

*Imagining India*. By Ronald Inden. Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishers, 1992. Pp. 298.

Despite the experience of colonialism and the impact of contemporary world politics, there has been little systematic attempt to examine the influences of these world-ordering systems on the scholarship about Asia. While Edward Said's *Orientalism* has given a boost to reassessing the moral and intellectual nature of Orientalist writings, critical examination of the production of knowledge about Southeast Asia has not yet come forth. Ronald Inden's *Imagining India* is a major attempt to deconstruct the Orientalist knowledge of India and is an extremely useful work for Southeast Asian scholars.

Inden draws heavily on the writings of Foucault, Gramsci, Said, and Collingwood in his analysis of the Western imagining of India. He laments the fact that Indology has failed to understand India by essentializing its society and culture through some basic concepts. There is little consideration of human agency, the capacity of Indians to make and remake their history. According to Inden, Orientalist discourse considers its form of knowledge as superior because it is perceived as rational, logical, and scientific. It was used as a part of the power/knowledge for colonial domination. Today, such a discourse is still employed in other articulations in the studies of development and issues relating to the Third World. While in the past Western power/knowledge was used to domesticate colonial subjects, today it is utilized to guide Third World nations towards the path of modernity based on European ideals.

Like Said, Inden is at pains to emphasize that a critique of Orientalism should go beyond pointing out personal and ideological biases. Such a critique, Inden suggests, should "penetrate the emotional minefield" surrounding Western scholarship and "directly confront the central question of knowledge and its multiple relations to power". Accordingly, Orientalist scholarship about India is deficient by refusing to go beyond the descriptive and commentative realms. The scholarship often provides facts in order to construct Indians and their thoughts as dream-like, neurotic, insane, or mad. Texts on Indian history basically argued in terms of four essentializing concepts: caste, Hinduism, the village, and

divine kingship. "Imagining India" through these concepts has made it possible for scholars to consider India as the anti-thesis of the West. By using caste to understand every aspect of India's complex social life, the country emerged from the Indologists' discourse as rigid, impermeable, and unchanging.

Indologists perceived "the Hindu Mind" as devoid of reason and rationality. Hinduism, it is argued, diverted the Indian mind from seeing and understanding things objectively and rationally. Notwithstanding some differences within Indology itself, there is a general agreement that Hinduism lacked a rational and scientific approach capable of apprehending the objective world. Implicit here is the idea that the "Indian mind" urgently required an imported intellectual system. Thus Indological texts tend to be marked by racism in arguing that the Hindu-Aryan mind could have pursued a rational and scientific path had it not been mixed with the inferior and effeminate Dravidian culture of the South.

Similarly, the concept of the village is used to give an idea that the Indian countryside was basically static and had no history. Indologists emphasize the separation between the village and the state; and the political processes were preserved for the later. At the same time, the concept of divine kingship perceives traditional Hindu state as the mediator between regional, tribal, caste, ethnic, and class interests. Divine kingship and the state performed an educating role of transforming Indian regional élites into one of cultural and ritual significance. In short, divine kingship is understood as a deficient political institution because of its subordination to social and cultural functions.

From these criticisms, Inden proposes a theoretical model for the understanding of India. His notion of human agency gives primacy to Indian subjects in the construction of their own history. Inden believes that the broader concept of polity should be utilized to capture the complex historical role of Indian subjects. His concept of overlapping membership is an attempt to analyse the dynamic relations between different agents within a given polity. Such a theoretical approach helps to avoid some of the pitfalls of conventional Indology.

Inden's book shows a meticulous understanding of India's complex

history. His rich and subtle analysis is not simply one of pitting the West against the East, and his deconstruction of Orientalism is particularly praiseworthy. Further clarification would be useful with regard to his theory of human agency and the difficult concept of overlapping membership. There is also a need to elaborate on the nature of relations between agents and how these agents are constituted within a polity. Central too is the question of structure and the extent to which this constrains or enables agents in their engagement with the wider social processes. While agents are both equal and unequal, the differentiation in terms of their integration in the social structure will be crucial. The question is: Under what social and economic conditions would structural changes take place that give shape to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements?

It is possible to suggest that the autonomy of human agents is relative to the structure in which they are situated. The displacement of structural component has the danger of making human agents structurally unanchored and free-floating in the endless ambiguity of overlapping membership. Inden rightly criticizes the knowledge generated by the Orientalists as political. A different form of politics is invoked by a work such as Inden's, which gives a prominent place to the role of human agency. Inden's work stands on equal footing with Said's. These two books are a must reading for those of us who feel uneasy with the Orientalist claim of superior knowledge.

P. RAMASAMY