

## CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: BRITAIN AND  
INDIA IN THE EIGHTEENTH  
CENTURY

As they extended their rule across the face of India during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British had to confront the problem of how to govern this far-flung dependency, and, more importantly, how to justify this governance to themselves. How could the British, as a members of a society who adopted as their own the ideals of nationalism, in good conscience extend their authority over this distant and densely peopled land? There was, to be sure, agreement, after the rapacious years of conquest following Plassey, that, as Edmund Burke reiterated, Britain must secure the ‘prosperity’ of India’s people before seeking any gain itself. Britain’s right to rule India, so its leaders argued, could be made legitimate, but only through just governance. Yet such a principle by itself gave little guidance for a fledgling empire. How was such a governance to be secured, and what principles might give the English a claim upon such legitimacy?

This introductory chapter examines the intellectual foundations upon which, during the eighteenth century, the British constructed their rule in India. Of necessity, as they sought to come to terms with the existence of their new dominion, the British drew upon a range of ideas that had for a long time shaped their views of themselves and, more generally, of the world outside their island home. As products at once of Britain’s own history of overseas expansion and its participation in the larger intellectual currents of Europe, these ideas included settled expectations of how a ‘proper’ society ought to be organized, and the values, above all those of the right to property and the rule of law, that for the English defined a ‘civilized’ people. As they extended their conquests to India, the British had always to determine the extent to which that land was a fundamentally different, ‘Oriental’ society, and to what extent it possessed institutions similar to those of Europe; how far its peoples ought to be transformed in Europe’s image, and how they should be expected to live according to the standards of their

## IDEOLOGIES OF THE RAJ

own culture. Under the leadership of men like Warren Hastings and Lord Cornwallis, Edmund Burke and Thomas Munro, the British had begun by 1800 to lay out ordering principles for what was to become the most extensive empire since that of Rome.

## BRITAIN AND THE WORLD OUTSIDE

The British idea of themselves as an imperial people, charged with the governance of others, had its origin in the discoveries and conquests of the Tudor state in the sixteenth century. As Elizabeth's lieutenants set out in the 1560s and 1570s to subdue Ireland and establish there 'plantations' of their followers, they endeavoured to devise explanations, satisfactory to their own consciences, which would justify these expeditions. Although a simple 'right of conquest' provided some measure of legitimation, the English conquerors sought further justification for practices that often involved massacre and expropriation by asserting that the Irish, especially the Gaelic-speakers beyond the Pale surrounding Dublin, were, despite their professed Christianity, no more than pagans, or even barbarians. As evidence, the English cited their wandering pastoralism, so unlike the settled agriculture of England, and their unorthodox belief. 'They are all', so Edmund Spenser wrote, 'Papists by their profession, but in the same so blindly and brutishly informed for the most part as that you would rather think them atheists or infidels.' The Irish, as another put it, living like 'beastes, void of lawe and all good order', were 'more uncivill, more uncleanly, more barbarous and more brutish in their customs and demeanures, then in any other part of the world that is known'.

Consequently the English had no difficulty convincing themselves that the imposition of their rule would benefit the Irish. As Sir Thomas Smith argued, God had given the English responsibility to 'inhabite and reform' this 'barbarous' nation. It was their task, he said, to educate the Irish 'in vertuous labour and in justice, and to teach them our English lawes and civilitie and leave robberyng and stealing and killyng one of another'. In so doing the English saw themselves acting as the Romans had done in England itself. 'Ones as uncivill as Ireland now is,' so Smith insisted, 'this contrey of England was by colonies of the Romaynes brought to understand the lawes and orders of thanncient orders whereof there hath no nacion more streightly and truly

## INTRODUCTION

kept the mouldes even to this day than we, yea more than thitalians and Romaynes themselves.' With the conquest of Ireland the English thus made of themselves for the first time – but not the last – new Romans, charged with civilizing backward peoples. Conquest henceforth found justification not, as in the Crusades, in the punishment of heretics and infidels, though the Irish were of course degraded by their Catholicism, nor as the outcome of dynastic rivalry, but as the product of a conception of civilization whose differing levels secured a place for the English at its apex. The English took this rationale for the subjugation of foreign peoples from Ireland to America, and thence to India and to Africa.<sup>1</sup>

During the early eighteenth century, united into a single state, the peoples of Great Britain began to construct a view of themselves as an integral nation, joining English, Scots, and Welsh into one community set apart, as 'British', from others. Much in the creation of this 'British' national identity was, as Linda Colley argues, a product of a shared Protestantism, especially as the three peoples together confronted Catholic France in a succession of major wars lasting throughout the eighteenth century. The 'British' patriotism evoked by these recurrent wars, however, gained further strength from the extension of British power across the seas. Shared participation in the imperial enterprise, from which the Scots, the Scots-Irish and Anglo-Irish benefited disproportionately, as it forged a new 'British' identity, not only obscured the differences between the three peoples, but encouraged the British at the same time to see themselves as distinct, special, and superior. Whatever their internal differences, Colley writes, 'Britons could feel united in dominion over, and in distinction from, the millions of colonial subjects beyond their own boundaries.' The growth of empire, and a conviction of 'Britishness', went hand in hand.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth century this sense of imperial patriotism found expression pre-eminently in a populist politics. While the Hanoverian dynasty fought on the continent to shape the fortunes of Europe, enthusiasm for empire defined an arena of dissent, set apart from the narrow struggles of court and ministers, in which Britain's

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Canny, 'The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, vol. 30 (1973), pp. 575–98.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Colley, 'Britishness and Otherness: An Argument', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 31 (1992), pp. 309–29.

## IDEOLOGIES OF THE RAJ

merchants and artisans, with the residents of its provincial towns, gloried in the country's overseas triumphs. In 1739 Admiral Vernon was made a popular hero for his victories in the West Indies.<sup>3</sup> The following year 'God Save the King' was first sung in Britain, and the same year brought the first publication of 'Rule Britannia'. This empire was, however, for the most part a maritime empire, an oceanic empire of trade and settlement, not an empire of conquest; an empire defended by ships, not troops. Indeed, the British people, while proud of their navy, were fearful of a standing army, and apprehensive of too deep an involvement on the continent of Europe, for they saw a powerful army under royal control as a threat to their liberties. The simultaneous conquest of India and loss of America, from the late 1770s, gave this imperial patriotism a new character. Henceforth, 'Britishness', as Colley argues, manifested itself not through an inclusive sense of community shared with the American colonists, but by the demarcation of 'an essential quality of difference'. Foreshadowed in Tudor Ireland, Britain's empire was now to be like that of Rome, defined by ideals of law and order flung across a subcontinent, united by roads and by rulers. Its heroes were not admirals, but generals, like Clive and Wellesley, brother of the Duke of Wellington; its military, quartered abroad and so no threat to its masters, was a mercenary army comprised of its conquered subjects.

As the British defined their own identity as a nation in opposition to the world outside, so too, more generally, did they as Europeans, under the influence of the ideals of the Enlightenment, announce their own pre-eminence as a 'modern' and 'civilized' people. The medieval Christian world view envisaged the 'East' as a fabulous land of miracles and monsters, of gold and heroism. For many it was the location of paradise; for others the abode of the terrible Gog and Magog, perhaps even of the anti-christ himself. Despite this often fearsome vision of a land utterly different from the known world of Christendom, the 'East' was, paradoxically, part of that known world. Bound into a unified cosmology with the European centre, Hell and Paradise, the anti-christ and the devil, were all integral, even necessary, elements of the medieval world order. Familiar, even if frightening, the 'East' was always described through the forms of Western iconography. Partha Mitter has shown how Hindu gods, conceived as

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Wilson, 'Empire, Trade and Popular Politics in Mid-Hanoverian Britain: The Case of Admiral Vernon', *Past & Present*, no. 121 (1988), pp. 74–109.

## INTRODUCTION

inventions of the devil, took shape in Western painting as monsters and demons. Similarly, though more sympathetically, in a famous fourteenth-century painting, the *devadasis*, or women consecrated to a temple, described in Marco Polo's travel account, were represented in such a way that, did the caption not state the subject of the picture, it would be impossible to recognize it as Indian, for the *devadasis* were transformed into blonde nuns attired in flowing habits!<sup>4</sup>

From the seventeenth century scientific study of comparative religion, with greater knowledge of India, dissolved the old 'monster' image of a frightening 'East'. Under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism and secularism, distant lands lost their cosmological significance for Europeans, and were described instead through the taxonomic structure of eighteenth-century natural science. Much of this description was sympathetic, and informed by a search for the underlying unities that bound together the family of 'Man'. Nevertheless, it decisively set the non-European world apart as an 'Other'. Several elements in Enlightenment thinking together produced this result. One was the use of such societies as platforms from which to criticize the governmental structures and social conventions of Europe itself. From Montesquieu's 'Persian Letters' to the invocation of the 'noble savage', the philosophes of the Enlightenment drained non-European societies of all content. Imagined places, they served only, through the device of irony, to reflect Europe's gaze back upon itself.

Furthermore, and more importantly, the taxonomies of natural history, by constructing secularized notions of the 'modern', and the 'civilized', inevitably emphasized at once the difference, and the inferiority, of non-European societies. No longer occupying broadly 'sacralized' roles of symbolic inversion, as monsters and devils, distant lands either marked out, as in America and the Pacific, early 'natural' stages of human social organization, or, like Egypt, whose antique greatness caught Europe's attention during these years, societies forever in decline. However described, such societies, though comprehended within a universalistic framework, and no longer stigmatized for their religious beliefs, still, so Europeans insisted, were excluded by their cultural backwardness from the 'progressive' world order defined by a newly 'modern' Europe.

One might argue further that, as Europeans constructed a sense of self for themselves apart from the old order of Christendom, they had

<sup>4</sup> Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters* (Oxford, 1977), chapter 1, especially pp. 1–31.

## IDEOLOGIES OF THE RAJ

of necessity to create a notion of an 'other' beyond the seas. To describe oneself as 'enlightened' meant that someone else had to be shown as 'savage' or 'vicious'. To describe oneself as 'modern', or as 'progressive', meant that those who were not included in that definition had to be described as 'primitive' or 'backward'. Such alterity, what one might call the creation of doubleness, was an integral part of the Enlightenment project. As the British endeavoured to define themselves as 'British', and thus as 'not Indian', they had to make of the Indian whatever they chose *not* to make of themselves. This process, as we shall see in the following chapters, had as its outcome the creation of an array of polarities that shaped much of the ideology of the Raj. These oppositions ranged from, among others, those of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' to those of 'honesty' and 'deceit'. In the end, such contrasts encompassed anything that would serve to reassure the British of their own distinctive character and keep the Indian 'Other' in its proper place.

## INDIA AND 'ORIENTAL DESPOTISM'

As they began to put together their Raj in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the British had to devise a vision at once of India's past and of its future. Without such a vision there was no way they could justify their rule to themselves, much less shape a coherent administrative system. This section examines some of the ways the British conceived of India, and with it their role in India, in the early years of their rule. In particular it examines the tension between the notion of India as a society stamped by despotism, and that which saw it as an ancient land with its own enduring laws and customs.

Among the central categories the British employed as they sought to comprehend India was the notion of 'Oriental despotism'. From the time of Aristotle 'despotism' had existed as a description of a style of governance in which legitimate royal power was nearly the same as that of a master over a slave. For the ancient Greeks, the home of despotism was, not surprisingly, the land of their antagonists, the Persians. In the process this concept became a way of setting off people like themselves, conceived of as 'Europeans', from those, conceived of as 'Asians', who, in their view, willingly submitted to 'absolutism'. Although the notion of despotism later fell into disuse, the concept enjoyed a renewed currency in the eighteenth century, as

## INTRODUCTION

Europeans, under the influence of the Enlightenment, began systematically to regard themselves, and Europe, as distinct from Asia, and Asians. Despotism described the way 'Oriental' states were organized.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, however, as critics, above all of the French monarchy, men such as Montesquieu and Voltaire, sought ways of challenging the growth of royal absolutism, 'despotism' became not only something to be found in the Orient, but a form of government to be feared, and fought, in Europe. The 'tyranny of the Turk', as in Montesquieu's 'Persian Letters', was a foil for that of Louis XIV. The model of 'despotism' thus helped Europeans define themselves in European terms by making clear what they were not, or rather were not *meant* to be. Europeans, one might say, projected onto the 'Turk' the elements of unrestrained violence and sexual licentiousness they endeavoured to suppress within themselves. Part of the cost of European liberty was to be a distorted imagining of the nature of non-European societies.

Although 'despotism' faded from European concerns after 1789, with the ending of French absolutism, the notion of 'Oriental despotism' had enduring implications for the emerging Raj in India, for it carried with it the connotation that Asian countries had no laws or property, and hence its peoples no rights. Everything, in this view, derived solely from the will of the despotic ruler, who could take back what he had granted. Asia was at once, as Alexander Dow wrote in his *History of Hindostan* (1770), 'the seat of the greatest empires', and 'the nurse of the most abject slaves'. As the British, India's new rulers, began, from Dow's time onward, to write the history of India, the concept of 'despotism' took on fresh life. It was now a way of contrasting India's earlier history with the law and order that the British conceived they were bringing. Henceforward 'despotism' was in India a thing of the past, but at the same time the 'idea' of despotism had to inform the whole of that past.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, ironically, as the British were the inheritors of India's past, many of the assumptions about India's peoples that shaped their view of that past found a place in their own government. Dow himself

<sup>5</sup> Richard Koebner, 'Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term', *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, vol. 14 (1951), pp. 275–302.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Dow, *History of Hindostan*, vol. 3, *Dissertation on Despotism* (London, 1770), pp. vii–xxii.

## IDEOLOGIES OF THE RAJ

found implicit justification for Britain's own authoritarian rule over the subcontinent when he wrote, 'When a people have long been subjected to arbitrary power, their return to liberty is arduous and almost impossible. Slavery, by the strength of custom, is blended with human nature; and that undefined something, called Public Virtue, exists no more.' The British, as India's rulers, not only sought to create 'Public Virtue' in their subjects, but willingly accepted the responsibilities its supposed non-existence imposed upon them. As the eighteenth century's 'enlightened' despotism in Europe had drawn admirers as well as critics, so too did its nineteenth-century variant flourish, as we shall see, in the paternalism of the Raj. In so doing, it drew as well, looking back to Hobbes, on a tradition that insisted on the enduring power of the royal prerogative. As such eighteenth-century jurists as Lord Mansfield repeatedly affirmed, the exercise of rule could not, in overseas territories, always be contained within the bounds of 'law'.

The tropical climate of India powerfully reinforced European ideas of it as a land fitted for 'despotism'. For the inhabitants of India the 'labour of being free', as Alexander Dow put it, simply could not surmount the 'languor' occasioned by the heat and humidity the English saw as the characteristic features of the country's climate. With 'tranquillity' and 'ease' the chief objects of their desire, Indians let themselves be subjected 'without murmuring' to the 'arbitrary sway' of despotic rulers. The 'enervating character' of India's climate was complemented by the subjection of the land for six centuries to rulers who accepted the 'faith of Mahommed'. The perception of Islam as a religion, in Dow's words, 'peculiarly calculated for despotism', was of course deeply rooted in the European consciousness. Its origins go back at least to the medieval and early modern perceptions of Islamic states, above all the Ottoman Empire, as at once infidel and menacing. What Europeans feared most they not surprisingly associated with the most vicious of governmental forms.

Dow laid out in careful detail the ways Islam encouraged the growth of despotism. In so doing he took for granted that India was a land inhabited by 'Mahommedans' and by 'Hindoos'. Muslim rulers, he argued, derived their position from the sword, whose 'abrupt argument' enslaved the mind as well as the body; Muslim law gave every male unlimited power over his family in a 'private species of despotism' that reproduced in miniature that of the state, and so 'habituated

## INTRODUCTION

mankind to slavery'; polygamy, the immurement of women, the absence of primogeniture, with a host of other customs, all contributed to a state of society in which cunning and passion, jealousy and intrigue, flourished. Freedom and independence, by contrast, and with them justice and security for property, withered and died. In India, furthermore, Islamic despotism found its perfect foil. There climate and faith alike contributed to produce in the native Hindu a being so ineffectual and submissive, the 'most effeminate inhabitant of the globe', as Robert Orme described him, that he was an ideal subject for the 'fierce' and 'hardy' Muslim invaders from the north.<sup>7</sup>

Emphasis on the formative influence of the environment in making India a land so well suited for despotism reflected of course the enduring influence of Montesquieu. Yet such explanations raised awkward difficulties. In Orme's view, for instance, the 'climate and habits of Indostan' had even 'enervated the strong fibres with which the Tartars conquered it'. As Europeans, following the conquests of Clive, began to contemplate extended years of residence in India, climatic explanations for India's degeneracy had of necessity largely to be set aside. Europeans sought, on the one hand, as we shall see in a subsequent section, to protect themselves physically from India's threatening climate by erecting walls of distance marked out by distinctive styles of residence and behaviour. At the same time, as they undertook from the 1770s a more detailed study of India, the British turned their attention increasingly from climatic determinism to what they saw as the enduring cultural and racial characteristics of its peoples.

In this extended process of study the British endeavoured to secure at once understanding of India's uncharted civilization and a sense of mastery over it. Both the interpretations such study yielded, and the self-assured mastery it produced, became lasting foundations for British claims to rule India. In the process some ancient notions came into question. Among these was the idea of a pervasive 'Oriental despotism'. This concept necessarily implied that no will, and hence no law, existed apart from that of the despot himself. During the 1770s, however, just after Dow had completed his history, the Governor-General Warren Hastings began elaborating a view of the Hindus as a people who 'had been in possession of laws which

<sup>7</sup> Dow, *Dissertation*, pp. xiii-xx; Robert Orme, *Government and People of Indostan*, part 1 (London, 1753; reprinted Lucknow, 1971), especially Book 4, pp. 38-48.

## IDEOLOGIES OF THE RAJ

continued unchanged from remotest antiquity'. The country's 'ancient constitution', he insisted, was very much intact. What the British must do, in his view, if they were successfully to govern India, was to master these laws and the Sanskrit language in which they were contained, and, more generally, to respect the customs of their new subjects. As he told the company directors in 1772, 'We have endeavoured to adapt our Regulations to the Manners and Understandings of the People, and the Exigencies of the Country, adhering as closely as we are able to their ancient uses and Institutions.'<sup>8</sup>

Both practical and scholarly concerns fuelled Hastings's commitment to the study of ancient Indian learning. Shaped by the Enlightenment ideal of understanding all cultures, he saw in the 'cultivation of language and science' in India a way to secure the 'gain of humanity'. Yet such learning would also be 'useful to the state', as it would 'lessen the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection' and at the same time 'imprint on the hearts of our own countrymen the sense and obligation of benevolence'. This mixture of scholarly curiosity and administrative convenience, neither purely disinterested nor purely manipulative, was by no means unique to Hastings. Rather it informed the scholarly activity of such organizations as, above all others, the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Founded in 1784, under the patronage of Hastings, and with William Jones as its first president, the Asiatic Society was for some fifty years a centre of learning that took the shape of a host of translations of texts and other scholarly endeavours, and the publication of a uniquely influential journal, *Asiatick Researches*.<sup>9</sup>

The scholarship of the Hastings era was informed by assumptions whose consequences were to shape all subsequent British understanding of India. The first was the belief that there was something which could be identified as a separate religion called 'Hinduism'. Europeans were from the beginning determined to make of Indian devotional practice a coherent religious system possessing such established markers as sacred texts and priests. This process of definition gained momentum during the later eighteenth century as the British secured greater knowledge of India and its languages. It can be seen in the

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Bernard Cohn, 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985), p. 289.

<sup>9</sup> P.J. Marshall (ed.), *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 189; O.P. Kejariwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past, 1784-1838* (Delhi, 1988).