PRÁTICAS DA HISTÓRIA

JOURNAL ON THEORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND USES OF THE PAST

Nº 18 - 2024

Recensão a *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule*, de Audrey Truschke

João Pedro Oliveira

Práticas da História, n.º 18 (2024): 415-423

www.praticasdahistoria.pt

This journal is funded by National funds through FCT — Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the projects UID/HIS/04666/2013, UID/HIS/04666/2019, UIDB/04666/2020, UIDP/04666/2020, UIDB/04209/2020, UIDP/04209/2020 and LA/P/0132/2020.

Audrey Truschke

The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule

New York: Columbia University Press,
2021, 351 pp.

João Pedro Oliveira*

Most Orientalist scholarship was concerned with simplistic and universalising ideas about clearcut and mutually exclusive definitions between civilisations, which were often characterised by specific religions.[1] Colonial historian James Mill famously divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods.[2] In British imperial scholarship, Hindu India was regarded as ahistorical and stagnated in time. By contrast, British scholars adopted a teleological discourse of linear historical progress to represent Christian civilisation. To a greater or lesser extent, this kind of discourse has remained alive.[3] History is still a contemporary subject built along Western epistemological lines. Hindu India is still mostly studied through the languages associated with successive over-arching periods: Sanskrit for Hindu India, Persian for Muslim India, and English for British India.

---

* João Pedro Oliveira (jopeoliveira@ucp.pt). https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2833-0418. Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Cultura (CECC) da Faculdade de Ciências Humanas da Universidade Católica Portuguesa (FCH-UCP), Palma de Cima 1649-023 Lisboa. Receção da recensão original: 24-04-2024. Receção da versão revista: 02-05-2024. Aceitação: 02-05-2024.

[1] Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge: Indiana University Press, 2001 [1990]).

[2] James Mill, *The History of British India*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1818-1823]).

[3] E.g. Romila Thapar, “Cyclic and Linear Time in Early India”, *Museum International* 57, n.º 3 (2005): 19-31.

Contemporary Indology has been defined by post-Orientalist and postcolonial scholarship. These fields have aimed to dismiss “grand narratives” and to look for “alternatives” to understand the Indian past. In *Hindus: An Alternative History*, for instance, Wendy Doniger explicitly stated that her project was to analyse how oppressed groups (women and lower castes) have contributed to mainstream Hinduism, which has usually been regarded as a patriarchal and high caste religious system.[4] By contrast, the Indian public sphere at home and in diasporic contexts have been increasingly influenced by Hindu nationalism (also called *Hindutva*), a right-wing ideology which has also aimed to create an alternative history. In this case, however, this is not an alternative history in which colonial categories are deconstructed. Rather, it is an alternative history in which colonial categories are emphasised and in which new simplistic “grand narratives” emerge. In *Hindutva* discourses, “evil” Muslims are often antithetically represented to “good” Indians, and modern Hinduism is constructed as an ancient and continuous tradition.[5] In addition, *Hindutva* ideologues consider the usually more nuanced analysis of ideologically independent scholars to be neocolonial attempts to counter their own efforts to create a strong pan-Indian Hinduism.[6]

In *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule*, published in 2021, Audrey Truschke goes beyond the obvious and creates a kind of “alternative history of Indo-Muslims” by mixing two fields which, due to Orientalist discourses, have often been thought as different (Sanskrit studies and Indo-Muslim history).[7] The author specifically analyses a wealth of overlooked historical documents written in Sanskrit between the 1190s and 1721 dealing with the Muslim presence in India. As Truschke remarks, these works were mostly written by elite male Brahmins, even though the author provides deeper sociological nuance through the analyses of historical works by Jains and Buddhists, as well as by a female writer. The author also writes against colonial grand narratives when stating early on her goal of decolonising history. She claims that, while premodern India narratives about local kingdoms and their rulers would not satisfy the epistemological preconditions to qualify as history, at least as the concept is understood in modern terms, they are concerned with historical events and should therefore be regarded as legitimate alternative history, an alternative which is just epistemologically different from contemporary Western-style history and should not be hierarchically compared with it.[8]

---

[4] Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[5] Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007) and Sylvie Guichard, *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, Controversies, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[6] Rajiv Malhotra, *Academic Hinduphobia: A Critique of Wendy Doniger’s Erotic School of Indology* (New Delhi: Voices of India, 2016).

[7] Audrey Truschke, *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

Truschke's work is not only against Orientalist assumptions but also against *Hindutva* ones, given that the author begins her book by mentioning her clash with *Hindutva* followers who wished to silence her historical analysis of works which do not show a clearcut clash between Hindus and Muslims but present more nuanced relationships between these groups. The argument of Truschke's work is straightforwardly mentioned in the first pages and often repeated in every chapter, so much so that, at one point, she writes that she sounds like a "broken record"[9]: contrary to what Orientalist scholars and the new *Hindutva* intelligentsia has claimed, premodern Indians did not necessarily regard history as consisting of a "clash of civilisations" between Hindus and Muslims.[10] The identities at play had much more complex ramifications which cannot be reduced to mere clearcut dichotomies.

Truschke's analysis is both linguistic and discursive. Her main conclusion in these two regards is that Sanskrit histories were highly influenced by ancient literary tropes, such as the epics *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, which, rather than describing Hindus and Muslims, described ideals of heroism (*vīra*) and violent conflicts. Such tropes were used for different concepts of *Self* and *Other* long before Muslims came into India, when they were already in use to describe a whole range of sociopolitical *Others.* This, Truschke argues, is the reason why most writers decided to write in Sanskrit instead of in emerging vernaculars, which did not have this rich library of literary tropes that could be readily used by authors and easily grasped by their audiences.

---

[8] Truschke, *The Language of History*, 7.

[9] Truschke, *The Language of History*, 183.

[10] Truschke, *The Language of History*, 3.

Truschke analyses how new words were introduced and how old ones evolved to describe new complex identities and how such words were constructed discursively to give shape to physical, psychological, and behavioural identities. The author concludes that the many terms used to refer to ideal and counter-ideal historical figures or groups did not have a single meaning throughout the time period under discussion and that in no time can they be reduced to the modern definitions of "Hindu" and "Muslim". Also, she demonstrates how figures who would now be regarded as Hindu or Muslim had much more complex identities in relation to other more relevant identity traits, including place of origin, place of residence, caste, class, and style of rulership. This means that, depending on these traits and contrary to the wishful thinking of *Hindutva* historical revisionism, Muslim characters could be characterised with positive Sanskrit tropes and Hindus with negative ones.

As the chapters progress more or less chronologically, Indo-Muslim rulers become progressively more integrated into local culture and, as the author keeps arguing, one notices greater syncretism between the different sociocultural groups at play. In any case, instead of trying to create a new "grand narrative",[11] Truschke is always careful to state the historical works she analyses provide a plurality of sociopolitical goals and representations of *Self* and *Other.* In the end, the only common elements shared by these narratives seems to be the fact that they are all written in Sanskrit and discuss Muslim figures. This means that these narratives did not belong to a single discursive project and so Truschke's methodological contrast with both the British colonial project and the contemporary Indian nationalistic one is further reinforced.

---

[11] Truschke, *The Language of History*, 96.

Chapter 1 explores the earliest references to Muslims in India starting from the 8th century, that is, almost half a millennium before the establishment of Persian-Indian rule. Truschke notes the absence of Brahminical writings regarding invasions by Muslims, possibly because, as she states, Brahmins were used to similar raids by non-Muslims and consequently found them unworthy of special note. The most interesting section of this chapter is her analysis of the *Kālacakra Tantra*, a pre-1190 Buddhist text which still has great relevance for modern Tibetan Buddhism and which represents Muslims as a dangerous threat to Buddhism. Precisely because this is a Buddhist text and Sanskrit studies suffers from a "Brahminical bias", the *Kālacakra Tantra* is rarely regarded as a text belonging to the Sanskrit historical tradition, even though, as Truschke convincingly argues, it should be regarded as such.

In Chapter 2, Truschke analyses the first narratives about Muslim-led rule in India: the incursions by Ghurids starting from the late 12th century and their conflict against the local Chauhans. She focuses on Jayanaka's *Prthvīrājavijaya* (*The Victory of Prthvīrāja*) to argue that the Chauhans did not regard themselves as Rajputs, Hindus or Indians, given that the term *Rajput* did not yet exist, the Persian concept *Hindu* was not used self-referentially and there was no India (that is, the modern nation-state) to defend. Rather, Chauhans regarded themselves as defenders of a type of kingship which upheld specific requirements of Brahminical ritual purity encoded in previous Sanskrit tradition. By contrast, their enemies were regarded as ritually impure and were therefore represented in the same way as outcastes and not as members of a distinct religious group. As Truschke discusses in the following chapters, this textual and discursive tradition continued in later texts.

Chapter 3 deals with the consolidation of Muslim rule in India between 1200 and 1450 under the Delhi Sultanate. The author analyses Gangadevi's *Madhurāvijaya* (*The Victory of Madhurā*) and Nayachandra's *Hammīramahākāvya* (The Great Poem of *Hammīra*, the Sanskrit version of the Arabic title *Emir*). Gangadevi is the only female writer in her corpus, while Nayachandra is the first of several Jain ones. Truschke shows how authors have tried to fit representations of new rulers into a new idea of kingship at both the linguistic and discursive senses. She discusses, for instance, the introduction of the Arabic term *sultan* and its reinterpretation into Sanskrit as *suratrāna*, "protector of the gods", an epithet which was used by both Muslims and Hindus. Hindu king Bukka of the Vijaynagara empire described himself as *hindūrāya-suratrāna*, "sultan/protector of the gods among Hindu kings", which means that this Hindu "sultan" regarded himself as superior to other Hindu kings. One should note, however, that by this time the Persian term "Hindu" did not have the same meaning it has nowadays.

In Chapter 4, Truschke delves into four regional works from Gujarat and Kashmir. The former includes four *prabandha* (connected narratives) written between 1305 and 1349. The author concludes that, rather than attributing agency to Muslims, some of these texts refer to larger temporal and divine causalities for historical vicissitudes and that some even represent Muslims as continuing the premodern Indian tradition of supporting multiple religious communities. The latter texts include Kalhana's 1149 pioneering *Rājatarangiṇī*, which was written in praise of Zayn al-Abidin, a Muslim ruler. This has long been regarded as a unique Indian historical work. However, as Truschke shows, *Rājatarangiṇī* has several successors written between 1459 and c. 1600. For instance, the author analyses how Shrivara's 15th century *Rājatarangiṇī* comes close to depicting Islam as a distinct sect of religious practices separate from those practiced by "Hindus", which in this context would mean "high-caste Kashmiris". However, Truschke remarks that, rather than regarding the two sets of practices as adversarial, Shrivara regarded them as potentially compatible.

Chapter 5 analyses seven historical works penned between 1589 and 1652 by Jains working in the courts of Akbar and Jahangir, who were two Mughal emperors. While most texts until this point use Sanskrit tropes to represent Islam, this chapter presents the reader with the first instances of attempts at discussing Islamic theology in Sanskrit, although, in this case, the goal is to compare it unfavourably with Jain theology. In any case, Truschke reveals increasing syncretism when describing how Jain discourses resorted to Mughal imperial ones to represent Jains favourably and how, contrary to what happened in the analysis made in previous chapters, Muslim rulers were already steeped in Sanskrit culture and local (Indian) royal structures.

In chapter 6, Truschke deals with 16th and 17th texts written in Rajput and Maratha courts. This chapter is particularly relevant because of the way the author deconstructs contemporary *Hindutva* historical revisionism. Rajputs and Marathis, particularly the Marathi king Shivaji Bhonsale (-1680), are often constructed in such discourses as virile martial strongmen who bravely defended Hindu faith against Muslim aggression. As Truschke convincingly shows, while historians who wrote about Rajputs and Marathis wished to create dichotomic narratives of *Us* versus *Them*, these two sides were defined more in military and political terms than in religious ones, so much so that Rajputs and Marathis often fought alongside Muslims with similar military and political goals.

Finally, chapter 7 explores how the last Sanskrit histories of Mughal rule, which were written between 1589 and 1721, did not mention Mughals only in their relationship with Indian non-Muslims, as the works analysed in the previous chapters had done. By mixing Sanskrit tropes with Perso-Islamic historical ones, these histories focused on Indo-Muslims as fully integrated into the local sociocultural fabric. In Truschke's words, by the late 16th century Muslim and Indo-Persian rules had ceased to be *Others.*[12] The author, who pays constant attention to the uses of language and attitudes towards different languages, remarks that, while in the works analysed in chapters 2 and 3 Persian was negatively described as a foreign language, in the works examined in this chapter it was described positively and fully integrated into Sanskrit aesthetics. Similarly, by the end of Mughal rule, the authors already made a distinction between Indo-Persian rulers and their "Hindu" subjects, even though the relationship between them was not adversarial, contrary to the way moderns tend to portray it. The book's conclusion suggests several new ideas for further research on other "alternative" histories of India which, if materialised, should deepen scholarly knowledge about the Indian past and envision how postcolonial historiography may be decolonialised.

---

[12] Truschke, *The Language of History*, 209.

The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule includes an appendix with an English translation of several of the most relevant passages of the works analysed by the author and a glossary of non-English terms. In the end, Truschke's analysis proves to be a detailed and nuanced examination of a new and relevant topic and is of clear interest for readers interested on both broad subjects, such as the philosophy of history, as well as more specific ones, such as Sanskrit historiography, aesthetics and lexicography, Indo-Muslim history, and the premodern representations of ideal and counter-ideal types in Indo-Muslim India.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Guichard, Sylvie. *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, Controversies, Politics.* London: Routledge, 2010.

Inden, Ronald B. *Imagining India.* Cambridge: Indiana University Press, 2001 [1990].

Kurien, Prema A. *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Malhotra, Rajiv. *Academic Hinduphobia: A Critique of Wendy Doniger's Erotic School of Indology.* New Delhi: Voices of India, 2016.

Mill, James. *The History of British India.* 3 Vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1818-1823].

Thapar, Romila. "Cyclic and Linear Time in Early India". *Museum International* 57, n.º 3 (2005): 19-31.

Referência para citação:

Oliveira, João Pedro. "Recensão a *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule*, de Audrey Truschke". *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, n.º 18 (2024): 415-423. https://doi.org/10.48487/pdh.2024.n18.37859.