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**Does India Have History?**  
**Does History Have India?**

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*NMML Occasional Paper*

*The Hindus have never had any historical writings:  
all that is known of India is to be gathered from  
popular poems, or the accounts of foreigners.  
H.H. Wilson 1854: 123*

It was the unanimous opinion of the early Orientalists that India had no history, at least in the sense of historical writings. This view was widely influential, being endorsed, for example, by R.C. Majumdar (1951) at the beginning of the *History and Culture of the Indian People* series shortly after independence. But the consensus has been eroded by the rise of the "colonial studies" paradigm, which tended to discredit the consensus view by attributing it to colonial interest, colonial misunderstanding or insufficient grasp of Indian languages and literatures. An opening was thereby created for a rush of new studies and a new consensus, that India does have history of a kind, the task being to specify what kind it is. This has been much to the good. But the old consensus should not be so easily dismissed. It has had real effects, whose explanation can be valuable to us. It should be examined as an historical object. In order to pursue this we need to ask not only whether it is true, but, prior to that, to ask what its logic was for those who first developed the idea.

At the outset let me stipulate that by India I mean *ancient* India, and by history I mean *disciplinary* history — that is, I am asking whether ancient India is an object of study for the discipline of history. Inevitably, the question of the relation of ancient India to disciplinary history addresses the European view of India, and more especially it asks why ancient India was largely excluded from disciplinary history in the West. The paper has three parts:

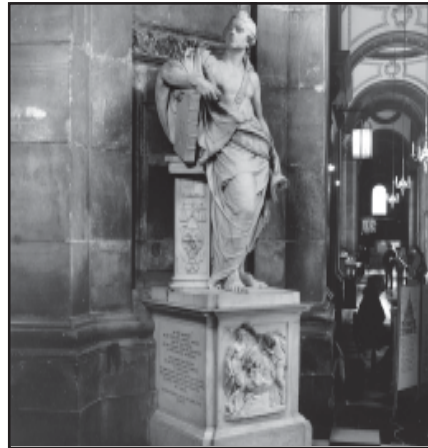
1. Ancient India is good to think
2. Ancient India has no history
3. Back to the Flood

The first two parts speak of European views, and the third will propose a new way forward, that is not Euro-centric.

## **1. Ancient India is good to think**

I begin with an image from the Sanskrit texts called *Puranas*. The image shows a female figure holding a tablet depicting the churning of the

milk ocean by gods and demons, generating from it precious objects that make civilized life possible. The female figure is next to a four-headed representation of the creator, Brahma. Where is this sculptural scene found? The answer is surprising. When we pull back a bit we get a clue, because the framing figures of an angel and a scholar — probably an Orientalist — are drawing back the veil that conceals ancient India, and shining a lamp upon it. When we pull back further still we find the carving is on the pediment of a colossal statue of Sir William Jones. This scene from Hindu mythology is in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, under the central dome, and opposite equally colossal statues of the writer Samuel Johnson, the painter Joshua Reynolds and the prison reformer John Howard. Jones held that the *Puranas*, because they contain a story of the Flood, are an independent proof of the Bible narrative, and an answer to learned skeptics such as Voltaire.



This idea died without a trace soon after it was engraved in stone and enthroned in the basilica of the Church of England. The pediment of the Jones statue became simply illegible in years to come, as floodology ceased to be respectable in the academy and became the preserve of enthusiastic amateurs and true believers.

Jones' other project, however, had a very long life and has a continuing presence: I mean his discovery of the historical relation of the Sanskrit language to Greek and Latin, as he proposed, via an ancestral language "now perhaps lost", and also with Celtic, Gothic and Old Persian; in short, what we call the Indo-European language family. Not only is this idea alive and current in the academy today, more than two centuries hence, it became the model for comparative philology or historical linguistics of all languages, worldwide. This achievement was unexpected and utterly new both to India and Europe; and as I have argued in my book, *Languages and Nations* (Trautmann 2006), it was the unanticipated result of the conjuncture of two traditions of language analysis, European and Indian, in colonial Calcutta. It was not an accident that British India was the site at which the Indo-European language family concept emerged. The acute phonological analysis of Sanskrit was the fruit of an obsessive concern with exactness in the recitation of the hymns of the Veda, and it is imprinted upon the alphabetical order of the scripts of India, such that first lessons in Sanskrit are first lessons in a scientific phonology. This analysis was the sharp tool that the European project of mapping the historical relations among the languages of the world needed to accomplish its object; and so effective was this joining of intellectual traditions that no less than four major new discoveries were connected with British India: the Indo-European language family; the Dravidian language family of South India; the connection of the languages of the Roma or Gypsies with India; and the Malayo-Polynesian language family stretching from Madagascar to Hawaii. These surprising, new and durable findings persist today, two centuries later.

Following this breakthrough, other European and American intellectuals found ancient India "good to think", as Lévi-Strauss taught us to say. Let me mention a few of them, whose ideas had lasting consequences, because they make the case for including ancient India within history: Jacob Grimm, Fustel de Coulanges, Henry Maine, and L.H. Morgan — a German, a Frenchman, an Englishman and an American.

**Jacob Grimm**, one half of the team that compiled Grimms' fairy tales, wrote a massive historical grammar of German (*Deutsche Grammatik* 1819), drawing upon the newly available Indo-European comparative material made possible by access to the Sanskrit language. In this project he made ancient India a resource for the deeper illumination of German and, by implication, other European languages. Grimm identified regular sound shifts, called Grimm's Law, between different historical phases of the Indo-European languages, such as, for example, P to F as in Sanskrit *pada* and English *foot*, or Sanskrit *pitr* and English *father*. This finding set comparative philology on a path of increasing rigour and precision, deploying the Indian phonological analysis to historical-linguistic ends with tremendous success.

**Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges**, in his book *The Ancient City* (*La cité antique*, 1864), used ancient India as a resource to recover the earliest form of Greek and Roman society before the city-state, and found it in the patrilineal family and the worship of its ancestors with food offerings. Fustel thought that Europeans had gotten the Greeks and Romans badly wrong by treating them as if they were Frenchmen in togas; and he thought that a truer history would find them strange and following an unfamiliar logic. In this project some texts of ancient India available to Fustel in translation (Manu, the *Mitakshara*) were resources for capturing that strange logic through comparison, and finding it in the ancestor worship of the earliest Greeks, Romans and Indians. Fustel's book, translated soon after its publication in 1864, and in print continuously ever since, had a large influence. Fustel was a teacher of Durkheim, and through him early sociology had a marked presence of ancient India in it.

**Henry Sumner Maine** wrote *Ancient Law* (1861), his own attempt to capture the strangeness of the ancients, which he expounded in the formula, "From status to contract," his interpretation of the evolution of law. After writing it he went to India as Law Member of the Governor-General's council, and acquired knowledge of ancient India, taking it up as a resource, along with Serbian and Irish materials, to thicken and deepen his conception of property and the village community among the ancient speakers of the Indo-European languages.

**Lewis Henry Morgan** fixed upon kinship as a means through which to deepen history beyond the limits that comparative philology had reached. That the language of kinship is durable and conservative is evident when we compare Sanskrit with its distant cousin, English:

|        |          |
|--------|----------|
| pitṛ   | father   |
| matr   | mother   |
| shvasā | sister   |
| bhratr | brother  |
| sunu   | son      |
| duhitṛ | daughter |

But it was in the Tamil language, through information supplied by an American missionary returning from South India, that Morgan found something like what he had initially found in Iroquois: a form of kinship that was both strange (different from English, that is) and internally consistent, having a logic of its own. It was this apprehension that gave Morgan a basis on which to propose that family and kinship relations do not merely reproduce themselves but have a history (*Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity* 1871). Attempts to write that history took both conservative and radical forms, the latter through Freidrich Engels, whose book was called *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State in the light of the researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (*Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigenthums und des Staats*, in Anschluss an L.H. Morgan's Forschungen 1884, 1972).

Further afield, and for the sake of being comprehensive, I may mention two figures as different as the American poet Walt Whitman, optimist, democratic visionary, and the Comte de Gobineau, French aristocrat, pessimist architect of the racial theory of world history which undergirds the politics of racial hate; both found ancient India to be a resource for their very different projects.

**Walt Whitman** wrote the poem *Passage to India*, further evidence of ancient India serving as a resource to older allies, Emerson and Thoreau. The stimulus was the first English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* which, Richard Davis tells me, Emerson got hold of in 1845. Whitman singles out his *Passage to India* as an especially significant expression of his message (Whitman 1871, 1982: 1005 fn.). To me it is remarkable for its

central idea, his unexpected juxtaposition of the recently completed transcontinental railroad, the Suez Canal and the transatlantic telegraphic cable, on one hand, and ancient India, on the other, the two together bringing about an expansion of consciousness into the distant and the deep past. This expansion of consciousness Whitman opposes to what he calls literary feudalism, that is, (in his view) an excessive dependence upon the literature serving the European aristocracy, and toward a poetry that is democratic and cosmopolitan. Emerson's and Whitman's ancient India is a resource for gaining critical perspective on American religion, money-worship and literary feudalism. Its influence has been huge.

**The Comte de Gobineau**, finally, deployed the new knowledge of ancient India to construct his 2000 page *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (*Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* 1853-55). This learned, nasty book did not invent racism, but it created a theory of world history in which imagined unchanging qualities of race, more especially of the white race, were the causes of the rise of the world's ten civilizations, and the racial mixture that empire inevitably brings was the cause of the fall of nine of them, Europe being the lone remaining exception, and only for the time being. Gobineau's radioactive book was translated into English and published in America soon after the first volume appeared (Gobineau 1856), serving as a support to the cause of slavery in the run-up to the Civil War; and it is the source text for the politics of racial hate in Europe and the United States.

All of these works, even, in a negative way, the race theory of Gobineau, make the case for ancient India to be included within the boundaries of history. Why, then, was it not?

## 2. Ancient India has no history

Orientalists of British India held the view that ancient India had no history, in a weak form, namely, that it had no history-writing properly so-called, and that its traditions are flawed because of a tendency toward the fabulous; but that India has a history nevertheless, that can be recovered from traditions and other sources. Others held the doctrine in a strong form: ancient India had no history-writing because it had no historical consciousness. There is no ancient Indian history to be recovered. H.H.



Wilson, Orientalist of Calcutta and first Sanskrit professor of Oxford, is a leading embodiment of the weak form of the doctrine, and G.W.F. Hegel, philosopher of history and leading anti-Orientalist of his generation, is the embodiment of the strong version.

### ***Wilson***

I cannot go into the evidence, and will simply lay down three salient points about Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860) and his fellow Orientalists.

1. Wilson and his predecessors did not simply *assume* India had no historical writing. They assumed the *contrary*, and sought to find historical writings, which they understood to reside in the *Puranas*. After inspecting the *Puranas* closely they decided that ancient India had no history. Wilson is the culmination of that development. He and a large team of Indian assistants at Calcutta made a massive chapter-by-chapter summary of the contents of the major *Puranas*. This remains in manuscript at the British Library, but Wilson published a translation of the *Vishnu Purana* as a leading text of this class.
2. The demotion of the *Puranas* from the status of history to the status of tradition, then, followed inspection. But it needs to be understood that at the very same time the expanding historical consciousness of Europe was also demoting Homer's epics from history to tradition, and was soon to view more skeptically the claim of the *Bible* to be historically true. In other words, all histories of past ages were losing rank before recent, critical histories.
3. These demoted histories, plus historical documents and "monuments" (which means physical objects as big as palaces and as small as coins) are nevertheless sources of true, critical histories. The project of the expanded historical consciousness of Europe was to interrogate these near-histories and history sources more closely and create reliable histories thereby. This new European history-obsessed consciousness was not sympathetic to what I may call "Indian time".

***Indian time***

At this point I must introduce the ancient Indian theory of history, that of the four yugas or ages, as we find it in the lawbook of Manu (Manu 2005). Each of the ages is a decreasing number in the thousands, plus a morning and evening twilight of as many hundreds:

|         |                           |
|---------|---------------------------|
| Krita   | 4,000 + 400 + 400 = 4,800 |
| Treta   | 3,000 + 300 + 300 = 3,600 |
| Dvapara | 2,000 + 200 + 200 = 2,400 |
| Kali    | 1,000 + 100 + 100 = 1,200 |
| Total   | 12,000 years of the gods  |

These years, however, are years of the gods; and since a human year is a day of the gods, and the days in the year are taken to be 360, we can work out the equivalence in human time as follows:

|         |                                      |
|---------|--------------------------------------|
| Krita   | 4,800 × 360 = 1,728,000              |
| Treta   | 3,600 × 360 = 1,296,000              |
| Dvapara | 2,400 × 360 = 864,000                |
| Kali    | 1,200 × 360 = 432,000                |
| Total   | 12,000 × 360 = 4,320,000 human years |

The twelve thousand divine years, which are the total of four human ages, make one age of the gods, a *mahayuga*, or "a great age." A thousand of these ages of the gods makes a day of Brahma, the Creator, called a *kalpa*, his night being of equal length. This gives us a kalpa of 12 million years of the gods, or 4.32 thousand million human years. Waking at the end of his day-and-night, Brahma creates mind, which performs the work of creation by modifying itself, impelled by Brahma's creative desire.

European traveller accounts of India regularly featured this theory of yugas and treated it as definingly Indian, different from Europe and so obviously wrong, it needed no refutation. The strong sense of difference sprang from the short chronology for human history allowed by the *Bible* which, among English Protestants, started as recently as 4004 BC as the date of creation.

Muslim writers on India had the same reaction to Indian time, and reinforced Europeans insofar as the latter approached ancient India through Persian language texts. On the other hand, the European reaction to Indian time was not shared by the Greeks of antiquity, who were not committed to Biblical time and who entertained ideas of cycles of ages. But all the Peoples of the Book — Jews, Christians and Muslims — held to a short chronology for human history that was strikingly different from Indian theories of time. For Britons the short chronology of *human* history did not begin giving way till about 1860 (although *geological* and *biological* time had lengthened out earlier), so that all the early Orientalists of British India, beginning with Jones, approached the vastness of Indian time from the shortness of Biblical time. This was the prime cause of the European belief that India has a defective grasp of history, but it is not the only one. Hegel's contribution to this effect was quite different, and it was decisive.

### *Hegel*

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was the great theorist of history at the moment of the most rapid and far-reaching expansion of history-mindedness in Europe in the early nineteenth century. It was the period in which the reach of human history was being expanded by historical linguistics, the invention of archaeology, and the great decipherments, of Egyptian hieroglyphics, Mesopotamian cuneiform, and the Indian Brahmi script, recovering written records that had been illegible for millennia. This expanding historical consciousness profoundly disturbed the interpretation of the *Bible*. Historical thinking spread beyond human history, from geology to Darwinian biology to the new developmental cosmologies of astrophysics. In this period of rapid expansion of historical thinking that coincided with the worldwide expansion of European imperial power and the great advances of science, Hegel theorized the scope of history in a way that was surprisingly restrictive, and whose exclusionary boundaries prefigured those of the discipline of history that took form soon after (Hegel 1970, 1975).

Hegel's exclusions and inclusions rested on a distinction between nature and history. Those aspects of humans that are deemed to be of nature, such as sex, kinship, family, gender and labour, got excluded from history. The idea of the distinction is that nature is un-self-conscious, that it always

reproduces itself without net change — change without development. History, by contrast, is the realm of self-conscious free choice and directional change, creatively making the new and unprecedented; and the main locus of this creative making is the state. Hegel, in effect, anticipates and theorizes the exclusion from disciplinary history of cosmology, Darwinian biology (Hegel's nature has no evolution, only self-reproduction), the astonishing new finds of historical linguistics (excluded because the changes of language are unconsciously made), the family (which Hegel thinks is natural and changeless), the working class (because it merely reproduces itself), gender and women, India and even China which, though it has many and extensive histories, lacks the sense of developmental change, according to Hegel, straining every nerve to find a way to exclude the non-West. The remaining inclusions are narrow indeed: the history of the state, in Greece, Rome and Europe.

As to the relation of Hegel to disciplinary history, it is a complicated story. Most historians, in the past and in the present, are oblivious, indifferent or overtly hostile to Hegel. Disciplinary history has felt free to ignore the Hegelian dicta about what does and does not count as history, though the Hegelian viewpoint in European thought has been strong. History in the West has been drawn this way and that, between the poles of the Orientalists and the anti-Orientalist Hegel and his European vanguardism. Historians have generally held the un-Hegelian belief that every people has history whether or not they have a well-developed consciousness of history and a body of history-writing that expresses it. Disciplinary history has been interested in family, custom, language and other topics that Hegel rules out of bounds; Fustel de Coulanges would be an outstanding example, and one who finds ancient India "good to think" as well. But disciplinary history has chosen to remain within the limited chronological horizon of Biblical time, and it has been as committed to European vanguardism as Hegel himself, if only in a softened form, until fairly recent times, that is to say, about the 1960s. Till that time the uses of ancient India which I have mentioned have largely been outside of history, in departments of linguistics, anthropology, sociology and religion; and history departments had little or no relation to the tremendous growth of history in the natural sciences. The Hegelian exclusions serve history badly, and historians have been right to dismantle them over the last generation.

### **3. Back to the flood**

Sometimes when we need to find a new way forward, it helps to return to the past, to find where we took the wrong turning. This is one of those times. We need to return to the flood.

From the vantage of Christian Europe, Indian time was exotic and obviously false for its excessive length, which exceeded that of the biblical chronology for world history; but increasingly it was drawn into the Hegelian frame, in which cyclical change is of nature, and opposed to lineal change, which is of history.

#### *Eliade*

Eliade is certainly involved in this reading of Indian time. There are several reasons for bringing in Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), Romanian novelist and public intellectual turned University of Chicago professor of the history of religions, into the analysis at this point. It brings the argument up to the recent past; it invokes a thinker whose intellectual formation included ancient Indian texts in Sanskrit and whose views were greatly shaped, therefore, by India; a thinker who was immensely influential in history of religions, at least in America; and a thinker for whom the cyclical/linear distinction is central.

Eliade was an anti-Hegelian who did not believe that "man makes himself" in the Hegel-friendly phrase of the English archaeologist V. Gordon Childe. Eliade's book, *The Myth of the Eternal Return (Le mythe de l'éternel retour: archétypes et répétition, 1949, 2005)*, constructs a category he calls "archaic man", the content of which largely comes from his study of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy as a student in Calcutta, and the writings of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia. Archaic man, Eliade believed, had a rage for being, expressed through the *rejection* of history and the *repetition* through ritual of models from the beginning — time of myth. These ritual re-enactments of the beginning served to abolish history, that is, the events intervening between the ordinary model and its ritual repetition, history having the negative valence of that which deviates from the model. Eliade had a strong feeling of attraction for this supposed *rejection* of history by archaic man; it is, for him, the source of religious feeling, a philosophy of religion which we can only appreciate by going

back to the pre-Hegelian world. He thinks that historical time first began to be valorised by the Hebrew *Bible* with its scenes of God's intervention in history; and that modern philosophies of history, starting with Hegel's, are regrettable secularizations of this Biblical time-sense. He is opposed to the developmentalist history of Hegel and the "man makes himself" modernist time-sense. It is an oddity of his relation to the object of his affection that he chose *history* of religions for his project, but in truth, it is a *philosophy* of religion, not a history, except in the limited sense that it operates within a contemporary sense of chronology. Even though it reverses the signs on the Hegelian construct, the structure remains Hegelian.

However that may be, and leaving aside the many problems that vex the interpretation of this complex and elusive thinker, the main point for present purposes will be that Eliade's construct of the history-fleeing archaic man comes from the very civilizations that compiled lists of kings and recorded the deeds of past kings for the edification of contemporary ones, and scrutinized the skies to discover the future — that is, who wrote the first histories. Eliade's big idea just does not hold together. The ancient civilizations were not dealing in primordial conceptions of time and being, they were inventing new theories of time, cosmos and history and putting their ideas into circulation across Eurasia.

Between them, Hegel and the anti-Hegelian Eliade, among others, collaborate in promoting a strong contrast between cyclical and linear time-senses, attributing the first to nature, or "archaic man," or the Indians, or the non-West, and the latter to the Greeks, to the *Bible*, to Europe, to modernity. I believe this is wrong and leads us down false paths.

### *Lineal v. cyclical time*

There are two good reasons to believe a hard opposition of lineal and cyclical time is mistaken. One of them is philosophical: they are not true opposites. The second is that it wrongly takes the cyclical time of the Indian theory of world ages to be primordial.

As to the first, most measures of time are taken from the literally circular motions of bodies in space: the daily revolution of the earth, the monthly orbit of the moon about the earth, the yearly orbit of the earth about the

sun; the conjunctions of planets in their several orbits; even the backward wobble of the earth on its axis that, once every 26,000 years, makes the equinox precess through the signs of the zodiac. None of this is incompatible with the idea of linear time, that time flows in one direction and not the other. The directionality of time is not suspended by the cycles that bring recurring birthdays, saints' days, Diwalis or New Year days. We relive the past in the movies in our mind, but we relive them forward, not backward. We know that when you run a real movie backward, you get an impossible world with strange physics in which water flows uphill, broken dishes rise and reassemble themselves, people and horses and cars run unerringly backwards.

My second objection is that the view in question makes the yuga theory of ancient India the expression of primordial belief. But as Pingree (1963) has observed, there is no trace of it in the earlier, Vedic age, except for the word yuga itself, which in the Veda indicates brief ages of five or so years. Eliade has led us down a false path. The yuga theory is not ancient folk-belief but is the recent invention of a religious elite. It is a new, post-Vedic theory, positing a new configuration of relations among time, person and authority. We now have a conception of big time through which worlds arise and dissolve and arise again and again; into which eternal truth is inserted into history by religious teachers who, likewise, appear again and again, from age to age, as a series of Buddhas or Jinas or avatars of God; and through which persons migrate from life to life, body to body, seeking salvation through escape from history, into eternity, and eternal truth is brought into history by authoritative teachers and saviours who, as a signature feature of this cosmology, are repeated in each world age, *yuge yuge* as the *Gita* says.

This cosmology was a new creation, surely made in India by Indian theorists of history; but it has a connection, I believe, with an international circulation of ideas about astronomy, kingship and the sacred among the ancient civilizations of Eurasia.

Which takes us back to the flood of Noah.

If we widen and extend back in time this view of a field of variation in which ideas of the sacred and of kingship circulate among the early

civilizations of Eurasia, we will be in a position to find connections across the boundary between the non-opposites of the cyclical and the linear, the ancient Indians and the Peoples of the Book, the archaic and the modern, the Non-West and the West.

Since cuneiform writings of the Sumerians and Akkadians were made once again legible by nineteenth-century Orientalists, it has become apparent that the flood narrative of the *Bible* has many precursors in stories of the ten or so kings who ruled from the creation to the flood; an example is the Greek history of Babylon by the Babylonian priest Berossus (1978), written in the Hellenistic period. In this version, as in the *Bible*, the period before the flood is a strange time in which people lived exceptionally long lives, like Methusaleh; except that in the account of Berossus the ten kings' lives were in the tens of thousands of years, and the entire interval from creation to the flood was 432,000 years. Thus the *Bible* narrative is a miniature version of the Babylonian flood narrative or some relative of it.

This is where the yuga theory of India comes in. Pingree (1978) believed that the number 432,000 is a parameter from Babylon which Indian theorists took up and around which they constructed the schema. The evidence is the number itself, which is the length of the Kali age in which we live, and ten times which is the total length of the cycle. The number is a Babylonian one, that is, a round number in the base-60 number system (which we still use, in the minutes and seconds of the clock, or degrees, minutes and seconds of angle used in astronomy). It is expressed as 120 *sars*, one *sar* being 60 squared, or 3600.

Formerly I had thought it was a pure coincidence that the *Puranas* contained the story of a world-wide flood from which a remnant of mankind survived in a boat towed by a fish, and that Jones fixed upon this coincidence to find a connection between the *Bible* and the *Puranas* via floodology. Now I think it is entirely possible that the *Puranas*, just as the *Bible*, contain a version of a flood story that grew up in Mesopotamia and circulated where its civilizations had contacts with other ancient civilizations. It may be that the illegible scene inscribed on the pediment of the Jones statue in St. Paul's Cathedral is a late reflex of that ancient story, about the flood in mythical times, after which strange time comes to an end, and the normal time of history begins; and the



*Bible* and the *Puranas* may be remote cousin-versions of some Mesopotamian original text, "now perhaps lost", of how history began.

If this is so, it is certainly the case that the Indians rewrote the Middle Eastern flood story and the beginnings of history in their own way, making it both same and different from the original. In the Mesopotamian version, the flood is the dividing line between myth and history, before which gods and humans communicated directly, and humans live extraordinarily long lives, a strange time which gets normalized and familiarized after the flood, when the gods withdraw and human life assumes a familiar duration. In India the length of human life declines with the four passing ages, from 400, to 300, 200 and the present 100 years — but then the cycle begins again.

If India drew its flood story and the base number of its theory of ages from Mesopotamia, it pleases me to think that one of the values of ancient history is that the further back we go in antiquity the less different from one another the West and the Rest become. The peculiar conception of Europe which Hegel proposes — that it is both universal and singular at the same time — seems to melt and disperse into a field of singularities in constant flux and mutual influence.

We need a different conception of the past, and especially the ancient past. We need to understand it as a living present kept living by countless daily iterations by individuals beyond number, of such machines for living as the Mesopotamian base-60 numbers or the Indic base-10 numbers, and the myriad ways of making and doing by which we perpetuate the practices and concepts of the ancients, unknown to us but invisibly by our sides.

It concerns me that disciplinary history seems to have been shrinking to an ever narrower band of the recent past, and losing interest in the deeper past. While we have become more global, our chronological depth has grown shallower; and we now find that deeper past being laid claim to by other disciplines. At the very moment when we historians should be joining forces with the new technologies of the past, we are losing the capacity of doing so; and with it we risk thinning out our understanding of the present, and the future.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me give answers to the rhetorical questions I have posed in the title of my paper.

Let me take the second one first: Does history have India? Having long been a historian of ancient India in the history department of an American university, I am of course committed to the proposition that history has and should have India, more specifically, ancient India. The question is partly one of fact. Departments of history manifestly have India these days, not only departments of history in India, but in America as well. I will say that the India we have in American history departments is mostly colonial India. It has become the mark of a good department of history that it includes India and China in it, but in the case of India at least it is first colonial India, and secondly or thirdly, if at all, ancient or medieval India. It is part of this pulling toward the recent which I deplore. But at least India is by now an instituted part of disciplinary history in America, and it should be. For that I am glad.

But the question is also one of philosophy of history. I see no reason that the answer to the second question should depend on the answer to the first; that is, I do not see why disciplinary history should limit itself to history self-consciously made by human agents. I think we have bettered ourselves to the degree that we have rejected the Hegelian linkage between being a worthy object of historical study and being a self-conscious agent of history-doing.

If so, the first question, "Does India have history?" does not determine the outcome of the second. Nevertheless, even taken by itself, and without the Hegelian linkage between the two questions, it is more complicated and requires a more thoughtful answer. I am certainly prepared to say yes, ancient India does have history, and it has it where the Orientalists were prompted to look for it, in the *Puranas*. These classic Sanskrit texts, by one ancient definition, treat of five topics: creation, the successive world ages, the genealogies of gods and sages, the ages of the Manus or first humans of their ages, and the genealogies of kings. This combination of cosmogony, mythology and dynastic history is not entirely different from the shape of the past as we find it in the *Bible* from Genesis to Kings, or

in Berossus in his history of Babylonia from the Creation to the Flood to the kings of Babylon to the present. It is grandly historical in a certain old-civilizational way; and so far from representing a flight from history, it is a product of the beginnings of the keeping of history through king lists, embedded in a cosmological frame that in its time was a new departure. So far as India is concerned, we need to abandon Eliade's primordialist view of Indian time, which has obscured for us the process by which the Vedic tradition reinvented itself by reinterpreting itself within the new cosmology. We need a different history of religion which focuses on that reinterpretation, beginning with the theory of the yugas in Manu.

Nevertheless, the Orientalists assiduously sought out the history of ancient India, focusing especially on the *Puranas*, and regularly reported failure. I think the datum needs to be taken seriously, and that we must try to explain it. I have suggested that one strong reason for the Orientalist verdict against ancient India on this head was the clash of chronologies between the *Bible* and ancient India. The Orientalists just could not recognize what they saw in India as comparable to their idea of what constituted history. But, setting the clash of chronologies aside, there remains something worthwhile in what the Orientalists register in their unanimous judgment, and we will miss it if we dismiss them as fools and knaves.

If we look at the intellectual accomplishments of ancient India I believe the highest achievements lie in language analysis, and astronomy-astrology-mathematics; perhaps also aesthetic theory and logic. In all of these the overall approach is structural rather than historical; not exactly timeless, but without making directional change a fundamental object of interest and an engine of analysis. Modern comparative philology, in my argument, folds into itself the Indian structural analysis of phonology, and hitches it to a European programme of historical linguistic study. In China, I have argued, the same Indian analysis of phonology, purveyed by Indian Buddhist monks, was a resource by which the Chinese created a new philology to recover the lost sounds of the ancient Chinese classics. These outstanding historical successes remind us that history needs sharp tools that it may not be able to make for itself. In any case I am not one who insists that history was a well-developed department of letters in ancient India. As an approximation, as I have said elsewhere, ancient India did not teach

the modern world to think historically, but it did teach it algebra and the number system; and I now add, it gave the world sharp-edged tools for history as well.

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