

CHAPTER 3

THE CREATION OF DIFFERENCE

For the Rede Lecture at the University of Cambridge in 1875, after his return from seven years as law member of the Viceroy's Council in India, Henry Maine set out to explain 'The Effects of Observation of India on Modern European Thought'. India shared with Europe, he said, as Sanskrit scholarship since the time of William Jones had revealed, a 'whole world' of Aryan institutions, customs, laws and beliefs. India was thus part of that 'very family of mankind to which we belong'. Yet, he went on, those Aryan institutions had 'been arrested in India at an early stage of development'. The country was, as a result, 'a barbarism', but it remained one which 'contains a great part of our own civilisation, with its elements as yet inseparate and not yet unfolded'. India was implicated with Britain, somewhat paradoxically, in a common origin, and yet was fundamentally different. In much the same way, the British were, in Maine's view, at once agents of 'progress', charged with setting India on the road to modernity, and at the same time custodians of an enduring India formed forever in antiquity. As Maine put it in the conclusion to his Rede lecture, India's rulers had to keep their watches set simultaneously to two longitudes. Throughout the later nineteenth century, as they constructed their 'India', the British had always to negotiate this disjuncture: between an acknowledgement of similarity, and an insistence upon difference. The task was never to be easy, nor was the result to be a coherent ideology of rule.¹

For men like Maine, India was Europe's past, or rather its various pasts. In India Europe could find, alive in the present day, its entire history. India was at once a land of Teutonic village 'republics'; it was 'the old heathen world' of classical antiquity; it was a set of medieval feudal kingdoms; in the coastal cities 'something like a likeness of our own civilisation' could even be discerned; and India was, of course, also an 'oriental' land forged by despotism. In the later nineteenth

¹ Henry Maine, *The Effects of Observation of India on Modern European Thought* (London, 1875. Reprinted, Folcroft, Pa., 1974); and Henry Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West* (London, 1871).

century all of these various conceptions of India existed side-by-side with little sense of incongruity. Each, in its own context, represented the 'real' India; and each, as we shall see, served the needs of the Raj.

The creation of varied pasts was not confined to India alone. For the Victorians, and indeed for Europeans more generally, history played a critical role in organizing the world around them. They used it, in particular, to create for themselves a national identity, even if often troubled and fractured, that brought together English, Scots, and (with difficulty) Irish in a 'United' Kingdom; and to constitute sets of relationships with the world outside that would position their own 'progressive' society at the leading edge of the development of civilization. Though the varied British 'histories' of India might be inconsistent with each other, they were united by this nineteenth-century 'historicism'. Together they shaped the way the British constructed the difference they ascribed to India. Above all, through a theory of 'decline' that complemented Britain's own 'progress', the history of India was made to accommodate not just the existence of the Raj, but a course of historical development that made the imposition of British rule its necessary culmination.

The Victorians set out, in addition, to order and classify India's 'difference' in accordance with scientific systems of 'knowing'. British progress could not be simply a matter of cultural pride. The study of India was thus made part of a larger scholarly enterprise in which the Victorians, as children of the Enlightenment, sought rational principles that would provide a comprehensive, and comprehensible, way of fitting everything they saw in the world around them into ordered hierarchies. The existence of empire, by imparting a sense of urgency to the process, spurred on this creation of knowledge, and at the same time the unequal power relationships of imperialism helped shape the categories within which that knowledge was constructed. No longer a product of mere assertion, in the manner of James Mill, Western pre-eminence was now demonstrated, or, more properly, assumed, as it underlay the scientific structures that grew up around it. Victorian science, like its historicism, thus necessarily if not always consciously, fitted India into a hierarchical relationship with Europe and provided the firm footing of legitimacy which the British sought for their Raj.

This chapter will examine the persisting tensions between the claims of similarity and those of difference as they informed the ideology of the late Victorian Raj in the arenas of history, race, and gender.

Chapter 4 will assess how, in the light of their understanding of India's past – and its present – the British devised structures for ordering its society.

INDIA'S PRESENT AND BRITAIN'S PAST

Maine is most widely remembered for his striking, aphoristic statement in *Ancient Law* (1861) that 'the movement of progressive societies has hitherto been a movement from Status to Contract'. In his Rede lecture he reiterated his conviction that civilization was 'nothing more than a name for the old order of the Aryan world' reconstituted around 'several property' in place of an earlier collective ownership. Indeed, he insisted fiercely, 'Nobody is at liberty to attack several property and to say at the same time that he values civilisation.' Such views expressed a concept of social progress whose roots went back to the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment. But Maine, with the other evolutionary theorists of his time, repudiated the utilitarian vision of an infinitely malleable human nature. Societies were different, and history had shaped the path each had followed. As John Burrow has written, in this view 'mankind was one not because it was everywhere the same, but because the differences represented different stages in the same process'. And, he continued, 'by agreeing to call the process progress one could convert the social theory into a moral and political one'. The superiority of Europe, and of private property, was thus preserved in an era when old certainties were fast disappearing.²

In place of Benthamite deduction from the abstract principles of utility, Maine sought a scientific basis for his evolutionary social theory in what he called a 'comparative' and 'historical' method of analysis. By this reasoning India's ancient institutions, linked to those of Europe by their common Aryan origin, became the germs out of which the social and political systems of modern Europe had emerged. They were not merely curious anachronisms, of interest only to antiquarians, but successive phases of one on-going process of development. The old Aryan institutions had persisted in India, Maine argued, partly because of the country's geographical isolation, shut in by the Himalayas and the sea, and partly too because all subsequent migrations after that of the Aryans had affected Indian social organi-

² J.W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1966), especially pp. 98–100.

zation to only a superficial extent. With the people insulated from outside influences, 'Brahminical religion' and the system of caste had preserved 'in extraordinary completeness' the society's 'old natural elements', along with the institutions and ideas which were their 'appendage'.

Yet Maine's theory was hardly coherent. Despite his commitment to an evolutionary concept of history, his use of the 'comparative' method had the effect of undermining the theory it was meant to sustain. In order to justify making inferences from India's present to England's past, Maine had inevitably to assume that India had had no history since the time of the early Aryan invasions. The result was to sharpen the distinctions the Aryan theory was meant to contain. As he gave India with one hand a history linked to that of England, with the other he took it away. The dichotomy between India's static society and England's progress ultimately overwhelmed any sense of parallel development. Similarity was necessarily subordinated to difference. To account for this difference, other contemporary thinkers, as we shall see, preferred to speak of India's Aryan past not in institutional but in racial terms, and in the process devised yet other ways of explaining its unique history.

Central to Maine's analysis alike of India's similarity and its difference was his conception of the village community. By Maine's time the notion of the 'village community' had already acquired an extended history both in India and in Europe. Building upon the writings of German Romantics, who sought their national origins in the Teutonic forests, Victorian liberals, anxious to discern the origins of Britain's distinctive freedoms, conceived of the Saxon village community as the training ground for all subsequent self-government. From the Saxon freeman, these 'Germanists' argued, a line could be traced directly to the parliamentary system of their own era.³

The idealized Indian village community, derived from the same Romantic imagination, was described in much the same language, but served purposes of a very different sort. The conquests of the first decades of the nineteenth century first brought the British face to face with the fortified villages of Maharashtra and the North Indian plains. In 1830 Sir Charles Metcalfe, defending the award of revenue collect-

³ J.W. Burrow, 'The Village Community and the Uses of History in Late Nineteenth-Century England', in Neil McKendrick (ed.), *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society* (London, 1974).

ing rights to these corporate village bodies, rather than to landlords or individual cultivators, wrote:

the village communities are little republics, having nearly everything that they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindoo, Patan, Mogul, Mahratta, Sikh, English, are all masters in turn; but the village community remains the same . . . If plunder and devastation be directed against themselves and the force employed be irresistible, they flee to friendly villages at a distance; but when the storm has passed over, they return and resume their occupations . . . This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India through all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered, and is in a high degree conducive to their happiness, and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence.⁴

As a Company official, Metcalfe's objectives were in large part fiscal and administrative. It was easier to rule by incorporating rather than destroying such entrenched institutions. Yet Metcalfe's romanticized vision of the village was difficult to reconcile with the community it purported to describe. Although the disruptions of the later eighteenth century had enforced a great degree of self-reliance upon the Indian village, it was at all times much less isolated, from state and market alike, and much less egalitarian than Metcalfe's rhetoric implied, for the community of cosharers rarely encompassed the entire population. Nevertheless, Metcalfe's text resonated through the years. Neither the decline of romanticism, nor that of the independent village community itself, which by mid-century had been incorporated into a system of law and a colonial economy that offered little scope for the exercise of its alleged virtues, much affected the way the village was perceived. Even the utilitarians, who disparaged the village community as an impediment to their plans for an agrarian revolution in India, spoke of it in terms that acknowledged its cohesion and independence.⁵

In the later nineteenth century policy and theory together combined to embed the 'village republic' ever more deeply into the ideology of the Raj. With the shift after the Mutiny to a bulwarking of what were seen as traditional and stable elites, and the consequent desire to

⁴ Cited in Dewey, 'Images of the Village Community', pp. 296–97.

⁵ Louis Dumont, 'The "Village Community" from Munro to Maine', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 9 (1966), pp. 77–89; Dewey, 'Images of the Village Community', pp. 307–28; Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 137–42.

dampen the pace of social change, the 'village community' came to define an ordering of Indian society which was at once unchanging and unthreatening. Indeed, almost paradoxically, one might argue, as the village community altered to accommodate the requirements of an increasingly interventionist state, the simultaneous need for a secure agrarian order evoked an ever more urgent ideological assertion of its enduring permanence. At the same time, from the 1860s onward, with the growth of evolutionary thought, the Indian village community took on a new, and larger, meaning. In 1871 Maine published *Village Communities in the East and West*. In this work he described India's villages, with their patriarchal clans and communal tenures, as marking out the earliest phase of an evolutionary process whose end point was to be found in contemporary England. India was, he insisted, 'the great repository of verifiable phenomena of ancient usage and ancient juridical thought'; he went on to pronounce its present village communities 'identical' with the 'ancient European systems of enjoyment and tillage'. Like Metcalfe's vision of the 'village republic', Maine's theory also had little place for the state or for caste; the latter, in his view, was 'merely a name for a trade or occupation'. The institutions of the village thus embodied for Maine that which at once most intimately linked, and yet separated, India and Europe.

Maine refused to let inconsistencies, whether in 'Germanist' theory or Indian practice, deter him from constructing a unilinear scheme of evolution for the village community. In large part this was because what mattered to him was in the end not India, but Europe. His principal objective was always to explain Europe's historical development in a way that inextricably connected 'civilization', progress, and private property rights. Not surprisingly, in consequence, Maine's views secured a wide and appreciative audience among Europe's privileged classes. As time went on, however, alternative views emerged. By the 1880s agrarian reformers, determined to secure occupancy rights for Irish, and for Indian, tenants, turned Maine's theory to their own purposes. They argued that the collective organization of property in these early communities justified placing restrictions on private property in their own day. Maine and his followers, in response, fearful of 'communistic' attacks on landed property, vigorously denied that joint property holding had ever existed in the early history of Europe, and so brought to an end the European career of the village community. At the same time in India, officials like B. H. Baden-

Powell, on the basis of the land settlement reports of the 1870s and 1880s, insisted that the Indian village community had never enshrined communal ownership of land and indeed owed little to the country's Aryan invaders. Patterns of landholding were, in this view, always heterogeneous, most often ryotwari, or household based; and they were shaped by the social requirements of indigenous Dravidian and aboriginal peoples. Still, the notion of the 'immemorial' village community remained as a compelling sign of the 'traditional' India which the Raj sought to sustain. Eventually this idealized village was appropriated in turn by India's nationalists, who saw in these communities evidence for the antiquity of an indigenous concept of democracy.

Insofar as he extended India's ancient past up to the present, Maine had of necessity, despite his evolutionary schema, to deny that India had ever passed through a 'feudal' stage comparable to that of medieval Europe. He acknowledged the possibility of a 'nascent' feudal development, but his need to leap directly from India's antiquity to its present foreclosed any further discussion. For many of Maine's contemporaries, however, India was *par excellence* a 'medieval', even a feudal society. The Indian official Alfred Lyall, for instance, in 1875, marching through Rajputana, wrote that 'Barring Oriental scenery and decorations, the whole feeling of this country is medieval; the Rajput *noblesse* caracoles along with sword and shield; the small people crowd round with rags and rusty arms; the king and his principal chiefs are lords of the country, and the peasant is at their mercy.'⁶ As one of the most philosophically and historically minded members of the Indian civil service, Lyall was to play a major role during his career in India in shaping an ideology for the late Victorian Raj.

Much in the description of India as 'medieval' was simply an extension of the 'picturesque' vision, attracted by the colourful and the exotic, which found such comparisons to be the most satisfactory way of coming to terms with India's difference from Victorian England. Nevertheless, the 'medieval' vision of India had much in common with that of the idealized village community. In each case one group was made to represent the whole: as the Jat community of the northern plains embodied the Indian 'village', so too did the princely states of Rajputana (now Rajasthan) personify a 'medieval' India. In the

⁶ Mortimer Durand, *Life of the Right Hon. Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall* (London, 1913), pp. 181–82.

princely state, as in the village, time stood still. The Rajput states, as Lyall wrote, had 'managed to preserve unaltered much of their original structure, built up out of the needs and circumstances of primitive life'. No other 'political fabric' in Asia, he insisted, had changed so little in the preceding 800 years. In this way, as India's princes were shaped to fit the needs of the Raj, India's past was once again created anew.⁷

The idea that the Rajput principalities represented an Indian feudal order took shape along with the British conquest of this desert region. In the 1820s, as Colonel James Tod negotiated the treaties which brought the Rajput chieftains under British suzerainty, he ordered their past as well as their present. In his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* Tod laid out in over a thousand pages of print the customs and lore of all the major Rajput states, and he did so with such authority that nearly a century and a half later the old Brahmin guide taking tourists through the Chitor fort would refer to Tod as 'our historian'. For Tod 'the leading features' of government among peoples in the 'same stages of society ... must have a considerable resemblance to each other'. The 'martial system' of the Rajputs, with its feuds and rivalries, its ties of lordship and vassalage, was similar, he wrote, lumping all these peoples together as medieval, to that of the ancient German tribes, the Franks, and the Gothic races. Hence, the Rajputs too had to possess a feudal order. Indeed, anxious to turn aside the 'contempt for all that is Asiatic' which, he said, too often marked 'our countrymen in the East', he proudly insisted upon Rajput participation 'in a system hitherto deemed to belong exclusively to Europe'. Despite 'general decay' during long periods of Muslim rule, Tod argued, much still remained of these 'ancient institutions', especially in such places as Mewar, which was 'worthy of being rescued from oblivion'.⁸

Other officials extended this 'feudal' analogy to princes outside Rajputana. George Campbell, for instance, compared the eighteenth-century Sikh states in the Punjab to the princes of medieval Germany. It was, however, he said, a 'puzzle' how these Sikh Jats, who had 'for many hundred years' never seen anything except their village communities, should create a 'complete and fully organized feudal system'. The only explanation Campbell could offer was that 'the same feudal

⁷ Alfred C. Lyall, *Asiatic Studies*, vol. 1 (London, 1884), p. 208.

⁸ James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, 2 vols. (reprinted, London, 1914), pp. 108–15, 155–58.

system which prevailed in Europe is a sort of natural instinctive habit of the Aryan race when they go forth to conquer'. Only a racial ideology could undo what the same ideology had created in the Aryan 'village community'!⁹

One of the more attractive features of this Indian feudalism for the British was the way its dispersed sovereignty served as a check on 'Oriental despotism'. Lyall, for instance, contrasted the Maratha ruler Sindhia, 'a despot of the ordinary Asiatic species, ruling absolutely the lands which his ancestor seized by the power of a mercenary army', with the Rajput states, where the 'feudal lords' counterbalanced the sovereign power of the prince, 'exactly as the barons of Europe did, and very effectively prevent him from becoming an arbitrary despot'. As a result, he said, although the peasantry were often reduced to near serfdom, the 'feudal system of Rajputana' was 'the only free institution of India'. A system of government that could be described by analogy with that of Europe, even the Europe of the Middle Ages, was by definition superior to a system which was purely 'Oriental' in character.

The 'feudal' view of princely India did not go wholly unchallenged. By the 1880s many officials, including Lyall himself, had determined that the political system of the Rajput states was shaped not by ties of vassalage but by those of kinship. The Rajput chief, Lyall argued, was 'the head of a clan which has for many centuries been lords of the soil which now makes up the State's territory'. Critics pointed out that such central feudal elements as the fief and the manor, homage and the knight's service, were all lacking in India. Although he emphasized Rajput participation in the larger feudal order, Tod was himself aware that in many of these states the 'vassal chiefs' claimed 'affinity in blood' to their sovereign. This 'tribal' ideology found its fullest expression, as we shall see later, in accounts of the society of the neighbouring province of the Punjab.¹⁰

The reconstruction of Indian 'feudalism' as a social order based on ties of blood and kinship inevitably implied that it was fundamentally different from any European form, and so called into question the possibility for India of any evolution, of the sort that had taken place in Germany, from a medieval to a fully modern state. Still, the notion

⁹ George Campbell, *Memoirs of My Indian Career*, vol. 1 (London, 1893), pp. 46–47.

¹⁰ Lyall, *Asiatic Studies* (1884), pp. 224, 244; Charles Lewis Tupper, *Our Indian Protectorate* (London, 1893), chapters 10–11; Tod, *Annals*, pp. 107–9.

of the Indian state system as medieval served important political purposes. Like the India of the idealized village community, a 'feudal' India lived in a past that extended into the present, yet one tied to elements of Europe's own past; it possessed its own indigenous institutions of self-government, yet needed the British to secure the larger order that warring principalities could not by themselves bring about.

Not only India's princes, but the Raj itself, so the British believed, exhibited 'striking analogies' to the medieval world. Such resemblances were not accidental. They reflected the powerful appeal of the medieval ideal in Britain. A number of elements converged to create this enthusiasm for the Middle Ages: the search for the picturesque, the Romantic creation of a national past, the Anglo-Catholic religious revival, and the abandonment of classical for Gothic forms in architecture. All, however, expressed an overriding nostalgia for what has been called 'the world we have lost'. In an age of industrialism and individualism, of social upheaval and *laissez-faire*, marked by what were perceived as the horrors of continental revolution and the rationalist excesses of Benthamism, the Middle Ages stood forth as a metaphor for paternalist ideals of social order and proper conduct. Though they had no intention of repudiating the material benefits which progress had brought to Britain, the medievalists looked to the ideals of chivalry, such as heroism, honour, and generosity, to transcend the selfish calculation of pleasure and pain, and recreate a harmonious and stable society.

Not surprisingly, the medievalist conception of an ordered society, together with its idealization of character in contrast to mere material wealth or intellect, made it an attractive vision for both the landed classes in Britain and the civil servant in India. Indeed, as the public schools by mid-century were propagating the virtues of the chivalrous 'gentleman', even people of middle-class origin could hope to join this elite. Whether at home or in the empire, and also in relations with women in the masculine world of Victorian Britain, like knights in armour, the noble were to protect, and cherish, the weak. Medievalism thus sustained the Raj not just by portraying India as itself a 'medieval' society of hierarchy and deference, but by holding forth an ideal of benevolent paternalism derived from ostensibly 'medieval' virtues.

As this medievalist ideal helped shape Disraeli's toryism, it is no surprise that in India the medieval fantasy reached its fullest flower in the 1877 Imperial Assemblage, when Disraeli's creation of Victoria as

empress was proclaimed to India's princes. The viceroy, Lord Lytton, a romantic medievalist and member as a youth of Disraeli's Young England group, determined to use this occasion to give India's 'feudal nobility' a firm institutional basis, and to secure for the British Crown as 'the recognized fountain of honour' a visible place 'as its *feudal* head'. He sought to set up an Indian Privy Council which would bring together the 'great ruling chiefs' in a common body with the viceroy and high British officials, while he established a College of Arms at Calcutta to order the Indian 'peerage'. In this way, Lytton argued, the 'Imperial supremacy of the British Crown' could be associated with all hereditary ranks and titles.

In addition, Lytton designed for the major princes large banners emblazoned with coats of arms. The armorial bearings, devised by a Bengal civil servant and amateur heraldist, embodied European notions of the 'history' of the various princely houses. The presentation of these banners to the attending princes formed the central event of the Imperial Assemblage. The decoration of the viceregal pavilion erected for the ceremony also invoked a lush Victorian version of the 'medieval' idiom. The shafts holding the canopy, for instance, were festooned with satin bannerets displaying the Cross of St George and the Union Jack, while the frieze hanging from the canopy displayed the rose, shamrock, and thistle, with the lion of India, embroidered in gold and silver. Silver shields, with strips of red and white satin, decorated with fleurs-de-lis and gilden lances, completed the decorative ensemble. To open the Assemblage, announced by a fanfare from six trumpeters in medieval costume, the viceroy entered the arena to the strains of Wagner's 'March from Tannhäuser'.

Although the Assemblage represented India as having at once a feudal past and a medieval present, the organizing principles of the Assemblage were not consistently 'medieval'. The selection of Delhi as the site for the event was shaped by a desire to create for the Raj a Mughal past, while the orderly layout of the British camp announced a strategy of colonial mastery whose message did not go unheeded. As Sindhia's prime minister Dinkar Rao reported after viewing the imperial camp from Flagstaff Tower, anyone who notices 'the method, the order, the cleanliness, the discipline, the perfection of the whole organization . . . will recognize at once the epitome of every title to command and govern which one race can possess over others'. The use of banners also attracted Lytton, not only as a way of representing

India as a 'feudal' society, but as part of a larger 'Orientalist' strategy of rule. In his view the Indian peasantry were an 'inert mass' capable of being moved only by their native chiefs and princes, and these princes in turn responded most effectively to symbol and 'sentiment'. The 'further East you go', he wrote, 'the greater becomes the importance of a bit of bunting'.¹¹

Lytton's use of 'feudal' imagery nevertheless raised awkward questions about the direction of India's political development. The secretary of state, Lord Salisbury, warned Lytton, in making announcements about the proposed 'native peerage', to avoid the 'technical expressions applied to similar institutions in Western Europe'. The plan for a Privy Council, above all, he insisted, had to be abandoned. Such a body might evoke memories of the 'great power' once exercised by the English Privy Council and give rise to 'expectations' which could not be realized. More generally, Salisbury argued, the 'constitutional bodies' of medieval England could not be introduced into India because they formed part of a 'very different system of government'. India's 'feudalism', in sum, was not, like England's, to be a stage on the road to a modern nation state. Hence, Lytton had to be content with the naming of twenty 'Counsellors of the Empress' – a title with no meaning for a body which never met.¹²

The medievalist vision also found expression in the creation of orders of knighthood. In India, as throughout the empire, such orders, and with them the numbers of knights, grew throughout the later nineteenth century. Four years after the Mutiny, in 1861, as we have seen, the first Indian order, the Star of India, was created. By 1877 there were several hundred holders, British and Indian, of its three ranks; and in 1878 it was joined by a new order, the Order of the Indian Empire, established on the occasion of the Imperial Assemblage. For British officials in India the coveted knighthood represented the capstone of a successful administrative career. Few among them, however, in keeping with the medieval ideal, could hope after the age of conquest to join the ranks of imperial heroes, or win a chivalric title in the manner of James Outram, whose tomb in Westminster Abbey proclaimed him the 'Bayard of India'. Of necessity,

¹¹ For imperial assemblage, see Bernard Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 189–207; Lady Betty Balfour, *The History of Lord Lytton's Indian Administration* (London, 1899), pp. 106–33.

¹² Lytton to Salisbury, 5 October 1876, Salisbury to Lytton, 20 November 1876, and address of 1 January 1877, in NAI For. Pol. A, December 1877, no. 286–496.

therefore, the princes, and above all the Rajputs in their desert fastnesses, given knightly rank, were made to take up the role of 'proud nobles'. In strikingly similar fashion, the Scottish Highlanders, newly bedecked in kilt and tartan, were created as a brave people with an ancient Celtic lineage. It is no accident that Victoria was herself drawn strongly to both the Highlands and to India's princes.¹³

Yet, as in the case of Lytton's proposed Privy Council, Indian membership of orders of knighthood on the British pattern forced India's rulers once again to confront the question of what it meant to describe that society as 'feudal'. Although the government endeavoured to maintain a rough parity in numbers between the British and the Indian members of the Indian orders, Indian initiates were rarely 'dubbed' as knights when they were invested with the insignia of the order. On this ground – and also because financial contributions were considered 'quite unsuited to India and Indian ideas' – the customary fees charged for the conferment of knighthood were remitted. But in consequence, as they were not properly 'knights', so officials such as H. M. Durand at the Foreign Office argued, the Indian members of these orders were not entitled to be called 'Sir'. In the end such an invidious distinction between the races in the mode of address could not be sustained, and the Indians were addressed by the usual titles.¹⁴

Hostility to the incorporation of Indians in ritual forms derived from medieval Europe nevertheless persisted, and even grew more intense as time went on, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter. The British peerage, for instance, with only a handful of exceptions, remained at all times closed to Indians. As Curzon wrote when he was planning his own durbar in 1902, however 'illustrious' the Indian chiefs, their traditions did not require, for their conservation, 'the varnish of a purely European invention'. I do not think, he continued, that 'Maharajas or Rajas will be any the better or the happier for being converted into Dukes, Marquises, Earls and Barons'. Such titles, with coats of arms of the sort Lytton had devised, represented ideas that were 'essentially foreign to Indian history and practice'. In similar fashion, Curzon eschewed a 'medieval' for what he regarded as a

¹³ Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, 1981), pp. 220–29; Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 15–41.

¹⁴ See note of H.M. Durand of 7 February 1889, and correspondence in NAI files For. Secret-I, March 1889, no. 56–76, and For. Intl-A, June 1887, no. 356–66.

Mughal, or 'Saracenic', decorative scheme for his durbar. As he wrote disdainfully of Lytton's banners and flags, 'so far as these features were concerned, the ceremony might equally well have taken place in Hyde Park'. In his view, Britain ought to represent its empire as Indian, not its Indian subjects as Europeans.¹⁵

Whatever its manifestations, medieval nostalgia was invariably shot through with irony. By its very nature it involved an effort to preserve that which the British were in the process of destroying, and indeed, as they built their empire, could not help but destroy. This destruction was visible, if with an ample measure of self-deception, to those engaged in the colonial enterprise itself. Tod, for instance, insisted that British 'generosity' had 'rescued' the Rajputs 'from impending degradation and destruction' at the hands of their Afghan and Maratha neighbours. Yet, he said, the British alliance was itself 'pregnant with evil', liable to 'lay prostrate' these 'ancient relics of civilization'. Tod nevertheless maintained that by a scrupulous policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of these states it was possible to restore the 'harmony and continuity' which had once existed, and so 'perpetuate this oasis of ancient rule'. Lyall, fifty years later, in similar fashion spoke of British rule as having 'rescued' the Rajput states from the anarchy that had followed the decline of Mughal rule. He recognized as well that the 'listless security produced by our protection' had brought about a 'rapid deterioration' in the effective functioning of the Rajput states. Yet he too clung to the hope, if not the expectation, that these 'ancient political structures' could be preserved.¹⁶

At one level, of course, such yearning for the past, and the consequent desire to keep 'the past' alive in India in the present, represented a disenchantment with Victorian British civilization itself. This was particularly evident, as we shall see in the next section, in patronage of India's crafts. Yet medievalism concealed as much as it revealed. No one was prepared, above all, to give up the 'progress' that had secured Victorian England its predominance, much less the Indian Empire itself, in pursuit of what can only be called a medieval fantasy. Renato Rosaldo has argued that 'imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of "innocent yearning" both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination'.¹⁷ Medievalism

¹⁵ Minute of 11 May 1902, NAI For. Secret-I, September 1902, no. 1-3.

¹⁶ Tod, *Annals*, pp. 100-5, 155-58; Lyall, *Asiatic Studies* (1884), pp. 204, 261-63.

¹⁷ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth* (Boston, 1989), chapter 3, especially pp. 68-74.

can perhaps best be seen as a form of theatre which was meant, through insistence upon the persistence of the past, to obscure, from the British themselves as much as from the Indians, the extent of change which occurred under British rule, and perhaps even the fact of colonialism itself. Certainly its theatrical character was readily apparent at the time to outside observers. As the painter Val Prinsep wrote with disgust of the arrangements for the 1877 Assemblage, 'They have been heaping ornament on ornament, colour on colour . . . They have stuck pieces of needlework into stone panels, and tin shields and battleaxes all over the place. The size . . . gives it a vast appearance, like a gigantic circus.' Of the ceremony itself he said, 'it was what is called a splendid sight, but so was Batty's hippodrome, and so is Myers's circus'. At its conclusion, he wrote simply, 'The curtain falls . . . Turn down the lights.'¹⁸ This grand assemblage, one might suggest, was not so different from the famous Eglinton Tournament of 1838, when a spectacular recreation of the Middle Ages, with armour, costumes, and horses, was brought to an abrupt halt by a downpour of rain that forced the knights to lower their lances and unfurl their umbrellas.

Lytton's 'medieval' India was not a sham in the manner of Eglinton, for the princes were being shaped to play a central role in the colonial order. What the British sought, one might say, was not to turn the clock back but rather to create a simulation of the Middle Ages, in which its institutions remained apparently intact even as they were fundamentally altered to suit the requirements of the new order. In so doing, perhaps, the British could convince themselves that they had bridged the gap between Maine's 'two longitudes'. In the end, however, medievalism illuminated only Britain's present, not India's past.

LANGUAGE, RACE AND HISTORY

Although the antiquity of India's past had been brought to light by the Oriental scholars of Warren Hastings's time, the process of recovering its rich and lengthy history was inevitably long drawn out. The path-breaking studies of the Sanskrit language undertaken by such men as Jones, Halhed, and Colebrooke in the 1780s and 1790s were followed in the first decades of the nineteenth century by exciting new discoveries. Among these were the decipherment of the Brahmi script,

¹⁸ Val C. Prinsep, *Imperial India* (London, 1878), chapter 3.

which revealed the existence of the third century BC Asokan era; the uncovering of Gandharan art in the northwest, which pointed to ties linking India and classical Greece; and the translation of the account by the Chinese pilgrim, Fa Hsien, of his tour in the fifth century AD, which, together with the discovery in 1819 of the Ajanta caves, gave historical depth to the Gupta Empire and the Buddhist experience in India. Although much remained unknown, above all the existence of the Harappan civilization, by the middle of the nineteenth century the major outlines of India's history had been established.

Confronted with this history, the British could not simply dismiss India as a land of 'changeless' villages and feudal principalities. India's extended past had at once to be explained and made subservient to the needs of the Raj. The British could, of course, assert their own superiority, as James and J.S. Mill had done, by pointing to the values, such as individualism and liberty, embedded in Western culture. They could also recite evidence of their technological prowess. By this measure Britain's superiority was palpable. The British had, after all, conquered India; and by the 1850s they were engaged in building railway and telegraph networks whose principles had been devised in Europe, not India. As Michael Adas has argued, this technological superiority was taken, even by such a sympathetic observer of indigenous societies as the traveller Mary Kingsley, as a justification for imperial dominance. On her return from West Africa, Kingsley wrote that she was ready to embrace 'the first magnificent bit of machinery' she came across as 'the manifestation of the superiority of my race'.¹⁹ Kipling too, despite his sympathy with much in Indian culture, in *Kim* proclaimed the 'te-rain' and even the museum keeper's spectacles, so gratefully received by the lama, as evidence of the West's superiority.

Yet the mere celebration of technology provided no way of explaining the course of India's history. Britain's mastery of nature – so long as one chose to accept technology as the appropriate measure for judging the worth of cultures – could perhaps be seen as marking out differing levels of achievement between itself and India, but by themselves such differences gave no indication of why India had been left stranded so far behind. To explain this apparent discrepancy many Victorian theorists in the latter half of the century turned to the Aryan theory of race, which joined England and India in a compelling discourse at once of history and of science. Initially, as Sir William

¹⁹ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men* (Ithaca, 1989), pp. 146–53, 175–77.

Jones conceived it, what was to become the Aryan theory amounted to no more than perceived affinities in certain key words and forms of grammar between Sanskrit and most European languages. On the basis of these similarities, Jones then speculated that the peoples who spoke these languages must have shared a common origin. But these speculations were no more 'scientific' in character, or widely accepted, than Jones's other more fanciful theories linking the ancient Hindus with peoples as widely scattered as the Ethiopians and the Scythians.²⁰

As a diffusionist, Jones insisted upon a common origin for all peoples; and he made no attempt to connect language with race. Nevertheless, over time, as comparative philology became more sophisticated, especially through the work of the German scholar Max Muller, Jones's loosely linked language family took on a new ethnic coherence and was given an ancestral home in southern Russia, from which the Aryans (as they were now called) were believed to have spread out to conquer and colonize vast tracts of land from northern India to western Europe. In this process language, culture, and the physical biological features that distinguish race became inextricably linked; and the Aryans as a race became sharply demarcated from other races such as the Semitic and the black African.

For the German Romantics who devised the theory, Aryanism was part of the search for the origins of the German *Volk*. They saw India as a land of ancient wisdom and the cultural cradle of mankind. In England, although many questioned the validity of Aryan racial categories and were unhappy about the use of linguistic affinities to define biological descent, the Aryan theory still had a powerful attraction in that its 'scientific' character allowed the similarities and differences of the Indians and the English to be assessed systematically. As such, Aryanism participated in the growing appeal, from the 1850s onward, of racial theory in general. Yet it was fundamentally different in character from that 'scientific' racism which sought to measure anatomical features such as the size of the brain and the shape of the head. To be sure, such classificatory schemes were not without adherents in India, for the Victorians, as their power came to encompass the entire world, sought to order that world in a coherent and 'scientific' fashion. H.H. Risley, census commissioner and ethnologist, for instance, denied the existence of any correlation between head size or shape and intelligence, but sought to demonstrate that the social status of the

²⁰ Marshall, *Hinduism*, pp. 15–16, 252–54, 260–61.

members of the various caste groupings varied 'in inverse ratio to the mean relative width of their noses'. Nevertheless the greatest utility of such 'sciences' as craniometry lay elsewhere, above all in the effort to assess the racial characteristics of Africans, and blacks more generally. Africans, in the British view, were deemed to have no history at all, because they lacked written records and ancient monuments. Hence, they were regarded as mere 'savages', whose bodies alone could define their enduring nature. India's extensive past could obviously not be treated with the disdain directed towards that of the African peoples. A place too had to be found in any racial theory for India's similarity with, as well as its difference from, Europe. Hence, as the British set out to place India in a racial hierarchy, they used philology to constitute a history, not biology to constitute a 'primitive' state of being.²¹

Aryan racial theory was itself not free of troubling difficulties. If the Indians and the British were alike Aryans, then how could the Indian people be marked out as inferior? How, indeed, could the British Raj be justified? The answer was to be found in evolutionary theory. Unlike the properly Darwinian view, in which weaker species suffered extinction, among human races, with perhaps such exceptions as the Tasmanians, those who fell behind in the struggle for survival instead experienced racial degeneration. While the European branch of the Aryan peoples triumphed over those of other races, those who went to India, as the amateur ethnologist and civil servant George Campbell wrote, 'lost their purity of race' by 'intermingling with the aboriginal races, and by the innate decay of enervation by the climate'.

The notion of Aryan decline in India was of course wholly dependent upon the characterization given to India's non-Aryan peoples. Victorian philologists categorized these people under the terms Turanian and Dravidian. The latter encompassed the major language grouping of southern India, first subjected to serious study by Robert Caldwell, in his *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* (1856); while the term Turanian was loosely used as a way of describing speakers of non-Aryan and non-Semitic languages, especially those of Ural-Altai derivation. From mid-century onward these categories, like that of Aryan itself, took on racial connotations; and Turanian especially, perhaps because

²¹ For Aryan theory, see Joan Leopold, 'British Applications of the Aryan Theory of Race to India, 1850-1870', *English Historical Review*, vol. 89 (1974), pp. 578-603; Herbert Risley, *The People of India* (London, 1915; reprinted, Delhi, 1969), chapter 1.

of its inherent vagueness, was adapted to the need of creating within India a racial foil to the Aryan conquerors. Overlapping and incorporating the Dravidian speakers, it defined those low caste aboriginal races who served, and had corrupted, their Aryan superiors. They were, as Risley put it, the oldest and 'most primitive' of India's peoples; their 'birthright' was that of labour for those above them.

As the Aryans settled in India, a few favoured communities, especially in the country's northernmost reaches, were able to preserve themselves from this 'intermixture' with 'Turanian blood'. The Jats, for instance, were described by George Campbell as 'in no degree Tartar or Turanian, but on the contrary in every respect intensely Aryan in their features, in their figure, in their language, and particularly in their institutions'. Risley too insisted that the Aryans of the Punjab and Rajasthan, with their 'very light transparent brown' skins, retained a 'high degree of purity' distinct from the bulk of the Indian people. For the most part, however, as the Aryan invaders migrated down the Gangetic valley, they came in contact with the Dravidians. The results were disastrous. As the 'men of the stronger race took to themselves the women of the weaker', the amount of 'pure Aryan blood' flowing through the veins of India's peoples became ever less, until by the British colonial period it had become 'infinitesimally small'. As we shall see, this racial distinction between those of the northern plains and those of the lower Ganges was to have its counterpart in the category of gender, which opposed the 'martial' peoples of the north to the 'effeminate' Bengali.²²

An account of India's evolution based on race created problems as well as solved them; for the Aryan thesis as applied to India's social institutions, by such men as Henry Maine, was used to deny that change of any sort had ever taken place. Far from declining, as we have seen, India's Aryan institutions, in Maine's view, remained as powerful at the end of India's historical development as at its beginning. Nevertheless, a racial theory had the great advantage that it could provide not only a 'scientific' account of the diverging paths followed by India and England, but it could also order England's 'progress' in relation to India's 'decline', and so mark out the precise stages of India's downward course. Despite the incompatibility of institutional 'changelessness' with racial 'decline', each served important purposes, and so their theoretical contradictions had to be ignored.

²² Campbell, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 59, 194–95.

Similarly, in their depreciation of racial 'mixing' the British were not always consistent. They took pride after all in the mixture of racial strains from across northern Europe which were supposed to have given the British themselves their exceptional vitality. Nor was India all that different. Campbell himself admitted that the 'modern Hindoos' were 'in fact, taken as a whole, a mixed race like ourselves, with much the same varieties of features that are found in Europe'.²³ What was at issue, then, was clearly not race itself, but processes of history and culture for which 'race' was a convenient marker. These inconsistencies are readily visible in the history, at once racial and cultural, that the British constructed for India.

For the racial theorists, the spirit of the Turanian or the Dravidian stood opposed in every way to that of the Aryans. The Turanian peoples, above all, had never declined, but rather, isolated in the jungles and hills of the south, they had 'preserved their nationality pure and unmixed'. Furthermore, the coming of Buddhism, from the fifth century BC, provided an occasion for these depressed peoples to rise up in opposition to Aryan, and Brahminical, domination. At the same time too, the era of Buddhist predominance, pre-eminently the two centuries before and after the coming of Christ, provided a new and attractive way of marking out India's ancient greatness. Untainted by the associations of Hinduism with 'superstition' and 'priestly despotism', which contributed so much to its disparagement at the hands of the Victorians, Buddhism had at its core a 'great teacher', who converted by persuasion to a 'rationalistic' faith. Buddhist art too, as revealed in such monuments as Sanchi, approached a European aesthetic which celebrated simplicity of design and a 'truthful' representation of nature. Impressed by the values associated with this 'classical' era, the British had to overlook the obvious paradox that those same people whom they had defined as racially inferior had created a religion, and an art, which represented the apex of India's cultural achievement.

The pre-eminence of the Buddhist era was further assured by the fact that one school of Indian Buddhist art, that of Gandhara in the far northwest, directly incorporated Western classical forms. As the art of European classical antiquity was for Victorians the measure of superiority for all art everywhere, art influenced by it had by definition to be superior to other Indian art. Alexander Cunningham, for instance,

²³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 2, 133.

who as first director of archaeology focussed his attention primarily on the excavation of Buddhist sites and the decipherment of Bactrian Greek coins, was convinced of the central role of Greece in providing inspiration for the finest Indian work. Vincent Smith too, with other historians, until well into the twentieth century argued for the superiority of the classically influenced Gandharan sculpture over that of Mathura and central India. In similar fashion, Alexander the Great's brief invasion of the Punjab in 326 BC was made the climactic moment of ancient India's history.²⁴

The decay of Buddhism, together with the waning of Greek influence following the fall of the Bactrian kingdoms, enabled the Aryans, by now thoroughly mixed with the indigenous peoples, to reassert their dominance. They did so, however, only by adopting as their own 'the absurd fables and monstrous superstitions' of the Turanians. The result was the absorption of the 'pure' Vedic faith into these 'abominations', and the subsequent emergence of the two predominant Hindu sects of Shaivism and Vaishnavism. These, wrote the architectural historian James Fergusson bitterly, 'brought God to earth, to mix and interfere in mundane affairs in a manner that neither the Aryan nor the Buddhist ever dreamt of, and so degraded the purer religion of India into the monstrous system of idolatry that now prevails in this country'. Nor did the enduring encounter with the Dravidians shape religion alone. As Risley put it, 'By the stress of that contact caste was evolved . . . and the whole fantastic structure of orthodox ritual and usage was built up.' In this view, contemporary Hinduism, as both a religion and a form of social organization, was the product of racial mixing and Turanian superstition. It had nothing to do with the 'genius' of the Aryan race. To be sure, some, with Fergusson, echoing Maine, insisted that the influence of Aryan 'intellect' remained 'powerfully impressed on every institution of the country'. Nevertheless, its racial history made India a fundamentally different place from Britain. As a society whose Aryanism had been overwhelmed by too intimate a contact with debased Turanians, it could never hope to emulate on its own the achievements of Europe.²⁵

India's downward trajectory was most visibly manifested in its art

²⁴ Vincent A. Smith, 'Greco-Roman Influence on the Civilization of Ancient India', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. 58 (1889), pp. 112–37.

²⁵ James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (London, 1876; 2nd edn, 1910), pp. 10–12, 34–47.

and architecture. Unlike the obscure and difficult Sanskrit texts, whose study in Victorian times was confined primarily to German scholars like Max Muller, the looming temples and intricate carvings which the English found all about them in India were easily accessible, even, with the invention of photography, in Britain itself. As Fergusson put it, announcing his study of India's monuments, they could be regarded 'as a great stone book, in which each tribe and race has written its annals and recorded its faith'. Architecture, one might say, provided, with philology, another language in which could be read the story of India's decline. The Turanians, in this view, though incapable of producing great literature, were 'extensive and enthusiastic builders', and so inaugurated India's architectural traditions. The results were, however, as Fergusson described them, not very impressive. All the south Indian builder sought, he wrote, was 'a place to display his powers of ornamentation, and he thought he had accomplished all his art demanded when he covered every part of his building with the most elaborate and difficult designs he could invent'. Nowhere was there to be found 'those lofty aims and noble results which constitute the merit and greatness of true architectural art'. The logic of decline further demanded that later structures be more 'degraded' than those of earlier times, so that the seventeenth-century Madurai temple became 'the most barbarous, it may be said the most vulgar' building to be found in India. Nor, in this degenerate period, could even borrowing from the West, of the sort undertaken by the later nawabs of Avadh, redeem Indian design. The Western forms would themselves only be tainted by, and so further degrade, a 'dying art'.²⁶

These judgements were informed not only by a theory of history, but by arguments drawn from the science of aesthetics. From the time of the Renaissance onward, Europeans had conceived that there existed a universally valid aesthetic shaped by certain principles of balance and proportion. By this standard India's architecture, above all such structures as South India's temples, were judged wanting. Instead of a 'tall central object to give dignity to the whole', most of them possessed lofty gateways surrounding inconspicuous central shrines. Such an arrangement of architectural elements was, as Fergusson asserted flatly, 'a mistake which nothing can redeem'. In the end, the lessons of science and of history were the same: temples that

²⁶ Fergusson, *History*, pp. 323–24, 341–42, 362–65, 604; see also Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (Berkeley, 1989), chapter 2.

housed the deities of a 'degraded' faith were, not surprisingly, constructed according to 'false' principles, while the use of a 'false' architectural design testified to the existence of a 'degraded' civilization.²⁷

Nor was architecture alone seen as flawed. George Birdwood, the premiere patron of India's arts in late-nineteenth-century Britain, argued that while the creative spirit had flourished in the era of India's 'archaic beginnings', it had then been stifled by Turanian influence. As a result, the 'nobler lovelier forms of flowers and trees' inherent in the Aryan 'love and worship of nature' were discarded in favour of a meaningless elaboration of form. Only on those rare occasions, above all during the Buddhist era and subsequently during the years of Islamic predominance, when the artist was free of the 'trammels' of Puranic mythology, could India's art escape what John Ruskin in 1858 called its wilful and resolute opposition to 'all the facts and forms of nature'. Yet the accurate representation of 'Nature' was hardly the real issue. What was at stake, in the discussion of art as much as of architecture, was not aesthetics, but politics. Neither India's art, nor the larger culture in which it was embedded, could be allowed to challenge Britain's, and Europe's, predominance.

In this historiography only intervention from without could halt India's spiral of decline. '*Ex Occidente Imperium*', as Risley put it, 'the genius of Empire in India has come to her from the West.' This was the 'determining factor' both of India's ethnology and its history. Yet no set of invaders could for long remain aloof from India's peoples, and its institutions. 'As each wave of conquerors', Risley wrote, 'Greek, Scythian, Arab, Moghul, that entered the country by land became more or less absorbed in the indigenous population, their physique degenerated, their individuality vanished, their energy was sapped, and dominion passed from their hands into those of more vigorous successors.' Even those warriors who seemed to emerge from within India, like the Marathas, could claim their 'individuality of character and tenacity of purpose' only as part of an inheritance which had come to them from supposed 'Scythian ancestors'.²⁸

India's Muslim conquerors, above all, were made to share with the Aryans the task of revitalizing a decadent society. To be sure, these

²⁷ Partha Mitter, 'Western Bias in the Study of South Indian Aesthetics', *South Asian Review*, vol. 6 (1973), pp. 125–36.

²⁸ Risley, *People of India*, pp. 53–61.

men were 'Oriental despots', subject to the 'effeminacy and corruption inherent in Eastern dynasties'; so that each of the Muslim states of India, despite a 'brilliant beginning', gradually sank into 'inevitable decay'. Still, as both Muslims and conquerors, their perceived role in shaping India's history was markedly different from that of the indigenous Hindus. For Europeans, as we shall discuss more fully in chapter 4, Muslims were always, unlike Hindus, a worthy adversary. As Lord Napier insisted, 'the progress of Mahomedanism was not entirely destructive'. Throughout the Muslim world its rulers, he argued, despite conquest and rapine, discovered 'generous abilities and tastes', which made their courts centres not only of warfare but of artistic patronage. These men adhered as well to a rigorous monotheism that was 'no vain superstition, but a true religion', and hence was deserving of respect.

The Mughal dynasty which preceded the British conquest was accorded an exceptional status. It contained 'liberal and humane' rulers such as the emperor Akbar; and these men constructed such buildings as the Taj Mahal, an architectural 'jewel' Fergusson considered almost, though not quite, on a level with that masterpiece of Western art, the Parthenon. Yet precisely because it had reached such illustrious heights the collapse of the Mughal Empire was all the more devastating. As Alfred Lyall wrote, 'assaulted by foreign invaders from outside, and distracted by internal revolts, it fell with a crash, and was torn to fragments by usurpers, successful rebels, and military adventurers'. In the 'anarchy' that resulted during the eighteenth century the Indian people were left a 'masterless multitude swaying to and fro in the political storm, and clinging to any power, natural or supernatural, that seemed likely to protect them'. In short, Lyall concluded, 'the people were scattered without a leader or protector; while the political system under which they had long lived was disappearing in complete disorganization'. Eventually, as the Viceroy Lord Lytton told the Imperial Assemblage in 1877, 'Providence' called upon the British to 'replace and improve' the 'constantly recurrent' anarchy of its strife-torn predecessors. India, in other words, had to be saved from itself.²⁹

Critically important in this creation of a history for India was not, of course, the mere fact of decline. What mattered, and what set the

²⁹ Alfred Lyall, *The Rise and Expansion of the British Dominion in India* (London, 1894; reprinted, New York, 1968), pp. 62–65.

late-Victorian theorists apart from those, say, of the eighteenth century, was the description of this decline in racial, rather than environmental or cultural, terms. This alternative mode of explanation had far-reaching consequences. As the effects of racial degeneration could never be eradicated, India's peoples, even though Aryan in origin, had now to remain forever distinct, different, and inevitably inferior. Asserting 'difference' in such terms provided powerful theoretical underpinning for the larger post-Mutiny disillusionment with liberal idealism. Science and history together, so this ideology seemed to say, made all thought of reform pointless. Such ideas, in particular, reaffirmed the sense of Christianity, not as a faith to be shared with the world, but as a sign of England's intrinsic superiority. This took visible form in Indian church architecture. Even as the British were devising an architecture that endeavoured to represent the Raj as Indian, through the use of 'Saracenic' forms, church architecture remained rigidly confined within European, and particularly English Gothic, styles. The few attempts to create structures for Christian worship adapted to Indian forms, such as that of F.S. Growse in Mathura or the Cambridge Brotherhood in Delhi, provoked only a fury of opposition. As one correspondent wrote, criticizing the Delhi college of the Cambridge Mission, 'I cannot but regard as fatal the idea of carrying on Christian teaching in a building entirely surrounded with symbols, suggestions and associations which are opposed to Christianity.' The parallels the British delighted to find between themselves and the Romans were also shaped to the same end. Few of the British by the 1870s and 1880s expected what they called the 'ancient polytheism' of India to give way, as had occurred in the Roman Empire of antiquity, to Christianity. As Alfred Lyall put it, 'the seasons and the intellectual condition of the modern world are unfavourable to religious flood-tides'. In practice, Christianity was a faith meant for Europeans, to be housed in European-styled structures. In the India of the Raj, race and faith went hand in hand. India had to be accepted, and ruled, as it was.³⁰

India's decline from an ancient Aryan glory did not, in the view of the late Victorians, degrade all elements of its culture. To the contrary, as men such as John Ruskin and William Morris argued, India kept alive in its crafts, as in its villages, cherished values of a shared past. Fergusson exulted that India's architecture was a 'living art' practised

³⁰ Lyall, *Asiatic Studies* (1884), pp. 159–60; Metcalf, *Imperial Vision*, pp. 98–104.

on the principles which caused its 'wonderful development in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries', while Morris praised India's art works for being 'founded on the truest and most natural principles'. In so doing these men expressed a growing British disillusionment with the fruits of the industrial revolution. Although its industrial might had raised Britain to the position of the most powerful nation on earth and secured their own prosperity, it had at the same time, the crafts enthusiasts argued, enshrined the making of money, degraded English taste with its mass-produced ugliness, and isolated the labourer from pride in his work. 'Degrading' labour, as Morris wrote, must be replaced with work conceived in the spirit of the village blacksmith or carpenter. In its condemnation of Victorian individualism the crafts movement inevitably participated in the larger 'medievalist' critique of contemporary society. Although Morris as a socialist sought a revolution to usher in a new communal society, his romantic and backward-looking vision brought him close to those who sought to preserve distinctions of status and custom, and to assert the authority of the Crown, the landed elite, and the state.

The crafts enthusiasts' vision of India's past closely paralleled that of men like Henry Maine. The art critic Birdwood, in opposition to Maine, insisted that the perpetuation of the past in India was not a product of the growth of unwritten custom, but arose directly from the Code of Manu. This body of ancient Sanskrit law, in Birdwood's view, established both the caste system and the enduring village communities. Yet the end result was identical. Caught up in an ordered system which provided 'place and provision' for everyone, India's craftsmen had no 'stimulus to individual exertion', and so had handed down the industrial arts of antiquity 'through 5,000 years to modern times'. India was a land which had escaped an unattractive industrial order, yet remained confined within an 'invincible immobility' that disabled the country from participating, like England, in the 'advancement of art'.³¹

Despite their hostility to industrialism, the crafts enthusiasts in no way emancipated themselves from the fundamental assumptions that sustained the imperial enterprise. They fully accepted the Victorian belief that the 'whole organization of social life in India', as Birdwood put it, was 'theocratic' in character, with, at its centre, the 'monstrous

³¹ George Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India* (London, 1880), pp. 136–40; Metcalf, *Imperial Vision*, chapter 5.

shapes' of Hindu idolatry. Imbedded in this religion, India's art inevitably expressed its values. Truly creative art was therefore inconceivable. In 1910, reflecting on his 'experience of seventy-eight years' in the study of Indian art, Birdwood asserted that he had never found any work that sought to give 'perfected form to the artist's own ideals of the good, the beautiful and the true'; and he went on, in a memorable phrase, to compare an image of the Buddha to a 'boiled suet pudding'. For Ruskin and his associates, as much as for their opponents, aesthetics remained bound to the service of politics. No matter how much they might criticize their own society, the crafts enthusiasts were never prepared to abdicate their moral superiority, and with it the predominance of Europe. The work of the artisan craftsman alone, safely contained within the village order, posed no threat to the supremacy of the Raj, and so could secure unstinting praise. Everything else – whether of art or architecture – of necessity expressed only the 'barbarism' of a debased land.

Whether India's history was described in terms of 'decline' or of 'invincible immobility', in either case, then, the outcome was the same. Contradictions within the ideologies of race and language were ignored; the similarities demanded by the Aryan theory were accommodated; while difference was accentuated and shaped to insure a space in India for the Raj. Invariably, India was linked to Europe's past only in antiquity, and only where the ties to Europe were constituted within an unthreatening village society. The creation of an enduring 'traditional' India, in its crafts as in its village communities and among its princes, as we shall see later, carried with it as well a rigorous enclosure of the 'native' within this 'traditional' space. As the prince had to play the role of feudal 'vassal', so too did the craftsman have to work within what the British 'experts' who controlled the Schools of Art and the lavish *Journal of Indian Art* had determined was a properly 'traditional' style. In no way did the preservationist ideal simply involve the preservation of what existed.

GENDER AND THE COLONIAL ORDER

The British conceptualized the difference between Great Britain and India in terms not only of history and race, but also gender. Such distinctions had a long history. As far back as the 1750s, Robert Orme had entitled a chapter of his account of India, 'Effeminacy of the

Inhabitants of Indostan'. As he wrote, 'we see throughout India a race of men, whose make, physiognomy, and muscular strength convey ideas of an effeminacy which surprizes when pursued through such numbers of the species, and when compared to the form of the European who is making the observation'.³² With the growth of empire, gender, like race, helped define the contrast between ruler and ruled, and so provided a way to order Britain's relations with its Indian subjects. Throughout, though the two are not identical, the categories of gender intersected with those of race. As a result, British men, British women, Indian men and Indian women were all fitted for distinct roles within the ideology of the Raj. Together they were made to enact a set of gendered notions of India's 'difference'. Yet these distinctions could be sustained only by rigorously containing, even disowning, the similarities of gender, of male and female, that cut across the hierarchy of race and rule.

Distinctions based on gender gained an avowedly 'scientific' rigor with the growth of a powerful domestic ideology in Britain during the early nineteenth century. According to this theory, innate and demonstrable biological differences defined a fundamental difference between male and female. By their very nature women were fragile, passive, and emotional, in contrast to men, who were held to be strong, active, and intellectual. These differences in the structuring of the body, in turn, dictated differing patterns of behaviour for men and women. Men were to be active in the public world, competing against each other for power and wealth; while women, from the sanctuary of the home, were to nurture their husbands and children, and so uphold the society's values. Women possessed great power, for their task was the moral regeneration of society; but it was a power that made itself felt indirectly, by shaping the consciences of men.

The existence of empire sharpened these distinctions of gender. By its very nature the British imperial experience, as Ashis Nandy has written, brought into prominence the 'masculine' virtues – such as control, self-discipline, and the like – and de-emphasized the 'feminine' virtues, such as tenderness and feeling, which were expressive of 'the softer side of human nature'. The everyday life of the British in India, with women for the most part secluded, though, as we shall see, by no means inactive, in darkened bungalows, and with men engaged

³² Robert Orme, 'Effeminacy of the Inhabitants of Indostan', in *Of the Government and People of Indostan*, pp. 42–43.

in the work of empire in court and camp, reinforced the distinctions between home and the world, and between the private and the public, which lay at the heart of the British domestic ideology. The experience of the British in India under the Raj in this way reinvigorated dichotomies of 'masculine' and 'feminine', which then returned to England to nourish further the ideology of separate spheres.³³

Although domestic ideology defined coherent, if contested, gender roles in Britain, the construction of gender within the empire did not take shape in any explicit formulation. Rather, theories of gender, though forming a consistent set of assumptions and expectations, were embedded in the ideology of the Raj in a variety of often only half-recognized ways. Hence, each must be examined separately. It is necessary to look in turn at British ideas of their own masculinity as they sought to 'rescue' India's 'degraded' women; at the notion of India as a 'feminized' land, at once seductive and dangerous; at the presumed effeminacy, as Orme described it, of Indian men; and at the ambiguous role of the white woman, caught up in the centre of the hierarchies of race and gender. For the most part, for obvious reasons, the voice that enunciated this vision was not only British but male.

For the Victorians, as heirs of the historical anthropology of the Scottish Enlightenment, the distinctive gender roles of their own domestic ideology were markers by which progress in civilization everywhere could be measured. The more 'ennobled' the position of women in a society, the 'higher' its civilization. By this measure, not surprisingly, India lagged far behind Britain. In contrast to the 'pure' and 'modest' demeanour presumed to define English women, India's women were not 'ennobled' by their men but instead 'degraded'. This state of moral degeneration, as we will see, was visibly represented by the *zenana* and the veil. Confined to a life of languid idleness in closed rooms, hidden from view, India's women were seen as suffused with an unhealthy sexuality and a disabling passivity. As India's men, so the British conceived, did not properly order their households – much as the country's previous rulers had failed to provide proper governance for the society as a whole – the British determined that they themselves should act as the protectors of India's women. In so doing they could not only, as they saw it, 'rescue' these unfortunate creatures; they could also make manifest their own 'masculine' character and proclaim their moral superiority over the Indian male.

³³ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi, 1983), pp. 31–34.



3 *Lord William Bentinck*, by Richard Westmacott (1835). This full length bronze statue of Bentinck, portrayed as aloof and serenely self-confident atop a circular drum, announces Britain's new commitment, recorded in an inscription on the rear of the base, to 'elevate the moral and intellectual character' of its Indian subjects. In the *sati* scene an Indian woman, oblivious to the cries of her children, is shown as she prepares to mount the pyre.

Few of their activities in India gave the British greater satisfaction than this vision of themselves as the reformers of Indian morality, which left as its legacy a range of enactments from the abolition of sati in 1829, through the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, to the Age of Consent Act of 1891, and beyond. Though these acts were very different in character, none of them immediately affected large numbers of people. Satis, for instance, when enumerated in Bengal during the 1810s and 1820s, though sufficiently numerous to be readily visible at 500 or 600 a year, involved only an infinitesimal fraction of the millions of people in that province alone; while enforced widowhood and child marriage remained at least as prevalent after the enactment of British reform legislation as before. Yet the dramatic representation of these 'evils' was essential to the self-image of the Raj. The statue of Bentinck, for instance, erected soon after his departure from India in 1835, praised him for 'abolishing cruel rites'; on the base is depicted an affecting bas-relief of a half-clothed woman, her baby pulled from her exposed breast, being led to the funeral pyre. (See fig. 3.) None of Bentinck's other achievements, which include the introduction of Western education, gained such graphic representation.

From the earliest days of the Raj sati compelled widespread attention. Despite its infrequent occurrence, the fascination with this event is not surprising. With its immolation of a living woman in a raging fire, sati, even more than the public execution, catered to the English obsession with death as spectacle. In the British imagination the event was also highly sexualized. The scene on Bentinck's statue evoked a salacious mixture of sex and violence, for it showed the woman's sari slipping from her hips and her bare breasts, now rubbed smooth, pushing forward on the curved pedestal at the centre of the composition, while the governor-general presided majestically above. It was easy, as well, to conceive of sati as emblematic of much that was wrong with Indian society. Whether the widow walked by herself in a trance-like state onto the pyre or was pushed from behind by relatives and priests, the act of sati represented the Indian woman as the helpless victim of a blood-thirsty and superstitious faith. India, sati seemed to say, was at once an exotic and a barbarous land.

Yet the representation of sati as an embodiment of India's difference could succeed only by the suppression of similarity. This was not an easy task. In the late eighteenth century, and in the first years of the



4 *An Indian Woman Burning Herself on the Death of her Husband* (date and author unknown, but probably c. 1810). A product of the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century romanticized depiction of the Hindu widow's self-immolation as a heroic act, this drawing shows the widow, as the funeral pyre is lit, pouring oil over herself, while three British officers calmly watch from on horseback.

nineteenth, the British had frequently romanticized, as an ideal of conjugal fidelity, the self-sacrifice of the bereaved widow who selflessly braved the flames. Several paintings even show the widow as a heroic figure nobly transcending death in the manner of Captain Cook in Hawaii. (See fig. 4.) Nineteenth-century domestic ideology too, as it took shape in the 1810s and 1820s, presented the ideal woman as not only moral and innocent, but imbued with a spirit of self-renunciation. She was not to think of 'self-development', but was meant to sacrifice herself for her 'high and lofty mission' in society. For the British themselves, however, such female 'self-renunciation' was not meant to be that of the sati who followed her husband onto the pyre. From this act the British recoiled in horror. It was, nevertheless, as the ultimate 'self-sacrifice', not so far removed from the 'self-abasement' or 'self-annihilation' that, especially for feminist critics, defined the core of the domestic ideology. In a Britain where gender roles were contested, the existence of a connection between Indian self-immolation and the ideals of domesticity could not be avowed. To the contrary, only a vigorous attack on sati could effectively deny such similarities by displacing them onto an India seen as barbaric and inhumane. The suppression of sati had to be made an affirmation of Britain's superiority, and with it that of Christian civilization. Such a task fell with special urgency upon evangelicals, for they had played a central role in creating the notion of women as morally pure and self-sacrificing. Hence, from the outset, they took the lead in the campaign against sati, and they used the representation of its 'horrors' to induce English audiences to support evangelicalism. In time, as a 'moral' India was constructed in accordance with the ideals of Victorian liberalism, its women would presumably adopt an 'appropriate' mode of self-sacrifice – as 'angels in the house', not as victims upon the pyre.

Among British officials in India a different perspective informed the campaign against widow burning. Unlike the British at home, they sought to challenge sati from within Indian tradition, and so make themselves the masters of that tradition. In India sati's opponents and supporters alike accepted the assumption, a product in large part of late eighteenth-century Orientalist scholarship, that India was a society ruled by 'scripture' and the self-interest of Brahmins, and that its people were so tightly bound by the constraints of religion that they possessed little independent agency. Thus, on the one hand, those who opposed the abolition of sati argued that the practice was a

cherished element of the Hindu religion with which it would be unwise, if not foolhardy, to interfere; while those who supported abolition equally denied any intention of introducing into India 'modernizing' notions of 'individual rights'. Instead of imposing outright their own ideals, so Bentinck and his supporters argued, they sought only to establish a 'purer morality' within forms of legitimation shaped by a vision of Britain as an indigenous Indian ruler. As Bentinck said, disavowing any intent to convert Indians to Christianity, 'I write and feel as a legislator for the Hindus and as I believe many enlightened Hindus think and feel.' Authority for suppression had thus to be found in Brahmanic 'scripture'. The British approached various pandits, and from them secured interpretations of selected Sanskrit texts which they used to support a claim that sati was not an essential part of the Hindu religion. In either case, the will of the widow mattered not at all; what was 'proper' was what could be defined as 'scriptural'. Bentinck's decision to outlaw sati was therefore, as he saw it, a 'restorative act' meant to enable Indians to act according to the 'purest' precepts of their religion. In practice, of course, this 'restoration' involved the introduction of 'modern', which is to say colonial, notions of the country's past and its religion. In the process too, not surprisingly, Hinduism was meant to give way to a 'higher' religion.³⁴

The central assumptions of the sati debate continued in the later-Victorian era to inform legislation for the reform of Indian morals. Always, as in the case of sati, discussion of the condition of Indian women involved an outraged expression of horror at Indian degradation, and the consequent need for the British to save the Indians from themselves. The 1891 Age of Consent Act, for instance, which prohibited the consummation of marriage for girls below the age of twelve, provided an opportunity, as Mrinalini Sinha has written, for the British to 'demonstrate their liberal intentions in the face of the "uncivilized" and "unmanly" practices of the Bengalis'.³⁵ Similarly, in these later discussions, whether of widow remarriage or the age of marriage, 'scripture' always mattered more than custom, with the oldest texts accorded the greatest authenticity. At the same time, while

³⁴ Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women* (New Delhi, 1989), pp. 88–126.

³⁵ Mrinalini Sinha, 'The Age of Consent Act', in Tony Stewart (ed.), *Shaping Bengali Worlds, Public and Private* (East Lansing, 1989).

religion was seen as permeating Hindu society, those practices the British sought to discountenance were defined as marginal to, if not wholly outside, its core traditions. As the viceroy, Lord Lansdowne, told the legislative council in the Age of Consent debate, early consummation of marriage was not one of the 'great fundamental principles' of the Hindu religion, but one of a number of 'subsidiary beliefs and accretionary dogmas which have accidentally grown up' around it.

Much in this reformist ideology was internally inconsistent, if not contradictory. Although the British looked to ancient texts to define their ideal Hindu society, in fact the practice of the courts, inasmuch as they enforced Brahminical norms, encouraged precisely the kind of behaviour, such as avoidance of widow remarriage, that the government sought to discourage through its legislation. Similarly, although not accorded an independent voice of their own, Indian women were viewed at one and the same time as the passive vessels of 'tradition', and the site on which colonial officials, and with them upper-caste Hindu reformers, proposed to constitute a reformed society more closely fitted to Victorian ideals. Despite their avowed concern to avoid unsettling Indian religious belief, British reformers were in no doubt that there existed an absolute standard of 'morality', and that where, as Lansdowne insisted in the debate on the Age of Consent act, 'religion' and 'morality' were in conflict, the former had to give way. In their vision of themselves as moral reformers, as in their attitude towards Indian society more generally, the British could not escape the enduring contradiction between their self-imposed 'civilizing mission', with its ideal of an India remade in Britain's image, and their insistence upon maintaining an imagined India of enduring 'difference'.³⁶

As India's Hindu women, so the British conceived, were degraded by their sexuality and their vulnerability to priestly influence, so too was their religion itself feminized in its character. Above all, the British looked on in horror at a Hinduism that venerated female deities imagined as vicious and licentious in nature, such as Kali. Further, many Hindu devotional practices, especially those of India's

³⁶ Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Issues of Widowhood: Gender and Resistance in Colonial Western India', in D. Haynes and G. Prakash (eds.), *Contesting Power* (California, 1991), pp. 62–108; Lucy Carroll, 'Law, Custom, and Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 20 (1983), pp. 363–88; *Proceedings of the Imperial Legislative Council*, vol. 30, 19 March 1891, pp. 146–50.

peasantry, were stigmatized as 'mother goddess' cults. Drawing on the gender stereotypes of Victorian England, M. Monier-Williams described such 'guardian mothers' as 'more easily propitiated by prayer, flattery, and offerings', yet 'more irritable, uncertain, and wayward in her temper' than male salvation gods. At the same time, such deities, related, some thought, to Mesopotamian mother-goddesses, expressed the innate degeneracy characteristic of Dravidian peoples. Together, these characterizations, as they linked the discourses of race and gender, defined for the British a religion of unashamed sensuality and shallow emotionalism. This system of belief, by its very nature, stood in sharp contrast to the Protestant British conception of Christianity. Lacking the coherent belief and principled conviction that was taken to mark Christianity, Hinduism was of necessity effeminate because it was degraded, and degraded because it was effeminate. The Brahmin priesthood alone exercised authority within the religion. But theirs was not the self-mastered command of the properly masculine elite. It was only the guileful concealment and dissimulation of the weak.³⁷

The contrast between India's degraded sensuality and the masterly redemption of the British nourished a larger, enduring, opposition between an ordering Europe and a feminized 'Orient'. Such an Orient, with its erotically charged excitation, was perhaps most visibly manifested in the French painting of the imagined world of the harem and the shapely figure of the odalisque. Though John Frederick Lewis created such scenes for English audiences, he, with the French 'Orientalist' painters, worked almost exclusively in the Middle East. In paintings of India, though the landscape was often evoked in soft and yielding tones, representations of the erotic were infrequent, and confined for the most part to scenes of the 'nautch', or dance. Colonial officials, especially in the early years of British rule, participated as observers in dance performances given by Indians; and to some degree the 'nautch' dancer in colonial painting can be seen as a sexual being presented for the privileged, and controlling, gaze of the European male viewer. Yet the British response to Indian dance, particularly in Victorian times, was ambivalent. Many, like G.O. Trevelyan, found the nautch 'extravagantly dull', while others reported that the dancers were, 'as usual, ugly'. At best, as one observer recounted a visit to Lucknow, 'the dancer slinks to and fro with panther steps on her white

³⁷ Inden, *Imagining India*, pp. 115–22.

cloth, raises her eyes to the heavens before closing them to smack her lips together, and sings verses from a sleepy lullaby, sways beneath her veils, stretches out her arms, writhing like a serpent in paradise until the highlight of her act is over, and another girl, more supple even than her . . . takes her place and sways to and fro in her turn'.³⁸

In the creation of a feminized India the figure of the prostitute took centre stage. For the British, the prostitute, alluring and dangerous, at once symbolized India's degradation and generated a set of practical problems of regulation and control. As a result, in contrast to the voyeurism common to the male European vision of the Middle East, where the British, on the outside looking in, were free of the day-to-day responsibility of maintaining order, in colonial India the play of male erotic fantasies had for the most part to be contained within the confines of a moralized imperial authority. Even so, an India seen as suffused with sensuality offered ample scope for the imagination; and the imagination, in its turn, often shaped administrative action. One arena, not surprisingly, in which the existence of prostitution revealed itself was the Hindu religion. There it took the shape of the devadasis, women married to a god and dedicated to his service in the temple. Unable, or unwilling, to conceive of a religious system in which the erotic and the spiritual could be joined together, the British called this practice 'temple prostitution'. Through the use of such a term the unimaginable could be contained, and so controlled, and appropriate righteous indignation mounted against its existence. Even though a Hindu petitioner in Madras claimed that girls dedicated to a temple lead a life 'very similar with that class of females called nuns in Roman Catholic churches', while British critics from their side captiously compared the 'immorality' of such women with that of 'ballet-girls' on the London stage, the Indian authorities insisted on India's essential difference. Temple prostitution, they argued self-righteously, was 'equally immoral and immemorial'. Unlike English ballet girls, who sometimes 'preserve their virtue in spite of trials and temptations', in 'the case of the pagoda girl prostitution is the object of her dedication to the temple, and practice it she must to the end of her existence'.³⁹

Anxiety about the prostitute loomed largest in connection with the military. As British troops in India were not allowed to marry, and the

³⁸ Sten Nilsson and Narayani Gupta (eds.), *The Painter's Eye: Egon Lundgren and India* (Stockholm, 1992), p. 128.

³⁹ See correspondence in NAI Home Judl.-B, May 1874, no. 169-74.

scourge of venereal disease regularly incapacitated large numbers of soldiers, the military authorities endeavoured to make available in cantonments a supply of prostitutes subject to medical inspection. This policy, formalized in the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868, modelled upon that in force for British ports, brought down upon the government the wrath of moralists at home, who disliked the official recognition of prostitution which these acts implied. Their opposition, together with that of British feminists, secured the reluctant repeal of both the British and the Indian Acts by 1888, although the Indian military authorities, ever anxious to contain the spread of venereal disease, managed to circumvent much of the effect of repeal by the promulgation of 'sanitary' regulations for cantonment areas.⁴⁰

More was at stake in these controversies, however, than the simple provision of prostitutes for soldiers. Especially when contrasted with the comparable British acts, the Indian regulations make clear how the treatment of Indian prostitutes at once constituted, and was informed by, assumptions about enduring Indian 'difference'. In Britain, for instance, moral reformers, with their feminist allies, fought for the right of women, even as prostitutes, to be free of coerced bodily searches and registration; and they endeavoured to 'rescue' 'fallen women' by exhortation and recuperative treatment. No such concern for women's civil liberties cumbered the Indian debates, nor was there talk of redemption or 'rescue'. The Indian reformers were concerned only to secure an appearance of 'purity' in the behaviour of the British themselves. Prostitution itself mattered only where European women were involved, for their 'immoral' behaviour, by inverting the 'proper' hierarchies of race and gender, would bring discredit on the Raj. The fate of the common Indian prostitute evoked no interest. Prostitution was, after all, so the British commonly believed, an hereditary caste profession, recognized in the Hindu law books.

Furthermore, the Indian acts extended to major urban areas throughout the country, not just to selected ports, and hence implied that prostitution was a widely spread menace to the security of the Raj. While 'respectable' British women might openly traverse the city streets, if only in certain times and places, no such secure public arena existed for her Indian counterpart. Almost any Indian woman outside the seclusion of the zenana could thus potentially be suspect as a

⁴⁰ Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905* (London, 1980), especially chapters 1–3.

prostitute, and a bearer of disease. As Lord Kitchener, the commander-in-chief, warned his troops in 1905, 'the common women as well as the regular prostitutes in India are all more or less infected with disease.' Venereal disease in India was regarded, moreover, as not just an unfortunate infection, but rather as a symptom of a 'diseased' society. As Kitchener wrote, 'Syphilis contracted by Europeans from Asiatic women is much more severe than that contracted in England.' It assumes, he continued, 'a horrible, loathsome and often fatal form'; and he proceeded to list an array of frightening symptoms, above all that of the body rotted and eaten away by 'slow, cankerous, and stinking ulcerations'. India was a land in which sexuality, disease, and degradation were linked together, and inscribed on the bodies of its women.⁴¹

The notion of a sexualized India was not, of course, exhausted by the figure of the prostitute. As we shall see later, in discussing Rudyard Kipling's Indian stories, the seductive attraction of India was by no means wholly contained by its enmeshment in the administrative concerns of the Raj. Furthermore, the contradiction between the vision of the prostitute as a contaminated being, and the urgency with which the government endeavoured to make prostitutes available to its soldiers, pointed to another fear, unacknowledged but haunting – that of homosexuality. Such an 'effeminate' pattern of behaviour among the members of the ruling race had to be avoided at all costs. Nevertheless, in the hyper-masculine society of the Raj, a barely suppressed homosexual tension can be seen shaping much of the erotic attraction of India. Such was the case, above all, in the British association with the 'martial' tribes of the Frontier. There alone, one might argue, did the British find in India a sense of excitement comparable to that aroused by the veil and the harem of the Middle East.

A society defined by sensual indulgence created, in the British view, 'effeminate' men as well as 'degraded' women. Indeed, the very opposition of a 'feminized' India to a 'masculine' Britain had as a central object the devaluing of the Indian male. Insofar as the British claimed for themselves the right to protect Indian women from the evil effects of 'tradition', Hindu males, denied a claim on 'masculinity', were reduced to a helpless ineffectuality. The growth of the idea of Indian 'effeminacy' can be traced in part to eighteenth-century theories of

⁴¹ Philippa Levine, 'Venereal Disease, Prostitution and the Politics of Empire: The Case of British India', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 4 (1994), pp. 579–602.

climatic determinism, in which heat and humidity were seen as conspiring to subvert manliness, resolve, and courage. As Orme wrote, 'Satisfied with the present sense of ease, the inhabitant of Indostan has no conception of anything salutary in the use of exercise.' Diet reinforced this preference, for the Indian, in Orme's view, ate only rice, which was an 'easily digestible' food, obtained with little labour, and thus 'the only proper one for such an effeminate race'. The most famous depiction of the debilitating effect of India's climate is surely that of Macaulay, who wrote of the languor and indolence produced by the 'constant vapour bath' in which the Bengali spent his days. The result, not surprisingly, was that his 'physical organisation' was 'feeble even to effeminacy'. There had never perhaps existed, Macaulay tellingly concluded, 'a people so thoroughly fitted by habit for a foreign yoke'. Reprinting this passage in his authoritative *India* some fifty years later, John Strachey concurred. Bengal remained as Macaulay had represented it.⁴²

The experience of Bengal, the area which they conquered first and knew best, powerfully shaped British views of Indian effeminacy. Not only the climate, but much in Bengali dress and customs confirmed this stereotype. The Bengali male's voluminous *dhobi* could easily be deprecated as a woman's dress; Bengalis, perhaps more than those of other regions, were devoted to female deities, among them Kali and Radha; and male devotees sometimes assumed the dress and demeanour of women as a mark of their submission to the god. In all of this, of course, the British, knowing little and caring less about Bengali belief, saw what they wished to see. Conquest itself reinforced this gender stereotyping. If not a land *of* women, for the 'sturdy' peasant gained British respect, India was a land ruled *by* women, or rather womanly men, who ran from battle, and so deserved their subjugation. To be sure, as their conquests reached northern India, the British encountered groups whom, as we shall see in chapter 4, they called 'martial races'. But praise of Punjabi 'manliness' did not eradicate the stereotype of Indian effeminacy. It only carved out an exception, which cast the larger Indian, and especially Bengali, 'effeminacy' ever more sharply into relief.

Within Bengal the British detested, above all, the English-educated Indians, known collectively as 'babus'. This term of respect among Indians, comparable to that of 'gentleman' in Britain, became in

⁴² Orme, *People of Indostan*, pp. 42–45; Strachey, *India*, pp. 334–35.

British usage a title of disparagement denoting those, unworthy of respect, who sought to ape British ways. Behind this condescension lay unvoiced, anxious fears. By his mimicry of English manners, the babu reminded the British of a similarity they sought always to disavow; and, steeped in English liberalism, he posed by implication, if not by outright assertion, a challenge to the legitimacy of the Raj. As the seductive female had to be repudiated, so too, even more urgently, had the educated Indian male to be contained within the gender stereotype that portrayed him as no more than a caricature Englishman. He might be, as Kipling wrote in his story 'The Head of the District', filled with 'much curious book-knowledge of bump-suppers, cricket-matches, hunting-runs and other unholy sports of the alien'; but his 'extraordinary effeminacy' made it unnecessary to treat seriously his 'political declamations'. Possessed of manly self-control, the Englishman alone stood apart from, and so could legitimately rule, the peoples of India.

Characterization of the Indian male, especially the English-educated Bengali, as 'effeminate' gained further strength from Indian opposition to such measures as the Age of Consent Act. While many educated Indians, from Rammohun Roy onward, had joined the British in seeking reformation of Hindu society, others, as early as the time of the sati debate, sought to exclude the colonial government from what they regarded as their domestic and religious affairs so that they might carve out an autonomous arena which they could call their own. At the same time, educated Indians often accepted the British insistence upon a connection between the 'status of women and that of the country in general'. *The Hindu* of Madras was even prepared to admit, as its editors announced on 15 September 1890, that Britain's 'power and prosperity' dated from 'the time when women were accorded a higher status than is implied in the present Hindu conception of women's privileges and rights'. Hence, questions of the proper role for women, and of men's responsibilities toward women, evoked strong feelings on all sides.

By 1890, with the proposal to prohibit consummation of marriage for girls under the age of twelve, hostility to British interference had spread across India from Maharashtra, where the nationalist leader B.G. Tilak took the lead in mobilizing public opinion, to Bengal. Opposition was most intense in Bengal because the educated classes there commonly practised, in the *garbhadan* ceremony, consum-

mation of marriage at the time of a girl's puberty. Appalled, the British sought explanations for this 'debased' sexual behaviour in a variety of racial and climatic factors, including most prominently, as the secretary of the Calcutta Public Health Society put it, the fact that Bengalis were not, like the residents of northern India, a 'more purely Aryan population'. Whatever the cause, however, for the British the effects of this early sexual activity were readily apparent in the 'degeneracy and deterioration' of Bengali society. Hence, opposition to raising the age of consent only strengthened their conviction that Indian men, above all Bengalis, were weak and 'voluptuous', and lacked 'manly self-control'. The argument was, of course, circular: for not only were effeminate men prone to premature sexual intercourse, but effeminacy, and with it the larger 'enervation' of the people, was itself a product of 'unnatural' early sexuality. In any case, such 'unmanly' men, like women, required the protection of a paternal superior.

The British refused to accept as legitimate not only arguments based on the character of the *garbhadan* as a religious ceremony, but those grounded in the belief, widespread among Indian men, that female sexual desire, if not satisfied within marriage immediately after puberty, would seek 'some other course' to satisfy its needs. For the British, female sexuality, at least among respectable women, simply was not supposed to exist. Similarly, Bengali protests that their 'male honour' was challenged by British infringements on their rights as husbands had to be ignored: not, of course, because the British refused to accept the notion of male superiority, but because the Bengali could not be allowed to claim more than a 'caricature' of masculinity. Even though it was clear from the outset that the Age of Consent Act could not be effectively enforced – the government openly acknowledged that its effect would be 'mainly educative' – this enactment nevertheless enabled the British effectively to display their superiority as rulers who were at once 'masculine' and moral.⁴³

The discourse on gender in colonial India had to accommodate English women as well as English men. Although women had no formal place as rulers in the colonial order, Victorian ideology, with its exaggerated opposition of 'masculine' and 'feminine', shaped a central place for them, as sign and signifier, in the discourse of colonialism. Pure and virtuous, superior to 'degraded' colonial races of either sex,

⁴³ Sinha, 'Age of Consent Act'; and Correspondence relating to the Act in NAI Home Judl., October 1890, no. 210–13, and January 1891, no. 1–42.



5 *The Magistrate's Wife*, from G. F. Atkinson, *Curry and Rice ... or the Ingredients of Social Life at our Station in India* (1859). This drawing represents the enduringly popular vision of the English woman in India, surrounded by servants, as idle and self-indulgent.

the Englishwoman was meant to enact Britain's moral superiority. In so doing, her 'true' femininity showed forth most visibly in contrast to that of the Indian zenana woman. Hardly less than a prostitute, so the British conceived, the secluded woman of the zenana typified India's moral degeneracy in her behaviour. Not only did she live a life of idleness in closed and unhealthy rooms, but her entire existence was seen by many observers as suffused with sensuality. The 'sexual function', as Flora Annie Steel wrote, was necessarily 'the central topic of lives confined to twelve square feet of roof'.⁴⁴ Ironically, even the Indian woman's veil, which for her male relatives signified her inviolability, and for the woman herself, as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had appreciated long before, made possible an exhilarating freedom of

⁴⁴ Flora Annie Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity: The Autobiography of Flora Annie Steel, 1847-1929* (London, 1930), pp. 246-47.

movement, suggested to the British what it was meant to hide – her sexuality. The English woman, by contrast, veiled in modesty, remained vigorous but delicate, active but demure. (See fig. 5.)

In these circumstances British women established space for themselves in a variety of ways – by writing, by travelling, and, most commonly, by undertaking religious and philanthropic activity. Such activity, seen as helping their ‘degraded’ colonial sisters, appealed especially to liberal Victorian feminists, for it gave them scope for independent action, without presenting a frontal challenge to the ideologies of either domesticity or empire. Nonetheless, such activity inevitably blurred gender roles. The ‘lady missionary’, or the ‘lady doctor’, was needed because she alone could visit the women’s quarters of Indian homes and care for Indian women. Yet she ran the risk by virtue of her independent movement of being implicated in ‘indelicate’ behaviour with men, or simply of being seen as acting ‘improperly’. The negotiation of such conflicting demands was never easy. Most successful perhaps was Florence Nightingale, who, as she created a nursing corps, acted out a dominant ‘masculine’ role in the imperial arena, yet as the nurturing ‘lady with the lamp’ participated in the creation of a ‘mythic’ figure compatible with Victorian domestic ideology. In the process she could further represent an aggressive English imperialism in the guise of a mother’s curative care for the ‘sickly child’ that was India.⁴⁵

Even the English woman who did not venture outside her bungalow, as we shall see later, could not wholly escape a similar conflict. While embodying the ideals of Victorian womanhood, she had also in practice to enact within the bungalow a role similar to the one her husband played outside – that of a masculine assertion of ordering rationality in the face of an India where disease and disorder raged unchecked. This was especially evident in the disciplining of Indian servants, who, ‘accustomed to it for thousands of years’, as Flora Annie Steel wrote, needed to be treated firmly. By pitting against each other the extremes of decorative seclusion and vigorous activity, the female roles set out within the Raj enforced upon the white woman exceptional tensions of race and gender. Caught between masculine assertion and feminine modesty, between identification with English men and with Indian women, the English woman, within the private

⁴⁵ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988), chapter 6.

sphere she presided over, bore the unenviable responsibility – what one may call the ‘white woman’s burden’ – of both representing the virtues of domesticity and extending the authority of the Raj.

Some few English women sought to create a space for female authority within an India free of colonial domination. The arena in which this took place was the practice of spiritualism. Although English spiritualists sought to portray themselves as properly ‘feminine’, still by its very nature female mediumship, or spirit possession, as Alex Owen has put it, ‘effected a truly radical subversion’ of nineteenth-century femininity.⁴⁶ Such ‘subversion’ came to encompass India with the founding in 1875 of the Theosophical Society. Through a set of occult practices drawn in large part from Hinduism, women like Madame Blavatsky, and subsequently Annie Besant, defiantly asserted a power of their own. Building upon, but inverting, the stereotypes which depreciated India as a ‘spiritual’ land, and women as ‘religious’, they challenged the accepted discourses of both empire and gender. Establishing the headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, near Madras, Blavatsky openly consorted on an equal footing with Indian males, whom she accepted as disciples; while Besant, with her support of Home Rule in the early decades of the twentieth century, extended the challenge from the realm of the spirits to that of nationalist politics. In so doing these women gave the creation of ‘difference’ a new meaning – as a set of values that could be used against the Raj as well as on its behalf. Nor was it long before Indians were to do the same, above all under the leadership of Gandhi, as he appropriated for the purposes of the freedom struggle the ‘feminine’ virtues assigned to India by the Raj. Such strategies of inversion nevertheless invigorated, rather than overturned, the gendered assumptions that had fortified the Raj.

Together with the construction of a distinctive history that sustained them, ideas of gender and race, then, were employed to constitute a set of fundamental differences between India and England. There existed a ‘changeless’ India inhabiting a past that endured in the present; an India of racial ‘decline’ marked by the triumph of Dravidianism and the anarchy of the eighteenth century; and an India of a gendered ‘effeminacy’ which made its women and men alike dependent on a benevolent British ‘masculinity’. Each of these descriptions of India’s difference had its own theoretical, even ‘scientific’, rationale;

⁴⁶ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room* (Philadelphia, 1990), chapters 1 and 8.

each too was rent with deep contradictions both within itself, and in relation to the others. Above all, race and gender provided explanations of very different sorts for India's plight. The theory of racial decline announced a process of irreversible physical deterioration brought about by the mixing of blood, while the degeneracy defined by effeminacy was one of character and morals.

In each case the creation of difference involved an acknowledgement, either avowed or implicit, of similarity as well as of difference. These similarities were then reconstituted to secure the results which the British required of them. Least troubling was Aryan racial theory. Though it implicated the British with the Indians in a common origin, the similarities were sufficiently distant, and India's subsequent history of 'decline' sufficiently convincing, that, whether examined in terms of language, architecture, or religion, India's racial history clearly stood apart from that of Britain. This distance was less apparent in the context of the village community and Indian feudalism. The ideal of the village community, in particular, resonated with nostalgia for the 'world we have lost'. Medievalism too was an English category imposed upon India to serve the requirements of English nostalgia as much as those of empire. Hence, this vision of India's past could not escape being caught up in a conflict between the need to 'civilize' India, and the opposing desire to preserve a still 'medieval' land. As the elements of this 'traditional' India were fitted into the working of the Raj, as we will see in chapter 4, they consorted uneasily with a commitment to progress which could not be disowned without disavowing the empire itself.

The British were much less willing to accommodate similarities of gender than of race or history. In part this was because gender distinctions were tangled in deeply seated British self-perceptions. Unlike Aryan racial theory, where similarities could be acknowledged and then shaped to the needs of empire, contested notions of women's roles in Britain, shaped by ideals of purity and domesticity, made impossible any acknowledgement of a shared female sexuality or the larger implications of women's self-sacrifice. Similarly, the reluctance of British men to acknowledge the feminine side of their own nature, or to accord Indian men more than a caricatured masculinity, meant that similarities of gender among males were consistently masked or denied. At once psychologically and politically threatening, any avowal of such shared ties was unthinkable. Conceptions of gender

therefore found expression not so much in a coherent ideology as in the ways they were enacted in British relations with their Indian subjects. Despite their inherent contradictions, however, all these varied notions of Indian 'difference' were made to fit together; and all alike helped to define the British as a 'superior' race. Sustained by Victorian 'masculine' and 'feminine' virtues, they possessed an incontestable right to rule over India's peoples.