CHAPTER 1

History Wars

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As ideology, nationalism requires that the nation be ascribed a stable and unified identity—call it culture, community, or civilization—that endures the vagaries of time and maintains the nation-ness of the nation through social conflict and historical change (Bhaba 1990). In other words, the nation is defined by its historical antiquity, continuity, and unity, which is why the modern art of history writing, however specialized and formalized it may become as a university discipline, remains always already implicated in the everyday politics of nationalism. Put otherwise, there remains a Gordian knot between the nation as a political form and history as an epistemological formation, which plays out in the form of a face-off between academic history and public history.

This chapter maps the evolution of the 'India of history'—from the early twentieth century when nationalist history ruled the roost, to the 1950s–70s when Marxist economic history came to dominate academia, to the 1980s when social history emerged in a critique of the statism and economism of earlier historiography (Sarkar 1997), and to the cultural turn of the 1990s and 2000s when multiple linguistic, regional, sexual, caste, and ethnic subjectivities seemed to demand their narratives (Chatterjee, Guha-Thakurta, and Kar 2014). However, instead of chronologically mapping the changing contours of the discipline, I focus on the three conceptual issues at stake in the changing relationship of academic history with public history in India: (*a*) political representation, (*b*) public affect, and (*c*) time and transition.

History and Representation

Modern historiography emerged in India under the shadow of the colonial accusation that India lacked history and Indians lacked historical sensibility,

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rendering anachronistic in one stroke *purana-itihasa*, *tarikh*, *bhakhar*, *kaifiyat*, and other pre-colonial forms of writing the past. In colonial rendering, to lack history was to lack temporal dynamism, the capacity to evolve with time. The nationalist call given out in the late nineteenth century by the iconic novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay—that all Indians must become historians unto themselves—was a response to this colonial quandary (Chattopadhyay 1954 [1880]. At heart, Bankim's argument was about representation. Instead of accepting at face value British colonial histories, which misrepresented India as stagnant, backward, and intellectually impoverished, Indians should write their own histories, recovering the deep historicity of the nation. The first democratic right against unrepresentative colonial rule was thus the right to write one's own history and to represent the national self on the global stage. Bankim's call led to an unregulated proliferation of popular history texts in India, late nineteenth century onwards, which circulated widely in print.

In the colony, thus, history writing at its origin was an activity of the public sphere (Deshpande 2007). History did not become a formal university subject until much later. The first master's degree in modern and medieval history was created by the University of Calcutta in 1919, and most post-graduate level history departments in other universities were set up only in the 1920s and 1930s. Historical research, however, began in India as early as the 1880s and was led by 'amateurs', who went on to set up local historical academies such as Varendra Anusandhan Samiti (Varendra Research Society) of Rajshahi and the Bharat Itiahas Samshodhak Mandal (Association of Researchers in Indian History) of Poona, both set up in 1910. History writing as a public activity made deliberations about history's evidentiary and analytical protocols subject to political debate from early on. In 1914, Akshay Kumar Maitra announced that Bankim's time was over. Instead of asking every Indian to write history, it was now time to discipline history into being 'correct and worthy knowledge'. In his speech at the seventh Bangiya Sahitya Parishat conference, Maitra insisted that historians must suspend their 'community or national interests', for 'truth was a greater ideal than patriotism'. One of the early journals of history in India, *Itihas o Alochona* (History and Criticism), came to be established in 1921 precisely to control history run wild in the public sphere. It set forth lessons in how to write correct history and classified histories currently in circulation, rejecting as ill-founded the masses of local histories being churned out by all and sundry (Banerjee 2006: 210).

As Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us, a telling episode of this enduring face-off between academic history and public history came from Maharashtra

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in the 1920s–1930s, when the Brahman–non-Brahman and Hindu–Muslim conflict erupted around the historical figure of King Shivaji. In his *Rise of the Maratha Power*, the liberal Maharashtrian Brahman politician M. G. Ranade—famous for his economic critique of colonial rule—staged Shivaji, a Maratha king allegedly with a Brahman guru Ramdas, as a national symbol. Shivaji soon became a political symbol of nationalists of all hues, including in distant Bengal. With the rise of the non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra, however, Shivaji came to be re-signified as a Shudra king with Kshatriya virtues, who triumphed against both Brahmans and Mughals. When Jadunath Sarkar, one of the early disciplinarian historians of India, published his *Shivaji and His Times* in 1919, he came under sharp criticism. Poona scholars accused Sarkar of being both pro-Mughal, that is, over-dependent on Muslim sources, and inattentive to Shivaji's non-Brahman Maratha identity. The 1925 Poona session of the Indian Historical Records Commission, under the leadership of Sarkar, had appointed G. S. Sardesai, a Brahman historian of the Marathas, to organize documents of the Peshwas, a Brahmanical regime which assumed power post-Shivaji. Non-Brahman leaders of the Bombay Legislative Council disputed Sardesai's appointment on the grounds that a Brahman could not be trusted to do justice to the history of non-Brahmans. Sarkar responded to this political pushback by invoking the virtues of objective historical truth and historical professionalism, much in the way that historians would do at the end of the twentieth century (Chakrabarty 2008: 175).

As democratic politics unfurled in postcolonial India, public histories written by different social groups proliferated and became the basis of claims to representation in the state. The historical fact versus political representation debate peaked in 1990s India. As is well known, the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid by militant Hindus was motivated by the apparent historical claim that the Mughal emperor Babar had erected his mosque over the ruins of an ancient Ram temple, which marked the actual birthplace of King Rama. History and archaeology came into reckoning in the public sphere and in courts of law when they were called out to respond to public demands for 'historical justice' for Hindus. The north Indian public sphere now saw the circulation of booklets and pamphlets historically 'proving' the oppression of Hindus in the hands of not only Muslims but also 'pseudo-secularists' who allegedly practised the politics of minority appeasement. At the same time, the adoption of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1989, suggesting reservations for Other Backward Castes in public institutions, brought caste back into visibility after decades of inattention by mainstream historians, who, unlike

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Indian sociologists, had so far been more interested in the categories of nation and class than *jati* and *varna*. This, in turn, resulted in a spate of regional and local histories demanding recognition and autonomy for diverse caste groups. This put academic historians in a political dilemma. While Hindu history could be justifiably critiqued for being politically mischievous, subaltern histories, even when they took liberty with facts, had to be acknowledged as feeding into the further democratization of the nation. The same criterion of disciplinary judgement based on evidentiary verifiability, which helped discriminate between good and bad and true and false history, had politically different implications with respect to majoritarian and minoritarian histories.

In other words, the debate around history in India has been, for a century and more, about who speaks in the name of the nation or who exercises the right of self-representation. Academic historians have responded in two ways to this question. Some have argued that despite enduring social conflict and competing identities, it is still possible to represent India as a coherent whole, however embattled, with the academic historian as the meta-subject of history (Gopal, Mukhia, and Thapar 1990). However, this claim to disciplinary expertise by historians, unlike similar claims by economists, has gone mostly unrecognized by both the state and the people. Other historians however came to question the nation-ness of the nation. They insisted that there can only be multiple histories and counter-histories of India, implying that the nation can only be grasped perspectivally, that is, in terms of discrete subjectivities, and never as a national-historical whole (Pandey 1991). In the latter case, the historian stands marginalized even as history as a mode of democratic claim-making triumphs.

Put otherwise, the ambient historicism of India's public sphere, despite competing representational claims and the consequent marginalization of historians, has ended up reinforcing the hold of history over popular imagination, which in turn has renewed the efficacy of nationalism as a political ideology. As Badri Narayan shows, the main impulse behind invented Dalit histories in 1990s north India—which completely sidelined professional historians—was to bolster Dalit electoral and democratic heft by registering the important contribution of Dalit heroes and martyrs to the nationalist movement (Narayan 2004). These histories, while critiquing mainstream nationalist histories for their implicit Brahmanical character, ended up reinforcing the nation as political form and history as national history. At the same time, while rendering historians redundant, they contributed to history's hegemonic hold over the language of popular politics.

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Concerned with this unrelenting hegemony of history and the associated politics of ressentiment that had gripped India's public sphere, some historians came to question the discipline of history itself, asking if history as a form of knowledge was adequate to the fashioning of true democracy. In this telling, democracy and nationalism appeared as competing values. This question was most succinctly posed by the subaltern studies school of historians in the mid-1980s, when they argued that both colonial and nationalist histories were equally elite and, therefore, unrepresentative of the people. They famously asked the question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' (Spivak 1988), and showed up historical archives to be by nature elite and counter-insurgent, that is, necessarily representing subalterns as disruptors rather than subjects of history. How, then, could one reconstruct and represent the past of marginalized peoples who left no written documents or archaeological traces in the present, who appear negatively in state and national archives, if they appear at all, as insurgent figures to be repressed or passive objects to be mobilized? (Guha 1983) Thus, if history as a discipline is defined by its anchoring in currently available evidence, then subaltern peoples such as Adivasis and other excluded and oral communities are always already lost to history. Dipesh Chakrabarty took this critique further when he argued that while 'minority' stories can be accommodated within the discipline of history, 'subaltern' pasts—peopled as they often are by gods, spirits, animals, and cosmic forces—can never find a place in the secular temporality of the historical narrative (Chakrabarty 1998). History's capacity to represent was thus limited, and had to be supplemented by disciplines such as anthropology and literary studies if it had to do justice to the task of representing marginalized peoples. The implication was that if history ended up becoming the sole medium and ground of political representation, as had come to be in Indian politics, then history as a knowledge form collapses and loses its residual epistemological credibility.

History and Affect

Hidden at the heart of the unresolvable question of political representation is the associated but somewhat distinct question of political affect. In 1995, the social psychologist and cultural critic Ashis Nandy argued that history as a discipline undoes the inherent temporal dynamism of memory. Memory, by nature, is changing and flexible, as becomes evident when we attend to old myths and legends, which tend to get retold differently in different presents. Memory thus permits forgetting and the overcoming of wounds of the past. History, by fixing our relationship to the past for

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all times to come, disables the healing work of memory and ceaselessly reproduces historical antagonisms. Nandy was writing in response to the heightened rhetoric of Hindu–Muslim conflict that was playing out in the domain of public history after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Implicitly criticizing historians who argued that empirically accurate history was the only possible hedge against Hindu historiography and the spiralling politics of historical revenge, Nandy insisted that it was history itself, as a mode of relating to the past, that was the problem. It was not accidental, therefore, that it was the Hindu right which was most vocal in invoking history to legitimize its politics of hate. As a discipline, thus history was intrinsically vulnerable to weaponization by states and majorities and produced a negative public affect (Nandy 1995).

In his reconstruction of folklore about the eleventh-century Turkish warrior Salar Masud, also known as Ghazi Miyan, Shahid Amin implicitly affirmed Nandy's argument. Believed to be the nephew of the iconoclast pillager Mahmud of Ghazni—who repeatedly attacked northern and western India in 1000–1026 CE and later became the archetypal figure of the foreign enemy in Hindu nationalist historiography—Ghazi Miyan was a venerated saint in middle-Gangetic peasant society. Both Hindus and Muslims owned up to Ghazi Miyan as the protector and provider of subaltern peoples—including sisters and wives in poor households—a warrior-bridegroom-saint who left his wedding ceremonies behind to ride to war and his ultimate death. Amin describes the relations of kinship and devotion that congealed around the cult of the warrior Ghazi across the centuries. He also records how orthodox Hindu and Muslim publicists of the early twentieth century, armed with the rhetoric of true history, sought to proactively 'correct' the errors of popular memory and return the people to nationalist resentment against foreign invaders in an effort to solidify adversarial political identities (Amin 2015). What Amin describes is no less than a war of affect. If folklore saw war as part of a larger affective economy, involving honour, sacrifice, loss, mourning, domesticity, and commensality across communities and the sexes, history sought to reduce war to the affective regime of victory and defeat, friend and enemy, ceaselessly calling out to be avenged.

The affect question remains relatively under-theorized in the historiography of India, even though the political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj points out that history itself can be seen as constitutive of the *rasa* (affect/emotion) of political modernity, something which Rabindranath Tagore had said in so many words in his critical reflections on the modern science of history writing (Kaviraj 2015: 4–6). One way to return the question of political affect to historiography is, following Amin, to explore the place

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of war and conquest in histories of India. As we know, in its origin in the late nineteenth century, Indian history's animating concern was to explain why and how India came to be colonized by the British (Asif 2016). Colonial historiography offered a simple answer—being a backward and stagnant society preoccupied with otherworldly spiritual concerns, Indians, especially Hindus, lacked historical and political acumen. Hindus were also lazy, effeminate, and weak, conditioned thus by climate, geography, and race. It was, therefore, always already vulnerable to foreign invasion, and was repeatedly conquered by Greeks, Scythians, Huns, Turks, Afghans, and Mughals. British rule was thus an organic part of India's long and continuous history of defeats in war rather than an unprecedented and exceptional event that interrupted the flow of India's history. Some nationalists like V. D. Savarkar too accepted that it was the loss of its martial qualities that led to India's colonization (Chaturvedi 2022).

Nationalist historians tied themselves up in knots trying to explain away India's constitutive vulnerability to foreign rule. Once the originary historical question was framed as that of conquest, nationalist history set out to recover and celebrate warrior figures of the past—like the Maratha king Shivaji, who defeated by valour and guile the then reigning Mughal emperor Aurangzeb—and developed a deep investment in militant masculinity, pitted against the caricatured figure of the allegedly brutal and over-sexed Muslim jihadi. Public histories continue, till date, to lament the emasculation of Hindus under Muslim rule. This vision of history pushed out from the public sphere self-proclaimed secular histories which sought to distinguish between modern British colonialism and medieval Islamic rule—by invoking historical examples of Hindu–Muslim cultural amity and political integration and arguing that pre-colonial conquerors, unlike the British, found their home in India and were therefore not 'foreign' in the colonial sense. In the public sphere, the foreign–national and insider–outsider affective economy played out unrestrained, in a ceaseless repetition of Carl Schmitt's vision of the political as a friend–enemy dialectic. In other words, so-called secular histories which brushed the question of conquest and conflict under the carpet in the name of benign cultural hybridity and social harmony, unwittingly left space in the public sphere for adversarial histories to flourish without challenge.

Being presented as secular national (as opposed to religious 'communal'), these histories of so-called popular syncretism overlooked how pervasive the motif and affect of war were to democratic politics in modern India. The Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita were the primary inspirational texts of revolutionary nationalism in the early twentieth century and

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valorized the idea of sacrificial action and righteous war. But war was a central motif not just of Hindu masculinist history. War was repeatedly invoked by anti-caste radicals, too. Both Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra and Iyothee Thass in Tamil Nadu explained the oppression of untouchables in India as being the historical result of ancient wars between invading Aryans and indigenous peoples, with the former defeating the latter and relegating them forever to the status of outcastes (Phule 1873; Ayyathurai 2011). Ambedkar, even though he did not deploy the motif of racial wars, also spoke of India's history as a history of relentless caste wars, between Brahmans and Kshatriyas (Shudras being erstwhile Kshatriyas who were defeated by Brahmanical reaction) and Brahmans and Buddhists (untouchables being early Buddhists who were expelled from society and turned into 'broken men' surviving at the edges of human settlements) (Ambedkar 1947; 1948). The spate of Dalit histories that accompanied the rise to power of Dalit political parties in the 1990s and 2000s—a phenomenon described by political theorist Christophe Jaffrelot as India's 'silent revolution' (Jaffrelot 2003)—were also largely histories of war, which valorized low-caste and untouchable warriors, including women, as leading anti-colonial military action, as in the great rebellion of 1857 (Narayan 2001). Needless to say, the motif and affect of war were central to communist and socialist histories too, based on the Marxian tenet that all history was the history of class war, in which the peasant and the proletariat came to be staged as heroic warriors pitted against the powerful landlords and capitalists. In communist politics in India, as we know, especially in the Naxalite and Maoist varieties, war came to be literalized as armed action by the oppressed.

Gandhi directly connected the hegemony of the war motif in modern Indian politics to the hegemony of history in the public sphere. As we know, Gandhi's religion of non-violence and 'experiments with truth' (involving the control of emotions such as desire, gluttony, lust, and anger) was nothing if not the cultivation of an affective orientation proper to a political subject pitted against the war-like disposition of nationalist and communist revolutionaries (Alter 2000). In his 1909 text *Hind Swaraj* and elsewhere, Gandhi famously distinguished between history and *itihasa*—the former, according to him, being a chronicle of states, rulers, and wars; the latter being stories and memories embedded in everyday life (Skaria 2016:193). He then went on to say that *itihasa*, and not history, was the proper locus for the politics of *satyagraha.* In his reinterpretation of the Gita, Gandhi proposed that the war of Kurukshetra be understood not literally but metaphorically—as a war within the human heart between the forces of good and evil (Chakrabarty and Majumdar 2010). Gandhi

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was arguing against the nationalist deployment of the Gita as a sacred text of revolutionary war, though Ambedkar strongly objected to Gandhi's sanitization of war as glossing over the actual historical fact of class and caste wars animating India's long history (Nanda 2016).

One historian who directly brought the affect question to bear on the discipline of history was Ranajit Guha, historian of subaltern insurgency and postcolonial critic of colonial modern knowledges, who turned to literary thinking late in his life. Guha was inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's critique of history. To Tagore, history chronicled the biography of the state and failed to do justice to the quotidian lives of common people, which were more properly the subject of literature. Tagore's critique of history was constitutively tied to his critique of nationalism. According to Tagore, the political ideology of nationalism was a narrow vision of the world, which failed to account for the diversity and vastness of civilization and cosmos. It reduced humanity to a contentious set of jealous identities, produced an adversarial relationship between the self and the other, and, as a result, impoverished the human spirit. Anti-colonialism, therefore, must not be reduced to nationalism (Tuteja and Chakraborty 2017). Following Tagore, Ranajit Guha criticized the constitutive state-centrism of modern historiography and believed that it was literature and poetry, rather than history, that better captured the *sukha dukkha*, or weal and woe, of ordinary everyday life (Guha 2003).

Guha contrasted the time of the historical event with the time of the quotidian everyday. The everyday is a peculiar phenomenon, he said. Its temporality cannot be identified with any calendrical or chronological moment; although in its self-evidence, the everyday is easy to recognize in a yesterday or a tomorrow. Everydayness is thus necessarily informed by a sense of the past. But this is not the historian's past, Guha insisted; for facts are differently experienced in history and the everyday. If historical facts are grasped ex post facto and experienced as finished and final, the facts of the everyday are subject to the unfolding of singular lives and, therefore, are anticipatory in nature. If history relates to the past through the logic of causality, literature and poetry do so through the logic of unfolding—the actualization of a potential that may or may not realize itself in time. In other words, if history seeks to own time under the name of a regnant subject-identity, be it the nation state or the historian-author, the everyday admits to the vicissitudes and uncertainties of time and is, therefore, best thematized in literature (Guha 2003: 30, 93–94).

Guha set up an analogy between the modern state and the modern historian. Both claimed to be a stable, transcendental, and impartial

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location from which to witness, record, and regulate the movement of history. Like Gandhi, Guha too contrasted modern historiography with the pre-colonial narrative genres of *itihasa* and *kavya*. If the former is grounded in the stable self-identity of the historian and his claim to authorize and authenticate a proper version of the past, the latter privileged the listener's initiative, Guha argued. Not for nothing did the *Amarakosa* translate the listener as the *arambhaka*— the commencer, initiator, of a narrative—rather than as a reader/audience subordinate to the author/narrator/historian. It was because it recognized the primacy of the audience that the narrative of *itihasa* allowed itself to be retold by diverse subjects and renewed in changing presents. It also allowed polyglossia in its structure of tales within tales in the voice of diverse speakers and listeners. Taking the Mahabharata as a prime example of *itihasa*, Guha showed how in its narrative form as a series of retellings, of stories nested in stories, it allowed multiple voices and versions to flourish side by side (Guha 2003: 59).

The narrative temporality of *itihasa* stages history as a 'heard of past', with both the author/poet and the listener/interlocutor recognizing the past as past, that is, beyond witness—which is why, Guha implies, we have had many versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and not a single version claiming to be authentic or authoritative. It is this recognition of the temporal alterity of the past (from the time of telling and listening) which produces 'wonder'(*bismaya*, *chamatkara*) as *itihasa's* prime affect—wonder being 'the ultimate form of novelty' which deploys repetition and retelling precisely to apprehend changes in the familiarities of common life (Guha 2003: 59–62). In other words, in Guha's argument, non-historical traditions of relating to the past are animated by the presence of alternate pasts and diverse narratives of the same, unlike history, which speaks in the voice of a centralized state and/or a unitary nation, thereby lending itself to battles over one true history. Modern history as an absolutist narrative thus leads to the substitution of the affect of wonder with the affect of war. Recall here how, in 2008, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the Bharatiya Janata Party's student wing, agitated for the exclusion of Ramanujan's essay on multiple versions of the Ramayana from the Delhi University history course (Ramanujan 2023). Interestingly, some historians—like Ajay Skaria writing of histories of the forest regions of the Dangs and Vinayak Chaturvedi writing of peasant pasts in Gujarat—have experimented with history's narrative temporality by weaving together the historian's telling with other tellings available in folklore and myth (Skaria 1999; Chaturvedi 2007).

Janaki Nair, in her study of competing public histories of Tipu Sultan—an eighteenth-century ruler of the Kannada country and one of the most

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intractable enemies of the East India Company and now, strangely, the Hindu right—has argued that instead of relentlessly asserting the virtue of true and objective history (a reincarnation of the Enlightenment affect of the 'scientific temper'), academic historians of India must work to reclaim the production of affect as part of the historian's craft. It is worth quoting Nair's conclusion here:

> Especially in order to recognise the power of the past at a time of waning visionary futures, it is imperative to put in the place of scientific temper, which was more megalomaniac than we have cared to admit, a new notion of historical temper. While resisting the precipitous decline into historical fantasy, this approach would be sceptical of a rigid attachment to positivist evidentiary protocols. By proposing a conception such as an 'imaginative truth' in the service of a historical temper, we may better appreciate that the 'shameful kinship' between history and storytelling can be not just empowering for peoples without a past, but also open up the space for outlining what ethics might govern its production. (Nair 2020: 596)

History and Time

Needless to say, it is the future that is at stake in wars over the past (Banerjee 2013). Clashing imaginations of what an empowered future might look like—a future in which historical grievances come to be redressed and dreams of better lives realized—give history wars their characteristic intensity. This brings us to the third conceptual issue that animates the face-off between academic history and public history in India—namely, the issues of historical time and transition.

Early nationalist history inherited its imagination of historical time from European historiography, which proposed that history universally unfolded across ancient, medieval, and modern periods, the ancient period being that of civilizational glory, the medieval of decline, and the modern of progress. In the hands of colonial historians of India, these three historical periods were mapped seamlessly onto the periods of Hindu, Muslim, and British rule, a temporal framework that was inherited by Hindu nationalists and continues to animate public histories of ancient Hindu glory and medieval Islamic barbarism till today. From early on, however, secular nationalists disputed this mode of periodizing history by the religion of rulers. They argued that history must be a narrative of changes in people's lives rather than the rise and fall of states. And because India was always a multi-religious nation, unlike European countries which adopted the *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion) principle after the sixteenth-century

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wars of religion, it was erroneous to count religion as a criterion of historical periodization (Thapar et al. 1970).

Anti-caste historians, however, disputed this version of secular historiography and argued that religion be accounted for in the periodization of Indian history, given that the political triumph of Vedic Brahmanism over Buddhism in ancient India and the coming of Islam and Christianity in medieval and modern India were important historical moments in the lives of low-castes and untouchables, forever in search of alternative religious world views that disavowed caste. However, the religion question became highly inflammatory in India with the partition of the country on religious lines in 1947, an event that was accompanied by bloody Hindu–Muslim rioting and the tragic participation of low-caste and untouchable peoples, such as the Namashudras of Bengal, in anti-Muslim violence (Bandyopadhyay 1997). Then came the assassination of Gandhi by a Hindutva extremist in 1948 and Ambedkar's conversion, along with thousands of Dalits, to Buddhism in 1956, in a spectacular act of political secession. Consequently, the newly independent nation state and the liberal intelligentsia assumed a hardened secularist position in their attempt to control religious nationalisms run amok and shied away from engaging the religion question in the academy.

The decades between the 1950s and the 1970s saw the rise to dominance of Marxist historiography, which firmly set aside the question of religion and committed to economic history. Marxism-Leninism had come to be an influential political opinion in India since at least the 1930s and became more so after the great famine of 1943 and the refugee, land, food, and employment crisis of the immediate postcolonial decades. Across the state and academia, there emerged a consensus that for an impoverished ex-colonial nation, the primary task at hand was economic development. It was also widely believed that an emphasis on economic questions would persuade people to turn away from the divisive issues of religion and caste and come together as rational economic subjects under the banner of nation-building. It is in this context that economic history came to re-signify the periodization protocols of Indian history—transmuting the idea of civilizational rise and fall that underpinned the existing ancient–medieval–modern division into a unilinear narrative of transition to a future of socialist egalitarianism.

The transition debate dominated Indian historiography up until the 1980s and was grounded in the principle that historical time inexorably and universally passed through the stages of primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and communism (Banaji 1972). The colonial temporality of progress, which offered a civilizational cum cultural

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reading of the relative backwardness and modernity of different nations of the world, was now redeployed to argue that all of humanity shared in the narrative time of transition to capitalism and socialism and that national differences were epiphenomenal to the shared historical destiny of the world. (See the 'Introduction' for more details on the 'transition debate' in Indian history.)

Yet, the universal temporality of Marxist economic history (and socialist internationalism) stumbled over the modern conception of the economy, which was inextricably tethered to the nation-form. Late nineteenth-century anti-colonial thinkers had pointed out that despite its rhetoric of free trade and world economy, Britain, in effect, administered its empire as a set of distinct national economies, with stringent economic borders marked by differential tariffs and manipulated currency and interest rates (Chandra 1966). Thus, the economy was, in effect, the proto-form of the nation. The late nineteenth-century critique of colonial rule took the form of economic nationalism, and early twentieth-century nationalists followed Friedrich List and John Maynard Keynes in arguing that economic policy must rest on protection of the national economy and, eventually, autarky, the economic equivalent to national political sovereignty. Early twentieth-century *swadeshi*, or the nationalist, ideology of economic self-reliance gave way in the postcolonial decades to state-led developmentalism, temporalized through five-year plan phases, making the nation state the primary economic agent of the time, charged with educating the people in economic citizenship as well as ensuring infrastructural support for capital investment (Menon 2022; also see Velkar's chapter in this volume). The state's narrative partook in a quasi-Marxist sensibility of a historical forward movement from colonial underdevelopment to national development, but unlike Marxist historiography, saw the nation as the sole locus of India's economic transition—even though for all practical purposes, the national economy remained entangled in enduringly hierarchical global trade and financial systems in ways that thwarted postcolonial dreams of self-sufficiency.

The transition narrative came to be criticized from the 1980s onwards. It had become clear by then that the nation state's developmental promise had come to nothing and that Marxist economic history's overemphasis on the category of class had led to a grave neglect of histories of caste and gender struggles in India, a point that was made strongly by the 'social history' and 'new cultural history' schools of historians (Sarkar 1997; Chatterjee et al. 2014). Some historians, however, went further than simply asserting the historical role of social subjectivities other than that of class. They came

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to query the very concept of modernity that anchored both the statist and the Marxist transition historiographies. This rethinking of the modern as a temporal imaginary was led by two sets of historians. The subaltern studies school of historians, riding the global wave of postcolonial criticism of the 1980s and 1990s, saw modernity as a temporal regime imposed on the colonized, which rendered them forever 'backward' in relation to the capitalist West and led to the neglect of alternate historical trajectories, as all histories of the world were expected to confirm to the so-called modernizing trajectory of European history (Chakrabarty 2000). They showed up colonial modern knowledge-forms, including the discipline of history itself, as complicit in the marginalization of subaltern pasts and futures (Cohn 1996). Some scholars of the subaltern studies school proposed the idea of alternate modernities. Thus, Sudipta Kaviraj argued for a 'revisionist' theory of modernity on the grounds that unlike in Europe, in India, universal democratization preceded industrialization and secularization, lending a very different temporal configuration to the Indian modern (Kaviraj 2005). Partha Chatterjee showed up the entanglement of modern and non-modern histories—such as of democracy and kingship, class and community, citizen and subject—in contemporary democratic politics in India (Chatterjee 2011; 2019). Other scholars deconstructed the idea of the modern itself to the extent of rejecting it as a useful category of thinking about the movement of historical time (Banerjee 2006).

Subaltern studies historians emphasized the 'autonomy' of subaltern pasts from the flow of national history as imagined by nationalist as well as Marxist economic historians (Guha 1982). Consequently, they disaggregated the nation into 'fragments', which sometimes came together to produce a nation-effect but at other times spiralled away in autonomous directions. The terminology of the fragment was made popular by Gyanendra Pandey writing on Hindu public histories circulating in Ayodhya in the 1990s. Pandey said that

> the totalising standpoint of a seamless nationalism needs to be challenged not only because of its interested use of categories such as 'national' and 'secular' but also because of its privileging of the so-called 'general' over the particular, the larger over the smaller, the 'mainstream' over the 'marginal'—its view of India, and all of south Asia, from Delhi. (Pandey 1991: 551)

Partha Chatterjee went on to write a textbook of modern Indian history, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, in which he argued that gender, caste, the working classes, the middle classes, the state, and indeed history itself be

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seen as so many fragments with their own autonomous histories rather than as part of a national whole with a singular national past and a common developmental future (Chatterjee 1993).

The 'connected history' school of scholars, on the other hand, did not quite critique the concept of modernity as much as ascribe it a different temporality. They criticized nationalist history, which saw the early modern period—roughly between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries—as a period of decline and disintegration which made India vulnerable to colonial conquest. Instead, they argued, the early modern period was precisely when the different historical elements that we identify as modern—such as the consolidation of a centralized fiscal state, emergence of standing armies, the accumulation of commercial and credit capital, the expansion of global commercial and cultural connections, the rise of secular literary and philosophical thought, the intensified participation of common people in political processes, and so on—emerged simultaneously in different parts of the world, including China, India, and Europe. The modern should, therefore, be understood as a transregional and conjunctural development rather than a strictly western European phenomenon that travelled post facto from the metropolis to the colony (Subrahmanyam 2005). This historical emphasis on the early modern rather than the colonial modern (or indeed the ancient, the favourite of Hindu history) allowed historians to rescue modernity from the stigma of its association with colonialism and Eurocentrism. It also allowed a critique of the nation-form on the grounds that history is always already connected history rather than national history. Scholars of connected history, most famously Sanjay Subrahmanyam, argued that the nation as political form was a colonial imposition. Both colonialism and nationalism caused the destruction of pre-colonial global connections, isolated peoples from long-standing transregional relationships, and constructed a new hierarchical world order in which the metropolis developed an enduring relationship of extraction and exploitation with ex-colonies. In this telling, India's modernity came to be temporally interrupted—that is, prevented from developing its full potential—by both colonialism and nationalism.

Instead of emphasizing the autonomy of alternative non-modern pasts like the subaltern studies school of historians, connected history scholars emphasized the autonomy of 'regions'. By regions, they meant not only pre-colonial transnational networks of exchange—say, between India and China or between India, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East—but also subnational linguistic regions, such as the Tamil country or the Kannada country, with deep pre-colonial histories of politics and culture.

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Their argument was that these regions displayed their own historical time and trajectory, which resist being subsumed under the single historical chronology of the nation and demand analysis as historically coherent and autonomous wholes unto themselves.

As we know, the autonomy of regions was a burning issue in the immediate postcolonial decades, with Tamil, Marathi, and Kannadiga peoples asserting their distinctive linguistic culture and demanding independent statehood from the newly independent nation state. At the same time, the frontier regions in Kashmir and the Northeast asserted their unique nationalities, as did so-called tribal peoples in the interior forest and hill regions of the country. In some cases, such as in the Northeast and Kashmir—areas that are still to be 'pacified'—the argument against absolute nationalization rested on a connected history argument, namely, that historically these regions were more organically connected to regions outside the borders of the nation: the Northeast to China, Tibet, and South-east Asia and Kashmir to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. However, the fraught history of religious nationalisms in India had caused the newly independent nation state to be suspicious of all demands of regional autonomy as potential threats to the nation's integrity. This led to an unfortunate foreclosure of creative experiments in federalism in India, and India's 'nationality' question became one of the most violent and perplexed questions of its democracy (Rudolph and Rudolph 2011).

In their *Textures of Time*, connected history scholars offered a critique of the European conception of history as a particular narrative genre with specialized authorship, singular chronology, standardized narrative protocols, and a national archival focus. Focusing on regional archives from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century southern India and on diverse languages—Sanskrit, Persian, Telegu, Tamil, and Kannada—they argued that in pre-colonial times, multiple social groups authored chronicles of the past, including kings, poets, scribes, and devotees, and wrote in multiple genres, including epics, poetry, court records, hagiographies, and political treatises. Many of these expressive genres had histories embedded in them, if by history we mean the epistemological mode of working with an internal distinction between factual and fictive accounts. The public recognized this distinction without any trouble by sensing the 'texture' of the narrative rather than by either generic or authorial distinction. In other words, history was not a formal professional activity, as it became in modernity, but a dispersed public activity and commonly recognized as such. For that reason, histories and counter-histories were also accepted as part of common sense. It was only when history was reduced to a singular and standard genre—an

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authoritative and absolute account of the past—that what we experience today as history wars emerged as an unresolvable political problem, blurring the previously commonly accepted and recognized boundary between the factual and the fantastical (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2001).

Conclusion

Today, history wars continue unabated. Public histories have infiltrated university departments, taking the battle to the heart of the historical profession. However, the discipline of history currently faces two other challenges that are relatively less discussed in the public sphere, even though they have a bearing on the questions of nation and nationalism. These are the challenges posed by digital technology and climate change.

The proliferation of public histories late nineteenth century onwards was made possible by the technology of print. Today, the production and circulation of history happen on the internet and in social media. Any individual with access to a digital device is now able to author and share historical snippets, making it even more difficult to regulate history than it was in the era of print. The intermedial form of the digital also means that history is now more subject to visual representations—more than in the era of calendar art, photography, and cinema—leading to a greater degree of iconization of the past and consequently greater cultural conflict over the 'imaging' of history (Pinney 2019). The internet has also intensified what media scholars call 'affective publics', leading to sharper divisions between communities of history, who operate within strictly separate digital 'echo chambers' with no possibility of political mediation. In other words, with the digital turn, public histories have become public in a renewed way. While this has led to a further proliferation of hyper-nationalist histories in India, digital technology has also put the nation into question—first, by allowing more space to hitherto marginalized oral histories and counter-histories; second, by raising the question of the unmistakable global structure of the Technosphere which runs counter to the culturalism of nationalist rhetoric; third, by the proliferation of big data, which challenges the imagination of stable historical archives as repositories of recognizable and classifiable national facts; and finally, by transforming the very ontology of memory, which is now invested in server farms and digital clouds, subject simultaneously to super-abundance and unspecifiable loss (Punathambekar and Mohan 2019). As a formal discipline, history today faces the challenge of having to rethink what it has so far known as historical fact and social data.

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The climate crisis has produced a very different kind of challenge. In international climate negotiations, nationalist history still reigns. The Indian state untiringly argues that erstwhile colonizing nations bear the responsibility of carbon reduction and that ex-colonies be allowed to complete the universal historical trajectory of economic growth, once charted by the developed nations, before they are asked to attend to the climate crisis and commit to 'de-growth'. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out in his book, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, ecological concerns demand from us thinking at a planetary rather than national scale and in terms of deep geological time rather than simply the time of human history. The question before historians today is, therefore, what history would look like if its protagonist is non-human and even non-life and its chronology is more-than-human chronology. The climate crisis also demands of us a rethinking of our relationship to the future, a thinking of what it means to do justice to unborn generations, and takes us beyond the singular question of doing justice to the past, which has been the primary concern of history wars (Chakrabarty 2021). History is today burdened with the task of having to function without utopia, and offer narratives of the future which are neither promissory nor apocalyptic.

These are intractable questions which not only exceed the framework of national histories but also trouble the remit of history itself as a discipline. Unsurprisingly, debates over ecology and technology are more common in the disciplines of anthropology and literary studies today than in the disciplines of history and political studies. Perhaps this is because history and political studies are more invested in an identarian imagination of the human subject as agent of change. It is ironic, therefore, that India's public sphere continues to remain preoccupied with history wars at the perilous cost of neglecting what can be called crises of the future. Perhaps this is where historians of India must go henceforward, sidestepping the exceedingly loud identitarian politics of public history.

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