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Indo-Greek Culture and Colonial Memory, or, Was Alexander a European?

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Abstract

Alexander's conquest of northwest India in the fourth century BCE was often cited by the British in post-Enlightenment England to trace their own identity as conquerors back to the Greeks. Taking a revisionist approach, this paper endeavours to show that the invocation of Alexander's memory to legitimize European hegemony over the Indians was enmeshed in imperialist ideology and involved a distortion of the past. The contexts and motives of the two types of colonization, the Greek and the British, were fundamentally different. The state of Greek thought in Alexander's time could not have sustained the notional binary between India and Greece, 'reason' and 'unreason', to justify a thoroughly hostile form of colonization. The Greeks engaged constructively with the cultural life of the Indians, and the resultant Indo-Greek civilization involved a rich fusion of Indian and Hellenistic influences. Modern European historiography has been extremely averse to acknowledging any fruitful dialogue between ancient Greece and non-Western cultures. This paper will strive to locate the genesis of Indo-Greek culture in the complex intermingling of ancient peoples and ideas.

[**Keywords:** Alexander, ancient Greece, Indo-Greek, imperialism, historiography]

Introduction: Ideological Contexts

In his Lectures on the Philosophy of History (1837/2004), Hegel defines history as "none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom" (Hegel 19). In this teleological view of history, India is ahistorical, in other words not part of the dynamics of rational progress that is essential for the self-manifestation of the Spirit. The tensions that have driven European rationality from its Greek beginnings in the *polis* through the evolution of the free human subject to the upheavals of the French revolution have been lacking in India. So lost has India been since ancient times in the "Substantial Unity" of the Brahm (or *brahman*) that everything has been "stripped of rationality" (141) and "the Spirit wanders into the Dream-World, and the highest

state is Annihilation" (148)¹. Comparing India with the "almost unearthly beauty" to be found in women – "a transparency of skin, a light and lovely roseate hue ... in which the features... appear soft, yielding, and relaxed" – Hegel claims that "the more attractive the first sight of it had been, so much the more unworthy shall we ultimately find it in every respect" (140). The spread of Indian culture is "only a dumb, deedless expansion", since Indians "have achieved no foreign conquests, but on every occasion vanquished themselves" (142). Just as "Alexander the Great was the first to

¹ It is intriguing, as Halbfass (1990) notes, that Hegel conveniently ignores the concept of *ātman*, and the dialectic between *ātman* and *brahman*, in this context. Also see Sen (2005) for ancient India's argumentative tradition.

penetrate by land to India”, the English are now “the lords of the land”, for it is the “necessary fate” of Asia to be subjected to Europeans (ibid.).

Hegel was not alone in this regard and many of his European contemporaries reiterated this stance. The alleged absence of an argumentative tradition in India coupled with the perceived lack of an independent self-consciousness gave Europeans a model, a projected Other, against which they could define their own rational (hence, superior) selves. It is intriguing that even Sir William Jones, founder of the Asiatic Society in 1784, who was otherwise so enthusiastic about a common Aryan heritage between Indians and Europeans, does not fail to privilege Europe when it comes to what he considers to be useful knowledge. He remarks that “whoever travels in Asia, especially if he be conversant with the literature of the countries through which he passes, must naturally remark the superiority of European talents: the observation, indeed, is as old as Alexander” (Jones 3). As in Hegel, the time of Alexander’s conquest is cited to give validity to British claims. In Jones’ view, therefore, Aristotle seems perfectly in the right when he “represents Europe as a sovereign Princess, and Asia as her handmaid” (12). Jones’ approach was, nevertheless, by and large sympathetic towards Indian culture. In the later decades, England’s colonial strategy towards India was to become far more rigid. Edmund Burke prosecuted Warren Hastings on charges of misgovernment; Hastings was allegedly too sympathetic to the natives.

The ideological construction of an undeveloped India became a vehicle for justifying its annexation by Britain as part of ‘the white man’s burden’. In his highly influential *History of British India*, James Mill (1858) reiterates the Hegelian view of India as a land mired in its past, in its fantastical legends, and therefore, as a place devoid of any sense of history. Only an external, superior power could shake it out of its perpetual stupor. Mill infers from his research that the Indians have never been fit to rule themselves, and that the Indian civilization has never prospered except under foreign rule. Here too, Mill supports his claim by invoking the memory of Alexander. He quotes Captain Francis Wilford, who contributed several articles on Indian history in the journal *Asiatic Researches*:

“According to Plutarch, in his life of Alexander, Chandra-Gupta had been at that prince’s camp, and had been heard to say afterward, that Alexander would have found no difficulty in the conquest of Prachi, or the country of the Prasians, had he attempted it, as the king was despised, and hated too, on account of his cruelty” (Mill 136).

Going on to highlight the natural passivity of Indians, Mill remarks that they “have always allowed themselves to be conquered in detail” (141) and that they now need the British to infuse in them a sense of history and help them attain a higher level of civilization. For the utilitarian Mill, the measure of civilization is scientific progress, an aspect in which he sees the Indians as singularly lacking. He writes:

Exactly in proportion as *Utility* is the object of every pursuit, may we regard a nation as civilized. Exactly in proportion as its ingenuity is wasted on contemptible and mischievous objects, though it may be, in itself, an ingenuity of no ordinary kind, the nation may safely be denominated barbarous (105).

The overblown literary style of the ancient Hindus is therefore nothing more than the extravagant outpourings of a barbaric race: “It has several words to express the same thing. The sun has more than thirty names, the moon more than twenty” (63). Mill dubiously claims that this excessive verbosity contrasts with the clarity of Greek and Latin which supposedly have “one name for everything which required a name, and no more than one” (64).

Mill never visited the subcontinent. He derived his supposed objectivity of ancient India by reading “the scattered hints contained in the writings of the Greeks”, from which he concluded that “the Hindus, at the time of Alexander’s invasion, were in a state of manners, society, and knowledge, exactly the same with that in which they were discovered by the nations of modern Europe” (107). The intervening two millennia had passed by without leaving a trace on Indian culture, Mill inferred. The British must therefore step in to complete the ‘civilizing mission’ that Alexander had left unfinished. They should, however, maintain an appropriate distance with the natives lest they too get stuck up in the quagmire of Indian traditions. Unlike Jones’ belief in a shared tradition between the ancient cultures of Asia and Europe,

Mill defined the two cultures in terms of binaries which he thought he derived from the Greek distinction between rational and irrational, progressive and static, *nomos* and *physis*.

Bruce Lincoln (1989) has shown how the repeated invocation of select moments from the past can be used to construct social identities. By repeatedly referring to Alexander's conquest, the British tried to identify themselves as the last in a long tradition of European conquerors. This claim to an Alexandrian heritage was, however, deeply enmeshed in British colonialist ideology and, to use a phrase by Romila Thapar (2007), was 'historical memory without history' (Thapar: web). This memory was founded on the belief in a shared European connection with Alexander, a view entirely anachronistic. As Gotthard Strohmaier puts it, "The Greeks were no Europeans" (cited in Toner 16). Strohmaier refutes a widely held misconception that there is an exclusive cultural continuity between ancient Greece and modern Europe. Europe as a cultural and political entity is a modern construct that took shape after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in the fifteenth century. The ancient Greeks never saw themselves as Europeans. Moreover, it is not just Europe that can claim a cultural continuity with antiquity; the interactions between ancient Greece and non-Western cultures, as Martin Bernal (Bernal 210) has influentially shown, have been no less potent. In fact, Britain had hardly any connection with the Mediterranean world until it became a part of the Roman Empire. The invocation of Alexander's memory in an attempt to legitimize British hegemony over the Indians was, therefore, spurious and involved a distortion of the past. In order to revise such narratives, it is important to look back and read the interactions between ancient cultures in the light of current theoretical perspectives.

Looking Back: Classical Greece and the Irrational

In his influential study on the origins of Greek rationality, Vernant (1984) has illustrated how the need for social unity in the face of internal rivalries and external aggression created conditions favouring the emergence of rational thought and the rise of the Greek polis between the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The polis was centered on

the agora, the public square, where problems of general interest were debated. The creation of this new social space helped to bring many royal prerogatives, including the right to debate, *es to koinon*, to the commons (Vernant 47). Politics was no longer the exclusive privilege of the king, whose power was now in rapid decline; politics was now set down *es to meson*, in the middle, at the centre of the polis, to be dissected by anyone who could argue with words, oppose speech with speech (Vernant 127). Politics and *logos* were thus inextricably linked, and argument by speech became the defining factor of the city's political life. The next two centuries would see the steady shift from mythological to rational thinking among the Greeks.

The common man, however, was not impressed by such astute reasoning. The breach between intellectual and popular beliefs reached its zenith in the late fifth century. With the Peloponnesian War looming large on the horizon, an unflinching reliance on reason and the denial of the supernatural was no longer tenable. Dodds (1951) writes:

To offend the gods by doubting their existence, or by calling the sun a stone, was risky enough in peacetime; but in war it was practically treason – it amounted to helping the enemy. For religion was a collective responsibility. The gods were not content to strike down the individual offender: did not Hesiod say that whole cities often suffered for one bad man? (Dodds 191)

The period during the Peloponnesian War (431 BCE – 404 BCE) also witnessed a sudden inclination towards magic and certain foreign, "orgiastic" cults (193). But the "reaction against the Enlightenment" (189) was nowhere more evident than in the systematic prosecutions of numerous intellectuals, including Socrates, on religious grounds during the late fifth century. "The evidence we have", writes Dodds, "is more than enough to prove that the Great Age of Greek Enlightenment was also, like our own time, an Age of Persecution – banishment of scholars, blinkering of thought, and even ... burning of books" (189). Relevant for the purpose of this paper, Dodds also notes that the knowledge of such radical reactions against rationality "distressed and puzzled nineteenth-century professors ... because it happened at Athens, the "school of Hellas", "the headquarters of

philosophy”, and, so far as our information goes, nowhere else” (189). At a time when the ethical justification of empire was largely contingent on the idea of Europe’s absolute commitment to rational pursuits since antiquity, such evidences of blatant violation must have proved singularly embarrassing.

To return to classical Greece, a close study of the evolution of Plato’s thought shows how it underwent severe transformations under the influence of contemporary events. The crisis in Greek politics compelled Plato, in his later works, to acknowledge the importance of the irrational elements in our psyche, and he extended his rational framework by giving it a metaphysical dimension. While an early work like *Protagoras* revels in the optimistic, rational, and utilitarian spirit of the past, the mood of the middle and the later dialogues, written in the early fourth century, is much more ambiguous. Even in Book IV of the *Republic*, which is otherwise well-known for its banishment of poets, Plato admits that there are two parts of the soul; the passions, unlike in the early *Phaedo*, are no longer seen of bodily (hence, extraneous) origin, but constitute an half of the soul itself. In the *Laws*, he dismisses the idea of the philosopher king as an impossibility, and says that the behaviour of human beings must be controlled by a diet of healthy incantations. And in the *Phaedrus*, his *daimonion* makes him give an apologia for attacking the passionate lover as foolish; in the ensuing recantation or ‘palinode’, he rejects the simplistic binary between *sōphrōsunē* and *mania*, and allows not only that “the best things we have come from madness” (Plato 522) but also that the person who “comes to the gates of poetry ... without the Muses’ madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds” (Plato 523).

Aristotle too, like his master before him, understood the significance of studying the irrational factors in human behaviour. The reality of war and the threat of Spartan dominance created tensions that sensitized Aristotle and his pupils, including Alexander, to the necessity of acknowledging the irrational faculties of the mind in order to reach a realistic understanding of human nature (Dodds 238). In Alexander’s time, therefore, the distinction between Greece and the East, reason and unreason, could no longer be sustained. It could be safely argued that when

Alexander invaded the East in the late fourth century BCE, his response towards rationality was ambivalent at best.

Earlier in the late sixth century BCE, the powerful Persian Empire had stretched from the Mediterranean in the West to the Indus in the East. The Ionian states in Asia Minor and various North-western regions of India were included in the list of the twenty satrapies of Darius. Greeks and Indians met each other in Persian courts and probably exchanged scientific, in particular medical, information (Vassiliades 127). Indians became well-known for their sound health, and there are references to Indian medicines in Hippocrates (Vassiliades 214). However, as far as evidences go, the Greeks at this point never actually visited India, and their scant knowledge of the subcontinent led to exaggerated accounts. Since Greek rationalism in the sixth and fifth centuries were on a high, the Greeks conveniently defined themselves in relation to an exotic Other. Herodotus (484 BCE – 425 BCE) wrote of the huge gold-digging ants of India and of various strange customs like the Indians’ habit of cannibalism and of having sexual intercourse in public (McCrinkle, 1979).

Alexander and Homonoia

Alexander’s conquest of India in 326 BCE opened up a whole new world before the Greeks, a world that was far more complex and plural than they had been led to believe by previous records. Accompanying Alexander’s huge army were a number of Greek philosophers, namely Kallisthenes (Aristotle’s disciple and nephew), Onesicritos and Anaxarchos, among many others. Though the tradition of exoticizing the Indians continued, it was gradually superseded in the post-Alexandrian era by numerous newer kinds of narratives that emerged as a result of the increasing dialogue between Indian and Greek thought. The original Greek records of Alexander’s campaign were all destroyed when the Hellenistic libraries in Antioch and Alexandria were burnt down. A few fragments of those works, however, have been preserved in the works of later writers like Strabo, Plinius, Arrian, and Plutarch. While some of these texts accentuate the differences between the worldly concerns of Greek philosophy and the asceticism of the Indians, this is not the

only picture. Megasthenes (350 BCE – 290 BCE), the famous ambassador who visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya, concludes after examining the similarities between Greek and Indian philosophies:

[O]n many points their opinions coincide with those of the Greeks for like them they say that the world was created and is liable to destruction, and is in shape spherical and that the Deity who made it and who governs it, is diffused through all its parts. They hold that various first principles operate in the universe, and that water was the principle employed in the making of the world. In addition to the four elements, there is a fifth agency, from which the heaven and the stars were produced. The earth is placed in the centre of the universe. Concerning generation, and the nature of the soul, and many other subjects, they express views like those maintained by the Greeks. They wrap up their doctrines about immortality and future judgement in Hades in allegories in the manner of Plato.

[...] All that has been said regarding nature by the ancients is asserted also by philosophers outside of Greece, on the one hand in India by Brachmanes [the Brāhmanas] and on the other in Syria by the people called the Jews (McCrimble b. 100-103).

The belief that the Indian philosophers had no interest in worldly matters was contradicted by Nearchus, a navarch in Alexander's army, who wrote of certain Brāhmanas who took active part in political life and acted as counselors to the king (McCrimble, 1979). Aristoboulos of Paneas, living in the third or second century BCE, also noted that he observed two Brāhmanas at the market-place in Taxila who, like the Greek sophists at the agora, were acting as public counselors (McCrimble, 1979).

The recognition of cultural parallels and the need for a cosmopolitan society was facilitated by Alexander's development of the concept of *homonoia*, or unity of mind and heart. In 324 BCE, he gave a banquet at Opis to nine thousand generals and leaders representing various ethnicities—Persians, Indians, Medians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians. Giving a political dimension to the spirit of *homonoia*, Alexander addressed the vast audience at Opis thus:

Now as the wars come to an end, I wish that you will live happily in peace. All mortals, from now onwards, should live like one nation, in amity, for the common progress. You should consider the world as your country, with common laws, where the noble ones will govern. I do not divide the people into Greeks and Barbarians as the narrow-minded do. I am neither interested in the origin of the citizens nor concerned with the race into which they were born. I classify them with only one criterion, Virtue. For me every good foreigner is a Greek and every bad Greek is worse than a Barbarian. If ever there would be disputes do not take resort to the use of weapons but solve them peacefully. If there is a need I shall stand as your arbitrator...From my side, I consider all white and black as equal. I do not want you to be merely the subjects of my state but participants and partners. (as cited in Vassiliades 64).

The substance of the speech comes from Plutarch, but is also referred to in Arrian and Eratosthenes. Some scholars have expressed doubt over the veracity of the speech, but Tarn (Tarn 32) believes it is certainly Alexander's. Even if the speech was a later fabrication, its spirit is remarkably Alexandrian. Though Aristotle had claimed in the first book of the *Politics* that the barbarians were natural slaves and the Greeks their natural masters, a counter-tendency was also prevalent in contemporary Greece. The early Stoic philosopher Antiphon, for instance, wrote in the fifth century BCE that all people, both barbarians and Greeks, are created alike by nature in all respects (McEvelley, 2008). Theophrastus (371 BCE – 287 BCE) claimed that all human beings are of common ancestry, while the Cynics emphasized that all human societies form a single world-community, the *cosmopolis*, and that the enlightened soul would not discriminate among them (McEvelley, 2008). Even Socrates in the *Phaedo* advised his students to consult foreign teachers. There was also a shift, as Vassiliades observes, in the meaning of the word 'foreigner'; from 'barbarian', it gradually evolved to mean 'guest' or 'host' (Vassiliades 63, 64). Tarn writes that "Aristotle told Alexander to treat Greeks as friends, but barbarians like animals; but Alexander knew better, and preferred to divide men into good and bad without regard to their race" (Tarn 12). In his epic study on the cross-currents of ancient

thought, McEvilley too notes that the xenophobic distinction between Greeks and barbarians “had lost much of its force on the Greek scene by the time of Alexander and his Successors” (McEvilley 351).

Historical records attest to Alexander’s syncretic approach to foreign cultures. Alexander probably realized that treating the conquered people as free men rather than slaves would make it easier to deal with the problems of administration. Ever keen to learn, he incorporated the organizational tactics of the Persians in his own scheme of administration. He himself adopted Asian customs, habits, and attires (McCrinkle, 1979). Moreover, unlike the commercial colonies of the British in India, those of the Greeks were all settler colonies. They were not interested in draining wealth from the colonies back into their country. Many Greeks became subjects of the Mauryan empire, and Megasthenes tells us that a separate department in Chandragupta Maurya’s court looked after foreigners (McCrinkle, 2008). Greek artists, physicians, and astrologers too probably settled permanently in India, establishing vibrant commercial centres (Vassiliades 14 - 32). Recent excavations reveal the presence of palaces, theatres, and gymnasiums in the Greek style in what is now Afghanistan. Numismatic evidence shows that several Indo-Greek kings like Pantaleon and Agathocles issued coins depicting Buddhist stūpas and legends, while some coins had inscriptions both in Greek and Brāhmi. During the Alexandrian phase itself, many discharged soldiers had married into the Indian community and, by the time of Asoka in the mid-third century BCE, still more had joined Indian religions, in particular Buddhism. This is attested by the Indianised names of several Yonaka (Greek) monks found in Pali texts and inscriptions. Yonaka Dhammarakkhita Thera preached the *Aggikkhandopama Sutta* and is reported to have converted thirty-seven thousand people into Buddhism (Vassiliades 58). The *Anguttara* commentary tells us that many of these people followed a mixture of Greek and Buddhist customs (Vassiliades 61), and the *Milindapañha* records conversations between the Indo-Greek king Milinda (or Menander) and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena. Very soon, the Graeco-Buddhist sculptures of Gandhāra and Mathura emerged as the expression of the rich fusion between Greek and Indian creative impulses. The Greeks were thus permanent immigrants, often converts to

Buddhism, engaging constructively with the cultural ethos of the community.

Conclusion

Even though ancient Greeks at times expressed prejudice against foreign cultures, the concept of racism was not as institutionalized as in post-Enlightenment Europe. “The intensity and pervasiveness of ... colonial racism since the 17th century have been so much greater than the norm that they need some special explanation” (Bernal 201). Most eighteenth century English-speaking intellectuals, including John Locke, David Hume, and Benjamin Franklin, were openly racist and claimed that dark-skinned people were naturally inferior. The dominant discourse of British imperialism was centered around racism and the fear of miscegenation. While the Greeks had erected no strong cultural barriers against intermingling with the natives, the British insisted that ‘never the twain shall meet’ and were constantly under the dread of ‘going native’². In order to justify empire, therefore, the British created an Alexander in their own image. An admission of cultural syncretism between the Greeks and the Indians would have upset the neat dichotomy between Europe and the Orient that was so important for sustaining the imperial discourse. England’s dominance over India was mirrored – and reinforced – by the way the British chose to remember and (mis)represent Alexander’s campaign.

Modern European historiography, likewise, has been extremely averse to acknowledging any fruitful dialogue between ancient Greece and non-Western cultures. The Hegelian view of civilization, with its emphasis on cultural purity and disapproval of hybridity, has brushed aside the question of possible influences between Indian and Greek cultures. Even as late as the mid-twentieth century, Heidegger could militantly designate the Asiatic as the “most foreign and most difficult” and as the “greatest opposite” of Western culture

² This is not to imply that only the ‘exoticist’ and ‘magesterial’ approaches defined England’s relationship with India. See Sen (2005) for the ‘curatorial’ approach. This paper, however, is concerned only with the ways in which the British appropriated the memory of Alexander’s campaign in order to give legitimacy to their own imperialist designs.

(Heidegger 228). Our own time has seen the rise of far-right political groups – like the Golden Dawn in Greece and the Hindutva movement in India – promoting a narrowly chauvinistic narrative of the nation by disregarding or demonizing foreign influences. Communal identities, however, are neither permanent nor static. It is important to locate the genesis and evolution of cultures in the complex web of identities, in the dialogic intermingling of ancient peoples and ideas.

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