


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

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We argue over history in part because it can have real significance in the present. We use it in a variety of ways: to mobilize ourselves to achieve goals in the future, to make claims, for land for example, and, sadly, to attack and belittle others. Examining the past can be a sort of therapy as we uncover knowledge about our own societies that has been overlooked or repressed. For those who do not have power or who feel that they do not have enough, history can be a way of protesting against their marginalization, or against trends or ideas they do not like, such as globalization. Histories that show past injustices or crimes can be used to argue for redress in the present. For all of us, the powerful and weak alike, history helps to define and validate us.

Who am I? is one question we ask ourselves, but equally important is, who are we? We obtain much of our identity from the communities into which we are born or

to which we choose to belong. Gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, class, nationality, religion, family, clan, geography, occupation, and, of course, history can go into the ways that we define our identity. As new ways of defining ourselves appear, so do new communities. The idea of the teenager, for example, scarcely existed before 1900. People were either adults or children. In the twentieth century, in developed countries, children were staying in school much longer and hence were more dependent on their parents. The adolescent years became a long bridge between childhood and full adulthood. The market spotted an opportunity, and so we got special teenage clothes, music, magazines, books, and television and radio shows.

We see ourselves as individuals but equally as part of groups. Sometimes our group is small, an extended family perhaps, sometimes vast. Benedict Anderson has coined the memorable phrase "imagined community" for the groups, like nations or religions, that are so big that we can never know all the other members yet that still draw our loyalties. Feeling part of something, in our fluid and uncertain times, is comforting. If we are Christians, Muslims, Canadians, Scots, or gays, it implies that we belong to something larger, more stable, and more enduring than ourselves. Our group predated us and will presumably survive our deaths. When many of us no

longer believe in an afterlife, that promises us a sort of immortality.

Nationalists, to take one example of the imagined communities, like to claim that their nation has always existed back into that conveniently vague area, "the mists of time." The Anglican Church claims that, in spite of the break with Rome during the Reformation, it is part of an unbroken progression from the early church. In reality, an examination of any group shows that its identity is a process, not a fixed thing. Groups define and redefine themselves over time and in response to internal developments, a religious awakening perhaps, or outside pressures. If you are oppressed and victimized, as gays have been and still are in many societies, that becomes part of how you see yourself. Sometimes that leads to an unseemly competition for victimhood. American blacks have watched resentfully as the commemoration of the Holocaust has taken an ever greater place in American consciousness. Was not slavery just as great a crime, some have asked?

In that process of definition, history usually plays a key role. Army regiments have long understood the importance of history in creating a sense of cohesiveness. That is why they have regimental histories and battle honours from past campaigns. As women and gays started to push for greater rights, for example, their histories also developed. By examining the ways in which women and gays were

disadvantaged in the past or how they coped, or by discovering and telling the stories of earlier feminists or gay activists, historians helped to create a sense of solidarity and even a sense of entitlement to some form of compensation.

In the 1990s, black parents argued that Canadian schools did not say enough about the contribution of blacks in Canada. "Africans in America were held on the outside," said the director of the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia. Now, with blacks entering the mainstream, they needed to know their history. For other black leaders, their history was a way of coping with a hostile world and overcoming stereotypes. In 1995, in response to pressure from Canadian blacks, the government decreed that there be a Black History Month, "to celebrate the many achievements and contributions of Black Canadians, who, throughout history, have done so much to make Canada the culturally diverse, compassionate and prosperous nation we know today."

Today deaf activists, who argue that being deaf is not a disability but a distinguishing mark of separateness, are in the process of creating a Deaf Nation. They resist medical interventions, such as cochlear implants or attempts to train deaf children to speak ("Oralism," they say with contempt) and insist that sign language is a fully fledged language in its own right. Capitalizing the *D* in Deaf symbolizes the view that deafness is a culture and not simply the loss of hearing. Scholars give papers and teach

courses on Deaf history and publish books with titles such as *Deaf Heritage in Canada: A Distinctive, Diverse, and Enduring Culture* or *Britain's Deaf Heritage*. In 1984, an American professor named Harlan Lane started researching and publishing about the oppression of the deaf in the past. Although he himself can hear, he is learning sign language.

Today, those who count themselves Deaf often wear a blue ribbon because that is what the Nazis made the deaf wear. At a formal Blue Ribbon Ceremony in Australia in 1999, seven Deaf narrators carrying candles spoke of their culture, their history, and their survival as a community. "We remember those Deaf people who were victims of Oralism in their education, denied their sign languages and Deaf teachers," said one. And, he went on, "We remember the constant attempts either to eliminate us or to prevent us from being born, by not allowing Deaf people to marry each other, through enforced sterilization." At a recent Deaf Convention in the United Kingdom, Lane told his British audience that speech therapists and hearing-aid manufacturers in the United States have coalesced into a powerful lobby to grind the deaf minority down. Paddy Ladd, an equally impassioned British professor who is himself deaf, praises the nineteenth-century deaf French scholar Ferdinand Berthier, whose attempts to build an international deaf community, Ladd says, were thwarted by oral imperialists.

There was an earlier happier time, even a golden age, so Deaf history has it, when a venerable French priest set up a school for deaf children in the second half of the eighteenth century and understood that they must have their own sign language. Unfortunately, for the deaf activists, the record shows that he did not intend signing to be an end in itself but a stage on the way to teaching his pupils to lip-read and perhaps even speak.

Lost golden ages can be a very effective tool for motivating people in the present. "Unity was and is the destiny of Italy," Giuseppe Mazzini, the great nineteenth-century Italian nationalist, urged the divided peninsula. "The civil primacy, twice exercised by Italy—through the arms of the Caesars and the voice of the Popes—is destined to be held a third time by the people of Italy—the nation." Mazzini was also a liberal who believed that a world filled by self-governing peoples would be a happy, democratic, and peaceful one yet there was an ominous tone to his exhortations: "They who were unable forty years ago to perceive the signs of progress toward unity made in the successive periods of Italian life, were simply blind to the light of History. But should any, in the face of the actual glorious manifestation of our people, endeavour to lead them back to ideas of confederations, and independent provincial liberty, they would deserve to be branded as traitors to their country." A great past can be a promise, but it can also be a terrible burden. Mussolini

promised the Italians a second Roman Empire and led them to disaster in World War II.

Greek nationalists in the early nineteenth century, and their supporters in Europe, took it for granted that they were freeing the heirs of classical Greek civilization from the Ottoman Empire. Surely history would grant them a second chance. Greek scholars wrote books showing that there was a direct line from the classical world to the modern. (The four centuries of Ottoman rule were largely overlooked.) Foreign scholars who suggested that such a view was too simplistic were pilloried or ignored. Written Greek was modelled on the classical and so generations of schoolchildren struggled with a language that was very different from the one they spoke. It was only in 1976 that the government finally conceded and made modern Greek the official language. More dangerously, the past held the promise of a reborn Greek empire. Eleutherios Venizelos, the leading Greek statesman at the time of World War I, once gathered his friends around a map and drew the outlines of the ancient Greece, at the height of its influence, across the modern borders. His outline included most of modern Turkey, a good part of Albania, and most of the islands of the eastern Mediterranean. (He could have but did not also include parts of Italy.) Under the influence of that great (*megalhi*) idea, he sent Greek soldiers to Asia Minor in 1919 to stake out Greece's claims. The result was a catastrophe for the Greek armies and for all

those innocent Greeks who had lived for generations in what became modern Turkey. As the resurgent Turkish armies under Kemal Atatürk pressed the Greek forces back, hundreds of thousands of bewildered refugees, many of whom barely knew Greek, followed them. In turn, huge numbers of Turks, many distinguished from their Greek neighbours only by their religion, abandoned their homes and villages for Turkey. The events of those years have in turn become part of history and have poisoned relations between Greece and Turkey up to the present.

Ideologies call on history as well, but in their hands the past becomes a prophecy. The faithful may have suffered, and may be suffering still, but history is moving toward a preordained end. Whether secular like Marxism or Fascism, or religious like the fundamentalisms of various faiths, the story they tell is at once breathtakingly simple and all-encompassing. Every event is fitted into the grand account and all is explained. The writer Arthur Koestler remembered the great relief and delight he felt when he discovered Marxism in the troubled years when the Weimar Republic was failing and the Nazis were reaching out for power. Past, present, and future all became comprehensible: "The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled at one stroke."

Karl Marx believed that he had discovered that history had laws just as science does and that these showed a communist future was bound to come. History had started with primitive communism, an idyllic world of hunters and gatherers, where there was no private property but everyone shared everything according to need. The end of history, Marx promised, was a similar society but this time, thanks to new and improved types of production, a much more prosperous one. Fascism, like communism, saw itself as facing the future, but it, too, called on old emotions and memories. The Nazis made much of ancient myths and legends and of historical figures such as Frederick the Great, Frederick Barbarossa who was crowned German king in the twelfth century, and the contemporaneous Teutonic Knights, whose crusades included not only the Holy Land but also much of the Baltic. These were all supposed to show the genius and continuity of the German race—and the need for it to resume its onward march. "We take up where we left off six hundred years ago," wrote Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. "We stop the endless German movements to the south and the west, and turn our gaze towards the land in the east." Religious fundamentalists, of course, do much the same as they summon believers back to the "true" religion as it first was after the divine revelations. They, too, paint a golden age when all the faithful lived in harmony, obeying the laws they had

been given. Muslim fundamentalists, for example, want to revive the caliphate and bring in sharia law (although deciding which of the several schools of sharia may be difficult).

Setbacks and defeats become part of such stories, rather than challenges to their truth. If the faithful have suffered, that is because of the plots and conspiracies of their enemies. For Hitler, of course, that meant the Jews. They had started World War I and created the Bolshevik Revolution, and they had ensured that Germany suffered under the Treaty of Versailles. He had warned them, Hitler said repeatedly, that if they dared to start another war he would destroy them, "the vermin of Europe." World War II was the fault of the Jews, and the time had come to deal with them once and for all. If any one person was responsible for that war, it was Hitler himself, but logic and reason do not enter into closed systems of viewing the world. In 1991, the American television evangelist Pat Robertson warned that Bush Senior's victory over Iraq was not what it appeared. It was paving the way not for peace but for the triumph of evil. It was all so clear to Robertson. Ever since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, a secret conspiracy had been pushing the world toward socialism and the triumph of the Anti-Christ. The European Union was clearly part of the plot and so was the United Nations. The Gulf War and the missiles that Saddam Hussein had

fired on Israel were yet more steps toward the final reckoning.

Remembering the evils of the past helps to sustain the faithful. Yes, the present may look dark, but that, too, is part of the story before the triumph of the faithful, and paradise comes on earth or in heaven. A few weeks after September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden released a tape in which he exulted about the destruction of the World Trade Center towers: "Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than eighty years, of humiliation and disgrace, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated." Few people in the West knew that, for him, Muslim degradation had started in the modern age with the abolition of the caliphate. In 1924, in a move that caused little comment in the West, Atatürk, the founder of a new and secular Turkey, had abolished that last office held by the deposed Ottoman sultans. As caliphs they had claimed spiritual leadership of the world's Muslims. The last one, a gentle poet, had gone quietly into exile. For many Muslims, from India to the Middle East, the abolition was a blow to their dream of a united Muslim world governed according to God's laws. For Bin Laden and those who thought like him, disunity among Muslims had allowed Western powers to push the Middle East around; to take its oil and, with the establishment of Israel, its land; to corrupt its leaders; and to lead ordinary

Muslims astray. The Saudi rulers had committed the ultimate sin of allowing the United States to bring its troops on to the holy land where Muslims had their most sacred sites. Bin Laden's history includes much more than the past eighty years. The Crusades, the defeat of the Moors in Spain, Western imperialism in the nineteenth century, and the evils of the twentieth all add up to a dark tale of Muslim humiliation and suffering. Such history keeps followers angry and motivated and attracts new recruits.

While most of us do not take such a simple view of the world, we nevertheless find history can be useful to justify what we are doing in the present. In 2007, Canada's prime minister paid a visit to France for the rededication of the Vimy Ridge war memorial to the many Canadian soldiers who had died there in 1917. Canadians were uneasy with his government's support for the Bush War on Terror and at the mounting losses suffered by Canadian troops in Afghanistan. Harper had already made it clear where he stood: Canada's interest lay in backing Washington on virtually every major international issue, and he intended to keep Canadian forces in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. In his speech he underlined how the capture of Vimy Ridge was a triumph for Canadian forces and stressed that it was a great moment in the creation of the Canadian nation. "Every nation has a creation story to tell," he said. "The First World War and the battle of Vimy

Ridge are central to the story of our country." Canadians had paid a heavy price for that victory. In an unfortunate choice of words, which left his meaning hovering uneasily between praise and condemnation, he told the living that they had an obligation to remember the "enormity" of that sacrifice and the "enormity" of their own duty, which was "to follow their example and to love our country and defend its freedom for ever." And he urged his audience, both there and the much larger one in Canada, to listen to the voices of the dead. "We may hear them say softly: I love my family, I love my comrades, I love my country, and I will defend their freedom to the end."

In Canada not everyone will agree with Harper's interpretation of what Vimy means for today. We have a multiplicity of views about the past and its significance for the present. In China, by contrast, the Communist Party does its best to ensure that the public gets only one version of history. When my book on Nixon's trip to China in 1972 came out, Chinese publishers showed an interest in translating it. There would, however, have to be a few small changes. Mention of the Cultural Revolution and of Mao's often scandalous private life would have to go. (The book has not been published in China.) Although the Communist Party has repudiated most of Mao's policies, it still holds him up as the father of the Communist Revolution. To question him would be to undermine the Party's own authority to rule China.

Authoritarian regimes also find a judicious use of the past a useful means of social control. In the 1990s, when the Chinese Communist Party grew concerned about the waning of communist ideology and the demands for greater democracy, which had led to the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989, they called in Chinese history. In 1994, a member of the Politburo, the central body of the Party, attended a memorial for the Yellow Emperor, a probably mythical figure from five thousand years ago who was said to be the father of all ethnic Chinese. It looked suspiciously like ancestor worship, one of the many traditional practices the Communists had condemned. The following year the authorities allowed a major conference on Confucius. Twenty years earlier under the approving eyes of Mao, Red Guards had burned the great Confucian classics and done their best to destroy the sage's tomb. The Party also sponsored a major campaign for Patriotic Education, which emphasized, as the official directive put it, "the Chinese people's patriotism and brave patriotic deeds." The Great Wall, which had in previous decades been condemned for its cost in ordinary Chinese lives, now became the symbol of the Chinese will to survive and triumph. Very little was said about the joys of socialism, but China's past achievements were neatly linked to Communist Party rule: "Patriotism is a historical concept, which has different specific connotations in different stages and periods of social development. In contemporary

China, patriotism is in essence identical to socialism." In other words, being loyal to China means being loyal to the Party. Chinese history was presented as the story of the centuries-old struggle of the Chinese people to unite and to progress in the face of determined interference and oppression from outside. China's failure to get the 2000 Olympic games, the Opium Wars of the early nineteenth century, foreigners condemning the brutal crackdown in Tiananmen Square, and the Japanese invasion in the twentieth century were all wrapped up into one uninterrupted imperialist design to destroy the Chinese nation.

It is all too easy to rummage through the past and find nothing but a list of grievances, and many countries and peoples have done it. French-Canadian nationalists have depicted a past in which the Conquest by the British in 1763 led to two and a half centuries of humiliation. They play down or ignore the many and repeated examples of cooperation and friendship between French and English Canadians. French Canadians—innocent, benevolent, communitarian, and tolerant of others—are the heroes of the story; the English—cold-hearted, passionless, and money-grubbing—the villains. Esther Delisle, a Quebec historian, has run into trouble by attempting to show some ambiguities in that picture. She argues that Abbé Lionel Groulx, the renowned scholar and teacher, has become an icon to French-Canadian nationalists who manage, however, to overlook his anti-Semitism. While

the nationalists stress the wrongs done to Quebec in the conscription crises of the two world wars, she points out that they fail to deal with the fact that in Quebec during World War II there was considerable sympathy for the pro-Nazi Vichy government of France. As recent works on Trudeau confirm, he, like other members of the young French elite, carried on his life and career between 1939 and 1945 without paying much attention to what was going on in the world. "Reading the memoirs," writes Delisle, "of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Gerard Pelletier and Gerard Fillion, among other French Canadians promised to prestigious careers, one could conclude that they saw nothing, heard nothing, and said nothing at the time, and that they were only interested in (and marginally, at that) the struggle against conscription.... There is more to the silence and lies than a simple narcissistic scratch. There is the need to hide positions which the Allied victory made unspeakable. These men would have to forget, and make others forget, their attraction to the siren songs of fascism and dictatorship in the worst cases, and in the best, their lack of opposition to them."

Stories of past glories or of past wrongs are useful tools in the present but they, too, often come at the cost of abusing history. History is also abused when people try to ignore or even suppress evidence that might challenge their preferred view of the past. In Japan at present, the nationalist right is furious with archaeologists who are

going to examine some of the scattered tombs where generations of the Japanese royal family are buried. Scholars have been asking for years for the right to investigate the sites, some of which go back to the third or fourth century. The nationalist fury grows out of their belief that the emperor is sacred and is, moreover, descended in an unbroken line from the sun. Japan, in the nationalist view, is a "divine land." The more prosaic answer is that the royal family came originally from China or Korea; even if that is not true, it is probable that there was a good deal of intermarriage between Japan and the mainland so that the imperial family's bloodline may contain non-Japanese genes. If the investigations find evidence to confirm that hypothesis, a key part of the nationalists' mythology is destroyed.

The treatment of the sites has fluctuated with prevailing political currents. While the emperors were mere figureheads, most of the sites were neglected. With the Meiji Restoration in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Japan began its great national project of rapid modernization, the emperor served as a convenient symbol of the national will, and a nationalist cult grew up around him. When suspected imperial tombs were discovered, the government bought the land and moved its owners away. No excavations were allowed until Japan's defeat in 1945. The American occupiers embarked on an ambitious program to remake Japanese society, and that

included rewriting Japan's history. In theory, the ban on excavations of the imperial tombs was lifted and, indeed, a number of discoveries were made that pointed to the extensive influence from both China and Korea on early Japanese culture. Access remains difficult, however, because the Imperial Household Agency, which runs the imperial properties, continues to insist that the sites are religious and that the spirits of the emperors' ancestors ought not to be disturbed. Archaeologists continue to demand that the agency allow fuller access. Several have received death threats from extreme nationalist groups.

Concern about what investigation of the past might reveal is by no means confined to Japan. In 1992 when a couple of spectators at hydroplane races on the Columbia River near Kennewick in the state of Washington stumbled on a human skull, their discovery set off a decade-long tug-of-war over the skull itself and the accompanying bones which were subsequently discovered. The remains turned out to be prehistoric, approximately nine thousand years old. Interestingly, the features of the skull appeared to be Caucasoid rather than Aboriginal. These findings challenged what had until then been the widely accepted view that Aborigines were the first and only indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. The federal government, which would have preferred to avoid dealing with the issues raised, was prepared to hand over the bones to Native American tribes, but scientists sued for the right

to do research. The Umatilla tribe argued that, according to its own myths, it had been near Kennewick since the beginning of time. "I have oral histories within my tribe that go back ten thousand years," said one member. "I know where my people lived, where they died, where they hunted, where they fished and where they were buried, because my oral histories tell me that." Kennewick man was an ancestor and must be properly buried. Furthermore, by letting the bones be investigated by scientists, the American government was showing contempt for the tribe's sacred beliefs. After an eight-year legal battle, the courts ruled that the bones stay in the possession of the Army Corps of Engineers on whose land they were found and that scientists be given access.

History that challenges comfortable assumptions about the group is painful, but it is, as Michael Howard said, a mark of maturity. In recent years, Ireland has witnessed a major revision of its history in part because it is prosperous, successful, and self-confident, and the old stories of victimhood no longer have the resonance they once did. As a result, the old, simple picture of Catholic Irish nationalists versus the Ulster Protestants and their English supporters and the two separate histories that each had is now being amended to show a more complex history, and some cherished myths are being destroyed. In World War I, it used to be believed, only the Protestants fought. The nationalists were engaged, depending on

which way you looked at it, either in treason or in a struggle for liberty. In fact, 210,000 volunteers from Ireland, a majority of them Catholics and Irish nationalists, fought for the British against the Germans. The Easter rising was not the unified movement of all Irish patriots of nationalist myth but the result, at least in part, of internal power struggles. As the president of Ireland, Mary McAleese, said in a recent lecture in London, "Where previously our history has been characterized by a plundering of the past for things to separate and differentiate us from one the other, our future now holds the optimistic possibility that Ireland will become a better place, where we will not only develop new relationships but will more comfortably revisit the past and find there ... elements of kinship long neglected, of connections deliberately overlooked."

Distorted history, suppressed evidence, there is worse still, and that is the history that is simply false. Sometimes it is done for the best of motives, to build pride among those who have suffered much and who live with a deep sense of powerlessness and humiliation. In 1923, Marcus Garvey, the black American leader, wrote a stirring polemic entitled "Who and What Is a Negro?" He tried to give his people back what slavery had stolen from them—a past as other peoples had, with a sense of who they were and what their achievements had been. He went further though and made claims that could not be substantiated.

"Every student of history," he said, "of impartial mind, knows that the Negro once ruled the world, when white men were savages and barbarians living in caves; that thousands of Negro professors at that time taught in the universities in Alexandria, then the seat of learning; that ancient Egypt gave the world civilization and that Greece and Rome have robbed Egypt of her arts and letters, and taken all the credit to themselves." His argument, which still keeps surfacing, was that civilization was like a torch that had passed from sub-Saharan Africa to Egypt, then, in an act of theft, on to Greece and Rome. It is a curious and static view of civilization as something that can be moved from one people to another—or that there is only one "civilization." In reality, there are and have been many civilizations and they are fluid and changing. The forces that shape them come from within and without. Of course, Greek civilization had outside influences, but they were as likely to come from the east as from Egypt. And there is little evidence that Egyptian civilization was derived largely from south of the Sahara.

More recent scholars have tried to bolster the claim by using linguistic and archaeological evidence. Athens, it is claimed, is originally an African word, and Socrates was black because one sculpture shows him with a flat nose. Scholars in the field have dismissed such evidence, but for some of the more committed supporters of the Garvey thesis, that is simply evidence that Europeans ever since

the Greeks have been engaged in massive conspiracy to conceal their theft and the fact that they could not create civilization on their own. According to Cheikh Anta Diop from Senegal, the Europeans even laid a trail of false evidence down through the centuries. Such stories bear the same relationship to the past as *The Da Vinci Code* does to Christian theology. They may help for a time to instill pride but at a cost.

In India, in the 1990s, the growth of Hindu nationalism brought extraordinary attempts to eliminate parts of India's heritage and to rewrite Indian history. In 1992, fundamentalists, supported by right-wing Hindu politicians, destroyed a sixteenth-century mosque at Ayodhya in northern India on the grounds that it was built over the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. Encouraged, they declared that they would move on to destroy other Muslim sites, including the Taj Mahal. This was part of a larger drive to peg India's identity as exclusively Hindu or, in the word used by the Hindu nationalists, *Hindutva*.

India's history inevitably became a key component of this. The standard view, based on the evidence available, had been that the fertile Indus Valley had housed the Harappan civilization between about 3000 and 1700 B.C. It was gradually absorbed or disappeared when horse-borne Aryans moved downward from the north, perhaps as peaceful migrants or possibly as warlike invaders. This did not suit the Hindu nationalists because it implied that

an indigenous civilization had given way to one from outside and that their own culture might have foreign elements. As Madhav Golwalkar, the spiritual father of today's Hindu nationalists, wrote in the 1930s, "The Hindus came into this land from nowhere, but are indigenous children of the soil always, from times immemorial." Of course, this was an absurdly simplistic view of the ways peoples and civilizations develop and commingle. They are not flies stuck forever the same in amber but much more like rivers with many tributaries.

When the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, won power at the centre in 1998, it immediately set bringing the past into line with its views. Harappan civilization was, it declared, actually Aryan. A terra cotta seal from a Harappan site had been found that showed a horse. (This conclusive piece of evidence, unfortunately, turned out to be a fake.) Harappan civilization was also, the government confidently pronounced, much older than previously accepted. Indeed, Murl Manohar Joshi, the BJP minister in charge of education between 1998 and 2004, announced that he had discovered an even older indigenous Indian civilization, which he and his supporters named the Sarasvati. "The evidence for this," said Romila Thapar, one of India's most respected historians, "is so far invisible." Nevertheless, it was quite clear, at least to the BJP and its supporters, that India had housed the world's first civilization. It had not only been

responsible for all manner of inventions and advances long before all others but it had civilized the rest of the world. The Chinese may have been startled to learn that they were in fact the descendants of Hindu warriors. Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language, was, it was claimed by the Hindu nationalists, the mother of all other languages. The Vedas, the oldest texts written in Sanskrit, were the foundation of most modern knowledge including all of mathematics.

To make sure that Indian students absorbed all this, Joshi introduced new textbooks which stressed such “Indian” subjects as yoga, Sanskrit, astrology, Vedic mathematics, and Vedic culture. He packed schoolboards and research centres with Hindu nationalists whose credentials as historians mattered far less than their adherence to a simplistic view of India’s past and culture. The respected Indian Council of Historical Research in Delhi was told that its historian for early India was to be replaced by an engineer. That appointment at least did not go through because there was a public outcry both about the appointee’s credentials and his attacks on Christians and Muslims.

Behind these often laughable attempts to remake Indian education lay a more sinister and political agenda. The BJP and its supporters conceived of India as a Hindu nation and, moreover, one that reflected the values of upper-caste Hindus, including their reverence for cows

and their hostility to beef-eating. Their India had little room or tolerance for the large religious minorities of Muslims and Christians, and precious little for lower-caste Hindus. The BJP view of the past was one in which Indian civilization had been, from its inception, as Hindu as they were today. Even the merest suggestion that ancient Hindus had been different, that they might have eaten beef, for example, had to be taken out of the record. It was true, one Hindu nationalist admitted, that the evidence suggested that upper-caste Hindus ate beef in ancient times but to let schoolchildren know that would confuse them, and quite possibly traumatize them.

The BJP’s India was one where Hindus had lived in harmony with each other until outsiders—Muslims and then the British—had arrived to damage and divide up Indian society through pillage, plunder, and forcible conversions. The new textbooks dwelled on the sins of the outsiders but were largely silent on the often brutal deeds of Hindu rulers. Moreover, the texts ignored the copious evidence that, down through the centuries, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs—indeed, adherents of all religions—had for the most part lived peaceably side by side, borrowing and learning from each other. While Muslim invaders had brought Mughal and Persian styles in the arts into India, those styles had been absorbed and influenced by those already existing in India. The great Mughal emperor Akbar had been fascinated by other

religions and had tried, unsuccessfully, to found a syncretic religion that incorporated elements of Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. In independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister, had stood firmly for secularism and tolerance in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith India. None of this appeared in the Hindutva version of India's past. Rather, Muslims had always been enemies of Hindus and always would be until they were converted or otherwise dealt with.

Historians who pointed out the manifest flaws in this picture of India's past were condemned as Marxists or simply as bad Indians. It was a pity, said one fundamentalist, that there was no farwa in Hinduism. In fact, extreme Hindu nationalists behaved as though there were. Scholars, including Romila Thapar, who published work that was at variance with the Hindutva orthodoxy, received hate mail and even death threats. Expatriates, as is so often the case, were particularly vociferous in their defence of what they claimed was India's true history and culture. Thapar was hounded when she gave lectures in the United States. At a lecture in London, a Hindu activist threw an egg at Professor Wendy Doniger because she was daring to lecture on the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana. In California, Hindu parents appeared before the state schoolboard to demand that textbooks be purged of the errors propounded by "India-bashers" such as Thapar and scholars such as Michael Witzel of Harvard University.

The errors they listed included, not surprisingly, the Aryan movement into India.

In a particularly bizarre series of incidents, James Laine, an American scholar at a small college in Minnesota who wrote a book investigating the myths surrounding the life of the seventeenth-century Hindu king and hero Shivaji, found himself the target of nationalist rage. Laine had dared to suggest that among the many stories was one that could be taken as a joking comment that Shivaji may not have been his father's son. The Shiv Sena, a right-wing political movement in Shivaji's home province of Maharashtra, ran a successful campaign to get Oxford University Press to withdraw the book. Early in 2004, a gang of toughs beat up and tarred a venerable Indian scholar whose name was mentioned in Laine's acknowledgments. Another mob broke into a research institute in Pune where Laine had done some work and, ironically, destroyed ancient Hindu writings and paintings and smashed a statue of the Hindu goddess of learning. The Pune police force responded by charging Laine and the Oxford University Press with "wantonly giving provocation with intent to cause a riot." Indian moderate opinion was outraged and warned against the "Talibanization" of India.

The impetus behind the attacks was, of course, as much or more about the present as it was about the past. It reflected competing views of Indian society—the Hindu

versus the secular—and attempts by the politicians to appeal to Hindu nationalist sentiment. India was due to have a general election in the spring of 2004 and the Laine book became part of the campaign as politicians competed to show how Hindu and how Indian they were. There were calls for Interpol to arrest Laine. The BJP prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, said foreign writers must learn that they could not offend Indian pride.

History and Nationalism