Preface

This book is concerned with two broad themes that are also reflected in the structuring of the book into two roughly equal sections. One section, consisting of the Prologue and Chapters 1, 2 and 4, deals with (a) a series of related historical events that have been profusely written and commented upon through several centuries until the present time and (b) how we perceive relationships between religious communities in India in the past (and also in the present). The events described by different texts and narratives deal with the Rajput chieftain of the impenetrable fortress of Ranthambore and his enmity and ultimate defeat at the hands of the Sultan of Delhi, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Khaljī. The text that receives particular focus is the Sanskrit *Hammīra-Mahākāvya*, which was composed by the Jaina scholar and poet Nayachandra Sūri in 1401. The purpose of the *Hammīra-Mahākāvya* seems to be twofold: on the one hand it is about poetry – about rising to the challenge of writing great Sanskrit poetry in the second millennium with all its poetical embellishments and linguistic markers. On the other hand, the poem is commemorative. It commemorates and celebrates the deeds and death of Hammīra, a flawed hero, who is unbending on his word. The poem is therefore both *kāvya* or poetry, and what we would call 'history,' i.e. it aspires to simultaneously contain the signifiers of a literary and a historical work.

The Sanskrit poem, however, is but one of an entire continuum of oral and written Persian, Sanskrit, Rajasthani, Hindi and English works over centuries until the present day, as well as conversations held at the fortress of Ranthambore during fieldwork, that draw out the imaginative fabric of Hammīra's life and heroic death, so much so that this becomes part of Hindu nationalist discourse on the protection of Hindu religion or *dharma* in the 20th century. Thus, a singular moment – the battle between Hammīra and ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Khaljī – reverberates through centuries vertically to the point of creating a temporal and cultural region, and a 'history' through a crystallization of the event in different texts and languages: Persian chronicles, Sanskrit works, Hindi and Rajasthani poems and songs, and English translations, as well as 20th-century historiography grounded in Hindu nationalist thought.

One critical detail concerning Hammīra's life is that he provides sanctuary to one of ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Khaljī's mutineering, 'neo-Muslim' rebel generals called Muhammed Shāh (who is later called Mahimā Sāhi) and his followers who then become – more so than the former's own traitorous Rajput generals Ratipāla and Raṇmalla – his closest and most faithful allies and friends, leading, as one can imagine, to wrath of the sultan, and ultimately the tragic demise of Ham-

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mīra, Muhammed Shāh (aka Mahimā Sāhi) and their families. Yet, it is intriguing that despite the singular fact of Hindu–Muslim friendship and loyalty lying at the core of the Hammīra narrative, in the hands of contemporary, post-independence historiography this fact is glossed over while the story attains the status of a 'national epic' (*rāṣṭrīya mahākāvya*), and Hammīra the status of a national hero protecting India from Muslim imperialists.

Clearly, the text creates a narrative space that allows a series of shared religious, social and political spaces to arise. Is there a set of values that underlie the creation of this shared literary space? Why does a Jain poet write about a Hindu chieftain and his clash with a Muslim sultan, and the accompanying description of gore, treason, violence, bloodshed, weaponry, war and so on? How indeed are religious labels such as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' or 'Jain' imagined in this context? Evidently, they do not carry the same significance as they would in the contemporary discourse of 'essentialized,' singular, bounded religious identities. Since in the original text they do not carry these meanings, how does Hammīra wind up becoming central to the creation of 20th-century scholarship propelled by Hindu nationalist discourse on the protection and sustenance of Hindu *dharma?* How and why does this shift occur in which shared religious and social spaces shrink? It would seem that modern enclaves of religion and caste also result in a politically charged re-imagining of the past that is both selective and palpably prejudiced in conceiving of discreet religious categories of Muslim and Hindu, rather than, for example, interrelated, rival and yet often mutually beneficial Turk, Mongol, 'neo-Muslim' and Rajput assemblages forged through the expediencies of honour, friendship and power but not necessarily religion or ethnicity.

The other section, consisting of Chapters 3, 5, 6 and 7, arises in particular as a response to the underlying cause that triggers the composition of the Sanskrit work: it is in a *dream* that the dead hero, Hammīra, appears to the poet urging him to write the *historical* poem. Can history begin in a dream? What does it mean to think about the past, and about history and time, through an enquiry into the imagination? Is there a connection between the imagination and thinking about the past? Is history linked to imagination? What, indeed, is imagination? Is time – whether past, present or future – linked to imagination? In other words, does time arise only when there is imagination? Or conversely does imagination arise when there is time? Alternatively, is there a simultaneous arising or rather co-arising of imagination, time and history, and therefore of what we call world? As a corollary to these questions, the book explores the idea that what we call world may be quintessentially nothing more than an enormously intricate 'seemingly real' appearance engineered by the imagination. What are the implications of this perspective for an understanding of history and of time? Is history,

as a result, simply a simulation of an apparent reality? Can History ever be *possibility?*[1]

While this book is inspired by the story of Hammīra – a Rajput chieftain who lived and ruled over the impregnable fortress of Ranthambore in south-eastern Rajasthan during the 13th century – the ideas, content and questions in the second section may not immediately appear as belonging to the kind of content and questions one expects of a work of history in the traditional sense. Perhaps at best – given some of the themes it deals with – the second half of the book can be described as an enquiry into the questions that a phenomenology of both history and the imagination would concern itself with. The book is thus about history as it appears in our experience while exploring the idea of what it means to be a historical being, and to write a history from the point of view of the subject who is aware of writing it, and in whom different temporalities and experiences of time are simultaneously intertwined in the here and now.

This book thus attempts to traces the movement of various texts and narratives, spiralling circles of imagination prospectively and retroactively from the 20th and 21st centuries going back to the moment of the *Hammīra-Mahākāvya*. The narratives live forward, backward, and simultaneously in the moment of now and the temporalities of past and future, as a prospective–retrospective field of intersubjective experience. The book endeavours a structure that represents this movement from future back to past, and from past into future in the simultaneity of ever-widening circles of imagination.

1 The understanding of imagination as I am using it is different to imagination as a function of a mental faculty that can conjure and construct and makes sense of past, present and future – it takes us to the realm of sheer possibility and 'clearing' that gives rise to the possibility of imagining as an intellectual or mental faculty of human beings.