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The Pre-Truth of the Place (Rather than "The Lie of the Land"): Representations of Bengal in the Writings of Early European Travellers

La pré-vérité du lieu (entre topographie et mensonge) : les représentations du Bengale dans les textes des premiers explorateurs européens

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The Pre-Truth of the Place (Rather than "The Lie of the Land"): Representations of Bengal in the Writings of Early European Travellers

La pré-vérité du lieu (entre topographie et mensonge) : les représentations du Bengale dans les textes des premiers explorateurs européens

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TEXT

1 In this volume, aimed to analyze the relationship between 'Place and Post-Truth', I thought that, to emphasize further on the connections between veracity and temporality, I would rather take a step or two back, to what I could refer to as 'pre-truth of the place' (in this particular case that of Bengal generated through the European imaginary before colonization of the former by the latter could begin in earnest). However, there is one more reason too for me to turn to 'pre-truth' here. 'Truth' has always been manipulated by the powers that are, and exposing the constructed nature of such 'Truth' has always been a resistive strategy, but what is new about the era of 'post-truth' is that, with the classic model of ideologization having given way to cynicism—where not 'false consciousness' and 'interpellation' of innocent masses, but knowing participation by them in the generation and circulation of untruth rules the roost—even the semblance of a mask of 'Truth' is not required anymore by the powers to be. Therefore, the invocation of 'Truth vs Untruth' may not work effectively to unmask or resist regimes of post-truth, as it would simply take us from one normativized regime of 'truth' to another (say, from the neo-fascist to the neo-liberal or vice-versa). My submission is that the concept of 'pre-truth' may be more helpful in doing the same: pre-truth being what lay before any of the regimes of 'Truth' (or 'Lies') set in; what did not necessarily claim to be factual, but whose subsequent moulding into 'Truth' lays bare the dynamics of the manipulation that Truth or Post-Truth subsequently undertake. This becomes all the more relevant as I am writing about Bengal at the exact time (August 2024) when Bangladesh, one of the

two major constituents of the geo-cultural territory called 'Bengal', is passing through a transitory period where a students' revolution has driven the elected government out of the country, leading to a period of both hope and apprehension, fuelled all the more by all sorts of discourses circulating in the electronic media, the 'truth' of which is often difficult to determine.

2 In traditional postcolonial theory, the cultural mapping of a colonized territory by the colonizer is often thought of in terms of the phrase 'The Lie of the Land' (see, for example, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's 1992 book by the same name), with there being a pun on the word 'lie', to convey the dual sense of the mapping being aimed to survey how the land *lies*, as also to suggest that the discourses about the land that emerge from such an exercise are often but *lies*. However, the colonial cultural mapping of the 'land', and the resultant 'lie' that emerges out of it in both its senses, is usually preceded by many pre-colonial (often enticing bits of the not-so-true) narrativizations of the 'place' which is yet to be colonized, producing thus a pre-colonial body of 'pre-truth of the place', as it were, before either the 'truth' or the 'lie' of the actual land gets rendered unto a real colonial cultural imaginary. To examine this, I will look at writings of 'early modern' European travellers who came to Bengal and wrote about it, somewhat prior to, but in preparation of, Europe's 'polycolonial' contact with Bengal, that is prior to the setting up of multiple European colonies in Bengal by the Portuguese (1514), the Dutch (1623), the English (1650), and the French (1673). [Some other European nations set up colonies in Bengal too, like the Danish (1698) and the Germans (1723), but I leave them out of discussion here, because they were somewhat late in establishing their contact with Bengal.] Further, prior to all this, there was also a steady flow of European (primarily Italian) travellers to, and travel accounts about, Bengal from the late 13th to the 16th centuries, whose writings I also look at, in building up a case for the pre-truth of Bengal from a polycolonial standpoint. I have already discussed the writers that I take up here (and much more) in far greater detail in my book *Polycoloniality* (see Bhaduri), but here I build up an altogether new case for the 'pre-truth' that emerges in their writings about Bengal.

3 I classify these early modern European travellers who came to Bengal and wrote about it into two groups—the 'Extra-Colonials' and the

'Pre-Colonials', with the former standing for travellers from European countries which did not ever have colonies in Bengal, and the latter for travellers who visited Bengal prior to their respective countries ending up having colonies there. The first extra-colonial early modern European traveller to come to Bengal and write about it is the Italian explorer Marco Polo (1254–1324), who mentions Bengal in Chapter XLII of Book II of his *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* (1298–1299). He writes an entire chapter on it, Chapter XLV, "Of the Province of Bangala", having visited Bengal before 1290—in the 1270s–80s perhaps—the period to which Book II conforms. The second is another Italian explorer and merchant, Nicolo Conti (1395–1469), who travelled through Bengal in the 1430s, and narrated it in his travelogue, *The Travels of Nicolo Conti, in the East* (1444). The third is the Italian traveller and adventurer Ludovico di Varthema (1470–1517), who came to Bengal in 1505, and wrote about it in two chapters—"Chapter concerning the City of Banghella" and "Chapter concerning some Christian Merchants in Banghella"—in "The Third Book Concerning India", in his elaborate travelogue *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema* (1510). I call these early European traveller-writers to Bengal 'extra-colonials' because they are all Italians, and Italy never came to have any colonial presence in Bengal, or anywhere in India. [The closest the Italians came to having a colony in India was when, between 1864 and 1868, Italy made unsuccessful attempts to buy the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal from the Danish, who had the archipelago, named by them as Frederiksøerne (Frederick's Islands), as their colony from 1756, but the islands were finally successfully sold to the English on 16 October 1868.] The writings of these three extra-colonial European travellers to Bengal would have really created an impact on the production of pre-truth in the European imagination of the place of Bengal.

4 I deliberately omit here two early extra-colonial 'western' travellers who came to Bengal in 1292 and 1345, respectively, and wrote about it. The first amongst these is the Italian, John of Montecorvino (1247–1328), who visited the east coast of India at least till Mylapore (in today's Chennai) and probably up to Bengal, and wrote a letter about the same on 22 December 1292, which is certainly the earliest 'written' account on India by a 'modern' European (since Marco Polo's

period of visit may have preceded Montecorvino's but his written account saw the light of day only in 1298–1299), but I leave him out from this discussion because it is not certain (in fact, it is quite unlikely) that he actually came to Bengal. I also leave out Ibn Battuta (1304–c. 1368), who visited Chattogram (Chittagong) and Sylhet in eastern Bengal in 1345, and wrote about the same in fair detail in his travelogue, *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling* (1355), because though the first early modern 'westerner' (Ibn Battuta was from Tangiers in Morocco, just off the coast of southern Spain) to certainly visit Bengal and write about it, he was technically not 'European', to whom alone I restrict this account.

5 Moving on to the 'Pre-Colonials', I take up for discussion here the earliest representatives of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English, and the French, who visited Bengal and wrote about it, before their respective countries should set up colonies there. I discuss, therefore, one after the other the accounts of: the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa (c. 1480–1521), who visited Bengal in the 1510s, and described this in § 102 "The Kingdom of Bengala" in Vol. 2 of his *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (1518); the Dutch Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563–1611), who visited Bengal in the 1580s, and wrote about it in Chapter 16 "Of the Kingdom of Bengalen, and the river Ganges" of Vol. 1 of his *Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies* (1596); the English Ralph Fitch (1550–1611), who visited Bengal in 1586 and in 1588–1589, and we have his travelogue "The Voyage of M. Ralph Fitch Marchant of London" (1591), originally published in Vol. 2 of Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations* (1599); the French Vincent Le Blanc (1554–c. 1640), who visited Bengal in 1575, and wrote about it in Chapter 22 "Of the kingdom of Bengala, and Ternassery" of the First Part of his *The World Surveyed* (1648); and the second French visitor to Bengal, François Pyrard de Laval (1578–1623), who passed through Chittagong in 1607, and documented it in *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil* (1611). I call these travellers 'pre-colonials' because they were from Portugal, the Netherlands, England, and France—the four major players in polycolonial Bengal—but they visited Bengal before their countries could set up colonies in Bengal in 1514, 1623, 1650, and 1673,

respectively. Let me discuss these eight travellers one after the other, to see how they set up the pre-truth of Bengal.

6 The first 'modern' European to talk about Bengal was surely the Italian Marco Polo (1254–1324). But, while he, in Chapters XVII to XXXIII of Book III of his *Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* (1298–1299), describes his journey, around 1292, in the Indian subcontinent—from Andaman and Nicobar Islands, to Sri Lanka, to the Coromandel coast, along the Malabar coast, and right up to today's Gujarat and Sindh (Polo 347–388)—there is no mention of Bengal here. It is however in his Book II, which concerns his travels before leaving Kublai Khan's court in 1290 (i.e. in the 1270s and 80s) that Marco Polo mentions Bengal (or Bangala) several times, beginning with Chapter XLII, in relation to Kublai Khan's (referred to as the Grand Khan) battle in 1272 with the King of Mien (today's Myanmar) and Bangala. This description has led to some doubt as to whether Marco Polo really knew Bengal, or based his account on what he heard about the place from other sources in the Khan's court (thus in itself a 'pre-truth' of sorts). This is so because there is no historical evidence of Kublai Khan's army ever having fought a battle with any king of Bengal, though it is possible that the Burmese king of Mien may have styled himself king of Bangala as well as of Mien, having conquered some eastern district belonging to Bengal, which is quite likely given the contiguity of Myanmar and parts of eastern Bengal. Bengal thus being invoked in this chapter only by extension, let me not go into details of the battle, and instead move on to Chapter XLV of Book II, "Of the Province of Bangala", where Marco Polo indeed gives an account of proper Bengal.

7 In this chapter, Marco Polo has a brief comment to make about the language of Bengal—"It has its peculiar language" (260). He focuses also on the religious customs and the scholarly class of the region:

> The people are worshippers of idols, and amongst them there are teachers, at the head of schools for instruction in the principles of their idolatrous religion and of necromancy, whose doctrine prevails amongst all ranks, including the nobles and chiefs of the country. (260)

Polo mentions the food habits of the people of Bengal too: "The inhabitants live upon flesh, milk, and rice, of which they have abundance" (260). He insists also on the primacy of agriculture and trade in the region: "Much cotton is grown in the country, and trade flourishes. Spikenard, galangal, ginger, sugar, and many sorts of drugs are amongst the productions of the soil; to purchase which the merchants from various parts of India resort thither" (261). More strikingly still Marco Polo draws our attention to the slave trade in Bengal, particularly to the prisoners of war who are castrated and sold as prospective guards of princely harems in other kingdoms:

> They likewise make purchases of eunuchs, of whom there are numbers in the country, as slaves; for all the prisoners taken in war are presently emasculated; and as every prince and person of rank is desirous of having them for the custody of their women, the merchants obtain a large profit by carrying them to other kingdoms, and there disposing of them. (261)

8 Thus, Marco Polo seems to have pointed out some of the peculiarities of the culture and customs of Bengal—including its linguistic, religious, and food habits—while also commenting on its flourishing economy, as also its darker side, in terms of its involvement in a very cruel form of slave trade.

9 The second extra-colonial visitor to Bengal, Nicolo Conti (1395–1469), travelled, among other places, up the river Ganges from its mouth in the Bay of Bengal to northern India and then via the mountains to the mouth of the Ganges again, and thus twice through Bengal, in the 1430s, and wrote his travelogue in Latin in 1444. While Marco Polo had discussed only the language, religion, food, and trade of Bengal, Conti begins by describing the two cities of Bengal that he passes through—Cernove and Buffetania (10)—leading to a lot of speculation in the readership to follow about what these towns would be. Cernove could probably be a corruption of Gaur-Nagar, or the 'city of Gaur', the old capital of Bengal, or Shehr-Nau, the 'new city' of Tanda, to which the capital of Bengal was later shifted from Gaur, and Buffetania could either be Patna or Bardhaman. The point, however, is that Conti describes Bengal as having big cities. Conti also focuses on the river itself—the mighty deltaic Ganga of Bengal—which he seemed to have been awestruck by: "This river is so large that, being

in the middle of it, you cannot see land on either side. […] in some places it is fifteen miles in width" (10). He is also awestruck by the flora, particularly the mighty bamboo:

> On the banks of this river there grow reeds extremely high, and of such surprising thickness that one man alone cannot encompass them with his arms: they make of these fishing boats, for which purpose one alone is sufficient, and of the wood or bark, which is more than a palm's breadth in thickness, skiffs adapted to the navigation of the river. (10)

And he is also awestruck by the fauna, particularly the aquatic animals: "Crocodiles and various kinds of fishes unknown to us are found in the river" (10).

10 Conti is most appreciative of the people of Bengal or of eastern India. Dividing 'India' into three zones—from Persia to the Indus, from the Indus to the Ganges, and what lies east of the Ganges—Conti reserves his greatest civilisational approbation for the dwellers of the third part of India, i.e. Bengal and beyond, though the description, to make them appear like Europeans, seems a bit exaggerated:

> All India is divided into three parts: one, extending from Persia to the Indus; the second, comprising the district from the Indus to the Ganges; and the third, all that is beyond. This third part excels the others in riches, politeness, and magnificence, and is equal to our own country in the style of life and in civilization. For the inhabitants have most sumptuous buildings, elegant habitations, and handsome furniture; they lead a more refined life, removed from all barbarity and coarseness. The men are extremely humane, and the merchants very rich, so much so that some will carry on their business in forty of their own ships, each of which is valued at fifty thousand gold pieces. These alone use tables at their meals, in the manner of Europeans, with silver vessels upon them; whilst the inhabitants of the rest of India eat upon carpets spread upon the ground. (21)

11 However, not restricting himself to only praising the people of Bengal, Conti also describes quite graphically the abominable act of *sati* that he must have witnessed during his trip, thus also not avoiding to describe his brush with the darker side of Bengal, which

also vividly influences the pre-truth imagining of Bengal in the European mind:

> […] the dead are burned, and the living wives, for the most part, are consumed in the same funeral pyre with their husband, one or more, according to the agreement at the time the marriage was contracted. […] The deceased husband is laid on a couch, dressed in his best garments. A vast funeral pyre is erected over him in the form of a pyramid, constructed of odoriferous woods. The pile being ignited, the wife, habited in her richest garments, walks gaily around it, singing, accompanied by a great concourse of people, and amid the sounds of trumpets, flutes, and songs. […] When she has walked round the fire several times, she stands near the elevation on which is the priest, and taking off her dress puts on a white linen garment, her body having first been washed according to custom. In obedience to the exhortation of the priest she then springs into the fire. If some show more timidity (for it frequently happens that they become stupefied by terror at the sight of the struggles of the others, or of their sufferings in the fire), they are thrown into the fire by the bystanders, whether consenting or not. (24)

Thus, Conti, like Marco Polo, brings to the fore both the rich and dark sides of Bengal, but he also adds more to Polo's account, by talking about the cities and the natural features of Bengal too.

12 Our third extra-colonial visitor, the Italian Ludovico di Varthema (1470–1517), came to Bengal in 1505, and wrote an elaborate travelogue about his visit: *The Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna from 1502 to 1508*. His travelogue appeared in Italian in 1510 and was translated into Latin in 1511, German in 1515, Spanish in 1520, French in 1556, Dutch in 1563, and English in 1577, thus opening up the pre-truth of Bengal for the first time in more than two centuries (after Marco Polo) to a broader European imagination. Varthema devotes two chapters—"Chapter concerning the City of Banghella" and "Chapter concerning some Christian Merchants in Banghella" (210–212, 212–214)—in "The Third Book Concerning India" in his *Travels* solely to his experiences in Bengal, which he calls "Banghella". He talks specifically about arriving at "the city of Banghella" (210), and since there is currently no city by that name in Bengal, there is some debate as to which city is referred to by the name Banghella, adding to the pre-truth about the place. The editor of Varthema's travelogue,

George Percy Badger, shows how different commentators identify Varthema's city of Banghella with Gaur, or Chittagong, or Satgaon, which all being the main cities of Bengal at that time, could have been referred to as '*the* city of Bengal' (see Badger's comments in Varthema 210, LXXX–LXXXII, CXXI). Whatever the location of the city of Banghella may be, what really matters is that Varthema thought of it as a fabulous place: "This city was one of the best that I had hitherto seen, and has a very great realm" (211), and later "this city, which I believe is the best in the world" (214). Varthema also goes on to describe the Sultan who ruled over this city and who "maintain[ed] two hundred thousand men for battle on foot and on horse" (211). Adding further to his account of the richness of the place, Varthema goes on to describe the plentiful food production and the commercial pre-eminence of Bengal, and the richness of the merchants who stayed there: "This country abounds more in grain, flesh of every kind, in great quantity of sugar, also of ginger, and of great abundance of cotton, than any country in the world. And here there are the richest merchants I ever met with" (212). However, Varthema is surely hyperbolic and 'pre-truthy' when he claims the city of Bengal to be the best city in the world, with a massive army, with more food production than any country in the world, and with the richest merchants ever.

13 More interestingly, Varthema also encounters some Christian merchants in Bengal, and writes a whole chapter on them. He tells us, "We also found some Christian merchants here. They said that they were from a city called Sarnau," and "that in their country there were many lords also Christians, but they are subject to the great Khan [of] Cathai" (212). Varthema is particularly amazed at the fact that they are "white" and Christians: "These same men are as white as we are, and confess that they are Christians, and believe in the Trinity, and likewise in the Twelve Apostles, in the four Evangelists, and they also have baptism with water" (213). Varthema identifies them as possibly Armenian, based on their script: "But they write in the contrary way to us, that is, after the manner of Armenia" (213), though the editor of the volume, George Badger, convinces us in a footnote that this is a wrong identification as the Armenian script is also written from left to right, and they must have been Nestorians writing in some Arabesque script. Varthema also observes these Christian merchants'

food habits: "they eat at a table after our fashion, and they eat every kind of flesh" (214). Importantly, he is so enamoured by them, that he decides to leave with them on a ship for Pego (Pegu/Bago in Myanmar), leaving behind his "best city in the world", ending his Bengal journey thus: "We departed thence with the said Christians, and went towards a city which is called Pego, distant from Banghella about a thousand miles" (214). What is to be noted is that, apart from commenting on the cities and the general prosperity of Bengal, Varthema also brings to the fore the potential cosmopolitan nature of the place, with the presence of merchants from other parts of the world, practising other religions.

14 One can now move on towards pre-colonial pre-truth, i.e. accounts of early modern European travellers to Bengal and their accounts prior to their respective countries having colonies in Bengal. One can begin with Duarte Barbosa (c. 1480–1521), who was in the service of the Portuguese government in India between 1500 and 1516, and visited Bengal around 1510. It should be noted that the Portuguese had colonies in parts of India from 1498, but in Bengal only from 1514, after Barbosa had left. Based initially in Cochin (Kochi) and noted for his linguistic skills, Barbosa was posted in 1502 as a scrivener and an interpreter from Malayalam to Portuguese in a factory in Cannanore (Kannur). Travelling intermittently through southern and eastern India, and combining his experiences therein with those of his prior voyages from Portugal to India and the later ones in south-east Asia, Barbosa wrote *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (*Livro de Duarte Barbosa*) in around 1516. Chapter § 102, titled "The Kingdom of Bengala", in Vol. 2 of this book is where the account of his visit to Bengal in the 1510s is recorded. Like his extra-colonial predecessors, Barbosa also points out the presence of big urban setups in Bengal, particularly the "city of Bengala": "this sea is a Gulf which runneth in between two lands, and going well into it there is to the north a right great city of the Moors, which they call Bengala" (135), which is "a very excellent sea-haven" (136). Similarly, Barbosa also points out the trade-driven and prosperous cosmopolitan nature of the city's demographics: "The inhabitants thereof are white men" (137), and that "there dwell there as well strangers from many lands, such as Arabs, Persians, Abexis and Indians" (138–139), with its residents being "great merchants and they possess great ships" (141–142) of both the Arabian

and the Chinese sort, "which are of great size and carry great cargoes" (142) and trade all over the south and southeast Asian coastline.

15 Additionally, Barbosa also focuses on Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal and the differences and disparities between different castes. Barbosa shows how the towns of Bengal were populated primarily by Hindus, it being a place "wherein are many towns, as well inland as on the coast, the inhabitants whereof are Heathen" (135), while the flourishing coastal mercantile trade was primarily held by the Muslims: "The Moors dwell in the seaports where there is great traffic in goods of many kinds and sailing of ships both great and small to many countries" (135). Barbosa also talks in detail about the difference in dresses and jewellery worn, and the personal lifestyle of "the respectable Moors", which seems quite extravagant, indulgent and bordering on the indolent: "They are luxurious, eat well and spend freely, and have many other extravagancies as well" (147), while the "lower castes" of the city of Bengala wear different and much less elaborate clothing, compared to the merchants: "The lower castes of this town wear short white shirts, which come half way down their thighs, and on their heads little twisted turbans of three or four folds" (148). Barbosa also comments on how conversion to Islam is rampant among the Hindus primarily to gain favours from their Muslim overlords: "The Heathen of these parts daily become Moors to gain the favour of their rulers" (148). Like Polo before him, Barbosa also mentions the evil practice of slave trade in Bengal, but he projects it further as a case of Muslim merchants of Bengal buying or kidnapping young Hindu boys, and castrating them and selling them:

> The Moorish merchants of this city ofttimes travel up country to buy Heathen boys from their parents or from other persons who steal them and castrate them, so that they are left quite flat. Many die from this; those who live they train well and sell them. They value them much as guardians of their women and estates and for other low objects. (147)

16 Barbosa ends his account with the comment that what he has observed in the "city of Bengala" in terms of cohabitation and mutual relations between Hindus and Muslims is generalisable to the whole of the kingdom of Bengal. Thus, Barbosa adds a further layer to the

pre-truth of Bengal, that concerning the not-too-hospitable relationship between different communities and castes there.

17 Our second pre-colonial European traveller to Bengal, the first Dutchman to visit Bengal in the 1580s, much before the Netherlands had its first colony in Bengal in 1623, was the merchant and historian Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563–1611), Secretary to the Portuguese Viceroy in Goa from 1583 to 1588. During his tenure at Goa, Linschoten visited many parts of India including Bengal and wrote about it in his *Itinerario*, which was published from Amsterdam in Dutch in 1596. An English-translation of the *Itinerario* was published from London in 1598, and called *Iohn Huighen van Linschoten: His Discours of Voyages into ye Easte & West Indies*; a German translation was published the same year, followed by two Latin translations from Frankfurt and Amsterdam in 1599; and a French translation followed in 1610, suggesting the importance of this book for the emergent pre-truth of the polycolonial European imaginary. The 16th chapter of Volume 1 of this aforesaid book is devoted to Bengal, and he mentions "the towne of Chatigan, which is the chief towne of Bengala" (93–94), and also "Porto grande, and Porto Pequeno, that is the great haven and the little haven" (95), thus touching upon both Chittagong and Hooghly, the two major settlements of the Portuguese in Bengal at that point of time. Linschoten also marvels at the plentifulness of produces in Bengal and the cheapness of it: "The country is most plentiful of necessary victuails […] and so good cheape that it were incredible to declare" (94), and particularly stresses on the different kinds of fabric produced in Bengal—cotton, linen (probably jute, as it seems from the description), and silk:

> [M]uch Cotton linen is made there which is very fine, and much esteemed in India, and not only spread abroad and carried into India and al the East parts, but also into Portingal, and other places […] They have likewise other linen excellently wrought of a hearbe, which they spinne like yearne […] it is yealowish, and is called the hearbe of Bengalen […] likewise they make whole péeces or webbes of this hearbe, sometimes mixed and woven with silke. […] (95–96)

Thus, like his predecessors, Linschoten also ends up mentioning the big cities of Bengal and its prosperity and primacy in trade.

18 However, at a departure from his predecessors, Linschoten does not have a very high opinion of the inhabitants of Bengal, as he says, "they are a most subtill and wicked people, and are esteemed the worst slaves of all India, for that they are all thieves, and the women whores" (94), almost as a word of caution for any nation desirous of trading with or colonising Bengal. However, for Linschoten, this apparent lawlessness in Bengal also makes it very inviting for a potential Dutch trading expedition to Bengal, and what makes it even more exciting, from an administratively colonial point of view, is that the sole European colonisers of Bengal at that point of time, the Portuguese, were not much into administration, leaving the field open for future entrants like the Dutch. As Linschoten says,

> The Portingalles deale and traffique thether [...] but there they have no Fortes, nor any government, nor policié as in India [they have], but live in a manner like wild men, and untamed horses, for that every man doth there what hee will, and every man is Lord [and maister], ney ther estéeme they any thing of justice, whether there be any or none, and in this manner doe certayne Portingalles dwell among them, some here, some there [scattered abroade]. (95)

This is not exactly true—the Portuguese did have formal settlements and governmental machinery in their Bengal colonies in the mid-1580s—but this write-up by Linschoten was meant as a pre-truth, an advertisement to his fellow countrymen, the Dutch, to come over to the prosperous, though a little wily, Bengal, and set up trade there, colonize it, and govern it properly. And, this is precisely what the Dutch do. In 1595, the first Dutch voyage to India happens, between 1598 and 1600, six companies are formed, and in 1602 the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or the United East India Company) is established, with their first formal colony in Bengal being established in 1623.

19 Our third pre-colonial travel writer is the Englishman, Ralph Fitch, who first visited Bengal in 1586, several years before England would have its first colony there in 1650. In 1578, Sir Edward Osborne and Richard Staper secured permission from the Ottoman Emperor, Sultan Murad III, for trading in his empire, and in 1581, Queen Elizabeth I granted a 'private letters patent' to Osborne and Staper, permitting them to represent England in trade with territories

belonging to the Ottoman Empire, leading to the foundation of the 'Turkey Company', better known as the 'Levant Company' (technically though this name was chartered only in 1592, after the merger of the 'Turkey Company' with the 'Venice Company'). Funded by the 'Levant Company', and with a letter from Queen Elizabeth I to the Mughal Emperor Akbar (Jalaluddin Akbar, 'Zelabdim Echebar' in the then English orthography), the merchants John Newberie and John Eldred, the relatively obscure Ralph Fitch, a jeweller William Leedes, and a painter James Story took the ship *Tyger* on 12 February 1583, on a mission to India, the first such official mission to India from England, more than 17 years before the founding of the East India Company. Evidently, Ralph Fitch (1550–1611) was not the leader or the most important person of the 1583 expedition, but he is the one who has gained greater attention than his superiors Newberie and Eldred, because of the breadth of his travels, and his influential writings about the same. The team reached Aleppo by sea, from where they moved on by land to Baghdad and Basra, which they reached in August 1583. At Basra, Eldred stayed back, while the others moved on to Hormuz. In Hormuz, all four were arrested by the Portuguese, suspected of being spies, and sent as prisoners, via Diu, Daman, and the Portuguese holdings in Bombay, to Goa in November 1583. Thanks to the intercession of a couple of Jesuits, including Thomas Stephens (the first modern Englishman, a Jesuit missionary, to come and settle in India, Goa to be precise, in 1579), they secured release, but the painter Story stayed back in Goa to join the Jesuit order. Fitch, Newberie and Leedes left Goa in April 1584 to travel by land through central India to the Mughal emperor Akbar's court in Fatehpur Sikri. There, they presented to the emperor the letter from Queen Elizabeth I, thus becoming the first direct 'ambassadors' of the British crown to the Mughal court. The jeweller Leedes stayed back in Fatehpur Sikri to work for Akbar with handsome remuneration, while Fitch and Newberie set off on a journey through India, but Newberie decided to return in September 1585, via Lahore and was not heard of again. In November 1585, Fitch started his solo travels from Agra, down the rivers Yamuna and Ganga, through Allahabad, Benares and Patna, to reach Tanda in Bengal in February 1586, and travelling extensively through it. Fitch left for Southeast Asia by sea from Bengal on 28 November 1586, and on his way back, visited Bengal again from November 1588 to 3 February 1589, before setting off by

sea to Sri Lanka to Cochin to Goa for his return journey exactly the way he had come, and returned to London on 29 April 1591. Detailed narrativization of these trips exists through letters by Eldred, Newberie, and Fitch, most of which were first published in Richard Hakluyt's *The Principall Navigations, Voiages, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589), and then in Chapter VI of Vol. X of Samuel Purchas's *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes, Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others* (1625), and thereafter in many compilations of Fitch's famed travelogue.

20 Like the travellers before him, Ralph Fitch also presents Bengal as quite prosperous, where "Many of the people are very rich" (119), and the region as rich in produces and in maritime trade: "Great store of Cotton cloth goeth from hence, and much Rice, wherewith they serue all India, Ceilon, Pegu, Malacca, Sumatra and many other places" (119–120). Fitch further shows how Bengal is at the crossroads not only of maritime trade, but also the land-routes of Central Asia, leading to the cosmopolitanism that earlier travellers had also pointed out: "and there are marchants which come out of China, & they say out of Muscouia or Tartarie. And they come to buy muske, cambals, agats, silke, pepper and saffron like the saffron of Persia" (116). Fitch also talks about the darker side and possible lawlessness in Bengal, when he says how the usual route from Cooch Behar to Hooghly was deemed unsafe: "We went through the wildernes, because the right way was full of thieues" (113), adding to it the lawlessness caused by the unstable political situation in interior Bengal. He mentions "Chondery", the king of Sripur, and "Isacan" (Isha Khan), "The chiefe king of all these countries" (119), who were all rebels who would have declared their own sovereignty, rebelling against the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Fitch says, crediting the topography of south-central Bengal for the possibility of such rebelliousness, "They be all hereabouts rebels against their king Zelabdim Echebar: for here are so many riuers and Ilands, that they flee from one to another, whereby his horse-men cannot preuaile against them" (118–119).

21 Over and above these pre-truths already pointed out by his predecessors, what is spectacular about Ralph Fitch's addition to the discourse is that he travelled extensively through Bengal, not just to

the usual big cities visited by Europeans (Gaur, Tanda, Satgaon, Hooghly, Chittagong, etc.) but also to far-flung areas of the hinterland of Bengal, and wrote about them. For instance, he proceeds "into the country of Couche, which lieth 25. dayes iourny Northwards from Tanda" (111), i.e. Cooch Behar in the foothills of North Bengal. He further talks of Bhutan (whether he visited it or not): "There is a country 4. daies iournie from Couche or Quickeu before mentioned, which is called Bottanter and the citie Bottia [...] There are very high mountains in this countrey, & one of them so steep that when a man is 6. daies iourney off it, he may see it perfectly" (116). He also goes to Tripura: "From Satagam I trauelled by the countrey of the king Tippara or porto of Tippara" (115), to relatively smaller port towns like Angeli (Hijli) (114) and Bacola (Bakla / Barishal / Bakerganj) (118), and big towns of interior east Bengal—to "Serrepore which standeth vpon the riuer of Ganges" (118), and "Sinnergan [which] is a towne sixe leagues from Serrepore" (119), i.e. Sripur and Sonargaon, respectively. It is very significant that Fitch visits and writes about not just the usual big port cities (Satgaon, Hooghly, Chittagong, etc.) but also far-flung peripheral places, smaller port towns, and towns in the interior hinterland of Bengal. Fitch's construction of the pre-truth of Bengal is thus not just about its port town and places of obvious trade interests, but about the hinterland and far-flung margins of Bengal. This actually corresponds to the final outcome of the polycolonial game: that of the English controlling the whole of the Indian hinterland, with the other European powers having only small enclaves of colonies on the coast. A further addition by Fitch to the pre-existing pre-truth of Bengal is the beginnings of somewhat of an 'orientalization' of the natives there. For instance, curiously, Ralph Fitch shows some Bengalis (at least the Hindus of Cooch Behar) as great animal lovers: "Here they be all Gentiles, and they will kil nothing. They haue hospitals for sheepe, goates, dogs, cats, birds, & for all other liuing creatures. When they be old & lame, they keepe them vntil they die" (112), which must be a bit exaggerated, leading to further fantastic accounts by his pre-colonial successors.

22 One can move on to the last set of pre-colonial travel writers to Bengal, the two Frenchmen to have visited Bengal before the French had their colony there from 1673. The first Frenchman to have come

to Bengal was the traveller Vincent Le Blanc (1554–c. 1640), who visited the elusive "Towne of Bengale", Chittagong, and Satgaon around 1575, and gives his account of the same in Chapter 22, "Of the kingdom of Bengala, and Ternassery", of the First Part of his *The World Surveyed: Or, The Famous Voyages & Travailes of Vincent Le Blanc, or White, of Marseilles* (1648). Like his predecessors, Le Blanc talks a bit about the geography of Bengal: "This Kingdom reaches 200. leagues upon the sea side, and containes the Kingdomes of *Sirapu* [Sripur], *Chandecan*, *Bacal* [Bakla], *Aracan*, or *Mogor* [the land of the Mogs, i.e. today's Rakhine province of Myanmar], and others" (83). He also brings into focus a bit of the then political situation of Bengal, that it "remains stil subjected to the great *Mogull*, Prince of *Tartary*, and Supreme Lord of all *Indostan*: and yet there remaine some Lords in that Countrey, that are Soveraignes, and obey the *Mogull* in a Noble manner" (83). His attention is primarily drawn, however, to the religious plurality of the place: "The Inhabitants of *Bengale* are Idolaters, *Mahometans*, and some Christians, for there are *Portuguaises*, and Fathers of the Society" (83). Le Blanc notes this multi-ethnic cosmopolitan ethos of Bengal in its trade practices too, and observes that "the people are very civill, and given to trade. And all Nations have free traffick, as *Persians*, *Greekes*, *Abyssins*, *Chineses*, *Guserates*, *Malabares*, *Turkes*, *Moores*, *Jewes*, *Russes*, or *Georgians*, and many others" (84). Thus, like the travellers before him, Le Blanc also notes the religious tolerance and cosmopolitanism of Bengal, and he notes as well how "The King of *Bengale* is an Idolater, as generally all the Eastern are" (85), but how the King was welcoming of the Christian fathers: "This King hath entertained the Fathers of the society at *Chandecan*, his Royal Town" (87).

23 What Le Blanc adds to the pre-truth discourse of Bengal is its connection to antique history. He brings us face to face with the toponymic confusion that we have encountered earlier, by naming the chief town of Bengal as "Bengale" itself, but adds further to the conundrum by stating that the locals call this city "Batacouta", and that it could be the same city that was referred to in Antiquity as "Ganges" on the banks of the river by the same name:

> Leaving the Coast of *Coromandell*, we came to the Kingdom of *Bengale*, the chiefe Town whereof beares the name, or at least so called by the *Portuguese*, and other Nations, & by the Natives *Batacouta*, one of the greatest antiquity in the *Indies*. Some would have it to be old *Ganges*, a Royall Town upon the River *Ganges*. (83)

The identification of this city of "Bengale" with a place called by the locals as "Batacouta" and the ancients as "Ganges" connects Bengal to the known history of European Antiquity, as the city of "Gange" referred to by classical greats like Plutarch and Ptolemy as the grand capital of the ancient and formidable kingdom of "Gangaridae" located in the deltaic region of the river Ganga, which is indeed today's Bengal, is often identified with archaeological finds at Wari-Bateswar (the name does sound similar to Battacouta) in today's Bangladesh or Chandraketugarh in today's West Bengal. Neither of these two places would have been towns of any consequence in Le Blanc's time, but this is definitely an attempt to connect the place with the pre-truth of antique history. Le Blanc, almost carrying forward what Fitch had begun regarding the pre-truth of Bengal, also takes off on some general Orientalist fantasies, like the Hindu king of the city of Bengal having a contingent of Amazonian female bodyguards and a seraglio of amorous and licentious women:

> The King keepes a great Court, followed by a gallant Nobility, and his chiefest guard consists of women, [...] they put more trust in them then in men, they march very gravely, are very valiant, and expert horseriders and vaulters, use the Cimitere and buckler, and battle axes very dexterously: you must take a care to come neer them in their March, for they will abuse you, [...] the King maintains a great many of them in his Pallace, and the handsommest are richly attired.

> The Sun once set, 'tis forbidden to any man to come neere the quarter, the *Seraglio* is kept in, it lookes upon a faire garden, on the side of a pleasant river, where the Ladies walke at night, and 'tis death for any man to be found there. [...] If the women are surprized in their amours, they run no danger, and men are very seldom exempt from punishments. (85)

24 Similarly, he talks of the languid climate of Bengal having contributed to some cases of freakishly long lifespans, including one person who was 330 years old:

> The Climate is very temperate, and well air'd, that makes them live long, witnesse the *Moor* of *Bangale*, aged three hundred and thirty years, in 1537. The oldest of the Countrey never knew him but old, and of the same growth, and remembred *Cambaye* without a Mahometan, his hair chang'd colour four times, from black to white, and he lost his teeth as often, and still they came again, he had about 700. wives in his life time, he was an Idolater for a 100. years together, and was the rest of his time a Mahometan [...]. (86)

Or that, for their funeral rites, Bengalis apparently "maintain women to lament and weep over the dead, according to the ancient *Roman* fashion. These women are clothed in mantles of the *Spanish* fashion [...] One of these women makes a Panegyrick of the dead" (89), and such other descriptions. These, certainly untrue and fantastic, descriptions do throw some light on the early French imagining of Bengal in particular, and the Orient in general, in terms of their pre-truth of the place.

25 The second French visitor to Bengal, François Pyrard de Laval (1578–1623), passed through Chittagong in 1607, and documented it in *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil* (1611). Apart from talking about the usual pre-truth about Bengal set by his predecessors—its richness and trade prospects, the cosmopolitanism of the place, the inner conflicts between Muslim kings and Hindu chieftains, the slave trade, etc.—Pyrard de Laval also has cautionary negative assessments to make about both its female and male inhabitants: "the women are pretty, but more shameless than elsewhere in India. The men are much given to trafficking in merchandise, and not to war or arms,—a soft, courteous, clever people, but having the repute of great cheats, thieves, and liars" (290). Besides, like Le Blanc, Pyrard de Laval also engages in some interesting exoticization, particularly about the fauna of Bengal, when he mentions elephants and rhinoceroses, and also reports that there are "some say unicorns, too, which are said to be found in this land only. They say other animals will not drink at a well until a female unicorn has steeped her horn in the water, so they

all wait on the bank till she comes and does so" (289). I do not know what to make of the Orientalist exoticization of Bengal peculiar to the pre-colonial French travellers, that too fairly late in the day, when the East would not have been that mysterious to the European imaginary any more, but this additional layer of pre-truth mystique to the place may have some correlation to how the French were relatively cautious and late starters in their colonization of Bengal, compared to the Portuguese, the Dutch or the English.

26 As one can note from the above accounts, as the extra-colonial and pre-colonial European travel accounts of Bengal move down time, and closer to actual colonization by the respective nations of the travellers, there are certain shifts in the construction of the pre-truth about the place. One can note a gradual accretion of pre-truth: from an initial description of its language, religion, food, and trade (Polo); to a description of its geographical, geological, sociological features, and flora and fauna (Conti); to hyperbolic projections of grand cities of the place and focus on its cosmopolitanism (Varthema); to more administrative issues like Hindu-Muslim relations and caste relations (Barbosa); to cautionary notes about its people as also enticement for prospective colonization (Linschoten); to scouting and reporting the hinterland of Bengal beyond the major cities (Fitch); to connecting Bengal with antique history and orientalist mystique of mythology (Le Blanc, Pyrard de Laval). Whether these shifts can be causally connected to the periodic and successful propagation of colonialism by diverse European nations in Bengal can only be speculated upon, but one can definitely see this well-crafted construction of a sustained narrative of the pre-truth of the place of Bengal to have laid the grounds for its reception in the European polycolonial imaginary.

27 Ten prominent themes seem to stand out from this accumulated pre-truth about Bengal. There are indeed many positives:

> 1) the rich history and geography of Bengal (pointed out by Polo, then by Conti, and connected to European Antiquity by Le Blanc);

> 2) the rich language and customs of Bengal (pointed out primarily by Polo and Conti);

> 3) the prosperity of Bengal (pointed out by Polo, Varthema, Linschoten, and Fitch);

> 4) the grand cities of Bengal (described by Conti, Varthema, Barbosa, and Linschoten);

> 5) the diverse hinterland of interior Bengal (described primarily by Fitch);

> 6) the cosmopolitan nature of Bengal (indicated by Varthema, Barbosa, Fitch, and Le Blanc).

But, on the other side, there are also the negatives:

> 7) problematic communal and caste relations in Bengal (described primarily by Barbosa);

> 8) leading to its dark side where inhuman practices like slave trade and *sati* flourish, the people are dishonest, and there is general lawlessness (begun by Polo and Conti, and carried forward by Linschoten, Fitch, and Pyrard de Laval);

> 9) leading to fantastic and stereotypical Orientalizing imaginings of Bengal (beginning with Fitch, but primarily in Le Blanc and Pyrard de Laval);

> 10) culminating in an enticement for a potential colonization of Bengal (primarily in Linschoten).

28 Could it be that these ten themes, arising out of the pre-truth of Bengal, can form a template for Bengal and Bengalis today to negotiate the labyrinthine alleyways of untruth and post-truth, and even resist the same?

29 Bengalis are the third-largest ethnic group in the world after the Han Chinese and Arabs (Chakravarti), with Bengali being the sixth-most spoken native language in the world (Lane), and yet, Bengal is a divided nation. The repeated partition of the subcontinent, particularly of Bengal (1905, 1947, 1971), has ensured that there are

multiple geopolitical entities, which can be collectively called 'Bengal': Bangladesh (referred to at some point of time as East Bengal); the Indian state of West Bengal; other parts of India where Bengali is the official language—the state of Tripura, and the Barak Valley region of the state of Assam; and parts of India where Bengali is the most-spoken language without it being assigned the official language status —the Andaman Islands, and some areas of the states of Assam, Bihar, Jharkand, and Odisha, adjoining West Bengal—there thus being multiple Bengals. Around 58% of the 300 million Bengalis reside in Bangladesh, around 38% in India, and around 4% are in diaspora, with there being major divisions as well amongst Bengalis on grounds of religion (66% of Bengalis are Muslims, 33% Hindus, and 1% of other religions, primarily Buddhists and Christians), and caste (see Census, Bangladesh; Census, West Bengal). Of late, one can notice enhanced communal polarization on both sides of the border through competitive fundamentalisms and casteisms, triggered often by post-truth and fake news. How can a divided Bengal battle these divisive 'post-truths', and think through its differences, through its diversities, through its pluralities, rather than giving in to homogenizing majoritarianism of either the Muslim or Hindu sort on the two sides of the border? My submission is that it can possibly do so by inverting its self-same gaze and imagining oneself as a divided, but plural and inclusive, Bengali people, by invoking the imagination of Bengal by others—Bengal deriving its toolkit of re-imagining itself, contra sectarian post-truth, through literary 'pre-truth' about the place, e.g., as discussed in this article, through how the colonial 'others' had imagined Bengal before they had become colonizers. The derivation of this toolkit from the imagination of Bengal by Europeans, rather than from that by Bengalis themselves, is important not because the former is any truer (after all, it is 'pre-truth' and not 'truth'), but because it is only from the other's perspective that one can deflate one's self-same identitarian post-truths.

30 But, what toolkit can we derive from this perusal of extra-colonial and pre-colonial pre-truth imaginings of Bengal? To follow up from the ten themes of pre-truth listed above, and to extrapolate therefrom:

> 1) We can surely take pride in the rich history and the awe-inspiring geography of Bengal;
>
> 2) We must cherish our unique and rich language and customs;
>
> 3) We ought to reminisce on the prosperity that Bengal once had (and may still have),
>
> 4) And celebrate its grand big cities and their flourishing trade;
>
> 5) But, we should also be accepting of the diversity that the interior regions of Bengal and its hinterland represent, and be responsive to the plurality that Bengal is all about.
>
> 6) This, particularly because Bengal has been shown to be a cradle of tolerance of diverse communities, and of cosmopolitanism;
>
> 7) Because otherwise, communal tension and caste problems are just lurking around the corner in Bengal, and can flare into sectarianism any time;
>
> 8) Thrusting us into the darker sides of Bengal, marked with fundamentalism, obscurantism, intolerance, hypocrisy, oppression of minorities, and violence;
>
> 9) Where blatant lies and fantastic imaginings and fake news may rule,
>
> 10) Inviting possible and renewed new-imperialist aggression and annexation.

31 Thus, these lessons learnt from the pre-truth of the place, as constructed by the 'other', can arm us against falling prey to the vagaries of post-truth, that seek to divide us and rule us evermore, and this could be all the more relevant for Bengal in our current times, with the current political turmoil in Bangladesh and growing sectarianism on both sides of the border that separates the two (or more) Bengals.

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ABSTRACTS

English

This article argues that the concept of 'pre-truth'—or what lies before a regime of 'Truth' (or 'Lies') about a certain subject sets in—can help one take on the vagaries of 'post-truth' that later peril that subject. In the colonial context, for instance, one can see that the 'lie of the land' (in both senses of the word 'lie') that emerges out of colonial mapping, is often preceded by prior accounts of the yet to be colonized territory, producing a pre-colonial body of 'pre-truth of the place', whose subsequent appropriation lays bare the manipulation that Truth or Post-Truth regimes undertake. This article looks at writings of 'early modern' European travellers to Bengal, prior to Europe's 'polycolonial' contact with the area: both as 'extra-colonials' i.e. late 13th to early 16th century travellers from European countries (primarily Italy) which did not have colonies in Bengal—'pre-colonials'—i.e. the first Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French travellers from the early 16th to the mid-17th centuries, who visited Bengal prior to their respective countries having colonies there. The article, in studying the writings of eight such travellers, notes a gradual accretion of pre-truth about Bengal, and identifies ten themes that emerge from the same. It further argues that these ten themes can form the template for a toolkit with which Bengalis can resist the identitarian polarization and fundamentalisms triggered by post-truth and fake news on both sides of their borders today. This is all the more because this toolkit is derived from the pre-truth imagination of Bengal by Europeans, rather than Bengalis themselves, as it is only from the other's provisionally true (or pre-true) perspective that one can deflate one's self-same identitarian post-truths.

Français
Cet article soutient que le concept de « pré-vérité » — ou ce qui se situe avant qu'un régime de Vérité (ou de Mensonges) ne se mette en place à propos d'un certain sujet — peut permettre d'affronter les aléas de la post-vérité qui plus tard menacent un tel sujet. Dans un contexte colonial par exemple, on peut voir que la configuration du territoire qui émerge de la cartographie coloniale est souvent précédée de récits antérieurs à propos de cette région qui reste à coloniser, produisant ainsi un ensemble de textes précoloniaux définissant ce qu'on pourrait appeler une pré-vérité du lieu, dont l'appropriation à venir ne fera que mettre à nu une logique de manipulation que les régimes de la Vérité ou de la Post-vérité enclenchent alors. Cet article examine des récits de voyageurs européens au Bengale au début de l'époque moderne, avant le développement des contacts « polycoloniaux » de l'Europe avec toute la région : qu'il s'agisse d'européens extra-coloniaux, c'est-à-dire de voyageurs qui, de la fin du XIIIe siècle au début du XVIe siècle (essentiellement des Italiens), ne venaient pas de pays qui auraient par la suite établi des colonies au Bengale, ou encore de précoloniaux, les premiers voyageurs portugais, hollandais, anglais et français qui du début XVIe au milieu du XVIIe siècles ont visité le Bengale avant que leurs pays d'origine respectifs n'y établissent de colonies. L'analyse des écrits de huit de ces voyageurs permet ainsi de noter une accumulation progressive de pré-vérités sur le Bengale et identifie dix thèmes qui en émergent. L'argumentation se poursuit ensuite en suggérant l'idée que ces dix thèmes puissent fournir une sorte de boîte à outils conceptuels qui pourrait se révéler utile aux Bengalais afin de résister au mieux à la polarisation identitaire et au fondamentalisme que la post-vérité et la désinformation encouragent des deux côtés de leurs frontières. Ceci est d'autant plus valable qu'une telle boîte à outils dérive justement de la pré-vérité imaginaire que les Européens ont projetée sur le Bengale plutôt que des Bengalais eux-mêmes, comme si on ne pouvait paradoxalement combattre et vaincre ses propres post-vérités identitaires que depuis la perspective de l'Autre, proposant une éphémère et fragile « vérité » ou « pré-vérité ».

INDEX

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pré-vérité, Bengale, polycolonialité, pré-colonial, extra-colonial, écriture de voyage du début de l'époque moderne jusqu'au XVIIe siècle

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