

CHAPTER 1

The Enlightenment and Orientalist Discourse on the Aryan

THE ENLIGHTENMENT BACKGROUND

Orientalist and postcolonialist criticism has positioned the origin of much that it seeks to critique within the Enlightenment project. Edward Said identified the Enlightenment as a unified trajectory and master sign of both Orientalism and colonialism (Said 1978). Ashis Nandy traced the roots of colonialism's mandate to absolutize the relative differences between cultures to the cultural arrogance of Enlightenment Europe. Partha Chatterjee problematized Enlightenment historiography (Chatterjee 1986). Peter van der Veer has blamed Enlightenment discourse for the erroneous politicization of Hinduism (Van der Veer 1998). Curiously, none of their arguments dwells on specifics—a common methodological flaw of critical schools which measure past texts against contemporary claims of emancipation or fantasies of dissent (Fluck 1996: 228). In these instances, critics assess the Enlightenment in light of the subsequent colonial experience. Their critical canon virtually ignores the fundamental texts of the period. Indeed, the Enlightenment has suffered much at the hands of poststructuralism's vague and atextual treatment. There is clearly a need for a reappraisal of the Enlightenment with reference to its literature.

In satirical works of the eighteenth century, there appeared a general theme, barely hidden under the fiction and in the satire itself: Asia can and should offer lessons. The picturesque Oriental tale provided an ideal medium through which authors could expose the vices of their own corrupt civil and religious institutions. The satirist's task had been made that much easier, since travel accounts minutely described the religious and secular institutions of Asia and marked analogies to European systems of rule. Somewhat

bemused, the voyagers drew comparisons between Christian and Asian mores. They noted in detail the various resemblances and their far-seeing readers were spurred on to draw further comparisons. In Diderot, Raynal, and Helvétius, for example, the strategy consisted of distancing readers from their normal surroundings in order to make them understand dangerous truths. Incessantly, Helvétius protested that his critique was aimed at the Orient and not at France, but the context of his discussion clearly pointed to misery found in a France stifling under the yoke of oppression.

In contradistinction to the voyagers' descriptions, the Jesuits had formulated a portrait of an Asia noteworthy for its enlightened customs and institutions. They represented the Chinese as philosophers of subtle wisdom, a marvelously civilized people who were ruled by a paternal government. They obeyed pious and tolerant magistrates who governed with admirably just laws. These Jesuitical observations were, in turn, appropriated by the *philosophes*, who were not adverse to borrowing their teachers' arguments to attack the Church. The Jesuitical emplotment of an enlightened Asia allowed the *philosophes* to question the principle of revealed religion.

For philosophers lost in the century of Louis XV, where visions of utopia collided daily with the contradictions of reality, the fiction of exotic "pure" religions proved captivating. Hindu or Confucian tolerance could be contrasted to the relentlessness of a Church suppressing liberty and to the sad spectacle of European religious disputes. One discovers, therefore, in the Enlightenment emplotment of the Orient, a subtle rhetorical strategy: Asia is portrayed as the victim of prejudice and superstition as well as the domain of reason and virtue. In its former role, it engendered political discussions and emphasized secularized history. In its latter use, the Enlightenment depiction of Asia helped define the disciplinary parameters of the history of religions. The comparisons of religious dogmas resulted in paradigms for practical analyses, most notably a form of biblical exegesis and a criticism of religious superstitions.

In this manner, Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* (1748) presented, for the first time in European literature, an examination of India with the purpose of illuminating universal history. Asia offered Montesquieu a vision of diversity which was unavailable in the classics or in European cultural attitudes. In an important respect, Montesquieu's understanding of Asia contributed to the work's originality. He showed that although nature was the same all over, climates differed and affected human behavior. Data culled from Asia enabled Montesquieu to develop this theory in book 17 of the *Esprit des lois*. Montesquieu's provocative conclusions directly inspired Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756–78). Voltaire adopted Montesquieu's theory of climates, which in turn legitimized the objective comparison of different social institutions.

Although Montesquieu and Voltaire herald the beginning of the scientific or philosophical reception of Asia, the didactic model still informed their work.

VOLTAIRE AND THE SEARCH FOR AUTHORITY

The Aryan Rewrites History

For Voltaire, Asia was the ideal. In fact, in the eighteenth century, Voltaire was a principle panegyrist and official defender of Asia's moral rectitude. It held the key to understanding the European present as well as its future. At first, Voltaire directed his enthusiasm toward China. But its radical foreignness and the indecipherability of its literature stymied his efforts. He then turned his attention toward India, consoling himself with the belief that Indian religion was "very possibly" the same as that of the Chinese government, that is, a pure cult of a Supreme Being disengaged from all superstition and fanaticism (Voltaire 1885: 11.190). He maintained that the brahmin religion was even more ancient than that of China (Voltaire 1885: 28.136). The Indians were, perhaps, the most ancient assembled body of people. It appeared that other nations, such as China and Egypt, went to India for instruction (Voltaire 1885: 11.49). The brahmins were the first theologians in the world (Voltaire 1885: 29.488), and Indian religion formed the basis of all other religions (Voltaire 1885: 45.448). Voltaire believed that Indian philosophers had discovered a new universe "en morale et en physique" (Voltaire 1963: 2.318).

With time and with a more complete documentation, Voltaire became better informed and refined his characterization of ancient India. As inventors of art, the Aryans were chaste, temperate, and law-abiding (Voltaire 1963: 1.65). They lived in a state of paradise—naked and without luxury. They subsisted on fruit rather than cadavers. Paragons of morality and specimens of physical perfection, the Aryans embodied prelapsarian innocence and sobriety. Their gentleness, respect for animal life, and deep religiosity incarnated the virtues of "Christianity" far more than anything found in the civilized West. Unlike the Saracens, Tartars, Arabs, and the Jews, who lived by piracy, the Aryans found nourishment in a religion (Voltaire 1963: 1.229, 231; 1.60; 1.234) that was based upon universal reason (Voltaire 1963: 1.237).

While Voltaire had initially based his information on the travel accounts of Chardin, Tavernier, and Bernier (Voltaire 1953–65: D 2698), he later came to rely heavily on the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses . . . par quelques missions de la compagnie de Jésus* (Paris: 1706–76), especially the letters from Père Bouchet to Huet. As elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, even in his most virulent cri-

tiques of the Church, Voltaire was never truly distant from his Jesuit teachers. Jesuitical documentation on India supplied him with a theme he was to exploit with verve. Although the reverend fathers expressed horror for idolatrous superstition, they were not totally negative in their assessment of Indian religious potential. Jesuit missionaries judged the Indians eminently capable and worthy of conversion. After all, one could find in their “ridiculous” religion belief in a single God (Voltaire 1953-65: 11.190; 11.54), suggesting a kind of proto-Christianity. Bouchet’s mention of parallels between Aryan religious thought and Christianity prompted Voltaire to develop the idea that the West had derived its theology from India.

In short, Voltaire appropriated from the Jesuits data to suit a specific polemic—that Vedism comprised the oldest religion known to man and represented a pure form of worship whose lofty metaphysics formed the basis of Christianity. Voltaire found no difficulty in reconciling the sublimity of Indian religion with its modern superstitions: the Vedic Indian had simply been made soft by the climate (Voltaire 1963: 1.235–37). The climate’s effect was so pernicious that India’s conquerors even became weak under its influence (Voltaire 1885: 13.158). Thus, human frailty (Voltaire 1963: 2.325) and nature (Voltaire 1963: 1.61) conspired to render man idolatrous.

By disengaging a fictive *Urform* of Hinduism from all superstition and fanaticism, Voltaire effectively set up an ideal against which all other religions could be measured to their disadvantage. What religion could compete with that of the initial brahmins, who had established a government and religion based upon universal reason? When you have peaceful prelates, ruling an innately spiritual people, religion is simple and reasonable. More importantly, India was to supply Voltaire with information to combat the Church and its role in society. As a culture ignored by the Bible, India allowed Voltaire to question the accepted biblical chronology. Most significantly, however, Voltaire’s discussion of India enabled him to vent his spleen against the Jews. In other words, Voltaire’s emplotment of India concentrated on four problems: it allowed him to call into question the chronology of the sacred book, the chosen status of the Jews, the origin of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the diffusion of our mythology, all of which challenged the historical importance of the Jewish people (Hawley 1974: 139–40).

Voltaire’s [H]anskrit Canon

One can almost forgive Voltaire his subjective portrayal of India, given the quality of the information culled from travel accounts, missionary letters, “scholarly” works, and “translations.” Although he sought out European accounts that he felt were exempt from sectarian prejudice, he was inexorably drawn to texts glaringly slanted by Protestant anti-Catholic rhetoric, as in

the case of La Croze and Niecamp. He studied those Europeans who purported to know Sanskrit, yet knew none. He studied authors who, although they had spent sufficient time in India, were nevertheless woefully ignorant of the culture. Having literally read everything available concerning India, edited and unedited, Voltaire realized only too well the necessity of basing any future discussion of India upon an authentic Sanskrit text. He, therefore, set out to discover one. After having depended so long on secondary sources, he tended to ascribe authenticity to any Sanskrit text that fell into his hands. Time and again, he was deceived by his sources.

As the oldest theologians, Indians were the first people to possess books (Voltaire 1885: 26.325–6). One such book was the *Shaster Bedang*, a supposedly four-thousand-year-old exposition of the doctrine of the “Bedas” written by the philosopher Beass Muni. It was found in Alexander Dow’s *History of Hindostan translated from the Persian to which are prefixed two dissertations concerning the Hindoos* (1768, French translation in 1769).¹ Voltaire believed that the *Bedang* taught Vedic monotheism. Voltaire was also familiar with another purportedly ancient and sacred book, the *Shasta* or *Shastabad of Brahma*. Voltaire maintained that the *Shasta* was five thousand years old, probably the oldest book in the world (Voltaire 1885: 15.326) and the source for subsequent law books (Voltaire 1885: 28.138).² It possessed real wisdom and the pure original expression of Indian religion. The *Shasta* was actually a small “theological” treatise of recent date that had been transmitted to John Zephaniah Holwell, who included it in his *Interesting historical events relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan* (1765–71). However, Voltaire read its existence to prove that the brahmins had preceded by several centuries the Chinese, whom Voltaire initially thought had preceded the whole world in wisdom. The *Shasta’s* importance for Voltaire, therefore, was not so much that it was the oldest book but that its style prefigured, in his estimation, all wisdom, including that of Greece.³ The *Shasta* proved to Voltaire that the Indians were monotheists (Voltaire 1885: 29.167). More importantly, however, it showed that the Chinese and the West borrowed from India both their vision of God (Voltaire 1885: 29.210–11) and their myth of the Fall of Man (Voltaire 1885: 26.326; 28.138; 29.472–73).

Voltaire also discovered a manuscript, entitled the *Cormo Vedam*, that he described as a résumé of opinions and rites contained in the Veda (Voltaire 1885: 11.52). Voltaire did not believe the *Cormo Vedam* to be a text worthy of the modern brahmins. He judged it a ludicrous ritual “pile” of superstitions (Voltaire 1963: 1.242–43). Voltaire cited the *Cormo Vedam* primarily to show how the Veda and brahmins had degenerated. Traces of such decay were particularly prevalent in Voltaire’s primary document of Aryan religion, the *Ezour Vedam*. In Voltaire’s estimation, the *Ezour Vedam* was the

most important Hanskrit [*sic*] text that he possessed.⁴ He claimed that its composition predated Alexander's expedition to India (Voltaire 1885: 41.12, 367, 464; 45.448). Voltaire received the manuscript of the *Ezour Vedam* from the Comte de Maudave (1725–77) who had brought it to France. The count was purportedly a close friend of a francophone brahmin (Voltaire 1885: 45.170; 46.117) who had tried to translate the manuscript from Sanskrit into French (Voltaire 1885: 47.72). Voltaire alternately defined the *Ezour Vedam* as the beginning of the Veda (Voltaire 1885: 26.325–26) or “a copy of the four vedams” (Voltaire 1885: 26.392). In *La Défense de mon oncle*, he characterized it as “the true vedam, the vedam explained, the pure vedam.” By 1761, however, he described it as merely a commentary of the Veda.

In reality, it did not matter to Voltaire that this text was not really the Veda; what mattered was that it satisfied the idea of a Veda which, for Voltaire, represented an exemplum of sublimity and the scripture of the world's oldest religion. The *Ezour Vedam* became such a text: it was the authentic text par excellence (Voltaire 1885: 41.464), the real *Urtext*, anterior to Pythagorus and anterior to the *Shasta* (Voltaire 1885: 19.58).⁵ Not only did Voltaire value it but, at the Bibliothèque du Roi where he had deposited a copy (Voltaire 1885: 47.72), he claimed that it was regarded as the most precious acquisition of the collection (Voltaire 1885: 45.464). This “Veda” announced a pure cult, disengaged from all superstition and all fanaticism (Voltaire 1963: 1.236). Written by the first brahmins, who also served as kings and pontiffs, it established a religion based upon universal reason.

More importantly, the *Ezour Vedam* provided Voltaire with the ideal text with which to challenge the historical perspective of Judeo-Christianity. Voltaire read the *Ezour Vedam* to show how the vaunted aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition existed in India centuries before the Old Testament. The general thrust of this argument was to displace the Jews from a favored position in the Christian tradition. Vedic India represented a more distant antiquity than that of the Jews (Voltaire 1885: 17.55–56). Or, as Voltaire allowed his Indian narrator to articulate his message:

We are a great people who settled around the Indus and the Ganges several centuries before the Hebraic horde transported itself to the banks of the Jordan. The Egyptians, Persians and Arabs came to our country in search of wisdom and spices, when the Jews were unknown to the rest of mankind. We could not have taken our Adimo from their Adam. (Voltaire 1885: 17.55)⁶

The *Ezour Vedam* harkens back to a time before brahmins and their cult had degenerated. The religion existing in modern India had obscured sage Vedic

theology, marketed superstition, and profited modern brahmins (Voltaire 1963: 2.405–6). The *Ezour Vedam*, however, combated the growth of idolatry and the very superstitions that eventually destroyed Aryan religion (Voltaire 1885: 26.392). For his part, Voltaire hoped to prove how all the principles of Christian theology that had been lost with the Veda could still be found in the *Ezour Vedam* (Voltaire 1963: 1.240–42), thanks to its retrieval and circulation by a French *philosophe*.

The Ezour Vedam

Max Müller characterized the *Ezour Vedam* as a “very coarse forgery” (Müller 1978: 5).⁷ It consisted of a poor compilation of Hindu and Christian doctrines mixed up together in the most childish way. While Müller believed that it was probably the work of a “half educated native convert at Pondicherry” (Müller, 1891: 39) and the silliest book that could be read by a student of religion, he did not believe that the original author intended it for the purpose for which it was used by Voltaire (Müller, 1872: 20).

In *La Renaissance orientale*, Raymond Schwab characterized the *Ezour Vedam* as an insidious piece of propaganda consisting of certain “Vedic” materials translated by Jesuits with the intention of isolating elements most in harmony with Christianity (Schwab 1950: 166–68). With this fraud, Schwab maintained, the Jesuits sought to refute idolatry and polytheism in the name of the purer doctrine of the Vedas, and, ultimately, to convert Indians. As the Indologist Willem Caland noted, the fraud was clever: The *Ezour Vedam* did not reject all Hinduism, but granted those tenets not in contradiction with Christian dogma. Its author tried to make readers think that the *Vedam* differed entirely from what they might have believed it to be (Rocher 1983: 24).

The editor of the *Ezour Vedam*, the Baron de Sainte Croix, did not present it as one of the four Vedas (*Ezour Vedam* 1778: 116),⁸ but offered it as the first original Sanskrit text published on religious and philosophical dogma. He did believe, however, that the *Ezour Vedam*’s scriptural citations were authentic.⁹ This point was important, since the editor also maintained that the four Vedas were lost (*Ezour Vedam* 1778:130). Sainte Croix felt that, given the mendacity of the brahmins and the large fees offered by the West for the Veda’s retrieval, the texts would have long since fallen into missionary hands had they still existed (*Ezour Vedam* 1778: 109–10).

It was upon its arrival in Europe that the confusion concerning the *Ezour Vedam*’s identity occurred. Ludo Rocher has suggested that error arose due to the work’s title. The *Ezour Vedam*’s reference to itself as a “veda” should have been understood in a generic sense, as the term “veda” is used in India by both missionaries and Indians alike. In fact, Rocher suggests that

the *Ezour Vedam* did not pretend to be one of the four Vedas, but rather a “veda” in the general sense of the term, a holy book or, as the text defined itself, a “corps de science” (*Ezour Vedam* 1778: 203). It made no attempt to rank itself among the Vedas. In fact, the text clearly presents itself as a commentary.¹⁰ By resolving the *sam̐dhi*¹¹ of the *Ezour Vedam*’s original title (*Zozur Bedo*), Rocher translated the title as the “Gospel of Jesus.” It seems likely that the *Ezour Vedam* was, indeed, a syncretistic pastiche compiled in the hopes of converting Hindus to an amenable Christianity. What the *Ezour Vedam* actually was is less significant than the use to which it and the mythic Aryan society it described were put during the Enlightenment. The Veda (in the form of the *Ezour Vedam*) allowed Voltaire and Sainte Croix to draw a distinction between what was Vedic and post-Vedic, the latter being a degenerated form of the former. Just as scripture had degenerated, so too had its interpreters.

A considerable portion of this early discourse surrounding the “Veda” consisted in mourning the loss of a rational religion that had suffered corruption (Voltaire 1963: 1.238) and blaming the brahmin elite, who neither instructed their people properly nor desired knowledge themselves (Voltaire 1963: 1.243–44). In this diatribe, Voltaire always presented the brahmin clergy as mendacious and generally corrupt (Voltaire 1963: 1.61).¹² Voltaire blamed the brahmin priests for having led the Aryans astray, just as he blamed the Jesuits for the state of French Catholicism. In both instances, priestly machinations had entrapped the faithful in the snares of superstition and intolerance. Aryan India mirrored the Human (that is, French) Condition: Rational religion had degenerated into superstitions and abominable cultic practices. The prime actors in both instances were the priests. Brahmins offered Voltaire a most pregnant symbol: Where in the world could he have directed his anticlerical polemics so successfully? The brahmin priests allowed him to “écraser l’infâme” and, for once, the objects of his critique were not Catholic, Jesuits, or French.

The polemic directed against the brahmin clergy was seen inscribed within the narrative structure of the *Ezour Vedam* itself rather than as an intentional product of it. Biache, the caricature of a degenerate brahmin, preaches superstition in the form of popular theology to the philosopher Chumontou. By challenging Biache with refutations culled from the “Veda,” Chumontou imparts “pure” Aryan wisdom concerning the unity of God, creation, the nature of the soul, and the doctrines of suffering and reward. By enumerating the proper forms of worship (*Ezour Vedam* 1778: 150), the text itself is seen to exhibit the extent to which original Aryan theism had degenerated into Hindu polytheism (*Ezour Vedam* 1778: 13). With a brahmin priest spouting foolish superstition ably refuted by a philosopher championing reason, the *Ezour Vedam* was tailor-made to voice

Voltaire's critique of organized religion and faith in rationalism. But, Voltaire's exoticism did not limit itself to a simple Deist idealization of the Aryan past. India was to provide Voltaire with a forceful weapon for a more significant battle in historical revisionism.

India, What Can It Teach Us?

This question, adopted by Max Müller as the title of a collection of essays, addresses a fundamental concern of this study, namely, that a fictive India and fictional Aryan ancestors were constructed in the West to provide answers for questions regarding European identity. India enabled Europe to discover its "true" past. Nowhere is this more true than in Voltaire's attempt to rewrite the history of religions. It was in his efforts to compare world mythologies, especially the myth of the Fall of Man, that Voltaire's true need to construct an Indian alibi (Latin: elsewhere) surfaced.

Voltaire compared the "Indian" version of the Fall with the classical myth relating the revolt of the Titans and the apocryphal account of Lucifer's rebellion found in the Book of Enoch (Voltaire 1885: 18.34). The common use of this myth in three traditions suggested to Voltaire that the Greeks and the Jews had knowledge of brahmin mysteries. Voltaire placed additional significance on this myth, attributing all subsequent religious thought to it. It provided the foundation for the entire Christian religion (Voltaire 1885: 11.184), since it set the stage for Original Sin, which in turn set the stage for everything that followed. Voltaire also claimed that the Aryans originated the concept of the Devil, who, as the agent of sin, animated all Judeo-Christian theology (Voltaire 1885: 29.482). If this was indeed true, why, Voltaire asked, did Christianity bother to use a source as tenuous as a Jewish apocryphal book to explain the existence of evil (Voltaire 1885: 29.172–73)? Why did Christianity seek to base itself solely on a myth that did not even appear in the Old Testament (Voltaire 1885: 28.139)?

Voltaire posed these questions with a clear response in mind. By inserting this fundamental myth into an apocryphal book, the Jews contrived to claim authorship and displace the true founders of our faith. It was the Aryans, the Vedic brahmins, who had first developed these truths. The Jews subsequently repeated this mythology, after stealing it from its ancient Indian source. Just as the Jews stole the source of religions, so too did they steal the idea of Adam as the progenitor.

Did they get this from the Jews? Did the Jews copy the Indians, were both original? The Jews are not allowed to think that their writers took (*ont puisé*) anything from the brahmins, of whom they have never heard. It is not permitted to think about Adam in

another way than do the Jews. I will be quiet and I will not think.
(Voltaire 1885: 19.59)

Such is Voltaire's polemic: The Jews stole what was of worth in their religion from the Aryans, people whom they called Gog and Magog (Voltaire 1885: 29.471). They then conspired to keep their fraud a secret. We, as Christians, have not dared to reveal this fraud, as our own beliefs are implicated (Voltaire 1885: 29.481). We have to believe the Jews, although we detest them, because they are regarded as our precursors and masters (Voltaire 1885: 11.47).

Ironically, Voltaire's strategy to reveal this fraud involved those very individuals who, had the Jews not been his scapegoats, would have been his natural enemies—the Jesuits. Voltaire felt that the Jesuits alone were capable of proving whether “the vast Indies or a part of Palestine” comprises the most ancient society. They alone possessed the scholarly means to determine whether brahmins had plagiarized the Pentateuch or the Jews had appropriated the wisdom of the Aryans (Voltaire 1885: 29.184).

The Veda was never more than a symbolic text for Voltaire. Nevertheless, it supplied him with an effective tool to launch a considerable attack: it combated idolatry, introduced Adam to the world, and provided an alternative scenario for the Fall of Man. In short, the Veda provided “all the principles of theology” (Voltaire 1885: 11.192) that Voltaire needed or desired: baptism, the immortality of the soul, metempsychosis, the identification of Abraham with Brahm (*sic*), and of Adam and Eve with Adimo and Procriti. The description of the revolt of the angels found in Holwell's *Shasta* prefigured the biblical account of Lucifer's fall.

The political repercussions of this reconstruction of Aryan religion were significant. We have seen how the *Ezour Vedam's* creation myth enabled Voltaire to attack the originality of the Hebrews and their religion. It allowed him to claim the anteriority of the Indians and, in doing so, effectively challenge the authority of the Bible. India provided another basis for religion unencumbered by the Judaic tradition. Indian “scripture” also allowed Voltaire to make the argument that the Jews were the great plagiarists of history:

Some very intelligent thinkers say that the brahmin sect is incontrovertably older than that of the Jews . . . they say that the Indians were always inventors and the Jews always imitators, the Indians always clever and the Jews always coarse. (Cited in Hawley 1974: 151)

In sections appended at a later date (1769) to the *Essai sur les moeurs*, Voltaire accuses the Jews of stealing from the Indians both the myths of Creation and

the Fall. The Jews did not set the stage for Christianity; rather it was the Aryans who bequeathed to us a religion based on universal reason that the Jews subsequently distorted. In a late letter to Frederick the Great (December 1775), Voltaire reiterated that Christianity was founded solely on the ancient religion of “Brama” [*sic*].

Voltaire’s reading of the “Veda” is, indeed, as ironic as it is inventive. He was able to imbue a clever piece of propaganda (or a clumsy attempt at ecumenicism) with characteristics that suited his polemical needs. Vedic India became a privileged site of Deist rationalism. He enlisted the Aryans in an attack on the pretensions of the Catholic Church and invoked their originality in order to displace the Jews from their privileged position in history. Less spectacular yet not less noteworthy is the simple fact that hidden behind Voltaire’s polemic lie the seeds of modern historiography, the study of comparative mythology, and the history of religions. It was with such faulty source material and prejudice that Voltaire initiated the comparative study of religion by comparing our myths to those of the Aryans.

LOCUS OF POETIC INSPIRATION OR SITE OF CULTURAL DECAY?

Herder: Poetry versus Metaphysics

Kant proclaimed that the modern state resulted from man’s progressive development. How was one to reconcile this theory with the perception that many “primitive” peoples were happier and better off than inhabitants of the civilized world? In accordance with popular Enlightenment propaganda, one could render these “primitives” more sophisticated than the modern Western man. Thus, Kant could declare that Indian religious thought was free of dogmatism and intolerance: “It is a principle of the Indians (i.e. the Hindus), that every nation has its own religion. For this reason, they do not force anyone to accept theirs” (cited in Halbfass 1988:61).

We have seen how in the French Enlightenment discourse, India provided an alibi: by satisfying, through spacial displacement, the need for a new social and religious geography. Moreover, Indian religion also illustrated how “natural light” had been eclipsed through superstition, fanaticism, and idolatry. As Wilhelm Halbfass has noted, this theme of the suppression of natural light through superstition enjoyed great popularity among thinkers of the Enlightenment. Finally, the discourse on India also gives expression to the motif of religious decay (Halbfass 1988: 60–61). It was in the writings of Johann Gottfried von Herder that this strategy, linking self-reflection to an

exotic, was first used to indulge politically charged fantasies of structural collapse and decay.

The *philosophes* and their followers believed in the unity of mankind and held that all men subsisted under the same natural law of right and reason. They supposed that all would participate alike in progress and that the outcome of history would be one of uniform civilization in which all peoples and races would share equally. As Herder maintained in the *Ideen*, man has the potential of ascending to the ideal of infinite perfection even without the benefits of Western culture. The study of peoples such as Indians (Herder 1877–1913: 4.357, 425; 5.214; 8.208; 11.247; 16.13) contributed to the development of *Humanität*, defined by Herder as the sum of the virtue and talents peculiar to human beings or the divine in man (Herder 1877–1913: 13.350; 14.230). However, the Enlightenment's belief in the potential similarity of all human beings and in freedom from intolerance and ignorance would not be so easily realized. Herder's discussions of India brings to the foreground this very dilemma.

Contrary to the account found in Genesis, Voltaire had placed the origin of mankind in the East on the banks of the Ganges. Herder followed Voltaire in that he too discovered the cradle of humanity in India (Herder 1877–1913: 13.38, 399, 403, 406).¹³ Since all men were descended from the same race (Herder 1877–1913: 5.447; 13.252, 405), Herder attributed the development of different cultures and languages to environmental forces (Herder 1877–1913: 5.539). Language, the purest expression of the spiritual character of a national group (Herder 1877–1913: 17.58–59), like man himself, descended from a unique source (Herder 1877–1913: 30.8). By positioning the childhood of humanity in India, Herder referred not only to the ancestors of Europeans, but also to progenitors of all humankind.

In the *Ideen*, Herder described India as the birthplace of all languages, sciences, and art (Herder 1877–1913: 13.411). He characterized the Hindus as the gentlest race of man (Herder 1877–1913: 13.222, 225–26). The Indian has respect for all sentient beings. His nourishment is sound and his demeanor as graceful as his spirit (Herder 1877–1913: 13.222). Indians are endowed with supernatural physical and spiritual qualities (Herder 1877–1913: 14.32, 73–74). No people exceeds the Indian in calmness and gentle obedience. Herder attributed the Indians' tranquility to the climate as well as their innate character (Herder 1877–1913: 14.28). Their gestures and speech are unconstrainedly charming, their intercourse free, their bodies pure, and their mode of life simple and harmless. Children are brought up with indulgence and are not lacking in sensitivity, knowledge, or diligence. Even the lowest strata of society learn to read, write, and add (Herder 1877–1913: 14.28–29). Their vision of God is great and beautiful.

However, Herder did not give India the least importance in the comparative history of primitive revelation. It was as though Indian religion, since the supposed loss of the *Rig Veda*, had been cut off from primitive revelation and reduced to human speculation. Indian religion was interesting in and of itself, but inappropriate to illuminate the authenticity of pure Christianity or Judaism, which, after all, were the objects of legitimate exegesis. Herder found much to respect about India. Like his friend Goethe, he admired the graceful simplicity of Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā*. He even felt that it must be more valuable than all "the Vedas, Upavedas and Upangas" put together. Its poetry, undistorted by tendentious religious speculation, provided greater beauty and truth than was thought possible in Sanskrit literature. Herder judged the Vedas, "Upavedas" and "Upangas," although absent to his gaze, as interminable, less useful, and far less agreeable than the poetry of Kālidāsa. He even surmised that it was the Veda that had blunted the spirit and character of the Indian people. Compared to the poetry, all those "Upnekats" and "Bagavedams" must have presented faint notions of the Indian mentality (Herder 1786–92: 91).

In Herder's mind, India and the primitive world, the primitive world and nature, nature and poetry become synonymous and interchangeable. He joined the eighteenth-century belief in the anteriority of poetry to his own variation of the *bon sauvage* theme and posited an equivalence of India and poetry (Herder 1877–1913: 5.50; 1.32). The compiler of the *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* also encouraged Germans to seek new inspirational models and question the absolute value of Greek classical norms. The *philosophes* and their German disciples believed that reality and, by extension, the arts were ordered in terms of universal, timeless, objective, and unalterable laws which rational investigation could discover. Their detractors believed that logic was incompatible with the force of inspiration necessary for poetic creation. Herder sought a middle ground between these diametrically opposed alternatives. He rejected the particular concept of reason propounded by Enlightenment rationalism and endeavored, rather, to interpret rationality in such a way that it was not inimical to spontaneity and vitality.

The *Fragmente*, *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur*, and *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* reveal Herder's struggle with the possibility of discovering a native German literature. The movement of German authors to found a German national literature developed along two distinct lines: the first consisting of a need to establish a clear criterion for assessing a work's national characteristics, the second, to create a literature unique in itself. As a corollary, this movement stimulated speculation on the nature of artistic inspiration in general. To proclaim the poetic origin of language, to situate the land of poetry in India, to present popular songs against the classics, to underline the sacred character of inspiration—in other words, to found a

Weltliteratur—already entailed the assertion of the artistic equivalence between the *Nibelungenlied* and the Vedas (Gérard 1963: 65).

With man's origin in India, it followed that Sanskrit poetry should provide the source from which all poetry descended. Sanskrit poetry thus played a pivotal role in Herder's thought. Its beauty and sublimity provided an excellent argument in favor of Herder's humanistic aesthetic. The study of songs, fables, and myths of nationalities such as that of India (Herder 1877–1913: 16.13; 4.357; 5.214; 8.208; 11.247) contributed to the development of one's national culture, which, in turn, contributed to the development of humanity (Herder 1877–1913: 13.356; 14.230).

Due to the West's necessarily incomplete knowledge of Sanskrit literature, Herder could cut it to measure out of the poetic presuppositions of an unpoetic age. As a result of Herder's theories and instigations, Sanskrit poetry became required reading for anyone who desired to experience "real" poetry. In Herder's thought, the *Śakuntalā* possessed everything the absent Veda lacked. In fact, for Herder, Kālidāsa's *nāṭaka* assumed a significance which subsequent writers attributed to the Veda in their depiction of an Aryan humanity. Herder chose to emphasize the *Śakuntalā* for two reasons. Kālidāsa's play existed and could be read in support of Romantic claims which found their germ in Herder's writings. The Veda did not exist. But, even as an absent text, it was never absent as a counterpoint to Sanskrit poetry and was a negative authority in his discourse to be rejected because of its degeneracy and superstitious beliefs.

According to Herder, Aryan religion was destroyed long ago by Vaiṣṇavite and Shivaite sectarians. Its legends came down to us only in the form of more recent interpretations. While some residue of the initial purity of primitive Aryan religion remains in these legends, they have been grossly distorted by myth. While quasi-biblical and quasi-Christian, Indian religion suffered from a particular evil, metempsychosis, that destroyed Aryan spirituality and morality, leaving Hindu quietism, indifference, and social disaster in its wake. Herder suspected what modern Indologists can prove from the *Rig Veda*—that the Aryans did not believe in metempsychosis. Herder believed that metempsychosis betokened the regression of Aryan spirituality from contact with aboriginal tribes given to totemism (Herder 1877–1913: 16.78). For Herder, metempsychosis signified the illusion of sensual men who envied the fate of animals. Populations that are more evolved and happier invent a locus where their terrestrial life can be prolonged in idealized form. The Aryans had done this. But the later Indians had degenerated. Their belief in metempsychosis encouraged compassion for plants and animals, rather than for people (Herder 1877–1913: 14.31).

In actuality, Herder distinguished three Indias: the primitive kingdom of poetry and natural religion provided by the presence of the *Śakuntalā*, the

mystico-metaphysical worldview represented by the Aryans of the absent Veda, and the degenerate present. For Herder's subjective reasoning, the first alone was of interest, the second inaccessible, and the third a monstrous product of the human spirit. All three Indias—the locus of true poetry, the lost Aryan hierophany, and the degenerate present—would, however, reappear in subsequent discussions. It would be the task of the Romantic mythographers to incorporate these fictive Indias within an interpretation of the Semitic-Christian religious cycle. India was still too distant, however, in Herder's time.

Nevertheless, many of the Romantic theses regarding India begin to coalesce in Herder. Already, in Voltaire, we saw the Aryans inhabiting a golden age and their religion offering a tradition older than the Bible. Aryan India saw primitive revelation degenerate under the influence of a corrupt priesthood and monotheism reduced to polytheism. Upon this script, Herder and the Romantics projected their own aesthetic need: the desire to discover a true national poetry. Once the Veda appeared on the literary scene, Herder's notions concerning the poetic origin of language and poetry as a spontaneous expression of the folk spirit and Sanskrit poetry as natural national poetry would be applied to it. Herder's depiction of India as an ancient poetic utopia and modern site of cultural decay would also reappear in subsequent discussions.

Jones and Colebrooke: Myth versus Text

Sir William Jones was Europe's foremost Orientalist scholar. He mastered twenty-eight languages, translated the *Śakuntalā* and the *Mānava Dharmashāstra* (*Laws of Manu*), and served in India as a judge. Nevertheless, he depicted the ancient Aryan in terms not dissimilar to those of the nonspecialists of his time. The Aryans were a superior people. All that was considered valuable in the Ancients found an initial expression among the Aryans. They possessed a highly evolved moral wisdom and a fertile imaginative genius (Jones 1788: 728-29). They originated the study of astronomy (Jones 1788: 430) and developed metaphysical theories that the Greeks later appropriated (Jones 1788: 425). The Aryans also supplied the Ancients with their gods (Jones 1788: 724). They were somewhat related to the great cultures of mankind, including our own. Aryan society was so magnificent that, even after so many revolutions and conquests, they still surpassed the world in wealth. However, Aryan culture degenerated and only vestiges of its former glory appear in modern India.

Today they appear degenerate and abased . . . in some early age, they were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledges. (Jones 1788: 421)

Before the Aryans disappeared, however, they left a textual trace of their genius behind in the Veda and its “compendium, the Upanishads.” According to Jones, these texts provided source material for information regarding the Aryans and their noble metaphysics (Jones 1788: 429). To this script, Jones added several key points that would provide valuable information for an ideological portrait of ancient India that subsequent thinkers in India and the West would exploit.

Jones is credited with the discovery of the affinity between Sanskrit and the Classical, Persian, Celtic, and Gothic languages. His speculation regarding the importance of Sanskrit not only initiated the scientific study of India, but proved revolutionary to the then barely nascent study of linguistics. For, in addition to noting the similarity between Sanskrit and the classical languages, Jones informed his readers that Sanskrit was “more perfect” than Greek, more copious than Latin and, more exquisitely refined than either (Jones 1788: 422). If Sanskrit so far surpassed those languages previously held as the highest forms of expression, then the Indians who spoke it were truly a race to be admired. We have seen how others had made similar assertions. Jones, however, was the first to be able to back his claim with “scientific” data. The belief in a linguistic affinity of the Aryans with Persians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Tuscans, Goths, Celts, Chinese, Japanese, and Peruvians implied that these peoples all proceeded from some central site of origin (Jones 1788: 431). That they all possessed languages structurally similar to our own became politically significant. Scholarship could now be enlisted in the service of empire. By rediscovering India’s Aryan past, England could subsequently presume that it was helping India help itself. This motive, explicit in Jones’s translation efforts (Figueira 1991: 25), also informed the portrayal of the Aryan in the scholarship of Henry Thomas Colebrooke (Müller 1837: 1.2). Colebrooke’s assessment of the Vedic materials was, however, more directly instrumental in defining the British colonial mission.

Jones, along with other scholars (Halhed, Marine, and Chambers) had collected numerous Vedic fragments and deposited them in the library of the College of Fort William in Calcutta (Kopf 1969:40). In 1800, Colebrooke was assigned by Governor-General Wellesley to teach Sanskrit at Fort William. During his tenure there, he found an ideal opportunity to collate the Vedic fragments residing in the college library. In the *Asiatick Researches* of 1805, Colebrooke offered an approximate idea of the contents of the Veda (Colebrooke 1805: 377–497). His readings of this material offered Westerners for the first time the textual evidence to chart the decline of Indian civilization from Vedic to modern times (Müller 1837: 1.3).

Colebrooke had initially doubted whether the Vedas were extant or whether their obsolete dialect could be read by anyone.¹⁴ He had thought

that even if brahmins possessed the Veda, they would not have shared them. Although the Upanishads had already been translated into Persian, the brahmins still jealously guarded their scripture (Colebrooke 1805: 377). Colonel Polier's discovery of a purportedly complete copy dispelled Colebrooke's doubts. The Veda did, in fact, exist and it became Colebrooke's task to introduce it in general terms to the West.¹⁵

The bulk of Colebrooke's article, however, dealt with proving the authenticity of his manuscripts. Although the Veda's date and authorship could not be determined "with accuracy and confidence" (Colebrooke 1805: 489), Colebrooke confirmed its authenticity by cross-referencing it to other works. He also compared fragments of numerous commentaries whose authenticity had been secured by interpretations of their annotations in other works.¹⁶ He further verified Vedic quotations with the testimony of grammars, collections of aphorisms, law digests, astronomy, medical texts, profane poetry, and even the writings of heretical sects (Colebrooke 1805: 481-84). This corroboration offered sufficient grounds to prove that no forger's skill was equal to the task of fabricating large works in all branches of Sanskrit literature to agree with the numerous citations pervading thousands of volumes in every branch of that literature (Colebrooke 1805: 484). The "superstitious" manner in which the Veda was read, its explanatory table of contents, and indices as well as glosses of every passage and every word made interpolations impracticable (Colebrooke 1805: 480). Colebrooke assured his readers that the Veda, as he presented it, not only was genuine but had survived in an unadulterated form. After authenticating the texts in question, however, Colebrooke showed little interest in analyzing their message or the civilization out of which they arose.

He did, however, corroborate Jones's more significant assertions. Colebrooke read the Veda as a negative authority. It did not so much relate what the Aryans were like as what they were not like: modern Hindus. All the abuses of modern Hinduism were absent from Vedic religion. There were no blood sacrifices (Colebrooke 1805: 437-78). The numerous gods of modern cultic practice could be reduced to the three major Vedic deities and these were ultimately manifestations of one supreme god (Colebrooke 1805: 395). Just as Aryan religious rituals differed dramatically from those of modern India, so did its social practices (Colebrooke 1795: 209-19; Colebrooke 1798: 33-67).

Colebrooke's thesis, while evidently more informed and expert than that of the nonspecialist commentary, was remarkably similar to the Enlightenment discourse on the Aryans. It emphasized an ideal Vedic age whose religion had degenerated through superstition and clerical abuse. The monotheistic religion that Colebrooke discovered in the Vedas was no longer in use and had been superseded by polytheism and decadent ceremonies,

founded on the Purāṇas or, even worse, the Tantras. Bloody sacrifices to Kālī had taken the place of the less sanguinary *yajña*, just as adoration of Krishna and Rāma had succeeded the worship of elements and plants (Colebrooke 1805: 495-96). As Colebrooke would note in his essay “On the Religious Ceremonies of the Hindus,” modern Hinduism functioned as a misunderstanding of ancient texts (Colebrooke 1802: 229-31). Rituals such as *satī* were not part of the authentic scriptural tradition (Colebrooke 1785: 109-19). Colebrooke also found discrepancies between the ancient texts and contemporary practice with reference to caste exclusionary practices. David Kopf has characterized the Jones-Colebrooke depiction of the Aryans in the following terms: they “were thought to have been outgoing and non-mystical. They were pictured as a robust, beef-eating, socially egalitarian society” (Kopf 1969: 41). These Aryans believed in one God, did not practice *satī* or idolatry, and did not adhere to caste regulations. They were in no way similar to modern Hindus.

Despite the length of Colebrooke’s article, his specific conclusions were scant and uninspiring. He limited his discussion to providing a *souçon* of the Vedas, citing passages to show the “seeming absurdity” of the text under analysis (Colebrooke 1805: 434). They were too voluminous for a complete translation, their language was obscure, and they presented too little reward to the reader and the translator.¹⁷ Colebrooke concluded that the Vedas deserved to be consulted occasionally by the Oriental scholar for those few remarkable and important things found in them, however difficult it was to extract such pearls. On this negative note, Colebrooke concluded his 120-page analysis introducing the Veda to Europe. His article had the effect of dampening interest in the Vedas and discouraging scholars from delving deeper into them for profitable information. However, Colebrooke’s analysis had a significant political effect upon the colonial administration’s assessment of the worth of Sanskrit literature and modern Hindu religion, as Thomas B. Macauley’s oft-cited *Minute* will attest. It took another half-century to amend Colebrooke’s dismissive judgment and shift the focus of scholarly interest away from the classical period of Sanskrit literature back to the *Urtext*.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

The discourse on the Aryan during this period, culled from fraudulent or largely absent textual material, expressed concerns that were crucial to the Enlightenment vision of historical progress and knowing subjects acting within history. The Veda’s discovery, “scientific” analysis, and presence in the West as a text would not significantly alter the nonspecialist portrait of the

Aryan. In fact, Orientalist scholarship is seen to have provided the documentation necessary to support the Enlightenment conceptual apparatus. Such validation may, indeed, explain critical interpretations of the Enlightenment's influence on Orientalism and colonialism. As we have noted, postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment tend to avoid actually engaging Enlightenment texts. This failure should not be attributed to critical laziness, the theorists' restrictive canon, or the fact that Foucault has exhausted the possibilities of interpreting the Enlightenment. By evoking the Enlightenment without allowing its literature to inform any analysis and projecting onto Enlightenment anthropology the discursive source of colonialism without engaging texts, critics can neatly avoid having to confront what the literature reveals: the Enlightenment's ambiguous representation of the Other. Poststructuralism's limited canon normally protects certain ideological presuppositions, the first and foremost of which is Deconstruction's critique of Western rationalism. Actual engagement with Enlightenment texts might very well call such presuppositions into question. Therefore, postcolonial theory, spawned as it is from Deconstruction's confrontation with logocentrism, must present the Enlightenment as a unified trajectory. It must be seen as a period that uniformly absolutized differences. The Enlightenment must be made to fit the master narrative of Orientalism and colonial discourse analysis.

Moreover, any actual confrontation with Enlightenment literature would highlight the extent to which poststructural criticism embraces its presentism, equates politics with oppositionalism and power with rationalism. If poststructuralist theory's universalization of power defines itself as a systemic limitation to individual choice (Fluck 1996: 227), then postcolonial criticism has a vested interest in dismissing the Enlightenment. If a key concern of this criticism involves the rejection of ideals that were fundamental to the Enlightenment project, then the Enlightenment as the perpetrator of rationalism, empiricism, and historicism must be suspect. The Enlightenment belief in the idea of historical agents and/or knowing subjects must also be ignored, since the edifice of poststructuralist criticism has been erected upon the impossibility of self-reflection and intersubjective validation (Fluck 1990: 17). Thus, criticism's own agenda must be projected onto texts from the past. A valuable lesson can be learned from this critical reading of the Enlightenment. As readers, we should look beyond critical gestures of empowerment and assess the larger politics of identity that not only informed historical and literary analysis, but continue to be played out with Indian props.