Introduction

After Affect: Poetry, Positivism, History

The only thought which Philosophy brings with it to contemplation of History, is the simple conception of Reason; that Reason is the sovereign of the world; that the history of the world, therefore presents us with a rational process.

G.W. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*

In the first place, beyond the rational there exists a more important and valid category – that of the meaningful which is the highest mark of being . . .

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms; in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people.

Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense"

The essays in this volume are part of a larger argument that has long been in progress in the world of ideas, about the nature of truth and persuasion in historiography. But before I turn to these larger issues – which have centrally to do with facts and the nature of narratives that claim to be factual – let me begin with two stories. The first concerns the oeuvre of the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998). Within twentieth-century cinema, Kurosawa is as canonical as Sergei Eisenstein, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Oliver Stone,

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Francis Ford Copolla, and Satyajit Ray. Over a fifty-year career of thirty films his key preoccupations can be summed up under five heads:

- exploring the honour codes of the Samurai warrior class
- the dialectic between the individual and the collective
- the elusiveness of truth
- human suffering, with almost no possibility of redemption
- despite the challenges of nihilism to constantly strive to expand the aesthetic dimension of cinematography

His 1957 film *Throne of Blood* was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; two other adaptations followed, *The Bad Sleep Well* (of *Hamlet*) in 1960, and *Ran* (of *King Lear*) in 1985. In Japanese the word "ran" means chaos or turmoil. These three classics enhanced Kurosawa's stature, in no small part because, despite his core belief in the elusive nature of truth, he heroically sought throughout to capture "truthfulness" – or, to put it more truthfully, what his cinematic practice showed as the wide arc of truthfulness. Kurosawa is perhaps more internationally emblematic in this respect – in showing truth as a spectrum or arc – than anyone of comparable artistic repute in the modern world. A good illustration of this specific engagement with truth as something far from simple is Kurosawa's famous cinematographic innovation of simultaneously using three cameras for each take in his films. In his memoirs he reminisces:

> Working with three cameras simultaneously is not so easy as it may sound. It is extremely difficult to determine how to move them. For example, if a scene has three actors in it, all three are talking and moving about freely and naturally. In order to show how A, B and C cameras move to cover this action, even complete picture continuity is insufficient . . . The three camera positions are completely different for the beginning and the end of the shot, and they go through several transformations

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> in between. As a general system, I put the A camera in the most orthodox positions, use the B camera for quick decisive shots and the C camera as a kind of guerilla shot.[1]

Not only did Kurosawa use three cameras, each camera had lenses of different sizes and was positioned at a different angle from the others. The actors being filmed did not know which of the three cameras, at any given time, was working. It seems to me that even the very setting up of this elaborate cinematic framing scenario and related apparatus is to suggest that to arrive at what will be perceived as truthful is an entire enterprise; it is to say that truth is not something just existing out there in some natural state or obvious way; and to say that even with the best technology deployed, getting to the fact of the matter, or to the facts of a situation, is a complex exercise rather than some straightforward business that can be done and dusted.

If the pursuit of truth is an arduous task, that pursuit is best manifest in Kurosawa's most famous film, *Rashomon*.[2] While its plot is simple, overall the story line has interpretive challenges that are hard to disentangle. Roughly, this is the story: sometime in the twelfth century a Samurai and his wife are travelling through a forest outside the imperial city of Kyoto. A notorious bandit attacks the couple and in the resulting scuffle the Samurai is murdered. The dead man's body is discovered by a woodcutter who leads the local authorities to the scene of the crime. The police investigate the crime and the captured bandit is taken to be tried to a courthouse. The trial judge hears testimonies from four eyewitnesses at the crime scene: the bandit, the wife of the deceased, the woodcutter, and – since the Samurai is dead – a Shinto priest who acts as a medium to recover the warrior's voice.

[1] Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, p. 194.

[2] Awarded the prize for Best Film at the Venice International Cinema Festival in 1950.

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All four testimonies diverge greatly on what precisely happened. The bandit claims the Samurai died in a duel that had been spurred on by the deceased's wife. The wife claims she was deeply upset by slights against her by her husband, and, since she had fainted during a scuffle with him, it was strange for her dagger to be found lodged in his body. The Samurai, through the medium, conveys that he had felt dishonoured by his wife's romantic overtures to the bandit and so had committed ritual suicide. The woodcutter claims he discovered the dead body inadvertently and was only a bystander, but later confesses (to a set of acquaintances) that he was very much present at the scene of the crime and that all three protagonists were lying. The sequence of events, the woodcutter says, was completely different from what each of them had narrated to the judge.

What Kurosawa seems to be saying is that though only a single bloody event took place, the four subjective and alternative testimonies make it difficult to assert any single truth about a singular event. So, is the truth always relative and personal? Does each person always, as the *Rashomon* tale proposes, experience it differently? Is truth tied to our psychological and emotional states and to the burgeoning category of individual memory? How reliable are our memories? And what happens if there are more than four witnesses – say twenty? Do we then know truth as twenty different versions of an event? As twenty versions of recorded memories?

These are large, philosophical, and probing questions given memorable shape by Kurosawa. They concern judges, legal experts, psychologists interested in cognition – and, of course, the guild of historians. It is hard to write history without testimonies from the past. But if memories are malleable and governed by forgetfulness, self-interest, and our varied emotional states, how does one write history that can confidently be asserted as "objective"? The opening line in *Rashomon* is the disturbed voice of the woodcutter: "I don't understand, I just don't understand." The

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truth is in fact that understanding is a very tough nut to crack, even when one is equipped with three cameras and shoots each scene with different lenses and guerrilla placements.

For our second story, let us move from the forests of medieval Japan to the rich agrarian lands of early-modern Punjab. In the year 1843, just as the monsoon season started, Bhai Santokh Singh – a poet, scholar, exegete, and historian – was busy editing his monumental project entitled *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth* (The Sun of Guru's Glory). This gigantic work is now more popularly known as *Suraj Prakash*. Written in the form of a mahakavya (epic poem), *Suraj Prakash* aims to provide a complete and authentic history of early Sikhism, focusing on the lives of the Sikh gurus and the great warrior-king Banda Bahadur. For close to two decades, starting in 1825, Santokh Singh was attached to the court of Raja Udey Singh, ruler of the princely state of Kaithal, a town close to the imperial city of Delhi. Certainly, the final product must have made the ruler a happy patron; even more certainly, without his extraordinary royal patronage Santokh Singh would not have had the luxury or even the means to write his magnum opus.[3]

Our enigmatic poet, Santokh Singh, has left us with an exhaustive history comprising 51,829 couplets within fourteen grand volumes. In total, he wrote over 250,000 lines of verse in various metres. When in the late 1920s a prominent publisher of Amritsar sought to turn the extant manuscripts into printed books, the printed volumes released between 1927 and 1935 weighed in as fourteen large-format books; if one is fortunate enough to locate the *Suraj Prakash* in a research library, an entire shelf is normally beheld as its lodgings. While Gibbon's

[3] See Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, pp. 76–7. For some recent interventions on Bhai Santokh Singh, see Sagar, *Historical Analysis of Nanak Prakash*; Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, pp. 9–14; Jvala Singh, "Sourced Sikh History"; and Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, pp. 132–4.

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six-volume *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is far broader in its geographical and chronological scope, for sheer size Santokh Singh's fourteen easily surpass Gibbon's.

Though in many ways Santokh Singh outshines a lot of the canonical historians, in one key dimension he is quite different from global historians, Herodotus down. Unlike the classical Graeco–Roman historians, or even those practising the historian's craft in, say, the Islamicate world or East Asia – most of whom wrote their chronicles in prose – Santokh Singh chose to write his monumental history as poetry. Why? Why did Santokh Singh write history as poetry, or as what in South Asia is called kavya? Why did this extraordinary scholar, fluent in Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Braj, and Punjabi, eschew the global trend of writing history in prose?[4]

As a preliminary, we can suggest that Santokh Singh in opting for poetry over prose was simply following the strong currents of cultural tradition in the subcontinent. Instead of choosing to open new conversations, say, with Persian prose chroniclers, Santokh Singh opted to follow classical Indic historians such as the Kashmiri historian Kalhana, whose *Rajatarangini*, a detailed history of the Kashmir region beginning in mythical times to the twelfth century, was finished in 1149. Given Kalhana's location close to the Silk Trade Routes of Central Asia and his considerable erudition, it is fair to assume that Kalhana was familiar with competing templates of global historiography: Graeco–Roman, Islamicate, and Sinic. But he seems to have ignored the dominant mode – prose – used by his contemporaries and predecessors in their narrations of the past, preferring to narrate his regional history as poetry. We get first-hand intimation of Kalhana's thoughts on how the past ought to be represented in the opening chapter of his pioneering history:

[4] For an outstanding survey of global trends in historiography and Indian contributions, see Thapar, *The Past Before Us*, esp. pp. 3–48.

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> Worthy of praise is that power of true poets, whatever it may be, which surpasses even the stream of nectar, in as much as by it their own bodies of glory as well as those of others obtain immortality. Who else but poets resembling Prajapatis [in creative power] and able to bring forth lovely productions, can place the past times before the eyes of men? If the poet did not see in his mind's eye the existence which he is to reveal to all men, what other indication would there be of his possessing divine intuition? . . . The noble-minded poet is alone worthy of praise whose word, like that of a judge, keeps free from love or hatred in relating the facts of the past.[5]

Clearly, for Kalhana "the facts of the past" ought to be narrated by a poet rather than a historian: only the poet has the "divine intuition" which allows him to see "in his mind's eye" existence in its totality.

Kalhana's view of the poet as divinely inspired arbiter of the past was widely shared across the subcontinent. What sort of cultural dynamics made this poet-historian so confident of what he acclaims as the "power of poets"? He seems not to be paralysed in any obvious way by what Harold Bloom, following Freud, calls "the anxiety of influence". In this view of historian as poet, the exceptional faculty of vision peculiar to the poet is key; it makes the poet-historian an analogue of the judge rendering justice to appellants. Like judges, poet-historians are capable of sifting through vast troves of materials and eyewitness accounts to provide fair judgment to an audience of what really transpired. For what transpired was never only at the superficial surface level of human experience – which secular history ordinarily reports – since it also transpired deep inside the human heart.

Following Sheldon Pollock, I would say Kalhana's supreme confidence and lack of methodological anxiety can be traced back to India's long classical tradition. Pollock argues that once Valmiki

[5] Stein, *Kalhana's Rajatarangini*, vol. 1, p. 2.

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had finished composing the Ramayana, which happened at some point in the middle of the third century of the Common Era, the subcontinent, or at any rate the scholarly literati within it, came to possess a powerful new paradigm in the form of kavya, poetry that would be deployed for over a millennium in region after region to narrate the events, heroic deeds, betrayals, and archetypes of the past. Pollock does not use the word "paradigm" for this newly invented kavya, i.e. poetical history; he describes it as "a set of interpretive protocols".[6] And these protocols, he tells us, are made up of three interlocking rules: "Do not read *kavya* the way you read science, ancient lore, or the Veda; do not be concerned about a breach between what is said and what is really meant, about correspondence with an actual world, about information or injunction. And do not expect *kavya* to be like ordinary language; its purposes are different."[7] This classical protocol was often supplemented by categories of "indirection" and "imagination".[8] So, not exactly the science of history, as we understand the field today, but a vast cultural field made up of new coinages and imaginative strategies that would illuminate a body of known facts.

Ancient poet-historians did not therefore make a fetish of facts, as we moderns do, for the canon gave them plenty of leeway to alter facts. Pollock cites the example of Anandvardhana, a great theoretician of Sanskrit aesthetics, who explicitly instructed his followers, sometime in the late tenth century CE, to the effect that historical facts ought to be creatively altered to enhance the emotional outreach (rasa) of a text. His exact rules for how a poet-historian ought to go about these emendations are listed below:

> Another means by which a work as a whole may become suggestive of *rasa* is the abandoning of a state of affairs imposed

[6] Pollock, "Sanskrit Literary Culture from the Inside Out", p. 51.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., p. 56.

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> by historical reality, if it fails in any way to harmonise with the *rasa;* and the introduction, by invention if need be, of narrative appropriate to that *rasa.* No purpose is served by a poet's providing merely the historical facts. That is a task accomplished by historiography itself.[9]

So, while Anandvardhana is open to the idea that there are certain distinctions to be made between historiography proper (itihasa) and poetic history (kavya), particularly in the way facts ought to be treated, we know from actual cultural practices within the subcontinent that the preferred mode for representing the past for close to two millenniums was kavya. When Hegel speaks of the totality of history, this totality in South Asia was not to be attained via positivist historiography but by the aesthetic arrangement of already known facts within poetry. The two most major North Indian epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, are the Indian exemplars of such a totality. In both, such things as clan genealogies, individual biographies and aspirations, and histories of the imperium are subsumed under the grand banner of kavya. In other words, these two metatexts absorb historiography (itihasa) as well. As Pollock might put it, in South Asia – at least from within the tradition – facts, invented or known, serve poetry, and rarely does poetry serve facts.[10]

If we now turn back to Kalhana, we cannot be surprised by his choice of the kavya genre for by the first millennium of the Common Era Indic culture had developed sophisticated conventions on the scope and methodology of historical narrative. Kalhana in distant Kashmir apart, there are dozens of examples from various regions and historical epochs reiterating the distinctive

[9] Ingalls, *et al.*, *The Dhavanloka*, p. 440, cited in Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*, p. 58.

[10] Pollock's exact words on this issue ought to be noted as well: "It remains the case, however, that historical fact constituted something of a problem for Sanskrit literary theory." Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*, p. 57.

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nature of Indic historical methodology. One prominent instance of poetry as history, or poetry as knowledge, is the text titled *Kanhadade-Prabandha*, written in a hybrid form of vernacular Rajasthani and Gujarati. This dates to 1455 and its author, an accomplished poet-historian named Padmanabha, was a Brahman by caste. Although much shorter than Kalhana's classic, this heroic poem of 1028 verses narrates the story of a Rajput clan of Chauhan rulers based in Jalor and Satal who offered stiff and glorious resistance to the expansive armies of the Delhi-based ruler Allaudin Khilji (1266–1316). Though the main objective of the Khilji campaign was the conquest of Gujarat, the Delhi ruler decided to punish the Rajput kings, who lay on his way, for not providing the imperial armies hospitality and smooth passage through Rajasthan, en route Gujarat, a major hub of international trade. The impasse between the imperial authorities and the Rajasthani ruler Kanhadade is narrated in considerable detail by this Brahman poet-historian, and an appreciation of his distinctive historiographical method requires quoting him at some length:

> On receiving the Sultan's orders, the Pradhans proceeded to Kanhadade, carrying with them a dress of honour sent by the Emperor. They presented the same to the Lord of Sambhar (Kanhadade) in his assembly, and spoke thus: "Know it well, your lordship, that the army of the Turks is on way to Soratha. Other routes have difficult passes. The Padshah, therefore, requests you to let the army pass this way." The Rair spoke out plainly to the envoys before the assembly, his words pregnant with truth and wisdom: "This is contrary to our *dharma*! The Kings do not give passage when by doing so villages are devastated, people are enslaved, ears of women torn (for ornaments), and cows and Brahmans are tortured. The Pradhans returned, their mission having failed. They were feeling much ashamed for it. Back home, they informed the Sultan that Kanhadade

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> had refused to acknowledge his authority. The Sultan realized that it would mean conflict, resulting in [the] destruction of many lives. He heaved a sigh, but then sent for Ulugh Khan, the renowned warrior, Mahmud Shah's main strength and his follower, a brave, persevering, and energetic noble. Farman was given to him to proceed with an army to Gujarat. The Sultan himself gave him bida [farewell] to undertake the campaign. Madhava Mutha, the influential Pradhan of Gujarat, was also sent with him. Senior Maliks and Amirs, Khojas and Khans were summoned and detailed to join the expedition.
>
> Thus, we see that on one side was Allaudin – a mighty Padshah no doubt, and on the other side was Kanhadade Chauhana. Such was the confrontation, matching and terrible at the same time. I now relate how this led to the siege of Jalor, how wonderful defiance was offered to the Turks, and how Gujarat, Soratha and Somnatha experienced terrible times, how Raval Kanhadade, a warrior like the protecting portals, took a firm stand and won victory over Ulugh Khan's army.[11]

Having provided his readers with the context and historical background to the war, Padmanabha proceeds to provide detailed sketches of various battles and the concluding campaign, led by Allaudin Khilji in person, which culminated in the defeat of the key protagonist. A few vignettes from the war scenes are worth quoting as well – as illustrations of embellished historical method. Here is the poet-historian's description of the bravery of a great Rajput warrior, Batada:

> He stalked in front of the Sultan's army, with sword unsheathed and glittering. He saw the Turks ready and prepared to fight. But what of that! He had decided to fulfil his duty, having bid adieu to life. Angrily, he planted his foot in the battle,

[11] Bhatnagar, *Kanhadade Prabandha* (henceforth *KP*), pp. 3–4. The meaning of the phrase "protecting portals" is not wholly clear but can be inferred as denoting sturdiness and reliability.

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> determined to give way to the enemy only after his death. For about half to one hour, Batada plied his sword skilfully, but then young Turkish soldiers wearing armour angrily fell upon him. The Khan saw him falling after he had already killed a large number of *Mlechhas*. He praised Batada's bravery. In the heaven there were cries of "Jai", "Jai", as Batada went there seated in a vimana [mythological flying chariot].[12]

This description of a heroic warrior laying down his life is followed by a more encompassing description of Rajput deeds:

> That a terrible and bloody contest was at hand, was clear to all. Presently, the vast host would set out, raising clouds of dust, darkening the sky, and making the figures indistinguishable. The sun would no longer be visible. Carrying thirty-six kinds of weapons, the Rajput warriors would move out, the bards reciting their deeds of fame. The brave warriors would fall upon the enemy, elephants dashing against elephants, horses against horses and foot soldiers locked up [*sic*] with foot soldiers. The hard and full-blooded blows of the swords, the thud of the strokes on the bucklers and shields, the sharp and swift passes of the shining blades, the loud twang of the bow strings, the sparks from the spear heads crashing and clanking, the hail of arrows – such would shortly be the scene, right as per martial traditions of the brave Rajput warriors.[13]

These passages from *Kanhadade* show history turning into an inexhaustible crucible perpetually fuelled by heroic deeds. The darkened sky, swirling clouds, steel weapons, war elephants and horses, blinding dust, bows and arrows, and bloodied warriors are all part of a dark symbolism preparing an intended audience for a clash of destinies and the unmasking of human fate. For

[12] Ibid., p. 6.
[13] Ibid., p. 22.

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our purposes, noteworthy here is the emotive and passionate framing of the past. Similarly poetic text modes representing the past are to be found widely distributed over peninsular India.[14]

Santokh Singh, we can then argue, was well situated in a hoary historiographic tradition that, while deeply concerned with the standard items that appear within every historical repertoire – such as a temporal frame, the characterisation of historical agents, an emplotment of events, the causations and hidden meanings of the past – still chose to articulate the passage of time in large units of poetic utterance. Some of these poet-historians, in fact, put a huge effort into composing their narratives in the appropriate ragas and metres, so that when the text was recited it evoked the requisite moods of awe, joy, surprise, tragedy, and lamentation in their audience. The modern practice of silent reading would obviously have been a notion alien to the composers of such texts: what they were aiming for was a recitation that tilted hearts and minds towards specific affective structures and deep emotional states. It is instructive here to revisit the manual-like instructions that the author of *KP* provides on how his text ought to be handled, and what sorts of benefits would accrue to those who partook of his text:

> Those who listen to this account with attention, all their sins will be washed off. The reward which one gets by giving to charities, by taking a dip in the Ganges, the merit which one earns by undergoing austerities, or by beholding the Narbada river, by being truthful, by listening to the recitation of the Puranas, the reward which the ascetics receive, or the reward one earns by securing release of the captives, or by performing the Yagnas and pilgrimage to Prayaga, or the merit which one earns by making pilgrimage to Gangotri or Kedarnath, or the reward which one receives by a deep study of different branches

[14] For a highly sophisticated account of historiography in South India, see Rao, *et al.*, *Textures of Time*.

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> of knowledge, or the merit which one earns by taking a dip in the Godavari river, or by beholding Narayana himself, or by distributing charities at Kurukshetra, or the merit earned by courageous women who become *Sati*, or the reward which one gets by taking a dip in the Gomati river, or by residing for six months in Dvarika, or by a pilgrimage to Somnatha, or by residing in seven *Mukti-Puris*, verily the abodes of salvation, or by reciting the name of Lord Rama in the early hours of the morning, whosoever will recite *Kanhade-Charita*, or listen to its recital attentively, will earn the same merit (*punya*) which one will by the ways mentioned above . . . May the hopes and desires of all who recite it or listen to its recital be fulfilled.[15]

Pilgrimages, encountering gods, heading to sacred sites on the banks of rivers, and immersion in a historical sensorium are in the *Kanhadade* very similar activities. Why should an author propose ritualistic equivalences between sacred sites and his remembrance of the past in his kavya? His clues point quite transparently to the creation of a bedrock for the extension of Brahmanic hegemony: his narrative practices, he says, have to do with salvation and salvific desire, with the need for a populace to earn merit (punya). Much as pilgrimage can lead to punya and sometimes salvation, the act of hearing a poetic-historical narrative that adheres to the proper and prescribed Indic conventions can lead to merit and deliverance.[16] How could this be? What makes Padmanabha so confident when advancing such large metaphysical claims? My hypothesis is that this is because

[15] *KP*, p. 104.

[16] Many parallels can be cited from the Western literary-historical canon of this South Asian argument for the therapeutic and soteriological dimensions of poetic narrative, recommendations of the Bible as “the Good Book” being perhaps the most common. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* – specifically the Pardoner’s Tale, the Monk’s Tale, and the Parson’s Tale – also come to mind as rough equivalents.

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Padmanabha firmly holds the keys to the doors of Indic theory of aesthetics or rasa (taste/emotional flavours). I cannot detail the rasa theory in all its intricacies and complexity here – it is a bit like string theory in quantum physics, defying easy or formulaic descriptions – but it is crucial for our purposes to note certain key features of the theory.

Pollock says Indian aesthetic theory took over a millennium and a half to fully evolve and represents one of the key contributions of Indian civilisation to global culture and discourses of discernment and taste.[17] All art forms – drama, painting, dance, poetry – are blended through the dexterous use of rasa. Indian intellectuals were initially unsure of how exactly rasa works, but eventually a consensus developed: rasa was inherent in every creative medium, and thus a reader or listener intensely engaged in or enraptured with an artefact was much like a fish able to draw breath from a surrounding element. The only difference was that what the reader or listener was drawing into his body was affect – a variety of emotions that then inhered in her consciousness.

The great minds of the classical era identified eight rasas: fear (Bhyanaka), laughter (Hasya), anger (Raudra), disgust (Bibhatsa), erotic love (Shingar), heroism (Veera), and compassion (Karuna).[18] In its denotative aspect, rasa was also argued as deeply transformative and capable of generating thirty-three different emotions.[19] Pollock has a sutra-like gloss on rasa, terming

[17] What follows on rasa theory here is based on Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, pp. 1–46. I am deeply indebted to Sheldon Pollock – to his text and personal conversations – for my understanding of rasa theory. The extraordinary richness of his scholarly insights can benefit South Asian history even more than it has already.

[18] Some lists go on to include nine rasas, the ninth being peace/tranquillity (Shanta) rasa.

[19] For a list of these thirty-three emotions, see Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, pp. 327–8. Also see Higgins, "An Alchemy of Emotions", pp. 43–54.

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it an "emotional-aesthetic force".[20] It seems possible to unpack several layers in this useful gloss for a word conventionally translated as juice, taste, emotions, and aesthetics, but rarely as force.

What is striking about this system of emotions is that it encompasses not merely physiology or the senses. The physical element of emotions or passions is of course acknowledged, but the crowning achievement of this paradigm is that it moves beyond the sensorium and includes within its ambit matters of classification, evaluation, and judgement.[21] Thus, unlike the Cartesian mind–body split, where the mind orients our desires and feelings, rasa theorists persuasively argue that emotions and feelings drive the arc of our judgements. Cognition, then, is not merely a function of the brain, something that we have been told since the Enlightenment, but is deeply tied to feelings and emotions. And part of the DNA of human judgements stems from the texts under discussion: poetic epics and narratives produced by the creative classes in South Asia.

The second part of Pollock's gloss that we need to deconstruct is the term "aesthetics". What is being alluded to here is not just the dictionary usage concerning standards of beauty, but something much larger that would include such items as questioning, judging, refinement, surveillance, analysis, and pedagogic arrangements for learning and its transmission. It was through the touchstone of aesthetics that a culture decided what to include and exclude from its canon.

Finally, let us turn to the "force" aspect of Pollock's trinity. Here I see the rasa ensemble as a complex signalling device with the power to alter the homeostatic state. In other words, the uses and regulations of rasa generate an agenda, or action programme,

[20] Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, p. 28.

[21] Here I am supplementing my reading of Pollock with Chatterjee, *et al.*, "Feeling Modern", pp. 539–57.

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among those who imbibe the taste, the rasa, in which the artefact has been made available. And this agenda, these actions, are then recorded as history, a history of a cast of actors or a larger history of a community or region.

Thus, rasa cannot be deemed a passive variable; we become oblivious to both its generative and creative potency if we think of it in purely formal terms – as for instance we might think of ornamental adjectives, or the choice of a specific genre deployed for a particular kind of expression. Rasa is, by contrast with purely formal moulds or embellishments, capable of doing unanticipated things to humans, and in time great intellectuals, artists, and performers within the subcontinent acquired the skills and learning necessary for an expert handling of its capaciousness. Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata demonstrate the workings of rasa, and the fact that those who read or heard these epics went on to develop certain frames of behaviour and action ought not to surprise us.

Some concrete examples help in thinking this through. It is now commonplace to suggest that Indian ideas of gender, marriage, domesticity, kingship, statecraft, and politics are deeply influenced by these epics. If we think closely about why this is so, it becomes obvious that the influence is not merely because of the basic content of the stories narrated in them but very considerably because of an intricate deployment – which is inseparable from their bodies and their substance – of the eight listed rasas. Pollock's assertion, that rasa is an "emotional-aesthetic force" for action, cannot be disputed: one has only to recall the emotional intensity with which, over the centuries, geographically disparate South Asian audiences have been moved and inspired by the two Indian epics.

The life of Mahatma Gandhi, a lifelong reader of both epics, illustrates the emotive and inspirational action plan embedded in rasa aesthetics. When Gandhi proclaims Ram Rajya as the end goal of his politics, he is echoing his reading of the Ramayana;

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he makes it clear he is keen to see the spirit of the epic translated into everyday politics in South Asia.

In brief, my argument is that starting from the time of Valmiki, to Kalhana and closer to Santokh Singh in our time, Indic culture has opted to render its history via poetry or more loosely via the use of poetic-literary tropes and strategies. Kalhana as poet-historian is not alone in asserting that the truth of the past can only be revealed in poetry. The assertion seems to have withstood the test of time: the obtuseness of James Mill and his ilk who saw the subcontinent as free of history is clear from the fact that the past never dies in South Asia, and has not in times past. Or we could rephrase this to suggest that the past never rests in South Asia. Rich offerings of it with the flavourings of rasa have allowed us to taste it in our everyday lives.[22] Even in the much-vaunted Persian histories of India, when Muhammad Qasim Farishta, as a court historian of the kingdom of Bijapur, wrote a history of Hindustan in the early-seventeenth century, he gave it the title *Naurasnama* (A Book of New Emotions/ Flavours). Much like caste, no one escapes rasa in South Asia.[23]

However, rendering the past in poetical frames in the form of a multi-media performance in front of a large body of people,

[22] I am aware that from time to time historians did choose to write about the past in prose, particularly for such things as lists of kings, clan histories, and land grants. This started with rock inscriptions, and once metals were introduced we begin to get prose histories on copper plates. For two recent works that closely examine prose histories, see Guha, "Speaking Historically", pp. 1084–1103, and Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*. And outside the Maharashtrian context we have the long history of Persian chronicles. For a survey of Persian histories, see Auer, "Persian Historiography in India", pp. 94–139. But as Sumit Guha – a votary of pre-colonial traditions of history in India – himself warns us, the existence of prose sources ought not to be conflated with historiography. As for Persian chronicles, we know next to nothing about the circulation of these texts and their impact on public consciousness.

[23] For a detailed analysis of Farishta, see Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan*, pp. 21–7.

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almost as if the entire exercise of historiography were one vast emotional carnival of rasa theory, raises vexing issues for modern historians. Nor should we make the mistake of thinking that rasa theory provides a unified theory of everything to do with South Asian history and cultural production. Segregations of the imaginative and fanciful directions and capacity of poetry from mundane historical facts when creating the historical record have also long coexisted, specially for the past couple of centuries, with rasa-laden history. How can one get away with claims of historical fidelity when merging empirical facts and fanciful reconstructions – quite obviously, this too has been a perennial question in historical assumptions distinguishable from those of the rasa history tradition. From the time of Plato, we have been told that poetry and knowledge do not mix well at all – everyone knows Plato thought it best to ban poets from his proposed ideal Republic. It is never hard to detect the ire of modern historians with poetry as a form of knowledge. Max Macauliffe, the famous British historian of the Sikhs, has this to say about Santokh Singh's endeavours: "He was unquestionably a poet . . . the consequence was that he invented several stories . . . some of his inventions are due to his exaggerated ideas of prowess and force in bad as well as in a good cause – a reflex of the spirit of the marauding age in which he lived. His statements accordingly cannot be accepted as even an approach to history."[24] This juxtaposition of fact and imagination also, as is generally known, gave rise to the cliché, particularly within Orientalist circles, that Indians lacked a sense of history or historical consciousness.

Given this context of undervaluing the past, or at least rendering it in a different register from other civilisational systems of knowledge, the oft-quoted statement of the eleventh-century Muslim ethnographer Al-Biruni is hardly surprising: "Unfortunately, the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical

[24] Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, p. 77.

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order of things, they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of kings, and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling."[25] In another passage he notes:

> Besides, the scientific books of the Hindus are composed in various favourite metres, by which they intend, considering that the books soon become corrupted by additions and omissions, to preserve them exactly as they are, in order to facilitate their being learned by heart, because they consider as canonical only that which is known by heart, not that which exists in writing. Now it is well known that in all metrical compositions there is much misty and constrained phraseology merely intended to fill up the metre and serving as a kind of patchwork, and this necessitates a certain amount of verbosity. This is also one of the reasons why a word has sometimes one meaning and sometimes another. From all this it will appear that the metrical form of literary composition is one of the causes which makes the study of Sanskrit literature so particularly difficult.[26]

What Al-Biruni wrote about Sanskrit literature applies to classical Indian historiography. Literary texts overlapped with historical narratives, and often there was no difference between the two. Clearly, Indian historiography was not for the faint of heart and was rather far removed from the canons of world historiography.

Fortunately, where Al-Biruni gave up, others persisted. For the stakes in answering the question why South Asians rarely wrote prose histories are very high. Some of the most gifted historians of recent times have devoted extraordinary professional energies to answer this vexing question of form: Why narrate the past in

[25] Sachau, *Alberuni's India,* vol. 2, pp. 14–15.
[26] Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 21–2.

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