Cultural Pasts
Essays in Early Indian History

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The Tyranny of Labels
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In the writing of Indian history, we have become accustomed to packaging our past and identifying it with labels. Such labels, even where they may include a variety of activity and experience, tend to force interpretations into a single category so that the infinite shades of difference within them, disappear. When this happens, the historical perspective comes to be governed by the tyranny of labels: a condition which requires the historical unpacking of the categories and a redefining of the contents.

I would like in this lecture to explore two of these labels: the Hindu community and the Muslim community, with particular reference to the way they are used in the writing of pre-colonial history. My intention in this exploration is both to question the validity of these as all exclusive categories in historical analysis, and to suggest the need to analyse afresh our historical understanding of what we are referring to when we speak of Hindu and Muslim communities in history. Such labels draw on conventional religious identities, but the form so demarcated is sought to be applied to every other aspect of life, whether applicable or not. It is also used to include a vast spectrum of social groups under the single label.

The viewing of Indian history in terms of these two monolithic, religious communities, has its origins in nineteenth century interpretations of Indian history, where not only were the two communities described as monolithic but they were also projected as static over many centuries. This is of course not to deny that the labels were used earlier, but to argue that they were used in a different sense, and their use has its own history which has yet to be investigated. A small part of this investigation is attempted in this lecture. My intention is to observe how those to whom we give

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a primary association with Islam, when they first arrived in India, were initially perceived in northern India, and the way in which such groups were represented as part of this perception. This was far more nuanced than is allowed for in the concept of monolithic communities, and these nuances require further exploration. The representation in turn had an impact on what have been described as the multiple new communities which came to be established. The newness was not because they were invariably alien, but because there was a departure from the existing pattern of communities. The newness of these communities requires investigation and this links the study of the first millennium AD with that of the second. The continuities did not have to be literal but could have been conceptual and while the nature of change in some situations was new in others it could well have followed earlier patterns.

The definition of the Muslim community extends to all those who claim adherence to Islam and the adherence is said to be demonstrated by a clearly stated belief and form of worship, which through conversion confers membership in a large body of believers, a membership which also assumes the equalitarian basis of the association. The perspective of the court chronicles of the Sultans and the Mughals was that of the ruling class and this perspective is now seen as broadly endorsing the above definition and reinforcing the projection of a Muslim community, a perspective in which the Hindu — as defined by such literature — was seen as the counterpart. It is as well to keep in mind that this is the current interpretation of these texts and although some may conform to the view from the windows of power, not all do so. Therefore, although sometimes carrying some political and even theological weight, this view was nevertheless limited. As the articulation of a powerful but small section of society it needs to be juxtaposed with other indicators.

The notion of a Hindu community evolves from a geographic and ethnic description gradually giving way to religious association. The Hindu community is more difficult to define given the diverse nature of belief and worship making it the amorphous ‘Other’ of the Muslim community in some of the court chronicles. The crystallisation of this perception occurs when erstwhile Vaisnavas, Saivas, Lingayats and others, begin to refer to themselves as Hindus. Communities of the subcontinent have in the past been diverse, with multiple identities and the attempt to force them into unchanging, static entities, would seem to contradict the historical evidence. With the modern
The connotation of a religious community, both terms have come to include even in the interpretation of the historical past, all manner of diverse societies across the subcontinent, for some of whom convergence with the formal religion is of recent origin, if at all.

The idea of two, distinctive, segregated civilisations, the Hindu and the Muslim, in conflict with each other was assumed in colonial scholarship. Thus James Mill, differentiated the Hindu civilisation from the Muslim, which gave rise to the periodisation of Indian history as that of the Hindu, Muslim and British periods. It crystallised the concept of a uniform, monolithic Hindu community dominating early history as did the Muslim equivalent in the subsequent period, with relations between the two becoming conflictual. These notions were in a sense summarised by Christian Lassen who, in the mid-nineteenth century, attempting to apply a Hegelian dialectic, wrote of the Hindu civilisation as the thesis, the Muslim civilisation as the anti-thesis and the British as the synthesis.

Part of the insistence on the separateness of the two civilisations was the assumption that those who came with Islam, had been regarded even by earlier Indians as alien, in fact as alien as the Europeans. This however was an erroneous perception of earlier historical relationships. Those associated with Islam had come through various avenues, as traders, as Sufis and as attachments to conquerors. Their own self-perceptions differed as also did the way in which they were perceived by the people of the land where they settled. For a long while in India, they were referred to by the same terms as were used in earlier times for people from west and central Asia, suggesting that their coming was viewed in part as a historical continuity. And there are good historical grounds to explain such a continuity.

The Arabs, Turks, Afghans and Persians were familiar to northern and western India, since they had not only been contiguous peoples but had been linked by trade, settlement and conquest, links which went back, virtually unbroken, to many centuries. Central Asia was the homeland of the Saka and Kushana dynasties which ruled in northern India at the turn of the Christian era and later of the Huns who came as conquerors and became a caste. In Iran, the genesis of the languages spoken there and in northern India, were Old Iranian and Indo-Aryan which were closely related languages as is evident from examples of common usage in the Avesta and the Rigveda. Persian contacts with India were initially through the Achaemenids who were contemporaries of the Mauryas and later through the Sassanids, contemporaries of the Kushans and Guptas. Territories in Afghanistan and the north-west were alternatively controlled by rulers from both sides. Ancient inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic in Afghanistan attest to Mauryan rule and later dynasties with bases in the Oxus region and Iran brought north-western India into their orbit. Trading links were tied to political alliances. Close maritime contacts between the subcontinent and the Arabian peninsula go back to the time of the Indus civilisation and have continued to the present.

There is therefore an immense history of interaction and exchange between the subcontinent and central and western Asia. The change of religion to Islam in the latter areas does not annul the earlier closeness. Interestingly even the Islam of these areas was not uniform for there were and are strong cultural and sectarian differences among the Muslims of central Asia, Persia and the Arab world, differences which can in some cases be traced to their varying pre-Islamic past and which are likely to have influenced the nature of their interaction with the subcontinent.

These were contiguous peoples whose commercial and political relations with India over a long past, were sometimes competitive and hostile and at other times friendly, but were well recognised. Battles were fought, campaigns were conducted, commercial exchange was encouraged and migrants moved across borders in various direcions. Many had settled in India and married locally. One of the clauses of the treaty between Chandragupta Maurya and Seleukus Nikator has been interpreted as a jus contubii, freedom for the Greeks and Indians to intermarry. Such marriages doubtless gave rise to mixed communities of new castes and practices, a process that did not cease with the arrival of Muslim Arabs and others. Similarly Indian traders and Indian Buddhist monks who lived in the oasis towns of central Asia and in China, were also to be found in ports and markets in west Asia, and were agencies of cross-cultural fertilisation. Manichaeanism for example became a major religion in the early Christian era largely because it drew on Mahayana Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, and elements of central Asian animism. The dialogue between Indians, central Asian Turks, Persians and Arabs was a continuing one, irrespective of changes of dynasties and religions or of trade fluctuations. This dialogue is reflected for example, in Sanskrit,
Greek and Arabic texts relating to astronomy, medicine and philosophy, and in what is said of Indian scholars resident at the court of Harun al-Rashid.

The coming of the Europeans and the colonisation of India by Britain, was an altogether different experience. They came from distant lands, were physically different, spoke languages which were entirely alien and in which there had been no prior communication; their rituals, religion and customs were alien; their exploitation of land and labour exceeded that of the previous period; and above all they did not settle in India. The assumption that the western and central Asian interventions after the eighth century AD and that of the British were equally foreign to India, in origin and intent, would, from the historical perspective, be difficult to defend.

Colonial interpretations of the Indian past were often contested by Indian historians, but the periodisation was accepted in essentials. This was implicitly the acceptance of the idea that the units of Indian society were communities defined by single religious requiring therefore that monolithic religious identities be sought and established in history. This view coincided with the incubation of the nation-state. All nationalisms use history, some more evidently than others. Essential to nationalist ideology was also the attempt to locate and define a national culture, often equated with that of the dominant group. Inevitably other cultures get excluded in this process. But the historian also acts as a remembrancer, reminding the society of the histories that are not always apparent up front.

When communalisms become visible on the political stage, as they were from the early years of this century, there is not only a contestation between them on the question of identity, but there is also a conflict with the earlier anti-colonial nationalism. The separation of the indigenous and the foreign emerges as a contentious issue and is taken back to the beginnings of Indian history. Communal historiographies attempt to construct a religious majority into a monolithic community, claiming that their interpretations of the past which support such a monolith are the only valid ones. Religion is sought to be restructured in order that it can be used for political mobilisation. There is inevitably a confrontation between historical evidence and its logic, counterposed with resort to a fantasized past, in what are projected as conflicting histories.

I would like to illustrate this by taking up one central issue, now contested, of the period prior to the modern in south Asian history. The question of identities has hinged on the definition of communities as solely religious communities. Hindu and Muslim in the main, the former being indigenous and the latter foreign, and projected as generally hostile to each other. The assumptions have been that the Hindus and the Muslims each constituted a unified, monolithic community, and were therefore separate nations from the start, and that religious differences provide a complete, even though mono-causal explanation for historical events and activities in the second millennium AD. The reconstruction of this history is largely based on particular readings of court chronicles and texts where political contestation is sometimes projected in religious terms, to the exclusion of other categories of texts which allow of a different reconstruction.

My objection to the use of blanket terms such as 'the Hindus' and 'the Muslims', in historical readings, is that it erases precision with reference to social groups and is therefore methodologically invalid and historically inaccurate. It fails to differentiate between that which is more pertinent to religious history and that which relates to other aspects of life even if there had been an overlap in some situations. To explain the events of the time in terms only of an interaction between groups identified either as Hindus or as Muslims, is simplistic as a historical explanation. Some continuities in historical processes are arbitrarily broken by this usage and at the same time it is difficult to observe historical changes. Questioning the existence of such monolithic, religious communities, therefore has extensive historiographical implications.

The argument that the notion of community was always defined by a single religion even in the pre-Islamic past has been countered by the evidence of sources other than Brahmantical normative texts. Such sources relate to diverse social groups and depict a different social scene. Theoretical interpretations emphasising the nature of relationships between socially diverse groups and focusing on access to power, whether through economic or other disparities, have also changed the contours of pre-modern history. The many studies of caste, clan, village, town, language and region, have encouraged a diversified view of past identities. Caste as varna, earlier thought to be a definitive identity is now being recognised as intersected by identities of language, sect and occupation. Each individual
therefore, had varied identities, of which some might overlap, but which interfered with the consolidation of a single, monolithic religious identity, even in societies prior to the coming of Islam.\(^5\)

For Orientalist scholarship the construction of what came to be called Hinduism was a challenge, being different from the familiar perspective of religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The latter were founded on the teachings of historically recognised prophets or of a messiah, with a theology and dogma, a sacred book and some ensuing devotions which took the form of variant sects. Yet the religious articulation which we recognise as constituting the religions which came to be called Hinduism did not subscribe to these features. Of its many variant forms, some were deviations from earlier beliefs and practices but others had an independent genesis. The juxtaposition of religious sects did result almost through osmosis in similarities which introduced some common features, but the diversities remained. Hence the preference in some recent scholarship for the phrase 'Hindu religions', rather than Hinduism.\(^5\) Because of this flexibility and decentralisation, the religious identity was frequently closely allied to caste identities, and since these incorporated occupation and access to resources, there were factors other than belief alone which governed religious identities. This is equally true of other religions in the subcontinent.

The term 'Hindu' as referring to a religion is initially absent in the vocabulary of Indian languages and only slowly gains currency. This is quite logical given that earlier religious identities were tied to sect and caste. Membership was not of a specific religion, binding groups across a social spectrum and geographical space, as was the case for example, with Buddhism. The use of a single term to include the diversity would have been bewildering, and any linkage to this usage would have required a long period. When and why it came to be a part of the self-perception of what we today call the Hindus, would make a worthwhile historical enquiry. Terms such as 'Muslim' or 'Mulsim' are also not intermediate entrants into the vocabulary of Indian languages after the arrival of Islam, although these terms occur in the texts of what were initially non-Indian languages. Prior to that a variety of other terms are preferred and these have their own history. The Arabs, Turks, Afghans and others are referred to variously, such as Tadjika, Yavana, Saka, Turuksha and mleccha. There is therefore an attempt to associate the new entrants with existing categories and are therefore expressive of more subtle relationships than we have assumed. The categories gave them an identity which was familiar and interestingly provided them with historical links, emanating from Indian connections with western and central Asia in the past. The use of these terms was at one level a continuation from the earlier past. What is striking is that initially none of these terms had a religious connotation. It would again be worthwhile to locate the point in time when this connotation was acquired in cases such as Swetayaka and its variants, which later included a religious identity.

Inscriptions from the eighth century AD refer to Arab incursions coming from Sind and Gujerat into the Narmada delta.\(^6\) The Arabs are referred to as Tadjikas which suggests some complex link to an Arab identity in addition to their being maritime traders. The Rashtrakutas kings of the ninth- tenth centuries had appointed a Tadjika as governor of the Sanjan area of Thane District on the west coast, whose name is rendered as Madhumati, thought to be the Sanskrit for Mohammed since it also rendered sometimes as Madhumada.\(^7\) He conquered the chiefs of the neighbouring harbours for the Rashtrakutas and placed his officers in charge. As governor, he granted a village to finance the building of a temple and the installation of an icon. Arab writers of this period refer to Arab officers employed by the rajas and settlements of Arab traders, and in both cases they had to work closely with the existing administration.\(^8\)

The term Yavana was originally used for Greeks and later for those coming from west Asia or the west generally.\(^9\) The Sanskrit word yavana is a back formation from the Prakrit yona, derived from the west Asian yavana, referring to the Ionian Greeks. It was used in an ethnic and geographical sense. Buddhist texts speak approvingly of the Yavanas. Some became Buddhists or were patrons of Buddhism. There was also a curiosity about Yavana society which it was said had no castes but had a dual division of master and slave.\(^10\) The Greek speaking population of the Indo-Iranian borderlands is familiar from the Mauryan period. For most people the Yavanas were just another people, but the brahmanas were initially antagonistic. A text of the early centuries AD — the Yuga Purana of the Gorgi Sanhitā — depicts them as unfriendly\(^11\) even though some Yavanas declared themselves to be Vaisnavas. Perhaps this hostility grew out of the memory of Alexander's brutal attack on the Mallol\(^12\) and the
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in true Puranic style, that this text was first recited by Śiva to Pārvatī and then through Skanda, Nārāyaṇa and Bhṛgu to Śukra, the last of whom told it to the Yānavas. It is Śiva who sent Paigamba to earth and there were seven paigambers or wise men, starting with Adam. This is of course reminiscent of the seven Manus with which Puranic chronology begins. The paigambers came to earth during the Kaliyuga. They started their own era based on the Hījri era and different from the earlier Indian svayam era. They renamed Hastināpur as Dillī and initiated Yavana rule. They are thus located in time and space and provided with links to the past in accordance with the earlier and established vamsāvālī tradition.

The prime mover in this history is the deity Śiva and this makes any other legitimation unnecessary. Since the Yānavas had the blessing of Śiva, Pīthor Rājā Chauhana could not hold them back. The establishment of the Maratha kingdom also took place at the intervention of the deity. This kind of adjustment which emerges out of upper caste interests may also have been in part a response to the necessary change in the role model. Those claiming to be kṣatriyas were now not approximating the life-style of their ancestors to the same degree as before, but were increasingly imitating the appearance, dress, language and life-style of the Mughal courts, as is evident from painting and literature. The culture of the elite had changed and there was a noticeable degree of accommodating the new. The importance of such accounts lies not in their fantasy on what actually happened, but that they provide us with a glimpse of how a historical situation was being manipulated, in order to correlate a view of tradition with the problems of contemporary change. This might enable us to assess the nature of the ideological negotiation which conditioned such perceptions.

The term Śaka, was the Sanskrit for the Scythians, a people from central Asia who had ruled in parts of northern and western India around the Christian era. The reference to Turkish and Afghan dynasties as Śakas suggests a historical perception of place and people, a perception both of who the rulers were and how they might be fitted into the history of the ruled. A Sanskrit inscription of AD 1276 may illustrate this.\(^20\) It records the building of a baoli and a dharmaśāla in Palam (just outside Delhi) by Udādharma from Ucca in the Multan district. The inscription, composed by Pandit Yogēśvara, dated in the Vikrama Samvat 1333, begins with a salutation to Śiva and Ganapati. It then refers to the rulers of Delhi and
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Haryana as the Tomaras, Chauhanas and Śwakas, the earlier two having been recognised Rajput dynasties and the last being a reference to the Sultans. This is made clear by the detailed list of Śwakas, that is, the Sultans of Delhi up to the current ruler Balban, referred to as nāyaśaka śrī hammīra Gayaśchina rapti samrāta, and whose conquests are described with extravagant praise. His titles mix the old with the new. Nāyaśaka was an earlier title and hammīra is thought to be the Sanskritised form of Amir. In the eulogistic style of the earlier prāasti tradition, Balban’s realm is said to be virtually subcontinental — an obvious exaggeration. This is followed by a fairly detailed family history of the merchant in the traditional vamsāvalī style. He was clearly a man of considerable wealth. Other sources inform us that Hindu merchants from Mughal, gave loans to Balban’s nobles when the latter suffered a short- fall in collecting revenue. The identity of the Sultan is perceived as a continuity from earlier times and the identity of the merchant is in relation to his own history and occupation, and perhaps the unstated patronage of the Sultan. The sole reference to religion is oblique, in the statement that even Viṣṇu now sleeps peacefully, presumably because of the reign of Balban.

A Sanskrit inscription from Narain (also in the vicinity of Delhi), dated samvat 1384 or 5632 follows the same format. We are told that in the town of Dhilī, sin is expelled by the chanting of the Vedas. The city is ruled by Mahāmāyā Sāhi who is the cūdāmanī, the crest-jewel, of the rulers of the earth (a phrase used frequently in Sanskrit to describe a king), and is a śekendra, the lord/Indra of the Śwakas. This may well be the rhetoric of synecophy, nevertheless the juxtaposing of Vedic recitations to the rule of Mohammad bin Tughlaq carries its own message. The identification with the Śwakas is complimentary since the earlier Śwakas were associated with the important calendrical era of 1078, still in official use.

Another term is Turuṣka, and was originally a geographical and ethnic name. An interesting link is made with earlier Indian historical perceptions of central Asia, when Kalhana, in his twelfth century history of Kashmir, the Rājatarangini, uses the term retrospectively. He refers to the Kuśānas of the early centuries as Turuṣkas, and adds ironically, that even though they were Turuṣkas these earlier kings were given to piety. Here perhaps the points of contrast are the references in two twelfth century inscriptions to the Turuṣkas as evil, duśtāturuṣka, or to a woman installing an image in place of one broken by the Turuṣkas. Familiarity with the Turks was also because they competed with Indian and other traders in controlling the central Asian trade, especially the lucrative trade along the silk route between China and Byzantium and because Buddhism, known to these areas prior to Islam, had been reinforced by missions from north India. The initial attacks of the Turks and Afghans were tied into local politics, what Kalhana refers to as the coalition of the Kashmiri, Khazā and mlecha. The entry of the Turuṣkas on the north Indian scene is in many ways a continuation of the relations which had existed between the states of north-western India and those across the borders.

Kalhana writes disparagingly of the Kashmiri king Hāṣadeva ruling in the eleventh century who employed Turuṣka mercenaries — horsemen in the main — in his campaigns against local rulers, even though the Turuṣkas were then invading the Punjab. The activities of Hāṣadeva, demolishing and looting temples when there was a fiscal crisis, leads to Kalhana calling him a Turuṣka. But he adds that such activities have been familiar even from earlier times. However, the looting of temples by Hāṣadeva was more systematic, for he appointed Udayarāja as a special officer to carry out the activities, with the designation of devotpātanā-nāyaśaka, the officer for the uprooting of deities.

Alberuni writing soon after the raids of Mahmūd of Ghazni, states that Mahmūd destroyed the economy of the areas where he looted and this accounts for the antagonism of the local people towards the Muslims. This is as much a commentary on Mahmūd as a statement of what he perceived. The historical question would inquire into the degree of devastation, the areas referred to and the memory of the disruption. An interesting case is that of Somanātha, particularly associated with Mahmūd’s destruction of the Śiva temple in the early eleventh century.

Curiously, Bihāna referring to his visit to Somanātha later in the same century makes no mention of Mahmūd’s raid. An inscription from Veraval in the vicinity of Somanātha and dating to 101216 is a eulogy on the town and its temples, the Cauḍukya dynasty, the local governor Śridhara and the Śāva priest of the temple and speaks of the heroic Hamimīra who was subdued by Śridhara, yet there is no mention of the destruction of the temple or of its restoration. Here the Turuṣkas are a political enemy similar to others against whom the Cauḍukyas fought. Even more curious is the evidence of
another inscription from Veraval also in Sanskrit. It records that during the reign of a Cakula-Vaghela king a substantial grant of land was made in Somanathapura for the construction of a mosque in 1264 to the owner of a shipping company called Noradina Piru. Nur-ud-din Piru was the son of Koja Nau Abu Brahma of Hormuza, who built the mosque as a place of worship for the city. It is said that Nur-ud-din had the cooperation of the local patish-truda apart from the king. Among the members of the patish-truda were Shaiva priests (perhaps of the Somanathapura temple), merchants and administrators. Were memories surprisingly short, or was the destruction of the temple by Mahmud highly exaggerated? Or were the profits of trade a surmounting concern on the part of the authorities at Somanathapura? Or were the Turuks seen as a threat to the city from the Muslim traders from the Gulf, since they were considered enemies whereas the latter were contributing to local prosperity.

Finally we come to mlecha, the most contentious among the words used. It has a history going back to around 800 BC and occurs originally in a Vedic text and is used for those who could not speak Sanskrit correctly. Language was frequently a social marker in many early societies. The use of Sanskrit was largely confined to the upper castes, and gradually the word mlecha also came to have a social connotation and referred to those outside the pale of varna society. Those who did not observe the rules of caste as described in the Dharmashastras, or those who belonged to certain categories of lower castes. When used in a pejorative sense it included a difference of language and ritual impurity. The category of mlecha was again a well-established category but used more frequently by upper castes to refer to those from whom they wished to maintain a caste distance.

It has been argued that mlecha was essentially a term of contempt for the Muslim, or more recently, that the demonisation of the Muslim invaders in using the term rākṣasas for them, and invoking the parallel with Rāma as the protector, was part of the Indian political imagination of the twelfth century. But the rākṣasas, irrespective of who the enemy was, has been a constant factor with reference to many pre-Islamic enemies and going back to earliest times. Sāyana's commentary of the fourteenth century on the Rgveda, refers to the dāsas as rākṣasas and asuras. An inscription from Gujarat dating to AD 1253, states that Añārāja killed Ranaśimha in battle and the latter was

like Rāvana — rāvanariva — and the Gujjarra rājyam is said to be greater than that of Rāma. The inscription proceeds to mention the attack on the Turuksa — rājī who is described as the lord of the mlechas, but interestingly not as Rāvana. The powerful gens-sangha or chieftain of the Yauhdeyas issued coins in the early centuries AD, a few of which carry the name Rāvana.

In later centuries, the reference to some Muslims as mlechas, was an extension of the term to include them among the many others who were denied varna status. This usage is more common in sources which come from the upper castes, such as Sanskrit texts and inscriptions, and was more easily used for the lower castes who were, even without being Muslim, marginalised and moved to the fringes of society. The term itself included a multiplicity of peoples and jātis but generally it referred to those who were not members of a varna.

There is however a marked ambivalence in the use of the term. In another Sanskrit inscription of AD 1328 from the Raisina area of Delhi, reference is made to the mlecha Sahavatna setting Delhi. But he is praised for his great valour in what is described as his burning down the forest of enemies who surrounded him. If in this context mlecha had a contemptuous meaning it is unlikely that a local merchant would dare to use it for a Sultan.

The same ambiguity occurs in earlier texts. It is in this sense that mlecha is mentioned in the narrative sections of the Mahābhārata (1.62.5). This is emphasised in the passage which relates that Vidura, the uncle of the Pāñjadas, spoke in the language of the mlecha — mlechāvda — to a messenger (1.135.6). Vidura was the son whom Vyāsa fathered on a slave woman and was a conversant therefore with both Sanskrit and the language of mlechas. The sixth century astronomer Varāhamihira, states that among the Yavanas (referring to the Hellenistic Greeks), knowledge in astronomy had stabilised and therefore they were revered as rājas, even though they were mlechas. And a seventh century inscription from Assam refers to one of the rulers, Śalastamba, as the mlechādhināśa. Thus the context of this term varied but it was generally a social marker. The identification of what were regarded as mlecha lands and people could also change over time.

Social markers are frequently forged by those who demarcate themselves sharply from others and this tends to be characteristic of the upper levels of society. The usage of mlecha is no exception.
Among castes, brāhmaṇa identity was created in part out of an opposition initially to the kṣatriya as is evident in the Vedic corpus, an opposition which was extended to the heterodox teachings of the kṣatriyas in the Śramanic sects, and then to the non-brāhmaṇa in general. The dichotomy of the brāhmaṇa and the śūdra became common to virtually every part of the subcontinent. References to the coming of the mleccha creating a social catastrophe of a kind expected of the Kali age as described in the Purāṇas, was frequently invoked when there was a political crisis. The insistence that the brahmanical ordering of the world had been turned upside down on such occasions, was repeated in brahmanical texts each time this ordering was challenged. In the Kali age, which was not a specific historical period but was symbolic of a time when the brahmanical normative order was reversed in practice, mleccha rulers were frequent. Alternatively, the existence of mleccha rulers in itself endorsed the characteristics of the Kali age and required that their rule be described as such.

The social distinctions implicit in these terms applied to people of various religions. The connotation of these terms used in the last thousand years, changed with time, application and context, and the mutation of meaning requires analysis. The less frequent use of Yavana and mleccha for Europeans had been pared down in meaning by the nineteenth century. Some uses of these terms were mechanisms for reducing social distance, others for enhancing it. A major indicator of social distance was caste. Among castes which we now identify as Hindu, there was the separation of the dvija or twice born from the śūdra and even more sharply from the untouchable. Muslim society segregated the Muslim from central and western Asia and the indigenous convert. Even if this was not a ritual segregation, it was an effective barrier, and possibly encouraged the local convert to maintain certain earlier caste practices and kinship rules. At the level of the ruling class, the culture of the court influenced all those who had pretensions to power, irrespective of their religion. Further down the social scale, caste identities often controlled appearance and daily routine. Caste identity, because it derived so heavily from occupation and the control over economic resources, was not restricted only to kinship systems and religious practices. The perception of difference therefore was more fragmented among the various communities than is projected in the image of the monolithic two.

Those from across the Arabian Sea who settled as traders along the west coast and married into existing local communities, the Khojas and Bohras of western India, the Navayatis in the Konkan, the Mappillas of Malabar, assumed many of the customary practices of these communities, and sometimes even contradicting the social norms of Islam. This was also the case with some communities which had converted to Islam. Because of this their beliefs and practices were distinct even from each other, influenced as they were by those of the host community. Today there may be a process of Islamisation among such communities, encouraged by the politics of communalism, which is ironing out these contradictions, but in the past there has been some uncertainty as to whether some of these practices could be viewed as strictly Islamic. There have been marked variations in the structures and rules governing family, kinship and marriage among communities listed as Muslim in the subcontinent. These have quite often tended to be closer to the rules associated with the Hindu castes in the region.

The process of marrying into the local community is unlikely to have been free of tension and confrontation in the initial stages. The orthodox among both the visitors and the hosts, would doubtless have found the need to adapt to custom and practice on both sides not so palatable, but the presence today of these well-articulated communities speaks of the prevalence of professional and economic concerns over questions of religion. Their continuing historical existence points to the eventual adjustments of both the host and the settlers.

Even on conversion, the link with caste was frequently inherent. A multiplicity of identities remained, although their function and need may have changed. Not only was the concept of conversion alien to Indian society, but conversion to Islam remained limited. Possibly one reason for this was that those who introduced Islam could not break through caste stratification. If conversion was motivated by the wish for upward mobility, then even this did not necessarily follow. Conversion in itself does not change the status of the converted group in the caste hierarchy. Even converts have to negotiate a change, and the potentiality for such negotiation would depend on their original status, or else a religious sect would have to evolve into a new caste: a process which has been observed for the history of caste society over many centuries. At the same time, conversion does not eliminate diversities and there would be
a carry over of earlier practices and beliefs. Caste ranking continued to be important to marriage and occupation, for a radical change in ranking would have involved confronting the very basis on which Indian society was organised.

Reports as recent as a century ago point to the continuing role of caste even after conversion. The Gazetteer of Bijapur District in 1884 is an example. The Muslim population was listed as consisting of three categories: Muslims who claim to be foreign, indigenous Muslims but descended from migrants from north India and the local Muslims. Those claiming foreign descent list their names as is usual, as Saiyid, Shaikh, Mughal, Pathan; insist that they are Urdu speaking and strictly Sunni; and many of them held office in the local administration. Like the scribes of earlier times, some sought administrative positions in the emerging kingdoms. The second group, working in a different capacity, claims to have come from north Indian communities such as Jain cultivators, or from the trading communities of the west coast and identified themselves by their earlier caste names. They too maintained that they were Sunnis. Their languages varied with some using Urdu and others Marathi and Kannada, with some even preferring Tamil or Arabic.

The third group, with the maximum number in the district, was in many ways dissimilar. They were local converts, some of whom took on jati names that had come to have a subcontinental status and connotation, such as Momin and Kasab, but many retained their original jati names such as Gaundi, Pinjara, Pakhai, and so on, and identified themselves by the same name which they had used prior to conversion. The jati name was associated with the occupation as had often been so from earlier times. Their occupations ranked them at the lower levels of society as the poorer artisans and cultivators and tended to conform to those which they had performed as members of Hindu castes. Their Urdu was minimal because they used Kannada and Marathi. Most of them are described as lax Sunnis, not frequenting the mosque and instead declaring that they worship Hindu deities, observe Hindu festivals and avoid eating beef. The avoidance of beef may have been to distinguish themselves from untouchables who were not restricted from eating beef. The social and religious identity of this third group would seem to be closer to that of their Hindu caste counterparts than to that of Muslims of higher castes. From the thirteenth century there was intense Sufi activity in the area, nevertheless — or possibly because of the openness of certain schools of Sufi teaching — groups such as these could keep a distance from formal Islam. This was the larger majority of those technically listed as Muslims, who, perhaps because of their lower social status and therefore distance from formal religion, are likely to have been untouched by farwans.

This picture was not unique to Bijapur and can be replicated for other parts of the subcontinent. Such groups can perhaps be better described as being on the intersection of Islam and the Hindu religions. This gives them an ambiguous religious identity in terms of an either/or situation. Were they Hindus picking up some aspects of Islam or were they Muslims practising a Hinduised Islam? Did caste identity have priority in determining the nature of the religious identity and did these priorities differ from one social group to another?

Groups such as the third category mentioned above receive little attention from historians of religion since they cannot be neatly indexed. The same was true of their status in the historical treatment of Hinduism. The study of groups which reflect liminal spaces is recent and here too there is frequently a focus on the curious religious admixtures rather than the social and economic implications which encourage such admixtures. But in terms of the history of religion in the subcontinent, such groups have been the majority since earliest times and have lent their own distinctiveness to belief and to the practice of religion. On occasion, when they played a significant historical role, attempts would be made to imprint facets of the formal religion onto their beliefs and practices. History is rich in demonstrating the mutation of folk cults into Puranic Hinduism. For example, the hero who saves cattle from raiders was worshipped by the pastoralists of Maharashtra, but eventually emerges at Pandharpur under the patronage of the Yadava dynasty as the god Vithala, associated with Visnu. This was also one reason why belief and worship across the subcontinent, even when focusing on a single deity, was often formulated differently, except at the level of the elite who differentiated themselves by claiming adherence to forms approved of by brahmanical orthodoxy.

The evolving of Hindu religions, with specific rituals and practices often emerging from particular castes or regions, was a process which did not terminate with the arrival of Islam, nor did it turn away from Islam. The dialogue between Islam and earlier indigenous
religions, is reflected in various Bhakti and Sufi traditions, which have been extensively studied in recent years. Since the indigenous religions did not constitute a monolith and registered a range of variations, there were a range of dialogues. These were partly the result of such movements having a middle caste and śūdra following even if some of those who led them were brāhmaṇas. Formal religious requirements were often rejected in such groups. But not in entirety. Where a few showed familiarity with philosophic doctrine, others broke away from such a dialogue. The attempts to sanitise the bhakti tradition both in texts recounting the activities of the saints and in modern studies, has been cautioned against.

The famous Hindu-Turk Samvād of Eknāt written in Maharashtra in the sixteenth century, is the imagined dialogue between a brāhmaṇa and a Muslim who seems to have been a maulāna and there is an undercurrent of satire in the treatment of both. The language used by each for the other would today probably cause a riot! The crux of the debate states, 'You and I are alike, the confrontation is over līti and dharma' (v 60). The attempt is at pointing out the differences between facets of what were seen as Hindu and Muslim belief and worship, but arguing for an adjustment. Kṛṣṇa-pāda's Caitanya-caritra-amṛta reflects similar concerns in eastern India — a different part of the subcontinent. The pre-Islamic interweaving of religion and social organisation was not broken and the process of using new religious ideas to negotiate a social space, continued. At a different level but at about the same time, in the seventeenth century, Shivaji was writing in a political vein to Jai Singh about the grave danger facing Hindus and chiding him for his support to the Mughals and offering him an alliance instead. This would be an indication of the perception at elite levels being different from those at other levels and largely conditioned by factors of statecraft and political policy. Eknāt's reading of the situation stands in strong contrast to this.

This also becomes apparent in common cultural codes symbolising an altogether different level of communication. For example, the imagery and meaning encapsulated in the depiction of riding a tiger and who rides a tiger, becomes a powerful symbol. For those who live in the forests, the tiger is the mount of the forest deity such as Dakthin Rai in the Sunderbans. For caste Hindus, the goddess Durgā rides a tiger. Among Nāthpanthis, the nātha was depicted as riding a tiger and using a live cobra for a whip. In Sufi hagiography, the Sufi often rides a tiger and sometimes meets another Sufi riding a wall. At the shrine of Šabbarrimāna in Kerala, the deity Ayyāppan rides a tiger. In many rural areas there is to this day an all-purpose holy man who rides a tiger and is variously called, Barekhan Ghazi or Satya-pir, and is worshipped by all, irrespective of formal religious affiliations. This bond, or even the unconscious memory of a bond binding a range of peoples, had no formal definition. These were not individual deviations from conventional religions. This was the religious articulation of the majority of the people in such areas. When we arbitrarily attach such religious expression to either Islam or Hinduism, we perhaps misrepresent the nature of these beliefs.

The existence of parallel religious forms, some conflicting and others cohering, has characterised Indian society. Some of these distanced themselves from all orthodoxies and attracted those who participated in what might be called forms of counter cultures, preferring the openness of the heterodox. Their ancestry can perhaps be traced through a lineage of thought and behaviour going back to the wandering vīrācās, to the rogues with matted hair and the mendicants of the Upaniṣads, to the siddhas claiming extrasensory powers, the Nātha yogis, and some among the gurus, the pirs and faqirs. This was not invariably a confrontation with those in authority, but it was a statement of social distancing. The power of deliberate social distancing could sometimes help in mobilising popular support, the potential for which was recognised by those in authority. Hence the depiction of rulers paying homage to ascetics in myth, in history and in art. The absence of sharply etched religious identities among such groups, gave them a universality, but was also responsible for history neglecting to recognise their significance. This in turn relates directly to the question of whose history we are writing.

Religious expression, if treated only in formal terms and indexed according to established religions, leaves us with a poverty of understanding. For, together with the formal there is the constant presence of the informal and of beliefs unconstrained by texts. These were often forms of legitimising widespread popular practice which adhered neither to the formal requirements of Islam nor of Brahmanic or Puranic Hinduism. They could be, but were not invariably manifestations of peaceful coexistence or even attempts at syncretism.
It has been suggested that it might be useful to investigate the dichotomy between conversion and syncretism. The question of what historical situations result in the one or the other needs exploration. Syncretism is often a transitory phase for what might in the end become the continuation of two traditions in an unequal relationship although sometimes it may locate the new religion within the existing range. The locating can be based on metaphor which weaves complexities into the manifestation of a religion. Perhaps a new description should be sought for. The degree of institutional support or its curtailment in relation to religious practice and belief would result in varying patterns in the political impact of a particular religion. These variations become significant to questions of conversion and syncretism.

Concepts such as those of composite culture or syncretism are only partial explanations and refer to particular situations. Syncretism would apply for example, to Akbar’s attempts at combining variant religious activities and beliefs by propagating a religion of his own making, or to Einkath in his formulation of a dialogue between the Hindu and the Muslim, the two remaining distinct. Akbar’s efforts were in part a crystallization of the earlier Indian tradition where royalty bestowed patronage on a variety of religious sects, some even hostile to each other. Akbar’s acceptance of a religious pluralism, irrespective of how he formulated it, was significant even to the subsequent intertwining of religion and political policy although this was not characteristic of every aspect of religion during this period.

There were aspects of life in which religion was an identifier but there were also many other aspects in which more broadly based cultural expressions, evolving over time and through an admixture of various elements, gave an identity to a social group. It is these which need to be investigated. Associated with this is the exploration of a multiplicity of causes for particular historical events, causes which include or emphasise aspects of political expediency, economic control, ideological support, social associations, religious practices and custom; the exploration of which provide variations in the ordering of priorities among causal connections and historical explanations.

Composite culture also presupposes self-contained units in combination or in juxtaposition. In the history of Indian society such units would be jatis, sects, language groups and groups with a local identity and would have a history in many cases going back to pre-Islamic times. The juxtaposition would not have been invariably between formal religions, Hinduism and Islam, as is often argued, since this again presupposes the notion of the monolithic community, but more often between variant articulations among the many constituent units of society. These units would have to be historically identified, an exercise which requires a sensitivity to the problems of writing the history of those on the intersections of varied religious expression.

The concern would be with both social dissonances and social harmonies, and a need for adjustment. Occurrences of religious conflict were not unknown, but were more frequently associated with the attitudes of formal religions for whom the conflict was rarely confined to religious factors. It arose more frequently from competing claims to patronage and resources. Perhaps the existence of the parallel, informal religions played a role, not in preventing conflict, but in ensuring that intolerance was contained and remained at the local level, as it had done even in earlier times.

The relationship between segments of society, even those identified as Hindu or Muslim, would take the normal course of jostling for social space and social advancement. This would have involved diplomacy and management or on occasion conflict of a violent kind, particularly where established statuses were being challenged by newly evolved ones, using the patronage of authority. But the conflict at levels other than those of the ruling class, was localised. Friends and enemies were demarcated less by religion and more by the concerns of social and economic realities. Cultural transactions and social negotiations were common but were bounded by the degree of proximity to the structure of power.

To unravel the creating and modulating of religious identities, is a far more complex process than the chronicling of religious activities. I have tried to argue that it is linked to social identities and historical perceptions, which in turn hinge on access to resources and power, or alternatively, to a deliberate distancing from these. I have also tried to suggest that if we move away from the notion of monolithic communities we begin to see the historical potential of understanding how identities may actually have been perceived at points in time, and their multiple manifestations and functions. Exploring the perceptions which people had of each other in the past is not merely a matter of historical curiosity for it
impinges on the way in which current identities are being constructed. An insistence on seeing society as having consisted for all time of monolithic religious communities derives from the contemporary conflict over identities. Yet identities in history are neither stable nor permanent. Inherent in the process of historical change is the invention and mutation of identities. And the identities of the pre-colonial period would seem to have been very different from the way in which they have been projected in our times.

Notes and References

3. This was demonstrated in the debate over the history of the Ramjanmabhumi at Ayodhya. S. Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation*: Delhi, 1996. See especially, K.N. Penikkar, ‘An Historical Overview’, pp. 22–37. The pamphlet published by some JNU historians entitled *The Political Abuse of History*, is concerned with the same issue.
5. As for example in some of the papers included in G.S. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (eds), *Hindus Reconsidered*, Delhi, 1989 and V. Dalmia and H. von Steinborn (eds), *Representing Hinduism*, New Delhi, 1995.
It was only recently proclaimed that the end of history had arrived with the victory of global capitalism over socialism. Yet within the short span of these last few years we have witnessed and are continuing to witness, the most dramatic resurgence of ideologies and aspirations which have a distinctly nineteenth century feel to them. These have brought back history — if ever it had indeed been ended — with a disquieting resonance. I am not referring only to the ethnic confrontations in former Yugoslavia, but more widely to actions motivated by theories of racism and of ethnicity, and of the permeation of religion into politics. Such actions are more than visible in the heart of global capitalism as they also are in the societies of our subcontinent.

The intellectually fashionable periodisation today, speaks of history in terms of the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial. The latter two are familiar and subject to much discourse. But pre-colonial history in India, is largely unfamiliar to those who conduct this discourse. Nevertheless generalisations are made about the pre-modern tradition in India and these frequently derive from what is assumed to be the tradition, an assumption often based on the negation of that which is held to be characteristic of modernity. There is little hesitation in using colonial constructions of ‘tradition’ or ‘community’ or ‘culture’ in speaking of an earlier historical heritage. A familiarity with the various pre-colonial associations of these concepts is regarded as unnecessary. If, as some historians assert, cultural concepts are to be given priority in historical explanation, then surely these concepts have to be viewed from a historical perspective. It seems to me that this is all the more necessary in a society which even today carries so many ‘cultural

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