

Love What You Love Podcast

History of the Indian Subcontinent with Anirudh Kanisetti

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Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! Listen, I'm going to get right to it this week because this episode is *epic*.

Anirudh Kanisetti is a scholar and the host of two history podcasts, *Echoes of India* and *Yuddha*, all about the history of the Indian subcontinent. He's super thoughtful and insightful, but even more, he is absolutely passionate about the subject.

Did you know that India is the size of Europe, but even more diverse and many times more populous? How much do you know about India and the subcontinent? How much do you know about its history? In this chat, Anirudh and I talk suppressed histories, the political dangers of uncovering history, the Germany of India, the best movie you've probably never even heard about, our world in a younger state, the not-so-new concept of globalization, and so much more.

Find out why Anirudh loves the history of the Indian subcontinent, and why you might learn to love it too.

Julie: Hello, Anirudh! Thank you so much for joining me today!

Anirudh: Hey, Julie. It's a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Julie: I'm a big fan of your podcasts. You have two that are specifically about the Indian subcontinent. You've got *Echoes of India*, and you've got *Yuddha*, which is about medieval warfare. What made you want to start these podcasts?

Anirudh: Well, the long story short is, as they say, if you want something done properly you have to do it yourself. And frankly, I was just not very happy with the kind of representation that India generally had in the English-language podcast market. There weren't a lot of Indian history podcasts, and the ones that did talk about Indian history usually didn't have India front and center; or they had other issues, like for example not pronouncing Indian names correctly, not really understanding India beyond the, kind of, surface-level stuff that you can find on Wikipedia. So they weren't very insightful.

And I found there's a consistent tendency, especially among English-language audiences to, kind of, exoticize India. There's almost this perception that India isn't a country like any other. There's all these strange stereotypes about India and Indians which I felt needed to be taken head-on; this whole idea of India being fundamentally a religious country, this idea that Indian kings were somehow more peaceful than others, that Indians historically were not interested in interacting with the rest of the world.

These are all stereotypes that I felt needed to be challenged, not just in terms of the way the world saw India, but more importantly, the way that India itself sees India. Because in general, it's not easy for young Indians to get their hands on interesting and engaging content on Indian history. Unlike in the rest of the world, Indian history,

especially in academia, doesn't get an awful lot of funding, and history isn't necessarily seen as a viable career path.

A lot of Indians, especially younger Indians, including myself, end up studying engineering, or medicine, or law, or commerce because those are seen as ways towards a more stable and secure income. And as a result of that, there isn't a lot of historical material, whether it's academic or even just general history writing in the public domain.

So, it occurred to me that podcasting, given how accessible it is, given that all you need is an internet connection, can be a very powerful tool to, like, disseminate new ways of thinking about Indian history, to Indians and to the world at large. And given that I was working at a thinktank and I had access to really fantastic scholarly materials on Indian history, I saw it as a natural connect to digest those scholarly materials, figure out interesting ways of telling what those scholarly materials were telling me to the rest of the world, and using podcasting as a medium to do that. So that's basically how it happened.

Julie: What kinds of history do you get taught about your own country, about the subcontinent, when you're in school?

Anirudh: Well, simply put, most Indian history curricula were formed in the moments after independence, which is a very interesting time also in the subcontinent's history because for the very first time you have peoples of hundreds, if not thousands, of different linguistic, ethnic, social, cultural, religious groups who are used to thinking of their identity and their histories in very distinct ways, who are suddenly faced with the challenge of thinking of themselves as part of a single country.

It was a different matter when the British were around. It's easy enough to say, "We're Indians because we're not British." But after independence, you needed to find some kind of common ground. So, there was this very clear historiographical trend where curricula makers, especially sitting in New Delhi, tried to focus on "imperial moments." As you can imagine, with a subcontinent the size of India... It's basically the size of Europe but many, many, many times more diverse and more populous. Finding a single common thread is a very difficult kind of thing to do.

And what these curricula makers seized upon was looking at the imperial moments that were based in Northern India, usually around Delhi, or Bengal, or Bihar, and kind of trying to project that onto the rest of the subcontinent, trying to say that the other parts of the subcontinent, the other moments when other parts of the subcontinent are dominant, weren't really worth studying that much. And as a result... I studied the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education, so that's a national curriculum that's, again, set by folks sitting in New Delhi. And we basically only learned about India's imperial moments, the North Indian Imperial moments specifically.

So you learn about the Mauryas who ruled North India roughly 300BC, and then you skip forward, literally centuries and centuries to the Guptas who ruled North India for a century or so in about 300-500CE. And then you leap straight from there to the Delhi Sultanate about 700 or 800 years later, which ruled North India in about 1200-1300 CE. And then you leap forward to the Mughal who arrive in 1500, and then you leap forward to the British.

And if you look at the sheer size of Southern India... That's something I find absolutely fascinating. The state of Kerala, for example, recently got a lot of positive attention

internationally because of how well it did in managing the covid crisis. The state of Kerala alone is the size of Portugal, and it's way more populous. If you were to look at other states like Karnataka, for example, or Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, or Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra... Maharashtra literally means, you know, 'the great state' or 'the great territory'. They're the size of, like, France, Germany, sometimes even larger. How can you tell a history of India that doesn't include Maharashtra? That's like telling the history of Europe that doesn't include Germany or France. That's ridiculous, isn't it?

So, that's basically how I was taught history. And one thing that I very deliberately wanted to do was make it easier for people to understand those histories and make them understand that India is so, so, so much more than North India. I've traveled India a little bit - before the pandemic of course - and invariably the people from the West who happen to come to India that I spoke to, were very well aware of Jaipur, or Delhi, perhaps even Varanasi.

But in South India, they probably only know Hampi, and that's mostly because it's kind of a destination for hippies to hang out in, but not necessarily because it was the capital of one of the largest southern empires to ever exist, and not necessarily because I was a city that, in its heyday, was multiple times the size of Paris and Rome. These are things that the world simply does not know about India, and I feel like it is about time that they did.

Julie: This might be getting into difficult waters, but is there, like, a political reason... And forgive me, because I'm not *au fait* with the politics of India. Is there a political reason that the southern states are, kind of, locked out of the history curriculum?

Anirudh: I think that, initially, it may have started out with the best of intentions, this whole idea that, "Look, if we talk about the big, great empires, then we can all find some common ground and we can all believe that we're part of the same, single, grand nation." I feel like in the 21st century it's about time we move towards a more complex understanding of how the histories of various states and various regions intertwine to give us the India we live in today.

As for the reason why it's suppressed today, well, as you said, it is a profoundly political question. Compared to archaeology of early North India, early South India gets barely any funding from the Archaeological Survey of India, which is controlled from Delhi, essentially. But even beyond that, I certainly think so. The current political dispensation insists on a form of Indian identity that's fundamentally about Hindus who speak Hindi. And I think that India is way too complex to be reduced to a single national identity. It's like saying that Europe is for French people from Paris. It's a ridiculous way of thinking about Indian history.

I will say though, that there are a lot of young people who recognize that their states have had histories that are neglected. A lot of them have requested me, for example, to talk more about their states on *Echoes*, or to do more content about their states on my social media generally, especially Odisha, for example. But in terms of national politics, I feel like, more than the regions themselves, it's about religion, in terms of the way that the history of India is presented.

And it's very interesting that the stereotype that has taken root globally of Indian Islam is based primarily on a few North Indian Muslim rulers. Whereas if you look at South Indian Muslim rulers, they're actually very, very different in their approach to Hinduism. Generally, they tend to be far more syncretic in their approach. But they simply get no

attention in the media or in the political sphere, and the fact that they're not talked about is, in itself, I believe, a political act.

And therefore, talking about these histories, talking about just how complex India was, and of course not trying to present it as some sort of Utopia, which, again, some ends of the political spectrum tend to do. They tend to try to pretend that Indians were always peaceful, or that India's most violent emperors were some kind of beacons of liberalism and secularism. That's really not the case.

I feel like there needs to be a space for more complex conversations about Indian history. It might seem like something that's fairly obvious. I feel like in many parts of the world, at least generally, the mainstream conversation about history tends to be a little more complex than it is in India. There's a little bit more of a reckoning with the horrors of history and the mistakes that nation-states have made and trying to learn from them. That's not something necessarily that has happened on a wide scale in India.

In India, there's a tendency to mine history for politics. There's a tendency to... And this has been happening from the very beginning. I mean, if you look at the way that our first prime minister, Nehru, for example, presented Ashoka as, essentially, an Enlightenment-era monarch in Ancient India, as an extremely secular, tolerant, and enlightened individual, which Ashoka really isn't. If you read his inscriptions, he's a much more unique character. He sees himself as a culmination of North Indian empires that have grown and fallen over many centuries. He sees it as essentially, his divine and royal responsibility, almost, to use violence to compel various parts of the subcontinent into heeding his wise messages.

But if you look at the way Ashoka is presented today, like, liberals tend to present him as this extraordinary individual. And the same goes, for example, the Mughal emperor Akbar who is presented as, essentially, the idol of Indian secularism, which again, he was not. In his own time, Akbar was seen by his contemporaries as a profoundly violent and brutal man. Though he did some very interesting things, that doesn't mean you have to erase his historical legacy in order to make him into some kind of hero for a political stunt.

The same, of course, applies to right-wing historical figures, which really, the less said the better because I could go on about that for hours. [laughs] But the basic point is that in any mature democracy, any responsible society, history is not used as a way to make obtuse political claims which are not rooted in the ethos, and values, and the historical trajectories of the society they're part of. We need to have mature and more nuanced conversations about Indian history.

Julie: And about US history too, but we won't go into that.

Anirudh: Oh yeah. [laughs]

Julie: Wow, yeah.

Anirudh: It's something we have in common, I suppose.

Julie: For sure. So, stepping back, were you always into history? Were you like that as a kid? Did you just always love history when you were young?

Anirudh: Well, not really. I mean, not history specifically. I was actually interested in anything and everything I could get my hands on, really. I used to read a lot as a child, and I was

really lucky that I lived a few years of my life... just two years, really, in the US. But those two years really shaped the way I thought about a lot of things, because the US, at least then, had a pretty cool public library culture, which India does not really have at this point. I was able to read everything I wanted. My teachers encouraged me to read, encouraged me to write. And my parents bought me this beautiful multi-volume set of the Children's Encyclopedia Britannica, which I absolutely adored.

And it... How do I put this? When I came back to India it was a bit of a culture shock because the Indian education system is so much more rigid. There's so much more emphasis on just reading your textbooks and not really exploring stuff beyond that, which was strange for me because the fact that I knew so many things from so many different places actually made me fairly successful in the Indian academic system in the beginning.

But as you get older and as you get higher up the ranks of the Indian academic system, the syllabus becomes more and more rigid and what you learn from your textbook becomes more and more important. And that's when I figured there were some things that I liked more and some things I liked less, but even then history really wasn't at the top of my list. I knew I was good at it, but as far as employment and so on were concerned, I was told, and I convinced myself, I think, that engineering was really the way to go. Which of course blew up in my face royally. It really was not the way to go for me.

But luckily enough, my college - another unique thing to India - didn't have an attendance requirement, so I didn't have to go to classes. So I spent most of my four years in college just reading about stuff. And that's really, I think, when my love for history became something more. I was interested in history because of gaming and reading random things here and there, but that's when I started to systematically explore things. I would say, "Okay, look. I want to learn about the entire Deccan history first. Now I want to learn about this region. I want to know about this dynasty." And very systematically, I went through... educated myself on Indian history, on global history.

And because, I think, I read so much and so widely through my formative years, I was able to make connections in some very exciting and very intellectually stimulating ways. I know there's a tendency to think of history as, essentially, a discipline all its own, but to me, history much, much more than that. It's really the study of our world in a younger state. And in order to understand our world, you must understand ecology, climate, geography, anthropology, cultural. You need to understand every aspect of the human experience, everything that makes our world our world, to claim to understand it today.

Why is it that, when it comes to history, it's seen as some kind of totally different field that depends on, you know, such-and-such... that it needs to exist within particular academic bounds? And I don't really play with that, especially in *Echoes* and in *Yuddha*, because to me, history is not a litany of events. It's not a litany of this thing caused this thing, and this ruler caused this thing. It's more about, like I was saying, our world in a younger state. The same kind of complexities, the same human experiences that we understand today with a very complex and multi-disciplinary vocabulary need to be applied to history as well. That's really the way that I see it.

Julie: So you were doing this reading on your own during college, and besides the intellectual stimulation, was there a moment or a story that you read where you're like, "Okay. This is it. I'm hooked."?

Anirudh: I actually think it was when I read about Alexander's campaign into India. I was talking a little earlier about how difficult it is for Indians, especially young Indians, to access materials on Indian history. It's much easier for us to access materials on Greek and Roman history than it is to read about our own history. It's really kind of sad.

But I read a lot about Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome. It was really when I was reading about Alexander's Indian campaign. Then something kind of clicked, you know? There's this very famous incident where he meets this king, and he defeats this king in Punjab, and they meet as equals. And Alexander doesn't treat him badly, and he sees him as an equal, and I'm like, "What's changed?" Here we have an Indian who sees this Greek as an interloper, as a foreigner who... he doesn't even see him as an equal.

And look at Indians today. There's this profound inferiority complex. We define our history in relation to the West. I define my history in relation to the West. Why is it I'm reading about these Greek and Roman kings and why do I know nothing about the history of India beyond just the very broad contours? How do I learn more about it?

That's what really kicked off this whole exploration, to go through it period by period, understand what happened when, how things happened, what... I wanted to... How do I put this? When I thought... About six, seven years ago, if you had said the word "medieval" to me, I would've thought of a knight on this beautifully caparisoned horse in a jousting tournament, for example.

If you said 'medieval' to me now, the images in my head are of magnificent temples being assembled by these gigantic, migratory architect guilds, of knights on armored elephants riding around. And I feel like that's something that I wanted to bring to all Indians. I wanted our conception of history to be based on Indian examples and not to be rooted in ideas that belong to another history, another culture, and to be able to understand our present in our historical terms.

Julie: Do you have a favorite story from the medieval era on the subcontinent? Something that's maybe emblematic or just really interesting to you?

Anirudh: It's difficult to pick a single favorite story because it is really such a fascinating time. But one thing that does spring immediately to mind is this very interesting individual who was born in the year 800. That's the same year that Charlemagne is crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Leo X. So it's a very important year in European history and it's a very important year in the history of Germany, and it leads directly to the formation of the Holy Roman Empire, which is this magnificent entity that survives for, like, a thousand years beyond that point. And it's full of these colorful little states, and intense kind of internecine warfare, and religious movements, and all that.

And I often like to think that the Deccan Plateau is really India's equivalent to Germany. It has these great empires that come and go, and these immensely turbulent religious movements, and all that. And just as 800 is a significant year for Germany, it's a significant year for the Deccan Plateau as well because this chap called Amoghavarsha is born in that year.

Amoghavarsha is the son of possibly the most powerful man in Southern India at that time, a chap called Govinda III. And Govinda was at that point a very young man but

he had already managed to invade Northern India. He had managed to subjugate a coalition of 12 South Indian kings, one of them was his half-brother who was trying to overthrow him, another one who was his uncle. And over the next decade or so he would, basically, project Deccan power into places it had never been before, including for example, Odisha.

And then 814 of the Common Era, when Amoghavarsha, his heir, was just 14 years old, Govinda dies. And it's a totally unexpected death. He was probably only about, like, 44 or so at that point. And this young man, Amoghavarsha, really a teenager, an adolescent, is left alone. And I remember what I was like at the age of 14, and I would not have liked to be in charge of a massive empire at that point. And as you can imagine, it all falls apart. Everything goes to pieces very, very quickly. There's massive rebellions all over the place. The guy has to run for his life. But over the course of six or seven years, he matures into a really extraordinary person.

He learns how to charm and cajole people. He learns how to recognize talent and loyalty and promote them. He gradually gets his throne back and continues to reign until, I think, the year 880 or so. The guy's on the throne for 64 years. It's absolutely nuts. The entire ninth century of the Deccan is defined by the career of Amoghavarsha. He creates this new grammar of the Kannada language, which is spoken today in modern Karnataka.

And up until that point, most South Indian parties used Sanskrit to communicate and to express ideas of power and beauty. But he does it for Kannada, and in the process he initiates this flourishing literary tradition that survives to this day. And he's the only person in history, as far as I know, who actually managed to rule the Deccan for 64 years. The Arabs wrote about him as one of the four great kings of the world, on par with Abbasid Caliph, the Roman Emperor, and the Emperor of China. And yet, when it comes to global historical narratives, nobody talks about him.

If you look at the list of the longest-reigning monarchs on Wikipedia, I don't think you're going to find Amoghavarsha there. It's so strange. But you've got to think, right, this guy at the age of 14, he has this crown which his father and grandfather have worn being lowered onto his head. His eyes are stinging because of the sacrificial flames. He's looking around him and all he sees are relatives and courtiers with eyes like daggers who just want to overthrow him, murder him, whatever. And he survives, and he comes through it all, and he dies of old age as far as we know. It's absolutely insane. Fascinating guy.

Julie: Wow. That is incredible. Has his story been told in any kind of popular books or movies? And do you have a favorite movie or book about medieval India or the subcontinent?

Anirudh: The thing is that there was this other history movement that happened in India in about the 1960s, '70s, when regional-language cinema really kicked off. So, a lot of these regional-language cinemas were obsessed with great kings from their past, usually the marshal, manly-man kind of kings, who would be played, of course, by the most prominent actor of the day. And these actors inevitably would have political careers after that. So, there were a whole bunch of "historical" movies that were made then, which I mean, obviously are not a very accurate representation of the time. They're all about, you know, the noble and wonderful king who is so cultured, and so noble and whatnot. And the set design, costume design, not really the most accurate.

They're very obviously designed to appeal to new regional nationalisms that were emerging in India at the time. So I would... at least in terms of historical movies, I would say my favorite is not a really historical one; it's really a mythological one. It's called *Mayabazar*, and it's basically a movie that's based on a story from the Mahabharata. It was made, I think, in the 1950s or '60s in the Telugu film industry. And I find it absolutely delightful to watch, not necessarily because of historical accuracy or anything like that, because that doesn't matter in a mythological movie. But it's just a fun movie to watch. It is consistently hilarious, consistently witty; great performances, and most importantly, it's got great special effects.

Julie: Really?

Anirudh: Yes, for the 1950s and '60s, it's a really pioneering piece of film. I happened to watch it a couple of months ago and I was really surprised. There was one beautiful shot, for example, where a young girl looks into her reflection in a pond, and then in a single shot she transforms into a much older and more mature woman.

There's another example where this massive demon flies down from the sky and lands on a cliffside, and the cliff kind of shatters apart and boulders fall off. Very impressive visual effects. So, it's a delightful watch also. It's very humorous, like I said. I highly recommend it. I think there is, at least on Amazon Prime in India, you can get a version with English subtitles. I'm not sure if it's available in the US. But if you can watch it, and if your listeners can get their hands on it, I absolutely recommend it.

In terms of books, again, it kind of really depends on whether you want fiction or nonfiction, how accessible you want it to be. But for me, the book that was most transformative to my understanding of medieval India was Daud Ali's *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*. So, Daud Ali is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and it's a book that explains the courtly culture of medieval India in a way that no other book has done before. It's extremely influential academic work. It only came out, I think, in 2006 so it's not even... By the standards of medieval India in academia, it's extremely recent. But it's a fantastic book. I really cannot recommend it enough.

He gets into material culture, textual evidence... He's got these beautiful little examples of reconstructions of what courts would have looked like, and examples of their body language, and the kind of forms of address they would've used for each other. Absolutely fascinating.

In terms of fiction, that's a little trickier because kind of the worst thing about reading a lot of our history is that you can't really enjoy historical fiction anymore. So, I don't think I would necessarily recommend historical fiction from this period. There has been historical fiction written about it, but it tends to be really, like, rose-tinted. So, I'm not sure if I'd recommend it, but if something comes to mind then I will definitely ping you.

Julie: Yeah, awesome. And do you have any ambitions of writing your own book, or maybe a novel about this period?

Anirudh: Yes, I do. I actually have a nonfiction book coming out a few months from now set in the medieval Deccan. So, basically a narrative of its rulers and trying to get into... trying to make it more than just a narrative of kings being blah blah blah. But really about structures, and societies, and economies evolving, and about the Deccan's connections to the world in this time. Which again, barely features in global history.

Things are kind of changing now, but in general, people know about North India and South India. They don't know about the Deccan. They don't know about Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bengal, Assam, Nagaland, you know? These are extremely distinct regions with extremely distinct histories.

And the Deccan especially is so fascinating to me, partly because of where I'm from, but again, like I said, it's India's Germany and people need to understand the history of Germany to understand the history of Europe. You've got to understand the history of Deccan... So, I've tried to make it a modern, accessible popular history with an emphasis on personalities, with an emphasis on interesting pieces of art, and really with an eye to how the world was changing, and how the world shaped the Deccan, and how Deccan, in turn, shaped the world.

So that's something that I have written. I'm currently in the last stage of editing it, so it should be out anytime. I mean, it really depends on how the pandemic goes in India, of course. But long term, in terms of historical fiction, I feel like the Deccan has endless potential. I mean, I've told you just one example. There's other examples of, like, these revolutionary anti-caste religions that rose up against kings, assassinated them, ended up being persecuted and burned cities down in retaliation. And all these stories of warriors who mutilated themselves, cut off their heads and their limbs as sacrifices to deities. It's extremely rich, and vibrant, and colorful. There's so much potential to write about. I absolutely intend to.

I don't consider myself a very gifted litterateur. I don't think I can write fiction very well, but as and when I learn to write good fiction, that's absolutely something I intend to tackle.

Julie: I absolutely believe that. [laughs] Yeah. So, when you're putting together *Echoes* and when you put together *Yuddha*, every episode is so detailed and so well put together. Did you do all the work on the episodes? Did you write, produce... I mean, obviously, you narrate it. How much time did that take? It must've been an enormous undertaking.

Anirudh: They are a pretty big undertaking, so I don't do the production. That's usually taken care of by my partners at IVM Podcasts. But the research, the writing, and the narration is... it's a lot of work. I honestly, like, can't put a specific number of hours to each podcast, but it usually takes... I used to work full time while making *Echoes* and *Yuddha*, and they would take up most of my early mornings and my evenings just to get all the readings done and then write a script. Especially for *Echoes*, it's absolutely exhausting.

With *Yuddha*, there's a little more leeway because it's more of a conversational podcast, so my partner, Aditya Ramanathan, was able to... He would have his own readings so he'd be able to hold the fort in some areas while I focused on other areas. But it's still a lot of work because *Yuddha* especially is far more complex than *Echoes*, I think, because military history is something that, across the world, has kind of been taken over by these stomping, alt-right dude-bros. And Indian military history especially is just rife for bullshit nationalist mythmaking.

With *Yuddha*, I really try to give a critical and fact-based interpretation of what happened that doesn't shy away from, like, calling out the violence caused by all sides involved, and making it clear that these exist within a particular social and cultural

moment in time, and need to be understood as such, and bear little to no relation to modern political identities and activities.

I think one of the biggest scams that global politicians have pulled on all of us is this idea that wars a thousand years ago justify violence and atrocities against minorities today. I just do not understand how, logically, that works. There's a very complex media ecosystem, a very complex system of mythmaking and myth manufacturing that goes into it to make you believe that a Muslim carpenter who's struggling to put his kids through school is somehow responsible for the atrocities committed by a Muslim Indian king who was probably one of the richest men of his time and had a worldview and used power like rich people do today.

It's absolutely absurd, and of course we can see the same thing happening in the rest of the world. For example, there is global Islamophobia, there is a global phobia towards many religions, many minorities, that are very often rooted in these imagined historical dramas which do not really affect the way that communities live and want to live today except in this made-up political sense. But I should probably stop at this point before I get into too much trouble.

Julie: Insert Rant Here. Yeah, no. That's great. [laughs] So, you were working on the podcasts, kind of, around your day job, but I understand that you are now going to be studying history full time. Is that right?

Anirudh: Yes, or at least that was the plan until this new wave of the pandemic hit India. I was planning to do a Master's in History at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. I still intend to do it, but not this year. I'm going to be deferring my admission to next year. But I think that actually works out well for me because, honestly, working on a podcast and working full time, as I'm sure you will agree, is bloody exhausting. It's a lot of work.

And at this point, I just want to take time to just do my own thing. You know, I used to draw a lot as a child. I lost that habit as, you know, life got in the way. And now I just want to, like, do more digital art. Especially, I feel like digital art is a very powerful way to reconstruct Indian history.

If you were to look for... I don't know, like, a reconstruction of the Battle of Cannae in 218 or something, you will get some really beautiful art, people who have done the research, figured out how Roman and Carthaginian soldiers looked and photoshopped it, and illustrated it, and made it look real, and really brought these moments to life. You can look at the reconstructions of Ancient Rome, Ancient Athens that bring them back to life in full color and make them seem like actual living places. But you'd be hard-pressed to find, like, modern art of even Mughal Delhi, or even colonial Delhi; Delhi in the 12th century.

And that's to say nothing of South India. Where's the historical art for India? I feel like that's something I really want to do. I can't really draw that well at this point. But I fully intend to... I used to draw pretty well as a kid, but I've really got to grow and develop beyond that.

And I'm also doing a couple of fellowships. I'm currently doing... I'm part of the Princeton Center for Digital Humanities series of workshops on new languages for natural language processing, so I'm looking at trying to build a natural language processing model for Old Kannada with my friend Jajwalya, who is a graduate of

George Mason University. And I'm hoping to get a couple of other interesting fellowships at museums. I want to make a podcast about Indian museums.

The British Museum has a fascinating podcast. I'm not sure if you've heard *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Indian museums are full of objects like that, that all have such fascinating stories that could very easily reach a larger audience through podcasting. That's something I intend to do. And I mean, the TLDR of it is, I'm not doing the degree this year but I have more than enough to keep me busy.

Julie: Yeah! Yes. And do you have a thought for when you do go and start your MA, do you have a goal? Do you have a particular line of inquiry that you're interested in?

Anirudh: Absolutely. The Deccan is getting some attention in scholarship today, but that tends to look mostly at the Deccan sultanates, which came into existence from only the 14th century or so. And they're fascinating; I'm glad they're getting some attention now. But the early medieval Deccan, before the arrival of Turkic rulers, is really my jam. That's the period I was telling you about, with Amoghavarsha and all these revolutionary movements and whatnot. I feel like there needs to be more modern scholarship on this region on this time, especially... there's really any number of potential ways to approach it.

For example, there's this fascinating series of wars that happened through most of the 11th century where, basically, the empire that dominated the Deccan, the Chalukyas, are constantly clashing with the empire that dominates the south and the east coast, the Cholas. And it's essentially the equivalent of two medieval superpowers clashing. And that profoundly shapes a lot of things.

It changes the structures of societies. It changes... It leads to a burst of temple architecture. It changes the way that state formation happens. That's something I could potentially write about. And honestly, I could go on about my other ideas but it would probably be too geeky, and more importantly, I'm also a little concerned that people might choose this as their master's thesis for the coming academic year. So I should probably keep it to myself.

Julie: Keep it to yourself. [laughs] So, when you're talking about primary sources to do your research, I mean, there's written sources, there's epigraphy, there's archae- What would you draw from to do your research on this period?

Anirudh: It's primarily epigraphic sources. One of the tragedies of Indian history is that not a lot of materials have survived. When it comes to written materials, we do have some stuff that's in monasteries, but again, it tends to be mostly of a religious nature. And I think partially because of scholarship's reliance on these texts, there's a tendency to think of India as being only about religion, but it's really not.

A lot of courtly literature, these great epics that would have talked about the lives of various kings, and dramas about heroes and whatnot, and even basic bureaucratic records and all that, have basically vanished and can never be recovered, which is a great tragedy. Not just to Indian historians but also to the world at large, because how can you understand the history of the world without understanding a region that has historically represented about a sixth of humanity? It's a tragedy.

But the sources that do survive are inscriptions that were made to grant land to Brahmans, to grant land to temples, and to grant land to gods. So they're found on temple walls. They're found on copper plates. Those are the primary sources that I

tend to use for this period. I don't actually have a lot of command over Indian languages, sadly. Hopefully, that's something I'll get to this year. But you know, the British did Indian historians a favor by actually commissioning extensive surveys to go and find epigraphs and have them translated. And a lot of these are available on Archive.org, so anybody can really download them, so that's really the primary source that I've been using.

And honestly, I'm glad that the British did it because I can be damn sure that no Indian government today would do it. It is not politically smart for Indian politicians to actually fund deep studies into Indian history because the truths that are dug up are often very, very inconvenient to nationalist narratives.

Julie: What are some misconceptions about the history of the Indian subcontinent that absolutely drive you crazy? I mean, we've talked about some of them, but what are the ones that just drive you insane?

Anirudh: Well, the most persistent one, the one that has somehow managed to come down to this day, is this idea that Indians weren't interested in going outside the subcontinent. We did not want to fight anybody outside the subcontinent, we were a very peaceful people, we just wanted to do our own thing, and worship our gods, and build our temples. Which is, I mean... I can't even begin to describe how nonsensical that stereotype is.

I mean, a part of it is because of what I was talking about just now, right? The fact that most sources that survive are from religious centers of power, whereas mercantile centers of power, secular, royal centers of power have basically vanished, been buried under our constantly expanding cities. So, Indians, historically, have been among the most influential global mercenaries, traders, proselytizers, missionaries that you can possibly imagine. We have records of Indians scamming the Chinese emperors by convincing them they have alchemical formulas for immortality. Indians teaching martial arts to, like, Chinese Buddhists. Indians having business relationships with Jewish families based in Cairo. We have records of Sino-Indians living in Guangzhou who are commissioning temples built in styles based in Tamil Nadu.

I mean, I could just go on, and on, and on. But by far, the most endearing example of Indians going abroad, to me, is from the island of Socotra, which is off the coast of the Arabian Peninsula. In Socotra, there are a few caves where graffiti left by Indian sailors has been found. And if that is not the most resounding example of the fact that, yes, Indians did go abroad, and loved traveling, and were interested in seeing what the world had to offer, I don't know what is.

These guys are going into caves, they were climbing up to the ceilings and leaving their names written there. They were lighting little lamps in memory of their gods, because they were coming from the west coast of Indian where, you know, cave monasteries, cave temples were a really big thing. So they seem to have come here, and they seem to have figured out, "Oh, yeah, there must be a god living here. Let's pray to them for good fortune," or whatever.

And most fascinatingly, to this day in Gujarat, there is a goddess called Socotri-Mata, who was apparently worshipped by merchants who were setting out on a voyage to Socotra. But today she is considered just another form of the mother goddess. And you know, this connection, it's kind of talked about that... You can find that information on websites dedicated to her, for example. But she's otherwise presented, her

iconography, her ritual, and all that is very much that of any other Indian mother goddess. The unique features that must have once characterized her, which must have grown over so many centuries, are now totally lost.

But again, that is one of my rants. I tend to go on them a lot, as you've noticed. But yeah, that really grinds my gears. Indians loved traveling. Indians were as global a people as anybody else in the medieval period.

Julie: And that's one of the misconceptions about the medieval period in general, like around the world, that there was no interaction, there was no global trade, that people didn't know about other countries, which is absurd.

Anirudh: Humans have known about other countries since, basically, the inception of civilization. We know from the Bronze Age that humans were doing international trade, diplomacy, what we would consider early forms of globalization. Cretan artists being imported to make murals in Egyptian palaces, for example. It just... It really amazes me. I don't understand how anybody can really think that because there's an overwhelming preponderance of evidence at this point to show that globalization is not something new. Some of the things we associate with modernity are really not new.

For example, mass manufacturing. We know that China in the Song Dynasty had that, which is nuts. If you think about massive, international financial conglomerates funding expensive ventures. The Romans had that. Indians had that. What we think of as modernity has existed in various forms throughout history, almost cyclically in these great tides, as it were. And what we're seeing is really the only recent, and arguably the most complex, incarnations that modernity has taken. Also perhaps, the most violent and the most iniquitous version of it. But it's nothing new to humanity.

Julie: So, for folks who want to learn more about the history of the subcontinent, what are some good introductory resources for them?

Anirudh: John Keay has quite a decent book called *India: A History*. It's fairly accessible, a little out of date at this point, but as far as general overviews go, there's nothing better. I would also recommend this podcast called *Echoes of India*.

Julie: [laughs] Yes, I would recommend that too.

Anirudh: [laughs] Which, I also have a bibliography for every episode up on my website. So that can be a starting off point. Another thing that I've been doing recently is a YouTube channel called *Connected Histories*, which is precisely for this kind of audience. It's a history of the world but with South Asia at the center. So, we try to situate developments within South Asia in a global context. So, we keep drawing these parallels, for example. You'll see in our next video, really, how we draw these parallels. I think we found an interesting way to do it.

One thing that, like, a lot of Indians also have found surprising when I tell them is that, for example, Vasco da Gama, Henry the VIII, and Akbar, and Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara and of Hampi, were all contemporaries. When it comes to Indian history, there's almost this timeless quality that, like, is somehow associated with it. Like it's always the same or that it doesn't change. It's something that *Connected Histories* aims to challenge. So again, same thing, if your followers are on Instagram or on YouTube, every single post, every single video comes with a detailed bibliography that you can check out and explore.

In general, aside from that, in terms of general views, I would really hesitate to recommend a single book. Because I mean, what's a good place to start reading all the history of Europe, you know? You need to start with a period, you need to start with a region, and then you take it from there. But like I said, Daud Ali's book on medieval India is a fantastic general overview.

For more specific stuff, there's a really... I mean, honestly, I'm not sure if I should really go on a rant on this, really, because there are so many interesting books. All of them are quite academic, but in terms of a general overview, I would say, check out John Keay's book and most importantly, check out his bibliography, which is a really great starting off point.

Julie: Perfect. Anirudh, this has been just a delight. I always learn so much from you and I'm so grateful that you took so much time to chat with me today.

Anirudh: My pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

[music plays in background: up-tempo, lively Indian drums]

As you might imagine, the show notes for this episode are epic, so please make sure you check them out. There's links to Anirudh's socials and his websites for his two podcasts, and his new YouTube channel, *Connected Histories*, as well as links to his favorite nonprofits, and mine too.

The music we're listening to is traditional dance music from Andhra Pradesh called Dappu, named after the drum the dancers play while they're performing. I'll put a link to the video of this performance in the show notes. Huge thanks again to Anirudh for sharing his passion with us.

Just a reminder that you can find this podcast on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](#), on Twitter, [@WhatYouLovePod](#), and the website is [LoveWhatYouLovePod.com](#).

All of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website. Thanks to Emily White, transcription magician and proprietress of The Wordary. If you need transcripts, reach out to her at [Emily@TheWordary.com](#). The music for *Love What You Love* is called "Inspiring Hope" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

As always, thank you so, so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

Find Anirudh on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), and [AnirudhKaniseti.com](#)

[Echoes of India](#)

[Yuddha](#)

Related Links:

[Amoghavarsha I](#)

[Battle of Cannae](#)

[Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India by Daud Ali](#)

[Dappu](#)

[Deccan Plateau](#)

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[India: A History by John Keay](#)

[Mayabazar \(1957\)](#) on [YouTube](#)

[Princeton Center for Digital Humanities - Natural Language Processing](#)

[Socotra](#)

Anirudh's favorite nonprofits

[Hasiru Dala](#)

[People's Archive of Rural India](#)

[Solidarity Foundation](#)

My Favorite Nonprofits:

[Everytown for Gun Safety](#)

[Humane Society of Silicon Valley](#)

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