Land of Dreams: Western Denials of Indian History

By Gary Zabel

> [India] has always been the land of imaginative aspiration, and appears to us still as a fairy region, an enchanted world... The character of Spirit in a state of dream [is] the generic principle of the Hindoo nature...
>
> - Hegel

1.

At the easternmost reach of the inhabited world, beyond which lies nothing but empty desert, there is an enormous country populated with fantastic animals as well as strange nations and tribes. It is a place of mighty banyan trees, of a sun so hot it appears ten times its ordinary size, of multiple great rivers fed by torrential rains. Gryphons and satyrs roam there along with gigantic elephants, deadly snakes, multicolored peacocks and parrots, fierce jackals, and manlike monkeys. Its human population is more numerous than that of any other land. The people in the North are tall and fair, resembling Egyptians, while those in the South are dark skinned, like Ethiopians, though lacking their wooly hair. The northerners, long-lived and free of disease, wear brightly colored clothing ornamented with jewelry of gold and sparkling stones. Settled agriculturalists, their land is so bountiful it sustains two growing seasons every year. Organized into stable classes, they are ruled by kings who live in opulent palaces graced by pleasure gardens, and are guided by wise philosophers, who, like Plato, teach the immortality

of the soul. The people of the North pay a tribute in gold to the Persians, which they acquire effortlessly in their deserts from deposits left by huge gold-burrowing ants. Bizarre nomadic tribes are scattered throughout the rest of the country including pygmies, cannibals, breastless Amazons, men without noses, giants five fathoms tall, headless people, as well as those with feet so large they are able to use them as umbrellas, shielding themselves from the sun while lying on their backs. The entire land is wealthy in ordinary crops, herd animals, and gold, but also in beautiful gems, shimmering silk, exotic spices, and potent drugs.

This is the view of India that arose in Greece between the sixth and fourth centuries **B.C.**, was passed on to the Romans when they superceded the Greeks as the center of the ancient Mediterranean world, and migrated to Northern Europe after the Roman Empire fell under the impact of the barbarian invasions. Its principal sources lie in the writings of four men: Scylax of Caryanda, a Greek officer sent by Darius, the ruler of Persia, around 515 **B.C**. to reconnoiter the Indus valley, his easternmost province; Herodotus who wrote about India half a century later in *The Histories*, his famous treatment of the Persian wars; Ctesias of Cnidus, critic of Herodotus, who authored *The Indica* in 400 **B.C.**, the first foreign book devoted exclusively to India; and Megasthenes, Macedonian ambassador to the court of the Mauryas, who resided in the Gangetic plain and wrote extensively about Indian institutions and customs around 300 **B.C.**, in the aftermath of Alexander's invasion and ultimate retreat from the subcontinent.

At first consideration, there appears to be nothing astonishing about the phantasmagorical elements in the picture of India that emerges from the work of these men. After all, the Greeks did not hesitate to weave mythical threads into the fabric of their own history, as the Homeric accounts of the war with Troy and its aftermath attest. According to the Ionian poet, the event that initiates the martial drama described in the *Iliad* consists in an attack by Apollo on the Achaens in response to Agamemnon's arrogant rebuff of an Apollonian priest. Moreover the progress of the war is marked by the intervention of numerous divine figures motivated by both their patronage of opposing mortal combatants and their Olympian rivalries with one another. The vain and jealous gods and goddesses, plaintive ghosts, one eyed giants, and seductive sirens of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* seem appropriate company for the gryphons, satyrs, giants, headless people, and other odd creatures thought to inhabit the Indian subcontinent. But it is important to remember that the Homeric epics were composed no later than

the mid-seventh century **B.C**., and refer to events that probably occurred six hundred years earlier. In contrast, when Scylax and the others authored their accounts of India they were writing about the contemporary period. Moreover they were doing so at a time when Greece was in the throws of what later historians have called, after the eighteenth century European model, an 'Enlightenment.'

The ancient Greek Enlightenment had both a natural and social dimension. It began in the sixth century **B.C.** with the work of such figures as Xenophanes, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. These natural philosophers challenged the tradition of mythical cosmology - represented most significantly by Hesiod's poem, the *Theogony* - by appealing to impersonal, material principles of explanation. They argued that it was possible to account for the origin and structure of the visible universe by postulating a primordial substance or set of elements undergoing processes of condensation, rarefaction, rotational motion, and so on, without any need to refer to the supposed amorous or martial interactions of gods, goddesses, demigods, and titans. This revolution in natural philosophy was soon followed by a rejection of mythical approaches to understanding human affairs. In particular, the Sophists, those much-maligned itinerant teachers of the fifth century **B.C.**, argued that society could not be explained by reference to any supra-human, divine standard. According to Gorgias, Protagoras, and others, the astonishing variety in the ways different cities and nations have ordered themselves demonstrates that such communities are established on nothing more than relative, customary foundations. They are the products of entirely human beliefs, desires, and norms; creatures of variable *nomos*, not eternal *physis*. In addition, the political and military events that unfold within and between societies are not the result of any divine intervention or manipulation. They are the collective effects of human actions based upon perfectly ordinary, even disreputable, needs and desires, especially those for wealth, pleasure, honor, and power over others.

The enlightened effort to explain human affairs by reference to immanent rather than transcendent forces marks the transition from the mythical epics of Homer to the down-to-earth narratives of the fifth century historians. In the opening sentence of *The Histories*, for example, Herodotus gives the following account of his motive for writing:

These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus,

> which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud.

To preserve from decay the remembrance of what *men* have done, not what the gods or goddesses have accomplished by pulling the strings of human puppets; to put on record *their* grounds of feud, not the passions and jealousies of divine actors and actresses nor those of their marvelous or monstrous progeny.

Why then does the dominant view of India, developed while the Greeks were in the midst of their Enlightenment, retain such decidedly mythical elements? (Even Herodotus, who avoids mention of the more fantastic human-like creatures reported by Scylax, Ctesias, and Megasthenes, has no qualms describing the giant gold-burrowing ants, swift as horses according to him, that were supposed to supply Darius' tribute.)

In the most general terms, the answer to this question lies in the fact that enlightenment was never completely achieved in ancient Greece, any more than it was in northern Europe more than two thousand years later. First of all there was a reaction against the new secular learning on the part of religious traditionalists. Anxious elders often brought Sophists, who were beginning to exercise considerable influence on the youth of the upper classes, to trial by for teaching against accepted religious doctrine. Even Socrates' enemies brought him before the Athenian court on a charge (which he vigorously contested) amounting to the claim that he was a Sophist and an atheist, a charge that resulted, as everyone knows, in his conviction and execution. But secondly the battle for completely demythologized modes of explanation was difficult to win even in the case of those drawn to the life of rational inquiry and conversation. As we shall see when we examine Mircea Eliade's work in a later chapter, mythical traditions offer believers comprehensive and reassuring frameworks of meaning that natural scientific and mundanely historical kinds of knowledge are in no position to rival.

Consider, for example, Plato's middle dialogues, such as the *Phaedo,* the *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*, where we witness in vivid literary form reason straining from the burden of insights it attempts to bear but must in the end be expressed mythically. Such insights - among them those

concerning the fate of the soul and the nature of the Good, the highest object of intellectual apprehension - are truths about Being so profound Plato believed them to exceed the limits of discursive articulation. So he chose to express them in stories about the souls' assent on winged chariots to the celestial realm of eternal forms, in tales about the glorious true earth located far above the miasmic pit where we normally live, and in the famous allegory of the cave in which the knower is dazzled by its vision of the Good the way eyes are blinded while staring at the sun. For Plato, *logos* can support some of the meaningful load *mythos* once carried in the religious and poetic traditions, but it cannot wholly supplant it.

If enlightenment achieved only a partial victory in the work of the most important of Greek philosophers, it is not surprising that its triumph was also limited in the case of the ancient historians. While Herodotus, Thyucidides, as well as a host of lesser chroniclers were writing empirical and humanistic histories of Greece and its military campaigns, India became the repository for an in-eliminable residue of mythic imagination. In part this had to do with India's position in the geography of the period. As that region of the inhabited world that was supposed to lay furthest to the east and whose full extent was still shrouded in mystery, it functioned as a symbolic as well as physical extremity, well positioned to serve as refuge for the creatures of myth that were in the process of being driven out of the Greek homeland. This role no doubt was facilitated by India's possession of an exotic fauna that must have seemed little short of mythical to Greek visitors. For those who served there as agents of the Persians, accompanied Alexander, or followed in his wake, there must have appeared to be no real categorical difference between a gryphon and an elephant, a satyr and a monkey. Moreover the fact that many 'wild' tribes still inhabited the tropical forest, as yet un-subjugated by the rising kingdoms of the region, made rumors of headless people seem plausible, as well as those concerning Amazons, noseless men, giants, and so forth, all clearly relatives of the bizarre and dangerous creatures Odysseus encountered in his homeward travels.

2.

One aspect of the composite picture of India we have been considering that does not appear to have anything to do with myth concerns the Greek fascination with Indian wealth. For that fascination has an

undeniably objective basis in the unique directions pursued by India and Greece as variant expressions of ancient agrarian society.

To begin with, however, there are striking parallels in the social development of the two regions stretching over a course of approximately five thousand years. In both places settled farming communities emerged around 6000 **B.C.** where people cultivated cereal crops, domesticated animals, and made pottery and other containers for storing and transporting produce, water, and seed. These late Neolithic achievements allowed the production of a sizeable material surplus for the first time in human history. The availability of such a surplus in turn permitted the development of exploitative class relations in which a small part of society was able to live by siphoning off a portion of what had been created by the toil of others.

In both India and Greece, the emergence of class society, which took several millennia to complete, resulted in the crystallization of a state power that served as the primary instrument of exploitation. The Harappan civilization in the Indus valley and the Minoan and Mycenaean civilization in the Hellenic world arose within a few centuries of one another around the end of the third millennium **B.C.** Though Harappa and its sister cities seem to have had somewhat more egalitarian characteristics than their Greek counterparts (based on relative differences in square footage between the least and most affluent urban apartments), each supported administrative and repressive apparatuses that extracted surplus from the peasantry in the form of taxes and redistributed it to an aristocracy that was therefore dependent on the state for its wealth, power, and status. In permitting an efficient exploitation of the rural producers, such redistributive mechanisms also generated the accumulations of wealth and leisure necessary for developing the arts of civilization, including architecture, city planning, and writing.

Around 1700 **B.C**., however, the Harappan civilization collapsed suddenly followed by the equally rapid disintegration of Minoan and Mycenaean civilization a few hundred years later. In each area the precipitous breakdown seems to have been due to the climactic and environmental changes that followed in the long wake of the glacial recession marking the end of the most recent ice age. In Greece and India ‘Dark Ages’ several hundred years long ensued. They were characterized by regression in the conditions of civilized life, including loss of writing, as well as by political fragmentation and endemic warfare between rival clan confederations and kingdoms. These are the periods of violent struggle

subsequently immortalized in the epic literature of the two societies: the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the case of Greece, and the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in that of India.

At the culmination of their respective Dark Ages, in each case around the end of the sixth century **B.C.**, the histories of agrarian society in Greece and India began to diverge significantly. In the two regions the endemic warfare between tiny confederations and kingdoms came to an end. But what followed were very different ways of producing the material conditions of life and organizing political power.

In Greece and its outlying colonies in Europe and Asia Minor, hundreds of city-states formed where civic forms of authority, most completely expressed in the Athenian democracy superseded the autocratic rule of the old Homeric kings. To be sure, even Athens remained an agrarian society in the sense that both the vast majority of its laboring population engaged in agricultural work, and land was the primary source of the wealth that sustained all other activities. Nevertheless the urban center served as the dynamic arena in which political affairs were decided and most forms of culture produced. Here free-born citizens met in open assembly where they debated and voted on public policy, and served by means of rotating lotteries on executive and judicial bodies. In addition to determining and implementing political decisions, the life of the free citizen was devoted, apart from necessary work, to participating in the theater, athletic contests, poetic recitals, drinking parties, philosophical conversations, and so on familiar from the literature of the period.

Yet supporting the civic freedom of Athens, as well as that of the less fully democratic city-states, was a class of slaves in most cases outnumbering the free-born population. Its members labored on the farms, orchards, and vineyards in the countryside as well as performing craft, mercantile, and other functions in the urban centers. Now it is possible to exaggerate the role of slave labor in the productive process of classical Greece. There were free-born citizens who did the same work as slaves, sometimes as wage-laborers, more often as independent producers. Many labored alongside one or two slaves of their own. In fact the Athenian democracy was primarily the instrument of such free workers and their merchant brothers - the so-called commoners, or *banausoi* - for securing their interests against relentless aristocratic pressure to adopt new forms of autocratic rule. Still it remains true that slaves were the primary human force

of agricultural production on the large landed estates, and that they were the sole source of labor for the most dangerous and onerous kinds of work. Countless numbers, for example, perished from hellish toil in the infamous silver mines.

Just as important as its contribution to material production, however, was the role slavery played in defining the nature of civic freedom. The rest of the ancient world was characterized by a gradation of forms of servitude that included various kinds of bondage and subservience in addition to chattel slavery. Greece alone was marked by a stark contrast between two utterly distinct social conditions. As a matter of law and political culture, the freeborn citizen was the polar opposite of the Greek slave. That is to say, freedom, and therefore status as a genuine member of society, had meaning precisely as what the slave lacked. It consisted in the autonomy, the condition of self-rule that was the antithesis of existence as the property of an owner, as the "animate instrument,' in Aristotle's phrase, of someone else's will.

While the presence of a huge class of slave laborers thus sustained Greek society both economically and politically, it also served as a barrier to its development, a boundary beyond which it was unable to pass.

In spite of its undeniable intellectual and cultural achievements, Greece remained poor throughout its history. On a terrain that was remarkably varied considering the limited area involved, the Greeks raised corn and other cereal crops, cultivated olives and grapes, and grazed sheep, cattle, and horses. But farmers and herdsmen were able to produce only a relatively small surplus of such items. One indication of this paucity is the diet that was common among independent rural producers, at least those who did not belong to the wealthy aristocracy: barley meal, olives, wine, a little fish as a relish, and meat only on major holidays.

Production naturally was not limited to agricultural goods. In addition to farming and herding, rural households engaged in craft manufacture devoted to local use, while urban workshops producing for the marketplace became increasingly important as city life developed from the end of the Homeric period. In addition commodity exchange in the port city of Athens and elsewhere had pronounced international dimensions. In the same markets that handled Greek merchandise, buyers encountered goods from all over the known world, brought back by maritime traders who made

full use of the unparalleled opportunities for transport offered by the placid Mediterranean ocean. Still crafts and foreign trade as well were inevitably restricted by the limited agricultural surplus that served as the foundation of all wealth.

In part the modest character of the material basis of classical Greece can be accounted for by the aridity and thinness of its soil. By the sixth century **B.C.**, thousands of years of stormy weather had leached much of the ground, washing its nutrients into the sea. But ecological conditions do not by themselves explain Greek poverty. For the Greeks failed to develop the advanced techniques of fertilizing, terracing, and irrigation that might have restored productivity to the soil, and this was so for historical, not ecological, reasons. The predominance of slavery as the living source of agricultural surplus blocked progress because the juridical status of slaves as mere property left them without any incentive to develop farming or herding methods. Such lack of innovative will pertained to craft technique as well. The historical precondition of the political and cultural greatness of Greece was also the source of its enduring poverty.

At the end of its Dark Ages, India took a direction very different from Greece with respect to both state formation and the associated emergence of a mode of production involving a specific form of the exploitation of labor. Both developments occurred far to the east of the original Harappan home of Indian civilization, on the rich soil of the Gangetic valley.

The alluvial plain formed by silt deposits from the monsoon fed Ganges offered a far more promising environment for farming than did the depleted Hellenic soil, especially since subtropical conditions permitted two annual growing seasons. But such ecological treasures are no more sufficient to account for the fecundity of India than the corresponding environmental deficits suffice to explain the limited productivity of Greek land. The Gangetic plain was initially covered with hundreds of miles of thick forest, which had to be cleared to make way for farmland. Such an ambitious project required the mobilization of work gangs as well as the production and use of expertly crafted iron implements such as axes, hoes, and ploughshares. New centralized states consolidated in the process of bringing these resources together, while at the same time subjugating by military force the forest tribes who resisted destruction of their age-old territories.

Buddhist texts record that, by the time Siddhartha was born into the Shakya tribe in the Himalayan foothills around 563 **B.C.**, four kingdoms had emerged as dominant powers in a region stretching from the Hindu Kush to modern day Bihar: Malla, Vrijji, Kosala, and Magadha. Of these, Kosala and Magadha were the most powerful states of the period; their struggle for control of the Gangetic plain in fact determined the subsequent course of Indian history. By the time Buddha passed into his *parinirvana*, his final liberation from the cycle of birth and death, at the age of eighty, Magadha had already begun to prevail over its rival. Some two hundred years later, it came to form the political core of the expansive Mauryan Empire under the brilliant and ruthless leadership of the probable shudra upstart, Chandragupta I. During this period the forces of production were fully unleashed throughout the Gangetic plain and a characteristically Indian form of the exploitation of labor was invented.

According to the *Arthashastra*, a manual of statecraft reputed to have been written by Chandragupta's wily Brahmin minister, Kautilya, the king was the owner of all the land and water in his domain. The taxes he extracted from the peasantry - equal to between one fourth and one sixth of the agricultural produce, depending upon the fertility of the farm - as well as the special labor services owed by peasants to the state, were simply forms of ground rent due the king for allowing use of his land. This claim to private property was no more than an imperial assertion, however, vigorously contested by popular social forces. The Magadhan and Mauryan rulers attempted to enforce the claim only on the land created by Gangetic forest clearance, since the virgin territory was farmed by immigrant labor without roots in the area. But over the course of time, even on the new farms and the villages that sprang up around them, old tribal principles of communal ownership began to reassert themselves. From their perspective, the king was an agent of the people, and the king's taxes were justified only as payment for protecting his countrymen from foreign invaders and maintaining public works beneficial to all. This partially successful reassertion of tribal norms prevented the rural producers of India from being reduced to the status of mere serfs or slaves. It left them in effective collective possession of the land - though subject to a substantial tax - with an incentive to improve its fertility, exactly the motive for progress the slave laborers of classical Greece lacked.

Slavery indeed existed in India, but as a marginal phenomenon, unable to impress its character on the labor process as a whole. Instead that

process was shaped by what the Portuguese were later to call the 'caste' system, itself the result of a complex interaction between *varna* - the ideal Vedic status divisions of Brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra - and *jati* - endogamous groups related by birth and specializing in particular crafts and other vocations. Principles of rigid inequality were certainly built into the caste system, but its developed specialization of labor and orderly transmission of technique from one generation to the next played an important role in unleashing the human forces of production, and so in creating the remarkable wealth of Magadhan and Mauryan India.

Since slavery was not the dominant form of labor exploitation, its polar opposite, freeborn citizenship, never achieved the political and social salience it enjoyed in classical Greece. There was nothing corresponding to the self-governing polis in India. Though towns and cities grew, especially along the trade routes that increasingly brought the spices and gems of southern India northward, they did not function as centers of civic self-government, the larger cities in particular being dominated by the palace complexes residing at their centers. Yet there was a dazzling development of all sorts of craft production by urban guilds, as well as the creation of luxurious buildings and gardens with their attendant forms of gracious living, all supported by the massive surplus extracted from the peasantry by the state's fiscal machinery.

From this discussion, it is easy to see that Greek fascination with Indian wealth had its basis in a very real and fundamental divergence of ways of organizing material production and political rule. Yet in reading the accounts of Scylax, Herodotus, Ctesias, and Megasthenes, it is impossible to avoid the impression that there is more to their fascination than purely objective factors can account for. For these authors, the wealth of India is not merely massive - it is created almost spontaneously, dug up by giant gold-burrowing ants, or born of land so fertile it requires little in the way of human intervention. Moreover the people who reside in the Indus and Ganges valleys not only lead luxurious and graceful lives. They do not suffer from disease, and their numerous and happy days on earth come to a gentle end. These are mythical themes whose source is quite different than the Homeric stories of monstrous creatures encountered on voyages beyond the Greek homeland, a source that lies instead in the work of one of Homer's poet contemporaries:

First of all the deathless gods who dwell on Olympus made

> a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Cronos when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bore them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.

The passage is from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, written around 700 **B.C.**, though the idea of a golden race and a perfect age in which it lived surely harks back to a more ancient popular tradition. According to Hesiod, the gods created four generations of beings before our own, the golden race described in the passage cited above, a race of silver, one of bronze, and one of belligerent demigods. The current race is an iron one, so-called, no doubt, because iron is the metal from which the implements of war are made as well as those of hard agricultural labor. The general direction of history is thus one of degeneration, and our own race, as the last in the series, contrasts sharply with the first, golden children of the gods. Hesiod's lament for the modern condition, which follows at the end of his account of the succession of creaturely generations, is appropriate to a world experiencing the acute misery brought on by warring states and ruthless exploitation:

> Thereafter, would that I were not among the men of the fifth generation, but either had died before or been born afterwards. For now truly is a race of iron, and men never rest from labour and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night; and the gods shall lay sore trouble upon them.

The ascendency of the city-state did not put an end to either exploitation or warfare - far from it. The consolidation of the slave mode of production, the long war with Persia, the bloody Peloponnesian struggle between Athens and Sparta, and the final destruction of civic freedom by the new Macedonian Empire made Hesiod's lament seem even more relevant to the centuries following his own. It is unsurprising then that, between the sixth and fourth centuries **B.C.**, the utopian imagination of the Greeks, their penchant to find somewhere a condition free of misery, projected its wishes

as far as the mysterious easternmost limit of the inhabited earth. Unsurprising, perhaps, but nevertheless ironic, since the contemporaneous rise of class society in India led people there to believe that they too were living in the *kaliyuga*, the most miserable and degenerate phase of human history.

The subtitle of this essay is *Western Denials of Indian History*, but nothing in the discussion so far is meant to presume that ancient Greece was a 'western' nation in anything more than the obvious sense that it lay to the west of India and Persia. Greek society and culture grew up on the east coast of Europe and the west coast of Asia; Homer himself, after all, was from Smyrna, and Herodotus from Halicarnassus, both in Asia Minor. When Mediterranean Antiquity fell in its final incarnation as the Roman Empire, the legacy of Greek learning was passed on to northern Europe to be sure, but also, and even more vibrantly, to the Arab world. It was only with the advent of the capitalist mode of production hundreds of years later that a newly expansionist Europe claimed ancient Greece exclusively as its own.

Roman authors, including the natural historian Pliny the Elder and the geographer Strabo, preserved Greece's largely phantasmagorical view of India near the beginning of the first millennium, allowing it to be transmitted north in the wake of the barbarian invasions. But they did not add much of importance to this view, except in two respects. They came to understand that there was inhabited land east of India, dimly recognizing China's existence; and they began to see Indian wealth as a resource important to Rome.

'India is brought near by lust for gain,' Pliny the Elder wrote. He was not referring to imperial conquest. Alexander's failure to secure a permanent foothold in the Gangetic valley or even the Punjab was an object lesson the Romans did not forget. What the author of the *Natural History* had in mind with his assertion was the amassing of fortune through commerce. For some time, Italian merchants had been traveling to India in significant numbers by both sea and overland routes, bringing home parrots, domesticated monkeys, wool, silk, fine muslin, pearls, ivory, diamonds, rubies, tortoise shell, spices (especially pepper), and female slaves. They sold nearly all of these commodities to wealthy aristocrats, firmly establishing India as a major source of supply for the luxury trade. But since they paid for their merchandise with gold and silver coins minted in Rome, the net result was a drainage of metal currency that more than one

conservative moralist came to lament. Medieval Europe would later repeat this pattern, the search for new sources of gold and silver to replace what had been lost in trade to India acting as a motive for the great voyages of discovery that initiated European expansion.

3.

With the Christianization of first the Mediterranean countries and then northern Europe in the centuries following the Fall of Rome, the ancient Greek view of India underwent a transformation as it was filtered through the new religious ideology. Its two basic mythical dimensions remained - the Homeric dimension of human and animal monstrosity and the Hesiodic one of a golden race - but they were reformulated in light of the Old and New Testament narratives.

According to the *Book of Revelation*, at the end of days when the Four Horsemen carry out the wrath of God against a world mired in sin, Satan will rally the barbaric nations Gog and Magog, descended from Japhat, Noah's son, and send them into battle against the righteous. The medieval Christians identified the bloodthirsty inhabitants of these biblical lands with the monstrous tribes of India. The only thing that was supposed to prevent them from overrunning the Christian nations in advance of the Apocalypse was an impregnable wall Alexander the Great was said to have built before he was turned back at the Ganges. Yet for medieval Christendom, India was not only the location of Satan's future horrific minions. Somewhere just west of Gog and Magog was the Terrestrial Paradise, the Garden from which Adam and Eve had been expelled for eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Appropriately, the life giving waters of the Indus and the Ganges originated there. Like the lands of the demonic warrior tribes, the Garden of Eden was surrounded by an insuperable barrier, but this one was the work of no human hands. It was an instrument of divine punishment, now guarded by an angry angel charged with preventing fallen humanity from returning to its first paradisal home. In this manner, the Greek myths of monstrosity and paradise came to lead a second life in the Middle Ages. Through figures of thought drawn from *Revelation* and *Genesis*, Christian Europe was able to incorporate India into the entire sweep of sacred history, allotting it a mystical role at both the beginning and the end of time.

The society that elaborated these new myths was quite different than the ancient one that had dreamed up their paradigm. This difference was more than a matter of religious thought; it also concerned the most fundamental economic and political structures. The world that emerged after the Fall of Rome was the hybridized product of Mediterranean slave society on the one hand and the tribal institutions of the invading barbarian bands on the other.

Agricultural estates farmed by servile labor were the enduring legacy of Greece and Rome, but in feudal Europe they were worked by serfs rather than slaves. Though the new direct producers were attached to the land of their lords, owing them labor services as well as a percentage of their crops, they enjoyed a juridical status superior to their predecessors. Unlike slaves, serfs were protected to some extent by customary rights, while the villages where they lived and the common lands available for their use preserved something of the communal character of the old tribal order.

The feudal polity also differed from the Greek and Roman states. In spite of the development of important urban areas, it was dominated, culturally as well as politically, by the countryside rather than cities. And in spite of the persisting fiction of an intact Holy Roman Empire, feudal Europe had neither the centralized imperial nor territorial unity of the latter day ancient world. Sovereignty was parcelized in a complex hierarchical order of liege lords and vassals, upper and lower clerics, while territory was divided into a patchwork quilt of kingdoms, duchies, baronies, and ecclesiastical states.

Although the rural societies of the medieval period rarely equaled the intellectual or other cultural achievements of urban antiquity, they did preserve and sometimes expand some of its learning through the efforts of the monastic orders. But even more importantly, they managed to develop the forces of agricultural and craft production that had been stymied in the ancient world by social relations based on the exploitation of slaves. In this sense feudalism was a dynamic and progressive development, at least until the fourteenth century. At that time, Alexander's wall finally collapsed and the demonic forces of Gog and Magog began to overrun Europe.

In 1348 the Black Death reached the European mainland in the form of a bacillus carried by fleas living in the fur of rats. It seems to have originated in the Far East about fifteen years earlier, made its way slowly to

Constantinople, from there to Sicily and the Italian peninsula, and from Italy to Spain, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, England, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Poland, and Russia. Wherever the bacillus appeared it unleashed bubonic plague and associated outbreaks of pneumonia. The result was agonizing death, economic devastation, and social hysteria, a level of misery unprecedented even by the sanguinary standards of the Fall of Rome or the ensuing Dark Ages. In Paris, over eight hundred people gave up the ghost every day. Whole villages emptied and farms were abandoned as rural inhabitants fled the advance of the epidemic. Many towns banned all travelers. Doctors as well as close family members refused to visit the beds of the sick, or priests to comfort the dying. In more than one incident, frenzied mobs massacred Jews, the perennial scapegoats of medieval Christendom. In the Rhineland entranced bands of Flagellants danced through the streets scourging their flesh while calling on sinners to repent and join them. The feeling of despair was overwhelming. In sheer demographic terms the Black Death ended by consuming at least a third, perhaps as much as two fifths, of the total European population.

Undoubtedly the epidemic would have been massively destructive under any circumstances, but it was especially devastating in that it struck at a society already in the grip of economic and demographic decline. The three hundred years spanning 1000 to 1300 were a period of growth for feudal Europe. Such improvements in agricultural technique as the invention of the harness for horse-ploughing and the development of the three field system of crop rotation led to the reclamation of huge areas of virgin forest, swamp, and heath as enterprising peasants as well as lords converted the wastelands into farms. Increasing food production in turn permitted a dramatic upswing in the birth rate, the European population roughly doubling in the period concerned. Towns developed where artisans produced goods for exchange against the surplus product from the countryside, and long distance trade in luxury items from Asia grew in response to the new wealth of the upper classes. Around 1300 however this expansionary trend reached its limit as the agricultural capacity of the most recently reclaimed lands proved to be quite restricted at current levels of technique. The consequence was widespread famine, demographic erosion, urban stagnation, and curtailment of trade beginning fifty years before the Black Death had even arrived.

It was not long before the suffering and death that were first the result of famine and then of plague as well found an echo in the discord of

war. By the mid-fourteenth century the decrease in rural population posed a serious threat to the income of the aristocracy. As the enserfed peasantry began to die off in great numbers, the agricultural surplus that they produced and that served as the mainstay of seigneurial wealth also shrank precipitously. In order to recoup their losses, aristocrats turned to the profession in which, after all, they had been specially trained: they launched armed campaigns in pursuit of plunder. The attempt to commandeer a declining surplus sometimes took the form of outright brigandage in which lords and their men preyed on the whole rural population. But it just as frequently led to more focused struggles within the seigneurial class. In such bloody and long-lived military conflicts as the Hundred Years War and the War of the Roses, nobles turned their weapons against one another in desperate attempts to win control of dwindling resources.

In order to finance their internecine class struggles, the aristocracy imposed heavy taxes on what was left of the peasantry. At the same time they enacted laws to reinforce servile conditions by fixing wages at low levels in both town and country and prohibiting free movement off the manor. In response to their increasingly onerous burdens, peasants, artisans, and laborers engaged in rebellions that shook the authority of state, nobility, and church. These included the victory of an army of artisans over nobles and urban patricians at the battle of Courtrai in 1309, the peasant uprisings in Denmark in 1340 and Majorca in 1351, the Grande Jacquerie in Northern France in 1358, and the Peasant's War in England in 1381. Though most of the rebellions ended in defeat, they constituted a generalized assault against the existing order that resulted in significant gains for the exploited classes, especially since the assault was combined with the strengthened bargaining position that accompanied labor scarcity. The hierarchical edifice of feudal society began to crack as wages rose, cereal prices fell, and labor services were commuted to money rents in a prelude to the abolition of serfdom.

From the time of the Dark Ages, Europe had lived in the anticipation of its demise. The small-scale societies that slowly emerged in the aftermath of the Fall of Rome lived at the mercy of the forces of natural and human predation. The radical insecurities of the period were interpreted in accordance with the teachings of the New Testament and Church Fathers as the mark of a world that was growing old, that existed in fact at the end of time. The eschatological expectations of many were focused on the year 1000, the conclusion of the first millennium after the birth of Christ. Yet ironically that moment proved to be not an end but a new beginning. The

intricate relations of dependency and superiority that characterized a now mature feudal society were dynamic enough to spur economic growth and demographic expansion. When this process came to an end in the fourteenth century eschatological expectations unsurprisingly returned. However it was not the whole world that was consumed in the flames of the ensuing crisis. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse indeed appeared. Their names were famine, plague, war, and social rebellion. But what they brought to an end was only European feudalism.

Asia, especially India, played an essential role in this process, and not only because the Black Death came from the East. The Orient became an irresistible pole of commercial attraction the pursuit of which enabled Europe to break out of the stifling confines of its own collapsing social order, and emerge as the center of a new global economy. The Iberian powers led the way. Spain and Portugal were already pointed in an expansionist direction by reason of their involvement in the 700 year old *reconquista*, the battle to drive out the so-called 'Moors.' Significantly Columbus sailed in 1492, the very year the struggle against Islam was finally successful on the Iberian peninsula. The immigrant Genoese admiral framed his threefold purpose with the Christian conflict with the Muslims in mind. First he wanted to discover a sea route to China and India that would enable European merchants to circumvent Islamic control of the overland trade. Second he promised the Spanish monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, that he would find sources of gold and silver to replace the metal currency that had drained eastward through commerce with Asia via the Arab world. And third he wished to accumulate the resources necessary to fund a Fifth Crusade to liberate Jerusalem, the location of the Holy Sepulcher, from the control of the Ottoman Turks, thereby restoring to Christendom its spiritual center. He never reached his intended destination, of course, though the discovery and conquest of the New World ultimately tapped a reservoir of precious metals exceeding his wildest dreams. It was left to the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama to discover the first sea route to Asia six years after Columbus set sail on his initial voyage. After rounding the Cape of Good Hope, da Gama landed near the port town of Calicut on the Malibar coast on May 20, 1498, thereby opening the long epoch of western subjugation of the subcontinent.

Like his Genoese counterpart, the Portuguese mariner stood on the threshold of the capitalist world-system. The fifteenth century saw the beginnings of four processes that were variously related but that nonetheless took place on different continents: the expulsion of the European, especially

English, peasantry from the land by gentry who wished to graze sheep for the international market in wool; the conquest of the Americas and the failed attempt to enslave their indigenous population; the trans-Atlantic trade in African slaves; and the plunder and eventual colonization of India. Together these processes constituted what Marx called the 'primitive accumulation of capital,' the amassing of those human and material conditions necessary to initiate a new and fundamentally global mode of production and exchange. What makes capitalism unique among class societies is that it is not constrained by any conservative norms - neither by status, nor custom, nor religious precept - but that it is guided instead by the dynamic and inherently limitless imperative to accumulate more and more capital. This open-ended imperative compels the capitalist system to transgress all geographical as well as traditional cultural boundaries, carrying it to wherever profits can be made. Thus capitalism is the first form of class society that can exist only on a global scale, though a scale marked from the very beginning by wide zonal disparities in wealth and power. Now given its unprecedentedly dynamic and expansive character, neither da Gama nor Columbus nor any of their contemporaries could envision the world that was on the verge of being born in the fifteenth century. Though their actions helped create modern capitalist society, their mentality, their most basic cultural and ideological frame of reference, was still rooted in medieval Catholicism.

Pope Urban II had launched the Crusades in 1095 in response to the conquest of Constantinople by the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuk dynasty was only the first of many Islamic enemies Western Christians would face both during and after the next two centuries of war in the Holy Land. In the course of their long struggle with the followers of the Prophet, Europeans nurtured the hope of receiving military aid from further east. There was an old tradition dating back to the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, set down at the beginning of the third century, that the doubting disciple had been assigned an evangelical mission in India when the apostles divided the world among themselves following the Resurrection. He was supposed to have landed on the Malabar coast around 52 **A.D.**, the very region where da Gama's ships would dock one and half millennia later. As the story goes, Thomas preached the gospels on the subcontinent, in the process establishing a Christian community, and, while he was finally martyred in India, the church he founded survived. By the twelfth century Thomas' church had swollen in the European imagination to the dimensions of a mighty nation ruled by a wise king. According to legend, the Indian ruler, named Prestor John, visited Rome around 1122, and sent the Pope a letter some forty years

later describing the power, wealth, and piety of his realm. Most importantly, he had met the Persians successfully on the field of battle. Europeans hoped that, if they could contact him once again, they might persuade him to take up arms against their Islamic enemies. Marco Polo looked for the king during his travels in the thirteenth century, and so did the Portuguese in their search for a commercial route to Asia two hundred years later. It is true that by the fifteenth century there was a tendency to place Prestor John in Africa rather than India. The Portuguese explorers who initiated the large-scale slave trade by entering the mouth of the Congo River a decade and a half before the landing at Calicut were in search of him. Still the Prestor had not been definitively dislodged from the site of Thomas' supposed martyrdom. The Portuguese arrival on the Malabar coast had the understandable effect of reviving the legend in its original form.

When Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope he was looking for treasure troves of pepper, ginger, cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon. There was an enormous and growing market in Europe for these spices, since the upper classes in particular had learned to value them as medicines and aphrodisiacs as well as indispensable condiments. But da Gama and his men also expected that they would encounter Prestor John. According to an entry dated March 22 1498 in an anonymous journal that survived the voyage, the ship's company captured two Indian Christians who told them that the fabled monarch lived so deep in the interior that he was reachable only by camels, though he also controlled cities on the nearby coast, important entrepots for spices and other luxury goods. There is no further documentation concerning the identity of these informants, though they very well may have been Christians since branches of Eastern Orthodoxy had been established in India as early as the fourth century. But neither da Gama nor any of the Portuguese who followed him ever found Prestor John. Moreover, the admiral soon discovered that the port towns that conducted the luxury trade were controlled, not by Christians, but by Muslim sultans and petty Hindu rulers, or *zamorins*.

Even without the assistance of Prestor John, da Gama launched a double campaign against the heathenish Moors and for control of the spice trade, a campaign the Portuguese would continue to wage over the next century of their hegemony in the region. First he returned to Portugal with a cargo that sold for sixty times the cost of his voyage, a rate of profit that immediately elicited a second expedition under the command of Pedro Alverez Calbral. Calbral was able to strike an agreement with the Hindu

ruler of Calicut allowing him to purchase a 'factory,' or warehouse, where he left fifty four merchants to buy and store spices when the cost were low. But when he pirated a Muslim ship for its cargo of spices, the Muslims retaliated by destroying the Portuguese factory and killing the merchants who lived there. Da Gama then returned to India on his second voyage in the guise of the wrath of God. He reduced Calicut to rubble with the mounted canon of fifteen ships. When he captured several Muslim vessels, he cut off the hands, ears, and noses of some eight hundred of their crewmen, sending the body parts to Calicut's *zamorin* as an ingredient for his 'curry.'

By applying or threatening similar forms of naval force and general brutality, the Portuguese were able to dominate strategically located ports up and down the coast, thereby wresting control of the spice trade from the Muslims. The architect of this achievement was Dom Affonso d'Albuquerque, the second viceroy. From 1509 to 1515, he was able to secure the foundations of Portugal's commercial power in India by gaining naval command of the entire Indian Ocean. He also learned to manipulate communal tensions in a way the British would later master: in those parts of India Albuquerque directly controlled, no Muslim was allowed to hold office of any kind, though a Hindu police force was created. In addition to excluding the Moors from even token forms of political power, the Viceroy dreamed of using India as a power base for more dramatic assaults against Islam. He had plans to dry up Egypt by diverting the Nile, and to steal the remains of the Prophet from Mecca. Such were the lurid medieval fantasies that accompanied the birth of the modern capitalist market.

4.

Odyssean monsters and the Golden Race, Gog and Magog and the Garden of Eden, Saint Thomas and Prestor John: all are dreams of India, but they occurred in the heads of Europeans. For the cultures that entertained these notions, there was, of course, nothing dream-like about them. They were the results of the application of deeply rooted and normally unquestioned mythical frameworks to a country that was too remote in any case for first hand experience to challenge them. The metaphor of India as a Aland of dreams' is one that *we* now apply from an external perspective to the views of the subcontinent current at first in ancient Greece, and then in Europe properly so-called from the Fall of Rome until well after da Gama's landing at Calicut. However, as the capitalist world system grew older and

imperialist domination deepened, the metaphor of the Aland of dreams,' as well as similar tropes involving the marvelous, the fantastic, the mythical, the wildly imaginary, were developed explicitly and with a considerable degree of reflective awareness by India's western rulers. But they were supposed to refer, not to European views of subcontinent, but to the most basic dimensions of India's understanding of itself and its world. Moreover, in their dominant versions at least, they were framed in the service of a critique of Indian culture and society that functioned as a justification of European hegemony over an increasingly subjugated people.

In order for the metaphor of a Aland of dreams' to count as a critique of India, capitalist society had to shed the medieval trappings that accompanied its birth and develop cultural and ideological resources in harmony with its dynamic, world transformative character. The first stab at such innovation was already underway at the onset of the great voyages of discovery. At that time, the central figures of the Renaissance were in the process of rejecting the intellectual standards of the Middle Ages on the basis of a re-appropriation of the heritage of Greek Antiquity. But in spite of the powerful stimulus to art, literature, and natural science that resulted from this new appeal to Greek learning, the Renaissance was too embroiled in mystical forms of Neoplatonism, including occult Hermetic strains, to serve as a symbolic resource suitable to the essentially prosaic reality of capitalism, concerned as it was with the instrumental conquest of nature as well as the careful calculation of gain and loss. It was not until the thinkers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment launched the second and explicitly anti-mythical attempt to re-appropriate Antiquity that the European core of the new global economy developed a lastingly significant cultural and ideological framework.

Hume, Adam Smith, Diderot, Voltaire, and so on - in other words, the most famous *philosophes* on both sides of the English channel - appealed to Greece in their struggle against the remnants of medieval culture, the enfeebled forces of an old world that were nonetheless still powerful enough to obstruct the full emergence of a new one. According to them, Europe had already taken some basic steps to free itself from the cognitive and social irrationalities of the priest ridden Middle Ages, including the rise of modern natural science, the establishment of private property rights, and the comprehension of the true dimensions of the globe thanks to the great voyages of discovery. But in the universities that were still dominated by scholastic philosophy, the absolutist courts that suppressed free thinking, and

the remaining feudal barriers to economic competition and careers open to talent, medieval culture was fighting a rear guard action against social and intellectual progress. In this battle, it drew upon an arsenal of notions concerning the unchallengeable truth of biblical revelation, the metaphysical ground for a rigidly hierarchical social order, and the divine right of kings - notions the *philosophes* labeled 'superstitions,' that is to say, myths. In their literary attack against these obstacles to the improvement of the human condition, the Enlightenment thinkers found a precedent in Greece, for the ancient philosophers and historians had been the first to criticize myth in the name of reason. But the *philosophes* were more selective in their re-appropriation of Greek tradition than the Renaissance thinkers had been. They rejected Aristotle *in toto* since his work had proven capable of being adapted to theological purposes by the medieval scholastic thinkers, and they had little good to say about Plato since, as we have seen, he was not willing to counterpose reason and myth so rigidly as the Enlightenment literati would have liked. They found their heroes elsewhere: in Socrates who, in their view, had martyred himself to religious obscurantism on behalf of philosophical reason, and in Thucydides who, to an even greater extent than Herodotus, had rejected all fabulous elements in the writing of history.

If the Enlightenment was more restrictive than the Renaissance in accepting Greek thinkers into its pantheon of rational minds, in another respect its re-appropriation of the ancient tradition went a good deal further than that of its predecessor. For the *philosophes*, the very identity of Europe assumed definitive form in opposition to that of the 'Orient,' the world east of Greece. Now it is true that Voltaire expressed admiration for what he saw as the stably rational bureaucratic structure of Chinese society. But this was an isolated sentiment, neither taken up by the other *philosophes*, nor importantly connected with the rest of his work. Far more representative of the Enlightenment view of Asia was Diderot's treatment of the theme in his essay, *Greek Philosophy*. In that piece, he argues that, from their origins down through the Homeric period, the Greeks shared many of the characteristics of such Oriental peoples as the Persians, Chaldeans, and Phoenicians. To begin with, they were mired in fables and myths many of which they had actually acquired from the East. But they were also the recipients from that quarter of mathematical, astronomical, and other forms of nascent scientific thought. In their countries of origin, these sciences were sullied by irrational elements; astronomy for example was wrapped up with astrological ideas. But in Greece the rational potential of eastern science was released from the mythical integument that had hitherto restricted its

development. Barbarians threw into Greece the first seed of philosophy, and seed could not have fallen on more fruitful soil,' because the Greeks had a 'turn of mind quite different from that of the Orientals.' In the work of the natural philosophers, but also in the moral philosophy of Socrates, oriental knowledge was purified of superstition and incorporated into the foundation of a new rational culture. This act constituted the birth of Europe, though the growth of the new culture was blocked by the recrudescence of eastern (i.e. Palestinian) superstition in the form of Christianity. The Enlightenment assault against such superstition, against this late form of oriental myth, is the genuine rebirth of the West.

There is something amiss with an interpretation that defines European identity on the basis of rationality that excludes from its conception of reason so much of the disciplined philosophical thinking that took place in areas claimed for the West. It is not just that the interpretation rejects as irrational the religiously based philosophy of the Christian Middle Ages; far more damagingly, it attempts to construct a history of Greek reason in which its most important and creative thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, have no place. It is easy to see from this exclusion that, insofar as it bears on the question of European identity, the dominant Enlightenment view of rationality is itself a myth in the original Greek sense of the word, that is to say, a 'false story.' This rather narrow conception of reason may or may not be correct, but it cannot serve to specify what it means to be a European.

In any event, most Enlightenment thinkers followed Diderot in defining European identity in opposition to the supposed irrationalism of the Orient. But that definition did not necessarily have straightforward imperialist implications. It is important to recognize that the Enlightenment was an internally contested body of ideas. It included Adam Smith's defense of competition and private property, but also Rousseau's account of the origins of inequality in a conspiracy of the rich to dispossess the poor through the invention of property rights. During the French Revolution, it inspired the moderate liberalism and constitutional monarchism of the Marquis de Lafayette, but also the revolutionary republican passion of Robespierre, and even the explicitly communist agitation of Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals. The Enlightenment was just as contested when it came to Europe's relationship with the non-European world. For example, Diderot himself wrote one of the earliest and most trenchant condemnations of western colonialism in his *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, an account of the first contact between French

explorers and the people of the Tahitian islands. His story demonstrates that the criticism of social institutions that was a major preoccupation of the Enlightenment could always be diverted from its original focus on feudal oppression in the European heartland, and directed instead against the destruction wrought on non-Western societies by Europe's imperial ambitions. But, when applied to the world beyond Europe, the sword of Enlightenment rationality proved to have a second, very sharp edge. By defining itself as a mode of being radically different from eastern myth, enlightened thought was capable of functioning as an alibi for Western domination of the supposedly benighted peoples of the East.

5.

The new British rulers of India were not slow in availing themselves of the alibi. Unlike Catholic Portugal at the time of da Gama's voyage, the England that conquered India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an Enlightenment culture. It is no accident that France and England (drawing, as the dominant member of the British isles, on a reservoir of Scottish intellectuals such as Hume and Smith) were the primary epicenters of the Enlightenment. For, following the eclipse of Iberian power and a hundred year interregnum of Dutch ascendency, England and France were the main contenders in the struggle for hegemony in the global capitalist system. The Enlightenment project for a rational reform of social institutions and intellectual standards was well suited to nations that quite plausibly felt themselves to reside at the center of a brave new world.

In order for Europeans to apply an imperialist version of the Enlightenment project to India, however, they first had to win political as well as economic control of the subcontinent through less than enlightened methods of warfare, outright plunder, and shrewd manipulation of the successional, regional, and communal struggles that characterized the disintegration of Mughal power. It was frought with implications for the future that, while the French and English states backed the struggle for India with their fiscal and military might, in both cases joint stock companies, forerunners of the multinational corporations of twentieth-century capitalism, actually conducted the battle on the ground. When, with the support of the fabulously wealthy Hindu banking house of Jagat Seth, Robert Clive of the British East India Company defeated the army of the Mughal *nawab* Siraj-ud-daula at the battle of Plassey on June 23, 1757, he

not only became the *de facto* ruler of Bengal, acquiring a vast personal fortune in the process. He also gained for England a base of territorial power from which he demolished the French mercantile and military enclave at Pondicherry four years later, effectively transforming India into the Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire. In promoting England's superiority over France in South Asia, he also helped secure the former's overall dominant position in the international system of capitalist states.

Although direct Crown rule did not replace that of the East India Company until the aftermath of the First War of Indian Independence - the so-called 'Mutiny' of 1857-58 - Parliament attempted to regulate Company rule in the broader national interest shortly after the Battle of Plassey. In the years immediately following the British victory, unfettered exploitation by Company agents and independent adventurers seeking to emulate Clive's example of personal self-enrichment brought Bengal to a condition of famine that claimed one third of its population. In addition, appropriation by free-booting individuals of a good portion of the Bengalese surplus, not to mention the product necessary for sheer survival, had drained the Company of the assets necessary to pay the fee it owed the Crown for granting it a monopoly over Indian exports to England. Pitt's India Act of 1784 was intended to prevent the destruction of the human source of exploitable Indian wealth as well as to ensure the regular flow of state revenue. It established a Crown Board of Control with administrative authority to override policies set by the Company Court of Directors, including the ability to recall its Governor-General of Bengal. Enlightenment schemes for the rational reconstruction of Indian education, economy, and society were first implemented under the pressure of Pitt's and related reforms.

In 1793, Governor-General Cornwallis was able to secure enough votes on his Council to decree the Permanent Settlement with Bengal's *zamindars*, thereby initiating a momentous transformation in rural property relationships. In their conquest of India, the Mughal rulers preserved the system of land tenure that had been worked out as early as the Mauryan period. Peasants were left in effective possession of the soil provided they remitted one fourth of its product to the Mughal state as taxation. The *zamindars* were local notables endowed by the emperor with the hereditary function of tax farming from specific groups of villages. In exchange they were allowed to keep a portion of the revenue as well as exercise judicial power over the peasantry. They did not, however, have the right to expel the peasants from their land, nor sell it as a commodity in the marketplace. In

this they differed, not only from capitalist landlords, but also from the European feudal aristocracy. The Permanent Settlement converted the land into the private property of the *zamindars* while fixing their taxes at an annual rate in perpetuity so as to assure them of the fruit of any improvements they might make. At the same time it turned the traditional peasant proprietors into tenants, their taxes into rents, and their tenancies into leases that need not be renewed by the *zamindar* landlords upon expiration.

A great deal of thinking went into the Permanent Settlement, much of it based on the doctrines of the physiocrats, early political economists who had collaborated with Diderot on his *Encyclopedia*. In a debate with merchantilists who held that the wealth of a nation was essentially commercial and measurable by its balance of trade, the physiocrats argued that agriculture was the source of all wealth. As a consequence, the correct property relationships in the countryside were the key to national prosperity. The model for these French proto-economists was the English gentleman farmer who enjoyed free disposition over his landed property and workforce. Though the physiocrats did not stress the fact, such disposition was the result of a three hundred year old enclosure movement that had succeeded in privatizing the common lands, thereby separating the English peasantry from means of production that had previously been available for their collective use. According to the physiocrats, the farm owner's unencumbered rights over his property constituted an incentive to investment that stimulated the growth of the agricultural product and hence the total national wealth. Philip Francis, a member of Warren Hastings' Council, as well as his infamous persecutor, adapted the physiocratic arguments to the Indian context in a plan for the Permanent Settlement that was implemented, without credit to Francis, by Cornwallis, Hastings' successor.

Though the purpose of the reform was to convert the *zamindars* into a class of capitalist farmers beholden to the British for their property and prosperity, the fixed annual tax proved too high for them to shoulder. Farms fell into arrears, mortgages were foreclosed, and the properties auctioned on the market. Members of the Hindu upper castes, who had accumulated the necessary financial means through their service to European commercial houses, acquired he estates that had been lost by the Islamic *zamindars*. This group of literate Brahmins, vaidyas (doctors), and kayasthas (writers) was the core of the *bandrolok* elite that had served in the military and administrative offices of the Mughals. They now entered the professions,

government offices, and schools established by Bengal's British rulers. The sources of *bandrolok* wealth and social authority were therefore two-fold, consisting in both the possession of landed property and service to the colonialists. But unfortunately for the agrarian reformers, these two sources proved to be in conflict. Instead of constituting an entrepreneurial class of resident capitalist farmers in accordance with physiocratic doctrine, the *bandroloks*, who lived at the center of colonial power in Calcutta, were absentee landlords, content to extract surplus from their tenants through rent racking rather than investing in the expansion of agricultural production. Still, by reason of their social and economic ascendency, the *bandrolok* class and caste elite as well as its equivalent in other parts of British India became the privileged focal point for further attempts at colonial reform.

Loss of their American colonies had taught the British the importance of cultivating a part of the native population who had a stake in colonial rule because their social fortunes depended upon the system it established. But the nature of that cultivation was a topic for debate, especially concerning an appropriate system of formal education. What was the best method for producing in the elite the knowledge and bearing required to mediate British rule successfully to the non-literate masses? At first there was a tendency on the part of the East India Company to refrain from interfering with the traditional cultural sources of Brahmin and Islamic authority. There was even a certain romanticizing admiration for the 'ancient wisdom of the East,' represented most energetically by Sir William Jones, poet, scholar of Persian and Arabic, originator of western Sanskrit studies, founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and member of the colonial Supreme Court. As Governor-General, Warren Hastings, who himself spoke Persian, Bengali, and Urdu, encouraged Jones' work. He also patronized a translation of the Bhagavad Gita by William Winkins, supported a compilation in English of Hindu law, and established a Muslim College of Arabic studies at Calcutta. Jones, Hastings, and like minded Englishmen have come to be called 'Orientalists,' not only because of their pioneering efforts in establishing that western academic discipline, but also because of the role their proteges later played as advocates of traditional learning in the debate over Indian education.

Strictly speaking, the debate began in the third decade of the nineteenth century while Lord William Bentinck was Governor-General. But the way for it was prepared a decade and a half earlier by James Mill, friend of Jeremy Bentham and father of John Stuart Mill. These three men were the

creators of that late version of Enlightenment thought, utilitarian moral philosophy, but the elder Mill was the one who applied its precepts to a reconstruction of Indian ideas. The title of the work concerned is *A History of British India*, but this is misleading, since its first part deals with the subcontinent before the British arrival. In that context Mill produces a withering assessment of the culture of South Asia.

The vantage point Mill assumes is that of a representative of the progressive, liberal wing of the English bourgeoisie, or, in the parlance of the time, the 'middle class.' Although in domestic politics he was an advocate of universal manhood suffrage, he argued for it on the grounds that it was compatible with the continued rule of the educated and propertied class of professionals, commercial farmers, and urban businessmen who had first gained control of the British state in the seventeenth century under the Protectorate of Lord Cromwell. For Mill, the middle class is the only group in society with an interest in preventing the body politic from descending into the tyranny of aristocratic and monarchical despotism on the one hand, and the anarchy of mob rule on the other. In their individualism, advocacy of careful reform, and shrewd calculation and pursuit of economic advantage, the most forward looking members of that class seemed to Mill personal embodiments of the principle of utility first formulated explicitly by his philosophical mentor, Jeremy Bentham. When Mill applies that principle to the evaluation of traditional India, he is, in his own understanding of the matter, measuring its intellectual and other forms of culture against an external criterion, one exhibited by the way of life of the progressive sector of the British bourgeoisie.

In *The History of British India*, he articulates his standard of evaluation quite clearly:

> In looking at the pursuits of any nation, with a view to draw from them indications of the state of civilization, no mark is so important, as the nature of the *End* to which they are directed.
>
> 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 or mischievous objects, though it may be in itself an ingenuity of no ordinary kind, the nation may safely be denominated

barbarous.

In Bentham's formulation, the principle of utility is a criterion for evaluating actions, institutions, and social policies according to their tendency to 'augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.' The party concerned is either the individual or society, the latter, according to Bentham, being a simple collection of individuals, possessing no reality greater than the sum of members who comprise it. 'Happiness' is equivalent to the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, sensations that lend themselves to a quantitative calculus of intensity, duration, certainty, and proximity to the present moment. For Bentham, this is a chief virtue of the utilitarian standard, since it renders it perfectly definite: in deciding between rival policies or courses of action, choose the one that maximizes the pleasure and minimizes the pain - along each of the relevant quantitative gradients - of the individual or group of individuals involved.

The principle of utility, however, is not only an evaluative standard. It is also a real psychological force, an operative cause of action: ANature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.' Since pleasure and pain are real causes and not only imperatives, since they account for what people actually do and not merely for what they ought to do, it is difficult to see why the principle of utility needs the advocacy of philosophers, for it seems impossible for anyone not to abide by it. Bentham is aware of this quandry, and responds by arguing that, while no one can avoid the motivating impact of pleasure and pain, it is possible to be confused about the nature and origin of these sensations. He gives as an example the apparent inverse of the principle of utility - that of asceticism, of minimizing pleasure and maximizing pain. There have been two traditional proponents of the ascetic principle: uneducated religious people and educated philosophers. The former renounce pleasure and embrace pain through fear of a greater degree of pain at the hands of an angry god or gods. The latter do so as a result of the pursuit of the pleasure that comes from reputation and honor in the eyes of those who believe asceticism to be enjoined by divine power. Thus neither proponent of asceticism actually violates the principle of utility, but the expression of that principle is distorted by ignorance and a false view of reality.

Though he does not refer explicitly to Bentham's example, it is the paradigm Mill follows in his assessment of Indian culture. Like everyone else, Indians seek to experience pleasure and avoid pain. But the fear, gullibility, and imaginative excesses of the benighted masses on the one hand, and the calculating opportunism of the Brahminic priest-philosophers on the other, has resulted in a culture where reason and moral improvement hold little sway. According to Mill, from the era of the initial voyages of discovery, Europeans have had a tendency to attribute to India a much higher degree of civilization than it really possesses. This is due in part to the fact that they have contrasted India with the New World, which was discovered simultaneously. When measured against the savage tribes of the Americas, India seems a place of advanced cultivation and learning. But it is in fact a society frozen in time. Anyone who reads the accounts of Megasthenes can see that it has not changed in any fundamental way since at least the fourth century **B.C.**, and probably a good deal earlier. For that entire span, it has been struck at a very early stage in the transition from savagery to civilization.

Mill attempts to demonstrate the 'rude,' or primitive, character of Indian civilization with respect to its law, forms of government, literature, science, religion, and conception of history. In its religion, in particular, we can see Bentham's unhappy collaboration of fearful and credulous masses and unscrupulous philosopher-priests that leads to perverse distortions of the principle of utility. A numberless pantheon of grotesque divine beings coexists with an emphasis on the exalted power and omniscience of Brahman, but the two are not really at variance, since, contrary to a widespread misconception, Brahman does not refer to the oneness of God. It is rather a meaningless term of exaggerated flattery applied to various gods in an attempt to placate them, and developed into a complicated and arcane style of thought by the leisure caste of Brahmins. The real source of Brahminical power, however, lies in their control of the deeply absurd though elaborate and expensive set of rituals required of ordinary believers to insure good fortune by propitiating the gods. One particularly appalling expression of the irrational religious propensities of the Hindus is the dreadful penance, the ingenious forms of self-inflicted torment, invented and practiced by the 'Fakeers.' These experts in techniques of mortification carry the ascetic principle to a further degree of expression than even the wildest extremists of other religions.

In Mill's account, there is no compensation for religious irrationalism in the other branches of Indian culture. India's law is marked by the most barbarous disproportion between offence and punishment, its literature consists wholly in poetry of the most childish, insipid, fantastic, and incoherent sort, and, apart from certain rudimentary advances in mathematics, it has no science to speak of, confusing, for example, empirical rules of thumb and astrological procedures with genuine knowledge of the heavens. Its system of traditional education is primitive, its vernacular tongues crude beyond belief, and even its learned Sanskrit language over complicated by frivolous grammatical distinctions as well as an ambiguous and redundant vocabulary.

Most important for our own discussions in subsequent chapters, Mill claims that India has no historical books at all, an understandable state of affairs since the country has not changed for thousands of years. In place of a real and sober understanding of historical time, Indian tradition offers instead a wildly inflated chronology, a purely imaginary history divided into monstrous periods, fantastic *yugas*, of 3,892,911 - 1,728,000 - 1,296,000 - and 864,000 years. In short, everywhere we turn in the native culture of India, we encounter crudity, distortion, credulousness, and unrestrained imagination.

It does not worry Mill that he judges India in relation to an external standard. For him the principle of utility is not only an expression of the way of life of the British liberal middle class; it is also a universal principle of rational action. (He does not understand, of course, that the extreme individualism of the utilitarian perspective is by no means universal, but has its historical precondition in the existence of a competitive, antagonistic market). Neither does it worry him that he is unable to read Sanskrit, speak any of the vernacular tongues, nor that he has never set foot on the subcontinent. Consultation of the records of the East India Company, of the few translations of Sankrit literature that existed at the time, and interviews with British subjects who had returned from India were for him sufficient to serve as the empirical base for one of the most unsparing condemnations of an entire culture ever produced under the rubric of historical writing. The East India Company was not troubled by Mill's methodology either. As the author clearly states in the introduction to his book, the basic purpose of *The History of British India* is to debunk the Orientalist notion, entertained by such as Warren Hastings and Lord William Jones, that India enjoyed a high civilization of great antiquity. Only when disabused of this illusion could the

British govern their South Asian colony well. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, an influential faction of the Company was inclined to agree. It adopted Mill's *History* as a textbook for inculcating in its functionaries the presuppositions necessary for effective colonial rule.

Mill never personally carried his message to India, though, on the strength of his book, he was given a post in the examiner's office of the East India House. Thomas Babington Macaulay played the role of Mill's surrogate, making his argument for him on the subcontinent. This is something of an irony. Though Macaulay was a liberal like Mill, he was also an opponent of utilitarianism. Under the influence of Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution, he distrusted appeals to abstract *a priori* principles such as utility, and adopted instead a careful empiricist approach to moral and political questions. But his own progressive version of what we normally think of as the conservative Burkean orientation did not leave him with any desire to ground colonial policy in traditional Indian institutions or systems of thinking. He rejected Mill's utilitarianism, but accepted his condemnation of Indian culture in its entirety.

The general context for Macaulay's intervention was the debate on the system of education designed to school the Indian elite that took place in 1832. Its immediate occasion was a legal question concerning which Macaulay gave his opinion in a famous minute in his capacity as Legal Member of the Council of India. The Act of Parliament that had renewed the charter of the East India Company in 1813 had also set aside a lac of rupees for the revival and promotion of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories.' At the time the Act was passed, Hastings' policy of supporting Sanskrit and Persian studies still prevailed. The funds sustained Sanskrit and Persian colleges at Dehli, Banaras, and Calcutta. The point of law at issue was whether the current Governor-General had discretionary power under the Act to switch the funds from their current use to support of studies by the 'learned natives' in the English language. Macaulay argued that Parliament had had no intention of restricting the money to instruction in the ancient scripts of Hindu and Islamic India, but merely of supporting the general goal of educating the indigenous elite. In other words, the money could be used any way the Governor-General in Council decided, so long as it was directed to such education. But more important than his legal opinion was the position that Macaulay proceeded to take in his minute concerning the

substantive dispute that had raised the point of law in the first place, that between the Orientalists of Hastings' and Jones' ilk and the so-called 'Anglicist' critics of Indian language and culture.

In siding with the Anglicists, Macaulay marshaled the arguments against indigenous literature, science, religion, and grammar that he had learned from Mill's *History*. Though he did not add anything new to these arguments, he did manage to boil them down rhetorically into a pithy and memorable assertion: 'a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.' Where Macaulay went beyond Mill was in his application of the latter's critique to the training, not of British agents of the East India Company, but of native surrogates for European rule - the class and caste elite who had their origin in the Permanent Settlement as well as professional and administrative employment in colonial institutions. Macaulay was admirably frank about his reason for advocating withdrawal of funding for the Sanskrit and Persian colleges and its application to a new system of education, one conducted in English and designed to convey the science, history, moral philosophy, and imaginative literature produced in that language:

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.

His Lordship Governor-General Bentinck was swayed by Macaulay's version of Mill's arguments and ordered the requisite fiscal and institutional rearrangements. Thus began, under enlightened liberal auspices, the cultivation of an educated indigenous class regarded by the British as a reliable agent of colonial rule to the precise degree that it was alienated from the intellectual resources of its own country.

6.

Though they opposed English language instruction, the Orientalists were not critics of colonial domination. Their dispute with the Anglicists concerned neither the right of the Empire to exist nor the need to cultivate an indigenous elite, but only the kind of educational preparation necessary if the natives selected were to represent British interests effectively. The

reason for their support of Sanskrit and Persian studies was their belief that a stable colonial order could only rest on the foundation of an undisturbed society and culture. For them there was no conflict between British rule and an indigenous elite whose source of authority consisted in learning based on the ancient texts; the former in fact depended upon the latter.

The Orientalists might have lost the debate over the design of the colonial educational system, but they and their intellectual successors shaped western conceptions of India in important ways. As we shall see in our discussion of Max Müller's work in a later chapter, Orientalism, especially in the form of Indology, became a new discipline in western universities, one that had a profound impact on several specialized fields, including philology, philosophy, prehistory, and the history of religion. But from the time of Hastings and Jones, the Orientalists also contributed to a romanticized view of India that worked its powerful influence on the European (and American) imagination well beyond the halls of the academy. Among others, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Schopenhauer (none of whom were university professors) were enamored of the Sanskrit texts that were slowly being translated into western languages and attempted to incorporate them in a positive fashion into their own work. But by far the most influential appropriation of Indian tradition outside the academy occurred at less respectable hands in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Momentous cultural and political movements set the stage. The Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment had been in progress for nearly a hundred years, emphasizing the importance of folk traditions in contrast with urban sophistication, a poetic approach to life against rationalist abstractions, 'spiritual' or 'metaphysical' themes against a narrowly conceived science, and exotic places and events in contrast with the ordinary, the familiar, the mundane. Each of these emphases originated in a rejection of the tendency of capitalist society to narrow and distort the full range of human experience by means of its fragmentation of the labor process, its penchant, especially in the nineteenth century, for industrial mastery of the natural world, and its overriding obsession with the careful calculation and quantitative expansion of economic value. The appeal to the 'ancient wisdom of the East' was in perfect accord with the Romantic revolt against what William Blake called 'one-eyed vision.'

Just as Romanticism reached the height of its cultural influence, the Revolution of 1848 broke out throughout Europe. In the cities, middle-class

radicals fought for the creation of representative assemblies elected by universal manhood suffrage, while workers and artisans marched under the red flag of the 'social republic,' a new order based on the redistribution of wealth as well as the exercise of democratic rights. In the countryside, exploited peasants struggled to break the final links of statutory obligation in the feudal chains that still bound them to their aristocratic landlords. Finally, in such places as Italy, Hungary, and Poland, oppressed nations rose against foreign domination in what became know as the 'springtime of the peoples.' Although the Revolution was unprecedented in geographical reach and number of people involved - it engulfed more than fifty European states - it was nevertheless defeated everywhere by the armed might of the existing monarchies and multi-national empires.

During the period of reaction that followed, the utopian expectations that the Revolution had aroused - especially those belonging to the lower middle class of professionals and small property owners - began to express themselves in nonpolitical ways. Hopes deferred by counter-revolution mingled with the aging influence of Romanticism to produce a variety of strange phenomena. Following its initial appearance in America, the spiritualist fad caught on in Europe. In England as well as the Continent, mediums conducted séances in which they acted as entranced mouthpieces for the spirits of the dead, also allowing them to manifest themselves in quasi-physical, 'ectoplasmic' form. The souls of the dearly departed not only made contact with their loved ones in this striking fashion; they also hinted at the advent of a new era in which the living as well as the dead would share the inexpressible joys of 'Spiritland,' a sort of astral utopia. The spiritualist community was thrown into an uproar when, in the 1870s, the expatriate daughter of a Russian nobleman announced that run of the mill mediums had only penetrated the most superficial layers of the 'metaphysical' realm. Madam Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was in contact with no ordinary phantoms, but with the Great White Brotherhood of Masters, or Mahatmas. The Masters were members of a secret order located in the fastness of the Himalayas who preserved the esoteric 'wisdom-religion' that was in fact the inner core of all genuine philosophies and faiths. Though they were immaterial beings of enormous occult power, they were capable of assuming temporary physical form in order to guide the spiritual development of the human race. Blavatsky herself had been in psychic contact with the Masters since childhood, but was first approached materially by one of their number at the World Exposition of 1851 held in London. For the purposes of the meeting, the Mahatma Morya, whom

Blavatsky called Master M, manifested himself in the body of a Rajput prince. The Madam was also later approached in physical form by Koot Hoomi, Master KH, who assumed the shape of a blue eyed Kashmiri Brahmin. These Masters communicated to her the Secret Doctrine, which she then conveyed, but only partially, to the members of her newly formed Theosophical Society.

Though the Doctrine was the well of Truth from which all spiritual traditions drew, it had been compromised in the West by religious intolerance as well as a fashionable scientific materialism. One needed to turn to the East - especially to Hinduism and Buddhism - in order to grasp something of its original splendor. It was for this reason that, when Blavatsky's attempt to establish her movement in the United States produced only mixed results, she decided to relocate the home of the Theosophical Society in India. She arrived in Bombay in 1879 with her associate Colonel Henry Olcott, and soon established a substantial following among Anglo-Indians as well as the indigenous population. She accomplished this feat by publishing a successful magazine, *The Theosophist*, and, more dramatically, performing miracles in which she materialized such objects as jewelry and teacups, summoned music out of thin air, and 'precipitated' letters directly from the Masters to especially promising Initiates. (In a famous scandal, enemies in her own camp revealed the source of her magical power when they took the press on a tour of the shrine where she performed many of her wonders, and demonstrated that its cabinet was equipped with numerous false panels).

The message that Blavatsky brought to India was a somewhat radicalized version of Orientalism. She argued that their colonial masters Indians had estranged from their own traditions. The Theosophical Society would act as the instrument for reviving the ancient wisdom of the subcontinent. There is no doubt that this message had a certain subversive potential. Blavatsky was carefully watched by the colonial intelligence service, which suspected her of being a Russian agent intent on stirring the natives against British authority. More concretely, when she and Olcott visited Ceylon in 1880 in order to establish a branch of the Theosophical Society, they spoke openly in support of Buddhists, opposing their exclusion from the educational system and government employment by a regime that embraced Christianity as a virtual state religion. Olcott also set up an effective Buddhist Defense Committee in Ceylon, and intervened with the Foreign Office on behalf of the monastic community when he returned to

London. Theosophy thus had more than a passing connection with local nationalist forces.

Nonetheless, Blavatsky claimed a final authority over the meaning of the Indian spiritual tradition. The Secret Doctrine was explicitly conveyed in neither the Hindu nor Buddhist scriptures. In order to reveal their true depths of wisdom, to unlock their hidden core, someone in direct contact with the Masters had to interpret the texts esoterically. That person of course was Blavatsky. She did not hesitate to dispute with defenders of Hindu and Buddhist orthodoxy on the grounds of her superior psychic insight into the eternal Truth that lay beneath the surface of the sacred books. The natives had no advantage in interpreting their ancient writings. After all, even the Mahatmas had abandoned India for the inaccessible wilderness of Tibet, from whence they chose to communicate with, not an Indian, but the daughter of a Russian nobleman. As an official biographer later wrote, the Masters: 'started their unique work by training H. P. Blavatsky, as a European, to bring the Western initiative and energy to awaken the East from its spiritual lethargy and to share with the world some of the buried treasures of the ancient wisdom.' Her mission was to 'awaken the dreamy Aryans' from their long and undisturbed slumber. In the process, Indian tradition would be revived in opposition to the British colonialists, but its significance and ultimate fate would remain in the hands of a European adept.

In addition to her activities on the subcontinent, Blavatsky communicated some of the secrets of the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures to westerners in a series of baroque writings that deeply influenced such notable figures as Alfred Russell Wallace, Darwin's collaborator, and William Butler Yeats. But the most remarkable transmission of Indian tradition to the West occurred after Blavatsky's death, when her successors, Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbetter, brought the young Krishnamurti to England.

Krishnamurti played his Theosophical role in the context of Besant's and Leadbetter's messianic expectations. In the undernourished Brahmin boy of riveting good looks, they saw an avatar of the Bodhisattva, Lord Maitreya, the World Teacher come to rescue humankind from ignorance. They convinced the boy's father to give them legal custody of his son (a decision he later regretted and tried to reverse in the courts, though unsuccessfully), and began an arduous regime of esoteric training to prepare

him for his exalted mission. When he reached the age of sixteen in 1911, his new guardians took him to England where they provided him with an elite education and groomed him as a proper gentlemen. The handsome, well-dressed, croquet-and-tennis-playing Messiah made quite a stir in middle class society, in particular eliciting the maternal concern of older women. As a result of the impact of his charismatic journey to the West, membership in the Theosophical Society more than tripled over the course of the next decade, growing from sixteen to forty five thousand. The message that he conveyed to Europe was still the one Blavatsky had pioneered, though it was taught to him directly by the Masters, whom he visited regularly in his astral body.

In his twenties and thirties, however, Krishnamurti underwent a series of painful psychological crises, the result no doubt of having been abruptly uprooted from his own society and set down in the eye of the storm of the increasingly acrimonious and faction ridden Theosophical movement. Besant and Leadbetter had made him the head of an esoteric society within Theosophy called the Order of the Star of the East, the purpose of which was to prepare for his messianic mission. But when the World Teacher addressed its annual meeting in Holland in 1929, he shocked the esoteric world by announcing that he was dissolving the Order. He upbraided the three thousand assembled members for slavishly tying their spiritual progress to authoritarian personalities and organizations:

> I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. ...A belief is purely an individual matter, and you cannot and must not organize it.

All organizations are crutches that constrain the individual and that:

> ...prevent him from growing, from establishing his uniqueness, which lies in the discovery for himself of that absolute, unconditioned Truth.

With this declaration, Krishnamurti bid farewell to Messiahhood, the Masters, the Order of the Star of the East, and the Theosophical Society. But he did not abandon the goal of helping people find their own way to liberation. He moved to California whose rootless, free-floating citizenry matched his own sense of cultural dislocation, as well as his emphasis on the

purely individual character of spiritual freedom. He spoke against any form of social or political engagement, regarding even the Second World War as nothing worth bothering about, an irritating distraction from the task of achieving inner freedom and peace. He had no trouble finding an audience on the West Coast as well as other parts of the United States. His books and lectures, along with donations from wealthy benefactors, gained him, or rather the Krishnamurti Foundation, a sizeable fortune.

This essay has now come full circle. Once Enlightenment ideology had helped secure the foundations of capitalist society, its rulers were uninterested in preventing the return of a good part of its population to the mythic themes of the past. In particular India became the Land of European Dreams once again. What is the Great White Brotherhood of Masters, or Mahatmas, for example, but the Hesiodic Golden Race that the ancient Greeks had located in the East, that the medieval Christians had identified with the original inhabitants of the Garden of Eden, and that had now reappeared in the very different world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Who was Krishnamurti but the wise and wealthy Brahmin of Megasthenes' description, come to peddle his spiritual wares in the capitalist marketplace?

Marx saw capitalism as the most rational of class societies, the first social order based on the mastery of nature and the ruthless destruction of traditional religious and mythic norms. But he also saw it as a mystified, enchanted society where relations between people take on the phantasmagorical form of relations between things, where commodities lead a ghostly life of their own. It is not surprising that in California, birthplace of the mass media and consumer market, the eastern Ghost of Theosophy and its aftermath should join hands with the Commodity Fetish and the two together dance their spectral waltz. The party is still in progress under the aegis of the New Age Movement in which a variety of gurus, domestic and imported, have followed the trail Krishnamurti blazed, this time in the wake of the disappointed revolutionary hopes of the 1960s. As in the case of the former Messiah, the Indian traditions present-day gurus teach for a price are detached from politics and history, weightless gems of Eternal Truth pitched to the detached consumers of advanced capitalist society. But in fact these traditions, when genuine, had a very different origin. They were the collective and often contested achievements of real, embodied people who developed their powers, including their powers of thought, in the course of their difficult struggle with the natural world as well as with one another.

Still the conception of an ageless Wisdom Religion, an incorruptible, a-historical Truth, is only one pole of the dominant Western misunderstanding of India. The other pole is the idea Mill and Macaulay established of a stagnant, irrational culture entranced by its own vain fantasies. At both poles, India is a Land of Dreams, a Land Without Genuine History.