Postcolonial Transnationalism
14. Islam, Europe and Indian nationalism: towards a postcolonial transnationalism

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As a comparative historian interested in race and colonialism, I sometimes find myself wondering what all the fuss is about when people advocate transnational history. Putting the definitional niceties of the term ‘nation’ aside for the moment and using it, in a vernacular sense, as something like ‘country’, both race and colonialism are inherently transnational phenomena. Confronted with the call to transnationalise, therefore, the historian of race and colonialism might well recognise how Mark Twain must have felt on discovering that he had been speaking prose all his life. Even in internal-colonial contexts, at least one of the contending parties originally came from somewhere else, a fact that continues to demarcate the relationship. As often as not, this demarcation is inscribed in the language of race. I have argued that race is a regime of difference that has served to distinguish dominant groups from groups whom they initially encountered in colonial contexts.1 These contexts were inherently spatial, the groups involved having previously been geographically separate. Thus we might adapt Mary Douglas’ celebrated dictum that dirt is matter out of place2 to human dirt, the racialised, who are constructed as fundamentally contaminatory. It would be hard to find a construct of race that has not involved concepts of spatiality and contamination, usually in association. Hence the frequency with which the racialised are spatially segregated to hygienic ends. This principle has not been particular to the modern discourse of race, which emerged in company with colonies and nations.3 Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, enduring

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proto-forms of European racism, applied internally and externally respectively: to the Jew within, who characteristically ‘wandered’ – a spatial determination – from ghetto to ghetto, and to the Saracen, Turk or Mahomedan, who threatened – and thereby constituted – the borders of Christendom from without.

To deal with race and colonialism is, therefore, to take transnationalism (or, before the nation state, some form of transregionalism) for granted. Again, therefore, what is all the fuss about? It seems to me that transnational history’s radical potential is a matter of its address. Until relatively recently, the call to transnationalism has been largely confined to historians of the United States (this is despite the fact that its principal advocate has been an Australian, Ian Tyrrell). Transnational historians have critiqued the Anglocentric historiography in which the United States has figured as miraculously conceived from Puritan sources, pointing to the formative contributions of Native American, African, Spanish, French, Chinese, Irish and other nations. To this extent, transnational history is a subset of United States minority history writing or, more broadly, of history from below. Self-consciously transnational histories differ from the generality of minority accounts, however, in insisting on the migrations and other global transactions that preceded and continue to underlie minority status in United States society. The nation is not axiomatic. For transnational history – and here pan-Africanism may be seen as paradigmatic – minorities have pre-United States genealogies to which space is central.

But to say that the call to transnational history has been directed to historians of the United States and not to historians of colonialism raises obvious problems. One has only to mention Native Americans or African Americans for the incoherence of the distinction to be patent. Thus the issue is not one of distinguishing between histories of colonialism on the one hand and histories of United States society on the other. It is about how and why that false distinction came to be established. What kind of exceptionalism is it that absolves United States history from – or, perhaps, enclaves it within – the global narrative of European colonialism? In promising to dismantle that solipsistic historiography,
transnational history has a radical potential that can be compared to the postcolonial project of dismantling the sovereign subjecthood of the West. For this potential to be realised, however, transnational history will have to extend its purview beyond its current, unfortunately narcissistic preoccupation with White-settler societies.\(^6\) Accordingly, while it is refreshing that transnational national mythology has historical correspondences with that of the United States, we should remain mindful of the varied range of colonial social formations.

The exclusion of minority genealogies in favour of a dominant group’s monopolosing of the national narrative has been a commonplace of accounts of the nation since Ernest Renan’s famous 1882 lecture on the forgetting that is central to nationalism.\(^7\) This kind of selective amnesia would seem to be particularly congenial to settler-colonial nationalism. After all, settler colonialism strives for the elimination of the native in favour of an unmediated connection between the settlers and the land – hence the notion of building clone-like fragments of the mother country in the wilderness. In this fantasy, nobody else is involved, just settlers and the natural landscape. Such a situation is clearly conducive to solipsistic narratives. On this basis, it is not surprising that transnational history should be developing in settler societies.

Yet the screening-out of other contributions may well be endemic to the nation state formation itself, rather than particular to its settler-colonial variant. This consideration suggests ways in which we might widen the scope of transnational history writing. Moreover, the very distinction between European and settler societies occludes the actual histories of European state formation (think, for instance, of Norman England, the Basques in France and Spain, or the Nazi lebensraum in eastern Europe). In this light, one could cite the Comte de Boulainviller, in early eighteenth century France, as a metropolitan precursor to self-consciously transnational history writing. In a nice conflation of race and class, Boulainviller reduced French history to a contest between a ‘race’ of external conquerors, the Franks, and the native Gauls, the invaders becoming the ruling class by right of conquest.\(^8\) In classic settler-colonial style, this

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involved Boulainviller in basing his own class’s claim to dominance on their not being native. In settling, though, and asserting their transcendent bond to the territory of France, they became so. By contrast, European authorities in franchise colonies such as British India or the Netherlands East Indies did not, in the main, come to stay. They remained as agents of the metropolitan power, their agenda being the aggrandisement rather than the cloning of the metropolis. In such colonies, nationalist momentum came from among the ranks of the natives. They, rather than the colonisers, proclaimed an eternal bond between themselves and the land. Yet the historiography of franchise-colonial nationalisms, unlike that of settler nationalisms in dominion territories, is unproblematically transnational. There has not, for instance, been a struggle to write Indians into the history of British India to compare with the scholarly energy that had to go into finding Aborigines a place in the Australian national narrative. In this light, the core issue that transnational history problematises is the core characteristic of the nation state itself: the assertion of privileged affinities between particular groups of people and particular parcels of land. Stated in these more general terms, transnational history has no necessary confinement to settler societies in the West. I wish to argue that, by adopting a transnational approach to other situations, we can contribute to the postcolonial project that Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed the provincialising of Europe.

In what follows, I intend to revisit a topic that I have previously written about, only this time in a more self-consciously transnational manner. In a critique of Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, I noted that, for all their differences, Hindu nationalism and British colonialism had concurred over the exclusion of Indian Islam from the colonial encounter. In particular, they had shared the assumption – embarrassing for anti-colonial nationalists, affirming for their colonisers – that key features of Indian nationalist discourse were themselves a colonial endowment inherited from the European rationalist tradition. Using the example of the early nineteenth century Bengali reformer Rammohun Roy, I argued that this widely-held assumption was not only misleading but could only be maintained so long as the Indian Islamic tradition was overlooked; that key rationalist premises attributed to the European enlightenment could be found already expressed in Indian Islamic discourse, where they testified to a post-Hellenistic Arabic-language inheritance which, as a result of the translation

9 Though this admittedly leaves the question, influentially insisted on by the Subaltern Studies group, of which Indians have been written about.

movement in al-Andalus, had also bolstered the European Renaissance. In returning to Islamic rationalism by way of India, colonising Europe was returning to its own repressed. Bringing a transcontinental Islamic inheritance together with Indian nationalism and British colonialism, the analysis was manifestly, albeit inadvertently, transnational (not to say transhistorical). Nonetheless, al-Andalus hardly fits the nation state category, while the ‘nation’ of Indian nationalism was still at a very early stage of its imagining, so the discussion was also somewhat unorthodox in transnationalist terms – as, of course, was its application to a non-Western, non-settler colonial context. Moreover, the analysis sought to decentre Islamophobia, instancing the contradictory variety of Islamophobic legacies involved in the current global malaise. On all these grounds, and trying to keep repetition to a minimum, I would now like to return to the analysis with a more informed transnational awareness, in the hope of casting some light on what might be called the creole genealogy of Western imperialism.  

A derivative discourse?

Opening the 1933 celebrations to commemorate the centenary of Rammohun Roy’s death, the great Rabindranath Tagore was unstinting:

Rammohun Roy inaugurated the modern age in India. He was born at a time when our country, having lost its links with the inmost truths of its being, struggled under a crushing load of unreason, in abject slavery to circumstance. In social usage, in politics, in the realm of religion and art, we had entered the zone of uncreative habit, of decadent tradition, and ceased to exercise our humanity. In this dark gloom of India’s degeneration Rammohun rose up, a luminous star in the firmament of India’s history with prophetic purity of vision, and unconquerable heroism of soul. He shed radiance all over the land: he rescued us from the penury of self oblivion.

Tagore’s panegyrical is in keeping with a well-established historiographical formula that unites an otherwise diverse range of scholars, both Hindu and

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11 I wish I could claim this phrase, which I have adapted from Richard Handler and Daniel A. Segal, ‘How European Is Nationalism?’, Social Analysis, no. 32, 1992, pp. 1-15, at p. 4.
13 Reference by family name (e.g., ‘Tagore’) is a European convention; reference by given names (e.g., ‘Rammohun’) is a Bengali one. With obvious exceptions, I shall generally follow the European convention (which, apart from anything else, facilitates the checking of citations). In conformity with his own practice, I use the conventionally anglophone Rammohun Roy rather than the transliterate Rammohan (or Ram Mohan) Ray.
European. Rammohun, the ‘father of modern India’, is seen (whether approvingly or with resentment) as a conduit between enlightened Europe and a regressive Brahmin elite, who were awakened and vitalised by his campaign to reform Hinduism. This campaign, which Rammohun conducted in English and other languages, harmonised with the ideas of European philosophers and missionaries, in particular orientalist scholars who had devoted themselves to recovering Hinduism’s pristine purity from beneath the corruptions that, in their view, had accumulated over the centuries that had elapsed since its original enunciation. In its orientalist rendering, pristine Hinduism bore a distinct resemblance to the monotheism and ethical precepts of the Christian West. Thus the price of Hindu redemption was the predicament that Partha Chatterjee has termed derivativeness. ‘As inaugurator of modern India, therefore, Rammohun pioneered the embarrassing irony that the emancipatory ideology with which Indian nationalism sought to mobilise an anticolonial movement was itself a colonial endowment’.14

In the sectarian balance, Hindu renaissance is synonymous with Muslim decline. In claiming to have recovered Hinduism’s lost glories, European Orientalists abetted a Brahminical narrative in which the intervening era of Muslim rule figured as a period of darkness and decay that separated an interrupted Hindu golden age from the present. In colonising India, the British East India Company was also delivering it from Islam. Through an analysis of Rammohun’s reformist creed, I hope to show that Indian nationalism’s derivation anxiety required not only the humiliation of colonial conquest but also the suppression of Islamic discourse as conditions of its possibility. The historical process of nationalist self-fashioning entailed the discursive erasure of this fact. Rammohun’s career occupies a crucial transitional site in this regard, since the premises that were to secure his place as founder of modern India can be found already formulated in a Muslim-addressed tract written in Persian and Arabic that this Hindu figure published in 1804, over a decade before he embarked on the anglophone career of reform on which his reputation is based, and well before he had learned enough English to have had any meaningful exposure to European ideas.

The existence of this tract, the Tuhfat-ul Muwahhidin (‘Gift to Monotheists’), is well enough known.15 The problems treated in the Tuhfat are classical ones. Their specification and assemblage, together with the propositional protocols employed, bear the unmistakable imprints of both Judaic and Hellenistic reasoning. Contrary to Eurocentric assumptions, however, this does not entail


that they were taken from European sources since, in addition to sharing in Christianity’s Hebraic inheritance, the Islamic philosophical canon incorporates a Greek legacy which is as profound as that of the Pauline West. This chapter is not concerned with Rammohun’s individual qualities but with the optic that his career provides into the historical terrain that he so conspicuously occupied. His significance is extrinsic. Focusing on the *Tuḥfat* enables us to see not only that Indian nationalism (at least, in its Bengali origins) was structured by the exclusion of Islam, which is hardly news. It also enables us to see the nationalist predicament of derivativeness in a reciprocal context. For the exclusion of Islam is also foundational to Western discourse – where, too, it represents a form of derivation anxiety.

In seeking to provincialise Europe in this way, the intention is not to metropolise anywhere else but to underscore the inter-textuality of the major discourses involved. This chapter will briefly survey the community between Islamic and Western discourse, on which basis it will identify the Islamic character of the *Tuḥfat* and illustrate the extent to which Rammohun’s post-1815 anglophone reformist ideology continued its distinctive principles. In conclusion, the chapter will consider some of the diverse ways in which the exclusion of Islam has been reproduced and maintained in the historiography of Indian nationalism. Taking salient examples from a varied range of histories – Christian-hagiographic, Hindu-nationalist, secular-liberal, Marxist, postcolonial – we shall see how, beneath their otherwise considerable differences, these accounts agree on excluding the Islamic inheritance that Rammohun Roy brought to the enunciation of Indian (proto-) nationalist discourse.

**Arabic into Latin**

In al-Andalus (Iberia), in the eleventh century of the Christian era, Ibn ‘Abdun warned his fellow Muslims about the activities of the translators: ‘One should not sell scientific books to Jews or Christians ... since they translate these scientific books, attributing authorship to their own bishops and coreligionists when they are actually Muslim works’. Since Ibn ‘Abdun’s time, a minority tradition of Western scholarship (including Bacon, Leibniz, Voltaire, Gibbon and Priestley) has sought to rectify the suppression of Europe’s scientific, philosophical and cultural debt to the Islamic or Arab-speaking world, a debt which was incurred in al-Andalus. The background to the Andalusian

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achievement can be briefly outlined. In the wake of the division of the old Roman Empire into Eastern and Western blocs that were comparatively watertight (Sicily, extending up to Naples, being an exception), a rough distribution of the cultural inheritance of classical antiquity obtained whereby, while the Eastern (Byzantine) empire maintained the scientific, philosophical, literary and cultural legacy of Greece, the Western (or ‘European’) empire found itself the repository of the relatively reduced inheritance of the Latin world. During the momentous century or so following Muhammad’s death, Islam spread outwards from the land of its origins with an unstoppable vitality that exceeded even that of imperial Rome. In the process, most of Byzantium and Sassanian Persia were taken over and their Greek philosophical and scientific learning (though not the poetry and


translated into Arabic, usually from the Syriac or other Byzantine language into which it had earlier been translated but sometimes from the original Greek. Over the next century or so, this learning was subject to the vicissitudes of survival under the aggressively militaristic regime of the Ummayyad Caliphate, but it managed to live on in the eastern outposts of the Islamic empire, particularly in exiled Nestorian centres of learning in eastern Persia, where it was augmented with scientific (especially astronomical) and mathematical knowledge emanating from India. With the ascendancy of the ‘Abassid Caliphate and the shifting of the political centre of the Islamic world to Baghdad, science and philosophy were actively encouraged and magnificent libraries assembled. The exiled legacy of ancient Greece was brought to the centre of Islamic culture, where, among other things, it was enlisted to buttress Islam’s dialogic armature in response to disruptive theological problems, concerning revelation, monotheism, predestination and the like, which had arisen through contact with the different faiths of the conquered peoples. To secure key elements of the Islamic tradition which were still being transmitted orally, the ‘Abassid caliphs sponsored the wholesale commitment of knowledge (including the Qur’an) to Arabic script, in the course of which project, during the eighth and ninth centuries of the Christian era, most of the Greek philosophical and scientific sources available today were translated into Arabic.

Somewhat prior to these latter developments – in the early eighth century A.D. – and on the north-western frontier of the Ummayyad empire, Visigothic Andalusia was conquered in a series of expeditionary raids carried out by combined forces of Arabs and Berbers and brought under the administrative control of Qayrawan, the regional headquarters of the African segment of the empire, situated in modern Tunisia. Though the Berbers had adopted Islam,


22 The Greek originals of a number of important texts are still missing, so these remain available only from the Arabic. For examples, see Badawi 1968, *La transmission de la philosophie grece au monde arabe*, pp. 119-80; Rosenthal 1992, *Classical Heritage*, p. 12; Walzer 1945–46, ‘Arabic Transmission of Greek Thought’, p. 164.
they maintained cultural and linguistic separateness and continually agitated against the overlordship of the Arab minority. This antagonism continued into al-Andalus, so that, when the ‘Abassids expelled the Ummayyad caliph ‘Abd ar-Rahman and his followers from Damascus in 750 A.D. and moved the capital to Baghdad, the fugitive ar-Rahman sought allies amongst the disaffected Berbers, at first in Africa but finally and successfully in al-Andalus, where he established his family dynasty from Cordoba in 755 A.D.

Despite the administrativ e and political dividedness of the Islamic world, a comparatively high degree of logistical cohesion was maintained. Relegated to provincial status in the far west, the Ummayyad sultans in Cordoba displayed an attitude toward science and learning which was markedly different from that which had characterised their predecessors in the Damascus Caliphate. They patronised the importation of intellectual and scientific (especially medical) knowledge from the eastern centre and attracted a number of polyglot Jewish intellectuals from Mesopotamia and elsewhere. In its third century (i.e. during the 10th century A.D.), the Ummayyad dynasty in al-Andalus produced two rulers, ‘Abd ar-Rahman III and al-Hakam II, who successively presided over a period of extraordinarily fruitful interchange and collaboration between Muslim, Jewish and Christian intellectuals, all writing in Arabic, in Cordoba, Toledo, Seville, Granada and other centres. By this stage, whatever a scholar’s religion, the language of scholarship was definitively Arabic, and Muslim faith had no necessary connection to Arab ethnicity. In following centuries, the work of translation having been effectively completed, most of the greatest developers of the Hellenic tradition (Ibn Rushd [Averroës], Ibn Sinha [Avicenna] and Ibn Maymun [Maimonides] to cite but three) took their Aristotle, their Galen and their Neoplatonism from Arabic sources and did not even know Greek. The Greek only lived in the Arabic.

This was the world of learning that became available for translation into the Latin of the Western Empire as a result of conquest – or, more specifically, of the Reconquista, the Christian jihad into al-Andalus through which an emergent Europe embarked on the Crusades. It should be stressed that ‘world’ of learning here signifies a dynamic tradition which, far from acting as an inert or neutral transmitter, creatively and critically engaged with the Greek legacy over a long period of time, extending it, changing its emphases, reshaping it and

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23 They became caliphs following a declaration by ‘Abd ar-Rahman III in 929 A.D.
incorporating new elements from outside. The Reconquista brought about a coexistence of Latin speaking (or, at least, writing) conquerors and Arabic speaking locals, generating a requirement for dialogue and, accordingly, for translations and translators. From the thirteenth century on, translation into Latin was increasingly done directly from the Greek. Prior to this, however, from the tenth-century translations of information concerning the astrolabe to the comprehensive alienation of knowledge that fuelled the intellectual transformation that Charles Homer Haskins termed the ‘Renaissance of the twelfth century’, Europe (or what was to become Europe) principally derived its scientific and philosophical advancement from its exposure to the Arabic tradition. Under different circumstances, things could have been otherwise – after all, the Greek texts had theoretically been available in western Christendom all along. As Haskins again put it, however, the Latin world ‘could have got much Greek science in this way, but for the most part it did not’.


27 Though such diffuse processes are hard to date with any degree of clarity, it seems fair to nominate the (re)capture of Constantinople in 1204 A.D. as a turning-point in the shift to translation directly from the Greek. It can be difficult to detect the use of Arabic texts where translators suppressed their reliance on them (d’Alverny 1982, ‘Translations and Translators’, pp. 423-4; see also George Makdisi 1976, ‘Interaction Between Islam and the West’, Revue des Etudes Islamiques, vol. 44, pp. 287-309, at p. 308).

28 Haskins 1927, Renaissance of the Twelfth Century.

Some scholars have attributed the European Renaissance and (by implication at least) the bulk of global modernity beyond it to Islamic inspiration, while others have dismissed such claims as emanating from naive enthusiasm, Islamic conviction or both. The non-committed have occupied a surprisingly narrow stretch of middle ground. Through all this, the integrity of the Islamic Other has remained robust, since almost no-one has problematised the process whereby the substantial commonalities between Islamic and Western discourse have persistently been erased in favour of a stark and mutual contrariety (a notable exception is the work of Maria Rosa Menocal). Focusing on the commonalities linking Islam and the West is at least superficially at odds with the stress on otherness that runs through Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Incommensurability does not plausibly account for the intensely specific virulence that has animated Western discourse on Islam. Islam gets under – more accurately, is already under – the skin of the West. The two have never been separate after all. Not only do we share a book, but Muslims have had the blasphemous temerity to find our Saviour deficient from within and to claim that an impostor has furnished them with the remedy. Pagans, savages or barbarians are merely ignorant; they cannot


blaspheme. Nor can they frustrate the coming of universal Christianity. They are safely Other. To appreciate the intensity of Western discourse on Islam, we should recognise it as not simply a species of undifferentiated Othering, but as a quite specific suppression of sameness. This consideration further underlines the historical contingency of the convergence between European Islamophobia and Hindu communalism, whose history is not marked by this particularity of European discourse.

Mughal to British

In the wake of the Clive’s victory at Plassey in 1757 and the subsequent transfer of the Mughal right to administer and tax (diwani) to the East India Company in 1765, the political and economic bases to Muslims’ marginalisation were spatially correlated in a general shift whereby major foci of power and learning followed the gravitation of economic activity to the British centre. The formative years of the British regime saw Muslims generally left out of the economic, political and cultural boardrooms of the colonial interchange. As a Hindu bhadralok (member of the urban elite) steeped in Muslim culture, Rammohun is, therefore, a transitional figure who still evinces a confluence that would be emphatically undone in later colonial discourse.

Born into a Mughal court and dying in England, Rammohun even exceeded at being transitional. In between, his career encapsulated the sea-change going on around him. After a period of youthful travelling which seems to have included some formal Islamic training at Patna, he accumulated considerable wealth through commercial dealings with British interests and took on a number of financial and estate management posts with British employers, in particular John Digby. In 1815, more than ten years after the publication of the Tuhfat, he settled in Calcutta, where he took up the tireless and multilingual public attack on corruptions and abuses for which he was to become renowned, rapidly antagonising Hindu orthodoxy by translating sacred writ into popular and even foreign languages. On the basis of his reading of the Hindu (which, for him, meant Vedantic) canon – a monotheistic, rationalist and socially reformist

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34 This recognition also has the virtue of restoring the Islamic specificity to Said’s Orientalism (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978), whose unwarranted extension to all and any alterity has, in my view, robbed it of its bite.
construction of sacred writ that strikingly resembled that of the European Orientalists – he launched a campaign to clean up Hinduism, singling out polytheism, idolatry and sati (burning widows alive) for particular attention. In contrast to European critics of contemporary Hinduism, however, Rammohun was even-handed in his denunciations, applying the same standards to Christian practices as he did to Hindu or Muslim ones. In my view, the adroit switch whereby he repeatedly held British institutions accountable on their own terms represents one of the formative moments of Indian nationalism. Accordingly, while he so admired Christian teachings that he learned Greek and Hebrew in order to translate the Gospel, his resultant Precepts of Jesus contained only the moral and social teachings, omitting the miracles, divine incarnation and other supernatural machinations that he regarded as irrational and absurd in popular Hinduism. Consistently, rejecting the Christian Trinity and Hindu polytheism alike, he set up the first public unitarian association in the world (the Atmiya Sabha, soon to develop into the Brahmo Samaj, whose influence on the nationalist movement would be disproportionate to its numbers,37) to which he attracted, among others, the Scottish evangelist William Adam (who thereby became known among the European community as the second fallen Adam!). In this and many other regards, Rammohun’s public career articulated the characteristically nationalist demand for Indians and Europeans to be subject to a common set of rational universal conditions.38

The decade that intervened between the appearance of the Tuhfat and the commencement of that public career has led to the Tuhfat’s being seen as disconnected from Rammohun’s historical mission. In consequence – and much more significantly – the genealogy of Indian nationalism is disconnected from the Indian Islamic tradition. As we shall see, however, there was no rupture between the Tuhfat and Rammohun’s later programme. The decade in question

37 The first Unitarian chapel had been founded in London by Theophilus Lindsey in 1774, but propagation had been a matter of private rather than public contact (the first service, for instance, was not publicly advertised). The first Unitarian periodical (Belsham’s Monthly Repository of Theological and General Literature) did not appear until 1806 (i.e. after the Tuhfat), while the first Unitarian Associations in Britain and the USA were both established in 1825 – i.e. ten years after Rammohun’s Atmiya Sabha. See E. M. Wilbur 1945, A History of Unitarianism – in Transylvania, England and America (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), pp. 285-6; S. Lavan 1973, ‘Raja Rammohun Roy and the American Unitarians: New Worlds to Conquer (1821–1874)’, in Barbara Thomas and Spencer Lavan (eds), West Bengal and Bangla Desh: Perspectives from 1972 (East Lansing, MI: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University), p. 3. Conrad Wright dated American Unitarianism proper from 1805, the year of Henry Ware’s election as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard. Wright 1976 [1955], The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America (Hamden, CT: Archon Books), p. iii.

was probably taken up with such mundane but demanding distractions as the making of money and the learning of English. Thus we turn to the *Tuhfat*.

**The Tuhfat**

Rammohun’s object in the *Tuhfat* is an ‘enquiry into the truth and falsehood of various religions’ (p. 19), an undertaking which has had him dubbed the founder of a characteristically post-Enlightenment enterprise, the science of comparative religions.39 Again and again, in impeccably rational-empiricist style, he opposes the dead weight of unreflective habit (fostered by those with a vested interest in the maintenance of traditional institutions) to the pristine endowment (intuition, reason, sensory experience) which affords humanity the ever-present possibility of true belief (‘Oh God give me strong power for making distinction between habit and nature’, p. 9). True belief is attainable ‘without instruction and guidance from anyone simply by keen insight into, and deep observation of, the mysteries of nature’ (p. 8). These capacities are manifest and irrepressible, as evidenced by the fact that people everywhere and at all times acknowledge ‘the existence of One Being’ (p. 1), even though they conceptualise that Being in different ways. Despite this, however, divergent concepts of the attributes and requirements of the One Being (‘an excrescent quality’, p. 1) engender sectarian conflict. In common with the *philosophes*, the *Tuhfat* attributes distortions of the truth to priestcraft, the founders of religion being the ‘first class of deceivers’ (p. 8), who exploit the credulity of the common people by claiming miraculous or supernatural corroboration for their missions. Once their followers have accepted illogical or impossible beliefs, the way is open for their tolerance of correspondingly baneful social practices. Pre-eminent among such illogical beliefs is idolatry, which Rammohun excoriates tirelessly. He is also concerned to discredit miracles, noting drily (p. 11) that people are less gullible when it comes to concerns more worldly than religion. Where phenomena defy human understanding (as in the cases of ‘many wonderful inventions of the people of Europe and the dexterity of jugglers’, p. 10) then intuition would prefer to attribute the failure to the limitations of our own understanding than to ‘some impossible agency inconsistent with the law of nature’ (p. 10).

Whether in the *Tuhfat* or in his later works, Rammohun’s writings only make consistent sense when they are read in relation to a constant set of strategic ends. Throughout his career, his sovereign end was equating monotheism with social benefit. So far as monotheism is concerned, Rammohun’s problems start with the *Tuhfat*’s founding premises. For it is either the case that acknowledgement of the One Being is universal or that illogical beliefs are producing polytheism and idolatry, but surely not both. Indeed, if it really were the case that

monotheism was general, the *Tuḥfat* would not have had a problem to address. Thus the appeal to popular sagacity which underlies the claim that monotheism is generally observable is starkly at odds with the *Tuḥfat*’s contemptuous reference to the ‘*Muquallids* or common people following that religion [idolatry] by blind imitation’ (p. 5). The point is not, of course, to critique the *Tuḥfat* but to show that its inconsistencies are consistently motivated by Rammohun’s pedagogical ends. Where they conduce to social benefit, for instance, religious beliefs that cannot be substantiated by either observation or reason are nonetheless excused the charge of illogicality. Hence irrational beliefs in souls and after-lives are to be excused in view of the restraining fear that they exercise, whereby people ‘refrain from commission of illegal deeds’ (p. 7). On this basis, even the founders of religion need not all be deceivers (Rammohun, after all, was later to become one himself). It depends on whether or not their teachings conform to Rammohun’s particular version of the truth. This nexus in the *Tuḥfat*’s thinking – the necessary interdependence of dualistic monotheism and social welfare – lies at the heart of the difficulty that Rammohun was trying to overcome in 1804. Associated with the link between monotheism and social welfare is Rammohun’s dismay at the cruelty and corruption occasioned by religious sectarianism, which anticipates the Brahmo Samaj’s linking of theistic universalism with social harmony. Similarly, as noted, Rammohun’s desire to refute prophecy and revelation while privileging particular canonical traditions prefigures his selective invocation of the Vedanta.

The Orientalist narrative was inherently cyclical: a golden age had given way to an era of corruption from which redemption now offered itself. Given the Edenic structuring of this narrative (innocence – fall – redemption) the extent of its distribution through Western discourse is hardly surprising. By the same token, nor is it surprising that it should also structure Islamic discourse. In bringing together questions of reason, revelation, tradition and social welfare within an Edenic framework (founding truth – distortion – return to truth) the *Tuḥfat* was conforming to a pervasive model. These *Tuḥfat* themes continue to preoccupy Rammohun through his post-1815 writings, where they have been held to testify to a Christian and Utilitarian influence. I am not suggesting that the later Rammohun was unaffected by imported ideas – given the extraordinary historical foment in which he found himself, this would be unthinkable. Nonetheless, a reading of the *Tuḥfat* shows that the principles of his anglophone ideology were already formulated before he could have been significantly exposed to such influences. In other words, Rammohun’s endorsement of foreign doctrines arose from their concordance with a position that he had previously developed rather than from their novelty. Moreover, the *Tuḥfat* treats issues and themes which had been extensively discussed in Indian Islamic disputation. Rammohun’s characteristic arguments were recognisably drawn from this
indigenous tradition, which had been developing in India for the better part of a millennium.\textsuperscript{40} 

Quite apart from these considerations, the idea that he could have been familiar with English writings in 1804 is rendered implausible by John Digby’s account of the timing of Rammohun’s acquisition of English. By 1801, he ‘could merely speak it well enough to be understood on the most common topics of discourse, but could not write it with any degree of correctness’.\textsuperscript{41} His sustained study of English appears to have commenced as late as 1809, when he became Digby’s dewan (administrative agent) in Rangpur.\textsuperscript{42} Rammohun’s own anonymous account clearly dates his acquisition of English as subsequent to the \textit{Tuhfat} (and, incidentally, affirms the \textit{Tuhfat} as a precursor to his engagement with Christianity):

\begin{quote}
...Rammohun Roy; who, although he was born a Brahmin not only renounced idolatry at a very early period of his life, but published at that time a treatise in Arabic and Persian against that system, and no sooner acquired a knowledge of English, than he made his desertion of idol worship known to the Christian world by his English publication.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Rammohun’s association with Fort William College from 1801 to 1804, together with commercial activities that brought him into regular contact with East India Company servants, have been held to have been adequate for imparting a familiarity with Western philosophy and ethics,\textsuperscript{44} but his lack of an adequate command of English makes this unlikely. Moreover, Colebrooke’s landmark \textit{Essay On The Vedas}, from which Rammohun is alleged to have derived his later

\textsuperscript{40} I have sketched some of this background in Wolfe 2002, ‘Can the Muslim Speak?’, pp. 375-7.
\textsuperscript{42} Rammohun first entered Digby’s service in 1805, at Ramgarh (Biswa and Ganguli 1962, ‘Supplementary Notes’, p. 37). Digby himself referred to Rammohun’s mastering English by perusing his (Digby’s) mail, conversing and corresponding with Englishmen and reading English newspapers whilst he was Digby’s dewan – i.e. at Rangpur. Digby’s Rangpur collectorship commenced in 1809.
\textsuperscript{43} Rammohun here refers to himself in the third person because, as was his wont, he had adopted a pseudonym (in this case, ‘A Friend to Truth’, \textit{The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy}, 6 volumes, Kalidas Nag and Debayjoti Burman (eds) (Calcutta, 1945–51), (henceforth \textit{English Works}), vol. v, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{44} See the discussion of David Kopf’s account (below).
enthusiasm for the Vedanta, was not published until 1805 – i.e. after the *Tuhfat* — so the monotheistic and socially benign principles that he was to divine in the Vedanta were certainly not new to him. Indeed, his most intense study of Hinduism would appear to have taken place at the same time as he was mastering English – in Rangpur, after 1809, in association with Hariharnandana Tirthaswami. In sum, therefore, the evidence renders any significant Western input into the *Tuhfat* implausible.

I have previously indicated some of the major lines of transmission whereby, *mutatis mutandis*, the Hellenistic legacy in Islam ‘was also incorporated into the Mughal theatre of Islamic civilization, where the young Rammohun, whose Brahmin father was a Mughal courtier, came to imbibe it as a central component of his polyglot education’. Of particular note is al-Shahrastani’s Kitab *al-milal wa’l-nihal*, which was widely read in late eighteenth-century India, together with the teachings of Shah Wali-Allah of Delhi and his son Shah Abdul-Aziz. With more specific reference to Rammohun’s immediate milieu, the Persian *Dabistan Mazahib* (conference of religions), which was inspired by religious debates that had taken place at the court of the ecumenically-inclined Mughal emperor Akbar, is significant. The *Dabistan*

was well-known among Islamic scholars in eighteenth-century Calcutta. Maulavi Nazr Ashraf of the Sadr Diwani Adalat, whom Rammohun would have known, edited the first printed edition of the *Dabistan*. Francis Gladwyn had translated the first chapter into English in 1789. The rest of the work was not translated into English until 1843, ten years after Rammohun’s death (Anthony Troyer, one of the translators of the 1843 edition, had known him personally). The *Dabistan* is devoted to comparative discussion of religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and others. So far as Rammohun is concerned, the most striking section occurs towards the end of the work – in the third volume — where Akbar’s *Ilahi* [personal faith] is represented by a philosopher

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45 Henry T. Colebrooke’s book was originally published in *Asiatic Researches*, vol. 8 (1805), pp. 369-476.


49 ibid.

who engages in disputation with, among others, a Muslim, a Christian and a Brahmin. The *Dabistan*’s philosopher thus took on adversaries almost identical to those whom Rammohun was later to engage.\(^{51}\)

Whether or not Rammohun was directly indebted to the *Dabistan*, however, the point at issue is the availability of an indigenous discourse rather than his personal relationship to it.

Where intertextualities are concerned, it is difficult to nail down particular influences from within a complex and evolving world tradition with any degree of confidence. It has been asserted that the major Islamic influence on the *Tuhfat* was the Mu’tazilite school (or heresy) which flourished in Baghdad and other centres from the eighth to the eleventh centuries of the Christian era.\(^{52}\) The Mu’tazilites championed the primacy of reason and freedom of the will, maintained the strictest interpretation of monotheism and denied the eternity of the Qur’an. They also insisted that their beliefs conduced to a just social order.\(^{53}\) The Mu’tazilites would thus seem to present a plausible precedent for Rammohun’s central contentions (though his concept of social justice was at stark variance to theirs). But there is no reason why he should have lifted his ideas from one Islamic source alone. Rather, the premises and concepts which animate the *Tuhfat* recur throughout Islamic disputation. To illustrate the manifest general influence, it is hard to avoid arbitrariness. I happen to find greater resonance between the writings of al-Razi and the *Tuhfat* than I do between the Mu’tazilites and Rammohun’s text, but this is not to say that this influence was necessarily formative either. Al-Razi’s attitude to knowledge was consistent with utilitarianism. He valued knowledge in proportion to its practical worth. The three means whereby he ensured the reliability of knowledge were the same as those of the *Tuhfat* – reason, intuition and authentic tradition. Consistently with this, al-Razi valued treatises on astronomy, logic, geometry and medicine more highly than sacred works, even than the Bible and the Qur’an.\(^ {54}\)

These sentiments not only recall the *Tuhfat*. They also harmonise with the controversial letter on education that Rammohun was to write to Lord Amherst nearly twenty years after the *Tuhfat* was published. In this letter, Rammohun recalled the ‘sanguine hopes’ that money earmarked for an educational institution would have been ‘laid out in employing European gentlemen of talents and

\(^{54}\) Badawi 1968, *La transmission de la philosophie grecque*, p. 446.
education to instruct the natives of India in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful Sciences’. Since a traditional Hindu school had been chosen instead, one like those that already abounded in India to no social advantage, Rammohun complained that ‘This seminary ... can only be expected to load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of no practicable use to the possessors or to society.’ These sentiments, which are clearly in accord with the views of al-Razi and others like him, also recall the split that Partha Chatterjee has shown to haunt the articulation of Indian nationalism. For Rammohun would have plenty of time for metaphysics in other contexts. But metaphysics belonged in the inner world of Indian culture and spirituality, a world that was quite separate from the outer world of material advancement that it was proper for Europeans to make available to Indians.

Al-Razi was familiar with Indian science, which he employed in his medical practice. The traffic was not one-way. Further, while al-Razi himself may not have attracted widespread support, his works were extolled by al-Buruni, whose writings on India secured him continuing attention there. The correspondences multiply. Half a millennium after al-Razi, the aforementioned Shah Abdul-Aziz exhibited a split attitude to the British which also anticipated Rammohun’s. As observed, Rammohun was to treat traditional Sanskrit learning as an internal Hindu matter, demanding that the British should not involve themselves with ‘useless’ (in material-scientific terms) metaphysical concerns but should provide a progressive Western education. Similarly, Shah Abdul-Aziz issued a fatwah declaring land occupied by the British to be daru’l harb (infidel territory) whilst simultaneously permitting the study of English and extolling British achievements in arts and industry. This ambivalence prefigures the division in the Indian Muslim elite, embodied in the Deoband and Aligarh schools, which

55 This letter, which is inexplicably missing from English Works (1945–51), is quoted in Collet [1900] 1962, Life and Letters, p. 458.
56 Chatterjee 1986, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World; Chatterjee 1993, Nation and Its Fragments.
corresponded to the division in Brahmo Samaj ranks that David Kopf has attributed to Rammohun’s own split approach.  

In short, one could go on citing correspondences indefinitely. Persistence is ultimately unnecessary, however, since the *Tuhfat* itself explicitly and abundantly declares its Islamic orientation. The issue is not the *Tuhfat*’s Islamic credentials, which can hardly be doubted, but its continuity with Rammohun’s anglophone campaign of reform as that was conducted in texts that he published after settling in Calcutta in 1815.

### The English writings

The premises that dominate Rammohun’s English writings are precisely those that had earlier dominated the *Tuhfat*. Still pairing monotheism and social utility, his later publications repetitively champion reason and sensory experience as grounds for discrediting institutionalised traditions and furthering his own brand of sacred writ in a manner wholly conforming to the *Tuhfat*’s argumentation. Accordingly, while regularly citing Hindu authorities in support of his contentions, he is careful to establish that the doctrines which he associates with these authorities are both rationally sound and socially beneficial:

> I agree in the first assertion, that certain writings received by the Hindus as sacred, are the origins of the Hindu law of inheritance, but with this modification, that the writings supposed sacred are only, when consistent with sound reasoning, considered as imperative.

As in the *Tuhfat*, distortions of scripture are promoted by leaders of religion, who prey on the ignorance of the populace. Institutions sponsored by leaders of religion foster division and war between people, ‘everlasting dissensions’ being occasioned by their conflicting interpretations of original truths. Not only do the leaders of religions remain the first class of deceivers, but the *Tuhfat*’s positive formula for the attainment of true belief remains the same. Thus the induction from nature whereby the *Tuhfat* argued that God’s existence was inferrable by everyone is ascribed to Vyasa’s position in the Vedanta, which explains ‘the Supreme Being by his effects and works, without attempting to

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61 The combination that Sumit Sarkar termed ‘the two standards of “reason” and “social comfort” which recur so often in his works.’ (Sarkar 1975, ‘Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past’, in Joshi, *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization*, p. 48).


define his essence’.\(^{65}\) Accordingly, divine truth is not the preserve of any single creed.\(^{66}\) That this rules out miracles is presupposed in the selection criteria of the *Precepts of Jesus* and explicated in the *Appeals* in their defence: ‘Had his doctrines of themselves made that due impression, the aid of miracles would not have been requisite, nor had recourse to.\(^{67}\)

To substantiate his claim that all religions are monotheistic, the later Rammohun returns to the *Tuhfat’s* empirical premise:

...in China, in Tartary, in Europe and in all other countries, where so many sects exist, all believe the object whom they adore to be the Author and Governor of the Universe; consequently, they must also acknowledge, according to their own faith, that this our worship is their own.\(^{68}\)

Rationally unsustainable eschatologies are excused in the English writings on grounds that are familiar from the *Tuhfat*:

The virtues of this class [i.e. peasants or villagers] however rests chiefly upon their primitive simplicity, and a strong religious feeling which leads them to expect reward or punishment for their good or bad conduct, not only in the next world, but like the ancient Jews, also in this.\(^{69}\)

Similarly, Rammohun’s regard for Christian ethics, the single issue around which the allegation of Western models is strongest, is expressed in the Introduction to the *Precepts of Jesus* in terms which are pure *Tuhfat*:

a notion of the existence of a supreme superintending power, the Author and Preserver of this harmonious system ... and a due estimation of that law which teaches that man should do unto others as he would wish to be done by ... The former of these sources of satisfaction, viz, a belief in God, prevails generally; being derived either from tradition and instruction, or from attentive survey of the wonderful skill and contrivance displayed in the works of nature ... [the latter] ... moral doctrines, tending evidently to the maintenance of the peace and harmony of mankind at large, are beyond the reach of metaphysical perversion, and intelligible alike to the learned and to the unlearned.\(^{70}\)

Where Christianity is concerned, though Rammohun values the connection between religion and good works, he is not prepared to overlook offences for

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\(^{65}\) ibid., vol. ii, p. 63; compare vol. ii, p. 129.

\(^{66}\) ibid., vol. ii, pp. 72, 89, 124.

\(^{67}\) ibid., vol. v, p. 64.

\(^{68}\) ibid., vol. ii, p. 130.

\(^{69}\) ibid., vol. iii, p. 64.

\(^{70}\) ibid., vol. v, pp. 3, 4.
which he criticised other religions in the *Tuhfat*.\(^{71}\) Thus he condemns Christian sectarianism as well as its miracles and paradoxes.\(^{72}\) In common with Muslim theologians, he asserts that Trinitarianism is a later corruption of an originally monotheistic creed, in one place attributing the origin of Islam to this corruption.\(^{73}\) He compares the Inquisition and witch-burning to *sati*. In short, he holds Christianity to account on its own terms – a tactic which, as I contended above, was formative for Indian nationalism.

In this light, we need to consider why Rammohun should have chosen Christianity as a vehicle for his ideals in his English writings, especially since Islam was equally compatible with them. He testified to studying Euclid and Aristotle from Arabic sources.\(^{74}\) Moreover, not only did he dress (see illustration), eat and even, it seems, marry in a Muslim manner.\(^{75}\) He commended Muslims, along with Sikhs, Christians and the Kabir Panth, as renouncers of idolatry,\(^{76}\) he characterised the idea that Christ personified the mercy of God as a Muslim concept,\(^{77}\) he acknowledged the monotheistic purity of Islam,\(^{78}\) he noted that,

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\(^{71}\) One of his more memorable critiques of the doctrine of the Trinity confirmed the *Tuhfat’s* emphasis on childhood conditioning: ‘These missionary gentlemen have come out to this country in the expectation, that grown men should first give up the use of their external senses, and should profess seriously, that although the Father is ONE God and the Son is ONE God and the Holy Ghost is ONE God, yet the number of God does not exceed ONE – a doctrine which though unintelligible to others, having been imbied by these pious men with their mothers’ milk, is of course as familiar to them as the idea of the animation of the stony goddess “Kali” is to an idolatrous Hindu, by whom it has, in like manner, been acquired in infancy’. *English Works* (1945–51), vol. *ii*, p. 180; compare vol. *ii*, pp. 105, 162, 163, 183; vol. *iv*, p. 48.


\(^{75}\) Most contemporary pictures of Rammohun depict him in Muslim dress (illustration from Collet [1900] 1962, *Life and Letters*, facing p. 128, see also frontispiece and illustration facing p. 360). See also Romesh Chandra Majumdar 1978, *History of Modern Bengal, Part One* (1765–1905) (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaf), p. 54 (including diet); Salahuddin Ahmed 1965, *Social Ideas and Social Change*, p. 36. Though, by his father’s arrangement, married three times in his youth to Hindu women, Rammohun seems later to have married a Muslim woman (whose name I cannot trace) by the unorthodox *shaiva* form of marriage, she being the only one of his wives to accompany him to Calcutta (De 1962, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 504).

\(^{76}\) *English Works* (1945–51), vol. *ii*, p. 89.

\(^{77}\) ibid., vol. *ii*, p. 93.

\(^{78}\) ibid., vol. *i*, p. 30 (where there is no mention of the Sunni/Shia divide).
in contrast to the divisions within Hinduism, Muslims observed one homogeneous and harmonious social order, and, in evidence to a select committee of the British House of Commons, even suggested that there were more honest Muslim lawyers than Hindu ones. In these connections, though, he was addressing a predominantly English audience, so Christianity was the appropriate strategic idiom for him to adopt. Furthermore, given the effective eclipse of Mughal rule, Islamic discourse was marginal to colonial power. In Muslim dress, Rammohun’s universalism might have appealed to munshis, but no-one else would have noticed. Since this is precisely the fate that had befallen the Tuhfat, it is no accident that he should have started to learn English a short time after its publication.

One could go on producing examples of the concordance between Rammohun’s English writings and the Tuhfat but it hardly seems necessary. A difficulty in

79 ibid., vol. i, p. 13.
80 ibid., vol. iii, p. 16.
81 It is significant that the Tuhfat stands out as a major work that Rammohun did not translate. This is consistent both with its intended audience being Muslim and with Rammohun’s not yet knowing English (compare Sarkar 1975, ‘Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past’, p. 50).
presenting this argument is that a reading of Rammohun’s corpus bears it out so consistently that substantiation becomes a labouring of the obvious. Thus we turn now to the historiography, considering some salient examples of a pervasive cross-factional consensus whereby Rammohun’s career has served to effect a rupture between Indian Islam and the enunciation of Indian nationalism.

**Polar history writing**

Traditional histories of the emergence of Indian nationalism conventionally counterpose Christian Europe to Hindu India, an exclusive pairing that admits a number of variations. The predominantly literary quality of the model of the Brahmannical/Christian encounter excludes the unlettered discourses of debt-bonded subalterns. It also effaces the generality of Muslims. In particular, the image of British foreigners taking over from Mughal foreigners suggests that Indian Muslims had somewhere to go back to. It does not matter where. Their effective disappearance is the practical outcome.

The same exclusion operates in a variety of historiographical guises. Some are obvious. It is only to be expected, for instance, that a Christian account should play down the consequence of Islam and emphasise that of Christianity. Sophie Dobson Collet’s *The Life and Letters of the Raja Rammohun Roy*[^82] was a pious exercise designed to demonstrate the virtues of a colonial subject to an English readership. It remains the most widely cited secondary source on Rammohun. Collet did not question the *Tuhfat*’s manifestly Islamic provenance; she simply discounted its significance for Rammohun’s later career. Nonetheless, as a Unitarian convert to Trinitarian Christianity, she remained able to acknowledge that it was ‘indubitable that Rammohun always retained a large amount of sympathy with Islam for the sake of its cardinal doctrine of the unity of God, and that he warmly appreciated the good which had thence resulted in countering Hindu idolatry’.[^83]

Though a Hindu nationalist is as likely as a Christian to discount Islam, the situation is complicated by Rammohun’s having a foot in two camps – how to relegate the Muslim part without jeopardising the nationalist part? This dilemma found serial realisation in the work of Romesh Chandra Majumdar, the doyen of Hindu-nationalist historians. Majumdar consistently stressed Hindu/Muslim dividedness and cast Islam as antithetical to the nationalist (‘freedom’) movement.[^84] In keeping with this view, Majumdar divided British domination


into two phases, a benign one (the suppression of Muslim power) and an oppressive, subsequent one. From a communal perspective such as this, it would be unthinkable that a major restatement of Hindu ethics should have sprung from Islamic precedents. Thus Rammohun must have got his ideas from the West. Majumdar did not shrink from iconoclasm; this made Rammohun the first great comprador. Yet this evaluation marked an extraordinary turnabout. Ten years earlier, in his History of the Freedom Movement in India, Majumdar had represented Rammohun as the ‘first and best representative’ of the new spirit of rationalism.

In a manner reminiscent of European Orientalism, the earlier Majumdar had singled out Rammohun’s opposition to ‘medieval’ forces for particular credit, medieval and Mughal being readily interchangeable. Thus Rammohun could enlist British inspiration to rouse India from a period of medieval decay without unduly compromising the Hindu nation’s credentials. Despite their incongruity, Majumdar’s ambivalent versions of Rammohun consistently sustained a Hindu-nationalist agenda. Since the Mughals were no less foreign than their British conquerors, the early phase of British domination could figure as the lesser of two evils in a way that did not have to compromise nationalist memory. The contrasting depictions of Rammohun do not affect this outcome. All that changes is the periodisation: the earlier depiction makes him part of the benign phase of British rule, while, in the revised version, the same actions, displaced into its oppressive phase, become compradorship. Either way, Islam is excluded from a nationalist version of the colonial duality.

The exclusion of Islam does not require a religious basis, however. A secular dichotomy – especially the modern liberal assimilation of East/West to traditional/modern – is no less solidifying within its poles. David Kopf’s bifurcated title, British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance, belies his attempts to complexify the two parties to the colonial encounter. For, although he went to considerable lengths to show how the category ‘British’ split up into conservative/liberal, Orientalist/Anglicist and so on (with the bhadralok correspondingly divided into orthodox/progressive, etc.), Kopf failed to avoid the familiar dualism of penetration and response.

From its title on, Kopf’s subsequent book, The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind, makes even grander claims for Rammohun’s legacy. This book’s manifest pretension is to the reconstruction of a quantity known as ‘the modern Indian mind’ from the evidence of a small association of Bengali

bhadralok, without regard either to the whole of Muslim society or to the rest of the Hindu population (or, for that matter, to the rest of India). In it, Kopf returns to the European division between Orientalists and Anglicists, reaffirming Rammohun’s encounter with Orientalism as the model for the rest of the century (and, presumably, for the entire ‘modern Indian mind’).

Kopf’s Orientalist-Anglicist controversy corresponds to Majumdar’s chronological division of British colonialism. The era of Orientalist predominance, of which Kopf approves, accords with Majumdar’s early benign period, while the ensuing Anglicist ascendancy is for both scholars a victory for racial suprematism. Regardless of their doctrinal differences, both require a division whereby British rule has an early, relatively benevolent phase, since they use this phase to graft Europe’s ideological import onto a Hindu version of indigenous tradition.

The notion of colonialism having a positive initial phase is also stamped on Indian Marxism, where it has caused any number of problems. Without embarking on a resuscitation of the Asiatic Mode of Production, we should at least recall in this connection that the Marx of the New York Daily Tribune articles saw British incursion, for all its violent rapacity, as injecting the historical germ necessary to disrupt the stagnant balance of Indian society and let loose the dynamic tensions which would eventually propel India into the capitalist era and thence on to its own socialist revolution.\(^88\) In conformity with this perspective (and with his Comintern line that the revolution would flow from the colonies), the pioneer Indian communist M. N. Roy contended that the iron hand of British rule provided the objective conditions for an Indian act of emancipation,\(^89\) while Palme Dutt maintained that the ‘objectively progressive’ aspect of British colonialism was its destruction of village economies that had prevented people from rising above subsistence preoccupations.\(^90\)

In a colonial context, one of the drawbacks of orthodox Marxism is that the category ‘class’ is blind to ethnic differences. The religious and colour-coded nature of colonial domination seems incidental.\(^91\) Thus we should not expect that an Islamic increment should significantly affect a Marxist critique of bhadralok ideology. The issue is not the etymology of comprador thinking but


\(^{89}\) M. N. Roy, Indian in Transition (Bombay, 1922).

\(^{90}\) R. Palme Dutt 1940, India To-Day (London: Victor Gollancz).

its conformity with colonial relations of production. In a careful analysis of the material conditions of Rammohun’s thought, S. N. Mukherjee did not erect the usual barrier between the *Tuhfat*, to which he attached considerable importance, and the rest of Rammohun’s ideas. He also allowed the possibility of looking on Rammohun as a tantric opponent of Bengali Vaishnavism and/or as ‘the last prophet of the Indo-Islamic syncretic movement carrying on the tradition of Kabir, Dara Shikoh [Akbar’s son] and many others’. Ultimately, however, the dual encounter – in this case, East versus West as feudal (or Asiatic) versus capitalist – was bound to eclipse such heterodox inspirations:

Rammohun’s faith in individualism was inspired by Western political philosophy, more particularly by the works of Locke and Bentham, but individualism was also part and parcel of the social, religious and economic aspirations of the Bengali middle class. Moreover, the social model of Rammohun – a competitive market society – corresponds to the social reality of Bengal in the early Nineteenth Century.

I am not suggesting that Rammohun was impervious to Bentham (he was not). The point is, rather, that ‘individualism’ is not dependant on Bentham (read Europe). It can select other notations. For instance, Maxime Rodinson argued cogently that the Neoplatonic tradition in Islam provided a model for individualistic philosophy that was as capable as its Western-Christian counterpart of subtending an emergent local capitalism. The issue is important because the one-to-one correlation between ‘market society’ and certain European philosophers makes individualism (among other things) impossible without European invasion. This, in turn, subordinates Indian history to the global narrative of European capitalist expansion as surely as missionary ideologues subordinated it to the coming of universal Christianity. Mukherjee’s account is built on what Partha Chatterjee terms ‘the condition of discursive unity’:

This condition is nothing other than the assumption that the history of Europe and the history of India are united within the same framework of universal history, the assumption that made possible the incorporation of the history of India into the history of Britain in the nineteenth century: Europe became the active subject of Indian history because Indian history was now a part of ‘world history’.

93 ibid., p. 361.
In substantially ruling out an Islamic contribution to the enunciation of colonial nationalism, however, Chatterjee himself might be seen to have subscribed to a global incorporation. In his influential postcolonial account, which merits more extended consideration, Chatterjee scrupulously and regularly registers Indian nationalism’s dependence on the exclusion of Islam. Yet there is a tension between this acknowledgement and the structuring of his narrative. In his account, the predicament of derivation produced a powerful dual agenda. On the one hand, Indian nationalism aspired to the technical, material and political advantages that colonialism had made available; on the other, it sought to resist the colonisers’ intrusions into native life. The outcome was a division into discursive domains that resemble the public and private spheres of feminist critique. Thus outer became to inner as material to spiritual, as universal to particular, as economic to cultural and so on, a trade-off whereby nationalists’ rising to the colonial bait in the domain of science, economics and statecraft was counterbalanced by an aggressive particularism, an insistence on irreducible difference in the inner-family world of Bengali language, religion and culture. For Chatterjee, this inner domain, which gave nationalism the autonomous difference from Europe that a self-conscious and self-producing national project required, was prerequisite to the development of political nationalism, conventionally dated from the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885. This reversal of the received order of priorities enables Chatterjee to backdate the emergence of nationalism proper to the 1860s, which saw the development of a new, self-regulating internal realm of Bengali language and culture with the confidence to exclude Europeans. Though his prioritising of nationalism’s inner realm enables Chatterjee to date nationalism from the aftermath of the Great Insurrection of 1857 (which the bhadralok had failed to support), it also instals a rupture between the preceding period of reform and the nationalist movement. Nationalist self-sufficiency is distinguished from Rammohun-style reform, which sought to regulate Bengali society by enlisting the support of the colonial masters. The problem here is that Indian Islam also lies on the other side of this rupture. Thus we should consider Chatterjee’s periodisation.

As observed, what interests Chatterjee is not so much the separation of nationalism’s two discursive domains as their mutual effects, the ways in which each ‘has not only acted in opposition to and as a limit upon the other, but, through this process of struggle, has also shaped the emergent form of the other’. This dynamic mutuality leaves behind the static pairings – traditional

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96 e.g. ‘The idea of the singularity of national history has inevitably led to a single source of Indian tradition, namely, ancient Hindu civilization. Islam here is either the history of foreign conquest or a domesticated element of everyday popular life. The classical heritage of Islam remains external to Indian history’, Chatterjee 1993, Nation and Its Fragments, p. 113.
97 ibid., p. 12.
versus modern, status versus contract, feudal versus capitalist, etc. – that colonial
discourse has made familiar. Thus subalternity is not simply a feudal throwback,
and the nationalist elite are more than merely an incomplete version of the
capitalist moderne. Rather, together and singly, in their ceaseless co-formation,
they are historically specific. This interpenetration of the two poles, a Saussurian
procedure inherited from Ranajit Guha, performs a crucial methodological
function. It is the basis on which the Subaltern Studies group insists that
Hindu–Muslim antagonism is not some atavistic residue from a superseded era
but an active constituent of colonial modernity. This structuralist element, shared
with the earlier Foucault, is conducive to abruptness of periodisation (Chatterjee
terms his version of Foucault’s episteme shift a ‘narrative break’).  

In before-and-after mode, Chatterjee reads Mritunjay Vidyalankar’s history of
India, published in Bengali in 1808, to show how the inculcation of European
narrative forms modernised the historical consciousness of educated Bengalis.
Mritunjay’s narratology, which Chatterjee memorably dubs ‘entirely pre-colonial’, is shown to lack the distinguishing features of the first criterion
of nationalist history writing, a consciousness of the nation as historical agent
and of the historian as forming part of it. Rather, the agents in Mritunjay’s
chronicle are gods and kings. Moving forward half a century, Chatterjee then
finds the requisite national agency, and historians identifying with it, in Bengali
textbooks of the 1860s and 1870s:

History was no longer the play of divine will or the fight of right against
wrong; it had become merely the struggle for power. The advent of
British rule was no longer a blessing of Providence. English-educated
Bengalis were now speculating on the political conditions that might
have made the British success possible.

This is no doubt the case, but consider the following statement, which could
well be the implicit referent of Chatterjee’s ‘blessing of Providence’. It was made
by a Bengali in an appeal to the King of England in 1823, around four decades
before the origin of nationalist historical consciousness as Chatterjee dates it:

Divine Providence at last, in its abundant mercy, stirred up the English
nation to break the yoke of those tyrants [the Mughals] and to receive
the oppressed natives of Bengal under its protection ... your dutiful
subjects consequently have not viewed the English as a body of

98 ibid., p. 80.
99 ibid.
100 ibid., p. 84.
101 ibid., p. 91. On pp. 88-9, this shift (the genealogy of this new history of ‘the nation’) is
narrowed down to the period 1857–1869.
conquerors, but rather as deliverers, and look up to your Majesty not only as a Ruler, but also as a father and protector.\textsuperscript{102}

This appeal has been taken by Majumdar to show that Rammohun, who penned it, was so anxious to celebrate the replacement of the Mughals by the British that he repudiated India’s Islamic inheritance.\textsuperscript{103} Yet it was actually a none-too-subtle serving of what his audience wanted to hear. The excerpt is part of an indignant demand that recently introduced press regulations be withdrawn. The flattering comparison between the British and the Mughals allows the regulations to be depicted as incompatible with the qualities that had enabled the British to defeat the Mughals in the first place.\textsuperscript{104} As Rammohun’s strategy unfolds, however, the self-same comparison produces the possibility that continued abuses of British power would be resisted violently. In stark contrast to Mritunjay’s version of ‘Divine Providence’, therefore, Rammohun’s conduces to anti-colonial agency on the part of Indians. The initially favourable comparison with the Mughals being agreeable to his English audience, Rammohun goes on to suggest a corollary whereby much less pleasant consequences would follow if they continued with the press regulations – consequences which conspicuously involved conscious historical agency, including the establishment of independence on the part of the subjected:

The greater part of Hindustan having been for several centuries subject to Muhammadan rule, the civil and religious rights of its original inhabitants were consistently trampled on, and from the habitual oppression of the conquerors, a great body of their subjects in the Southern Peninsula (Dukhin), afterwards called Marhattahs, and another body in the Western parts now styled Sikhs, were at last driven to revolt; and when the Mussulman power became feeble, they ultimately succeeded in establishing their independence.\textsuperscript{105}

As this example shows, Rammohun himself was not above tactically acquiescing in the characterisation of the Mughals as foreigners. A more important point is the extent to which his campaigning anticipates characteristics that Chatterjee confines to the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, might we not

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{English Works} (1945–51), vol. \textit{iv}, pp. 11-12.

\textsuperscript{103} Majumdar 1962, \textit{History of the Freedom Movement}, vol. 1, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{104} Such tactics were by no means without precedent: ‘A remarkable form of cultural syncretism expressed through Persian [in eighteenth-century Mughal India] was historical writing by Hindu historians in a Muslim idiom. Ram Lal in his \textit{al-Hind} (The Indian Present), 1735–36, followed Muslim convention so far as to state that the establishment of Muslim rule in India was divinely ordained and that when Shivaji, Aurangzib’s Maratha antagonist, died, he departed to hell’. Peter Hardy 1972, \textit{Muslims of British India} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 17.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{English Works} (1945–51), vol. \textit{iv}, p. 11.
be forgiven for discerning a tacit admission on Chatterjee’s part that the supposedly European-derived nationalist mode of historical memory, the one that was lacking in Mritunjay, might be found (if only we were allowed to look) in Persian and Arabic?:

This [Mritunjay’s] was the form of historical memory before the modern European modes were implanted in the minds of the educated Bengali. In Mritunjay, the specific form of this memory was one that was prevalent among the Brahman literati in eighteenth-century Bengal. What, then, was the form followed by Bengali Muslim writers? *The court chronicles of the Afghan or the Mughal nobility are not of concern here because these were never written in Bengali.*

Or consider the following:

Another source often acknowledged in the Bengali textbooks is the series called *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* ... these eight volumes comprise translated [into English] extracts from over 150 works, principally in Persian, covering a period from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries. It was a gigantic example of the privilege claimed by modern European scholarship to process the writings of a people supposedly devoid of historical consciousness and render into useful sources of history what otherwise could ‘scarcely claim to rank higher than Annals’.

The problem with this, of course, is that, having excluded Persian works from our concern, Chatterjee is not in a position then to re-assimilate them to the entirely pre-colonial status that he assigns to Mritunjay. Not, that is, unless ‘entirely pre-colonial’ is a condition of discursive unity. Chatterjee nowhere argues, let alone shows, that Indian Islamic discourse in Persian lacked historical protocols to distinguish it from Mritunjay’s epistemology. The periodisation that Mritunjay’s missing modernity sustains requires suppression of the counter example of Rammohun Roy, whose narratology was as nationalist, on Chatterjee’s own criteria, as was his establishment of that native self-improvement organisation the Brahmo Samaj.

Despite their substantial differences, therefore, these various historical approaches agree on endorsing a recalcitrant Hindu/European binarism in which the two parties are contrapuntally homogenised. Whether or not the category ‘nation’

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106 Chatterjee 1993, *Nation and Its Fragments*, pp. 85-6 [my emphasis].
107 Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 100.
108 Chatterjee (ibid., p. 86) does equate a much later Muslim writer with Vidyalankar (‘There does not seem to be much difference in the mode of historical thinking’), only he makes it clear that the discourse is at a subaltern (or, at least, village) rather than elite level.
is altogether appropriate to this situation, transnational history’s insistence on a wider global perspective provides a basis for unravelling such homogeneities.

**Conclusion**

In its connectedness to Indian Islam, the *Tuhfat* is strategically situated in two senses. First, it represents a moment when colonial discourse is not yet fully established (in Raymond Williams’ sense) – an interregnum, somewhere between thesis and antithesis but still short of synthesis, when the discursive elements of the colonial regime are still emergent. By identifying such moments, we can more clearly see what colonial discourse is structured to screen out. Second, it marks a space beyond the penumbra of colonial influence in which (proto-) nationalist discourse could be thought. In both respects, the case of the *Tuhfat* raises the question of the mechanisms whereby indigenous alternatives to European models became occluded.

In its various divisions – pre-nationalist period, early benign phase, etc. – the historiography touched on above has sought to quarantine an era in which Hindu and European discourses confronted each other as antithetical monoliths. The desire to graft the imported onto the local, both conceived as pristine, reflects an essentialist preoccupation with origins. Yet when it comes to origins, a Europe so riddled with transnational supplements is itself constitutionally derivative. Islamic Neoplatonism presents Europe with a formative derivation anxiety. In confronting Muslim India, Europe was also returning to its own repressed. By inscribing this return, we can begin to provincialise Europe.

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