CHAPTER FIVE

So immense an empire

A new mode of observation

As we have seen, many of the anxieties of imperial rule in India were played out in the debates leading up to 1813. The inclusion of the ‘pious clause’ in the East India Company’s charter may have been hailed as a victory by the evangelical cause, but it signalled a limited acceptance that missionary endeavour could promote social and religious reform and hence consolidate British authority. Minimally, it suggested that fears of insurgency provoked by undue interference in Indian culture were temporarily suspended. The most significant consequence of the debates, however, was the emergence of a certain consensus on the nature of imperial rule, linked to particular conceptions of the colonized and to-be-colonized Indian peoples.

An emphasis in the literature on the high politics of these debates has led to the neglect of another critical intervention made by the Company at the time. On the orders of the Court of Directors in 1807 the Government of Bengal instigated a survey of the ‘Eastern territories’. ‘We are of the opinion’, the Court declared, ‘that a statistical survey of the country, under the immediate authority of your Presidency, would be attended with much utility.’ Dr Francis Buchanan, who had previously been involved in a survey of Mysore in the immediate aftermath of its fall to the British, was appointed to take responsibility.

Buchanan recorded details of religion, condition of the people, agriculture, commerce, progress in arts and manufactures, and natural history found in the region. The full survey, completed in 1816, was never published in its entirety, largely because relations between Buchanan and the Company had so deteriorated that work on editing and revision was no longer possible. Instead, Robert Montgomery Martin later published selections from the vast archives deposited in East India House. The ‘intrinsic merit’ of the survey has not diminished in the intervening twenty-
two years, he suggested, since ‘a few years makes no difference in the manners and habits of the people’.4

This survey – comprehensive, intricate, diligent – represents something of a departure in the production of knowledge on India. Until the late eighteenth century orientalist interests in ancient language and culture had prevailed. With the expansion of British control and the attendant demands for an efficient and informed administrative system, however, new types of knowledge were necessary. In its attempt to quantify peasant production, Henry Colebrooke’s Remarks on the Present State of Husbandry in Bengal (1795) signalled a concern for information more directly related to the exigencies of managing land revenue. It provided the pattern for future surveys.5 At one level, therefore, Buchanan’s survey can be viewed as an imperial project. The accumulation of empirical material was the most determined attempt heretofore to know the Indian landscape and village life better to exercise economic and political authority.6

Equally, and to an extent autonomously of imperial exigencies, the survey represented a new mode of observation akin to that taking place in the metropolitan context. There were continuities with previous knowledge-producing processes, but in surveys the accumulation and commodification of observable materials as a scientific enterprise to know India was quite novel. A comparison with travel writings is instructive. As we have seen, this early genre did often valorize the act of first-hand observation in recording landscape and people. This was a process framed by the aesthetic, in particular the picturesque, which was designed to elicit emotional responses from the viewer through the delicate manipulation of natural imagery. The alien landscape of India was susceptible to the operation of this visual hegemony, and so picturesque representations gained a reputation for accuracy and objectivity. The scientific, geographical gaze, in contrast, was characterized by the ‘empiricist rhetoric of observation’.7 Here the focus was on the everyday rather than the novel, which was recorded mechanistically and faithfully – a statement of facts deriving from the visual, with little room for analysis. Images, maps, censuses and surveys, as well as the categories of knowledge from which they were constructed, all resulted from this desire to observe in a rational, ordered and coherent manner.8 This vision, however, was neither secure nor comprehensive. Buchanan could not have undertaken the survey single-handedly; when circumstances demanded it he was forced to rely on the evidence of other surveyors employed on the project, or indigenous informants:

In the town of Danapur the native officer of police, under the authority of the general, gave a statement of the number of houses. With regard to the other parts of the district I have followed the same plan that I did in Bhagalpur and Puraniya: from various statements and considerations I have conjectured the number of men required to cultivate each division, and then made
Because none of the informants observed in the same way as Buchanan, no matter how well briefed, he dismissed some of their evidence on local history and culture as nonsensical, confused or exaggerated. Where the data were incomplete or thought to be unreliable he resorted to averaging. Many of the estimates of population were devised in this way. Such evidence severely compromised the reliability of the survey, but these inadequacies could easily be masked within the framing narrative. Different types of evidence were brought together into a seamless, authoritative whole. Less reliable sources could thereby be incorporated into a single truth derived from personal observation that was often endowed with even greater authority by dating it according to a precise chronology. In those areas where Buchanan could not rely on first-hand evidence, the whole system seemed on the point of collapse. He did not visit Assam, for example, and was forced to rely on evidence over which he had no authority:

The following account was collected partly from several natives of Bengal, who on different occasions had visited Assam; and partly from natives of that country, who were fugitives in Bengal. Some of the former had resided long in Assam, and had connections there, whose office gave the opportunity of being well informed…. The accounts on all points did not agree, nor can I be certain, that I have on all occasions been able to select the parts that approach nearest the truth.

Buchanan’s topographical surveys reached far into those inaccessible spaces beyond the military routes mapped by Rennell’s project. He included detailed descriptions of such features as rivers, marshes, roads, hills and meteorology. The streets of Gaya in Bihar, for example, are described in terms that would have been familiar to many London residents:

The streets are narrow, crooked, dirty, uneven, and often filled with large blocks of stone or projecting angles of rock, over which the people have for ages clambered, rather than take the trouble to remove such impediments. In some places an attempt has been made at paving, and in the rainy season it may be of use to keep people from being ingulphed; but in dry weather the inequalities of such rude work harbour all manner of filth.

Likewise, his description of the poor in Patna:

The necessitous poor are abundantly numerous, and their condition is nearly similar to that of the unfortunate of Bhagalpur, the doctrine of caste producing the same evils. The people here are however more straitened in the means of giving relief to the necessitous by an enormous number of religious men-

[ 132 ]
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

dicants, whose impudent importunity exceeds the usual measure of patience... Many people, who are really necessitous, finding themselves deprived of assistance by these religious mendicants, have assumed the character, which must be considered a very venial offence.13

More important to contemporary knowledge of India was the publication in 1815 of Walter Hamilton’s *East India Gazetteer*.14 By this time the gazetteer was firmly established as a compendium of geographical and related information, and Hamilton simply adapted to India the example set by Brookes and Cruttwell. His intention was to provide a ‘summary and popular account of India’, gleaned from the more important published materials, ‘for the perusal of those who have never visited that quarter of the world, and whose leisure has not admitted of their examining the numerous volumes in which local descriptions are dispersed’.15 For Hamilton it was a propitious moment. Until recently, he argued, the vicissitudes of Indian politics and ceaselessly changing boundaries had rendered any such venture impractical, but there was now a degree of stability, and although ‘territorial divisions continue in many places perplexed ... these obstacles are not of such weight as to preclude an attempt to class the whole alphabetically’. It was an initiative that was to have significant long-term consequences for the production of knowledge of India.

For some, the hard empiricism of such surveys did little to further understanding of India. It was from a desire at this time to locate the accumulated knowledge on India within a wider theoretical framework that James Mill wrote his massive *The History of British India*.16 At first glance there appears little rationale for the inclusion of the *History*. Mill remained hostile to accounts of India written by travellers and evangelicals, and set himself beyond the reach of the nascent visual epistemology. As far as he was concerned, a ‘duly qualified’ man could ‘obtain more knowledge of India in one year in his closet in England than he could obtain during the course of longest life, by the use of his eyes and ears in India’.17 Alien cultures could therefore be better understood at a distance; close contact only compromises objectivity. Furthermore, Mill’s project to provide universal principles of progress was informed overwhelmingly by Benthamite utilitarianism. And yet the representations of Indian culture and society, in particular the damning indictment of Hinduism, drew upon diverse previous writings – including those of evangelicals – and were to exert a powerful influence over much subsequent thought.

It is tempting to view this influence as hegemonic. Ronald Inden, for example, has argued that indologists throughout the nineteenth century reiterated Mill’s construct of India or debated with his ghost. Company servants at Haileybury College found the *History* required reading.18 It was so because Mill’s attempt to formulate the principles of progress on
rational grounds confirmed India’s subordination to European civilization, and legitimated British rule as the solution to the country’s traditional backwardness. Savagely critical though he was of orientalists in using myth and legend to reconstruct and celebrate India’s past, and of the idiosyncratic excesses of Company rule, Mill employed their knowledge to reveal the irrationality of Indian society, and the necessity of combatting it with reformed imperial rule. In so doing, he defined the essential qualities of India as village life, the caste system, political tyranny and religious superstition.

A more recent revisionist account has questioned the confidence of Mill’s putative project to use India as a laboratory for utilitarianism. Because of the ambivalent nature of philosophical radicalism, Javed Majeed contends, utilitarianism had only a limited impact on British rule in India. Nowhere is this illustrated better than in the edition of the History edited by Horace Hyman Wilson, who defends orientalism against the ‘harsh and illiberal spirit’ of the book. And if India was the focus of Mill’s attention, it was used as a vehicle with which to attack the history of English laws, and so to arrive at general principles governing all national forms. Little of this was recognized by nineteenth-century accounts. Remembered selectively were the fierce denunciations of Indian society and custom which, although hardly novel, were endowed by Mill with the status of philosophical rationality. Important too was his positioning of India in a particular scale of civilization. The scale may have been distinct in that it was calibrated by the pursuit of utility demonstrated by individual nations, but the outcome was the same – India was a paternal despotism, positioned in a hierarchy of progress between societies of savage independence and those of Europe. Indeed, Mill went as far as to deny the claims of orientalists that Indian culture had ancient roots of great sophistication. To the contrary, since ancient times India, because of lack of liberty and individuality, had not advanced. It was immature, weak and primitive – a tabula rasa upon which British rule could write advantageously to reform and progress India along the path of enlightened civilization. Such arguments, mutatis mutandis, were readily appropriated by evangelicals and Company servants.

The privilege of the traveller

It was within this shifting climate that evangelical and travel narratives strove toward a degree of maturity. In the period 1811–22 William Ward’s studies of Hindu culture, for example, displayed a more determined effort to comprehend the seeming diversity of material he had accumulated (pp. 94–5). This was part of a more general trend that impacted also on travel writings. Something of their interrelationship is suggested by the
fact that 1813 witnessed not only the passing of the pious clause in the Company's charter but also the publication of James Forbes's *Oriental Memoirs*, the substantial volumes of which mark a defining moment in travel literature of India.21

Forbes first arrived in India as a Company servant in 1765, leaving nearly twenty years later having made his fortune. As a keen traveller, diligent observer and amateur naturalist, he took an obsessive interest in the contemporary natural and human landscape of India. Observations were recorded in an extensive series of letters supplemented by a large number of drawings, which Forbes prepared for publication after his return to England. During this time he read voraciously on India, and became increasingly involved in debates on the future of missionary work, publishing in 1810 a treatise advocating the necessity of converting the Hindu population.22 Forbes therefore drew promiscuously on a variety of influences to produce a heterogeneous knowledge of India:

As to the method I have taken in this work, it is unconfined, such being the privilege of the traveller; not bounded within the narrow terms of an historian, nor loosely extravagant, like poetical fictions; but suited both to time and place, and agreeable to the nature of the relation, which, though it may make some uneveness of style, as where the ruggedness of the way interposes, or the subject matter is varied, it must happen; ... though I do declare my desire is, to shew my diligence in collecting, and sincerity in compiling, what may make the road more easy to the next adventurers, and satisfy the present inquirers.23

In sensuous and romantic descriptions of its flora and fauna, constant reference is made to orientalist writings. Similar impulses are evident in his observations on Indian society, where he freely uses extracts from previous writings 'to add value and authenticity to the work', but in the event produces an often awkward mix of statistics, first-hand observation, impressions, fragmented historical narrative, illustration and information from villagers. His description of Malabar women is a good example:

Their black glossy hair, tied in a knot on the middle of the head, is copiously anointed with cocoa-nut oil, and perfumed with the essence of sandal, mogrees, and champahs; their ears, loaded with rings and heavy jewels, reach almost to their shoulders; this is esteemed a beauty.... Round their waist they wear a loose piece of muslin, while the bosom is entirely exposed; this is the only drapery of the Malabar women; but they are adorned with a profusion of gold and silver chains for necklaces, mixed with strings of Venetian and other gold coins.... Their skin is softened by aromatic oils.24

Overarching the *Memoirs*, however, was a nascent belief in the backwardness of Indian society and the concomitant necessity of conversion to Christianity. In ways emblematic of the shift from orientalist to hard-line
evangelical perspectives, early attractions to the novelty and innocence of Indian character are gradually displaced by disdain. Forbes himself recognized this change. ‘There was a time’, he claimed, ‘when I loved and venerated the character of a brahmin, leading a tranquil, innocent and studious life under the sacred groves.’ But experience as a collector and district judge gave Forbes the opportunity of ‘scrutinizing the Hindoo character’, and his ‘opinion materially changed’:

Their cruelty, avarice, craftiness, and duplicity, occasioned a thousand grievances, which I could neither counteract nor redress, and displayed such shocking traits, rooted and strengthened by religious opinions, prejudices of caste, and habits of oppression, as baffled all my endeavours to relieve the poor Ryots, suffering under their tyranny.25

Embittered, Forbes on his return to England embarked on extensive studies of Indian history and culture which merely confirmed his prejudices on India’s location in the historical order. Relying for the most part on lengthy extracts from previous work, the arguments may have lacked originality or insight, but they gained weight from being based on the personal experience of a diligent observer who had undergone the experience of conversion:

Civilization, as far as the Malabars are susceptible to it, has long attained its height: Egypt, Assyrian, Persian, Greece, and Rome, from the pinnacle of grandeur, perfection in the fine arts, and the luxury of opulence, have dwindled to a name: the Malabars seem to have been for some thousand years in the same state of mediocrity: on such a system, no new designs in building, no alteration in manners or dress, no improvements in art or science, are to be expected. This may be alleged of a great part of the world besides, but I do not compare the Negroes and Hottentots of Africa, nor the savages of America, with the natives of India, or the generalities of the Asiatics: these are certainly placed on a higher scale.26

Consistent with mainstream evangelism, Forbes concluded that Christianity would guarantee the stability of the Raj, promote commerce, and bring India into modern civilization. Hinduism was seen increasingly as a barrier to this project, as a result of which what prevails is a sombre and apocalyptic vision of a heathen India redeemable only through the destruction of its entire way of life.

As the British consolidated control over Indian territories so the opportunities for travel increased. Among the new generation of travel writers that appeared in the early decades of the nineteenth century there was the same struggle to comprehend the diversity of Indian society. Conspicuous was the presence of women, most of whom had experience of extensive travel abroad.27 Conscious of their strategy to assert themselves as intrepid and self-confident travellers in their own right, these women sought to
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

provide knowledge that was framed broadly by orientalist perspectives but
derived from privileged access to areas seemingly beyond the preserve of
men. In her *Journal of a Residence in India* (1813) Maria Graham con-
trasted her role as a ‘mere idle or philosophical observer’ of India to that of
imperial agents:

[T]he greater part are too constantly occupied with the cares and duties of
their respective vocations as statesmen, soldiers, or traders, to pay much
attention to what is merely curious or interesting to a contemplative spec-
tator…. Almost all our modern publications on the subject of India, are entirely
occupied with its political and military history, – details and suggestions
upon its trade and commercial resources, – and occasionally with discus-
sions upon the more recondite parts of its literary or mythological antiqui-
ties.28

In the ensuing pages, however, Graham soon disavows any notion that she
is an idle recorder of the curious and anecdotal. She brings to bear an
extensive knowledge of orientalist research, which she uses to compare
her own observations, or to identify gaps which are then filled by detailed
observation and information from native informants. In contrast to
Forbes, she decried the prejudice displayed by many Britons, and contin-
ued to hold in high esteem the achievements of Indian culture. Progress
for her depended less on the civilizing mission of the British, than on a
reawakening of ancient morality:

Our missionaries are very apt to split upon this rock, and in order to place
our religion in the brightest light … they lay claim exclusively to all the
sublime maxims of morality, and tell those who they wish to convert, that
their own books contain nothing but abominations, the belief that they must
abandon in order to receive the purer doctrine of Christianity. Mistaken men!
Could they desire a better opening to their hopes than to find already estab-
lished that morality which says, it is enjoined to man even at the moment of
destruction to wish to benefit his foes, ‘as the sandal tree in the instant of its
overthrow sheds perfume on the axe that fells it’. In short I consider mor-
ality like the science and arts, to be only slumbering not forgotten in India;
and that to awaken the Hindus to a knowledge of the treasures in their own
hands is the only thing wanting to set them fairly in the course of improve-
ment with other nations. Everywhere in the ancient Hindu books we find
the maxims of that pure and sound morality which is found on the nature of
man as a rational and social being.29

Few could match Graham’s erudition. More common were impression-
istic accounts of Indian life and character that drew upon and consolidated
pejorative rhetoric. First sights, so often from the vantage point of the boat
approaching Calcutta, were recorded with a particular sense of wonder and
bewilderment. Lady Maria Nugent reached India early in 1812, and
recorded her observations in terms virtually identical to those of Jemima Kindersley nearly thirty years earlier:

We can see a long line of low coast, and this is Saugur Island. Many ships are lying in the road. Several fishing boats came, with fresh fish, which was a great treat. The fishermen were a very dark olive, almost black, with very slight figures, but very good countenances. They were dressed in turbans, and had large muslin shawls round them, but they throw this off, when at work, and have only a bit round their waists.... They look like a mild innocent race of people, but I should imagine, from their listless manner, that they are without any energy of character.... In the morning, they seemed to be very sensitive of the cold, for they wrapped the coarse muslin, or cotton shawls round them, and squatted down like so many monkeys, smoking a sort of odd shaped pipe called a hookah, but they sung occasionally, and seemed very merry.... In the middle of the day, they all jumped up, as if by word of command, and began to sing, then they set to work to mend their nets.... They make as much use of their feet as their hands, and both are as small and delicate as a woman's -- indeed, the only thing that makes them look like men, is their whiskers, and they are immense.30

A similar rhetoric is later employed to describe the good Lady's 'poor out-cast' chambermaid with telling effect:

She never makes her appearance, unless called for by the ayah, but sits squatting like a cat on the back stairs, with a long veil, which covers not only her head, face and shoulders, but her whole person -- her dress is a coarse petticoat, very full, and plaited around her, like a Dutch woman's, and so long that it covers her feet -- then the veil I have just mentioned covers the rest of the dress, concealing almost every thing but her eyes; -- her arms are covered with silver bracelets, and are really remarkably pretty, and well shaped, otherwise she would be hideously ugly, and her caste is held in the greatest contempt by all the natives.31

This complex discourse singling out low-caste Indian women as particular objects of disgust stood in sharp contrast to comments on fair-skinned Indian women who were invariably described as possessing such exquisite features and soft expressions that differences from European complexions were soon forgotten. This was so because within this discourse race was articulated to class, gender and sexuality. William Huggins, for example, was so taken with the beauty of some Indian women at fairs that he overcame objections to their dark complexions. In noting that upper-caste Brahmin women were the most attractive, lowest-caste women the least, he commented that

this is easily accounted for: the one live retired, feed daintily, and have abundant time to devote to the care of their persons and improvement of their charms; the other, exposed to the sun and weather, become dark and coarse,
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

assuming a figure that corresponds with their harassing duties and lowly condition.32

Occasionally, this coding acquired even greater complexity through an articulation to evangelical concerns about the effects of heathenism on the Indian people. Here is Mary Sherwood describing her reaction to the sight of women on the streets of Madras:

The character of the countenances which are seen is such as I have never beheld in an English woman. The old women especially are fearful to look upon, their skin is shrunken and hanging loose, the lips thin and black, and the whole expression that of persons hardened by misery and without hope, having in youth exhausted all that life can give … all this evident misery, without counting the many secret cruelties which abound in every heathen land, in every dark corner of the earth, being the effect, either direct or indirect, of those abominable creeds which we think it an act of charity not merely to tolerate but to patronise.33

While acknowledging the particular horror she felt on first seeing Madras women, Sherwood felt unable to account for it unless it may be from this circumstance that even in Europe degradation of character is always more evident (as it is more irrecoverable) in a female than in a man. As religion, whether true or otherwise, has more influence on the female mind than on that of men, so the abominable administrators of a corrupt worship have a much stronger and more detestable influence over the minds of the weaker than the stronger sex.34

It is misleading to suggest, however, that all travel accounts of this period demonstrated such explicit racial coding. The hugely popular narrative of Bishop Heber, published in 1828, was written in a spirit of genuine sympathy for Indian people.35 Compare, for example, the description of boatmen encountered on his arrival in Calcutta with those above:

[T]he crew were chiefly naked, except for a cloth around their loins, the colour of all was the darkest shade of antique bronze, and together with the elegant forms and well turned limbs of many among them, gave the spectator a perfect impression of Grecian statues of that metal…. Two observations struck me forcibly; first, that the deep bronze tint is more naturally agreeable to the human eye than the fair skins of Europe … The second observation was, how entirely the idea of indelicacy, which would naturally belong to such figures as those now around us if they were white, is prevented by their being of a different colour from ourselves. So much are we children of association and habit, and so instinctively and immediately do our feelings adapt themselves to a total change of circumstances, it is the partial and inconsistent change only which affects us.36

By the time Reginald Heber was appointed as Bishop of Calcutta in 1823 he was an experienced European traveller, and almost immediately
THE OTHER EMPIRE

embarked on extensive travels over India. His death in an accident three years later silenced one of the more humane commentators on Indian society. Although Heber’s private letters tend to reveal harsh judgements on Hinduism in keeping with his evangelical leanings, the travel diaries convey a sense of a sympathetic project to understand difference and diversity. In this he was quite prepared to challenge received wisdom:

I have … understood from many quarters that the Bengalees are regarded as the greatest cowards in India, and that partly owing to this reputation, and partly to their inferior size, the Sepoy regiments are always recruited from Bahar and the Upper Provinces. Yet that little army with which Lord Clive did such wonders, was chiefly raised in Bengal. So much are all men creatures of circumstance and training.37

Indeed, many pejorative characterizations of Indians are either dismissed by Heber or understood as rational responses to the economic, religious and political conditions they were forced to endure. There is little sense of the innate or hereditary. Unlike the response of Forbes to prolonged contact with Indians, Heber’s impression of Indian society seems to grow more favourable. Overall, the impression he conveys is of a people active, charitable, loyal and affectionate; divested of heathen propensities, they would prove superior to Europeans.

From the sheer diversity of published accounts emerged what was arguably the first attempt to provide a comprehensive guide to India for the general reader. As we have seen, previous surveys had been undertaken, but they were regional and specialist in nature; the archives of Buchanan still lay hidden in the vaults of East India House. In 1820 Walter Hamilton used the material gathered for his East India Gazetteer to ‘reduce the Geography of Hindostan to a more systematic form’. Thirty years had passed since the appearance of Rennell, during which time the revolution in ‘our knowledge’ had rendered many of his observations obsolete. Furthermore, the supremacy of British rule was now so complete that India must be viewed not as a ‘mere assemblage of Nabobs, Sultans and Rajas, but as a component portion of the British empire’.38 The result was A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of Hindostan. This epistemological appropriation, however, was not without problems. Much extant knowledge was suppressed or was selected in pursuit of political objectives which have little contemporary relevance, as a result of which it is unreliable and incomplete. ‘It is impossible’, Hamilton is forced to conclude, thereby revealing the limits of any such endeavour, ‘to describe so vast and populous a country in a small compass, or by a few phrases, some of which apply universally.’ His objective was rather more modest and contingent:
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

It is obvious … that a satisfactory delineation of so immense an empire must be the result of a progressive accumulation of facts, and that acquiescence on the prior details of accidental travellers tends to perpetuate errors. Many of the statements here collected will probably require future correction, many remote tracts and sources in information remain to be explored, and new discoveries hereafter will disturb and confound all previous systems and arrangements.39

In the event, even this overstated Hamilton’s ambitions. The book ultimately was a work of synthesis intended for ‘persons who have never visited India’. As in the Gazetteer, information was gleaned and presented from orientalist researches, regional surveys, evangelical tracts and East India Company archives, inevitably transmitting much of their ideological baggage. Hamilton found Bengalese, for example, a
lively, handsome race of men; there is also a softness in their features, corresponding to the general mildness, or perhaps, pusillanimity of their character; and were it not for the uncharitable operation of caste, they would … be a friendly and inoffensive race…. As subjects they are quiet, patient, industrious, and governed with a facility almost incredible; and that one European may sleep secure, amidst a million of Bengalese, without a lock on his door, or a weapon of offence in his vicinity. We mention this as a notorious matter of fact, experienced by every European of character, who has ever resided among the genuine Bengalese, remote from the contamination of Calcutta, and of European society.40

Indian society, however, remains resistant to modernization. Its sense of the past derives from traditions ‘preserved among ignorant people’ or from ‘monstrous fables’. Hindus, in sum, have ‘nothing deserving with the name of history’. Their ideas ‘run equally counter to all European notions of civil liberty’; indeed, the very idea ‘never seems to have been contemplated, and is to this day without a name in the languages of India’.41

Hamilton concludes:

On the British Government will devolve the task of inculcating the principles of mild and equitable rule, distinct notions of social observances, and just sense of moral obligations, the progressive result of which must inevitably be the adoption of a purer and more sublime system of religion.42

The demand for general guides to India was partially sated also by the publication in 1825 of a revised edition of Williamson’s The General East India Guide and Vade Mecum. Edited by J. Borthwich Gilchrist, the former Professor of Hindoostanee at Fort William College, it aimed to simplify the original by omitting now familiar details on Indian sects, languages and literature.43 The most significant revision, however, was its attempt to standardize Hindi orthography. Gilchrist included – rather incongruously
– a discussion of the ‘vulgar mode of spelling Hindustanee’ and long extracts from his *Collection of Dialogues English and Hindoostane* which had originally been published in 1804 as part of a project to establish Hindi as a preferred language of command.44

Formal recognition was finally bestowed on the world traveller with the publication in 1828 of Josiah Conder’s multi-volume *The Modern Traveller*.45 In contrast to older travel accounts which are ‘amusing and often valuable, but abound with obsolete errors and are barren of scientific information’, Conder asserted, information in this collection was given in a succinct and popular form with accurate references.46 India, which occupied the first four volumes, presented a particular problem for the editors, for in spite of the work of Rennell, military writings and trigonometrical surveys, our geographical and statistical knowledge remained in an ‘extremely crude and imperfect state’. In addition, although numerous valuable studies of India’s history and religion had appeared in transactions and journals, ‘little or nothing has been effected in the competent and scientific arrangement of these stores of information’.

Demonstrating none of Hamilton’s reticence, Conder plunders previous works shamelessly. Material on history and natural history is little more than a reworking of Rennell, Robertson, Mill, Ward, Hamilton, Prinsep and Elphinstone, while that on topography relies almost exclusively on Buchanan, Forbes and the travel writings of Heber and Graham. Underpinning these narratives is the same valorization of British rule, which has ‘performed a splendid act of justice, policy and humanity, which fairly entitles it to be regarded as a conservative and beneficent power, whose supremacy has been the deliverance of the people’.47

With the publication in 1838 of Montgomery Martin’s three-volume digest of Buchanan’s archives this genre reached its apogee. The first volume was widely reviewed in the periodical, national and regional press, reviewers for the most part expressing gratitude to Martin for his industry in recovering such a valuable source of information on India. The *Literary Gazette*, for example, was ‘glad to see the commencement of an undertaking which bids fair to redeem a large portion of British India from the dark state, in which it has heretofore remained’.48 Faced with the mass of evidence accumulated by Buchanan, however, Martin seemed overwhelmed by this act of redemption:

To offer an analysis of the facts contained in these three volumes would be a difficult task, and it would fail to convey an accurate impression as to the reality of the case; the whole work should be read and pondered on; the very minutiae of detail conveys to a thinking mind a clearer view of what the condition of people so situated must be, than any other mode of description; while those who are in the habit of contemplating the progress of society, and whose mental faculties are sufficiently comprehensive to examine all
the elements of social wealth and happiness will philosophically scrutinize the materials on which alone sound and just opinions can be based.49

His object in rescuing the manuscripts was rather to ‘arouse in some measure, the people of England to some sense of feeling for the condition of the myriads of their fellow subjects now pining and perishing of famine, disease and all the slow but sure concomitants attendant on long continued want and slavery’.50 He concludes with a remarkably prescient warning:

England treats India with a despotism which has no parallel in ancient or modern history. But injustice acts like the scorpion’s sting on its possessor, and the temporary and trifling advantage which England gains by her cruel and ungenerous treatment of India, will, if persevered in, recoil with tenfold effect on the persecutor.51

Thus in the period leading up to 1840 we can detect distinct shifts in the India created for domestic consumption. Travel and evangelical narratives continued to appear, but in spite of their popularity India remained shrouded in ignorance and mystery. In response, certain convergences took place that signalled commitment to a more total vision. Travellers such as Graham subordinated the vicarious and anecdotal to scholarly observations on Indian history and culture, while evangelicals such as Heber relegated theological invective against Hinduism to the sympathetic observations on Indians encountered on his extensive travels around the country. Personal accounts, however, no matter how well informed, could provide only partial truths; more systematic, empirical, standardized and comprehensive perspectives were needed. Hamilton, Conder and Montgomery Martin in their various ways represented attempts to meet this need.

Christopher Bayly has talked of the emergence of a new information order in these years, and although his emphasis is on intelligence gathering administered by the imperial state in India, I find much of relevance to an understanding of related changes in knowledge production for a popular domestic readership.52 The demand for ‘useful knowledge’ was prompted and fuelled by the need to improve communication within the state, to provide social and economic statistics at a time of commercial crisis, and to establish cultural hegemony through the subordination of indigenous knowledge, particularly in the sphere of education. This new knowledge took the form increasingly of quantitative, routinized, abstract surveys which may have borrowed from indigenous knowledge and been rich in empirical detail but rarely penetrated beneath surface reality to reveal the inner workings of Indian society. Indeed, despite the exponential growth of empirical projects based on more sophisticated methodologies, the ‘deeper social knowledge’ of India receded. Colonial knowledge of India remained partial and contradictory.
As we have seen, these totalizing endeavours were increasingly evident in the production of knowledge for popular consumption. Most shared a belief in the providential nature of British rule and a concomitant desire to understand the complexities of Indian culture, but the more critical among them acknowledged that India defied totalization. Against this backdrop of self-doubt and insecurity those aspects of India most remote from the inquiring gaze of imperial administrators, travellers and evangelicals attracted undue concern. Enough had been done to provide a reasonably secure knowledge of India’s languages, history and, increasingly, topography, and militarily the position seemed strong, but there remained worrying silences about Indian culture which, if unaddressed, would come to threaten the entire fabric of British authority. From such concern emerged increasingly virulent forms of racial coding.

**Racialization of India**

The notion of race derived authority from its versatility both in providing putative answers to a range of questions around Indian society and progress, and in legitimating the continuance of imperial rule. The precise ‘moment’ of this racism is difficult to establish. It seems likely that racist sentiment existed in ‘traditional’ Indian society, and that this was readily articulated by imperial authorities into an orthodoxy. The impact of this elective affinity was profound, for whereas racist sentiment in Indian society had been limited in scope and effect, colonial modernity consolidated and generalized racism into an ideology that shaped attitudes and policies toward virtually every facet of Indian society. It even penetrated into the heart of Hindu intellectual thought, not by engaging Indian elites in the modernizing project but by provoking as a form of resistance a retreat into myths of a rigidly hierarchical Indian past.

We have already encountered diverse elements of racial thought in the early writings of travellers and evangelicals. One of the most influential emerged from the geographical imagination of the Enlightenment. Here the concern was to explore putative relationships between the physical environment and its human occupants as a means of understanding regional characteristics. Some topographical studies emphasized the significance of landscape, agriculture and climate, while ethnologists tended to stress cultural formation, pattern of inhabitation and economy, but the boundaries between the approaches were crudely drawn. Attempts were made reductively to refer indigenous temperament to environment in ways that engendered racial thinking. In his *Essay on the Origin of Language*, Rousseau attributed the softness of the languages spoken in the southern hemisphere to its warmth and natural abundance. In Asia, people are close to nature; they have little to do but express love and tender-
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

ness. Europeans, on the other hand, are forced to work, and therefore repress natural instincts. This utopian vision, however, was readily inverted by those seeking a naturalization of European supremacy. Civilization, it came to be argued, had attained its heights in Europe because its temperate climate produced a vigorous and virile race, while tropical countries were inhabited by carnal and indolent peoples, incapable of improvement.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century writings on India displayed aspects of this geographical imagination. William Robertson’s An Historical Disquisition (1791) noted that India had over a long period of time been able to form extensive states even under its ‘genial climate’ and in its ‘rich soil’. More significantly, the stereotype of the Hindu as enervated, incurious, apathetic and listless, commonly found in the contemporary writings of Orme, Scrafton, Tennant and Claudius Buchanan, was given pseudo-scientific credence by being linked to the Indian climate. Charles Grant in his Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain (1792) identified climate as one of the principal causes of the Hindu character, although qualified this by adding that any improvement had to come from moral reform. But it was James Forbes who identified the relationship with greater rigour:

That the heat of the torrid zone debilitates the body, and enervates the mind, is very obvious: to this cause may be attributed the want of curiosity, enterprize, and vigour, among the Malabars: their inclinations are chiefly passive; indolence constitutes their happiness, and you cannot impose a severer task than mental employment … from this habitual indolence they become incapable of exertion; and thus the laws, manners, and customs, are at this day as they were some thousand years ago.

Forbes was too assiduous an observer to claim that the whole of India languished in such torpor, but his recognition of environmental diversity served only to consolidate the orthodoxy. Employing a typology that was to become familiar, he contrasted lowland peoples such as indolent Malabars and effeminate Bengalis with caste-free, energetic and rugged Sikhs and Rajputs found in mountainous regions, and wild, predatory, tribal Bheels. Over time, and with the application of a nascent interest in ethnology, more elaborate racial taxonomies emerged. In the writings of Francis Buchanan, for example, a sophisticated sense of topography provided a platform for deliberations on racial physiognomy:

The mountain tribes are, I believe, the descendants of the original inhabitants of the country, very little, if at all, mixed with foreign colonies. Their features and complexion resemble those of all rude tribes, that I have seen on the hills from the Ganges to Malabar…. [T]heir noses are seldom arched, and are rather thick at the points, owing to their nostrils being generally circular; but they are not so diminutive as the noses of the tartar nations, not
flattened like those of the African Negro. Their faces are oval, and not shaped
like a lozenge, as those of the Chinese are. Their lips are full, but not at all
like those of the Negro; on the contrary, their mouths are generally well
formed. Their eyes, instead of being hidden in fat, and placed obliquely, like
those of the Chinese, are exactly like those of the Europeans.58

In some contrast to the denunciations of a pan-Indian heathenism
apparent in evangelical writings, travel writings displayed a heightened
concern with particular populations perceived to be beyond both the inter-
pretative skills of European observers and the civilizing influence of Hin-
duism. Bengalis, tribals and criminal sects were singled out. Complex
codings were used by early travellers to describe the seemingly uncertain
gender and racial identity of Bengali fishermen and ayahs [p. 138], but it
was the tribals who continued to attract the most virulent forms of racist
representation:

The great mass of the Hindoo and Mahommedan population throughout
Hindoostan has nearly reached the same stage of civilization, but intermixed
with them are certain races of mountaineers, probably the true aborigines,
whose languages have little affinity with the Sanscrit, and whose customs
retain all their primitive barbarity. The most remarkable of these tribes are
the Gonds, Bheels and Coolies; but there are many others of less note, such
as the hill people of Boglepoor, and the Kookies of Chittagong.59

Henry Spry, of the Bengal Medical Staff, sensitive to the fact that ‘men
of profound learning … have chosen subjects which … are not generally
interesting’, sought to prove that there were ‘no subjects more attractive
that those relating to a country upon which so much apathy and ignorance
have hitherto prevailed’.60 He cited as influences the works of Heber and
Emma Roberts; indeed, something of their humane sentiment prevails,
but it is allied to an environmental determinism. ‘The sensibility of men's
natural or inborn character’, he argues, ‘must depend principally on the
climate and products of the soil.’61 The people of Hindustan, it follows, are
‘frugal and primitive; their pastoral habits being nearly the same as they
were in the time of the patriarchs of old’. Their national character does not
deserve ‘that unqualified censure which has been so lavishly heaped on it’.62
Indeed, even while respecting the ‘authority of so great a name as Mill’,
Spry contends that Indian culture is ‘not so much attributable … to the
inherent bad qualities of the mind of the people themselves, as to the
selfish and unhealthy form of government under which they have been
nurtured’.62 In descriptions of Bengalees, however, Spry had recourse to a
harsher racial typology:

The Bengalees are a race distinct in many respects from the people who
inhabit the provinces of Benares, Rohilcund, Bundelkund, Rajpootana, Malda,
or the Nerbuuddah. Their style of living is different, and their manners and
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

...their climate are different, the latter particularly so, the climate of Bengal
being damp, and the heat and the cold more tempered than in the provinces
of Upper Hindustan. They have, moreover, a dialect peculiar to themselves,
which is intelligible to persons only conversant with the Hindustanee lan-
guage. In their social relations they are characterized as a degenerate class of
people, being notorious for low cunning and deceit, and for the readiness
with which they will enter into schemes of fraud and treachery.63

But it was in his characterization of tribals that Spry revealed the most
strident racist sentiment:

The Kookees … only differ from more civilized natives, forced by necessity
upon expedients of the kind, by living constantly in trees, in other respects
there is fortunately no similarity, even to the most degraded beings of the
human race. They openly boast of their feats of cannibalism, showing, with
the strongest expressions of satisfaction, the bones and residue of their fel-
low creatures who have fallen prey to their horrible appetites.64

Similarly, he felt compelled to mention

a race of native mountaineers, called Goands, who live in the hill jungles of
Central India, particularly the southern parts. The Goands observe manners
and customs which are peculiar to themselves, – their physiognomy par-
takes neither of the intelligence of the Mahomedan nor the effeminacy of the
Hindu. They have hard set features. The lips, particularly the upper, thick; a
receding forehead, and a general unintellectual expression of countenance.
The skin is very black. The hair in the head thick, with an approach to
woolliness, offering, in short, in their external physical characteristics, a strik-
ing resemblance to the well-known features of the African…. In the wild
unreclaimed jungles in the eastern part of the Jubbulpore division, … these
people are no other than savages, and wander about when and where inclina-
tion prompts.65

In the uncertain political climate of the 1830s British colonial authori-
ties sought to secure the frontiers of their expanding empire and facilitate
movement of personnel over military and commercial routes. They met
with resistance from indigenous populations whose customary rights of
control and access were thereby threatened. Riots erupted that were con-
veniently blamed on tribals occupying adjacent areas of waste land. In
February 1832, reported Lieutenant Thomas Bacon,

A popular disturbance took place among the Koles, a wild uncultivated race
of men, inhabiting a tract of country … forging the northern boundary of the
province of Orissa…. There is little cultivation of the soil, and where it does
exist, the operations of agriculture are performed in the most primitive and
uncivilized fashion, the natives being far too stupid to benefit by example,
and too superstitious to venture upon any innovation of their established
usages or to desire improvement of any kind. They are well made and ath-
THE OTHER EMPIRE

etic in person, of very dark complexion, and coarse savage features; in temper they are sullen, dissipated in their habits, being slaves to excitement produced by fermented liquors, and tyrannical and revengeful in disposition. Without restrictions of any distinct religion ... the most revolting part of their savage degeneracy exists in the almost indiscriminate connexions or marriages which take place between members of the same family, and the neglect of other decencies, which form the most distinctive line between humanity and the brute creation.66

It was at this moment that the Thuggee Act of 1836 was introduced. It had novel and distinctive features; it could be applied retrospectively, and to territories beyond the Company’s control, effectively extending its jurisdiction.67 In this, the Act represented the most significant authoritarian intervention into the sphere of criminality, and we need briefly to consider its genesis.

Castes of robbers and thieves

Various forms of collective activity had long been recognized as a source of concern and therefore criminalized. From the inauguration of the Company’s judicial framework in 1772, and in the belief that dacoits were robbers by profession, even birth, Warren Hastings included an article extending punishment from the individual criminal to his family and village.68 Toward the close of the eighteenth century the British periodical press featured regular accounts of robberies and murders committed by dacoity gangs.69 Seemingly undeterred by the threat of imprisonment or execution introduced by British authority, armed gangs were described as stalking the fashionable streets of Calcutta, occasionally abetted by European sailors in disguise. Riverside dacoits, operating in as many as twenty-four boats, attacked travellers, robbing them of everything of value. And in the surrounding countryside, gangs successfully plundered military camps without raising the alarm. How such daring could be displayed by a population known to be effeminate and cowardly puzzled Charles Grant; the answer was to be found in identification of hereditary criminality:

Though the Bengaleze in general have not sufficient resolution to rent their resentment against each other in open combat, yet robberies, thefts, burglaries, river piracies, and all sort of depredations where darkness, secrecy, or surprize can give advantage are exceedingly common.... There are castes of robbers and thieves, who consider themselves acting in their proper profession, and having united their families, train their children in it. Nowhere in the world are ruffians more adroit or more hardened. Troops of these banditti ... are generally employed and harboured by the zemindars of the districts, who are sharers in their booty.70
Grant, however, anticipated rather than instigated thinking on criminal activity. The notion of hereditary criminality was not to emerge as a system of thought in India for some forty years; instead, it surfaced at particular moments to explain threats to the social order, and to justify punitive measures that reached beyond procedural boundaries. It was during the war against the Marathas, for example, that a prolonged campaign was organized by colonial authorities to put down the Pindaris. One of its commanders, Lt. Col. Fitzclarence, described them:

The horrid predatory system which has so long desolated India with the ravages of an active banditti, formed of the refuse of all countries and religions, and presenting the uncommon spectacle of a community of robbers [exceeding in numbers any of which history furnishes an example], yet permitted to exist in the states which made no attempt to eradicate them, was an anomaly in the political world.... The Pindarries had in 1812, 1816, and 1817, 'rushed like a torrent' upon the provinces of Mirzapoor, Gintoor, and Gangam, all in our possession, and with the barbarity so common, ... had committed the most cruel and wanton excesses on our subjects.

Fitzclarence proceeded – and perhaps going to heart of the matter – to record that peasants used the plunder to excuse themselves from payment of rent arrears to government, resulting in a loss of revenue greater than that taken by the Pindaris. The Marquis of Hastings refused to negotiate with them; the Pindaris, as far as he was concerned, were public robbers who had to be eradicated by military means. Even the rights of war were denied. On capture, Pindaris were tried and, if found guilty, summarily executed. By 1818 Hastings could report that the campaign had been successfully completed. Rumours subsequently flourished, however, that rural labourers continued to join the Pindaris.

The campaign against mercenary bands did little to solve the problem of robber gangs; indeed, it may have exacerbated the situation, for smaller groups of itinerant predators were less likely to attract the attention of military contingents. From the insecure territories of Sagar and Narbada, annexed from the Marathas in 1817–18, emerged the new threat of thuggee that in the colonial imagination acted as a potent articulating principle of hereditary criminality. Within ten years, thuggee came to dominate fears about the limits of colonial knowledge and authority, and prompt wholesale changes in surveillance and the operation of law.

Thugs were, like dacoits and Pindaris, organized into groups numbering in their hundreds, led an itinerant existence, and preyed upon innocent victims. In other respects, however, Thugs were seen as distinct. They were secretive, hereditary murderers who inhabited cults with their own cant and superstitions, and followed their calling as an act of devotion to the popular Hindu goddess of destruction Kali. For some, this confirmed...
the inherent evil of Hinduism. ‘The genius of Paganism’, stated Edward Thornton, ‘which has deified every vice, and thus provided a justification of the indulgence of every evil propensity, has furnished the Thugs with a patron goddess, worthy of those whom she is believed to protect.’

Early encounters with Thugs had excited little interest. After the conquest of Seringapatam in 1799 approximately one hundred such robbers were apprehended, but there was no suspicion that they formed a band of hereditary murderers. The idea of thuggee was taken more seriously by Thomas Perry, a magistrate in the frontier region of Etawah. Faced with a local population hostile to colonial authority, and regular looting from temples and rich inhabitants, Perry was persuaded that criminal bands were responsible. He used the term Thug to describe the miscreants – although for indigenous informants it meant little more than a cheat – and in the ensuing years recorded increasing numbers of Thug activities as a means of extending his police powers and resources. By 1815 thuggee was recognized as a particular form of organized crime, and in the ensuing years entered into popular imagination. Writing of his exploits in the early 1830s, Lieutenant Bacon, who had previously singled out tribals for attention, had difficulty in locating Thugs on any known scale of humanity:

[T]hugs ... are subjects affording ample scope for the investigations of the metaphysician and the philosopher; there is more filth from the sink of superstition than we can find in any other record of savage depravity; even cannibalism falls short of the diabolical influence which in thugs has spread over thousands of square miles, and among all ranks and sects.

It was not, however, until the establishment of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, and, more particularly, the appointment of Captain WH. Sleeman as Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General in the Sagar and Narbada territories, that a grand narrative of thuggee emerged. Thornton found it remarkable that after a period of nearly two hundred years the British should have been ignorant of the ‘existence and habits of a body so dangerous to the public peace’, but it was Sleeman who took on the task of revealing the underworld of thuggee as a prelude to its extirpation. He traced its origins to the time of the Arab, Afghan and Mughal conquests of India when similar practices were in evidence. Thereafter, he claimed, thuggee was allowed to flourish by the rulers of independent states and local zemindars, many of whom entertained a dread of Thugs but benefited handsomely from Thug revenue.

More significantly, through minute scrutiny of official records, including cross-examinations of suspected Thugs, Sleeman attempted to decode its hidden rituals, practices and language. Thuggee, however, resisted rationalization. No explanation of the phenomenon was offered, nor was the phenomenon defined with any precision. The early identification with
ritual strangulation was abandoned after the 1830s, and the notion of thuggee came to apply to a wide range of organized criminal activity including kidnapping and poisoning. And although tropes of the hereditary and itinerant were maintained, these seemed only to confound any understanding colonial authorities had of the location occupied by Thugs within Indian society. At times seen as a community apart, preying upon the indigenous population, at others as a natural expression of certain essential Hindu values, thuggee could not readily be incorporated epistemologically into caste or religion. It was discovered that Muslims frequently joined Thug gangs; in Oude, for example, they comprised 90 per cent of those apprehended. And many of the Thugs arrested turned out to be among the most respected members of the community — merchants, tradesmen and loyal soldiers in the service of the Company. It was this unknowability, combined with the public invisibility of Thug misdeeds, that helps to explain why a criminal activity that never threatened British persons came to demand so much attention from colonial authorities, and entered so vividly into popular mythologies of Indian culture. As Parama Roy puts it:

There is an ongoing and strenuous endeavour in the discourse of thuggee to interpellate the thug as an essence, a move which attests to the anxiety of rupture that subtends the totalizing epistemologies of colonialism. Yet the thug as discursive object is strikingly resistant to such fixity; he is all things to all people. If native identity can be staged, can be plural, then what are the implications for colonial authority and colonialism’s project of information retrieval? Thuggee, I would suggest, introduces a disturbance on the paradigm of information retrieval … as well as [in] the notion of native authenticity and ontological purity that is a governing trope of colonial discourse.

Sleeman displayed rare zeal in cracking the code of thuggee. He mapped the activities of Thugs, constructed genealogies, and completed a dictionary of their secret cant, Ramasee. This project, however, was never solely one of reading Indian criminality; it laid the foundation for a transformation in the rhetoric and practice of colonial authoritarianism. Drawing upon experience of anti-Thug campaigns in the Sagar and Narbada territories, and given legal sanction by the 1836 Thuggee Act, the colonial state instituted a draconian regime of arrest, trial, conviction and punishment that came to be applied to virtually all acts of collective crime – and indirectly to itinerant activity – across the whole of India. At the height of the campaign in 1840, 3,689 Thugs were committed; of these, 466 were hanged, 1,504 transported and 933 sentenced to life imprisonment. Radical new techniques of ethnographic classification were also introduced. Here, Henry Spry, medical officer of Sagar, appeared on the scene. In the interests of science, he forwarded to the phrenological society at
Edinburgh seven skulls of Thug leaders executed at Sagar. The findings were to inform his later deliberations on tribal societies [p. 147].

The reactions provoked among colonial authorities by the discovery of tribal and criminal societies in the first decades of the nineteenth century had a material basis. Frontier regions in west and central India, wherein most of the societies were located, were politically insecure. Troublesome tribal societies such as the Kolis and Bhils, which earlier had been granted rights by the Marathas to control access to mountain and forest routes, found themselves in conflict with a newly won British authority intent on securing its commercial and military operations. Simultaneously, land revenue, so necessary to finance Britain's precarious expansionist policies, was under threat from armed banditti who successfully plundered ill-protected villages. The solution was to be found in the break-up of those forest and waste land areas adjacent to arable land which had provided sanctuary for unruly elements, and the promotion of settlement, or at least the orderly migration of labour instead of untrammelled movement of criminal fraternities. Despite the completion by 1820 of the conquest of most of the Indian states, continued financial insecurity prevented the Raj from stabilizing its frontiers. It was against the disturbed conditions of the 1820s and 1830s when revolts broke out in border areas, and the severe fall in government revenue during the 1830s and 1840s, that the Thug panic has to be seen. It represented an exaggerated response to fears of all nomadic peoples.

This period therefore witnessed a distinct shift in representations of both the metropolitan poor and sections of the indigenous Indian population. On the surface this was evident in the emergence of a certain linguistic repertoire. Epithets such as ‘wild tribes’, ‘wandering tribes’, ‘savage races’ and ‘nomad races’ were invoked by Henry Mayhew, Watts Phillips and James Greenwood to describe the metropolitan street poor, and by William Sleeman, Edward Thornton other social investigators to describe predatory bands and tribal peoples in India. Underpinning this vocabulary, however, was a radical new attempt to comprehend constituencies previously beyond observation. As was so often the case when faced with such epistemological insecurity, writers turned to older discursive strategies. I wish to argue that the field of understanding created by these explorers was one structured largely by an awkward reworking of the idea of wildness.

Wildness had an ancient lineage. In the founding traditions of both Judeo-Christian and Hellenic-Roman thought the notion of the wild man was associated with areas of wilderness such as the desert, forest, jungle and mountains that had yet to be domesticated and thus brought within knowledge. As these areas became known, so the wild man was ‘progressively despatialized’, and in the modern era wildness was no longer
thought as a physical entity beyond geographical knowledge, but internalized as the ‘repressed content of both civilized and primitive humanity’. In the course of this long transformation, wildness was used variously to denote a stage in human development, a moral condition and a category in cultural anthropology, each of which bore traces of its complex origins. Hebrew thought tended to stress wildness as an evil condition. Wild men were hunters and nomads who lived in a state of ignorance below animality, sowed the seeds of destruction, and violated the laws of God, most notably by transgressing the natural order through species corruption. Descended from Ham, they were also seen as black. As the early modern era began to liberate emotions from the stifling influence of medieval Christian thought, so the more benign influence of classical conceptions of the wildness came into play, and primitivism briefly celebrated a state of natural desire unconstrained by civilization.

This cosmography framed much contemporary thought on the nature of populations seen to be beyond civilization. Thus in the eighteenth century Henry Fielding could compare London’s criminal haunts to the ‘deserts of Africa’. With the discovery of the threatening presence of an endemic poor on the streets of London and predatory populations in India nearly a century later, the discourse of wildness provided an amenable trope of representation, not necessarily to reveal the real conditions of existence of these populations, but rather to locate them in the human order:

The notion of ‘wildness’ (or, in its Latinate form, ‘savagery’) belongs to a set of culturally self-authenticating devices which includes, among many others, the ideas of ‘madness’ and ‘heresy’ as well. These terms are used not merely to designate a specific condition or state of being but also to confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses ‘civilization,’ ‘sanity,’ and ‘orthodoxy,’ respectively. Thus, they do not so much refer to a specific thing, place, or condition as dictate a particular attitude governing a relationship between a lived reality and some area of problematical existence that cannot be accommodated easily to conventional conceptions of the normal or familiar.

This, I believe, was the political and intellectual context of Prichard, Mayhew and Sleeman. That they were familiar with India is not in doubt. In his survey of the ethnography of human societies Prichard included a detailed description of ‘Hindus’ based for the most part on the accounts of travellers including Orme, Heber, Tod, Abbe Dubois and Elphinstone. Hindus, he concluded, belong to Indo-European stock, and provided ‘striking and conclusive proof’ that their complexion is due to climate. Aboriginal ‘races’ were not of the same stock. Mountaineers and ‘wild tribes’, including Bhils, Gonds and Coolies, spoke languages distinct from Sanskrit, and demonstrated diverse physical characteristics. Ethnology,
THE OTHER EMPIRE

however, is in ‘far too imperfect a state to render it possible at present to determine what relation these tribes bear to each other, and to the civilized nations who are nearest to them’. Mayhew made few direct references to India in his work on street folk, but the section on India in the long chapter on prostitution relied heavily on travel and evangelical accounts. Bernier, Forster, Hamilton, Wilson, Malcolm, Ward, Grant and Thornton were among many cited.

It is in this context that we can better appreciate Mayhew’s contribution to the understanding of metropolitan poverty. Despite his problematic use of Prichard and absence of detailed references to India, the rhetoric and tropes employed by Mayhew emerge from earlier concerns of colonial authorities and travellers in India to locate the troublesome presence of nomadic populations. ‘The notions of morality among these people’, Mayhew states in his discussion of coster girls, ‘agree strangely … with those of many savage tribes – indeed, it would be curious if it were otherwise. They are part of the Nomades [sic] of England, neither knowing nor caring for the enjoyments of home.’ And he proceeds to describe habits where ‘passion is the sole rule of action’, and where ‘every appetite of our animal nature is indulged in without the least restraint’. Indeed, such imagery can be found in descriptions of many of the varieties of street poor that came under Mayhew’s gaze. But he rarely lapsed into crude racial typologies. Thus the tentative suggestions of distinct physiognomies appearing in the preface were never applied to the poor. Mayhew was too much of a humanitarian and too good a sociologist to allow this. Thus the immorality of coster girls was not due to some hereditary traits, but to the conditions which they were forced to endure. Coster girls grow up, he argues, without the beneficial guidance of parents, without education, and under the cruel rigours of street life. Their fathers are in the tap room, mothers away tending the stall or hawking goods from morning to night. Under such circumstances, girls pick their morals ‘from the gutter’, the only notion of wrong formed by ‘what the policeman will permit them to do’. ‘I say this much’, he concludes,

Because I am anxious to make others feel, as I do myself, that we are the culpable parties in these matters. That the poor things should do as they do is but human nature – but that we should allow them to remain thus destitute of every blessing vouchsafed for ourselves – that we should willingly shape what we enjoy with our brethren at the Antipodes, and yet leave those who are nearer and who, therefore, should be dearer to us, to want even the commonest moral necessaries is a paradox that gives to the zeal of our Christianity a strong savour of the chicanery of Cant.

And yet these fears expressed also a profound sense of unease about the state of colonial knowledge. Those populations that were seen to bar the
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

progress of colonial modernity were precisely those about which so little was known. New narratives of knowledge – based largely on racialized categories – were constructed as a means of addressing the silence. Events in 1857 were to explode this project, and set in motion the consolidation of more systematic, centralized, totalizing and abstract bodies of knowledge based on fundamental discourses of race, caste and criminality.

Notes


2 Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar … for the Express Purpose of Investigating the State of Agriculture, Arts and Commerce, the Religion, Manners, and Customs; the History Natural and Civil and Antiquities, in the Dominions of the Rajah of Mysore, and the Countries Acquired by the Honourable East India Company, in the Late and Former Wars, from Tipoo Sultan*, London, Cadell and Davies, 1807.

3 Marika Vicziany claims that Buchanan’s real interests lay in botany. Certainly, he devotes a disproportionate amount of space to it, and the subordination of other aspects in the survey created tensions with the Company [see ‘Imperialism, botany and statistics in early nineteenth-century India: the surveys of Francis Buchanan (1762–1829)’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 20, 1986, pp. 625–60]. Some light is shed on this by a comparison between Buchanan’s interests and the topics of interest identified by the Company for the Mysore and Bengal surveys. For the Mysore survey ‘agriculture’ is singled out as the ‘first great and essential object’, and given prominence also in the Bengal survey. Here the priority is with cultivation and its improvement. The Bengal survey includes a requirement to forward to the Company’s botanical garden ‘useful or rare and curious plants and seeds’, but it is almost as a postscript [see the tables in Matthew Edney, *Mapping an Empire. The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 46–7].


6 But if it was part of such a project its location was somewhat ambiguous. Buchanan’s priorities were botanical, and although this did not automatically disqualify him as an active agent of imperial endeavour, it did lead to seemingly irreconcilable differences of opinion between him and the Company on the nature of the project and the final product. Furthermore, Buchanan can equally well be located in the Scottish Enlightenment. Influential though Colebrooke was to the development of the survey of India, Buchanan’s more immediate inspiration was John Sinclair’s *Statistical Account of Scotland*, published in twenty-one volumes between 1791 and 1798 [Vicziany, ‘Imperialism, botany and statistics’, p. 649].

7 Edney, *Mapping an Empire*, p. 66.

8 See the exemplary discussion in ibid.


10 Vicziany, ‘Imperialism, botany and statistics’, p. 646.


THE OTHER EMPIRE

15 Ibid., p. vii.
24 Ibid., p. 390.
26 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 381.
29 Ibid., pp. 85–8.
31 Ibid., pp. 88–9.
34 Ibid., p. 253.
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

37 Ibid., pp. 85–6.
40 Ibid., pp. 102, 113.
41 Ibid., pp. xxx–xxxi.
42 Ibid., p. xli.
43 John Borthwick Gilchrist, The General East India Guide and Vade Mecum, for the Public Functionary, Government Officer, Private Agent, Trader or Foreign Sojourner, in British India, and the Adjacent Parts of Asia immediately connected with the Hon. East India Company, being a Digest of the Work of the Late Capt. Williamson, London, Kingsbury, Parbury and Allen, 1825.
44 See the useful discussion in C.A. Bayly, Empire and Information. Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 287–93. ‘Unlike Persian’, Bayly argues, ‘Hindustani was a language with which to marshal the lowly servant and Sepoy.’
45 [Josiah Conder], The Modern Traveller. A Popular Description. Geographical, Historical, and Topographical, of the Various Countries of the Globe, 10 vols, London, Duncan, 1828. The first four volumes of the series are devoted to India. Two years later Conder published a revision edition in thirty volumes, those on India were numbered VII–X.
46 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 11.
47 Ibid., p. 29.
50 Ibid., p. v.
51 Ibid., p. xxi.
52 Bayly, Empire and Information.
53 Although the literature is copious, there remains no consensus on the theorization of race. For the purposes of this study, I take the position that racial theory is predicated on the identification of essential characteristics in particular populations. This identification is fluid. Historically, it has involved cultural, religious and physical attributes, and, with the emergence of ‘scientific’ racism in the nineteenth century, hereditary biological traits. It always results in the hierarchical ordering of populations.
56 William Robertson, An Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India, London, Cadell and Davies, 1817 [1791], p. 205.
62 Ibid., p. 4.
63 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 3.
64 Ibid., p. 17.
67 Radhika Singha, A Despotism of Law. Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India,
As early as 1822, officials such as Ochterlony and Bentinck suggested that Thugs had formed out of the ‘remnants of the Maratha Pindari evil’ (ibid., pp. 178–9). In fact, mercenary bands in search of service with Indian rulers were in evidence throughout the eighteenth century. The extension of British authority probably added to their numbers.

The findings were widely reported in popular publications, most notably W.H. Sleeman, Ramaseena, or a Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language used by the Thugs, Calcutta, Huttman, 1836; The Thugs or Phansigars of India, comprising a History of the Rise and Progress of that extraordinary fraternity of Assassins, Philadelphia, Carey and Hart, 1836, Report on the Depredations Committed by the Thug Gangs of Upper and Central India, Calcutta, Huttman, 1840, Report on Budhuk Alias Bagree Dacoits and Other Gang Robbers by Hereditary Profession, Calcutta, Sherriff, 1849. The Thug mythology created for the domestic reading public of the nineteenth century, however, was probably facilitated more by publications such as Edward Thornton, Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs, and Notices of some of the Proceedings of the Government of India for the Suppression of the Crimes of Thuggee, London, Allen, 1837, p. 44.

The parallels with earlier canting dictionaries of metropolitan low life are clear.
SO IMMENSE AN EMPIRE

[1861–62], Vol. IV pp. 116–25. This chapter was co-written by Bracebridge Hemyng, Mayhew’s long-time collaborator. The section on India was actually devoted almost exclusively to denouncing the lot of Indian women in general, and said little about prostitution.

94 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 43.
95 Ibid., p. 43.