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Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament

Perspectives on South Asia

Edited by
Carol A. Breckenridge
and Peter van der Veer



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Sheldon Pollock

3. Deep Orientalism?

Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj

smṛtibhramśād buddhināśah
(*Bhagavadgītā* 2.63)

Orientalism and Indology

This paper brings together two projects, both still in progress, and frames them within the general problematic of orientalism, which, as it is usually conceived, may seem peripheral to both. Thinking about German Indology during the years 1933–45 and about forms of precolonial domination in South Asia in this framework, however, suggests that the question orientalism, at least in its common contemporary sense, is usually thought to pose—to what degree were European scholarship of Asia and the colonial domination of Asia mutually constitutive?—may be too narrow. The case of German Indology, a dominant form of European orientalism, leads us to ask whether orientalism cannot be as powerfully understood with reference to the national political culture within which it is practiced as to the colony toward which it is directed; whereas examining forms of social power in India before the Raj leads me to believe that “orientalist constructions” in the service of colonial domination may be only a specific historical instance of a larger, transhistorical, albeit locally inflected, interaction of knowledge and power. I will enlarge on these questions a little more broadly before turning to them individually.

The history of classical Indology in the West, more particularly of Sanskrit studies, discloses a process of knowledge production fundamentally informed by, and serving to enhance, European power in Asia.¹ This is all well known—although in isolating three specific forms of such power my assessment may be idiosyncratic—and I will be brief about it here. What this orientalist commonplace cannot readily accommodate, however, is German Indology. One way to theorize this case is to consider the possibility that the movement of orientalist knowledge may be multidirec-

tional. We usually imagine its vector as directed outward—toward the colonization and domination of Asia; in the case of German Indology we might conceive of it as potentially directed inward—toward the colonization and domination of Europe itself. Orientalism may be said to create an opposite when this “othering” fits both with historical paradigms and with political needs, as in the Middle Eastern matrix of semite, infidel, colonized, and so on charted in the studies of Edward Said. In the case of the Germans who continued, however subliminally, to hold the nineteenth-century conviction that the origin of European civilization was to be found in India (or at least that India constituted a genetically related sibling), and who at the same time had none of the requisite political needs, orientalism as an ideological formation on the model of Said simply could not arise. On the contrary, their “othering” and orientalizations were played out at home. At least this seems to me one way to understand Indology in the National Socialist (NS) state, for which I give a brief institutional and intellectual-historical sketch below.

A fundamental thing about orientalism is that it offers an extreme and often transparent instance of knowledge generating and sustaining power and the domination that defines it. How might we apply this insight of the orientalist critique to precolonial forms of domination? Pared to the bone, orientalism is disclosed as a species of a larger discourse of power that divides the world into “betters and lessers” and thus facilitates the domination (or “orientalization” or “colonization”) of any group.² From this perspective, indigenous discourses of power—the various systematized and totalized constructions of inequality in traditional India—might be viewed as a preform of orientalism. Raising such a possibility, at all events, might encourage extending to premodern Indian cultures the problematics of power and domination necessary to help us interpret their products.

The status of these indigenous discourses of power in everyday relations of domination has been a principal target of the critique of orientalism in India, a critique conducted, however, largely in the absence of adequate analysis of the discourses themselves. Sanskrit knowledge presents itself to us as a major vehicle of the ideological form of social power in traditional India, and I want to look at this self-presentation and some of the questions that have been raised about its status as an “orientalist construction.” At the same time, I will examine briefly one feature of this ideological form of Sanskrit knowledge, namely, its monopolization, and thematize the restriction of access to Sanskrit “literacy” as a principal mode

of domination. Admittedly, these are "mandarin materials" I am working with, but much ideological discourse, almost by definition, consists of mandarin materials. I also acknowledge that I do not attain (or seek) at present much institutional, regional, or historical specificity. But the lack of a social-historical framework of analysis for domination doesn't entail the lack of its historical social reality.

Widening the scope of orientalism to include discursively similar phenomena is not meant as an attempt to relativize and thereby detoxify European colonialism. Nor, of course, does focusing on the contributions of German Indology to the discourse of National Socialism, or of high Brahmanism to the ideological formations of precolonial India, mean to suggest that other discourses of power—directed at Palestinians on the West Bank, Brahman communities in contemporary Tamil Nad, or whomever—do not exist. On the contrary, it is precisely by expanding our analysis that we may be able to isolate a certain morphology of domination that many such discourses share—in their invoking higher knowledge naturalizing cultural inequality ("revelation," "science," "intuition of the blood"), creating the idea of race and concurrently legislating racial exclusivity, asserting linguistic hierarchy and claiming superiority for the language of the masters, and securing an order of domination by monopolizing "life chances" such as forms of literacy.

It might be argued that expanding the term "orientalism" to cover phenomena beyond, and before, colonialism jeopardizes the heuristic historical specificity of the very concept. To a degree this criticism is valid, yet I think we may lose something still greater if not doing so constrains our understanding of the two other historical phenomena.

Both sets of problems, German Indology in the period of National Socialism and social power in precolonial India and the interpretation of Sanskrit cultural products, are complicated issues that I do not pretend in either instance to be fully competent to adjudicate. German Indology presents so many problems that I see I have often been driven in what follows from the more central—a consideration of academic-political discursive formations—to the more peripheral—a narrative of "personal politics." (The tendency for histories of academic disciplines for the NS period to veer toward *Personalpolitik* suggests others share my conceptual difficulties.) The question is whether the motivating impulse, the very epistemological foundation of so much German Indology up to the end of the Second World War (which I think is the German search for national self-understanding) is in its very nature a reactionary impulse. If not, how did

such scholarship find itself, so easily and so vastly, contributing to reactionary politics? How did even those whose overt politics seem to have had little to do with National Socialism come so readily to contribute to precisely the same discourse as officers in the SS? Finally and more broadly, how far do regnant discourses—and these are, ultimately, the discourses that are politically regnant—constrain what we can know and why we want to know it?

As for the work currently being done to "de-orientalize" the study of South Asia, I have come to regard it as an essential precondition for classical Indology, and as the most exciting development in the field in this generation. Yet at the same time, I have begun to sense that some arguments and perspectives currently dominant could benefit from a more capacious historical view and a more nuanced methodological reflection on what ideological power—projected, imagined, hoped-for power—in addition to "real" power might mean for our interpretation of Indian cultures. It is crucial to ask to what degree we must take into consideration asymmetries of power, interpreted though all the accounts of them must be, in the context of "Sanskrit culture" when trying to understand its products. Can we not argue that redirecting our work to this problematic is required not only by a morally sensitive scholarship, but even more compellingly, perhaps, by an epistemological necessity, given that social contextuality—however infinitely expandable it may be—and, correlatively, relations of social power, form the condition of possibility for any cultural meaning?

I have no illusions that I have successfully negotiated all the strong whirlpools, epistemological, political, and moral whirlpools, that confront anyone approaching the history of German Indology, still less so the problem of writing a history of cultural power in a precolonial world from within a postcolonial one (particularly the problem that such cultural critique sometimes might seem to recapitulate the very colonial discourse it seeks to transcend). The "Notes" in the subtitle is meant at least to circumscribe the ambitions I have and the claims I am prepared to make. But I want to share these notes because I think the issues in each of the two cases are too central to what, ultimately, Indologists do to permit the luxury of silence on the plea of specialization.

Finally, placing my two projects within the framework of "orientalism" reinforces the necessity to think about the critical dimension of this scholarship. A history of Indology, extracolonial no less than colonial, that finds it to be enmeshed in power from its very beginnings, and an analysis

of the object of Indology, or at least of Sanskrit studies, as an indigenous form of knowledge production equally saturated with domination, have important implications. We are forced to ask ourselves whether the Indology we ourselves practice continues its past role. Which of those forms of traditional domination that have existed in India remain sedimented in contemporary society? What can we learn about our own history as well as Indian history from all this, and what might be some components of a critical Indology that confronts domination in both the scholarly process and the scholarly object?

Indology, Power, and the Case of Germany

The early history of Indology is constituted out of a network of factors, economic, social, political, and cultural, that make any generalization about it at the same time simplification. With that caution understood, I think we can broadly identify three constituents in early Indian studies as especially important for their historical effectiveness and continuing vitality. These are British colonialism, Christian evangelism (and its flip side, theosophy and related irrationalisms), and German romanticism-Wissenschaft.

In the West, Sanskrit studies from the beginning developed from the impetus provided by one or another of these constituents. The earliest grammars of the language, for example, are the work of German and Austrian missionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hanxleden, Paulinus; Roth 1988); many of the first Sanskrit manuscripts in Europe were collected by French missionaries, some of the first attempts at Sanskrit editing and publishing are those of the British Baptists at Serampore in Bengal (e.g., Carey and Marshman 1806–10). One of the first Europeans to learn Sanskrit well enough to make use of it was—obligatory reference—William Jones, supreme court judge under the East India Company (1785; Cannon 1970: 646, 666, 682ff.), whose principal motive, like that of another important early Sanskritist, Colebrook, was the administration of law in British India. One of the critical moments in the academicization of Sanskrit studies was the encounter in Paris (1803–04) of the dominant character in German romanticism, Friedrich von Schlegel, with Alexander Hamilton of the East India Company (Rocher 1968). From Hamilton, Schlegel learned enough Sanskrit (*Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 1808; Oppenberg 1965) to encourage his brother, August Wilhelm, to learn

more, and it was A. W. von Schlegel who went on to hold the first chair for Sanskrit in Germany, at the University in Bonn (1818).

All of this history is certainly well known. I review it here to disentangle the three principal components so that, by arranging them side by side in their bare outline, we can appreciate more fully the fact that it was particular institutions of European power, the church, the corporation, the university, that created and later sponsored Indology; that, however we may wish to characterize the ends of these various institutions, it was their ends that Indology was invented to serve.

The principal target of the orientalist critique in South Asia has been the intimate and often complicated tie, sometimes the crudely heavy link, between Indology and British colonialism, and we now possess sharp analyses of some of its most subtle forms (for instance, Cohn 1987).³ Some of the postulates in this critique about precolonial power, and the more complex and challenging issue of a postcolonial “European epistemological hegemony,” I will discuss below. But the creation of Indological knowledge and its function in colonial domination need no elaboration here.

The various forms of cultural and spiritual domination represented by missionary Indology do not require special comment here either, although its cognate phenomenon, nineteenth-century theosophy and its wide range of modern-day incarnations, merit discussion within an orientalist analysis. It would be worth examining how these representations, especially in their highly commodified, scientistically packaged, and aggressively marketed contemporary forms, continue to nourish one of the most venerable orientalist constructions, the fantasy of a uniquely religion-obsessed India (and a uniquely transcendent Indian wisdom), and how this fantasy in turn continuously reproduces itself in contemporary scholarship, given the institutional monopolization of Indian studies by the “history of religions,” and presents one of the most serious obstacles to the creation of a critical Indology.

The third major component of Indology, my oddly hyphenated German romanticism-Wissenschaft, is less easily accommodated within an explanatory framework of colonial instrumentality and thus not accidentally was the one major form that Said left unaccounted for in his analysis.⁴ Trying to conceptualize in larger terms the meanings and functions of German orientalism invites us to think differently, or at least more expansively, about orientalism in general. It directs our attention momentarily away from the periphery to the national political culture and the relationship of knowledge and power at the core—directs us, potentially, toward

forms of internal colonialism, and certainly toward the domestic politics of scholarship.

No serious encounter with orientalism as it relates to traditional India can avoid the case of Germany. There are two reasons that are immediately obvious, because of their very materiality: the size of the investment on the part of the German state in Indological studies throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries (without this involving, it bears repeating, any direct colonial instrumentality) and the volume of the production of German orientalist knowledge. On both counts Germany almost certainly surpassed all the rest of Europe and America combined.⁵

In dissecting what accordingly has to be seen as the dominant form of Indianist orientalism, both in sheer quantity and in intellectual influence, two components seems worth isolating: the German romantic quest for identity and what was eventually to become one of its vehicles, the emerging vision of *Wissenschaft*.

The romantic search for self-definition (beginning in the early nineteenth century but with impulses continuing halfway into the twentieth, and perhaps beyond) comprised initially a complex confrontation with, on the one hand, Latin-Christian Europe, and on the other, the universalizing Enlightenment project of humanism. The discovery of Sanskrit was one of the crucial components in this search. As a British historian put it in 1879: "Not in a merely scientific or literary point of view, but in one strictly practical, the world is not the same world as it was when men had not yet dreamed of the kindred between Sanscrit, Greek, and English"—and, he should have added, German.⁶ As is manifest in the responses of the first Germans to learn the language (Friedrich von Schlegel and Othmar Frank, among others), Sanskrit was thought to give evidence of a historical culture, and spiritual and ultimately racial consanguinity, for Germans independent of, and far more ancient than, Latin or Christian culture.

This romantic dream seems to have sharpened into the vision of an Indo-Germanic *Geisteswelt* only gradually. The principal German cultural dichotomy in the early nineteenth century had juxtaposed Germania and Rome. This came to be replaced by the antithesis and finally essentialized dichotomy between "Indo-German" and "Semite." Indo-German, according to one of the best short accounts, was largely a *Kontrastbegriff*, called into being by the social and economic emancipation of Jews in the course of the century (von See 1970). But what made it possible to construct and consolidate this dichotomy, in addition to an "orientalizing" epistemology, was "orientalist" knowledge itself.

The discourse on Aryanism that this orientalist knowledge generated was, to a degree not often realized, available to the Germans already largely formulated for them at the hands of British scholarship by the middle of the nineteenth century. This discourse included a generous selection of what were to become the topoi of 1930s Germany: the celebration of Aryan superiority; the willingness to recognize racial kinship between European and Indian coupled with a readiness to establish (where this was politically useful) and explain (with the commonplaces that recur in 1933) the degeneracy of the South Asian Aryans; the politically driven disputes on the original homeland; even proposals for a eugenics program in India (calling for a revivification through racial planning of the debilitated South Asian Aryan stock). It might even be said that Aryanism was one conceptual building block in the totalizing projects of a good deal of nineteenth-century British work on India (H. S. Maine, J. W. Jackson, F. Max Mueller—a list easily extended).⁷

In the German instance, however, orientalism as a complex of knowledge-power has to be seen as vectored not outward to the Orient but inward to Europe itself, to constructing the conception of a historical German essence and to defining Germany's place in Europe's destiny. If the "German problem" is a problem of identity, and "the German figure of totalitarianism" racism (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990: 296), the discourse of Aryanism and, consequently, the orientalism on which it rested was empowered to play a role in Germany it never could play in England.

There is no need to trace further here the beginnings in the nineteenth century of the orientalist creation of Indo-German as counteridentity to Semite, still less the general place of India in the rise of German romanticism, for a good deal of work has already been done on those topics (e.g., Schwab 1950: 74ff.; Willson 1964; Stern 1961: 3–94; Römer 1985: 62ff.). What I want to focus on instead is the end point of the process, by which I mean not so much its chronological end but its consummation, in the period of National Socialism. In this culminating instance, I think two things happen: First, there come to be merged what hitherto seemed by and large discrete components of German orientalism, romanticism and *Wissenschaft*. Second, "orientalist" knowledge becomes part of the official worldview of a newly imagined empire, and in this German allomorph of British imperialism—the attempt to colonize Europe, and Germany itself, from within—orientalism has its special function to discharge.⁸

With some exceptions (the Göttingen orientalist, though not Indologist, Paul de Lagarde in the last third of the nineteenth century, for instance), the emerging vision of science/scholarship, *Wissenschaft*, seemed