KATHERINE ULRICH—student, friend, editor supreme—and
WILL DALRYMPLE—inspiration and comrade in the good fight
River, then climbed two and a half miles with their clothes off to offer prayers to the goddess at the hilltop cave temple.

But police banned the nude pilgrimage in 1986 after devotees clashed with members of the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS), a group advocating the uplifting of lower castes. DSS volunteers, claiming that the ritual was degrading for Dalits, were beaten when they tried to prevent pilgrims from undressing. The worshipers then attacked police and paraded ten police officials, including two women constables, naked along the banks of the river. Complex issues of sexual propriety intersect here with the rights of Dalits, as non-Dalits attempt to prevent Dalits, ostensibly for their own good, from indulging in their own rituals. No longer a question of heads versus bodies, the worship of Renukamba now expresses an ambivalence toward the human body itself, as well as the enduring tension within the social body of caste Hinduism.

CHAPTER 25
INCONCLUSION, OR,
THE ABUSE OF HISTORY

The spirit of broad catholicism, generosity, toleration, truth, sacrifice and love for all life, which characterizes the average Hindu mind not wholly vitiated by Western influence, bears eloquent testimony to the greatness of Hindu culture. . . . The non-Hindu peoples in Hindustan . . . must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land . . . but must . . . stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights.1

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906–1973)

If I know Hinduism at all, it is essentially inclusive and ever-growing, ever-responsive. It gives the freest scope to imagination, speculation and reason.2 . . . It is impossible to wait and weigh in golden scales the sentiments of prejudice and superstition that have gathered round the priests who are considered to be the custodians of Hinduism.3

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)

The statement by Golwalkar, a leader of the chauvinist Hindu organization known as the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), in 1939, reflects a different sort of cultural schizophrenia from the creative dichotomies that have typified so much of Hinduism. The first half of his statement seems to me to express largely valid historical claims, while the political agenda of the second half contradicts those claims, paradoxically using the justifiable Hindu pride in religious tolerance to justify intolerance. Gandhi, the bane of the RSS, also makes
two points that are, if not contradictory, in considerable tension: He takes the inclusiveness and imagination of Hinduism for granted, but he contrasts that inclusiveness with the attitudes not (like Golwalkar) of the non-Hindus of India but of the Brahmins, whose "prejudices" against both Dalits and Muslims Gandhi protested throughout his life. The boast that Hinduism is tolerant and inclusive has become not only a part of Hindu law but a truism repeated by many Hindus today, yet this does not mean that it is false; it is a true truism, however contradicted it may be by recurrent epidemics of intolerance and exclusion. How are we to understand the balance of these conflicting currents in the history of the Hindus?

Agni, the name of the Vedic god of fire, is also the name of one of India's most powerful nuclear missiles. Pakistan named its missile Ghori, after Muhammad of Ghor. Why should the two warring South Asian nations reach back into Vedic and eleventh-century history to name their nuclear warheads? What is the relevance of history to religious intolerance?

India is a country where not only the future but even the past is unpredictable. If you have read this far, dear reader, and have plowed through these many pages, and have paid any attention at all, you will have learned at least one important thing. You could easily use history to argue for almost any position in contemporary India: that Hindus have been vegetarians, and that they have not; that Hindus and Muslims have gotten along well together, and that they have not; that Hindus have objected to suttee, and that they have not; that Hindus have renounced the material world, and that they have embraced it; that Hindus have oppressed women and lower castes, and that they have fought for their equality. Throughout history, right up to the contemporary political scene, the tensions between the various Hinduisms, and the different sorts of Hindus, have simultaneously enhanced the tradition and led to incalculable suffering.

The great mystery about the abuse of history is not the abuse itself but the question of why, in such a future-intoxicated age, we still reach for the past (or a past, however confected) to justify the present. "That's history," after all, is an American way of saying, "So what?" But even such American amnesiacs practice a cult of the past with regard to the Constitution and the often unintelligible intentions of the founding fathers, and they have just a few hundred years of history. Hindus have thousands, and their concern for history is correspondingly more intense.

We (and by "we" I mean all of us, Hindus and non-Hindus) can of course learn from the errors of the past, though we are often condemned (pace Santayana) to relive it even when we remember it—indeed, sometimes precisely because we (mis)remember it. And we must be on guard "lest we forget," as Kipling prayed. Often the future is shaped not by what we remember but by what we forget. But we have lost our naive faith in our ability to know our past in any objective way. And memory may not be on our side here; given the tragic power of revenge, sometimes it pays to have a good forgettery. At the end of the day, individuals and groups will have to make their decisions in the present, as they did in the past, on some basis other than history, such as, given present conditions, what seems most humane, most compassionate, most liberating for the most people now.

In the Epilogue to George Bernard Shaw's play Saint Joan (1923), Joan cries out: "Must then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those who have no imagination?" Surely history is one of the most important things for us to imagine and to realize that we are imagining. What an utter waste it would be not to keep using our knowledge of a tradition, such as the Hindu tradition, that is so rich, so brilliantly adaptive. The profuse varieties of historical survivals and transformations are a tribute to the infinite inventiveness of this great civilization, which has never had a pope to rule certain narratives unacceptable. The great pity is that now there are some who would set up such a papacy in India, smuggling into Hinduism a Christian idea of orthodoxy; the great hope lies in the many voices that have already been raised to keep this from happening.

We can learn from India's long and complex history of pluralism not just some of the pitfalls to avoid but the successes to emulate. We can follow, within the myths, the paths of individuals like King Janashruti or Yudhishthira or Chudila or, in recorded history, Ashoka or Harsha or Akbar or Mahadevyyakka or Kabir or Gandhi, or indeed most rank-and-file Hindus, who embodied a truly tolerant individual pluralism. We can also take heart from movements within Hinduism that rejected both hierarchy and violence, such as the bhakti

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1 "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." George Santayana (The Life of Reason, 1905).
2 As Carl Sandburg once said.

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* This is a joke that historians of Russia used to make about revisionist Soviet Union historical propaganda during the cold war. Alas, it applies equally well to many revisionists in India today.
movements that included women and Dalits within their ranks and advocated a theology of love, though here too we must curb our optimism by recalling the violence embedded in many forms of bhakti, and by noting that it was in the name of bhakti to Ram that the militant Hindu nationalists tore down the Babri Mosque. We must look before we leap into history, look at the present, and imagine a better future.

Perhaps we can ride into that future on the glorious horse that graces the jacket of this book. It is an example of the contribution of a foreign culture to Hinduism, since composite animals of this type come from Persia and entered India with the Mughals, and an example of the intersection of court and village, as the image traveled from the Mughal court in Delhi to a village in the state of Orissa, the source of this contemporary example. It is an image of women, almost certainly painted by a man. Depicting the god Krishna as the rider on the horse makes the Muslim image a Hindu image, and the rider on the horse is an enduring Hindu metaphor for the mind controlling the senses, in this case harnessing the sexual addiction excited by naked women. This multivocal masterpiece is, like Hinduism, a collage made of individual pieces that fit together to make something far more wonderful than any of them.

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