Introduction

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Princeton University Press
The West and South Asia

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We are becoming accustomed to the notion that what a traveler tells us about his trip will reveal more of importance about the traveler than about the lands he has seen. But it is a source of unending interest to us to see how our own ideas of the world “out there”—acquired in childhood, reinforced in our reading, modified by our own travels—were formed and expressed by those who came before us: how the lenses of our vision were ground. For what each of us sees is what we are prepared to see; if what we find is not what we expect, or is entirely strange, we must nevertheless find words for it, metaphors from what we know, to fit our experience into our own world view. But how does that world view itself change from these experiences? Do our questions change with our exposure to a different world? And how does that world, in turn, change in the process? In short, when perceptions are mutual and continue over time, how do they affect one another?

South Asia—the Indian subcontinent—has always stimulated extreme reactions among visitors from the West. India is a land to be loved or hated; the visitor takes as a personal challenge or affront the heat and humidity, the conspicuous poverty and flaunted wealth, the unexpected difficulties in proceeding “normally” in this world where others’ priorities seem always to be different from our own. And the visitor turns with relief to the places that seem only comfortably exotic and the people who can understand the questions we ask, and perhaps answer them. Inevitably these people become the “informants,” the primary means of sorting out our impressions of India. It is easy to see that the informants are a filter for impressions, supplementing and enriching the lenses provided by our own past experience. But it is also clear that the relationship goes in both...
directions, and the Indian “informant” is also being informed about the West. Each of the pair, by articulating his own perceptions and meeting the other’s questions and reactions, sees his own world a bit differently. Self-perception and mutual perception thus become inextricably mixed up with one another.

We who wish to study the mutual perceptions of those who came before us are in the position of being able to see the viewpoints and blind spots of those we study, while revealing to our own readers (though not necessarily to ourselves) our own peculiar angles of vision. The enterprise of studying Indology thus quickly becomes a hall of receding mirrors.

The first paper in this section studies the perceptions of a Dutch missionary who wrote before there was an Indological tradition. He published his observations of South India in Leiden in 1651, calling his book “The Theater of Idolatry; the open door for arriving at knowledge of hidden paganism, and the true representation of the life, customs, religion, and divine service of the Brahmins, who live on the Coromandel Coast and surrounding regions.” Catherine Weinberger-Thomas shows how Abrahamus Rogerius’ proto-anthropological observations, based largely on the interpretations of his Brahmin informant, served him, in the end, to find the hand of his own God in the most unlikely places. His writing was an important element in the creation of the scholarly European image of India, and especially influenced the idea of the predominant Brahmanical, textual basis of Indian culture (an idea that may, in fact, have helped to create the Brahmanical tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a form that had not previously existed). Once we have identified Rogerius’ sources, we find his book is more interesting for what it tells us about his own beliefs and those of his countrymen than for its exposition of the beliefs and customs of the Brahmins, about whom we think we have more and better information.

But then we ask ourselves, with a by-now familiar shock, can the same not be said of any Orientalist writing, or indeed of any writing at all? And if so, why do we venture so far afield, to end up writing chiefly about ourselves? The humanist answer must be that to study people of different places and other times is intrinsically interesting—it both piques and satisfies our curiosity; how do others see and cope with the problems of being human, as we see them? Thus seventeenth-century European curiosity about the activities of the devil gave way to nineteenth- and twentieth-century curiosity about sexual mores.

The scholars who pursued this latter subject have assumed various moral stances toward it, as David Kopf explores in the next paper. Perhaps Western interest in Shakto-Tantrism could get a start in academic scholarship because there were texts to study—the safest of starting points for professional intellectuals. The subject, still obviously a loaded one, is today legitimized by the view that to study manifestations of the feminine form of divinity is not only acceptable, but admirable. As Kopf points out, scholars of literature and anthropology as well as students of comparative religion have contributed to the field. One may speculate that their inquiries start with a sense of more than curiosity. There is a sense that something is present in Indian culture that is lacking in their own, and their study serves as a means of search for values to fill their own sense of lack.
This is at least overtly quite different from an earlier era of Indology, which felt the lack to be the other way around—that the devil was to be found the more easily, the further one traveled from home. (One could always argue, of course, that manifestations of the devil are precisely what is felt to be lacking and is often sought for in the quest of the “Other.”)

There have always been Westerners who went to India not to study it but to make a living there or to make a home for their families. As Margaret Case describes in the next paper, British wives in India, who had learned about the Orient from romances, word of mouth, and the appeals of missionaries, on the whole did their best to keep India as a romantic backdrop to an ordinary life. Many had an extraordinarily limited curiosity about India; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it never occurred to them that answers to their perplexities in life could be found anywhere but among their own kind. Their perceptions of India varied with time and place, personality, and circumstance, but the focus of their interest in India was to maintain as much as possible of the familiar for themselves and their families. It was expected of these women that they not show interest in either the devil or sex, or in any religion but their own, or even in much of anything about India except the setting that provided such charming subjects for delicate watercolor sketches. There were few women whose perceptions of the East went beyond what they expected or what was expected of them by their families and friends. As in the case of European scholars, who began from the start to construct a common ground of perception with their Indian counterparts, such that both participated in the shared assumptions that few on either side broke away from, British women and their servants created a world of shared assumptions. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, these assumptions began to be embedded in writings about India and then in “how-to-do-it” books for the guidance of newcomers. It was frequently true that the only escape from this world that had been created by the British in India was to head for the hills—and with the creation of hill stations, their world followed them almost to the high peaks of the Himalayas. It became impossible by then to separate the perceptions of these women from the facts of the world they and their Indian servants had created. We return, then, to the hall of mirrors: who creates the limits of what we perceive in others?

The alternative question of how the West was perceived by Indians seems so complex as to defy summary. Kenneth Ballhatchet has suggested the descriptive categories “selective acceptance” and “concealed acceptance” (which could probably be just as usefully labeled “selective rejection” and “overt rejection”). He points out to what a large degree the things Indians praised and criticized in English (and European) culture were viewed similarly by parts of English society. This points to the risk of assuming that values or ideas that are shared by people of the two cultures are necessarily borrowed by one from the other. Englishman and Indian may each be pursuing goals or expectations drawn from within his own society, working within the values of his or her own culture, yet finding in the vocabulary or techniques of the admired (or despised) other cultural elements to suit present needs. Imitation (and distortion) are inevitable, and reciprocal. Both Englishmen and Indians borrowed to pursue their respec-
tive ends. It is too simple to explain the encounter of cultures by a model of stimulus (on a previously inert mass?) and reaction—whether that reaction be called Westernization or modernization or Sanskritization or whatever.

An important aspect of the complex interaction between the people of different cultures has been the formation of their beliefs about how things ought to be done—indeed, how they “always used to be done”—the creation of tradition. Dennis Hudson’s paper sketches the forces that have gone into the creation of a Dravidian tradition, indeed, of a Dravidian identity, among Tamil-speaking Indians. It is a phenomenon similar to that being traced in almost all aspects of modern Indian history: how new categories have been created, but are called by old names. Here we face squarely another aspect of the same problem: mutual perception and self-perception cannot be separated without distortion. We see ourselves to a large extent as we think others see us. We see in others what we expect to see in them. As the interaction continues over time, each side changes as a result of the mirror held up by the other.

As almost all the papers document, mutual perception becomes increasingly difficult to trace over time as members of each culture begin to take as their own elements of the other. Interactions between East and West have been more intense and prolonged in South Asia than in either of the other areas covered in this volume. The questions asked on both sides have changed over time because of historical change within each culture—itself induced in part by the mutual contact, in part by other events in the societies. The papers here can only touch on the enormous variety of changes to be rung on the theme of mutual perception of East and West.