History is an inexhaustible reservoir which can be drawn upon for legitimating action and a cement of group action. History is not only a string of events but is built upon memories, myths, traditions, rituals, and symbols, on the hopes, needs, longing and interests of people. These elements become embedded in the shared subconscious of people. However, each generation rewrites history to meet its needs, and the national histories of South Asian countries have recorded and retold for contemporary political purposes.

There was a British colonial writing of Indian history whose aim was to justify British rule. This was followed by an independence-oriented writing of Indian history. Since Independence, the writing of history in India has become more diversified with more historical accounts taking the view point of women, of the lower castes, of the rural and the marginalized. Yet as Michael Shapiro in the chapter "History, Politics, Space" and Sankaran Krishna in "Narrating India Through Foreign Policy" indicate, there is a growing Hindu-related ideology, usually called Hindutva which, in writing history, combines the idea of nation, history and communal narrativity.

Ironically, the Hindutva writings build upon the structure of British colonial writings but tell a different tale, for the writing of history needs to form events into a story - the narrative component produces intelligibility. The Hindutva tale is a three act play with a first act of a Hindu “Golden Age” in the Gupta empire (320-540 CE), followed by a depressing second act beginning with the conquest of Sind by Muhammad bin Qasin (712 CE) followed by other Muslim invaders and temple destroyers. The third act is yet to get really under way. The plot outline calls for the rise of communalism - a consciousness which draws on a supposed religious identity and uses this as the basis for an ideology and for political action.

From across the frontier in Pakistan, there is a parallel growth of political Islam, continuing the "two nation" approach to history championed by Mohammed Ali Jinnah from the 1920s on. The future-oriented writer Sohail Inayatullah has a useful chapter on possible scenarios for Pakistan "Handcuffed to History and Chained to the Future". Wimal Dissanayake traces the same pattern in Sri Lanka by analysing the political use of the Mahavamsa, a sixth century CE epic poem of Sri Lanka, used to justify the Tamil-Sinhalese divide.

This set of important essays grew out of reflections on two events of recent Indian history in which myth, symbol, ideology, and politics are all closely interlinked. The first is the conflict over Kashmir which dates from the partition of the Sub-Continent into India and Pakistan, a conflict with its ebbs and flows which continues in various forms today. It is well analysed here by Daanish Mustafa and Viren Murthy. The second is the December 1992 demolishing of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The mosque was built upon a spot which some Hindus considered to be the birth place of the god Ram at an unspecified time. The editor S.P. Udayakumar deals with this central event in his "Historicizing Myth and Mythologizing History: The Violent 'Ram Temple' Drama". As Udayakumar notes "Ram is wooed once again to help consolidate the brahmanical orthodoxy's political
power base... The Hindutva forces' interpretation of Hinduism and history and their understanding of 'greatness' and 'regeneration' are deceitful and opportunistic. In sheer desperation, they misappropriate Indian heritage, misrepresent Indian legends and manipulate the people."

If the retelling of historic narratives can be used for narrow ideological and political ends, it can also be an occasion to try to analyse collective karma - the impact of acts and currents of thought upon a large number of people living at the same time in a given geographic area. The title of the book *Handcuffed to History* is taken from Salman Rushdie's novel dealing with the birth of Indian independence *Midnight's Children*, and is a telling symbol for the impact of past deeds and thoughts upon the present. Had the concept of collective karma been more widely used, more care would have been taken in the 1920s with the lasting impact of the idea that there were two nations - Hindu and Muslim - and that each should have a state. Those working for an independent India needed the support of the Muslim League leader Ali Jinnah and so were unwilling to mount a strong counter vision of a culturally pluralistic India. Likewise, the first 1947 conflict over Kashmir has continued to send out karmic waves for over two generations. If the destructive impact of the Kashmir events had been better understood in the sense of action - corresponding reaction in both India and Pakistan, constant efforts for a compromise settlement could have been undertaken earlier. A spiritual understanding of history can be a guide for appropriate political action.

Rene WADLOW