
The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India. Manan Ahmed Asif. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. Pp. 321.
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Manan Ahmed Asif's *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* is an ambitious endeavour to trace the genealogy of the concept of Hindustan and to embark on this quest with a decolonial framework of the philosophy of history. Asif contends that the people of the South Asian subcontinent share a common political ancestry in a region once conceived as a multicultural "Hindustan." This notion was subsequently elided by a European understanding of a religiously-partitioned land called "India" which endures today. As his key methodological ideology, Asif takes the intellectual agendas of pre-colonial, non-European pasts seriously and focuses on a seventeenth century Deccan historian by the name of Muhammad Qasim Firishta. *Tarikh-i Firishta (The History of Firishta)*, Asif argues, is the first formulaic history of Hindustan. Firishta's work was a cornerstone for the formation of Europe's philosophy of history, a staple in the colonial knowledge project, and crucial for the transition from Hindustan to British India. This transition is the nefarious result of epistemic violence that colonialism imposes on the colonized through the ordering and reordering of knowledge, and it is precisely this narrative that Asif recounts in *The Loss of Hindustan*.

Asif intentionally displaces colonial temporal and epistemic frameworks by organizing his book thematically as opposed to chronologically. His study asserts three main points. First, there is a rich archive of pre-European historiography in Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, and "from the eleventh century onward, this Hindustani network of scholars produced a cohesive account of their world and their past" (59). Second, the encounter between the

Arab world and Hindustan and between Hindus and Muslims consisted of “a preponderance of amity based on notions of mutually recognizable good” and intellectual exchange (48). Third, Europeans usurped Hindustani historiography to re-conceptualize global intellectual history, to reimagine land and property, and to propagate an imperial agenda which make impossible the “act of accessing a precolonial history of Hindustan without going through the intellectual edifice created by British India and its histories of the subcontinent” (64).

Asif’s genealogy begins in the rich archive of pre-European historical writings of Hindustan, in which historians stressed the cultivation of personal ethics in order to think about the political world. He parses copious amounts of manuscripts and literary works between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries to defend the existence of a rich intellectual geography that “encompasses the network of texts, citational practices, archives, schools, royal patronage, and scholarly communities [...] embedded in institutions that cohere across political systems and for generations” (55). Far from a dry archive of exclusive histories, Asif imbues his narrative with poetry, epics, romances, and correspondences, which prompt the reader to question what materials constitute a history. Most prominently they include “Baihaqi (d. 1040), Juzjani (d. 1260), Barani (d. 1367), Mir Khwand (d. 1498), Nizamuddin (d. 1594), and Abu’l Fazl (d. 1602), alongside epics and histories in Sanskrit such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, Ratnakara’s *Haravijaya*, and Kalhana’s *Rajatrangani*” (65). Contrary to the conclusions of colonial translators, Asif perceives “a coherent inter-referentiality, a clear sense of development of a theory and a practice of doing history and deliberate ways in which the logic of history is made apparent to future generations” (86).

Firishta's work lies at the intersection of pre-European and colonial historiography. Firishta aimed to produce a novel mode for historical thinking by writing the first comprehensive history of Hindustan. *Tarikh-i Firishta* "reflected a long genealogy of historians interested in the practice and ethics of history writing" including "histories of the places and peoples of Hindustan" (101). His references from poetry, inscriptions, and histories reflect the ethical and spiritual responsibility of rulers towards subjects of various belief systems, one in which Brahmanical astrology and Sufi prophecy coexist (136) and one in which "we see Hindustan as an eminently hospitable space — heavenly— with excellent weather, climate, access through water to the hinterland, and political structures that were already open and accommodating to a diverse population" (145). The enlightened picture Asif paints of Firishta's history is comparable to the cosmopolitanism stressed in Rajeev Kinra's work on the Mughal court historian Chander Bhan Brahman in *Writing Self, Writing Empire*. Here too, the factional and socially insular image of hegemonic Muslim invaders is refuted by a self-referential author with a meta-awareness of an ethics of belonging and a corrective foresight for posterity. Interestingly, both Chandar Bhan and Firishta were intent on reconciling Muslim rulers within the chronology of the continuously unfolding time of the *Mahabharata*, highlighting the contrapuntally intertwined genealogy of places and people in Hindustan which were neither Hindu nor Muslim. Both Kinra and Asif recognize that Hindustani historians shaped early British colonial understandings of administration, geography, and social norms in India which reinforced their imperial goals.

The effects of historical colonization are most obvious by the hijacking of indigenous languages in translation projects where "the colonial episteme collected, archived, organized, and excerpt-

ed textual and material forms to create histories of India” that robbed the colonized of the agency to represent their past in categories different from what the imperial archive created (5). For Asif, this is epitomized by the work of “soldier-scribes” like Alexander Dow and William Jones who operationalized texts in order to legitimize colonialism. Dow’s *History of Hindostan*, which began as a “translation project” of Firishta’s history, was simply a carrier text for the dissertations and policy papers appended to it. As Asif articulates, “in doing so, Dow also manufactured the formal project for writing British India—isolating the Muslim despot, segmenting Persian histories as source materials for the story of decay and conquest, and constructing the political intervention of the soldier-scribe in the conquest of knowledge about Hindustan” (198). Inspired by Dow’s *History of Hindostan*, Hegel, Voltaire, Kant and others theorized a philosophy of history and the social scientific disciplinary truths within the field of philology. Ultimately, this allowed for the exploration of intellectual history as a whole and a reimagining of land and property not only in Bengal, but for colonies in the Americas too.

Asif asserts that the re-writing of Hindustani history in colonial terms created ethnic and religious division. Central to this division was the “linking of *India* with the Vedic past coincided with the linking of *Hindustan* with the ‘Muslim’ despotic political regimes” (33). This paradigm signifies the term “India” as indigenous, ancient, and most importantly, antagonistic to the “Hindustan” of Muslim rulers. It allows the colonizer to establish a timeless, suspended Hindu history which effectively primitivizes the populace and leads to a political forgetting or erasure through universalist inclusion. Therefore, the colonizer creates a distorted chronicle of discord to justify a sustained presence as a conciliatory intermediary between two quarreling factions. In effect, it is a

manipulation of the Hindustani histories, especially Firishta's, for the purposes of building an empire.

Asif begins and ends his monograph with the twentieth century and present-day ramifications of the transformation of Hindustan into India. After 1857, despite the efforts of intellectuals like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Shibli Nu'mani, and Abdul Halim Sharar to popularize the Muslim past, nationalists favored communal allegiances which led to the creation of India and Pakistan. Asif's juxtaposition of Iqbal and Savarkar's poetry in the first chapter is a metaphorical premonition of the "slow evolution in the idea of a Hindustan from an exemplary and inclusive space to a multi-political federation" that the book traces (9). Asif relativizes his historical project by indicating that "after partition, the postcolonial states of Pakistan and India continued their progress toward majoritarian hegemonic ideas," which are evident in the ever-present persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India.

Like his first book, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (2016), one can sense the weight of responsibility and simultaneous quest for belonging that Asif imbues in his words. While his first book challenged the origin story of Islam in the subcontinent, this book is a history of Muslim belonging which reconstructs the archive of Persian histories to paint a picture of pre-European cohabitation. If there is something lacking in this impressive work, it is perhaps the inadequate discussion of the gendered dimension of the colonial narrative project which centralized sexual excesses and social depravity as a justification for reform in the nineteenth century. Additionally, the asynchronous organization of the book holds true to his decolonial methodology, but his narrative is often difficult to follow especially because the breadth and depth of his research spans several

centuries. Nevertheless, *The Loss of Hindustan* is a model in the ethics of writing history for future intellectual projects and a reminder to recognize the ways in which the past continues to formulate how our current prejudices are articulated. Asif's work is a treasure trove of bibliographic resources for the interested student and an indispensable work in the field of global intellectual history.