Modern studies of Indian nationalism make frequent reference to the literary-cultural genres of Indian nationalism as sources or texts, yet the implicit assumption made by these scholars of nationalism is that one can gain access to nationalist literatures without theorizing the literary-rhetorical conventions that govern each of the literary forms associated with nationalism. This is a serious drawback, given that Indian nationalism began as literature before it assumed the form of political theory. Cultural production pre-dates the political phase of Indian nationalism; nationalism emerges in the nineteenth century primarily as cultural-social movements and only later constitutes itself as anti-colonial political movements. While the tropes, mythologies and narrative structures of Indian nationalist historiography and political thought have received careful attention, the dominant tendency in the analysis of nationalist literatures is to treat the literary text as a historical document unmediated by genre conventions, a transparent vehicle of discourses and ideologies.

This chapter suggests that genre analysis of the nationalists’ cultural production, particularly the borrowings between subaltern and nationalist literatures, remains the unexamined underside of postcolonial theoretical examination of nationalism. Theorizing the literary genres that emerged and flourished under the aegis of Indian nationalism is not merely an exercise in formalism. My point is that it is precisely in the citation and adaptation of the Lakhnavi tall tale by the nationalist literary text, Premchand’s Hindi–Urdu language satirical short fiction
“Shatranj ke Khilari” (The Chess Players, 1924), that we glimpse the complex relationships between elite nationalism and subaltern classes. I examine the key differences between the two genres, the Lakhnavi tall tale and nationalist satire, because I wish to examine a writer’s borrowings, stealings, acknowledged and unacknowledged influences. The study of cross-genre borrowings tells us about the cultural ancestors of the genre, and the sedimented history of influences reveals when and in what way the new genre broke off. The aesthetics of a literary genre provides insight into the set of prohibitions and regulations which determine what can be said within the boundaries of the genre and how it can be said. Cross-genre borrowings constitute a way to track the subtle processes of cultural production. One borrowing facilitates another. Satyajit Ray’s interpretation of Premchand’s short fiction became the subject of a national debate in the late twentieth century with the screening of his 1977 film The Chess Players, a film that seized the imagination of Ray’s several constituencies in India and abroad (Ray’s borrowings from Premchand and the Lakhnavi tall tale form the subject of Chapter 4). There is no better way of understanding the complexities and ideological stakes of cultural production in postcolonial India than to track the late nineteenth-century subaltern genre of what I call the Lakhnavi tall tale about the chess-playing nawabs from its place of emergence in oral anecdotes and culturally encoded jokes passed down word of mouth, to its appropriation and recodings by early twentieth-century nationalism and its re-emergence in postcolonial cinema in late twentieth century.

Through genre analysis I provide the view from below. Elite nationalism not only excludes subaltern communities and classes from the historic project of nation building, the cultural production of elite nationalism appropriates subaltern histories, genres, and forms of resistance. The subaltern’s body, labour power, and collective strength are harnessed by the colonial power and the indigenous elite. In like manner the literary-cultural forms through which the subaltern articulates and mediates the world around him/her and comes to know how, where, and when to resist colonial domination are also subject to appropriation by nationalism. The story of elite appropriation is not included in the official narrative that nationalist literatures tell about themselves. Just as nationalist historiography re-invents the historic past of the nation, correspondingly nationalist literatures describe their stealings and erasures of subaltern genres in the idiom of mobilization as a way to reach the common people, as the nationalist ideologue’s commitment to the folk and the popular.