The Past and its Passions: Writing History in Hard Times

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‘There is history because there is a past and a specific passion for the past.’
Jacques Rancière, translated by Hassan Melehy
The Names of History (1994)

Let it be said at the very outset that it is a difficult task, in the first half of 2004, to critically evaluate James Laine’s recent book, Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India (OUP 2003). When I originally decided to write about it several months ago, the book had not become the subject of so much controversy, and it would not have been a particularly fraught undertaking to produce a fair review. But after everything that has happened in the city of Poona, in the state of Maharashtra, and in the field of Indian history more generally around the appearance of this volume, my job as a reviewer is no longer straightforward. Across the Indian as well as the American academies, scholars in South Asian studies have joined the battle against physical intimidation and cultural policing by militant Marathas, to defend Professor Laine’s right to have written the book, and his publisher’s right to sell it freely without fear or favour. The Indian government, however, has its own ideas about what is proper and permissible in Laine’s work and what is not, and in imposing a ban it has denied many readers the chance to form an independent opinion. I trust, however, that enough copies of the book are available through private and underground networks of circulation in India, so that it still remains a useful exercise to review it in a journal of history.

As with most things that might occasion a huge furore, Shivaji is actually a very compact volume, scarcely over one hundred pages long. Laine’s style, in this book, is far from inaccessibly academic. Oxford University Press seems, in fact, to be aiming at a generalist audience, people interested in India’s past but not necessarily experts on Maharashtra as a region, on Shivaji as a historical personage, or indeed on identity politics and communal relations as themes for scholarship.

1 Thanks are due to Davide Panagia, Prithvidatta Chandrashobhi, and Spencer Leonard, for their valuable suggestions and criticism.
Had the Sambhaji Brigade not vandalized Poona’s Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in early January 2004 using this book as a pretext, and had the book not been banned subsequently, it is possible that Shivaji would have been reviewed in India, in the English language, only in popular magazines like Outlook and Frontline, and in newspapers like The Hindu and The Telegraph, rather than in scholarly publications like this one. But after all the fuss, we are forced to consider this work with as much intellectual and political care as we can muster. Many Left and secular scholars, journalists and mediapersons are likely to be equally dismissive of the acts of vandals and the acts of governments, and to argue that the politics of injury being what it is, it really doesn’t matter what, specifically, James Laine wrote. In this view, the violence occasioned by the book is not a function of its form or content, but of the dynamics of caste conflict, religious fundamentalism, and election-time demagoguery in the contemporary political context. However, I would argue that given the damage done, it is important to look carefully at what the author says and how he says it, and to figure out what future writers on Shivaji and on similarly charged identity symbols can do to make their valuable interventions without inviting danger upon themselves and upon other individuals and institutions. Naturally, the idea is not to blame the victim, but to learn from this episode a tactical lesson in intellectual politics and historical method.

I

The French political philosopher Jacques Rancière has theorized a ‘poetics of knowledge’, that is, a ‘set of literary procedures by which a discourse escapes literature, gives itself the status of a science, and signifies this status.’ Rancière himself, in several of his books, is interested primarily in the poetics of the form of knowledge we call history, and examines in detail the work of several major historians of France, among them Jules Michelet, Fernand Braudel, Lucien Febvre and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.¹ In The Names of History, he writes:

...history can become a science by remaining history only through a poetic detour that gives speech a regime of truth.... It doesn’t give this to itself in the form of an explicit philosophical thesis, but in the very texture of narrative: in the modes of interpretation, but also in the style of the sentences, the tense and person of the verb, the plays of the literal and the figurative. (p. 89)

Rancière tries to identify, helpfully, I think, the particular poetic structure that makes a given discourse history. Thus history is not history only on account of its subject matter: what it is about, but also on account of its form: how it is written. This notion of the poetics of knowledge has reference not to this or that style of history-writing, but to history per se, as a genre of scientific writing that also exhibits some literary qualities. With the idea of a poetics of history, we come to an understanding of the rules of discursive composition on account of which history takes its place among the human sciences. Through a close reading of important histories of the French Revolution and of the corpus of the Annales school, Rancière demonstrates how history comes to be constituted as such, in the formal features of its linguistic substance.

In Rancière’s view, history has to negotiate its place between literature, science and politics. History has narrative, but historical discourse cannot have the same form as literary discourse; history has truth, but historical discourse cannot have the same form as scientific discourse. What, he asks, should be ‘the essential poetic structure of the new historical knowledge’, such that it can possess, at once, the logic of narrativity and the appearance of truth? (p. 49) Moreover, how is history to be related to politics, in as much as it must position itself ‘between the dead chronicles of the sovereigns and the intrusive chatter of the poor’? (p. 60) As Hayden White points out in his ‘Foreword’ to The Names of History, politics has to do with ‘membership in communities whose pedigrees are either confirmed or denied by an appeal to “history”’. (p. ix) How White understands Rancière’s project for a ‘poetics of knowledge’ is ‘in the sense of a “making” or “invention” of a “discipline” for the study of the past that will be at once scientific, political, and literary.’ (p. viii)

By a Rancièrian criterion, James Laine’s Shivaji is not history. It is not fiction either. In other words, it possesses neither poetic nor poesis. This book does not establish through the careful arrangement of its words a regime of historical truth, nor, through an artful figuration of language, does it take us into the realm of the creative imagination. Perhaps, then, Laine’s approach amounts to the criticism of other historians of Shivaji? This seems to be his intention, and to some extent he is able to execute it. He does refer, for example, to the texts of early chroniclers and balladeers who wrote about the great king in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Agrindas, Paramanand, Bhushan, Sabhasad, Jedhe, Mahipati, and the anonymous writer of the Shivadigvijay. However, Laine does not critically read these authors in a way that might tell us something about their history-writing. Instead, he uses their work to make various claims about Shivaji: his actions, his state, his character, his family, his enemies, his legacy, etc. But these claims remain scattered statements, never cohering into a narrative account of the life and works of Shivaji, even with Laine’s own chosen qualification of ‘Hindu King in Islamic India’. My objection to Laine’s method is this: If works by other historians function as sources, then they must be sources for a fresh history of Shivaji, albeit a specific Shivaji, let us say the Shivaji who was the most conspicuous Hindu king in late Mughal India. If, however, these works are being critically evaluated, then we must hear why they are or are not histories, how they are good or bad histories, how they differ as histories from one another and from colonial or modern histories, and so on. Laine does not choose either path. Why? By treating the texts of traditional historians neither as sources for his own history nor as objects of criticism,
he ends up with a sort of glorified survey of the historical literature on Shivaji. Much of the chapter ‘The Epic Hero: Seventeenth Century Sources for the Heroic Legends of Shivaji’ repeats Laine’s ‘Introduction’ to Paramanand’s Shivabharata. It is not clear to me why someone with Laine’s grasp of Marathi and Sanskrit (and Persian?), and his command over Maharashtra’s literary and religious cultures, should content himself with writing what is effectively a bibliographic essay, or at best a couple of long journal articles stitched together.

Laine notes that in the first phase of the production of the history of Shivaji, he is repeatedly portrayed as an epic hero—as Arjuna or Bhima from the Mahabharata, or as Rama from the Ramayana—and sometimes even as a deity, for example in the Shivabharata, where he is figured as an avatar of Vishnu. Accordingly, someone who may be in the position of exhorting him to bravery, like his mother Jijabai, assumes the role of a Krishna, while an enemy figure, like the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, or a Muslim martial opponent like Aizil Khan, Shaista Khan or Udeebhan, morphs into a Ravana or a Duryodhana. The goddess Bhavani, warlike but also maternal, routinely appears in these narratives as Shivaji’s divine mother, his inspiration, his guide and his protector. I would be interested in learning what it is about the historical imagination of the early writers on Shivaji that harks back to the epic literature, and that inserts, apparently with ease, divinities into the affairs of men. Put differently, I would like to see an exegesis of the particular poetics developed and deployed by these writers. How does it compare, for instance, with the poetics of a purana? In his introduction to Paramanand’s Shivabharata translated jointly by him and Laine, S.S. Bahulkar briefly considers the text at hand as a mahakavya. Bahulkar doesn’t push this comparison far enough to provide a full-scale reading of the Shivabharata according to the canons of literary and aesthetic criticism available in Sanskrit kavya-shastra or alankara-shastra. But his is a step in the right direction. In his Shivaji, Laine rather distracts us with misplaced references to Texas, which do not, it seems to me, help him to make either the point about ‘good-guy versus bad-guy’ narratives that are embedded in the folk memories of a given region, or the point about the relationship between community identity and popular ethno-histories. How Texas was wrested from the Mexicans may not be the most productive frame within which to think about how Maratha dominion was established in the late medieval Deccan and later on in other parts of central and northern India. In fact, to anyone familiar with the history of the United States and the unhappy transactions between the white settlers and the indigenous American peoples, the comparison would seem inappropriate. Laine needs to delve deeper into the rules according to which his

seventeenth century sources are writing their accounts of Shivaji and of the Kohlapur, Satara and Thanjavur Maratha dynasties that sprang from him, not go off into at best inutile and at worst inaccurate analogies between the charter myths of Maharashtra and those of Texas.

In 1677, Shivaji goes to the shrine of Mallikarjuna in Shri Shailam, and offers his own head up to the gods. Bhavani, the goddess his family venerates in Tulajapur, appears to Shivaji in a dream. She urges him to abandon this plan of auto-decapitation, and devote himself instead to the tasks of righteous conquest and just rule. How do we read this episode, of a successful monarch feeling suicidal, while a normally blood-thirsty deity rejects his flamboyant offer of self-sacrifice? A historian would bring this scene alive, allowing us to inhabit, momentarily, the sensorium of the past: Shivaji in a violent frenzy at a temple far from his home, Shivaji subsequently falling asleep, Shivaji dreaming, the descent of the goddess, the nocturnal conversation of king and goddess, Shivaji’s return to his senses and his kingdom. A critic of history-writing in pre-modern Maharashtra would make something of the literary-historical imagination that constructs such an event into the life of a mortal man, thereby transforming a human agent into a character from myth. Why, in the eighteenth century, is Shivaji larger-than-life, why is he made to transcend his time and place to carry on the eternal struggle for dharma? Laine attempts no answer. He suggests that Shivaji as epic hero or as god is a type of ‘Hindu’ figure, but surely every repository of royal power in pre-modernity, all across Asian and European political cultures and religious traditions, is thus made heroic or divinized by bards and chroniclers, eulogists and poets? How is Shivaji unique in receiving such favoured treatment at the hands of those who record and remember his deeds? How is their way of creating the past different from that of their Ottoman, Chinese, Italian or Mughal brethren? During Shivaji’s life and for a good two centuries after, all across the civilized world there are Christian and Muslim monarchs, and their power and glory too, is routinely indicated through the use of ahistorical and suprahuman imagery. Howsoever he chooses to understand the category ‘Hindu’, someone in Laine’s position must offer a viable interpretation of the inflection of these cross-cultural phenomena in late medieval Maharashtra.

The next modality of Hinduizing Shivaji that we see in the historical literature, according to Laine, is that of associating him with Maharashtra’s holy men, especially the two who were more or less his contemporaries: Ramdas (1608–81) and Tukaram (1598–1649). There are also efforts by historians to get the maximum mileage out of the role of Gagabhatta, the pandit from Banaras who performed Shivaji’s royal consecration (rajyabhisheka) in 1674, and Nischalpuri Gosavi, a sakta Brahmin who may or may not have performed a tantric abhisheka for Shivaji later that same year. The intersections, real or imagined, of these four figures (but especially the first two) with the career of Shivaji, provide occasions for the depiction of the king as a pious devotee, or as undergoing and then resolving

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4 The Epic of Shivaji: Kavindra Paramananda’s Shivabharata. Edited and translated by James W. Laine and S.S. Bahulkar. New Delhi: Oriental Longman (1991). My copy of this book was given to me by Sujit Mukherjee at his home in Hyderabad, December 2001. He handed it to me on the condition that I would review it, but before I could write about it in any context, he passed away. I hope that his wife and my teacher Meenakshi Mukherjee will get to see this review.


6 Shivaji’s own dates are 1630–80.
cures of faith, or as a protagonist whose temporal power is tempered by a quest for spiritual liberation. In certain visions of royalty, an ideal ruler must have a wise teacher. Shivaji evidently did not have a personal preceptor. Early in his life he was taught by Dadoji Konddev, but he was more a tutor and a guardian than a religious guide, and so an account of Shivaji’s life had to be fashioned such that his person became concatenated with that of the saint Tukaram or the guru Ramdas. Moreover, the association with these individuals allowed the character of Shivaji to be recruited into discourses about the legitimacy of the hugely popular religious sects that they led, namely, the Varkari sampradaya and the Ramdasī sampradaya respectively (both of which are alive and flourishing even today).

Again, a student of history would seek a proper exegesis of the many stories of miraculous feats wrought by Tukaram or Ramdas for the benefit or in the presence of Shivaji. Where is the analysis of the trope and tense, figure and phrase that make history out of marvels and miracles, and keep generations of readers and listeners entranced? While modern Maharashtrians know these tales cannot be true, they nonetheless believe them, in that they accept the particular ‘regime of truth’ that is sought to be constructed. What is the nature of historical knowledge at work here? It is not enough to say that Maharashtra’s audiences buy into this kind of history because they are Hindu. It is not enough to note that non-Brahmin Varkaris like Shivaji to be represented as being close to their deity Vitthal and their saint Tukaram, while Brahmin Ramdasīs like him to be shown as close to their revered Parashuram and their preacher Ramdas. Rather, we must push these observations further to ask why this is the case, and then perhaps we might begin to get some insight into the perduring ways in which religion and politics may be inter-related in our society. Laine is writing about Shivaji as a Hindu king in Islamic India precisely because, as he says in his Introduction, he wants to ‘contribute in some way to a richer understanding of this great man, and rescue his biography from the grasp of those who see India as a Hindu nation at war with its Muslim neighbors.’ But it is not just dramatic moments of cultural synthesis or biographic from the grasp of those who see India as a Hindu nation at war with its Muslim neighbors. It isn’t only the events to which history has reference, but also the practices of history-writing—the poetics of history, to return to Rancière’s theoretical category—which can reveal to us long-term patterns of coexistence and conflict between communities. These are what Laine, unfortunately, turns a blind eye to.

Perhaps one is asking too much of the author, the objector may say. After all, in the entire output of Indology and Indian history—European disciplines which have had a full-fledged career on the subcontinent for over two centuries now—where is the authoritative theory of the place of historical realism in South Asia’s multiple historical and history-like genres, especially in pre-modernity? How can one James Laine tell us how to read pre-modern histories and what to make of them, how can he single-handedly decipher pre-modern historical consciousness for us? In response I would say: in the history of history, we are no longer in an era when as historians we will only consider those accounts that are ‘factual’ to be valid sources of knowledge—pramanas—about the past. That kind of blunt positivism has given way to what Bruno Latour has called ‘a second empiricism’, wherein our emphasis is not on ‘matters of fact’ but on ‘matters of concern’. We are not interested in whether Shivaji could in fact talk to a goddess or kill a man with his bare hands or drive his steed so fast he may as well have been flying through the air. We are, rather, interested in why Shivaji is represented, by pre-modern historians, as being on talking terms with deities, preternaturally strong, or miraculously swift. What is the relationship of these representations of Shivaji with the historical reality, not just of the personality of the man, but of the nature of his rule over large geo-political territories and large numbers of people? Some contemporary historians, especially of South India, notably Sanjay Subrahmanyan, David Shulman, V. Narayan Rao and Phillip Wagoner, have begun to address the problem of historical realism in pre-modern sources: to try and comprehend in a systematic fashion what the rhetoric of the supernatural can tell us about the actuality of the human; to sort the purely literary from the partially historical; to understand that even though we do not encounter the language of science, we are nonetheless looking at discourses that purport to have a strong relationship with the truth. Laine need not propound a whole new theory of reading pre-modern histories, but I would ask that like a few of his colleagues in South Asian history, he exhibit some engagement with the question of how to evaluate the veridical and the fantastic when we have, by broad consensus within our community of practitioners, and as a function of our position in the intellectual history of our discipline, agreed that both kinds of discourses are, for us, ‘matters of concern’.

Having moved hurriedly and inadequately through the early histories on Shivaji, Laine turns next to historical writings from the colonial and nationalist periods. In the works of Keluskar, Chitnis, Grant Duff, Phule, Ranade, Tilak, Rajwade, Sardesai, Savarkar and Sarkar, we see the life of Shivaji adapted to and incorporated into a variety of modern agendas. Thus he becomes an emblematic figure in, simultaneously, the anti-colonial struggle, the non-Brahmin movement, the justification for British imperialism, the contest for cultural and political supremacy between Marathas, Kayasthas and Brahmins, the effort to build a strong regional and sub-nationalist spirit in Maharashtra, early Hindutva, and so on. Shivaji’s appeal as a floating signifier in Maharashtra’s complex identity politics is indeed unique. In the spring of 2002, I helped organize a conference on ‘Cultural Symbols and Political Mobilization’ in Satara, together with Oxfam-Delhi’s Violence Mitigation and Amelioration Project, the Social Science Center based in Mumbai, and the Sontheimer Cultural Association based in Pune. Purushottam Aggarwal, Rudolf Heredia, Ajay Dandekar and I invited scholars, mostly historians and sociologists, but also artists, activists and mediapersons, to speak on key symbols

1 Shivaji, p. 6.
in the cultural and political life of Maharashtra. We expected to hear of all kinds of charged and dense discourses built around saints, deities and leaders, about Ambedkar, Marathi bhakti poets, the god Ganesh—instead, almost every one of the 30 or so presentations at our conference turned out to be about Shivaji. From the annual vari pilgrimage from Alandi to Pandharpur, to communal violence and terrorist bombings, from perennial caste-based electoral politics in the state to Marathi vs Kannada language riots in Belgaum district, it seemed, from the testimony of our participants, that every aspect of Maharashtrian society was tied up somehow or the other with Shivaji. No doubt the ground for this centrality and polysemy of a single figure was laid by the vast historical literature about the man produced from the late 1600s through the mid-twentieth century.

While indexing this literature, Laine is strangely dismissive of the motivations of the historians who co-opted Shivaji into their narratives of caste, class, region, language, race, colour, nationality, state, religion and modernity. I would step back and ask whether their history-writing can really be reduced to simplistic co-option in every case. If all history were so programmatic, would it really be popular or persuasive? Politically active personalities like Tilak, Phule and Ranade were widely respected in their respective milieus, Rajwade and Sardesai were extremely influential public intellectuals, and the ideas of Savarkar, like them or not, have ended up changing the very character of India’s post-colonial polity even in our own time. These men created the political, educational and social institutions that dominate public life in Maharashtra today, in our new millennium. We cannot dismiss them as casteists, communalists, or even simple-minded patriots who wanted to make Shivaji’s heroism their own. Just like nineteenth and twentieth century Calcutta, late colonial Poona has to count as one of the key sites for the production of Indian nationhood, and surely it is a mistake to naively ascribe to Savarkar, like them or not, much as it is not about possessing or selling objects that survive as fragments of history, archaeology and museology, as well as the ordered publics of modernity, but also notes that vandalism stands, as a form of political action, in some determine relationship to the human effort to come to terms with the embodied past that is no longer available for us to inhabit in its totality.

Professor Chakrabarty speaks of vandalism and looting as much in the context of the war in Iraq as the recent incidents in Pune, which ought to give us a sense of how frightening the entire situation has become for Indian history and its practitioners. When it comes to religion, especially Islam, there is what I would term as a consensus of hatred growing between different social and political sectors of our society, the net effect of which is not only to mostly discomfit and occasionally terrorize minorities, but make a free, fair and frank discussion of our complicated multi-religious historical past equally difficult for all groups.

Moreover, this problem, as Laine has now learnt to his cost, is not only a historical one. If the explanation for Shivaji’s importance were merely formulaic—everybody loves a hero—then we would not have the ugly and complicated situation that obtains in Pune today surrounding Laine’s book, with political parties, caste groups, communal camps and vote blocs all entering the fray, claiming injury, trading insults, and wreaking material as well as ideological damage. Why does Professor Bahulkar, Laine’s collaborator on his earlier book (The Epic of Shivaji, 1991) end up having his face tarred with black paint in January 2004, if scholarship in Maharashtra is only a matter of using and abusing Shivaji? I would hazard that the poetics of an event such as the vandalization of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute—just like the poetics of the discourses that are entextualized in Maharashtra’s historical literature—are still opaque to us. By ‘poetics’ I mean the rules of composition, of either a genred interaction like the attack on BORI and its denizens, or a text of history written to glorify the achievements of Shivaji. To decipher such objects, interactional or textual, to read society as to read history, we have to have some grasp of their poetics, their metrical structure.

Note how all of the fracas over Laine’s Shivaji has taken the form of highly structured and semantically loaded gestures: the banning by the Maharashtra government of the offending book, the looting of an archive by the Sambhaji Brigade, the blackening of a Brahmin scholar’s face by Maratha hooligans, the warrant issued in India for Laine’s arrest on American soil, the demand from some quarters that Interpol’s help be sought in arresting Laine overseas, the convergence between Maratha, Sangh Parivar and Congress responses to the book and its author. Most of this is worthy of challenge and condemnation, but none of this is random or irrational. Far from it—there is precisely a rationale of cultural contestation and civilizational politics at work here, and the resultant statements as well as actions possess what, in the language of a full-scale linguistic anthropological analysis, would have to be called ‘dense metricality’. Dipesh Chakrabarty has spoken recently of vandalism as a form of dealing with the past—specifically, historical evidence: relics, documents, artifacts, and so on—that is certainly the very opposite of rational debate, but is nonetheless distinct from looting, in as much as it is not about possessing or selling objects that survive as fragments of the past. He correctly contrasts the unruly nature of vandalism to the disciplines of history, archaeology and museology, as well as the ordered publics of modernity, but also notes that vandalism stands, as a form of political action, in some determine relationship to the human effort to come to terms with the embodied past that is no longer available for us to inhabit in its totality.

II

Babasaheb Purandare is someone whom every Maharashtrian associates with the name of Shivaji. He is described sometimes as Shivaji’s greatest living balladeer (shahir) and sometimes as his very incarnation (avatar). Purandare has written the story of Shivaji for adults and children, and directs, each year, a massive stage-shows, which have travelled abroad, as also upon the plethora of web sites
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that have appeared in the last five to ten years, providing information on Shivaji-related matters to thousands of expatriate Maharashtrians. Purandare’s headquarters are located on one floor of a Peshwa-period house off Bajirao Road near Tulsi Bazaar in old Pune. During 2000 and 2001, while I was doing my own doctoral research in Maharashtra, I went several times to this decrepit but elegant building, called Vishrambaghwada. I must confess to being fascinated by it.10 I talked to staff members of Purandare’s trust, I formally interviewed Purandare on tape, I sat in, one time, on a rehearsal of Janata Raja. I wandered about among the armour, weapons, cannons and other bric-a-brac stored in the back in a sort of informal museum, and I asked my friend, the late Aashay Chitre (d. 2003) to take photographs of the premises for me.

It would not be inaccurate to say that under the profusion of green, blue and red glass lanterns, among the carved wooden pillars, in the narrow hallways lit by small Persianate windows, listening to actors who had day jobs as teachers and clerks saying their lines in the roles of Jijabai and Aurangzeb, Shahji Bhosale and Raja Jai Singh, Maharashtra’s romance with history came alive to me. At one level history has only to possess the quality of child’s play, a game of dress-up, a fantasy of the past, for it to achieve its experiential immediacy and communicative power. Purandare may indeed be close to Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray and lend his voice to the message of cultural chauvinism espoused by Maharashtra’s Hindu Right. But I suspect that ordinary people enjoy his shows and turn out in the thousands to fill stadia and cricket fields whenever he comes to their corner of the state not because they hate Muslims, but because Purandare’s productions capture the thrill of having Shivaji ambush and disembowel Afzal Khan, or slice off the fingers of a fleeing Shaista Khan, or make a clever escape hidden in a basket of sweets from the Mughal emperor’s palace in Agra. Are these stories from the life of Shivaji about communal identity, or are they about danger and courage, cunning and quickness, capture and conquest? Do folks like them because they are murderous and chauvinistic, or because they’re fun to watch and listen to and read? These tales full of daring and pathos—the derring-do and bluster of Shivaji, the martyrdom of Tanaji Malsure, the bravery of Baji Ghorpade—these are what your grandparents tell you about, as their grandparents told them, and so on, stretching back almost four centuries. To get at the meaningfulness of Shivaji, the abiding charisma of one who has been called lord of the umbrella (chattrapati), wise king (janata raja) and luminous sage (shriman yogi), Laine has to come up with a better thesis than that Shivaji was a Hindu king in primarily-Islamic South Asian premodernity, and continues to serve as a symbol of Hindu power in secular but increasingly communally-divided India. Bigotry and hatred are not productive of culture, but only of its breakdown. They may yield the death and destruction in Bombay (1992) or the horrific genocide in Gujarat (2002), but it is poesies and poetics that give rise to the array of genres constituting the rich and continuing cultural life of a region like Maharashtra. My appeal to Laine is that as scholars we have to pay as much attention to the springs of culture as we might to its pathologies, and for us to perform this task competently, we must treat history with the utmost care.

The attack on Laine’s Shivaji did not come, as one might have expected (given that the book discusses Shivaji through religious categories like ‘Hindu’ and ‘Islamic’), from the BJP-Shiv Sena, but from a militant Maratha outfit called the Sambhaji Brigade. Their objection was to Laine entertaining the folk theory that Shivaji’s parentage might be doubtful—a doubt that raises the issue not only of his father Shahji’s whereabouts, but also of his mother Jijabai’s virtue, prior to his birth. In our era, of the politics of hurt sentiments, a historical question about religious affiliation is routinely cast in its degenerate form as a matter of communal identity, while a historical question about genealogy easily slides into a problem to do with caste. Laine himself is liable to the first kind of confusion, of the religious with the communal, while his detractors are guilty of the second kind of confusion, of the genealogical with the casteist. Neither position makes for sound history. What prevents us from historicizing Shivaji, not vis-à-vis our times, but vis-à-vis his own? The interest in Shivaji’s unique career as a ruler lies in the nature of the Maratha state he created in the vicinity of the Mughal empire and amidst the Deccan sultanates. Why not look at his political achievement in terms of state formation—a perennial theme in the history of Deccan and South India—rather than in terms of his purportedly Hindu opposition to Muslim environs? What was the nature of the resistance that he articulated by carving out a new kind of polity in the face of an array of other, entrenched, states in northern and southern India? Why do we position his creation of an independent dominion only with reference to what Laine calls ‘Islamic’ powers—what about his other contemporaries, like the Rajputs and innumerable small tribal and pastoral-nomadic kingdoms, what about Vijayanagara before and the Nayakas after? These are the questions that serious historical scholarship should be posing, instead of everyone, historians as much as demagogues, harping endlessly on Shivaji as a ‘Hindu king’. The grand political rivalry of the age, in terms of a narrative of personalities, may indeed have been between Alamgir Aurangzeb and Chattrapati Shivaji, but this clash of titans has to be relativized for us to move on to a more mature historical account of the politics of a great swath of South Asia in the mid-late seventeenth century.

Recently, in a conversation across disciplines, I was trying to tell an IT professional about my research. He listened to me for a few minutes, and then said, ‘I see, so this man was an entrepreneurial king?’ This struck me as a rather felicitous description of Shivaji after all, even if it came from someone who had next to zero information. In a sense, this ‘entrepreneurial king’ is the Shivaji of Jotirao Phule’s Marathi ballad in the late-nineteenth century, Chattrapati Shivaji yancya Povada. Phule regards Shivaji’s achievement as the work of native genius in hostile circumstances, of down-to-earth tactics in a world of imperial powers (South Asian as well as European), intrigue and war. Laine notes that Phule’s

10 This is the Mandai area of Pune, and Vishrambaghwada is right across the street from a famous sweet shop, Chitale’s, close to Laxmi Road.
reading of Shivaji did not achieve much popularity in Maharashtra, even though I would argue that by recasting Shivaji as a son of the soil and king of the *sudra* people who rose to rulership through natural cunning and hard work, Phule is able to transform the referent of *‘sudra’* such that it begins to capture, in its extension, the artisan as worker and the cultivator as peasant, and also, to some degree, the warrior as soldier. Phule’s is a brilliant translation of a traditional varna category like *‘sudra’* into the terms of colonial modernity. The figure of Shivaji, entrepreneur *par excellence*, is central to the transformation that he is able to effect in nineteenth century Maharashtra’s regnant discourse about the relationship between caste hierarchy, social prestige and political power. It is Phule’s legacy that B.R. Ambedkar inherits in the twentieth century—including, crucially, his innovative reading of Shivaji’s role in successfully undermining the totality that is caste society (*varnasramadharma*). Phule’s work may be recessive, as Laine seems to think, in Maharashtra’s history of ideas, but in as much as it feeds directly into Ambedkar’s movement for a revolution from low-caste and untouchable groups to truly modernize India, to democratize and render egalitarian her ossified social structures, his is arguably the most important take on Shivaji.

Sunil Sahasrabudhey, the Gandhian thinker, perhaps looking to push the Phule-Ambedkar appropriation of Shivaji for a post-colonial context, asks if it might be possible to genealogize Gandhi’s *svaraj* back to Maratha *sva rajar*. A question of this sort could cut both ways: on the one hand, it makes for an uneasy link between *Hind svaraj* and *Hindavi svaraj* whose mediating term is that of communal identity (‘Hindu’). Here is the danger of communitarianizing both the Chattrapati and the Mahatma, or rather, of focusing on those aspects of their respective lives, ideas and actions that lend themselves to a Hinduist interpretation. In the current political climate, this would only serve the purposes of Hindutva forces, who desperately seek to colonize both regional and national symbols, like Shivaji and Gandhi, for their dystopic project of building a Hindu rashtra, and would be only too welcoming of a discursive manoeuvre that bags both of these giant figures in one fell swoop. On the other hand, if one were to concentrate only on the nature of the self (sva-) written into *svaraj*, then this self could be construed as comprising different constituencies at different points in history: thus the people of Maharashtra in the seventeenth century or the people of India in the twentieth—not Hindus or Muslims, but at all times the community of the oppressed—seeking independent control (*raj*) over their destinies. Through such an exegesis of *svaraj*, oriented to the idea of a collective self and its quest for freedom and justice, we can begin to construct a *longue durée* history of the notion of sovereign citizenship in India, one that enfolds two of the most significant icons from the relatively recent past of South Asia, while also looking for those elements of South Asian cultural life in late pre-modernity that made Indians receptive to emancipatory Enlightenment values during the British Raj. I am not entirely certain, yet, of the viability of such a project, but I would hazard that Sahasrabudhey’s suggestion, which amounts to reading Shivaji as an early modern and Gandhi too as a modern, albeit an incomplete one, based on the modernity inherent in their deployment of a more or less developed idea of *svaraj*, might actually provide a useful way for liberal and Left historians to begin to wrest two of the most potent historical symbols back from the ideological tyranny of neo-Hindus.

As I stated at the very outset, when an academic peer is being forced to apologize publicly for his research and suffer the banning of his work by the Indian government, when friends, teachers and colleagues in the field are being intimidated by extra-constitutional vigilante groups for associating with the hapless author, it is extremely difficult to keep one’s sights trained on the contents of the book and evaluate these in a review. Even deserved criticism can begin to seem cruel in such dire circumstances. Moreover, one has to at all time distinguish one’s critical comments that are supposed to be scholarly, from those made by militants and fundamentalists of various stripes for political reasons. Not that political considerations *tout court* can or should be excluded from the practice of either writing history or critiquing historical writings: after all, in treating religious communities and sects as the subjects of our scholarly work, we do not want to incite communal passions; in treating caste-based communities, especially marginalized and subordinated groups, we do not want to be insensitive to the sense of self of our subjects. So, as historians our work is political in the way that Hayden White spells out in his discussion of Rancière: we must decide to what extent we tell the stories of the privileged and the elite, and to what extent we recover the lost voices of the masses. In addition we must be aware, at all times, that we are in the position of mediating the crucial relationship between the past (as a sort of cultural capital), community identity and in many instances, community self-respect.

The Sambhaji Brigade is addressing the images of Shivaji referred to or fashioned by Laine. While as citizens of democratic India—or democratic America, where the author lives—we too must have an investment in the politics of representation and in the political deployment of symbols like Shivaji, as historians we are interested, rather, in questions of method, evidence, style, argument, and so on. For us the project of history is ultimately a rational one, and while we willy-nilly may be embroiled in the discourse of sentiment that now threatens to engulf South Asian history and destroy it entirely as a discipline, we have to consider the work of our fellows first and foremost according to disciplinary protocols and by intellectual standards. Even as we stand by Professor Laine in what must surely be a dark hour in his career as a scholar, we must take his book seriously and engage it, not as a mere object of political controversy, interchangeable with, say, a film by M.F. Husain or a novel by Taslima Nasrin (to name other recent targets of censorship and cultural policing on the subcontinent), but as a work of knowledge. To read it as such is to accord it the respect it deserves, but has not received, from the self-appointed guardians of Indian history.

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33 (personal communication).