

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**  
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**Lecture-05**

Orientalism and the Politics of Knowledge Production I

Welcome back to the class. As you know in the previous few sessions, we spent a lot of time trying to provide a very broad overview for these disciplines, sociology and anthropology. We had a brief discussion about its theoretical orientations and specifically in the last class we looked at the very close, intricate connection between the history of anthropology and colonialism. So, we saw that anthropology as a discipline has been heavily influenced by the enterprise of colonialism and the very history as well as trajectory of anthropology really stands testimony to the fact that knowledge production is heavily influenced by the kind of current, the larger political and social and economic context. So especially study of human societies, study of others, study of other culture, all these things are heavily influenced by the kind of geopolitical concerns and the power structures of any given time. So before moving ahead with the study of Indian society, how Indian society was studied, I believe it is important that we discuss a very important intervention or a very important theoretical intervention by one of the most important philosophers who intervened in this area of study by name Edward Said and we are going to spend some time to look at his monumental work titled Orientalism in great detail.

And the reason why I am looking into or spending maybe 3 or 4 hours trying to understand Orientalism is because of its very central position or its very important position of this particular book and Edward Said as a scholar who provided a completely entirely different kind of orientation about this knowledge production about human societies. So we will spend this maybe 3 or 4 sessions trying to understand this author and this particular book basically because this will provide as a kind of larger background in order to understand how Indian society was studied by different scholars and from different theoretical orientations and as students of sociology who tries to understand how a colonial society like India or a postcolonial society like India was studied by different disciplines especially like sociology and anthropology, the paramount importance of this particular book can never be kind of neglected. So even if it is a slight detour from the kind of analysis that we are supposed to do which is supposed to focus on Indian society, I think it would be worthwhile to spend some time trying to understand why this book is considered to be important and what are the

important arguments of this particular book because the argument that Edward Said puts forward or the implications of this work has been so far reaching and even now it considers to be a very very important book and as we go ahead you will realize why the arguments that are made by Edward Said are so powerful, they became so influential and even now they continue to be relevant in the study of colonial and postcolonial societies. So, Orientalism and the Politics of Knowledge Production.

So this class, these lectures, these three or four sessions as well as a couple of or two more lectures when we discuss another scholar by name Ronald Inden, we are trying to understand how knowledge production about societies have been very closely connected with the kind of a power relation. So that is why I have given this title Orientalism and the Politics of Knowledge Production. Now Edward Said and his book Orientalism, born in Palestine in 1935, Edward Said grew up in Cairo for some time before moving into, moving to the US. So, he has a mixed parentage and he grew up in Egypt and then later he went to the US and then got his education then and he became a professor of literature at Columbia University where he continued for a long time even till his death. And he was very active, he had a very active public and political life.

He was an independent member of Palestinian National Council and argued for the rights of Palestinians throughout his life. So, one of the very important dimensions of Edward Said is that he was a scholar of the first order but along with that he was also very active political being. He was very active, he was very active in political struggles, especially he took very strong positions vis-a-vis the Palestine-Israel conflict. He was a member of the Palestinian National Council and he very actively, very vociferously argued for the rights of Palestinians for their land. And he participated in their agitations and there is a very controversial picture of Edward Said pelting stones at the Israeli soldiers in Gaza.

And that picture became very controversial because it created quite a lot of outrage and though Said tried to clarify that it was only a kind of symbolic act and nobody indeed was injured in this stone pelting, he had to face quite a lot of flak and criticism for the kind of an activism that he displayed through his action. And he was an independent member of the Palestinian National Council and argued for the rights of Palestinians throughout his life. Now, why is this book so important? As I mentioned, this is widely seen as occupying a very, very important central position, almost kind of considered as a canon in the post-colonial studies. So, published in 1978, this has been, it has been influential in about half a dozen established disciplines, especially literary studies, English, comparative literature, history, anthropology, sociology, area studies, mainly Middle Eastern studies and comparative religions. So, you can look into the breadth of the scholarship that this particular book produces.

And usually, you have a book or a scholar who specializes in a particular area and that particular work will have implications in that given area or in that given specialized subfield. But here, it is a book, he is a, as we mentioned, he is a professor of literature and this work has very specific implications in at least some six very important, very broad domains including literary studies, English and comparative literature, history, anthropology, sociology, area studies and comparative religion. So, that is a kind of a breadth of his scholarship, that is a breadth of the arguments contained in this particular book. So, any scholar who looks at the way in which Eastern societies are depicted and studied and presented in through historical or anthropological or sociological or fictional initiatives cannot really neglect the monumental contribution made by Edward Said. So, whether you agree with him or not, that is a different part, different question.

There have been quite a lot of criticisms raised against Edward Said that we will discuss later. But the kind of arguments that he made forward, the extremely scholarly way in which he put forward, he demonstrated the arguments and the implications of his findings and his arguments have been far reaching. And that is why he made a very important imprint on all these disciplines, something which is very unusual for any scholar. In it, in *Orientalism*, Edward Said examined western scholarship of the Orient, specifically of the Arab Islamic world, though he was an Arab Christian and argued that early scholarship by the westerners in that region was biased and projected as a false and stereotype to vision of otherness on the Islamic world that facilitated and supported western colonial policy. So, this is what is the argument of that book in a nutshell.

So, Said examines the western scholarship of the Orient. So again, that is a huge body of knowledge spanning into several centuries, the kind of knowledge, knowledge from across the disciplines from historical to philological to archaeological to sociological, anthropological. So, the whole body of knowledge that is produced about the Orient, about the eastern people and he specifically focuses on the Arab, the present day Middle Eastern world and through the lens of by the westerners and then argued that the early scholarship by the westerners in that region was biased and projected a false and stereotyped vision of otherness on the Islamic world that facilitated and supported western colonial policy. So basically, he argues that even while the westerners presented this knowledge about the east as objective and neutral and scientifically validated behind all these claims, beneath all these claims and validations, what lie beneath is a kind of very strong stereotypical impressions about another and this other is the Orient, it is a Muslim, it is a traditional person in comparison with the values that you attach to the Occidental people or the west. Though there were other scholarly works that critically examined the western depiction of eastern societies, Said offered one of the most sophisticated, theoretically nuanced and scholarly rigorous critic of this and as we

mentioned earlier that Said was not the first one to find fault with or to take issues with the way in which the eastern world has been depicted by the western scholars.

There have been previous attempts in doing that but the kind of breadth that Edward Said offers, the kind of depth that Edward Said offered, the kind of theoretically rigorous analysis that he provided, the kind of nuances that he provided and the persuasive force with which he was able to convince a large section of readers was something unprecedented. Said offered one of the most sophisticated, theoretically nuanced and scholarly rigorous critic of this. He invoked Foucault and Gramsci to demonstrate that this knowledge production was a discourse produced through specific interrelations between power and knowledge. And this is a very, very central concern or central argument of this book. He invokes two of the very important and influential philosophers and political thinkers or political intellectuals of his time, Foucault and Gramsci.

And again, we need to keep in mind that the writings of Foucault and Gramsci was becoming popular during the time when Said was studying this particular book. So, in that sense, these Foucauldian ideas about power and knowledge and Gramsci's ideas about hegemony, they really helped Said to understand or theoretically understand the kind of materials that we were trying to, he was grappling with. So, in that sense, he owes a lot to these two scholars for the kind of very insightful contributions that they made in terms of making sense of the materials that Edward Said was trying to understand. And we will see that in detail how he invokes Foucault and how he invokes Gramsci because these two very prominent figures play a very central role in Saidean argument about Orientalism. So, it is all about how knowledge production, for example, he invokes Foucault to talk about how this knowledge production was a discourse, how it was a discourse, how it was a product of a particular time, how various actors involved in, were involved in producing a kind of a particular set of propositions and produced through specific in relation between power and knowledge.

So, again those who are familiar with Foucault and Gramsci, they provide very, very nuanced understanding, a much more sophisticated understanding of power in comparison with kind of a more traditional understanding of power, say for example, that provided by Weber. So, I am not going into the details, but there is a, the interventions of Foucault and Gramsci provides you with a much more sophisticated, much more broader understanding of power and how power operates in a particular society. And especially Foucault focuses on the very close connection between power and knowledge and that these ideas and these insights were heavily drawn by Edward Said in order to put forward or to write this particular book, Orientalism. And it became one of the most important books of the 20th century. So, I think we do not need to be hesitant in saying that Orientalism was one of the most important books of the 20th

century.

As we discussed the influence that this particular book has across disciplines, across disciplines, across various perspectives is something unmatched starting from literature to anthropology to history to sociology to a host of other disciplines, Said continues to be an important figure and *Orientalism* continues to be a very important book. So let us get into the book. I am going to show you the book and it is available; I would strongly urge you to read that and we are not going to discuss this entire book, but rather we will go through extensively in the introduction. And the introduction itself is a lengthy chapter and that introduction will give you a kind of a very broad overview about the very specific arguments that Said is making. So it will tell you the kind of a theoretical positioning, it also tell you about some of the important positions from which very unorthodox position at that particular time, position from which Edward Said tries to address this thing, very original arguments about knowledge of production, about positionality, about personal and political, very, very important and insightful arguments.

And by the way, most of these arguments have been widely accepted now, they have become common sense among the scholars of today. But when Said proposed them in almost 40 years ago, this was something very, very unusual, it was something very new. So let us see, have a look at the book and go into the details of the introduction. This is the cover page of *Orientalism*, it has appeared in various covers, but this is the one which is one of the popular books. *Orientalism*, Edward Said, vintage books published from New York, it is published in 1979.

So this book has three chapters, one is, there is an introduction which we are going to discuss in detail, then chapter 1, the scope of *Orientalism*, it has three, no four subdivisions, almost 100-page long chapter. Then chapter 2, *Orientalist structures and restructures*, which again has five subsections and chapter 3 has four subsections and it ends with some notes and indexes. And in some of the subsequent editions of the work, he has also added another chapter, in which he kind of responds to the kind of criticisms that were raised against his book and we will have a look at them as well towards the end. So, this book begins with two quotes from two very, very important people, one is Karl Marx of course and it is taken from this 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte and it says, they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. And Said argues that they mentioned in Karl Marx is the non-Westerners and it is a claim that the non-Westerners cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.

And there are again controversies about this particular statement, there are critics who argue that Said has picked this particular statement out of context and then he has not really represented Marx's version in its fullest sense. And the second one is East is a

career by Benjamin Disraeli, from *Tancred*. So, these are the two quotes that he presents, and this is the introduction that we are beginning. So, we will be going through this introduction in an extensive manner, I have highlighted certain texts and we will discuss those particular section, highlighted sections. So, he begins to say that I shall be calling Orientalism a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on Orient's special place in Europe's European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe, it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant and one of the deepest and most recurring images of the other.

So in the very introduction, Said is making his case or Said is making his argument, if you read this whole paragraph, Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East, China and Japan mainly. Unlike the Americans, the French and the British, less to the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. So, he says that historically there has been a very specific connection between the Orient and the Occident and the very fact that there has been so much of knowledge produced about the Orient is not accidental. There has been so much of writers and philosophers and novelists have written about the Oriental region including the Asia and the Middle East is not something accidental because you need to look at it as a product of a particular historical formation and because the Orient has a special place in the European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe, it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies.

So you know, Said is bringing forth this all you know, episode of colonialism to the fore, the decades old colonial rule and colonial invasion is brought to the fore by Edward Said and it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilization and languages and the kind of very you know, the connection between the East, between the Asian and the European civilizations and its cultural contestant and one of the its deepest and most recurring image of the other and this is a very, very controversial as well as very important argument that Said is making. So, the fundamental argument that Said makes at this point, it is a proposition of a very provocative proposition that the East has been the recurring and the deepest images of the other for a Westerner and why this other required? The other is required for the self to create a kind of a more concrete essential idea about itself and as you know that in the discussions on identity formation, a self-formation is impossible, a self-formation is impossible without another, only through the process of othering that a self gets formulated. So, this is a very important argument, a very provocative argument that Said

is making that for a long century and even continuing today, the East represents the most important, deepest and recurring images of the other for a European and how this other is created and how the particular images and stereotypes about the other has have been created is what Said is going to examine in this essay. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture, given the history of how Europe tremendously benefited from the material, you know, the contributions in terms of material and ideological thing from the Eastern region. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies, and colonial styles.

So this is again the fundamental point that he makes. Orientalism expresses and represent that part of region culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse. So, we will elaborate what it means to be a discourse and with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines and even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. So, it is not a very impassionate, you know, or a neutral depiction of some place elsewhere. The place is very closely connected with the self-interest and then self-identity of the people who are producing knowledge and that is the reason why a discourse has been created about others and all these aspects, supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines and even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles were involved in creating that kind of a discourse about the, about the East.

And he contrasts that with American understanding of the Orient will seem considerably less dense although our recent Japan is Korean and Indo-Chinese advantages ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic oriental awareness. But his focus is specifically on the European depiction of the, of the East. It will be clear to the reader and will become clearer still throughout many pages to follow that by Orientalism, I mean several things, all of them in my opinion interdependent. The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. So, usually Orientalism is understood as a branch of academic inquiry, academic discipline that studies the East.

You have several institutions named after this word Oriental. There are Oriental institutions, there are centers for the study of Oriental society. So, the term Oriental is attached with several universities and several study centers in Europe even now. Anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist either in its specific or in general aspects is an Orientalist. And what he or does or she does is Orientalism.

Compared with Oriental studies or Area studies, it is true that the term Orientalism is

less preferred by specialists today both because it is too vague and general and because it connotes the high-handed executive attitudes of 19th century and early 20th century European colonialism. And so, but this has been a very old way of naming the centers and many of the centers are now renamed into say South Asian Studies Center or Middle Eastern Studies Center and other things. But still several centers and universities carry this particular term. So, this is the first meaning that is widely accepted and Said argues that this is one of the one of the meanings of Orientalism. Related to this academic tradition whose fortunes, migration, specializations, and transmissions are in part the subject of the study is a more general meaning of Orientalism.

This is the second meaning that Said proposes. Orientalism is a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and most of the time the Occident. Thus, a very large mass of writers among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, mind, destiny and so on. This Orientalism can be accommodated, can accommodate as Aeschylus, Say and Victor Hugo, Dante, and Karl Marx. A little later in this introduction I shall deal with the methodological problems one encounters in so broadly constructed field as this.

So, what is the second meaning? The second meaning he talks about is a style of thought based, style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident. So, he argues that there is a huge body of knowledge or almost all the body of knowledge that is created so far is based on an assumption that there is an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Occident and the Orient. Ontological in terms of what it constitutes, what is Orient? What is Orient according to, according to, you know, Said is perceived as entirely different from what is Occident. So, there is an ontological difference and there is also an epistemological difference about how do you study this different Occident and how do you study this different Orient. So, there is a fundamental incongruence in terms of ontological and epistemological basis between these two regions, so these two entities.

Thus, a very large mass of writers among whom are, so this particular list you know that this includes both the creative writers, people who work in literature as well as people who work in social sciences. It includes both humanities as well as social sciences as well as philosophers. A large mass of writers among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people



and mind, customs, mind, destiny and so on. So, this is another you know very important definition, way in which Orientalism is understood. Now the interchange between the academic and the more or less imaginative meaning of Orientalism is a constant one and since the late 18th century there has been a considerable quite disciplined perhaps even regulated traffic between the two.

Here I come to the third meaning of Orientalism which is something more historically and materially defined than either of the other two. Taking the late 18th century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with Orient. Dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it by teaching it, selling it, ruling over it, in short Orientalism as a western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. So, this is the crux of a Saidean definition of Orientalism. So he is saying that through this constant process of knowledge creation that the westerners have been doing for the past several centuries about the Orient, what in fact was happening was an establishment of a very authoritative control over the, over the Occident.

So he says that taking late 18th century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with Orient. So, this is a very starkly different understanding about how this knowledge has been created. Dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it. And if you look at from a different point of view, all these things are seen as intellectual exercises. The scholars, the intellectuals do all these things, they make statements about it, they authorize views about it, they describe it, they teach it, they settle it, they rule over it.

In short, Orientalism as a western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. So, he is bringing the kind of a scholarly dimension of Orientalism or the scholarly dimension of the whole work that is produced and then exposes the kind of a very stark power relations underlying this kind of a particular process. So, he is saying that these two cannot be seen separately. The knowledge production was very intricately connected with a particular form of exercising authority over that. I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse as described by him in the archaeology of knowledge and in discipline and punishment to identify Orientalism.

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European cultures was able to manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. So,

this is the point where he, you know, he acknowledges the very upfront that he is borrowing Michel Foucault's ideas of a discourse and then argues that without understanding it as a discourse, you cannot really understand how European culture was able to manage and even to produce Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically and others. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of its limitations on thought and actions imposed by Orientalism. So, we will discuss this whole idea of discourse later. But one of the implications of discourse is that once you are a part of this discourse, it is impossible for you to go beyond that.

The discourse is almost kind of seen as a kind of a deterministic one which controls and shapes the way in which you understand, and you see the world around. So moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and actions imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism, the Orient was not and is not a free subject of thought or action. This is not to say that Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about Orient, but that it is a whole network of interest inevitably brought to bear on an always, therefore always involved in any occasion when that particular entity of Orient is in question. How this happens is what this book tries to demonstrate.

It also tries to show that the European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self. This is the point that we mentioned earlier. So, one of the fundamental motives of studying the Orient so extensively, so systematically, so deliberately for over a period of time according to Said was to create a surrogate and even underground self as opposition to the other. So, this is a very, very, very serious charge, this is a very serious accusation. It is almost accusing as if the Westerners in a very abstract sense had a very predetermined idea to create a self which is in opposition to that of another.

And this other was created with all qualities and attributes that are in opposition to the qualities and attributes that you would give to the self. So that is a very, very important and very, very crucial accusation that Said makes in this particular section. So, these are the main points in this introduction section, and we will continue with the second part in the next class. So, thank you.