

ROLE OF HISTORICO-MYTHIC WRITINGS IN SHAPING OF A HINDU IDENTITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BENGAL

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ABSTRACT:

Since Bengal was the first region of India to come under British control, it rose to prominence during the colonial period. The exposure to western education enabled the indigenous intelligentsia to start thinking about their country which despite having a glorious past filled with intellectual, cultural and material achievements, had found itself under the clutches of foreign rule. Taking cues from Orientalist research works as to the rise and fall of an ancient civilisation, the Bengali intellectuals began to respond to the official and missionary denigration of Hindu culture. It won't be incorrect to say that in nineteenth-century Bengal we see the first concerted efforts by Hindus towards writing their own history. Still, a clear break is not made from the ancient tradition of taking recourse to Puranic legends in writing accounts of the past. We can also see intellectual efforts towards national unification through claiming stories of valour from other regions like Rajasthan and Maharashtra by presenting them as a collective heritage of the Hindu people.

KEY PHRASES:

Growth of the Hindu identity; Hindu nationalism; Hindutva in Bengal; historiographical tradition in Hindus; Bengal renaissance

Writing in 1874, the great litterateur Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay lamented:

In many instances pride is useful to man. National pride lies at the root of the creation of indigenous history and the betterment of people; history is the basis of social science and social betterment. The misery of a people without thistory is endless. There are a

few unfortunate wretches that do not know even the names of their great-grandfather; and there are a few wretched races that know not the glorious deeds of their ancestors. Of those disgraceful races the Bengalis are most prominent.¹

In the nineteenth century, this was the pervasive feeling among the intellectuals of Bengal. Since Bengal was the first region to get colonised and exposed to the western mode of education, it was the Bengali middle class and the Bhadrakalok intellectuals who first began to ponder over the state India had found herself in. The loss of national pride and glory began to hurt most the people who set out to build their destiny themselves but then the reality struck that it was the coloniser who first denigrated the Hindu culture and then wanted to create an educated class in India who was loyal to him. Then began the journey of self-discovery, hence the rising importance of history as a source of pride. It was not that colonial norms didn't influence the indigenous endeavour of history writing. It was also a period where the foundations of national integration were laid for the modern purpose of creating a nation-state, albeit subconsciously through finding and linking the history of Bengal with the stories of valour from other regions of India. The need was felt to define the term 'Hindu' within proper and sometimes vague historical and geographical frameworks. Also, some attempts were made to locate Bengal within the larger History of India and to locate India within the History of the world.

We also observe a tendency in the writings where concern is expressed regarding the weak state of the discipline of history in the country. Main concerns include the lack of history books in Bengali, the lack of sufficient knowledge of the English language in institutions for studying history and the lack of awareness of world history so that Indian history can be properly contextualised within the larger perspective. It was stated that only then the accurate assessment of how the Hindu community fares against others can be made if we are aware of not only our past but the past of the collective human race. In this concern also the universalist tendencies of the reformist spirit are reflected among the Hindu intellectuals. Romesh Chander Dutt gives the evaluation of the state of affairs in 1877, that 'History continues to be studied in English and little progress has been made in this subject in the Bengali language, except in the matter of school books.'²

The western notions of writing accounts of the past were appropriated so that a level of recognition could be achieved among the western-educated class of Bengal as well as the colonialists. It was also reflected in the concern for the type of books that were included in schools' curricula. This is considered the most important step for gaining legitimacy for a brand of knowledge in the immediate society. In these representations, the Bengali middle class began

to see itself as part of the larger entity called ‘Bharat’³ which existed before the contemporary attempts at constructing its History. ‘The Bengalis gradually appropriate this “glorious” history with great eagerness and begin to see imaginatively, of course, this history of a distant, unrelated people (the Marathas and Rajputs mainly) as a “prehistory” of themselves’.⁴ This perception of ‘distance’ and ‘unrelatedness’ is a sign of the tendency to look at regions of India in isolation and without the context of the spread of the Brahmanical culture to distant parts of the subcontinent which gave different regions a cultural affinity with the heartland i.e., the Ganga valley. This is the reason why this ‘creation’ of genealogy was not unknown in India’s history but signifies the first efforts of a community in the modern period to locate itself within the larger cultural and geographical framework so that a united intellectual challenge could be presented to the ideologues of colonialism.

As stated, there was also an element of ‘invention’ going on within the framework of history. Throughout the ancient period myths and legends were used to provide legitimacy to the integration of a region with the larger geographical and cosmographical framework. This kind of project was always undertaken when its need was felt after the integration had already taken place at other levels like political, economic etc. Nineteenth-century historiography was also laden with the fusion of myth and history. As Partha Chatterjee notes, the distinction between pre-colonial and colonial modes of history writing is not pronounced to a considerable extent.⁵ Although, European social sciences had an impact under which a new style of narrativisation emerged. Stories that were told were derived from Orientalist research. However, the structure of storytelling was much different from how the Orientalists built their narrative.

The Hindu nationalism that was emerging had at its core a repackaged literary tradition according to the given socio-political conditions. That’s why elements of rationalisation of discourse are seen in the project of history writing of the nineteenth century. These discourses were in reaction and/or response to the colonial and missionary denigration of the Hindu culture. Orientalists provided the knowledge base for this project through original research albeit with a western lens and a romanticism regarding India’s past. Since this History was written as a response, the western perception of India’s history and culture was most of the times referred to and criticised in these works. Thus, history was resorted to construct an oppositional identity to the colonial paradigm. Although, it must be kept in mind that this history was not ‘purified’ by purging out elements of the western brand. That’s why we see a paradox in this project.

Colonial historians like James Mill emphasised on the absence of historical consciousness among Indians, specifically Hindus.⁶ They explained how they were not equipped with the rational perspective of looking at the past and lacked an understanding of basic notions of historicity like periodisation. The histories of India that were written by the colonists were touted to be clearing the myths that the indigenous ruling classes had created to perpetuate their rule over the common masses and how such rule had resulted in anarchy.⁷ Meanwhile, missionary accounts of Indian culture stressed on the superstitious nature of the Hindus and how their whole outlook was influenced by their belief in false gods.⁸ Claudius Buchanan, William Carey, William Ward and Sir John Shore wrote severe condemnations of Hindus and saw Christianity as a way to redeem the pagan society. Their problem with the caste system was that it was a hurdle to religious conversion (Nicholas Dirks, 2001). The need that was felt among Bengali educated circles to refute such disparaging accounts first manifested itself in form of writing histories of Bengal in the native tongue. Thus, Ramgati Nyayaratna and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar wrote History of Bengal in two parts based on earlier works by Marshman which had become popular among students and general readers. These history textbooks in Bengali set a trend upon which a new historiography was developed in which opposition was mounted against the official and missionary versions. For example, Kedarnath Datta's Bharatbarsher Itihas (1860):

This history of India is the first original work of the kind, and I feel myself contented in filling a desideratum. The wild notions of men like Mill, Ward and Marshman, their misinterpretation of Hindoo character, manners etc., have been strenuously impugned.⁹

Towards the closing of the nineteenth century an indigenous tradition of history writing in an institutional framework was firmly established. Rabindranath Tagore applauded Akshay Kumar Maitreya's Bengali journal Aitihasik Charitra:

The raw material are collected from our country and transformed into craft items in England. When they are sold here at a high price we are not even aware that its original material was collected from our land ... However, in trade and in literature, should India remain in the shape of raw material? Will these be of no use to us until the foriegner comes and collects it for his factory? Aitihasik Chitra is being inaugurated as a swadeshi factory of Indian history.¹⁰

The transition of nineteenth-century historiography in Bengal from being intertwined with myths and legends to being based on original research of primary sources is seen in Tagore's foreword for Aitihasik Charitra:

By learning by rote the history written by others, one can pass examinations and become a scholar, but the endeavour to collect and write historical account of one's own country can never be mere scholarship. That effort lets fresh currents flow in the stagnant waters of our minds.¹¹

Histories of India written by Indian historians from an Indian perspective became a strong rebuttal against the colonial argument that Hindus lacked an understanding of the discipline. There was also a tendency to cite India's history within world history to gain recognition within an internationally recognised framework. Although it must be kept in mind that until lately this framework has been very euro-centric and application of it to histories of other countries is sometimes problematic. It is seen in the indigenous acceptance of the Aryan invasion theory in nineteenth-century historiography.¹² Despite these theories, the Hindu universalist notions came out on top due to their popularisation by Swami Vivekananda in and outside India. The term 'Aryan' began to be used for the Indian civilisation and not for a particular race that 'conquered' India. For example, Dwijendranath Tagore called for a balanced fusion of Western notions of reason and humanism with Aryan spirituality. He held that while the former gives the world modern development, the latter provides rich wisdom and a sense of culture.¹³ Without being restricted as a religious or a racial class Aryans were projected as the ancestors of the Hindus and the progenitors of the Indian civilisation. The land of Vedic Aryans was also defined geographically:

The Vedic Hindus called themselves aryas, and the tract in which they settled themselves in India has the distinctive name of Aryadesa ... The Aryadesa or Aryavartta [sic!] of Manu is bounded on the north by the Himalaya; and on the south by the Vindhyan chain.¹⁴

By claiming descent from the ancient Aryans, a sense of belonging with the Gangetic heartlands was also developed. The claim of Hindu superiority and having an equal footing with the Europeans also emanated from the pan-India links that were sought to be reinforced by the literary Hindus of Bengal. By reinforcing this sense of belonging the tendency to not think outside Bengal was also overwhelmed and we see Bengali Hindus claiming to be the spokespersons of the whole Hindu race. This was because they all had the same ancestry and the problems they faced were also more or less of the same nature. No doubt in claiming common descent the ancient mythic tendency of narrativisation was used creatively. The reason behind this is that the very objective of these texts was didactic and they weren't scrutinised to match the standards of the Rankean norms of objectivity. These works were precipitated by the popularity of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay who being a litterateur instead of a historian,

wrote historical fiction instead of extensively researched historical works. In these inspired works we observe an urgency of evoking the latent vitality of the Indian nation. In 1884, Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay wrote in *Banga Darshan*:

‘O sons of India, remember the past glory of India and try for once to alleviate your ill-lot. Have you considered what you were and what you have become?’¹⁵

The notion of civilisational progress in ancient India and the subsequent decline had in it a great deal of contribution from the Orientalists. Max Muller set the tone for the Orientalist approach to the study of Indian history and culture which established India as an ancient civilization. Unlike Missionaries who perceived Hindu culture as being filled with nothing but absurdities, Orientalists expressed grief because of its decline from the position of former glory. Their thesis filtered down to the Indian intellectuals and the notion of a ‘golden age’ in the ancient period was set unequivocally.

The depiction of India’s ancient past as a period of glory by the Orientalists set the base for the construction of the indigenous perspective of it. It included the description of Hinduism as a culture or a ‘way of life’ different from the western notion of the term ‘religion’. Instead of the caste system, universalist spirituality was presented as the central feature of its value system. But the Orientalists acknowledged that this value system had undergone a period of decline. It was they who first presented the possibility of reviving that value system by getting rid of the social practices which had corrupted the ethical and moral standards of the pristine past.

Reformers acted on the possibility presented by the Orientalists. The latter had given a voice to the problem that plagued Hindu society. Indian reformers tried to popularise the notion that how some practices weren’t the mainstay of the Hindu culture and had harmed the society very much resulting in harsh criticism from the Christians. They also didn’t want to make a clear break from Indian society and culture while criticising some aspects of it. Through different methodologies and using different Hindu texts they tried to infuse rationalist and humanist values into the society so that some superstitious and inhuman practices could be abandoned without altering its fundamental cultural uniqueness and spiritual traditions. (Parekh, 1989)

This was also a period of intense debate within the Hindu society. Similar to the socio-religious reform movements of nineteenth-century Bengal in which there were both traditionalists and modernists, attempts at rationalisation of historiographical discourse came under severe scrutiny from some quarters. Claims of Hindu superiority also came with opposition to rationalisation of the Hindu discourse. These attempts were sometimes seen as

‘colluding’ with the colonists. In 1890, the paper *Bangabasi* criticised R.C. Dutt’s *History of India* because he saw the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna as abstract ideas rather than real personalities of the past. This book was removed from schools. However, Dutt got support from some sections of the contemporary Bengali press which also considered the rationalisation of Hinduism important. *Burdwan Sanjivani*, a regional weekly with a smaller circulation criticised the uproar over Dutt’s remarks:

‘Can Mr Dutt’s book possibly do more harm than is done by books written by European scholars? In missionary schools, the weekly continued, Hindu children read the Bible and are daily told that their religion is full of superstition. But the religious sensibility of the Hindu are not hurt on that account, and it is certainly strange news that the society which tolerates this has been thrown into convulsions by the publication of Mr Dutt’s book. (Report of the Native Newspapers, No. 21 of 1890, p. 4)

Orientalists also touched upon the Muslim invasions and their impact on the Hindu society. The violence and temple desecration during the invasions were highlighted to show what the Hindu society had endured but still retained vitality, albeit with some degradation. Unlike the official colonial accounts which looked down upon the Indian society and portrayed Muslim rule in a way so as to justify their own, Orientalists’ treatment of it came with a tone of appreciation for the ancient period of Hindu glory and dismay at the decline during the medieval. However, both laid the intellectual foundation for the widening of the divide that was to come in the future. Max Muller’s sympathies with the Hindu culture came with his portrayal of the Muslim invasions as an appalling episode of Indian history and an expression of wonder at the Hindu resilience that was shown in the face of grave threat.¹⁶ The Hindu intelligentsia of Bengal was vaguely aware of these features of Muslim rule, but Orientalist works had brought them out in the open. It is important to note that all indigenous works of history were based on secondary sources authored by colonial and oriental European scholars. That’s why the nuances and complexity of the situation of the period under study were not looked deep into. The project of the construction of a Hindu identity was subordinated to that of writing objective history. That’s why Muslim rule was blamed for mass slaughter, religious conversions, temple desecrations, rape and selling of Hindu women into slavery, burning texts of intellectual value, persecuting Brahmins etc. In absence of a study of primary sources, the intentions behind these actions were presumed. Like Priyanath Mukhopadhyay’s history textbook for school boys, written in 1891:

It is not certain why our ancient countrymen, who were so learned and had achieved so much, did not write down any descriptions of the country. Some people say that they

probably wrote such descriptions, but just in case reading histories of the glorious past should inspire people to rebel, the Muslims destroyed these books together with other good books when they conquered this country.¹⁷

Writing in 1881, Rajendralala Mitra touched upon Muslim iconoclasm against Hindu architecture:

Moslem fanaticism, which, after repeated incursions reigned supreme in India for six hundred years, devastating everything Hindu, and converting every available temple, or its materials into a masjid or a palace, or a heap of ruins, was alone sufficient to sweep away everything in the way of sacred buildings.¹⁸

It becomes significant to analyse the history-myth nexus that was used to evoke some consciousness in the community regarding the shared past. Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay uses the concept of revelation prevalent in major religions to explain the importance of historical consciousness and the lack of it in Hindu society. In his *Purabritta-sar* he comments upon the shortage of history writing among Indians and exhorts them to do so by using the logic of linearity of events. He says that if one doesn't have recollections about one's birth from his parents he/she is bound to have an identity crisis. He also justifies the use of mythology in writing history by saying that if the creator hadn't given his revelations through religious texts, humanity would have never known about its origins. In applying this logic he takes the religious word as a matter of truth in determining the origin of humanity.¹⁹ Taking the Puranic word as a matter of truth seems to be contradictory to the project of history writing on a scientific and rational basis, but it is inextricably interwoven in the narrative that it built during the assertion of the Hindu community in the modern period. This takes us to the discussion regarding the term 'Itihasa'.

The Sanskrit word 'Itihasa' is loosely translated to 'so indeed it was'. In the etymology of this word the emphasis is on the authenticity of the events involved. In practice, this tradition is a literary one consisting of history, legend, myths, heroic poetry and oral tradition. However, different versions and interpretations exist of a single literary tradition. So, every version claims authenticity of narrative in its own right, staying true to the meaning of the word 'Itihasa'. This literary liberty was also used creatively by nineteenth century historians to weave other literary forms into the discipline of history to suit their needs of constructing an oppositional identity.

Akshyay Kumar Maitreya while underlining the purpose of reading and writing history, in effect reiterates the outlines of the traditional notion of Itihasa:

Ancient narratives which advise us about Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha are called itihasa - such is our ancient tradition. Accordingly, although the Ramavana and the Mahabharata are poems, they are included within the aegis of history.²⁰

Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay quoted Goethe in his Pushpanjali written in 1876: 'Ordinary history is traditional, higher History [sic!] mythical, and highest mystical'.²¹ It is interesting to note that he found the justification for the Pauranic tradition in western literature. Notions of time and space were freely adopted from the Puranas. The limits of vague geographic-cosmological units like Aryavarta, Bharatvarsha and Jambudvipa were compared with the contemporary boundaries of India. Mukhopadhyay traces the geographic spread of the Hindu culture as observed in the interactions between the sages Vyasa and Markandeya in their pilgrimages to different parts of India.

The classic textual Hindu understanding of time in terms of the four yugas was juxtaposed with the modern periodisation of history into ancient, medieval and modern. The degradation of the Hindu society was presented as an inevitable stage in human evolution since this was the Kali-yuga.²² In this we find influence of Hindu universalist ideas in the form of acceptance of all faith systems. The prominence of different religions in India in different ages was explained by Priyanath Mukhopadhyay as a part of divine plan as elaborated in the Gita:

The Aryan religion, the Buddhist religion, Islam and Christianity are all dictates of god. He has sent these decrees for man's protection in each Yuga, and because of that particular branches of Religion have been disseminated. Therefore no religion ought to be ignored.²³

This coincided with the European myth that all societies had to go through the stage of barbarism in its journey of enlightenment. In Hindu society polytheistic practices were the subject of criticism from missionaries and that of reform for the socio-religious leaders. Kedarnath Datta highlights the prevalence of similar practices in ancient European societies to show how the Hindu society must inevitably outgrow these tendencies:

If we follow the ancient period of the Romans, Greeks and the English, we shall see that in the beginning they were unnecessarily religious and worshipped innumerable imaginary gods and goddesses, and even made human sacrifices before these gods.²⁴

The romanticisation of the Hindu past was not reproduced by the Bengali historians as it was in the Orientalist accounts. It was remodeled and refashioned to cater to a wider audience. The Orientalist notion of a fall from the golden age was also adopted. The popularity of Gibbon's *The Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) among the educated circles of Bengal also encouraged the use of similar framework to the history of Hindus. While the Orientalists

labelled the ancient period as a golden age and the medieval as a dark one, the indigenous histories also managed to highlight episodes from the medieval period to glorify not only the universalist spiritual principles but also the Hindu valour, patriotism and honour that had survived the Muslim onslaught. Thus, not only moral but physical strength was also emphasised. But then the elements of debilitation and sapped strength were also recognised. In his Introduction to the fourth edition of *Rajsimha*, Bankim wrote:

The purpose of history can sometimes be fulfilled by the novel... I have tried to explain in my essay entitled 'Bharatkalanka' (India's Disgrace), the reasons behind the downfall of India. The lack of physical strength amongst Hindus is not among the causes. There are no signs of physical strength among Hindus in the present century. The lack of exercise renders the whole human body weak. The same applies to nations. With British imperialism the physical strength of the Hindus has diminished. But it had never dwindled previously. The physical strength of the Hindus is my substance. As an example I have taken *Rajsimha*.²⁵

After comparing the battle between Aurangzeb's forces and Rana Raj Singh I with the legendary exploits of Xerxes, Bankim goes on to criticise the educated Bengalis who chose to read European histories instead of Indian ones:

These two events compare with each other, making a third comparison impossible. We kill ourselves learning Greek history by rote, but know nothing of the history of *Rajsimha*. Such are the benefits of modern education!²⁶

This historical fiction by Bankim in 1882 set the trend in which literary Bengalis began to look towards Rajputana and Maharashtra to invoke the valour of the Aryan blood. In this search for stories of valour and heroism, Marathas and Rajputs made perfect candidates. It was these groups who had a history of resistance against the Turks, Afghans and Mughals. The colonial designation of Bengalis as a non-martial race on the basis of their anthropometric evaluations had produced the need of rebuttal to such perception of Bengalis as a physically and militarily weak race. In contrast to the Afghans, Punjabis and Gorkhas who were considered to naturally possess military attributes, Risley had stated that 'its [Bengali community] members may be recognised at a glance throughout the wide area where their remarkable aptitude for clerical pursuits has procured them employment'.²⁷ The exploits of military greats of the ancient period like Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka and Samudragupta were discussed, but a need was felt to showcase examples from recent history who fought against Muslim imperialism. Marathas and Rajputs were depicted as the warrior descendants of the Aryan race, from whom Bengalis had also emanated. So these identities were co-opted and the borders of Bengal transcended to forge

a common Hindu identity with shared efforts of resistance to the imperialist tendencies which sought to compromise the dignity of the indigenous.

The access to the history of Rajputana was made easier through James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* published in 1832. The works by R.C. Dutt and Rajanikanta Gupta are important in this aspect. Both these authors drew on Tod's *Annals* to showcase Rajput tales of bravery. Hindu benignity in military affairs was shown as a matter of principle and honour, rather than in the tone of sarcasm which is used by Tod.²⁸ We see this in Rajanikant's admiration of Rana Kumbha of Mewar:

In battle he had followed the dharma and technique of a gallant man; he had fought with the hope of winning, and finally even while victorious he did not abuse the dharma of a brave man. Like a genuine hero, he preserved the honour of the defeated and surrendering enemy. Not only did he set the King of Malwa free, he also gave him gifts before sending him to his own kingdom.²⁹

Rajanikanta sets the Hindus apart from the Mughals and British who were portrayed as displaying unscrupulous ways in order to establish their political supremacy:

Had Shahabuddin Ghori not been cunning ... the Fortune of India might not have been drowned ... had Akbar not killed Jaimal through cunning, Chitor would not have belonged to the Mughals ... and had Lord Clive not cunningly won Mir Jafar and Jagat Seth over to his side, the British may not have gained suzerainty over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa; and without the conspiracy of Captain Lawrence and Captain Nicholson, the British flag would not have flown triumphantly over Maharaja Ranajit Singh's kingdom. In India, many brave men have misused their bravery, but no such stain darkens the courageous deeds of the Rajputs.³⁰

The historical novel *Rajput Jiban Sandhya* written by R.C. Dutt in 1879 also drew heavily on Tod. Chhatrapati Shivaji was popularised in Bengal as a national hero who stood up against the 'Mlechchha' rulers. This popularity is attested by the poem *Shivaji Utsav* by Rabindranath Tagore. In an imaginary conversation that is built up by R.C. Dutt in his novel *Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat* (1878), the Rajput ruler of Amber Jai Singh addresses Shivarai and exhorts the Maharashtrians to occupy the throne of Delhi:

Shivaji! I can see the blaze of war lighting up on account of this treachery - it flares up in Rajasthan, in Maharashtra and in the East! Aurangzeb is unable to put out that fire despite twenty years of effort... The fire is becoming more intense, it is crackling forth from all sides and consuming the Mughal empire! And then? then [I see] the fortune of

the Maharashtrian race ascending - Maharashtrians! proceed and occupy the empty throne of Delhi!³¹

Dutt tries to create a pan-Hindu identity by hailing the Rajput-Maratha alliance against the Mughal as a testimony to the greatness of the Aryan race. The political undertones in such works are clear as they try to cater to the need of presenting a larger Hindu identity blurring the regional distinctions.

Conclusion

The socio-political conditions of nineteenth-century Bengal had long-lasting consequences for the intellectual and cultural heritage that was built up in the project of nation-building. Different forces like colonialism, cultural revivalism and social reform were in the air. The onslaught of official and missionary accounts on Hindu culture was vociferously responded to. Orientalists had built up research works and established India as a land of ancient civilisation and described the contemporary state of the Hindu society as one that had degraded from its original character. Now was the turn of indigenous intellectuals to use this research to fuel further scholarly interest in this glorious past. History became a natural battlefield where Hindu superiority was claimed. Original research works based on primary sources began to be undertaken. All this was done with the objective of presenting an intellectual challenge from Indians themselves to the Histories of India written by colonists and Christian missionaries who presented India with a contemptuous and patronising attitude. Bengali intellectuals appropriating Rajput and Maratha legends of valour became the torchbearers for the nationalist thinkers that were to come in the following decades.

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