



**Wesleyan University**

---

Shades of Orientalism: Paradoxes and Problems in Indian Historiography

Author(s): Peter Heehs

Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (May, 2003), pp. 169-195

Published by: Blackwell Publishing for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590880>

Accessed: 31/01/2009 07:45

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=black>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Wesleyan University and Blackwell Publishing are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History and Theory*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## SHADES OF ORIENTALISM: PARADOXES AND PROBLEMS IN INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY<sup>1</sup>

PETER HEEHS

### ABSTRACT

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said attempts to show that all European discourse about the Orient is the same, and all European scholars of the Orient complicit in the aims of European imperialism. There may be “manifest” differences in discourse, but the underlying “latent” orientalism is “more or less constant.” This does not do justice to the marked differences in approach, attitude, presentation, and conclusions found in the works of various orientalists. I distinguish six different styles of colonial and postcolonial discourse about India (heuristic categories, not essential types), and note the existence of numerous precolonial discourses. I then examine the multiple ways exponents of these styles interact with one another by focusing on the early-twentieth-century nationalist orientalist, Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo’s thought took form in a colonial framework and has been used in various ways by postcolonial writers. An anti-British nationalist, he was by no means complicit in British imperialism. Neither can it be said, as some Saidians do, that the nationalist style of orientalism was just an imitative indigenous reversal of European discourse, using terms like “Hinduism” that had been invented by Europeans. Five problems that Aurobindo dealt with are still of interest to historians: the significance of the Vedas, the date of the vedic texts, the Aryan invasion theory, the Aryan-Dravidian distinction, and the idea that spirituality is the essence of India. His views on these topics have been criticized by Leftist and Saidian orientalists, and appropriated by reactionary “Hindutva” writers. Such critics concentrate on that portion of Aurobindo’s work which stands in opposition to or supports their own views. A more balanced approach to the nationalist orientalism of Aurobindo and others would take account of their religious and political assumptions, but view their project as an attempt to create an alternative language of discourse. Although in need of criticism in the light of modern scholarship, their work offers a way to recognize cultural particularity while keeping the channels of intercultural dialogue open.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Now that “orientalism” has become an academic buzzword, it may be useful to recall its former meanings. From the mid-eighteenth to the late-twentieth century, the term was applied to the study of the languages, literatures, and cultures of the Orient. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said acknowledges this ordinary (but by then obsolete) meaning and adds two others: “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the

1. I am grateful to the members of the Religions Reform Movement panel at the 17th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Heidelberg, September 2002; to Brian Fay and the other editors of *History and Theory*; to Jacques Pouchepadass; and to two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. Final responsibility is, of course, my own.

Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' " and "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>2</sup> It is with the third sort of orientalism that Said chiefly is concerned. "Orientalism" in this sense is a discourse about the Orient as the "other" of Europe, which confirms Europe's dominant position. Said studies the works of scholars who instantiate this discourse but he is less concerned with particular individuals than with the body of European discursive practices in regard to "the Orient" that generate a self-affirming account of what it is (essentially inferior to Europe, and so on).<sup>3</sup> One of his more controversial contentions is that all European orientalists of the colonial period were consciously or unconsciously complicit in the aims of European colonialism.<sup>4</sup>

Said's theory has been criticized by scholars who study oriental cultures—now referred to as Indologists, Sinologists, Asian Studies specialists, and so forth—on several counts. Many object to his indiscriminate lumping together of different types of orientalism. Denis Vidal, for instance, insists that colonial orientalism of the nineteenth century and the sort of orientalism highlighted by Said are "two entirely different things." The orientalism of the nineteenth century itself had two sides, one scholastic, the other romantic, and "Said's definitions cannot account for" this distinction.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Trautmann reminds us that British champions of Indian languages and culture (called "Orientalists") were opposed by government proponents of English education (called "Anglicists"), and notes that "the Saidian expansion of Orientalism, applied in this context, tends to sow confusion where there was once clarity."<sup>6</sup> David Ludden distinguishes "colonial knowledge," which generated authoritative facts about colonized people, from other forms of orientalism, some of which were explicitly anticolonial.<sup>7</sup> Rosane Rocher spells out the consequences of these conflation: "Said's sweeping and passionate indictment of orientalist scholarship as part and parcel of an imperialist, subjugating enterprise does to orientalist scholarship what he accuses orientalist scholarship of having done to the countries east of Europe; it creates a single discourse, undifferentiated in space and time and across political, social

2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 3-4.

3. See, for example, *ibid.*, 94.

4. See, for example, *ibid.*, 203-204: "For any European during the nineteenth century—and I think one can say this almost without qualification—Orientalism was such a system of truths, truths in Nietzsche's sense of the word. It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric. . . . My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West."

5. Denis Vidal, "Max Müller and the Theosophists: The Other Half of Victorian Orientalism," in Jackie Assayag *et al.*, *Orientalism and Anthropology: From Max Müller to Louis Dumont* (Pondicherry, India: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 1997), 14-15.

6. Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 23. This point was made earlier by David Kopf in "Hermeneutics versus History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (1980), 495-506.

7. David Ludden, "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 252.

and intellectual identities.”<sup>8</sup> The irony is that the Saidian analysis of orientalist discourse is itself an orientalist discourse—one that “sometimes appears to mimic the essentializing discourse it attacks,” as James Clifford puts it.<sup>9</sup> This essentializing of orientalist scholarship might be excused if it resulted in a transformed view of oriental and occidental societies. But to Said the Occident is always the dominant partner, determining the terms of the oriental response. As a result the very orientals who are meant to be the beneficiaries of the Saidian analysis are again denied agency and voice.<sup>10</sup>

At one point in his presentation, Said does distinguish between what he calls latent orientalism, “an almost unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity” of ideas about the Orient, and manifest orientalism, “the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth.” This allows him to acknowledge the possibility of varying expressions of orientalism while retaining his core concept. For, he asserts, “whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent orientalism is more or less constant.”<sup>11</sup> The changes in the forms of manifest orientalism are froth on the surface; the underlying truth of latent orientalism is the same. If this is so, the paradox remains. The concept on which Said and his epigones base their critique of the essentializing of “the Orient” is itself an essential category.

Despite the criticisms leveled against Said by specialists in the literature that comprises his material, his theory has gained currency both inside and outside the academy, with the result that “orientalism” is now applied loosely to any unflattering Western attitude about the East. In what follows I return to scholarly discourse properly speaking. Acknowledging the utility of Said’s “orientalism” as a critical tool, I enlarge and historicize the concept by examining various forms of oriental knowledge. Said’s area of interest was Middle Eastern orientalism; I confine myself to Indian. I begin by distinguishing six “styles” of orientalist discourse about India. These, it should be clearly understood, are heuristic categories, not essential types. Three belong to the colonial, three to the postcolonial

8. Rosane Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” in Breckenridge and van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, 215.

9. James Clifford, review-essay of Said’s *Orientalism, History and Theory* 19 (1980), 210. The same point is made by, among others, Albert Hourani, “The Road to Morocco,” *New York Review of Books* (8 March 1979), page 5 of online edition; Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Winter 1994), 344; Charles Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 32; Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 118; William R. Pinch, “Same Difference in India and Europe,” *History and Theory* 38 (October 1999), 389-407; Richard M. Eaton, “(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India,” *Journal of World History* 11 (2000), 69-71.

10. This paradox has been noted by Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken,” 32; Eaton, “(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness,” 65-66; Wendy Doniger, “‘I Have Scinde’: Flogging a Dead (White Male Orientalist) Horse,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 58 (November 1999), 945; and others.

11. Said, *Orientalism*, 206.

era.<sup>12</sup> There were also, of course, numerous indigenous discourses about what Europeans call “the Orient” in precolonial times.

Limitations of space prevent me from doing more than identifying typical exponents of each style and citing illustrative passages. This should be enough to serve my immediate purpose, which is to show that there are many shades of orientalism. The next step is to show that the exponents of these styles interact with one another in various ways. I accomplish this by examining the life and works of the nationalist orientalist Sri Aurobindo, showing how his approach took form in the matrix of colonial orientalism and has been criticized or appropriated by postcolonial orientalist of various sorts. Such scholars stress Aurobindo’s nationalistic premises but miss the broader import of his arguments. The value of his work and the work of other scholars of the Orient depends more on the quality of their scholarship than on their political or religious assumptions.

### *Styles of Orientalist Discourse*

<i>Era</i>		<i>Style</i>	<i>Approx. period</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<b>Precolonial</b>	0	[various]	Before 1750	<i>Kamikagama</i> (?seventh cent.)
<b>Colonial</b>	1	Patronizing/ Patronized	1750–1947 (and after)	Jones, <i>Institutes of Hindu Law or the Ordinances of Menu</i> (1794); Rammohun Roy, <i>Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant</i> (1816)
	2	Romantic	1800–1947 (and after)	F. Schlegel, <i>Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier</i> (1808); Sarda, <i>Hindu Superiority</i> (1906)
	3	Nationalist	1850–1947 (and after)	Nivedita, <i>Aggressive Hinduism</i> (1905); Aurobindo, <i>A Defence of Indian Culture</i> (1918–1921)
<b>Postcolonial</b>	4	Critical	1947 to present	Thapar, <i>Interpreting Early India</i> (1993); Trautmann, <i>Aryans and British India</i> (1997)
	5	Reductive	1978 to present	Inden, <i>Imagining India</i> (1990); Chatterjee <i>et al.</i> , <i>Texts of Power</i> (1995)
	6	Reactionary	c.1980 to present	Rajaram and Frawley, <i>Vedic Aryans and the Origins of Civilisation</i> (1995)

12. Here and elsewhere I use “postcolonial” in its unadorned sense: “belonging to the period after the colonial period,” that is, with regard to India, “post-1947.”

*Precolonial Discourses*

If the European idea of the Orient is a European invention, the Orient itself is not. Even Said is obliged to “acknowledge it tacitly.”<sup>13</sup> Long before Vasco da Gama landed in Calicut in 1498, the peoples of South Asia created modes of self- and world-representation that owe nothing to European notions. (It is necessary to mention this obvious fact, since reductive orientalists who push theory to extremes are sometimes inclined to forget it.) Many of these systems of discourse are preserved in texts or methods of practice or both. One example (among hundreds) is the Shaiva Siddhanta school of early medieval India, whose rituals are still performed in south India. The *Kamikagama* (?seventh century CE) and related texts present a systematic and coherent view of the Divine, the world, and the human being, and detail practices that “not only sought to bring the agent personally into relation with God and to transform his or her condition, but . . . also collectively engendered the relations of community, authority, and hierarchy within human society.”<sup>14</sup> Far from being influenced by Western discourse, such precolonial societies were oblivious of it. “There is,” as intellectual historian Wilhelm Halbfass writes, “no sign of active theoretical interest, no attempt to respond to the foreign challenge, to enter into a ‘dialogue’—up to the period around 1800.”<sup>15</sup>

*Three Styles of Colonial Orientalism*

1. *Patronizing/Patronized Orientalism.* European visitors to India between 1500 and 1750 published their observations in travel narratives, missionary polemic, and so on, but serious European oriental scholarship may be said to begin towards the end of the eighteenth century. Two landmarks are the formation of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta in 1784 and the publication of Charles Wilkins’s translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* the following year. The preface to this volume by Governor-General Warren Hastings contains a passage that is archetypally “orientalist” in the Saidian sense: “Every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state.” But Hastings also demonstrates a real, though patronizing, appreciation of Hindu culture. He notes, for instance, that the Brahmins’ “collective studies have led them to the discovery of new tracks and combinations of sentiment, totally

13. Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

14. Richard H. Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Siva in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 6.

15. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 437. Halbfass’s statement is a generalization and can pass as such, though I would move the date back to 1750 or earlier. Works such as Mirza Shah I’Tesamuddin’s account in Persian of his trip to England in 1765 (translated by Kaiser Haq and published as *The Wonders of Vilayat* [Leeds: Peepal Books, 2002]), and Ananda Ranga Pillai’s diaries in Tamil, dealing with official and private life in French Pondicherry between 1736 and 1761 (*The Private Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai*, ed. J. Frederick Price [reprint edition, Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1985]), show that eighteenth-century Indians were as capable of observing and theorizing about Europeans as Europeans were of them. One might even go back as far as the late sixteenth century, when the emperor Akbar (1542–1605), always curious in matters of religion, interacted with Jesuits from Goa.

different from the doctrines with which the learned of other nations are acquainted: doctrines, which . . . may be equally founded in truth with the most simple of our own.”<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, the iconic orientalist William Jones writes in the preface to his translation of the *Manu Smriti* that this code is “revered, as the word of the Most High, by nations of great importance to the political and commercial interests of *Europe*,” who ask only protection, justice, religious tolerance, and “the benefit of those laws, which they have been taught to believe sacred, and which alone they can possibly comprehend.”<sup>17</sup> With British rule established, patronizing Europeans taught their language to patronized Indians, some of whom made important contributions to English-language scholarship. Rammohun Roy (1772–1834), who produced a number of translations and expositions of Sanskrit texts, notes in the introduction to one that he had undertaken the work “to prove to my European friends, that the superstitious practices which deform the Hindoo religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates!”<sup>18</sup>

2. *Romantic Orientalism*. British orientalism during the colonial period was obviously connected, if not invariably complicit, with British imperialism. Germany had nothing to do with imperialism in India, yet Germany took the lead in Sanskrit studies in the nineteenth century, a fact that impels Trautmann to ask: “How does Said’s thesis help us to understand” this?<sup>19</sup> One of the first German Sanskritists was Friedrich von Schlegel, whose *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) is a glorification of the religion and philosophy of the “most cultivated and wisest people of antiquity.”<sup>20</sup> The work of Schlegel and other orientalists helped in the development of German Romanticism, of which Indophilia was a major strand. Writers like Goethe and Schopenhauer were influenced by Sanskrit literature, and published positive assessments that helped offset the largely negative British view. Indian scholars were delighted to reproduce such European praise. *Hindu Superiority* by Har Bilas Sarda (1906) is a catalogue of out-of-context encomiums by writers from Strabo to Pierre Loti, to which Sarda adds his own *obiter dicta*, for example, “The Vedas are universally admitted to be not only by far the most important work in the Sanskrit language but the greatest work in all literature.”<sup>21</sup>

3. *Nationalist Orientalism*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, educated Indians began turning from the imitative Anglophilia of the previous generation to a renewed interest in their own traditions. Around the same time the national movement got off to a slow start. In this climate a nationalist style of ori-

16. Warren Hastings, “To Nathaniel Smith, Esquire,” in *The Bhagavat-Geeta or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon*, transl. Charles Wilkins (London: Printed for C. Nourse, 1785), 13, 9.

17. William Jones, *Institutes of Hindu Law: or, the Ordinances of Menu*, in *The Works of Sir William Jones*, vol. 7 (London: Printed for John Stockdale and John Walker, 1807), 89-90.

18. Rammohun Roy, “Translation of an Abridgement of the *Vedant*,” in *The Essential Writings of Raja Rammohan Ray*, ed. Bruce Robertson (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

19. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 22.

20. Schlegel, translated in Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 76.

21. Har Bilas Sarda, *Hindu Superiority: An Attempt to Determine the Position of the Hindu Race in the Scale of Nations*, 2d ed. (Ajmer: Scottish Mission Industries Company, 1917), 177.

entalism took root. Sister Nivedita (Margaret E. Noble, 1867–1911), a disciple of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), gives an explicitly nationalistic turn to her writings on India. “The land of the Vedas and of Jnana-Yoga has no right to sink into the role of mere critic or imitator of European Letters,” she writes in *Aggressive Hinduism*. “The Indianising of India, the organising of our national thought, the laying out of our line of march, all this is to be done by us, not by others on our behalf.”<sup>22</sup> Nivedita’s friend Aurobindo Ghose (who became Sri Aurobindo) insists even more firmly on the necessity of judging Indian culture by Indian standards. The career of this scholar, revolutionary, and mystic is discussed in some detail in section II.

### *Three Styles of Postcolonial Orientalism*

4. *Critical Orientalism*. Nationalist scholarship was prominent during the years of the freedom movement (1905–1947) and the first two decades after the achievement of independence. During the 1950s and 1960s, historians trained in Western methods and working within Western theoretical frameworks began to produce empirical studies of all periods of India’s past. More recently, critical scholarship has turned its attention to historiographical issues. Romila Thapar, for example, investigates how “both the colonial experience and nationalism of recent centuries influenced the study, particularly of the early period of [Indian] history” in her *Interpreting Early India*.<sup>23</sup>

5. *Reductive Orientalism*. As we have seen, Saidian interpretations of orientalism and the Orient are themselves orientalist discourses. As Ludden puts it, they inhabit “a place *inside* the history of orientalism.”<sup>24</sup> Saidian treatments of Indian history and culture began to appear within a decade of the publication of *Orientalism*. One of the first was Ronald Inden’s *Imagining India* (1990).<sup>25</sup> His stated aim is to “make possible studies of ‘ancient’ India that would restore the agency that those [Eurocentric] histories have stripped from its people and institutions.”<sup>26</sup> But by insisting that European orientalists constructed Hinduism, the caste system, and so forth,<sup>27</sup> he tends instead to deny Indian agency and give a new lease on life to Eurocentrism.

6. *Reactionary Orientalism*. In recent years a loose grouping of scholars, many with degrees in scientific disciplines but without training in historiography, have sought to restore India to its ancient glory by rewriting its history. This revisionism is necessary because, “as a consequence of a century and a half of European colonialism, and repeated extremely violent onslaughts [by Muslims and Christians] going back nearly a thousand years, Indian history and tradition have

22. Sister Nivedita, *Aggressive Hinduism*, in *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls’ School, 1973), vol. 3, 492, 500.

23. Romila Thapar, “Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History” [1974], in *Interpreting Early India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.

24. Ludden, “Orientalist Empiricism,” 271, emphasis mine.

25. Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). The book was preceded by Inden, “Orientalist Constructions of India.” *Modern Asian Studies* 20 (1986), 401–446.

26. Inden, *Imagining India*, 1.

27. *Ibid.*, 89, 49, 58, etc.



undergone grievous distortions and misinterpretations.” This critique is directed against nineteenth-century European orientalists as well as contemporary writers who “assumed that the fashionable theories of the age in which they were brought up—theories like Marxism—represented universal laws of human history.”<sup>28</sup>

## II. A BRITISH-TRAINED INDIAN NATIONALIST

In my table, nationalist orientalism occupies a pivotal place, midway between the precolonial and early colonial discourses on one side and the three forms of post-colonial practice on the other. In this section, I examine the life of a nationalist writer, showing how his style of orientalism emerged in a scholarly environment dominated by patronizing and romantic orientalists and a political environment in which loyalism and moderate dissent were giving way to extreme forms of nationalism. Aurobindo Ghose (known as Sri Aurobindo, 1872–1950) is often spoken of as a typical nationalist scholar, but his career was in some respects unique. Raised in England with no knowledge of the culture of his homeland, he was destined for a position in the colonial civil service but instead became a revolutionary politician. After a decade of literary and political activity he retired to French India to practice yoga, embodying, in the eyes of his admirers, the spiritual tradition that, according to reductive orientalists, was an invention of colonial orientalism.

Aurobindo’s father was a British-trained physician who was active in local government in Bengal. Frustrated in his attempts to enter the Indian Medical Service and shunted here and there by the bureaucracy, he resolved that one or more of his sons would become members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS). Sent to England at the age of seven, Aurobindo won scholarships to St. Paul’s School, London, and King’s College, Cambridge, and passed the ICS entrance examination in 1890. At Cambridge he received a thoroughly “orientalist” introduction to the culture of his homeland. He read about India’s past in books like Elphinstone’s *History of India* and Mills’s now-notorious *History of British India*. He learned Bengali (the “mother-tongue” his father had forbidden him from speaking) from an Englishman unable to read the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterji. His teachers of Sanskrit and Hindustani also were European, as was his lecturer in Hindu and Muslim law.<sup>29</sup> By the time he left Cambridge in 1892, his Greek and Latin were good enough to win prizes, but his Sanskrit so sketchy that when he first read the Upanishads, it was in the English translation of the Oxford orientalist F. Max Müller.

We get a glimpse of Aurobindo’s attitude towards patronizing orientalism in a passage he wrote a decade later in reply to a passage in Müller’s preface to the *Sacred Books of the East*. “I confess it has been for many years a problem to me, aye, and to a great extent is so still,” Müller wrote, “how the Sacred Books of the

28. Navaratna S. Rajaram and David Frawley, *Vedic Aryans and the Origins of Civilisation: A Literary and Scientific Perspective*, 3d ed. (New Delhi: Voice of India, 2001), xv-xvi.

29. *Final Examination of Candidates Selected in 1890 for the Civil Service of India* (London: Printed for Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1892), 6, 10.

East should, by the side of so much that is fresh, natural, simple, beautiful, and true, contain so much that is not only unmeaning, artificial and silly, but even hideous and repellent.”<sup>30</sup> Aurobindo’s reply was ironic in the great tradition of British irony:

Now, I myself being only a poor coarse-minded Oriental and therefore not disposed to deny the gross physical facts of life and nature . . . am somewhat at a loss to imagine what the Professor found in the Upanishads that is hideous and repellent. Still I was brought up almost from my infancy in England and received an English education, so that I have glimmerings. But as to what he intends by the unmeaning, artificial and silly elements, there can be no doubt. Everything is unmeaning in the Upanishads which the Europeans cannot understand, everything is artificial which does not come within the circle of their mental experience and everything is silly which is not explicable by European science and wisdom.<sup>31</sup>

In India Aurobindo mastered Sanskrit and Bengali and began to translate literary classics—the poems of Vidyapati, portions of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, some works of Kalidasa—into elegant Victorian English. He also wrote essays on various Sanskrit authors, in some of which he twitted the opinions of European orientalists. “That accomplished scholar & litterateur Prof Wilson”—H. H. Wilson, first Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford—was, Aurobindo noted around 1900, “at pains to inform” his readers that the mad scene in Kalidasa’s *Vikramorvasiyam* was nothing to the mad scene in *King Lear*, but rather “a much tamer affair conformable to the mild, domestic & featureless Hindu character & the feebler pitch of Hindu poetic genius. The good Professor might have spared himself the trouble” since there was “no point of contact between the two dramas.”<sup>32</sup> The European condemnation of Indian drama as sapless was “evidence not of a more vigorous critical mind but of a restricted critical sympathy.” “The true spirit of criticism,” he concluded, “is to seek in a literature what we can find in it of great or beautiful, not to demand from it what it does not seek to give us.”<sup>33</sup>

Another habit of European scholars that got Aurobindo’s hackles up was their tendency to trace Indian achievements back to European, usually Greek, predecessors. Where Greek influence was evident, as in the Gandharan school of sculpture, he condemned the work as inferior to “pure” Indian styles. Europe’s literary criteria were not applicable to India. Albrecht Weber’s idea that the original *Mahabharata* consisted only of the battle chapters was a case of “arguing from Homer.” It was, he insisted, “not from European scholars that we must expect a solution of the Mahabharata problem,” since “they have no qualifications for the task except a power of indefatigable research and collocation. . . . It

30. F. Max Müller, *The Upanishads*, Part I. Volume I of *The Sacred Books of the East*. Reprint edition (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), xii.

31. Sri Aurobindo, *Kena and Other Upanishads* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972), 164.

32. Manuscript note included in Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2003), 202.

33. Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings*, 188-189.

is from Hindu [i.e. Indian] scholarship renovated & instructed by contact with European that the attempt must come.”<sup>34</sup>

For all his condemnation of European scholars, Aurobindo admired their textual scholarship and made use of it in his own work. He wrote around 1902 that a student of Gaudapada’s *Karikas* could not do better than to start with “Deussen’s System of the Vedanta in one hand and any brief & popular exposition of the six Darshanas [philosophical schools] in the other.”<sup>35</sup> But he felt that European academics could not grasp the full meaning of Indian scriptures. This was due to an essential difference in mentality: the Indian mind was “diffuse and comprehensive,” able to acquire “a [deeper] and truer view of things in their totality”; the European mind, “compact and precise,” could hope only for “a more accurate and practically serviceable conception of their parts.”<sup>36</sup> Situated between these two “minds,” he was in a position to mediate. His aim as a scholar, as he saw it around this time, was “to present to England and through England to Europe the religious message of India.”<sup>37</sup>

Aurobindo pursued this project between 1902 and 1906 in a series of commentaries on the Upanishads. Then, between 1906 and 1910, he put most of his energy into the nationalist movement and its revolutionary offshoot. (His transformation from quiet scholar to fiery patriot was much remarked on at the time. After his arrest for conspiracy to wage war against the King, a former ICS classmate wrote: “Fancy Ghose a ragged revolutionary! He could with far greater ease write a lexicon or compose a noble epic”).<sup>38</sup> During these years he managed to complete a few “patriotic” translations; but it was not until he retired from politics and settled in French Pondicherry in 1910 that he found time to fulfill his scholarly mission. This was, as he described it in August 1912, “to re-explain the Sanatana Dharma<sup>39</sup> to the human intellect in all its parts, from a new standpoint.” Specifically, he would explain “the true meaning of the Vedas,” outline “a new Science of Philology,” and present the true “meaning of all in the Upanishads that is not understood either by Indians or Europeans.”<sup>40</sup> He worked steadily at these and related projects between 1910 and 1920, returning to them on and off until his death in 1950.

Struck by Aurobindo’s passage from Cambridge classicist to Sanskrit scholar to revolutionary publicist to philosophical yogin, many writers have sought clues

34. *Ibid.*, 277, 280.

35. Aurobindo, *Kena and Other Upanishads*, 319.

36. *Ibid.*, 346.

37. *Ibid.*, 163.

38. Unnamed English classmate of Aurobindo’s, quoted in English in Charuchandra Dutta, *Puranokatha Upasanghar* (Kolkata: Sanskriti Baithak, 1959), 81-82.

39. A Sanskrit phrase that in classical texts means “constant duty” or “invariable law.” In the nineteenth century it was reinterpreted as “eternal religion” and put forward as an Indian equivalent of the English term “Hinduism.” Aurobindo used it to signify the “religion of Vedanta,” which he believed to be the supreme expression of the one universal religion. I discuss the history of the term *sanatana dharma* at some length in “‘The Centre of the Religious Life of the World’: Spiritual Universalism and Cultural Nationalism in the Work of Sri Aurobindo,” in *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender and Sampraday*, ed. Antony Copley (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

40. Undated letter (c. August 1912) to Motilal Roy, published in *Supplement to the Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1973), 433-434.

in his early life, scripting selected biographical data into explanatory narratives. His disciples find evidences of the future yogi almost from his birth and the stamp of divine election on all his actions. The historian Leonard Gordon condemns this hagiographical approach, offering instead a jejune pop psychology (“Aurobindo’s lifelong obsession with mother figures dates from his childhood,” “It seems to have been the fear of failure rather than God’s call or nationalist speeches that kept him out of the ICS”).<sup>41</sup> More sophisticated and fruitful is political psychologist Ashis Nandy’s “enquiry into the psychological structures and cultural forces which supported or resisted the culture of colonialism in British India,” in which he contrasts Aurobindo with Rudyard Kipling, the latter “culturally an Indian child who grew up to become an ideologue of the moral and political superiority of the West,” the former “culturally a European child who grew up to become a votary of the spiritual leadership of India.” Nandy is weakest when dealing with Aurobindo’s spiritual life, falling back, like Gordon, on unsubstantiated guesswork (“Aurobindo’s spiritualism can be seen as a way of handling a situation of cultural aggression,” “the ‘exotic’ alternative he found to it [revolution] in mysticism was probably the only one available to him”). But his working assumption is both applicable to Aurobindo and germane to the Orientalism debate: “Colonized Indians did not always try to correct or extend the Orientalists; in their own diffused way, they tried to create an alternative language of discourse.”<sup>42</sup>

Nandy admits that his “use of the biographical data” of his subjects is “partial, almost cavalier.”<sup>43</sup> As a result he makes some minor but significant errors in regard to Aurobindo’s life. For a psychological analysis of a historical figure to be useful, the data must be reliable and the analysis based on a non-reductive theory that takes the subject’s personal and cultural values seriously. The following data seem relevant to a study of Aurobindo’s style of orientalism. (1) He spent his earliest years in a colonial environment in India (speaking English, attending convent school) and his entire youth in England. (2) He developed a distaste for English life after a brief period of admiration as a child. By his own (retrospective) account, this was the result of an aesthetic reaction to the ugliness and hurry of life in England,<sup>44</sup> supported by a reading of romantic, anti-industrial poets and critics: Blake, Shelley, Ruskin, *et al.* (3) His education was that of a British literary scholar and civil servant. (4) He admired the verbal scholarship of orientalists like Müller, Wilson, and Deussen, but resented their patronizing attitude towards India and things Indian. (5) While still young he became convinced that the British occupation of India was unjust, and that he was destined to struggle against it.<sup>45</sup> (6) After his return to India he quickly became re-nationalized

41. Leonard A. Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876–1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 101, 106.

42. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), xvi-xvii, 85-100.

43. *Ibid.* xvii.

44. Interview in *Empire* (Calcutta), 9 May 1909.

45. Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972), 3-4.

through what he later called a “natural attraction to Indian culture and ways of life and a temperamental feeling and preference to all that was Indian.”<sup>46</sup> (7) At some point he became convinced that the West was in moral and spiritual decline, and that the inherently superior values of India could help the West recover its spiritual balance.

What does this tell us about Aurobindo as an orientalist? One thing that seems certain is that he resented the colonial way of writing about the literatures, arts, religions, and societies of India. Well acquainted with the British equivalents, he was comparatively immune to the colonial “myth” of British cultural superiority.<sup>47</sup> To break the debilitating hold of this myth, which he considered the greatest obstacle to the creation of a revolutionary consciousness, he put forward the opposite myth of Indian superiority in matters of the mind and spirit. This was not in his case simply a strategic move; it sprang from his conviction that in many important respects Indian culture was in fact superior to Europe’s. This feeling was shared by other Indian nationalists, among them B. G. Tilak and M. K. Gandhi.

Indian nationalists’ assertions of cultural difference or claims of cultural superiority are seen by recent political philosophers as a reversal of the essentialist premises of colonial orientalism. As Sudipta Kaviraj puts it: “Orientalism—the idea that Indian society was irreducibly different from the modern West . . . gradually established the intellectual preconditions of early nationalism by enabling Indians to claim a kind of social autonomy within political colonialism.”<sup>48</sup> I would put it the other way around: one of the ways the nationalists asserted their claim of cultural and political autonomy was by deliberately reversing the terms of orientalist discourse. The problem, for the historian, is whether this reversal, this alternative discourse, has opened the way to a more accurate account of the Indian past. In studying Indian history, is Indocentrism necessarily better than Eurocentrism?

### III. FIVE PROBLEMS AND AN ASSORTMENT OF SOLUTIONS

Among the topics Aurobindo touched on in his Indological writings are five problems that are still actively debated by students of Indian history: (1) the sig-

46. *Ibid.*, 7. A historian is not obliged to take retrospective assertions like this at face value, but there seems to be less danger in accepting them provisionally, in the spirit of Ricoeur’s “second naïveté” (see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1969], 347-357), than in imposing an alien explanatory framework on them.

47. Pages could be written summarizing how this “myth” was created and enforced by British law, anthropology, architecture, ceremony, etc., as well as by military force. The most interesting of the recent Foucault-inspired studies of imperial disciplines, such as those in Chatterjee *et al.*, *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines and Colonial Bengal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), are concerned with various aspects of this myth-creation. To my mind, however, such studies give far too much importance to disembodied “discourse” and too little importance to deliberate personal, political, diplomatic, and military force.

48. Sudipta Kaviraj, “Modernity and Politics in India,” *Daedalus* 129 (Winter 2000), 141. Kaviraj here draws on, and cites, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

nificance of the Vedas, (2) the date of the vedic texts, (3) the Aryan invasion theory, (4) the Aryan-Dravidian divide, and (5) the idea that spirituality is the essence of India. In this section I sketch the outlines of these problems, and summarize Aurobindo's solutions along with those of other orientalist of the colonial and postcolonial periods. Adopting his nationalistic approach as my primary point of reference, I show how his views took shape in a particular historical matrix (of which the biographical factors discussed in the previous section are only one strand) and how they have been criticized and in some cases appropriated by postcolonial writers. Disentangling what is of lasting value in his work from what belongs to his era, I show that both his critics and admirers miss out on his enduring contributions. If the views of other orientalist were subjected to a similar triage, it might be possible to approach the five problems, and others, with a better chance of finding satisfactory solutions.

### *1. The Significance of the Vedas*

In the Hindu tradition, the hymns of the Vedas occupy an unusual place. On the one hand they are regarded as Divine Revelation, uncreated and the source of all truth. On the other, they are treated as crude sacrificial formulas, meant to propitiate gods who reward their worshippers with welfare, progeny, and so on. Patronizing orientalist, interested only in the ritual interpretation, studied the Vedas as interesting relics of primitive humanity. Romantic orientalist gave their attention not to the hymns (the *karmakanda* or "action part" of the Vedas) but to the Upanishads (the *jnanakanda* or "knowledge part"), which deal among other things with mystical knowledge. Aurobindo too was at first interested only in the Upanishads, accepting passively the ritual interpretation of the hymns. Later he theorized that the hymns present, in symbolic form, the same knowledge that later was given intellectual expression in the Upanishads. According to his theory, the hymns are concerned outwardly with gods and sacrifices but inwardly with the attainment of divine knowledge and bliss. Their language is deliberately equivocal, having at the same time a ritual and spiritual significance.<sup>49</sup>

Incompletely worked out, mystical in intent, Aurobindo's theory has found few takers among academic orientalist. Dutch Sanskritist Jan Gonda asserts that Aurobindo goes "decidedly too far in assuming symbolism and allegories." Indian philosopher S. Radhakrishnan writes that it would be unwise to accept his theory, since it "is opposed not only to the modern views of European scholars but also to the traditional interpretations of Sayana and the system of Purva-Mimamsa."<sup>50</sup> Aurobindo's followers of course endorse his reading, but only one, T. V. Kapali Sastry, founds his exposition on an independent study of

49. Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1998).

50. Jan Gonda, *Vedic Literature (Samhitas and Brahmanas). A History of Indian Literature*, vol. I. 1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 244; S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1941), 70.

the Sanskrit texts and commentaries.<sup>51</sup> The others simply base their assertions on Aurobindo's authority.<sup>52</sup>

Most critical scholars of the postcolonial period follow the lead of their patronizing predecessors in regarding the Vedas as documents of great historical and linguistic value but no literary or philosophical interest. At the other end of the spectrum, reactionary scholars see the Vedas as repositories of extraordinary wisdom, much of it in advance of modern science.<sup>53</sup> Few of them have enough knowledge of Vedic Sanskrit to argue intelligently in favor of this hypothesis. For most the Vedas are just unchallengeable evidence of the antiquity and superiority of Indian culture. Reductive orientalist regard this sort of interest in the Vedas as an expression of a postcolonial nostalgia for origins, with worrisome applications to the reactionary project of imposing essentialist Hinduism on the Indian state.

Given the millennia that separate us from the texts, and the paucity of non-textual supporting materials, it is unlikely that we will ever know what the Vedas meant to their creators. Reactionary scholars rely on little but faith when they make their extraordinary claims. It is easy for critical scholars to undermine these assertions, but their own interpretations leave much to be desired. Like the readings of an art historian who knows everything about the provenance, iconography, and formal structure of a quattrocento painting but nothing about Christianity, their work seems often to be an empty display of linguistic and historical virtuosity. Aurobindo's theory accounts in principle for the historical as well as the spiritual sides of the texts, but in practice he gives almost all his attention to the latter.<sup>54</sup> This omission is the primary weakness of his theory, which to be true must permit both an inward and an outward reading of every hymn.

## 2. *The Date of the Vedas*

Precolonial Indian scholars were for the most part uninterested in the historical origin of the Vedas, regarding them as eternal and uncreated. Traditional Indian

51. T. V. Kapali Sastry, *Collected Works of T. V. Kapali Sastry*. 12 vols. (Pondicherry: Dipti Publications, 1977–1992). Although Sastry attempts to show the superiority of Aurobindo's interpretation to the "European" interpretation and to the traditional interpretation preserved primarily in the work of the fourteenth-century ritualistic commentator Sayana, he admits that he has "generally taken Sayana as his model in regard to word-for-word meaning, grammar, accent, etc." (*Collected Works*, vol. 4, ix).

52. See, for example, Kireet Joshi, *The Portals of Vedic Knowledge* (Auroville, India: Editions Auroville Press International, 2001); *Rigveda Samhita*, ed. R. L. Kashyap and S. Sadagopan (Bangalore: Sri Aurobindo Kapali Shastri Institute of Vedic Culture, 1998).

53. Typical claims are that the *rishis* ("seers" of the Vedas) knew about airplanes, atomic energy, and cloning. Such absurdities make it difficult for people to accept that Indian mathematicians and scientists did make some remarkable discoveries, such as the Pythagorean theorem (before Pythagoras) and the revolution of the earth (before Copernicus). It might be added that neither of these discoveries had generalized scientific or cultural consequences in India.

54. See Aurobindo, *Secret of the Veda*, 8, 139. Sastry argues in Aurobindo's defense that the ritual meaning "was unimportant with the Rishis as that was intended as an outer cover for guarding the secret knowledge" (*Collected Works*, vol. 1, 17). This is unconvincing. The ritual meaning and its associated practices are still current after more than two millennia, while Aurobindo's exoteric meaning is not part of the extant indigenous tradition.

chronology, which deals in cycles of millions of years, is not much help in placing the texts in a historical framework. Documentary Indian chronology begins with the Buddha around 600 BCE. The Vedas predate the Buddha, but by how much? By estimating the rate of change between the language of datable texts and the Sanskrit of the *Rig Veda*, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century orientalists such as William Jones and Max Müller arrived at a date around 1000 BCE.<sup>55</sup> Other scholars (most of them Indian) have tried to push the date back by a couple of thousand years or more. B. G. Tilak, a scholar and nationalist associate of Aurobindo's, proposed a date not later than 4000 BCE and perhaps as early as 6000 BCE.<sup>56</sup> Aurobindo himself showed little interest in the question. In his published writings he accepted provisionally a date of three and half thousand years before the present, but suggested the actual date might be much earlier.

Modern critical orientalists stand by their colonial predecessors, placing the *Rig Veda* no earlier than 1900 BCE and generally centuries later. They offer linguistic and archeological data to support this dating but admit that they lack knock-down arguments, since the texts of the Vedas contain no sure dating clues, and accurately dated artifacts cannot surely be correlated to the texts. The one thing that might decide the matter would be the decipherment of the script of the Harappan Civilization ("mature" phases c. 2600 to c. 1900 BCE). First excavated in the 1920s, and so unknown to earlier orientalists, this long-forgotten civilization has become an important battlefield in the contemporary Indian culture wars. It is certain that the Harappan people created one of the most extensive societies in ancient Eurasia. But what was their relation to Vedic culture? If the Vedas were composed after the decline of Harappan culture, the claim made by romantic, nationalist, and reactionary orientalists that the Vedas are the primordial sources of Indian civilization fails. Passions in this debate run remarkably high, though few of the participants know enough about linguistics, paleontology, archaeology, and history to make significant contributions.<sup>57</sup> Very briefly, critical orientalists argue that the differences between the urban Harappan culture and the pastoral culture described in the Vedas are too great for the two to be the same. A familiar argument cites the lack of reliable evidence of the horse in Harappan cities. (The Vedas are filled with references to horses.) Reactionary orientalists read the evidence so as to make the Harappan cities a late efflorescence of Vedic culture. N. S. Rajaram, writing on the website of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an aggressive sectarian group, asserts without evidence that "the Vedic and Harappan civilizations were one."<sup>58</sup> Rajaram also is co-author of a book pur-

55. Müller's linguistic computations, by which he dated the *Rig Veda* to 1000 BCE, are explained in Gonda, *Vedic Literature*, 22. William Jones arrived by a different means at a date of c. 1200 BCE (*Works*, volume 7, 79).

56. B. G. Tilak, *The Orion or Researches into the Antiquity of the Vedas* [1893], in *Samagra Lokmanya Tilak*, vol. 2 (Poona: Kesari Prakashan, 1975).

57. The various issues in these and other fields are comprehensively and even-handedly summarized in Edwin Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

58. N. S. Rajaram, "Vedic-Harappan Gallery," [http://www.vhp.org/englishsite/hbharat/vedicharappan\\_gallery.htm](http://www.vhp.org/englishsite/hbharat/vedicharappan_gallery.htm) (accessed 6 July 2002).



porting to show that the language of the Harappan script is Sanskrit. This decipherment, which has won no acceptance, has been shown to be based in part on doctored evidence.<sup>59</sup> Arguments and counter-arguments on this and related questions fill books, academic papers, Sunday supplement features, and internet newsgroups. The rhetoric reveals the preconceptions and attitudes of the participants. Critical scholars, versed in the primary and secondary literature, lay out impressive data with a show of objectivity but often betray a superciliousness similar to that of colonial orientalists. Their reactionary opponents make up for lack of linguistic knowledge by attacks on their opponents, Max Müller, and the British Empire, and half-informed invocations of nationalist orientalists like Tilak and Aurobindo.<sup>60</sup>

### 3. *The Aryan Invasion Theory*

Aurobindo never referred to the Harappan Civilization, which was excavated after he wrote his major works. He did sometimes speak of an issue related to the Harappan puzzle: the question of the Aryans' homeland. Colonial orientalists theorized that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and so on were all descended from an earlier language spoken by a distinct group of people in a fairly compact homeland, who dispersed in various directions. These people were formerly known as "Aryans."<sup>61</sup> Much scholarly ingenuity has been expended in the search for their homeland, sites as disparate as India and Scandinavia being proposed. A consensus eventually emerged that the homeland was located in central or western Asia. The southeastern Aryan tribes were thought to have entered India as conquerors, displacing the earlier Dravidian inhabitants, who spoke languages unrelated to Indo-European. Not long after the formulation of this "Aryan-invasion" theory, it was recognized that conquering or even migrating "races" are not required for the dispersion of languages; but the damage had already been done. Taken up by romantic orientalists in nineteenth-century Germany, the hypothetical "Aryan race" began a career that even the defeat of Nazism could not end.

Aurobindo was unconvinced by the Aryan invasion theory, pointing out that Indian tradition, including the texts of the Vedas, makes "no actual mention of any such invasion."<sup>62</sup> In one or two drafts not published during his lifetime, he said that the theory was a "philological myth" foisted on the world by European scholars. He suggested that this and other speculations be brushed aside in order to "make a tabula rasa of all previous theories European or Indian [bearing on the meaning of the Vedas] & come back to the actual text of the Veda for enlighten-

59. N. Jha and N. S. Rajaram, *The Deciphered Indus Script* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2000). Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer, "Horseplay in Harappa," *Frontline* 17 (30 September–13 October 2000), 1-14.

60. See Jha and Rajaram, *The Deciphered Indus Script*, and Michel Danino, *Sri Aurobindo and Indian Civilisation* (Auroville: Editions Auroville Press International, 1999).

61. The modern word "Aryan" comes from the vedic *arya*, which was taken to be the name of the "race" that composed the Vedas. In modern scholarly literature, the presumed linguistic ancestor of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, etc. is known as Proto-Indo-European; the presumed people who spoke this language are often called Indo-Europeans.

62. Aurobindo, *Secret*, 26.

ment.”<sup>63</sup> But when he came to publish his findings, he simply expressed doubt about the Aryan invasion theory without denying the possibility that an “Aryan”-speaking people may have entered the subcontinent from the north.<sup>64</sup> He sometimes spoke favorably of Tilak’s hypothesis that the Aryans dwelt originally in the arctic region and later migrated to India.<sup>65</sup> For the most part, however, he showed little interest in the historical origins of vedic culture. This has not prevented reactionary orientalists from enrolling him posthumously in their campaign to destroy the Aryan-invasion theory, which they view as a creation of colonial orientalism meant to transfer the sources of Indian culture to a region outside India. Such writers often cite Aurobindo’s manuscript drafts but ignore the more cautious references in his published writings.<sup>66</sup>

Those who campaign against the Aryan-invasion theory are flogging a long-dead horse. Critical scholars abandoned it decades ago in favor of a theory that holds that speakers of Indo-Aryan (the presumed predecessor of Sanskrit) entered the subcontinent in one or more migrations.<sup>67</sup> The relation between the different branches of the Indo-European family is linguistic; race does not enter into it. (This is a point Aurobindo insisted on as early as 1912.) Critical scholars do maintain, however, that the linguistic distinction between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages is valid.

#### 4. *The Aryan–Dravidian Divide*

In the late nineteenth century, the distinction between the Indo-Aryan languages of northern India and the Dravidian languages of the South was seized upon by colonial ethnologists, who made it a benchmark in their survey of Indian physical types. The “Dravidian races,” inhabiting south and central India, were depicted as dark, flat nosed, etc., in contradistinction to the “Indo-Aryans” of the North, who were almost like Europeans.<sup>68</sup> Linguistic data became the basis of an ethnographic split between two essential types, who were said to be at odds with each other.<sup>69</sup> The Aryan invasion was used to plot this work of historical fiction. The

63. Sri Aurobindo, “The Gods of the Veda [second version].” *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research* 8 (1984), 136; cf. Aurobindo, “A System of Vedic Psychology: Preparatory,” in *Supplement*, 183.

64. Aurobindo, *Secret*, 26, 31, 38.

65. Aurobindo, *Secret*, 31. See B. G. Tilak, *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* [1903], in *Samagra Lokmanya Tilak*, vol. 2.

66. François Gautier, *Rewriting Indian History* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1996), 7-8; David Frawley, *The Myth of the Aryan Invasion of India* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1998), 8; Michel Danino and Sujata Nahar, *The Invasion That Never Was* (Delhi: The Mother’s Institute of Research, 1996), 39-43; Michel Danino, *The Indian Mind Then and Now* (Auroville: Editions Auroville Press International, 1999), 44; Danino, *Sri Aurobindo and Indian Civilisation*, 53.

67. See for example Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), 26; Thapar, “The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics.” *Social Scientist* 24 (January–March 1996), 3-29. The migratory theory appears in all up-to-date textbooks, e.g. Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *History of India* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 30.

68. Herbert Risley, *The People of India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1908).

69. In this connection, see Risley’s ridiculous (but at the time dangerous) misreading of a Buddhist bas-relief, which he presents as “the sculptured expression of the race sentiment of the Aryans towards the Dravidians” (*ibid.*, 5).

almost-European Aryans pushed the dark, flat-nosed Dravidians from the fertile plains of the North into southern India. Isolated texts were cited to support this theory. The word *anasa*, which occurs once in the *Rig Veda* in a description of the Aryan's enemies, was taken to mean "noseless," that is, flat nosed. This accorded well with the "racial science" of the era. In 1872 a French writer of popular scholarship noted that the seers of the Vedas often spoke of their "negro" enemies as "the noseless ones," thus "revealing an anthropological characteristic of great importance."<sup>70</sup>

When Aurobindo arrived in South India in 1910, he was surprised to discover no radical physical difference between his new neighbors and people in the North. Eventually he became convinced that "the [racial] theory which European erudition started" was wrong, and that "the so-called Aryans and Dravidians" were parts of "one homogenous race."<sup>71</sup> When he began to study Tamil he was further surprised to find "that the original connection between the Dravidian and Aryan tongues was far closer and more extensive than is usually supposed." This led him to speculate that "that they may even have been two divergent families derived from one lost primitive tongue."<sup>72</sup> He never went so far as to assert that Tamil was an "Aryan dialect," but he did question the methodology and conclusions of European philology, which used meager data to arrive at grand conclusions. In this connection, he ridiculed the reading of *anasa* as "noseless." This was, he said, not just bad etymology but also bad ethnology, "for the southern nose can give as good an account of itself as any 'Aryan' proboscis in the North."<sup>73</sup>

Aurobindo's philological research, preserved in hundreds of pages of notes on Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Tamil, and other languages, helped convince him that European comparative philology was overrated. He liked to allude to a remark by Ernest Renan characterizing philology as a "petty conjectural science."<sup>74</sup> His citation (apparently from memory) was somewhat inaccurate,<sup>75</sup> though his belief that the philology of the period promised more than it delivered is one that few today would question.

70. G. Lietard, *Les peuples ariens et les langues ariennes* (Paris: G. Masson, 1872), 13.

71. Aurobindo, *Secret*, 25, 593. Aurobindo did, however, acknowledge a difference in culture between the "Aryans" of the north and center and the inhabitants of the south, west, and east (see Sri Aurobindo, *The Hour of God and Other Writings* [Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972], 278).

72. Aurobindo, *Secret*, 38.

73. *Ibid.*, 26.

74. *Ibid.*, 50; cf. *ibid.* 29; *Hour of God*, 298; *Supplement*, 180; "The Secret of the Veda" (manuscript draft), *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research* 9 (1985), 42.

75. What Renan wrote, in an ironic passage of his memoirs, was that if he hadn't gone to Saint-Sulpice and learned Hebrew, German, and theology, he might have become a natural scientist. As it was his studies led him to the "historical sciences, little conjectural sciences, that forever are unmaking themselves as soon as they are made and are forgotten in a hundred years" (*Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* [Paris: Nelson Éditeurs, n.d.], 190). There is no special mention of philology. (Renan did important work in many "historical sciences," philology among them.) The French savant was simply giving expression to the usual longing of the social scientist for the neatness and precision of the natural sciences.

Modern critical orientalists would agree with Aurobindo that the ethnological theories of colonial scholars are politically suspect and scientifically worthless.<sup>76</sup> They would reject his idea that the Dravidian languages may have sprung from the same protolanguage as Sanskrit.<sup>77</sup> Reactionary orientalists distort his views on this matter, turning his cautious speculations into positive assertions and supporting their rejection of historical linguistics by means of his misquotation of Renan.<sup>78</sup>

### 5. *Spirituality as the Essence of India*

When the culture of India was introduced to Europe, it was made to look predominantly religious. Travelers and missionaries wrote about the country's exotic faiths. Translations of texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* lent support to the notion that Indians were uniquely preoccupied with spirituality. The stereotype of the "mystical Indian" was not without its use in a colonial state: otherworldly Indians needed down-to-earth Englishmen to rule over them. The mystical stereotype was confirmed and extended by Romantic orientalists, scholarly as well as flaky. In 1882 the Theosophical Society moved to India, which soon displaced Egypt as "the source of the ancient wisdom."<sup>79</sup> New forms of traditional religions took shape. Vivekananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, spoke of an India that was chiefly distinguished from Europe by its inherent spirituality. "That nation, among all the children of men, has believed, and believed intensely, that this life is not real. The real is God; and they must cling unto that God through thick and thin. In the midst of their degeneration, religion came first."<sup>80</sup>

Aurobindo agreed with Vivekananda that spirituality was the essence of India, but he insisted that it was not the whole of what he called "the Indian mind." He begins a key paragraph: "Spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind," but goes on to say that India "was alive to the greatness of material laws and forces; she had a keen eye for the importance of the physical sciences; she knew how to organise the arts of ordinary life. But she saw that the physical does not get its full sense until it stands in right relation to the supra-physical."<sup>81</sup> He was aware of the influence of colonial discourse on the formation of this image, and tried to enlarge it beyond Western stereotypes:

76. See Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*.

77. See *Ibid.*, 131-164. One well-published linguist writes that "it is quite clear that Chukchi-Kamchatkan and Eskimo-Aleut . . . are both closer to Indo-European than Afro-Asiatic or Dravidian is" (Merritt Ruhlen, *The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue* [New York: John Wiley, 1994], 134-135).

78. Danino and Nahar, *Invasion*, 42; *India's Rebirth*, ed. Sujata Nahar et al. (Mysore, India: Mira Aditi, 1996), 96; Rajaram and Jha, *The Deciphered Indus Script*, 18; Rajaram and Frawley, *Vedic Aryans*, xvi, 118.

79. Mark Bevir, "The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (1994), 756.

80. Swami Vivekananda, "My Life and Mission," in *The Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), vol. 8, 74.

81. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India with A Defence of Indian Culture* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1997), 6.

European writers, struck by the general metaphysical bent of the Indian mind, by its strong religious instincts and religious idealism, by its other-worldliness, are inclined to write as if this were all the Indian spirit. An abstract, metaphysical, religious mind overpowered by the sense of the infinite, not apt for life, dreamy, unpractical, turning away from life and action as Maya, this, they said, is India; and for a time Indians in this as in other matters submissively echoed their new Western teachers and masters.<sup>82</sup>

In fact, Aurobindo claimed, the Indian spirit comprised “an ingrained and dominant spirituality,” “an inexhaustible vital creativeness,” and “a powerful, penetrating and scrupulous intelligence.”<sup>83</sup> In passages like this he seems practically to slip into the self-laudatory tone of works like Sarda’s *Hindu Superiority*. Yet for all his “defence of Indian culture” (the title of his main work on the subject), he was not blind to the country’s limitations. He specifically condemned the “vulgar and unthinking cultural Chauvinism which holds that whatever we have is good for us because it is Indian or even that whatever is in India is best, because it is the creation of the Rishis.”<sup>84</sup> He promoted India as aggressively as he did because of the historical circumstances in which he wrote. It would have been self-defeating for this sworn anticolonialist to be completely evenhanded in his discussion of Indian culture while European writers were condemning it wholesale.<sup>85</sup>

In the postcolonial period, critical historians have tried to revise colonial depictions of Indian spiritual culture. The results have often been iconoclastic, in part because many of the better writers are Marxist or Left-leaning. The reactionary orientalist’s reaction is against this perceived attack on Indian spiritual values.<sup>86</sup> Reductive orientalist, too, have been hard on the romantic and nationalist views of Indian spirituality. Some of them depict Aurobindo and other nationalist writers as precursors of today’s reactionary scholarship as well as of Hindu identity politics (*Hindutva*). Peter van der Veer, for example, says that Aurobindo wrote that “the Ramayana and Mahabharata constitute the essence of Indian literature. This orientalist notion was foundational for the Hindu nationalisation of Indian civilisation.”<sup>87</sup> There is no such statement in Aurobindo’s works, nor it true that his mature views on Indian spirituality lend support to the monolithic Hindu, anti-Muslim nationalism that van der Veer justly criticizes.<sup>88</sup>

82. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

83. *Ibid.*, 10.

84. *Ibid.*, 75.

85. *A Defence of Indian Culture* was written in reply to William Archer’s *India and the Future* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1917), a condescending and primarily destructive critique of Indian life, literature, and art.

86. See for example, Arun Shourie, *Eminent Historians: Their Technology, Their Line, Their Fraud* (Delhi: Asa, 1998); Rajaram and Frawley, *Vedic Aryans*; Nahar *et al.*, eds., *India’s Rebirth*.

87. Peter van der Veer, “Monumental Texts: The Critical Edition of India’s National Heritage,” in *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, ed. Daud Ali (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 154.

88. Van der Veer cites, without page reference, Aurobindo’s *Foundations of Indian Culture*, the editorial title under which *The Defence of Indian Culture* and other essays were formerly published. There is no passage in these essays in which Aurobindo writes that the two Sanskrit epics were the essence of Indian civilization. He does say that “the Mahabharata and Ramayana, whether in the original Sanskrit or rewritten in the regional tongues, brought to the masses by Kathakas—rhapsodists,

Other reductive writers go farther than van der Veer in reducing Indian spirituality to a construct of colonial-period orientalism. Ronald Inden writes that European colonial scholars “constituted Hinduism and brought it into relationship to the religion and science of Europe.” Richard King seconds this: “The notion of a Hindu religion . . . was initially invented by Western Orientalists basing their observations on a Judeo-Christian understanding of religion.”<sup>89</sup> If the intent of such assertions is that the European view of “Hinduism” as a single religion like Judaism or Christianity is a European invention, there could be no objection, since the statement is tautologically true. If it is suggested that this and other European notions have had a massive impact on Indians’ ways of viewing themselves and their beliefs and practices, any objection would be futile, since the intellectual history of India since the seventeenth century gives ample testimony to such influence. But if the meaning is that Europeans created Hinduism *ex nihilo* and that precolonial Indians had no ideas about themselves and their religious practices and beliefs, one would have to be a very orthodox Foucauldian to accept it.

A serious investigation into the formation of cultural ideas in India would have to begin with the precolonial period, that is, the three thousand years that precede the colonial era. Hundreds of traditions are preserved, to a greater or lesser degree, in texts written in a dozen or more languages.<sup>90</sup> Even a cursory study of the textual, historical, and anthropological data makes it clear that religion

---

reciters, and exegetes—became and remained one of the chief instruments of popular education and culture, moulded the thought, character, aesthetic and religious mind of the people and gave even to the illiterate some sufficient tincture of philosophy, ethics, social and political ideas, aesthetic emotion, poetry, fiction and romance” (*Renaissance*, 346). The allusion to the translations and dramatic presentations of the epics is interesting, for it is part of van der Veer’s argument that the neglect of these popular traditions was one of the errors of “orientalist” scholarship. The passage in Aurobindo’s works that comes closest to van der Veer’s paraphrase is this one from a very early essay: “Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa [the authors, respectively, of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and several classical poems and plays] are the essence of the history of ancient India; if all else were lost, they would still be its sole and sufficient cultural history” (*Early Cultural Writings*, 152). Aurobindo’s point here is that the three poets represent what he then regarded as the three main “moods” of the “Aryan civilisation,” the moral, the intellectual, and the material. Hinduism is not mentioned. As for Indian Islam, see the last chapter of the *Defence* for Aurobindo’s inclusive attitude.

89. Inden, *Imagining India*, 89; King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 90. It should be noted that Inden and King are serious scholars whose arguments are based on primary research. The nuances and qualifications present in their work are lost when their conclusions are retailed by popular writers, as in this extract from a review of a collection of essays: “Quite correctly, the contributors argue that the conventional construction of India is a product of orientalist scholarship. Though more marked in the case of Muslims and Islam, European imperialism in general invented the traditionalism that formed the ideological ‘other’ in the orient. . . . [E]ach of these contributors and their positions are by now well known, at least within the charmed circle” (Harsh Sethi, “Threads of Communalism,” *Indian Review of Books* [16 January–15 February 1997], 9). The “charmed circle” in question might concisely be described as a hundred-odd people who went to the same colleges and attend the same parties in south Delhi.

90. One happy result of the trend towards specialization in the study of Indian languages and culture has been the production of a large number of first-class monographs and translations representing a wide variety of traditions. Extracts from and references to many such works are found in *Indian Religions: A Historical Reader of Spiritual Expression and Experience*, ed. Peter Heehs (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

played an important role in the lives of the people of the subcontinent as far back as we can go. It follows that an adequate theory of the construction of Indian cultural forms would have to include a critical reading of precolonial religious texts. At present, such theories are far more likely to be based on readings of eighteenth-century British scholarship—or nineteenth-century British fiction. There are practical reasons for this. It is easier to get hold of and understand the novels of Jane Austen than the treatises of Abhinavagupta. Even scholars who read Sanskrit and other subcontinental languages tend to subject Indian discourse to European theory—just as their colonial predecessors did. This is due in part to the continuing fascination of Foucault, in part to the exigencies of contemporary politics. Liberals and Leftists are so afraid of *Hindutva* and the culture of violence it has spawned that they brand any scholar who tries to examine Indian religion on its own terms as a fascist or fellow-traveler—a phenomenon Arvind Sharma calls “secular extremism” and Edwin Bryant “Indological McCarthyism.”<sup>91</sup>

#### IV. PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE?

The principal claims of Said’s *Orientalism* are that oriental scholars of the colonial period were all of a piece, and were subservient to the political system that supported them. I have shown that there are many styles of Indological scholarship, and that all of them reflect, in various of ways, the political, social, and intellectual concerns of their authors. Patronizing orientalists took the British Empire for granted, and viewed Indian cultural forms from a position of assured cultural superiority. Romantic and nationalist orientalists reversed this bias, the former seeking in India the wholeness Enlightenment Europe seemed to have lost, the latter insisting on the superiority of Indian cultural forms and the consequent need of political independence. Scholars of the postcolonial era are also divided according to their preconceptions. Critical orientalists stress the objectivity of knowledge, seemingly unaware that their views too have political underpinnings. Reductive orientalists base their critique on a specific intellectual foundation, yet claim to be anti-foundationalist. The political concerns of reactionary orientalists are patent, and are defended, if at all, by majoritarian claims and aggressions.

How is one to choose between these conflicting styles when examining a question of historical fact? It should be clear from my discussion of five problems of Indian historiography that the style of orientalism adopted by a given scholar neither guarantees nor precludes good results. What is important is the way the scholar collects and analyzes the data and formulates conclusions. In other words, good scholars must practice the traditional scholarly virtues: gathering all available data, remaining open to new findings, drawing conclusions as dispassionately as possible. These virtues are not the monopoly of critical writers, just as their opposites are not the preserve of nationalists or reactionaries.

91. Sharma quoted in “A Faith Besieged,” *Outlook* 42 (8 July 2002), 57; Bryant, *Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*, 7.

This is not to say that the framework within which a scholar works has no effect on his or her practice. Some sets of assumptions are too confining, others are too amorphous, and all have a limited shelf-life. After a time it becomes necessary to challenge the established framework, to look at the data from a different angle of vision.<sup>92</sup> Such a challenge against the framework of traditional (mostly) European orientalism has been mounted for a century or longer by (mostly) Indian orientalists of different styles. Their approach varies greatly in accordance with their preconceptions, but their common objective has been to shift the center of the debate from Europe to the non-European world—to provincialize Europe, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it.<sup>93</sup>

Chakrabarty writes about this project from a (roughly) Marxist–Foucauldian standpoint, and this gives a postmodern and “postcolonial” coloring to his presentation. But his aim, as distinct from his theories and methods, is hardly new. Many scholars of the colonial period, and many contemporary scholars with no sympathy for Marx and Foucault, have tried to put Europe in its place. Chakrabarty and his associates have more in common than they would like to admit with nineteenth-century Romantics who saw the Indian “nation” as possessing a unique essence, with twentieth-century nationalists who insisted that India should be interpreted by Indians, and with twenty-first-century reactionaries who say that only “Indians” (by which they mean traditionally minded Hindus) have the *adhikara* or capacity to write about India. Chakrabarty distances himself from such writers, insisting that his provincialization of Europe “cannot be a nationalist, nativist, or atavistic project.” He also abjures the simple expedient of saying that India lies beyond the reach of European categories and concepts.<sup>94</sup> He is committed “to engaging the universals—such as the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason—that were forged in eighteenth-century Europe and that underlie the human sciences.” But this engagement, he admits, originates “from within” the Western intellectual tradition, since “the phenomenon of ‘political modernity’” is one that “is impossible to *think* of anywhere in the world” without invoking certain characteristically European concepts and categories: the state, civil society, and so forth. This puts him in the paradoxical position of trying to provincialize Europe while accepting European modernity as his necessary “and in a sense indispensable” framework.<sup>95</sup>

Chakrabarty’s project is one of the most sophisticated attempts to arrive at an Indian, or let us say a not-exclusively-European, way of looking at Indian history, but he builds on foundations that were laid a hundred years ago. Many of his predecessors exhibit great subtlety of thought and are not hobbled, like him, by an excessive reliance on (European) figures like Heidegger and Marx who, taken at

92. I hesitate to use the much-abused word “paradigm,” but what I am referring to here is a paradigm shift of the sort spoken of by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [1962] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

93. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

94. *Ibid.*, 43.

95. *Ibid.*, 4–5.



face value, seem to offer little support to his thesis. By way of example, I would like to examine briefly one branch of this lineage, the nationalists of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bengal.

Any survey of this style must begin with Bankim Chandra Chatterji, who, suggestively in his novels and explicitly in his essays, challenged the right of Europeans to dictate the terms of the colonial encounter. His aim, as Hans Harder puts it, was “to take the authoritative discussion about Indian culture out of [European] Orientalist hands and back to India.”<sup>96</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, who assumed Bankim’s literary mantle at the end of the century, wrote about this development: “For some time past a spirit of retaliation has taken possession of our literature and our social world. We have furiously begun to judge our judges.”<sup>97</sup> Around the same time Bengali authors, artists, academics, mapmakers, and others took up the disciplines that helped the colonial state assert its mastery, making what Chakrabarty’s *Subaltern Studies* colleague Partha Chatterjee calls “serious attempts to produce a different modernity.”<sup>98</sup> This move towards literary and cultural autonomy helped pave the way for the emergence of nationalist politics in the first decade of the twentieth century. Political organizer Bipin Chandra Pal wrote in 1906:

The time has come when . . . our British friends should be distinctly told that . . . we cannot any longer suffer ourselves to be guided by them in our attempts at political progress and emancipation. . . . They desire to make the government of India popular, without ceasing in any sense to be essentially British. We desire to make it autonomous and absolutely free from British control.<sup>99</sup>

Aurobindo expanded on this the following year: “If the subject nation desires not a provincial existence and a maimed development but the full, vigorous and noble realisation of its national existence, even a change in the system of Government will not be enough; it must aim not only at a national Government responsible to the people but a free national Government unhampered even in the least degree by foreign control.”<sup>100</sup> Aurobindo subsequently left the political field because he saw what he was doing “was not the genuine Indian thing,” but only “a European import, an imitation of European ways.”<sup>101</sup> He wrote in 1920 (the year Gandhi emerged as the leader of the freedom movement) that the country was sure to achieve independence if “it keeps its present tenor.” What was preoccupy-

96. Hans Harder, “Bankimchandra’s Religious Thinking.” *IAS Newsletter* 18 (1999). Harder elaborates this point in *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s Srimadbhagavadgita: Translation and Analysis* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

97. Rabindranath Tagore, “Introduction” to Sister Nivedita, *The Web of Indian Life* (Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1918), vi.

98. Partha Chatterjee, *Texts of Power*, 27.

99. Bipin Chandra Pal, article in a lost issue of the newspaper *Bande Mataram*, quoted in the *Times* (London), 10 September 1906.

100. Aurobindo Ghose, *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* (April 1907), reprinted in *Bande Mataram: Early Political Writings—1* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972), 92.

101. Sri Aurobindo, letter to Barindrakumar Ghose, April 1920, reproduced in *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research* 4 (April 1980), 3 (translated from Bengali).

ing him was what India “is going to do with its self-determination.” Would she “strike out her own original path” or forever “stumble in the wake of Europe”?<sup>102</sup>

One thing that distinguishes the attempt of the nationalists cited above to create “an alternative language of discourse” or “different modernity” and many modern scholars who want to write the history of India from an Indian point of view is their attitude towards religion. Chatterji, Tagore, Pal, and Aurobindo were all modern in outlook and education, but they all used religious concepts in their writings. Most contemporary Indian historians, reactionaries excepted, reject religious forms of expression as impossible to square with their secular, often Marxist, backgrounds. This lands them in awkward positions when they try to represent the attitudes and ideas of the subaltern groups whose histories they wish to tell. The lower classes in India, broadly speaking, take religious and mythological discourse very seriously indeed. I would need a hundred pages to justify this generalization (it is no more than that), but will content myself with a single anecdote. When a friend of mine, then a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), was organizing in rural Maharashtra during the 1960s, he was often taken aback, at the end of a lecture on the Marxist theory of History, to be asked what all that had to do with the history of Rama, Sita, and Lakshman. For his listeners the heroes of the *Ramayana* were a great deal more real than the nineteenth-century German and his theories. Confronted with such attitudes, even the most sympathetic scholar tends to resort to some sort of reductive historicism or “anthropologism” to fit his human data into his theory. Chakrabarty’s mentor Ranajit Guha, writing about a nineteenth-century insurrection among the Santals (a tribal people of central and eastern India), admits that “religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the *hool* [uprising].” He examines with respect the statements of leaders of the *hool* that they were impelled to revolt by their god (*thakur*). He concludes: “it is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as a religious consciousness,” but adds, “except, that is, as a massive demonstration of self-estrangement (to borrow Marx’s term for the very essence of religion).”<sup>103</sup> The question is whether a student of the insurrection is better off accepting Marx’s or the Santals’ explanation of the “essence of religion.” The Santals are a decidedly unmodern South Asian subaltern group. Do the ideas of a metropolitan, atheistic, nineteenth-century European political philosopher, however brilliant, really help us understand them?

It is to Chakrabarty’s credit that he does not sweep this problem under the carpet. Commenting on Guha’s discussion of the Santals’ statements, he writes:

In spite of his desire to listen to the rebel voice seriously, Guha cannot take it seriously enough, for there is no principle in an “event” involving the divine or the supernatural that can give us a narrative-strategy that is rationally-defensible in the modern understanding of what constitutes public life. The Santals’ own understanding does not directly serve the cause of democracy or citizenship or socialism. It needs to be reinterpreted.

102. Sri Aurobindo, letter to Joseph Baptista, 5 January 1920, published in *On Himself*, 430-431.

103. Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), vol. 2, 34.

Historians may admit that participants in the *hool* did not view it as a secular event, but there are limits to how far they can go in applying this insight. Ordinarily the notion of divine intervention cannot be admitted to “the language of professional history in which the idea of historical evidence . . . cannot ascribe to the supernatural any kind of agential force except as part of the non-rational (i.e. somebody’s belief system).”<sup>104</sup> But Chakrabarty is not satisfied with just drawing a line between the non-modern and modern modes of discourse. He wishes “to raise the question of how we might find a form of social thought that embraces analytical reason in pursuit of social justice but does not allow it to erase the question of heterotemporality from the history of the modern subject.” As he puts it in his conclusion, “to provincialize Europe in historical thought is to struggle to hold in a state of permanent tension a dialogue between two contradictory points of view.”<sup>105</sup>

Chakrabarty has been criticized for giving an opening to religious obscurantism, even for providing aid and comfort to the religious Right. The entry of religious discourse into Indian politics has done the country a great deal of harm, his critics aver. If it is allowed to enter academic discourse as well, would not things become much worse? This line of thought is not without justification. Much of the political and social tension in contemporary India is due to the misappropriation of religious discourse by political parties. Politicians incited people to destroy the Babri Mosque and justified the act by saying that Hindus believed that the mosque stood on the site of a temple that marked the place of Rama’s birth. The mosque needed to be destroyed to make way for a glorious temple, the erection of which will usher in the Ramarajya or earthly Kingdom of Rama. The terms are those of religious discourse, but the methods and motives are political. The anti-mosque movement would never have succeeded without anti-Muslim hatred being whipped up by religio-political organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Samaj, and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).<sup>106</sup>

104. Chakrabarty, “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts,” *Postcolonial Studies* 1 (1998), 20-21. The same passage, somewhat watered down in revision, is found in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 104.

105. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 239, 254.

106. These groups continue to use religious discourse to serve political ends. “A time has come to bring [Vinayak Damodar] Savarkar’s dictum of Hinduising politics and militarising the Hindudom to reality,” said Giriraj Kishore, vice-president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), in a speech to members of the Bajrang Dal, the VHP’s youth wing, on 30 June 2002 (*Hindustan Times*, 1 July 2002, online edition <http://www.hindustantimes.com/nonfram/300602/dlnat55.asp>, accessed 1 July). The sort of “Hindudom” Kishore had in mind may be imagined by reading accounts of the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in February–March, in which the VHP and Bajrang Dal played conspicuous roles (see, for example, *Lest We Forget: Gujarat 2002*, ed. Amrita Kumar and Prashun Bhaumik [New Delhi: World Report, 2002]). On 3 September VHP president Ashok Singhal, speaking of the February–March events, stated: “We were successful in our experiment of raising Hindu consciousness, which will be repeated all over the country now” (*Indian Express*, 4 September 2002, online edition [http://www.indianexpress.com/full\\_story.php?content\\_id=8831](http://www.indianexpress.com/full_story.php?content_id=8831), accessed 4 September). After the BJP won the Gujarat state elections by a wide margin in December 2002, VHP leader Praveen Togadia lauded the organization’s workers for helping to bring about the victory, saying that Gujarat had turned out to be “a graveyard for secular forces” and declaring that “a Hindu Rashtra [Hindu theocracy] can be expected in the next two years” (*Rediff.com*, 15 December 2002, <http://www.rediff.com/election/2002/dec/15guj13.htm>, accessed 25 December 2002).

And the anti-mosque movement played an important role in the rise to power of the BJP, which now controls the government in New Delhi.

If religion can be put to such perverse use, would it not be better to ban it from intellectual discourse—unless indeed it is rendered harmless by viewing it in the framework of historiographical or anthropological theory? This is what reductive and critical orientalists have tried to do for the last few decades, and they have failed. Now they are being challenged by reactionary “new historians,” who embrace religious discourse but lack training in critical historiography, and so contribute little of value. The same reactionary historians have tried to appropriate the work of nationalist writers like Aurobindo, Tilak, and Gandhi,<sup>107</sup> and critical historians have let this go unchallenged or even helped it along by writing of the nationalists as proto-reactionaries in scholarship as well as in politics.<sup>108</sup> This is unfortunate both because it misrepresents the positions of the nationalists, and because it fails to make use of those parts of their work that are of lasting scholarly value and that might be of help in establishing the dialogue that is needed to arrive at a viable reinterpretation of Indian history.

A return to nationalist orientalism is hardly the way to resolve the outstanding problems in Indian historiography. The approach of the nationalists was a product of their age, and much of it is obsolete. Their essentializing of the Indian soul, for instance, is unjustifiable on historical or anthropological grounds, and politically dangerous. On the other hand, the dissolution of all cultural distinctiveness in the name of political stability, which Said seems sometimes to propose,<sup>109</sup> would also be bad social science and would not provide a solution to our political problems. Writers like Chatterji, Tagore, and Aurobindo laid stress on India’s distinctiveness because it seemed threatened by absorption into a universalized Europe. But they were also internationalists who knew and respected Europe and worked for intercultural understanding.<sup>110</sup> Their defenders and detractors lay stress on their essentialism, but they themselves went beyond it, contesting the validity of Eurocentrism without promoting an equally imperfect Indocentrism.

### *Pondicherry, India*

107. I discuss the Hindu Right’s misappropriation of Aurobindo in “Centre of the Religious Life.”

108. See, for example, van der Veer, “Monumental Texts,” and Thapar, “Past and Prejudice,” 13.

109. In the first chapter of *Orientalism*, Said states the “main intellectual issue raised by ‘Orientalism’”: “Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?” (45).

110. See, for example, Aurobindo’s “Message to America” (*On Himself*, 413-416), and Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931).