

The Maharaja Grants the Brahman a Boon

The Subordination of History to Myth

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A POPULAR STORY IN Varanasi concerns the origin of Banaras Hindu University. It explains how the founder of the university obtained the land on which the university was constructed. There are several versions of the story, all of which are elaborations on the theme of the Maharaja of Banaras granting a boon of a gift of land to a brahman. The story is not supported by documented historical evidence of the event and could be dismissed as a tale of little consequence. The popular story, though, is now as common in Varanasi as any of the ancient stories of the Sanskrit epics or Puranas. The fact that the account of the Maharaja granting a gift of land is told and retold, elaborated upon, and offered as a true account, encourages analysis of the relationship of the story to the truth claims of history. The story has mythic elements, and as this paper will show, the mythic aspect of the story has predominated in local memory over the historical details of British involvement in the founding of the university. The rich tapestry of ancient Hindu myth

*Our beloved mentor brought me to the topic of Banaras Hindu University, first with her work with David Lelyveld, 'Campaign for a Muslim University', published in *Modern Asian Studies*, then with her amazing course on Social and Religious Reform Movements, and finally with her guidance of a Ford Foundation project, in which four of her graduate students participated, on Religious Pluralism and Educational Reform in India. My part in the project focused on BHU and, with Professor Minault's encouragement, I set out for Varanasi and expanded my work into a dissertation and book, *Hindu Education: The Early Years of BHU* (OUP).

serves as a kind of sieve through which historical events are filtered. What remains as a local claim of truth serves to erase the memory of colonial presence and to legitimate certain features of the social structure of Varanasi. This paper considers the oral account of the founding of the Hindu University as a modern myth, and explores the relationship of the account to the wider nexus of Hindu mythology and the function of the myth in relation to history.

This case study of a local narrative applies to a larger question: Could the sustaining influence of South Asian mythic traditions, which have little to do with factual truth and much to do with the construction of meaning and group identity, reflect an indigenous epistemology that subordinates the truth claims of history to the truth claims of myth? Do the persistence of myth and the subordination of history to myth demonstrate that the realities expressed in myth are regarded on some level as higher truth than historical evidence? The truth claims of myth exist in relationship to the believers. Can the opposite hold true in regard to historical evidence? Can historical facts be devoid of meaning and value and as such untrue, having no relationship with a people? It is apparent that while history is a means of knowing in certain societies, not all structures of meaning and value include appreciation of the role of evidence in the historical method. In India today, history is at the centre of important debates between those falling on opposite sides of a broad range of secularist and religious nationalist positions. These largely educated middle class factions make opposing claims based on differing perceptions of what constitutes reliable evidence and analysis, but both have accepted the historical paradigm as the legitimate means of interpreting the past. A larger segment of the population, though, regards not history, but myth as the authentic witness to the past.

Of this wide gap in perspectives, Vinay Lal writes, 'The disconnect between the two Indias can also be read as the gulf between those Indians who are comfortably attuned to discourses of history and have embraced the historical sensibility, if only as one of the indispensable accoutrements of modern citizenship, and those Indians who still dwell largely in the house of myth.'¹ For many in South Asia, the personalities and events of ancient mythology continue to be malleable and rich sources for interpreting the truth claims concerning past and present events. Vinay Lal sets forth a challenge to consider Puranic and mythic literature of South Asia as a 'corpus of literature that might yield an aesthetics and epistemology which might be deployed to question a

modern aesthetics of time, memory, history, narrative, and chronology, or modern notions of events, occurrence, and repetition'.² The truths of South Asian mythic traditions could be employed, then, in the rejection of the historical paradigm.

There are multiple understandings of the definition and function of myth to be considered in locating the modern story of the Maharaja of Banaras and the Brahman within the mythic realm. Ivan Strenski writes that a wide variety of stories have been identified as myth:

Myth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is the true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional, symbol or tool, archetype or stereotype. It is either strongly structured and logical or emotional and pre-logical, traditional and primitive or part of contemporary ideology. Myth is about the gods, but often the ancestors and sometimes certain men. . . . It is charter, recurring theme, character type, half truth, tale or just plain lie.³

While some scholars do not distinguish between legends, folktales, and myth, Mircea Eliade viewed myths specifically as tales that explained how something came into being.⁴ He defined creation stories, stories of the origin of things, as myths. Claude Levi-Strauss viewed myths as structured stories that could reveal much about the thought of the creators of the myths. Levi-Strauss writes of myth:

They [myths] teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate, they help us lay bare their inner workings and clarify the *raison d'être* of beliefs, customs and institutions, the organization of which was at first slightly incomprehensible; lastly, and most importantly, they make it possible to discover operations modes of the human mind, which have remained so constant over the centuries.⁵

In his analysis of myth, Levi-Strauss was not concerned with the association of myths to specific religious traditions, but with how the internal structure of the myth reflected the particular logic of the mind that constructed the myth. While Levi-Strauss believed that the phenomenon of myth making resulted from the need of the human mind for order, Carl G. Jung believed that myths represented universal archetypes in the collective consciousness of humanity. Other scholars have put forward other explanations of myth. Ivan Strenski, though, holds that there is really no such thing as a 'myth'. He regards myth as

a modern construction. He writes, "There may be the word "myth", but the word names numerous and conflicting "objects" of enquiry, not a "thing" with its name written on it. "Myth" names a reality that we "cut out", not one that "stands out". It is the camel in the cloud, the profile of the Rorschach test."⁶ Strenski's position, though, is only one among many on myth.

Wendy Doniger's definition of the term 'myth' seems particularly applicable to the story in Varanasi concerning the creation of Banaras Hindu University:

(A) myth is not a lie or a false statement to be contrasted with truth of reality or fact or history, though this usage is, perhaps, the most common meaning of myth is casual parlance today. But in the history of religions, the term *myth* has far more often been used to mean 'truth'. What makes this ambiguity possible is that a myth is above all a story that is *believed*, believed to be true, and that people continue to believe despite sometimes massive evidence that it is, in fact, a lie. . . . In its positive and enduring sense, what a myth *is* is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories.⁷

In dealing with the story of the Maharaja giving the land for Banaras Hindu University, historical documents exist that would lead a historian to consider the tale as a 'lie or false statement to be contrasted with truth of reality or fact or history'. Yet, the story is believed and, as the paper will demonstrate, contains truths or values deeply held by many in modern Varanasi and can thus be considered as a modern myth.

The creation of myth is not confined to the ancient past, but extends into the present. Haripriya Rangan, for example, examines the construction of a myth surrounding the Chipko movement to save trees in the Garhwal Himalaya in recent history. He writes, 'Myths are not just ancient tales of gods and heroes . . . nor is their production an activity confined to "primitive" societies and religious minded-folk. . . . Myth-making occurs in the present, within rational, secular, and non-exotic worlds, and through contemporary modes of communication.'⁸ Rangan refers to myth as an allusion to a particular kind of narrative, and in the case of Chipko an environmental narrative, that shapes social and political realities:

Environmental narratives are particular forms through which social power is gained, asserted, and reinforced by narrators in various spaces of political discourse. Each environmental narrative aims to reshape social and material life by authorizing particular experiences, people, and events . . . by seeing them as natural, as integral parts of nature and the natural world, and in so doing, dismissing other social practices and experiences by deeming them artificial, illegitimate, or inauthentic.⁹

The narrative of the acquisition of the land on which Banaras Hindu University was built can be understood as an environmental narrative, particularly in versions of the story which have the brahman of the story traversing the boundaries of the land on which the Hindu University was to be built, symbolically sanctifying the land as part of the Hindu holy ground of Varanasi.

The chartering of Banaras Hindu University was a significant moment in the history of modern South Asia. During the colonial period, the British envisioned higher education in India as a means of breaking down barriers of religion, language, caste, and regionalism. English education was a means of producing a cadre of subjects who were rational, scientific, secular, and cosmopolitan in outlook. As part of British strategy, religion was not taught in Indian universities. Yet in an abrupt change in policy, in 1915, the British Government of India chartered the establishment of Banaras Hindu University, proposed by the most active promoter of Hindu causes during the period, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. In the royal charter for the major national institution, a stipulation was included that called for compulsory education in the Hindu religion for all Hindu students. While the university is now a secular institution, administered by the Central Government of India, many Hindus, especially local residents of Varanasi, regard the university as a Hindu institution belonging to the ancient tradition of learning of the city. The weaving of Banaras Hindu University into the mythic fabric of Hindu tradition is supported by the popular story of the founding of the institution.

The Myth

The story of the Maharaja of Banaras, Prabhu Narayan Singh (1855–1931), giving the land for the Hindu University to the brahman, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946) is well known to the citizens of Varanasi, a city of over one million people. The story is not confined

to certain social circles or caste groups, and is told in multiple versions. According to one version, Pandit Malaviya was present at a religious festival when the Maharaja was feeding the brahmans of the area. When asked by the Maharaja what more he would like, Pandit Malaviya said he would like a large area of land on which to build a university:

One time, the Maharaja held a great feast and invited brahmans of the city to attend. Pandit Malaviyaji was called to the feast. During the meal, the Maharaja approached the Pandit Malaviyaji and asked if he would like anything more. Malaviyaji told him that he would like to ask a boon of the Maharaja. The Maharaja told him to ask whatever he liked and it would be granted. Then Malaviyaji pointed to the land on the opposite side of the river and told the Maharaja that he would like all of the land so that he could build a great university. The Maharaja gave the gift of the land to Malaviya. This is how the Banaras Hindu University came to be.¹⁰

Another version of the story has the Maharaja at the bank of the Ganga when Pandit Malaviya asks him for a boon. According to the tale, one morning Pandit Malaviya was standing at the waters of the Ganga saying his prayers. In one account of this version, the narrator said that Malaviya was at particular location, Assi Ghat. While the brahman was saying his prayers, the Maharaja came along in his boat and noticed the serene look on his face and recognized him to be an enlightened person. The Maharaja went to the brahman and told him that he would like to grant him a boon. It was then that Malaviya asked for the land and the Maharaja granted him the gift.¹¹

In one telling of this particular story, the meeting in the river occurs only after Malaviya had gone repeatedly to the palace to ask for the land for the university, but had been ignored by the Secretary of State, who refused to give him access to the *raja*.¹²

In yet another version of the story, when Pandit Malaviya asks the Maharaja to give him land, the Maharaja responds by telling Malaviya that he can have as much land as he can walk around in twenty hours.¹³ In one day the brahman walked around the large piece of land that is now the campus and the Maharaja gave him the land. In yet another version, told by the owner of a travel agency, the Maharaja told the brahman that he could have all the land he could cover if he ran without stopping. In this story, Malaviya was standing at what is now Lanka Gate, the main entrance to BHU. He ran all the way to Hyderabad Gate (which is at the opposite end of the campus), and the Maharaja gave him the land.¹⁴

In its various forms, though, the story of the Maharaja and Malaviya has become part of the mythic fabric of Varanasi.

The Wider Tapestry of Hindu Myth

Aspects of the story of the *maharaja* giving the land to the brahman link the tale to Hindu myths of ancient origin. In this regard, the story of how the land for the Hindu University was acquired has been woven into the wider tapestry of Hindu myth. The account of the Maharaja of Banaras giving the land for the Hindu University to Pandit Malaviya corresponds to a common theme in Hindu myths of Sanskrit literature in which a righteous *raja* bestows upon a poor, pious brahman a generous boon. In the *Mahabharata*, the poor brahman sage Atri, for example, before forsaking his worldly duties and retiring to the forest, approaches King Vainya to ask for wealth to leave to his sons. The king dutifully granted the boon.¹⁵ According to the *Mahabharata*, the figures of the righteous *raja* and the brahman sage are complementary. A section of the *Mahabharata* is devoted to expounding upon the necessity and benefit of the relationship between the brahman and *ksatriyas* (rulers/warriors).¹⁶ In the *dharmashastra* (Hindu law) text, the *Manusmriti* (or Laws of Manu), a section on the duties of the *raja* states that the holier a Brahman, the greater the gift the *raja* should bestow on him and, likewise, the greater the gift given by the *raja* to the brahman, the greater would the *raja's* reward after death.¹⁷ Feeding of brahman, providing for their protections, gifting of various forms of wealth, including land, are considered meritorious acts for *rajas*. The authority of the *raja* in the physical realm is used to support the authority of the brahman in the realm of the spiritual, and vice versa.¹⁸ The spiritual powers of the brahman, as in the myth of the sage Bharadvaja, can powerfully affect the success of the *raja*. In the *Saukhyana Sruta Sutra*, Bharadvaja receives gifts and wealth from the three *rajas* Prastoka Srnjaya, Abhyavartin Cayamana and Bribu Taksan and in return gives them all victory in battle.¹⁹ When *rajas* refused to grant boons they were cursed.²⁰

A second theme present in two versions of the story is the traversing of the land. In these accounts, the *maharaja* stipulates that he will grant the boon of the gift of the land for the university, but that he will give only as much land as the brahman can walk around in 20 hours or run around without stopping. This theme seems to echo accounts of the *ashvamedh* (horse sacrifice ritual), found in several ancient Sanskrit

texts, in which ancient rajas allowing a consecrated horse to roam free for a year, accompanied by attendants. At the end of the year, the land over which the horse had roamed became the *raja's* at the conclusion of the ritual when the horse was sacrificed. The ritual was basically a means of sanctifying the gaining of new land. An example of the theme is found in the myth of the descent of the Ganga from the heavens included in the Bala Kanda of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and the Vana Parva of the *Mahabharata*, in which King Sagara sends out the sacrificial horse to roam.

A twist to the roaming of the horse element tells of a king granting a boon to a dwarf brahman to have all the land that he can cross in three steps.²¹ It is told in several versions in different texts of King Bali, who was preparing to sacrifice the horse. King Bali invited brahman to attend the sacrifice. When Vamana, a dwarf brahman, arrived, the king asked him to name whatever he desired. The dwarf replied that he only wanted three strides of land. Unbeknownst to King Bali, the dwarf was a manifestation of Vishnu, who in taking the three strides covered the earth, the heavens, and the underworld. So Vishnu, in the form of a dwarf, takes the role of the sacrificial horse. After taking three giant steps to claim the worlds, Vishnu sanctifies the universe. In the light of these myths, the story of the Maharaja of Banaras telling the brahman that he can have all the land he can cross gets another dimension, associated with the mythic acquisition and sanctifying of new lands. The themes of the ritual traversing of land and of a beneficent raja granting a pious brahman a boon are found in a variety of myths from different Sanskrit sources spanning hundreds of years. The inclusion of these themes in the modern story imparts a mythic quality to the explanation of how the land for Banaras Hindu University was acquired.

The Function of the Myth

A mundane event becomes a potent source of meaning when enmeshed in a powerful mythic tradition. The origin of the university as a gift from a maharaja to a brahman places the establishment of a modern Western institution, a university, within the Hindu realm, while at the same time denying the historical reality of the colonial context for its establishment. The myth not only subordinates the fact that the ruling authority of the time was not the Maharaja, but the British Raj, but that the leading supporters of Malaviya's plan were British officials, not

the Maharaja of Banaras.²² The actual extent of the British role in the establishment of the university was voiced in a letter written by Viceroy Hardinge to Harcourt Butler, the Member for Education. The Viceroy wrote, 'It is very satisfactory to feel that this venture in Indian education, for whose birth you and I are chiefly responsibly, has been successfully launched.'²³ The intention of these officials for Hindu education at the institution to be used to promote loyalty to the Government of India is obscured entirely.²⁴

The myth not only erases the colonial presence, but also Muslim participation in the creation of the Hindu University. In fact, in another myth that is equally popular in Varanasi, Pandit Malaviya approaches another ruler, the Nizam of Hyderabad, for a donation to the university, but the miserly Nizam, who is a Muslim, sends him one of his old shoes on a platter to the brahman.²⁵ There are variations to the story, all narrating how the Pandit Malaviya was successful in publicly humiliating the Nizam by one means or another into giving a sizeable donation to the institution. The narrative, like that of the maharaja and the brahman, is told and retold in Varanasi. The myth of the Nizam, also has its parallels in episodes in Sanskrit literature in which disrespectful kings deny the requests of brahmans. The effect of the Nizam myth in Varanasi, though, is to discount the actual substantial Muslim support for the university, including the well-documented generous financial support of the Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Osman Ali Khan (1886–1967) to the Hindu University.²⁶

In contrast, the myth of Pandit Malaviya and the Hindu Maharaja of Banaras affirms the figures of the maharaja and the brahman in their correspondence to key social positions in Varanasi. The Maharaja of Banaras is given a prominent role in the myth, which corresponds to the significance the current Maharaja continues to play in the ritual life of city. Regarded as the central Hindu figurehead of the area, he presides over the major public rituals of Varanasi.²⁷ The myth reinforces the legitimacy of the Maharaja of Banaras as a beneficent Hindu figurehead. At the time of the founding of the Hindu University, there were many subjects who would have contested this portrayal. In the early years of the century, when the students of BHU were becoming involved in the independence struggle, the subjects of the State of Banaras, over which the Maharaja ruled, were fighting their own struggle against the tyranny, not of the British, but of the Maharaja. The agitation of the Praja Mandal Movement,²⁸ a democratic movement against the tyrannical rule

of the Maharaja, which continued from 1921 to 1947, is now largely forgotten. The maharaja of the myth, the beneficent ruler and supporter of brahmins predominates.

Additionally the popular narrative affirms the place of brahmins in the society of Varanasi, which has long had a reputation as a centre of brahmanical tradition. In Varanasi, many still point to Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya as the exemplar brahmin, referring to his simple lifestyle, strict adherence to rules of purification, and knowledge of the scriptures. The myth expresses the maharaja's reverence for the spiritual superiority of the brahmin and the brahmin's dependence upon the beneficence of the maharaja. The myth also puts Hindu education in the hands of Pandit Malaviya, a role traditionally claimed by brahmins, but one that was contested in the early years of the Hindu University.

The myth obscures from view the acquisition of the land, the protests against the acquisition, and the suffering caused by the displacement. The fact is that villages were dispossessed and people were forced to leave their homes, wells, crops and orchards. But this is forgotten. Some versions refer to the displacement, but wrap it in a cloak of benevolence. For instance, one story version says that in compensation for their loss, Pandit Malaviya offers employment at the university to the former inhabitants of the land.²⁹ In another account, Malaviya promises the poor inhabitants that he would employ one person from each family at the university.³⁰ In another version, Malaviya relocates the inhabitants in two other neighbourhoods outside the university gates. The most common versions of the story, though, leave out any mention of displacement of former residents of the land on which the Hindu was constructed.

The mythologizing of a historical event has political significance. In this case, we see the erasure of colonial influence from the history of the Hindu University, the diminishing of Muslim contribution, the buttressing of an idealized social order in the prominence of the brahmin and the legitimization of the maharaja as figure-head of the community and the supporter of brahmins. Such use of myth for political purposes is not a modern phenomenon. Indian kings, for instance had specific myths expressed in art that would serve to legitimate their rule. For instance, as Heinrich von Stietencron illustrates, the first image of Gangadhara (Shiva as the deity who carries Ganga) was created after the victory of king Mahendravarman I (c.610–30), who was a worshipper of Shiva, over the Ganga dynasty, who were Jains. The Gangadhara image was based on a specific variation of the descent of the Ganga story in which

Ganga tries to destroy Shiva, but Shiva punishes her.³¹ The myth of the descent of the Ganga was given political meaning within a particular historical context.

Another instance of the connection of myth to power relates well to the myth of the origin of the Hindu University. As historian Vasudha Dalmia has written in *The Nationalization of Hindu Tradition*, the legitimacy of the lineage of the Maharaja of Banaras as the traditional Hindu lord of the land is based on a myth of a raja granting a brahman a boon of a gift of land.³² In a twist upon the theme of the maharaja granting the boon to the brahman, the raja bestows the boon upon the brahman, but against his wishes. The brahman curses the raja, telling him that his own brahman descendants would become the rulers of Banaras. The myth of the raja granting the boon of land locates the origin of the lineage of the Maharaja of Banaras in a distant mythical Hindu past, thus providing legitimacy for the maharajas as the rightful Hindu rulers of Banaras. The establishment of the lineage of the Maharajas of Banaras was actually brought about by the granting of land by Muslim Mughal rulers, but this information is obscured by the myth.³³ In similar manner, myth of the gift of the land for the Hindu University does not correspond well with the historical events surrounding the creation of the university.

The History

The story of the Maharaja giving the land to Pandit Malaviya is not supported by historical evidence. British documents attest to the fact that the land was not donated by the Maharaja, but was acquired from the previous inhabitants only by force through the execution of a land acquisition order. These documents are from the local records of the British Government at the time of the foundation of the university, which are now housed at the Banaras Regional Archives. The records show that the land Pandit Malaviya and the other founders of the university desired was already inhabited. The forced evacuation of the site was protested by owners and tenants of the very valuable and fully cultivated land.³⁴ The acquisition order was issued on 17 November 1915 by the Government of the United Provinces for the acquisition of approximately 1,164 acres from the *pargana* of Dehat Amanat, including the *mauzas* (villages) of Sri Gobardanpur, Khizirhi, Jangampur, Siswahi, Chettampur, Bhagwanpur, Dhanarjaipur, and Naria for the site of the Hindu University.³⁵

The acquisition of such a large tract of land was extremely unusual. Sheo Karan Nath Misra, the Special Land Acquisition Officer assigned to consider the amount to be paid in compensation to the proprietors and tenants, wrote to the Collector of Banaras, explaining that such a tract of land, of about 2 sq. km., consisting of first rate cultivated land, under permanent settlement and so close to the city had seldom been taken by forced acquisition.³⁶ According to the officer, the Hindu University could hardly have chosen a more valuable plot of land from the agricultural point of view. There was hardly any portion of the area which could be called actual waste or barren land—over three quarters of the total twelve hundred acres was regularly cultivated land yielding two, and in some cases, three crops each year. In addition, fixed rate tenants or occupancy tenants had occupied most of the land for some time and were privileged to retain a very low rent. These villages were practically losing all that they possessed in the world. Their houses, groves, their tenures and their wells, in fact everything they possessed had been taken.³⁷

After the initial acquisition of land for the campus, the university required additional plots of land. In 1917, the university officials wanted to expand the boundary of the university. As the proprietors of the land were unwilling to part with it, the university obtained another land acquisition order from the local government.³⁸ Again in 1921, the university made an application for yet another acquisition of land. It was in connection with this acquisition that the Maharaja of Banaras was involved. The Maharaja owned a 75-acre plot of land that the university wanted for the purpose of building a canal to irrigate some 2,100 acres of land.³⁹ The Maharaja would only agree to lease the land. In 1923, Pandit Malaviya still had not acquired the land through private negotiations and wrote to the Commissioner, Benares Division asking that 'the Government to take the necessary action for the acquisition of the land in question as early as may be practicable'.⁴⁰ By 1924, J.B. Darwin, the Deputy Collector for Banaras reported that the additional land had been acquisitioned for the university.⁴¹

The land acquisition records at the Banaras Regional Archive reveal that all of the acreage for the site on which Banaras Hindu University is now located was not received as a gift, but was acquired by land acquisition orders, including land under the proprietorship of the Maharaja of Banaras. Former owners and tenants of the land protested the action, but nevertheless were forced to leave their homes, fruit trees, and wells. The story that is revealed in the 'official' records of the land

acquisition would appear to a historian to be the more reliable account. Yet the official version of how the land for the Hindu University was acquired is given no hearing in Varanasi. The myth prevails in local memory.

Distinguishing Myth from History

The untangling of history and myth has been a topic of scholarly concern. Early Western scholars in South Asia found that its literature was extensive and diverse, covering a number of subjects from drama, to politics, to medicine. They could detect little, though, that they regarded as historical. They also perceived the apparent lack of historical work as a deficiency of South Asian culture. Indians responded by making efforts to write their own histories. Another development occurred which involved attempts to historicize myths and to prove that myths contained modern scientific truths. In the early twentieth century, at the time of the establishment of the Hindu University, the Maharaja of Banaras, Prabhu Narayan Singh, and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya were members of an association in Varanasi called the Kashi Bharat Dharm Mahamandal. In one of the publications of the organization, *The World's Eternal Religion*, an argument was made against the attempt to historicize ancient mythology, explaining that the inhabitants of the subcontinent deliberately did not construct a historical record:

As regards the historical test, it is worthwhile to observe that India did not, nay, in the view of the truth, could not, care to record a history in the modern sense which means narrations limited to particular periods and geographical tracts, to certain select great names and localities arranged in a chronological order, all intended to picture forth a past to vivify the present. India's wisdom transcended the wisdom of every other country's, and it had a vivid knowledge of the past, the present, and the future. How could the Seers of old take account petty details which are forgotten as soon as given, as by school boys on leaving school? Countless ages, countless places, countless personages have come and gone, and will come and go. The Seer adheres to the truth. 'History but repeats itself'—this is what they have brought out in the Grand Epics. In the play of human character in its birth and development and ideals and consummation common to all ages in all conditions, the essence is there, the chaff is thrown off. India has always referred itself for light and guidance to such ideals of lofty character as Bhishma, Rama, Krishna, Vyasa, etc. What higher ideals are necessary to govern human conduct by example and precept?

The wisdom deduced from the epic record is preserved, and will never be lost, while modern historical works will have their day and vanish into 'oblivion's uncatalogued library'.⁴²

The authors interpreted India's past lack of historical literature not as a deficit, but as cultural difference and claimed historical research to be of limited utility in guiding people toward the true goals of human existence. The details of history fell into the realm of the mundane and were given scant respect in the wider scope of the wisdom of countless ages, the wisdom exemplified in the lofty characters of myth.

In *Textures of Time*, Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam refute this view that Indians rejected history and argue that a significant body of historical literature exists from late medieval and early modern south India.⁴³ They explain that the historical material has not been recognized as such because the history appears in different genres from folk-epic to poetry that do not correspond to the formal features of historical narrative prose.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the authors argue, there is a clear distinction between factual and fictional accounts within a single genre of literature indicated by variations, sometimes subtle, in language, which could be detected by the intended audience. History and myth co-existed then and were distinguished one from the other.⁴⁵

The distinguishing of the language of history and myth can be applied to the modern accounts of the founding of Banaras Hindu University. In oral accounts of the founding of the university, the mythic story of the Maharaja granting the Brahman a story is told, but curiously, in official records of the Hindu University, the story of the Maharaja giving the land is not included. Also, the official history of the university, *History of Banaras Hindu University*,⁴⁶ published by Banaras Hindu University Press, does not include any mention of the story of the Maharaja of Banaras giving the land to the brahman, Pandit Malaviya. In a chapter, 'University Site and the Holy Kashi', which details the selection of the site, the author only vaguely states that, 'necessary steps for the acquisition of the land were initiated'.⁴⁷ In the prevalence of the myth in local oral accounts and the absence of the myth in official papers and historical account, there appears to be clear distinction between history and myth. A difference can also be detected between the language used in the official history of the university and that of the oral accounts. The oral accounts, for instance, set the scene for the maharaja and brahman outside of history with a beginning much the same as the 'once upon the time' of fairy tales.

The myth, though, being commonly accepted as the true origin of the Hindu University, has made its way into books and other sources of information as history. For instance, in her book on Varanasi, *Banaras: City of Light*, Diana Eck mentions the founding of the Hindu University. She writes, 'The Maharaja of Banaras donated the land for the university.'⁴⁸ In another book on the history of the city, *Kashi: The City Luminous*, in a section on the Maharajas of Banaras, the author writes that Prabhu Narain Singh 'donated 1300 acres for the starting of the Banaras Hindu University'.⁴⁹ Is this mistaking of myth for history due to the lack of understanding of language of which Rao, Shulman, Subrahmanyam wrote? Are these instances of the often-told claims of truth of the mythic oral accounts being confused or combined with the truth claims of historical accounts?

Myth has little to do with factual truth and much to do with the construction of meaning and identities. The story of the maharaja giving the university land to the brahman, in one regard, is a lie or a false statement contrary-to-fact. Yet it is a story shared and believed by many who embrace the social norms, hierarchies, and the politics affirmed by the story. In this regard the story of the giving of the land can be regarded as myth. As Wendy Doniger maintains, a myth is a part of a larger group of stories of a people.⁵⁰ In this case, the corpus of Hindu myth is massive, with themes that continue to be woven into modern events, as this paper has demonstrated. Local accounts of historical events, especially when told in various versions and having mythic elements, can easily be discounted. This paper, although drawing attention to various dimensions of such stories and connecting them to myth, is not a call for historians to become mythologists. It is only in the difference between the historical record and the mythic record, that what is left out of the story and what is added, becomes apparent. As Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam write:

To distinguish the fictive from the factual, is perhaps, the work of history; to distinguish false from true is the work of poetry, or of logic or of myth and music. Still there are kinds of history, and great historians are open to that dimension of reality that we call 'myth', in the sense of being more deeply saturated with meaningfulness and also more creative of the reality that they purport to describe than are other expressive modes.⁵¹

Myth also often serves to portray the ideal imagined by the myth-makers. Myth can be a narration of idealized events, one that reshapes or masks realities. The popularity of a myth can point to the existence

of a less than ideal situation behind the myth and suggest that there is much more to the story than is being expressed.

Modern myths such as the Maharaja of Banaras granting the boon of the land for Banaras Hindu University can be understood as narratives of events as they *should have* happened (at least according to those who prefer the myths to history). In this, myths may be considered in the light of Jonathan Z. Smith's analysis in the 'Bare Fact of Ritual'.⁵² In his examination of a bear hunting ritual, Smith concluded that the ritual, which was performed before an actual hunt, was an enactment of a bear-hunt as the hunters imagined an ideal hunt, as a hunt *should* happen. The fact that the idealized bear hunt was performed before the actual hunt was 'eloquent testimony' that actual hunts did not correspond to the ideal.⁵³ In a similar manner, modern myths can be understood as idealized oral accounts of events. Importantly, the fact that the myths are remembered and repeated in much the same way that ritual is repeated to imbed the ideal in community, can also be testimony that the actual events did not correspond to the ideals expressed in the myths.

Instances of the interpretation of a historical event in mythic terms may provide insights that may be entirely absent in the historical record. Revealing the truth of an event for the people may be the boon that such mythic accounts grant historians. As in the case of the Maharaja granting the land to the brahman, the myth illustrates the importance of the Hindu University in the eyes of the people of Varanasi, the insignificance accorded to the role of the British and Muslims in the history of the university, the continued social affirmation of the ascribed roles of the maharaja and the brahman during a time when those roles are being contested by other segments of society, and the absorption of a modern institution into the mythic Hindu past. Understanding the existence of such a myth as an expression of an ideal that is contrary-to-fact, can also lead to what is obscured by the truth claims of the myth. Such truths can enrich historical interpretation.

Notes

1. Vinay Lal, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 281.
2. Ibid., p. 282.
3. Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in the Twentieth Century: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi Strauss and Malinowski*, London: Macmillan Press, 1987, p. 1.
4. Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs: Journal, 1957-1969*, translated from the French by Fred H. Johnson, Jr., New York: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 16.

5. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Naked Man: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* 4, Translation of *L'Homme Nu*, 1971, London: Harper and Row, 1981, p. 639.
6. Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth*, p. 1.
7. Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 2.
8. Haripriya Rangan, *Of Myths and Movements: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 10.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
10. Vibhuti Narayan Singh, Maharaja of Banaras and grandson of the maharaja of the story, interview with author, Varanasi, September 1997.
11. S. Somaskandan, interview with author, Varanasi, November 1996.
12. Pushpa Pratap, interview with author, Varanasi, March 1997.
13. Rajendra Prasad, interview with author, Varanasi, September 2006.
14. Salil Tiwari, interview with author, Varanasi, August 2006.
15. *Aranyakapurva* 3.183.1–32, in *Mahabharata*, vol. 1, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1971, pp. 636–8.
16. *Shantipurva* 12.73–7, in *Mahabharata*, vol. 3, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974, pp. 2085–98 and 'The Necessary Complementarity of Ksatriyas and Brahmins', Book 12, pp. 73–7, *Mahabharata*, vol. 7, James L. Fitzgerald, translator and editor, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 350 fols.
17. Chapter 7, pp. 82–7, Wendy Doniger, translator, *The Laws of Manu*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 137.
18. John E. Mitchiner, *Traditions of the Seven Rsis*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, p. 224, writes of the mutual necessity of brahmins and kings: 'In several instances, Rsis are depicted as giving instruction on the necessity for and duties of kings. Thus Bharadvaja is said to have composed a *raja-sastra*, or treatise on the duties of kings; in a similar manner Vasistha instructed king Mucukunda on the interrelations between kings and their Purohitas—to the effect that a king depends on his Purohita for success, while a kingdom depends on a king. This question of the political involvement of the Rsis generally conform to—and may be considered in connection with—the more general theory of Brahmin-Ksatriya relations, where it is the duty of the king or ksatriya to rule to and to protect the Brahmin, while it is the duty of the Brahmin to legitimate and sanctify the power of the king.'
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 228–9.
20. *Mahabharata* 13.53.20 tells of a king's reaction to a *rishi's* request for meal; 'Through fear of the *rishi's* curse, the king had caused all kinds of foods to be gathered and got ready for his guest.' Also see 'Cursing Kings', in John E. Mitchiner, *Traditions of the Seven Rshis*, pp. 230–3.
21. Deborah A. Soifer, *The Myths of Narasimha and Vamana: Two Avatars in Cosmological Perspective*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 3.

22. Leah Renold, 'Chapter Two: A Leap In the Dark: The Chartering of the Hindu and Muslim Universities', *A Hindu Education: The Early Years of Banaras Hindu University*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 29–63.
23. Letter from Lord Hardinge to Harcourt Butler, 18 February 1916, India Office Library, Butler Collection, MSS.EUR.F.116/42.
24. Renold, *Hindu Education*, pp. 52–60.
25. Maqsood Ali, interview with author, Varanasi, April 2015; Jokhan Singh, interview with author, April 2015. A version of this story is also told in Krishnadatta Dvivedi, *Bharatiya Punarjagarun aur Madan Mohan Malaviya*, Varanasi: Vishvavidyalaya Prakashan, 1962, pp. 19–20.
26. S. Somaskandan and S.L. Dar, *History of the Banaras Hindu University*, p. 778.
27. Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu and Nineteenth-century Banaras*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 77.
28. An unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 'Cultural History of Varanasi in the First Half of the Twentieth Century', completed at BHU by S.K. Singh in 1990, includes a chapter on the Praja Mandal Movement.
29. Rajendra Prasad, interview with author, Varanasi, September 2006.
30. Vidya Varidhi Upadhyaya, interview with author, Varanasi, September 2006.
31. Heinrich von Stientencron, *Hindu Myth Hindu History: Religion, Art, and Politics*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2005, pp. 10–11.
32. Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Tradition*, pp. 65–6.
33. In another instance of a Muslim ruler granting lands to brahmans, an interesting twist is given to the myth of the maharaja granting the boon to a brahman in the story of the origin of the lands of the Maharaja of Darbhanga, who coincidentally played an important role in the establishment of Banaras Hindu University. One of the versions of the story goes that Akbar, the Mughal emperor, granted a land to a poor brahman student who had the power of being able to see the new moon of Eid even when it was entirely obscured by cloud. The poor student, in turn, made a gift of the land to his guru. The guru, then, became the first Maharaja of Darbhanga. The myth provides a means for the maharajas of Darbhanga, who were particularly pious Mitthili brahmans who would have been polluted by the gift from a Muslim, to situate the origin of their lands in a ideal context as a *gurudakshina*, a traditional gift of a brahman student to his guru.
34. Y.P. Dubey, interview with author, Varanasi, January 1995.
35. No. 1843/XV-292, Educational Department, 17 November 1915, Appropriation of Land for a Public Purpose, Government, United Provinces, Banaras Regional Archives.
36. Sheo Karan Nath Misra, Special Land Acquisition Officer, to the Collector, Benares, 22 May 1916, Banaras Regional Archives.
37. Ibid.
38. No. 1226 of 1917, from G.H. Lambert, District Officer of Benares to the Commissioner, Benares District, 15 January 1917, in Banaras Regional Archives.

39. S. Somaskandan and S.L. Dar, *History of the Banaras Hindu University*, Banaras: Banaras Hindu University, 1966, p. 463.
40. Madan Mohan Malaviya, Vice-Chancellor, Benares Hindu University, to J.C. Smith, Commissioner, Benares Division, 3 March 1923, in Banaras Regional Archives.
41. Letter from J.H. Darwin, I.C.S., Deputy Collector of Benares to the Commissioner, Benares District, 17 January 1924, in Banaras Regional Archives.
42. *The World's Eternal Religion*, 2nd edn., Varanasi: Bharat Dharm Syndicate, Ltd., 1924, pp. 2–3.
43. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2001, Kindle Edition, p. 158.
44. Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, p. 166.
45. Ibid., p. 190.
46. S.L. Dar and S. Somaskandan, *History of Banaras Hindu University*.
47. Ibid., p. 317.
48. Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 91.
49. K. Chandramouli, *Kashi: The City Luminous*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1995, p. 283.
50. Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, p. 2.
51. Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, pp. 343–4.
52. Jonathan Z. Smith, 'The Bare Facts of Ritual', *History of Religions*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 1980, pp. 112–27, accessed 20 June 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/1062338>.
53. Smith, 'The Bare Facts of Ritual', p. 127.

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