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978-0-521-09296-8 - The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century

Edited by P. J. Marshall

Excerpt

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Introduction

The great wave of exploration, trade and conquest which began in the late fifteenth century inevitably brought Europeans into much closer contact with non-European peoples. Over the next two centuries information about the peoples of Asia, Africa and America was gradually amassed and disseminated among the European reading public. Knowledge of other civilisations invited comparisons with that of Europe itself, comparisons which by the mid-eighteenth century had become highly flattering to the Europeans. Europeans had proved their military prowess over and over again; western European living standards were markedly higher than any outside Europe; the superiority of European scientific knowledge and technical accomplishments was hardly open to question; western Europeans were able to contrast their own political and legal systems with what they called 'Asiatic despotism'; and since most Europeans could not conceive of criteria for judging works of art which were different from their own, they had no hesitation in disparaging the cultural achievements of others.

The apparently unsophisticated societies of North America or Africa, the extinct civilisations of the Near East, or those which had disintegrated before the onslaught of the Spaniards in South and Central America did little to weaken European self-confidence. However superficially and myopically they may have judged, most eighteenth-century Europeans were prepared to dismiss Islam as recent, derivative and anyway in retreat. There remained, however, the civilisations of China and India, which did not fit so easily into a pattern of European supremacy. By the middle of the eighteenth century there was enough information available to indicate their great age, their continuing vitality, and their practical achievements; and there were also Europeans willing to exploit this information. Criticism of certain aspects of European society commonly took the form of unfavourable comparisons with China or less frequently with India. While this

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combination of increased awareness of the rest of the world and increased self-criticism did not effectively dent eighteenth-century complacency, it did provoke a debate in which European values were for the first time seriously called in question. The controversies were fiercest over China. High claims were made for the Chinese system of government, for Chinese art, and above all for Confucianism (Buddhism being generally ignored or disparaged).¹ Since the late seventeenth century, opponents of Christianity had been setting themselves the task of demolishing its claims to be the unique vehicle of God's purposes on earth by showing that Old Testament history was a corruption of more ancient religions and that other faiths were preferable to Christianity in their ethical teaching. Confucianism seemed to be an admirable candidate on both counts; disputes about the nature of Confucianism and the implications for Christianity if the more favourable accounts of it could be accepted dominated the European debate on China.²

Widespread European discussion of India took place rather later, mostly occurring in the second half of the eighteenth century, but here too religious controversies overshadowed other issues. Although a number of published accounts of India had appeared in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, perhaps because they lacked the powerful advocacy of the great Jesuit works on China, they do not seem to have received very much public notice. In the eighteenth century, however, European rivalries attracted attention to India and European conquests gave new facilities for gathering information. From the 1760s books on India began to multiply. Readers of these books would have been reassured that in general Europe had little to fear from comparisons with India. With the Mughal empire collapsing and most of the successor states in disorder, few argued that India had anything to teach the West politically.

¹ G. R. Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 18–22.

² For a brief outline of these controversies see R. Shackleton, 'Asia as seen by the French Enlightenment', R. Iyer ed., *The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe* (Oxford, 1965); for a fuller account, B. Guy, *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire* (*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth century*, xxi) (Geneva, 1963); also L. Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident. Le Commerce à Canton au xviii^e siècle* (Paris, 1964), 1, 17 ff.

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Indian literature not written in Persian remained largely inaccessible to Europeans until they could master Sanskrit. Indian Islamic architecture and the ‘pagodas’ and sculpture of south India were well known, while the cave temples of Ellora, Elephanta and Salsette were periodically visited and described by travellers, but it would require a major change in aesthetic standards before ‘proportions and forms, so different from Grecian rules’ or ‘grotesque and fanciful’ sculpture would be admired.¹ For all their great reputation with antiquity, Indian philosophy and science, with the possible exception of astronomy, now seemed to have very little to offer. Indeed, most Europeans believed that India was in a state of intellectual stagnation. Nothing seemed to have changed since the Greeks wrote their accounts. Indian learning appeared to have degenerated into the uncomprehending repetition of time-honoured formulae. Speculation and endeavour were thought to have been stifled by an enervating climate, political despotism, a fertile soil producing the necessities of life without any stimulus to effort, and a religious system which forbade change in any aspect of its believers’ lives.² Yet in spite of much adverse comment on its effects on Indian society, Hinduism found its champions in Europe. The debate set off by Confucianism was revived. Another candidate was put into the field against Christianity and its historical claims and the purity of its doctrines were asserted.

The debate on China had been largely confined to continental Europe and above all to France. In spite of their military débâcle in India, the achievement of the French in exploring Indian civilisation and in analysing and publicising the latest findings is remarkable. In the early eighteenth century the Jesuit series of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* contained much material on Hinduism, some of it of high quality, written by French members of the south Indian missions.³ The precocious Abraham Anquetil

¹ An article on Elephanta by Lt.-Col. Barry, *Annual Register* (1784–5), II, 90–1.

² A few examples of this kind of explanation are: J. L. Niecamp, *Histoire de la Mission Danoise dans les Indes Orientales* (Geneva, 1745), I, 84 ff.; Robert Orme, ‘Effeminacy of the Inhabitants of Indostan’, India Office Library, Orme MSS, I, 121–37; J. Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*, 2nd ed. (1792), pp. xxi ff.

³ Some of these were translated into English by J. Lockman, *Travels of the Jesuits, into various parts of the World*, 2nd ed. (1762), 2 vols.

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Duperron launched his deciphering of Avestan in 1771 in a book which also contained much on Indian subjects.¹ Pierre Sonnerat included a comprehensive survey of Hinduism in his *Voyage aux Indes Orientales* published in 1782; and Guillaume Le Gentil de La Galaisière provided the fullest of the early accounts of Indian astronomy.² Their material and that of other travellers was sifted from an orthodox point of view in articles, such as those by Etienne Mignot and Joseph de Guignes, in the *Mémoires de l'Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*,³ and from an unorthodox point of view most obviously by Voltaire, the Abbé Raynal, and the future mayor of revolutionary Paris, Jean-Sylvain Bailly. Much information on India also came to eighteenth-century Europe from Danish sources. The Danish Lutheran mission, established like the Jesuits on the Coromandel Coast, provided a stream of letters published in various collections⁴ and in the annual *Account of the Origins and Designs* of the British Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, who contributed to subsidising them. But once the British began their conquests in the second half of the century, Europe came more and more to see India through British eyes. Although the Church of England and other British Christian bodies had largely kept aloof from the controversies stirred up by Confucianism, they could not ignore the controversies about Hinduism; the case for the prosecution against Christianity was still largely argued from across the Channel, but much of the evidence was being provided by Englishmen and many English Christians spoke for the defence.

The pieces included in this book have been chosen to represent the major British contributions to European understanding of Hinduism in the second half of the eighteenth century. They

¹ *Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre* (Paris, 1771), 3 vols.

² In two articles in *Mémoires de l'Académie royale des Sciences* for 1772, part ii, see below, p. 32.

³ Mignot published five *mémoires* 'Sur les anciens philosophes de l'Inde' in tome xxxi (1761–3); de Guignes wrote three entitled 'Recherches historiques sur la religion Indienne' xl (1773–6), 'Reflexions sur un livre Indien intitulé Bagavadam', xxxviii (1770–2), and 'Observations historiques et géographiques sur le récit de Pline concernant l'origine, l'antiquité des Indiens', xlv (1780–4).

⁴ A number of these appeared in English, e.g., *Propagation of the Gospel in the East*, 2 parts (1710); *Several Letters relating to the Protestant Danish Mission at Tranquebar in the East Indies* (1720); *An Account of the Religion, Manners and Learning of the People of Malabar*, trans. J. T. Philipps (1717).

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begin with chapters on ‘The Religious Tenets of the Gentoos’ taken from the second part of John Zephaniah Holwell’s *Interesting Historical Events relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan*, published in 1767, and ‘A Dissertation concerning the Customs, Manners, Language, Religion and Philosophy of the Hindoos’ from the first volume of Alexander Dow’s *History of Hindostan*, published in 1768. Neither work shows any major advance in knowledge over previous accounts of Hinduism, and in places Holwell suggests that he was either remarkably credulous or remarkably inventive, but the manner in which both were written and the time at which they appeared won them a public attention not given to earlier offerings. The next two items show much greater insight into their subject. Nathaniel Brassey Halhed’s Preface to his translation of *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, issued in 1776, reveals some acquaintance with a wide range of important sources. Charles Wilkins’s *The Bhāgvat-Gēētā, or Dialogues of Krēṣhṇā and Ārjōn* (of which Wilkins’s own Preface and an introductory letter by Warren Hastings are here given) appeared in 1785, and was the first published translation into a European language of any major Sanskrit work. Finally, three essays by Sir William Jones, ‘on the Hindus’, ‘on the Gods of Greece, Italy and India’ and ‘on the Chronology of the Hindus’, are included. These appeared in the first two numbers of *Asiatick Researches*, the journal of the Bengal Asiatic Society, which were published in 1789 and 1790. Jones’s contemporaries regarded his essays as the final and definitive statement of the claims and nature of Hinduism. Later research has inevitably shown the limitations in Jones’s approach and the gaps in his knowledge, but to appreciate his quality it is only necessary to read his essays in conjunction with those of Dow and Holwell written no more than twenty years earlier. His studies and translations reached a very wide European audience and created an awareness of Hinduism that was almost entirely new.¹

Holwell was born in Dublin in 1711.² He was given what seems to have been a conventional merchant’s training, but became a

¹ R. Schwab, *La Renaissance Orientale* (Paris, 1950), pp. 59–71.

² The chief source for information on him is H. E. Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, 4th ed. (1908), pp. 47–52.

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surgeon, first on an East Indiaman and later in the East India Company's service in Bengal. He had a highly contentious career, becoming *zamindar* of Calcutta, being incarcerated in the Black Hole, and eventually succeeding to the Governorship of Bengal for a brief period in 1760 before he left India. He lived in retirement in England for another thirty-eight years, dying in 1798. Although he had made many enemies during his active career, his obituary described him as a person 'in whom brilliancy of talents, benignity of spirit, social vivacity, and suavity of manners were so eminently united, as to render him the most amiable of men'.¹ It is clear that he did not know Sanskrit, but it is likely that he had a good knowledge of some other Asian languages. Long service on the Calcutta Mayor's Court and the Calcutta *Zamindar's* Court must have given him some grasp of Hindustani and Bengali and he apparently also knew Arabic. His books suggest that he had strong and increasingly eccentric opinions, a ready pen, and an alert if disorderly mind. Apart from various personal polemics, he published in 1765 the first part of a disjointed and inchoate work largely concerned with Hinduism, to which he gave the appropriately rambling title of *Interesting Historical Events, relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan . . . As also the Mythology and Cosmogony, Fasts and Festivals of the Gentoos, followers of the Shastah, and a Dissertation on the Metempsychosis, commonly, though erroneously, called the Pythagorean doctrine*. In 1767 he added a second part, and in 1771 a third. In 1779 he reissued parts two and three, with the altered title of *A Review of the Original Principles, religious and moral, of the Ancient Bramins*. Finally, in 1786 he brought out a tract called *Dissertation on the Origin, Nature, and Pursuits of Intelligent Beings, and on Divine Providence, Religion and Religious Worship*, which to an even greater degree than his earlier books is as much a statement of personal beliefs as an exposition of Hinduism.

Very little can be ascertained about Alexander Dow and unfortunately nothing at all is known about his education. He was born in Scotland, probably in 1735 or 1736, and is reported to have run away from an apprenticeship to go to the East Indies as a sailor. In 1760 he was appointed an Ensign in the Company's

¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXVIII (1798), pt. ii, 999.

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Bengal Army and had risen to the rank of Colonel by the time he died in India in 1779. By normal eighteenth-century standards he was much more accomplished than Holwell. His views on moral, religious and political questions were conventionally 'enlightened'.¹ Reviewers found that he talked 'like a sensible, rational man',² which is more than they found in Holwell. He wrote two plays, called *Zingis* and *Sethona*, both of which were staged at the Drury Lane theatre. He undertook two major Persian translations, though his reputation as a Persian scholar was said to have been 'far from high in Bengal'.³ In 1769 he published *Tales translated from the Persian of Inatulla*, and in the previous year the first two volumes of his *History of Hindostan* appeared. They purported to be a translation of the seventeenth-century historian, Firishta, but have been described as 'an interpretation in which there is little to distinguish a very free translation from Dow's own glosses'.⁴ A third volume was added to the *History of Hindostan* in 1772. The Dissertation on the Hindus appeared in the first volume, more dissertations being added in the third. Dow admitted that he had been unable to learn Sanskrit and that he had been forced to rely for his knowledge of Hinduism on translations into Persian and into 'the vulgar tongue of the Hindoos'.⁵

The importance of Dow and Holwell lies less in the novelty of what they said than in the audience that they reached. Both authors were widely reviewed and discussed in Britain. A notice in the *Annual Register*, possibly written by Burke, called Holwell's account of Hinduism 'a very curious and important acquisition to the general stock of literature in Europe',⁶ while Dow was said by a reviewer to be better informed on Hinduism 'than any preceding writer'.⁷ Holwell was translated into German in 1767,⁸

¹ See R. Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (Paris and The Hague, 1963), pp. 21–41.

² *Critical Review*, xxvi (1768), 81.

³ Lord Teignmouth, *Memoir of the Correspondence of John Lord Teignmouth* (1848), I, 105–6.

⁴ P. Hardy, 'Firishta', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn. (Leiden and London, 1960–), II, 923; also J. S. Grewal, 'British Historical Writing from Alexander Dow to Mountstuart Elphinstone on Muslim India', London Ph.D. thesis, 1963.

⁵ See below, p. 108.

⁶ *Annual Register* (1766), II, 307.

⁷ *Monthly Review*, xxxix (1768), 387.

⁸ By E. Thiel in J. T. Koehler, *Sammlung neuer Reisebeschreibungen aus fremden Sprachen* (Göttingen and Gotha, 1767–9), I.

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and into French in 1768.¹ Dow's Dissertation on the Hindus appeared in French in 1769,² and was reproduced again, with much additional material of his own, in a French version by the Swiss savant Jean-Rodolphe Sinner.³ Voltaire had read Holwell in English by December 1767;⁴ he also read Dow and a rather earlier English account by Luke Scrafton, called *Reflections on the Government of Indostan*, which first appeared in 1763. He was lavish in his praise of all three authors, particularly of Holwell and Dow, making extensive use of them in his correspondence and in his published works, and writing 'C'est surtout chez MM Holwell et Dow qu'il faut s'instruire'.⁵ Voltaire had been attracted to Hinduism in 1760 when he was presented with a manuscript called the 'Ezour Vedam', or commentary on the Hindu scriptures, now known with a beautiful appropriateness to have been a forgery perpetrated by his great antagonists the Society of Jesus.⁶ Holwell and Dow abundantly confirmed the favourable impression created by the 'Ezour Vedam', and praises of Hinduism frequently occur in his later writings.

While Dow was probably a typical product of an eighteenth-century Scottish education, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, the son of a Director of the Bank of England, had undergone the full rigours of an upper-class English one at Harrow and Christ Church.⁷ Although he later complained that his Greek had suffered from 'the levity of youth and the dissipation of Xt Church',⁸ he reflects credit on both institutions. His writings show that as well as a conventional classical grounding, he had read very widely at an

¹ *Événements historiques, intéressants, relatifs aux provinces de Bengale* (Amsterdam, 1768).

² *Dissertation sur les Moeurs, les Usages, le Langage, la Religion et la Philosophie des Hindous* (Paris, 1769).

³ *Essai sur les Dogmes de la Metempsychose et du Purgatoire enseignés par les Bramins de l'Indostan* (Berne, 1771).

⁴ *Voltaire's Correspondence*, ed., T. Besterman (Geneva, 1953–65), LXVII, 210, 217–8.

⁵ *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1877–85), xxix, 166. Large borrowings from Holwell and Dow can be found in *Fragments historiques sur l'Inde*, *Lettres à M. Pauw*, *Précis du siècle de Louis XV*, *Dieu et les Hommes*, *Essai sur les Moeurs*.

⁶ *Voltaire's Correspondence*, XLIV, 254, XLVII, 72; A. Debidour, 'L'Indianisme de Voltaire', *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, iv (1924), 29–30.

⁷ The main source for the following paragraph is an anonymous article 'Warren Hastings in Slippers', *Calcutta Review*, xxvi (1856).

⁸ Letter to G. Costard, 1779, British Museum, Stowe MS, 757, f. 23.

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early age. A later acquaintance recalled that he had ‘seldom met a man who knew so much of so many things, or who had so ready a command of all he knew’.¹ He went to India in 1771 as a Writer in the Company’s Bengal service, publishing his *Gentoo Code* in 1776 and a *Grammar of the Bengal Language* in 1778. He left India with Warren Hastings in 1785, apparently intending to lead ‘the easy life of an independent gentleman’ and to devote his talents to Oriental scholarship. Though he lived for another forty-five years, he produced nothing to compare with the two books he had written in his twenties. Two events seem to have wrecked his career. In 1790 he lost a large part of his fortune invested in France, and in 1795 he committed what appears on the surface to be a wholly inexplicable aberration, from which he seems never to have recovered. An M.P. since 1791, he became in 1795 the advocate both in the House of Commons and in the press of the self-styled prophet Richard Brothers, who had announced that he was shortly to be ‘revealed’ as the ruler of the world. There were rumours that Halhed would be confined for lunacy, and in fact he lived in seclusion until 1809, when, as an act of charity, he was appointed a Chief Assistant to the Examiner of Correspondence at East India House.

Halhed was clearly an excellent linguist with a serious interest in the development of language. He had learnt enough Persian in four years to be able to put the Persian version of the Sanskrit original of the Code into English, and his papers contain many Persian translations which he made later.² He also learnt Bengali quickly and claimed to be the first European who had ever been able to conduct the Company’s Bengali correspondence,³ as well as being the first European to see the connexion between Bengali and Sanskrit.⁴ His knowledge of Bengali and its literature has been called ‘astounding for the day’ by a modern Bengali scholar.⁵ Precisely how much Sanskrit he knew is a matter of doubt. He gave a brief account of Sanskrit grammar and prosody,

¹ E. B. Impey, *Memoirs of Sir Elijah Impey* (1846), p. 355.

² B. M. Add. MSS 5657, 5658.

³ Memorial to the Company, 18 Nov. 1783, National Library of Scotland, MS 1072, f. 96.

⁴ *Grammar of the Bengal Language* (Hooghli, 1778), p. xix.

⁵ S. Sen, *History of Bengali Literature* (New Delhi, 1960), p. 178.

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and quoted widely from Sanskrit literature in the Preface to the Code, as well as making a large collection of Sanskrit manuscripts, many of which were specially copied for him. But all the translations surviving in his papers are from Persian versions. In the Preface to the Code he admitted that he only had 'slender information' about Sanskrit at his disposal and had as yet found no *pandit* willing to teach him, though he had high hopes of one of 'more liberal sentiments'.¹ When he wrote the Preface to the Bengali Grammar some three years later it would seem that his *pandit* had still only 'imparted a small portion of his language', even if 'he readily displayed the principles of his grammar'.² In 1779 Halhed was lamenting the death of his *pandit*.³ Whatever may have been the limits of Halhed's knowledge of Sanskrit, his study of it did enable him to formulate theories about its relationship to other languages which Sir William Jones was later to develop. In the Preface to the Bengali Grammar Halhed wrote that he had been 'astonished to find the similitude of Shanscrit words with those of Persian and Arabic, and even of Latin and Greek'.⁴ He developed these ideas further in a manuscript written in 1779. He found in Sanskrit

every part of speech, and every distinction which is to be found in either Greek or Latin, and that in some particulars it is more copious than either . . . I do not attempt to ascertain as a fact, that either Greek or Latin are derived from this language; but I give a few reasons wherein such a conjecture might be founded: and I am sure that it has a better claim to the honour of a parent than, Phoenician or Hebrew.⁵

The *Gentoo Code* had been commissioned by Warren Hastings. In 1772 the Company had taken the decision that it should 'stand forth as dewan' and assume direct responsibility for the administration of civil justice in Bengal. This meant that Europeans were frequently called upon to act as judges in cases to be decided according to Hindu law. Hastings hoped to be able to provide them with a clear and undisputed corpus of law which would replace the conflicting sources and rival interpretations quoted by the *pandits*. Eleven *pandits* were instructed to draw on the best

¹ See below, p. 157.² *Bengal Grammar*, pp. x–xi.³ Letter to G. Costard, 1779, B. M. Stowe MS, 757, f. 12.⁴ *Op. cit.* p. iii.⁵ Letter to G. Costard, 1779, B. M. Stowe MS, 757, ff. 25–6.