

On Metahistory and a Purportedly
“Homeless Text”: Reflections upon
an Eighteenth-century, South Asian Traveller’s
Impression of Modern European Science

In dealing with the subject matter of South Asia one cannot but confront several of the issues that are germane to the concerns of “Variantology”. These issues relate as much to the historiography of South Asia as they do to the subject matter of social theory itself. In the light of some recent developments in the historiography of South Asia this essay attempts to elucidate the consequences for the history of sciences in the South Asian region. In other words the essay could be read as one about different geographies of knowledge. The connotation of the term geography is extended to connote the carving up of the globe into a variety of regions, but it is just as much about carving out continents of knowledge and configuring them like maps with either disciplinary or regional or civilisational labels. The likelihood that regional boundaries and maps of knowledge could have been drawn differently poses questions for contemporary disciplinary boundaries and their associated content. For between these temporally separated maps of the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries a great deal of history finds no location within the new spatially ordered maps of nations and regions, disciplines and knowledge systems.

¹ The discussion on Abu Taleb Khan, with some modifications and quotations, is taken from an earlier paper co-authored with my colleague and collaborator S. Irfan Habib, *The voyages of Abu Taleb Khan and Le Gentil: A preliminary comparative study of the scientific imagination in eighteenth century Indian and French travelogues*, in *Science and Cultural Diversity: Proceedings of the XXth International Conference of the History of Science*, ed. Juan Jose Saldaña, University of Mexico (Mexico City, 2001), pp. 2794–2809.