

# The Loss of Hindustan, the Invention of India

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Colonization refuses the colonized access to their own past. By imposing a colonial language, it retards the capacity of indigenous languages to represent reality. It claims that the languages of the colonized lack “technical” or “scientific” vocabulary. It removes the archives, renders history as lack, blurs faces and names. Thus, the colonized face a diminished capacity to represent their past in categories other than those given to them in a European language, or provided to them in an imperial archive. This rupture, brought about by the colonial episteme, erases the fuller memory or awareness of the precolonial.

*(The Loss of Hindustan, the Invention of India)*

In attempting to erase this erasure, Manan Ahmad Asif's *The Loss of Hindustan, the Invention of India* takes on the formidable task of not only questioning the ‘colonial episteme’ but the very discipline of history and the history-making process. In this path breaking and meticulously researched book, Asif begins by asking what changed when the pre-colonial Hindustan became India. He argues that replacing Hindustan by the name preferred by the British, India, though both are derived from the Sanskrit word Sindhu, Hindustan coming from the Persian Hindu, while India is derived from the Indos of the Greeks, is not a matter of simply replacing one notation by another, one language by another. Replacing Hindustan with India is an act of political forgetting and a determined effort to create a particular type of narrative and the erasure of one was necessary to invent the other.

So what *was* the Idea of Hindustan? And how was it different from the idea of India? And how and why

did India need to be ‘invented’? To explore these concepts Asif turns to Muhammad Qasim Firishta's *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, a history of Hindustan written in the early 17th century in Bijapur at the court of Ibrahim Adil Shah II. This history, according to Asif, is the ‘most comprehensive and substantive rendering of the concept of Hindustan’. Firishta situates his history in a tradition of history writing that is influenced by Arabic and Persian texts on the one hand and Sanskrit, Prakrit and Urdu texts on the other. However, this tradition is very different from the colonial episteme, (the ‘domain of knowledge constituted beginning in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese, French, Dutch, German, and British about the subcontinent’) which arranged the history of Hindustan around a ‘Golden Age’ situated in the distant past; an unchanging ‘Hindu’ society whose hallmarks were the caste system and the practice of sati; followed by a disruptive and despotic Muslim polity from which the Hindus were rescued by British colonial rule.

How was this colonial episteme arrived at? As the British gained military and political control over the subcontinent, they sought to harness the authority of indigenous customs and practices to be able to control the people, realizing that force would get them only so far. Thus began a search for texts and documents that would uncover the history and culture of the people they ruled. With the discovery of ancient Sanskrit texts, they could posit the ‘real’ India, of a moribund, backward society; a people without historical sense and without martial might. Differentiating sharply between the Muslims and Hindus, Persian and Sanskrit texts, they posited that Muslims were ‘foreign’, and all Muslim rulers were, and had been, invaders and despots. An important role, in the construction of this episteme was played by the realization that a history of the East was necessary not

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only for better governance but also to bolster, by contrast with Mohammadan rule, Britain's image of itself as a civilized, cultured country and the seat of the liberal values. As debates around liberalism and 'civilization' raged around Europe, the British also needed to justify their mercantile and military interventions in this country as an attempt to civilize and modernize a backward, infantile and superstitious people.

Firishta's *Tarikh* paints a rather different picture of this land and its people, taking as its model the many *Tarikh*s in Persian and Arabic as well as the mythologies of the *Mahabharat* and iconic Sanskritic texts. Firishta's Hindustan is a place where Hindus and Muslims can live peaceably even if not in complete harmony; exchange gifts, not only of precious jewels but books, curious about and respecting each others' traditions and cultures; translate Sanskrit texts into Persian and Urdu and the Quran into local languages, and where murder and mayhem is not the preserve of Muslims alone. Also, Firishta can see that the *firangi* who has arrived in their midst is different from both the Hindu and the Mussalman and is neither straightforward nor trustworthy and can easily fool them all.

For whom we write history determines why we write it and how we write it so that the very writing of history

has a history. History, Asif contends, is itself a colonizing tool. The colonial episteme was not merely a by-product of the expansionist designs of the British, it was central to their enterprise; it determined not only their politics but also economics, science and technology. Asif's work is significant not only because it points to amore inclusive way of looking at our past but also because it questions the way in which the colonial episteme has been internalized and is now being used by the so-called nationalists and social and political organizations in not only India but Pakistan and Bangladesh (the erstwhile subcontinent), to which we can now, sadly, add Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, to marginalize and 'other' whole communities and enforce the vision of a majoritarian, communalized, patriarchal society.

*The Loss of Hindustan, the Invention of India* uncovers the intellectual concepts and political imperatives that went into the invention of 'India'; how that concept was normalized and circulated; internalized uncritically by eminent colonial historians/thinkers, many of them Indian (though stray voices were also raised against it), and the enduring legacy of that narrative as it plays out in modern South Asia. And the dangers that such a writing of history poses.