

# Imperial culture and cultural imperialism

## The case of India

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“Specificity is not just there. India is not just there.”

— Immanuel Wallerstein

### Introduction

“Imperialism” in English usually means the dominion or autocratic rule of a sovereign, be it an individual (a king or emperor) or a collective actor (a constitutional government). Looking at the history of India covering a time-span of roughly 100 years, i.e. from about 1750 until about 1860, the dominant “imperial cultures” to be put into focus will mainly be those which historians usually identify with the Moghul Empires. “Cultural imperialism” on the other hand is nothing else but a shorthand formula contracting the really monumental enterprise of the British of that time to appropriate the South-Asian country, also expressing their insensible efforts to violently shape the divergent cultures of the subcontinent in conformity with a homemade vision of civilizational standards.

Framing “culture” as a scholarly applicable key-concept usually means to consciously or unconsciously connect to former patterns of theoretical thinking. My own memory of those patterns is shaped by a concept of cultural pluralism that can be compared with the notion of culture first introduced into anthropological discourse by Franz Boas. It is a concept that very well fits the many-coloured, variously patterned web of Indian cultures because it not only favors cultural diversity and co-existence of the diverse, but it also is—at least in the researcher’s mind—akin to relativism. In fact, the position marked by that choice is well known because of its ties with a tradition of great influence represented by the

name of Johann Gottfried Herder. There is in any case something about it: to combine the modern anthropological understanding (Boas) with that of the—if I may say so—classical philosopher of culture (Herder). For Herder saw the dignity and value of each individual culture, as he put it, enclosed in itself like the gravitation centre in a globe. That means that any individual culture has to be studied in its own rights, or to give it a hermeneutical twist, by methodically exploring it *from within*. This is, of course, a maxim which makes the comparison of different cultures a difficult task. It reminds us at least that one of the indispensable conditions in comparative cultural studies is the overt existence of similarities of different sorts shared by the cultures chosen for comparison.

By that last remark I also want to emphasize that behind the imperial culture and the cultural imperialism mentioned in the headline of my talk are hidden indeed two very different cultural patterns of the past, represented on the one side by traditional India, on the other side by the British Empire, a society that for a long time was in the position of a modernist avant-garde. Of course, the relation between both to a large part was not so much based on similarities than on deep going differences and hostile oppositions. There is, therefore, less reason to compare but enough reason to watch the interaction of both cultures before the backdrop of explosive confrontations and cultural violence. However, the argument of my paper is that relations between two complex and dynamic cultural worlds—especially if these relations oscillate for a considerable historical time between recognition and aggression—the crucial point (I say) is that in this case both cultural worlds will definitely change their characteristics, at least by degrees; and they will do that primarily by cooperating in order to bridge the gap in between.

Regarding the semantic width of the concept of culture I do not restrict it to art, science or religion. Instead, in what follows I will use the concept under systemic premises, i. e. as an idea interconnected with, and often enough included in those contexts as politics, economics and social order. To repeat the trivial: cultures exist never on their own, they are one of the creative elements of the social world—shaping it and being themselves shaped by that world. Consequently my argument here will be rather versatile, tentatively moving to and fro between the institutional

levels of social organisation, political order, economic reproduction and legitimizing discourse.

To be blunt: I reject the meaning of culture as a coherent unity; instead I prefer to use "culture" as a marker signifying the interplay between soft- and hardware, or more to the point, between the imaginaire (incl. beliefs and world views as well as value- and symbol-systems) and the institutions (incl. the agencies of bureaucratic, political, military and economic power).

### Confrontational Histories

Speaking of *confrontational* histories means to deliberately put histories into contrastive positions; an approach that aims at a disputatious method of narration, not at an ontological quality.

To illustrate the deep divide between Indian and British cultures in the period in question it may be advisable to first take a short look at the British homeland. Politically Britain became a republic at a rather early date, i. e. roughly spoken, in the second half of the seventeenth century, which was a period of world-crisis and in Britain a revolutionary time. The state then was temporarily called "the Commonwealth". Interesting enough, that seventeenth century designation "Commonwealth" was, as we all know, transferred to the vast global empire the British later succeeded to establish within a time-span of less than 100 years. There was not a big difference in being treated as a subject of the Empire or as a subject of the Commonwealth of Nations. Yet, "Commonwealth of nations" did not mean much; it more or less was and remained a void formula, maybe useful for propagandistic ventures. To quote from Hannah Arendt's chapter on Imperialism: "the British Commonwealth was never a 'Commonwealth of Nations' but the heir of the United Kingdom, *one* nation dispersed throughout the world. [...] Instead of conquering and imposing their own law upon foreign peoples, the English colonists settled on newly won territory in the four corners of the world and remained members of the same British nation." (Arendt 1951, 127–128) I would like to add, that to call India under colonial rule a 'nation' would have been a grotesque misunderstanding. Looking at the territorial and cultural multifariousness of the subcontinent, it is quite plausible to fall into line with Immanuel

Wallerstein and read the label "India" as an indexical sign indicating an invention made up of Asian and European ingredients (Wallerstein 1991, 130–134).

One of the advantages of the British political system in competing with other European nations for the domination over non-European countries was the centralisation of power including monetary and taxation matters. The big, in those times newly founded, soon globally acting capitalist investment companies—the Bank of England and the East India Company as well as the South Sea Company—conferred for some time their capital stocks as non-repayable credits on the government. In exchange they received, besides the payment of interest, first-rate privileges comprising, as in the case of the East India Company, the monopoly of free trade *and of warfare* in the territories chosen for conquest. It was only a question of time that out of the fusion between the imperial colonialism and a clever financial policy emerged that dubious system of world-capitalism, the historian Niall Ferguson recently deemed worthy to justify as one of the great British achievements.

The success of British empire-building was to a large part due to those early established structures of a "fiscal-military state" (J. Brewer) that were accepted, sustained and promoted by a large majority of the English society. By this consent the society fostered a model of political organisation that owed its infrastructural strength to the absence of such despotic power plays which are the hallmark of an absolute or an autocratic kingship. At the same time power distance (G. Hofstede) was gradually reduced and participation of citizens in the process of political decision-making enhanced. And another, not to be underestimated advantage was provided by the fact that value-orientation was endorsed by a homogenous religious belief: Anglican Evangelicalism, protestant ethics added as a free bonus.

The situation on the Indian subcontinent of that time was quite the reverse. Here the British struggle for hegemony was confronted with an almost unimaginable diversity of languages, poly-ethnic lifestyles, heterogeneous belief systems, power structures and traditional green economies. In encountering each other, both sides must have experienced the particular foreignness of the other. A passage out of a recently published Indian history book may illustrate that:

Concepts like *state, sovereignty, society, nationality* and *nationhood* conveyed in the English language”, the author notes, “were quite new to the Indian mind. More appealing to it, were the ideas of human rights and dignity which had no place in the caste system. The personal feudal authority that prevailed in the country was replaced by the impersonal authority of law, a radical change that restored to the individual his legal personality, irrespective of his religion and caste. The rule of law that the British introduced implied both sanctity and supremacy of law and legal equality between individual and individual. It has prohibited arbitrary exercise of authority. The British [...] in their administrative behaviour and social belief, were essentially secular. (Sadasivan 2000, 472)

This is certainly a well fitting statement with the exception of the last sentence—the British, were they really “essentially secular”? To put that straight, it needs some laborious arguments, but it is worth to run that path because it will lead us into the core of that conflict which finally escalated into a bloody religious war, a war that shattered all what had been attained during the longstanding Anglo-Indian commerce: I mean the Great Rebellion or Great Mutiny, that started in Delhi about 150 years ago, in the Indian summer of 1857.

Regarding the religious dimension of the British-Indian tensions it is important to know, that the Mughals in general were good Muslims, but secular-minded rulers. The emperor Akbar (1542–1605), a great seeker of truth like Gandhi, had set the pattern for his successors in the Timurid lineage. In his courtly bureaucracy he included Indian elites of different religions, but was at the same time anxious to enhance the authority of the king’s charismatic rule by sacralizing his person. So he established a ritual cult around his person and was venerated as an incarnation of Divine Faith (*Din-i Ilāhī*), without, however, forcing an exclusive religious doctrine upon his subjects. What is more, he invited the leading figures of different confessions of his time (Sikhs, Hindus, Jains, Zoroastrians etc.) including representatives of the Portuguese Jesuits to engage in a cross-cultural religious dialogue taking place in the beautiful audience hall in his newly

built capital Fatehpur Sikri (City of Victory) near Agra. Having a greatly tolerant attitude toward religion, Akbar even preserved Hindu temples.

Since Akbar's days most Mughal kings were venerated as the legitimate rulers furnished with a divine authority that made them acceptable for Muslims, Hindu and other people alike. The title of the last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775–1862), who died as a British state-prisoner in Rangoon, might give a clue to the imaginary transcendence of the emperor's cultural as well as political position. It reads: 'His Divine Highness, Caliph of the Age, Padsha as Glorious as Jamshed, He who is surrounded by Hosts of Angels, Shadow of God, Refuge of Islam, Protector of the Mohammedan Religion, Offspring of the House of Timur, Greatest Emperor, Mightiest King of Kings, Emperor son of Emperor, Sultan son of Sultan' (Dalrymple 2006, 21). It goes without saying that such a highly charged charismatic authority was determined to emphasize hierarchy and to sustain a good deal of power distance.

Perhaps the most important factor of success at least in the early times of the British dominion in India was the existence of an initially private enterprise and its competent and, often enough, ruthless way of economic and political decision-making: the East India Company. Established in 1600 as a joint-stock association of English merchants, the Company was transformed during the second half of the eighteenth century from a commercial body with scattered trading interests into an almost invincible territorial power. As a headquarter she had founded the settlement of Calcutta in Bengal, from where the Company's armies subjugated in unparalleled efforts step by step the whole sub-continent. Despite being a private entrepreneur, the Company was by official privilege allowed to recruit her own mercenary army; and she did so well that her chief militaries soon had command over the biggest army in the world of that time, a stunning war-machine useful to expand British interests into vast parts of Central Asia. To finance subsequent expenses the Company extracted considerable, progressively rising revenues from the Indian peasantry, in such a way spreading poverty and impeding what in the British homeland formed part of the economic progress, the intensification of agrarian productivity. One of the quasi-philosophical convictions behind this economy of exploitation was a contemporary mixture of physiocratic and

utilitarian ideas, which to a steadily rising degree during the nineteenth century were unfortunately joined by racism and cultural arrogance. "All the capital employed is English capital," wrote John Stuart Mill in the early years of the Victorian era, "almost all the industry is carried on for English uses" (quote Said 1993, 90). And Lord Macaulay, who had to deal with the reform of public education in India, assisted with his infamous verdict "that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."

The East India Company was active on the sub-continent more than 250 years. Her climax she had in 1800 when her army under command of Lord Wellesley overthrew Tipu Sultan near Mysore. In his report to the Court of Directors of the East India Company Wellesley wrote: "The glorious termination of the late war in Mysore [has] established the ascendancy of the British power over all the States of India", from now on—he continued—it would be essential, "to consider the extensive and valuable possessions to the government of which the Company have succeeded, as a great Empire." (Martin 1836, II; 312, 320)

More than half a century later, in 1858, one year after the Great Rebellion—or as Indian historians call the incident: after the First War of Independence—the Company was nationalised, and thus became the property of the British Government, her duties being reduced to administrative tasks. The seizure of power by the Government initiated a policy of rigid control and oppression in the new "Empire", organized directly by the newly established governmental India Office in London.

In the long history of her existence the Company underwent a lot of drastic changes. That was, to a large part, due to the almost impossible task to occupy and pacify a continent so vast in geographical size and so abundant in cultural differences. The Company was certainly not from the beginning involved in the task of empire-building, but steadily channelled the expertise of her Anglo-Indian personal in this direction, with increasing enforcement since the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Parliament in London tightened control by conveying power to the figure of a Governor-General; a commitment that raises a lot of questions.

Again and again the Company, like the colonial policy altogether, was accused, to have pursued nothing else but the naked exploitation of

the foreign cultures and societies. However, to criticise that policy with Hannah Arendt for a type of imperialism characterised by the strict separation between *ius* and *imperium*, does not hit the point correctly. No question, the primary interest of the Company was directed at economic success. But to secure this purpose she first and foremost had to take care to keep up stability in the already colonised parts of the continent. To attain her goals she not only boosted police and military measures, she also assumed tasks that were, strictly speaking, of the politico-cultural sort. It is impossible to describe and hardly possible to generalise the efforts of the Company as a cultural agent in India. Too wide apart were the regional peculiarities and too various the attempts to intervene without ravaging the cultural memories of Hindus and Muslims. If we would venture on a rough summary of what is reported about the Company's goals we could perhaps reduce these to a broad prospect of those achievements which represent the basics of modernity in the British society of that time: I mean:

1. the culture of capitalism, since long a highlight of British entrepreneurship;
2. the culture of industrialism, gaining speed and innovative impulse;
3. the culture of surveillance, enhanced by new algorithmic technologies and statistics;
4. and last not least the culture of reflexivity with its tendency to deconstruct traditions and leave their normative contents to be scrutinized, interpreted and brought into distance by academic experts of European origin; experts, who, for instance, in variance with the autochthonous guardians of heritage, declared Sanskrit a holy language with affinities to classical Greek and Latin.

Imperialist colonialism exerted a tremendous impact upon those media of communication and symbolic world-making: language and writing. The rather late introduction of printing in India at the end of the eighteenth century had a profound standardizing effect on the development of languages and literatures. Until then a multitude of co-existing languages and writing systems was in use. But now there emerged the ambition to conquer the imaginations and reasonings of the few literate by establishing



the leadership of at least two main literary languages: Urdu, using the Arabic script, and Hindi, using like Sanskrit, Marathi and others the Devanāgarī alphabet.

Traces of all this can be found in many of the Company's activities. They include not only the establishment of schools and colleges under British supremacy, but also the more academic attainments like territorialisation by map-making, philological and historical reconstruction of languages, myths and chronicles, also—especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century—extensive surveillance through census and population-statistics and, not to forget, the heavy European investments into those enterprises which were thought to speed up the mechanisms of commerce and communication throughout the whole subcontinent: instalment of roads, railways, canals and the electric telegraph. "In purely agricultural pursuits," the Indian historian Romesh Dutt wrote in 1900 in his retrospect on India's economic development, "England had little to teach; but in cleaning and husking the food grains, in spinning and weaving, in the manufacture of indigo, tobacco and sugar, in the growing of coffee and tea, in the forging of iron, in coal-mining and gold-mining, in all industries which were dependant on machinery, Europe had adopted more perfect methods than India in 1830."

Dutt, like so many other Indians, would have been happy if their own people would have had the opportunity to partake in and hence to learn from the technological advancements. Instead, Dutt comments, "it was hardly possible that foreign merchants and rival manufacturers, working for their own profit, would have this object in view [...]. A policy the reverse was pursued with the object of replacing the manufactures of India, as far as possible, by British manufactures." (Dutt 1956, 288)

The ambivalence of this radical, enduring scheme of transforming the sub-continent by keeping investment in one's own labour forces and the collected taxes on the domestic side soon became only too obvious. On the one hand the interventions initiated a process of modernisation which in the long run nurtured especially in the British educated Indian elite a longing for self-determination that culminated in the struggle for independence; out of this the Indian nationalist movement was born, whose members invented, as docile disciples of the European historians,

their own nationally tainted cultural memory, only to use it as a weapon against their former 'masters'. On the other hand the colonialist process of transformation went along with the destruction not only of holy sites (temples and mosques) and the basic structures of the traditional village economy, disrupting the local ecological balances, but it also affected the normative impact of those cultural memories that in the manifold empires and kingdoms of that wide-stretched subcontinent had established for generations a readily comprehensible set of life-orienting traditions. Not to forget the influence of other cultural heritages embodied in different religious beliefs, e.g. Buddhism, Jainism and Islam.

To call the various Hindu-religious observances and rituals "Hinduism" was a typical Western attitude meant to simplify a complex phenomenon and to reduce a disturbing heterogeneity. Apart from the Trinity Brahma—Vishnu—Shiva, the rich polytheistic pantheon of Hindu-deities is almost inexhaustible, what mirrors the possibilities of manifold forms of adoration and worship. Accordingly confusing is, therefore, the teeming crowd of the holy imagery. Another big difference to the monotheistic confessions lies in the major importance of *oral* interpretations and teachings, something that cut across the Protestant estimation of the *written* word, a guiding principle also in the Anglican Church. All in all, enough reasons for many British functionaries who had to do in some form or other with the affairs of colonizing or, as they saw it, civilizing the Indians, to qualify the Hindu-religions as a gross form of superstition.

The greatest danger for a sustainable mutual understanding between Europeans and Indians pertaining to the interchangeable uses of their cultures was brought about by the awakening of religious fundamentalism about the middle of the nineteenth century. There was a growing estrangement between both sides, stimulating a general negative development that was to a good deal pressed ahead by the coincidence of a crisis-ridden and therefore weak government in the British homeland on the one hand and successful imperialist policies in the colony on the other hand. The latter encouraged a boisterous attitude towards the "natives" as the Indians were then disdainfully called. "For the first time", resumes William Dalrymple in his recent book about that time, "there was a feeling that technologically, economically and politically, as well as culturally,

the British had nothing to learn from India and much to teach; it did not take long for imperial arrogance to set in. This arrogance, when combined with the rise of Evangelical Christianity, slowly came to affect all aspects of relations between the British and the Indians.” (Dalrymple 2006, 70)

The militant strategies of the Evangelical missionaries strengthened the resistance of their Hindu and Islamic antagonists. And it was a question of time when the first ‘mujahedin’ conspiracies were uncovered and a ‘jihad’ against the ‘Kafirs’, the infidels, was invoked. The consequence was one of the bloodiest upheavals in the history of British colonialism, the 1857 war, that once and for all destroyed the rich Mughal culture and shattered for a long time all hopes for fair dealings between India and Europe.

### Intermediary cultures

My brief and very selective outline of the British-Indian relations is not meant to convey the impression that the British were the first and only who happened to incorporate the Indian subcontinent into the modern world system. There is something like a very early beginning of this process dating back to the arrival of Vasco da Gama at the West-coast of the subcontinent by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Certain commercial routes (*carreiras*) were officially mapped out by the Portuguese, and quite similar national monopoly-like conditions applied as later in the Northwestern European East India companies. When Panikkar in his famous book on *Asia and Western Dominance* names the era between 1498 and 1945—almost 450 years—the “Vasco Da Gama Epoch”, it seems that he is alluding not only to a long-lasting continuity of Western dominance but also to a long and not only hostile history of commercial and cultural exchange between Asia and Europe. After all, the Portuguese called their growing network of commercial settlements on the West-coast “Estado da India”. This is, I think, a definite clue to the task of empire-building in those days and an anticipation of that unifying label “State of India” that came into use only after the Indians had cast off the colonial dominance of the imperialist powers.

In the beginning the Portuguese were primarily interested, as later the British, in the trade with India. Soon, however, they fostered rising

imperialistic tendencies and started to conquer small parts of the Indian territory, and to draw in the catholic missionaries. So at first sight the common collaboration of military violence and ideological brainwashing seems to have been the dominant sign also of this cultural encounter. Yet, new historical studies were able to substantiate co-operative attitudes on both sides, Indian and Portuguese, and there is now a fairer assessment of the formerly underrated symptoms of mutual acceptance and recognition (Feldbauer 2004).

Let me elaborate a bit on that other side of the history in the following conclusion: So far I avoided those well-known theoretical key words: *orientalism* (sensu Said), *hegemony* (sensu Gramsci) and *hybridity* (sensu Rushdie). And I do not think that they are absolutely essential. Since all cultures are syncretic, *hybridity* does not have any distinctiveness and doesn't it have rather ominous roots in nineteenth century race theories (Young 1994)? Particularly, India is a fabulous example for denominating in an outspoken manner various cross-cultural amalgamations as there are Hindu-Muslim communalism and architecture, Indo-Islamic civilization, Indo-Persian art, or Anglo-Indian literature. The two other key words mentioned above originate from normative political contexts: The fight for *hegemony* of a "social bloc" (Gramsci) presupposes the developed nation state, which does not apply to India in the time treated here; let alone the fact that the social system in that part of the world had not a class-, but a caste-structure. As to *orientalism* this is a polemical key word, which in the Saidian discourse has certainly shown a notably illuminative force, notwithstanding, however, the fact that it underestimates the creative power, which might emerge out of the encounter of different cultures in the secluded realm of interpretive research and narration.

I prefer to speak of *intermediary cultures* instead of using the above mentioned somewhat outworn key words. The term *intermediary culture* is introduced here as a merger with a subversive potential, convenient to designate a new form developing *between* forms already existing. Meant is not simply the intersection of the characteristics shared by A and B. It rather means the dynamic conjuncture and cooperative interaction between the two, out of which may emerge a hitherto unknown form. This new form often has a transitory function, and the concept could hence also

be called *culture in transition*. My decisive argument is, that the agency of the *intermediary culture* shows up as something *creative*, especially when it succeeds to transform the given structures of A and B. The implied action mode being based on shared intentions, its rationality can be called "responsive" (B. Waldenfels). The efforts, for instance, of the Portuguese Jesuits as well as of the European philological scholars to comprehend the foreign cultures of the Indian peoples may be appreciated as being committed to that principle of responsive rationality. The point is, they experience the otherness of the foreign culture as if they themselves were asked questions by the other and should strive for acceptable answers.

Sometimes their answers will certainly be unsatisfactory, but even then they may empathetically intrude into the self-perception of the culture in question and develop alternative views that might be in some way examined and appropriated by the other side. The question-and-answer-game will, if it brings profit for both sides, never come to a halt and can unleash a constant exchange of roles since it relies, like a dialogue, on reciprocity: the asked one becomes the questioner, the answering person the questioned et vice versa.

The question-and-answer-game forms the core of the *intermediary culture*. Its objective outcome consists, however, not only of statements and texts. In fact its yield often has an organizational consequence, which for some time can change the determining factors of political, social or cultural practice. The British, who around 1800 took over the life-style of the Indian Nawabs or Rajahs, put on test the principle of responsive rationality not only in a discursive, but first and foremost in a mimetic way. Their assimilative practice was an attempt to understand the strangeness of the other culture by living the way of life of the others.

When the emperor Akbar initiated a dialogue with the other religions and began to integrate the Hindu elite into the political culture of the Moghul court, this initiative of an intermediary cultural practice produced flexible and durable new power constellations. If, on the contrary, responsive rationality is prohibited by an assault on the other culture, be it religiously or politically motivated, the question-and-answer-game cannot unfold. Exactly that happened under one of Akbar's later successors, Aurangzeb (1658–1707), who via adjustment of rigid boundaries between the religions

carved the way for the decline of Moghul power. When the British stepped in with upgraded imperialist and combined fundamentalist, i.e. religiously narrow-minded claims, they brought down the symbolic power of the last Mughal in Delhi and sparked off a cruel war.

My attempt to depict some of the confrontations and interdependencies between imperial cultures and cultural imperialism within a specific span of historical time in India is not meant to prove a clear-cut theoretical hypothesis. Intermediary cultures may emerge under whatever condition. It is an open secret, after all, that the policy of neither an imperial nor an imperialist power is particularly suitable for the advancement of the freedom to practice what I called 'responsive rationality'. But I hope I have not completely failed to indicate that none of the two power-systems can totally rule out the burgeoning of intermediary and at the same time subversive cultures.

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