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MĪMĀṀŚĀ AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY IN TRADITIONAL INDIA

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The long-held view concerning the absence of a historical understanding in traditional India merits reconsideration on the basis of recent scholarship on the notion of history as such, the rhetorical foundations of historiography, the nature of narrativity, the character of historiography in classical antiquity, and the actual historical documents that are available from premodern India. Yet the absence of a historical-referential dimension of Sanskrit discourse remains a serious problem, one that Mīmāṁśā views on the referential sphere of the Veda may help us to understand. Mīmāṁśā makes the authority of the Veda dependent on its timelessness, and thus must empty the Veda of its historical referentiality. Since learned discourse (Śāstra) in general is subject to a process of "vedicization," it adopts the Veda's putative ahistoricity; and the same set of concerns comes to inform the understanding of the genre itihāsa ("history") and the interpretation of itihāsa texts. History, consequently, seems not so much to be unknown in Sanskritic India as to be denied.¹

The beast lives unhistorically . . . but man is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the past.—Nietzsche

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no issue in Indian intellectual history has been as frequently commented upon and as univocally adjudicated as the tradition's presumed lack of historical awareness. When a contemporary Indologist writes that "[History is] a category which has no demonstrable place within any South Asian 'indigenous conceptual system' (at least prior to the middle of the nineteenth century). . . . South Asians themselves seldom if ever used [a historical] explanation. . . . In a South Asian environment, historical interpretation is no interpretation. It is a zero-category," we are being confronted, not with an extreme formulation, but with a virtually unchallenged axiom.² How far this

¹ This paper is a revised version of a presentation made to the Seventh World Sanskrit Conference (Leiden, 1987). I want to thank Bimal Matilal for his comments on that occasion. Paul Greenough helpfully commented on an earlier draft.

² The quote comes from Gerald Larson, "Karma as a "Sociology of Knowledge" or 'Social Psychology' of Process/Praxis," in Karma and Rebirth, ed. W. O'Flaherty (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1980), 305. The complaints begin with (the incessantly quoted) Alberuni in the eleventh century (Alberuni's India, trans. E. C. Sachau [London: axiom has entered into the more general Western discourse of historiography is illustrated by Georges Lefebvre, who remarks in his influential book, La Naissance de l'hi storigraphie moderne:

Une seule civilisation en est restée, et encore, à ses premiers pas, sur la route longue de l'histoire, celle de l'Inde . . . . D'ailleurs, il fautad, pour observer l'histoire des hommes, que l'esprit indien ait été moins obsédé par de larges visions cycliques de destin du monde (qui rejettent les humains vers une attitude de patience ou de résignation), ou par les impératifs esthétiques qui relègent l'histoire dans le monde merveilleux des légendes. 'Rien d'étonnant,' disait déjà Max Weber, 'que l'Inde n'ait pas développé une historiographie digne de mention.' Pourtant, ce problème difficile serait à reprendre à la lumière des études historiques. . . . Mais laisserons l'Inde, ici comme si souvent, cas difficile. ³

Lefebvre is wise to conclude his remarks with a note of caution. I believe the received view about Indian historical consciousness is constructed out of a set of ideas whose truth can no longer be taken for granted: ideas about history and narrativity as such, about ancient historiography in general and Indian intellectual history in particular. Moreover, even if we grant that there are idiosyncratic features about the traditional Indian response to historical experience, the characteristics of this idiosyncrasy have never been adequately described or convincingly explained.

It will not be possible to develop all these ideas in the space available here. But as my offering in honor of the humane scholarship of Ernest Bender and his long dedication to Indology, I would like to try to delineate programatically if very briefly a range of questions worth pursuing. Then I will go on to examine in a little more detail what I think could be viewed as a confrontation with history on the part of Mimamsa, and the resulting limiting conditions on historiography imposed by the valuation of knowledge in general that Mimamsa, the dominant orthodox discourse of traditional India, articulated.

RETHINKING THE QUESTION OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

On the face of it, the reduction of historical consciousness to a "zero-category" for traditional India is improbable; from the viewpoint of phenomenology, which offers us the most sustained analysis of such consciousness, it is impossible. Historicality (Geschichtlichkeit) is constitutive of human existence, even in "cool" societies where "all generations become as it were contemporaneous." As for Ditheu, his work, and Heidegger argues out at length, "The historical world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it." And we are aware of our historicality even before we thematize it. I cannot in this sketch detail the evidence for the consciousness of such historicality necessitated by, or reflected in, the temporal structures of the Sanskrit language, and the elaboration on these structures in the philosophical systems; or follow through the implications of the popular images of an entropic process in the universe (the yuga theories), of the karma doctrine, of the kingly and spiritual genealogies, all of which map in their own ways causal sequences of events. I want to call attention to something perhaps more fundamental: the implications of the narrativity itself of Sanskrit literature. Much is to be learned from contemporary reflections on the significance of the narrative moment. Consistent with Heidegger's claim that the structure of discourse manifests the historicality of human existence, Ricoeur reasons cogently that narrative itself is the linguistic form of human temporal experience. This includes a sense of historical causality, which emerges from the particular configuration in which narrativized events are grasped together. How Sanskrit texts figure this temporality, and what causal structures are erected in the process, are questions whose answers would, I think, enable us to recover evidence of a profound, if culturally specific, understanding of historicity in traditional India.

I believe this line of investigation is pertinent because of the deeply problematic character of history in and of itself. What, for example, are the precise requirements or characteristics of that "historical" discourse which India is said to lack? Leaving aside the questions raised by identifying history as an "objective investigation of facts" (in view of the now very uncertain status of both "objectivity" and "facts" themselves), we may concentrate on the degree to which historiographical narrative distances itself from other sorts of narrative, particularly literary narrative. In fact, this distance has been very nearly obliterated in contemporary thinking. It has been cogently argued that upon inspection "history" turns out to have unsettlingly close affinities with other types of storytelling; it too perforce makes use of employment via rhetorical tropes (e.g., metaphor, metonymy) and modes (e.g., the tragic, the romanesque) such as "suggest a relation of similitude between [historical] events and processes and the story types that we detected in the Vedic imperfect (see La Valeur du parfait dans les hymnes védiques [Paris: Champion, 1925]).

I do not pretend to have mastered the abstruse texts on this question, the most important of which are those of Paul Ricoeur, especially Temps et récit (Eng. translation. Time and Narrative [Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1984]). An encapsulation of Ricoeur's views may be found in his "The Human Experience of Time and Narrative," Research in Phenomenology 9 (1979): 17–34. I wish to thank my colleague David Klemm for helping me to understand and formulate the implications of Ricoeur's work.
conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings.”

Indeed, for an event to become historical at all, it must be seen to contribute to the development of a plot. Moreover, when history becomes a form of fiction, fiction through its various orders of mimesis begins to recover its form as historical representation. All this should lead us to ponder anew the historical consciousness operative in a wide variety of Sanskrit literary works, and especially in such texts as Kālidāsa’s Rāghuvamśa. No doubt the “historical” poem differs in respects from the “fictional” history of Thucydides (though exactly how has never been spelled out), yet it remains decidedly and meaningfully a form of historical configuration.

The rhetorical dimension of history was acknowledged in the West as early as Longinus, who in On the Sublime writes about historians no differently from the way he writes about dramatists. Historia was scarcely considered, and in some ways scarcely was more than another genre of literature. This suggests that a third, if subordinate area for reconceiving the question of Indian history would be to assess anew the precise differences between traditional Indian texts and the classical models against which these texts are implicitly judged. Recent work on Greek and Latin historiography shows, for example, that, contrary to accepted belief, the idea of history did not constitute in itself an important philosophical, religious, or cultural question in antiquity, and that history was largely marginalized in both philosophical and popular thought. We are reminded, moreover, that, while accurate information may have been history’s defining characteristic in Greco-Roman antiquity, the gods and their acts remained a permissible and important part of its subject matter. The confusion of legend and history with which even Kalhana is repeatedly charged is a criticism of Greek historiography enunciated already in antiquity. Finally, the common notion of a Greek sense of history as such has come under forceful challenge. MacIntyre, for example, writes persuasively about “the absence of any sense of the specifically historical—in our sense—in Aristotle, as in other Greek thinkers,” the absence of any sense of “historicity in general.”

The “history” that forms the yardstick of India’s inadequacy, then, may not be an altogether useful measure, no better than the stories that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries dreamed to be history. Upon reflection we might find ourselves, as we so often and no doubt inevitably have done, looking vainly in ancient India for a category constructed in modern Europe, and a self-deluding category at that.

From a considerably less theoretical perspective, the revision of our view of Indian historical consciousness has already in fact begun. I do not need here to repeat the arguments of Hermann Kulke, who has usefully reviewed the “beachtliche Anzahl von Geschichtsquellen, die durchaus auf ein ausgeprägtes Geschichtsbewusstsein schliessen lassen.”

What


3 Sometimes explicitly: “In the large and varied literatures of the Brahmins, Jains, and Buddhists there is not to be found a single work which can be compared to the Histories in which Herodotus recounts . . . or to the Annals in which Livy traces . . .” (E. J. Rapson, ed., The Cambridge History of India, vol. 1 [New York: Macmillan, 1922], 57).


12 Compare most recently Stieltencron, “Selbst in der einzig drei erzählten Ausnahme, [the Rājatarāṅgini] . . . werden die geschilderten historischen Ereignisse von Fabeln und Legenden füllig überwuchert” ("Das Kunstwerk als politisches Manifest," Saeulum 28 [1977]: 366) and Cicero, “. . . quamquam et apud Herodotum patrem historiae et apud Theopompu sunt innumerables fabulae” (De Legibus 1.1.5).

13 A. MacIntyre, After Virtue, second ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 147, 159.

becomes evident from all this is that the historicity of human existence was cognized, appropriated, and processed in traditional India as elsewhere. But this took place according to a special modality, and subject to categories, ideas, and constraints peculiar to traditional India, with the result that the "historiographical" end-products often differ from what we encounter elsewhere in antiquity. A telling example of this is provided by H. von Stietencron's acute analysis of the new type of Siva Gaṅgādhara motif that suddenly appears in Pallava sculpture in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, which commemorates—in a way, writes—the history of the Pallava defeat of the Gaṅgas.15

The belief in a thoroughly ahistorical Indian culture previously made it impossible to recognize what in the Pallava case are historically meaningful cultural products, and the special sort of historical products these are, telling us both more and less about Indian history and what was historically significant to traditional Indians than we learn, say, about Romans from Roman political statuary. Concrete events are perceived and recorded, while at the same time they are located in a parallel context—the divine—that offers an interpretation of their ultimate meaning.16

THE PROBLEM OF REFERENTIALITY
AND THE POSTULATES OF MĪMĀṂŚĀ

The example of Siva Gaṅgādhara and the essentially historical context of much Pallava sculpture, while it provides a model of how we might recover the dimension of history in traditional Indian culture, yet reminds us of something that as a rule we do in fact miss. It is what Ricœur, in order to avoid the total submerging of history in fiction which rhetorical analysis risks, calls the incipientia to redescription that come from the past itself," that is, the "referential intention."17 At the level of ontology (and in the practice of contemporary "eventless" historiography) this concrete historical referentiality, the realm of "facts," is admittedly problematic, but it remains certainly one element of traditional historical discourse.18 And it is precisely what the products of Sanskritic culture generally speaking lack, and almost completely lack.

To an astonishing degree Sanskrit texts are anonymous or pseudonymous, or might just as well be. The strategy of eliminating from the text—whatever sort of text it might be—the personality of the author and anything else that could help us situate the text in time is a formal correlate of a content invariably marked by ahistoricity. Works on statecraft, for example, describe their subject without specific reference to a single historically existing state. Books on law expatiate on such crucial questions as the relationship between local practices and general codes of conduct without adumbrating any particularized events or cases. Belles-lettres seem virtually without date or place, or indeed, author. Literary criticism prior to the tenth century (Anandavardhana) neither mentions the name nor cites the work of any poet, the ālayamkārikas themselves supplying all examples. Philosophical disputation takes place without the oppositional interlocutor ever being named and doxographies make no attempt to ascribe the religious-philosophical doctrines they review to anyone, unless a mythological personage. Even in those texts whose historical vision I suggest merits particular reconsideration—Raghuvamsa, for instance—referentiality remains somehow unanchored: We are indeed told that it is the Bengalis that Raghu uproots (4.36), the Kalingas he attacks, (38), the Pandyas he scorches (49), the hair of the Kerala women upon which he sprinkles the dust of his army (54), and so on, but if the digvijaya has local contours, it remains essentially timeless. In short, we can read thousands of pages of Sanskrit on any imaginable subject and not encounter a single passing reference to a historical person, place, or event—or at least to any that, historically speaking, matters.


16 Kulke seems to me on the right track when he speaks of the tendency of medieval India “gerade Höhepunkte historischen Geschehens ebenso wie jene des täglichen Lebens aus der ‘ewigen’ Geschichte herauszulösen um durch ‘In-Beziehung-Setzen’ mit dem goldenen Zeitalter und seinen mythischen Heroen [or rather, gods] zu erhöhen, um sie dem Prozess irdischen Vergessens zu entreisst . . .” (Kulke, op. cit., 112; see also pp. 106–7).


Now, regardless how far we problematize “history” by uncovering its rhetorical foundations, eliminating it from premodern culture, and reducing it to an epiphenomenon of European positivism—still, the general absence of historical referentiality in traditional Sanskrit culture remains an arresting, problematic, and possibly unparalleled phenomenon.

What would count as an adequate explanation for such a phenomenon is hard to see. Those that have been offered range from Macdonell’s deduction (widely shared despite its circularity) that “early India wrote no history because it never made any,” to Kulke’s tentative suggestion that the division of labor between brahmins, who controlled the intellectual tools, and kāyasthas, who controlled the archives, made serious historiography impossible.¹⁹ Most explanations, however, reduce in one way or another to Lefebvre’s account of the Indians’ “obsession with large cyclical visions of the destiny of the world” and “aesthetic imperatives that relegate history to the miraculous world of legends.”²⁰ I find this common view unsatisfying because it explains nothing. Besides being static and undialectical (and unwarranted extensions of merely sectional obsessions), it seems to replace one problem with another, or simply to restate or defer it.

Our suspicions are justifiably aroused by any explanation with pretensions to total adequacy; a mentality of this fundamental nature is constructed out of complex of factors. One of these is the context of the production of culture in Sanskrit India and the constraints on what is culturally sanctioned for reproduction in discourse. I would like to explore this context by examining a set of notions developed by Mimāṃsā—the pedagogically and thus culturally normative discipline of Brahmanical learning—which may not only have contributed to discouraging the kind of referentiality we are concerned with, but more, may be said to have sought to deny the category of history altogether as irrelevant, or even antithetical, to real knowledge.

The purpose of Mimāṃsā is to develop principles of interpretation for the sources of our knowledge of dhārma, that which constitutes the good (artha) in human existence (PMS 1.1.1–2). It is the burden of the first chapter of the Pārvavimāṃsāsūtras to demonstrate that it is only through texts, and only certain sorts of texts, that we are able to cognize dhārma. The long and complex argument need not concern us in detail, but there are two key points that need to be mentioned (which are in fact an elaboration of the Mimāṃsā formula, codanāvīm praṃāṇam, codanā praṃāṇam eva). First—this is where we encounter the essential a priori of Mimāṃsā—dhārma is stipulatively defined, or rather posited without argument, as a transcendent entity, and so is unknowable by any form of knowledge not itself transcendent. Second—and this is the basic epistemological position of Mimāṃsā—all cognitions must be accepted as true unless and until they are falsified by other cognitions. The first principle eliminates as sources of knowledge dhārma perception and any cognitive act based on perception (verbal communication, inference, and the like). The commitment to falsifiability (without Popper’s corollary that what is not falsifiable cannot count as true) renders the truth claims of a transcendent source of knowledge—revelation—inviolable.²¹

All that remains to the Mimāṃsakas to prove is that the texts in which the rules of dhārma are encoded are in fact transcendent. A substantial obstacle here, of course, is to establish the possibility of language itself existing outside of social time and space, and it is largely to solve this general problem—by arguing the eternality of the significants, the significandum, the relationship between these two, and that between the words of a sentence and its signification—that a large part of the philosophical portions of Mimāṃsā texts is devoted.²² The specific question of the transcendent character (apauruseyatva, “existing beyond the human”) of the Vedas themselves, which is determinative for the entire system of Mimāṃsā, may be reduced to basically two arguments, the first of less, the second of greater, significance for our discussion.²³

¹⁹ Macdonell, op. cit., 11; Kulke, op. cit., 112.

²⁰ The literature on this subject is quite large. I cite here as an example only U. Schneider, “Indisches Denken und sein Verhältnis zur Geschichte,” Saeculum 9 (1958): 156–62 (who speaks of the “überschwengliche Phantasie” of the “Indian mind,” and attributes Indian ahistoricality to a “starken Hang zum Abstrahieren und zum Theoretisieren”).

²¹ Pārvavimāṃsāsūtras (Poona: Ānandārama Sanskrit Series, rep. 1976), 1.1.1–5; on svaibhāp rāmānya see especially Mimāṃsāsikavārttikā (Varanasi: Tārā Press, 1978), 41ff. (codanāsūtra, 33ff.).

²² Especially PMS 1.1.6–26. and 1.3.30–35. For a recent discussion, see Francis X. D’Sa, Sādhaprāmānyam in Śābara and Kumārila (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1980).

²³ Other arguments are offered, such as those based on the language and style of the Vedas (Tantravārttikā, vol. 1 [Poona: Ānandārama Sanskrit Series, repr. 1970], 164ff.). Despite the importance of the subject for Mimāṃsā, vedāpauruseyatva is not proven with the consistency and cogency
Mimamsa holds on empirical grounds that the tradition of the recitation of the Vedas must be beginningless (uktam tu sabhapurvavat, PMS 1.1.29; cf. Slokaavarti, Vakyadhiratana, vs. 366). But that is not sufficient to prove its transcendence and thus infallibility (something false can be beginningless, the jatyandharmacaramanyakya). It is therefore argued that the Vedas are transcendent by reason of their anonymity. Had they been composed by men, albeit long ago, there is no reason why the memory of these composers should not have been preserved to us. Those men who are named in association with particular recensions, books, hymns of the Vedas—Kathaka, for example, or Paippaladaka—are not to be regarded as the authors but simply as scholars specializing in the transmission or exposition of the texts in question (akhya pravacanat, 1.1.30; purvapaksa ad 1.1.27). Texts for which no authors can be identified have no authors, and this applies to the Vedas and to the Vedas alone (which are thus presumably the only authentically anonymous texts in Indian cultural history).

Signally important is the second argument. The transcendent character of the Vedas, which is proved by the fact of their having no beginning in time and no author, is confirmed by their contents: the Vedas show no dimension whatever of historical referentiality. Allusions to historical persons or to historical sequentiality are only apparently so. For instance, the Vedic sentence “Babara Pravaha [son of Pravaha] once desired...” [TS 7.1.5.4]—which might establish the system elsewhere evinces. For example, in answer to a purvapaksa averring that (whereas words may be eternal) sentences can only be composed by men, Sabha claims the argument has been refuted by the anonymity of the Vedic texts, when that has yet to be proven (Sabarabhya [Poona: Anandasmara Sanskrit Series, 1976], 119.3). The claim for the beginninglessness of vedic recitation is nowhere clearly sustained in the Bhasya (for a late statement, see Sastradipika [Bombay: Nira Wagar Press, 1915], 162.17ff. A final example is the argument advanced by Sabha, ibid., 119.4 (repeated by Prabhakara [Bhati] ad loc. [Madr: University of Madras, 1934], 399) but suppressed by Kumari that I find to be patently circular: The truth of the content of the Vedas depends on their being apauruseya: apauruseyayava, however, is made to depend on the fact that they discuss metaphysical matters—i.e., to depend on the truth of their content.

However unconvincing we may find this argument, Kumari clearly did not, for he reverts to it elsewhere (cf., for example, Tantravartika, 1:166.25–26).

25 It is a principle of Mimamsa interpretation, consequently, that there can be no connection in mantras or arthavadas with noneternal entities (what Kumari refers to as the mantrarthavadyamavayogaparivaranyaya [Tantravartika, 188.14ff.]). I am not sure I altogether understand Kumari’s paradox in Slokaavarti [Vedanitiya, vss. 13–14, p. 672]: If the Veda is eternal, it cannot communicate information about non-eternal things; nor can it do so even if it is not eternal, for then no absolute authority (would attach to any of its communications?).

26 Such a bifurcation in interpretation between the “historical” and the allegorical is familiar from the early Christian tradition, see Press, op. cit., 286.

aitihāsikas from the Nirukta itself, but thereafter Vedic commentators seem to become increasingly indifferent to citing them. From the materials that we do have, however, it is clear that this mode of interpretation consisted in providing the mythological and historical background—the deeds of gods and of praiseworthy men—to which the Vedic hymns were thought to make allusion.

Whatever the scholarly value to us of aitihāsika interpretation itself—an old controversy of no relevance to the present discussion—it is significant in reexamining the question of Indian historical consciousness to know that such interpretation existed. In a large but still meaningful sense, this was historical explanation—as Durga defines it, “aitihāsa concerns causal events, it is ‘what actually happened’” (nidānahātām iti haivam ādī īti ya ucyate sa itiḥāsah)—and explanation of texts that were viewed as what they are, historical-cultural products. Moreover, it should now be clear that in the classical period, crucial postulates about the Vedas, as paradigms of truthful and authoritative discourse, that were developed by those who came to be regarded as their true guardians—the Māmāsmakas—rendered such a mode of understanding impossible, with nirukta or etymological allegoresis eventually becoming the dominant hermeneutic.

The second, or prospective, direction of significance of the Māmāsa conception of the Vedas has considerably more importance for Indian intellectual history. My hypothesis in essence is that, when the Vedas were emptied of their “referential intention,” other sorts of Brahmanical intellectual practices seeking to legitimate their truth-claims had perforce to conform to this special model of what counts as knowledge, and so to suppress the evidence of their own historical existence—a suppression that took place in the case of itiḥāsa, “history,” itself.

I have argued elsewhere at length that virtually all Sanskrit learning in classical and medieval India comes to view itself in one way or another as genetically linked to the Vedas (a process, which we may call vedicization, that is in fact culture-wide). As “knowledge” tout court, and as the sāstra par excellence, as the “omniscient” (Manusm 2.7) and “infinite” (TS 3.10.11.4 etc.) text, Veda is the general rubric under which every sort of partial knowledge—the various individual sāstras—are ultimately subsumed. There are several routes to establishing this consanguinity: through some formal convention embodied in the text—a sāstra will explicitly claim status as a Veda, or establish for itself a paramparā reverting to God, or present itself as the outcome of divine revelation directly to the author or of successive abridgements from an all-comprehensive Veda; through incorporation into a taxonomy (such as the vidyāsthānas) of what constitutes authentic knowledge of dharma, dharma itself having come in the meantime to connote merely the social sanction of a given cultural practice; or through the argument that all traditional Brahmanical learning—smṛti—is derived from lost Vedic texts. There is, in the last analysis, hardly any branch of learning whose texts do not claim authority by asserting a quasi-vedic status in one way or another.

28 See for example Nirukta (Bombay: Nirnaya Sāgar Press, 1930), 10.3.26 (p. 450).
29 Sieg characterizes aitihāsika interpretation as “mythologisch-historische” (op. cit., 7, 19), or “historisch-antiquarische” (p. 35); Horsch remarks that itiḥāsa “[darf] ohne Bedenken als Vorläuferin des Heldenepos betrachtet werden und wird deshalb schon in vedischer Zeit Sagenmotive und heroische Taten von Menschen in ihre Darstellung verflochten haben” (op. cit., 13).
30 Durga on Nirukta 2.10 (p. 81) (cited Sieg, op. cit., 28).
31 I expect to deal elsewhere with the Māmāsa treatment of [parakṛtipurākaparīpa]-arthaśāda.
another. For such a claim to be sustained, it was essential to conform with the putative referential sphere of the Veda.

As for the texts of “history,” itihāsa itself—the great epics, for example, which were early viewed as authoritative social codes and yet like all epics are self-professedly “historical” and referential—how were they dealt with in respect to this process of “vedicization”? In precisely the same manner as any other sort of Sanskrit discourse. They not only come to be numbered among the vidyāsthānas, the sources of our knowledge of dharma, but are fitted into a genealogy similar to that of the Vedas: The “great being” that breathes forth the Vedas likewise breathes forth itihāsa (BĀU 2.4.10). As is well known, the Mahābhārata, the text consistently viewed throughout the classical and medieval period as the principal representative of the genre itihāsa, proclaims itself the “fifth Veda,” as in fact itihāsa and purāṇa had been identified in the latest stratum of the Veda itself (indeed, they are the “Veda of the Vedas,” CHU 7.1.2), while the study of itihāsa is conjoined with the study of the Vedas properly speaking as a cognate activity (ibid.; cf. Yaññavalkya Smṛti 1.39–45, esp. last verse; Artha Śāstra 1.3). Altogether representative of the learned assessment of the character of itihāsa for classical and medieval India is the Nyāyabhaṣya. After asserting that the authority of itihāsa is established by the Veda itself (he cites a Brāhmaṇa passage that calls itihāsapurāṇa “the fifth Veda, the Veda of the Vedas”), Vātsyāyana strengthens his argument by adding, “precisely the same men who saw and expounded the mantras and brāhmaṇas saw and expounded itihāsa...” (NB 4.1.61). So itihāsa itself, “what has actually taken place,” has become merely another textualization of eternity, an always-already given discourse. Like language itself, which in the Mīmāṃsā view expresses in the first instance the general (ākṛti) and not the particular (vyakti), the primary reference of itihāsa, “history,” is now the eternally repeated and no longer the contingent, the localized, the individual—that is, the historical.

In brief, given the Mīmāṃsā propositions about the nature of the Veda, the ascription to other intellectual disciplines, including itihāsa, of Vedic or Veda-like status can only have provoked an accommodation with those propositions. There were two vectors of force in this accommodation. When the dominant hermeneutic of the Vedas eliminated the possibility of historical referentiality, any text seeking recognition of its truth claims—any text seeking to participate in brahmanical discourse at all—was required to exclude precisely this referential sphere. Discursive texts that came to be composed under the sign of the Veda eliminated historical referentiality and with it all possibility of historiography. As for the itihāsa portions of Vedic literature and such works as the Mahābhārata or Rāmāyaṇa, these came to be interpreted in ways that ignore or occlude their constitutive historicality.34

History, one might thus conclude, is not simply absent from or unknown to Sanskritic India; rather it is denied in favor of a model of “truth” that accorded history no epistemological value or social significance. The denial of history, for its part, raises an entirely new set of questions. To answer these we would want to explore the complex ideological formation of traditional Indian society that privileges system over process—the structure of the social order over the creative role of man in history—and that, by denying the historical transformations of the past, deny them for the future and thus serve to naturalize the present and its asymmetrical relations of power.35

34 I am thinking here particularly of the type of allegorical (or better, analogical) interpretation of the Mahābhārata-Harivaṃśa and Rāmāyaṇa that we find occasionally in Nilakantha for the former (who regards the entire epic as nothing other than an “illustration of the essential meaning of all fourteen vidyāsthānas” [ad MBh 1.1.1]), and consistently in the Śrīvaśnavata commentators (Mahēśvaratīrtha and Govindarāja, in particular) for the latter. A similar development might have occurred in belles-lettres. It is of interest that the old distinction between akhyāyikā and kathā, “historical” and fictional stories, which we find still in Bhāmaha (Kāvyālamkāra 1.17: viśteśvādicitārasāṃ as opposed to upādīyavastu) is obliterated in Daṇḍin, who can no longer perceive the fundamental distinction between the two (they form ekā jāthi: Kāvyādarśa 1.23–28).

35 The intractable antinomy of process and system is well described by Andrew Feenberg, Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 172–239. My basic conclusion about the denial of history is at odds with the thesis of Claude Lefort (“Outline of the Genesis of Ideology in Modern Societies,” in The Political Forms of Modern Society, ed. John Thompson [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986], 181–236), which seeks to restrict such a denial to modern society. My work has been much influenced, however, by his characterization of ideology as a “sequence of representations which have the function of re-establishing the dimension of ‘society without history’...”