Shahid Amin,
"On retelling the Muslim conquest of South India"

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CHAPTER 2

On Retelling the Muslim Conquest of North India

SHAHID AMIN

Dawn had broken on the horizon and outside, some peasants were going towards their fields merrily singing the Ballad of Alha-Udal. Kamal looked around quickly... this was Bahraich. He had been sleeping fitfully in the isolation of Shravasti...

He rubbed his eyes again and began to ponder. Allah, Allah—he was all alone in a ghost-town and surrounded by ancient apparitions. Reason fails on such occasions...

The sun came up. While Kamal was crossing the dhak forest which surrounded the nearby stupas he saw a Shaivite sadhu hovering over an old grave...

Kamal knew about the belief that Sufi saints have their own unseen, parallel spiritual administration of the world, their own ranks, grades and so on... So you were conversing with this gentleman who was buried here four hundred years ago? Do you know who he was? Kamal argued. The yogi looked at him, looking very cross. Kamal went on recklessly, his rationalist mind had taken over once again. 'He was one of the soldiers of Salar Masud’s volunteer army—some adventurous youth from Afghanistan or Georgia or Azerbaijan. There had been a skirmish over here too, against Sohal Dev. He must have fallen in battle and buried here. I am a historian, so I know.'—Qurratulain Hyder, River of Fire (Aag ka Darya). Transcreated from the original

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ON RETELLING THE MUSLIM CONQUEST


The politics of the imagination of ‘Hindu India’ has depended crucially on a particular reading of the oppression of the disunited denizens of India by Muslim conquerors and rulers from the eleventh century till the establishment of British rule in the mid-eighteenth century.

Believing in four Vedas, six shastras, eighteen puranas and 33 crore devas Hindus, to begin with, were differentiated according to bhav-bheesh-bhata (language, beliefs and customs), and then Mahabharata caused further havoc. The one or two germs of valour that remained were finished off by the Ahimsa of Lord Buddha... Our ferociousness simply disappeared, our sense of pride deserted us, and as for anger, all sorts of sins were laid at its door. The result: we became devas, mahatma, or for that matter nice fellows [bhadmanus], but our spunk, we lost that. No fire, no spark, simply cold ash, that’s what we became: “nirbhankam deeyta lekith pariya bhassmitya padam.”

And on the other side in the desert of Arabia a soul appeared who was brave as his word, and in whose new religion killing, slaughtering, fighting and marauding were the principal elements...

Thus wrote Mannan Prasad Dwivedi, Bhojpuri poet, Hindi novelist and writer of nationalist prose in an impressive two-part ‘History of Muslim Rule in India’, commissioned by the Hindi-nationalist Kashi Nagari Pracharni Sabha, in the year 1920.

There are obvious continuities here with what Partha Chatterjee calls the ‘new nationalist history of India’ written in Bengali in the late nineteenth century. These vernacular histories transmitted the


'stereotypical figure of "the Muslim", endowed with a "national character": financial, bigoted, warlike, dissolute, cruel'. This distinct history, says Chatterjee, originates in, and acquires its identity from the life of Muhammad. In other words, the dynasty that will be founded in Delhi at the beginning of the thirteenth century and the many political changes that will take place in the subsequent five centuries are not to be described merely as the periods of Turko-Afghan or Mughal rule in India: they are integral parts of the political history of Islam.

The actors in this history are also given certain behavioural characteristics. They are warlike and believe that it is their religious duty to kill infidels. Driven by the lust for plunder and the visions of coexisting with the nympha of paradise, they are even prepared to die in battle. They are not merely conquerors, but 'delirious at the prospect of conquest' (digujyornammat), and consequently are by their innate nature covetous of the riches of India.¹

'Jin janaan twv dhamar nari dharm tinhan tinhan': 'You Muslim foreigners! You have robbed us [Hindus] of [our] dhrama, women and wealth', wrote the north-Indian Hindi poet Bharatendu Harishchandra in 1888, echoing the stereotypical recollection of Muslim conquest and its effect on a Hindu India.² Implied in this memorable couplet by one of the founders of modern Hindi is a conflation of the foreigner-Turk conquerors of north India with the entire population of Muslims in India.

There has been a series of return to this 'communalisation of history', the term 'communal' implying an adherence to narrow religio-sectarian loyalties that colour and impede the development of a properly contextualised historical past and a composite cultural present.³ The most powerful (and very nearly the first) of these critiques came from Professor Mohammad Habib of Aligarh Muslim University.


⁴ Ibid., p. 99.


⁶ For an important statement see, Rohini Thapar, Harbans Mukhia and Bipan Chandra, Communism and the Writing of Indian History (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969).

who, in a series of long essays penned between 1931 and 1952, sought to counter the communalisation of India's medieval history from a broadly Marxist perspective.⁷ Habib's ire was directed particularly against the partisan political scholarship of British administrator-orientalists who had consistently projected 'Muslim India', c. 1000-1700, as a period of oppression and fanaticism from which colonial rule had at last liberated (Hindu) India.

Habib countered by saying that the 'real motives of the plundering expeditions' of the beginning of the eleventh century associated with the name of the notorious despoiler of northern India, Mahmud of Ghazni, was greed for treasure and gold. The iconoclastic pretensions were meant only for the applause of the gallery: that the Muslims of India were not so much the progeny of Turkish conquerors as local converts from the artisanal classes, socially and spatially at the margins of both Hindu society and early medieval towns, and that 'an Indian Muslim had as little chance of becoming a warlord of the empire of Delhi as a Hindu Sudder had of ascending a Rajasthani throne' occupied by Hindu rajas. More importantly for Habib, 'such limited success as Islam achieved in India [as a proselytising force] was not due to its kings and politicians but to its saints'.⁸

With a new faith everything depends upon the method of its presentation; and if Islam in this land had worn no other aspect except the conquering hordes of Ghazni, it would not have been accepted even by a minority of people. But Islam had nobler and better representatives, who far from the atmosphere of court and camps lived the humble life of humble people according to the Sunnat of the Prophet to whom 'his poverty was his pride'. And Hinduism in its cosmopolitan outlook enrolled the Muslim mystics among its rishis, and neighbourly feelings soon developed a common calendar of saints. So it was in the thirteenth century and so it remains today.⁹


⁸ Mohammad Habib, 'An Introduction to the Study of Medieval India (AD 1000–14000)', and 'Presidential Address to the Indian History Congress, Bombay, Dec. 1947', in ibid. The quotations are from pp. 21, 116 and 22–3, respectively.

⁹ Habib, p. 23.
Syncrétism, argues this founder of a 'scientific history' of medieval India, was an ingrained characteristic of the land, and marked by shared cultural spaces. 'The Indo-Muslim mystics, without perhaps consciously knowing it, followed the footsteps of their great Hindu predecessors.' Habib's efforts were to blunt the 'Sword of Islam' motif in the construction of the Indian past, both in the colonial and immediate post-colonial present. The tracing of Indian history as a sort of religious genealogy of India's present-day Muslims, he argued, was to do both the nation and its largest minority a grievous historical wrong. 'It is a grave injustice to the Muslims of India to judge them by the character of their kings, for whom they were in no way responsible, while their religious leaders, their artists and poets, who exercised an immeasurably greater influence over them, are ignored.' However, the colonial masters had mischievously conceived the task of history primers in colonial India as being to disseminate dissonance and 'communal hatred' between the various faiths of the population. To this end—

The peaceful Indian Muslim, descended beyond doubt from Hindu ancestors, was dressed up in the garb of a foreign barbarian, as a breaker of temples, as an eater of beef, and declared to be a military colonist in the land where he had lived for about thirty to forty centuries. All the opposite vices were attributed to the Hindu; weak, emaciated from the excessive heat of the Indian plain, quiet in his manners, unambitious in his outlook, he was obviously a fit object for 'straegiem and spoils' and had no right to complain when conquered by more virile races from colder climes . . .

Year after year, thoughtless schoolmasters have instilled these ideas into the impressionable minds of their pupils; year after year boys, who could not repeat these noxious platitudes in their examinations, were ploughed. The result of it is seen in the communalistic atmosphere of India today . . .

The Hindu feels it his duty to dislike those whom he has been taught to consider the enemy of his religion and his ancestors; the Musliman, bred into the false belief that he was once a member of a ruling race, feels insufferably wronged by being relegated to the status of a minority community. Fools both! Even if the Musalmans eight centuries ago were

as bad as they are painted, would there be any sense in holding the present generation responsible for their deeds? It is but an imaginative [i.e. imaginary] tie that joins the modern Hindu with Harshvardhana or Asoka, or the modern Musliman with Shihabuddin or Mahmud. In this moving passage, penned in 1931, Habib sketched the essentials of what amounts to the professional secular-national view on medieval India. Not that there have been no efforts to counter this perspective by discovering the existence of a 'Hindu India' in the thirteenth century, not that all history primers in independent India have been free of sectarian orientation, intention and effect. Rather, the two strands, which could loosely be termed the secular-national and the sectarian-Hindu, have to come to occupy different terrains.

The result is that every time the 'fact' of the Turkish conquest of Hindu India and of a homogeneous and eternal Hindu community/ nation asserts itself in public discourse—as has happened over the last decade—this receives a predictable riposte. First, the suppositions behind the claim for homogeneity within a segmented and hierarchical Hindu society are shown to be untenable. The second, and by now equally traditional, response is to stress the long trend of tolerance, mutual respect and crossings in India's national past. 'Turkish conquest of North India is either assimilated into the history of the establishment of a centralised agrarian state, the Dalit Sultanate, or gets written over by the longer and gentler history of Indian syncretism."

II

The shared worship of worthies—heroes, warriors, saints—by a multi-religious populace is rightly portrayed in most writings as evidence of the remarkable composite 'religiosity' of the Indian masses. Moinuddin Chishti, Nizamuddin Auliya, Shah Madar, Shailk

10 Ibid., p. 22.
11 Ibid., p. 22.
12 Ibid., p. 12. I have broken this long passage into smaller paragraphs, and marked these by ellipses. Italics in the original.
14 A representative and powerful example of such a response is contained in Amartya Sen, 'Threats to Indian Secularism', The New York Review of Books, 8 April 1993.
Nasiruddin Chirag-Delhi, Fariduddin Ganjshakar, and Khwaja Khizr (the patron-saint of boatmen after whom the Kidderpore docks at Calcutta are named) have all received their fair share in most scholarly accounts of Indian Islam. These personages continue to hold on to their importance in today’s uncertain India. But the focus on syncretism sans conflict amounts to taking only half a step. And this is so because our concentration on inter-communal goodwill and harmony, though necessary, leaves the field of sectarian strife as the special preserve of sectarian and ‘communal’ historians. Mine is thus a plea for essaying non-sectarian histories of conquest and conflict.

Veena Das has argued that ‘It is not the social sciences, such as history and anthropology, which can provide “correct” solutions to contentious issues, but political practices which, regardless of the political practices of the past, can now redefine the collective goods for a plural policy in India which is faithful to the present.’ My plea for non-sectarian histories of the Turkish conquest is not an effort to produce a historically ‘correct solution’ to the recent rise of Hindu majoritarianism in India. It is to complicate the relationship between the ‘facts of history’, popular remembrance, and matters of belief. It is only by this means that one can mount an historiographical challenge to the natural-and-necessary connection between mutilated memories (of the past) and cathartic violence (in the present) made by the votaries of majoritarianism.

My argument is fairly simple: if the sites of the martyrdom of Islam’s holy warriors in India are equally the sites of long-lasting, syncretic, multi-religious cults, then clearly this is neither attributable to popular amnesia nor to the magical triumph of thaumaturgy over ‘facts and history’. The narratives of Muslim warrior saints retailed by balladeers, which bear a complicated relationship with the more standard hagiographies, are evidence of the refashioning of sagas of

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14 Veena Das, Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India (Delhi, 1995), p. 42.


construction of his figure as India's premier Muslim warrior saint that concerns us here. The central text is Mirzā-i-Masūdi (c. 1611) which retails the military exploits of this Sultan-us Shuhda (king/prince of martyrs) in the cause of Islam in northern, western and north-eastern India, ending with his untimely death at Bahrājīn in AD 1033. In this Persian hagiography written by a profile Sufi savant of central Uttar Pradesh, Salar Masud appears as the nephew of Mahmud of Ghazni. Conceived in the holy city of Ajmer, Masud grew up as a youthful holy figure with a Jesus-like countenance, destined to 'take possession of a country which has not fallen into the hands of any Musalman'. He 'excelled in all the arts' at a very young age, was 'pure of body and mind', had a preference for chewing betelnut, and in relation to hygiene seemed almost Brahminically Indian: 'He was constantly performing ablutions, though if he had prayed without bathing, so pure was he in body and mind, it would not have been wrong. He had clean carpets spread where he was wont to sit, he wore pure garments and delighted in fragrant essence and eating betelnut.'

While Masud Ghazi is pious and virtuous, the Hindu rajas he subdues are treacherous. The raja of Rawal tries to poison him with

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all manner of food. Masaud spurns the offer of the raja to 'eat the food he had prepared for his party' with a retort—The Prophets never ate food prepared in the house of a Hindu, nor will I! The raja then entreats him to 'take sugar, rice and all things necessary, and have his food prepared by his own cooks', thereby mainaining both his own Islamic as well as Hindu notions of purity, but even this offer is turned down. Satgun, the raja, then brings huge quantities of sweets—which are commonly acceptable across caste barriers—but Masaud, 'with divine perception suspects the truth' and offers it to some dogs, who die instantly. Masaud turns back and attacks the raja in the town of Rawal: 'unable to withstand... the brave youths' who are led by the twelve-year-old Masaud, 'the unbelievers... were routed, and the Faithful scattered their heads in every street'.

His forays into the foothills of Nepal are in the nature of hunting expeditions during which he encounters a famous sun temple and a holy tank where 'every Sunday the heathen of Bahraich and its environs, male and female, used to assemble in thousands to rub their heads' under the stone image of Bala Rukh, 'and do it reverence as an object of peculiar sanctity'. It was Masaud's wish to 'destroy that mine of unbelief, and set up a chamber for the worship of the Nourisher of the Universe in its place, rooting out unbelief from those parts'. The local chiefs of the country around Bahraich present him with an ultimatum: 'You come from the upper country (mulki-bala dars), and know nothing of these parts. This is the land of nobles; never shall the inhabitants of the Upper Country remain here. Think more wisely of this matter.' Masaud confers, gauges the strength of the enemy, and prepares for battle. Several engagements ensue. Masaud issues orders 'to bring the bodies of the Faithful slain and cast them into the Suraj-kund [the sun-god tank], in the hope that through the odour of their martyrdom the darkness of unbelief might be dispelled from that spot'. Masaud now has a premonition of his martyrdom: before the final engagement Masaud 'distributed all the money and property he had to those around him, and told them to spend it quickly, saying, "Jesus found no use for even his woollen cap and needle, what good shall I get from all this wealth". He then

26 Ibid., p. 133.
27 Ibid., p. 141.

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dismissed the people... [and] retreated to occupy himself with religious exercises: from that time he adjured food and water, eating a large quantity of betel nut and rubbing himself with perfumes... In the final engagement, on Sunday, the 14th of the month Rajab in the year 424 Hijri (15 June 1033) Sahar Deo and Har Deo, with several other chiefs, 'seeing that the army of Islam was reduced to nothing, unitedly attacked the bodyguard of the Prince (of Martyrs).

As the time of evening prayers came on... a chance arrow pierced the main artery in the arm of the Prince of the Faithful. His sun-like countenance became pale as the new moon. Repeating the text in praise of martyrdom, he dismounted. Sikandar Diwana, and the other servants of the loved-one of God, carried him to the shade of the mahua tree [by the Suraj Kund, a favourite resting spot of Masaud's], and laid him down upon a couch. Sikandar Diwana taking his honoured head upon his lap, sat looking towards Mecca, weeping bitterly. The prince of Martyrs opened his eyes but once, then drew a sigh, and committed his soul to God...

A sound of woe and lamentation broke from the people; they wept aloud, and brandishing their swords, rushed upon the enemy of the unbelievers, and gave up their lives... By the time of the evening prayers not one was left. All the servants of Masaud lay scattered like stars.

The story told here is clearly an elaboration on the 'Sword of Islam' motif in India, with its characteristic hyperbole, for the language of medieval conquest and warfare is necessarily one of excess: we are here centuries ahead of today's 'smart bombs' and clinical descriptions of collateral damage. The comparisons with Jesus are intriguing, but the character of the Islamic hero is built within Indian referents: restrictions on the acceptance of cooked food, the chewing of betel nut (and perhaps the betel leaf), etc. It is the centrality of Indian tropes that opens up the possibilities of telling an Islamic tale to a wider audience of unbelievers.

IV

A detailed analysis of the structure of this hagiography must await another occasion. For the moment I wish to draw attention to the way the hagiography is authenticated (a difficult task in every case) with reference to two very different 'histories' that pre-date the literary

28 Mirat-i-Masaud, B.M. Addl. MS 30776, Chapman tr., p. 29.
endeavours of mausteqid—one who has a firm belief in the larger-than-life deeds of a warrior saint. Abdur Rahman Chishti claimed to have based his work on an early Ghaznavid history which 'seems to have been written to satisfy popular curiosity about Salar Masud at a later date'. The fact that this Twarikhi is not mentioned by any writer before or after the writing of the Mirat has not exactly endeared Abdur Rahman to professional historians of the early Ghaznavids. But apart from maintaining that his efforts had been materially assisted by the helping hand of his long-deceased hero (almost a hallmark of hagiographies), Sheikh Abdur Rahman took care to maintain that 'his history had been corroborated by a learned Hindu Brahman of Bahrain from his own Sanskrit sources.' It was thus that Abdur Rahman Chishti literally 'believed his work to be an authentic history of Salar Masud'.

Urdu translations of the Mirat with poetical embellishments were printed routinely in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, and these form the core of the chapbook literature that is sold at the shrine in Bahrain today. A more open-ended crafting of the exploits of Masoud Ghazi takes place in accounts of Muslim balladeers

Thus Muhammad Nazmi: The Mirat-i-Masudi is a history mixed with a liberal supply of pious fiction. The author claims to have based his work on a history by Mulla Muhammad-i-Ghaznavi who is alleged to have been attached to the court of Sultan Mahmud, but this so-called contemporary history is not mentioned by any previous writer. See his works. His time and place of writing are given in the text of the poem, which is signed 'to give expression to the longing for humanity, justice, tolerance and secularism' and not to Abdur Rahman Chishti's remarkable hagiography. See Collected Works of Mohammad Habib, vol. ii, pp. 36–104, and pp. 389–92.


Akbar Ali ibn Mohammad Baksh, Khushab-i-Tariikh-i-Masudi (Lucknow, 1876); Ghotazet-namah-i-Masudi (Kanpur, 1876). See also Mansur Ali Khadim,

(Dafals). It is difficult to establish when these ballads first came into existence, though it is difficult to conceive of devotees covering the long distance from Agra to Bahrain, as testified by the Emperor Akbar himself, with no songs or stories to accompany them. A large collection was made by colonial ethnographers in the late nineteenth century which is not markedly different from my own field recordings in the 1990s. The story of Ghazi Miyan is recounted in several episodes, and only these are common to most locations—as far from each other as Ambala near Delhi, Bahrampur near Bahrain (bordering Nepal) and Banaras in Uttar Pradesh—is about the marriage of the warrior saint. In this ballad, Ghazi Miyan is being ritually bathed preparatory to his marriage when Jaso Rani (Queen Jashoda, also the name of Krishna’s foster mother) arrives, not with the customary gift of milk products, but with pails brimming with the blood of Nand (her husband) and her cowherd subjects, who have lost their cows and their lives to the treacherous Raja Sohal Deo. Ghazi Miyan (here Ghazi Dulha, or the young bridegroom) responds to this ‘Gau Ghar’—‘Save the kine’—cry, gets up from his wedding, and is martyred in the cause of cows/Islam. The poignantness of his martyrdom lies in the tragic reversal of marriage as death.

Devotees form marriage parties and converge on Bahrain every May/June (Jeth) to complete the important ceremony which was interrupted that fateful first Sunday of Jeth in 1033, corresponding to Sunday the 14th of the month Rajab in the year 5424. Because of some untoward occurrence (pachkha)—a blizzard, a drizzle, thunder in the sky—the marriage will not take place: this is, as it were, written into the script. On Sunday, 12 May 1996, an unusually strong wind was read as the sign that stymied the proceedings. So the unfulfilled desire to get Bale Dulha, or the young bridegroom (Ghazi Miyan),

Hazrat Sipah Salar Masud Ghazi (Bahrain, n.d.), Aina-i-Masudi (Bahrain, n.d.).


"Isiliye kahat hain, 'Bale Miyan ka biyam jo barnahar tala rabta hain'. Thus
married is pushed to the first Sunday of the month of Jeth in the next agricultural year, 'when the first mangoes expectedly ripen'. And so it has gone on at least since the great medieval traveller Ibn Battuta's visit to the shrine in 1341.

In a society such as India where segmentation and division into castes and sub-castes are governed by marriage rules, to be a part of the wedding procession (barat) of Ghazi Miyan is to subvert the normal barriers in the creation of community. And this joyous community of the devotees of Bale Dulha becomes possible because popular narratives transform the Islamic notion of shahadat, martyrdom, in the very telling of the story.

In principle the story of jihad cannot be communicated to a 'non-believer', outside the context of the exercise and acknowledgment of just force. Shahadat involves both witnessing 'truth' and martydom, and is to be anticipated and welcomed, as indeed Salar Masaud did on 14th Rabia 424. But even in the Mirat-i-Masaud, a thoroughly Islamic hagiography of a shahed, the martyrdom of Salar Masaud is in fact precipitated by 'Gau Guhar' cry which invades the text so imperceptibly as to go almost unnoticed.

Let us go back to the story of the encounter with the confederacy of rajas at Bahraich. Salar Masaud has received an ultimatum to vacate the hunting ground and retire to the Upper Country (muqta-i-baladar). The prince of martyrs confers with his commanders and it is 'agreed to take the offensive rather than allow the unbelievers to attack them' so that 'with God's help they might hope to conquer'.

The next day they were preparing, when news arrived that the enemy were driving off the cattle. The prince sprang like an angry lion, and beat to arms; buckling on his armour and mounting his horse, he himself put his troops into battle array, and advanced to the attack. 36

In folklore and local histories Ghazi Miyan appears as the protector of his innumerable cows and cowherds. As Zainullah Dafali of Gonda District recounts in May 1996: 'Ghazi Miyan' had 1600 Ahir-cowherds and 125,000 cows. He had given his cowherds the freedom to do as they pleased, what he expected of them was the present [shagun] of milk every eighth day. Raja Sohal Deo got annoyed at this. He said. 'A Turk like him takes the shagun of milk, and I a Khatriya am ignored'! 37 Sohal Deo prohibits the giving of such gifts to the Turkish interloper, but the wives of cowherds disregard him. They take the gift of milk for the marriage of Ghazi Miyan, whereupon Nand, the cowherd chief and his followers, are attacked by Sohal Deo, and Rani Josi rushes to Ghazi Miyan with the cry of 'Save the Cows!' In a late-nineteenth-century rendition, Ghazi Miyan begs his mother's pardon for so abruptly disrupting the marriage festivities in order to respond to the killing of his Gwala cowherds:

'O hear me, mother mine', he said,  
'Great Wrong the king [Sohal] had wrought...  
He hath our kine as plunder seized  
And all our Gwals killed:  
Jaso hath come to me: the air  
With cries for blood is filled.  
O hearken, Saiuddin; the tale  
To me hath Jaso told;  
Who kills my Gwals and steals my kine  
A traitor King I hold.' 38

35 Mirat-i-Masaud, p. 138.  
37 Interview with Zainullah Dafali, Chittawa, near Bahraich, 9 May, 1996.  
38 English translation by William Hoey of a manuscript text of a ballad, 'The Marriage of Ghazi Miyan'.
the city is made to drink milk while reciting an acceptance of the Islamic creed. Certain astrologers, when consulted by Raja Banar (the semi-eponymous ruler of the city) on how to halt the Ghazi’s advance, suggest to him that the Muslim hero is protected by Khuda himself. The ballad recounts how the ‘shameless kafirs’, in order to distract and thwart Ghazi Miyan, then parade their women before him and his companions. The virginal saint is forced to act drastically to avert his eyes from this pornographic parade: ‘Jab aurat par pari nasar, sar kaut aapan jeb mein dhaya—he cuts his head off, pockets it, defeats the raja’s forces while headless, and only subsequently puts his head back on. Unlike the stereotypical lascivious Turk, the first popular Muslim conqueror of North India dies an unwed virgin.

To recapitulate: There is no doubt that the narrative of Ghazi Miyan is about the Sword of Islam. But its denouement—the Ghazi’s martyrdom—is played out in terms of an enduring, non-exploitative relationship between Hindu herdsmen and a Muslim protector of their cows. The martyrdom of conqueror then transforms the Sword-of-Islam motif by creating a third possibility external to itself: we do not have here the usual harsh choice between conversion or death. Protected by a Ghazi in the wilds of the Nepal foothills, herdsmen do not become converts to Islam or even subjects of a new ‘Islamic state’: they become ardent follower-devotees. In effect they give assent to the life of a young Ghazi-Shaheed which has been well-lived on two very different registers: the call of Islam and the call to save cows.

This is a bald summary of an insufficiently told story, but I hope it raises issues similar to the ones I started with. The person Ghazi Miyan and his martyrdom at Bahrach in 1033 are unchronicled. Yet his exploits, as recounted in ballads and in a seventeenth-century Persian hagiography, relate to a history—that of the Turkish conquest of North India. Historically dubious, these retellings nonetheless articulate aspects of a verifiable past conflict, creating, in the process, communities in the present—communities that are based in part on a memorialized recognition of difference and conquest. And this articulation has a definite narrative form which subverts the dominant narratives of difference and conquest. To write now about Ghazi
Miyan involves grappling with more than a narrative understanding of the warrior saint as a just conqueror. It also involves being faced with unexpected 'fabrications' of the story of this virgin Muslim warrior in unexpected quarters. This then opens up the possibilities of creating a new and unfamiliar—and defamiliarising historical narrative of the 'Sword of Islam' in India.

To overlook the story of Ghazi Miyan's life as recounted in the early seventeenth century hagiography and in extant ballads, and to concentrate instead on the well-established syncretic and thaumaturgic aspects of the cult, is in other words to forgo the opportunity of penning an alternative history of the Turkish conquest of northern India: neither Turkiana (the Sword of Islam) nor Sufiana (the gentle ways of the Islamic mystics)—to borrow the polarity of Suniti Kumar Chatterjee—but, rather a history which focuses attention upon this recalcitrant and popular figure of north India's premier warrior saint. The alternative history that I am advocating is not the rewriting of privileged textbook events, which might involve a reworking and contextualising of the fictivities of Mahmud Ghazan's raids in this instance. Rather, I am putting forward the case for alternative histories of submerged, abbreviated, straitjacketed events—recalcitrant events and recalcitrant lives—whose very telling by historians is made possible by calling into question the terms in which the ‘Big Story’ (as the popular idiom of modern times would call it) or the Master Narrative (as we understand it) is told and ascribed to both in the profession and within the nation. Alternative histories are not local histories; they are not alternatives to history; alternative histories are histories written from within the profession; ideally they are accessible also to those outside the profession, i.e. they ought to become, one day, the Big Story.

It serves little purpose to lay down the conditions for the possibility of such histories in advance of the actual writing. With Ghazi Miyan,

40 Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, 'Daraf Khan Ghazi', first published in Vishva-Bharati Patrika (1354 A.), reprinted in Sanskrit, vol. I (1568 B.S.) I am grateful to Gautam Bhadra for drawing my attention to this text and translating from it.

41 Romila Thapar, 'Sonnad: Narratives of a History', Seminar (Delhi), no. 479 (March 1999), pp. 15–22.