

From the mid-eighteenth century, as the East India Company embarked on its career of conquest, the British had to confront the question of how, as a people steeped in the ideas of nationalism and liberalism, they could claim the right to control a vast Asian subcontinent. The principles they enunciated endeavoured to legitimate their rule over India. Thomas Metcalf argues that the British devised two divergent strategies to justify their authority; one defined essential characteristics which the Indians shared with the British themselves, while the other emphasized the presumed qualities of enduring 'difference'. Over time, however, it was the differences – differences of history, race, gender and society – which embedded themselves most deeply in the British idea of India, and so became predominant. Since the British constructed few explicit ideologies of empire, the author explores the workings of the Raj through study of its underlying assumptions as revealed in policies and writings.

THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY
OF INDIA

Ideologies of the Raj

Cambridge University Press

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THE NEW
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III.4

Ideologies of the Raj

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PREFACE

This volume examines the ways in which the British sought to justify, and thus legitimate, their rule over India. The Indian Empire, as it was put together by the conquests of the East India Company during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was for the British unprecedented in its extent and character. As Thomas Macaulay exclaimed in wonder in his speech on the renewal of the Company's charter in 1833, the Indian Empire, 'the strangest of all political anomalies', was a state that 'resembled no other in history'. To be sure, precedents could be found. The Spanish Empire in Latin America could have provided a model. But Spain had been Britain's enemy since the sixteenth century, and it was always in British eyes associated with the vices of popery and tyranny. The British had, of course, conquered Ireland, and this conquest, in Tudor times, had helped shape the British image of themselves as an 'imperial' people. Yet, especially after the Union of 1800, the British chose not to avow the colonial nature of their dominion over Ireland. Then too, they had colonized the eastern coast of North America. But this, the so-called First British Empire, had involved driving the original inhabitants of America into the wilderness and replacing them with settlers of British stock. From the outset these settlers had been awarded a large measure of self-government, and until the crises of the 1770s they proudly proclaimed themselves to be British.

Hence, as the British set out to make space for themselves as the rulers of India, they had to devise novel, and exceptional, theories of governance. This task was made more difficult by the evolving British definition of their own society through the discourse of nationalism. In contrast to most continental European states, for which conquest simply involved extension of the sway of a ruling dynasty over additional peoples, the 'United Kingdom' of Great Britain, though it might accommodate within itself the peoples of Wales and Scotland, and, uneasily, those of Ireland, by its very nature could not incorporate into its 'imagined community' the peoples of a distant India. Indeed, if anything, the notion of a 'British' national community

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implied that the people of India were equally entitled to form their own national identity. Furthermore, as Britain became, during the course of the nineteenth century, a society shaped by the ideals of liberalism, and, in time, of democracy, the existence of an autocratic rule over India stood in sharp contrast with the presumption, ever more deeply embedded in the British constitution, that the people, through election and representation, possessed the right to choose those who were to rule over them. By what right, the Victorian British had to ask themselves, could a liberal democracy assert a claim to imperial dominion based on conquest?

At the heart of this volume is the contention that there existed, as the British contemplated India, an enduring tension between two ideals, one of similarity and the other of difference, which in turn shaped differing strategies of governance for the Raj. At no time was the British vision of India ever informed by a single coherent set of ideas. To the contrary, the ideals sustaining the imperial enterprise in India were always shot through with contradiction and inconsistency. At some times, and for some purposes, the British conceived of the Indians as people like themselves, or as people who could be transformed into something resembling a facsimile of themselves; while at other times they emphasized what they believed to be enduring qualities of Indian difference. Sometimes, indeed, they simultaneously accommodated both views in their thinking, making it perilously difficult to discern any larger system at all. This book argues that, throughout the Raj, and especially during the years of uncontested British supremacy from 1858 to 1918, the ideas that most powerfully informed British conceptions of India and its people were those of India's 'difference'.

Despite an enduring commitment to the production of knowledge about India, the British made little effort at any time explicitly to construct an ordering system of ideology for their imperial enterprise. As a people, after all, the British had always eschewed grand political theories in favour of ones presumed to be derived from empirical observation, and, from John Locke onward, they insisted upon the value of experiential modes of understanding. As one seeks the sustaining ideologies of the Raj, therefore, much has to be inferred from theories devised to serve other purposes, as, for instance, in John Stuart Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*. Much, too, that one might regard as theory was elaborated only to meet the

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needs of particular occasions, or in response to particular challenges, such as the 1857 revolt or the Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883. And much remained always embedded in practice. Assumptions about gender, and even those concerning race, although centrally important to British conceptions of India's people, were rarely the subject of systematic inquiry.

As a result, much in this book involves an attempt to tease out larger implications from an array of decisions, policies, and activities on the part of the British in India. These range from the construction of administrative categories in the census to the layout of British Indian residential areas, from the strategies of archaeological preservation to the diagnoses of disease. In addition to the works of established political theorists – James Mill, Henry Maine, and J. F. Stephen, among others – the sources consulted include works of imaginative literature, among them the writings of Rudyard Kipling and Flora Annie Steel; the memoirs of Indian civil servants, like Alfred Lyall and W. W. Hunter, who reflect upon their careers in Indian service; and, of course, the important recent writings of the growing numbers of scholars of Indian history. I have endeavoured to give credit to these secondary works, ever more stimulating and suggestive, on the many occasions where they have helped shape my own thinking. In addition, I have consulted government records in the National Archives of India on some subjects, and for others I have drawn upon the research materials which I have collected during more than thirty years study of the Raj.

It is important to emphasize that this book does not attempt to examine the character of the Indian response to the ideologies imposed upon them by the British, nor does it make any claim to be a general history of India during the British era. Although I have attempted to make clear that much in the elaboration of these systems of knowledge was a collaborative enterprise, above all in the British reliance on Brahmin pandits for information about the nature of Indian society and religion, the British presented these ideologies as their own and for the most part used them to convince themselves of their right to govern India. The Indian response to, and, as the years went on, their interaction with, the various British descriptions of their land was complex and multi-faceted. It involved simultaneous processes of acceptance, accommodation, adaptation, and rejection. I have tried to hint at some of the ways Indians endeavoured to come to terms with the ideas that defined their status as colonial subjects, but this is a vast

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topic, currently an exciting area of new research, and one that would require a volume of its own. I have furthermore, so far as possible, avoided analysing or pronouncing general opinions upon the nature and overall development of India's social, cultural, or political institutions. This work seeks only to understand the ways in which the British endeavoured to create a system of knowledge, about India and themselves, which would sustain that 'strange anomaly', the British Indian Empire.

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