Climate, Culture and Colonialism: British perceptions of India in the Early Colonial Era

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Abstract

In 1757, upon their initial encounter with a new colony, the British embarked on a journey to understand an unfamiliar land, along with its inhabitants and its distinct climate. Through certain assumptions and preconceived notions, the British Raj sought to justify its governance in India. Any discourse on the colonial period would remain incomplete without considering these colonial representations. The British aimed not only to manage their colonies through their interpretations but also to legitimise their rule as a period of civilisation. Over time, entrenched preconceptions have provided new perspectives on the tropical environment and its unique flora and fauna. What remains intriguing is the diversity of European reactions to the Indian environment, and how these reactions contributed to the broader colonisation process. This work seeks to revisit these prevalent notions, as well as the British Raj's understanding of their colonies during a time of rapid change.

Keywords: **Conceptualisations, Orientalism, Tropical, Civilised, Rationalise**

British dominance over India commenced in 1757, following their victory over Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, in the Battle of Plassey. This event marked a pivotal moment in British history as the acquisition of the Indian colony came on the heels of losing the American colony. In the aftermath, the British approached their Indian territories with entrenched beliefs and preconceived notions that had influenced their policies and attitudes. They endeavoured to legitimise and rationalise their governance in India. As Thomas Metcalf aptly points out, "the intellectual foundations upon which the British constructed their rule in India included certain ideas that had for a long time shaped their views of themselves and the outside world."[1] These ideas encompassed established expectations of how a proper society should be structured and the values it should uphold.[2] Simultaneously, the unfamiliar and uncharted landscape became a subject of colonial fear and desire, utility, and aesthetics.[3] This reveals a duality in their perceptions, as the new colony was assessed with a blend of scenic appreciation and practical potential, alongside a more severe judgment of India as a land

plagued by death and disease, desolation, and deficiency.[4] Interestingly, historian David Arnold has observed that while the colony was acknowledged for its unique physical and cultural identity, India was nonetheless annexed to ideas of landscape and nature that were external and alien to itself.[5] Any discussion on the colonial period would therefore remain incomplete without understanding these intellectual foundations of the British Raj. This study attempts to understand not only how but also why the British conceptualised their colonies, as they did in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

The West versus the East

Exploring how the British initially sought to understand India and the various factors that influenced their perceptions was intriguing. From the beginning, the Raj needed to justify their dominion over India, and one rationale it adopted was the belief that "God had given the English the responsibility to inhabit and reform the barbarous nation."[6] This suggests that the British were tasked with civilising and educating those they deemed backwards. Thus, the conquest was rationalised as a result of a civilisation hierarchy that placed the English at the top. The English adopted this rationale for subjugating foreign nations [7] Metcalf points out that the British perception of themselves as an imperial authority tasked with ruling others began with the explorations and conquests of the Tudor State in the 16th century. As Elizabeth's deputies set out to conquer Ireland, they looked for justifications that would ease their conscience and validate their endeavours.[8] By the early 18th century, as Great Britain unified into a single state, its people began to see themselves as a distinct nation, separate from others. [9] This burgeoning sense of British national identity led them to view themselves as unique, superior or exceptional. In fact, the expansion of the Empire and the belief in 'Britishness' were intertwined. Moreover, the loss of America and the concurrent conquest of India simultaneously reshaped imperial patriotism. Consequently, Britishness was expressed by delineating the fundamental quality of the difference. [10] As the British defined their national identity in contrast to the external world, they, like other Europeans influenced by the Enlightenment, proclaimed their own superiority as modern and civilised individuals. Between 1773 and 1857, colonial power was formalised and strengthened. During this period, colonial officials depicted the Company's philanthropic efforts as acts of 'public utility,' positioning them against what they considered the superstitious and wasteful Indian social traditions.[11]

British perception of India was influenced by various factors, including the concept of the West being superior to the East. During the medieval period, the Christian world perceived the East as a mythical land filled with marvels, creatures, riches, and heroic acts. For some, it represented paradise, while for others, it was the abode of the Antichrist.[12] Metcalf explains that despite this often-intimidating view of a region vastly different from the familiar Christian world, the East was paradoxically part of that known realm. Hell and Paradise, Antichrist, and Devil were essential, even necessary, elements of the medieval world order. As a result, the East has been consistently portrayed through Western iconography. From the 17th century onwards, the scientific study of comparative religion, along with a deeper understanding of India, dismantled the older image of the fearsome East. Influenced by secularism, distant lands lost their cosmological significance for Europeans and were instead described through the taxonomic framework of 18th-century natural sciences. Indeed, enlightened thinking distinctly separated the non-European world as an 'Other.' As Europeans developed a sense of identity separate from Christendom's older order, they also had to create the notion of an 'Other' across the sea. Thus, if one was described as enlightened, then naturally, someone else had to be portrayed as savage or vicious.[13] This led to the creation of a duality where one was modern and progressive, while the other was primitive and backward. As the British sought to define themselves as 'British' and thus not Indian, they had to attribute to the Indian whatever they chose not to attribute to themselves. This process automatically generated a series of polarities that shaped much of Raj.[14] These opposites included concepts like masculinity and femininity, honesty and deceit, modern and primitive, and enlightened and savage. Ultimately, such contrasts encompassed anything that would serve to reassure the British of their own unique character and keep the Indian 'other' in its proper place.[15]

Climatic Factor

The British rationalisation of their rule in India was not only grounded in cultural and societal perceptions but also significantly influenced by their interpretation of the Indian climate. In their quest to comprehend the colony and legitimise their rule over India, British historians and officials often highlighted that Indians were accustomed to despotic and arbitrary governance. Raj found that one explanation for this was India's tropical climate, which seemed to encourage despotism. As Dow observed, the people of India found the pursuit of freedom overwhelming due to the lethargy induced by heat and humidity, which the English

identified as a key characteristic of the country's climate. As a result, with 'tranquillity' and 'ease' as their main aspirations, Indians allowed themselves to be subjugated without opposing the arbitrary control of despotic rulers. Notably, the distinct nature of India's climate has been complemented by six centuries of domination under Islamic rule. [16] The emphasis on the environment's role in making India amenable to despotism reflects Montesquieu's enduring influence. [17] Officials writing about India frequently mentioned its climate, posing a significant challenge to every European constitution. [18] As the British began a more detailed examination of India in the 1770s, they shifted their focus from climatic determinism to what they perceived as their people's enduring cultural and racial characteristics.[19] Europeans thus portrayed life in this hot climate as mere laziness, lacking the necessary drive to work, accumulate wealth, and build a civilisation according to the European model. [20] Consequently, the impacts of the environment and climate on culture have been consistently highlighted. In 1770, James Stewart wrote, "If the soil be vastly rich, situated in a warm climate, and naturally watered, the production of the Earth will be almost spontaneous: this will make the inhabitants lazy."[21]

From the 18th century onwards, the development of racial theories of differentiation based on climatic determinism became a crucial tool for imperialist justification. Each climatic region is believed to shape a distinct constitution of its inhabitants. Thus, specific climatic regions were thought to mould the human constitution unique to that area. The geographic concept of tropicality emerged as a practical tool in the colonial context. During the 18th and 19th centuries, European powers engaged in colonisation efforts. The initial phase of settlement in South Asia proved deadly for many Europeans, as their mortality rate was significantly higher than that of the local population. This led to efforts to comprehend how the tropical climate affected the health of Westerners. The colonial era saw a revival of the ancient idea of climatic determinism, believing that India's harsh climate and disease-ridden environment posed a threat to the survival of Anglo-Indians in the region. This theory suggests that people tend to adapt to the dominant environmental conditions and climatic characteristics in which they live. At the time of aggressive expansion, this theory proved convenient when moral grounds were required to justify Western designs of conquest and exploitation. Explanations such as environmental determinism encouraged conjectures that the tropical climate of India bred only' lazy' and 'degenerative' people in contrast to the 'manly' and 'strong' individuals of the temperate zone. Historian Rituparna Ray Chowdhury notes that this notion, with its insidious veneer of rationality, facilitated a justification of the ideology of

imperial colonisation, while also discouraging permanent settlement of the European colonisers upon Indian soil.[22]

It is crucial to understand the significance of environmental and climatic perceptions in shaping Indian colonial policy. David Arnold has highlighted the significant emphasis the British placed on India's monsoons. The yearly monsoon rains were considered not only a central element of India's meteorology but also crucial to various aspects of its economic and social life. This made them a symbol of the control that 'the disposition of nature' had over the Indian populace. [23] It was a common belief that, while nature had been subdued in Britain, its influence persisted in India, impacting nearly every facet of society and governance. India was perceived as being more subject to nature than Europe, which was used to explain its perceived backwardness, inferiority, and internal divisions. This perception underscored the British rationale for ruling India, aiming to bring 'improvement,' 'order,' and 'progress,' thereby freeing Indians from their subjugation to nature. Consequently, environmental factors, climate, and diseases were frequently cited to illustrate and rationalise India's moral and physical frailty, justifying the continuation of imperial rule. [24]

Orientalist Discourse

In the latter part of the 18th century, as the British sought to establish their Raj, they developed a vision that encompassed both the historical and future trajectories of India. Metcalf observes that without such a vision, the Raj could neither justify their governance to themselves nor establish a cohesive administrative framework.[25] In their efforts to comprehend India, the concept of Oriental despotism was pivotal. Influenced by French intellectuals and the Enlightenment, despotism was perceived not only as a characteristic of the Orient but also as a form of governance to be feared and opposed in Europe.[26] Some British officials, such as Warren Hastings, advocated for the study of ancient Indian knowledge, which he deemed essential for effective governance of India.[27] Scholars who engaged with ancient Indian texts were identified as Orientalists. The concept of Orientalism as a discourse concerning the Orient was first introduced by Edward Said in his book ‘Orientalism’ (1978) and reflects a long-standing European approach to the Orient as a counterpart to Western culture. Orientalism as an ideology has been extensively analysed historically.[28] In their quest to understand India, the notion of 'Oriental Despotism' evolved into Orientalism, as knowledge was imposed from

above and validated by the colonial state's authority, integral to an imperialist agenda. The Orient was not a geopolitical reality but rather a political and cultural construct of the West. Orientalism was a system of representations shaped by a set of forces that introduced the Orient into Western awareness and subsequently into the Western Empire. It was a method of perceiving and depicting the Orient itself.[29] It portrayed India as a land stuck in the past and in need of regeneration through British governance.

In the initial efforts to understand new colonies, certain recurring themes became apparent. These included a belief in moral superiority over their Indian subjects and a perceived distinction between Victorian Britain and the Indian 'other.' Metcalf characterises the British perspective as viewing India as a land entrenched in the past, with its people influenced by the climate's heat, the unique nature of their religion, and the ancient traditions of their social structures.[30] This portrayal depicted a scene of complete degeneration, desolation, and decay, necessitating regeneration through British governance. Historian Eric Stokes observes that the British perceived themselves "as inheritors rather than innovators, as revivers of a decayed system."[31] Understanding the historical underpinnings of Orientalism not only sheds light on the colonial mindset but also helps us recognise its lingering effects on modern perceptions of the East.

The idea of Tropical 'Other'

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Europeans explored India from various angles, including the study of Hinduism and Oriental literature, as well as through physical surveys and measurements of the land.[32] Another significant aspect of depicting India at this time was its classification as a tropical region. To people of that era, the term 'tropics' referred to areas known for their heat, humidity, and lush vegetation. Over time, labelling a region as 'tropical' became a Western method of identifying it as culturally foreign and environmentally distinct from Europe and other temperate areas.[33] Tropicality described the experience of northern Europeans entering a world unfamiliar in terms of climate, flora, inhabitants, and diseases.[34] Consequently, there was a palpable sense of tropical otherness. The concept of the tropics served as a Western means of defining something, both culturally and politically foreign, as well as being environmentally unique compared to Europe and other temperate zones. By referencing the tropics, early 19th-century authors introduced a range of

scientific and aesthetic ideas to India, spanning from idyllic to disease-ridden, and from impressionistic and romantic to strictly technical descriptions of plant and animal life.[35] Thus, India's classification as part of the tropics was a way to highlight its 'otherness' from Europe while also emphasising its connection to what was increasingly viewed, in contrast to temperate regions, as the 'tropical world'.[36] Therefore, the concept of tropicality played a crucial role in the discovery and portrayal of India in multiple ways. It assisted in capturing the European perception of India as a foreign and exotic place filled with unique sights, smells, and tastes, along with its products. The influence of tropicalization was significant. Arnold notes that moving away from and partly contrasting with the concept of the 'Orient' was a crucial way to place India within a broader geographical and cultural framework.[37] However, a recurring question was why India was not and could never be Europe. Here, it is important to understand that if India was indeed part of the tropics, it was more as a representative of the 'bad tropics' rather than the 'good tropics' imagined by Europeans.[38] Interestingly, in the early 19th century, India was often seen by Europeans as a land surrounded by death. There were perceptions of India as a place filled with disease and danger.[39] From the beginning, the prevalence and visibility of death shaped many European travellers' understanding of India and influenced their scenic perceptions.[40] Writings from that period depicted the land as deadly, with malignant miasmas rising from every swamp, graveyard, paddy field, and jungle, summoned by tropical humidity and a strong sun.[41] This perceived deadliness of India's climate and landscape was a common theme in most writings about India at the time. From a European viewpoint, a medical topography was depicted, portraying an unfamiliar and hazardous landscape with its unique seasons, climate peculiarities, distinctive vegetation, and even abundant insect and animal life.[42]

Indeed, the medico-topographical perspective on the Indian landscape was truly novel, and in historical discussions, the tropical climate has frequently been regarded as the primary factor behind severe fever and flux. It was commonly observed that extreme heat, humidity, and sudden temperature changes typical of tropical regions are believed to adversely affect the European constitution, increasing susceptibility to illness, even if not directly causing it.[43] Despite advancements in sanitation and medicine during the 19th century, disease remained a significant aspect of the European perception of the tropical world. For Europeans, residing in the tropics is considered a source of both physical and mental strain. Interestingly, in the early 20th century, medical experts identified a condition known as tropical neurasthenia,

characterised by intense anxiety simply from living in the tropics.[44] The tropics were consistently portrayed as environmentally inferior and incapable of supporting advanced societies. It was believed that native populations in the tropics were intellectually slow and sluggish in their actions.[45] Furthermore, there was a widespread belief that civilisation was rare, if not impossible, in tropical regions. Slavery is viewed as a natural phenomenon in these areas. With nature being abundant, it was thought that a surplus could only be produced by people who were naturally lazy and could meet their needs with minimal effort through coercion. Consequently, slavery represented the otherness of the tropics, a place where standard labour laws did not apply [46]

By the end of the 19th century, India's integration into tropical areas had become increasingly apparent. Its diseases, plant life, soil, climate, farming methods, and population have gradually been included within the notion of tropicality. This shift can be linked to the growing reach of imperial science and the interconnectedness of different regions within the Tropical Empire. Geographers such as Semple and Huntington viewed India as exemplifying many typical traits of a tropical country: a climate that drained energy, illnesses that weakened the populace, and an environment inherently unsuitable for what they deemed civilised life. As the empire's power expanded, along with the British belief in their racial and technological superiority over India, the environment was more frequently cited as a reason for the significant divide that separated them. [47]

Romanticism and Indian Landscape

In his book 'Tropics and the Travelling Gaze,' historian David Arnold explores how British and other European travellers and observers came to understand and conceptualise the vast and varied region during the first half of the 19th century. He contends that landscapes and other natural elements were often used to legitimise colonial authority and exert control over populations through the natural environment.[48] Many travel narratives from this period, much like numerous scientific publications, were written by individuals who were either members of or connected to the military in India, or who had familial ties to military personnel. Arnold observes that the constant demand for surveys and reports led to continuous movement, and the company's territorial expansion drove much of the travel during this era.[49] In the 16th and 17th centuries, visitors to India documented the intrigues of the Mughal court, the trade goods, the distinctive customs and behaviours at court, as well as the unusual fruits and exotic

animals they encountered. Essentially, India was viewed as a place of wonder. However, by the late 18th and early 19th centuries, European accounts of India had become significantly more detailed and expressive.[50] Over time, India was perceived as having a newfound sensitivity to its natural environment. The travel literature from this period reflects a romanticised appreciation of the richness and diversity of the physical surroundings. This literature was also enriched with a new vocabulary concerning place and taste, along with an unprecedented medical and scientific interest in topography, climate, vegetation, and landscape. This shift may have started in the 1780s or even slightly earlier. Some of this new sentiment has been captured in the artistic depictions of India, and in publications showcasing views of India's key historical, architectural, and scenic locations. By the early 19th century, and particularly during the 1830s, a more affluent, expressive, and distinctive narrative concerning India's landscape, geography, and travel had emerged.[51] Prose writings, scientific studies, and travel literature about India sought to portray aspects of the country that transcended the restrictive boundaries and superficial norms of the picturesque.

Arnold notes that the scenic complexity and vast diversity of India's landscapes allowed for the creation of narratives filled with contrast and contradiction.[52] In the early 19th century, India garnered unprecedented interest in Britain.[53] This era saw the publication of hundreds of books about India, including histories, biographies, political commentaries, economic analyses, evangelical tracts, military campaign chronicles, sports and hunting stories, and, most notably, travel narratives.[54] From the 1820s to the 1840s, this surge in travel writing about India became a key way for the West to gain knowledge about the subcontinent and for ideas about it to spread.[55] At the same time, from the 18th century onwards, negative depictions of the tropics became more common in travellers' tales and fiction [56]

In the early 1800s, European writings about India often mixed romantic stories and images with descriptions of the land. This shows how outside ideas were used in India, which is important for scholars to study.[57] Arnold notes that romanticism in India appears in different and sometimes opposing ways. One way was the love for wild nature, but this was usually shown by comparing it to European landscapes or through art and literature.[58] A romantic love for nature often came with a wish to 'improve' India. At this time, travel writing and Romanticism were closely connected, and travel writing became a key way to show colonial romanticism.[59] India is often seen as a country in decline. Arnold points out that signs

of this decline were visible not just in old palaces and tombs but also in the natural environment. Travellers and mapmakers used words like jheels, ghats, and nullahs to describe the land, but 'jungle' was the most powerful term. For Europeans, the jungle meant danger, chaos, and wild plants. People cleared jungles because they were hiding places for bandits and dangerous animals.[60] Over time, jungles had a bad reputation because they were linked to diseases like malaria, which made many Europeans and Indians sick or even killed them.[61] Historical records unequivocally demonstrated a profound connection between diseases and specific regions, tracing back to British military campaigns in the 1770s, particularly in the sub-Himalayan Tarai and the jungle areas of Bengal. By the 1820s, the fusion of "jungle, pestilence, and fever" into a singular concept became prevalent among military and medical personnel. Europeans residing in remote areas for extended periods were often perceived as becoming 'jungly,' a term coined by Emily Eden to describe the erosion of their refined manners.[62] While some romanticised jungles as 'picturesque' or possessing 'romantic beauty,' travel writings starkly contrasted the dense, disease-ridden jungles with the delightful mango tree tops offering shade and fruit. The jungle symbolised neglected land, and the decline of civilisation was underscored by its wildlife. Fields and villages that 'went to the jungle' were seen as indicators of human regression, with tigers, bears, and wild elephants serving as evidence.[63] This perspective underscored a preference for a cultivated, orderly landscape over a wild one. The notion of improvement was intrinsically linked to the imperative of European intervention to supplement what was perceived as Indian ignorance. Improvement transcended mere restoration of India's ruins; it entailed transforming the country to mirror Britain's rural landscape.[64]

The preceding discussion highlights that during the 18th and early 19th centuries, the British Raj approached their newly acquired Indian colony with fixed, preconceived notions. Efforts have been made to comprehend the unfamiliar climate landscape and populace through a Western-centric perspective. While historians such as David Arnold have uncovered new themes and perspectives in the British portrayal of India, it is evident that certain fundamental ideas consistently appeared in colonial rulers' descriptions of India. These included a strong sense of superiority and racial arrogance, the perceived fundamental difference between Victorian Britain and the decayed Indian colony, and the attribution of blame to the hot, humid, and tropical climate. Through these conceptualisations, Raj sought to legitimise and justify governance over India. Over time, new themes and perspectives have

emerged, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of colonies. This underscores the British Raj's entrenched perceptions of India in the 18th and early 19th centuries, where the British viewed themselves as enlightened and modern while depicting the colony as primitive and backward.

Notes

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