

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Ronald Inden: Orientalist Constructions of India I

Welcome back to the class. We had a very lengthy discussion about this book Orientalism written by Edward Said and I repeatedly emphasized its significance as a monumental work that redefined a host of disciplines, orientations towards history, knowledge production and studying other societies and so on. So, I do not want to recap the points that we discussed, and we also had a guest presentation by Mr. Navaneet who critically looked at, who kind of discussed with you some of the very important criticisms raised against Orientalism and the way in which, specific way in which Edward Said looked at this huge body of knowledge. So, we know that Edward Said's focus was how the Islamic world, or the Middle Eastern region was represented in the Orientalist discourse. So, that was his focal point and you must be remembering how he speaks about the necessity to delimit the kind of the material that he has at hand to provide a kind of precise analysis of this work.

So, the focus of Orientalism and Edward Said was how Muslim societies, Islam and Middle Eastern societies were represented in the Orientalist discourse and there is hardly any discussion about Indian society in Edward Said's writings. So, this class and the coming class as well, these two classes, we are going to look at a similar kind of argument that are raised by another very important scholar, Ronald Inden and his arguments or his work mostly specifically looks at how there has been an Orientalist construction about India. So, if Edward Said looked at the Middle Eastern and Islamic societies, Inden is looking at how India was framed, India was understood, India was described, how India was how knowledge about Indian society was produced in a very specific manner by the Oriental and colonialist discourses. So, we are not, he has a very important book titled The Imagining India and we are not going to discuss that book because it will be much lengthier and more difficult.

Rather, we are looking at another essay by Ronald Inden. Again, it is a very lengthy essay. It is titled The Orientalist Construction of India. So, this is the essay, Orientalist Construction of India published in 1986. It is around 65 pages.

It is a very lengthy sorry 47 pages. We are not going to discuss the complete essay. We

are discussing almost till the half of this essay because that is a place where he provides his larger arguments. And the second half of the essay is a more specific analysis about two very important constructs about India, that is Oriental Despotism and Asiatic mode of production, which we are not going to discuss because that will be kind of a digression into more specific discussions about these two themes, which were made very popular by scholars such as Weber and Marx and a host of others. So, I do not think that we need to go into that.

Rather, we will look into the kind of the larger arguments and those who are interested to understand how Inden analyzes these two categories Oriental Despotism and Asiatic mode of production. You are always welcome to read this latter part of this essay. So, this essay is published in *Modern Asian Studies*, a very prestigious journal of Cambridge University Press, published in 1986. And he titled it as *Orientalist Construction of India*. And that is an important essay.

And the arguments are more or less similar to that of Edward Said and he openly acknowledges his intellectual depth and to Said and similar kind of work. So, he starts this essay by a quote from Hegel in *Philosophy of History*. Let us leave it for now and then get into the argument. This essay is critical of Indology and related disciplines in the social sciences. Its aim is to establish a space for the production of new knowledge of South Asia.

The object of the critic is what I following others refer to over-indolence discourse and accounts of India that it produced. It has emerged out of the work I have been doing for the past decade on Hindu states and rituals in early medieval India. What I present here is to be seen as a proportional part of a larger study of Hinduism kingship which I hope to complete soon. And this is the work that he completes later with the title *Imagining India*. Although I write here from the standpoint of an Indologist, historian and anthropologist of India, the problem with which I deal here are not confined to those disciplines.

So, my concern in the deconstruction of this deconstruction that follows is not to compare the theories or explanations of these accounts with the facts of Indian history. On the contrary, I take the position that those facts themselves have been produced by an episteme, a way of knowing that implies a particular view of existence which I wish to criticize. And this is very, very similar to Edward Said's argument about Orientalism and it is very, very evident that Ronald Inden almost follows the footsteps of Edward Said and only a difference is that the focal points are different. So, Said also makes it very clear that his intention is not to, not to compare the Orientalist construction or the imaginations or the representations produced by these Occidental scholars and then compare it with the facts. Because that is not the way you are trying to understand the

kind of underlying consistencies, underlying assumptions, underlying you know ideas that give rise to a kind of a particular form of construction and representation about the Orientalist, Oriental societies.

So, here as well he says, he is not going to compare the theories or explanations of these accounts with the facts of Indian history. On the contrary, I take the position that those facts themselves have been produced by an episteme, a way of knowing that implies a particular view of existence which I wish to criticize. So, he even problematizes this idea that there are facts about Indian society as if these facts are unmediated, these facts exist in isolation, these facts have been existing as a kind of a neutral entity. So, he criticizes that, and he argues that even these facts themselves are a product of a particular episteme. And this episteme is, he defines it as a way of knowing that implies a particular view of existence.

So, Foucault talks about different epistemes, about the modern episteme that actually you know provides with a kind of particular understanding of that. So, almost every scholar who works at a particular time mostly work within a given episteme. It is very difficult to move beyond that. So, I assume that the true knowledge merely represents or mirrors a separate reality which the knower somehow transcends. So, what he wishes to criticize the episteme at issue presupposes a representational view of knowledge.

So, it assumes that a particular episteme assumes that the true knowledge merely represents or mirrors a separate reality with the knower somehow transcends. So, here again this is a problem, this is an issue that Edward Said kind of problematized. He argued that there is no objective reality. So, I hope you remember all those discussions. He very strongly argued that we have not invented a process or a method through which an, a scholar or a writer can remove himself/herself from his locations or his or her location and then look at these things as if they are completely unconnected with that.

That is impossible. But this particular episteme, it claims that the true knowledge merely represents or mirrors a separate reality which the knower somehow transcends. The knower or the writer or the scholar is able to transcend that particular boundaries and try to represent in a very innocent, neutral and authentic manner. Adherence to this position has allowed the scholars to claim that his and rarely her because the early scholars of Indian society or most of the ordinary scholars were mostly men. Knowledge is natural and objective and not a matter of political debate.

It has also operated to produce a hierarchical relationship between knower and known, privileging the knowledge of the scientist and other experts and leaders who make up the former while subjugating knowledge of the people who comprise the latter. Again, this is

something that we have discussed in the earlier classes as well. The kind of hierarchy that was created especially in the light of colonial engagement with the, with the third world or non-European societies. So, almost every scholar of that particular time including Hegel or even Marx or others would assume that the native people, they cannot really write a history about themselves, they cannot really contextualize their story in the larger story of humankind. So, the knowledge of the knower, the knowledge of the insider, the knowledge of the native was seen as inferior to that of a knowledge of the expert, the knowledge of the scholar who comes from the western societies.

So, that hierarchy is something very much ingrained in this larger argument of this particular episteme. My own position relies on a reading of the works of thinkers as diverse as R.G. Collingwood, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and indirectly, Jacques Derrida. It also benefited a great deal from the writings of Anthony Giddens.

So, he talks about that, but interestingly he does not acknowledge Edward Said here, but of course later he makes a mention about Edward Said. Two of the assumptions built into episteme of Indology are that the real world, whether that is material and determinate or ideal and ineffable, consist of essence and that the world is unitary. So, one of the most important point again, many times discussed by Edward Said is that this particular episteme of Indology or in general that of Orientalism, it consists, it is understanding that the real world, whether it is material or non-material, it consists of certain essence and that the world is unitary. There is only a singular understanding of the world. There is a kind of a particular essence that is prevalent in all societies, but the way in which this essence manifest itself are very different.

It holds that there exists a human nature, which itself consists of a unitary nature, unitary essence. So, it is this, the episteme of Indology very strongly believes that there is an essence of human nature, which itself consists of a unitary essence. So, there is a very defining, very concrete set of qualities, essence that defines what means to be human nature. It also suppose that at a lower level, each culture or civilization embodies a similarly unitary essence. Since the unitary essence of human nature is assumed to be the most fully realized in the West, a major difficulty, if not a fundamental one that has confronted the scholar of non-Western authors has been how to reconcile the essence of the other civilization with the Euro-American manifestation of the human nature's unitary essence, rational, scientific thought and the institutions of liberal capitalism and democracy.

So, this is a very interesting argument. That one of the very important theorizations of modern social theory or even political theory is the idea of a uni-linear evolutionary model, which we have, I think mentioned several times. So, a uni-linear evolutionary

model almost assumes or very vehemently argues that every society will have to follow a singular trajectory of evolution. And again, you know that the early period of sociology, early growth of sociology was heavily influenced by the theories of evolution from biology. So, most of the important founding fathers including Auguste Comte and Spencer and even Durkheim had, were very heavily influenced by the biological theories of evolution.

So, they also presented a story of social evolution, where societies move from simple undifferentiated entities into more complex differentiated societies, where division of labor is extreme as elaborated by Durkheim. So, here in this uni-linear evolutionary model, evolution takes place in a singular direction. So, every society is supposed to follow this uni-linear evolutionary model. And they all presumed that or all of them very strongly believed that the western societies of the 18th and 19th century, it represents the pinnacle, it represents the most epitome of this particular evolutionary trajectory. And all other societies are supposed to follow this and they will take maybe decades or even centuries to reach there.

But because the European societies have reached the heights of human evolution, they have reached the pinnacle, they represent the epitome of that, because they represent the kind of a rational, scientific thought and institutions of liberal capitalism and democracy. These 4 or 5 features were considered as the features of a highly, of the most developed people. So, if that is the case, the challenge was, how do these people make sense of the people who are lagging behind, people who are left behind, people in Africa, people in Asia, people in the Middle East, people in so many other places, in Latin America, where they do not really represent the features of these qualities, rational, scientific, or places where they do not have a capitalism, they do not have democracy. So, how do you reconcile them? Because the fundamental assumption that they also share a common essence with you, but it is not manifest, it is not seen anywhere. Indological discourse, I argue, holds or simply assumes that the essence of Indian civilization is just the opposite of the West's.

It is the irrational, but rationalizable institution of caste and the Indological religion that accompanies Hinduism. Human agency in India is displaced by Indological discourse not onto a reified state or market, but into substantialized caste. This has entailed several consequences for the Indological construction of India. So, Inden argues that one of the fundamental assumptions of Indological discourse about India was that the essence of Indian civilization is ensconced in this idea of an institution of caste and the Indological religion that accompanies Hinduism. So, caste system and Hinduism were seen by the Orientalist as the institutions that represent the essence of Indian society.

Human agency in India is displaced by Indological discourse not onto the reified state or market, but into a substantialized caste. So, human agency, according to this discourse, in India will not, is not representing itself or it is not manifesting itself in the form of a state or market as in the case of developed societies, but in the form of a substantialized form of caste. Because there are quite a lot of arguments that kind of look at caste as a very, very, very unique feature of South Asian society, of Indian society, something that really defines the very nature of Indian society. It has entailed several consequences for the Indological construction of India. It has wholesale dismissal of Indian political institutions, especially kinship.

And this is another very, very old but fundamental debates, because the over emphasize that has been given to the questions of ritual aspects, the question of religion, the question of culture in the Orientalist and the subsequent sociological and anthropological studies of Indian society has rendered more important or powerful institutions like kingship or political institutions kind of giving, getting less attention. And to give this concept of India credibility, the depiction of Indian thought as inherently symbolic and mythical, rather than rational and logical has been required. So, they represent India society, Indian thought has more to do with the kind of a symbolic and mythical character rather than the logical and other one. Finally, it has been necessary for the Brahminism or Hinduism, the religion considered to be the justification of caste to be characterized as essentially idealistic, that is apolitical. And we will maybe in the future discuss about how Hinduism was characterized by scholars like say Marx and even Weber.

Weber had done a systematic study about Hinduism, in which he presents Hinduism as mostly preoccupied with the questions of other worldly affairs, not with the kind of this worldly affairs, very, very interesting characterization but very problematic. Caste conceived in this way, as India's essential institution has been both the cause and effects of India's low level of political and economic development and of its repeated failure to prevent the conquest by outsiders. So, these are all kind of a particular kind of constructs that why India had a much lower level of political and economic development, completely negating the fact that at the time of British colonialism, India was one of the most prosperous, India was one of the most wealthy nations in the whole world. India had a highly developed production system, agriculture system in almost every fields of human endeavors, India really, India in the sense the kind of a larger geographical region really was on the top. So, but that was kind of systematically neglected.

Given this, it was only natural for European scholars, traders, and administrators to appropriate the power of Indian, not only the masses but also elite to act for themselves. So, this particular depiction, Inden says that it helps the Britishers, the Orientalists in general and Britishers in particular to claim that these people cannot represent

themselves, rather we need to represent them. The fixation of caste as the essence of India has had still another effect. It has committed Indology, a largely descended from the British Empiricism and utilitarianism into a curious and contradictory mixture of Societalism in which Indian actions are attributed to social groups, caste, village, linguistic region, religion and joint family because there are no individuals in India and individualism in which Indians act are attributed to bad motives. And this is another very, very important narrative about Indian society and this you will find in the coming classes when you talk about, for example, a very important scholar like Louis Dumont.

Dumont also echoes this particular argument very, very, very strongly that in India you will not find individuals, not in the exact sense, but you will not find any individualism. Individuals are always already a part of a larger collective and they act only as per the dictates of the collective and these collectives are joint family, religion, linguistic region, village and caste. Whereas the West is the land of individuals, all these ascribed identities, all these larger societal markers or social markers are less significant in this Western and in the European societies. Whereas in India, these social categories are the most defining and the individuals are almost unheard or silent in this larger argument. Now, this section the Oriens, he is talking about how there are, have been constructs about different kinds of Oriens, the Near East and the Far East, or in how there are different ways in which these areas were depicted in the orientalist discourse.

So, there is no singular idea, there is no, there have been multiple ideas about how to characterize the Middle Eastern region, how the South Asian region, how the say East Asian region, places including China, Japan, how to represent that. So, that is what he is discussing in this particular section. Europeans and North Americans have produced many overlapping images of the Orient or the East as other. Terms like Orient and the East are used very loosely nowadays and, in the past, to refer to Asia, but there is only one use to which these terms are put. The first of these terms, but not the second is also employed at present to distinguish communist world also known as the second world from the free world.

You know the argument, the larger argument about these whole communist countries were seen as the second world where the capitalist countries were seen as the first world. So, it is a description about that. Although the expression of the Orient was used to refer rather vaguely to Asia as a whole, it was used to paint two rather different pictures. One picture of the Orient, the older of the two crudely but sharply distinguished a Christian Europe from the Islamic Asia, where the Europeans used the term Orient primarily to designate the people and the land dominated by Ottoman Turk. So, this was one of the earliest ways in which this Orient and Occident was used to distinguish between the Christian Europe and the Muslim dominated Asia and the Turkey occupying the kind of a

middle region.

The Orient embraces not only the lands of Antolia, Asia Minor, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula in Asia, but also Egypt and Africa. Parts of Christian Europe, Albania, Bulgaria and Greece itself, the fons et Origo of European civilization were also included within the Orient. The other part of Asia, particularly Safavid, Persia and Mughal India could be seen as a vague extension of this conception so far as they were constituted as Islamic polities, even though they lay outside the Ottoman sphere of influence. So, that was one kind of particular kind of construction. As the Western Europe came more and more dominant, to dominate India, Asia and to know more and more about it, another picture of the Orient emerged.

It was, it saw the Semitic Near East and the Aryan Persian as sharing a fundamentally monotheistic and individualistic culture, values with Christian Europe and America and contrasted this world with a more distant East that is comprising of India and China, along with Japan and Central and Southeast Asia. It is this Orient, the Asia of the East as reproduced by the sociologist Max Weber in the Religions of India or the mythologist Joseph Campbell in the volumes of the Mask of Gold entitled Oriental Mythology. So, this is another yet another you know, distinction of the Near East and the Far East. The Near East comprising of the people in the Semitic Near East and the Asian Persia, whereas the other, those who belong to India and China and Japan were seen as the other section. This further Asia or the Orient has come to be known as the Far East.

The Asia that is seen by Europeans and Americans has dominated by China. Although India is integral to this concept of the Orient, she is only ambiguously included in the more restrictive idea of the Far East. India, so you read that, that is a kind of a discussion about how it was depicted. Now, the term Orientalism generally replaced nowadays by the expression Asian studies has been used to designate these discursive practices in its widest sense. So, what are these discursive practices? Europeans have constructed these varied images of Asia out of many materials.

They have not only used media such as the literary text and the painted canvas to fashion their construct. They have by their gaining control of knowledge of the East also used the very people and institutions of Asia itself to remake the civilizations that continent. The construct which I take up here are the pictures of those fashion in the medium of academic discourse. There is of course no discipline that takes as its object the study of whole of Asia. The discipline which constitute the core of Oriental discourse are the various branches of philology and textual study, often called as language and area studies since the Second World War known by various names such as Sinology, Indology, Arabic or Islamic studies.

So, talking about the later development of area studies, sorry Asian studies and mostly revolving around the study of different languages. The other cluster of disciplines consists of the study of the classical Chinese and Sanskrit, India's classical language along with the other regional languages of the subcontinent. It is unified only very loosely by the religion of Buddhism. So, this how it has been traditionally evolved kind of argument. Each of these linguistic disciplines and its area or areas is also connected through these and other organizations with the disciplines in the social sciences with anthropology, history, sociology, political science, economics and psychology.

Despite the seeming diversity, however, it is possible to speak of a distinctively Oriental discourse and to single out them from among other overlapping discourse. First, it is about the civilized rather than about the primitive. This is a very, very important point. This whole Oriental discourse about India is not something comparable with the Oriental discourse about a place like say Africa or a place like say Latin America or many other places which are seen as highly primitive uncivilized. Because here they are talking about, they are dealing with a civilization that has thousands of years of age and they are talking about a civilization that has produced huge amount of classical works, highly developed art forms, highly developed architecture, highly developed knowledge systems.

So, they were not talking about a primitive other, but it is about a civilized other. Other distinguishes it from the anthropology which distinctly concerns itself with the latter rather than the former. And as we discussed earlier anthropology usually concerned itself with the primitive other. Second, it speaks of Asian other in a way that contrasts sharply with the way in which it speaks of itself. Third, it continuously distinguishes the part of Asia by reference to the same differentiating features.

So, even though it talks about, it deals with a civilized India, the way in which it presents is, the way in which it depicts this Oriental, this Asian society is almost very similar. It continuously distinguishes this part of Asia by reference to the same distinguishing features. And here he brings in Hegel and to talk about how Hegel really represents a very, very important tendency or Hegelian depiction of Indian society as a sort of civilization which has not reached the essence of human society kind of reflects into this. So, we will continue with these coming discussions on Oriental discourse in the coming class. Thank you.