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Anne Viguier: Against the Aryan (and Colonial) Version of Indian History: South India's Counter-narratives and Geographies

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The European Version of Indian History: The Aryan Cradle of Humanity

Since the 19th century, the writing of history has been a key issue of national identity. In their colonies, Europeans sought to impose their writing systems and worldviews. India presents a unique example of this endeavour for several reasons.

From the very beginning of the colonial enterprise, a contradiction existed in the European perception of Indian history. From the late 18th century onward, India became an object of fascination through the Aryan myth. This myth stemmed from a hypothesis, both scientific and religious, that Europeans shared a common origin and that their ancestors had migrated from Asia in an epic journey from the Himalayan highlands. This myth evolved through three phases: the period of romantic Indophilia (1790–1830), the racialization of the mythological discourse (1840–1920), and its Nazi instrumentalization (1920–1945).

The German linguist Franz Bopp introduced the term “Indo-European” in 1816 to designate a family of languages spanning Europe and Asia. The existence of the Indo-European linguistic family implied the existence of an ancient people who spoke the original language. For European Indophiles, these were the Arya mentioned in ancient Sanskrit texts from the so-called “Vedic period.”

Vedic India became a matter of identity not only for Indians but also for Europeans. Its history was first exploited by 19th-century Orientalists such as Friedrich Max Müller, an Oxford professor who admired the spiritual and literary heritage of the Vedas and the Avesta, the sacred book of ancient Iran’s Zoroastrian religion. For Müller, the Arya were a superior race who had invaded and civilised a backwards indigenous India. He went so far as to write that the blood flowing “in the veins of the black Bengalis” was the same as that of British soldiers. In the 19th century, racial classifications were often based on language, leading to the idea that Europeans, too, descended from this “superior” race.

But to justify the ease and necessity of conquest, British colonisers constructed a degrading version of post-Vedic history: after a glorious past, India had supposedly fallen into decadence. This narrative was used to explain the country’s stagnation, backwardness, and the degeneration of its religion, whose polytheism horrified Christian missionaries. It legitimised the colonial civilising mission, which aimed to put India back on the tracks of history, albeit in a subordinate role within a narrative of progress.

India Without History

The negative view of India’s post-Vedic past also stemmed from the perceived absence of historiographical writing. Unlike in Africa, Europeans could not deny the existence of traces of the past. Still, they argued that Indians, preoccupied with spiritual matters, had turned away from action—and thus from history.

Centuries apart, the Persian historian Al-Biruni (early 11th century) and the British historian James Mill (1773–1836), who respectively witnessed the Turkish and British conquests of India, made similar observations. They noted the Indian scholars' indifference to historical knowledge and interpreted it as a sign of weakness that had facilitated conquest. Mill's *History of British India*, published in 1817, was written in England based on translated sources and had a lasting impact. Mill developed a theory using Indian history to argue that the production of historical writing was a measure of a people's level of civilisation. He introduced a periodisation adopted by almost all historians of India (MEYER, 2014, p. 2010).

Ancient Indian texts and oral traditions, compiled in manuscripts, were devalued due to their lack of chronological precision and their embedding in mythical conceptions of world origins and human institutions.

Indian Nationalism and the Instrumentalisation of History

This version of Indian history was not directly challenged by Indian nationalists, who began contesting colonial rule in the late 19th century and seeking to reclaim agency. Born into an orthodox Brahmin family, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894) popularised the old Sanskrit term *itihasa* (history—literally, “what was”) and infused it with a prophetic sense. Adopting Mill's periodisation, he aimed to restore Indian national pride by promoting a rebirth of ancient civilisation in the Italian Renaissance model, celebrated as a golden age, beyond a medieval period obscured by Muslim rule. He coined the term *Hindutva* (Hinduness), later used by political movements hostile to Islam. Conversely, Muslim historians grouped at Aligarh University—successor to the first Anglo-Muslim college founded in 1875—celebrated the grandeur and modernity of the Mughal Empire. Meanwhile, archaeology uncovered evidence of an urban civilization predating Sanskrit antiquity after 1920. This bolstered arguments attributing Indian civilization to the Dravidians rather than the Aryans.

In response to such widespread instrumentalisation of history, Gandhi took a radical stance, prioritising unity in the independence struggle. He rejected any historical justification for nationhood, seeking instead an eternal humanism as the foundation of Indian identity. He wrote in 1924: “I believe a nation without a history is a happy nation” (KHILNANI, 2006, p. 241).

In contrast, Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (1946) offered a series of historical syntheses embedded in a conceptual framework that viewed Indian civilisation as the result of successive contributions from Aborigines, Dravidians, Aryans, Turks, Persians, and the British. This inclusive, secular vision rejected Hindu primacy, building national unity on India's richness and diversity.

Ultimately, two main conceptions of history emerged:

- An **inclusive interpretation** emphasising India's plural heritage and capacity to absorb external influences.
- A **restrictive conception** that idealises the Vedic golden age, asserting that Indian identity is built upon Hinduism as its immutable foundation—this is the view of Hindu nationalists and the Hindutva ideology.

Both narratives imply a preexisting national unity on which to build independence.

After Independence and Partition

After independence and Partition, the secularist version of history prevailed in the national narrative and school curricula, often infused with Marxist interpretations. Unity was the focus. A partially Westernised elite—mainly from northern India—took power and promoted a democratic ideal while emphasising Indian historical specificity through revised narratives.

The South: A Different India?

These dominant narratives often downplayed or ignored regional identities. Yet colonial India, a quasi-continent, lacked political unity not due to any inherent deficiency, but because of its size and demographic diversity. Civilizational centres shifted across time. External contacts also varied: while the North faced successive invasions (Greeks, Kushans, Turks, Afghans, Mughals), the southern peninsula, with two maritime fronts, maintained extensive trade across the Indian Ocean since antiquity, shaping material culture and society.

Crucially, the foundational Aryan myth was challenged in the 19th century with the “discovery” of the Dravidian linguistic family. This gave rise to interpretations with racial overtones, portraying Aryas as conquerors of a backwards population. Southern scholars, historians, and politicians challenged the unitary version of India’s past in various ways.

Literary Sources

They constructed their own golden age based on ancient Tamil literature (*Caṅkam* literature) and archaeological discoveries attesting to an early South Indian civilisation. This was enabled by 19th-century *pulavars* (poets) who revived early Tamil texts from manuscripts. This classical heritage had been gradually forgotten through three ruptures:

1. Between the 6th and 8th centuries, secular bardic poetry was replaced by individual devotional hymns from the Shaivite and Vaishnavite *bhakti* movements.
2. In the 17th and 18th centuries, militant Brahminical Hinduism dismissed secular texts as anti-religious, creating an “intellectual taboo” (ZVELEBIL, 1992).
3. Despite partial transmission loss, the manuscripts preserved this heritage, which was revived through literati networks, teachers, administrators, vernacular presses, and print media.

Tamil literature was later instrumentalised during nationalist movements, just like European literature. But unlike Europe, where popular folklore played a central role, in Tamil Nadu, it was highly erudite literature that was mobilised, alongside moral texts promoting rural virtue, particularly beneficial to agricultural castes like the *vēḷāḷar*.

The *Caṅkam* texts fostered a shared Tamil cultural identity. This process began in the 19th century amid nationwide identity redefinitions. While affiliations remained multiple (village, family, caste, religion, language), linguistic identity gained prominence, especially in reaction to English as the colonial standard. This triggered a linguistic nationalism, rooted in territory and nourished by a compelling myth.

A Lost Territory

Unable to identify many locations mentioned in ancient poems and considering the advanced civilisation described unlikely to have thrived in South India’s limited space, Tamil authors adopted zoologist P. L. Sclater’s theory of Lemuria—a sunken continent. They imagined Kumarikandam, a submerged land that housed the ancient Tamil civilisation. This “myth” (RAMASWAMY, 2004), presented as fact in some post-independence textbooks, gave Tamil grandeur a nostalgic hue. With no physical land left, only devotion to the language could preserve the culture by existing history to keep it alive.

Though not universally accepted (many Brahmin scholars emphasised cultural hybridity), the myth spread widely.

Social Struggles

This exalted history also served as a tool for social transformation. Drawing from caste-free texts, southern activists claimed the caste system was imported from the North by Brahmins, who, while only 4% of the population, held 90% of colonial administrative and teaching posts. Anti-Brahmin, sometimes atheist, political and social movements gained ground

in the South. This historical reimagining supported a broader cultural, political, and social movement. A popular history disseminated via literature, theatre, and cinema emerged. It was introduced into school curricula in Tamil Nadu after 1967, when a Dravidian political party came to power.

Does the South Exist?

Some once envisioned an independent “Dravidian land,” but this dream faded for two reasons. First, the nationalist struggle had created a sense of belonging in the South that elites sought to capitalise on. Second, the South was itself divided, especially linguistically: while Tamils saw themselves as heirs to Dravidian history, Telugus claimed their own Andhra heritage and successfully demanded separation in 1953. Far from simplistic North-South maps or sunken continents, a new map emerged, with administrative boundaries drawn based on language, and not religion, as during Partition. Tracing these boundaries was difficult due to regional circulations and shared pre-colonial histories (14th–18th centuries). The division of the Dravidian space into four, later five, federal states led to the emergence of sub-regional identity narratives. In Tamil Nadu, governments since 1963 (from the Dravidian movement) promoted knowledge of classical and medieval Tamil literature. In the 1960s and 1970s, many publications were funded by the state. A vigorous campaign also promoted Tamil figures through statues, murals, and monuments.

Conclusion

Ultimately, multiple versions of pre-colonial history emerged, tied to shifting maps, yet still within the Indian nation. A dual identity became possible by rewriting colonial history to elevate regional heroes, such as Kattabomman in Tamil Nadu and Kittur Chennamma in Karnataka, who were seen as precursors to independence. Communist movements in Kerala and Telangana also contributed new local heroes.

Comparison with African History

The Indian case can be compared with the African situation, which highlights some similarities but also many differences.

Just as in India, Europeans constructed an Africa "without history," but for a different reason: not due to a disinterest in history, but because of the absence of written sources. In both cases, this contributed to legitimising colonial conquest, which was supposedly meant to guide backwards or degenerate peoples toward progress.

Like Indian nationalism, African nationalism took on various forms. However, we are comparing two very different situations: in India, we refer to a single country after the Partition (as the common elements with Pakistan are never emphasised by either side), whereas in Africa, we are dealing with a fragmented continent within borders that Africans often view as artificial. Historical writing took several directions: reclaiming the African past, as Cheikh Anta Diop did with the history of Egypt; and redefining geographical frameworks beyond colonial boundaries, as Boubacar Barry, a member of the second generation of the Dakar School, attempted through his studies of Senegambia (1988, 2001).

Pan-Africanism emerged in opposition to European notions of African inferiority. It emphasised elements shared across the entire continent and primarily developed outside Africa, without a unified political structure. Oral traditions played a particularly prominent and celebrated role. However, in the 1960s, newly independent African nations emerged, each seeking to establish a national history written in Africa, about Africa, and by Africans. These histories could be based on precolonial political structures or the struggle for independence, thereby introducing new national heroes.

However, due to the widely acknowledged artificial nature of borders and the emphasis on oral tradition (particularly among so-called "traditionalists"), much research has focused on local histories: lineages, localities, and former kingdoms. These histories reflect scales or mappings different from those of the new nation-states.

Academic history in Africa also confronts traditionalists rooted in oral traditions, whereas in India, written culture retains its prestige, relegating popular culture to the domain of anthropology. In both cases, what is referred to as "local history" may offer a response to the enduring conflict over meaningful scales, provided it opens up to the circulation of people, knowledge, and political processes and attempts to move beyond a single, identity-based conception of territory (HARNEIT-SIEVERS, 2002).

In India, by contrast, oral traditions and folklore are not emphasised as much, as the competition between versions of the past mainly takes place through sources valued by European historical practices, considered more "noble"—such as ancient texts and archaeology. Indian traditions, often studied through anthropology rather than history, were long devalued and are only gradually gaining legitimacy. Today, this contrast frequently presents itself as a dichotomy between academic history and public or popular history.

Another difference lies in how history and memory are divided. The divide does not fall in the same place in African countries and India. Indeed, both contexts reflect the tension between history—which seeks to demythologise the past and make it intelligible in the present—and memory, which instead tends to sacralize the past, giving it a mythic coherence in relation to the present, as theorised by Maurice Halbwachs. In a sense, local or regional histories are often more closely tied to memorial inquiries. However, among those who engage with these subjects in Africa, a distinction is typically made between "traditionalists"—who often transmit lineage and ancestral memory—and "professional" historians. Their sources differ, and more importantly, so do their purposes. These two approaches to the past can coexist without undermining national unity, which is rooted at another level. Nevertheless, modern borders may hinder research on groups that straddle several states, such as those in Burkina Faso and Ghana, and elsewhere.

In India, there are no "traditional" roles for preserving the past, as pre-colonial literature did not contain a distinct historical genre. However, some manuscripts recounting history have been preserved, notably in South India (RAO and al, 2004). However, those claiming to be guardians of local history cannot rely on ancestral practices.

We can therefore contrast a fragmented continent in which a collective consciousness developed in opposition to colonisation—though without effective political embodiment (which explains the Afro-pessimism of the 1980s and today's rejection of the former colonial powers, especially in former French colonies)—with a newly formed "country-continent" whose history is constantly being rewritten. At the same time, its memory remains fragmented and contested, sometimes challenging the very functioning of its institutions.

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