

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

Welcome back to the class. We are discussing Roland Inden's essay Orientalist's discourse, orientalist's construction of India. And in the previous class, we had, we were discussing the introductory part of this essay, where he talks about different interpretations about orient. And in this essay, which I wish to conclude with this class, he is talking about the orientalist's discourse. He talks, he identifies multiple interpretative, descriptive and hegemonic accounts. So, we will have a very quick look at these major arguments.

So, he, the discourse of the orientalists, we have recently been told presents itself as a form of knowledge that is both different from and superior to the knowledge the Orientals have for themselves. This is something that we discussed how the Orientalist present themselves as having superior knowledge to that of the people who, whom they study. Backed by government funds disseminated by universities supported by the ACLS and SSRC, endowed by the Ford Foundation and given more than equal time by the New York Review of Books, the knowledge of the Orientalist, known today as the Area Studies Specialist appears as a rational, logical, scientific, realist and objective. And this is a familiar argument.

The knowledge of the Orientals by contrast, often seen irrational, we know that we have discussed that. Now, it authorizes the Area Studies Specialist and his colleagues in government and business aids to advise, develop and modernize arms and stabilize the countries in the so called third world. In many respects, the intellectual activities of the Orientals have even produced India, the very Orient which it constructed in its discourse. So, I doubt very much, for example, if Gandhi's concept of non-violence would have played the central part it did in Indian nationalism, had it not been singled out long ago as a defining trait of the Hindu character. So, he is talking about how a host of political institutions, financial institutions and state missionary was involved in on the whole colonial enterprise for creating specific kind of knowledge about India.

And this is a very, very important theme, which will come again in our future discussion. In the coming classes, when you talk about the emergence and subsequent development

of sociology in India, the colonial influence will be one of the central themes. So, a genuine critic of Orientalism does not resolve around the question of prejudice or bias, or the likes or dislikes of the people and cultures of Asia, or lack of either objectivity or empathy. Emotions, attitudes and values are, to be sure, an important part of Orientalist discourse, but they are not co-terminus with the structures of ideas that constitute Orientalism, or with the relationship of dominance embedded in that structure. So, he is talking, he is arguing that beyond the individual prejudices likes or dislikes, there is a very important structure of ideas, very, very important structure of ideas that almost had a kind of a hegemonic influence on the people who studied.

He talks about a series of philosophers, James Mill and L. Basham, who had very, very, a kind of typical kind of understanding about Indian society, but many times they were contradictory. So, for example, James Mill talks about, he depicts Indian people as very, of very peculiar character. For example, he says, this religion Hinduism has produced a practice which has strongly engaged the curiosity of Europeans, a superstitious care for the life of the inferior animals. A Hindu lives in a perpetual terror of killing even an insect, and hardly any crime can equal that of being unintentionally the cause of death of any animal or more sacred, of the more sacred species.

So, these are the kind of, the way in which Hindu religion or Indian people were made as a kind of a caricature by some of the very important influential people like James Mill. So, if the curious non-violence of the Hindus were accompanied by divisiveness, it also entailed outright cowardice. So, he also talks about how cowards Indian people are, and how they are unlike the European counterparts who were kind of bold enough or adventurous enough to venture out to the unknown world. And so, this kind of stereotypical impressions of India, stereotypical representations of India has been very, very prevalent. These mental habits of Hindus are in turn implicated in India's inherent political incapacity.

There are long discussions about how India has been or India had been perpetually invaded by others where Indians have not invaded any other country, very, very problematic statement. So, as of, of all the results of civilization that are forming a combination of different states and directed their power to one common object seems to be one of the least consistent with the mental habits and attainment of the Hindu. So, Mill talks about as if all the Hindus have a singular kind of a mental habit, a very unsubstantiated kind of an argument. But, Inden says that it was very, very powerful argument. So, such in brief is the bold message of Edward Said Orientalism.

As we know from the discussion that Inden is using exactly the similar kind of framework to make sense of Indian society. With the difference that I have made India

rather than the Middle East, the primary referent in my summary of the portrayal, to a large extent I agree with Said's critic and to perhaps do many other scholars of Asia. My intention here is not to interpret Said's book, to defend it against his detractors or attack him. What he does is to look at how there has been a similar construction of Indian society and he uses Indological study as an example of Orientalist construction of India. So, then let us look at his core arguments.

He talks about three different types of accounts, descriptive, commentative and hegemonic account and briefly looking after that we will wind up the session. So, fundamental to this form of Indological discourse is the distinction between what I shall refer to as the descriptive or and commentative text. The descriptive aspect of an Indological account is that which presents the thoughts and acts of Indians to the readers. So, a huge amount of work made by the English scholars, or the Oriental scholars fall under this category that they are simply, you know, presents the thoughts and acts of Indians to the reader. They just describe, they just explain as somebody seen as an, as an, as an, you know, objective observer.

The commentative aspect of an account is its frame of an isolable in distinction, in distinct passages. It represents, it represents those same thoughts and actions by characterizing them by indicating their general nature of essence. So, the next one, if it is the descriptive, descriptive accounts are of one character that it just presents you with the kind of description, the commentative accounts, the commentative accounts go a step further and it actually, it presents a kind of a particular framework, a framework through which the scholar will enable you to understand this particular reality. So, this is how this particular word is important, the way you frame certain things, the way you frame your data, the way you present your, the kind of an observable thing in a more intelligible framework. So, that is where the author comes here with his insight about the nature of people and then helps the reader to make sense of what he or she is observing or reading.

So, this commentative account is something very important where the ideas and prejudices of the Western scholar comes into picture. The commentative aspect of an account is its frame of an isolable in distinct passages. It represents those same thoughts and actions by characterizing them by indicating their general nature of essence. So, here they revolve around the idea of essence. It actually characterizes them, they interpret these observable facts for the reader and then helps the reader to understand it in a particular character.

Now, it is my contention that the Indological text or its affiliates in the social sciences places its strange and seemingly inexplicable descriptive content in surrounding comments that have the effect of representing it as a distorted portion portrayal of reality.

This is his major argument that in the while depicting in the society, the Western commentators present the Indian society as a distorted portrayal of reality. And he uses Freud to a large extent in the subsequent sections which we are not going to kind of discuss in detail. That is, it functions to depict the thoughts and institutions of Indian as distortions of normal and natural, that is Western thoughts and institutions. So, Indians understand reality, but this understanding is a distortion of the reality and reality can be only singular and the singular realities understood and then internalized by only one section of people, that is the Westerners.

It represents them as the manifestations of an alien mentality. So, the Indians representing a kind of an alien mentality, very contradictory to that of the West because they are kind of an unmodeled other. But since all human beings have a kind of a unitary essence, this will take lot more time for them to change and revolve and resolve and then attain the features of what the true Europe actually represents. So, there are illustrations by talking about Louis, Bruno, and others. So, go through that, how something is simply describes certain things and then how some of them kind of, it shifts back to commentative account.

So, one particular paragraph simply explains certain things, other paragraph helps the reader to understand this explained paragraph in a particular frame and in this framing is that where the scholar comes alive. So, what does the Indological text accomplish with this double presentation of the Vedic religion? This is the, the, Renou talks about the Vedic religion. It transforms the thoughts and the actions of the ancient Indians into a distortion of reality. So, that is the argument that we came across. Renou know, however, does not do so.

He, like many Indologists, holds certain presuppositions about the relationship of knowledge to the reality that precludes this. It is worth saying immediately that these presuppositions have all been attacked in the philosophy of science. He assumes that there is a single determinate external reality out there, which human knowledge merely copies, represents, or mirrors. Western science claiming to be empiricist or rationalist in its epistemology and realist in its ontology has privileged access to that reality. So, this is a, is a very important philosophical discussion about a heavily Eurocentric understanding about reality.

Reality as singular and reality as, you know, as approachable through empirical methods and empirical methods as being the most authentic way of accessing this particular reality and a kind of a complete faith on our senses, complete faith on a unitary understanding of reality, you know, the development of positivism and other scientific kind of argument as the most legitimate way of understanding things. So, this really

represents the crux of a Eurocentric understanding of philosophy of knowledge, which has been criticized, of course, later by quite a lot of other scholars. Then he invokes Freudian, he invokes Freud, basically, to explain that I am not going into the discussion, it might be slightly difficult. We will have to discuss Freud in detail and then that might take a lot more time.

So, I am not doing that. He talks about the, say, condensation and displacement and secondary revision by using, these are all Freudian tools that Freud used for his dream interpretation and Ronald Inden is invoking these terms, basically, to analyze that. It is a particular kind of theorization, which I am skipping here. Let me now turn to our Indological example. The Indian classification of rituals as Renou constructs is not a scientific, rational one. The products of mind that leaps between extreme of an occult mysticism and a finicky scholasticism, it is characterized by both of the forms of distortions described by Freud.

All these rites are but variations, one recalls of a single archetype. The elements of one type of rite appears again and again in other types. The classification scheme is, in other words, over determined, uneconomical and incoherent in its organization. So, talking about how Freudian analysis is helpful in making sense of how the Western scholars made sense of Indian religion, Indian society, especially that of Hindu religion. Now, the second kind of accounts, the first we talked about descriptive and commentative account.

Second type of accounts that Inden talks about is explanatory and interpretative accounts. Freud also distinguishes that third type of distortions which he labeled secondary revision, operating after the condensation and displacement have done their work. This process also known as secondary elaboration provides the confused dream text with an orderly facade. Many Indological texts do not go beyond the commentative. Many others, however, go on to include explanations or interpretations which closely resembles Freud's secondary revisions, just as passages of comments frame those descriptions in an Indological account.

So, those of secondary revision frame in turn the commentative aspects of these texts, in turn the secondary revisions frame in turn the commentative aspects of these texts. So, he is talking about how the, quite a lot of oriental scholars also indulge in a kind of a providing an explanatory or interpretative account of the behavior of the oriental people. So, it is not only kind of describing or helping to frame it, but also, they take upon themselves the responsibility to provide explanations. Because these people, they cannot engage in this kind of a sophisticated explanation and that burden also is falling on these particular Western scholars. Secondary revision is an account of South Asia goes just the other way.

It makes the strange and incoherent seem rational and normal. It is however not attributed to the Indian mind. The Indologist himself takes a credit of providing this orderly facade for Indian practice. So, this is exactly what we were talking about that there is a very complicated complex reality in India, and it is only possible for the Western scholars to make sense of it. Only Western scholars possess the faculties to make sense of that.

The ordinary, the native population, the people who indulge in this kind of a cultural activities are unable to understand or explain it rather it has to be done or this whole burden falls on the shoulders of this expert scholar. Here the scientific theorist, the scientific theorist, the physical anthropologist, the racial historian, historical materialist, comparative mythologist, social psychologist, historian of religion, structural functionalist anthropologist, Parsonian socialist or developmental economist truly come into his own. So, these are the frameworks used by the scholars supposedly claiming this kind of a specialized field to come into the picture and then do the kind of an explanation for the rest of the society. Nearly all these secondary revisions tend to be monistic and to concentrate on one sort of course of factor to the exclusion of others, which is to say that they are also almost invariably reductionist. These explanatory texts which presupposes the existence of a single fixed external reality analogize a society, nation or a civilization to our own organism and sees particular configuration of a thought and institution as the outgrowth of adaptations to a given environment or as the development or unfolding of an essence consisting of fixed defining attributes.

So, this again something that we discussed how this early preoccupation with development of organisms and development of living organisms influenced these people. Before turning into the topic of hegemonic account in Indological discourse, let me summarize what I have said about the work that discourse. The result of the discursive work within Indology and affiliated human sciences is first to present the reader in a descriptive passage with some facts on the other. So, it has multiple levels of explanation, the most basic and fundamental first level is to present certain facts about the other. And as you know these facts he puts it in inverted comma because these facts themselves are a construct.

These facts themselves as a product of a particular way of looking and constructing them. The accounts then or concurrently represents the other in a commutative term as radically different from the self. So, first they put certain kind of facts and present these facts in such a way that appears as completely different and many times even opposite to that of the self. So, it will be presented as something completely irrational, unscientific, religious, orthodox, filled with blind beliefs, speaking in the language of collectivity not

that of the individual. So, all these depictions are in stark contrast with the way in which self is created.

So, we discussed this point earlier. The self that is a western self is seen as rational, it is seen as logical, it is seen as scientific, it is seen as gone beyond superstitions, it is seen as modern, it is seen as industrial, it is seen as individualistic, it is seen as speaking the language of capitalism and democracy whereas the other is talking in completely different opposite voices. It is a gross distortion of self or the opposite of self, but it is itself disturbing. But this is itself disturbing given the premise in orientalist and social scientific discourse of any unity of human nature, one that is exemplified or realized in Euro-American man. But these threatening differences are not allowed to remain. The Indological text also goes on to provide or evoke an explanation for these differences.

So, these stark oppositions are not left there, they are then the scholars come again and then they provide kind of an explanation for the differences. These explanations or interpretations are almost always naturalistic. That is, they lie beyond, behind or outside the consciousness and activity of the others involved. So, they do not really reduce it to the consciousness and activity of the others involved. It is necessary for the other to be the way he, she is because of the environment, its racial composition, its inferior place of the evolutionary scale.

This is again something very important as we know. This was the time when the kind of a scientific racism was at its peak. It was almost considered as commonsensical that there are human species, modern human beings are made of very separate distinct races on the basis of people's features. And not only that they were separate and distinct races, they were also kept in a kind of hierarchical manner with the Caucasoid European race at the top and the Negritos at the bottom. So, once the reader comes to know the natural reason for the others' otherness, the threat of it is naturalized.

The explanation is this, one which restores the unity of mankind with western man as its perfect embodiment. As we mentioned that these people, these orientalist people, they are, these oriental people, they are behaving in very different way, they have very different culture. But it is not because of their consciousness, but it is because of their, say, their different pace in the evolution because of the natural reasons, because of a host of other naturalistic reasons, because of its environment, its racial composition, its inferior place in the evolutionary scales. So, though they share the kind of similar character, they appear very differently, though there is a common singular essence combining the European and the rest, these people are very different, these people are almost seen as the other of the self because of these reasons. It does this by hierarchizing the others of the world by placing them in a spatial, biological or temporal scale of forms,

one which always culminates in the homo-euro-Americanness.

So, homo-euro-americanus is seen as the, as the epitome of human evolution. And the final one, he is talking about the hegemonic account, how certain texts assume the kind of a hegemonic account and hegemony again, as you know, is a term popularized by Gramsci, Antonio Gramsci, talking about how the power relations exist not only in the realm of the political field, but also in the realm of the civil society field, through knowledge and other kind of seemingly innocent institutions and how this hegemonic power has a kind of an absolute control, more or less absolute control over the population and how power kind of works in a very indirect manner. So, he, Sir William Jones is usually the man who is credited with first suggesting the Persian and European languages were related to one another and not descended from Hebrew. He was also the personnel largely responsible for formulating in 1784, the first Indological institution, the Asiatic Society of Bengal. If one person can be named as the founder of Indology, it is certainly he, William Jones.

Because he advocated the importance of studying Eastern languages and texts in India, he and some of his colleagues were dubbed Orientalists. They were opposed by certain utilitarians who came to be known as Anglicists because they argued that the Western knowledge in English would displace the Eastern. The most notable of these opponents was James Mill, whose history of India was in large part written as a refutation of some Jones ideas. The victory which Mill and his colleagues gained over the orientalist in shaping the politics of the East India Company had the effect of securing dominance of the utilitarian or positivist view, both in government practice and in the fledgling discipline of Indology. So, he is talking about how James Mill and his work, *The History of India*, assumed a kind of an overarching, overarching importance in the larger scale of things and how they systematically you know, countered many of the arguments of William Jones and others who had a more positive approach about Indian society.

Every discipline has within its particular historical formulation, text or accounts which can be dubbed hegemonic. The idea of a text as hegemonic that I use here is taken from the large part from Gramsci, particularly in the sense that such a text is not concerned with narrow and internalist issue of the discipline itself, but with the broader questions of India's place in the world and history. Issues in which these outside of the discipline, the active subjects of the world, business and government leaders and the more passive subjects of the world's history, the populace at large are interested. It is furthermore an account that is seen during the period of its predominance to exercise leadership in a field actively and positively and not one that is merely imposed on it.

A hegemonic text is also totalizing. It provides an account of every aspects of Indian life.

So, he talks about how some works like James Mills, History of India appears and presents itself as a hegemonic account, as having a kind of huge totalizing influence on everything. So, here he takes this example of James Mills work, this history, History of India. Throughout the 19th century, Mills history remained the hegemonic text of Indian history. Later Indologists have either wittingly or un-wittingly reiterated his construct of India or they have directly or indirectly written their accounts as a response to that.

So, whether you agree with it or you disagree with it that this book always remained in the limelight. So, it is all the elaboration of that particular thing which again I am not going into. The question I would pose, even at this juncture is, whose thought is it that is dreamlike in this commentative and explanatory text? The Indians to whom it is attributed or the Indologists themselves. It could be well be that careful, empirical study of Indian texts and practices has indeed disclosed to us a culture whose bearers are lost in an irrational dream state. And here he is talking about these people as the orientalist scholars.

So, Inden argues that these are the scholars who were lost in their dream state. It is a difficult proposition to defend however, because Europeans took dreaming irrationality as a distinctive trait of Indian thought before the field of Indological research was even established. So, read that section. Again, he is invoking Freud and talking about Freudian connection with use of Freudian theories in using Indology. The major reason for using Freud theory of dream interpretation here is that the theory makes quite explicit the discursive principles that have for the most part remained implicit in the discipline of Indology.

What makes this possible is the fact that both shares the same presuppositions about the relationship of knowledge to the reality. So, he is explaining, he is justifying why he invoked Freud to use of that. For both the analysts and the philologists, however, the knowledge of those whom they studied were what Foucault referred to as a subjugated knowledge. This comprise according to him, a whole set of knowledge that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated. Naive knowledge is located low down on the hierarchy beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.

So, Foucault talks about how different kinds of knowledge are presented in a hierarchical manner and then subjugated knowledge are seen as the knowledge systems that are kind of incapable of or have not kind of reached up to the level of cognition or scientificity. So, he talks about how Freud privileged the Western scientific rationality in the form of a psychoanalysis. In much the same way, the Indologist, Renou, privileged his variance of his rationality, philology. The knowing subject, the analyst of Sanskritist is rational. The person who are the subjects of inquiry are in relation to him irrational.

So, the person who studies this whole body of work is seen as rational, whereas the people who created that is seen as irrational. The knowledge of the latter are distorted representations of their own reality. They are knowledge, they are knowledges that must be subjugated. They are knowledges that must be introduced, annotated, catalogued, broken up and analyzed in database, apportioned out of monographs, reports, gazettes, anthologies, readers and courses syllabi. I shall return to this question of the dualism of knower and knowledge in the conclusion.

Let me now overturn to a brief examination of the construction of India that appears in the hegemonic text of Indological discourse. So, from here onwards, he goes on to explain the kind of a, these two terms, this oriental despotism, which are an Asiatic mode of production. Asiatic mode of production is heavily popularized by Karl Marx to describe a kind of particular, a very peculiar mode of production as he argued that existed in Asia, which according to him was qualitatively very different from that of the European society, which had different kinds of mode of production. And oriental despotism is also about the political arrangement, the questions of governance and the political institutions in India, which again was seeing as something so characteristic to Indian society. We are not going into the details because they will take up a entirely different kind of questions and other things.

So, I hope this essay, though we did not complete the full essay, would give you some idea about how Ronald, Roland Inden provides a kind of a similar critic to that of Edward Said. This work and his imagining India is a very important contribution in that sense, where he talks about how the orientalist's construction of India had the kind of a similar set of prejudices, ideas and it produce a kind of particular discourse about Indian society, about Hinduism, about caste system and they created a kind of a particular reality about India and how that itself is a kind of a reflection of their deep seated anxieties and other things about themselves. So, that is what the Inden is talking about. So, let us conclude this class here and see you in the next class. Thank you.