"... and when I look at a history book and think of the imaginative effort it has taken to squeeze this oozing world between two boards and typeset, I am astonished. Perhaps the event has an unassailable truth. God saw it. God knows. But I am not God. And so when someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friend who also saw, but not in the same way, and I can put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own."

Jeanette Winterson

Conclusion
Raising further questions for history: the south Asian context
In the last decade, history has displayed an urgency and consequence in modern politics than it has in a long time in the history and politics of the Indian subcontinent. I say 'subcontinent' because it has had significant ramifications for South Asian nationalisms. The question of tradition and religion has been inextricably wound up with the discourse of the nation, often suffocating the space for liminal and minority traditions. Most importantly, history has been used to diminish political and fundamental democratic rights, and all the while a language of a contest between equals or of rightful vengeance is maintained. That is the issue - whether history can decide, or help us decide, if the contest is actually between equals, and what the terms of the contest should be. In something of a conclusion, I can at best draw out some of the threads from the preceding chapters and weave them into questions regarding the basic tenets of appropriating history.

In outlining the fashioning of Europe’s ‘other’, a necessarily racialised category, I have tried to point out how certain vestiges of such an essentialisation percolated into the historiography of ancient as well as early modern India by indigenous sources in the late nineteenth century. This creation of an ancient oriental civilisation and its kinship with the originators of the European world was not simple. It was a process fraught with the anxieties of Europe’s self-perception, the inner contradictions of European nationalisms, and the differences between a direct colonial instrumentality and a discursive one, which belonged in the same Orientalist package. The Aryan idea, irrespective of its transformation into a linguistic category in Comparative Philology, did not take away from its racial connotations, and in fact complicated the issue with frequent reinforcement. It was the confluence of ethnography and linguistic science that was responsible for the embedding of this theory in Indian historiography. Romila Thapar has argued that the concept of race was alien to Indian conceptualisations of society. It was the very fact of colonisation that introduced this idea. The perception of racial separateness required an explanation and the idea of an Aryan invasion served to produce a view of caste as

1 Here the reference is to the debate about the role of Germany and Britain in relation to one another within the debate on orientalism.
3 “Conquest introduced both the language Indo-Aryan and what has come to be called the distinctive Aryan civilization. This was the opening narrative of Indian history.” Romila Thapar, “Some Appropriations of the Theory of Aryan Race Relating to the Beginnings of Indian History” in Daud Ali, ed., *Invoking the Past: The Uses of history in South Asia*, SOAS Studies in South Asia, Understandings and Perspectives Series, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 17.
racial segregation, as a primary feature of Indian social organisation. One must invariably remind oneself that the idea of the Aryan race actually emerged out of Comparative Linguistics, and went further with a classification of Dravidian languages to conclude the existence of a Dravidian race and “the idea that Dravidian speakers are native to India”, and no amount of clarification on the part of Max Mueller could ever dispel the idea which he too was significantly responsible for conjuring.4 Sifted through the colonial context in India, it was an idea that had very lasting consequences for the writing of history. In defining themselves against colonial rule and its attendant ideological framework of categorising the colonised as the inferior ‘other’, for those who engaged with questions of history, the claim to indigenousness became central. It became a useful idea with which to establish property rights over the history of the subcontinent. The potential of the idea of an Aryan race for the indigenous elites lay in the possibility of resisting the logic of colonialism by asserting a racial/historical/civilisational kinship, and by asserting that they in fact belonged to the same genus. This is how the logic of an inferior ‘other’ was sought to be countered. Even as the indigenous elite sought to define themselves as the oppressed with respect to the colonial state, it was not incidental that the Aryan idea was projected upon internal social dynamics within the subcontinent with the separation of the Aryan and Dravidian languages. While people like Phule, as we have seen, inverted the idea completely, in the sense of going a step further to argue that in fact there was a golden age before the Aryans – predecessors of modern day Brahmans – came and wrecked the ship. As we have seen, the same idea in Tilak’s hands in fact glorifies the triumph of an Aryan civilisation over lesser and lowly societies. Moreover, it stresses the “initial superiority of Asiatic Aryan Culture”, a strategy moulded to contest colonial claims to civilisational superiority.5 As we now know, Tilak claimed that knowledge of primitive Aryan life in the inter-glacial period, was best preserved in the Vedas by the Asiatic Aryans. With this he was pointing out, that in fact the Asiatic Aryans were superior because their texts contain the memory of the arctic home with a comprehensiveness not found elsewhere. Their cultural memory went much farther than what Europe had remembered till then, i.e., the Neolithic ‘savages’, as Tilak calls them. It has also been argued that Tilak’s theses

about the Aryan home went rather beyond rational accounting of facts, to an overly imaginative interpretation. The implications of this for the question of caste, once it had been accepted as racial segregation, was, that it functioned as a reinforcement of the notion of racial difference between castes. When compared, Tilak and Phule seem to approach this idea from totally opposite directions. Tilak is saying that our ancestors were in fact superior and have preserved more of original Aryan culture than it was imagined that the Neolithic people had done, and so as inheritors of that original tradition, we are perfectly capable of independent governance. What this also meant was that when it came to taking a stand on caste in the face of the lower caste movement, which had gained momentum, the deeply ingrained matter of 'difference' could not be put to rest. The Aryan theory became a way to assert racial and cultural superiority, in order to ensure the perpetuation of unequal political and economic structures as embodied in the reality of caste. In fact, in a paper read at the Industrial Conference in Poona in 1892, Tilak uses colonial officials' theorisations on caste to discuss the issue of the emancipation of the industrial working class. He is very critical of those who insist that caste needs to be abolished if the industrial working classes were to progress. He agrees with the British sources he quotes on the issue and says, that the institution of caste in fact prevented Indians from "relapsing into barbarism, by preserving the knowledge of industrial arts, by checking the abuse of despotic power and generally keeping feelings of morality, self-respect, superiority amongst people." In his eyes the only demerit of caste was the sense of inferiority it engendered among some sections. However, it seems to be all right, that while the Rigved does not give any suggestion of such an institution, it mentions that Aryans treated the dasys with contempt. So, he concludes that the feeling of inferiority is not communicated within the Aryan fold, only to those outside it. And so, the rules of endogamy and of purity and pollution practiced within the so-called Aryan fold are not about contempt, but about the maintenance of hereditary occupations in an organised manner. Of course, he proposes a resolution which urges the conference to


7 "The origin of caste must therefore be traced chiefly to the difference of occupation amongst all the castes except the lowest, and to the idea of inferiority and contempt only so far as the aboriginal races were concerned. Gradually as the lower castes came to be admitted into the pale of Hinduism and as the society became more and more settled the idea of inferiority seems to have spread up more or less to other castes." (My italics). Ibid, p 471.

8 Here Tilak makes a comparison with old Germanic tribes which coalesced into trade guilds: "considering the fact that German tribes that settled in the North of Europe are now regarded as a
resolve that “caste as an Industrial Institution is very useful, and endeavours ought to be made to preserve it from decay, and to reform it, so as to be useful in bringing into it those useful features of co-operation and enterprise which have been the principle agents of progress in Western countries.”

Phule on the other hand was looking at oppressions closer home. In his case, the use of the Aryan concept is a historical tool in crafting a popular people’s history, in which he inverts the concept of superiority and brings home the very basic point that civilisational triumph has nothing to do with ‘superiority’, a necessarily Brahmanical notion, but has everything to do with oppression. His entire scheme is really based on this absolutely simple idea. Therefore it is important also to test these contrary points of view not on the basis of historical fact, but to test the substance of its politics. The question of indigenousness is important with Phule who says that the lower castes peoples were the rightful inheritors of this land before the Aryans/Brahmins arrived. In fact the immediate opponent for Phule is the Brahmanical caste order; the colonial state is regarded as a possible enforcer of egalitarian values in the face of Brahmanical oppression.

The implications of the Aryan idea for nationalism are serious. In its association with caste, and more importantly with religion as a fundamental tenet of a national culture, there is in this early emergence of nationalism(s), an attempt to demarcate the components of nationhood. It is true, that Tilak never formed any other organisation with the ‘Hindu’ inspiration, and chose to remain within the Congress. However, his political views on the question of religion, caste and nationalism suggest the earliest glimmerings of inextricable linkages between nationalism and religious identity. Recent research on the national movement and the growth of the right wing has shown that after the formulation of modern Hindutva with Savarkar, the anti-Muslim character of Hindu nationalism only gave it a sharpened pro-British thrust. Associates of Tilak who were part of early formations like the Hindu Sabha in Nagpur were instrumental in shaping the basic features of this brand of nationalism. This branch of the Aryan race, it is not unlikely that the sacrificial assemblies or guilds of these tribes might themselves be derived from an old Aryan institution which, according to the different circumstances of each country, developed into castes, trade guilds, trade unions, clubs and similar other more or less exclusive societies.”

9 Ibid, p. 473.


10 It was probably not surprising given that the Congress itself had a certain composition and it went on to prove its upper class/caste sympathies in a rightward shift.
stream of ‘nationalists’ were meeting with fascist leaders in Europe, when the
Congress was trying to define nationalism in terms of secular political right – which
of course it abandoned later. I use the term ‘religion’ only provisionally, since it is
a very broad category and the conservatism inherent to the politics described above,
does not seek to incorporate and symbolise the lower caste/lower class elements
within that broad fold. Tilak uses the same argument about indigenousness in the
case of the Muslims, that they have been marauders who have no right to be there.
This idea is supported by the sense of an organic notion of culture, that in settling and
triumphing over the indigenous populations, the Aryans had succeeded in a
civilisational sense, and had given the subcontinent a tradition; the Muslims, on the
other hand were supposed to be plain invaders. We have seen how festivals were
used by Tilak to assert this sense of indigenousness. While I have said earlier, that
Tilak’s politics does show the early shape of ‘religious’/majoritarian nationalism, I
would like to differentiate between him and later political developments in which in
fact this brand of politics led it proponents to collaborate with the colonial state in its
quest for the annihilation of the internal enemy. In Ranade’s rendering of history
too, the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy is used on the scale of indigenous community as
against ‘invader’, by basing the historiographical argument about Maratha history as a
‘national movement’ against Muslim invasion. This attribution of volition and an
agenda to Maratha history, analysing its possibility in terms of syncretic traditions on
the one hand and the supposed erosion of caste structure into an informal unity on the
other, left a lasting impact. It gave a model of history of Maharashtra, which
effectively glossed over caste hierarchies, which imagined that there was actually
such a thing as ‘Maharashtra dharma’, and thus in a way trying to co-opt the question
of lower caste assertions in reinterpreting histories. In Ranade’s case, the idea was to

11 B. S. Moonje, a former aide of Tilak who spoke of the Malabar Riots in terms of a lack of militancy
among Hindus, met Mussolini, around the time of the Round Table Conference, which he had been to
attend in 1930. Christophe Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the
12 While it is also true that there were shifts away from the Congress towards the right, and Tilak died
in 1920, we have no way of knowing what might have followed. Also the entire history of how later
RSS leaders like Golwalkar drew inspiration from Nazism in their vision of the nation, at the same time
as they entirely missing from the Quit India Movement in 1942, is very revealing. Golwalkar’s famous
words summing up the absence of the RSS from movements at the time: “The theories of territorial
nationalism and of common danger, which formed the basis of our concept of nation, had deprived us
of the positive and inspiring content of our real Hindu nationhood and made many of the movements
virtually anti-British movements. Being anti-British was equated with patriotism and nationalism.
This reactionary view has had disastrous effects upon the entire course of the independence struggle, its
leaders and the common people.” M. S. Golwalkar, as quoted in Vinod Mishra, Selected Works,
show that there was actually such a unity, and that the circumstances critiqued by people like Phule did not really exist. This is in a sense an attempt to at best ignore, and at worst endorse what was actually a glaring social iniquity, brought into the spotlight by the lower caste movement.

People drew from the Aryan notion depending upon their own positionality. While those with entrenched elite interests used the idea of a Golden Age to define the terms of resolution of contemporary social conflicts – for instance the perception that the colonial state favoured Muslims – women like Ramabai who were very clear about what this kind of history had done to the future of gender relations in the subcontinent, categorically denied it. They did not reject it for being regressive, but recognised the patriarchal upper caste politics behind this notion of history. A striking similarity between Ramabai and Phule is that they have a truly internationalist perspective – unlike a highly selective reference to world history, made only to endorse indigenous social hierarchies of caste and gender, as in the case of Tilak and also Ranade: ‘truly’ internationalist because they recognised the similarities between various modes of oppression, and also saw the dynamics of social structures and institutions which operated behind-the-scenes, so to speak. Their inspirations came from struggles elsewhere – the women’s movement and the black movement for Ramabai and Phule, whereas the inspirations and parallels drawn by the other two were geared around the abstraction ‘progress’, at the cost of the rights and freedoms of those oppressed by internal – not necessarily colonial – structures. Patriotism was for them an issue of such proportion, that its proof came in the individual’s constancy in the observation of conventional religious, caste and gender codes. Such was their picture of the ‘nation’. For Phule and Ramabai, the question of ‘patriotism’ never quite got formulated except through their consistent work for those who were never part of the history that reformers and conservatives were busy cooking up.

None of this is really novel. The point is to ask what this brings us to. First of course, one needs to find out what relevance this has to contemporary uses of history. Whether in the aftermath of a distortion of history, which ultimately leads to a blindness to the present, there are any possibilities to bring forth simpler arguments which will open up the past in a way which, with a finality, shall demonstrate that the contest is, after all, not between equals. If at the height of colonialism Europe was
trying to create a ‘seductive’ and yet regressive ‘other’ to bring into relief its own situation, and to perpetuate and expand its power at a particular stage in capitalism as a world system, why was it that those who considered themselves the oppressed used those very tools to point fingers at those low down in their own hierarchies? Why was it that inspirations could be drawn from assertions by women and black people in America, without once pondering the question of ‘patriotism’? What do these conflicting notions of history mean in contemporary politics in the subcontinent? How do we read the signs when history is appropriated to gauge the consequences?

The suggestion of an answer probably lies in the fact that, just as there is a possibility of solidarity of those written off the page, there is that of those writing the pages.