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The Presence of the Past: History and Imagination in Uday Prakāś's *Vāren hesṭiṅgs kā sā̃ḍ*[1]

ABSTRACT: The paper aims at discussing the role and meaning of history in a Hindi short story by Uday Prakāś, *Vāren hesṭiṅgs kā sā̃ḍ* (*Warren Hastings' bull*, 1996). Based on the historical figure of Warren Hastings, this work of fiction intermingles fantasy and facts, imagination and history. Significantly, Uday Prakāś warns his readers about this matter right at the beginning of the narrative: if readers look for *history* in his short story, they will be left "with a heap of sand in their hands". This and similar statements immediately give rise to other crucial questions, i.e. what exactly is the *history* that the readers expect to find in the story? What are the strategies adopted by the author while addressing the subject of *history*? What is the role and meaning of the past in a postcolonial and progressively postmodern reality like that of India at the dawn of the new millennium? By focusing on some 'dark areas' of Warren Hastings' private life, Uday Prakāś not only offers an unusual perspective from which to view the figure of the British Governor but also engages his readers in an explicit reflection on the meaning and the presence of the past in our own reality. A short story (*kahanī*), based on a two hundred-and-fifty-years old tale (*kathā*), becomes a powerful instrument for criticizing the anomalies of the contemporary world.

[1] This is the spelling of the word 'bull' in the short story as originally published in 1996. Usually dictionaries give *sā̃ṛ* and this second, standard spelling appears in the later book editions of the story.

KEYWORDS: Hindi fiction; historiographic metafiction; presentness of the past; Uday Prakash; Uday Prakāś; Warren Hastings

Vāren hesṭiṅgs kā sā̃ḍ (*Warren Hastings' bull*, 1996), a short-story written by the Hindi writer Uday Prakāś,[2] is based on the historical figure of Warren Hastings (1732–1818). The story, adapted in 2001 for the theatre by Arvind Gaur, seems to narrate, when viewed on the most superficial level, the life of the high British officer named in the title, right from his first encounter with India to the time of his assuming, on the behalf of the East India Company, the office of Governor-General of Bengal, and his later, old age period marked by the allegations of corruption, all the while focusing on the most intimate and unknown aspects of the protagonist's life. The short story, not by chance, depicts a multifaceted historical figure, "a noted Indophile who during his youth fought hard against the looting of Bengal by his colleagues" (Dalrymple 2019: xix), but was later himself impeached for imputations of high crimes and misdemeanors committed while in office (see, for instance, Carnall and Nicholson 1989; Dalrymple 2019: 307–314). However viewed, Warren Hastings was undoubtedly a complex individual whose well-attested interest in Indian culture and languages, combined with the charges levelled at him in his old age and his final acquittal, invited many speculations about the trajectory of his life. But Prakāś's well-crafted short story (*kahanī*) actually offers to a careful reader much more than an unusual account of the experiences and vicissitudes of a man who played considerable role in the history of colonial India. The author, on the one hand, encourages his readers to reflect on the nature of this particular tale (*kathā*), and hence, indirectly, on the nature of the historical accounts in

[2] Uday Prakāś was born in 1952 in Sitapur, a remote village in Shahdol district, Madhya Pradesh, in a middle-class family. His parents handed him down their interest in literature at an early age. Despite their premature death, Prakāś managed to enroll at the Dr. Harisingh Gaur University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, and support himself by giving tuition. During the Emergency (1975–1977), he left his native region for Delhi (Sahitya Akademi 2007). He undertook several jobs: he worked as a teacher at the Manipur Center of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, he wrote for the Dūrdarśan (the state-owned broadcasting services), made documentaries and worked for a newspaper, *Times of India*. He translated into Hindi works of international poets and writers, including Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, and Jorge Luis Borges. He has also authored numerous poems and prose, but initially this activity was not sufficient to live on. A turning point was the publication of *Pīlī chatrīvālī laṛkī* (Prakāś 2011) which provided him with an income (Patel 2013: 61–63). His literary works include collections of poems such as *Abūtar-kabūtar* (2017a), *Ek bhāṣā huā kartī hai* (2009a), *Rāt mẽ hārmoniyam* (2009b), *Suno kārīgar* (2001a) and collections of short stories, like *Aur ant mẽ prārthnā* (2017b), *Dattātreya ke duhkh* (2006a), *Maingosil* (2017c), *Păl gomrā kā skuṭar* (2006c), and *Tirich* (2001b). In 2010 Prakāś received the Sahitya Akademi award for his long short-story *Mohan dās* (2006b; on this short story see also Consolaro 2011b), an award that he returned in 2015 in protest against the Akademi's indifference over the murder of the Kannada writer, Kalburgi. On his fiction, with a specific focus on the short story *Hindustānī ivān denīsovich kī zindagī kā ek din*, see also Dubyanskaya 2015.

general; on the other, he makes his fictional take of a two-hundred-and-fifty years old event an extremely actual and powerful device to denounce the evils of widespread corruption, a malpractice that afflicted India during the eighteenth century and does so also today.

In Prakāś's words, when Warren Hastings joined the East India Company and reached Calcutta in 1750, only traces remained of the once glorious Mughal empire the present sovereigns of which were craven and dissolute (Prakāś 1996: 76). Young Warren Hastings was both frightened and fascinated by the newly encountered land, a land of dark, mysterious people and coal-black, marionette-like women with pearl white teeth (*ibid.*: 76). But he soon cast aside his fears and immersed himself in this new world, becoming friends with a native[3] boy, Buntū, listening to Buntū's Baul melodies, learning Bengali language and discovering devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa. Some years later, more specifically in 1772 (the year of his elevation to the post of Governor-General), Warren Hastings met a young maidservant, Cokhī (*ibid.*: 84–85). The native girl soon became his lover and their amorous encounters seemed to replicate the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's *līlā.* A considerable part of Prakāś's story is devoted to these fictional aspects of the private life of the British Governor, aspects that are, however, linked in a systematic manner to events and personages conventionally introduced by the regular history books. This strategy makes it often hard to discern where exactly does fantasy make way for historical facts and vice versa, with Prakāś embracing and emphasizing such ambiguity by including in his re-telling of the tale numerous explicit meta-reflections on the subject. At the very beginning of the story, for example, he warns his readers about the impossibility of individuating clear-cut borders between the fantasy and the facts. If the readers look for mere history, writes the author, they will probably be left empty-handed (*ibid.*: 75). In the short story, dream and history, imagination and reality all blend together: in this way the divine *līlā* is set in motion, the illusion is born, and it is impossible to discern any longer what is true and what imaginary.[4] Prakāś not only points

[3] I am resorting to the word 'native' as it is used by Prakāś in the original Hindi text (*neṭiv*).

[4] The words above paraphrase and reference this passage: "is kahānī mẽ itihās utnā hī hai jitnā dāl mẽ namak hotā hai. agar āp ismẽ itihās khojte kī kośiś kareṅge to āpke hāth mẽ ret kī ḍhūh yā kaner kī ṭahnī bhar āegī. asal mẽ jab itihās mẽ svapn, yathārth mẽ kalpanā, tathya mẽ phaiṇṭesī aur atīt mẽ bhaviṣya ko milāyā jātā hai to ākhyān mẽ līlā śurū hotī hai aur ek aisī māyā kā janm hotā hai jiskā sākṣātkār satya kī khoj kī or ek yātrā hī hai. Isīlie har līlā aur pratyek māyā utnī hī sac hotī hai, jitnā svayã itihās" (Prakāś 1996: 75)—"In this story there is only as much history as salt in the *dāl*. If you try to look in it for history, you will be left with a heap of sand or a small branch of oleander in your hands. In fact, when history and dream, reality and imagination, facts and fantasy, past and future are all blended together, the divine *līlā* starts in the story, and the encounter with such an illusion is a real journey in the search for truth. That is why every *līlā* and every *māyā* is as true as history itself." All English translations from this text are mine. There is also a published English translation of the story, by Robert A. Hueckstedt and Amit Tripuraneni, see Prakash 2003: 17–87, under the title *Warren Hastings and His Bull*.

out openly to this aspect of his story, but inserts his seminal reflection, set out in italics as a sort of incipit, at the very beginning of the narrative according it thus a privileged position. Reading such an incipit is indeed similar to reading the rules of the game the readers are invited to join in. An incipit, as a rule, provides a sort of anticipation, conveying to the audience what they may expect from the text and giving it an inkling of the kind of operations they probably need to undertake in order to participate in the proceedings. In other words, by reading the very first lines of a text the reader activates frames and scripts necessary to its comprehension (Nemesio 1999: 7). It is evident that with his preamble Prakāś starts off creating his fiction and, at same time, makes a clearly voiced statement about this very act of creation.[5] He is aware that his readers might expect to find in his story a different kind of *history*, a *history* closer to the one most conventionally imparted about the colonial India. For this very reason, through these initial words, he sets out to clarify the nature of his narrative and guide the reading experience accordingly.

Undoubtedly, the simultaneous presence of the factual history and the imaginary accounts does not represent a novelty in the Indian literary context. Starting with the Sanskrit *itihāsa*, the description of facts has frequently implied a mixture of the real episodes and fiction, while rethinking the past has often meant a rediscovery or an unearthing of history in a more conventional sense and, at the same time, engendering a re-reading of popular narratives where fantastic and amazing ingredients were deemed essential (Consolaro 2011a: 111). In the Indian subcontinent the boundaries between the genres or the factual and the fictional writing were never as clear-cut out as in the Western tradition. As highlighted in Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam 2001, history writing itself does not necessarily have to be synonymous with the idea of dry prose, based on a specific method of collection, sifting and organization widespread in Western Europe since before the positivist turn. History writing needs not be reduced to a single genre with fixed features, quite the opposite; it might even transform over time, embracing in turn a number of the ever changing, temporarily dominant literary genres. Hence, history in India came to be written as *purāṇa*, *kāvya* or prose chronicles depending on the particular genre's literary preeminence, and in most examples of the given genre it had been possible to find both factuality and fictionality. Nonetheless, this did not imply that all texts speaking about the past were of historiographical nature nor that these texts had a mere literary relevance. In other words, genres have been conventionally more fluid in South Asia and the reader (or

[5] Here I am recalling almost literally Patricia Waugh's words on metafiction (Waugh 1984: 6).

listener), sharing with the texts the same cultural background, had the in-built sensitivity and the required instruments to interpret them.

By mingling history and fantasy, Prakāś thus follows centuries old tradition, but at the same time embraces a contemporary, worldwide tendency towards self-reflexivity (see, for instance, Ommundsen 1993, Waugh 1984). In Warren Hastings' story the latter does not merely imply a reflection on the nature of fiction and the writing process, but a similar reflection on other types (including the mainstream) of historiographic accounts as well. The tale suggests that fiction is not the sole and only subjective product of a *human* author (and I wish to stress *human* to differentiate this kind of contemporary author from the omniscient author-demiurge of the much of the previous realist tradition) thus subject to partial and sometimes prejudiced knowledge; the mainstream historiography is also a human construct, being "human illusions-necessary, but none the less illusory for all that" (Hutcheon 1989: 4). As proposed by the postcolonial (e.g., Said 2013 [1978]; Spivak 1988, 1999) and postmodern (e.g., Foucault 1993 [1975], 2009 [1969]; Vattimo 2007) critique, history and the various kinds of 'truths' recounted about different societies and epochs are, at best, partial and non-objective representations. History, as conventionally conceived, conceals an intrinsic bias, since the choices on which it is built (i.e., which elements are to be recounted and which left untold) are mainly determined by the dominant groups and reflect the prevalent structures of power. What actually took place is largely unavailable to us, since retrospective viewing and historical thinking imply a process of selection, generalization, and ranked reconstruction. History is thus only one among many possible accounts of the past and is not tantamount to the totality and the objective truth about the past (Jenkins 1991: 20). Not by chance a considerable part of recent literature shows a renewed historical consciousness and an urgency to recall history from novel, so far marginalized or unexpected perspectives. This new literary dimension, labelled by Linda Hutcheon 'historiographic metafiction' (Hutcheon 1989, 2004), implies an awareness that the past cannot be disregarded, as this would determine the exhaustion of all expressive possibilities, but neither can the past be recalled as in the traditional historical fiction. On this matter Bryan McHale writes that the postmodern, historical novel, firstly, "revises the *content* of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself" (McHale 2004: 90). The result of such a postmodern process can be an "apocryphal or alternative history" that might displace the mainstream history

altogether or supplement it with a series of elements that have conventionally been lost or suppressed.[6]

The latter is exactly the operation conducted by Prakāś, who plays with some 'dark areas' of Warren Hastings' private life and connects them to the more or less well-known facts available in conventional historical narratives. This is the case, for example, of his relationship with the Bengali maidservant, Cokhī. The author promptly contextualizes their first encounter in 1772, when Warren Hastings was appointed the Governor-General, and seems to provide factual evidence for the present account by including in his deliberations an authentic painting, by Johann Zoffany, "Mr. and Mrs. Warren Hastings in their Garden in Alipore", dated 1783, and housed at the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta.[7] Moreover, Prakāś resorts to ekphrasis by providing a detailed description of this piece of visual art and discloses a series of aspects and details that, for a generic audience, might remain unavailable or else, go unnoticed. In this canvas Warren Hastings is depicted, together with his English wife, under a banyan tree, holding in his left hand a cane and a hat, while the fingers of his right touch those of his wife's. Behind the couple, or rather right behind the wife, there is one more character, a dark, native girl. According to Prakāś, this native girl is Cokhī, and a careful observer might notice the secret thread linking the two lovers, since their eyes (supposedly) are unable to conceal their passionate feelings. Not by chance both Warren Hastings and the Bengali girl have a hat each in their hands, while Warren Hastings' wife holds nothing (Prakāś 1996: 84). However, this description of the painting differs considerably from other, more conventional ones. According to the catalogue of the Victoria Memorial Hall collection, for instance, Zoffany has produced this intimate piece and imbued it with such sadness largely due to the patron's wife, Marian Hastings' impending departure for Europe (Nabi 2018). There is no mention of the native girl and the interpretation of the dominant feeling is completely different. Another viewing of the painting confirms the circumstances of its commission but makes out the girl to be Marian Hastings' "favorite Indian attendant" (de Almeida, Gilpin 2005: 135).

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[6] For more on the postmodern in the context of Hindi literature and literary criticism, see Ghirardi 2018, 2021.

[7] The short story under discussion, when published in *India Today*, was accompanied by visual paratexts including two eighteenth century paintings—"Mr. and Mrs. Warren Hastings in their Garden in Alipore" by Johann Zoffany and "A view of Purley Hall, Berkshire with Warren Hastings and his menagerie of exotic animals" by an unknown artist (Prakāś 1996: 75, 85)—which set the story in a distinct meaning-making frame. Nevertheless, as these paintings are bereft of any sub-titles, the reader does not actually know that they are period pieces made during Hastings' lifetime. Book editions of the story included the English translation by Robert Hueckstedt (Prakash 2003) also enclose such visual paratexts.

Similar example of backing the story with scraps of factual evidence may be found again a few pages later, where Prakāś refers by name to two other eighteenth century British painters, Ozias Humphry (1742–1810) and John Thomas Seton (1738–1806), both known to have worked in India. The narrator asserts that the Governor had commissioned them to produce some miniatures and paintings eternalizing his love affair with Cokhī. Obviously, nobody knows where and how those works that could have revealed the amorous games of the new Gopal and his beloved *gopikā* (Prakāś 1996: 87), had disappeared. Even the well-known interest of the British Governor in the Hindu culture, and particularly in the *Bhagavadgītā,* is explained by Prakāś as the effect of his infatuation with the girl. In this version of the story, Warren Hastings apparently started to read *Gītā* (and even to apply, for some months, a *tilak* to his forehead) out of feeling of wonder and exhilaration experienced with Cokhī. The fact of Hastings' interest in *Gītā*, widely testified by the mainstream history—the Governor made considerable efforts to facilitate the first translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* and gathered many illustrious scholars like Sir William Jones, Sir Charles Wilkins, and Henry Thomas Colebrooke to acquaint the world with priceless treasures of Indian philosophy and learning (*ibid.*: 87)—is thus intimately intertwined with fantasy. This systematic juxtaposition of historical figures and facts with fictional elements makes the reader wonder not only about the nature of the tale in front of him but the related historical narratives as well. Is the version recorded by the mainstream historians the most accurate or only one of many plausible? Are there other realistic options? Is it possible that some essential brick is missing?

To acknowledge the partial and artificial nature of any account (in literature, general history or history of art), however, does not imply any kind of skepticism towards the act of narration itself. Quite the opposite; on many occasions Prakāś explicitly celebrates importance of the same, particularly through the figure of Buntū, the first local friend of the future Governor. It was Buntū that the young Warren Hastings had visited many devotional places with, especially places connected to Kr̥ṣṇa worship where he had the first chance to admire sculptures and low relief panels enriching the temples. Buntū had once explained to Hastings that all those figures, namely deities and women the likeness of which Warren Hastings had never seen before, not even in Rome or Greece, appeared in thousands of myths, and for this very reason they were all still very much alive. Warren Hastings came thus to realize that with so many legends and myths narrated in India since times immemorial, had those myths had a tangible, flat surface, they would have covered not only Europe, Asia, and Africa but the entire expanse of the oceans as well (*ibid.*: 78). At that moment Warren Hastings is reminded of the words of Caesar, filtered by William Shakespeare's genius: "If you have to defeat them you have to kill their memories. You have

to destroy their past. You have to shoot their stories".[8] Here, for the first time in the story, Prakāś stresses the power of narration and memory as prerequisites to keeping someone (or something) alive, regardless of the passing time. A few pages later (*ibid.*: 80), Buntū explains to the future Governor that Kr̥ṣṇa, though killed by a hunter[9] during the *dvāpar yuga*, had not really died. Only people who do not have a tale (*kathā*) immortalizing their deeds truly perish, and since Lord Kr̥ṣṇa has his own tale which is being told and retold, he lives on (*ibid.*: 80). These reflections are particularly relevant to the current topic and allow one to understand the title of the short story, *Warren Hastings kā sā̃ḍ* ("Warren Hastings' bull"), a title that otherwise might appear a little odd. Indeed, why does the title refer to a bull?[10] To answer this question, it is necessary to understand how and why does the author bring into the story this animal, which makes its appearance sometime towards the end of the text. Like the figure of Cokhī, the bull is introduced through the rhetoric device of ekphrasis, referring this time to a painting made by an unknown artist and a part of a private collection (*ibid.*: 92).[11] The canvas, titled "A view of Purley Hall, Berkshire with Warren Hastings and his menagerie of exotic animals",[12] depicts an estate rented by Warren Hastings during his impeachment. In front of an elegant mansion, a stable boy is leading a magnificent black horse. Foregrounded in the right-hand corner are a cow and a calf; the left corner is taken by a chained black bull. According to Prakāś, an engaged observer would be unable to take his eyes off the mysterious and fierce-looking animal in the left-hand corner; but why? As it turns out, the existence of this mysterious bull is attested to in numerous historical records and widely discussed (e.g., Grigson 2016: 148–150). The bull was gifted to Warren Hastings by his cousin, Samuel Turner, who had in turn received it from an old lama during a stay in Tibet. The Governor, going back to England, decided to take with him his bull and five brahma cows. Unfortunately, in Europe, the cows were considered mere goods, a source of milk, meat, and leather, and not maternal creatures with their own personalities as in India. The cows stopped eating and one by one fell ill and

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[8] In the Hindi original, Prakāś renders the English text in the Devanagari script (Prakāś 1996: 78).

[9] This is a reference to the episode narrated, among other, in the *Mausalaparva* of *Mahābhārata*, where Kr̥ṣṇa is killed by hunter Jarā who mistakes him for a deer. It is said that in his previous birth Jarā was Bālī, Sugrīva's brother, and was shot from behind by Rām. Because of this Bālī was to shoot Rām from behind in his future birth. Both Kr̥ṣṇa and Rām are incarnations of Viṣṇu.

[10] For a detailed discussion of the bull see also Śītāṃśu 2000 and Ghirardi 2018.

[11] Interestingly, the internet search reveals that the painting in question has changed hands a number of times remaining however in private hands.

[12] This painting is reproduced, without any references, right after the title of the story in the magazine publication (Prakāś 1996: 75). In fact, the name of the illustrator, Śyām Śarmā, responsible for graphic framing of the story is given right next to the name of the author, Uday Prakāś, adding ambiguity as to the authorship of the two historical paintings featuring Hasting and his house, and amplifying the story.

died. The last cow was mated with the bull and for some time they created a sort of family. However, when their calf died, the cow became inconsolable and starved itself to death. The bull went crazy with anger and sorrow and started to attack British men on the estate. One evening Warren Hastings and his wife were returning home in their carriage, glad of the recent acquittal from all charges, when the bull charged at them like a typhoon. The crazed animal destroyed the carriage and ripped the stomach of the black steed, both items, the carriage and the horse, standing here for tangible symbols of the British empire. Due to his behavior, says Prakāś, the animal was thought a risk to England and was shot dead by a platoon of the British army. The story of the incident does not however end there. Prakāś adds that so much fat was obtained from the bull that a servant stole some of it and sold it to a leather factory. The fat then reached the armory at Woolwich and when, in 1857, Mangal Pandey shot a British man, he did it with a bullet greased with the very same fat (*ibid.*: 95).[13] In other words, something of the crazy bull was still present and in circulation more than sixty years after its death and surreptitiously animated the beginning of the National War (*rāṣṭrīy mahāsaṅgrām*) which the British called mutiny (*gadar*) (*ibid*.: 95), the very use of two terms to describe the same event exemplifying superbly the existence of two contrary historical accounts reflecting power relations and impacting vantage point from which particular version is compiled. Prakāś however does not dwell on the subject but remains focused on the bull; he stresses the importance of the wild animal by wondering explicitly on the possible meaning of his action: did he go crazy because of the death of the cow and the calf? Or did he sacrifice his life in the struggle against the inhuman Western society? Did he fight and die like some fanatics do to preserve the traditions and myths of his country? Or did he die as a devoted servant of his homeland (*deśbhakt*), engaged in a righteous fight against the British (*ibid.*: 95)? All these images may be subsumed under the bull image but, as suggested by the concluding sentence of the story, there is yet something more to it as today, too, the bull is not dead. The bull thus becomes a symbol of the Indian-ness executed by the 'world of reason' and industrialization,[14] and this allegory seems to be as true today

[13] This detail obliquely references the rumor that the bullets were greased with beef and pig fat (offensive respectively to the Hindu and the Muslim of the Indian British army) which apparently jump started the 1857 mutiny.

[14] In a thought-provoking article, *Uttar ādhunik sāhitya-sṛṣṭi aur samīkṣā-dṛṣṭi ke bīc "vāren hesṭings kā sẽḍ"* ("*'Warren Hastings' Bull'* between the postmodern literary creation and critical perspective"), Pāṇḍey Śaśibhūṣaṇ Śītāṃśu (2000) focuses on the image of the bull, suggesting that the short story not only includes the physical, historical bull, with all its interconnected allusions, but a second and more dangerous one. This is the bull of Western industrial society and culture, devoid of any compassion and inhuman. The madness of this inner bull led Warren Hastings towards immoral and corrupt behavior, and its cruelty reached its peak during the famine of 1769–1770, when the Governor, despite the death of millions of people and the desperate conditions of the survivors, continued to collect land taxes and various duties. The short story thus may be read as a

as it was in the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the old lama's statement, reported by Prakāś, suggests that, despite the spread of Western culture, the Indian-ness is not dead. For this very reason it is so crucial to devote a whole story to a seemingly unimportant and peripheral creature such as Warren Hastings' bull, because only in this way it, the bull, will never die, just like Kṛṣṇa and all the figures that live on and populate Indian mythical tradition never do.

The presentness of the past, however, is linked not only to the power of narration but also to the presence of a series of social issues that have remained unchanged over centuries. On this matter as well Prakāś provides his readers with some engaging insights:

> This is a two-hundred and fifty-years old tale (*kathā*). You might wonder what the logic is in recalling today such an old yarn as in the last two-hundred and fifty years the world has completely changed. Moreover, these changes are so astonishing and unimaginable that two and half centuries years ago nobody–no astrologer, scientist, sociologist, philosopher, opium addict, insane person or prophet–could have foretold [any of] them. (…) But it is also true that that there is something that has not changed at all in the last two-hundred and fifty years. Something that is exactly the same. You can say that despite all scholars announcing *the end of history*,[15] history is perpetually present. Changeless.[16]

With these words, which significantly mention the widely-debated issue of 'the end of history',[17] the narrator introduces the stark picture of the degeneration of the British *rāj* that

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confrontation of two wild animals, the bull of the Western, industrial mentality, and the bull of Indian-ness (see also Ghirardi 2018, 2021: 60–63).

[15] Italics here is mine and foregrounds an expression that is particularly relevant in the contemporary scenario. See also fn. 17.

[16] "yah kissā āj se lagbhag ḍhāī sau sāl pahle kā hai. āp kah sakte haĩ, itnī purānī bāt ko āj uṭhāne kī kyā tuk hai kyõki in ḍhāī sau sālõ mẽ yah duniyā pūrī tarah badal cukī hai. ye parivartan itne āścaryajanak aur kalpanātīt haĩ jinkā anumān ḍhāī sau sāl pahle koī jyotiṣī, vaijñānik, samāj cintak, dārśanik yā aphīmcī, pāgal aur paigambar tak nahĩ̃ lagā saktā thā. (…) lekin sac yah bhī hai ki ḍhāī sau sāl pahle aur āj ke bīc kuch aisā bhī hai, jo jarā bhī nahĩ̃ badlā hai. vah jyõ kā tyõ hai. āp kah sakte haĩ ki itihās ke ant kī ghoṣṇā karne vāle tamām paṇḍitõ ke bāvjūd itihās satat nivartmān hai. vah nirantar hai" (Prakāś1996: 75).

[17] The idea of 'the end of history' might recall, on one hand, Francis Fukuyama's publication *The End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama 2012 [1992]), where the American political scientist argues that, after the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, humanity has reached 'the end of history', that is to say, the end-point of its ideological evolution, thanks to the universalization of the Western liberal democracy. Such a reading of history, which actually implies a rather biased vision of the evolution of mankind, embraces a positivist belief in the power of reason and progress. On the other hand, the idea of 'the end of history', as developed by many postmodern intellectuals, is based on the pervasive sense of disillusion towards all master narratives proposing themselves as universal and indisputable truths. In this sense, 'the end of history' implies the impossibility of believing in

Lord Clive, a figure crucial to the foundation of the British Empire in India and the person responsible for the defeat of the *nawab* of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah, in the battle of Plassey (1757) and opening up of India to the British, has provided. Clive wrote that dishonesty, corruption and avarice have become endemic, affecting all kinds of people: urban officers, soldiers, merchants, and writers. Everyone appears eager to accumulate wealth, no matter the consequences. And this criticism includes both the British colonizers and the local notables. On one hand, the majority of Warren Hastings' compatriots in India are depicted as arrogant and dissolute young men who came to the subcontinent just to plunder it. They neither properly know their own culture and traditions nor are interested in understanding the Indian. It seemed as if England—which has already experienced the Renaissance and where resounded the words of great men like Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, Voltaire, Diderot, and Machiavelli—was exporting only mean people and dissolute behaviors (*ibid.*: 78–79). Moreover, the local notables, both Hindu and Muslim, appeared eager to strengthen their relations with the colonizers and were ready to abandon their own traditions and beliefs. They began to eat beef, speak English, wear Western clothes and use their women to procure social and economic benefits. This was the case, for instance, of a Thakur family exploiting their young daughter, Mohinī, to get a trade contract from the East India Company (*ibid.*: 83). John Zephaniah Holwell, an employee of the Company and the Governor of Bengal in 1760, (supposedly) wrote in a letter that the Indian upper-caste people were more slavish than the slaves of ancient Rome (Prakāś 1996: 86).[18] Apart from the color of their skin, they were completely British, mere subjugated shadows that would rule India for the colonizers once those returned to Europe. According to Prakāś, it is here that a centuries-old story becomes a contemporary story, for the deceitfulness and greediness that affected India during the eighteenth century remain current issues today. This is thus a harsh criticism of both the colonial experience and the contemporaneity with the present-day India seemingly having betrayed much of the ideological thrust characterizing its struggle for Independence. In author's words, "across the whole world, from its origins to the present day, only one single story (*kahanī*) has been composed and it is [this story that is] repeated over and over again. Its shape, its casing might change, but the basic storyline (*kathā*) remains the same".[19] This statement simultaneously mirrors the general idea of time that is

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history as a linear and univocal path where humanity seems to walk, in a teleological process, towards better conditions.

[18] Here as well Prakāś links his statement to evidence or a collection of letters by Holwell, *India Tracts*, dated 1764, and currently easily accessible online.

[19] "sāre saṃsār mẽ anādikāl se āj tak bas ek hī kahānī racī gaī hai aur vahī bār-bār dohrāī jātī hai. uskā rūp, uskā kalevar badal saktā hai, par mūl kathā vahī hai" (Prakāś 1996: 76).

well-rooted in the Indian subcontinent and according to which the general thrust of events repeats itself in the *yuga* cycles (on the *caturyuga,* the idea of cyclical time in Hinduism and more precisely in the *Mahābhārata* see, for instance, Gonzáles-Reimann 2002), and more specifically, refers to the particular trajectory followed by India during the last centuries. Despite the Independence, the influence of the Western world is still pervasive in the country, and the interaction between the Western and the local realities does not determine a mutual enrichment, rather an impoverishment of the Indian society. It seems that the rationalist and consumerist Western world is exporting its worst features, while at the same time many irresponsible, self-serving Indians are ready to leave behind their own culture and traditions to embrace an alien life style.[20] An aspect of the Western world that is particularly under attack in Prakāś's short story is its unshakable rationalism. According to the author, human experience should not be reduced to the mere logic and rational laws, hence his story does not only narrate historical facts but is imbued with fantasy and imagination. For instance, Prakāś explicitly questions modern Western rationalism on the pretext of describing the inebriating effects of the Indian spring. The narrator provocatively states that scientists like Priestley and Scheele[21] might refer to that vital essence of the air through the use of the word oxygen, but is it really possible that the essence that instills life and enthusiasm into all living organisms is a mere chemical phenomenon (*ibid.*: 80)? It is evident that, for Prakāś, to approach the world through the sole lens of reason and logic would imply the dismissal of all its subtler and deeper meanings. He stresses that when a human being loses all his dreams and his world of fantasy vanishes, he remains just a pragmatic and calculating man. This is exactly what happened, at least in Prakāś's version of the story, to Warren Hastings after Cokhī's death and the arrival of his British wife, whereby the Governor turned from an inquisitive, passionate individual into a self-absorbed

[20] This very issue is, in actual fact, often present in Prakāś's fiction. The novella *Pīlī chatrī vālī laṛkī* (2011 [2001]), translated into English by Jason Grunebaum as *The Girl with the Golden Parasol*, for instance, depicts a corrupt and degenerate university campus, where tradition, modernity, and post-modernity both interlace and collide. Due to the effects of liberalization and globalization, many changes have occurred in the campus mirroring a situation that has rapidly transformed Indian society. It seems that the new system has generated a new kind of humanity which wants to throw the past away and disregard all principles and restrictions of religious, sociological and political knowledge. Moreover, even though as the result of the positive effect of the global village phenomenon the world should have become a smaller place, and each country easily accessible, this is not true for millions of deprived and rural Indians. When one of the protagonist's schoolmates commits suicide, his father has to brave a three-day trip by train to reach the mortuary and there is no money for a flight or to send the corpse back home (Prakāś 2011: 59–60).

[21] Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) and Carl Wilhelm Scheele (1743–1786) are both connected to the discovery of oxygen. The latter, a German and Swedish chemist, discovered oxygen in Uppsala 1773 (or earlier); the former, a British chemist, philosopher and theologian, published his findings on oxygen first (in 1775) and has thus historically been credited with its discovery.

person, deprived of his earlier spirituality and past memories. Author suggests that a similar impoverishment might affect not only individuals but entire communities and societies as well (*ibid.*: 90). This would also be the basic reason why Prakāś, narrating a two-hundred-and-fifty-years old but a still relevant tale, surrounds historical figures and episodes with fantastic and dreamlike atmosphere, resorting to a constant fusion of factuality and imagination.

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