Aryans, Jews, Brahmins

Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity

DOROTHY M. FIGUEIRA

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I dedicate this volume to my daughter, Lila,
and in loving memory of my mother, Marion Gentile Figueira

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The Westerner who returns to India no longer recognizes his cradle. I am well aware that these Hindus are Aryans of our stock, our brothers; but we are brothers who refuse to reach out in one another's direction. We are too different. Too many millennia divide us. We said farewell to one another too long ago.
— G. Gozzano, *Journey to the Cradle of Mankind*

Anything can be believed if one cites the authority of the Veda, if one takes some passage from the Veda, juggles it, gives it the most impossible meaning and murders everything reasonable in it. If one presents one's own ideas as ideas meant in the Vedas, "all fools will follow me in a crowd."
— Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*

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Introduction

SHARED MYTHS

The present is fractured; it consists of competing pasts. By positing the past as a special case of the present, one not only remakes the present, but creates a new past and redefines identity (as kin, race, family) through an act of memory. The past thus possesses sociopolitical instrumentality when perceptions of "history" are made relevant to the present. Conflicts concerning the past are, in fact, struggles suggesting the proper shape the present should take. In such instances, history may be elevated to myth, when the needs of the present are read into the past and an image of the past is imposed on the present. History, once transformed into myth, becomes an instrument to construct social forms. It shapes the present through an evocation of the past and specific groups that inhabit it.

In this volume, I will examine how the Aryan past can be studied as a myth or a form of discourse that can be employed in the construction or the deconstruction of society. In particular, this examination focuses on the discourse concerning the Aryan race as a "shared myth" (Thapar 1992: 71) in nineteenth-century India and in Germany and as a reification of ancient textual sources in service of social practice. The Aryan myth has given historical value to ancient Indian history and has contributed to Indian nationalism during the colonial period and after the departure of the British. Myths concerning the Aryan race also served the ideological interests of Europe. The history of India could be appropriated as a means of expressing nineteenth-century European concerns with origins.

THE ARYAN CANON

Since the Aryan arrival in India is associated with the compilation of the *Rig Veda*, we will focus on how the construction of Aryan racial identity developed through a continued rearticulation of the authority vested in "Vedic" texts. For Indians and Westerners alike, the Veda functioned as the touchstone for Hindu orthodoxy as well as for their understanding of the Aryan. It served as a point of reference to be regarded as absolutely authoritative. Yet it provided a

rather peculiar canon: open yet unerring, complete yet subject to reinterpretation. It posed multiple problems from a hermeneutical point of view.

In India, while the Vedas are revered and recognized as omniscient, the texts themselves were weakened, altered, or even lost (Renou 1965: 1). Although traditional Hinduism accedes to the infallibility and authority of the Vedas, their importance in practice was textually and historically limited (Llewellyn 1993: 95). Before the nineteenth century, they were not used beyond their ritual status as a practical guide.[1] The Vedas were invoked, rather than laboriously analyzed as communicative texts. In Europe, different hermeneutic issues presented themselves, since the Veda engendered critical discussion in the form of spurious fragments, misattributions, and forgery (Figueira 1994: 201). When we speak of the reception of the Veda in pre-nineteenth-century Europe and India, we are referring to either an absent or a falsely present text. In critical terms, the Veda functioned as an aporia. It also served as a metaphor since the Vedic tradition was often culled from texts that were not strictly "Vedic," but "Vedāntic"[2] or even later.[3] Various Sanskrit texts function therefore as mediators of knowledge between the Aryan and its Other. On the level of history, they recount truth. On the level of the text's own production, the reader mediates this truth through idiosyncratic readings and authoritative definitions of what was considered "Vedic."

As the textual reference in the formation of an ideology regarding the Aryan, the Veda also posed problems on the level of canonicity. In what manner was the Veda used to legitimize assertions of faith or law? What were accepted procedures for interpreting the Veda as a canonical text? How did it change over time and place? Was there ever an accepted interpreter whose exegesis was seen as binding (even before it was read)? To what extent did the Veda's reception characterize the situation where "the Devil can quote Scripture to his need?" A canonical literature arises through the consensus of a group elite and normally serves to stabilize that group. It lends value to the interests and products of that group. A fictive Veda or the fiction of the Veda was used to this effect in both the East and the West. In this manner, the Vedic canon could change to meet one challenge after another.

METHODOLOGY AND PLAN

This study has a twofold aim, as a contribution to the theory and methodology of literary analysis and as an illustration of the historical reconstruction of myth. It attempts to retrieve fictions of the Aryan past through a consideration of rhetorical conventions and an awareness of the interaction between literary texts and other nonliterary and subliterary discourses. Because the Aryan myths described in this study originated in the literary reception of surviving

"Vedic" texts, particular significance is attached to textual exegesis. The modern reader's task consists of restoring both the linguistic and the extralinguistic context.[4] It is necessary to understand the cultural milieu and genre of the work itself as well as those conventions being echoed, since both European and Indian authors attempted to subvert tradition.

This study does not focus on the linguistic, ethnographic, archaeological, and physical anthropological literature dealing with the identity and migrations of the Aryan. Rather, I examine various European and Indian thinkers who built an ideology of the Aryan out of readings of "Aryan" texts. Adopting the general systems thinking of comparative literature,[5] rather than the expertise of the area specialist,[6] I focus on how myths of identity can be tied to textualities. This cross-cultural comparison involves critical choices.[7]

The foundations of my methodology have their roots in anthropology. For my interpretation of myth, I draw from the Mauss/Durkheim legacy wherein society is viewed as constituted from sentiments of affinity (affection, solidarity, mutual attachment) and estrangement (alienation and detachment). I am indebted to Cassirer's analysis of myth as a political tool constructed to confront or abet the overriding influences of the occult or irrationalism. I am also influenced by Malinowski's view of myth as a form of social charter, Eliade's understanding of myth as a true narrative, and Barthes' sense of myth as a second order semiotic system, a metalanguage of preexisting signs that can be appropriated, stripped of their original context, and infused with a new content. Finally, I borrow from Bruce Lincoln, who, drawing upon Geertz, interprets myth as discourse functioning either to preserve social stability or to deconstruct order and reconstruct society according to a novel pattern (Lincoln 1989).

My working definition of myth, therefore, is a composite of several approaches: Myth functions as a narrative which possesses credibility and authority and whose charters are manipulated to elicit sentiments which, in turn, construct social formations or legitimize changed social and political conditions. A myth can be restructured to activate "latent" symbolic meanings that play upon the sentiments of affinity to effect political reform. As Romila Thapar maintains, myth functions as the self-image of a given culture, the medium through which its social assumptions are expressed (Thapar 1992: 140). Following Thapar, I view the Aryan myth as a myth of descent, a narrative that can both serve to integrate diverse groups by providing common origins as well as be used for the reverse process of distinguishing one group from the other (Thapar 1992: 142). By positing an authoritative beginning, a myth of descent uses the past to explain the present.

Inasmuch as this study examines myths of identity, it also deals with the writing of history. History as opposed to myth is shaped by the system in which it is developed. As a combination of a social place, "scientific" practices,

and writing, the historical operation takes limited evidence and seeks to unify it into coherence. I am indebted to Michel de Certeau's understanding of history as a staging of the past (Certeau 1988: 9): Historians translate ("carry over") elements of the past embedded in present-day consciousness and repackage them to figure in their own interpretative system. The historian thus creates a heterology or a discourse of the Other, wherein strategies are employed to convert alterity into something assimilable to the prevailing configuration of knowledge.
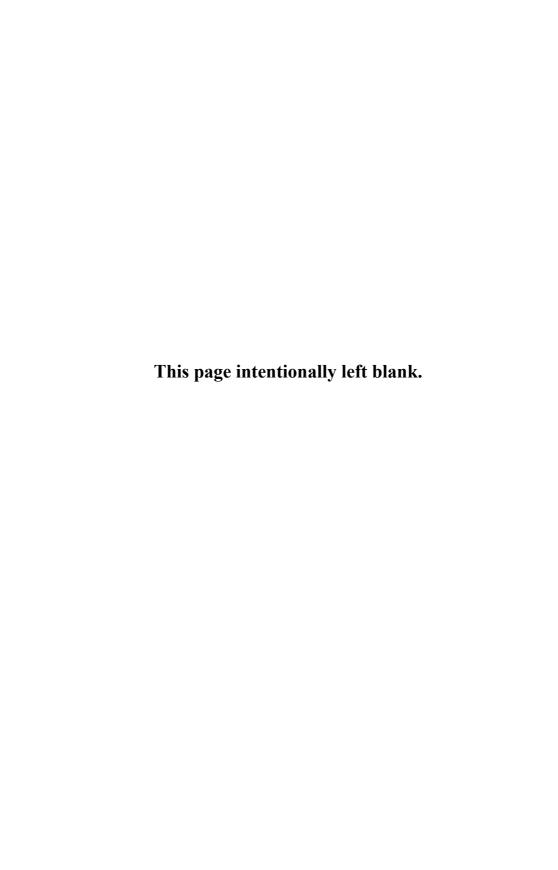
In any selection of materials, shards or remainders are created. What disappears from the product appears in the production, not so much the personal intentions, but the sociocultural localizations that inspire the foci of research. Historiography then becomes the treatment of absence. Certeau's concept of the heterology structures this investigation. The various myths of the Aryan that we will encounter all address concerns central to the heterological process: assimilation, authorial control, and absence. The Aryan as a mythic construct only exists in relation to its non-Aryan Other. We will see how in each seductive representation of the Aryan an unassimilable residue escapes interpretive control in order to return and upset organizations of meaning. The Aryan and its Other appear as phantasmal projections, rather than as effectively "real" populations. This volume examines the manner in which the past, or competing pasts, were constructed, changed status, and claimed historical value.

Part I begins with an examination of the Aryan myth's formation and activation in Western Orientalist scholarship through the construction of the Vedic Golden Age. I then juxtapose this initial Western depiction of the Aryan that was grounded in the reception of the Veda with that of the Enlightenment nonspecialist. I next examine the Western myth of the Aryan race and the Vedic Golden Age in the work of European Romantic mythographers. As an extension of the Romantic emplotment, I turn to the work of Friedrich Max Müller, the first Western "reader" for whom the Veda was a present document and the Aryans actual literary subjects. The remaining chapters in part I focus on the myth of the Aryan in European nineteenth-century race theory. The work of Gobineau and Nietzsche and their theories of social evolution provided an important link to the later nationalist emplotment of the Aryan in Chamberlain and Rosenberg.

Part II examines the Indian myths of the Aryan, beginning with Rammohan Roy's rejection of the exclusivity of Sanskrit and his reliance on the vernacular in his interpretation of the Upanishads. Dayānand Saraswatī worked from the authority of the Veda as a present text. In chapter 6, I examine his iconoclastic interpretation of the *Rig Veda* and the fiction of the Aryan that was formulated in his readings, commentaries, and debates. The time frame of part II encompasses the period during the solidification of British colonial rule, when Indian elites became concerned with the threat from above as well as from below. The desire for change, whether along lines of modernization or tradi-

tion, was motivated by the desire not to lose one's position in the hierarchy. Thus, the Aryan myth enabled privileged segments of society to revitalize Hindu traditions by positing them as canonically centered and appropriating them in the name of modernization, whether liberal or not. Finally, I examine how low-caste social reformers such as Jotirao Phule and B.D. Ambedkar subverted the nationalist script by overturning the hierarchic relations encoded within Indian society. Through counter-hegemonic/taxonomic inversion, they sought alternative models wherein subordinates and marginals under the present order agitated for the deconstruction of that order and the reconstruction of a novel pattern. Such reform relied upon this disruptive discourse gaining a wide audience and propagation. It also relied upon the domination of sentiments of estrangement over those of affinity. In the contest for political power between caste and non-caste groups, emphasis was thus placed on cultural separateness of the Aryan and the non-Aryan. Such reformers sought to sharpen separation, with each group searching for divergent roots.[8]

Initially, I limit my analysis to the myth of the Aryan as it was constructed from readings of a "Veda." Presented consistently as the central sacred book, the various "Vedas" offer the reader a literary rather than historical construct of a single Hindu community that implies multiple imagined communities based on various identities (Thapar 1992: 84–85). I must stress, again, that this analysis differs from earlier examinations of the Aryan myth in that it is uniquely tied to the textual construction of race. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the Western discourse on the Aryan predating the appearance of the *Rig Veda* in edited form, when an ideology regarding the Aryan was imposed upon absent or falsely present texts. Of necessity, this reception was not text-specific. Chapters 5 and 6, dealing primarily with the Indian strategies of reading reconstructed "Vedas," are exegetical and address issues of textuality. The remaining chapters examine a curious situation in which the Vedic text, although present and available, recedes from its reader's grasp. These readings are more evocations than models of reception. The "Vedic" text all but disappears or surfaces as an optical illusion. Beyond the mirage of the text, all that remains are the aspirations of readers who feel themselves marginalized under existing social structures. Their evocation of an Aryan canon, their call to the authority of an "Aryan" text, becomes the means whereby they confront their sense of estrangement and assert a reified Self. Whether the text is present, absent, or symbolic, these readings are no less "textual." Each use of a "Veda" to construct an Aryan identity is concerned with key literary issues of reading, canonicity, textual accessibility, hermeneutic strategies of reading, and ideal readers. The reception of the Veda in India and Europe is ultimately grounded in a discourse of readership and, as such, suggests the broader theoretical concerns of textually-bound identities and hegemonic textualities.

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PART I

The Authority of an Absent Text

CHAPTER 1

The Enlightenment and Orientalist
Discourse on the Aryan

THE ENLIGHTENMENT BACKGROUND

Orientalist and postcolonialist criticism has positioned the origin of much that it seeks to critique within the Enlightenment project. Edward Said identified the Enlightenment as a unified trajectory and master sign of both Orientalism and colonialism (Said 1978). Ashis Nandy traced the roots of colonialism's mandate to absolutize the relative differences between cultures to the cultural arrogance of Enlightenment Europe. Partha Chatterjee problematized Enlightenment historiography (Chatterjee 1986). Peter van der Veer has blamed Enlightenment discourse for the erroneous politicization of Hinduism (Van der Veer 1998). Curiously, none of their arguments dwells on specifics—a common methodological flaw of critical schools which measure past texts against contemporary claims of emancipation or fantasies of dissent (Fluck 1996: 228). In these instances, critics assess the Enlightenment in light of the subsequent colonial experience. Their critical canon virtually ignores the fundamental texts of the period. Indeed, the Enlightenment has suffered much at the hands of poststructuralism's vague and atextual treatment. There is clearly a need for a reappraisal of the Enlightenment with reference to its literature.

In satirical works of the eighteenth century, there appeared a general theme, barely hidden under the fiction and in the satire itself: Asia can and should offer lessons. The pittoresque Oriental tale provided an ideal medium through which authors could expose the vices of their own corrupt civil and religious institutions. The satirist's task had been made that much easier, since travel accounts minutely described the religious and secular institutions of Asia and marked analogies to European systems of rule. Somewhat

bemused, the voyagers drew comparisons between Christian and Asian mores. They noted in detail the various resemblances and their far-seeing readers were spurred on to draw further comparisons. In Diderot, Raynal, and Helvétius, for example, the strategy consisted of distancing readers from their normal surroundings in order to make them understand dangerous truths. Incessantly, Helvétius protested that his critique was aimed at the Orient and not at France, but the context of his discussion clearly pointed to misery found in a France stifling under the yoke of oppression.

In contradistinction to the voyagers' descriptions, the Jesuits had formulated a portrait of an Asia noteworthy for its enlightened customs and institutions. They represented the Chinese as philosophers of subtle wisdom, a marvelously civilized people who were ruled by a paternal government. They obeyed pious and tolerant magistrates who governed with admirably just laws. These Jesuitical observations were, in turn, appropriated by the *philosophes*, who were not adverse to borrowing their teachers' arguments to attack the Church. The Jesuitical emplotment of an enlightened Asia allowed the *philosophes* to question the principle of revealed religion.

For philosophers lost in the century of Louis XV, where visions of utopia collided daily with the contradictions of reality, the fiction of exotic "pure" religions proved captivating. Hindu or Confucian tolerance could be contrasted to the relentlessness of a Church suppressing liberty and to the sad spectacle of European religious disputes. One discovers, therefore, in the Enlightenment emplotment of the Orient, a subtle rhetorical strategy: Asia is portrayed as the victim of prejudice and superstition as well as the domain of reason and virtue. In its former role, it engendered political discussions and emphasized secularized history. In its latter use, the Enlightenment depiction of Asia helped define the disciplinary parameters of the history of religions. The comparisons of religious dogmas resulted in paradigms for practical analyses, most notably a form of biblical exegesis and a criticism of religious superstitions.

In this manner, Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* (1748) presented, for the first time in European literature, an examination of India with the purpose of illuminating universal history. Asia offered Montesquieu a vision of diversity which was unavailable in the classics or in European cultural attitudes. In an important respect, Montesquieu's understanding of Asia contributed to the work's originality. He showed that although nature was the same all over, climates differed and affected human behavior. Data culled from Asia enabled Montesquieu to develop this theory in book 17 of the *Esprit des lois*. Montesquieu's provocative conclusions directly inspired Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756–78). Voltaire adopted Montesquieu's theory of climates, which in turn legitimized the objective comparison of different social institutions.