessed 3rd April 2014

punished by the king for contravening orthodox caste rules about intermarriage. The contested historical interpretation of Basava's life is thus not only a focus for political controversy in the novel; it also mirrors details of the contemporary narrative, setting up thematic reflections about the worth of dissent. The resonances between the twelfth-century Basava and his modern academic chronicler become fully established when Shiv vacillates over whether to continue to defending his historical research or capitulate to demands from his Head of Department that he apologise, and is immediately answered by the adherent of Basava in him — his more heroic conscience — 'Basava's man is ready with his rejoinder: Why pretend you are a professor if you can't stand up to someone telling you what to think? How to think? ... do you imagine an ordinary man cannot be a hero?' (Hariharan 2004: 65).

While *In Times of Siege* explores history through the context of academic scholarship, and reveals the tensions between a productive research-led historical uncertainty and the monologic demands of Hindu nationalism, M.G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song* (2009) approaches history from a more personal angle in the story of Karsan Dargawalla, the eldest son and heir to the priesthood or gadi-varas of the shrine of a medieval sufi saint *pir bawa*, Nur Fazal, which has been a place of worship in the eponymous Gujarati town of Pirbaag for hundreds of years. Karsan grows up unsure of his own commitment to the priesthood and sceptical of the renouncing demands of faith in preference to the fascinations of secular intellectual history, and his disillusionment grows when he leaves India on a scholarship to study at Harvard and, against his father's wishes, decides to stay and pursue an academic career in North America. Karsan's new life in the United States is marked by tragedy and his marriage fails after his young son is killed in a road accident. Without any ties, and after receiving a letter informing him of his father's death and the destruction of Nur Fazal's shrine during the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, Karsan returns to India. There he takes up an academic residency at Simla to research the background of the saint his family has been connected with for so long while at the same time trying to re-establish a connection with his brother.

In contrast to the claustrophobic dramatic focus of Hariharan's novel, *The Assassin's Song* ranges widely, moving from rural Gujarat to North America and then back to India and sweeping chronologically from the time of Nur Fazal to the early post-independence decades and the first years of the twenty-first century. It is tempting to ascribe these fictional differences in setting to their authors' backgrounds (Hariharan a South Indian resident in Delhi and Vassanji is a Tanzanian-Canadian who grew up in the South-Asian community in East Africa but has lived in Canada for most of his adult life), but apart from the way Vassanji's work touches on some characteristically migrant themes and concerns (about memory, guilt, cultural betrayal and the vicissitudes of migrant identity), these details are ultimately less important than the beleaguered defence of forms of alternative, syncretic history that occurs in both texts.

However it is essential to realise that in both *In Times of Siege* and *The Assassin's Song*, even as an exclusive Hindu nationalist interpretation of history is critiqued, the religious or miraculous is not rejected conceptually as an aspect of historical consciousness. In Vassanji's novel the miraculous is contained in an asynchronous sequence of chapters narrated in the third person dealing with the life and miracles of Nur Fazal. By bracketing these chapters against the novel's 'disenchanted' present, Vassanji preserves the miraculous as an aspect of history, rather than taking the clumsier option of employing it as a formal component of an overarching magical realism. Hariharan is also unwilling to lose a sense of the confluence of both mythical and historical aspects of the South-Asian past, so that as he conducts his research Shiv finds that 'wading through numerous contradictory accounts of Basava's life means parting several meeting rivers. Separating history and myth, pulling apart history and legend. Deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth earthbound' (2004: 90). In the 'secular' contemporary sections of Vassanji's text, the miraculous comes directly into question when Karsan realises that the lamp on Nur Fazal's shrine, which is alleged to burn constantly without ever needing oil, is actually refuelled secretly at night by Karshan's mother. Karshan's disillusionment is devastating and leads him to reject the authority of the shrine and question his father, who responds that the illusion is a necessary part of faith: 'People need miracles, Karsan. Without

miracles they lose their way [...] our message is more subtle — it's about the meaning of existence — but people have need of miracles' (2009: 150).

In both these novels the answer to the problem of a politically threatened history is not, then, a retreat into an implacably empirical historicism; it is instead a careful mediation of secular and mythical components of history which recognises the importance of the latter in Indian cultural responses to the past. In this sense, Vassanji, and to a lesser extent Hariharan, both tackle a problem outlined by the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty: that to understand history in the context of India one may have to develop an incredulity towards a certain historicism, a 'meta-narrative of secular progress' and allow for an untranslatable sense of enchantment — what Chakrabarty calls the 'times of the gods' which are implicit in locally embedded versions of history (1997: 50). For Hariharan this enchantment is implicit in the resonant devotional politics of Basava's poems, or *vachanas*, which have a gnomic, aphoristic quality, even as they represent a revolutionary political vision. In Vassanji's case, a similar gesture is implicit in Karsan's decision to return to Pirbaag and take up his birthright and his mantra-like *bol*, even after he has ascertained the 'true' historical origins of the Nur Fazal in the Iranian Shia assassin sect.

Here we perhaps encounter a strategic redeployment of something we have already registered in the second stage of our rudimentary scheme which summarised so-called 'postnationalist novels'. In these texts, as H.S. Komalesha notes, Indian authors retain a fascination for 'premodern narrative techniques' because they can be used to 'foreground a postmodern disbelief in nation' (2008: 158). Developing on this point I would suggest that, in the novels dealing with a more recent communalist threat to history, the recourse to premodern narratives and aphoristic or miraculous ways of thinking is not so much a critical disbelieving gesture as an affirmative 'besieged' statement of the need for an expansive historical consciousness: what Hariharan calls in her novel 'the right to know things in all ways possible' (2004: 195). In a certain way, as rejoinders to aspects of the Sangh's communal project both Hariharan's and Vassanji's novels call for history as a support for a civic idea — of medieval Indian city-cultures marked by plurality and tolerance — which can countermand the monolithic, purified Vedic golden-age cities of Hindu nationalist history.

Returning to the concluding stanza of Ramanujan's poem, a further irony and foreshadowing of history present themselves in the fact that in 2011 one of Ramanujan's works — a scholarly essay he had written in 1987 titled 'Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation' on the numerous variant versions of the Ramayana — was subject to the same treatment that Hariharan describes for Shiv's research. In 2008, Delhi University students belonging to the BJP's student organisation, the ABVP, campaigned against the essay's inclusion in the syllabus on the grounds that it offended them, but were unable to have it removed. Three years later, however, in a highly controversial move, the Academic Council of Delhi University decided to ban the essay. For liberal historians this was a retrograde move and as the blogger and journalist Nilanjan Roy commented:

if you find ideas and stories threatening, if your way of life depends on having just one rigid view of faith, or history, or mythology, then there is no possibility of debate [...] the goal is never to encourage dissent and conversation but to shut it down. In that world, making a university back down on what it allows students to learn is a major victory, and it holds out the possibility that one day, it will be only this narrow view of history that will prevail, that we will learn only one kind of history, one Ramayana. (Roy: 2011)

Although it is a potentially reductive critical manoeuvre to cite the Ramayana as a narrative precursor of the India novel, the fact that this is narrative multiplicity and a meticulous, scholarly version of early Indian literary history that was censored in this case should be highly relevant to any reading of contemporary fiction. Ramanujan did not live to see the removal of his essay from the Delhi University syllabus, but his subtle polyglot sensitivity to the different ways in which culture and history come into confluence stands as a reproof to the emergence of a 'predatory' identity politics

(not, of course, exclusive to India) that seeks to reduce identity to an ethnic singularity (Appadurai 2006: 53). And given the continuing importance of vote banks and the social uncertainties unleashed by India's globalising ascendancy, the onward rush of India's present history is likely to see further literary-historiographic engagements of the kind exemplified by Hariharan's and Vassanji's fictions. In these texts the question will not only be how Indian writers can use history for different dissident imaginaries, but also how they can maintain the right to imagine history as difference.

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