

UNDERSTANDING AND IMAGINATION

A Critical Notice of Halbfass and Inden

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During the last decade or so, a new restlessness has begun to disturb the calm facade of the social scientific academia. As yet, it has no name. Better said, it has many names: from 'reflexive' to the 'post-modern'. The ferment is not widespread, but the voices of discontent are coherent and articulate. The critical voices indicate the many kinds of dissatisfaction they have with the status and nature of social sciences. Even though most dissenters cannot be grouped as representatives of any one tradition, many of their writings stand out above the rest. Two such authors are Wilhelm Halbfass and Ronald Inden; each has written a book that is worthy of attention and respect.

It is easy enough to identify the context that has brought forth the dissatisfaction of these two authors: the indological discourse and the manner in which Indian culture and civilization has been made into object of study and description over the centuries. Thematically, the ground for their restlessness is one of 'representational inadequacy': the extent to which accounts for other cultures capture the otherness of their object. As a theme, during the last decade or more, it has come into prominence in many fields and in many guises: in philosophy an attack against the notion of knowledge as a representation of the world has been remounted by Rorty; in anthropology it has taken the form that the anthropologist does not describe the other culture he meets with but writes some kind of psycho-biography instead. Whatever one's stance with respect to these emerging disputes be, it does not take away the fact that, say, anthropological and Indological accounts are experienced as constituting some kind of problem.

What kind of problem? In this critical notice, I will look at how Wilhelm Halbfass and Ronald Inden answer the above query. Each has sliced the theme along different axes: Halbfass focuses on the hermeneutic situation of inter cultural dialogue and titles his contribution, *India and Europe: an Essay on Understanding*; Inden, appropriately enough, opts for a more ambiguous *Imagining India*.

1. *Halbfass on India and Europe*

Halbfass' book consists of three parts: the first part deals with the historical growth of the multiple appreciations of Indian thought and culture in the West; the second part deals with the Indian thought and the way it has looked at other peoples and cultures; and a third part with appendices that treat some of the problems tackled in the first two sections. Each of these parts ends on a theoretical note, which reflects about what has been said: a 'preliminary postscript' concludes the first part; an 'epilogue' ends the second; 'in lieu of a conclusion' sums up the appendices and the book as a whole. There are ample end notes to each of the chapters (totaling nearly 130 pages). The book is reasonably well written, crammed with many different kinds of information, thus enabling its use as a reference work as well.

In the ten chapters that constitute the first part of the book, we are provided with a general survey and overview of the prevalent pictures the West had of India till the twentieth century. The first chapter begins, appropriately enough, where western philosophy is supposed to have begun: with the Ancient Greeks. Through the early church fathers, the story is carried forward to the Islam encounter with India (chapter 2). The third chapter treats the constructions of the Christian missionaries.

The next chapters (till chapter 8) handle the history--mostly German--of the western understanding of India. The German Romantics, Hegel, Schelling and Schopenhauer, and the developments following them, each of these gets a chapter. The ninth chapter discusses the place accorded to India in histories of philosophy. The last chapter (#10), a preliminary postscript, deals with the hermeneutic situation in the twentieth century. Writing such histories is always a risky enterprise. Inevitably, one opens oneself up for charges of one-sidedness, incompleteness, and such like. To level such charges with respect to the first part of this book, however, is to completely miss both the project of the author as well as the work's pioneering character. As far as I know, this is the first book-length attempt to provide us with an outline of the way European images of India have been built up over the centuries.

The above paragraph notwithstanding, I should nevertheless like to raise an issue of historical inadequacy which, in fact, touches on a core problem of Halbfass' project itself. As he himself notices (p.53), the Christian missionary literature has been extremely important in constructing the western images of India. Curiously enough though, a disproportionate amount of space is devoted in the third chapter to Roberto Nobili who played very little role in defining the western understanding of India. The Catholic Church was suspicious of Nobili, and his works hardly saw the light of the day. Roberto Nobili is an interesting figure, to be sure, but hardly of any significance to the *actual* dialogue as it took place between these two cultures. By contrast, Halbfass glosses over missionaries like Abrahamus Rogerius, Philippus Baldaeus, *etc.*, who were extremely important in outlining precisely the contours of understanding and dialogue that Halbfass is interested in. It is almost as though two different questions and two different concerns are constantly interfering with each other. There is the first set which Halbfass constantly grapples with: who are the best exemplars of the hermeneutic situation of inter-cultural dialogue? Which figures exemplify best the tension inherent in the attempts at cross-cultural understanding? And, then, there is also the second group of questions which actually sets the *context* for the above questions. How shall we choose our best exemplars?

One choice is to look for those who were most sensitive to the problems generated by the contact and dialogue between India and the West. More likely than not, such figures have also been utterly marginal to the actual hermeneutic process; they have been unable to determine the terms of the dialogue. Furthermore, the contemporary situation from where we identify hermeneutic questions is itself the result of the hermeneutic understanding as it evolved. Consequently, the second is to opt for those figures who have effectively *shaped* such a dialogue. These alternatives are not a mere speculative

enumeration of possibilities. They have altogether different consequences to Halbfass' project if it turns out that there is a hiatus between, on the one hand, the dialogue as it took place and the marginal figures who raised sensitive hermeneutic questions on the other.

To see what this remark means, consider another genre of writings--the travel accounts published between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries in Europe. For example, the writings of Varthema, a Portuguese explorer, were immensely popular in the West and it is such writings that tell us what the hermeneutic situation was like. The early missionaries, the philosophers of the enlightenment, all and sundry in fact were brought up on such tales and accounts. When a Herder or a Hegel speak of the culture of India, when they attempt to understand translations of fragmentary texts, their horizon of understanding was determined in very important ways by what explorers had written about India. Yet, Halbfass hardly mentions the travel literature. This is not a mere side comment on the bibliographical inadequacy of *India and Europe*. Rather it points to a fundamental lacuna, which can be formulated in very simple terms. Halbfass seems to pay no attention to the *contexts of dialogue*. By this I do not refer to such events as colonization and so forth, but to those that fundamentally defined the *very nature of the dialogue itself*. When Christian missionaries from the seventeenth century Europe described Indian religions and philosophies, they were working within Christianity. When the enlightenment philosophers looked at other cultures and peoples, they were doing so within the ambit of Protestant criticisms of Catholic Christianity. To even think of abstracting from this context (because of the excuse that one is not giving an "exhaustive" history of the encounter between India and Europe) is to fundamentally misconceive the dialogue itself. One example ought to suffice.

Halbfass uses the term 'fulfilment' to describe the attitude of the nineteenth century missionaries in India who looked at Christianity as the fullest and most complete religion and believed that the religious needs and feelings of people are fulfilled only in Christianity. About this orientation, he says

We may even suspect that the development of the idea of fulfilment among the Christian missionaries is, in part at least, a response to the Neo-Hindu inclusivism as we find it exemplified by Ramakrishna, Keshab Chandra Sen and Vivekanda (p.52).

Despite the qualifications ('we may even suspect', 'in part at least') that rob this formulation of much of its worth, surely, this is untrue. The idea of 'fulfilment' is as old as Christianity itself. It is a part of Christian self-understanding that Jesus is Christ and that in him alone does God reveal Himself fully and completely. (Some modern-day Christian philosophers of religion and theologians are less inclined to subscribe to this remark of course.) In fact, Eusebius, some of whose writings Halbfass seems to be acquainted with summarized the understanding prevalent during his time (300 years after Christ) in his famous *Evangelical Preparations*, where he sees the Ancient Greek and Roman Culture as preparations for the advent of Gospels. Two hundred or so years later, St. Augustine (in his *De Vera Religione*) argues that all heathen religions were fulfilled by the coming of Christ in flesh; and so forth. The missionaries (both Protestant and

Catholic) after the reformation schism never made any bones about this theological issue. In this sense, to attribute an absolutely essential part of Christian self-understanding to a response to the 'inclusivism' of Neo-Hinduism is to live in a no-man's land. Clearly, Halbfass pays no attention to the fact that these missionaries were *Christian* and were looking at India through the lens of their religion as they received it from their milieu. As a consequence, Halbfass cannot but misread both what the missionaries were saying, what 'Neo-Hinduism' is about, and what the nature of their dialogue was. Thus a big question opens up: which dialogue is Halbfass describing? How could we *continue* a dialogue if we are oblivious to its very terms?

Traditional Hinduism has not reached out for the West. It has not been driven by ... the urge to understand and master the foreign cultures. ... India has discovered the West and begun to respond to it in being sought out, explored, overrun and objectified by it. ... Europeans took the initiative. They went to India. This is a simple and familiar fact. Yet its fundamental significance for the hermeneutics of the encounter between India and the West is often forgotten. (p.172; see also p.437)

Thus begins the eleventh chapter (and the second part) of Halbfass' chronicle of Indian "xenology". (A term that Halbfass borrows from Duala-M'bedy to pick out the attitudes towards and conceptualizations of foreigners; p.507. n2.) In this part, Halbfass is interested in finding out what Indian "xenology" has been like. There is obviously not much of an interest in the 'other' in the traditional Indian thought. Halbfass believes that "the lack of xenological interest and initiative in traditional Hinduism is obviously connected with its lack of historical interest and motivation" (p.196). The next chapter is about Rammohan Roy (a Bengali reformer). We read there that Roy was deeply influenced by the European thought: "The mark of European thought may be seen in his program of a return to the purity of the original sources, his universalism, his concept of God, his style of Interpretation, *etc.*" (p. 207). What was his contribution to the dialogic encounter? Here is Halbfass' answer, one of those typical passages that abound throughout the book:

Rammohan's contribution to the encounter between India and Europe is not to be found in any teachings *about* the relationship between the two, nor in any theoretical model of cross-cultural or interreligious understanding. The essence of his contribution lies instead in the variety and interplay of his means of expression, in the rupture and tension in his hermeneutic orientation, in his practice of responding and appealing to different traditions and horizons of expectation, and in the exemplary openness and determination with which he avails himself of the historical situation and its hermeneutical opportunities (p.208).

It is worth our while to pause and look at the above passage and its message. Roy's contribution was not theoretical in the sense of providing a theory (or a model) of cross-cultural or interreligious understanding; it was not empirical in the sense that he discovered something hitherto unknown in either India or the West. His contribution lies in the way he used some parts of a language ("in the variety and interplay of his means of expression"); in the fact of what he was--a Europeanized Indian Christian ("in the

rupture and tension in his hermeneutic orientation"). Because of this, he had to appeal to what he knew of both these traditions ("his practice of responding and appealing to different traditions and horizons of expectation"), and in doing so, he was quite an unprincipled opportunist ("the exemplary openness and the determination with which he avails of the historical situation and its hermeneutical opportunities"). In other words, Rammohan Roy had nothing interesting to say and his importance to the *Indians* (or Hinduism) is the fact that he is an Indian. If this is it, why not simply say so? Is it a fear of hurting Indian readers? or simply a reflection of the 'tension and rupture' in Halbfass' own hermeneutic orientation? Whatever the reason, I can only note that such paragraphs hardly help an interested reader.

The next chapter (#13) about Neo-Hinduism is followed by five subsequent chapter (#15 to #19) which are of narrowly Indological interest. They discuss the notion of Dharma, philosophy and such like in the Indian literature. Here, Halbfass is at his best revealing a masterly grasp of relevant texts. Extended discussion of these chapters will not be of great interest to the readers of this journal and, personally speaking, I am skeptical too of the results that this kind of Indological research can possibly deliver. A short epilogue concludes the second part of the book.

The third part consists of a series of appendices: one on the concept of experience, the other is the author's debate with Hacker on the concept of 'inclusivism', and ends in a chapter that should be seen 'In lieu of a conclusion'.

By now it must be evident that Halbfass has written a rich and complex book. It is a difficult book to evaluate, partly because it is not obvious to me what his central thesis is or whether he has any. Neither thematically not chronologically is it a unified book. While reading the book, I often had the feeling that Halbfass has identified some interesting problems, has developed insights that are immensely important but is unable (or unwilling) to elaborate them in any systematic way. Perhaps, one reason is his adopted 'philosophical' style: a peculiar combination of hermeneutics with a typically German idea of what it is to 'think through'. In fact, one of the irritating aspects of this book is its tendency to raise multiple questions without trying to answer any of them. There is a world of difference between simply formulating questions by their hundreds and solving problems. It is the latter which helps us understand more about the world, and the former has merely a nuisance value when raised without answers or even hints of one. Here are two characteristic passages (there are many such in this book, *e.g.* 161, 163, 169, 260-261, 262, 379-380, 401-402, 419, 439-440) that typify what I am talking about.

Is Hegel's scheme of historical subordination and his association of the idea of philosophy with the historical identity and destiny of Europe entirely obsolete? Does it reflect the attitude of his own time and the earlier history of European interest in India? To what extent has it influenced its subsequent development? Has it finally been superseded by the progress of Indian and "Oriental" studies and by the results of objective historical research? But to what extent is such research itself a European phenomenon and part of European self-affirmation? To what extent does it reflect European perspectives and motivations? How, on the other hand, has the encounter

with India, the accumulation of information about it, affected the European self-understanding and sense of identity? Has it affected the meaning of religion and philosophy itself? How and why did Europeans become interested in Indian thought? Which questions and expectations did they have concerning India and themselves? How much "search" for "Indian wisdom" has there been, and what is its significance? (p.2; see also 374-375)

In a very trivial sense, you will be able to answer these questions at the end of Halbfass' book; but then, in exactly same sense, you would have been able to answer them before reading the book as well. Consider now the second characteristic passage.

Is there a philosophy today which is nourished by an equal, and equally committed, familiarity with Indian and European sources? Has the encounter between India and Europe, and the "comparison" of Indian and European philosophies, opened new prospects for philosophy itself? To what extent have we gone beyond the projection of speculative images of India on the one hand, and the accumulation of historical and philological information on the other? To what extent have the Indians gone beyond apologetics, reinterpretation, and the combination and interplay of Indian and European concepts? Will Indian and European thought come together in a "truly cosmopolitan world-philosophy" Will there ever be a "global philosophy" and a genuine "fusion of horizons", *i.e.* a new context of orientation and self-understanding which would be fundamentally different from what Troeltsch called "bookbinder's synthesis" or from a merely additive accumulation of data about foreign traditions, and a non-committal recognition and "understanding" of alternative world-views? In what sense can the dialogue between India and Europe affect our way of asking fundamental questions, as well as our reflection upon the meaning and limits of philosophy itself? Is there hope for a philosophically significant "comparative philosophy" which would imply the freedom to transcend philosophy in its European sense? (p.375)

These are, let us note well, important questions. But how shall we go about answering them? Even more importantly, what would count as answers to these questions? Halbfass' own reflections on the above paragraph take the following form:

These questions remain open. The temptation to answer and discard questions of this nature by presenting general and programmatic declarations has itself contributed greatly to the abstract rhetoric which continues to dominate wide areas of "comparative philosophy" (ibid).

Will, I wonder, Professor Halbfass understand and forgive me if I raise a rhetorical query or two myself? To what extent are these questions like those raised by Professor Halbfass themselves contributive to making what "comparative philosophy" has become? Is there a way we can fruitfully conduct serious enquiries without being tempted to appear prematurely profound? Is there hope for a serious cross-cultural theory which avoids the extremes of mimetic reproduction of hackneyed themes or a rehash of famed vulgarities? Your guess in answering these queries, I am inclined to say, is as good as mine.

Polemics aside, let me note that my criticism of Halbfass is not that he has failed to answer all or any of these questions. But we need to know what would count as an answer and what is required in answering these questions. Of course, more theoretical and empirical work is all that is needed in answering this or any other question about the world we live in. But surely, we need to go beyond this trivial truth after having read a book about the dialogue between India and Europe.

"Modern Indian thought", says Halbfass continuing, "finds itself in a historical context created by Europe, and it has difficulties speaking for itself. Even in its self-representation and self-assertion, it speaks to a large extent in a European Idiom" (ibid). Without a doubt, a fundamental and true insight; but what is its import? This is true not merely for India but also for all non-western cultures. Our problem is to find out how this insight could be put to work in a creative and productive fashion. Until such a stage is reached, repetition of this insight will be so much flag waving. Surely, this situation has not come into being because we speak a European language or that sufficiently intelligent people do not exist in India or elsewhere. What, then, has made the Indians understand themselves in terms of the European understanding of their culture? Ronald Inden, in his book about *Imagining India*, tries to obliquely answer this question.

2. *Inden on Imagining India*

As one of the interpretations of the title is suggestive of, Inden concentrates on the way Europe has imaginatively pictured India. The three interdependent theses he argues for, however, have a broader scope than the Asian subcontinent alone. To begin with, Inden argues that a particular kind of metaphysic has had the historical consequence of producing false descriptions of India which parade as Indological knowledge. Furthermore, this metaphysic is not uniquely present in Indology alone but has a wider acceptance among social scientists. Secondly, embracing an alternative metaphysics is required if one intends to do more than merely exercise one's imagination while indulging in a study of peoples and their ways of living. He argues for this thesis by drawing upon Collingwood and by trying to redescribe the ubiquitous 'caste' system and state. Thirdly, there is the broader thesis that the image Europe has of itself is tightly connected to the image it has of the other, in this case, India. Of necessity, the second and the third theses are less elaborated than the first.

With the exception of the first and the last chapter, the bulk of the book concentrates on spelling out both the metaphysic that has supported the European understanding of India and the several landmarks that characterize this description. Each one of them is accorded a treatment in an independent chapter: the caste system (#2); Hinduism (#3); the village India (#4); and oriental despotism (#5). These chapters are to illustrate the contention that a particular metaphysic underlies Indological practice. Put in extremely simple terms, this metaphysic displaces human agency to supra- or trans-historical essences. In more

elaborate terms, the characteristic properties attributed to the social world by this metaphysic are the following:

1. It is *objective*. It exists as its apart from any knowledge of it and does not differ with the interests or perspectives of those who know about it.
2. It is necessarily *unified*. All its parts operate together toward the same goal or in accord with the same design.
3. It is *bounded*, in that it is isolable from any other systems that can be known apart from them.
4. It is *atomist* and consists ultimately of fundamental units that are the smallest, irreducible entities in it, to wit atoms in physics, individuals in the social world.
5. It is *complete*; any diminution of its parts would impair its working; any addition would be redundant.
6. It is *self-centered*, that is, it has a directing centre and a directed periphery.
7. It is *self-regulating*; it operates automatically, apart from the original and perhaps occasional intervention of a Prime Mover, equatable with the guiding mind of this giant body.
8. It is *determinist*. Its parts follow universal laws; events in it are discrete, each cause having a definite effect, which is to say that the future is determined by the past.
9. It is *essentialist*. The phenomena that make up the world are manifestations of 'essences', objective determinate entities that underlie their 'surface' features or appearances, *e.g.*, 'sovereignty is the essence of state' (p.13).

Inden's fire, then, is directed against all social scientific thinking that is guided by this metaphysic. His aim is to demonstrate that Indological discourse is indeed imprisoned by this way of thinking.

Has Inden succeeded in showing this? The answer to this question is not simple, unfortunately. It depends on very much on what is count *as evidence* for these claims. That is not all. The relationship between this metaphysic and the Indological descriptions is not a simple relation of a premise to its consequence either. As Inden puts it: "I shall be concerned to bring out the presuppositions that silently inhabit their (the European scholars of South Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) words and thoughts and the consequences that attend them" (p.11). What kinds of consequences are these? The footnote formulates it thus: "I distinguish consequence here as a historical problem from entailments in a formal, logical sense" (ibid; fn.5). If I understand Inden correctly, he is suggesting that the Indologists have often made assumptions characteristic of a certain

kind of metaphysic and that, as a historical fact, some peculiar problems have come to the fore. What relation is there between these assumptions and the problems that have emerged in the Indological research of the last two hundred years? In the rest of the book, a dependency relation is posited between the two without being clear, however, about what that relation is. As I shall be returning to this point later on, let me suggest that the best strategy to evaluate the success of Inden's enterprise is to look at one or two chapters closely. That I shall do by looking at the second chapter (caste) here, while glancing at the third chapter (Hinduism) towards the end.

Caste system in India

Inden introduces the theme by speaking about the problem that has fascinated many. China, the other greatest civilization that dominates Asia, was never really colonized; India, by contrast, has often been.

What differentiated India, then, from China and the Near East was this paradoxical fact: outsiders, beginning with the Aryans and ending with the British had conquered India again and again, but her ancient civilization had survived into the present more or less unchanged. ...

... What in the nature of this civilization could possibly explain this seeming paradox? The answer discourses on India have given ... has been 'Caste', that institution considered peculiar to India, and particularly to India's distinctive religion, Hinduism (p.55-56)

Of course, this problem arises only if India is seen as an 'unchanging' civilization. But then, as Inden points out, this image of static India was as such a part of the Indological discourse as was the solution provided to answer the alleged paradox.

This solution knows at least two dominant variants, as Inden tells the story. There is, firstly, 'the empiricist' theorizing about the origin of this institution; secondly, there is the 'idealist' speculation about its emergence. Rejecting the story about the cosmogonic creation of four groups (from the brahmin to the sudra) as an explanation for the genesis of 'Caste' in India, the empiricists (which counts mostly the British colonial administrators, utilitarian thinkers like James Mill, and so on) went in search of a possible mechanism that could account for its origin. One of the favored hypothesis was the interaction and intermingling of races--the Aryan with the native, the Dravidian. To the idealists, the cosmogonic story about the birth of four varnas constitutes the fundamental explanation of what 'caste' is. Inden also sketches the ideas of some dissenting voices: from Hocart through Weber to Dumont. "Nearly all, however, have continued to look on their version of caste as a post-tribal society of 'natural' ties that constitutes the distinctive essence of India" (p.83).

More or less along similar lines, by referring to appropriate authors, Inden provides a critical look at the other pillars that constitute the Indological discourse: the belief that understanding Hinduism is to grasp the nature of the Hindu mind (chapter #3); that the essence of India is in her villages (chapter #4); and that the oriental despot provided the key to understanding her political structure (chapter #5). In the last chapter, Inden attempts at a reconstruction of 'medieval India' by using the philosophical resources adumbrated in the first chapter.

In my assessment, his last chapter is by far the best in the book; the first chapter, the worst. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will ignore both: the last chapter because Inden's reconstruction is in a preliminary phase and we should all wait and see what kind of a theory will come out before indulging in an assessment; the first chapter because it is counter-productive to have a philosophical fight at this stage.

How could a debate about philosophical presuppositions be counter-productive when the meat of Inden's book--and his message--is precisely about the need for examining the metaphysics of social scientific discourse? How, furthermore, could Inden write such an important and exciting book while giving himself over to excavating and discussing philosophical assumptions of Indological discourse?

Inden's Critique of Caste

Reconsider the two dominant theories prevalent in the Indological discourses as Inden outlines them: a racialist theory and the idealistic one. Both attempt to explain the origin of Caste by assuming its antiquity. Apart from their cognitive inadequacies as explanations of social phenomena, their status as theories get discredited if it turns out that what they explain never existed *i.e.*, if Caste does not have such an antiquity at all. Inden, in fact, states as much by referring to his early work on the Bengali kinship:

(T)he distinctive institution of Indian civilization does not appear until the thirteenth or fourteenth century, at the earliest; and castes are not the *cause* of the weakness and collapse of Hindu kingship, but the *effect* of it. (p.82)

Such a discussion about object-level accounts are both productive and important. But Inden wants to push the discussion one step further and go to the 'roots' of these images themselves. Such would be possible, if these images have some *one* foundation. My suggestion is that they do not.

To appreciate this suggestion better, consider the fact that the Indologist discourse over the last few hundred years does entertain the image of Caste-dominated India. How has this image sustained itself? Why is there such a wide-spread acceptance of this 'datum' among intellectuals? Here is one way to account for this state of affairs. Thinkers from

succeeding generations have read either books or have read/heard in the media that Caste is a non-dynamic social fossil, or whatever. Some among them treat this as a fact requiring explanation, build their theories to do so; subsequent generations look at the earlier, unsuccessful theories and try to improve upon them, and so on. Thus, over a period of time, a commonsense claim crystallizes as a fact--now it is also a fact of these theories.

This possibility shall definitely have occurred to Inden and, perhaps, he rejects it because it is too banal. He tries to look for a 'deeper' explanation and finds it in the 'metaphysics of essences'. However, this is no explanation at all, deeper or otherwise. Why not?

First, an empirical example. Marcus Olson jr. wrote a book a few years ago titled *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (Yale University Press, 1982). He is neither an anthropologist nor an Indologist, appeals to the writings of Nehru among other things, but one of his problems too is: how to account for the social fossil that Caste is supposed to be? Nehru, as Inden argues, may have been a prisoner of the metaphysics of essences; Olson, by no stretch of imagination, is. Olson's *explanandum* happens to be Nehru's fact as well as the Indologists's characteristic description. Olson merely takes it as a problem requiring a solution without enquiring into the process of how it was made into a problem. In fact, Olson even believes that the power of his theory could be measured by the number of problems it solves *including* the unsolved problem of explaining Caste. So do the sociobiologically oriented sociologists like Pierre van de Berghe (*The Ethnic Phenomena*, Elsevier, 1981), for instance. Individuals active in one field of social science take over 'problems' (which might later turn out to be pseudo-problems) and 'facts' from their colleagues active in other domains whenever they believe they have built a theory which can successfully solve a number of problems hitherto unsolved.

The *forced* reconstruction of Indology as a prisoner of a particular metaphysic can succeed in the face of such empirical examples and practices only if it is the case that taking over a fact or a problem also *entails* taking over the metaphysic. That is to say, if the relation between a theory about some phenomena both entails and is entailed by a specific metaphysic. Can such a claim be made today?

At first sight, it appears as though there is a very tight relationship between how we describe the world and what we take to be present in the world. Someone who believes that the world is made up of spirits is not likely to come up with the relativity theory, of course. While true, it does not tell us what kind of a theory such a person is likely to come up with either. Maximally, when alternative theories and ontologies are present and known to us, *we* can anticipate some kinds of impossibilities regarding a description of the world that such a person could provide. More generally put, we do not have a great deal of clarity about the nature of the relationship between meta-theoretical assumptions and theories about objects in the world. We do believe that our philosophies have a heuristic function with respect to developing scientific theories. But more than that is very difficult to maintain today.

The empirical history of natural sciences, as well as the plurality of the philosophies of sciences, are the best examples of our problem. Surely, it cannot be held that each practitioner of different scientific theories over the last three hundred years or more entertained the same meta-theoretical assumptions. If anything is knowledge at all, theories in natural sciences are that. Their growth and development itself constitutes a philosophical problem--subject to different meta-scientific treatments ranging from inductivist arguments to problem solving accounts.

The first reason why Inden's diagnosis fails to be convincing is this: Why should either Indology or human sciences be any different in this regard?

Close on the heels of this question comes the second. Assume, counterfactually, that Inden's portrayal of Indological accounts is acceptable. That is to say, Inden is able to show us *textually*--something which, in his book, often turns around whether or not same author uses the word 'essentially', as though this betrays a commitment to 'essences'--that he can make interpretative sense of these authors by using certain philosophical assumptions. What does this demonstrate? Not that Indologists *have* entertained certain beliefs about the world but that Inden's proposals appear to be heuristically powerful. We can test Inden's claim about Indology by *deriving* (in some suitably diluted sense of the word) the Indological 'theories' from the assumptions.

In other words, Inden's proposal could only be convincing if we have some kind of a theory which tell us what the relationship between our meta-theoretical commitments and our descriptions of the world. None has such a theory today. In its absence, to lay even a part of the blame at the doorstep of a set of philosophical assumptions can hardly convince. It is a gratuitous act.

Neither empirically nor theoretically could one argue that embracing some metaphysic or the other has necessary repercussions on object-level theories about some aspect of the world. A group could hold on to one theory and yet differ in metaphysical commitments (*e.g.* quantum physicists); a group could hold on to different theories and yet subscribe to one and the same metaphysic (Inden accepts this claim). That is why I find philosophical discussions at this stage (when we have no serious theories in the field) a waste of time.

Consider the same issue from another angle, which Inden himself suggests. He claims that the social scientific discourse is a prisoner of the metaphysic he identifies. Let us accept this claim at its face-value. In what does the identity and unity of Indological, as distinct from the social scientific, discourse consist of? Because the same metaphysic is operative elsewhere, the specificity of the Indological discourse lies in the object of its study, *viz.*, India. In that case, why is there a positive description of the West and a negative one of India? One cannot lay blame on philosophical assumptions--they are the same in the social sciences as a whole. Consequently, the blame can only be laid on the individual *practitioners* of Indology: they were racist, prejudiced, biased,... While this is one way of holding these practitioners responsible, Inden wants to hear nothing of such judgments, as he repeatedly makes clear:

Throughout his book I have argued that the problem with orientalism is not just one of bias or bad motives, hence, confined to itself (p. 264).

What is the second possibility? The Indologists were not individually prejudiced or racist but, as a group, they were expressions of the bourgeois imperialist class interests. They were 'objectively' serving the interests of the imperialist powers. This possibility too is rejected by Inden. (Even though, let it be noted, he himself leans toward such an explanation albeit covering it up with the talk of 'knowledge formations' and 'hegemonic intellectuals' and their texts).

This third possibility is to locate the biased and prejudiced descriptions in the Indologist's desire to discover 'otherness' and 'alienness' in Indian culture. That may well be true; but the question remains: why did they speak of *otherness* in the manner they did?

Inden's answer, as I read his book, is simplistic. It had to do with the dominant metaphors in terms of which the West understood itself. The western intellectuals perceived their culture as exemplifying a male with a world-ordering rationality contrasted to which stood the 'other' as negation. It is, of course, difficult to demonstrate that all these intellectuals did really think of both themselves and others in terms of these metaphors. Be it as that may, there are two distinct issues here. First: Inden is right in suggesting that the kind of 'otherness' which one can conceive of depends on how the 'self' itself has been conceived. The second issue is where to localize the terms of self-description. My claim is that one has to look at object-level theories. Neither their 'underlying' metaphysics, nor even these metaphors help us much.

The reason for this is not far to seek. The relation between theories and metaphors is not a one-way traffic. Metaphors have proved to be powerful heuristics in the process of producing and popularizing theories. But the expressive abilities of metaphors depend on what kind of theories we have at our disposal as well. From a commonsense point of view today, 'order' and 'chaos' might appear as two poles of a description, but you would not think so any more if you knew the theory of Fractals. Consequently, to judge whether 'world-ordering rationality' is responsible for the description of the Indian culture as a 'female irrationality', we first need to look at object-level theories held by the practitioners during that period. How the West looked at caste system is parasitic upon its ideas of what social groups were; how its intellectuals treated Hinduism will be non-trivially dependent on what religion was to them; *etc.*

Is Inden doing the same? Yes and no. The 'yes' is evident, but the 'no' is more important: he criticizes some alleged 'common' metaphysical presuppositions instead of focusing on object-level constructions. The commonality in the West's multiple descriptions of India cannot be shown by some fancy footwork. It requires nothing less than building a theory about the western culture itself and a tendentious hermeneutic exercise is no substitute for it.

3. Halbfass and Inden: About Limitations

While discussing Halbfass' book, I made the point that he appears oblivious to the *cultural* nature of the hermeneutic encounter between India and Europe. To show *how* and in what sense such a dialogue is cultural, we need theories about cultures which give us insights into the nature of cultural differences. In Inden's account too, this sensitivity to cultural difference is missing. Like Halbfass, he too is aware that the Indian intellectuals have mostly taken over as their self-description those that the West has provided (p.38). His answer to this puzzle, one supposes, is that Indians have taken over the metaphysic of their western counterparts. No doubt, colonialism (in one way or another) would be a very important part of an explanation. But the very idea that cultural differences could be a part of the *explanans* appear inadmissible to Inden (*cf.* p. 263).

From any point of view, this is extraordinary. We have two books on our hands that *focus* on the contact between two cultures and talk about the images that one culture has built up of the other. But they are either oblivious to (Halbfass) or dismissive of (Inden) the possibility that it could have much to do with the *cultural differences* between India and the West.

I cannot hope to argue for this point in any detail here; but it may be worthwhile to register here that I have begin constructing such a description which does not trivialize the nature of cultural differences. (*Comparative Science of Cultures and the Universality of Religion*. Gent: Studiecentrum oor Godsdienstwetenschappen, 1990.) What I can do, however, is to indicate what it means to ask for what I am asking by looking very briefly at Inden's treatment of Hinduism.

Inden on Hinduism

In the process of understanding India, the European savants went in search of a religion that underlay its social organization. In this process, they 'constituted Hinduism' (p.89), broke it into elements and mapped it onto three groups in the Indian society: 'Brahmanism', the religion of the 'priests', *viz.*, the brahmins; the 'popular' Hinduism, which expressed the piety of the laity, and a crude, animistic religion meant for the illiterate. Inden chronicles the 'history' of this Hinduism as it was penned by the European scholars. A sectarian phase of excesses, during which period there was a decline and degeneration of Hinduism.

As Inden tells the story, the Europeans did not merely look for the religion of another culture. They also looked for another religion--an 'other' from their own--that could explain the alienness of Indian culture. The contrast set to the male 'world-ordering rationality' (p.86) of the European culture, says Inden, was found in the essentially feminine, sponge-like, amorphous entity that Hinduism was.

Mill's chapter on the religion of Hindus--in his *History*--and the Wilson's indological comments on it provide the framework for the orientalist discourse. What is that

framework? It is actually a combination of two things: an explanation about the origin of religion (*viz.* the transformation of natural forces into divine entities) coupled with a pejorative description of Hinduism. This combination does create a problem: if religion is an explanatory attempt (the so-called intellectualist description of religion), how to understand the absence of any coherent system of belief in Hinduism? The answer to this question, says Inden, was provided by the German Romantics and Hegel.

That answer had to do with combining the development of religion with 'faculty' psychology: religious consciousness grows from an inferior form of reason to its explicit articulation in reason proper. As a natural religion, Hinduism was a product of imagination; the latter itself--as a faculty of human psyche--was under the sway of emotions. Inden detects the 'multi-layered' picture of soul in contemporary authors like Levi-Strauss and in those many studies of myth as well (p. 96).

In the subsequent pages, Inden tries to show how the European descriptions of Brahmanism, 'popular' Hinduism, and the animistic religion of the illiterate are accommodated within the framework of Mill. Brahmanism appeared, as the Europeans described it, to have a double essence:

In the first instance, it is an over-elaborated cosmic ritualism; in the final instance, it is a radical idealism or mysticism. There is not the orderly world made by King Reason and his prime minister Will. It is the disordered, extreme world conjured by the mistress of the senses, Imagination (p.104).

'Popular' Hinduism, appropriately enough, grows from the more elite religion. Concomitantly, it focuses the piety of the laity by using icons, images and such like. In one version, Brahmins catered to the superstitious masses; in another, they popularized their own 'creeds' to meet the religious needs of the masses (p. 112). As the Indological research progressed and knowledge about India accumulated, a third religion was revealed to exist beneath the earlier two: a sacrificial and animistic cult seen severally as a 'native' religion of the Dravidians which shaped Hinduism or as an archaic survival.

In the subsequent part, Inden looks at several authors from Jung to Sudhir Kakar, who have taken over the notion of an essentially feminine Hindu mind.

On Inden's Critique

To know the religion of the Hindus, it was and is still believed, is to grasp the nature (or mind) of their civilization. This belief, however, has no special relationship with either 'Hinduism' or any 'world-ordering rationality'. Rather, it is part of a much more pervasive, deeply rooted idea (which, *nota bene*, Inden shares as well) that religion is a constitutive element of human cultures. This assumption has a history of at least two thousand years in the West--and it partially constitutes the West as a culture. Not merely does this belief about religion make the West into a culture, but the latter's constitution *as a culture* is itself a history of what religion is to this culture.

Neither James Mill's treatment of Hinduism, nor the so-called intellectualist explanation of the same, nor even the historian Spear's portrayal of Hinduism as 'an amorphous entity'--*none of these* is a characteristic description of either Hinduism or the female that Indian culture is supposed to be.

For a nearly two hundred and fifty years (from Herbert of Cherbury to Freud), the question of the origin of religion was a hotly debated issue in the West. What a Spear or a Mill said about Hinduism was said long ago by others of paganism and heathendom. Mill, *contra* Inden (p. 70), set neither the terms nor provide the framework of presuppositions for describing the nature of the Hindu religion. He himself inherited all of these from the debates about the *nature* of religion. As long as we do not understand why the issue of the origin of religion was important to this culture and what its importance was, we are simply doomed to lay the 'blame' at the doorsteps of a spurious metaphysic, mysterious class interests, or whatever else takes your fancy.

Again, the description of the 'priests' of Hinduism was not specially coined for the Brahmins. This too has a heraldry and a tradition within Europe. Its ancestry stretches back to the Greeks; using such theories to attack heathen priests is as old as Christianity itself.

The point I want to make is the following: the multiple constructions of hinduism, those several descriptions of the brahmin priests (including the pejorative terminology) were developed within Europe, applied *internally* in its culture first. This process resulted in the elaboration of a 'theoretical' framework, which was later used to describe *other* cultures, including the Indian.

If we lose sight of internal developments in Europe, we are likely to misread (the way Inden does) what European intellectuals did with respect to Hinduism and, more importantly, why they did so. Bu the same token, one reproduces the same intellectual mistakes without realizing what these mistakes were.

In other words, Indological discourse was to a very great extent determined by the kind of issues that European culture was struggling with. These issues and their resolutions has made Europe into a culture, and indological discourse expresses the different phases in the self-constitution of the European culture.

Understanding such issues, however, requires doing something that neither Halbfass nor Inden do. It requires looking at the participants in this encounter (especially the western intellectuals) as individuals-in-a-culture. They are not supra-humans embodying a set of metaphysic (which seems to float around in a non-cultural world but highly catching as a disease) or raising some 'deep' hermeneutic questions in vacuum. It requires too that the chronicle penned by Inden and Halbfass be retold: as a story of one culture's way understanding the other; seeing, in such a story, how the West has become a culture; framing such a story not in some culture-free term (for, that indeed is the self-image of the West as a culture) but showing how the West has so far always looked at the 'other' *in*

terms of its self-image. *Contra* Inden, this is what has happened so far: the western culture never grasped the 'otherness' of another culture. The others have been but the pale and erring variants of itself. If anything is characteristic of the western culture, it has been the above. Inden treads the same path as well.

Halbfass and Inden have written excellent books. If I have dwelt on some of their weak points, it is because such a criticism has a purpose today. It is to say that until intellectuals from other cultures start providing partial descriptions of the world against the background of their own cultures, our understanding is not likely to grow.

Both Halbfass and Inden would agree with this sentiment. They would concur too in the assessment of what has been produced by intellectuals from elsewhere: either a mimetic reproduction of western quasi-theories or a third rate rehash of more abominable ideas from the western commonsense.

The publication of these two books could turn out to be an event in the history of Indology and anthropology. It will be an intellectual non-event, however, if all we are going to get hereafter is a 'mini-Inden' in Delhi and a 'min-Halbfass' in Bombay. This critical notice is hoped as a contribution to the former--but whether intellectuals from India (and elsewhere) will feel challenged by the inadequacies and dead-ends of the intellectual traditions these two books represent is something that only future can tell.