

How far can Empire be explained as the result of a series of imagined relationships?

The early part of the twentieth century saw moves to challenge the justifications for continued British rule, both in the older colonies such as India, and also, most specifically, to the irregular status of British Protectorates, such as that of Egypt. AJ Balfour's view of the matter was that the paternalistic benevolence of British rule was the best justification - that colonised peoples needed British or other European support in order to maintain their economic development and spiritual purity. This belief was founded on an attitude common to all cases, in that the British ruling class was showing itself as a trustworthy set of guides for a territory's future development. Britons managed to achieve this trend was by making use of the new sciences and social sciences - and most important, their claims to objective Truth as seen from the perspective of empiricist science. Writers across the subcontinent claimed to 'know India'. As Balfour told the House of Commons in 1910, 'We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know the civilization of any other country. We know it further back; we know it more intimately; we know more about it. It goes far beyond the petty span of the history of our race, which is lost in the prehistoric period at a time when the Egyptian civilisation had already passed its prime.'¹

This approach shows quite clearly two different facts about the way that British governing figures viewed the far-off places which were now part of the British Empire. Firstly, Balfour suggested that the number of Middle East scholars which Britain had produced had uncovered all that could be known about the way that life was and should be in that part of the world. Secondly, in dismissing the possibility that Egyptians themselves might have their own equally-accurate knowledge of local history and practice, Balfour strongly suggests that the Western science provided a complete and empiricist account of Egyptian history, disounting and over-riding anything produced by local scholars. His use of the word 'we' in counterpoint to the 'Egyptian civilisation' - at least as Said was concerned, proved also that 'to have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for 'us' to deny autonomy to 'it' - the Oriental country - since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it.'² Neither of these points would necessarily have disturbed Balfour himself, and on the contrary he reinforced the image of self-debasing services to Egypt by suggesting that if 'the native populations have that instinctive feeling that those with whom they have got to deal have not behind them the might, the authority, the sympathy, the full and ungrudging support of the country which sent them there, those populations lose all that sense of order which is the very basis of their civilisation.'³ How exactly, England's presence had become 'the basis of their civilisation' Balfour did not explain, but left it understood.⁴ One even more directly involved in the government of Egypt echoed such a paternalistic, yet scientific, outlook. Lord Cromer, 'each special issue should be decided mainly with reference to what, by the light of Western knowledge and experience tempered by local considerations, we conscientiously think is best for the subject race, without reference to any real or supposed advantage which may accrue to England as a nation.'⁵ Western knowledge therefore, provided the basis for a justification of European Empire, based on the manifest superiority of Western science over any local scholars; and an attitude of responsibility under which Britain played a paternalistic world, guiding the Arabs and Indians to the maturity of a European-educated state. One important aspect of this during the early period was the work of missions in teaching the worth of Christianity and Western

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London, 1978), p.32

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London, 1978), p.32

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London, 1978), p.34

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London, 1978), p.34

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London, 1978), p.37

civilisation to a reluctant population. Harry Johnston said that 'Missions strengthen our hold over the country, they spread the use of the English language, they induct the natives into the best kind of civilisation, and in fact each mission station is an essay in colonisation.'⁶ Yet even in doing so, the offer of education showed that at least at that stage, it was possible for non-whites to be accepted as equally deserving of recognition as his poor white colleague. The fact that so many European scholars found the Orient so fascinating also shows the respect the British held for these civilisations - a respect they did not share with their African colonies. Compared with other parts of Europe and the Orient, India appeared to be singularly lacking in political unity and, therefore, in history. Hegel suggested that the reason for this was that India was a land dominated by imagination rather than reason. Still earlier, commentators like James Mill had argued that in India an exotic institution, caste, prevented political unity.⁷

If British administrators justified their rule by reference to the educational status of themselves relative to the people they ruled, an increasing trend was to depart from lack of experience towards racial inferiority. However disparaging this interest in Indians was, it remained very serious compared to the almost universal condemnation of the African. A British newspaper wrote in the 1880s, that 'the African's nature is as plastic and impressionable as a child's - a blank sheet whereon we may write at will, without the necessity of first deleting old impressions.'⁸ Winwood Reade suggested 'the absolute futility of Christian missions among the savages' since the Negro in general 'had no religion, and no concepts of mercy, pity, fatherly love or conjugal affection.'⁹ India proved equally resistant to the activities of the missionaries, but the long heritage of Hinduism and Islam provided more of a justification to European eyes than the animist Africans they found on the Dark Continent. Nevertheless, Indians also felt the sharpness of Europeans tongues, some of whom thanks to their Fabian connections would have been expected to see them in a different light. Graham Wallas said in 1892, 'The real fact is, that these men are a different species of animals to ourselves - their physical and mental constitution are extraordinarily different... their physical constitution is feeble and weedy and often disgustingly sensual. Their character is fawning and grovelling to superiors, bullying to inferiors, mean and deceptive to equals. Their general level of character does not show as much reason as ordinary European children and is much more full of spite and meanness.'¹⁰ Yet this was a castigation as much about the Indian character than his capacity to understand what was being said to him. To prove that this was not the case in regards to the black races, Europeans were beginning to form the new science of anthropology. Even in America, this anthropology classed Africans as racially-inferior not just lazy and menial. In the words of the French thinker Gustave Le Bon in 1894, 'One easily makes a school graduate or lawyer of a Negro or of a Japanese; but one only gives him a simple veneer, altogether superficial, without acting on his mental constitution... This Negro or Japanese will accumulate all the diplomas possible without ever arriving at the level of an ordinary European.'¹¹ To this, Indians and other races were allowed to aspire, and by 1912, the *Round Table Journal* suggested that it was highly fallacious to compare British rule in India to that of Africa, for India 'is full of highly-educated, thoughtful and competent people... It has numberless country gentlemen exactly like the country gentlemen of England.'¹² In Africa, science even developed ways to prove racial stratification, such as Dunn's famous report, which stated that 'the receding forehead and projecting jaws of the Negro speak a

⁶ cited in Porter 'Cultural Imperialism' and Protestant Missionaries (Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, Sep 1997) p.369

⁷ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford, 1990), p.8

⁸ Bernard Porter: *The Lion's Share* p.72

⁹ Bolt *Victorian Attitudes to Race* p.7

¹⁰ Rich: *Race and Empire in British Politics* p.27

¹¹ cited in Gifford & Weiskel *African Education in a Colonial Context* in Gifford and Louis *France and Britain in Africa* (New Haven, 1971) p.678

¹² Rich: *Race and Empire in British Politics* p.59

language which cannot be mistaken... for whenever and wherever ignorance and brutality, destitution and squalor have for a long time existed, this prognathous type invariably prevails. By contrast the Saxon broad forehead, upright jaws and symmetrical features clearly indicate the harmonious development of the whole brain, and a special fullness in the intellectual and moral regions.'¹³

On the contrary, Western education sometimes had the effect of making natives themselves begin to criticise their own heritage, in terms which can derive only from Western forms of thinking. The concept of a 'Bengal Renaissance' draws directly on Western historical experience as well as on the linear Western form of historical thinking. The linear form of historical thinking also encouraged Indian writers to seek backwards for examples in the past, which, when redefined and purified, could be used for models or prescriptions for behaviour in the present.¹⁴ It also saw Indian writers taking up themes already outlined by Orientalist scholars as to the which is linear, in which it was possible for Humanists to see the past in relation to themselves and to think of a process. Amiya Charan Banerji, for example wrote that 'superstition and cruel customs played havoc in Hindu society. The burning of widows in those days was a common practice. The poor meekly submitted to the tyrannies of the rich. Modern science had not yet begun to dispel ignorance, superstition and blind faith. The Hindu orthodoxy formed almost an immovable barrier on the path leading to progress and development. During the period of the Renaissance, a galaxy of inspired religious leaders, great social reformers, noble patriots, eminent political thinkers and mighty literary geniuses appeared in India and especially in Bengal.'¹⁵ The castigation of 'superstition' and 'ignorance' betrayed an authentic Western outlook, which may or may not have fitted with the complex realities of Indian society and political consciousness. They may have been seeking to purify religions thought and practice, but did the Bengali intellectuals of the nineteenth century project their own thoughts over an India which did not fit the model. In their belief that there was a quintessential Hinduism, they skated over the enormous regional variations across the subcontinent - and set up straw men in the shape of widow-burning, which was always a highly minority activity among the most exclusive castes, which over the centuries had become encrusted with superstition and other unhealthy accretions.¹⁶

What was even more important was that this form of approaching Indian was precisely the way that Europeans approached it - except they brought many of their ideas about India from European history, not Indian history. The application of Western standards of scholarly research nevertheless lent extra credibility to their findings, although the empiricist traditions were alien to the Indian traditions they purported to study. The discourse of orientalists, according to Edward Said, presents itself as a form of knowledge that is both different from, and superior to, the knowledges that the Orientals have of themselves.¹⁷ Its reportages remained solidly functional and technocratic - since its aim was to allow the rational, European mind to conceive the bases of Indian thought and tradition, regardless of whether they fitted into a rational, secular mindset. Since Europeans were in control of much of the East, Western knowledge about the Orient in the post-Enlightenment period was given increased prestige. As Said argues, 'systematic Orientalist discourse allowed Europe to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively.'

¹³ Bolt *Victorian Attitudes to Race* p.16

¹⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.225

¹⁵ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.226

¹⁶ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.226

¹⁷ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford, 1990), p.37

An excellent example of how Orientalist studies managed to change the very realities they were trying to explain, can be seen in the way that 'Hinduism' changed and regenerated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most common view of Indian society developed by Indologists was based on the study of the Sanskrit texts coming from before 1200 A.D. It is easy to see why this lever should have been chosen, with the European tradition of tracing their own history through viewing the primary documents. However, in an Indian context, only Brahmin castes can read Sanskrit, and the texts therefore set out the specific Brahmanical traditions, which may or may not have been in conflict with the oral traditions of other castes. This study of a rarefied set of traditions led to the consistent notion that Brahmans were the most important group in society - and that Hindu society was substantially unchanged for hundreds of years. Yet in reverse, the Orientalist conclusions were often deliberately driven by the actions of orientals themselves. The Brahmanical Sanskrit texts certainly had been used before the British arrived - but they had never been codified as a canon of Hinduism, nor been used to give Brahmans such high status - reference to the timeless and spaceless Vedas enabled Brahmans to legitimate practices that in reality depended largely on the historical and regional contexts in which they were produced. Brahmanical discourse was systematized as 'Hindu Law' and 'Hinduism' to the extent that in the end it no longer needed actual Brahmanic 'spokesmen' to interpret and authorize it.¹⁸ Orientalism gave crucial support to the Brahmanical contention that Indian civilization is a unified whole based on a tradition of they themselves were the guardians.

Indeed, Orientalists even managed to replace the fragmented set of oral traditions with an unchangingly homogenized written canon, such as the West had with the Bible. Western research into Sanskrit works such as the Bhagavad Gita, prepared the ground for Mahatma Gandhi to make this Sanskrit work into a fundamental scripture of Modern Hinduism.¹⁹

Yet even in the way that Orientalist scholars attempted merely to describe Indian social and religious institutions, they made no attempt to conceal their technocratic approach. Descriptions of Indian rituals are presented in a way which Europeans could understand, but which ignored the specific Indian resonances they were designed to produce. Louis Renou wrote 'I do not intend to engage in a theoretical consideration of the nature of the ritual. Ritual has a strong attraction for the Indian mind, which tends to see everything in terms of formulae and methods of procedure, even when such adjuncts no longer seem really necessary for its religious experience.' Yet this detachment depicted the thoughts and institutions of Indians as distortions of normal and natural thoughts and institutions (according to the dominant Western discourse of the period in question)- it represents them as manifestations of an 'alien' mentality.²⁰ Renou might have argued that what were apparently irrational and disconnected acts by Vedic priests were parts of a coherent and rational whole, but that the real world of the Vedic Indian was based on presuppositions differing from those of nineteenth-century European thought. Empiricist Western science argues instead that there is one single, determinate, external reality, and that it has privileged access to that reality.²¹ The reality that Indology gave was an explanation of the strange and incoherent to make them seem rational or normal - but Indologists themselves take credit for providing the orderly facade for Indian practices. Here scientific theorists - physical anthropologists, racial historians, historical materialists, comparative mythologists, social psychologists, historians of religion, structural-functional anthropologists, sociologists, development economists, and psychoanalysts - truly come into their own. They all claim their ordering of the patient's material to be rational and not merely a rationalization.²²

¹⁸ Peter van der Veer, *The Foreign hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and communalism*, (Philadelphia, 1993), p.27

¹⁹ Peter van der Veer, *The Foreign hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and communalism*, (Philadelphia, 1993), p.40

²⁰ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford, 1990), p.39

²¹ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford, 1990), pp.39-40

²² Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford, 1990), p.42

This scholarship about heritages had different effects on those who came into contact with it. For Jawaharlal Nehru, Western education and Indian origin made a *mélange*. 'I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. Perhaps my thoughts and to life are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern. but India clings to me, as she does to all her children, in innumerable ways; and behind me lie, somewhere in the subconscious, memories of a hundred, or what ever the number be, generations of Brahmins.'²³ For other groups, the reactions were far less obvious or beneficial. In Africa, the fact that Europeans considered Africans to have no history meant that the moulding of African society did not even have to observe proprieties, except in relation to individual Africans. LMS missionaries to East Africa were being instructed 'Do not Anglicise your converts. Remember that the people are foreigners. Let them continue as such. Let their foreign individuality be maintained. Build upon it, so far as it is sound and good... Seek to develop an mould a pure, refined and Christian character, native to the soil.'²⁴ Further advice from the Rev Chauncey Maples (1895) held that 'the European missionary must become an African to win Africans. He must, so far as is consistent with his Christian principles, assimilate himself to them.'²⁵ Elsewhere in the world, existing traditional patterns survived without detailed scholarship - but nevertheless provided problems for colonial governments who had never dealt with them before. The Resident in Bida (Nigeria) complained in 1900 'If slavery - the national labour system - be abolished, with what are we to replace it? It will take years - generations - to teach the pagans who form the slave population the meaning of hired labour, and if the existing labour system is broken down *before* there is a new one to replace it nothing but ruin and famine can result.'²⁶ In French Africa and the Middle East, General Gallieni declared that 'l'oeuvre français n'a pas de plus mortel ennemi que l'islamisme.'²⁷ The Islamic world remained consistently blocked to Westernisation by the Westerners themselves - and with the exception of Algeria, India and Egypt, they remained governed entirely by their own institutions.

The actions of government were, nevertheless, the most formal manner for transforming Orientalist ideas about traditional peoples into the realities on the ground. Foremost among these were the technocratic ways with which Imperial governments attempted to subdivide people according to arbitrary categories of their choosing. The official rationale for the taking of the census in Bengal, as elsewhere, was based on administrative necessity. Beverly argued in 1872 that without precise information on the numbers of the people, 'the basis is wanting on which to found accurate opinions on such important matters as the growth and rate of increase of the population, sufficiency of food supplies, the incidence of local and imperial taxes, the organization of adequate judicial and police arrangements. the spread of education and public health measures.'²⁸ This may have been the initial reason for the census, but the inclusion of questions of caste and religion on the census return answered the curiosity of officials more than any administrative necessity - there were no separate electorates until after the First World War. Orientalist thought led many British officials in the middle of the century to feel that caste and religion were the sociological keys to understanding the Indian people. At the same time the army was beginning to be reorganized on assumptions about the nature of 'martial races', questions were being raised about the balance between Hindus and Muslims in the public services, about whether certain castes or 'races' were monopolizing access to new educational opportunities, and a political theory was beginning to emerge about the conspiracy which certain

²³ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.227

²⁴ cited in Porter *'Cultural Imperialism' and Protestant Missionaries* p.377

²⁵ cited in Porter *British Expansion in the long Nineteenth Century* p.383

²⁶ cited in Phillips *The Enigma of Colonisation* (London, 1989) p.29

²⁷ cited in Obichere *French Authority in West Africa 1880-1900* p.445

²⁸ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.242

castes were organizing to supplant British rule.²⁹ Yet the importance that Orientalist discourse played in India in stressing the difference between Hindus and Muslims led to indigenous thinkers adopting these ideas to support the imagination of the religious community as a 'nation'³⁰ Bryce, for example, justified the British Raj since 'no other sort of government would suit a vast population of different races and tongues, divided by religious animosities of Hindus and Muslims, and with no sort of experience of self-government on a scale larger than a Village Council.'³¹

As with arguments over the nature of 'Hinduism', the question of caste also raised problems with how to define them, whether there were significant regional variations, their relative precedence, and any auxiliary benefits which went with them. In the 1881 census, the Commissioner for India: W. C. Plowden, decided that the castes should be arranged in five categories: 'Brahmans, Rajputs, Castes of Good Social Position, Inferior Castes and Non-Hindus or Aboriginal Castes. The Census Commissioner for Bengal, however, felt that the classification proposed by Plowden would do great violence to the facts of the caste system as found in Bengal. Therefore, he proposed a category of intermediary castes to come right below the Rajputs and Brahmans. The Lieutenant-Governor consulted Rajendra Lal Mitra, the outstanding Indian Sanskrit scholar of the time. Mitra set out an order or precedence, based what he termed 'Hindu ideas' of classification. He felt it was not the responsibility of the census to deal with claims for higher social positions such as were put forward by the Vaidyas of Burdwan, Subarnabariks and the Kayasthas. 'It [the census's] duty is clearly to follow the textbooks of the Hindus and not to pronounce on particular claims.'³² However, the textbooks of the Hindus remained essentially a Brahmin preserve, thus allowing them more securely to claim leadership of Indian society. GS Ghurye, as well as succeeding students of Indian society, also saw the census itself as having effects on the caste system. 'The total result has been as we have seen, a livening up of the caste-spirit. the ranks accorded to castes in census reports became the equivalent of traditional copper-plate grants declaring the status, rank and privileges of a particular caste or castes.'³³ Certainly the importance of caste became clear, especially in the cities, where caste sabhas were formed to give petitions to have their caste status changed upwards. An example comes from a petition presented by a group called Mahtons who wanted to be recorded in the census of 1911 as Rajputs. Apparently some of the Mahtons wanted to be able to join a Sikh regiment of the army. The Inspector of Schools of Mundur district wanted to know how to rule on a request that the Mahtons be eligible for a zamindari scholarship established by the Punjab government for Sikh and Hindu Rajputs.³⁴ The very facts of the extension of the State meant that social position was now far more important and regimented than it ever had been.

An interesting corollary of this is that greater awareness of social origins - or at least what was now the accepted view of social origins - directly led onto the creation of a special nationalist history, constructed out of images from great pre-colonial Indian rulers. Indian nationalists tried to find in their past a 'golden age' and when their own religion and society were superior to the West; if they could succeed in doing this, then they could argue that Indian civilization at a point in the past was the equal of Western society and that the rebirth inherent the idea of a Renaissance was a rebirth of their own traditions and not only a borrowing from the West.³⁵ Secular nationalists venerated the Emperor Akbar's tolerant state. 'Akbar's was 'perhaps the first

²⁹ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' pp.242-3

³⁰ Peter van der Veer, *The Foreign hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and communalism*, (Philadelphia, 1993), p.24

³¹ Rich: *Race and Empire in British Politics* p.22

³² Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.245

³³ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.241

³⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.249

³⁵ Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' p.228

conscious attempt to formulate the notion of a secular State', as Kabir put it. 'he also initiated a liberal social and religious policy which aimed at bringing about a fusion of the diverse elements which constitute the Indian people.'³⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru also added that 'Akbar became the great representative of the old Indian idea, of a synthesis of differing elements and their into a common nationality. He identified himself with India and India took to him although he was a newcomer.'³⁷ However, this view of India's past was also fundamentally affected by European scholarship - and then extended. For religious-based nationalists, their use of historical symbols was also based on European scholarship. Muslims remembered the days of Moghul Muslim power, and the easy position for their religion, in contrast to the sectarian tensions of their own period. Yet Muslim kings were important patrons of Hindu temples and festivals. Conversely, Maratha war leaders in the eighteenth century were used by Hindu nationalists after the example of Tilak - but historical evidence shrews that they also supported the Chishti Sufi shrine at Ajmer. Here, alone it was European Orientalism that essentialised these complex relations as Muslim despot over Hindu subjects, and as Hindu resistance to it in order to legitimate the colonial replacement of that rule.³⁸

Orientalism, therefore, did create an alternative view of the fundamentals of social politics in India at least, to a small degree. It by no means extended across the world, for the very simple reason that Africa was deemed to have no history, and therefore could not be studied and rationalised in the way that Oriental society had to be. The essential difference can be seen in the differing ways with which the French treated their colonies in Senegal and Egypt at the time of Napoleon - in the latter, French power was based on their tactful and Islamophile approach towards the traditional authorities. In the equally-Muslim (but black) African Senegal colony, full-scale assimilation tried to destroy all traditional chiefs and social structures, to replace it with an imported European version. Islam and the Muslim world had remained a fascination for Europeans since the birth of the religion in the seventh century. Its unique foreign-ness and proximity, as well as its undoubted military and social strength, posited many theories and studies by European scholars, who applied exactly the same patterns wherever they encountered populations of Muslims, whether in Zanzibar, Moplahs, Egyptians or Pathans. India too had an ancient civilisation, and study of it clearly brought out the civilised yet alien nature of all the cultures in India. For Europeans, the essential task was to rationalise these, and to simplify them for their own consumption. In doing this they were so successful that Indians themselves took up the very Orientalist discourses that simplified and codified their own culture. This approach, according to Ronald Inden, continues to this day. 'Once, his special knowledge enabled the orientalist and his countrymen to gain trade concessions, conquer, colonize, rule and punish in the East. Now it authorizes the area studies specialist and his colleagues in government and business to aid and advise, develop and modernize, arm and stabilize the countries of the so-called Third World.'³⁹

³⁶ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism*, (Delhi, 1992), p.249

³⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism*, (Delhi, 1992), p.249

³⁸ Peter van der Veer, *The Foreign hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and communalism*, (Philadelphia, 1993), p.34

³⁹ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford, 1990), p.38