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Textures of time: writing history in South India

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Abstract

Along with the clock and the railroad, did the British colonists bring the questionable gift of history to India? Generations of Western writers have claimed that historical consciousness did not exist in India before its conquest by the British at the end of the eighteenth century, assuming that Indians in pre-colonial times were indifferent to historical fact and approached their past through myth, legend, and story. Nearly a thousand

years ago, the great scholar Al-Biruni complained that, "unfortunately, the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things. They are very careless in relating the chronological succession of kings, and when pressed for information ... invariably take to tale-telling." Until now this had been the received wisdom of the West, repeated with little variation by post-colonial historians. Textures of Time sets out not merely to disprove that idea, but to demonstrate through a brilliant blend of storytelling and scholarship the complex forms of history that were produced in South India between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Through a nuanced reading of the rich language of folk epic, courtly poetry, and prose narratives, the authors reveal a subtle but distinct divide between fact and fiction in South Indian writings and make a clear case for the existence of historical narrative in precolonial India.

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