

Amartya Sen

Indian traditions & the Western imagination

This essay is concerned with Western images of Indian intellectual traditions and the interactions between those representations and a contemporary “internal” understanding of Indian culture.¹ I focus particularly on the elementary diversities that characterize Indian society and its intellectual traditions, as well as on the biases that result from paying inadequate attention to them. In an obvious way, this applies to seeing India as a “mainly Hindu” country (as Western newspapers often describe India, as do the newly powerful Hindu political parties within India); this “mainly Hindu” country is also the third-largest Muslim country in the world (with nearly 110 million Muslims).

Less conspicuously, the contrast applies also to Indian intellectual traditions. This home of endless spirituali-

ty has perhaps the largest atheistic and materialist literature of all the ancient civilizations. To be sure, this accounting of the *amount* of unorthodox writing may be a little misleading, since Indian traditions are characterized by some prolixity. For example, the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, which is often compared with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is in fact seven times as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together. One of the more striking Bengali verses I remember from my childhood is a lamentation about the tragedy of death in a nineteenth-century poem: “Just consider how terrible the day of your death will be. / Others will go on speaking, and you will not be able to respond.” But even this extreme fondness for speech is associated with an enormous heterogeneity of programs and preoccupations. Irreducible diversity is perhaps the most important feature of Indian intellectual traditions.

The self-images (or “internal identities”) of Indians have been extremely af-

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fectured by colonialism over the past centuries and are much influenced – both collaterally and dialectically – by the impact of outside imagery (what we may call “external identity”). However, the direction of the influence of Western images on internal Indian identities is not altogether straightforward. In recent years, separatist resistance to Western cultural hegemony has led to the creation of significant intellectual movements in many postcolonial societies – not least in India. This has particularly drawn attention to the important fact that the self-identity of postcolonial societies is deeply affected by the power of the colonial cultures and their forms of thought and classification. Those who prefer to pursue a more “indigenous” approach often opt for a characterization of Indian culture and society that is rather self-consciously “distant” from Western traditions. There is much interest in “recovering” a distinctly Indian focus in Indian culture.

I would argue that this stance does not take adequate note of the dialectical aspects of the relationship between India and the West and, in particular, tends to disregard the fact that the external images of India in the West have often tended to *emphasize* (rather than downplay) the differences – real or imagined – between India and the West. Indeed, I propose that there are reasons why there has been a considerable Western inclination in the direction of “distancing” Indian culture from the mainstream of Western traditions. The contemporary reinterpretations of India (including the specifically “Hindu” renditions), which emphasize Indian particularism, join forces in this respect with the “external” imaging of India (in accentuating the distinctiveness of Indian culture). Indeed, it can be argued that there is much in common between James Mill’s impe-

rialist history of India and the Hindu nationalist picturing of India’s past, even though the former image is that of a grotesquely primitive culture whereas the latter representation is dazzlingly glorious.

The special characteristics of the Western approaches to India have encouraged a disposition to focus particularly on the religious and spiritual elements in Indian culture. There has also been a tendency to emphasize the contrast between what is taken to be “Western rationality” and the cultivation of what “Westerners” would see as “irrational” in Indian intellectual traditions. While Western critics may find “antirationalism” to be defective and crude, and Indian cultural separatists may find it cogent and penetrating (and perhaps even “rational” in some deeper sense), they nevertheless agree on the existence of a simple and sharp contrast between the two heritages. The issue that has to be scrutinized is whether such a bipolar contrast is at all present in that form.

I will discuss these questions and argue that focusing on India’s “specialness” misses, in important ways, crucial aspects of Indian culture and traditions. The deep-seated heterogeneity of Indian traditions is neglected in these homogenized interpretations (even though the interpretations themselves are of different kinds). My focus will be particularly on images of Indian *intellectual* traditions, rather than on its creative arts and other features of social life. After distinguishing between three of the dominant approaches in Western interpretations of Indian intellectual traditions, I will consider what may appear to be the overall consequence of these approaches in Western images of India and its impact on both external and internal identities.

Indian traditions & the Western imagination

A dissimilarity of perceptions has been an important characteristic of Western interpretations of India, and several different and competing conceptions of that large and complex culture have been influential in the West. The diverse interpretations of India in the West have tended to work to a considerable extent in the same direction (that of accentuating India's spirituality) and have reinforced each other in their effects on internal identities of Indians. But this is not because the distinct approaches to India are not fundamentally different; they certainly are very disparate. The similarity lies more in their *impact* – given the special circumstances and the dialectical processes – than in their content.

The analysis to be pursued here would undoubtedly invite comparison and contrast with Edward Said's justly famous analysis of "Orientalism." Said analyzes the construction of the "Orient" in Western imagination. As he puts it, "The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence *in and for the West*."² This essay has a much narrower focus than Said's, viz. India, but there is clearly an overlap of subject matter since India is a part of the "Orient." The main difference is at the thematic level. Said focuses on uniformity and consistency in a particularly influential Western characterization of the Orient, whereas I shall be dealing with several contrasting and conflicting Western approaches to understanding India.

Said explains that his work "deals principally not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Ori-

2 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978; Vintage Books, 1979), 5; italics added.

talism and its ideas about the Orient."³ I would argue that unless one chooses to focus on the evolution of a specific conceptual tradition (as Said, in effect, does), "internal consistency" is precisely the thing that is terribly hard to find in the variety of Western conceptions of India. There are several fundamentally contrary ideas and images of India, and they have quite distinct roles in the Western understanding of the country and also in influencing self-perceptions of Indians.

Attempts from outside India to understand and interpret the country's traditions can be, I would argue, put into at least three distinct categories, which I shall call *exoticist* approaches, *magisterial* approaches, and *curatorial* approaches.⁴ The first (*exoticist*) category concentrates on the wondrous aspects of India. The focus here is on what is different, what is strange in the country that, as Hegel put it, "has existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans."

The second (*magisterial*) category strongly relates to the exercise of imperial power and sees India as a subject territory from the point of view of its British governors. This outlook assimilates a sense of superiority and guardianhood needed to deal with a country that James Mill defined as "that great scene of British action." While a great many British observers did not fall into this category (and some non-British ones did), it is hard to dissociate this category from the task of governing the Raj.

The third (*curatorial*) category is the most catholic of the three and includes

3 Ibid., 5.

4 In the earlier article "India and the West" on which this essay draws, the third category was called "investigative" rather than "curatorial"; the latter is more specific and I believe somewhat more appropriate.

various attempts at noting, classifying, and exhibiting diverse aspects of Indian culture. Unlike the exoticist approaches, a curatorial approach does not look *only* for the strange (even though the “different” must have more “exhibit value”), and unlike the magisterial approaches, it is not weighed down by the impact of the ruler’s priorities (even though the magisterial connection would be hard to avoid *altogether* when the author is also a member of the ruling imperial elite, as they sometimes were). For these reasons, there is more freedom from preconceptions in this third category. On the other hand, the curatorial approaches have perspectives of their own, with a general interest in seeing the object – in this case, India – as very special and extraordinarily interesting.

Other categories can be proposed that are not covered by any of the three. Also, the established approaches can be reclassified according to some *other* organizing principle. I am not claiming any grand definitive status of this way of seeing the more prominent Western approaches to India. However, for the purpose of this essay, I believe this threefold categorization is useful.

I shall begin by considering the curatorial approaches. But first I must deal with a methodological issue, in particular, the prevalent doubts in contemporary social theory about the status of intellectual curiosity as a motivation for knowledge. In particular, there is much skepticism about the possibility of any approach to learning that is innocent of power. That skepticism is justified to some extent since the motivational issues underlying any investigation may well relate to power relations, even when that connection is not immediately visible.

Yet people seek knowledge for many different reasons, and curiosity about

unfamiliar things is certainly among the possible reasons. It need not be seen as a figment of the deluded scientist’s imagination, nor as a tactical excuse for some other, ulterior preoccupation. Nor does the pervasive relevance of different types of motivation have the effect of making all the different observational findings *equally* arbitrary. There are real lines to be drawn between inferences dominated by rigid preconceptions (for example, in the “magisterial” approaches, to be discussed presently) and those that are not so dominated.

There is an interesting methodological history here. The fact that knowledge is often associated with power is a recognition that had often received far too little attention in traditional social theories of knowledge. But in recent social studies, the remedying of that methodological neglect has been so comprehensive that we are now in some danger of ignoring other motivations altogether that may not link directly with the seeking of power. While it is true that any useful knowledge gives its possessor some power in one form or another, this may not be the most remarkable aspect of that knowledge, nor the primary reason for which this knowledge is sought. Indeed, the process of learning can accommodate considerable motivational variations without becoming a functionalist enterprise of some grosser kind. An epistemic methodology that sees the pursuit of knowledge as entirely congruent with the search for power is a great deal more cunning than wise. It can needlessly undermine the value of knowledge in satisfying curiosity and interest; it significantly weakens one of the profound characteristics of human beings.

The curatorial approach relates to systematic curiosity. People are interested in other cultures and different lands, and investigations of a country and its tradi-

Indian traditions & the Western imagination

tions have been vigorously pursued throughout human history. Indeed, the development of civilization would have been very different had this not been the case. The exact motivation for these investigations can vary, but the inquiries need not be hopelessly bound by some overarching motivational constraint (such as those associated with the exoticist or magisterial approaches). Rather, the pursuit may be driven primarily by intellectual interests and concerns. This is not to deny that the *effects* of these investigative pursuits may go well beyond the motivating interests and concerns, nor that there could be *mixed motivations* of various kinds, in which power relations play a collateral role. But to deny the role of curiosity and interest as powerful motivational features in their own right would be to miss something rather important. For the curatorial approaches, that connection is quite central.

A fine example of a curatorial approach to understanding India can be found in Alberuni's *Ta'rikh al-hind* (*The History of India*), written in Arabic in the early eleventh century.⁵ Alberuni, who was born in Central Asia in A.D. 973, first came to India accompanying the marauding troops of Mahmud of Ghazni. He became very involved with India and mastered Sanskrit; studied Indian texts on mathematics, natural sciences, literature, philosophy, and religion; conversed with as many experts as he could find; and investigated social conventions and practices. His book on India presents a remarkable account of the intellectual traditions and social customs of early eleventh-century India.

Even though Alberuni's was almost certainly the most impressive of these

5 See *Alberuni's India*, trans. E. C. Sachau, ed. A. T. Embree (New York: Norton, 1971).

investigations, there are a great many examples of serious Arabic studies of Indian intellectual traditions around that time.⁶ Brahmagupta's pioneering Sanskrit treatise on astronomy had first been translated into Arabic in the eighth century (Alberuni retranslated it three centuries later), and several works on medicine, science, and philosophy had an Arabic rendering by the ninth century. It was through the Arabs that the Indian decimal system and numerals reached Europe, as did Indian writings in mathematics, science, and literature.

In the concluding chapter of his book on India, Alberuni describes the motivation behind his work thus: "We think now that what we have related in this book will be sufficient for any one who wants to converse with [the Indians], and to discuss with them questions of religion, science, or literature, on the very basis of their own civilization."⁷ He is particularly aware of the difficulties of achieving an understanding of a foreign land and people, and specifically warns the reader about it:

... in all manners and usages, [the Indians] differ from us to such a degree as to frighten their children with us, with our dress, and our ways and customs, and as to declare us to be devil's breed, and our

6 See Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), chap. 2.

7 *Alberuni's India*, pt. II, chap. LXXX, 246. The same Arabic word was commonly used for "Hindu" and "Indian" in Alberuni's time. While the English translator had chosen to use "Hindus" here, I have replaced it with "Indians" in view of the context (to wit, Alberuni's observations on the inhabitants of India). This is an issue of some interest in the context of the main theme of this essay, since the language used here in the English translation to refer to the inhabitants of India implicitly involves a circumscribed ascription.

doings as the very opposite of all that is good and proper. By the bye, we must confess, in order to be just, that a similar depreciation of foreigners not only prevails among us and [the Indians], but is common to all nations towards each other.⁸

While Arab scholarship on India provides plentiful examples of curatorial approaches in the external depiction of India, they are not, of course, unique in this respect. Chinese travelers Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang, who spent many years in India in the fifth and seventh centuries A.D. respectively, provided extensive accounts of what they saw. While they had gone to India for Buddhist studies, their reports cover a variety of Indian subjects, described with much care and interest.

Quite a few of the early European studies of India must also be put in this general category. A good example is the Italian Jesuit Roberto Nobili, who went to south India in the early seventeenth century, and whose remarkable scholarship in Sanskrit and Tamil permitted him to produce quite authoritative books on Indian intellectual discussions, in Latin as well as in Tamil. Another Jesuit, Father Pons from France, produced a grammar of Sanskrit in Latin in the early eighteenth century and also sent a collection of original manuscripts to Europe (happily for him, the Bombay customs authorities were not yet in existence then).

However, the real eruption of European interest in India took place a bit later, in direct response to British – rather than Italian or French – scholarship on India. A towering figure in this intellectual transmission is the redoubtable William Jones, the legal scholar and officer of the East India Company, who went to India in 1783 and by the follow-

8 *Alberuni's India*, pt. I, chap. I, 20.

ing year had established the Asiatic Society of Bengal with the active patronage of Warren Hastings. In collaboration with scholars such as Charles Wilkins and Thomas Colebrooke, Jones and the Asiatic Society did a remarkable job in translating a number of Indian classics – religious documents (such as the *Gita*) as well as legal treatises (particularly, *Manusmriti*) and literary works (such as Kalidasa's *Śakuntala*).

Jones was quite obsessed with India and declared his ambition “to know India better than any other European ever knew it.” His description of his selected fields of study included the following modest list:

... the Laws of the Hindus and the Mohamedans, Modern Politics and Geography of Hindustan, Best Mode of Governing Bengal, Arithmetic and Geometry, and Mixed Sciences of the Asiaticks, Medicine, Chemistry, Surgery, and Anatomy of the Indians, Natural Productions of India, Poetry, Rhetoric, and Morality of Asia, Music of the Eastern Nations, Trade, Manufacture, Agriculture, and Commerce of India.⁹

One can find many other examples of dedicated scholarship among British officers in the East India Company, and there can be little doubt that the Western perceptions of India were profoundly influenced by these investigations. Not surprisingly, the focus here is quite often on those things that are distinctive in India. The specialists on India pointed to the uncommon aspects of Indian culture and its intellectual traditions, which were obviously more interesting given the perspective and motivation of the

9 William Jones, “Objects of Enquiry During My Residence in Asia,” included in *The Collected Works of Sir William Jones*, 13 vols. (London: J. Stockdale, 1807; republished, New York: New York University Press, 1993).

observers.¹⁰ As a result, the curatorial approaches could not escape being somewhat slanted in their focus. I shall come back to this issue later.

I turn now to the second category, the magisterial approaches. The task of ruling a foreign country is not an easy one when its subjects are seen as equals. In this context, it is quite remarkable that the early British administrators in India, even the controversial Warren Hastings, were as respectful of the Indian traditions as they clearly were. The empire was still in its infancy and was being gradually acquired, rather tentatively (if not in a fit of absentmindedness).

A good example of a magisterial approach to India is the classic book on India written by James Mill, published in 1817, on the strength of which he was appointed as an official of the East India Company. Mill's *History of British India* played a major role in introducing the British governors of India to a particular characterization of the country. Mill disputed and dismissed practically every claim ever made on behalf of Indian culture and its intellectual traditions, concluding that it was totally primitive and rude. This diagnosis fit well with Mill's general attitude, which supported the idea of bringing a rather barbaric nation under the benign and reformist administration of the British Empire. Consistent with his beliefs, Mill was an expansionist in dealing with the remaining independent states in the subcontinent. The obvious policy to pursue, he explained,

10 I have discussed the "positional" nature of objectivity, depending on the placing of the observer and analyst vis-à-vis the objects being studied, in "Positional Objectivity," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1993), and "On Interpreting India's Past," in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, eds., *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

was "to make war on those states and subdue them."¹¹

Mill chastised early British administrators (like William Jones) for having taken "Hindus to be a people of high civilization, while they have in reality made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization."¹² At the end of a comprehensive attack on all fronts, he came to the conclusion that the Indian civilization was on a par with other inferior ones known to Mill – "very nearly the same with that of the Chinese, the Persians, and the Arabians"; he also put in this category, for good measure, "subordinate nations, the Japanese, Cochinchinese, Siamese, Burmans, and even Malays and Tibetans."¹³

How well informed was Mill in dealing with his subject matter? Mill wrote his book without ever having visited India. He knew no Sanskrit, nor any Persian or Arabic, had practically no knowledge of any of the modern Indian languages, and thus his reading of Indian material was of necessity most limited. There is another feature of Mill that clearly influenced his investigations, to wit, his inclination to distrust anything stated by native scholars, since they appeared to him to be liars. "Our ancestors," says Mill, "though tough, were sincere; but under the glossing exterior of the Hindu, lies a general disposition to deceit and perfidy."¹⁴

Perhaps some examples of Mill's treatment of particular claims of

11 Quoted in Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 250.

12 James Mill, *The History of British India* (London, 1817; republished, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 225 – 226.

13 *Ibid.*, 248.

14 *Ibid.*, 247.

achievement may be useful to illustrate the nature of his extremely influential approach. The invention of the decimal system with place values and the placed use of zero, now used everywhere, as well as the so-called Arabic numerals are generally known to be Indian developments. In fact, Alberuni had already mentioned this in his eleventh-century book on India,¹⁵ and many European as well as Arab scholars had written on this subject.¹⁶ Mill dismisses the claim altogether on the grounds that “the invention of numerical characters must have been very ancient” and “whether the signs used by the Hindus are so peculiar as to render it probable that they invented them, or whether it is still more probable that they borrowed them, are questions which, for the purpose of ascertaining their progress in civilization, are not worth resolving.”

Mill proceeds then to explain that the Arabic numerals “are really hieroglyphics” and that the claim on behalf of the Indians and the Arabs reflects the confounding of “the origin of cyphers or numerical characters” with “that of hieroglyphic writing.”¹⁷ At one level Mill’s rather elementary error lies in not knowing what a decimal or a place-value system is, but his ignorant smugness cannot be understood except in terms of his implicit unwillingness to believe that a very sophisticated invention could have been managed by such primitive people.

Another interesting example concerns Mill’s reaction to Indian astronomy and

specifically the argument for a rotating earth and a model of gravitational attraction (proposed by Aryabhata, who was born in A.D. 476, and investigated by, among others, Varahamihira and Brahmagupta in the sixth and seventh centuries). These works were well known in the Arab world; as was mentioned earlier, Brahmagupta’s book was translated into Arabic in the eighth century and retranslated by Alberuni in the eleventh. William Jones had been told about these works in India, and he in turn reported that statement. Mill expresses total astonishment at Jones’s gullibility.¹⁸ After ridiculing the absurdity of this attribution and commenting on the “pretensions and interests” of Jones’s Indian informants, Mill concludes that it was “extremely natural that Sir William Jones, whose pundits had become acquainted with the ideas of European philosophers respecting the system of the universe, should hear from them that those ideas were contained in their own books.”¹⁹

For purposes of comparison it is useful to examine Alberuni’s discussion of the same issue nearly eight hundred years earlier, concerning the postulation of a rotating earth and gravitational attraction in the still-earlier writings of Aryabhata and Brahmagupta:

18 Mill found in Jones’s beliefs about early Indian mathematics and astronomy “evidence of the fond credulity with which the state of society among the Hindus was for a time regarded,” and he was particularly amused that Jones had made these attributions “with an air of belief.” Mill, *The History of British India*, 223–224. On the substantive side, Mill amalgamates the distinct claims regarding 1) the principle of attraction, 2) the daily rotation of the earth, and 3) the movement of the earth around the sun. Aryabhata and Brahmagupta’s concern were mainly with the first two, on which specific assertions were made, unlike on the third.

19 Mill, *The History of British India*, 223–224.

15 Alberuni’s *India*, pt. I, chap. XVI, 174–175.

16 For a modern account of the complex history of this mathematical development, see George Ifrah, *From One to Zero* (New York: Viking, 1985).

17 Mill, *The History of British India*, 219–220.

Brahmagupta says in another place of the same book: "The followers of Aryabhata maintain that the earth is moving and heaven resting. People have tried to refute them by saying that, if such were the case, stones and trees would fall from the earth." But Brahmagupta does not agree with them, and says that that would not necessarily follow from their theory, apparently because he thought that all heavy things are attracted towards the center of the earth.²⁰

Alberuni himself proceeded to dispute this model, raised a technical question about one of Brahmagupta's mathematical calculations, referred to a different book of his own arguing against the proposed view, and pointed out that the relative character of movements makes this issue less central than one might first think: "The rotation of the earth does in no way impair the value of astronomy, as all appearances of an astronomic character can quite as well be explained according to this theory as to the other."²¹ Here, as elsewhere, while arguing against an opponent's views, Alberuni tries to present such views with great involvement and care. The contrast between Alberuni's curatorial approach and James Mill's magisterial pronouncements could not be sharper.

There are plenty of other examples of "magisterial" readings of India in Mill's history. This is of some practical importance, since the book was extremely influential in the British administration and widely praised. It was described by Macaulay as "on the whole the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since that of Gibbon."²²

20 Alberuni's *India*, pt. I, chap. XXVI, 276 – 277.

21 Ibid., 277.

22 Quoted in John Clive's introduction to James Mill, *The History of British India* (repub-

Macaulay's own approach and inclinations echoed James Mill's:

I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic . . . I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.²³

This view of the poverty of Indian intellectual traditions played a major part in educational reform in British India, as is readily seen from the 1835 "Minute on Indian Education," written by Macaulay himself (the quoted remark is actually taken from that document). The priorities in Indian education were determined, henceforth, by a different emphasis – by the need, as Macaulay argued, for a class of English-educated Indians who could "be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern."²⁴

The impact of the magisterial views of India was not confined only to Britain and India. Modern documents in the same tradition have been influential elsewhere, including in the United States. In a series of long conversations on India and China conducted by Harold Isaacs in 1958 with 181 Americans – academics, professionals in mass media, government officials, missionaries and church officials, and officials of foundations, voluntary social-service groups, and political organizations – Isaacs

lished, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), viii.

23 T. B. Macaulay, "Indian Education: Minute of the 2nd February, 1835"; reproduced in G. M. Young, ed., *Macaulay: Prose and Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), 722.

24 Ibid., 729.

found that the two most widely read literary sources on India were Rudyard Kipling and Katherine Mayo, the author of the extremely derogatory *Mother India*.²⁵ Of these, Kipling's writings would be more readily recognized as having something of the "magisterial" approach to them. Lloyd Rudolph describes Mayo's *Mother India* thus:

First published in 1927, *Mother India* was written in the context of official and unofficial British efforts to generate support in America for British rule in India. It added contemporary and lurid detail to the image of Hindu India as irredeemably and hopelessly impoverished, degraded, depraved, and corrupt. Mayo's *Mother India* echoed not only the views of men like Alexander Duff, Charles Grant, and John Stuart Mill but also those of Theodore Roosevelt, who glorified in bearing the white man's burden in Asia and celebrated the accomplishments of imperialism.²⁶

Mahatma Gandhi, while describing Mayo's book as "a drain inspector's report," had added that every Indian should read it and seemed to imply, as Ashis Nandy notes, that it is possible "to put her criticism to internal use" (as an over stern drain inspector's report certainly can be).²⁷ Gandhi him-

self was severely attacked in the book, but given his campaign against caste and untouchability, he might have actually welcomed even her exaggerations because of its usefully lurid portrayal of caste inequities. But while Gandhi may have been right to value external criticism as a way of inducing people to be self-critical, the impact of the "magisterial approach" certainly gives American perceptions of India a very clear slant.²⁸

I turn now to the "exoticist" approaches to India. Interest in India has often been stimulated by the observation of exotic ideas and views there. Arrian's and Strabo's accounts of Alexander the Great's spirited conversations with various sages of northwest India may or may not be authentic, but ancient Greek literature is full of uncommon happenings and thoughts attributed to India.

Megasthenes's *Indika*, describing India in the early third century B.C., can claim to be the first outsider's book on India; it created much Greek interest, as can be seen from the plentiful references to it, for example, in the writings of Diodorus, Strabo, and Arrian. Megasthenes had ample opportunity to observe India since, as the envoy of Seleucus Nicator to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, he spent nearly a decade (between 302 and 291 B.C.) in Pataliputra (the site of modern Patna), the capital city of the Mauryan empire. But his superlatively admiring book is also so full of accounts of fantastic objects and achievements in India that it is hard to be sure what

²⁸ On this, see Glazer and Glazer, eds., *Conflicting Images*. The influence of magisterial readings on American imaging of India has been somewhat countered in recent years by the political interest in Gandhi's life and ideas, a variety of sensitive writings on India (from Erik Erikson to John Kenneth Galbraith), and the Western success of several Indian novelists in English.

²⁵ See Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1958); republished as *Images of Asia: American Views of India and China* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958). See also the discussion of this issue in the "Introduction" in Sulochana Glazer and Nathan Glazer, eds., *Conflicting Images: India and the United States* (Glen Dale, Md.: Riverdale, 1990).

²⁶ Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Gandhi in the Mind of America," in Glazer and Glazer, eds., *Conflicting Images*, 166.

²⁷ Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8.

is imagined and what is really being observed.

There are various other accounts of exotic Indian travels by ancient Greeks. The biography of Apollonius of Tyana by Flavius Philostratus in the third century A.D. is a good example. In his search for what was out of the ordinary, Apollonius was, we are assured, richly rewarded in India: "I have seen men living upon the earth and not upon it; defended without walls, having nothing, and yet possessing all things."²⁹ How such contradictory things can be seen by the same person from the same observational position may not be obvious, but the bewitching charm of all this for the seeker of the exotic can hardly be doubted.

Exotic interests in India can be seen again and again, from its early history to the present day. From Alexander listening to the gymnosophists' lectures to contemporary devotees hearing the sermons of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Shri Rajneesh, there is a crowded lineage. Perhaps the most important example of intellectual exoticism related to India can be seen in the European philosophical discussions in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, among the Romantics in particular.

Important figures in the Romantic movement, including the Schlegel brothers, Schelling, and others, were profoundly influenced by rather magnified readings of Indian culture. From Herder, the German philosopher and a critic of the rationalism of the European Enlightenment, we get the magnificent news that "the Hindus are the gentlest branch of humanity" and that "moderation and calm, a soft feeling and a si-

29 Quoted in John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 95.

lent depth of the soul characterize their work and their pleasure, their morals and mythology, their arts."³⁰ Frederick Schlegel not only pioneered studies of Indo-European linguistics (later pursued particularly by Max Muller) but also brought India fully into his critique of the contemporary West. While in the West "man himself has almost become a machine" and "cannot sink any deeper," Schlegel recommended learning from the Orient, especially India. He also guaranteed that "the Persian and German languages and cultures, as well as the Greek and the old Roman, may all be traced back to the Indian."³¹ To this list, Schopenhauer added the New Testament, informing us that, in contrast with the Old, the New Testament "must somehow be of Indian origin: this is attested by its completely Indian ethics, which transforms morals into asceticism, its pessimism, and its *avatar* (i.e., the person of Christ)."³²

Not surprisingly, many of the early enthusiasts were soon disappointed in not finding in Indian thought what they had themselves put there, and many of them went into a phase of withdrawal and criticism. Some of the stalwarts, Schlegel in particular, recanted vigorously. Others, including Hegel, outlined fairly negative views of Indian traditions and presented loud denials of the claim of preeminence of Indian culture – a

30 J. G. Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte: Samtliche Werke*, translated by Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 70.

31 Translations by Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 74–75. Halbfass provides an extensive study of these European interpretations of Indian thought and the reactions and counterreactions to them.

32 A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena*; translated by Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 112.

claim that was of distinctly European origin. When Samuel Coleridge asked: "What are / These potentates of inmost Ind?"³³ he was really asking a question about Europe, rather than about India.³⁴

In addition to veridical weakness, the exoticist approach to India has an inescapable fragility and transience that can be seen again and again. A wonderful thing is imagined about India and sent into a high orbit, and then it is brought crashing down. All this need not be such a tragedy when the act of launching is done by (or with the active cooperation of) the putative star. Not many would weep, for example, for Maharishi Mahesh Yogi when the Beatles stopped lionizing him and left suddenly; in answer to the Maharishi's question of why were they leaving, John Lennon said, "You are the cosmic one; you ought to know."³⁵

But it is a different matter altogether when both the boom and the bust are thrust upon the victim. One of the most discouraging episodes in literary reception occurred early in this century, when Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, and others led

33 See John H. Muirhead, *Coleridge as a Philosopher* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1930), 283–284, and Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination*, chap. 6.

34 The nature of exoticist reading has typically had a strongly "Hindu" character. This was, in some ways, present even in William Jones's curatorial investigations (though he was himself a scholar in Arabic and Persian as well), but he was to some extent redressing the relative neglect of Sanskrit classics in the previous periods (even though the version of the *Upanishads* that Jones first read was the Persian translation prepared by the Moghul prince Dara Shikoh, Emperor Akbar's great-grandson). The European Romantics, on the other hand, tended to identify India with variants of Hindu religious thought.

35 William Davis, *The Rich* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1982), 99.

a chorus of adoration at the lyrical spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry but followed it soon afterwards with a thorough disregard and firm denunciation. Tagore was a Bengali poet of tremendous creativity and range (even though his poetry does not translate easily – not even the spiritual ones that were so applauded) and also a great storyteller, novelist, and essayist; he remains a dominant literary figure in Bangladesh and India. The versatile and innovative writer that the Bengalis know well is not the sermonizing spiritual guru put together in London; nor did he fit any better the caricature of "Stupendranath Begorr" to be found in Bernard Shaw's "A Glimpse of the Domesticity of Franklyn Barnabas."

These different approaches have had very diverse impacts on the understanding of Indian intellectual traditions in the West. The exoticist and magisterial approaches have bemused and befuddled that understanding even as they have drawn attention to India in the West. The curatorial approaches have been less guilty of this, and indeed historically have played a major part in bringing out and drawing attention to the different aspects of Indian culture, including its nonmystical and nonexotic features. Nevertheless, given the nature of the curatorial enterprise, the focus inevitably leans towards that which is different in India, rather than what is similar to the West. In emphasizing the distinctiveness of India, even the curatorial approaches have sometimes contributed to the accentuation of contrasts rather than commonalities with Western traditions, though not in the rather extreme form found in the exoticist and magisterial approaches.

The magisterial approaches played quite a vigorous role in the running of

the British Empire. Even though the Raj is dead and gone, the impact of the associated images survives, not least in the United States (as discussed earlier). To some extent, the magisterial authors also reacted against the admiration of India that can be seen in the writings of curatorial observers of India. For example, both Mill and Macaulay were vigorously critical of the writings of authors such as William Jones, and there are some important dialectics here. The respectful curatorial approaches painted a picture of Indian intellectual traditions that was much too favorable for the imperial culture of the nineteenth century, and contributed to the vehemence of the magisterial denunciations of those traditions. By the time Mill and Macaulay were writing, the British Indian empire was well established as a lasting and extensive enterprise, and the “irresponsibility” of admiring the native intellectual traditions – permissible in the previous century for early servants of the East India Company – was hard to sustain as the favored reading of India in the consolidated empire.

Turning to the exoticist approaches, the outbursts of fascinated wonder bring India into Western awareness in big tides of bewildering attention. But then they ebb, leaving only a trickle of hardened exoticists holding forth. There may well be, after a while, another tide. In describing the rise and decline of Rabindranath Tagore in London’s literary circles, E. M. Forster remarked that London was a city of “boom and bust,” but that description applies more generally (that is, not confined only to literary circles in London) to the Western appreciation of exotic aspects of Eastern cultures.

The tides, while they last, can be hard work though. I remember feeling quite sad for a dejected racist whom I saw,

some years ago, near the Aldwych station in London, viewing with disgust a thousand posters pasted everywhere carrying pictures of the obese – and holy – physique of Guru Maharajji (then a great rage in London). Our dedicated racist was busy writing “fat wog” diligently under each of the pictures. In a short while that particular wog would be gone, but I do not doubt that the “disgusted of Aldwych” would scribble “lean wog” or “medium-sized wog” under other posters now.

It might be thought that since the exoticist approaches *give* credit where it may not be due and the magisterial approaches *withhold* credit where it may well be due, the two might neutralize each other nicely. But they work in very asymmetrical ways. Magisterial critiques tend to blast the rationalist and humanist aspects of India with the greatest force (this is as true of James Mill as of Katharine Mayo), whereas exoticist admirations tend to build up the mystical and extrarational aspects with particular care (this has been so from Apollonius of Tyana down to the Hare Krishna activists of today). The result of the two taken together is to wrest the understanding of Indian culture forcefully away from its rationalist aspects. Indian traditions in mathematics, logic, science, medicine, linguistics, or epistemology may be well known to the Western specialist, but they play little part in the general Western understanding of India.³⁶ Mysticism and exoticism, in contrast, have a more hallowed position in that understanding.

Western perceptions and characterizations of India have had considerable

³⁶ On this issue, see Bimal Matilal, *Perceptions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). See also Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

influence on the self-perceptions of Indians themselves. This is clearly connected to India's colonial past and continued deference to what is valued in the West.³⁷ However, the relationship need not take the form of simple acceptance – it sometimes includes strategic responses to the variety of Western perceptions of India that suit the interests of internal imaging. We have to distinguish between some distinct aspects of the influence that Western images have had on Indian internal identities.

First, the European exoticists' interpretations and praise found in India a veritable army of appreciative listeners, who were particularly welcoming given the badly damaged self-confidence resulting from colonial domination. The admiring statements were quoted again and again, and the negative remarks by the same authors (Herder, Schlegel, Goethe, and others) were systematically overlooked.

In his *Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru comments on this phenomenon:

There is a tendency on the part of Indian writers, to which I have also partly succumbed, to give selected extracts and quotations from the writings of European scholars in praise of old Indian literature and philosophy. It would be equally easy, indeed much easier, to give other extracts giving an exactly opposite viewpoint.³⁸

In the process of accepting the exoticist praise, the Indian interpretation of the

37 On this issue in general, and on the hold of "a predominantly third-person perspective" in self-perception, see Akeel Bilgrami, "What Is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (4) (1992).

38 Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1946; centenary edition, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 158.

past has extensively focused on the *objects* of exoticist praise, concentrating more on the mystical and the antirationalist, for which many in the West have such admiration.³⁹

Second, the process fit into the politics of elitist nationalism in colonial India and fed the craving for a strong intellectual ground to stand on to confront the imperial rulers. Partha Chatterjee discusses the emergence of this attitude very well:

... anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowl-

39 While the constitution of independent India has been self-consciously secular, the tendency to see India as a land of the Hindus remains quite strong. The confrontation between "secularists" and "communitarians" has been an important feature of contemporary India, and the identification of Indian culture in mainly Hindu terms plays a part in this. While it is certainly possible to be both secular and communitarian (as Rajeev Bhargava has noted in "Giving Secularism Its Due," *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 9, 1994), the contemporary divisions in India tend to make the religious and communal identities largely work against India's secular commitments (as Bhargava also notes). I have tried to scrutinize these issues in my paper "Secularism and Its Discontents," in Kaushik Basu and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity* (Delhi: Penguin, 1996). See also the other papers in that collection, and the essays included in Bose and Jalal, eds., *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India*.

edged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one’s spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa.⁴⁰

There was indeed such an attempt to present what was perceived to be the “strong aspects” of Indian culture, distinguished from the domain, as Chatterjee puts it, “where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed.”

Chatterjee’s analysis can be supplemented by taking further note of the dialectics of the relationship between Indian internal identity and its external images. The diagnosis of strength in that nonmaterialist domain was as much helped by the exoticist admiration for Indian spirituality as the acceptance of India’s weakness in the domain of science, technology, and mathematics was reinforced by the magisterial dismissals of India’s materialist and rationalist traditions. The emphases on internal identity that emerged in colonial India bear powerful marks of dialectical encounters with Western perceptions.

Third, as the focus has shifted in recent decades from elitist colonial history to the role of the nonelite, the concentration on the intellectual traditions of the elite has weakened. Here we run into one of the most exciting developments in historiography in India. There has been a significant shift of attention from the elite to the underdogs in the writing

40 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6.

of colonial history, focusing more on the rural masses and the exploited plebeians—a broad group often identified by the capacious term “subalterns.”⁴¹ The move is entirely appropriate in its context (in fact, much overdue), and in understanding colonial history, this is a very important corrective.

While this shift in focus rejects the emphasis on elitist intellectual traditions in general (*both* of the materialist and the nonmaterialist kind), it is in many ways easier to relate the religious and spiritual traditions of the elite to the practices and beliefs of the nonelite. The cutting edge of science and mathematics is inevitably related to formal education and preparation. In this context, the immense backwardness of India in mass education (an inheritance from the British period but not much remedied yet) compounds the dissociation of elite science and mathematics from the lives of the nonelite. Acceptance of the achievements of Indian spirituality tends to look less “alienated” from the masses than the achievements in fields that demand more exacting formal education. Thus, the exoticists’ praise of India is more easily accepted by those who are particularly careful not to see India in elitist terms.

The fact remains, however, that illiteracy is a deprivation. The issue of interclass justice cannot be a matter only of recognizing the real role of the subalterns *in history* (for example, in anticolonial national movements), important

41 The most effective move in that direction came under the leadership of Ranajit Guha; see his introductory essay in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982). See also the collection of “subaltern” essays edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

though it is. It is also a matter of remedying the immense inequalities in educational and other opportunities that severely limit, even today, the *actual* lives of the subalterns.

Interestingly enough, even by the eleventh century, the seriousness of this loss was noted by Alberuni himself (one of the major curatorial authors whose work was referred to earlier). Alberuni spoke of the real deprivation of “those castes who are not allowed to occupy themselves with science.”⁴² This substantive deprivation remains largely unremedied even today (except in particular regions such as Kerala), with half of the adult population of India (and nearly two-thirds of the adult women) still remaining illiterate.⁴³ In understanding the nature of Indian cultures and traditions, focusing mainly on the achievements – rather than deprivations – of the Indian subaltern can yield a deceptive contrast.

This shift in emphasis has also, to some extent, pushed the interpretation of India’s past away from those achievements that require considerable formal training. While this move makes sense in some contexts, a comparison of a self-consciously nonelitist history of India

42 Alberuni’s *India*, chap. II, 32.

43 Indeed, in conceptualizing “the good life” even from the perspective of the deprived underdog, it would be a mistake to ignore altogether the intellectual achievements of the elite, since part of the deprivation of the exploited lies precisely in being denied participation in these achievements. While Marx might have exaggerated a little in his eloquence about “the idiocy of the village life,” there is nevertheless a substantial point here in identifying the nature of social deprivation. There is, in fact, no basic contradiction in choosing the subaltern perspective of history and taking systematic note of the scholarly accomplishments of the elite.

with the typically classical understanding of the intellectual heritage of the West produces a false contrast between the respective intellectual traditions. In comparing Western thoughts and creations with those in India, the appropriate counterpoints of Aristotelian or Stoic or Euclidian analyses are not the traditional beliefs of the Indian rural masses or of the local wise men but the comparably analytical writings of, say, Kautilya or Nagarjuna or Aryabhata. “Socrates meets the Indian peasant” is not a good way to contrast the respective intellectual traditions.

The internal identities of Indians draw on different parts of India’s diverse traditions. The observational leanings of Western approaches have had quite a major impact – positively and negatively – on what contributes to the Indian self-image that emerged in the colonial period and survives today. The relationship has several dialectical aspects, connected to the sensitivity towards selective admirations and dismissals from the cosmopolitan West as well as to the mechanics of colonial confrontations.

The differences between the curatorial, magisterial, and exoticist approaches to Western understanding of Indian intellectual traditions lie, to a great extent, in the varying observational positions from which India has been examined and its overall images drawn. The dependence on perspective is not a special characteristic of the imaging of India alone. It is, in fact, a pervasive general feature in description and identification.⁴⁴ “What is India really like?” is

44 I have tried to discuss this general issue in “Description as Choice,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 32 (1980) (reprinted in *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* [Oxford: Blackwell; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982]), and in “Positional Objectivity,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1993).

a good question for a foreign tourist's handbook precisely because the description there may sensibly be presented from the particular position of being a foreign tourist in India. But there are other positions, other contexts, other concerns.

The three approaches investigated here have produced quite distinct views of Indian intellectual history, but their overall impact has been to exaggerate the nonmaterial and arcane aspects of Indian traditions compared to its more rationalistic and analytical elements. While the curatorial approaches have been less guilty of this, their focus on what is really different in India has, to some extent, also contributed to it. But the bulk of the contribution has come from the *exoticist admiration* of India (particularly of its spiritual wonders) and the *magisterial dismissals* (particularly of its claims in mathematics, science, and analytical pursuits).

The nature of these slanted emphases has tended to undermine an adequately pluralist understanding of Indian intellectual traditions. While India has inherited a vast religious literature, a large wealth of mystical poetry, grand speculation on transcendental issues, and so on, there is also a huge – and often pioneering – literature, stretching over two and a half millennia, on mathematics, logic, epistemology, astronomy, physiology, linguistics, phonetics, economics, political science, and psychology, among other subjects concerned with the here and now.⁴⁵

Even on religious subjects, the only world religion that is firmly agnostic

45 This contrast is discussed in my joint paper with Martha Nussbaum, "Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions," in Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

(Buddhism) is of Indian origin, and, furthermore, the atheistic schools of Carvaka and Lokayata have generated extensive arguments that have been seriously studied by Indian religious scholars themselves.⁴⁶ Heterodoxy runs throughout the early documents, and even the ancient epic *Ramayana*, which is often cited by contemporary Hindu activists as the holy book of the divine Rama's life, contains dissenting characters. For example, Rama is lectured to by a worldly pundit called Javali on the folly of his religious beliefs: "O Rama, be wise, there exists no world but this, that is certain! Enjoy that which is present and cast behind thee that which is unpleasant."⁴⁷

What is in dispute here is not the recognition of mysticism and religious initiatives in India, which are certainly plentiful, but the overlooking of all the other intellectual activities that are also abundantly present. In fact, despite the grave sobriety of Indian religious preoccupations, it would not be erroneous to say that India is a country of fun and games in which chess was probably invented, badminton originated, polo emerged, and the ancient *Kamasutra* told people how to have joy in sex. Indeed, Georges Ifrah quotes a medieval Arab poet from Baghdad called al-Sabhadi, who said that there were "three things on which the Indian nation prided itself: its method of reckoning, the game of chess, and the book titled *Kalila wa Dimna* [a collection of legends and fa-

46 For example, the fourteenth-century book *Sarvadarsanasamgraha* (*Collection of All Philosophies*) by Madhava Acarya (himself a good Vaishnavite Hindu) devotes the first chapter of the book to a serious presentation of the arguments of the atheistic schools.

47 English translation from H. P. Shastri, *The Ramayana of Valmiki* (London: Shanti Sadan, 1959), 389.

bles].”⁴⁸ This is not altogether a different list from Voltaire’s catalog of the important things to come from India: “our numbers, our backgammon, our chess, our first principles of geometry, and the fables which have become our own.”⁴⁹ These selections would not fit the cultivated Western images of Indian historical traditions, which are typically taken to be pontifically serious and uncompromisingly spiritual.

Nor would it fit the way many Indians perceive themselves and their intellectual past, especially those who take a “separatist” position on the nature of Indian culture. I have tried to discuss how that disparity has come about and how it is sustained. I have also tried to speculate about how the selective alienation of India from a very substantial part of its past has been nourished by the asymmetrical relationship between India and the West. It is, oddly enough, the rationalist part of India’s tradition that has been affected most by this alienation. The impact of the West on internal identities in India has to be seen in fundamentally dialectical terms.

48 Ifrah, *From One to Zero*, 434.

49 Voltaire, *Les oeuvres complètes*, vol. 124; translated by Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 59.