Quarrelling with the past

At one point in his intriguing, provocative and sometimes irritating *A Lover's Quarrel with the Past: Romance, Representation, Reading,* literary scholar Ranjan Ghosh claims that indignation and dissent "can infuse a sense of discovery to our historical studies." [p. 79] The phrase, subconsciously perhaps, describes Ghosh's own work, a work that is not only written in dissent, but cries out in justified indignation.

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THE ENEMY THAT EARNS GHOSH'S WRATH is those scholars and pseudo-scholars who shrink historical narratives into the pliable political tools of communalists; more specifically, the target of his ire is a Hindu fundamentalism that, thriving on anti-Muslim emotionalism, represents Indian history within a horizon permitting space only for a narrative of Hinduism, cleansed of all outsider contamination.

The heart of the book is an essay, "Reality of Representation, Reality behind Representation: History and Memory". Here Ghosh allows his indignation to brush against those Indians who willingly permit their history to be shrouded in myth, so "myth and history hide beneath the skin of each other in a pontificatory discourse that censors, suppresses and mismaps events" – all the better to feed the agenda of Hindu fundamentalists. [p. 18] The case study that forms the centerpiece of this essay is the north Indian town Ayodhya. Infamously, in 1992 a mob of tens of thousands of Hindus stormed the mosque in Ayodhya and tore it down, because the mosque reportedly stood on the site of the birthplace of Rama, an avatar of the God Vishnu. The mob could justify their actions by appealing to the collective memory among Hindus, of the Hindu temple that once stood on this spot. Ghosh convincingly maps how this 'history' was nurtured by British imperial scholars and later cultivated and developed by Hindu *sadhus,* politicians, historians, and archaeologists in order to produce "a public memory largely governed by communal discrimination and prejudice". [p. 39] He plausibly argues that the mytho-history or heritage that has coalesced around Ayodhya provides a collective memory of fear and victimization, creating a screen upon which Hindu communal unity can be projected.

The Greek Goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, was the mother of the muses, including Clio, the muse of history. With the professionalization of historical studies one could be forgiven for believing that it was the other way around – that Clio, the muse of history, gave birth to Mnemosyne, Goddess of memory. But historians only offer one set of vantage points (among a multitude) from which to view the past. Novelists, politicians, artists and, increasingly, film makers offer the public representations of a past reality and when these representations come to be accepted they in turn contribute to the construction and distribution and maintenance of a mediated collective memory. In Ghosh's words: "Modern media and the contemporary politics of memory are entwined in a mutual embrace", and, moreover, "Riding piggyback on such megamediatisation-serialisation of the Hindu cultural past – the flow of cultural memory with its 'entangledness' in televisuality and popular culture – Hindu radicals win the major part of their battle by controlling public memory." [pp. 56-57] In other words, when it comes to memory wars unleashed by rival cultural/religious believers, the Hindu fundamentalists have proven their political astuteness by creating mytho-historical narratives through the use of televised religious epics and other media strategies.

Aleida Assmann has written of how an area of land can become "a sacred text" and how usually this happens in places considered to be "the localization of myths". Ominously, she concludes that he who conquers such a site "has to create a *tabula rasa* before he can engrave it with the tale of his own glory."[1] This would imply more trouble ahead in Ayodhya. One can understand Ghosh's indignant call for dissent.

Opposing the totalitarian certainty of the fundamentalist, Ghosh is aware of the sheer difficulty of doing history, what he aptly calls "the agony of history", whereby the historian accepts that something always escapes his representations but this lack of understanding "makes him try his intelligence with greater enthusiasm and power to make deeper and varied sense of the past." [p. 9] In the other central chapter of this book, "Whose Mandir? Whose Masjid? The Historian's Ethics and the Ethics of Historical Reading", while acknowledging his debt to Groningen philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit, he argues for an ethics of historical reading. Taking his cue from E. H. Carr's famous dictum that facts do not speak for themselves, he sees that the task of the historian is to invest the facts with meaning. That meaning will always be influenced by the present-mindedness of the historian, including the historian's personality and values. This is not necessarily a weakness, but a strength, ensuring the historian does not tail off into irrelevancy, forcing him or her to find the connection with the central discourses of our time.

Anticipating the recent revelations from former American intelligence analyst Edward Snowdon, Ghosh expresses his resistance to "statist superintendence" of a "panoptic character resulting in disciplinary surveillance by the government". [p. 105] He appeals to historians to not be "collaborators in power" [p. 115], but instead to embark on "the risk of history" [p. 119], daring to accept responsibility to the public when creating historical representations while aware of the double bind – our inability to understand the past fully and a lack of access to complete data due to the opacity of government.

The memory wars being fought over Ayodhya beg a comparison with what seems like a similar situation in Jerusalem. Professor Hans Bakker has written extensively about Ayodhya and has compared the situation in Ayodhya to Jerusalem during the Crusades. He has even dared to call into question the age of the Hindu city of Varanasi.[2] I was somewhat surprised to find no mention of Bakker in Ghosh's otherwise excellent bibliography.

Ghosh has written an original, intriguing, even passionate book and, for the most part it is written in an appealing style, with interesting images and quirky turns of phrase. But it is sometimes burdened by what I felt to be unnecessarily obscure jargon and neologisms. An excellent chapter on presence, for instance, is weakened by a short section containing sentences such as: "Presence is not always a surfacing of the repressed; rather, it lubricates out of the persistent 'translogical' quarrel with the past, out of a negation of efforts that threaten to lobotomise the past and, also, grows out a negativity and apprehendability in historical representation and description." Does it have to be this esoteric?

As Peter Geyl famously said, "History is an argument without an end." Ghosh has sent us news from the frontline of the memory wars in India. No end to this argument is yet in sight. His book is a call for tolerance and sanity and doing history responsibly.

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Notes

1 Assmann, A. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization,* New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 287-291
2 Bakker, H. 1991. 'Ayodhya, A Hindu Jerusalem', in *Numne* 38; Bakker, H. 1996. 'Construction and Reconstruction of Sacred Space in Varanasi', in *Numen* 43.

the impending local elections. By studying the most prominent leaders and core combatants, McRae not only disentangles the medley of payback and revenge, he also reveals an astonishing shortage of direct political interests. But how does McRae then manage to fill this explanatory vacuum in order to explicate the shifting dynamics of aggravation?

McRae divides the conflict in four specific phases that overlap and at the same time are each marked by very specific characteristics of patterns and participation in the collective violence. For each of these phases, McRae exposes different "divisions of labour" among conflict participants, which serve as one of the most outstanding factors for explaining the shifts in violent action. Whereas the first phase of fighting (1998-2000) started as a youth brawl and then developed into urban riots between rivalling patronage networks, the subsequent phase (May-June 2000) saw widespread killings carried out by Christian combatants, who had been recruited spontaneously and received some form of rudimentary training. While the two-sided violence between Muslims and Christians continued as tit-for-tat murders and sporadic attacks on villages during 2000 until 2002, the Christian dominance started to crumble with the arrival of mujahidin fighters from other parts of Indonesia. Not only had these mujahidin access to manufactured instead of only self-made weapons, moreover, because of their affiliation with Islamic terror groups, such as Laskar Jihad, some of them had previously received military-style training in other conflict areas, both inside the archipelago and overseas. Although these mujahidin brought along a number of conceptions of piety and morality that they sought to impose on the newly recruited followers, they had no formulated further-reaching political objectives other than multiple revenge.

Given the swelling militancy and the enduring violence applied by the involved fighters, who did not shy away from bombing public markets, burning places of worship and beheading innocent civilians, one must ask the question of why the state authorities both at the national as well as at the provincial level remained inactive for such a long time? McRae refers not only to the peripheral significance of Poso amidst all the other Indonesian troubled districts and provinces, but also mentions the shortage of funding, skills and resources among the local police that prevented them from conducting proper investigations. Moreover, arrests were also impeded by the fears of reprisals towards law enforcers, as a number of officers had previously died while on duty. The inactivity of the central government only paused briefly in the aftermaths of 9/11 and once again, after the Bali bombings, when Indonesia saw widespread arrests of militant Muslims. Given the continuing violence and the risk that the Poso conflict might spread to other areas, the central government eventually had to stop looking the other way. The "cost of violence" among combatants increased through the deployment of extra troops and the arrests and prosecutions of some leading figures, making fighters rethink their participation. According to McRae, continuing to fight was seen no longer as a necessity for defence but rather became a choice that brought along higher risks than before when perpetrators usually enjoyed impunity (p. 170). The battle fatigue together with the need for community rebuilding led some former fighters to return to their villages and take up their previous occupations in the fields and plantations. Financial shortages among the mujahidin also caused some of them leave their posts. Last but not least, the negotiations that eventually led to Malino Peace Agreement deserve some mentioning here, even though McRae deals with these consultations only marginally. However, given the involvement of four state ministers, first and foremost Vice President to-be Yusuf Kalla, and several dozens of representatives from the Muslim and the Christian sides, this approach later became an important model for conflict resolution in other areas in Indonesia, such as in Aceh.

Dave McRae's book is a great example of thorough and subtly nuanced research. He has sought to reconstruct the violent developments through interviews with victims and perpetrators, court documents and other material evidence. In encountering the many voices and versions of the stories, he consistently applied a healthy amount of scepticism towards the content of material documents and interview responses, which allows him to create a well-nuanced and fine-graded analysis. Thus, his book offers profound insights that other comparative analyses can hardly ever offer. All and above, this book is written in a sober and straight-to-the-point-style, however, what makes it particularly pleasant to read, is the occasional interspersion of subtle irony.

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