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## Europe, seen from India

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this essay is a very broad and general reflection on how Europe is perceived in Indian culture, both in manifest and in less obvious forms. The starting point is a general quest for the image of Europe in present day India, searching for clues in popular culture, language usage and mass-media. Since the limited data suggests lack of visibility rather than any defined representation, an explanation is offered based on ancient texts and traditions pertaining to the concept of *dharma* in Hinduism. Then less obvious impacts and influences are investigated, tracing some unacknowledged cultural border-crossings, which have been instrumental in shaping Hinduism as we know it today. Last, some very visible and acknowledged reactions and counter-reactions in the academic field are presented around the concept of post-colonial critique. As a conclusion, suggestions are made on how to reverse the mirror: how the Indian experience can be profitable to Europe and what Europe would be wise to look for when looking at India.

**Keywords:** India, Europe, Hinduism, post-colonialism.

### Introduction

This essay tackles a great variety of subjects, without getting seriously into any of them. Rather, it presents itself as a series of variations on the theme of Europe and India, a broad reflection, assuming different perspectives, on what Europe means, has meant, or could mean for Indians. It starts with some general observations on the search for a distinct image of Europe in today's Indian mass culture. Since the limited data points towards a lack of visibility rather than any clear representation, we will look for a tentative explanation in popular traditions and ancient texts, all related to the Hindu concept of *dharma*. Then we will adopt a different outlook in search of less obvious instances of cultural border-crossings, tracing major influences which have largely remained unacknowledged in Indian culture itself. Here we will see how the acculturation of European ideas and values has contributed to shaping Hinduism as we know it today during the Hindu reform movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Last, we will turn to the academic

field and examine the lasting impact of post-colonial critique on Indian thought and in the field of Indology, both Indian and European. Unlike the case with Hinduism, where the unconscious acceptance of external judgment has induced a cultural transformation, here it is the foreign gaze itself, which is under scrutiny, in a very conscious and articulate debate. As a conclusion we will ask ourselves how, in a collection of writings such as this one, focused on the idea of Europe and its boundaries, the example of present day India can feed the discussion. In other words: what Europe could look for when looking at India.

## 1. The invisible Europe

The first impression one gets when searching for the Indian idea of Europe is that such a concept does not seem to exist, or rather, that its fuzziness allows for the confusion with two other “ideas”: that of “England” and the general concept of “foreign”.

Traditionally and for obvious reasons, the focus of public attention has always been Britain. Even today, as Rajendra K. Jain has noticed [1], the Indians’ perception of Europe has been essentially conditioned by the Anglo-Saxon media and most of the foreign correspondents of Indian media are based in London. Neither the EU, nor any of its member countries, is featured as prominently in the Indian press, or, for that matter, even possesses something of a distinct presence, character or identity. The British have left a distinct stamp on the collective memory of the Indians and, on the other hand, Indians are the single largest visible ethnic minority population in the UK. With 1.4 million people they are one of the largest Indian communities in the diaspora. If there are any new trends to be noticed in this respect, it’s a shift of attention towards the US in modern times. Europe though remains just as vague.

The British have become the paradigmatic foreigners in the eyes of the common Indian to such



an extent that the Hindi term for “English” has practically become a synonym for “foreign”. Here is an example: across India, especially in the North, one can see many simple roadside shops with big sign boards above the entrance claiming to sell English wine. What you actually find inside

An “English wine shop” in India

is neither English, nor, for that matter, wine. “English” stands simply for “foreign”, and “wine” is a generic term, in the specific Indian usage of the English language, that indicates just any type of alcoholic beverage. So what you should really expect to find in those shops is mostly Indian brands of whiskey and some beer.

So “English” stands for “foreign”. The Hindi term for “foreign” is *videsh*, “that which is distinct from, opposite to, contrary to *desh* – “one’s own country”, “the country” by default. Thus the territories beyond the borders of India are not defined with a term denoting border crossing, like *abroad* or the German *ausland*, or a term referring to the strangeness of those lands and the people inhabiting them, like the French *à l’étranger*, or the Bulgarian *чужбина*. The term *videsh* is more radical: it’s built as a derivative of *desh* with a negative prefix in front of it. That simple linguistic structure bears testimony to a pre-modern map of the world where whatever lies beyond the limits of “one’s own country” is not only unknown, but also unwanted and dangerous. We will elaborate on that a little later.

Many years ago, while doing field work for my PhD thesis, I was introduced to a sweet old lady from Odisha, a state on the South-East coast of India. Since it was too complicated to explain to her where Bulgaria was, she was just told that I came from *videsh*. Hearing the fact, her reaction was “My poor dear, you should come and live here! There is nothing in *videsh*!”

Now let’s look for Europe in that fascinating source of information: Bollywood movies. Since being understandable and pleasing to the largest possible audiences is a constant concern for movie makers [2], we can reasonably expect that they will faithfully reflect the general public’s ideas about Europe (or the lack of such ideas).

We have selected here examples from two “block busters” from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first one is *Ham dil de chuke sanam*, which would translate as “I have already given my heart, my love”. It tells the story of the lovely Aishwarya Rai, torn between her love for a foreign musician and the man she has been married off to by her family. Part of the action is supposed to take place in Italy. Only the Italian exteriors are represented by scenes from... Budapest. There are landmark buildings and bridges, street signs in Hungarian, waiters and a tram ticket controller (in a scene where the main characters travel without tickets) conspicuously speak Hungarian. The only possible conclusion is that the general public's perception of Italy is vague enough not to be challenged by such discrepancies. Italy is just another occurrence of *videsh*.

The second film is *Dilwale dulhaniya le jaenge*, translating as “the brave will take away the bride”, featuring Sharukh Khan and Kajol, and often referred to by its fans as the acronym *DDLJ*. Half of the movie takes place in Europe where the two protagonists fall in love with each other and the other half in Punjab, where the hero has to win his bride from the hands of a fierce and uncompromising father. The first scene takes place in London, where the main characters live, and opens with the line “This is London. The greatest city in the world”. Then we are shown some London scenery. So right away we can assume that, possibly, there are more definite public expectations regarding the capital of the UK which have to be met adequately.

But the movie is not only about London. Later in the plot the main characters take a trip across Europe and other countries appear on screen. The most conspicuous among them is Switzerland. And it’s not an accidental setting. Switzerland has a distinct presence in the Indian imagination.

What we learn from Indian movies (*DDLJ* is not the only example) is that Switzerland is the most romantic country, one that provides the perfect background for a hero and a heroine to fall in love. It’s like the Himalaya in the older movies, only fresher, more perfect and more dreamlike. And, of course, there is the snow. In that respect *DDLJ*, modern as it is, is faithful to the established Indian cinematic tradition in being totally unrealistic about snow. Snow is never bitterly cold, you can dance barefoot or frolic in it, it can only refresh you in cool whiteness. Just like Switzerland itself, it’s the stuff Indian dreams are made of.

The indianization of Switzerland in *DDLJ* goes as far as adding a monsoon rain to it. A traditional Indian cinematographic cliché shows the lovers dancing, singing and frolicking in the pouring rain. To open a short bracket, this is an old narrative tradition. The monsoon comes to India after months of scorching heat and brings nature back to life. It’s mating season for animals, birds and insects. It’s the time when the wandering holy men finally stop wandering, when travelers return, when lovers reunite. The air is filled with amorous longing and the pain of separation becomes hardly bearable to the occasional lonely heroine, as testified in many classical poems and folk songs.

This ancient narrative model has been happily adopted by the Indian cinema, even more so since it adds to the plot a plausible pretext for the heroine to dance in a drenched sari. Rain season is love season and that goes for the Bollywood version of Switzerland in *DDLJ*, where

a traditional singing-in-the-rain scene has been introduced to match the emotional progress of the main characters towards irresistible, overwhelming, everlasting mutual love.

Thus our brief excursion to Bollywood has shown us a kind of realistic London, Budapest barely masquerading as “Italy”, and images of Switzerland, which, although real, are far from realistic and serve in fact to accommodate a very Indian version of cinematographic paradise [3].

## 2. Videsh and dharma

The lack of interest towards *videsh* has roots going far back in time. Traditionally, the territory of India (or *bharat*) is conceived as a closed space, bordered to the North by the unsurmountable wall of the Himalaya and on all other sides by *kālā pānī*, or “black water”. Crossing the black water is not only dangerous (it is inhabited by demons) it leads to loss of ritual status and social exclusion.

This is explicitly stated in the *dharma-sutras*, the ethical and legal compendiums of ancient India. Baudhāyana in his *Dharma-sūtra* (II.2.2) mentions sea voyages as first of the offences that cause the loss of *varna*, or social class [4]. It is a sin that requires, in order to avoid the disastrous karmic effects, a number of expiatory rites: prolonged fasting, regular ablutions and different kinds of penances. The concept of *Sāgarollanghana*, or the offense of crossing the sea, resurfaces once in a while in the Indian news, usually as an objection to the appointment of some temple priest or administrator [5].

The reason behind the taboo is the severance from the sacred land of Bharat, which necessarily causes ritual pollution. Brought by the contact with alien substances and people (all foreigners are deemed impure), it is further aggravated by the inability to carry out the daily rituals and the unavailability of the ultimate purifier: water from holy rivers of India and the Ganges in particular. The problem of ritual purity being a primary concern with Hinduism, this dreadful condition weighs heavily on the mechanics of reincarnation, as well as it destroys social and family bonds in the present life. Gandhi shares in his autobiography that part of his Gujarati *baniya* caste never accepted him back when he returned from his stay as a law student in the UK.

Even if Markovits calls it a myth, there is information from the Portuguese sailors setting foot on Indian shores that the Hindus were reluctant to engage in maritime trade due to this taboo [6]. Markovits’s objection is based on the fact that, nevertheless, Hindu merchants from coastal regions did, in fact, travel extensively all over the world and reside for prolonged periods in far

away lands. Still he acknowledges the fact that in the eighteenth century, the traders of North India considered even the lands beyond the Indus River as off-limits, and underwent purification rituals upon their return.

The East India Company adapted its requirements to this taboo when recruiting Indian soldiers. The upper-caste ones were not to be imposed overseas service.

In 1906, the Cellular Jail was completed in Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. The colonial administration used to send political prisoners there who were all held in solitary confinement. The prison was also known as Kala Pani: a name evoking not only its beyond-the-sea location, but most probably also the isolation, present and future, of the inmates.

Here is another story, exemplifying the dangers of sea voyage and the procedures for overcoming them, as envisioned in a traditional Hindu high-caste milieu: in 1902 Madho Singh, maharaja of Jaipur, was confronted by a serious problem [7]. He was invited to London to the coronation of Edward VII – an invitation he could not afford to turn down. In his case crossing the ocean meant not only endangering himself, it was also threatening to his kingdom and his subjects, who, at the time of his accession to power, had been literally incorporated into him through the appropriate rituals. Finally, he and his counselors came out with an innovative solution to the dilemma: basically he was to travel without ever leaving India. The ship that was hired to take him to England was ritually purified and sanctified. Food was loaded: rice, vegetables, fruits, cows for fresh milk and water from the Ganges in gigantic silver jars, which can be admired until today in the part of the palace of Jaipur open to the public. In that way pollution of the raja's sacred persona through contact with foreign substance was avoided and he could proceed safely.

Each of these disparate examples show in different perspective a reticence to foreign lands and people deeply ingrained in Indian culture. They may be relevant, at least in part, to the lack of visibility of Europe as well.

### **3. Unacknowledged border crossings**

This cultural self-sufficiency did not succeed, however, in making India immune to cultural influences in general and to European values in particular. For if India did not take interest in foreign lands and people, foreigners certainly did take interest in India. And here they were, observing her from their superior vantage point as colonizers and sharing their observations in books and reports with their fellow-countrymen and the world in general. With the advent of

the English education systems those books and reports became accessible to Indians as well. Indian intellectuals became aware of the reflection of their own culture in the eyes of the *videshis*. And they necessarily reacted to the foreign gaze, one of the most remarkable outcomes of this reaction being what is known as “the Hindu Renaissance” or, more accurately, the Hindu reformist movement of the 19th century.

First of all, this is the time when the very term “Hinduism” was introduced to both European and Indian audiences. For the Europeans it is a general term, coined on a toponymic basis, conveniently able to accommodate anything qualifying as a religious phenomenon occurring on the territory of the subcontinent [8]. For the Indians, the term was difficult to understand. The concept of belonging to a common religion named “Hinduism” was almost as new to them as the term “religion” itself. Nevertheless they adopted it, little by little. The persistency of the foreigners calling them “Hindus” produced in time a reflection on their own beliefs and practices. Like a grain of sand, the foreign gaze, embodied in the term “Hinduism”, induced a crystallization process, which, in due time, produced Hindu identity and its political extension – Hindu nationalism.

Of course, there was more to it than just a case of name-giving from outside onlookers. The Europeans were very judgmental in their descriptions of the beliefs and customs of the local populations. They were very explicit about what they liked (like the monistic doctrines of the Upanishads) and what they disliked (mostly the “crude” aspects of Hinduism like what they called “idol worshipping”). The Indian reformers were intellectuals who had received a European style of education and who expressed themselves in English. They felt the need to defend their customs and beliefs. That apologetic reaction, though, is formulated through and so tacitly accepts the values of the colonizers. This is why we have listed it here as an “unacknowledged border-crossing”.



Portrait of Ram Mohan Roy

follows:

The most outstanding figure among the reformers was Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833). Born in Kolkata in a rich brahman family, he studied Arabic, Persian, ancient Greek and Latin. Then he got employed by the East India Co. and learned English. Brilliant and eccentric, after quitting his job with the British administration he devoted himself to religious and social matters. To further his ideas he founded the Brahmo Samaj, a society that continued his work after his death and grew to be very influential.

The two lines of action of Ram Mohan Roy's multifaceted movement can be summed up as

1. Defense of Hinduism. In this context he was the first Indian to use English language as a medium;
2. Critique and reform of Hinduism in accordance with his own ideas and beliefs.

What were Roy's ideas concerning religion?

Basically, in numerous pieces of writing, Roy took the concept of God as defined in the Upanishads and presented it as central to Hinduism. In that vision God is transcendent, omnipresent, eternal, immutable, unknowable in its essence and formless. This God is not only equal to that of Christianity or Islam, he is superior to them because he is universal. If Roy rejects the Hindu worship of divine images (which he agrees with the Christian missionaries in calling "idolatry") he says that Christianity has to be purified too from the doctrine of the trinity.

The monism of Ram Mohan Roy certainly has roots in the Upanishads, the brahma-sutras and the works of the great Indian philosopher Shankara, but it also matches the ideas of Deism, an influential philosophical movement during the Enlightenment. Deists believed in an innate religious intuition and a God who can be known through reason and the observation of nature [9]. Roy's defense strategy regarding Hinduism consisted in promoting monistic ideas agreeing with Christianity and rejecting whatever elements the European found displeasing by calling them corrupt.

Even though Ram Mohan Roy had a limited number of followers, mostly with an intellectual background, his effort was groundbreaking in that he was the first Indian to try to explain Hinduism to Europeans in their own terms. In his determination to bridge the cultural gap he also internalized their set of values and tried to modify Hinduism according to them. In doing so he set a trend, which would ultimately modify the Indians' perception of their own religious identity.

This is, in fact, an ongoing process. As a kind of epilogue to the story of Ram Mohan Roy and his role in introducing Christian values in the heart of Hindu culture, let us turn briefly to "global Hinduism" and its effect of on Indian Hinduism. This is a process that has been aptly described as an example of the "pizza effect" [10]. The pizza effect is a term coined by Aghenanda Bharati, meaning a kind of cultural reenculturation. Pizza, it seems, was originally a kind of bread. Italian immigrants took it with them to the US, where it was seasoned with tomatoes, cheese, etc. before coming back to Italy where it became a national dish.

When we spoke of a trend set by Ram Mohan Roy, it's because there were many after him who not only tried to explain Hinduism to the West (like Vivekananda or even Gandhi), but also started their own religious communities and crossed the black waters in search of westward expansion. Like the ironical term "export guru" suggests, these movements (ISKCON, Osho, Transcendental Meditation, etc.) introduced proselytism into Hinduism, a very unexpected and uncharacteristic new feature. Some of these movements are targeted exclusively at foreigners, others have an Indian following as well, in the diaspora or in India, or both. Little by little these movements change the face of Hinduism in a global perspective. This is the pizza effect at work.

#### **4. Orientalism and post-colonial criticism**

At the beginning of this essay we examined the generally negative attitude of Indian culture to foreign lands and people who may have left traces in modern day popular culture. Then we showed instances of hidden cultural influences, like the case of the Hindu reform where the effort to promote Hinduism tacitly instilled foreign, Christian, or European values in Indian culture. The very urge to defend Hinduism shows how the Indian reformers have internalized the point of view of the colonizers.

Then, a century and a half later, came Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the subtle mechanisms of the colonization of the mind became painfully clear, at least to the academic world. The dichotomy of the rational self and the irrational other and concepts such as the sexification of

the Orient were assimilated and interpreted in passionate discussions. The anti-colonial fight developed a cognitive agenda. Colonialism came to be viewed as a distortion and all knowledge in the social sciences and the humanities had to be reviewed and cleaned from it. Of course this was particularly true for knowledge about India.

One of the most fierce and articulate proponents of the post-colonial perspective was Ashish Nandy who wrote in the seventies. I have selected for a brief discussion a few representative quotes from his most famous piece of writing, *The Intimate Enemy*.

Why “intimate enemy”? Because even the choice of intellectual tools and concepts when fighting colonialism is provided by the colonizers. “Even in enmity these choices remain forms of homage to the victors” [11].

Ashish Nandy speaks of colonialism as a state of mind, of internal colonialism, of identification with the oppressors. To a large extent he makes explicit, and gives prominence to, illicit assumptions and assimilations very relevant to Roy’s and other reformers’ work.

Since Nandy’s voice is unique in style and quality, a few citations will serve to outline his specific outlook on colonialism.

Colonialism is “a shared culture, which may not always begin with the establishment of alien rule in a society and end with the departure of the alien rulers from the colony. In the example of India, a colonial political economy began to operate seventy-five years before the full-blown ideology of British imperialism became dominant, and thirty-five years after the formal ending of the Raj, the ideology of colonialism is still triumphant in many sectors of life... It includes codes which both the rulers and the ruled can share. The main function of these codes is to alter the original cultural priorities on both sides and bring to the centre of the colonial culture subcultures previously recessive or subordinate in the two confronting cultures.” [12].

In this excerpt the crucial word is “share” – colonialism is a kind of mental deformity, a disease, which affects rational thinking on both ends. In that sense the colonizers are also victims.

“...the culture of colonialism presumes a particular style of managing dissent. Obviously, a colonial system perpetuates itself by inducing the colonized, through socioeconomic and psychological rewards and punishments, to accept new social norms and cognitive categories. But these outer incentives and dis-incentives are invariably noticed and challenged; they become the overt indicators of oppression and dominance. More dangerous and permanent are the inner rewards and punishments, the secondary psychological gains and losses from suffering and submission under colonialism. They

are almost always unconscious and almost always ignored. Particularly strong is the inner resistance to recognizing the ultimate violence which colonialism does to its victims, namely that it creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter.” [13].

Here we have explicated one of the big objectives of post-colonial critique – to make apparent through a kind of cultural psychoanalysis hidden mechanisms and unconscious inhibitions instilled by the colonial balance of power (what we saw to a large extent at work with Roy).

Between the modern master and the non-modern slave, one must choose the slave not because one should choose voluntary poverty or admit the superiority of suffering, not only because the slave is oppressed, not even because he works (which, Marx said, made him less alienated than the master). One must choose the slave also because he represents a higher-order cognition which perforce includes the master as a human, whereas the master's cognition has to exclude the slave except as a 'thing' [14].

This is an important statement for the social sciences and the humanities because it justifies the whole post-colonial project not only as a social project, as a restoration of justice, but also on purely cognitive grounds.

One of the main objects of post-colonial attack was classical Indology, that 19<sup>th</sup>-century basically philological discipline, whose main focus of interest was the edition and translation of Sanskrit texts and the study of ancient India in general. Post-colonialists have repeatedly shown that early indologists have transmitted an altogether erroneous image of India, partly because they trusted the Brahmins they employed too much: they mistook Indian culture with the brahmins' version of Indian culture. They made fundamental assumptions about the importance of Sanskrit texts and deliberately disregarded other possible perspectives and a big part of the Indian reality in general.

The post-colonial critique has rightly made a point. Many of the classical Indologists, until a few decades ago, had a problem in dealing with the living reality of India. But they accepted the criticism and little by little have made serious efforts to make their methodology more adequate. Today no Indologist can be taken seriously unless he has done some sort of field work in India.

But the post-colonial project has bigger ambitions. Not content with deconstructing concepts and ready-made assumptions about India, at times it looks like it wants to invent a whole new

language. It is a highly ideological, even militant position and there are Indian academics in the fields of humanities who reject the very term “Indology” as politically incorrect.

Voices have been heard in favor of an indigenous social science, or sciences, which could serve as a successor science to Western, “main-stream” social science with regard to the study of Indian reality. Mainstream social science embodies “a built-in bias, a specific view of reality, which excludes the viewpoint of the oppressed” [15]. In India post-colonialists aim at nothing less but a new, indigenous social science, free from the “imperialism of categories” in the structures of knowledge. This alternative social science would embody the wisdom and experience of the Indians, expressed in forms of knowledge that the mainstream has dismissed as pre-modern and unscientific. This indigenous form of knowledge could even have a claim on universality, which has been “defended on the ground that the prevailing concepts of universality are themselves rooted in the Western philosophical tradition and embody ethnic bias” [16]. An Indian kind of universality cannot be worse than any other.

The attractiveness of this kind of project is certainly linked to the ongoing effort to articulate an independent cultural identity for Indian society. It still looks more political than scientific and the support it draws is more emotional than rational. It is also connected with the recent ambitions of the diaspora, especially in the US, to have its word in academic nominations and publications [17]. Around the charismatic figure of Rajiv Malhotra an intellectual movement has been gathering momentum, which violently opposes these methods and questions the very competence of foreign scholars to speak about Indian culture [18].

The irrational aberrations put aside, post-colonial research is justified and necessary. At times, though, the deconstruction goals it has set for itself appear so overwhelming that the rebuilding meant to follow seems postponed forever.

### **In lieu of a conclusion: what could Europe be looking for when looking at India**

As Rajendra K. Jain has pointed out, as distant as they may be, there are structural similarities between India and Europe. India, in particular, has a lot of experience in accommodating diversity.

And Europe seems to be looking indeed. As a very concrete example, Sofia University was, until recently, partner with the British Council on one EU sponsored project related to multilingualism, the Language Rich Europe project [19]. The project made reference in its conceptual foundation to India’s trilingual formula.

As early as the 1950s, the Indian government had put forward the outline of a multilingual educational policy, which included instruction in the mother language, in the regional (or State) language, in Hindi as the language of general communication and in one of the classical languages: Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic or Persian. Revised in 1961, the proposal was named the three language formula (TLF), which included instruction in the regional language, in Hindi in non-Hindi-speaking areas or in another Indian language in Hindi speaking areas, and in English or another European language. The Language Rich Europe project, questioned, among other things, the possible relevance of this formula to the European situation [20].

India has also a lot to share with respect to the integration of Muslims. It has the second largest Muslim population in the world. Ashish Nandy has argued that Europe needs to replace its concept of secularism with that of religious tolerance to all faiths, which has been very much a part of everyday life in India and still is today. We may or may not agree with that, but still in India multiculturalism is a reality worth looking deeper into.

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[2] A very interesting case, for instance, is the use of different languages in the course of one movie, in particular, the switching between English and Hindi, or local languages.

[3] To be fair I must acknowledge that Bollywood productions, getting richer and catering more and more to a prospering upper middle class and Hindi-speaking audiences abroad, have changed greatly. Nowadays they feature far more often foreign countries as the exotic settings for the movie action (like Spain in *Zindagi na milegi dobara* (“You don’t live twice”), 2011).

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