GANDHI, NATIONALISM AND THE SUBALTERN: AN EXAMINATION OF INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

History is not the true, objective and linear account of the past, but the result of interpretation and, often, politically motivated appropriation. It is the aim of this thesis to understand the ways in which Indian colonial history and, specifically, the growth of nationalism have been interpreted and appropriated, for the construction of a cultural 'Hindu' identity. Many groups existing on the margins of 'Hinduism' were subsumed within an oppressive and political 'Hindu' fold. Gandhi's nationalism played on notions of 'Hinduism,' appropriating subaltern traditions and consciousness, in order to unify India under his idealized conception of community. While the history of these subaltern groups is interconnected with the national movement, this thesis demonstrates that certain interpretations can provide a critique of their political appropriation within a dominant 'Hinduism'.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

On December 6th 1992, various 'Hindu' organizations successfully collaborated in demolishing a Mosque at the supposed birth site of a Hindu god, in Ayodhya, India. Justification for this act was based upon 'historical evidence' which supposedly reveals that, in the sixteenth century, a Mughal emperor destroyed the Hindu temple that was originally at this site. This 'historical evidence' has been discounted by the Archaeological Survey of India, and the claim about this as the specific birth site of the Hindu god *Rama* remains unproven.

This is but one example of the political appropriations of history, in the name of a 'Hindu' majority in India. While interpretation is integral to history, and appropriations are universal, these ones must be contextualized, in order to show them up as politically motivated, instrumental appropriations. Within these political appropriations, minority groups are excluded, as in the case of Muslims, or subsumed, as in the case of — loosely defined — 'Hindu' groups. However, it is not only politics that makes dubious claims to historical evidence, but also historiography itself. By privileging certain interpretations and, masking, or excluding others, historiographies are complicit in the act of political appropriation.

I am concerned, in this thesis, with examining dominant historiographical modes of colonial history, which favourably analyze Gandhian nationalism, a form, I will argue of 'Hindu' nationalism. More specifically, I am interested in seeing how this interpretation deals with the history of subaltern, especially tribal groups. In order to

understand the position of tribal groups, Gandhian nationalism and its ideal of 'Hinduism' have to be explored.

India's colonial period, marked as it was, by the intermingling of diverse groups, was a site of conflict, protest and repression. British rule made an indelible impression on every aspect of Indian life. Therefore, analytical distinctions between 'Indian' – read eastern – and 'western', used by many scholars, have not proved to be effective epistemological tools. Both 'eastern' and 'western' elements have to be viewed in their combined constitution of social relations. In doing so, other analytical distinctions, between, for example, materiality and ideology, or spirituality, and modernity and tradition are also found wanting.

Despite the inadequacies of these dichotomies, Indian nationalists and historiographers have attempted to construct a cultural identity for Indians by mobilizing these distinctions. In their attempt to create the illusion of a Hindu majority in India, histories have generally been written on one side of the dichotomy, that of traditional and ideological. This method of writing history leaves aside the material dimensions of inequality.

In the construction of this cultural identity, as a project of Indian nationalism, the model used has been that of the hierarchical structure of 'caste', as incorporated within the label 'Hinduism'. Nationalists of the colonial period, and subsequent historians, have privileged a particular version of 'Hinduism', and projected it onto an idyllic conception of a precolonial Indian past. This model of 'Hinduism' subsumes within its fold most of the diverse elements, without attention to the disjunctures in social reality. What results

in the histories, therefore, is a marginalization or silencing of large segments of the Indian population who occupied a subaltern position with reference to the 'Hindu' elites.

Defining what constitutes 'Hindu' is complex task. The term originally dates back to encounters with the Greeks, but its contemporary political form originated during the colonial period. It was meant to incorporate a large number of diverse groups and sects, which were neither Muslim nor Christian. As such, during different points in the colonial and post colonial period, the term 'Hindu' has been used to refer to tribal groups, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and members of other dissenting sects (Omvedt, 1993: 9). However, members of the aforementioned groups would not all agree to the label 'Hindu'. As Gail Omvedt observes, "…what is today known as Hinduism was only gradually consolidated out of the myriad of traditions, crystallized as a religion based on appeals to the Vedas and to the authority of brahmans" (Omvedt, 1993: 9). The *brahmin* privilege that is emphasized in this term 'Hindu' creates a philosophy that is more accurately termed *brahmanism*, than 'Hinduism'. The terms are synonymous.

Brahmanism is the privileging of the ritual status of the upper castes. Caste is a term that has been used to refer to both *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* is the hierarchical division of society into four groups: the *Brahmins* at the top, are traditionally associated with the priesthood and higher levels of administration; the *Kshatriyas*, the warriors and nobility; the *Vaishyas*, merchants and businesspeople; and the *Shudras*, the peasantry, artisans and other groups who toil for the above three. In reality, however, it is the *jati* (often translated as a sub-caste) which determines the general rules of social relations within and among different groups. *Jati* was originally an extended kin network, while *varna* emerged later, superimposing a ritual, ideological division on *jati*. Tribal groups lie

outside the ideological system of *varna*. The common practice of subsuming the terms

varna and *jati* into the English term caste is, therefore, not an adequate representation of

the reality of these social relations in India. However, as the term caste is most

commonly used, I will use it also.

During the British rule, upper-caste elites attempted to create an inclusive

'Hinduism' "that claim[ed] the whole mythologies of the Puranic traditions as deriving

ultimately from a brahmanic, Vedic, and Sanskritic core, that incorporate[d] and yet

subordinate[d] all the various "subaltern" traditions – and that [was] posed in radical

contrast to such "non-Indian" religions as Islam and Christianity" (Omvedt, 1993: 9-10).

Hindu assertion reemerged at the turn of the 19th century. At this time, a section of the

nationalists – known as 'extremists' – invoked ancient post-Vedic 'Hindu' traditions,

which had, in the medieval times, been transformed so as to ensure the *brahmins'*

superiority. This notion has developed as the politics of *hindutva* – a jingoistic attempt to

create a hegemonic 'Hindu' identity – in post independence India.

Gandhi arrived on the scene soon after the 'extremists' gained dominance within

the Congress Party (the political party associated with India's freedom struggle). His

version of 'Hinduism' is particularly important. While Gandhi severely criticized

western civilization and industrialization, especially as the latter had flourished at the

expense of the Indians, his approach was founded in his own interpretation of an ideal of

'Hinduism'. As numerous scholars have pointed out, Gandhi's alternative to western

industrialization was based not on the modern principles of human freedom and equality,

but upon the notion of the self-sufficient village community. This village community

was to function according to an idealized *varna* system, where "the paternalistic rule of

kings" would be "regulated by intellectuals (brahmans)" (Omvedt, 1993: 12). As Gandhi was also a shrewd political leader, his ability to strike compromises between groups of high castes and peasants allowed the inequality, entailed in his vision of India, to be subsumed in the larger project of a hegemonic appropriation of 'subaltern' groups. This attempt at appropriation of the disadvantaged groups in Indian society was conceived within the project of building a 'Hindu' majority which would, ideally, be generous and tolerant to the diverse ways of living and believing of the non-Hindu minorities.

A Brief History

Archaeological evidence has shown that the history of the Indian subcontinent can be traced to the Indus Valley Civilization, somewhere between 2800 and 2600 BC. Around the early second millenium BC, a group of people labeled the Aryans, arrived in India from the north-west, settled areas in the Indus Valley and established Vedic Aryan society.

Various indigenous tribal groups were assimilated into the Vedic fold, as the Aryans expanded their settlement of India. This period of Indian history, known as the Vedic period, has been described as predominantly tribal (Thapar, 1993:116). However, Romila Thapar has argued, that, in the Indian context, the term tribal society, "...is ambiguous and includes a range of cultures from stone-age hunters and gatherers to peasant cultivators" (1984: 18). This leads to some confusion about the term itself. Thapar points out, that lineage is a precise and narrow term which explains the socio-economic relations of the time more efficiently. As neither private property, nor a system

of taxation existed at this time, succession (*vamsa*) and status were conferred through religious rituals which, in turn, reinforced existing patterns of control over economic resources (Thapar, 1993: 117).

With the subsequent emergence of a household economy, it was not so much the existence of surplus itself, but the need to determine how that surplus was to be distributed, that led to further divisions in society (Thapar, 1993: 118). As state systems emerged, the prestation economy declined, while the ritual status of the lineages was still upheld. The stratified lineage led to the formation of *varna*, in an attempt to draw together new and old ideologies, "...into a holistic theory of social functioning" (Thapar, 1984: 18). Thapar points out that economic changes were reflected in the structure of caste. What emerged was the existence of two statuses: ritual and actual. Ritual status became a continuation of the lineage system, and had to be adjusted to the changing economic status (Thapar, 1984: 19). Thus the ideology of the old lineage system was supported by the material basis of a developing inegalitarian order.

Caste evolved as a system of social hierarchy, for which philosophical justifications were put forward in the form of religious texts. These texts are open to interpretation, and tended initially to be based more on observance than ideology (Thapar, 1989). During colonial rule, attempts were made to create, from these diverse texts, a coherent whole, in order to provide new justification for the *brahmanical* model labeled Hinduism. It consisted essentially of the belief in the *brahmin's* superiority at the top of the caste hierarchy.[1] What has come to be known as Hinduism today, results from a mix of Orientalist and nationalist attempts to read the ancient texts, as coherent and mutually consistent.

Tribal Groups

Tribal groups have been the topic of much academic discourse. Yet, there is no consensus in India around the definition of tribe. The term 'tribe' emerged during the colonial era and, was used by the British to distinguish a group of people who did not easily fit into the category of 'caste'. Because of the lack of specificity, the term, is used to describe vastly different groups of people. Suranjit Kumar Saha, for example, defines tribal peoples as, "...those who during the centuries of Indian history, resisted Hindu incorporation" (1986: 275). The term tribe, states Thapar, "[i]n its precise meaning, ... refers to a community of people claiming descent from a common ancestor" (1993: 117). However, as Thapar has argued, the term lineage better describes ancient Indian Vedic society.

The transformation from lineage to caste occurred during the migration of the Vedic people towards the east. They increased their numbers by incorporating, in a select fashion, members of the indigenous groups, and thereby forming a *brahmin-kshatriya* alliance which comprised approximately 5-10% of the population (Saha, 1986: 285). While many tribal groups *were* assimilated into the caste framework, others resisted this Hindu incorporation (Saha, 1986: 282, Beteille, 1986: 308). Until British rule, there were rugged mountainous areas, where tribal groups remained relatively untouched by caste relations.

As the British consolidated their rule over India, the secluded tribal areas were forced open to the proselytizing activity of British missionaries. During this period, the accounts of tribal groups were based on two sources: ethnographies conducted by colonial officials on 'manners and customs' and Hindu attempts — by leaders of Hinduist

movements – to prove the 'Hinduness' of the tribes. The first approach treated the tribes as static social isolates comprising 'noble savages', in need of protection, by missionaries and the colonial government, against assimilation into 'Hindu' society. The second approach analyzed the tribes as an assimilated sub-system of Hindu society (Singh, 1978: 1221). Yet, as KS Singh notes, the tribes of India have neither been entirely isolated, nor have they been completely absorbed into Hindu society (1978: 1221).

For British administrative purposes, it was necessary to bring the whole of India under central control and the colonial administration, therefore, sent its officers and missionaries into tribal areas. At the same time, caste Hindu traders, shopkeepers, moneylenders and suppliers provided support for the colonial endeavour in these areas. What resulted was an entrenching of the caste/tribe division in tribal areas. Various changes introduced by the British brought previously autonomous tribal communities in contact with caste Hindu society, which significantly changed tribal life.

The introduction of the *zamindari* system of land tenure moved the tribals into a cash economy, and away from the communal character of their villages (Sachchidananda, 1990: 283-284). The British also extended the role of the traditional moneylender, to include that of a middleman. Singh defines the middleman as a, "...creature of the colonial system who performed a variety of functions...in administrative matters, as a moneylender, as a trader who controlled production of foodgrain through the system of advanced credit, and as a landgrabber" (1985: 13).

English missionaries tried to organize the tribal people into cooperative societies, to fight against oppressive Hindu landlords, operating under the land tenure system. This created the idea that missionaries were the benefactors of tribals. Many tribals were thus

converted to Christianity, creating a schism between the converted and the non-converted. The missionaries also perpetuated the idea that caste and tribal identities were different. At the same time, nationalists began lobbying for tribal welfare. As much of the nationalist work was done with the underlying idea that tribes were a part of Hindu society, tribal groups were pulled in two directions – 'Hindu' and British. (Sachchidananda, 1990: 294).

The British made distinctions between the tribes and caste society, perpetuating the notion that the two groups represented separate racial categories, distinguishable by physical features (Skaria, 1997: 728-730). While certain indigenous tribal groups in precolonial India had remained relatively untouched by the advancing *brahmanic* society, absolute racial distinctions did not represent the result of centuries of intermingling between the so-called Aryans, indigenous tribes and other outside groups.

In keeping with this idea of racial distinction, various characteristics were also associated specifically with each group. Despite the label of 'martial races' given to some caste groups, caste society as a whole was constructed as weak and effeminate by the British. Tribes, in opposition, were portrayed as masculine, noble and loyal. These ideas were fueled by connecting tribes to the romantic post-Enlightenment notions of the noble savage, and wayward children (Skaria, 1997: 732). In the British conception, caste and tribe represented different degrees of wildness. Castes were thought to have reached a slightly higher form of civilization, and were not expected to indulge in violent outbursts whereas, with tribes, violence was treated as the mischeviousness of children, the idea that 'boys will be boys'.

Indian nationalists, on the other hand, had a stake in representing the unity between tribe and caste. Tribes were claimed to belong within an all-encompassing Hindu realm. The tribes thus became a site of contention between nationalists and colonialists, both fighting to incorporate the tribal communities within their wider projects of nationalism and colonialism respectively.

Rapid and drastic changes in the lifestyle of the tribal populations led many of them to revolt against British and Hindu tyranny. Singh divides these tribal protests into three phases. The first phase, from 1795-1860, coincided with the rise and expansion of the British Empire, and comprised primary resistance movements which tended to be large and spontaneous. The second phase, from 1860 to 1920, coincided with the rise of a much deeper penetration of British capitalism into tribal areas. While both segments of the peasantry and tribals revolted, the latter developed a more political and religious overtone to their movements (1978: 1230). The third phase – 1920-1947 – witnessed movements of a more secular and political nature, and tribes began participating in the nationalist and agrarian movements (1978: 1230).

As the nationalist struggle was deeply influenced by Gandhi, his approach to the tribals is also important. In Singh's view, Gandhi's contribution to the tribal issue was two-fold. "First," he argues "the Mahatma, his personality and his message seemed to carry forward and deepen the process of Sanskritization[2] started by the tribal *bhagats* [spiritual leaders] in the latter half of the nineteenth century" (1978: 1230). And, second, Gandhi's work on tribal welfare – his 'Reconstruction Programme' – was largely responsible for politicizing the tribals. Gandhi's awareness of the plight of tribal populations came through the influence of Thakkar Bapa, one of his workers. Bapa was

concerned with tribal welfare and reform, and alerted Gandhi to the urgency of dealing with the tribal population (1985: 175-177).

Through the efforts of Gandhian workers, tribal movements 'appeared' as imitations of Gandhian nationalist Hindu ideology. Singh describes the Tana Bhagat movement, among a group of tribals known as the Oraons, as one that, "...started as a reformative movement after the First World War, [and] assumed a political overtone when it came in contact with the Congress movement in Chotanagpur. To the *brahmanic* bhagat idioms of purity, temperance and teetotalism were added new ones such as swaraj [self-rule], Gandhi raj, non-payment of taxes, *ahimsa* [non-violence] etc..." (1985: 180). Gandhi's influential principles of *swaraj* – self-rule for Indians – and *satyagraha* – the practicing of truth – became popular with tribal groups.

Nationalist approaches to Indian historiography lay emphasis on tribes as part of the large Indian, implicitly Hindu, family. Aggressive tribal assimilation into Hindu society began with the British, precisely because of their efforts to create artificial distinctions, and this was continued with the nationalists. As a result of colonial distinctions, the tribals were thrown into severely oppressive relations, and some theorists, consequently, have been critical of the 'welfare' and reconstruction programs aimed at tribal groups (Sachchidananda, 1990: 303).

Western education, it has been argued, has only created divisions within tribal society. For Mark Galanter, the "...absorption of the educated and better equipped tribals into the services...deprived the community of leadership and rendered it more easily manipulated and less assertive and self-reliant" (in Sachchidanada, 1990: 303).

Sachchidananda stresses the fact that welfare tends to benefit those who are already more privileged within the tribal community.

> The role of the tribal elite in bringing about social transformation in their community is a very mixed one. On the one hand, they serve as models for emulation and also inject some dynamism into local communities. On the other, the structural obstacles to upward mobility are too great for the majority of tribals to overcome on their own, and those who have already claimed the benefits of development do not engage in active politics to redistribute them (1990: 309).

Thus, even when 'social advancement' allows particular members of a tribal or other subaltern group to improve their socio-economic status, the group as a whole rarely benefits. Moreover, the members who increase their status, often do so at the cost of maintaining any link with their (tribal) community. Tribal separation from 'mainstream' society, thus, continues, as does the tribal subordination to the 'Hindu' mainstream. In other words, while tribal society still exercises a certain amount of autonomy, it is ultimately working within the 'broader pan-Indian', or Hindu society, on whose margins it exists (Saha, 1986: 287).

It is difficult to conceptualize the relationship between tribal groups and the wider Hindu community, as defining 'Hinduism' is itself a problematic, if not impossible endeavour. "Veer Bharat Talwar," Gyan Pandey notes, "has argued recently that the acceptance of *varnashrama dharma* (in effect, caste) and the supremacy of the Brahmin, the worship of the cow, and the burning of the dead, are three features of commonality in the beliefs and practices of all Hindus" (1993: 256). This rather overt reference to the supremacy of the *brahmin* points to the fact that Hinduism is, in its essentials, the same as *brahmanism*. And it is this *brahmanism* that lies at the core of the political agenda of the

hindutva proponents. The question, then, of where the 'marginal' groups fit in, has always been a problematic one for the proponents of *hindutva*.

Specifically, in terms of tribal groups, Pandey points out that *Panchjanya*, the journal of the Rashtriya Svayam Sevak Sangh (RSS, a nationalist, voluntary Hindu organization), made an attempt to separate the terms *vanvasi* and *adivasi*. *Adivasi* implies 'original inhabitant'. *Vanvasi* on the other hand, implies an inhabitant of the forest. *Hindutva* proponents believe that the upper castes are descended from Aryans (Pandey, 1993: 258). The term *adivasi* is avoided, as it would imply that tribes, rather than the so-called Aryans, are the original inhabitants of India. Using the term *vanvasi* instead of *adivasi* is a deliberate move by the RSS journal to designate the tribals as uncivilized people who still need to be brought into the fold of Hinduism. The term *vanvasi* also has historical implications, connoting uncivilized, even barbaric peoples. This negative association, for people of the forest, is found in precolonial and British literature, and although conceptions have been changing over the centuries, the negative connotation associated with tribal (forest) populations has remained rather constant.

Sumit Guha points out that even the term *adivasi* is problematic, as it implies some form of genetic continuity, whereas the history of Indian groups is marked with much intermixing. Still, the term *adivasi* represents the reality more closely. The closest English equivalent would be 'aborigine'. However, the term tribe has been used in literature, implying the political organization of a community (Guha, 1998: 430). But the term tribe also has connections with its anthropological past, which makes it 'foreign'.

Despite their 'foreignness' these terms are part of the political framework today. The politics of representing indigenous peoples is marked by two processes: the first is the construction of categories by the state, and the second is the usage of these categories by indigenous people themselves in their approaches to the state (see Rodrigues and Game, 1998: 2710). In other words, tribal communities have used the categories enforced on them, originally by the colonial state and later by the postcolonial state, to press for change.

Distinctions between caste and tribe were perpetuated, during colonial rule, in order to create and consolidate distinctions between two supposedly distinct racial groups. These separate categories have been used by nationalists, and later *hindutva* proponents, to fuel the rise of a 'Hindu' nationalism and to construct a 'Hindu' cultural identity. Colonial officials and writers perpetuated a notion of Hindus as emasculated and weak, and Indian nationalists responded with a return to some notion of a glorious Hindu past, in order to assert the naturalness of their strength and vigour, steeped in a (concocted) religion. Historiography of the colonial period is consequently submerged in a dialogue between Indian (Hindu) and British elements and categories. Indian nationalism, as it was strongly influenced by Gandhi's version of Hinduism, is difficult to understand without an examination of Hinduism itself.

This thesis examines two modes of historiography that have sought, in different ways, to examine and analyze the colonial imposition, and to understand the nature and effects of the emergence of the Indian nation. Within these modes of historiography, the subaltern populations have been dealt with in different ways.

In the first chapter I examine materialist nationalist histories, which have provided an important perspective on the colonial period. These histories have concentrated on the inimical effects of the changing forces of production which transformed Indian society. However, materialist historians share with nationalist historians a set of positive assumptions about the nationalist movement, which rests on a notion of hegemony. In other words, these historiographies analyze the freedom struggle as a successful counter hegemonic project which ousted colonial rule in India. In these accounts, subaltern groups such as the peasants, lower castes and tribes, are incorporated into the nationalist hegemony under Gandhi's leadership of the Congress Party. Where materialist and nationalist histories diverge is on the point of secularism. Bipan Chandra (the materialist nationalist historian examined in the chapter), contends that while the nationalist movement was guided by certain ostensibly 'Hindu' principles, it was still secular in its approach. Nationalist histories, on the other hand, do not address the question of secularism, and they primarily focus on the work of nationalist – mainly Hindu – freedom fighters. They emphasize the idea that the basis of Gandhian nationalist hegemony, was the notion of tolerance towards the minorities.

The Subaltern Studies Collective[3] has studied the history of the 'subaltern' groups in India, in order to show that neither the colonial state, nor the elite Indian bourgeoisie (which initiated the nationalist movement), was able to achieve an hegemony. Their work, especially that of Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha is the focus of chapter two. Working within the Gramscian framework of hegemony, Chatterjee examines the distinctions between civil and political society and community and capital and concludes that these distinctions are not adequate to understand the nature of nationalism in India.

He articulates a further distinction, namely, the unique dichotomy of an inner and an outer domain of nationalism. The importance of the inner domain or community is highlighted, using the Gandhian notion of community, through which Chatterjee seeks to explain the successful mass mobilization that allowed India to gain her freedom from colonial rule.

Guha also invokes Gramsci, in emphasizing the moment of persuasion rather than coercion which, for him, defines hegemony. Gramsci's rejection of 'economistic' interpretations of Marx which viewed alliances between different class groups, or what Gramsci termed the historic bloc, as instances of 'false consciousness', are echoed in Guha's work. While Guha emphasizes the disjunctures between British and Indian, and between an Indian elite and the masses, he also highlights Gandhi's role in the achievement of a partial hegemony, through the latter's class conciliation approach.

While the Subaltern writers explore the biases of nationalist (and colonialist) historiography, and outline the possibility for a nuanced colonial history, their deployment of Gramsci could be taken further to reveal a more layered history. Two themes emerge from Gramsci's concept of hegemony which, I believe, are vital to the understanding of subaltern history in India. The first is the importance of considering the materiality in Gramsci's concept of ideology (Mouffe, 1979: 199). While ideology fuels hegemony, the materiality of social existence cannot be artificially separated from it. A related point is the necessity of viewing the formation of the historic blocs in a dialectical sense, as this method reveals the materiality embedded within the ideology. Any historic bloc or alliance that may be formed has the potential to become coercive through an appropriation of folk traditions that are normally associated with the subaltern classes. It

is this appropriation which points to the coercive, rather than the consensual aspects (no matter how well concealed the former may remain), of hegemony. To reveal the potentially coercive moments of hegemony, then, involves the analysis of the material basis of ideology. This can allow for an interpretation of an embedded subaltern counter-hegemony.

The third chapter examines this possibility through one of David Hardiman's ethnographies. This study looks at the tribal groups of Gujarat in India, and their assertions against not only *brahmanical* privilege, but also against others who exerted economic pressure on them. This work brings out the potential of a critical, material perspective on Hinduism/ *brahmanism* and caste during the colonial period. Understanding the potential critiques embedded within this 'Hindu' consciousness is pertinent, especially in the postcolonial political context in India, where they could provide a counter-discourse to the 'Hindu' approach to history.

CHAPTER 2 – MATERIALIST NATIONALIST HISTORIES AND HINDU IDENTITY

This chapter examines the materialist nationalist approach to Indian colonial history in order to show how it is embroiled in the construction of a cultural 'Hindu' identity. Nationalist histories have been concerned with highlighting the role of Hindu nationalists during the independence movement. As such, they have focused on the cultural aspects of Indian life, emphasizing religion as a method of identity formation. Materialist histories analyze the Indian Independence struggle within the framework of the long-term economic exploitation of India through imperialism. They have also studied the development of classes (in the Marxist sense) as they arose with imperialism, and the rise of religious sectarianism, (known in India as communalism), from 1757 to 1947. Where materialist history takes on a nationalist stance, is in its analysis of Gandhi's contribution in transforming the national movement into a mass movement.

This history, however, does not account for the reasons why social relations were sustained in specific ways. Class and caste were categories entrenched by colonial rule. While these imposed categories did not adequately represent the reality of Indian life both the British and Indians, nonetheless, used them for diverse political ends. Bipan Chandra's materialist history reveals the changing economic circumstances which altered social relations in India. Yet, his materialist approach does not fully deal with the material dimension, by which I mean the changing mode of production which incorporates an understanding of not only economic, but also social processes, that helped entrench the newly emerging social relations. Also, Chandra's emphasis on Gandhi's contribution in bringing the masses into the nationalist movement leads him to

treat the implicit Hindu factor[4] that guided Gandhi, as unproblematic. Those who do not

significantly problematize this, take for granted that 'Hinduism' exists as a philosophy or

religion and, this results in the emergence of a notion of 'Hindu secularism'.[5]

Hinduism is difficult to define, and, specifically, in terms of its political

deployments, during the colonial period, which led to phenomena such as communalism.

By not problematizing the varied, diverse and syncretic set of ideas captured in this

religion, Chandra ignores the fact that Hinduism was never an 'absolute' and, that despite

its mass appeal, Gandhi's nationalism was a Hindu nationalism that did not speak for, or

represent, the entire nation.

Materialist Nationalist Histories

A Materialist Chronology of Colonial Rule

Chandra explains that colonial rule in India began in the eighteenth century when

the English East India Company (EIC) endeavoured to secure a monopoly in trade with

India and the East, so that it could buy products as cheaply as possible, and sell them with

maximum profit in Britain. The Battle of Plassey, in 1757, marked a significant victory

for the East India Company. Having defeated the Nawab (ruler) of Bengal (in East India)

(Chandra, 1972: 3), the EIC attempted to bring the whole of India under its control. In

order to achieve this mainly mercantilist function, the Company had to keep out other

European competitors who posed a risk to its trade monopoly in Asia. The Company

ensured the elimination of competitors from within Britain, but could not use the British

government to keep out other European companies. Thus, powerful blocs were set up to

maintain trading privileges, and waging battles became part of this procedure. Inevitably,

this involved large amounts of money which neither the EIC nor the British government could provide. Thus in order to maintain its position, the company began levying taxes on rulers in India (Chandra 1972: 4). During this period, few structural changes were made in India. The main aim behind trade monopoly was the efficient collection of revenue (Chandra, 1972: 5).

The second phase of colonial rule in India coincided with the rapid growth of industrial capital in Britain. With the decline of mercantilist trading corporations the EIC represented 'the dying social force'. The EIC's territorial power over India, thus, produced a struggle in Britain. As Chandra notes, "By 1813 [the EIC] was left with a mere shadow of economic and political power in India; the real power was now wielded by the British Government in the interests of the British capitalist class as a whole" (1972: 6).

The British government henceforth represented dominant industrial capitalist interests. The EIC was only a trading corporation, and its monopoly on Indian exports did not have any particular benefit for the British capitalist interest. British industrialists needed a market for their goods, as well as raw materials and cheap labour for the production of these goods. India could provide all these factors necessary for capitalist expansion. However, in return for British 'investment', India had to pay various dividends and fees. For these, she needed to obtain revenue from exporting goods but these goods could not undermine the sale of British products. By then, the cottage and handicraft industries had been all but destroyed by the exploitative policies of the EIC, and India was reduced to exporting certain non-manufactured goods and raw materials (Chandra, 1972: 7-8).

During this second stage of colonial rule, various changes were made which provoked severe consequences for India's infrastructure. Free trade was introduced to benefit British manufactures, and forcibly open India for their expansion. India's legal structure was changed to accommodate the emerging capitalist relations. And, to make India accessible and conducive to British administration, an elaborate system of railways was built, roads improved, and a modern postal system introduced (Chandra, 1972: 9).

The emergence of this new phase did not signify the end of the old forms of exploitation. Colonialism, to flourish, still needed revenue from India to pay English civil servants (Chandra, 1972: 10). Therefore, perpetuating and altering traditional feudal relations to suit their needs, the British extracted exorbitant taxes from peasant cultivators (Chandra, 1972: 17).

The third stage of colonial rule was that of undisguised imperialism. Beginning in the 1860s, other countries in Europe and North America experienced their own industrial revolution, challenging Britain's manufacturing supremacy. Many European powers were looking for markets in Asia, Africa and Latin America and competition for them was increasing. Colonizing countries in all these continents was beneficial for several reasons. First, the vast surpluses that were accumulating could be invested in these countries. Second, as the labour was cheap, profits were high, and there would be a constant supply of raw materials (Chandra, 1972: 12). Further, the rise of democratic ideals - such as liberty and equality - challenged the rights of the upper classes in Europe. Their hegemony was no longer sustainable without accommodating other working groups in society. European powers needed to find other areas where exploitation could be justified. For a time, therefore, this exploitation was legitimized under the banner of

capitalist growth and expansion in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America (Chandra, 1972: 12-13). In India, this third stage was characterized by intensive capital investment necessary for Britain to compete with other industrializing nations in Europe. In Chandra's words, "[t]he Indian army was the chief instrument for the expansion and consolidation of British power in Africa and Asia" (1972: 14).

Rather than becoming an independent industrialized economy, India 'developed' in an uneven way; it became a dependent underdeveloped economy. Even though industrial changes were introduced in India, the benefits of Indian labour were largely siphoned off for the British. In Chandra's words, "...India underwent a commercial transformation and not an industrial revolution" (1972: 23).

While colonial rule is commonly associated with the three different stages of mercantilism, industrial capitalism and imperialism, elements of continuity were present throughout.[6] Even though many changes were taking place, some aspects of Indian society were consolidated, with slight transformations, and deployed for different political purposes by Indians and British alike. One new element was the rise of classes in India. But while classes emerged, they did so by perpetuating the inequalities already present or nascent between groups.

The introduction of British styled education facilitated the coincidence of upper caste with upper class or elite status.[7] The lower castes, who could not access the educational and industrial 'progress' of colonial rule in India, fell into the disadvantage of the lower classes or masses. When the British first established their rule over India, members of the elite nurtured the hope that domination by the British would lead India towards independent industrialization. During the later phases of colonial rule, these

classes and castes became painfully aware of colonial exploitation, and began agitating

against colonial rule. Once the Indian elite realized that the British were in India solely

for their own purposes, and that the British presence was severely damaging to their

society, nationalist sentiments of a more militant variety began to take root (Chandra,

1972: 35-36).

The early freedom fighters, or moderates, as they were known (Chandra, 1972:

69) attempted to work towards self-government with the British Raj. Mainly from the

upper strata of society, they were successful in creating a climate of criticism against

colonial rule, but were unable to bring about any real transfer of power. This 'failure'

helped galvanize a group of more radical leaders known as the extremist nationalists.

The 'extremists' (so labeled for their more militant approaches, Chandra, 1993: 15),

realized that the national movement, if it were to succeed, needed the support of the

masses. Thus efforts were made at mobilizing students, the lower middle classes and

some sections of the peasantry and workers (Chandra, 1972: 80-82).

There is historical evidence in India that lends validity to these materialist

historical claims of the rise of classes. However, it is the interpretation of the

consequences of the rise of these new social relations for different groups that separates

the varied histories. Chandra's materialist nationalist history has not accounted, in a

significant way, for the Indian idioms that accompanied the formation of classes. Indeed,

new classes of workers and the bourgeoisie arose in colonial India, but they emerged with

the baggage of old hierarchies. Classes were not only formed by imperial economic

factors, but also by the Hindu hierarchy of caste. Meanwhile, caste itself underwent

change, as it was juxtaposed with religious identity, namely Hindu and Muslim, to

separate Indians through the British strategy of divide and conquer. This political

division along religious lines has come to be known as communalism. These factors of

religion, caste and class intermingled to form the myriad identities, with which Indians

mobilized themselves, in their attempt to overthrow colonial rule.

Communalism

One of the most potent problems to arise from colonial rule, and one that ushered

in a bloody Independence for India, was that of communalism – India's version of

religious sectarianism. Chandra explains the rise of communalism with reference to

various factors. Communalism, he argues, was the result of the British perpetuation of

differences amongst the Hindu and Muslim communities. It emerged because of the

scarcity of work, which manifested itself more sharply with Muslims than Hindus.[8] This

economic disparity, created largely by the British, led to conflict between Hindus and

Muslims as each blamed the other for problems that ensued from colonialism. Nepotism

became the safety net for both communities, with alliances based on religious and

familial affiliations ensuring a place in the job market. (Chandra, 1984: 34-54).

Chandra explains the difference between Muslim and Hindu groups in the

following way. During the pre-British period, in northern India, a number of upper class

Muslims were feudal landowners, while Hindus occupied lower levels of administration.

Imperial rule, as it became entrenched, excluded Indians from higher government posts,

but allowed them into the lower rungs of civil administration. Lower and middle class

Hindus used their education, acquired under colonial rule, to ensure job protection. The

hold that Hindus had on middle-level jobs expanded with their entry into banking, trade

and money-lending. In contrast, the Muslim intelligentsia was weeded out of the higher

positions of civil administration. As a result of this, and various British policies

disadvantaging the Muslims, divisions along religious lines were perpetuated (Chandra.

1984: 181-182).

For Chandra, communalism was not, as it has been conceptualized in imperial

(colonial) histories, an inherent or inevitable aspect of Indian society, but rather the

culmination of a complex set of forces (1984: vii-viii). Chandra explains that as a result

of the contradiction between imperial and nationalist interests in India, new identities

required formation, so as to resist colonial domination. These new identities evolved in

the context of the communal representation introduced by the British, as religion was

used to perpetuate conflict between groups.

Thus Chandra labels the subsequent communal practices as an instance of "false

consciousness" (1984: 19) because communalists played upon differences between

Muslim and Hindu interests, and not differences between national and imperial interests.

which was the real problem for India. All Indians were exploited at the hands of the

British (Chandra, 1984: 38-39). In Chandra's words:

> Communalism was the false consciousness of the historical process of the
> last 150 years because objectively, no real conflict between the interests of
> the Hindus and Muslims existed. Of course, religion as a social diversity
> or differentiation existed in real life; but making this diversity the basis of
> political organization, mobilization, and action or seeing it as the main
> inner contradiction in social, economic and political life was certainly an
> aspect of false consciousness (1984: 22-23).

While there is justice in this formulation, to the various Indian and British

elements at play, what Chandra does not analyze sufficiently are the different and

complex factors that sustained this 'false consciousness'. Further, even though Chandra

begins to engage in the analysis of nuances of social groups, he does not pay heed to the very constructedness of these groups in the first place. The British idiom of religious separation collaborated with the Indian factor of 'Hinduism' to form identities based upon caste and class. However, Chandra implicitly accepts the 'Hindu factor', terming it a mere 'weakness' in Indian nationalism, rather than a problematic to be analyzed (1993: 32-33). His approach to the use of Hindu symbols - as simply an unfortunate political deployment in the nationalist struggle - allows for a notion of Hindu secularism. But communalism is not simply an instance of false consciousness, as Indians sustained categories created by the British, because of their need to initiate change. Chandra does point out that these categories 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' did not have the same basis in social reality prior to British rule. However, it is the reasons for their continued use that should become the crucial point for analysis, and this Chandra bypasses.

Thus, while Chandra hints at the complexity of groups in colonial India, his analysis is ultimately steeped in notions of a successful and unified nationalism which cannot permit any ideas of divergence or dissent arising from a combination of precolonial and colonial history. The fact that the identity – Hindu – is, itself, a varied and concocted mix of idioms, remains unexamined. Thus, Chandra's approach to the analysis of different groups in the nationalist struggle is biased by his understanding of 'Hindu secularism'.

Whose History, Whose Struggle?

Chandra commends the role of the intelligentsia as having "initiated the national movement, [and] also [having] led it in all its phases till 1947" (1993: 14). His emphasis

on the invaluable role of the intelligentsia within the freedom movement leads him to lament the lack of credit given to the former. His concern is that the role of the intelligentsia is confused in some histories with that of the Indian middle class, which was occupied with its own capitalist interests, and not with the anti-imperialist struggle (1993: 14).

According to Chandra, this Indian bourgeoisie was initially concerned with simply safeguarding its position in the early phases of the freedom movement, but from the early twentieth century, the "capitalist class entered a period of long-term contradiction with colonialism as the colonial structure and economic policies increasingly hampered its growth" (Chandra, 1993: 14). From then the Indian bourgeoisie supported the independence movement, led by the Congress Party.

The Indian National Congress (Congress Party) was faced with the difficult task of accommodating several different groups and their interests. Chandra believes that the Congress met this challenge successfully, and he attributes this to two factors. First, the democratic and dynamic nature of the Congress Party made it flexible enough to allow for dissent. Second, precisely because the Party received its support from the masses, there was a certain cohesion and mutual respect for all (Chandra, 1993: 15). At the turn of the century, the success of the Congress was with the upper castes and classes. However, after the 1920s, under Gandhi's leadership, this changed. Gandhi mobilized the masses in India with his methods of appropriating and combining traditions from all segments of the population. Hindu idioms were employed by Gandhi in such a way that they would appeal to a large number of people — or the 'masses'.

Chandra is aware of the role of these 'masses' or other groups in Indian society, such as the peasantry, tribals, and 'other backward classes' (1972: 28). Indeed, he argues that some of the most powerful critics of imperial rule came from among the 'lower classes'.

> Women and tribal people [...] rose in defence of their rights. In order to mobilize all the people in the struggle against imperialism, the national movement became committed to the goals of abolishing all distinctions and disparities based on caste, sex or religion. Moreover, common participation in demonstrations, public meetings, popular movements, trade unions and *kisan sabhas* [peasant-farmer unions] weakened notions of caste and male superiority (1972: 28).

It has been presumed by Chandra, amongst others that, through Gandhi's leadership, the 'lower' sections of society were fully incorporated into the national movement. While the commitment to equality was certainly part of the nationalist rhetoric, the reality of the situation was never quite so unproblematic nor the movement so unified. In fact, women and the 'lower classes' *did* rise in rebellion, but Chandra does not analyze, in detail, the nuanced messages of their protests. Many tribal and peasant assertions were incorporated into the wider nationalist movement, but their fight against repressive Indian landlords was lost in the bigger picture of colonial exploitation. This incorporation was essentially a hegemonic appropriation made possible within Gandhi's version of 'Hinduism', a version which was expected to be embraced as much by 'other' groups as by the Hindus. However, this hegemonic appropriation was incomplete.

Chandra partially accounts for this when he states that historical records for peasant (and tribal) resistance are difficult to research, as they are listed in official documents as instances of "lawlessness and dacoity" (1972: 47). At one point, he even acknowledges that, "[i]n practice the ignorant and illiterate masses of India showed a

better appreciation of the menace of colonialism than the newly educated or upper-class Indians" (1972: 50-51). But Chandra does not analyze subaltern resistance in its context of a protest against Hindu practices, that is, *brahmanic* dominance, because, for him, the 'real' protest is that which was anti-imperial. "At the same time," he argues, "their [subaltern] struggles were foredoomed to failure...[t]hey did not possess a new ideology, or a new social, economic, and political programme based on an analysis of the new social forces generated by colonialism" (1972: 50-51).

Also, as Chandra is mainly concerned with the more 'organized' resistance of the nationalist elite, he understands subaltern resistance only as "[s]cattered [,] sporadic and disunited uprisings [which], however numerous, could not defeat modern imperialism" (1972: 50-51). As he sees it, initially, the peasantry was given to more spontaneous and disorganized rebellion, but with the emergence of *kisan sabhas* or peasant-farmer unions, these revolts were subsumed within the nationalist struggle, and given a more potent edge (1972: 51). But, one could argue, that it was precisely this hegemonic incorporation into the wider nationalist movement which 'softened' the anti-Hindu (anti-*brahmanic*) protest that emanated from peasant (and other lower caste and class) movements.

Sociologist AR Desai provides an even bleaker version of the role of the peasantry. According to him, as the peasant owned land, 'he' was given to conservatism. "Isolated from town culture and dynamic processes of modern life, the kisan, mentally natured [sic] in the culturally poor countryside, is relatively inert, mentally dull and ignorant" (Desai, 1984: 195). The peasants' work leaves him dependent upon the forces of nature and, therefore, results in the peasant's extreme superstition. The peasant most often accepts his fate, rather than rise in revolt against injustice. "Due to these organic

weaknesses, economic, social and psychological, such as dispersion on a vast area, heterogeneous social composition, conservatism and others, the peasantry does not play an independent political role in the history of social struggles" (1984: 195). Further, the peasant (*kisan*) was more individualistic in 'his' work, than was the factory worker. As a result, group-based peasant politics emerged much later than the trade unions of factory workers (1984: 194-195).

While Chandra accounts for the role of the peasantry in the nationalist movement, if only in terms of the latter's entry into mainstream Congress nationalism, Desai provides little space for the peasant presence within the nationalist struggle. His approach is based on the idea that the peasantry should be viewed as a heterogeneous mass needing the guidance of political leadership in nurturing the development of a revolutionary potential.[9]

Even though Chandra provides a more inclusive approach to the role of the peasantry, his interpretations are still mired in notions of a unified nationalism. That the resistance of the peasantry and other groups, which did not participate in the bourgeois-led nationalism, could have possibly entailed a critique against imperialism, or even internal Hindu 'culture', is not entertained.

While many social movements are led by elite groups, to be successful, the alliances they seek to create must be representative of a diverse set of interests. However, the attempted Congress hegemony only incorporated the 'creamy layer' of lower classes and castes, and did not significantly change the material inequality of these groups.

Chandra explains that the development of a strong socialist or Marxist wave within the national movement did not take place because the national movement was dominated by bourgeois interests.

> While the independent character of the Indian capitalist class strengthened the commitment of the national movement to the goal of political independence, it made the task of weakening or overthrowing the bourgeois ideological hegemony over the movement more complex and therefore difficult (1993: 40).

This is an important insight in Chandra's work. The hegemony that a bourgeois group exercises is supported by its control over the processes of production. However, the idea of a unified struggle is so central to Chandra's argument that he does not problematize the material control that the bourgeoisie maintained. Other scholars, as we see in the next chapter, have challenged the very notion of an ideological hegemony.

Chandra's nationalist bias becomes more evident when examining the parallels between his work and the work of nationalist historians Bhagwan Josh and Shashi Joshi. In a three-volume study, they use the communist or left of centre groups as their point of departure, and demonstrate the lack of success that they had in mobilizing Indians against imperialism. They argue that the communist groups did not understand that the struggle against imperialism had to be fought within the domain of nationalism, and not on the basis of class interests. They see Gandhi's role in bringing the masses within the fold of nationalism, through his class compromise approach, a successful venture (Josh & Joshi, 1992, 1994). Their nationalist historiography demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the importance of studying histories from 'above' and 'below', but like Chandra, they do not consider Gandhi's Hindu basis of nationalism problematic.

Gandhi and Secular Hinduism

Gandhi has been acknowledged in many histories as primarily responsible for bringing the 'masses' of India into the mainstream of nationalism. For Chandra, Gandhi was successful, as he was able to gauge the 'people's mood' (1993: 82). Gandhi saw the need to encourage the masses to fight for freedom, and understood his position as that of mediator. In Chandra's words, "Gandhiji realized that a mass movement had to be based on the active participation of the people—it could not be sustained only by the highly motivated cadre of the movement. It was only with 'the might of the dumb millions' that the British rulers could be challenged" (1993: 82).

Chandra contends that much of Gandhi's thought and ideology has been unfairly critiqued (1993: 76), and seeks to resolve some of the apparent contradictions in Gandhian thought. Further, he argues that Gandhi was an ever-evolving individual, whose views constantly changed and grew and he provides some examples. One contentious debate that emerged during the nationalist struggle was the idea of development along modern industrial lines. Gandhi opposed the use of machinery, as he believed it would replace human labour (Gandhi, 1922: 86-89). For Gandhi, large-scale industry was unnecessary in villages where essentials could be 'produced without difficulty' (Chandra, 1993: 78). However, Gandhi was not opposed to large-scale industry in general. This was far-sighted in many ways, as the emphasis on technological advancement was ruining indigenous and cottage industries, and displacing the balance between agriculture and industry. Artisans were pushed onto the land and this placed an unnecessary burden on agriculture. It was in light of these changes that Gandhi proposed his ideas of state ownership (Chandra, 1993: 73-85).

Another example is provided in Gandhi's mixing of religion and politics. Initially, Gandhi believed in the use of religion in politics, as a form of morality. However, when he realized that religion was being used instrumentally to perpetuate communal (sectarian) sentiments, he propounded his idea of the separation of religion from politics (Chandra, 1993: 77). To elaborate, Chandra states that Gandhi's original attempts to mix religion and politics were based on an effort to bring morality (*dharma*) into politics. However, when Gandhi realized the destructive effect of this mixture, in terms of emerging communalism he soon renounced this position (1993: 18).

Also, with the communal appropriation of religion, Chandra claims that Gandhi came, in later years, to believe in the complete overthrow of the caste system (1993: 18). While "he refused to condemn the *varna* system, [in the early 1920s] opposing primarily untouchability and caste oppression." by the 1940s, Chandra argues, he was "for the total abolition of the caste system..." (1993: 18).

It is not easy to trace the validity of Chandra's claim for he provides no references. More importantly, as discussed earlier, Hinduism is, in many ways, a justification of the ideology of the caste system. To renounce caste would also imply abandonment of Hinduism. Thus the logical extension of this argument would mean that Gandhi came to eschew Hinduism altogether. There seem to be no indications of such an absolute 'renunciation' of religion by Gandhi anywhere! Chandra's implicit argument that Gandhi came to espouse a 'secular Hinduism' is captured well in the following passage:

> Gandhi's use of religious terms and symbols made its own contribution [in this respect]. Gandhi's politics were of course fully secular and his basic appeal to the people was made on economic, political and moral grounds, *and never on religious grounds*. He really catered to the new secular

national consciousness. Still, his political thought was couched in the language of religiosity. He often employed Hindu terms and symbols, even though their use by him was seldom offensive to the followers of other religions. The best example of his use of a religious symbol was his interpretation of independence as *Ram Rajya*. He also used cow protection and many other Hindu religious ideas, though, once again, his ideas on cow protection were very different from other contemporary aggressive, communal versions. So too his definitions of non-violence and truth were steeped in Hindu religious traditions. His notions of 'spiritualizing politics' and 'inner voice' also tended to create a religious aura around politics (1984: 146).

It is this notion of secularism, despite the use of Hindu symbols, that permits Chadra's implicit claim for a Hindu secularism which was incorporated into the Congress Party's ideology. Chandra does not see this as problematic, nor does he discuss Gandhi's notion of *ram rajya* as a patriarchal community which was to be governed by an idealized *varna* system.

While the argument is riddled with contradictions, the notion of a Hindu secularism was not only privileged during colonial times but continues to be asserted today by proponents of *hindutva*. Hinduism has been, in its history, a practice of politically subsuming all diverse elements within its fold. The fact that Hindu symbols have been used instrumentally, can lead to an understanding of Hinduism as an amalgam of varied elements. But this lack of homogeneity provides potential to understand the artificially constructed homogeneity by elite groups through the Congress Party. These groups appropriated varied traditions into a seemingly homogenous fold to create an aura of hegemony.[10]

Chandra hints at the lack of hegemony, as well as the diversity of social groups such as the various castes, classes and religions. However, instead of analyzing the nature of these classes as they developed, or the contradictions between traditional

hierarchies of caste and newly imposed hierarchies of class, he resorts to the term 'masses' without explaining who constituted these masses, or their internal differences. This task is accomplished within the context of an understanding of Gandhi's contribution to broadening the base of nationalism. Here there is little critique of Gandhi's class compromise approach or philosophical Hindu underpinnings. Gandhi's ability to bring together people from different groups, within a system of *varna* (underlying his notion of community) is subsumed, in Chandra's account of the development of a successful nationalism.

At the same time, Chandra accounts for what he labels the 'Hindu tinge' in the nationalist movement (1984:141). This acknowledgement is important, because it could open a site for examining alternative histories. However, Chandra ultimately claims that, "with all its weaknesses Congress secularism was genuine and not Hindu communalism or Hindu 'nationalism' in disguise" (1984: 157). Further, he argues that this 'genuine secularism' "was amply proved later when, after 1947, under Congress leadership, India adopted a fully secular Constitution and set out to build a society and polity which was on the whole secular, despite serious shortcomings" (1984: 157).

To recapitulate, Chandra grounds his analysis of colonialism in a materialist understanding, praising the work of Gandhi for bringing most of India into the nationalist fold. What Chandra leaves aside – albeit in a new fashion – is the debate around Hinduism, what it implies, and its problematic usage in politics by Gandhi.

Nationalist Historians and Hindu Identity

The ways in which history is interpreted are crucially interconnected to the ways in which the political construction of identities is enabled. The history of the national period in India is important for its attempt to create a Hindu identity. While secularism and democracy were the stated ideals for Independent India (through the efforts of the Congress Party), they were, nevertheless, implemented with an implicit acceptance of the Hindu factor, thus, a secular Hinduism. Chandra's treatment of the emergence of classes, the growth of communalism, and the participation of the 'masses', all point towards his general sympathy for the Gandhian project of a Hindu identity.

His materialist-nationalist history lies close to the work of nationalist historians. Nationalist historians, however, largely ignore the material dimensions of inequality present in the idea of a 'Hindu secularism'. It is important, therefore, to provide a brief account of the nationalist histories from which Chandra departs but to which, in crucial ways, he is also indebted.

Nationalist histories have been incorporated – in however distorted a fashion – into the *hindutva* political ideology. For the *hindutva* of post-colonial India, modernity is to be attacked, because it preaches the separation of religion from state. At the same time, *hindutva* politics uses the notion of secularism, as an aspect of modernity, to legitimize its position. The emphasis, then, is not so much on the actual religion (Hinduism) but on the political message of aggressive nationalism, through the use of Hindu symbols. Tradition and the past are separated from modernity and, therefore, *Hindutva* proponents look to the past as something untouched by modernity.

While Chandra 's materialist nationalist history does not emphasize the ideological continuities of Hindu hierarchy, nationalist histories do precisely this, but with the aim of justifying continuing oppressions. These interpretations of history have also enabled much of the present *Hindutva* strand of politics to go largely unquestioned. Nationalist histories trace continuity from precolonial to colonial to postcolonial times, imposing present ideological assumptions upon the past in order to serve sectarian interests. In this process, they privilege the role of Hindu nationalists during the colonial period.

The early nationalists tended to be 'moderate' in their methods of reform, seeing the colonial presence as potentially beneficial for India. However, as colonial rule continued, with its economic exploitation, some groups of nationalists became more 'militant'. These nationalists, known as 'extremists', were concerned with ensuring the autonomy of the Indian private domain. As the political sphere had already been created by the colonial regime, the extremists played up differences, between the British and Indians within the 'civil sphere': this took place within a religious framework. Thus, in many ways, for the extremists, religion became synonymous with the creation of nationalistic sentiments. This involved the manipulation of various pieces of historical evidence to legitimate the core place of religion in Indian life.

Nationalist histories have been concerned with highlighting the role of these so-called extremists during the colonial period. Using the example of Bankimchandra, commonly placed in the camp of radical and extreme nationalists, the nationalist historian, Amales Tripathi, claims he debunked ideas of universality and emphasized the unique character of each historical period (1967: 2). Also, Bankimchandra was able to

understand the importance of the relation between the spiritual and the material, and the need to study communities rather than (primarily) the exploits of individuals. While Bankimchandra did not glorify the Hindu past, according to Tripathi, he still gave religion and god a core place in his philosophy. Religion was for him, the ultimate mover and mediator of mankind; it was what made humanity possible. Bankimchandra was also, above all, a linguistic patriot, assigning great importance to the Bengali language and community (Tripathi, 1967: 3-4).

Tripathi recognizes the effects of historical interpretations of leaders such as Bankimchandra, yet he does not link the work of the 'extremists' to the politics of subsequent times.

> Extremism was indebted to Bankimchandra, Vivekananda and Dyananda for its ideology in a qualified way but not for its political heredity. It was primarily a protest against the moderate politics of the day which had accepted the British mission in India at face value and hoped to get the best out of it through petition and agitation (1967: 46).

Tripathi separates ideology from 'political heredity' and, so, does not find problematic the implications of a constructed 'Hindu' factor. The political manipulations that have been termed 'Hindu' do not appear Tripathi's analysis.

The nationalist Hindu idea was that colonial exploitation was simply a process in a constant stream of unfolding. In other words, certain extremist nationalists propounded the idea that there was a "perennial fountain" in Hinduism. This 'fountain' would necessarily go through its periods of ebbs and flows, challenged by other philosophies, which would only serve to make Hindu philosophy stronger (Schwarz, 1997: 65-66). This idea is based on the work of the Indian nationalist and intellectual Aurobindo, and reveals his belief that Sanskritic sources, if unlocked, would reveal the great Indian

truths. Thus, for these nationalists, the untouched Indian past contained the potential of real truth. Looking to ancient Indian traditions was perpetuated by the work of Orientalist, European scholarship (Schwarz, 1997: 71).

In his nationalist history, Tripathi does not problematize the existence of the Hindu factor that implicitly informed nationalist work and writing. By separating politics and ideology, he misses the potential effects of these ideologically informed histories on politics. Traces of this approach – though less obviously – can be seen in Chandra's work. Chandra achieves this separation by dismissing religious complexities as elements of a 'false consciousness', without examining their continued political deployment. Thus Chandra's implicit acceptance of a 'Hindu factor' in Indian history does not allow him to deal thoroughly with the complexity of social relations. He sees the development of classes as a form of social differentiation, but fails to see their juxtaposition with caste.

Further, Chandra's history, is bent in favour of the Indian National Congress – the Party associated with India's independence and steered by an indigenous elite. Within this history there is a tendency to justify and, at times, even valorize the work of the elite in bringing India to independence. Implicit in this is a lack of analysis around the contribution of subaltern members of the population whose struggles are incorporated, under Gandhi's leadership, into the wider nationalist movement.

In the next chapter, the work of some representatives of the Subaltern Studies Collective will be analyzed. The Subaltern Group, as a whole, has accounted for many of the lacunae of materialist nationalist and nationalist histories. In contrast to the materialist histories, Subaltern histories tend to place more emphasis on the cultural aspects of the colonial period. For this reason, some of these histories show a striking

resemblance to the work of constructing cultural (read Hindu) identities, that occupies

nationalist historians and *hindutva* proponents.

CHAPTER 3 – SUBALTERN HISTORIES

This chapter will examine contributions, by the group of theorists known as the Subaltern Studies Collective, to Indian colonial history. Their aim has been to challenge the dominant approaches which treated the nationalist struggle as a unified movement. The Collective seeks to demonstrate that the diversity of groups in Indian society did not allow for the formation of a nationalist hegemony.

The accounts of the colonial period by members of the Collective, specifically Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha, whose works I will discuss here, have provided an alternative conception of Indian history which facilitates the analysis of a more complete picture. Chatterjee has shown that Indian nationalism emerged within the cultural domain of the community, and that this cannot be collapsed within the European notion of civil society. Guha has demonstrated that various idioms combined to form different political domains during Indian nationalism. In their work, both Chatterjee and Guha, invoking the thought of Antonio Gramsci, conclude that Gandhi's contribution to the nationalist struggle in India was largely successful. In their opinion, Gandhi created alliances which allowed many people to mobilize in the fight for independence. This brings their work close to the histories examined in the last chapter. Gandhi's class compromise is not considered problematic, as class is not the basis of their analysis.

The project has also entailed a reconceptualization of Indian historiography to provide a more layered analysis of the role of the subaltern. The term 'subaltern' is deployed as an epistemological and contextual category, where subalternity is a condition which both peasants and the elite alternatively share. Thus the peasantry as a mass is

subaltern to the elite of Indian society, but the indigenous elite was positioned, during

colonialism, as subaltern to the imperialists. It is useful first to see how the Subalternists

have adapted Gramsci's work to the Indian situation.

Gramsci and The Subalternists in India

As we saw in the last chapter, Chandra and Desai view the peasantry as entirely

dependent upon the guidance of the elite for creating revolutionary consciousness. The

Collective draws upon Gramsci's work and specifically his concept of subaltern to

provide an alternate conception of the peasantry.

Gramsci counted the peasantry as one group comprising the subaltern elements of

a population. This did not mean, however, that the peasant world could be

conceptualized as the 'idiocy of rural life' as in some Marxist accounts (Arnold, 1984:

155), including those of Chandra's and Desai's. Going beyond economically

deterministic accounts and laying emphasis on ideology and the 'philosophy of praxis',

Gramsci argued that the peasantry embodied more consciousness than Marx had posited.

As David Arnold states, "Gramsci offer[ed] us ...not ... a stark dichotomy between

proletariat and peasant, between revolutionary and reactionary... but differences of

degrees of consciousness and solidarity between the two, with the ability of both to

become revolutionary classes" (1984: 163).

Gramsci opposed the idea that movements were worthy of study only if they were

planned and entirely conscious. Peasant religion (and ideology) was not a 'false

consciousness', but rather a materially grounded way of explaining their social reality.

At the same time, Gramsci realized that, "[d]isunity and absence of collective

consciousness are also the hallmarks of subaltern ideology" (Arnold, 1984: 159). This is where Gramsci emphasized that intellectuals, should attend to the moments of resistance in peasant life, as well as lead the peasantry to revolutionary consciousness. Arnold argues that ultimately, however, Gramsci resorted to an economic determinism, in locating consciousness in material conditions (1984: 162). Historical accounts by the Subaltern Studies Collective, "have tended to go beyond Gramsci", according to Arnold, "in identifying a greater degree of autonomy and internal cohesion in the peasant politics of modern India than he saw in his native Italy" (1984: 175).

The Subalternists endeavour to show how the peasantry was never fully assimilated into the hegemony of the elite nationalists (Arnold, 1984: 169). Critiquing nationalist histories for their lack of attention to this, the aim of the Subaltern project is to analyze the, 'politics of the people', that is, "the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country" (Guha, 1982: 4). The peasantry provides, for the Collective, an example of subalternity.

This group of people, who were not part of the elite, also contributed to the freedom struggle.[11] Exercising their own methods, the subaltern resisted the hegemonic claims of the indigenous bourgeoisie as well as the colonialists. Guha's aim is to conceptualize an Indian historiography, of India, which captures the history of these subaltern groups.

As the Subalternists point out, the project of writing an Indian history must deal with the legacy of colonial historiography – the privileging of the nation-state and the related influence of European modes of historiography. Thus, Europe forms the 'silent referent' (Chakrabarty, in Guha ed, 1997: 264) in Indian historiography, as it is the birth

place of the modern state. Colonial constructions of Indian history created a meta-narrative of the Indian past, that, according to Ranajit Guha, is inextricably tied to the ideology of the state which, in India, as defined by post-Enlightenment thought, emerged only during colonial occupation. Thus, the project of writing history in India was dominated by the imperial interests of 'statism' which "authorizes the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic" (Guha, in ed Amin & Chakrabarty, 1996: 1).

According to Guha, in Europe, this statism *could* [12] speak for entire nations, whereas in India this was not possible. Indian history predated colonial rule and, unlike its European counterparts, could not be subsumed under one generic civil society, especially when occupied by an alien power. Guha, therefore, emphasizes the need to separate state from civil society in the Indian colonial context (1996: 3). This implies that an analysis of civil society can lead to a fuller account of Indian history, as statism can only reveal a 'foreign' picture. By focusing upon civil society, divergences between the elites and subalterns can be studied.

But the history of subaltern groups is associated with chaotic and spontaneous eruptions of violence, and is thus invisible to those looking for more systematic forms of resistance. In the European historiography of Europe and India, the history of the state marked the transformation to a more ordered way of life. As Gyan Pandey puts it, "[i]n colonialist writings, a distinction was first made between the history of local society — wild, chaotic, liable to unexpected explosions — and the history of the state" (in Das ed, 1990: 115). This privileging of the state influenced subsequent accounts of Indian history (in Das ed, 1990: 115).

Through the example of the Banaras riots of 1809, Pandey demonstrates the method by which particular instances of revolt served, in British accounts, to stand as representative of the Indian past (in Das ed, 1990: 97). The discourse of the colonial state justified its 'contained' and 'legitimate' violence, by characterizing the communal violence between Hindus and Muslims as 'chaotic' and 'uncontrolled'. Colonial writings seek to, "promote a picture of the colonial state as a wise and neutral power, ruling almost without a physical presence, by sheer force of its moral authority" (in Das ed, 1990: 119). The state was the mark of order, whilst religious sectarianism was an indication of the inherently violent and disordered nature of 'locals' in pre-state society.

Indians have incorporated these colonial narratives on Indian society into their nationalist and elitist historiography. While Subalternists critique statist accounts, and orientalist tropes on Indian colonial society, they partially continue to work within this framework, using such concepts as state and civil society, in an attempt to show its limitations for the Indian context. Chatterjee's work provides an example of historiography that moves beyond the European models of nationalism and statism.

Chatterjee: The Nation's Fragments

Chatterjee's work on nationalism explores the connections between colonialism, capitalism and the modern western state. The modern state is connected to capitalist growth, and thus cannot be understood separately from its colonial career. What is key here, for Chatterjee, is that capitalist growth is in contradiction with notions of community. Indeed, this is the fundamental contradiction of the modern western state: the "narrative of capital seeks to suppress [the] narrative of community and produce in

the course of its journey both the normalized individual and the modern regime of disciplinary power" (1993: 234). The indigenous notion of community – that Chatterjee implicitly offers as an alternative to that found in the modern western state – is Gandhi's idealized *varna* community (1993: 237-238). This indigenous community is a peasant community, which Gandhi was successfully able to appropriate and mobilize for the wider nationalist movement. While Chatterjee is aware of Gandhi's political appropriation of peasant community and politics, he does not problematize the underlying *brahmanic* ideology. In other words, Gandhi's appropriation created the aura of success, as it perpetuated alliances with rich sections of the peasantry, which were coincident with certain upper and dominant castes. Chatterjee believes that this conceptualization of the community can provide a critique of the capitalist-driven modern western state.

The Domains of Nationalism

Unlike European statist discourse, Subalternists argue that, in India, nationalist resistance emerged within 'civil society'[13]. In "The Nation and its Fragments" Chatterjee is concerned with developing a description of Indian nationalism which analyzes Indians as subjects, rather than as objects, of their own history. Chatterjee argues that the nationalist struggle was not merely a reactive political strategy to gain independence for India but emerged through indigenous notions of community (1993: 3-5).

Benedict Anderson has argued that nationalism was not the sociologically inevitable phenomenon of conditions of shared language, race or religion, but something that was imagined into existence, and Chatterjee finds his concept of nationalism as a 'sense of imagined community' useful. But Chatterjee objects to the implication of

Anderson's argument that countries in Africa and Asia were left to choose from modes of

nationalism already available in the west:

> History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall
> only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the
> only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the
> script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our
> anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations
> must remain forever colonized (1993: 5).

Chatterjee, argues instead, that nationalisms in Asia and Africa were marked by

the separation of two distinct spheres – the inner or spiritual and the outer or material

(1993: 6). In this account, the inner domain in India emerged first and consisted of the

nation's sovereign cultural identity. The material domain, on the other hand, was

associated with modern political institutions of statecraft, and constituted by fields of

science and technology (1993: 9-10). The cultural facets of the inner domain that gave

rise to nationalism were aided by the institution of print-capitalism, in Europe, as per

Anderson's argument (Chatterjee, 1993: 7-8). Using the example of Bengal[14], in Eastern

India, Chatterjee demonstrates how Bengali novels were printed, and drama and art

schools begun, as indications of the activity of the inner domain. This inner domain was

sacred to the extent that whilst social reform could be affected here, it could only be done

so by Indians themselves. That is, while reform was along modern lines, it was

indigenized to coincide with Indian traditions, and most importantly, remained

inaccessible to British intervention (Chatterjee, 1993: 8-9).

This inner domain was not, however, 'untouched' by British involvement. The

Bengali Hindu middle class, according to Chatterjee, was a theoretical subaltern which

struggled with the tension between Indian tradition and western modernity within the

inner domain. In its attempts at social reform, this 'subaltern elite' had to grapple with the contradictions imposed by adopting western principles of liberty and freedom, while, at the same time, paying heed to Indian tradition. As Indian tradition was itself made up of variegated elements, some consensus had to be reached about what constituted this tradition. This tension, according to Chatterjee, was played out in the fields of literature and drama (1993: 72-3). Further, the popular - or what may be called the folk - was appropriated into a largely Hindu idiom by the Bengali middle class. It "becomes the repository of natural truth, naturally self-sustaining and...timeless" (Chatterjee, 1993: 73) and, is also sanitized such that any indication of sectarianism is removed from it. This is because the 'popular', as understood in this context, is 'Hindu'. "The very timelessness of its "structure" opens itself to normalization" (Chatterjee, 1993: 73). Chatterjee demonstrates here the method by which elite sections of caste and class appropriated folk or subaltern traditions, in order to create a 'normalized', legitimized cultural 'Hindu' identity.

A classicization of tradition was also necessary for the project of this normalization of the national community. If the English could claim certain roots to ancient Greece, then the Bengalis felt they could trace their ancestry to the Vedic Age (Chatterjee, 1993: 73). Various anti-brahmanical movements such as Buddhism and Jainism were now incorporated into the broader fold of Hinduism. The only factor that proved problematic to the project of classicization was the inclusion of Islam.

> The middle-class culture [...] was, and still is, in its overwhelming
> cultural context, "Hindu." Its ability and willingness to extend its
> hegemonic boundaries to include what was distinctly Islamic became a
> matter of much contention in nineteenth-and twentieth-century Bengal,
> giving rise to alternative hegemonic efforts at both the classicization of the

Islamic tradition and the appropriation of a sanitized popular Islam
(Chatterjee, 1993: 74).

Chatterjee points to the fact that this term 'Hindu' was one given by "others" to describe a group of people who did not fit into other religious categories (1993: 74). This 'Hindu' identity which was constructed as unified, essentially privileging the elite positions of upper castes and classes, formed the indigenous notion of community. And Chatterjee implicitly approves of this Hindu construction of community.

Chatterjee goes on to make the point, that, despite efforts made towards normalizing a national community, internal differences were emerging in the literature and accounts written by Indians themselves, which revealed the geographical particularities of the regions. This undermines the idea of a core Indian history, and opens up the possibility of writing alternative histories. Yet, Chatterjee believes that we do not yet have the ability to fashion these alternative narratives, as we are still steeped in the idea of a linear historiography. "Until such time that we accept that it is the very singularity of the idea of a national history of India which divides Indians from one another, we will not create the conditions for writing these alternative histories" (1993: 115). Chatterjee privileges the writing of history as a method of resistance, much as nationalist historians do.

Further, he uses the term 'alternative', and not dialectical. The dialectical relationship, through which hegemony is constantly negotiated, is an aspect of Gramscian thought to which the Subalternists, such as Chatterjee, pay little attention. Chatterjee's 'alternative' implies an 'other' which is not western. This is opposed to dialectical, which would allow for internal contradictions within the indigenous community to

emerge as points for analysis. As Chatterjee's ultimate critique is against colonialism, the contradictions of the 'inner' community are not pursued in his work, as this would undermine the very notion of the inner community. Consequently, distinctions between inner and outer, indigenous and foreign also allow material and ideological elements to be separated.

Writing history as a method of indigenous resistance, from Chatterjee's reading, emerged within the inner domain. And even though much of this resistance was within a 'Hindu' framework, he does not seem to problematize the methods to any great extent. Instead, he concentrates on the contradictions which developed within the outer domain, which was associated with the modern liberal form of the state. In order to justify their imperial mission, the British emphasized the notions of difference between Indians and themselves. For Indians to assert claims to independence, they had to fight these very notions of difference and, in so doing, had to work within the given discursive field of modern liberalism, including such distinctions as private and public. This distinction implied that there had to be consensus within the public sphere, formed through law and by the state bureaucracy but, within the private sphere, on the other hand, individual 'liberties' and 'freedoms' could exist. The separation between private and public, however, did not coincide with the domains of inner and outer nationalism. In Chatterjee's words, "[t]hat contested field over which nationalism had proclaimed its sovereignty and where it had imagined its true community was neither coextensive with nor coincidental to the field constituted by the public/private distinction" (1993: 10). For the inner domain of cultural nationalism to thrive, it needed to achieve some sort of consensus and unanimity. As such, the notion of individual liberties could not be

permitted in the inner domain of the national community (Chatterjee, 1993: 26). Thus

the notion of community that became dominant was that of 'Hindu'. Chatterjee

implicitly validates this notion of community as a method of nationalist resistance,

without examining the way in which this community identity was developed.

Gandhi, the National Community and a Critique of the Modern Western State

This leads Chatterjee to his argument about the tension between the modern state

and community. Chatterjee argues that, in the discursive field of European nationalism,

the concepts of community and state must co-exist – the nation is one big community.

During colonialism in India, however, the community was separate from the state and, in

order to assert itself, had to appropriate, in a sense, the foreign notion of state and

indigenize it. This process of indigenization or 'normalization' had to be conducted from

a position of subordination (Chatterjee, 1993: 11). In European countries the state was

representative of civil society, whereas this was not possible with a colonial state. "If the

nation is an imagined community and if nations must also take the form of states, then

our theoretical language must allow us to talk about community and state at the same

time" (Chatterjee, 1993: 11). Chatterjee believes that 'our present theoretical language'

does not facilitate this coincidence of community and state. The inner domain of

nationalism was a cultural community, according to Chatterjee, which was not

represented by the colonial state. Thus, the idea of the inner or cultural domain, is not

simply another case of 'oriental exceptionalism' but helps mobilize a critique of the

character of the modern western state tied, as it is, to the interests of global capital and

capital accumulation, and existing, in contradiction with the concept of community (Chatterjee, 1993: 13).

The rhetoric of the community in this inner domain, of which "Gandhi is a particularly good example, is of love, kinship, austerity, sacrifice", notes Chatterjee, and it is also "antimodernist, antiindividualist, even anticapitalist" (1993: 237). While Gandhi's version of Hinduism is the subject of scholarly debate, his notion of the idealized *varna* (caste) framework, as the basis of his notion of community, has been reiterated by many scholars. This *varna* framework, based on principles of patriarchal *brahmanism*, is essentially the same as Hinduism. Chatterjee does not problematize the assumed 'Hindu factor' in the Gandhian idealized community.

Chatterjee accepts Gandhi's ideas of western modernity and its inimical effects on India. For Gandhi, the 'benefits' of western civilization far from bringing a better quality of life, were actually the harbingers of a servitude of man to his own senses and self-indulgences (1986: 86). In Chatterjee's words, "Gandhi [had] no doubt at all that the source of modern imperialism [lay] specifically in the system of social production which the countries of the western world [had] adopted", a system that encouraged greed, competitiveness and the conquering of countries for economic purposes (1986: 87).

According to Chatterjee, Gandhi was against large-scale industrialization, and capitalism in general. Gandhi's alternative vision, that of *ramrajya*, was "a patriarchy in which the ruler, by his moral quality and habitual adherence to the truth, always expresses the collective will" (1986: 92). Chatterjee goes on to describe this Gandhian notion of *ramrajya*:

> It is also a utopia in which the economic organization of production,
> arranged according to a perfect four-fold *varna* scheme of specialization

and a perfect system of reciprocity in the exchange of commodities and services, always ensures that there is no spirit of competition and no differences in status between different kinds of labour. The ideal conception of *Ramrajya*, in fact, encapsulates the critique of all that is morally reprehensible in the economic and political organization of civil society (1986: 92).

Chatterjee fails to acknowledge, however, that the idealized *varna* scheme that

Gandhi has in mind, as a viable option for Indian society, as opposed to modern liberal

democracy, is synonymous with Hinduism. Indeed, he explicitly states that Gandhi's

critique is not, "an attempt to establish the superior claims of Hindu religion," (1986:

93), but rather a concern with the universality, and not the specific historical adaptations

of the Gita. Nor did Gandhi believe "that the mere existence of scriptural texts was proof

that they must be a constituent or consistent part of true religion" (1986: 95).

On the extant caste system, Gandhi was only concerned, in Chatterjee's argument,

with its 'harmful nature to spiritual and national growth'. While Gandhi was aware of the

historical existence of partisan religious politics, he believed that these historical

particularities could not 'be taken to represent a corpus of truths' (1986: 96). This is

what is problematic about Gandhi's thought, especially as it relates to caste, and its

position within Hinduism. The fact that the caste system had been deployed for political

purposes, perpetuating inequalities, was presumably too minor a point in the bigger

scheme of truth which was moral. Chatterjee does not explicitly critique Gandhian

thought here. The fact that caste and *brahmanism* were byproducts of a much earlier

precolonial triumph of *brahmanism*, within the *varna* framework, was missed by Gandhi,

partly due to his lack of attention to the evolution of social institutions.

Chatterjee notes that Gandhi's position might lend itself to romanticism. But, Gandhi's critique of civil society and the concept of the idealized Indian society "could not have been a romantic longing for the lost harmony of the archaic world, because unlike romanticism, Gandhi's problem [was] not conceived within the thematic bounds of post-Enlightenment thought" (1986: 99). Gandhian ideology was not simply the reflections of a 'peasant intellectual' (1986: 100), but the compromise between peasant and elite nationalism (1986: 100). Thus Chatterjee implicitly approves of Gandhi's role in opening up a possibility for subaltern appropriation "into the evolving political structures of the Indian state" (1986: 100). Despite the fact that Chatterjee locates Gandhian thought outside of post-Enlightenment thought, he does not reveal how the 'utopia' of Gandhian *ramrajya* might work in a country whose material encounter with industrialization, through colonialism, changed it forever.

Gandhi's influence on Chatterjee is also evident in the latter's critique of the notion of 'universality' in western modernity. Chatterjee argues that universality, as the term implies, must be applicable to all societies. However, as colonialism was often justified on the grounds that it was for the improvement of the colonized, this necessarily entailed a notion of difference and inequality. Thus it was suggested that 'universal' principles of modernity were not quite applicable to societies outside the west (Chatterjee, 1993: 18). When faced with this contradiction, proponents of universal modernity provided an amendment, namely that, as a result of the cultural and historical particularities of the east, there were initial impediments to the realization of modern universal principles, but that they would ultimately be implemented. And thus the universality of modernity was restored (Chatterjee, 1993: 18).

In this way, Chatterjee critiques the interconnectedness of colonialism and forms

of the modern state. For the universality of modernity to assert itself, the whole world

had to come under its influence and, in the east, colonialism was the messenger of

modernity. Precisely because the resistance to colonialism, in the outer domain of

nationalism, had to be fought within the framework of modern discursive forms, the

danger of that resistance being subsumed in the larger project of modernity, existed.

Therefore, Chatterjee contends that, even though the project of colonialism is inextricably

tied to the principles of modernity, specific forms of the colonial state have to be studied,

in order to analyze the emergence of forms of indigenous nationalism (Chatterjee, 1993:

19-20).

The postcolonial nationalism that emerges, within this former colonial state, then,

is a site of struggle between western modernity and indigenous nationhood. Moreover,

the sphere of indigenous nationhood is itself identified by internal differentiation. This is

the separation between the domains of elite and subaltern politics. Chatterjee emphasizes

the nuances within each of these domains as well, showing that they are dynamic,

constituted by the specific context.

Chatterjee's analysis of subaltern groups provides potential for an alternative

history. One group or fragment - as the title of his book indicates - is that of the

peasantry in India. While Chatterjee accounts for the fact that the peasantry is internally

diverse, he analytically studies the peasantry as a largely homogenous group.

The peasantry, according to Chatterjee, was approached by nationalists and

colonialists in similar ways, but for very different purposes. Stereotypically modernist

notions of the peasantry entailed its construction as a group possessing neither reason, nor

rational ability. Colonialists and nationalists shared the assumption that the peasantry was a group of 'ignorant' and 'simple folk' given to irrational and spontaneous displays of violence who needed to be controlled. For the colonial authorities. this view justified their paternalistic inclinations toward protecting these 'simple folk' from exploitation at the hands of Indian landlords and moneylenders. For the nationalists, the nature of the peasantry was a reason to bring them into the bourgeois frame of politics, and mobilize them against colonial rule (1993: 158-159).

The arena of formally organized party politics, occupied by the Indian National Congress, was a bourgeois domain, which did not coincide with the domain of peasant politics. The INC had a specific agenda to act "within the institutional processes of the bourgeois state forms introduced by colonial rule and...use their representative power over the mass of the people to replace the colonial state by a bourgeois nation-state" (Chatterjee, 1993: 159).

Chatterjee contends that. while attempts were made to incorporate peasant struggles into the domain of party politics, they were not entirely successful in subsuming peasant interests. Even though the organized arena of party politics changed its strategies, and peasant politics became exposed to the wider claims of independence. this accommodation – between peasant and elite party – did not mean that their divergent interests were ultimately reconciled. On the contrary, peasant awareness of, and participation in, the domain of nationalist politics, was marked by breaks and disjunctures. This points to a "need for a critique of both colonialist and nationalist historiographies by bringing in the peasantry as a subject of history, endowed with its own distinctive forms of consciousness and making sense of and acting upon the world

on its own terms" (Chatterjee, 1993: 160). The result would be that if the dominated are

not "granted their own domain of subjectivity, where they were autonomous,

undominated," then the dominators "would, in the exercise of their domination, wholly

consume and obliterate the dominated", and Chatterjee contends that "[d]ominance

would then no longer exist within a social relation of power with its own conditions of

reproduction" (1993: 161).

But the Subalternists do not pay much attention to the diversity within the

peasantry, which would include an analysis of class differences. The emphasis on

autonomy - based on Chatterjee's privileging of a peasant 'community' - leads to a

cultural analysis, at the cost of a historically situated materialist analysis. Further, it leads

to an understanding of subalternity as a rather stable and homogenous category. The

reality of Indian social life points to the impossibility of this conception. Guha's work,

however, also in the Subalternist School, highlights the fact that the subaltern occupied

their own autonomous domain. Like Chatterjee, Guha's analysis concerns itself with the

cultural idioms that facilitated resistance.

Guha: Domains, Dominance and Hegemony

For Guha, there was never a singular unified political domain. The domain of

politics, according to Guha, was "structurally split between an elite and a subaltern part,

each of which was autonomous in its own way" (1997: ix). Following Gramsci, Guha

argues that civil society must be distinguished from the state, specifically, in the case of

the colonial state, which was not representative of Indian society. The assumption in

neo-colonialist and nationalist histories that civil society equals nation which equals state

is problematic, and does not allow a space to account for indigenous resistance. These histories also misrepresented the colonial state as hegemonic (Guha, 1997: 19). Imperialism constituted a 'dominance without hegemony', in Guha's words, because the colonizers were never fully able to incorporate the colonized into their culture (1997: ix). Nor did the Indian elite succeed in achieving a hegemony.

The obvious question becomes, why did the elite - or more generally, the bourgeoisie - fail to speak for the nation? Guha makes a distinction between an elite and a subaltern domain of politics, and his answer, to this question, lies in this split. The elite domain of politics consisted of Indian collaboration with the colonial arena of "...laws, legislatures and other institutions of political society, and of the activities and organisations of formal political parties and movements, pre-eminently the Indian National Congress" (Arnold, 1984: 165). The subaltern domain of politics, on the other hand, included a wide variety of largely autonomous modes of action and thought (Arnold, 1984: 164). The bourgeoisie was never able to incorporate vast sections of the subaltern population into its own domain and thereby overcome this structural split (Arnold, 1984: 165). According to many Subalternists, including Guha, Gandhi came closest to achieving this hegemony, with his ability to forge alliances between the elite and subaltern domains (Arnold, 1984: 172).

Dualities: Indian and Colonial

Guha shows how the two idioms, colonial and Indian, functioned during colonialism, to produce a particular set of social relations. In this schema, domination and subordination together constitute power. Domination is further broken down into

coercion and persuasion, and subordination, into collaboration and resistance. Each of

these categories is further comprised by a colonial and Indian element. Thus:

POWER (D/S)

DOMINATION		SUBORDINATION	
Coercion	Persuasion	Collaboration	Resistance
a) coercion	a) improvement	a) collaboration	a) rightful dissent
b) *danda*	b) *dharma*	b) *bhakti*	b) *dharmic protest*

(Adapted from Guha, 1997: 20).

Coercion was not simply an instrument of the British, but was brought about by

its mix with the Indian concept of *danda*, a combination of "...power, authority and

punishment". [emphasizing] ...force and fear as the fundamental principle of politics"

(Guha, 1997: 29). Persuasion – the other component of dominance – was comprised of

the British ideas of improvement, and Indian notions of *dharma*. The former was the

underlying bourgeois ideology that permeated colonial attempts to initiate social and

technological change. This was a part of the larger universalizing mission of capital,

which enthused the British and the indigenous elite alike. "Improvement", in Guha's

words, "was a political strategy to persuade the indigenous elite to 'attach' themselves to

the colonial regime" (1997: 32). *Dharma*, "the quintessence of virtue, the moral

duty...implied a social duty conforming to one's place in the caste hierarchy as well as

the local power structures" (1997: 35). Through the notion of *dharma*, Indian elites

justified their involvement with the British, initiating liberal reforms based on their

exposure to and valuing of western education. In so doing, the Indian elite took it upon

itself to reform the 'lower' sections of the population.

But, according to Guha, various activities of improvement, such as founding

village schools, which were 'liberal' for all intents and purposes, were actually validated

on the grounds of *dharma*. The nationalism of the Congress party, and the subsequent

mass mobilization, were steeped in notions of *dharma*, through Gandhi's theory of

trusteeship. Gandhi attempted to avoid problems of class struggle, especially in rural

areas. Trusteeship was essentially intended as a plea to the wealthy and the poor to enter

into mutually obligatory relations, whereby the owners of wealth would protect those

under them, while the 'protected' would willingly submit to this protection. In this way,

Gandhi's vision for self rule (*swaraj*), in India, was based on and made synonymous with

Dharmaraj – literally – the Rule of *Dharma* (Guha, 1997: 37). It was this national

notion of *dharma*, according to Guha, which resulted in the 'appearance of the political

discourse of western nationalism', "dressed up as ancient Hindu wisdom" (1997: 35-36).

Gandhi's role in orchestrating subordination is also important. Guha describes

subordination as constituted by collaboration and resistance. In the early part of his

career in South Africa, Gandhi's conception of loyalty and duty bears witness to the

collaborationist aspect of nationalism (1997: 42-43). As an example, Guha cites

Gandhi's volunteering, on behalf of the Indian community in South Africa, to fight with

the British in the Boer War (1997: 43).

At first glance, Gandhi's 'humble' and 'menial' request to help in the British war

effort, as subjects of the crown, simply represented a position of collaboration and

servility. However, Guha argues that this seeming servility needs to be unpacked, in order to reveal yet another Indian idiom. For it was not just the western notion of duty and obedience, that Gandhi had absorbed but, rather, the core of his notions of duty came from the Indian concept of *bhakti* (1997, 47). *Bhakti* is a type of devotion which often involves acts of extreme servility. "[Bhakti] is an ideology of subordination *par excellence*" (Guha, 1997: 49-50).

Resistance is the other aspect which, along with collaboration, makes up the domain of subordination. Resistance is what comes last, according to Guha, and if it is successful in overtaking collaboration, then one type of struggle can be said to be complete (Guha, 1997: 55). Presumably, Guha's point leads to Gandhi's role. During British rule, neither the colonizers, nor the indigenous elite exercised hegemony. However, with Gandhi's entry, the nationalist struggle came to fruition. One can read in this the idea, then, that Gandhi was able to fashion some sort of hegemony.

The English notion of resistance is what Guha labels, "Rightful Dissent". Examples of this were seen in the marches and lobbies that were organized by the representatives elected under democratic procedures (Guha, 1997: 56). However, many inconsistencies in the British principles of liberalism appeared when the law was applied to Indians. What resulted was a critique of British rule in India as being "un-British". Indian liberals, states Guha, took "the 'sacred' English idiom of Rightful Dissent too seriously for the regime's comfort" (1997: 57).

The other side of resistance was made up of an Indian idiom and Guha labels it *Dharmic* protest (1997: 57), based not on the European concept of right, but on the notion of duty. If a ruler failed to live up to his *dharmic* duty subjects had a duty to bring

back the *dharmic* aspects of rule by revolting (1997: 59). *Dharmic* protest often appeared in volatile forms, and was practiced as a type of peasant insurgency. The volatility of this protest was not conducive to bourgeois forms of resistance and, therefore, neither the colonial authorities, nor the elite nationalists counted this as protest (Guha, 1997: 59-60).

Guha concludes that neither the British imperialists, nor the indigenous elite nationalists, were able to exercise hegemony over the Indian population. For hegemony "is a condition of dominance in which the moment of persuasion outweighs that of coercion" (Guha, 1997: 103). The Indian nationalists, under the banner of the Congress Party, sought to incorporate the masses under their leadership, and mass interests under their bourgeois hegemony (1997: 133). However, subaltern methods of resistance were often incompatible with bourgeois forms of protest. According to Guha, Gandhi was instrumental in effecting a compromise, whereby subaltern resistance gave way to bourgeois methods of resistance (Guha, 1997: 142).

Gandhi's emphasis on the transformation of subaltern resistance into more 'organized' and controlled protest became one of the main elements of Congress organization (Guha, 1997: 146). Further, Gandhi's concern with crowd control and organization was not simply about the transformation of subaltern politics, but also about a principle fundamental to his conception of *swaraj* or self-rule. As Guha explains, the English term 'self' translates also as 'soul' in many Indian languages, from the Sanskrit — *atman* (Guha, 1997: 146). Hence, for Gandhi, self-rule was tied in with self-control, and this was a fundamental part of his strategy of civil disobedience and non-cooperation.

> It would appear...that swaraj was to be attained by soul control, that is, spiritual self-control, which itself was to be cultivated by swadeshi, which,

in its turn, was to be based on the two-pronged program of boycott and
khadi [the cotton cloth produced from the spinning wheel, which it was
Gandhi's aim that every Indian should spin and wear]. There was nothing
in either of these that could not be thought or practiced in entirely secular
terms. But propelled by self-control they were both assimilated to the idea
of self-purification, regarded by Gandhi as central to his project of giving
Non-cooperation the semblance of a religious movement (Guha, 1997:
147).

Guha analyzes Indian and British elements which functioned together to create a

set of socio-political relations during colonial rule. However, his analysis ultimately also

leads us back to Gandhi. Gandhi's ability to forge alliances only extended to the rich

peasantry who represented the powerful caste in particular areas. Thus, his appropriation

of peasant community, based on caste dominance, coupled with his notion of trusteeship

was a perpetuation of idealized *varna*. The divergences within the peasantry – rich,

middle, lower, landless – which resides in class, did not get incorporated into this

Gandhian 'hegemony'. Since the Subalternists do not analyze class, they are able to

permit, within their work, the notion of a partial Gandhian hegemony.

The Subalternists argue that subaltern history, while interconnected with

Gandhian and bourgeois politics, also had a domain of autonomy. However, they do not

emphasize that it is not so much that peasant or subaltern politics comprised an

autonomous domain but, rather, that within this domain, there were moments of

autonomy exercised, which lay outside nationalist. Gandhian and liberal democratic

frameworks. Attending to these moments permits the writing of other historical

narratives that offer a critique of the inner domain of nationalism. As Chatterjee suggests

himself, "in the historical effectivity of Gandhism as a whole, [we find], the conception

of a national framework of politics in which the peasants are mobilized but do not

participate, [and] a nation of which they are a part, but a national state from which they are for ever distanced" (1986: 125). At the same time, any analysis of the peasantry must involve an understanding of their internal differentiation.

While the Subaltern approach provides potential for a nuanced analysis of Indian nationalism as a multi-layered project, the reclamation of a subaltern history remains an incomplete endeavour. Subalternists, like Chatterjee and Guha ultimately take recourse in cultural and textual analysis, and pay little attention to politico-economic realities. This lack of material analysis leads to a cultural privileging of the Indian elite whose material supremacy is hidden in the cultural discussion of their subalternity. Finally Gandhi's idealized *varna* (caste) framework formed his notion of community, and this is used unproblematically in discussions of cultural nationalism. Gandhi's approach to community is based on an appropriation of folk idioms into a larger notion of a secular Hinduism, which is essentially a privileging of *Brahmanism*. As Jayant Lele has argued, "hegemonic appropriation includes, reinterpretation of popular critical insights, memories or dreams, as elite stock of coded culture," and this, while it "emanates from people...becomes inaccessible to them except on terms set by the rich and powerful" (Lele, 1995: 86). While this Gandhian project of assimilation did successfully mobilize large segments of the Indian population, it does not speak for the entirety of a subaltern history. Chatterjee and Guha's work still leads back to Gandhi and his apparent ability to reconcile the diversities and layers of the indigenous groups and subaltern elite.[15]

Instances of indigenous, subaltern resistance show that Gandhi's influences must be contextualized. The next chapter will examine the work of another Subalternist — David Hardiman — whose ethnography on a particular case of tribal assertion offers a

more historically situated, material understanding of subalternity including a critical

approach to Gandhi's influence.

CHAPTER 4 – A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the preceding chapters, two approaches to the writing of Indian history were

discussed. My argument has been that neither materialist-nationalist nor subaltern

historiography has significantly problematized the implicit Hindu factor which governed

the socio-political relations of the colonial period. This chapter discusses David

Hardiman's ethnographic account of the Devi Movement in Gujarat – a state in western

India – which offers a more complex method of writing an Indian subaltern history. At

the end of the chapter, some analysis will be devoted to the appropriations of history in

present day Indian politics to illustrate the contemporary political relevance of this

historiographical approach.

The Devi Movement originated out of a propitiation to the smallpox Goddess (a

Devi), but became transformed, during the colonial period, into a fight for tribal and.

later. nationalist rights. The relationship of these tribal groups to other Indian

communities and to the British was complex and tense. These groups did not easily

become assimilated into the politics and message of the Mahatma (Gandhi), nor did they

simply become proselytized puppets of the colonial regime. Hardiman locates the

subaltern position within a critical understanding of Gandhian Hindu nationalism, and

defines the Devi Movement and, others like it, as tribal assertions.

Gandhi's Hindu nationalism was a significant force which brought a large number

of groups in the Indian population together to fight against colonial rule. The precarious

consensus and unity of this mass mobilization has received little attention in the literature

on colonialism and the national movement. Hardiman's ethnography reveals the

possibilities for understanding the national movement as not confined to the perceived

Congress hegemony, under Gandhi. Further, this ethnography, among others, allows

various critiques to emerge: the first, against a nationalist all-encompassing Hindu

perspective, the second, against a Subalternist understanding that looks more to cultural

than material factors, and finally a critique of the contemporary political machinations,

that use history to justify the politics of *hindutva*.

Tribal Assertion

In her ethnography on the Bhils of the Narmada Valley, Amita Baviskar argues

that this community did not have a simple assimilative relationship with Hinduism or

nationalism. During the colonial period, Bhil resistance was not necessarily planned and

conscious but, rather, was motivated by their economic destitution. Their attacks were

against rich villages, rather than colonial officials.[16] Further, the Bhil involvement in the

national struggle was minimal, as the ideals of the nationalists were not in keeping with

theirs. The Bhil relationship to Hinduism was also tense, as individual conversion meant

total ostracization from Bhil society. Conversion to Hindu practices, for a Bhil, thus had

to offer great rewards and upward mobility, to be attractive (1995: 84).

Conversion to Hinduism involved a significant change in lifestyle. However,

caste relations were important even in tribal villages. Baviskar argues that each tribal

group has to be studied in relation to the caste community with which it had geographical

links. Proximity to and interaction with caste society facilitated – and continues to do so

today – the subordination of low caste and tribal groups.

The issue of designating and differentiating caste from tribal groups arose during colonial rule when the British wanted to segregate sections of the Indian population, and the process of categorizing tribes emerged. British civil servants emphasized the distinct identity of tribes, whereas nationalists insisted on the integrated nature of the tribes and pushed for them to be viewed as 'backward Hindus' (Baviskar, 1995: 86). What resulted was an ideal type construction of a social group known as tribe in India. Some sociologists have tried to overcome the problem of definition by labelling them tribes in transition (Baviskar, 1995: 86). The term transition is problematic, as this implies a linear or evolutionary trajectory. The phenomenon is not simply about a move from tribe to caste society (Beteille, 1986: 300, 312). As a result of the complexity of tribal assertion, each contributing factor has to be explored, as does Hardiman in his study.

The Devi Movement

Hardiman's analysis of the Devi Movement raises several critiques of the dominant schools of historiography which indicate the necessity of looking critically at Gandhian Hindu nationalism, to arrive at a fuller picture of subaltern assertion and activity. Hardiman provides this snapshot of the Devi movement:

> On 9 November 1922 about two thousand *adivasis*[17] who lived on the eastern borders of the Surat district of Bombay presidency congregated in a field near a village called Khanpur. Coming from six different villages, they had gathered to listen to the teachings of a new goddess of great power known as Salabai. This *devi* was supposed to have come from the mountains to the east, and she expressed demands through the mouths of spirit mediums. These mediums sat before the crowd under a *mandva*- i.e. a shade of leaves placed over a wooden frame. Holding red cloths in their hands they began to shake their heads and were soon in a state of trance. Then, as if reading from their cloths, they pronounced the commands of the Devi (Hardiman, 1987: 1).

These commands included activities such as prohibitions on consuming alcohol, and meat, living a clean, simple life, and having nothing to do with the Parsis[18], who were the liquor dealers in the region. While teetotalism and vegetarianism were associated with *brahmanic* rituals, the tribal adoption of these practices was founded in their materiality. Alcohol consumption occupied a central position, in terms of diet and ritual, in tribal life. And the Parsis used their control of the liquor trade to subordinate the tribals. This movement had parallels in other parts of India, with the Oraons of Chhotanagpur where, from 1914 to 1915, similar commands were issued by their divinities. Known as the Tana Bhagat movement, the message was to "...give up superstitious practices and animal sacrifices, to stop eating meat and drinking liquor, to cease ploughing their fields and to withdraw their field labour from non-adivasi [non-tribal] landowners" (Hardiman, 1987: 5). While these movements gave the appearance of a spiritual assertion, they were actually firmly founded, as Hardiman demonstrates, in a material dimension.

To understand the dependence on Parsi liquor dealers, Hardiman has explained the tribal relationship to alcohol. Drinking alcohol was a very important aspect of *adivasi* life, associated with all their important occasions. Unlike the *brahmins*, consumption was not connected to any feelings of guilt or shame, but rather, "great honour [was accorded] to spirituous drinks" (1987: 99). Drinking also ensured social solidarity between neighbours, as there was an obligation to share alcohol. Most importantly, the toddy and daru[19], that they produced and drank, had nutritional qualities. Often the consumption of toddy meant the difference between life and death for an *adivasi*, providing a substitute for both food and water, during times of near famine. Daru was believed to provide

protection against malaria, cholera and plague (1987: 102 -103). Hardiman observes,

however, that these *adivasis* of South Gujarat did not drink excessively (1987: 104).

Before the late nineteenth century, alcohol was obtained freely by the peasants,

and not heavily taxed (Hardiman, 1987: 99). Tribals were able to obtain alcohol from

the peasants, as well as manufacture it themselves. Toddy trees were numerous in South

Gujarat, and were generally thought to belong to the peasant who tilled the land on which

they grew. Thus peasant families drank most of the toddy themselves, but any surplus

that they sold had to be through the licensed liquor dealer, usually a Parsi. Toddy is a

highly perishable commodity, and when distances made it difficult to transport, the

peasants bartered. Although this was illegal, the British authorities did not significantly

attempt to stop it (1987: 105), which allowed *adivasis* to procure alcohol through

peasants.

Daru was made from the flower of the Mahua tree, which blossomed for a few

weeks in April. During this period, the whole *adivasi* family was involved in the

production of alcohol. The dried mahua flower was also used as food during the

monsoon and winter months. The production of daru was quite inexpensive and simple,

and was therefore easily made by any *adivasi* (1987: 106).

"By law" however, as Hardiman points out, "the manufacture and sale of liquor

was permitted only to those who had been given permission by a government liquor-

farmer", and "[t]his system had been continued from the preceding Maratha period"

(1987: 106). Even before the colonial period, Parsis controlled the liquor trade.[20] Liquor

rights were annually sold by auction to the most successful bidder, invariably a wealthy

Parsi. The dealer was then responsible for collecting duty on any liquor produced and

sold at the village level. The duty was usually a lump sum, and did not reflect the actual amount of liquor manufactured or sold. Further, the authorities did not exercise much control and, "much of the duty was evaded" (1987: 107). "Before the 1860s the Parsis were unable to turn the indebtedness of their adivasi clients greatly to their advantage", as the Parsis gave alcohol to *adivasis* in return for field labour (1987: 109). Once the land-tax settlement was introduced, which made land a marketable commodity. however. the Parsis were quite legitimately able to force *adivasis* to sell or mortgage their land for the latter's 'supposed drinking debts'.

While the *adivasis* were exploited by the Parsis. some were still able to minimize their dependence on them, by buying alcohol from the peasants. Ultimately. however. the system of liquor manufacture favoured the Parsis, as they were able to exploit the tribals on one side. and evade governmental taxes on the other.

When the British government realized this. it introduced the Bombay Abkari Act of 1878. Through this Act. centralized distilleries were set up to standardize liquor as a commodity (1987: 110). As toddy had a relatively short shelf life. it did not last the journey to centralized distilleries. Therefore, in order to ensure centralized distillation. the Government encouraged consumption of daru instead. Daru, however. was a stronger alcohol, and less popular with the tribals (Hardiman, 1987: 105). The Abkari Act made the tapping of toddy trees and the production of toddy extremely expensive and complicated. Heavy taxes were placed on every step of the production process. and this was precisely the intent of the Act. This forced inaccessibility to the production and consumption of toddy proved difficult and, at times, life-threatening for the *adivasis*.

The Parsis in this area had a great deal of power, bribing colonial officials when they could. Not only did the Parsis take land from the *adivasis*, but they also forced them to labour in their fields. The coercive and exploitative relationship that developed may be understood as a form of feudal exploitation, as the Parsis lived on their estates and exercised direct coercion on the peasantry and *adivasis*. But when Parsi control over land was formalized by British legal codes, the exploitation became much more severe and harsh (1987: 127). Even though the tribal groups in this area were dependent upon moneylenders from caste communities, their dependence on the Parsi liquor dealers was far more crippling (1987: 99). Colonial rule, therefore, had the result of exacerbating tribal exploitation.

In response, the tribals migrated to other areas, but this method of resistance was not always possible. The production of illicit liquor was a dangerous act, as it could be detected if not on sight, then by smell. And Parsi dealers would report the tribals to the British authorities, as tribal toddy production also posed a threat to their own distilleries (1987: 129). Resistance to this economic exploitation, then, also drew on pre-existing tribal spirituality.

The origins of the Devi have been traced by Hardiman to the Dangs, a tribal group from Nasik district, in the early decades of the 20th century.[21] The Devi – goddess – was supposed to have been brought by spirit mediums and, then, traveled in a northerly direction. The Gujarati language was spoken in this area, and further south, Marathi was spoken, which meant that problems of translation constrained the spreading of the Devi's message (1987: 22). Even further south, tribals who had been converted to Christianity, may not have been as receptive to this message.

Epidemics of smallpox were common at the time, and the Devi movement began as a propitiation ceremony to the goddess of smallpox. Ralph Nicholas points out that, unlike other gods and goddesses associated with disease in India, the smallpox goddess was known by most of the Indo-Aryan speaking regions of India and Nepal. Her name, Sitala, was also known by other variations in South India (1981: 21). Sitala was worshipped on a large-scale community level, in every region she was supposed to have inhabited.[22]

Typically, the goddess would reveal herself by entering the body of a person who, upon possession by the Devi, would issue various commands. The people of the community would then assuage the Devi by following her commands, which would 'persuade' the goddess to move on to another region (1987: 55). The Devi was said to bring good fortune and protection for those who followed her commands, and worshipped her correctly. Hardiman makes reference here to Ranajit Guha's explanation of the transference (atidesa) function, where tribals granted legitimacy to the possessed, by associating his/her name with well-known deities of the region, or sometimes even with Gandhi. The medium would read from a piece of cloth, on which were said to be written the commands. The sudden ability of the possessed illiterate to read, and his/her powers of clairvoyance, revealed through prophecy, further strengthened the legitimacy of their possession by the Devi (1987: 59-60).

The coming of the Devi entailed preparation by the tribal community, including the cleaning of houses, and the selection of a common site, at which various tribal villages would gather. These worshipping ceremonies usually took place at village cross-roads or other central meeting places (1987: 62). This propitiation practice had the

function of bringing tribal villages together: it was a custom with a long history.[23] The ceremony was conducive to spreading messages of resistance and nationalism.

During this period, the introduction of British education also served to bring the *adivasis* into 'mainstream' society, although for several reasons, *adivasi* attendance at British schools was not high. The schools were usually in the Marathi language, whereas the tribal children spoke Gujarati and tribal dialects. Further, the existence of corporal punishment in the schools was alien and unacceptable to the tribals. Finally, the divisive inter-communal results of education between the *Brahmins* and lower castes were clear. The egalitarian communities of *adivasis* did not want the same fate for themselves (1987: 131-134). Consequently, the *adivasis* developed various superstitions about the negative repercussions of schools.

Under British law, however, *adivasis* were compelled to send their children to school. The tribals thus began constructing their own schools with governmental assistance. Education inculcated a different sense of the world among the *adivasis*. Further, it brought about a belief in the superiority of Hindu practices. Teachers in tribal villages were often high caste Hindus, bent on reform. They felt it their duty to transform 'superstitious' *adivasi* beliefs to "...the 'higher' doctrines of Hindu religion" (1987: 139). At the same time, this presumed superiority, it was realized, would grant the tribals some power, if they were to adopt Hindu practices. Ideals such as temperance and teetotalism were gradually understood in the context of providing powerful mechanisms of tribal resistance against Parsi and colonial exploitation (1987: 134-139).

The tribals took to abstinence from liquor as a form of protest, and in Surat district between 1905-6, consumption declined by almost a third (1987: 144). However,

a bad harvest in 1905 meant a choice between abstinence and starvation, or consumption. The tribals, understandably, opted for the latter, bringing alcohol consumption levels back to normal. However, the continuing exploitation by the Parsi landlord provided impetus for renewed attempts at abstinence, and the Devi's message now took on greater importance as a wider social reform movement. While the message differed slightly from region to region, depending upon the requirements of the area, there were five core elements to the message: abstention from alcohol and non-vegetarian food, non-violence, cleanliness and a boycott of the Parsis (1987: 155).

Sanskritization and Gandhian Influence, Misinterpreted

These elements in the movement, appeared for some, to be proof of Sanskritization. MN Srinivas, who coined the term, defines it as,

> ...the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. The claim is usually made over a period of time, in fact, a generation or two, before the 'arrival' is conceded" (in Hardiman, 1987: 157).

There are various problems with this idea in the case of the *adivasis* of this region. First, the tribals made no claim to high caste status. Second, Srinivas has been criticized for not analyzing the changes that Sanskritization may have brought about in the whole system, rather than in simply inaugurating a positional change for a particular caste or other group. Third, for Sanskritization to be 'successful' the group claiming higher status has to possess a certain amount of clout, in order to make the claim at all (Hardiman, 1987: 158-160).

Hardiman also points out that Srinivas' theory of Sanskritization implies a certain static nature of *brahmanical* ideals. An analysis of different regions in India would easily show this not to be the case. The *adivasis*, argues Hardiman, showed a keen understanding of the relationship between values and power (1987: 163). For example, "[t]he ban on daru and toddy occupied a pivotal position because of its dual function of providing the chief weapon against the Parsis as well as serving as an index of purification" (1987: 164-165). Exposure to caste society and colonialism brought the *adivasis* out of their previous relative autonomy, but this did not imply helpless assimilation, or mimicry of caste principles. On the contrary, *adivasis* used new and old idioms to assert material and spiritual autonomy. The commands of the Devi "thus represented a powerful programme for adivasi assertion" (Hardiman, 1987: 164-165).

Along with the Devi, Gandhian workers in the region began to influence the tribals during the early part of the twentieth century. Added to the commands of temperance and social boycott were those related to the Gandhian national movement, such as, wearing *khadi* (cotton cloth), and taking nationalistic vows in Gandhi's name (Hardiman, 1987: 165). Gandhi's message, perpetuated through the Devi, was received in different ways by the *adivasis*. Some groups had a broader understanding of the nationalist movement, whereas others simply looked upon Gandhi as a divine and benevolent figure, in much the same way as the Devi herself. Hardiman's point is that the Devi movement was not simply a mouthpiece of the nationalist movement but that her worship gained renewed impetus because of the nationalist movement.

The support that the *adivasis* received from the wider nationalist movement worried British authorities and the Parsis. The boycott of the Parsis by the tribals had

been very harmful to them, and the Parsis often forced the tribals to work at gunpoint (Hardiman, 1987: 179). Gandhian workers were intent on pushing the aspect of self-purification of the tribals which they believed was an end in itself. Thus Gandhian reformers suggested that while *adivasis* boycott the Parsi liquor shops, they should not refuse field labour for the Parsis. This plea by Gandhian workers undermined the core of tribal protest, demonstrating Gandhi's attempts to deflect potential class struggles.

The tribals also became internally divided at this point. Some believed in the ideas of self-purification, while others thought it a temporary strategy to undermine their exploitation. Against the backdrop of the Congress Party's Civil Disobedience movement, and its suppression by the British, Gandhianism suffered a setback in the region. The British shut down *ashrams* – relatively austere religious community shelters providing livelihood and support – and arrested Gandhian workers in the area (Hardiman, 1987: 205-206). Ultimately, the Gandhian emphasis on passive forms of resistance, while beneficial initially, did not form an effective strategy of protest for the *adivasis*.

Education and exposure to the nationalist movement had provided *adivasis* with confidence. Subsequent support by the government also served to render Gandhian involvement somewhat redundant. While complete prohibition was not introduced, after the Government of India Act of 1935[24], many liquor shops *were* closed down, thereby, to an extent, freeing *adivasis* of Parsi control (Hardiman, 1987: 215). Large-scale landlordism did not last either, as the Congress passed a resolution, during the 1950s, to give land to the tillers. The Parsis and other landlords lost their estates to the *adivasis*,

although this did not take place equitably, creating various divisions within the *adivasi* communities (Hardiman, 1987: 215).

Despite this, the Devi movement allowed the tribals to understand that gods were not the sole factor in their existence and, more importantly, that they could be active agents in bringing about change. While the *adivasis* of the region had links with Gandhian nationalism, their material concerns, which were the foundation of their movement, were not adequately represented through Gandhian strategies.

In another ethnographic study, Hardiman shows that peasant resistance in Gujarat was strongest when class and community coincided (1981: 250). Further, he highlights the inadequacy of religious and factional explanations which emphasized the alliances formed between peasants and elite nationalists. Many have argued that these alliances were formed only with the richer segments of the peasantry. But Hardiman argues that this is not always the case and, among the peasant nationalists of Gujarat, alliances can be explained in terms of a certain type of class collaboration (1982: 230-231). "[Such] collaboration occurs when members of subaltern classes believe that it is in their best interest to collaborate with members of higher classes. This may be because of economic ties, or perhaps because of ties of caste and kinship which require 'brothers' to stick together"[25] (1982: 231).

These ties of caste and kinship do not necessarily translate into Sanskritization, or the omnipotence of a 'Hindu majority'. Kancha Ilaiah's work "Why I am not a Hindu", (1996) is an autobiographical account of his relationship with Hinduism and caste through his life. Ilaiah's background is *Dalitbahujan* which, he defines, as "a concept that has come to be used to designate a united whole of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled

Tribes, and the Other Backward Classes"[26] (in Amin & Chakrabarty ed, 1996: 166).

While caste formed an integral aspect of Ilaiah's life, Hinduism was a peripheral and

mostly alien concept, to which education and encounter outside of his community had

exposed him. Given this, neither he personally, nor his community, ever thought of

themselves as "Hindu". In today's political context the importance of labelling a broad

cross-section of people as Hindu, has become crucial, such that *hindutva* can gain

strength and proceed. This labeling process has a long history to which the colonial state

and Gandhi previously contributed. In Ilaiah's words, "socially, culturally, and even

physically, they [Hindus] want us to remain their 'other', while acting politically as

'homogeneous Hindus' who can be their tools against Muslims or Christians (in their

language 'minorities')" (in Amin & Chakrabarty ed, 1996: 166).

Political Appropriations of History

Hinduism is a construct that attempts to encompass a mix of varied groups and

practices that have existed for many centuries. It is, therefore, almost impossible to

define Hinduism in any absolute sense. This impossibility becomes especially important,

given the political manipulations around definitions. In the postcolonial Indian State, the

project of *hindutva* – the politically motivated attempt at constructing a monolithic yet

'tolerant' notion of Hinduism and Hindu identity – seeks to oppress all those who do not

fit into its realm. As such, selected, constructed versions of history are appropriated to

fuel the *hindutva* project.

Political scientist, Ashis Nandy, has also critiqued the present political stand of

hindutva. Nandy contends that, in fact, the present *hindutva* politics result from western

notions associated with the modern nation-state which have been used as a cover for religious intolerance (Nandy, in Das ed, 1990: 70). Nandy argues that religion in India has been split into religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology. Nandy defines faith as, "...a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural". Ideology, Nandy defines as, "religion as a sub-national, national, or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic, interests" (Nandy, in Das ed, 1990: 70).

Nandy's contention is that the religion-as-ideology model has been taken on by the proponents of *hindutva*. They have taken the faith of Hinduism and turned it into an ideology under the influences of western colonialism. In this reading, *hindutva* emerged in an attempt to bring India on par with European nations, by "defensively reject[ing] or devalu[ing] the little cultures of India as so many indices of the country's backwardness and as prime candidates for integration within the Hindu/national mainstream" (in Nandy et al, 1995: 58). This move made it possible to make Hinduism synonymous with western-style politics and nationhood, rather than a form of moral or cultural life (in Nandy et al, 1995: 59). But Nandy's notion of religion-as-faith avoids the fact that this religion – Hinduism – has no other basis in real (diverse) practice except as a political appropriation of the past. His critique of *hindutva*, therefore, does not get to the heart of the matter. Beyond political appropriation, there is also a dialectical relationship between the so-called 'little cultures' and the notion of 'moral and cultural life' which Nandy does not account for.

Using the example of the Sangh Parivar, Madhu Kishwar explains the postcolonial appropriation of 'Hinduism' in the form of *hindutva*. The Sangh Parivar, a

combination of various rightist Hindu groups, have been labeled communalist (sectarian), but according to Kishwar, this is not actually so (1993: 4). Hinduism cannot be categorized as fundamentalist, for it has no fundamental tenets upon which all Hindus would agree (Kishwar, 1993: 3). Moreover, the Sangh Parivar is not versed in any of the 'Hindu' theological texts. Its main purpose is to propagate a unified all-India identity. Thus, even such institutions as caste are not encouraged, despite the fact that certain upper caste communities *are* favoured. Further, the group is against ethnic, linguistic and regional assertions of identity. The idea is that while parochial loyalties may exist, Indians' first loyalty is to the nation. Diversity is the cause of India's weakness, and unification would therefore make India stronger. Notions of a nation-state are projected back into history, to make various historical figures appear as nationalists, even though there was no unified state in India at the time (Kishwar, 1993: 5).

The symbol of the Parivar's nationalism is Bharat Mata, or Mother India. This is a secular image, symbolizing the nation's relationship to the land, the traditional sustainer. Kishwar argues that the Parivar, successfully preying on the declining status of the Congress Party, plays up the idea that they alone are the ones that can unify India (1993: 10). The Parivar justifies this unification, by perpetuating Hindu fears of a growing Muslim threat, fuelled in part by the general global Islamic threat exploited in the media. Jayant Lele also points to the efforts of the Voice of India, the publishing house for the Sangh Parivar, to employ scholars who grant credibility to their notions of *hindutva*, in their construction of 'Muslim as enemy' (Lele, 2000: 22).

While the *hindutva* attempt – especially with such groups as the Sangh Parivar – is ostensibly secular, there is an implicit Hindu factor that permeates their rhetoric. Lele

shows the connection between superficially different modes of historical interpretation, and how they relate to *hindutva*. He points out how all groups – the anti-secularists – for example Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy, the secularists like Bipan Chandra, and the Hinduists – proponents of *hindutva* – share various assumptions about this Hindu factor which brings their analysis very close together and weakens the possibility of a thorough critique of *hindutva* (Lele, 2000: 21).

Within the ideas of the Hinduists and anti-secularists, Lele states, there is a lack of analysis of 'material dimensions'. The anti-secularists distinguish between *hindutva* and Hinduism. Hinduism is a benign and 'good' force, while *hindutva* is the negative result of modernity (2000: 29). Secularism, then, is a product of this modernity. While Nandy's solution comes in terms of a neo-Gandhian Hinduism, Chatterjee's comes as a return to neo-Gandhian notions of community (Lele, 2000: 31-33, 35).

This community is Gandhi's caste-based community. Chatterjee shares with Nandy and others, the idea that the tolerant and flexible 'community' was untouched by conflict. The existence of counter-discourses are dismissed as modernistic (Lele, 2000: 35). Thus secularism, which is posited as antithetical to the neo-Gandhian version of communitarianism, is also considered threatening to the potential balance and harmony of community. Chatterjee's idea is that the existence of tolerance should be based on the consent of the community's members which should be publicly sought (Chatterjee, 1997). However, Lele points out that this consent can be manipulated by elite interests. As Lele argues, the practice of creating an 'aura of consensus', such that a hegemony could be asserted, 'was the project of old brahmanism'. Logically, then, the views of anti-secularists promote a return to some notion of a golden Indian community. And this

is very similar to the views of the *hindutva* proponents, whose task is to construct a Hindu nation, based on Hindu revivalism. Embedded within this is a denial of the material aspects of inequality, based on an idealized *varna* or caste system, that are found within the community.

Lele also discusses other shared assumptions, between anti-secularists and Hinduists about the concepts of religion, tradition and modernity. Religion is considered shared and stable, while tradition and modernity are conceptualized as antithetical to each other, and match the dichotomy of east and west, respectively. Further, tradition and religion are made synonymous within a pre-modern state (2000: 43).

Brahmanism as 'religion' created a hegemonic control over much of Indian society. And Hinduism has been equated with *brahmanism*. Therefore, Hinduism can be equated with Indian tradition, and secularism with the undermining of this tradition through notions of western modernity. Again, this emphasis on the social and cultural, rather than the economic, distorts the picture of Indian history and present day social relations.

Conclusion

While the different modes of history examined in the first two chapters have considerably varied approaches, both these methods lend themselves quite easily to incorporation within the *hindutva* mode of present day politics. In the Subalternist literature it is precisely the lack of material dimension which allows inequalities to be occluded in favour of cultural theoretical analyses.[27]

While David Hardiman has written as part of the Subaltern Studies Collective, his work provides an important example of a critical micro historiography which does justice to the nuances of social reality of the colonial period. Through his ethnography, the complexity and multiplicity that underlies subaltern life can be examined. Further, while his ethnographical work provides potential for nation-wide comparisons, it does not universalize the specifics that mark regional life in India. His ethnographical endeavour, shows how a 'discourse from the margins,' as it were, can provide critical insight to dominant discourses of 'Hinduism'.

Historical appropriations by partisan politics are not a new phenomenon. However, when academic weight is given to supposed historical phenomena, the situation can be potentially dangerous. The present day politics of *hindutva* seeks to collapse together an amorphous and diverse India under a politically motivated and constructed notion of 'Hindu' identity. And this project allows violence and suppression of freedom to be legitimized. While this idea of a critical perspective is by no means original, it must be restated, until that which it critiques ceases to be used as an instrument of repression.

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ENDNOTES

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

[1] During colonial rule. the importance of the *brahmin's* position within the caste system was reinforced through the theory of Aryan race. The three upper castes were thought to have descended from the Aryans. while the lowest caste from the indigenous tribes. (Please see Thapar. 1996. and Lele ed. 1981: 2).

[2] Loosely defined. this is a process of adopting *brahmanic* practices. A discussion of Sanskritization appears later in this thesis.

[3] The Subaltern Studies Collective is a group of scholars who began writing in the early 1980s. Their aim was to challenge the dominant modes of Indian historiography.

CHAPTER 2 – MATERIALIST NATIONALIST HISTORIES AND HINDU IDENTITY

[4] As discussed in the introduction. the idea of 'Hinduism' being an absolutely definable and coherent body of thought is problematic. given its history. I am using the term implicit 'Hindu factor.' to refer to this assumed coherence of 'Hinduism'.

[5] The term 'Hindu secularism' refers to the ideology of the Congress Party. First. secularism was the stated ideal of Indian nationalism. under the Party. However. as Gandhi's use of Hindu symbols to mobilize the 'masses' could not be critiqued. without an accompanying critique of Gandhi. Hindu symbols were incorporated into the nationalist movement. Gandhi's affinity with concepts of 'Hinduism' along with his ideals of community. led him to a concept of 'secular Hinduism'. Thus the term has been reversed. when discussing Gandhian thought. as secular Hinduism.

[6] For details on the three stages. please see Lele 1990 in Vol. II ed. Frankel & Rao. Also. Sumit Sarkar. 1983.

[7] This coincidence of caste and class is not always the case in post-independence India. though.

[8] Please see Chandra. 1984: 180-185.

[9] Other works of Desai's reveal a more nuanced understanding. However. these quotations have been taken from. The Social Background of Indian Nationalism.

[10] This hegemonic appropriation was Hindu (*Brahmanical*). and was carried out in different ways in the precolonial period also. as discussed in the introduction.

CHAPTER 3 – SUBALTERN HISTORIES

[11] Guha divides society into this subaltern mass and the elites. His usage of the term elite is. "not...in Gramsci's sense of a revolutionary vanguard but...a synonym for hegemonic or ruling classes" (Arnold. 1984: 164).

[12] This idea is questionable even within the European context.

[13] Chatterjee indicates. that. western distinctions of private and public. civil society and state do not fully speak to the Indian experience. However. he uses these terms. because we do not yet have the language to describe these categories. Ultimately. however. the contradiction between community and capital lies at the core of the modern western state for him.

[14] Chatterjee uses the example of Bengal. which is meant to represent the core of Indian nationalist activity.

[15] As I am examining Chatterjee's and Guha's work. I have only taken into consideration their interpretations of Gandhian thought. My critique of Subalternist work also extends only to their work.

CHAPTER 4 – A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO HISTORIOGRAPHY

[16] Subalternists have argued that peasant resistance is not entirely unconscious. as there is too much at stake for peasants to simply 'stumble into rebellion'. Baviskar provides a counterpoint to the work of Ranajit Guha in this section of her book (Baviskar. 1995: 60).

[17] The term *adivasi* implies original inhabitant. Hardiman uses the term. stating that it is preferable for the Indian context. "as it relates to a particular historical development: that of subjugation during the nineteenth century of a wide variety of communities which before the colonial period had remained...relatively free.

from the controls of outside states" (Hardiman, 1987: 13-14, also, Hardiman in Guha ed, 1997: 100). I will be using the terms *adivasi* and tribals interchangeably, as I have used the latter throughout the thesis.

[18] The Parsis, originally from Persia, are people of the Zoroastrian faith.

[19] Hardiman defines toddy as the 'fermented sap of palm trees', and daru as 'distilled country liquor' (1987: 220, 218).

[20] Hardiman states, "The Parsis of South Gujarat were originally peasant cultivators, and during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries many had fled into the *adivasi* interior to escape persecution at the hands of the sultans of Gujarat" (1987: 107).

[21] Hardiman explains that the origins of the Devi are somewhat ambiguous. With his fieldwork, Hardiman has reached the conclusion, "...that the Devi movement originated as a smallpox propitiation ceremony which started in the fishing village of Palghar Taluka, probably in later 1921 or early 1922..." (1987: 22).

[22] Nicholas also explains the history of the disease, as it was described in Ayruvedic texts. He points out that despite the growth of medical and biological knowledge of the disease, both before and during colonial rule, religious propitiation to the goddess did not cease.

[23] This has been attested to in the work of historian DD Kosambi (Hardiman, 1987: 62).

[24] The Government of India Act of 1935 facilitated, in small measure, the process of a transfer of power from the British Empire to the Indians (see Sarkar, 1983: 336-338).

[25] The Gandhian alliances *were*, however, formed with richer, dominant castes within the peasantry, on a national level.

[26] Scheduling refers to the colonial categorizing of groups, which has been continued in post-Independence India.

[27] This critique of the Subaltern School has been made by a number of scholars, including Tom Brass. Brass argues that the influence of Gramsci and Foucault in their work, instead of Marx and Lenin, leads the Subalternists to transform historical materialism to the study of cultural subjects, and focus on ideology, instead of materiality (1991: 177-178). See also, Sivaramakrishnan, 1995: 402-410.

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