South Asia has been one of the focal points for rethinking the forms that Western knowledge of non-Western civilizations has taken. The "scientific" study of "traditional" South Asian texts, beginning with the Vedas—once thought to be the oldest extant texts in an Indo-European language—has been central to the colonial construction of India as a civilization and to the nationalist project of making India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal into "modern" independent nations. These texts figure prominently in South Asian fundamentalist, regionalist, and secular nationalist movements today. Strangely enough, postcolonial scholarship seems to have reinscribed a major divide in colonialist discourse, the divide between the traditional or medieval and the modern. The essays in this volume are concerned with the reevaluation of the approaches to these texts that have formed the basis of that discursive divide and of the constructions of the medieval and modern. The texts at issue here are the Sanskrit Purāṇas, crucial for the representation of an ancient and medieval Hindu civilization; the Pāli Vamsas, which have been the major sources for the writing of a history of an original Buddhism and for fashioning the history of the island kingdom and nation of Sri Lanka; and, finally, the royal genealogical eulogies inscribed on metal and stone, the "hard" empirical sources that modern historians have used to construct a chronologically accurate history of ancient and early medieval South Asia. The three essays in this book are the result of work in which several of us at Chicago and elsewhere have been engaged for close to twenty years. After a great deal of separate reading and criticism, and one-on-one discussion with colleagues and students, we decided in 1983 to formalize our questioning. We began a colloquium, "Texts and Knowledge of South Asia" that has met on the campus of the University of Chicago irregularly ever since.

Our position, after ten years, is this: we wish to see texts as participating in ongoing debates about how the human world should be ordered, and we wish to think of the traditions of which they are parts as something belonging to the living present and not as mere monuments of a dead past. We want to think of texts as works enmeshed in the circumstances in which people have made and used them, and we want to see them both as articulating the world in which they are situated and as articulated by it, that is, as integral to the makeup of one another. And because circumstances continually impinge on people's life-wishes and dislocate...
the orders people are trying to build, we also want to see texts and the world (context) as remaking or reworking one another. We reject the heavily criticized view that conceives of texts as merely or even uniquely expressive of something that lies beyond them.

This position has emerged from a prolonged questioning of scholarship on South Asia, combined with some widely dispersed and often critical reading of theoretical works. To some extent our work parallels that done by the "new historicists." It also relies on some of the work of "poststructuralists," especially Foucault and Derrida, and, from a different angle, Laclau and Mouffe. The predominant position here, though, follows on a reading of the post-Hegelian R. G. Collingwood and of the heterodox Marxists, Vološinov/Bakhtin, and Antonio Gramsci.

We address both textual scholars and historians in this collection of essays. It has become fashionable for historians to look to textual scholars (especially, in the United States, to critics in English departments with whom the Force now resides) for solutions to their problems, and for textual scholars to look to history. There are good reasons for this. If we give up the notion of a universal truth grounded either in theology or in scientific knowledge, if we no longer think of the state of affairs in the world as God's plan or nature's design, then the object of our inquiry shifts. We no longer concern ourselves with trying to know God or one of his reborn substitutes—human nature, reason, creative genius, modes of production, and the like—but turn to the causes of the human world: transitory human agents and their actions. Of special concern are the practices, persistent and consciously ordered activities, in which people engage because these, more than other activities, have to do with ordering the world and disrupting orders. Among these practices, the ones having to do with texts and with the use of texts take on an importance they did not have before. Our knowledge of the human world beyond the reach of our immediate experience comes to us through texts, if we construe this category as embracing stories told from memory, TV news, pulp fiction, computer databases, home videos, and magazines as well as the Bible and the humanist works of a high culture taught in universities. If texts and the practices in which their making and use are embedded are no longer merely the vehicles for knowledge that resides elsewhere—in God or Nature—then knowledge of textual practices becomes of paramount importance. History also becomes crucial because the direct, predictive knowledge we can have of the human world through disciplines modeled on the older natural sciences becomes less privileged. Knowledge becomes retrospective and critical, and concerned with the reconstruction of the past, of the practices in which people made knowledges—which is to say, historical.

History is also important in another sense. Critical, retrospective knowledge is not only vital in an intellectual project that privileges the actions of transitory human actors. It has always been important for any community that tries to make itself a polity, a complex agent capable of shaping itself and its world. That many of those specially charged with this activity have tried to erase and falsify or otherwise manipulate the past, and attribute past actions to gods and heroes or sages or, in our own time, to market forces or late capitalism, simply underlines the importance of this activity. To strip a community of this capacity to textualize its past or deny that
they possess it, as in the case of India, is to strip those people of the knowledge to articulate themselves as polities. We call this colonialism. Our approach will also show that the makers and users of texts in India did indeed “have history” and were agents of their own world despite the double handicap of being in India and of being medieval. At the same time, we also wish to argue that the history denied in India either did not exist in the West until recently or is not, by our criteria, the thoroughgoing history we would like every polity to have.

Our problems would be solved if we could take the methods textual scholars and historians each have to offer and gratefully combine them. This, however, would not be desirable. Both textual and historical scholarship are beset with problems, and this is especially so for the ancient and medieval texts of South Asia.

Textualizing History

What, then, are the problems we face? Many South Asianists might suppose that the main problem we face in the postcolonial period is “orientalism.” Certainly this is important, though by no means can we say that some easily identifiable orientalism is to be found uniformly at work in every treatment of a South Asian text. Scholars of South Asia have approached texts with a variety of assumptions. More importantly, orientalism cannot be isolated from the more general problems that textual scholars confront. It is, rather, an inflection of the existing approaches. The main problem we wish to address is what Volosinov calls the construal of the text as a monological utterance.1 This holds that a text, for example the Mahābhārata, is a closed, isolated entity, one that has an identifiable essence, a permanent core of meanings, which is what its readers are supposed to obtain when they read it. There has been a long-standing debate about what the essence of a text consists of and where it is to be located. One side, dominated by aesthetics, assumes that the essence of the text is psychic and the property of discrete individuals or subjects. I shall refer to it as authorism.2 The other, dominated by philology, assumes textual essences are material and belong to the objective linguistic (phonological, grammatical, lexical) structures (and by extension to social, economic, or cultural structures) that impinge on individual authors from outside.3 I shall call this position contextualism. Scholars have oscillated between these two positions/trends in their study of texts. Since most of the scholars who have studied ancient and medieval India have combined their training in philology with an interest in literary esthetics, political history, or religion and mythology it is usual to find both of these trends at work in their writings.

The major position inherited by the post-World War II generation of scholars in the disciplines that study the texts of the West was estheticist.4 It holds that a

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2Volosinov refers to this position as “individualistic subjectivism,” pp. 45–52.
text is the unique expression of a mortal (but perhaps divinely inspired) man and hence a monological utterance. The “higher truths” in a text may be eternal, but their concrete expression in the text is based on the “experience” of the author and is confined, therefore, to a finite time and place. Once the author has inscribed his intent in a text, the work is complete and should, henceforth, be treated as the expression—one might as well say the property—of a unique individual. The problem of how such authors are themselves constituted does not arise, for it is assumed that individual greatness is everywhere the same and will somehow manifest itself.

On first sight, authorists seem to focus on historically transitory actors as the agents of their texts, but there is a strong tendency to turn authors into the instruments of what Collingwood calls a substantialized agent, a term by which he designates an agent which, although it underlies the actions of transitory historical agents, stands outside the flow of history and remains unaffected by the acts of those agents. The substantialized agent onto which authorists tend to displace agency is some supposedly universal expressive or creative genius, equated with either the spiritual essence of humanity or God himself. It is a close relative of the ideas of human nature in free-market economics, though some would claim that it transcends the material and selfish urges of the marketplace.

Cultural and literary histories here privilege the authors of texts over their readers and, because authors precede readers in time, tend also to elevate the past over the present. Their narratives proceed by talking about the “influences” that earlier authors have on later ones. Indeed, they assume that the main job of the historian is to document these influences. Combined with the notion of authorism (and expressive realism) is also the idea of a a high or elite culture, a great tradition that is the opposite of a low folk or mass culture, a little tradition. It doubles the author as the site of the unique expression of reality. Just as the author captures the essence of the human world around him, so the high culture (reducible to its authors) contains, represents, and expresses the values of the entire culture or civilization in question, be it Western or Eastern.

Most orientalists approached their texts with this authorist notion perhaps uppermost in their minds, but alas their project was to come to an understanding of texts that did not easily meet the criteria of the authorist and aestheticist concerns of their colleagues in English and Germanic or Romance language and literature departments. It appeared that many of India’s “sacred” texts—Vedas, Epics, Purānas, and Sūtras—like that notorious text, the Bible (upon which tex-
tual criticism as a discipline began)—are themselves not internally coherent works of the same “author.” Much work has gone into making critical editions, trying to create discrete texts out of the mass of manuscripts accumulated by colonial scholars. The assumption behind this Indolological project is that once texts have been disentangled and attributed to discrete authors, then we can determine what reality they express, convey, or mirror. That is, authorist concerns would have to be deferred in favor of philological needs. To a very large extent, the philological project, for reasons given below, was antithetical to the aesthetic project. Nonetheless, Indologists claimed some success in this direction. The most famous Indian literary author to emerge from the process of philological scrutiny was the poet and dramatist, Kalidāsa, construed as a “genius” at expressing the Indian natural world (the tropics) in general and the life and times of the “classical” or Gupta age, the high point of Indian civilization as Brahmanical or Hindu, in particular. Here is A. B. Keith speaking of that playwright’s Raghuvamsa:

In the description of Raghu’s conquests we need not seek for parallelism in detail with the achievements of Samudragupta and Chandragupta, but we have in it the poetic reflex of the achievements of these great Emperors; as ever Kalidāsa effects his aim not by direct means but by suggestion; just as Virgil glorifies Rome and incidentally the imperial dynasty by his Aeneid, so Kalidāsa extols the sway of the Guptas and the Brahmanical restoration by reminding his audience of the glories of the far gone days of the solar race.”

Even here, where some unity of authorship is assumed, an orientalist construct of the Indian mind as dominated by the imagination has permitted scholars to assume that South Asian texts have only the most tenuous connection with external reality. Whereas language in the Western text provides transparent access to its object, language in India, being either too elliptic or too ornate—and Kalidāsa is the least of the offenders on this score—conceals or obscures its object. Recently, literary markets and critics have reinscribed this notion of the imagination, but this time it is positively and highly valued under the rubric of magic realism. Salman Rushdie thus falls heir to Kalidāsa.11

Structuralists and cultural or symbolic anthropologists have been among the most prominent critics of the aestheticist form of authorism in the past four decades. They emphasize the importance of relations among units—meanings, themes, classes of objects—in cultural or social systems that stand as total objects outside of or between “individuals” arguing that these be given primacy in textual analysis over the individual properties that constitute authors and texts. Structuralism, however, cannot be said to have displaced philology in the study of India’s ancient and medieval texts. Structuralism is, furthermore, only one form of contextualism. Taken more loosely, it is a trend that insists on the priority of context, the

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11 Aijaz Ahmed has questioned this neo-orientalist treatment of the literatures of India and other decolonized countries on the part of poststructuralists and others in “Third World Literature” and the Nationalist Ideology,” Journal of Arts and Ideas 17–18 (June 1989), 117–35.
setting, system, or structure in which the text is embedded, over its author. From the standpoint of agency, the problem is this: the contextualist tends to displace agency from transitory agents onto the generality of what the text expresses—industrial society, the bourgeois family, the Greek polis, Roman imperialism, Christendom—because it is there that the essence of the text lies. History, as many critics have pointed out, is largely irrelevant for structuralists. At best we are concerned with histories of the sort that Braudel has made famous under the rubric of the longue durée.

Indologists have certainly treated texts in a contextualist manner. The Purāṇas are taken to be expressions of a classical Hinduism or a caste society or the interaction between Aryan and Dravidian races. The Vāṃsas are considered the expressions of an early, authentic Buddhism; and the land-grant inscriptions are made to reveal an Asiatic or feudal mode of production. Once again, Keith provides a good instance when he interprets an historical poem about Kashmir for his reader: the author, Kalhana, is clearly not expressing the reality of Kashmir’s political life for us on his own. He is the instrument of that higher author, the peculiarly ineffectual form of oriental despotism that many of the British imagined to exist as the essence of Indian politics. Though his “characterization in the main...lacks depth,” Kalhana

knows well the types which thronged the petty principalities of his day, the rival ministers, the greedy soldiers, the intriguing priests, the teachers only too proficient in immorality, the untamed barons of the country, the frail ladies from the temples, and the royal entourage divided into hostile factions. He is a master of the petty politics of Kashmir and its treachery, massacres, intrigue, murder, suicide, strife of son against father, of brother against brother, its worthless debauchees of kings, its intriguing queens like the bloodthirsty and lascivious Diddā (A.D. 980–1003), who put her own grandson to death in order to rule alone. (p. 55)

Keith, like most of his colleagues, was not in any explicit sense a structuralist. But there is a stronger sense in which Indology has been structuralist.

Philology has and still does dominate the study of South Asian texts. Philology is no one thing historically. Germans in their industrious making of dictionaries have been more positivist than have French philologists. Still, I think it is possible, following Vološinov, to see structuralists as the descendants of the earlier French philologists and linguists, continuing to engage in a sort of orientalist practice. According to Vološinov, the philologist was interested in languages that were not only dead but—and here one may see many of the philologists as orientalists—alien. The philologist could have treated his texts as dialogic utterances, but because they were not part of a living tradition for him, not part of a flow of utterances in which he had to make his way, the philologist construed them as monological. “The philologist-linguist,” argues Vološinov, “tears the monument out of that real domain and views it as if it were a self-sufficient entity. He brings to bear on it not an

12 The connecting link, of course, is the work of Georges Dumézil and those who follow him.
active ideological understanding but a completely passive kind of understanding, in which there is not a flicker of response, as there would be in any authentic kind of understanding." The idea of a monological utterance that mirrors a static, dead tradition, passively reflected in the scholarship of the Indologist is, thus, grounded in the scientific discipline central to orientalism, philology.

It has its continuation in the structuralists' notion of a closed system of signs. Anthropologists' theories of society and culture, I am afraid, are collateral kin of the philologists' (especially if we think of Claude Lévi-Strauss and, for India, Louis Dumont). Indeed, anthropologists have provided the museums in which the philologists display their monuments. Just as the texts reconstructed by philologists are abstract objects that no one historically used, so the tripartite structures of Georges Dumézil and the hierarchy of Dumont are themselves abstract objects, texts reconstructed from other actually existing texts.

Yet roughly the same problem, I contend, remains from the standpoint of the history of practices we want to undertake: the structuralists tend to treat their objective structures or systems as pregiven, in much the same way that the individualists do their authors (and readers). Those systems are, furthermore, as Vološínov shows (in relation to language) highly reductive abstractions from the real flow of utterances. They take our attention away from situated textual practices and direct it to the abstraction which itself tends to become the subject of the narratives one constructs. Nor do the structuralists escape the dichotomy of a high and low culture, though they do tend to privilege the low or common over the high, or simply to conflate the two.

Beginning some twenty-five years ago, critics who have come to be called poststructuralists (Roland Barthes and especially Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) have criticized the presuppositions of unity, systematicity, and rationality in their structuralist predecessors. Of particular importance in resolving some of

13Vološínov, Marxism, p. 73.
14According to Vološínov, "In reifying the system of language and in viewing living language as if it were dead and alien, abstract objectivism makes language something external to the stream of verbal communication" (p. 81).
15Unaccustomed to studying literate societies or "civilizations," the anthropologists Robert Redfield and Milton Singer attempted to recreate their object by making a distinction between great and little traditions. Singer used text to appropriate products of the great tradition and context in order to reposition ethnography; see "Text and Context in the Study of Contemporary Hinduism" and "Search for a Great Tradition in Cultural Performances," in his When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization (New York: Praeger, 1972), pp. 39–52, 67–80. For him, a cultural performance was the site where the two came together. If the texts out of which scholars have written about Indian civilization or its supposedly distinctive religion, Hinduism, were abstracted ideals, then they would have to give way to the context of a cultural performance. Thus, at the end of the analysis, text is subsumed in context, returning the favor the Indologists had done the anthropologist by subsuming an entire civilization in a corpus of "classical" texts.
16Vološínov, Marxism, pp. 52–61.
17Above all, they have taken them to task for the primacy they place on binary opposition as the fundamental ordering principle of language and culture. Foucault has shown that the disciplinary practices assumed as rational can be seen as endowed with conflicting and shifting logics, and has demonstrated how an assumed opposition of power and knowledge works to manipulate our understanding of modernist practices. His emphasis on discourses as specific language practices articulative of the human
the difficulties of authorship and readership is Derrida’s idea of supplementarity, which prevents the grounding of a text, the transcendence of its “outside.” No text is, thus, complete unto itself.  

People inevitably read a text through supplementation, through commentaries or representations of a text’s significance in a tradition that postdates the text’s supposed closure and keeps its eternal truth or universal insight up to date.

The poststructuralist opposition to monolithic structure equips us with some tools for the deconstruction of essentialism but does not provide the “space” or equipment for an alternative approach. Indeed, we are faced with the notion of text as infinite play of signifiers which Laclau has rightly called the “discourse of the psychotic.” This position comes dangerously close to the authorist approach with its emphasis on the text as a unique creation, but with the difference that “intertextuality,” the interconnectedness of texts to which poststructuralists rightly point, extends to infinity the body of the text.

Each of these positions has something to offer. Authorists ask us to focus on creation of a specific text and its authorship, and they raise the problem of taste and evaluation, a problem that does not disappear in studies of the popular just by dismissing it. To the extent that contextualists, and especially the structuralists and poststructuralists, alert us to the importance of “systematicity” in cultural products, point to the social or collective and sometimes unconscious dimensions of textual production, and blur the dichotomy between the author and text and the realities they are supposed to express, their sociological and objectivist views are a desirable corrective to the individualist and subjectivist view that has tended to predominate in the Anglo-Saxon world. Yet there are major problems with both of these trends.

world is an important turn away from the universalism in structuralism (whether in the form of an unconscious savage mind or the practices of the unitary modern society) in Durkheimian sociology and the study of mentalité, and in classical Marxism; many of us have taken up this part of Foucault’s approach. Derrida has shown how structuralism and earlier Western metaphysics both use opposition, and yet produce unity in their conceptions of the text, society, and the state by subsuming one of the elements of an opposition in the other, or by negating its existence altogether. Unfortunately, scholars of ancient and medieval South Asia have made little use of these criticisms. One example is that of text and context. Derrida’s notion of undecidability is helpful in “deconstructing” such oppositions. Is, for example, the author of a text part of the text or of the context? Is that notoriously shadowy alter ego of the ethnographer, the informant, text or context? Where do we place the commentaries on a text, whether written or oral? And what is the status of the received wisdom of anthropology, carefully inscribed or printed and stored in libraries? More often than not, when my colleagues in anthropology call for context they seem to be asking for a detached, potentially feral, textual practice to be converted into an expression of or, at best, a commentary on this anthropological text.

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The authorist approach displaces our attention from the text onto its essence—the creative or expressive genius of the author and ultimately onto the psychic nature that underlies genius. The contextualist approach displaces our attention from specific texts onto an ur-text (or onto text fragments) that nobody used in the case of philology; or, in the case of structuralism or other structural approaches, it displaces agency onto the structure, system, or type that it supposedly expresses. We are thus left with a dichotomy between author and context (synonymous with the dichotomies of individual and society or agency and structure) and the problem of essence or substantialized agency.

To make matters worse, the very project of textual study has constituted itself as very much a part of the project of making and sustaining a European preeminence over the rest of the world. South Asian texts with all their "problems" were the underside of the European Self's construction of its own texts and tradition as the homogeneous, centered, and transcendent products of unitary authors. That work—the production of a unique canon of texts that would lead to or legitimate the rise of the West to world dominance—could only be carried out successfully if the same scholarship in its more "exotic" departments could show that the texts of the Other either lacked the qualities of their European counterparts, as in the case of sacred and epic texts, or, in the case of philosophical and literary texts, possessed them only in an inchoate ("underdeveloped") form.

In order to overcome this dichotomy of author and context and its attendant problem of essence, and make possible an alternative approach, we have turned to two connected notions, "complex agency" and "scale of texts." We have taken these notions from the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood, and extend them here. His discussion of agency in connection with historical knowledge seems to offer a way both of criticizing current intellectual practices and of formulating an attractive alternative to the individualist and structuralist, as well as the antistructuralist, approaches in cultural history. We also draw out interesting parallels and convergences with the work of Volosinov.

Rather than thinking of the authors and readers (including listeners, reciters, performers, and so on.) of texts as either individual or collective, which is what scholars normally do, we want to think of the people and institutions concerned with texts as relatively simple (the "individual") or complex (the "nation-state") and more or less unitary or dispersed. The author might consist of a preceptor, himself the adherent of a particular disciplinary order and his royal pupil, of monks and nuns, of royal poets and key persons in a royal court. Authors, however, are complex in the sense that their composition consists of responses to other authors.

A text is a more or less composed utterance that is objectified in a practice involving some combination of writing, reading, reciting, performing, memorizing, teaching, and learning. Like utterances at large, texts are "dialogical" moments in the relations that agents, relatively simple or complex, have with themselves.

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and with other agents (both in their capacity as the agents of their actions and as the instruments and patients of them). It is important to distinguish two aspects of dialogue, the “dialectical” and the “eristical.” An agent’s practice of writing or reading a text is dialectical insofar as he or she starts from a position of nonagreement with another agent or agents, and comes through a process of argumentation to agreement. It is eristical to the extent that one agent attempts to gain victory over another with whom he or she disagrees. No act of speaking, writing, or reading is, however, purely dialectical or eristical. Many texts in India (like Plato’s Dialogues) are explicitly dialectical in their ordering, consisting of questions and answers.

To some degree or other and in varying ways, texts are discursive and narrative. Agents compose texts so that they may use them in their encounters to make arguments and to tell stories. Among the activities in which agents engage when they make and use texts is to determine what is rational in discursive practice and what counts as a plausible story. That is, there are no universal criteria that stand outside the practices of the agents concerned.

The arguments that agents are making, the stories they are telling in their ongoing utterances, are heterogeneous. The very practice of textualizing has as one of its purposes the reduction of heterogeneity to homogeneities tailored to specified situations or organized around specific issues or wishes. A particular text is itself one momentary effect or result of the textual practices in which agents engage. It belongs to a tradition conceived of not as something dead and complete, or as the unfolding of an original unitary idea, but conceived of, after Collingwood, as a scale of texts. Later agents and their texts overlap with those of their predecessors and contemporaries and, by engaging in a process of criticism, appropriation, repetition, refutation, amplification, abbreviation, and so on, position themselves in relation to them. Volosinov, continuing with his treatment of the book as a dialogical form, confirms the notion of looking at tradition as a scale of utterances in Collingwood’s sense.

Moreover, a verbal performance of this kind also inevitably orients itself with respect to previous performances in the same sphere, both those by the same author and those by other authors. It inevitably takes its point of departure from some particular state of affairs involving a scientific problem or a literary style. Thus the printed verbal performance engages, as it were, in ideological colloquy of large scale: it responds to something, objects to something, affirms something.
something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on. (Vološinov, *Marxism*, p. 95)

Once we begin to look at texts in this discursive and dialogical fashion, our notion of text itself, of course, also changes. We begin to question the idea of "textuality," the notion of texts as inherently expressing the preset or unique mind of an author or, further, representing or participating in an essentialized great tradition, whether Judeo-Christian or Brahmanical. Texts and their authors and users are for us immanent in the world of practices and intertextualities. We would wish to take as texts many documents or utterances that students of great traditions would ignore—films and film scores, large-circulation magazines, political pamphlets, official pronouncements, the discourses of professions such as medicine and law, and even everyday dialogue. On the other hand, we do not wish to concede that "classical" or "canonical" works—the *Dharmaśāstra* of Manu, the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kālidāsa’s *Śakuntalā*, or the *Caitanyacaritāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadāsa, to name but a few—should be left to the traditional methods of Indologists or historians of religion.

The idea of a scale of texts allows us to avoid the “equal-and-opposite” reaction to the static, monolithic notion of culture or tradition, the notion of an infinitude of significations, the endless play of signifiers. People do make canons, they do order the texts they use. That people and scholars may misrecognize this process both in India and in the West does not require us to abandon any idea of ordering. At the very least, such a move tends to remove the using of texts from public places where wills encounter one another, and to situate their use in a private, personal space—a process I refer to as the novelization of texts.

We wish to emphasize that once texts are seen as participating in the making and remaking of a living, changing scale of texts, we become aware of their political and polemical dimension. Every text, no matter what claims its authors or users may make about its transcendence, is *articulative* with respect to specific actors and situations. It is not merely a “source” that passively records events, but an intervention on the part of an agent in the world. It calls on its readers as they read the text not only to engage in (or refrain from) textual activity but to engage, to some degree, in other acts as well. The very composition (and reiteration) of a text, the placement of it in relation to other texts, is itself an assertion of relative power. The political effects of a text, however, are not uniform. Although the knowledges in South Asian texts may strengthen the will of some people to act in the world and in certain ways, they may also weaken the will of others, that is, they may have a disarticulative or dislocating effect on the world in which they intervene.

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22 One tendency has been to talk about texts as “constructing” or “constituting” the past. We prefer, following Laclau, to avoid these terms because they involve too much of a reaction to the essentialist position of which their users are critical. The essentialist saw texts as the expression of an author or context; the constructionist tends to see texts as “producing” tradition or history almost, as it were, ex nihilo. Instead we talk about “articulation.” Laclau adumbrates a post-Marxist and poststructuralist notion of articulation in his discussion of the dislocation of structures. The articulation of a structure in his rendering is contingent and political; it is not given by “objective laws” of the structure and of its history or development; *New Reflections*, p. 50.
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To the extent that one reads a text as discursive and polemical, one should be prepared to look for indirect statements or silences about its author or commentators and their rivals. In reading a document as a living text, we also want to be sensitive to tone, to the possibility that certain readers or commentators would have read some statements or characterizations as ironic or parodic. This is to say that we have to engage in informed speculation. We have to step away from the positivist notion that we should confine our task to understanding only that which is positively inscribed in the text (as if that were fully possible).

Not all texts are merely articulative. Some, we would argue, are comprehensively so. They are transformative, calling on their readers to make major changes in the world in which people compose and use them. Given the importance of ontological and theological issues in certain broad historical periods, it is perhaps uncontroversial to claim that texts such as the Epics, Purāṇas, and Dharmaśāstras, or the Mañgalakāvyas of Bengal, and Vamsas of Sri Lanka are transformative. Yet we would not want to argue that literary texts are merely expressive of, say, the emotions, and not articulative or even transformative of them. Whichever they may be, we want to give up the notion of a text as passive and reflective. Having done so, we can begin to detect in many South Asian texts the signs both of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices ("resistance"). We can talk about agents, instruments, and patients deploying complex strategies of persuasion, parody, and criticism directed at themselves as well as others.

Texts do not, however, act on their own, however "great" or "seminal." Texts can only be articulative or transformative insofar as people use them, and the use of a text after its supposed moment of composition always involves supplementation, as Derrida has argued. That is, people read texts of the past through the later commentaries that frame them and especially through those of their own present. Most of these commentaries in India were the oral commentaries of the texts’ teachers. Some teachers formalized and inscribed their commentaries or glosses (almost invariably leaving out what we in the present would most like to know). We do not want, however, to suggest either that these supplements were either violent appropriations or the unfolding of an original author’s intention. Rather, we wish to see the relationship between text and supplement as problematic. There is always some gap between them. The ongoing reality of daily life, with its smaller and larger disruptions, sooner or later transcends the capacity of an existing scale of texts to account for the world. The reader is, thus, always confronting a discourse in the text (including its earlier commentaries) that differs from his or her own discursive position.

To conclude, we wish to establish a dialogical or interdiscursive relationship with the texts we study. Instead of looking at them as dead monuments, as mere sources of factual information or the expression of a creative and exotic genius that we can only appreciate in itself for itself, or as the accidental expression/sedimentation of some larger structure or context, we want to see them as living arguments both in their historic usages and by virtue of our reenactment of their arguments, in our own present. We want to see what we can learn from these texts that pertains to our own time and its problems.
To approach texts as the dialogical utterances of complex authors in a shifting scale of texts would go far to help those who have been trained as philologists and historians. Let me turn now to the other half of our problem, that of situating texts historically, a problem often referred to as that of context.

**Historicizing Texts**

If the knowledge in texts is specific to situations and not universal, and if it is dialogical rather than monological, then it is important to historicize texts and to determine how the knowledges in them relate to one another. Authors and textual practices themselves are imbricated in other practices—the liturgical practices of monasteries and temples, the agricultural practices of villagers, and the political and military practices of royal courts. Formal, internal analysis of texts is no longer sufficient to reconstruct the relations among these practices. Historians, however, have not been exempt from the discursive practices that produced monological texts authored by substantialized agents. On the contrary, they have composed monological texts of their own, the master narratives of a nation’s or civilization’s history.

Historians of the nation use two principles to order their master narratives. First, they map people, institutions, and events, as if they were discrete objects, onto a homogeneous time-space grid. This is the empiricist or positivist phase embedded in a history text. This has mostly taken the form of reconstructing a “political” chronology that will constitute the “backbone” of history. The text the scientific historian creates also tends to be monological because, as Collingwood puts it, “He regards history as a mere spectacle, something consisting of facts observed and recorded by the historian, phenomena presented externally to his gaze, not experiences into which he must enter and which he must make his own” (p. 163). As Jonathan Walters and Daud Ali both show in this volume, the colonial and nationalist historians of South Asia have spent much of their energy producing dynastic histories of just this sort.23

Second, historians overlay their absolute time and space grid by ordering their narrative into the periods or epochs of a “universal” or totalizing philosophy of history, which that of the nation exemplifies or from which it deviates.24 Those epochs are conceived of as teleologically connected (in Christian histories of salvation, Croce contends that, recognizing the shallowness of this history, historians sought the remedy “in turning the historical inquiry on to other sides of life, and in collating the various new histories thus discovered with the political-military history by means of a series of parallel chapters on letters, the arts, sciences, religions, morals, customs, agriculture, commerce, and so on. Even in our day this kind of historical treatment, though it has been satirized as ‘pigeon-hole history,’ is still cultivated because it is pleasing to unadventurous minds who, having panoramically arranged events of history, then think that they have fused them in the fire of thought and reduced them to unity.” [1941] *History as the Story of Liberty* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1970), pp. 171–72. Taking its cue from the *Cambridge History of India*, the nationalist multi-authored *History and Culture of the Indian People* (HCIP) epitomizes this approach.

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Kantian and Hegelian histories of freedom, or Marxian historical materialism), and as brought into existence by an apocalyptic event: the birth of Christ, the discovery of the new world, the French or Russian (or Industrial or Green) revolutions, the Arab conquest of the Middle East. Some schemes also employ cyclical notions (such as those of Spengler and Toynbee) while others (such as Ranke) claim to treat of each epoch as self-contained.25

Partly shadowing the master narratives of European and world history, but with an orientalist twist, the historians of India divide its history into that most widely normalized scheme of periods—ancient (or classical), medieval, and modern. Whatever labels they give to them, historians have tended to equate ancient with Hindu, medieval with Muslim, and modern with Christian, British, or Western.26

How are events related to one another within these periods and, more importantly, how are these periods related to one another? Historians use notions of repetition, influence, development or growth, and the unique, apocalyptic event to move their narratives along. Historians of South Asia have been fond of the apocalyptic event, in the form of invasion or conquest, as marking the shift from one period to the next.27 That is, the narrative is a story of the conquest of one civilization by another, where each civilization is assumed to be a monolith.

The single “hero” of this history is the potentially or actually unitary national and imperial state, which more often than not, in the colonialist histories of India, turns out to be the instrument or patient of a substantialized agent—caste or Hinduism, or the imagination-dominated Indian mind. Historians have not invented these agents. They have taken them, often unwittingly, from one philosophy of history or the other, sometimes through the mediation of sociology or anthropology. There is, consequently, little room in these narratives for contingency, especially when it comes to the major events that separate periods. The successes enjoyed or the failures endured by the nation almost always have a single and necessary cause underlying them.

The three essays in this book all deal with texts from the eighth to twelfth centuries, an “early medieval” period in many of these master narratives. Let me, therefore, look at what we do in our three essays against scholar’s representations of the medieval period in India. That period, as in Europe, follows a decline from a “golden age” in a classical or more generally ancient period, the age of the Guptas (c. 320–550) in India, that of Rome in the West. That decline eventuated in the invasion of the civilization by barbarians, the Germans in Europe and the Hunas in India. As a result of these disturbances, populations decreased and became impoverished, and polities became fragmented. The threat of a newly risen Islamic

25 Croce used the term “historicism” to denote the relativist history of a Ranke; more recently, Popper uses it to label the universalist history of a Hegel or Marx. Collingwood argues, too dismissively, that these schemes are capricious and adhered to for “religious” reasons, to arouse the emotions for some political movement (pp. 263–66).


civilization is also defining in both places, though in different ways. Finally, the sign of the medieval in both places was the prevalence of “faith” over “reason” and, within religion, of the more “emotional” or “devotional” forms over the more “ritual.”

The Indian medieval period, as inflected by orientalism, is, of course, worse than the European. It begins, according to the hegemonic text of the colonialist historian of premodern India, Vincent Smith, at about the same time in India as in Europe, after the death of Harṣa in 647, giving India a prolonged decline under the Rāṣṭras (descendants of the Hānas) before the Muslim conquest around 1200.

Other colonialist historians, consistently with the idea that the medieval period is essentially Islamic, signal its beginning with the Arab conquest of Sind in 712. Some Hindu nationalist historians have attempted to recuperate the first two centuries of this period for the ancient period, compressing the decline into the later two centuries (or even less). The point is nonetheless the same: whereas Western Europeans were able to repel Islam, in India that civilization triumphed. The apocalyptic moment, the Turkish Muslim conquest of the feuding Rāṣṭras of north India, took place in the last decade of the twelfth century and culminated in the establishment of a sultanate at Delhi.

Most historians, surprisingly, agree on the decline that caused the Muslim Turkish conquest. According to one of the most important “secular” nationalist historians of medieval India, the Muslims succeeded in their conquest of India because of the

superiority of their social organisation. The Hindu social system had no coherence or unity. The Hindus were one only in name. They were divided into numerous religious sects, and therefore, did not form a single religious community. Not even did the members of a particular sect act as a solid group, because religion was more a personal matter than an affair of the community. There was no common worship. Again, Hindu society was divided into numerous sections and among them there was no sense of social oneness. There

28Romantic, progressive historiographers came to revise the earlier Enlightenment view of the middle ages in Europe as a “dark age,” and that rehabilitation has continued.
29Textual production also declined in this period, an age of poetics (Udbhata, Rudrata, Ānandavardhāna) rather than poetry, of commentaries and digests rather than original texts in law (Medhatithi, Vijnāvasara, Lakṣmīthihara), philosophy (Vācaspati, Śāṁkara, and Bhāskara), and theology (Yādavaprakāśa, Rāmānuja). According to one aestheticist representation, “the literary productions are all stereotyped and laboured; they lack vigour, inspiration, and originality. They are merely mechanical reproductions of earlier models, without their vitality and living touch. It is an age of scholastic elaboration and systematic analysis, of technical skill and learning, of commentaries and sub-commentaries, and of manuals and sub-manuals”; M. A. Mehdendale and A. D. Pusalker, “Language and Literature,” HCIP 5 (1957), 297.
31“In the fateful year A.D. 997, Abū-l-Qāsim Mahmūd, son of Sabuktigm, captured Ghazni, developed a marvellous striking power and turned his attention to India.... Ancient India ended. Medieval India began”; K. M. Munshi, “Foreword,” HCIP 4 (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1955), xxiii.
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were numerous principalities which were perpetually hostile to one another, and which took no interest in the humiliation of their neighbours at the hands of foreigners. In fact there was no sentiment of nationality, and no hostility against an alien because he was an alien.33

The older colonial historians had emphasized the fanatical faith and greed of the Muslims.34 The more conciliatory secular nationalists opted instead for the metaphor of civilizations as men at different stages of growth and decay.35 The main point, though, was that India was about to enter an age of faith rather than reason, one in which the imagination or emotion dominated the mind.

Historians have depicted the late medieval period, the medieval period proper, as one in which two incompatible civilizations, Islam and Hinduism, remained fundamentally hostile to one another, a conflict that hindered development.36 Or they have represented the Muslims, in secular nationalist discourse, as making efforts at rapprochement with the Hindus.37 Either way, the salient fact is the rise to prominence all over the subcontinent of an intense devotionalism. Among Muslims, according to one well-known history, this took the form of Sufism and the adoration of saints called pirs. Among Hindus, it took the form of “the doctrine of bhakti, or salvation by Grace and Love,” expressed in the poetic texts of the vernacular or regional languages.38 Earlier scholars, directly or indirectly prompted by a Christian desire to see a predisposition to Christianity in the Indian people (their leaders having rebuffed Christian urgings to convert), tried to find Christian origins for these medieval sects. Within the Iberian imperial formation that the British and French had supplanted, the assumption prevailed that all people were, in essence, Christian—and if not, they were in league with the devil. The displacement of this ontology by a scientific materialist one did not cause Christians to give up


34The Muslims, inspired by the spirit of adventure, of militant propaganda, of spreading the Kingdom of God upon earth, as well as seizing the goods of this world, had every advantage over the native Hindus, and when the invaders were led by kings who embodied these masterful qualities their triumph was assured”; Lane-Poole, Mediaeval India, pp. 63–64.

35“The war between the two peoples was really a struggle between two different social systems, the one, old and decadent, and the other, full of youthful vigour and enterprise”; Ishwari Prasad, A Short History of Muslim Rule in India from the Advent of Islam to the Death of Aurangzeb ([1939] Allahabad: Indian Press, 1965), p. 104.


37The earlier ecumenical poet-saint Kabir (c. 1425–1500) is made to exemplify this at the “popular level,” whereas the later Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605) is seen as doing this work at the “state level.”

38Conflating the Reformation with the High Middle Ages, one narrative asserts that “the effect of the literature produced during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries may justly be compared to that of the Bible in the life of England—for the common people the one great accessible source of inspiration as of consolation”; W. H. Moreland and Atul Chandra Chatterjee, A Short History of India ([1936] New York: David McKay Co., 1957), pp. 192–94. The authors continue in their silently Christianizing way: “The peasant may still follow scrupulously the ancient ritual appropriate to the worship of this deity or that, but in his mind, or rather in his heart, there is the idea of something larger and more universal, and when his feelings find expression, it is in an appeal to Parameshar, the one Supreme Being, whom he has been led by this literature to know and love” (p. 194).
their quest to find proto-Christians among those their governments colonized. It did, however, shift the Christian project of textual study from one of looking for signs prefiguring the one true faith (or indicating the presence of its evil opposite) to an authorist concern with historical “influences.” It is fair to say that many of the medieval religious texts edited and translated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are imbricated in this search.39

As highly as many Christian colonialists, Hindu and Muslim nationalists, and egalitarian secularists valued these devotional movements (albeit for different reasons), there remained a fundamental contrast with the West. Whereas, for them, Europe embodied a rationality that was able to reassert control over its civilization, the civilization of India lacked this internal capacity for positive change.40 Left on its own, the substantialized agent of Indian civilization, whether its imaginational mind, caste, race, religion, or a peculiarly Indian feudal mode of production, was itself incapable of true autonomy. So the slow process by which a progressing, expanding, increasingly rational and scientific civilization reappeared in Europe in a renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (or as early as the twelfth century, according to revisionists) did not occur in the Indian subcontinent. A renaissance did not take place there until the early nineteenth century, when Bengal responded to the impact of the colonial presence of the West.

One part of the Western reason at work in these master narratives is historical consciousness. The society dominated by imagination or emotion cannot see its own past or its own destiny. So the idea that Indians lacked a historical consciousness is but another way of saying in the absence of the West it lacked the reason to order its affairs and progress.41 All three essays in this volume, Ali’s

39Tara Chand in his master narrative for medieval India, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1936), completed in 1922, was probably the first to divert this project and direct attention instead to Islam and the nationalist project. Later scholars have criticized and abandoned many of his hypotheses on empirical grounds. Although Sūfis and bhaktas were similar in outlook, “They were unconcerned with the idea of achieving any form of union between the two religions and instead tended to work within their respective religious communities for an understanding of the spiritual and social values of each other”; Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, A History of Sufism in India (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978), 1:399.

40A clear recent example of the global, unicausal historical writing that sees India as a defective mirror image of Europe is Satish Saberwal, India: The Roots of Crisis (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986). Taking a “world historical view” (p. 1) reminiscent of Braudel’s longue durée, Saberwal concludes in a chapter, “Medieval Political Traditions” (pp. 36–57) after summarizing studies of Rājputs, the Delhi Sultanate, Mughals, and south India, that “Overall, then, organized officialdom was virtually missing in Rajasthan (except later under Mughal tutelage) and in south Indian polities” (p. 54). It was “more salient” in the Mughal state, “suggesting the seeds of bureaucracy,” but because of dynastic succession struggles became parochialized. “Overall, therefore, the political domain in India remained host to cyclical processes of the rise and fall of dynasties, and often it took only a few brief generations to complete the cycle” (p. 55). The key to the difference between European and Indian history was a lack—the Roman Catholic Church: “Briefly, it was largely the Church that enabled Western Europe to grow out of cyclical political processes into others, facilitating the endogenic evolution of political and other institutions over the long term” (p. 55).

41Marc Aurel Stein, editor and translator of Kalhana, quotes Alberuni on his (and other Indians’) limited historical horizon: “Unfortunately the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings, and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-
especially, reexamine this long-standing notion. It is obviously the case that Indians did not, before the advent of colonial rule, practice the professional discipline of history that people established in Europe in the nineteenth century and that scholars practice now almost everywhere. It is, however, not as easy to sustain the claim that although Indians (both Hindu and Muslim, but differently) had “traditions of chronicling” the past and of producing “mythographies,” they lacked a “modern and secular sense of history.” This dichotomy, which reinscribes that between the medieval or traditional and the modern, makes too sharp a contrast between different practices. What is “history” in such generalizations? Is it empiricist or positivist history (which Walters discusses in this volume)? On the empiricist front, the idea that modern academic history rests on three foundations—a “sense of anachronism,” “rules of evidence,” and “causality as a major means of explanation”—simply fails to distinguish what Kalhana claims to have done with his material prior to fashioning his poetic narrative (see Inden below). It is also difficult, I fear, to assume that the histories of the nation—India or any other—rest exclusively on these foundations. Chakrabarty himself seems keenly aware of the tendency in those histories to naturalize the nation that amounts, from his point of view, to the systematic anachronizing of its values and institutions. In other words, chronizing and anachronizing are integral components of any view of the past, although people use them on different materials. Need I say anything about the vexed question of causation?

Or is the history at stake in the master narratives that compare India and the West more a philosophy of history, Christian, Hegelian, or Marxist than a method? Certainly, to the extent that these latter presuppose substantialized agents—God, World Spirit, Feudalism and Capitalism, or Caste and the Hindu Mind—and reduce transitory humans and their institutions to the status of instruments or patients which it moves toward a final destiny, they can hardly be said to constitute the secular history that Collingwood advocates. Indeed, I think I would be prepared to argue that whereas Theists in medieval India presupposed substantialized agents, Viṣṇu and Śiva, they positioned humans more as their coagents than as their instruments. When it comes to the Theravādin Buddhism of Walter’s essay, the situation is more complicated. There, I think, one can perhaps talk about representations of the Buddha (textual and practical as well as pictorial and sculptural) as signaling and causing a way of life that is active in the world, but I would hardly want to characterize the Buddha in any form as a substantialized agent. So, in these respects one can argue that some medieval Indians and Sinhalese were more historical-minded than have been many modern thinkers in the West.

42Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Death of History? Historical Consciousness and the Culture of Late Capitalism,” Public Culture 4.2 (Spring, 1992), 50.
44Surely Chakrabarty would agree that the history which suffers death or end, as in Fukuyama’s postmodern world, is this philosophical variety and not the empirical.
We wish, then, to challenge the historical contextualization of texts that historians and textual scholars engage in when they insert them into a master narrative, a universal or civilizational narrative that has a single subject and goal—in this case, a unified secular (or Hindu) Indian nation (and the responses to that, separate Muslim and Buddhist nations). We especially wish to displace the chapter of this narrative that represents Europe’s Indian Other in its “medieval” history as devoid of reason and history because the West (in one of its many incarnations—Reformation or Counter-Reformation Christian, Enlightenment absolutism, Burkean conservatism, historical materialism, free-market liberalism) has not yet come to be the major presence in their lives.\(^{45}\)

Criticisms of the medieval notion in European studies seem to fall on either side of the old Enlightenment-Romantic faultline. David Aers voices the position of the former when he criticizes many of his colleagues’ work for viewing medieval society as unproblematically hierarchic. He also questions the uniformity attributed to it.\(^{46}\) It is possible to find parallel positions in the scholarship on South Asia.\(^{47}\) The problem, however, is not solved by moving the medieval-modern divide back or forth a few centuries or reducing the tripartite scheme to the still more simplistic bipartite scheme of traditional-modern. Nor do we solve the problems of agency and text interpretation by changing our evaluation of the medieval without changing the way we think about it. Our own position is that any historical account is underdetermined by its evidence. It is always possible for two or more plausible accounts to be written using the same evidence. If different questions are asked and different evidence is brought to bear on a historical event, then the number and variety of the plausible accounts multiplies. The problem is rather that of doing away with the notion of a master historical narrative and its division of history into teleologically connected (or self-contained) epochs brought into existence by apocalyptic events.

As Lee Patterson points out, a “postmodernist” stance toward the past can exaggerate the strong antihistorical tendency of modernist discourses, or it can radically historicize it.\(^{48}\) But what does “historicize” involve here? It could mean, as is often the case with those who work under the rubric of the “new historicism,” not just a destabilization and fragmentation of the universal, master narratives of modernism, but a radical pluralization and particularization of history, one that lapses into an empiricist atomization of topics, or an anthropology of incommensurable cultures isolated in space-time from one another; or the infinite interplay

\(^{45}\)One could include fundamentalism here, for it is, I would argue, as much a reworking of these other modernist positions as it is the recuperation of an earlier one.


\(^{47}\)Ideas of the “village republic,” an organic caste society, and “homo hierarchicus” have appealed to the more conservative in Europe, but have not been predominant among nationalists or socialists in the Indian subcontinent.

of poststructuralist signifiers. As I have already said, these responses are overreactions to the monoliths of modernism. These oppositional stances reinscribe the antihistoricist tendency of modernism, but in reverse: the human past is so diverse that no one can make more than a momentary, fragmentary sense of it.

The alternative to these oppositional stances is a historicization that theorizes human actions as dialogical and articulative of the human world. We are particularly concerned to focus on practices because, as we see it, practices were the activities most involved in making and articulating the agents and things of the human world. We think of the agents of history as more or less complex, ranging from persons to the ruling societies—royal or imperial courts—of politics through the so-called intermediate institutions of “civil society.” For “medieval” India these included families, the ruling societies of villages and districts, associations of merchants and soldiers, and associations of Brâhmaṇ householder liturgists, Buddhist monasteries, and associations of Vaishnav and Śaiva devotees. We would, thus, collapse the dichotomy between society and the individual thought of as pregiven wholes. We see the question of order and unity as empirical ones and not as inherently given or guaranteed. On what occasions and with what practices did people order their world? To what extent can we say that some people were successful and others not so? We wish also to emphasize that no order is complete or all-embracing, despite any claims its creators might make.

As one step in the direction of rethinking alternatives to the predominant images of a traditional India, and of medieval India in particular, we self-consciously change five discursive practices. First, we will use the expression “way of life” instead of “religion” both in its sense as belief or creed and as practice or institution (church). We use that expression in order to embrace phenomena such as Buddhism and, for that matter, certain so-called Brahmanical practices that were not theocentric, as well as those that by some definition are or have been. We also use it to indicate modernist movements—liberalism, socialism, humanism, conservatism, and so on—both their “ideologies” and their parties, so as to place them and “religions” and their churches on the same playing field. We also use the expression “life-transforming practices” instead of the term “ritual” to point to those practices distinctively associated with a way of life, those that people have taken as most implicated in the making and articulating of the human world. We do not imply with this expression that the practices involved were life-affirming or completing. This quality differed both in degree and in kind among different associations claiming to adhere to the same way of life, and differed even more among those adhering to different ways of life. Some practices emphasized radical transformations, doing away with life and, in the case of Buddhism, the denial that the essential bearer of life, a “soul,” even existed. In order to emphasize the compulsory aspect of these acts and avoid the irrationalist and obscurantist connotations of the term “cult,” we will use the term “liturgy” to describe them.


50The various ideas of religion that scholars have used have a complicated and contested history, which we will bypass here.
Second, we will use the term “Theist” to denote the Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas. We do not use the term Hindu to refer to the Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas of the eighth century. As is well known, this term was Persian, and used at first simply to describe the inhabitants of the subcontinent. Later, perhaps as early as the thirteenth century, certainly by the fifteenth, both the followers of Muḥammad and the devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva (and, arguably, Śakti), use the terms Hindu and Muslim. Before this time, Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas used the term āstika, the term we translate as Theist (despite its Christian connotations) to describe those who considered a god to exist. Perhaps more frequently, they used the negative of this term, nāstika, to tag those who did not. That is, the major division in the period I deal with was over theism and not over whether a way of life was barbarian or not. If anything, there was a tendency to associate atheism, Buddhism, and barbarians. Of course, the matter is further complicated because people also used these abstract terms in situated, shifting ways to denote varying configurations of “schools” or “sects,” and not to denote an objectively constant thing, a “religion.” If, for example, one took the term to mean that the Veda exists as the authorless ground of existence—as did some adherents of the Vedic sacrificial way of life—that would exclude those Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas who believed that Viṣṇu or Śiva was the author of the Vedas. If, as some Vaiṣṇavas did, one considered the Buddha a manifestation of Viṣṇu, then one could count the Buddhist “monastic society” (samgha) as Theist.

Third, we will use the expression “disciplinary order” (which we can take as a translation in part of such terms as carana, vidhāna, and kalpa, or such terms as paramparā or sampradāya, and, among Buddhists, nikāya), to denote both the societies of adepts who have taken some particular name and the life-transforming practices in which they engage. We avoid the terms “sect” and “school” used by most previous scholars to designate these societies and their practices. By emphasizing the disiplinary practices of these societies, we do not mean to deny that many of them did have moments of dissent or sectarian opposition. We do not think, however, that these moments should be made into their essences (unless that is what an order did). Each of the three essays is concerned in different ways with a disciplinary order. Inden focuses on the Pāñcarātra order of Vaiṣṇavas, Walters on the order of Theravādins at the Mahāvihāra (“great monastery”) of Sri Lanka, and Ali, more indirectly, on the Śaiva Siddhāntins and Kālāmukhas of south India, some of whom were the recipients of royal grants of land.

Fourth, we will use such expressions as life-wish, royal wish, imperial wish, world wish, life-account, world account, and world vision in place of such conceptually overloaded terms as myth, ideology, and worldview to denote the effects of certain activities that people carried out in the course of their lives, activities that were crucial to the ways of life they pursued. The transformation of heterogeneous life- and world wishes into more coherent and stable world accounts and, in some cases, visions, was crucial to the practices of the disciplinary orders. It is the ac-

51 There is no evidence we would judge reliable to justify talking about Śaktas, those who take the female principle (dakṣī) as the absolute and engage in Tantric practices, in this period. My own guess is that disciplinary orders constructed around these practices were post-Islamic, and constituted one sort of response to a situation in which an Islamic way of life was hegemonic.
activity we see in the texts that they composed for fashioning or ordering the lives of their adepts and for addressing would-be followers and transforming their lives.

Finally, instead of dividing history into periods defined by apocalyptic events, the conquest of one civilization by another in a battle or war, we prefer to divide our history into successive "imperial formations." The idea of an imperial formation is one Inden first used to theorize India as a complex polity consisting of a hegemonic empire and other subjected, allied and rival kingdoms and allied, and rival empires. We do this in order to provide an alternative notion of order to the idea of India and the Indian empire as an administrative, centralized state or as the opposite of that, an inherently divisive congeries of feudal or segmentary states at best only "ritually" or "symbolically" united. Our alternative sees polities and other societies and communities as dialogically related, as more or less complex agents positioning themselves in relation to one another. Just as authors articulate themselves and their texts in this way as scales of forms, so, too, do the larger polities to which those authors belong. Finally, we consider one imperial formation as dialogically emerging from another. The many agents involved in making an imperial formation, more or less consciously and on occasion self-deceptively, evaluate what they and others have done in the past and make decisions about what to do in their present. That is, the ruling societies of imperial formations necessarily used ideas about the past and how it connected to a present and future.

The accounts of these imperial formations are, we assume, underdetermined by the evidence on which those accounts would be based. So historians can reconstruct different political histories for every imperial formation: the history of the hegemonic empire in that formation, that of its major rivals, and those of the polities whose rulers were either underlords of the imperial polities or their allies. The histories of those societies whom the ruling societies of these polities ruled are also possible, as are those of the different ways of life and disciplinary orders of which they were composed.

Textual scholars tend to dichotomize text and context and then privilege one over the other, as we have seen. Similarly, within larger histories there is a tendency to dichotomize the economic/political and the religious/ideological, and privilege one over the other. We see the idea of an imperial formation as overcoming this dichotomy of power and knowledge. Every imperial formation had an intimate and complex relation to the disciplinary orders of the ways of life within it, as the Inden and Walters essays both show. Hegemony within an imperial formation was not a simple matter of domination exercised within an essentially separate political and economic sphere but a question of both will and force, with adepts of disciplinary orders and ruling societies of polities closely involved in the articulation of one another's spheres of action and their life-, imperial, and world wishes. We wish to emphasize in this regard the strategic aspects of their acts, the situatedness of the agents of those acts, and the momentariness of the hegemony that a polity and its associated disciplinary order achieved.

So far as "early medieval" India is concerned, I tried in Imagining India to destabilize the existing images of a medieval India. I argued there that there is no evidence of overall population decline. It is plausible to argue for a relative political
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decline in north India—the middle Gangetic plains—but there is no need to deduce from that an overall decline of "Hindu" civilization. Rather, there was a shift of its hegemonic center southward, after Harṣa, to the Cāḷukyas in the Deccan, challenged by the Pallavas to their south. The Rāṣṭrakūṭas dominated its imperial formation from around 750, contested by the Pālas of eastern India and the Pratihāras of north India. Then, after 975, the Cōḷas emerged at the center of an imperial formation still further south, in Tamil Nadu. Before the rise of the Cōḷas to preeminence, an imperial polity centered on Kashmir and Gandhāra, a zone of Indo-Iranic cultural activity, appears to have stretched more or less continuously to the north and east from Kashmir along the Indus (Gilgit, Baltistan, Ladakh) and the Satlej (Spiti, Cīna, and Suvarṇagotra or Guge) and, further north, into Kashgaria around the northern and southern edges of the Takla Makan Desert. The successes of the Arab and then Turkish Muslim, Tang Chinese, and Tibetan Buddhist empires had the effect, eventually, of separating these Indo-Iranic centers from India. Islamic practices became the cosmopolitan way of life in much of central as well as southwest Asia. The eventual establishment of a Turkish empire at Delhi left Buddhist practices divided into its so-called Northern and Southern varieties. Meanwhile, the relations of the Indian kingdoms and Sri Lanka with kingdoms in Southeast Asia seem to have intensified in this period. So the idea of seeing the Cōḷas as the center of a predominantly Theist Indic world and of Sri Lanka as the decentered focal point of a largely Thēravādin Buddhist world makes sense.

There is, finally, a major political point to be made about the tripartite division of history into ancient and modern eras that resemble one another and are separated by a medieval era of little value. It has shifted people’s attention away from the practices and institutions of the past before the advent of colonialism, and onto a fanciful remote past that seems to have little to do with their everyday life—the primordial world of a heroic Rāma; the rational, secular, bureaucratic world of Aṣokan India; or the world of a unified nonsectarian classical Hinduism of the Guptas. This tends to limit the agency of people in the present, for the only way they can explain their present lowly condition is by some apocalyptic event such as a conquest, and the only way they can get to a utopian future is, again, by some apocalyptic leap—a five-year plan that will lead to socialism or a Free Market that will lead to a consumerist paradise. What they cannot see is that their more immediate ancestors remade the world they inherited again and again through their own efforts. And if they cannot see what people like themselves have done in a past that is recognizably theirs, their own horizons for action become very limited.

We hope that these essays will help to focus attention on a past that moves away from this tripartite division. We wish to advance a view of history that sees Indians as thinking, critical agents of their own traditions, and not just as its instruments or patients, one that is skeptical of master political narratives whose authors have tried to impose a single plot on divergent lives.

The three essays that follow have emerged from the "Texts and Knowledge" colloquium. They are an attempt to make some headway in carving out a space for articulative approaches to the study of South Asian texts. These essays concern themselves with three genres of texts that have been crucial to the Indological
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project of creating a history and civilization of South Asia—the Purāṇas, Sanskrit “encyclopedias” of Hindu cosmology and mythology; Pali “chronicles” of the Buddhist kings of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon); and Sanskrit and Tamil copper-plate “inscriptions” containing royal genealogies and recording land grants.

Scholars have viewed the Purāṇas, “originary accounts” (of the divine ordering of the world), as central to their attempts to recover the history of India, an attempt rendered extremely difficult because of these texts’ refusal to reveal their “actual” authorship and provenance. To begin with, Europeans attempted to revive an early, “epic” stage in that history. Later, Indians endeavored to extract “social” history from them. Others have labored to distill the “mythology” of a “classic” Hinduism from these texts. Inden labels the first of these efforts “empiricist” and the second “idealist,” and criticizes both for dehistoricizing the texts by treating them as “sources” or as expressions of an underlying “text,” Hinduism itself. Instead, Inden argues, these texts can be read as discursive and narrative texts that can be historically situated.

His own account focuses on the Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa (VDhP), a text mined for its “facts” on iconography, kingship, and astronomy. On the basis of an analysis of textual precedents and innovations and of the text’s organization and self-representations, Inden is able to show that the VDhP was composed in three “sessions” by a “complex author” that consisted of a world-conquering monarch and members of his court, as well as adepts of the disciplinary order of Pāṇcarātra Vaisnavas to which the king also belonged.

He argues that the VDhP positions itself as a supplement that claims to order all preexisting knowledges. Together with the texts it supplements, the text forms, argues Inden, a “scale of texts.” Crucial in this scale are texts of the Vedic disciplinary order most closely associated with Kashmir, texts of the Pāṇcarātrins called Āgamas or Saṃhitās, and another Purāṇa, the Nilamata, a text explicitly about Kashmir but as reticent as the VDhP to disclose its date.

The vale of Kashmir, whose people are now almost wholly Muslim, is today largely a victim of India’s and Pakistan’s nation-making projects. The Kashmir of the eighth century was, however, the coagent of a new imperial formation, one in which Theism gained over both Vedism and Buddhism. The approach to texts Inden uses helps us to reconstruct this history.

Considering the evidence that points to the eighth-century kingdom of Kashmir as the site where the VDhP was composed, Inden suggests that the complex agent that authored this text probably included the two Kārkota Nāga kings of Kashmir, Candrāpīḍa Vajrāditya and Muktāpīḍa Lalitāditya. Having made this connection, Inden is able to demonstrate that the life-wish of the VDhP—the institution of a kingdom embracing the entire earth in which the Viṣṇu of the Pāṇcarātrins received recognition as overlord of the cosmos—and the circumstances faced by the Kashmiri imperial court were mutually articulative. The “conquest of the quarters” that Muktāpīḍa undertook was informed by the narrative and discursive contents of the VDhP, whereas the vision of the text was itself tailored to the situation. This can be seen most clearly in the temple-building activities (as documented in arche-
The *VDhP* was, Inden concludes, one of the major texts involved in the rise to hegemony of “temple Hinduism” at the expense of both the Vedic sacrificial liturgy and Buddhist monasticism. The *Nīlamata* as a text envisions Kashmir as a polity in which Pāñcarātra Vaiṣṇavism is recognized as the highest way of life. According to Inden’s intertextual reading of the *Nīlamata*, that text is itself a dialectical reworking of an earlier Śaiva vision of Kashmir, which in turn reworked a still older Buddhist vision.

Scholars of ancient India, Sri Lanka, and Theravādin Buddhism have relied for the better part of two centuries on three texts of the Vamsa genre, the *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa*, and a commentary on the latter, the *Vamsattappakkāsini*, to provide an absolute chronology of history not only for Sri Lanka but for ancient India, as well. Colonial historians claimed that the Sri Lankan Vamsas, along with Kalhaṇa’s *Rājarānjini* from Kashmir, formed the only works in premodern South Asia that approximated the practice of modern objective history. Challenging the empiricist and positivist underpinning of this colonialist notion of history, Walters shows how scholars have rather naively turned the claims of these texts into ahistorical essences that the texts are said simply to “express.” The effect of this approach has been to turn medieval Sri Lankan agents into the “patients” of a world that they themselves created. Taking an articulative approach to the Vamsas, Walters is able to rethink completely some of the most basic presumptions in the historiography of ancient and medieval Buddhism, Sri Lanka, and even India itself.

Walters begins by showing how the “mythological” concerns of the Vamsas, bracketed out by positivist historians, actually framed the dynastic narratives within the larger project of creating an imperial Sri Lankan Buddhist notion of time, whereby, through the effects of their actions in previous lives, the Buddha (as Bodhisattva) and his disciples would be reborn together in successive ages. The Vamsas are, thus, better rendered as “successions of the Buddha’s presence” than as chronicles. Walters locates the birth of this conception in earlier strands of Buddhist literature, and traces its uptake in the Vamsa texts, culminating with its formulation in the *Vamsattappakkāsini*, which fully enunciated an imperial Buddhist world vision with the Theravādin Hinayāna monks at the Mahāvihāra monastery and the Okkāka kings of Anurādhapura as its principal agents and “hearers.” This history would eventuate in a polity where the Bodhisattva would be born as an Okkāka king and would lead his polity to *nibbāna*—a world wish that was sought after and even achieved momentarily in medieval Sri Lanka. In locating these texts so precisely in history while also making clear their claims about history, Walters not only helps us to rethink the political and intellectual history of medieval Sri Lanka and India but also opens up the possibility of seeing other texts, like the Theist Purāṇas and “dynastic” eulogies, in a new light.

Despite the fact that colonial historians saw the *Rājarānjini* and the Vamsas as indications of an “objective” historical impulse in premodern South Asia, they eventually gave pride of place to stone and copper-plate inscriptions as the most important tools for historians of South Asia. Ali’s essay argues that the “inscrip-
tions” of medieval India or, more precisely, the “royal eulogies” (*praśastis*) with which these inscriptions begin, should be seen as historical texts and not simply as primary sources for the reconstruction of a political history. The inscription on which he focuses, the “Order of Rājendra Cōla” (1012–1044), issued in year six of his reign, is a remarkable document consisting of thirty-one copper plates bound, in the manner of an Indian manuscript, by a ring. The Cōlas, a dynasty of south India, made themselves the paramount rulers of all India in the twelfth century. Ali explores the claims about the present and the past that formed a crucial part of the Cōla paramount lordship. To be sure, Ali concedes, the eulogies contained in these “royal orders” do not form self-contained, free-standing histories of the sort to which we have become accustomed. Nonetheless, he argues, these royal eulogies, if read intertextually, can be seen as situated moments in a living historical text. He thus reads the royal eulogy in conjunction with other inscriptions and with those texts that long provided the metanarratives of history for Theists, the *Purāṇas*. The royal eulogies extend the notions of time and polity provided in the *Purāṇas* into their own present, both fulfilling and remaking Purānic time, and in conjunction with a range of other practices, attempt to complete a Theist way of life.

Each of the essays has an appendix in which the reader who wishes it will find a critical history of orientalist approaches to the text and tradition in question.