THE FUTURE OF THE PRESENT

Thinking through Orientalism

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to probe the phenomenon of post-Orientalism in order to answer the question: what next after Orientalism by Edward Said? Building further upon the insight that Orientalist discourse is the result of a particular form of constrained thinking, it argues that social sciences and Orientalism constrain each other. If that is the case, the consequences are immense for any further theorizing by the 'post-colonial' intellectuals.

Key Words ♦ comparative studies ♦ India ♦ Orientalism ♦ post-colonial ♦ post-modern ♦ Western culture

Though it was published nearly two decades ago, Said's Orientalism continues to be topical. Many have rejected the message of this work; others have attempted to develop its arguments yet further. This article will not be an interpretation of Said's book; after all, there are many such interpretations, including Said's own. Instead, it probes the phenomenon of 'post-Orientalism'. Even here, the intention is not to map its contours either historically or conceptually. Rather, the focus is on raising the question: what next after Orientalism?

I

The Study and the Kitchen

Not of all books can it be properly said that they change our perception of the world. In a very literal sense, such a predicate does apply to Said's Orientalism. Until that book arrived on the scene, all that one saw were pieces and fragments. After 360 odd pages one saw—or at least one
thought that one saw—patterns, structures, consistencies or a *Zusammenhang* where there were only blurred images and vague dissatisfaction before. One of the most interesting intellectuals on the current Indian scene captures this experience beautifully in the following imagery:

I will long remember the day I read *Orientalism*. It must have been in November or December of 1980. In India this season is classically called Hemantha and assigned a slot between autumn and winter. In Calcutta, where nothing classical remains un tarnished, all that this means is a few weeks of uncertain temperature when the rains have gone, the fans have been switched off and people wait expectantly to take out their sweaters and shawls. I remember the day because the house was being repainted and everything was topsy-turvy. I sat on the floor of the room in which I usually work, now emptied of its furniture, reading Edward Said whom I had never read before. I read right through the day and, after the workmen had left in the evening, well into the night. Now whenever I think of *Orientalism*, the image comes back to me of an empty room with a red floor and bare white walls, a familiar room suddenly made unfamiliar. (Chatterjee, 1992: 194)

Partha Chatterjee's bare room, the study with which he is intimately familiar, had suddenly become different. Not alien, not new, and I submit, not even just unfamiliar. It had become intimately unfamiliar—a strange conjoining of terms to indicate the strangeness of the experience. This intimately unfamiliar study was the India that Chatterjee and many of us saw as well.

However, without the shelves and their books, the table and the chair, and that particular sofa by the window—without these—the study is not a study either. It is merely a room like any other. It is shorn of familiar reference points: this particular copy of Hegel's *Phenomenology*; that dog-eared version of Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question*; that heavily underlined, cheaply priced, Progress Publishers' edition of the third volume of *Capital*. These intimate and familiar paraphernalia—this European intellectual tradition—had transformed the bare room into the study and had us believe that we knew the latter as well (or as badly) as the proverbial back of our hands. Until that day when the painters arrived, reading *Orientalism* with the room made bare, and the realization dawned: we know India through the reference points of the Western intellectual tradition.

If we know India through the organization effected by the Western intellectual tradition, how would it look if organized otherwise? What if the study became either the *puja* room or a kitchen with-a- *puja*-corner? Said's book raised these kinds of thoughts in the minds of many of us. It succeeded in provoking us to look in particular directions by depicting the consistent manner in which the West had described the Orient over the centuries. The book suggested too that these descriptions enjoy stability, possess durability and have a peculiar kind of objectivity (in the sense that these descriptions are not myths). The entire story, as told by Said, held out a promise as well: thinking through the issues raised by the phenomenon of Orientalism could/would lead to the coalescing of a very interesting research programme.
The Orientalist Discourse

As Said says repeatedly, ‘racist’, ‘sexist’ and ‘imperialist’ vocabularies do not transform something into an ‘Orientalist’ discourse, any more than the use of ‘dichotomizing essentialism’. These are not the constituent properties of the discourse but merely its imageries. Such a discourse does not just consist of a set of stereotypical images about people from elsewhere and the value of their cultures. That Indians are lazy, dishonest, superstitious, etc., to be sure, is a part of the vocabulary. So too are the notions that Indian culture is ancient and backward, it is dominated by the caste system and such like. Nor is the discourse a perpetuation of the romantic image of India: an ancient land with a mythical past, harbouring spiritual insights of a lofty nature, merely waiting to be discovered by modern man. These and similar imageries are neither constitutive of the Orientalist discourse nor do they exhaust it.

Said’s characterization of Orientalism occurs almost en passant. ‘Orientalism ... is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) ... world’ (p. 12). Therefore, ‘Orientalism ... is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine’ (p. 42, my italics.) This means that ‘limited vocabulary and imagery ... impose themselves as a consequence’ (p. 60). That is to say, the limited vocabulary and imagery of the Orientalist discourse are the consequences of a set of constraints imposed upon Western thinking in its attempts to understand a world manifestly different from its own.

It is trivially true that all human thought is subject to constraints and limitations. Such constraining is a condition sine qua non for human thought: it is constrained by language and by the conceptual resources available to it. That is to say, human thinking is always a particular way of thinking. It is not as though ‘human thought’ is placed under constraints varying in time and place. Rather, it is the case that formed thinking is what human thinking is. To draw an analogy: it is not that ‘human language’ is subject to arbitrary constraints like ‘English’, ‘French’ or ‘Sanskrit’ that vary in time and place. Only when we learn these languages do we speak human languages at all. In the same way, thinking in some particular way is what human thought is all about. For the sake of convenience, one might want to identify the notion of ‘some particular way’ with that of constraints. However, this epistemic trivium should not be confused with that set of constraints which brings forth Orientalism. To do so is to claim that all human thought is ‘Orientalist’—a patently false statement if ever there was one.

While Orientalist thinking is also human thinking (because it too is subject to constraints), it is not Orientalist because it is human. Orientalist
thought, as a particular way of thinking, is ‘Orientalist’ because it is a particular way of thinking. What constitutes this particular way of thinking? What kind of constraints upon and limitations of thought transform human thinking into Orientalist thinking? Said’s remarks are en passant here as well:

[T]he Orient and the Oriental, Arab, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or whatever, become repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating. (p. 62)

To the Westerner, however, the Oriental was always like some aspect of the West; to some of the German Romantics, for example, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of Germano-Christian pantheism. (p. 67)

That is to say, in the Western descriptions of other cultures, the ‘otherness’ of the latter has disappeared. Or, better still, ‘non-Western’ cultures are seen to differ from the West only in the sense that the former are pale (or erring) imitations of the great original that the latter is. Orientalism is constrained to describe non-Western cultures not merely in terms of Western culture. It is also forced to do it in a way that effaces the differences between the two. A limited vocabulary and imagery are the consequences of this constraint. This formulation merely characterizes Orientalism, nevertheless, it is sufficient to make sense of almost all of Said’s book, and see in the latter the historical illustrations of the depth and the scope of the Orientalist discourse.

Such a circumscription of Orientalism, as a discourse that is constrained to describe non-Western cultures as variations or imitations of the West, is not merely of hermeneutic value. It has also heuristic potential in at least two distinct ways. On the one hand, it prevents us from being trapped into a cul-de-sacs or from raising sterile issues. On the other, it enables us to think through and identify those genuine issues and challenges, with which the phenomenon of Orientalism confronts us.

**Said’s Musings**

Often, writers of great books fail to appreciate the true depth and breadth of what they themselves have written. Such is also the case with Said. His own thoughts on the issues raised by the phenomenon of Orientalism, predictably, take on a very disappointing hue:

[T]he main intellectual issue raised by Orientalism [is:] Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, and even races, and survive the consequences humanly? I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division ... of men into ‘us’ (Westerners) and ‘them’ (Orientals). When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and end points of analysis, research, public policy ... the result is usually to polarize the distinction—the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western—and limit the encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. (pp. 45–6)
If human reality is 'genuinely divided into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies,' surely one ought to assert that human reality is thus divided. Yet, *talking about* the division seems to cast doubts upon our abilities to 'survive its consequences humanly'. One could, of course, lapse into a profound meditative silence and, I suppose, this is one alternative. The other is to ask silly questions like how to 'survive these consequences humanly?'.

When Said wrote his *Orientalism*—the situation has not altered much since then—describing other cultures was predominantly a Western activity. The hostility that Said speaks of was engendered by these, *Western* descriptions. Even if they ‘limited the encounter’ between human beings, surely this does not provide us with the evidence that ‘talking about’ genuine divisions could have catastrophic consequences. It might be even more plausibly held that dividing the reality into ‘us’ and ‘them’ does not lead to violence. Whereas the way the West has conceptualized both ‘us’ and ‘them’ has the tendency to do so. All that we have are the generated descriptions of cultures using the resources of but one intellectual tradition, viz., the West. No other culture in the world has come even remotely close to the West (in either depth or variety) in describing both itself and the world. Consequently, there is no possible way for us to know how alternate descriptions of the world would look or whether they too would suffer from the same debilitating diseases. By merely looking at just *one* individual who is deaf, dumb, lame and blind, what predictions or pronouncements could we make about *la condition humaine*?

The point can be made even more forcefully when, towards the end of the book, Said muses about the character of his project.

My project has been to describe a particular system of ideas, not by any means to displace the system with a new one. In addition, I have attempted to raise a whole set of questions that are relevant in discussing the problems of human experience: how does one *represent* other cultures? What is another *culture*? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved in self-congratulation (when one discusses one’s own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the ‘other’)? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politico-historical ones? How do ideas acquire authority, ‘normality’, and even the status of ‘natural’ truth? What is the role of the intellectual? Is he there to validate the culture and state of which he is a part? What importance must he give to an independent critical consciousness, an oppositional critical consciousness? (pp. 325–6)

These questions deserve either frivolous answers or none at all. To the question of how one represents another culture, what do you think of the answer, ‘very carefully’ or ‘by drawing pictures’? I am not contesting that Said’s questions are ‘relevant’ in discussing ‘the problems of human experience’. However, I do contest that *Orientalism* raises them or that Said’s book provides an adequate basis to do so.
As indicated earlier, Said was the first to alert us to the existence of the phenomenon of Orientalism. While he was unsure whether Western ‘constructions’ of other cultures followed the logic of Orientalist discourse, we need entertain no such doubts today. Our certitude is both factual and theoretical. The sheer size of empirical research conducted since Orientalism is sufficient to provide the factual certitude. If Orientalism is the constrained thinking of Western culture, theoretically speaking, it must be manifest in its descriptions of all cultures including the Orient.

Given these certitudes—we know now that Orientalism exists—what should our research do? Surely it should answer questions like the following. Why develop a critique of Orientalist discourse? What forms should such a critique take? What is its function? However, most of the research conducted after Said’s book is an ad nauseam repetition of the following claims: that Orientalism exists; that ‘knowledge’ is related to ‘power’; that ‘essentialism’ is a sin; that one should not think in ‘dichotomies’ or ‘binary oppositions’. In short, it is not clear why one should provide a critique of Orientalism, except for purposes of self-edification. As examples, take two of the very best of such efforts: Inden’s Imagining India (1990), and Almond’s The British Discovery of Buddhism (1988).

Inden, inspired indirectly by Said, tries to provide us with a picture of the Orientalist constructions of India. He details the ‘imaginative construction’ of India in much the same way Said did with respect to the Orient. Unlike Said though, Inden intends travelling further: he wants to identify the foundation on which the Orientalist’s India is erected. Such a foundation turns out to be philosophical, consisting of essentialist ontology, a metaphysic of structures, and such like. Consequent to these, Inden tries to outline a metaphysics—drawn from Collingwood and Gramsci—that gives ‘agency’ back to the Indians. Inden does not pause to think whether it makes any sense to ascribe some single metaphysics to all those who have written and talked about India during the last 150 years or so. Nor does he realize the flimsiness of his attempts to tie different theories to a particular philosophy. In any case, the rich, three-dimensional ‘Orientalism’ of Said becomes a flat, two-dimensional, one-way relationship between meta- and object-level discourses.

While Indians are no doubt eternally grateful to have been accorded the status of agents in Inden’s brilliant book, as an Indian intellectual, I am left with nagging doubts. If Collingwood and Gramsci are required to elevate human beings into agents, what about those innumerable social theories which presuppose neither one nor the other? What is the status of human beings in Western societies and, more to the point, in social theories about the West? How could psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, histo-
rians and cognitive scientists in the West, when they theorize in their respective domains, accord 'agency' to human beings without Collingwood or Gramsci? If they do it on a different basis, why can we not use this to talk about India? Surely, on any count, the possibility of raising such legitimate questions should make one sceptical regarding stories like those told by Inden.

Almond's project, by contrast, is more modest but no less disappointing. Narrated in brilliant detail, the story is about the creation of Buddhism in one culture by the efforts of another. The West imaginatively created Buddhism in the East, says Almond, without, however, being willing (or wanting) to tell us what this 'imaginative creation' consists of. For instance, does that mean that the status of Buddhism is that of the unicorn struggling to get into my study? Or like that of the 'electron' in theoretical physics?

Both Inden and Almond, like Said himself at times, are seduced by the imageries used in Orientalist discourse. The result is an inevitable identification of the imagery with the discourse. One is merely left with the feeling that 'essentialism' is equivalent to the original sin. However, neither writer bothers telling us either what essentialism is, what is sinful about it, or what alternative one has. At least one cause for this intellectual sterility can be identified. In the process of analysing Western constructions of other cultures—in this case, India—the central idea that made Said's book interesting is lost sight of: such constructions are created by Western culture. Consequent to this, no relation can be postulated between Orientalist descriptions and the constraints of a specific culture.

*The Issues in Orientalist Discourse*

In the course of generating descriptions of other cultures—whether framed in positive or negative axiological terms—Orientalism made use of a conceptual reservoir. It consisted of ideas and theories about human beings, the nature of languages, the structure of societies, the character of cultures, the nature of religion and the value of history. In its turn, such a constructed discourse had an impact on the evolution of subsequent theorizing about Man and Society. In other words, Orientalist discourse did not evolve in splendid isolation but in continuous interaction with and as a part of the growth of social sciences. It is not an extraneous and alien growth on the otherwise splendid corpus of social sciences. It is an *inextricable part* of social-scientific discourse as the latter has evolved in order to understand human beings, their societies and cultures.

By saying this, I am not advancing the absurd claim that all social sciences are Orientalist in nature. They would have been that if they spoke only about non-Western cultures, which they obviously do not. What I do want to say, however, is that we *must* appreciate that Orientalism is not just a way of talking about 'non-Western' cultures. It is also partly the way the
West has tried to make sense of the social world. The way the West looks at its own culture is sustained by the way it looks at other cultures; the way it looks at them is implicated in the way it looks at itself. Its experience of the world involves these two dimensions of 'the self' and 'the other'. Though distinguishable from each other by virtue of the object of their discourses, one can understand neither of the two in isolation from either. This is what I am trying to get at.

When looked at this way, the phenomenon of Orientalism begins to take on interesting proportions. If 'Orientalism' picks out the dimension of the 'other' present in the experience of Western culture, one can then begin to get to grips with the reproduction of Orientalist discourse in the West. Answering the question, 'why does Orientalism sustain and reproduce itself in the West?' does not require the chanting of mantras invoking deities like 'Foucault' or 'Gramsci'. Rather, it becomes a task for developing a theory about Western culture. Similarly, the reproduction of Orientalist discourse elsewhere will also need a different answer. Whereas the mechanisms for the reproduction of Orientalism within the West are those that constitute the Western experience of the world, the same answer—for obvious reasons—can hardly work with respect to India.

The Challenge of Orientalist Discourse

'Orientalism' refers not merely to how Europe experienced the Orient, but also to the way it gave expression to that experience. Western culture built and elaborated conceptual frameworks using the available resources from its own culture. These descriptions were used to generate Europe's description and understanding of itself. That is to say, Europe's descriptions of other cultures have been fundamentally entwined in many untold ways with the way it has experienced the world. To understand the way Western culture has described both itself and others is to begin understanding Western culture itself. The challenge of Orientalism, thus, is a challenge to understand Western culture.

To appreciate this challenge better, let us pursue the issue conceptually. It is an epistemic truism to claim that all descriptions of the world are framed using the concepts of the describer. Such a description does at least two things. In the first place, it claims to provide a partial description of the world. In the second place, being framed this way and not that or another way, the description tells us something about the framer of such a description. This epistemic truism has immensely profound consequences for our subject-matter. If constancy, consistency and durability characterize the West's descriptions of itself and others, then such descriptions tell us much about the culture that has produced them.

Let us assume that cultures other than the West exist and that they experience the world differently. In that case, to study Western descrip-
tions of the world as the way one culture experiences it, and to generate alternate descriptions of the same world are the real and only challenges raised by the phenomenon of Orientalism. Before meeting these challenges, however, we need to understand them first. The question is: do we?

II

The Nature of a Monologue

Without the least bit of exaggeration, it could be held that the study of societies and cultures is a project that the Western world has initiated. Over the centuries, Western intellectuals have studied both themselves and other cultures and, in this process, have developed a set of theories and methodologies to understand our human, social world. What we call 'social sciences' are the result of the gigantic labour performed by brilliant and not-so-brilliant men and women from all over the world over a long period of time.

Let us formulate a hypothetical question in order to express the problem: would the results have been the same, or even approximately similar if, say, the Asians had undertaken such a task instead of the Europeans? Suppose that, in the imaginary world that we are talking about, it was the effort of the Asian intellectuals reflecting about themselves and European culture, as they saw them both, which produced the social sciences. Would the result have looked like the contemporary social sciences?

I put to you that the most natural answer to this question is: 'We do not know'. It is worth reflecting on this answer. The inability to answer the question does not arise from the impossibility of answering questions about hypothetical situations. All our scientific laws describe hypothetical situations and we can say what would happen in such situations. (If I drop a stone from the top of a building, what would happen to it? It would fall downwards.)

The ignorance in our case has to do with the specific kind of hypothetical situation the question picks out, and with the feeling that there is no way to check the veracity of the answers given. Because we have no model of such an attempt, we have no way of deciding how to go about answering the question. Worse still, because we have no models where the answers can come out true or false, we feel that all answers to this question are meaningless and, therefore, that the question itself is meaningless. The question has not violated any syntactic or semantic rule; it has not committed any category mistake; yet, we do not know how to make sense of this question.

There is a peculiar air about this state of affairs. We are not able to make sense of a question, which asks us, literally, how we appear to ourselves and
how the West appears to us. Yet, we have been studying both the West and ourselves for quite sometime now. Western culture, with background assumptions peculiar to it, 'problematised' a phenomenon which has taken the status of a fact to us. We prattle on endlessly about the problem of 'underdevelopment', the 'question of human rights in Asia', 'the amorphous nature of Hinduism' and, in the same breath, about 'Hindu fundamentalism', 'the problem of modernity and nationhood', 'the women's question in India'. The same is also true for our perspectives on the West.

Surely, but surely, there is a problem here. If our culture differs from that of the West and if, perforce, our background theories and assumptions are other than those of the West, we could not possibly either formulate questions or assign weights to them, both about us and the West, in exactly the same way the West does. Yet, we do—invariably and as a matter of fact. How could we make sense of questions routinely copied from Western social research and go on to answer them by means of empirical studies? We do, we act as though these questions do make sense to us.

We know the West the way the West looks at itself. We study the East the way the West studies the East. We look at the world the way the West looks at it. We do not even know whether the world would look different, if we looked at it our way. Today, we are not even in a position to make sense of the above statement. When Asian anthropologists, psychologists or sociologists do their anthropology, psychology or sociology, the West is really talking to itself.

The Consequences of a Monologue

Such a monologue, however, has a number of consequences. Two are of importance to us here. The first is also the most obvious. Research into indigenous phenomena will not contribute in any fundamental way to the growth of knowledge about the object of enquiry. Instead, it will merely reproduce, in a monotonous manner at that, claims made elsewhere, even if they are spiced with local details. The second of these consequences pertains to the perpetuation of Orientalism itself. One does not have to use either the well-known imagery or the familiar vocabularies—both of which are limited—in order to reproduce Orientalism. As must be obvious by now, the same job can also be done by reproducing those theories that have given expression to the Western experience of the world.

One candidate which illustrates these consequences is the discussion about 'secularism' in India. Because this debate really deserves a book-length treatment in its own right, I shall not go deep into the issue but will merely touch upon it. In any debate about secularism, two kinds of problems are involved. The first has to do with the relation between any two (or more) religions; the second is about the relation between these religious
groups. The relation between religions is a *theological* issue: each religion characterizes itself explicitly and thus specifies what its relation to its predecessors (and competitors) is. This theological stance generates a *civic* issue: how could groups that belong to several religions cohabit the interstices of the same society?

In order to keep the discussion manageable, let us stick to the classical textbook story about civic tolerance. It tells us that explicit theorizing about tolerance emerged first in the Christian West, subsequent to the schismatic developments in Christianity. That is to say, the Reformation forced the issue of civic tolerance on the agenda. The idea of 'civic practices', viz., those practices which were neutral or indifferent with respect to religious ones, began to merge with the idea of 'secular practices'. It must be remembered, however, that the notion of secular is the contrast set of the concept of the sacred: the 'secular' is that which does not belong to the domain of the 'sacred'. Deviating from the textbook story, it can be shown (Balagangadhara, 1994) that the emergence of such a *secular world* in the Christian West did not mean detaching the former from the latter. Instead, the secular world remained within the religious world and what emerged was a secularized religious world. That is to say, it was a religious world in a secular outfit.

European societies torn internally by religious wars faced the following question: how could different Christian groups live together within the ambit of the Christian West? The parameters of the problem also contained the seeds of the solution. Within the ambit of a secularized religious world, different religious groups could continue to coexist. This secularized religious world was thus charged with the task of enforcing peace among the necessarily intolerant religious groups.

Historically speaking, the notion of tolerance makes sense *only* within the larger framework of intolerance. That is to say, 'tolerance' is conceptually parasitic upon the notion of intolerance—even if the prima facie linguistic form appears to suggest otherwise. Especially in this context, the notion of tolerance can only be explicated in terms of 'abstaining from actions that express intolerance'. In Europe, the notion of intolerance made sense both conceptually and factually: people broke into each other’s churches, defaced them, beat up the preacher and the congregation of the faithful, and so on. This idea of civic tolerance did not—does not—mean that the Protestant ceased to think that the Pope was the anti-Christ; or the Catholic thought that the Protestant was not a heretic. To this day, these ideas continue. A similar point holds elsewhere too, if we broaden the range of the discussion a bit more. A Jew cannot claim that Jesus is the Christ and continue to remain a Jew. Nor could a Muslim say that doing *puja* to Ganesha is the same as worshipping Allah and continue to be a Muslim. This is the reason why the notion of civic tolerance made (and makes) sense. Needless to say, this intolerance is predicated at the level of the individual believer.
What do ‘tolerance’ and ‘intolerance’ either mean or signify in Indian culture? At least in the several Indian languages I know, translation is not possible. Words like ‘patience’ (as it is contrasted with the notion of ‘impatience’) and ‘acceptance’ (in the sense of a ‘resigned acceptance’ as contrasted to ‘protest’) are used to translate the notions of tolerance and intolerance. In and of itself, this linguistic fact need not mean much.

However, try telling a ‘non-Muslim’, ‘non-Christian’ Indian (i.e. a ‘Hindu’) that he ought to tolerate his neighbour going to some temple X, doing puja to some Y, and celebrating some other festival Z. Not only will he stare uncomprehendingly at you but he will also probably feel that you ought to be certified. If he is a bit talkative, this is what he will tell you: it is absolutely none of his business what his neighbour does; it does not and it never did interest him; it does not in the least matter to him what his neighbour does or does not do; and that, in all honesty, he does not really care . . . These are not deep anthropological facts. They are the day-to-day trivia of every ‘Hindu’, if not of every Indian. Nevertheless, for a discussion of ‘tolerance’ in the Indian context, they are relevant and salient. Why is it that the Indian intellectuals remain silent about such facts, while pontificating endlessly about the virtues of tolerance?

Tolerance is a civic virtue in a secularized religious culture like the West. In India too, like in most places, different peoples and practices coexist. However, they are premised not on tolerance but on indifference. (The contrast notion here is that of interference.) Neither religious intolerance nor civic tolerance makes sense in Indian culture. Examples of intermittent persecutions of groups belonging to different traditions—there must be many such—do not illustrate religious intolerance in India. If one insists they do, these examples merely illustrate one’s own ignorance regarding whether and why religions are intolerant of each other.

Be that as it may, because the ‘pro-secularist’ discourse is unable to shed any light on the so-called ‘Hindu–Muslim’ strife, it takes the form of a moralizing sermon. The narrated empirical details of the dispute, about the original site of Rama’s temple and the demolition of Babra Masjid, merely add local colour and indigenous flavour to the sad tale enacted many a time in Europe: religious intolerance. A ‘secularist’ account that tells us this is about as illuminating as an explanation of the totality of human history in terms of greed. While such a story might make a fine object for theological reflection, it does not carry us far. One might write interesting theological tracts about the nature and structure of human greed. Others might use them to preach third-rate moralizing sermons. Neither helps us understand human history.
The Reproduction of Orientalism

The Western description of the Orient and its self-description are like two faces of the same coin. The constraint imposed upon the way the West experiences other cultures is partly to do with what Western culture thinks of itself. What it thinks of itself, in its turn, is also parasitic upon what it thinks of other cultures. In other words, it looks as though two sets of constraints are operative here. One set of constraints, namely its self-image, constrains what the West says of other cultures. The second set of constraints, namely what it thinks of the others, appears to constrain how it views itself.

What, however, is the ‘self-image’ of the West? Culled from the Orientalist writings, there is a prepared answer, as outlined from Said through Inden: the West thinks that it is a scientific, entrepreneurial, rational culture contrasted with which are the Western conceptions of the Orient. If one is satisfied by this answer, one has succumbed to the seductive power of the imageries and there are but two avenues of research open. One is to locate the causes for the emergence and sustenance of these images. Depending upon one’s philosophical proclivities, one could identify the causes in some ontology or metaphysics; or in imperialism; or in the mantra ‘knowledge is related to power’, or whatever. The second avenue plays on the fact that these self-images privilege the West above other cultures and that all cultures are prone to self-edification. One could then begin on the endless journey of pseudo-philosophical despair about the nature and notion of representation. Clearly, this situation signals that something is wrong with the question which traps intelligent minds in cul-de-sacs.

Let us, therefore, step backwards a bit. Since Said, we know that the Western representations of other cultures have taken specific forms: Orientalism is an academic domain, a set of institutional structures, a discourse. That is to say, one is able to answer questions about the forms taken by the Western conceptions of other cultures. Surely, the next logical step would be to formulate a similar question regarding the ‘self-image’ of the West as well? What form has the ‘self-image’ of the West taken? Enough has been said during the course of this article to enable a sharp, short answer: the social sciences.

We are now able to identify the two constraints more precisely. Social sciences constrain Orientalist discourse; Orientalism constrains the social sciences. We need to see whether this formulation is able to make sense of what has been said so far. Before doing that, however, let us notice its implication with respect to the reproduction of Orientalism.

If Orientalism is thinking under a particular set of constraints and if this set is the set called ‘the social sciences’, then it follows that to use the latter is to reproduce Orientalism. When Indian intellectuals use the existing the-
ories about religion and its history, for example, to analyse the ‘Hindu-Muslim’ or the ‘Hindu-Sikh’ strife then they are reproducing—both directly and indirectly—what the West has been saying all along. Directly, in the sense that the ‘secularist’ discourse about either of the two issues can hardly be distinguished—whether in terms of the content or the vocabulary—from the Orientalist writings of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instead of talking about ‘Indians’ or ‘the Hindus’, one talks about ‘the Hindu fundamentalists’. The criticisms of most ‘progressive’ thinkers or of the ‘Dalit’ intellectuals against ‘Brahmanism’ or against ‘the evils of the caste system’ are no different from those of the erstwhile colonial masters of a century or two ago.

It is also an indirect reproduction of Orientalism in the sense that its constraints are reproduced when we ‘study’ Indian culture using the self-image of the West. To the extent that the most interesting writings in India today are also criticisms of Orientalism, Orientalism is reproduced in the name of a critique of Orientalism. It is of complete irrelevance whether one uses the language of a Marx, a Weber, or a Max Müller to do so. Of equal irrelevance is the fact that one borrows the vocabulary from a Derrida or from the ‘post-modern’, ‘post-colonial’ writers in Amsterdam or California instead. In both cases, the result is just about the same: uninteresting trivia, as far as the growth of human knowledge is concerned, but pernicious in effect as far as the Indian intellectuals are concerned.

This tirade can be justified if and only if the identification of the ‘Western self image’ with the ‘social sciences’ can be made sensible. Further, there is also the claim that the social sciences force Orientalism into effacing the differences between cultures. This too has to be made sense of. As though this is not enough, one has to make sense of what, in that case, anthropology is all about. Is it possible to make sense of these, and many more, assertions?

III

It is my conviction that the answer to the above question is in the positive: yes, it is possible. It is also imperative that we do so. However, assaying the possibility of the task is not the same as executing it. I hope that this article lends some plausibility to my conviction. As far as executing this task is concerned, well, it is a collective effort. I can do no more than invite the interested to help build the required research programme—not ex nihilo, of course. Some spadework has been done, some foundation work is in progress, and some initial results are already in. These either lend plausibility to the programme or will fail to do so.
Orientalism and the Social Sciences

Orientalism has been characterized as a particular way of thinking. The particularity of this thinking lies not merely in the fact that understanding other cultures takes place in terms of Western culture. It is also exhibited in the way other cultures are transformed into pale imitations of the West. Let us recollect Said again: ‘[T]he Orient and the Oriental, Arab, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or whatever, become repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating’ (p. 62). Being the ‘constraints upon and limitations of thought’, social sciences generate Orientalism when the West looks at other cultures. Looked at in isolation from Orientalism, social sciences are how the West experiences itself. Social sciences teach us about Western culture.

However, ‘social sciences’ are many: not just in terms of domains or fields of study, but also in terms of domain-theories. How can they be read as expressions of a particular type of culture? Are the changing theories, their assumptions, etc., symptomatic of the changing nature of the Western culture? Alternatively, is there also an underlying continuity (the famous ‘essence’) to these changes? For instance, there are as many notions and theories of ‘religion’ and ‘ethics’ as one could think of. From among them, which notion or theory about either of the two phenomena ‘expresses Western culture’? How could one justify the selection at all without a prior theory of the Western culture?

These are legitimate problems, to be sure. It is, however, of great importance to note that they have arisen in the context of looking at social sciences independent of Orientalism. In fact, these problems parallel those with respect to Orientalist discourse, when we look at it as an independent, isolated discourse about ‘other cultures’. What we need to do, therefore, is to look at the one as providing answers to the other. In rather abstract terms, it means that Orientalism answers questions about social sciences. The former constrains the latter to ask particular kinds of questions; these, in turn, tell us about the kind of culture that asks these and not other questions.

Even at this general level, if this claim is true, we can begin to appreciate the signal achievement of Said’s Orientalism. He has provided us with the ‘Archimedean point’ to move the world. It can now be shown why a critique of Orientalism is required. Such a critique does not help us to ascertain our ‘dignity’ or recover our pride, or saddle the current and future generations in the West with guilt complexes. In a true and fundamental sense, it enables us to contribute to the growth of human knowledge. For that is what we will surely be doing when, through a critique of Orientalism, we undertake to understand one particular culture’s way of understanding itself. Such a task will force us to provide alternate descriptions of the world that are richer and fuller than those we have today. If this is not a quest for knowledge, what is?
Social Sciences, Orientalism and the Ethical Domain

As noticed above, the mutual relationship between Orientalism and the social sciences has been formulated abstractly. A relatively concrete illustration might go some way in making my claim more credible. With this in mind, I would like to touch upon the conceptualization and description of the nature of the ethical domain in India.

Most of us are familiar with the modern Orientalist descriptions of Indian people and their morality. That Indians are dishonest, liars and cheats, is as much a part of this picture as the recognition that the British did a great service when they implanted their system of law in India. A totally random citation, therefore, just for the sake of academic decorum:

[C]ould I transplant my reader ... to the purely native circle by which I am surrounded ... and could he understand the bold and fluent hindostanee which the Hindoo soldier speaks, he would soon distinguish the sources of oriental licentiousness, and how unprincipled is the Hindoo in conduct and character.

In nothing is the general want of principle more evident, than in the total disregard to truth which they show; no rank or order among them can be exempted from the implication. The religious teachers set the example, and they are scrupulously followed by all classes. Perjury and fraud are as common as is a suit of law; with protestations of equal sincerity will a witness stand forth who knows the falsehood of his testimony, and he who is ignorant of what he professes to testify. No oath can secure the truth; the water of the Ganges, as they cannot wash away the filth of lying and deceit, so they cannot preserve the court of law from being the scene of gross and impious contradiction. No task is so difficult as is he who would elicit truth from the mouth of a witness. Venality and corruption are universal; they are remarkable, too, for their ingratitude.
(Massie, 1840: 466–7)

If Orientalist discourse transformed Indian culture into an immoral one, what are we to make of a ‘scientific’ discourse that transforms Indians into moral cretins? That is the result of Shweder’s research (Shweder et al., 1987), where he tries to relate culture to moral development. In the course of conducting a cross-cultural research into the growth of moral awareness, Shweder and his co-workers developed a questionnaire supposed to test the presence of several moral notions among their subjects. The contrasting cultures are the Indian and the American; the interviewees are both children and adults. From the list of the cases that Shweder uses, here are the first five—in order of perceived ‘seriousness of breach’, as judged by Hindu Brahman eight-year-olds:

1. The day after his father’s death, the eldest son had a haircut and ate chicken.
2. One of your family members eats beef regularly.
3. One of your family members eats a dog regularly for dinner.
4. A widow in your community eats fish two or three times a week.
5. Six months after the death of her husband, the widow wore jewelry and bright-colored clothes. (p. 40)

It is important to note that, in India, while there was a consensus between
the children and the adults regarding the first two cases (p. 63), there was no consensus only among children regarding the last three cases.

What are we to make of this kind of research? First, it appears to me that the garnered facts cannot be disputed regarding their veracity. It is almost certain that the Indian informants would consider the above cases as 'paap' or even as a great 'paap'. Second, it is equally probable that this concept has been translated as 'sin' by Shweder and his co-workers. Third, consequently, sins have been interpreted as violations of ethical norms.

None of these might appear problematic in themselves, until one reads through the rest of the cases. Keeping in mind that they are ordered in terms of the 'perceived seriousness of the breach', we further come across (Shweder et al., 1987: 40): '8. After defecation (making a bowel movement) a woman did not change her clothes before cooking. 13. In a family, a twenty-five-year-old son addresses his father by his first name.' The fifteenth breach is: 'A poor man went to the hospital after being seriously hurt in an accident. At the hospital they refused to treat him because he could not afford to pay.'

Now is the time to pause and take stock of the situation. Consider the first case again: 'The day after his father's death, the eldest son had a haircut and ate chicken.' This 'moral transgression' consists of two actions: eating chicken and having one's hair cut. It is a matter of certainty again that the same informants would not think unanimously and unconditionally that eating chicken is a 'moral violation'. Certainly, none would say that going to the barber is a 'sin' either. It now follows (as a matter of logic) that the conjunction of these two actions cannot be a 'moral transgression' either. It could be the case, a very improbable one, that Indians cannot think logically and, consequently, do not appreciate logical consequences in moral matters. Should we leave this Orientalist imagery aside, then we have a serious explanatory problem on our hands.

The problem gets compounded by the fact that what one would normally consider as a moral breach is ranked the fifteenth. Assume, for a moment, that such is the moral domain for the Indians. If this is the case, there would be no India to talk of. No group could survive as a culture if its members think that 'eating chicken and going to a barber', or a 'widow eating fish' are more immoral than not treating a poor man for his sickness. Indians might be moral cretins; if they were, there would be no Indian culture today.

One supposes that Shweder is vaguely aware of the absurdity of the situation, especially when the American children and adults do not consider 'eating chicken' or the 'widow wearing bright clothes' as moral transgressions. Instead of trying to figure out what has gone wrong with his research that cretines an entire culture, Shweder tries to figure out an 'ideal' argument structure, which can provide a 'reasoned defence of family life and social practice'. What does it look like? 'The body is a temple with a spirit
Therefore the sanctity of the temple must be preserved. Therefore impure things must be kept out of and away from the body' (pp. 76–7). Because further commentary is superfluous, let me make my point. As I said before, the facts are almost certainly true. The problem lies not in the mere translation of the Indian ‘paap’ into the English ‘sin’, but elsewhere. It lies in the very notion of the ethical domain.

One of the essential characteristics of the Western intellectual tradition regarding ethics is the belief that this domain is constituted by moral rules. Those rules are normative, in the sense that they prescribe one action, prohibit some other action and permit a third one. ‘Being ethical’ means that one acts according to some rule or another. In accordance with this view, ethical differences between cultures have traditionally been conceived as differences between rules for moral behaviour. What is considered moral in one culture need not be seen so in another. This factual variety, however, has not damaged the belief that it is in the nature of moral rules to be universally valid. The requirement of universalizability is a constitutive part of the Western idea of ethics (Potter and Timmons, 1985).

Yet, the combination of both views—(a) that the ethical domain consists of rules and (b) that rules actually differ from society to society—has led to certain problems, as it still does, especially when the description of the moral domain of a non-Western culture is at stake. They have to do with the difficulty in identifying something in Asian cultures akin to a universalizable moral norm.

In order to clearly see the difficulty involved, consider the following claim. Not only is there an absence of the concept of ‘morality’ in Asian cultures, but also of the very cluster of concepts required to speak about moral issues.

Consider as a specific example the classical Chinese language in which the early Confucians wrote. Not merely does that language contain no lexical item for ‘moral’, it also does not have terms corresponding to ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, ‘autonomy’, ‘individual’, ‘utility’, ‘rationality’, ‘objective’, ‘subjective’, ‘choice’, ‘dilemma’, ‘duty’, ‘rights’, and probably most eerie of all for a moralist, classical Chinese has no lexical item corresponding to ‘ought’—prudential or obligatory. (Rosemont, 1988: 61)

This claim is as puzzling as it is startling: in classical Chinese it is not possible to speak of ‘moral duty’ or ‘moral dilemmas’ or ‘moral choices’. It is not even possible to formulate a rule which uses the notions of ‘ought’—either obligatory (‘All ought to do X’) or prudential (‘If one desires X then one ought to do Y’). In the Western intellectual tradition, the ‘essence’ of a moral principle or norm is that it is formulated using the ‘ought’—in either obligatory or prudential form. Without ‘ought’, there would be no difference in kind between factual and evaluative statements. Yet it is impossible to use ‘ought’ in Confucianism. The philosophical significance is immense: ‘Speakers (writers) of languages that have no terms (or concept clusters) corresponding to “moral” cannot logically have any moral princi-
But, rightly enough, we take Confucianism at least as an example of a moral system. What is the upshot of the above remark? Rosemont formulates the issue as follows:

If one grants that in contemporary western moral philosophy 'morals' is intimately linked with the concept cluster elaborated above, and if none of that concept cluster can be found in the Confucian lexicon, then the Confucians not only cannot be moral philosophers, they cannot be ethical philosophers either. But this contention is absurd; by any account of the Confucians, they were clearly concerned about the human conduct, and what constituted the good life. If these are not ethical considerations, what are? (p. 64)

The problem is not limited to classical Chinese and Confucianism alone. I have suggested (Balagangadhara, 1988) that in India we are confronted with exactly the same problem. The 'ethical' domain itself is constructed differently; ethical language is not a normative language.

The intriguing question, apart from the truth-value of these claims, is about their intelligibility. What is the structure of the moral domain if it is not defined by norms? If ‘following rules’ is not characteristic for acting morally, how does one learn to act in a moral way? How is an ethical judgement possible without referring to norms? How are ethical disputes settled? And, above all, how is an identification of such a domain possible at all?

Surely, these are the questions that Shweder should be asking, but he does not. The reason for this is the relation between Orientalism and the social sciences that I have alluded to. The science of ethics in the Western intellectual tradition makes it impossible to conceive the domain other than in terms of norms, duties, obligations. An Orientalist is forced or constrained to describe ethics from elsewhere (in other cultures, that is) as ‘repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating’. This constraint on Orientalist thinking comes from ethical theorizing. However, if it is the case that such a normative domain does not exist in some non-Western cultures, what else can Orientalist discourse do except portray us as immoral?

On the other hand, if one would like to deny the ‘facts’ that Orientalism has dredged up—that, for instance, Indians have no moral norms—what routes could one travel? One could suggest that ‘Orientalism’ was prejudiced; one is more enlightened today; and that Indians are not immoral but merely moral cretins. Take your pick: moral idiocy or total immorality. These are the only two choices open to us if we do not realize the intimate relationship between Orientalism and the Western theorizing about ethics.

IV

Much more requires saying than has been said so far, but let me round off
here—reasons of space forbid anything else. What should the Indian intel-
lectuals be doing today, if their present is to have a future? What is the
future for what they are doing at present? I have tried to suggest that what
they are doing at present has no future. There is no future to a parrot-like
reproduction of Western theories—whether Marxian, feminist, or post-
modern. There is, however, a future for their present if they think through
the issues that Orientalism raises.

This article began with a citation from Partha Chatterjee. Let me also
end with citations, both of which come from Partha’s books. The first is
original to Gandhi; the second is Partha Chatterjee’s own conviction. As we
read through them both, let the distance as well as the nearness between
the two sink in. And then, perhaps, we could ask ourselves the question:
what is the future of the present?

First Gandhi:

Let us not be obsessed with catchwords and seductive slogans imported from the West.
Have we not our own distinct Eastern traditions? Are we not capable of finding our
own solutions to the question of capital and labour? … Let us study our Eastern insti-
tutions in that spirit of scientific inquiry and we shall evolve a truer socialism and a
truer communism than the world has yet dreamed of. It is surely wrong to presume that
Western socialism or communism is the last word on the question of mass poverty.
(Cited in Chatterjee, 1996: 112)


Now that there is a much greater eagerness to face up to … historical material, its very
richness forces us to throw up our hands and declare that it is much too complex…. [T]he feeling of unmanageable complexity is, if we care to think of it, nothing other
than the result of the inadequacy of the theoretical apparatus with which we work.
Those analytical instruments were fashioned primarily out of the process of under-
standing historical developments in Europe. When those instruments now meet with
the resistance of an intractable complex material, the fault surely is not of the Indian
material but of the imported instruments. If the day comes when the vast storehouse of
Indian social history will become comprehensible to the scientific consciousness, we
will have achieved along the way a fundamental restructuring of the edifice of
European social philosophy as it exists today.

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