

ORIENTALISM AND THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BENGAL

By Joel M. Berry

During the British occupation of India, members of the Indian Civil Service participated in an enthusiastic rediscovery of Indian culture known as the Orientalist movement and Indian Renaissance. In recent years literary critic Edward W. Said (1935-2003) and successors have employed discourse theory to undermine the legitimacy of European scholarship of "Other" cultures, including that of the British Orientalists, imparting upon the term "Orientalism" itself a distinctly negative connotation. Often associated with philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), discourse theory attempts to analyze the treatment of information and language by scrutinizing how knowledge is characterized by themes of power, self-reference, and bias. While literary critics have employed discourse criticism to reject Orientalism in its entirety as a manifestation of ethnocentrism and imperialist appropriation, such broad claims inaccurately assess the productive scholarship of the period. Imperialism certainly had an effect on European representation of colonized areas, but it is a misapplication of discourse analysis to lump together Orientalist scholarship with lurid examples of literary and popular ethnocentrism. This error produces its own dogmatic discourse of *anti-Orientalism*, which has a dangerous consequence of discouraging the study of cultures other than one's own.

Following Said's example, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Bernard S. Cohn, and other "subalternist" scholars have applied discourse theory to colonial India. Numerous critics including Bernard Lewis, David Kopf, and Robert Irwin have raised a number of key problems with "Saidian" methods and conclusions, noting Said's essentializing characterization of the West and his tendency for factual errors both large and small. In practice, Said's claims are largely self-defeating, falling victim to relativistic nihilism. Quoting Said, D.A. Washbrook points out that: If, for example, as Said insists, 'any and all representations... are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions and political ambiance of the representer... [and are] interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth", which is itself a representation'- then so must be *that* representation, and *that* truth. Said traps himself inside a web of solipsism. In the same vein, Andrew Rotter writes, "in his unwillingness to provide an alternative to Orientalism, Said leaves readers with the impression that enlightenment is impossible, at least for the benighted likes of them."

Radical discourse analysis and postmodern relativism cannot effectively refute the validity of Orientalist scholarship because such intellectual techniques tend to refute themselves. Nor can

complex cultural interactions easily be circumscribed by simplistic categories of Orientalist/ "Oriental" and European/ Other. Recent scholars have proposed alternatives to the colonial discourse analysis of Orientalism, favoring multilateral dialectic or dialogic analysis that resists reductive generalization. As Rama Sundari Mantena notes, "the idea that early colonial interaction between the British and Indians went into the construction of colonial knowledge, that British colonialism did not simply impose a structure of knowledge production onto Indian society, is indisputable."

Said, in his sweeping indictment *Orientalism* (1978), argues, "that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient." Said claims that "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric." Such sweeping generalizations are hard to take seriously and quite easy to discredit. Of course there were many imperialist, racist Europeans, but it certainly does not follow that all Europeans were so, particularly not those who chose to devote their free lives to the study of India. Nor is it feasible that these philologists and antiquarians were agents of a nefarious Orientalist conspiracy and that their findings are thus uniformly tarnished. In his dissertation on 17th century travel writing on India, Rahul Sapra highlights plentiful examples dissenting from Said's monolithic argument. Sapra maintains that "there are also enough instances of highly discerning representations of the natives, to counteract a clear-cut Orientalist reading of the narratives," and that history is not so reductively simple as the anti-Orientalists would contend.

A comparison between the Portuguese, the English and the Dutch trade set up in "India" would demonstrate that the approach of each of these nations to the Mughal empire was so distinct from the other's that it would be misleading to posit a single "European" view of "India" in the seventeenth century. Moreover, the bonding of the English with the Mughals in opposition to the Portuguese in the seventeenth century, not only undermines the idea of a homogenous "West" but also of a homogenous "East," which is already split from within, since not only do the Mughals ally with the English, but they also represent the Hindus as "barbaric" others in their writings. Sapra cites the works of William Hawkins, Thomas Roe, Edward Terry, John Ovington and Alexander Hamilton in their positive portrayal of the Mughals, and observes that the actual situation was far too complex to fit into a typical anti-Orientalist interpretation. Gyan Prakash asserts that "more than anything else, what accounts for the extraordinary impact of *Orientalism* is its repeated dissolution of boundaries drawn by colonial and neocolonial Western hegemony." In actuality, Said's book does more to propagate and exaggerate boundaries than it does to dissolve them. *Orientalism* attempts to reify the divisions between West and Orient, imposing immense geographic, cultural, and political barriers. Another popular criticism of Said's *Orientalism* is his strict focus on Europe's representation of foreigners. Nowhere does Said contrast the manner in which non-Western empires such as the Ottoman or Chinese depicted other peoples, implying that the case of Europe is somehow singularly unique in history. Robert Irwin discusses Said's selective vision: The Persians, who under Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes built up a mighty empire and sought to add Greece to that empire, were not denounced by Said for

imperialism. On the contrary, they were presented as the tragic and innocent victims of misrepresentation by Greek playwrights. Later the Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids and Ottomans presided over great empires, but those dynasties escaped censure. Indeed, they were considered to be the victims of Western misrepresentation. Similarly lacking is analysis of Middle Eastern and Indian characterizations and representations of Europe. Perhaps these issues are outside the intended scope of *Orientalism*, but their exploration could have lent Said considerably more credibility. Instead, his concept of a single “West” with one essential *modus operandi* and an equivalent, opposing “East” reinforces stereotype and fails to take into account the multifaceted nature of historical processes.

These contestations aside, the fact remains that British Orientalists made prolific contributions to the knowledge of India. While scholarly work is to some degree subjective and by nature exists in a historical context, Said condemns “Western” study of the “East” outright and fails to provide any substantial alternative method of which he would approve. Moreover, his rationale for making such a condemnation is selective, unclear, and often illogical. He is careful to apologize for not making a more thorough survey of Orientalist scholars, perhaps because those he leaves out or mentions tangentially would effectively negate his arguments. British Orientalism was a highly productive enterprise, based on experiential science and actuated by the genuine academic inquisitiveness of obsessively dedicated researchers. Rather than increasing cultural bias, the movement actually tempered ethnocentrism by fostering greater respect and understanding of Indian culture and history.

In 1784, British scholars in Calcutta founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the premier Orientalist institution of its time. The Asiatic Society consisted of British administrative officials who devoted their free time to studying India. Virtually none stood to receive monetary gains from their work, and most met the research expenses out of their own pockets. Rama Sundari Mantena notes that throughout the annals of the Madras Public Proceedings, “there are numerous entries of British officials requesting compensation for expenses incurred in their research endeavors.” It is problematic to label these enthusiastic amateur and professional scholars agents of a Saidian conspiracy to denigrate India. Quite the contrary, the British Orientalists were staunch admirers of Indian culture. Colonel Charles Stuart (1757-1828), member of the Asiatic Society, expressed his opinions on the merits of Hinduism: Whenever I look around me, in the vast region of Hindoo mythology, I discover piety in the garb of allegory: and I see Morality, at every turn, blended with every tale; and as far as I can rely on my own judgment, it appears the most complete and ample system of Moral Allegory that the world has ever produced.

The Society was firmly at odds with Anglicist scorn for Indian culture, a stance espoused by politician Thomas Babington Macaulay, Governor-General William Bentinck, and Utilitarian James Mill. Orientalist and Governor of Bengal John Zephaniah Holwell (1711-1798) published two works on Indian culture, one of which had the lengthy title *Interesting Historical Events, relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan... As also the Mythology and Cosmogony, Fasts and Festivals of the Gentoos, followers of the Shastah, and a Dissertation on*

the Metempsychosis, commonly, though erroneously, called the Pythagorean doctrine. Holwell cautioned his successors not to study India superficially or with an Eastern or Christian bias, but to labor objectively, alleging that what had been written prior was prejudicial and rife with error.

With the East India Company Act of 1773, Warren Hastings (1732-1818) became the first Governor-General of British India. Hastings strongly supported collecting knowledge of Indians and their customs, laws, and languages. He became proficient in Bengali, Urdu, and Persian and encouraged a generation of Orientalists in their research. Nathaniel Halhed, author of the 1778 *Grammar of the Bengal Language*, compiled his *Code of Gentoo Laws* at the suggestion of Hastings. In December of 1783 Hastings secured a paid leave of absence for printer Charles Wilkins to study Sanskrit in Benares. Wilkins went on to translate the Bhagavad-Gita into English in 1785. Already an eminent scholar of Arabic and Persian, William Jones came to Calcutta in October 1783. *En route* he compiled a list of sixteen items to research while on the subcontinent, including "the laws of the Hindus and Mahomedans; the history of the ancient world; modern politics and geography of Hindustan; the best mode of governing Bengal; mathematics and sciences of the Asiatics; poetry, rhetoric, and morality of Asia; and music of the eastern nations." On January 15th, 1784, thirty gentlemen attended the first meeting of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Jones opened the proceedings and delivered a "Discourse on the Institution of a Society for enquiring into the History, civil and natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia." To this Jones added that the intended objects of inquiry were "Man and Nature; whatever is performed by the one, or produced by the other." Such a broad mandate defies classification as a reflection of colonial interests, as does Jones' and the Orientalists' corpus of works.

Jones presented over 29 papers to the Society, including *On the Chronology of the Hindus*, *Dissertation on the Orthography of Asiatic Words in Roman Letters*, *On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India*, *On the Antiquity of the Indian Zodiac*, *On the Musical Modes of the Hindus*, *On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus*, *On the Philosophy of the Asiatics*, and *Observations on select Indian Plants*. In his paper *On the Indian Game of Chess* he reported that the game was invented on the subcontinent. Jones is perhaps best known for founding the field of modern linguistics by proposing the common origin of Indo-European languages. Jones approached his work with a reasonably impartial perspective, avoiding overt racism or bias. Embarrassed by the Eurocentric views of the time, he commented that "some men never heard of the Asiatic writings, and others will not be convinced that there is anything valuable in them... We [are] like the savages, who thought that the sun rose and set for them alone." Jones writes to Richard Johnson: I am in love with Gopia, charmed with Crishen [Krishna], an enthusiastic admirer of Raama and a devout adorer of Brimha [Brahma], Bishen [Vishnu], Mahiser; not to mention that Judishteir, Arjen, Corno, and other warriors of the M'hab'harat appear greater in my eyes than Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles appeared when I first read the Iliad.

Jones was evidently spurred by a curiosity that transcends identity as a European or agent of colonialism. His admiration of Indian culture was emblematic of the British Orientalist

movement. Standing for the opposing Anglicist view was Thomas Macaulay, who famously claimed that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Of course, the Orientalists fervently disagreed. One such dissenter was Colonel Colin Mackenzie (1754-1851), who compiled a comprehensive archive of documents and manuscripts in Southern India. Most of these items were of little immediate use to the state, but had great influence in stimulating Indian scholarship and preserving artifacts of Indian culture from destruction. A 1798 general letter from the Court of Directors of the East India Company states the need and motivations for an archive: We understand it has been of late years, a frequent practice among our Servants--- especially in Bengal to make collections of oriental Manuscripts, many of which have afterwards been brought into this Country. These remaining in private hands, and being likely in a course of time to pass into others, in which probably no use can be made of them, they are in danger of being neglected, and at length in a great measure lost to Europe, as well as to India, we think this issue, a matter of greater regret, because we apprehend, that since the decline of the Mogul Empire, the encouragement formerly given in it to Persian Literature, has ceased, --- that hardly any new works of Celebrity appear, and that few Copies of Books of established Character, are now made, so that there being by the accidents of time, and the exportation of many of the best Manuscripts, a progressive diminution of the Original Stock, Hindostan may at length be much thinned of its literary stores, without greatly enriching Europe, To prevent in part, this injury to Letters, we have thought, that the Institution of a public repository in this Country, for oriental writings, would be useful. Such was the precarious condition of many irreplaceable Indian documents and artifacts that Mackenzie and his vast team of Brahmans helped to preserve. Rami Sundari Mantena maintains that at the time, due to the disintegration of the Mughal Empire, "without the support of the British, the cycle of production and reproduction of Indian literatures could be destroyed."

Mackenzie's compulsive action to preserve and research Indian documents counters Said's assertion that "empirical data about the Orient or about any of its parts count for very little." Mantena provides a list of research topics from the Mackenzie Collection:

1. Who was Durma-Vurma, the first founder of the temple of Runganaad at Sreerungam? is it the same with Durma-Rajah? & what is the meaning of the title Vurma?
2. What were the circumstances & supposed Era; or how many years since the city of Warriore, the Capital of some Chollan or Soran Kings, was destroyed by a shower of sand, or what is the History of these kings?
3. List of the names of the 20 kings of the south from Earoon-Samoodrum to Sankaran or Sangran – they are said to have ruled 1119 years – at what capital; & is any history preserved of them & of their transactions?
4. List of the names of the Kings from Salleevahan & BoojaRajah downward on; with any amount of their history & actions, & dates if possible, & when the last of them reigned?

5. List of the names of the ancient kings of Cholla or Sorra & their dates & reigns particularly six of them who are said to have reigned from Crema-Conda-Chollen & Caree-Chollen. Any accounts of their transactions, their capitals & their endowments with dates? which of them & at what period erected the first works on the Caavery – the great anicut?

Evidence from the Mackenzie Collection reveals meticulous care in researching a wide scope of topics, particularly the local vernaculars, customs, religious practices, and regional histories. Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), president of the Asiatic Society for ten years, contributed nineteen papers on topics including Hindu and Islamic religious practices, Sanskrit and Prakrit language, geology, astronomy, and a particular species of Indian ox. While assembling a digest of Hindu law, Colebrooke worked to the point that his acquaintances were alarmed for his health. They tried to tear him away from his studies by proposing sporting excursions and even barging into his solitude to snuff out his lamp. Colebrooke's essays on religious ceremonies included translations of prayers and detailed accounts of the daily ablutions practiced by the Brahmans. Colebrooke was the first European able to obtain and study the Rig Veda. The Calcutta Review praised Colebrooke's analysis of the Vedas as a highly valuable contribution.

While supervising at the Sanskrit College of Calcutta, Sanskritist Horace Hayman Wilson oversaw the translation of eighteen Hindu Purana scriptures. Wilson became Deputy Secretary of the Asiatic Society in 1811 and continued his Sanskrit research with a translation of Kalidasa's ancient love poem Megha Dutt, or "Cloud Messenger," which was published in 1813. The Asiatic Journal called Wilson's rendering of Megha Dutt "one of the most perfect translations that adorns the literature of the nation." His Sanskrit-English Dictionary totaled over 1000 pages and took four years to complete. Like most of the Orientalists, Wilson advocated Indian cultural education rather than conversion to Christianity. Hungarian Alexander Csoma de Koros (1784-1842) journeyed from Kashmir to Tibet in 1822, where he devoted his time to learning the Tibetan language. Like Colebrooke he worked to the point of self-denial. A colleague remarked: His effects consisted of four boxes of books and papers, the suit of blue clothes which he always wore and in which he died, a few sheets, and one cooking pot. His food was confined to tea, of which he was very fond, and plain boiled rice, of which he ate very little. On a mat on the floor with a box of books on the four sides he sat, ate, slept, and studied, never undressed at night, and rarely went out during the day. Csoma de Koros works include the papers *Notices on the different systems of Buddhism, extracted from the Tibetan Authorities; Enumeration of Historical and Grammatical works to be met with in Tibet; Analysis of a Tibetan Medical work; Geographical notice of Tibet; Notices on the Life of Shakya*, and a full Tibetan Grammar and Dictionary.

Calcutta Mint assay-master James Prinsep (1799-1840) served as secretary of the Asiatic Society, to which he contributed 63 papers and 13 inscription transliterations. Topics he approached include mineralogy, numismatics, paleontology, geography, and climate. In 1835 Prinsep was

able to decipher the characters in an inscription at an ancient Buddhist monument at Sanchi, a process he lays out for inspection in his papers. Later researchers applied this remarkable discovery to inscriptions at numerous sites, greatly increasing the knowledge of ancient Indian history. This inquisitive spirit was not constrained to British transplants alone. Robert E. Frykenberg writes, "Orientalist enterprises provided careers for hundreds of Indian scholars throughout India. The scholarly tradition so founded continues down to this day." While the ancient Brahmanic culture long predated and was entirely independent of British influence, the Orientalist movement clearly stimulated learning and research by native Indians. Governor Hastings encouraged Hindu scholarship and founded a Muslim college, the Calcutta Madrasah. In 1791 Jonathan Duncan founded the Benares Sanskrit College for the education of local residents. The British established additional madrasahs, granted funds and honor to pandits, and set aside land revenues to endow educational institutions. The Charter Act of 1813 included a mandate ensuring one lakh (100,000) of rupees each year for "the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotions of a knowledge of the science among the inhabitants of the British territories in India." It is remarkable that this occurred twenty years before the British government spent any money on public education in Britain.

Throughout his treatise against Orientalism, Edward Said preemptively counters his critics. He claims that any praise of past Orientalist research indicates a "scholar who is not vigilant, whose individual consciousness as a scholar is not on guard against ideas reçues [received ideas] all too easily handed down in the profession." Taken to Said's extreme, this position becomes nihilism as all past theories are necessarily false, any dissent indicating a reckless and faulty "individual consciousness." Moreover, if the only substantial value of Orientalism is its political context and ethnocentric subjectivity, similarly the chief value of Said's study would be not his conclusions themselves, but his own bias and particular sociopolitical context. Such anti-epistemological exercises tend to invalidate any claims to knowledge. Genuine scholarship is thus drowned in broad criticism of imperialism and colonization, justified or not. We are left looking for the chimerical "truth" that Said implies is superior and valid, even though he attests that such pure knowledge cannot actually exist. There is significant irony in Said's accusation of the "scholar who is not vigilant." Irfan Habib illustrates what he calls Said's "notable lack of rigour in terms of documentation and logic." In *Orientalism*, Said quotes Marx as writing, "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." Said claims Marx had thus expressed an Orientalist assumption that "Oriental peoples are incapable of representing themselves, and so Europeans (better still, European Orientalists) must speak for them." Habib reveals that Marx was actually referring to impoverished 19th-century French peasants, not Asian peoples, and to *political* representation, not *depictive* representation in literature or history. Later, "on p293 [of *Orientalism*], Said makes the still more audacious statement that Marx had used the quoted phrase 'for Louis Napoleon', as if Louis Napoleon had made any claims to represent or depict Orientals." Habib concludes that Said's philological distortions arouse grave questions about his credibility.

In *For Lust of Knowing* (2006), Robert Irwin spends a chapter in a formidable indictment of Said's *Orientalism*. Irwin asserts that "Said libeled generations of scholars who were for the most part good and honourable men and he was not prepared to acknowledge that some of them at least might have written in good faith." Following nearly 300 pages of research into the lives and works of individual Orientalists, many of whom appear to have studied in quite good faith, Irwin lays out some of Said's grosser factual errors and misrepresentations. As Bernard Lewis pointed out, Said has Muslim armies conquering Turkey before they conquered North Africa. That really does suggest a breathtaking ignorance of Middle Eastern history, as does his belief that Britain and France dominated the eastern Mediterranean from about the end of the seventeenth century. Said says many of Bonaparte's Orientalist translators were students of Silvestre de Sacy, but he does not trouble to produce any evidence for this... de Sacy began teaching only in 1796. Bonaparte's chief interpreter was a dragoman, rather than an academic product, and, since de Sacy did not know colloquial Egyptian, his tuition would in any case have been of limited assistance.... Said claimed that Gibb insisted in the title *Mohammedanism* for his little monograph on Islam, when in fact, if Said has bothered to read the introduction to that book, he would have learnt that the title was imposed on Gibb by the publisher...

It seems that Said's concept of "scholarly vigilance" is not particularly concerned with facts and history, as indeed not one of the many reprints of *Orientalism* emended any of the factual errors present in the book. In his 1985 essay *Orientalism Reconsidered*, Said speaks to his critics: Similarly, the claims made by Dennis Porter, among others, that I am ahistorical and inconsistent, would have more interest if the virtues of consistency (whatever may be intended by the term) were subjected to rigorous analysis; as for my ahistoricity that too is a charge more weighty in assertion than it is in proof. With this mysterious evasion of consistency and historical accuracy, Said again leaps towards nihilism. If in examining history Said wishes to reject facts and reason, he is left with fancy and conceit. As Irwin writes, "the value of a debate that is based on a fantasy version of past history and scholarship is not obvious." Said parades a continuous stream of selective citations exemplifying the prejudices common in 18th and 19th century Europe. Habib writes that "Said's concept of 'Orientalism' is both far too general and far too restricted, and the limits of his definition are so set and the actual selection so executed that his conclusions are thereby simply predetermined." Procuring the most blatant examples of claims of Western superiority and labeling them "Orientalist," Said calumniates in a whole field of scholarship. Precisely why imperialism or ethnocentric high literature in Europe would invalidate the findings of solitary Civil Service men assiduously deciphering ancient hieroglyphs or compiling Tibetan dictionaries remains unclear.

Writes Said, "formally the Orientalist sees himself as accomplishing the union of Orient and Occident, but mainly by reasserting the technological, political, and cultural supremacy of the West." Such summary generalizations about "the Orientalist" bear a strikingly resemblance to the very stereotypes that Said justifiably condemns. Of the scholar Gustave von Grunebaum, Said tells us: ... he continued to make the same set of essentially reductive, negative generalizations. His style, which bore often chaotic evidence of his Austro-Germanic polymathy,

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

of his absorption of the canonical pseudoscientific prejudices of French, British, and Italian Orientalism... as well as an almost desperate effort to remain the impartial scholar-observer, was next to unreadable. Either out of deliberate irony or blinded by righteous indignation, Said makes routine use of the same types of “reductive generalizations” that he so roundly denounces. Robert E. Frykenberg writes, “theory, in the names of current fashions, has become a cloak for dogma, for denial of empirical evidence, and for scorning real events in historical understandings.” Said’s claims and discourse analysis categorically applied to Orientalism fail to take into account the complex and often conflicting interactions of history and historical representation, and drastically neglect the lasting contributions of the Orientalists. Polemical criticism and misguided generalizations against the study of foreign places and peoples cannot detract from the actual achievements of the Orientalist movement, but *can* serve as a dangerous deterrent to new scholarship and dialogue.

SOURCE: Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, June 2006.