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Review: The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India -- By Manan Ahmed Asif

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The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India. By Manan Ahmed Asif, Harvard University Press, 2020. Hardcover: 39.95, Pp. 336, ISBN 9780674987906.

Reviewed by

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Most of South Asian history has been written by European, more specifically British, chroniclers. Even in the years following the end of formal colonisation, these accounts of history continued to remain predominant. Broadly, they painted a picture of a subcontinent which was heavily divided, stuck with regressive socio-political conditions (like child marriage), and had to be civilised, modernised, and unified by those on a divine mission — the British. Significantly, this version of Indian history was adopted by Indian nationalist historians and leaders who acknowledged India's civilisational achievements, but at the same time bought into the new category of "India", with its own set of implications, that colonial historiography constructed. This India that was intellectually, politically, and socially manufactured vastly differed from the idea of Hindustan,[1] a spatial concept predominant in the subcontinent prior to its colonisation and subsequently lost.

The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India by Manan Ahmed Asif arrives as a refreshing text in this context. Asif studies the Tarikh-i-Firishta, a historical account by Muhammad Qasim Firishta, a historian at Ibrahimʿ Adil Shah II's court in late sixteenth century Deccan. With a strong grounding in postcolonial theory, Asif argues that the colonisation of India required the creation of a "colonial episteme" — way of thinking or knowing — which replaced any alternate way of envisioning the socio-political community (of Hindustan) that Firishta had written of. To quote Asif, "I would like to show how we know the precolonized is shaped irrevocably by the colonial knowledge-making machinery".[2]

Asif's text is relevant in the context of global history, wherein our understanding of the histories of different regions is filtered through colonial knowledge. This orients how and what we think about history and historical sources, making alternate forms of history and knowledge inaccessible.

In the introductory chapter, Asif charts out some recurring themes: the deliberate erasure of precolonial concepts, the political debates regarding Hindustan in the nationalist period (where he cites political thinkers such as Muhammad Iqbal and VD Savarkar) and the colonial writing of Indian history which was based on the historical notions of universal history and teleology. Through this, he traces the fall of Hindustan as a space, and the rise of India as a category created through colonial archiving of precolonial histories.[3]

In the second chapter, titled 'The Question of Hindustan', Asif elaborates on how the British construction of India was guided by the "five thousand years" history. This expressed Indian history in religious terms, wherein the 5000 year old Hindu "Golden Age" was interrupted by Muslims who unleashed despotism over India beginning from the thirteenth century, which would only come to an end with British secular rule.[4] He contrasts this with Arabic and Persian accounts from the eleventh to the twentieth century to emphasise how vastly differing accounts of this history existed, which drew upon Sanskrit textual sources and did not exist in opposition to each other.

In chapter three, Asif examines the practice of history-writing among historians that Firishta refers to, something deeply significant as British historiography was based on the assumption that South Asian historians lacked an "ethic" of history. He contrasts British positivist history drawn from the Rankean tradition with Firishta's history, which uses the past to develop "new ethical registers", while engaging with the "genealogy of historians interested in the practice and ethics of history writing".[5]

Asif uses the next two chapters to chart out the "contents" of Hindustan, such as what places it comprised of, and who its peoples were. For the former, Asif makes a strong case for the erasure of pre-existing relations and ways of belonging that followed from the reduction of spaces to cartographic realities. As for who inhabited India, he offers vastly differing accounts of the Europeans and Firishta. While for Firishta, Hindustan was a diverse place with a just ruler, the Europeans categorised it in terms of contrasts between people of different religions — the Hindus were oppressed by the Muslims, who were in a civilisational clash with the Christians.

In his sixth chapter, "A History of Hindustan", Asif engages with Firishta's history and illustrates how soldier-scribes of the British East India Company, in using Firishta's account to write histories of Hindustan, fundamentally distorted its key characteristics. Further, he suggests that by the time Muslim intellectuals used Firishta to write the subcontinent's history in the nineteenth century, the concept of Hindustan itself had fallen into ruin. As Asif astutely notes, "It [Hindustan] would emerge in the debates on Hindustani as a language, in the articulation of a Hindustan that is a homeland for Hindus alone, in the nostalgia for a long-lost Hindustani culture, in the rallying cry for a free Hindustan. Largely forgotten in popular memory, however, is the history of histories in which Hindustan was an archive, a space, and a belonging for diverse peoples".[6] In his penultimate chapter, Asif binds together the diverse strands in his text to conclude that "as post-colonized historians we have inherited the colonial episteme, but we are also inheritors of a deep archive of history writing that stretches from Juzjani to Firishta to Muhammad Habib… it is our collective task to re-imagine the past".[7]

Asif's arguments have incredible bearing on not just South Asian historiography, but also on world history, which has been troubled by the same processes of imperial knowledge-making as South Asia. The existence and erasure of alternate notions of conceiving space, belonging, and territory are central to Asif's claim of the creation of a colonial episteme. In other words, it was in the erasure of this different way of knowing space and cross-cultural relations that followed that there was a loss of the intellectual and literary category of Hindustan. Such a reformulation of space following the European model was undertaken by colonial officials globally. Here, the basis of dividing space was based on religion and their reading of history, which was very different from indigenous conceptions.

This can be seen across the world, prominently in places like Palestine, Africa, and South Asia, where constructed partitions and borders were based on religious or other communitarian divisions. These differences were seen as fundamental, although as is clear

from Asif's account of an "undivided" Hindustan, they were often not. A vital part of colonisation, then, is an internalisation of the logic of divisions expressed by people living in these countries. This was best seen in the formation of Pakistan — the debates that led to its foundation represented the loss of a multicultural *Hindustaniyat* and relied on arguments of "inherent" differences and conflicts among Hindus and Muslims.

Colonial history-writing, oft discussed in Asif's account, also forms a large area of interest within global history. Not only did the histories written by the British erase any alternate ways of understanding the past, but they also rewrote previous local histories to suit their colonial purpose of divide and rule. In demonstrating that some communities were fundamentally opposed to each other — and had been for centuries — they paved a fertile path to their supposedly uniting rule. This created the binaries of natives and settlers, majorities and minorities, and perpetrators and victims that were not only useful for imposing colonial authority then, but also are popular in contemporary political discourses[9] as well.[9] Lastly, these histories were imbued with judgemental stereotypes wherein indigenous peoples who were seen as "backward" and in eternal conflict required both a civiliser and arbiter to resolve their disputes.

This aspect of history-writing is crucial to seeing contemporary global issues of civil wars and apartheid not as inevitable, but rather constructed in a particular colonial context. What history does — particularly with a decolonial approach such as Asif's — is to help us think differently of our world and identities as not being driven by the logic of fundamental divisions (as colonialism made us believe) but a separate logic altogether. In a Foucauldian sense, the past exists in a different paradigm of knowledge which is important for us to tap into to understand and recreate our present differently. Just as two hundred years ago when history writing was used to colonise, we must now use history as a tool of liberation. Liberation permits us to imagine the world through frames that have been rendered inaccessible by colonial knowledge; to shift how we see ourselves with reference to our world. *The Loss of Hindustan* does an impeccable job at this by opening up a repository of knowledge that comprehends history in a vastly different way. It allows us access to this paradigm and its frames of knowledge, thereby granting us the agency to not be confined by our world and to liberate ourselves.

Notes

[1] Subcontinental South Asia was more commonly known as Hindustan prior to the arrival of colonisers. Manan Ahmed Asif argues how Hindustan was a space imbued with meaning and knowledge of its own, something that is developed throughout this review.

[2] Manan Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* (London: Harvard University Press, 2020), 26.

[3] Asif, 26.

[4] Ibid, 29.

[5] Asif, 101.

[6] Ibid, 219.

[7] Ibid, 225.

[8] In contemporary India, Muslims are seen to have unleashed violence against the native Hindu populations, in the process imposing their culture and traditions on the Hindus. This rhetoric has gained increasing popularity with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India which feels that Islamic influences are alien and demands a return to "original" Indian traditions.

[9] Mahmood Mamdami, *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (London: Harvard University Press, 2020), 20.