

CHAPTER III

Concepts of Indian Character

Of the people, so far as their natural character is concerned, I have been led to form, on the whole, a very favourable opinion. They have, unhappily, many of the vices arising from slavery, from an unsettled state of society, and immoral and erroneous systems of religion. But they are men of high and gallant courage, courteous, intelligent, and most eager after knowledge and improvement with a remarkable aptitude for the abstract sciences, geometry, astronomy, &c, and for the imitative arts, painting and sculpture. They are sober, industrious, dutiful to their parents, and affectionate to their children, of tempers almost uniformly gentle and patient, and more easily affected by kindness and attention to their wants and feelings than almost any men whom I have met with.

—BISHOP HEBER, 1825¹

The natives, as far as I have seen, have nothing attractive in their character; indeed, as Gil Bias said, when he was with the actors, "I am tired of living among the seven deadly sins."

—HONORIA LAWRENCE, 1837²

THE Victorian Englishman in India, by his situation as well as temperament, was singularly ill-suited to gain a favorable impression of Indian character. "No one can estimate very highly the moral and intellectual qualities of people among whom he resides for the single purpose of turning them to pecuniary account," G. O. Trevelyan remarked, referring to the business community, but the statement could be applied with almost

¹ Heber, *Narrative*, in, 333.

² Letter to Mrs. Cameron, dated 28 December 1837, in Edwardes and Merivale, *Henry Lawrence*, p. 104.

equal force to the official classes.³ The official classes were similarly motivated in coming to India by considerations of status and monetary reward, available only at India's expense. An Englishman, moreover, whatever his purpose or position in India, found himself automatically endowed with privileges which made unstrained relations with Indians virtually impossible. His contact was primarily with menials and subordinates, and many a young official formed his first impressions of Indians while presiding over a criminal court. As Miss Martineau observed, "We are apt to take our notions of the natives from the inferior specimens which press upon our observation, either from their numbers or their servility."⁴ In addition, the Victorian temperament posed nothing but difficulties. Closely regulating his own thought and actions by a rigid code of conduct, the Englishman, far from finding refreshment in the diversity of human conduct, attached exclusive virtue to his own pattern of behavior, and found in Indian behavior a comprehensive rejection of every standard he had learned to value. The polarization of the Victorian and the traditional Indian character, as it appeared to Englishmen, was so extreme, that it is not surprising that Honoria Lawrence had the sensation she was living among the seven deadly sins.

The Victorian age was preeminently one of self-conscious progress in which man was thought capable of turning nature to his own purposes; India seemed fatalistic, hopelessly wedded to constricting custom and indifferent to human life and the material world. The Victorians emphasized the ideal of dominant masculinity, admiring a man who was physically strong, fond of vigorous sports, and capable of vast amounts of work. In contrast: "The physical organization of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapor bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid."⁵ The Victorian was taught to value simplicity, honesty, and plain

³ *Competition Wallah*, p. 261. ⁴ *Suggestions*, p. 99.

⁵ Thomas B. Macaulay, "Warren Hastings," in *Essays and Poems*, Boston, n.d., 11, 566-67.

dealing. In contrast, "What the horns are to the buffalo, what the paw is to the tiger, what the sting is to the bee, what beauty, according to the old Greek song, is to woman, deceit is to the Bengalee."⁶ "Besides, your native positively likes to see Jack-in-office. During the progress of a Governor through his province, all the rajahs and zemindars who come to pay their respects to the great man are never content unless they pay their rupees to his servants. They would not enjoy their interview thoroughly if they got it gratis."⁷ The Victorians were sober, undemonstrative, unaesthetic, convinced that art should be morally improving and censorious of that which was not; Indians were depicted as sensuous, extravagant, and delighted by immorality in art. To the Victorian family and country were sacred; "The Bengalee . . . would see his country overrun, his house laid in ashes, his children murdered or dishonoured, without having the spirit to strike one blow."⁸ The Victorian was frugal and unostentatious in externals, and though in India he lived on a scale which was lavish by English standards, he was still usually intent on saving a large portion of his income for remittance home. In contrast,

I will mention a very common trait in the Native character, which is, that although at the head of a large body of well-mounted and armed men [Nawab Golaum Kadir] is now living close to the cantonments, in a small and tattered tent (at which a half-batta sub-altern would turn his nose up); and his followers, I fancy, live under the canopy of heaven; but so it is: with Blacky, everything is for display, and many a dashing fellow carries his fortune in his horse and accoutrements, and should he have more than enough for that, he hires such a chap as himself to ride behind him, and perhaps

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 567. These quotations are from Macaulay's description of Nuncomar.

⁷ G. O. Trevelyan, *Competition Wallah*, p. 233.

⁸ Macaulay, "Warren Hastings," p. 567.

does not spend half-a-dozen rupees a month on everything else.⁹

The Victorians, who placed Accumulation very close to Godliness,¹⁰ considered the Indian fascination with gaudy apparel, lavish weddings, and entertainments highly unfortunate, if not sinful. And finally, on the score of sexual morality, the Victorians held rigidly to notions of chastity and self-restraint, and pictured their womenfolk as models of innocence and purity. Indian religion struck them as no less than a systematic encouragement of lust; the Indian conception of women, and the position of women in Indian society seemed the epitome of barbarity.

Such a catalog of disparate qualities, seemingly united only by their common defiance of values which the Victorians held dear, might seem difficult to ascribe to any single individual; on the contrary, it was only necessary to demonstrate that any given individual was indeed a "native" to have proved that he possessed them all. To take an example from a region and a religion different from those of Nuncomar, the Bengali Hindu of Macaulay's celebrated caricature, consider the description of a Kashmiri Muslim, "Sheik Imammoodeen, the Governor of Cashmere," which appeared in the *Calcutta Review* of July 1847:

The Sheik is, perhaps, the best mannered and best dressed man in the Punjaub. . . . [H]is figure is exquisite. . . . His smile and bow are those of a perfect courtier. . . . Beneath this smooth surface of accomplishment and courtesy lies an ill-sorted and incongruous disposition: ambition, pride, cruelty, and intrigue, strangely mixed up with indolence, effeminacy, voluptuousness and timidity. . . . Deeply engaged in the intrigues and revolutions of Lahore, he was never to be found at

⁹ Henry Lawrence, in a journal written for his sister, October 1830. Edwardes and Merivale, *Henry Lawrence*, p. 68.

¹⁰ Miss Martineau, noting the prevalence of poverty in India, commented that die people "cannot live—much less accumulate." *Suggestions*, p. 82.

the crisis of any of them; and so completely are all his aspirations negated by indecision, that he spent six months of his Cashmere government in wavering between three schemes for his own personal aggrandisement [before choosing] the most senseless of the three...¹¹

The emergence of the Victorian conception of Indian character, which ultimately became *so* conventionalized that it was assumed to apply to any given native, resulted from a blend of observation and preconception. As Harold Isaacs has noted, stereotypes are never entirely false.¹² Stereotypes would be easy enough to explode if they were patently untrue. Stereotypes, however, are formed, not out of the air, but by the selection and emphasis of observations of reality which seem to conform best with one's preconceived notions. The Victorian image of Indians was thus not entirely false in detail, but as a generalized picture it was highly colored by the artificiality of the relations Englishmen had with Indians, by the values which they brought with them to India, and by what they wanted to see in Indians.

To some extent, impressions were shaped by either willful or unintentional misunderstandings. Both Englishmen and Indians inevitably viewed one another in ways conditioned by their own culture, and consequently often dismissed as mere perversity actions which were entirely rational in the context of values which were not understood. By traditional Indian standards, Englishmen could seem extremely immoral. As the Abbe Dubois commented,

How, indeed, could a Brahmin, or any other Hindu have any real feelings of friendship or esteem for Europeans so long as the latter continue to eat the flesh of the sacred cow, which a Hindu considers a much more heinous offense than eating human flesh, so long as he sees them with Pariahs as

¹¹ Edwardes and Merivale, *Henry Lawrence*, p. 396.

¹² Cf. his discussion of American stereotypes of Asia, in *Images of Asia, American Views of China and India*, New York: Capricorn, 1962, pp. 379ff.

domestic servants, and so long as he knows that they have immoral relations with women of that despised caste?¹³

In contrast, most of the Indian customs which shocked Englishmen (including even such violent customs as widow-burning) possessed a certain reasonableness in the broader context of Indian social and religious values. The Indian custom of giving presents was part of a system of conventional politeness, though the only word the British could find in their own experience to describe such a system was corruption. And what was described as "deceit" and "dishonesty" could very often be mere courtesy; it was more polite, according to Indian notions, to agree to do something even if you did not intend to do it, in order to avoid giving offense. Among people who understood the convention, misunderstandings were not liable to arise. Many illustrations of Indian "double-dealing" seem often to have been simply the product of such a misunderstanding of Indian language or etiquette.¹⁴

Even when Englishmen and Indians were actually following comparable patterns of behavior misunderstandings arose because of the differing ways in which the same inclination was indulged in the two societies. What, for instance, constituted extravagance? Henry Lawrence considered Nawab Golaum Kadir extravagant because he supported a number of retainers, which he may well have done as much out of charity as for display. But the "extravagant Indian" was also portrayed as eating the simplest food and not caring where he slept. To the Englishmen, the comforts of a settled home and imported English cuisine did not seem luxuries, even though Nawab Golaum Kadir obviously considered them such. And what constituted sensuousness and indolence?

¹³ J. A. Abbe Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, trans. Beauchamp, London: University Press, 1959, p. 305.

¹⁴ An intriguing study of this process of mutual misunderstanding based on diverging preconceptions has been written, which discusses the relations between French colonialists and the inhabitants of Madagascar. See Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban*.

"By Jove, sir," exclaims the major, who has by this time got to the walnut stage of argument, to which he has arrived by gradations of sherry, port, ale, and Madeira—"By Jove!" he exclaims, thickly and fiercely, with every vein in his forehead swollen like whipcord, "those niggers are such a confounded sensual lazy set, cramming themselves with ghee and sweetmeats, and smoking their cursed chillumjees all day and night, that you might as well think to train pigs. Ho, you! *punkah chordo*, or I'll knock—Suppose we go up and have a cigar!"¹⁵

The truth of the matter was that Indians could match the British in moral disapproval of acts which violated their traditional notions of propriety, and the British were just as capable of indulgence as the Indians they excoriated. The normal human tendency to see the mote in the other person's eye and ignore the beam in one's own was here exaggerated by the fact that the mote and beam were of different substance. Englishmen saw more immorality in Indian actions than was there because they did not understand those actions, and failed to perceive the comparability of many of their own vices because they assumed a somewhat different form.

Added to these considerations was the tendency to ascribe to those whom one dislikes or is eager to disparage failings which are feared and disliked in oneself.¹⁶ This undoubtedly contributed to the Victorian predilection for ascribing to Indians precisely those traits which Victorians were taught to consider most reprehensible in their own lives. If one were ashamed, for instance, of one's own sexuality, it was a psychological relief to contrast one's own still relatively superior state with the presumably unlimited sexuality of those one disliked.

The importance of predilections and preconceptions in form-

¹⁵ Russell, *My Diary in India, in the Year 1858-1859*, London: Routledge, Warne and Routledge, 1, 50-51.

¹⁶ Philip Mason describes the tendency to project "all he dislikes in himself on to the people of another class or another race," in *Prospero's Magio*, pp. 57ff.

ing British impressions of Indian character can be seen by contrasting the Victorian attitude with that which had been common only a few years before. In the eighteenth century, Englishmen had come from a country less narrowly constrained; and, moreover, had come to India as "mere boys," where they were shaped as much by Indian as by English influences. Such men were less likely to recoil from an appreciation of India's diversity, if only because their remembrance of England was less strong. In particular, if they lived not exclusively at Calcutta, but in addition in areas remote from other Englishmen and English women—travelling in sovereign Indian states and associating with Indians not dependent on British will, they found much to inspire enthusiasm. Travelling among the Sikhs in 1808, Captain Matthew had found it "impossible to fancy myself in a foreign country,"¹⁷ so hospitably was he received. David Ochterlony, who though born in Boston, Massachusetts, spent most of his life in northern India, and who according to legend had thirteen wives who took the air each evening riding on thirteen elephants, ended his life in India, "the only country in the world where he can feel himself at home."¹⁸ The warm appreciation of the Indian character expressed by Bishop Heber was not uncharacteristic of the feelings of many people in the period before Victoria's reign. To the Victorians such appreciation seemed not only incomprehensible but immoral.

Much more important than the simple fact that the Victorians found the Indian character distasteful, were the causes to which were attributed Indian failings. The reformers of the early years of the century had also disparaged Indian character, but in doing so had ascribed its depravity to remediable causes. The most important alteration in the Victorian approach was thus not in its main impressions of what Indians were like but in its attempt to conceive those failings as inherent and incurable. Whereas the reformers had traced the origins of Indian depravity to religious and social causes, to the Victorians it seemed

¹⁷ Thompson, *Princes*, p. 159. ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 184.

a result of the more intractable considerations of climate and race. As Henry Beveridge wrote in 1876,

Carlyle says that the most important thing about a man is his religion. . . . It seems to me that it would be truer to say that the most important thing about an individual man is the character of his parents, and about a people, the race to which it belongs. Certainly, I do not think, in looking at the Bakarganj people, that the most important thing about the majority of them is whether they are Hindus or Mahomedans. They were Bengalis before they were Hindus or Mahomedans.¹⁹

The Victorians treated with great concern the effect the Indian climate might have on their own constitutions. It was presented as an objection to the prospects of European settlement that children reared in India would not have the same stamina as those reared in a brisker climate and that "the European constitution cannot survive the third generation."²⁰ Thus preoccupied with the effect of climate on themselves and their children, the Victorians naturally held that it was even more crucial in molding Indian character, which had been subject to tropical influences much longer. Alleged Indian languor, sensitivity, fatalism, constitutional feebleness, preference for despotic institutions, and sexuality, were all depicted at various times as necessary results of India's "constant vapor bath."

Such speculation could claim a respectable antiquity, its history running all the way from Hippocrates to Montesquieu. Hippocrates apparently considered a tropical climate an important though only contributory cause of "indolence," striking a balance between climatic and political considerations.²¹ Montes-

¹⁹ Henry Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj; Its History and Statistics*, (1876), pp. 211-12, quoted by Lord Beveridge in *India Called Them*, London, 1947, p. 6.

²⁰ *Parliamentary Papers*, (H. C.), "Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement (India)," 1857-1858, Vol. vn, Fourth Report, question #9767.

²¹ Cf. Mill, *History of British India*, 1840 edn., 1, 48m.

quieu held that climate did indeed determine character in many respects. "Cold air constringes the extremities of the external fibres of the body," he observed, while "warm air relaxes and lengthens the extremes of the fibres; of course it diminishes their force and elasticity. People are therefore more vigorous in cold climates."²² Montesquieu felt that climate did have an effect on character, but avoided passing judgment on the relative merits of the character formed in different climates: "In cold climates they have very little sensibility for pleasure; in temperate countries, they have more; in warm countries their sensibility is exquisite____"²³

Montesquieu's theory of climatic determination was furthermore in no sense destructive of the notion of basic human equality; Englishmen, he felt, would have been no different from Indians if they had grown up in India. Nor did Montesquieu consider it a justification for inaction. If climate determined human inclinations, this in Montesquieu's eyes was no reason why inclination should be considered invincible to correction by suitable regulation. Though the tropics might require legislation which would be superfluous in colder regions, there seemed no reason why, if such legislation were devised, the civilization of the tropics might not acquire the virtues of those existing farther north.

The English reformers of the early years of the nineteenth century were less responsive to the attractions of the character Montesquieu had believed to be induced by warmth and also highly skeptical that climate was its cause. The reformers either belittled climatic theories as of minor significance, or dismissed them as totally false. They were no more inclined to attribute Indian depravity to the heat than they were to ascribe their own virtues to "constringed cutis," "compressed papillae," and "paralysis of the miliary glands."²⁴ Charles Grant believed that "in

²² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Nugent, New York: Hafner, 1962, p. 221.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

developing the causes of the Hindoo character, too much seems sometimes to have been imputed to the climate."²⁵

If the character of the Hindoos proceeded only from a physical origin, there might be some foundation for thinking it unalterable; but nothing is more plain, than that it is formed chiefly by moral causes, adequate to the effect produced: if those causes therefore, can be removed, their effect will cease, and new principles and motives will produce new conduct and a different character.²⁶

Grant felt that Indian physical weakness was in large measure attributable to diet. "The inhabitants of foreign descent, who continue the use of animal food, especially the Armenians, a sober people, are more robust than the Hindoos."²⁷ For the many other presumed effects of the climate—indolence, fatalism, sensuousness, sexuality, etc.—Grant found more than adequate explanation in the Hindu systems of law and religion. It seemed scarcely surprising to him that Indians were excessively preoccupied with sex when "Representations which abandoned licentiousness durst hardly imagine within the most secret recesses of impurity, are there held up in the face of the sun to all mankind, in durable materials, in places dedicated to religion."²⁸ Grant suggested that a similar encouragement of promiscuity in England through the placing of lewd sculptures prominently on public buildings might well have a similar effect on English morals.

The Abbe Dubois described graphically the nonclimatic influences molding Indian attitudes toward sex:

The instincts which are excited at an early age by the nudity in which they remain till they are seven or eight years old, the licentious conversation and obscene verses that their parents delight in teaching them as soon as they begin to talk, the disgusting expressions which they learn and use to the de-

²⁵ Grant, "Observations," p. 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁸ *Ibid.*,

pp. 69-70.

light of those who hear them, and who applaud such expressions as witticisms; these are the foundations on which the young children's education is laid, and such are the earliest impressions which they receive.

Of course it is unnecessary to say that, as they get older, incontinence and all its attendant vices increase at the same time. It really seems as if most of the religious and civil institutions of India were only invented for the purpose of awakening and exciting passions towards which they have already such a strong natural tendency. The shameless stories about their deities . . . the public and private buildings which are to be met with everywhere bearing on their walls some disgusting obscenity . . . all these things seem to be calculated to excite the lewd imagination of the inhabitants of this tropical country.²⁹

James Mill, after consulting his sources, came to an even more emphatic rejection of climate as a formative influence. He, like Grant, considered the "lightness and feebleness" of the Indian physique a result of diet.³⁰ But while Grant stressed the fatalism of Indian religion as the primary cause of indolence, to Mill it seemed the result of the insecurity of property :

The love of repose reigns in India. . . . "It is more happy to be seated than to walk; it is more happy to sleep than to be awake; but the happiest of all is death." Such is one of the favourite sayings, most frequently in the mouths of this listless tribe, and most descriptive of their habitual propensities. Phlegmatic indolence pervades the nation. Few pains, to the mind of the Hindu, are equal to that of bodily exertion; the pleasure must be intense which he prefers to that of its total cessation.

Here Mill rightly sensed a challenge to the Benthamite theory of pleasure and pain which was predicated on the assumption

²⁹ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, p. 308.

³⁰ *History of British India*, 1840 edn., 1, 478.

that all men shared with the industrious Englishman a preference for the pleasures obtainable only by hard work. Replying to the challenge, Mill continued,

This listless apathy and corporeal weakness of the natives of Hindustan, have been ascribed to the climate under which they live. But other nations, subject to the influence of a warm sun, are neither indolent nor weak; the Malays, for example, the Arabians, the Chinese. The savage is listless and indolent under every clime. In general, this disposition must arise from the absence of the motives to work; because the pain of moderate labor is so very gentle, that even feeble pleasures suffice to overcome it; and the pleasures which spring from the fruits of labor are so many and great, that the prospect of them, where allowed to operate, can seldom fail to produce the exertions which they require . . . there is but one cause, to which, among the Hindus, the absence of the motives for labour can be ascribed; their subjection to a wretched government, under which the fruits of labour were never secure.³¹

In Mill's eyes, Indian sexuality was also a reflection of the pattern normal in all "rude" societies. "In the barbarian," he wrote, "the passion of sex is a brutal impulse, which infuses no tenderness."³² Mill similarly attributed Indian "effeminacy" not to delicacy and reluctance to take exercise, but to the primitive state of Indian society. He noted that

Much attention has been attracted to the gentleness of the manners, in this people. They possess a feminine softness both in their persons and in their address. . . . Mildness of address is not always separated even from the rudest conditions of human life, as the Otaheitans, and some other of the South-Sea islanders, abundantly testify. "The savages of North America are affectionate in their carriage, and in their conversations pay a mutual attention and regard, says Charlevoix, more

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 480-81.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 445-46.

tender and more engaging, than what we profess in the ceremonial of polished societies."³³

Mill and Grant went to such pains to discredit climatic interpretations because they realized how effective a means they were of discouraging the motive to reform. Montesquieu, it was true, had felt regulation could curb propensities instilled by climate. But the reformers desired much more than merely the introduction of regulations to check natural tendencies; they aspired to see the tendencies themselves transformed. What Montesquieu had felt was simply a result of a cold climate—love of work, stern self-discipline, etc.—Grant and Mill believed were norms of conduct based on universally valid principles and accessible to peoples in all climes. Grant considered industriousness the product of a love of virtue; Mill conceived of it as resulting from the love of postponed pleasures. Neither considered this impulse, so similar though diversely described and justified on divergent grounds, to be the monopoly of any single race or climate.

The Victorian revival of climatic theories coincided with the waning of reform enthusiasm. The Victorians were inclined to agree with Montesquieu that the Indian temperament was the product of special Indian conditions, just as their own temperament was the product of the "climate," both physical and moral, of England. But they were also inclined to agree with the reformers that the peculiar English temperament possessed pre-eminent moral validity, a view Montesquieu would have considered ludicrously narrow. In the hands of the Victorians climatic theories thus became a justification for the English presence in India because of England's presumably exclusive ability to provide India with rulers of a vigorous frame, which was constantly refreshed by visits home and to the hills. Climate, which for Montesquieu had been the ground for universal law acknowledging basic human equality, had become a justification for imperialism.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 465.

Climatic theories, furthermore, in the nineteenth century had begun to fade, with almost imperceptible shadings, into theories of racial distinctness. The scientific study of race emerged only after extremely haphazard and tentative gropings in the course of the century, and in the early stages of speculation about racial characteristics, climate played an important role. Before Darwin, racial distinctness was usually considered the result either of separate Divine creations or of the effect of climate working over a period of time.³⁴ In regard to India, climatic explanations were more commonly employed because of the absence of the obvious differences which distinguished Mongolians and Negroes from Europeans. In the case of Indians, it seemed more logical to imagine the effect of a tropical sun slowly darkening the color of the skin and eyes and hair, for other physical differences were minor. And yet, even though such a climatic explanation for racial distinctness was in a sense liberal, in its assumption that Indians and Englishmen had evolved from the same stock, it was nonetheless capable of illiberal elaboration. One might insist that over the ages climate had wrought a change in Indian racial character which made it totally distinct from that of the English. Montesquieu, adhering to a radical doctrine of human equality, had imagined that Englishmen would be just exactly like Indians if they grew up in India; one generation was enough. The Victorians, on the other hand, conceived that the effect of climate over untold generations had transformed Indians into an almost totally different race, and that a gap existed between the races which could not be produced—or eradicated—in any small number of generations. When contrasted to the differences existing between Englishmen and Indians the similarity of facial features seemed inconsequential to the editors of an encyclopedic anthology of Indian informa-

³⁴ For a discussion of pre-Darwinian study of race, cf. William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815-1859*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960; and Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa, British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850*, Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964.

tion presented to the British public in 1858—the year following the Indian Mutiny and a year before the publication of *Origin of the Species*. They wrote:

In point of race the Hindoos have been regarded by naturalists as belonging to what they call the Caucasian, and even to the same family of that race as the white man of Europe! But this is a fantastical notion, for which there is hardly even so much as the shadow of a foundation. The only three points in which any analogy has been discovered between the Hindoo and the European are the oval form of the face, the shape of the head, and traces of a certain community of language. In every other respect the points of contrast are incomparably more decisive than those of resemblance. The European is white, the Hindoo black. . . . The European is taller than the Hindoo, more robust, and more persevering. Even in the rudest stages of civilization, the European has exhibited a firmness, perseverance and enterprise, which strikingly contrast with the feeble, slow, and irresolute character of the Hindoo. In the performance of ordinary labor, in those employments where there are means for drawing a just comparison, the labor of *one* Englishman is equal to that of *three* ordinary Indians.³⁵

³⁵ *India: Geographical, Statistical, and Historical*, Compiled from the London *Times* Correspondence, McCulloch and Others, London: George Watts, 1858, pp. 81-82. In 1923 the United States Supreme Court declared that an Indian's skin color was sufficient to designate him of a distinct race in "common understanding."

The claimant in the case, a Punjabi Sikh who had entered the country in 1913 and served with American forces in the First World War, claimed to be "a descendant of the Aryans of India, belonging to the Caucasian race (and, therefore) white within the meaning of our naturalization laws." In a decision handed down on February 19, 1923 the United States Supreme Court disallowed this claim. Justice Sutherland, who wrote the majority opinion, found that a Hindu was not, after all, a "white person" in terms of the common understanding: "The words of the statute are to be interpreted in accordance with the under-

"Racial" theories such as this were no more than the conventional impression of Indian character appended to such evident physical differences as that of skin color, which appeared to give them the quality of scientific objectivity. In 1792 Charles Grant had insisted that there existed in India "the universality of great depravity . . . a general moral hue, between which and the European moral complexion there is a difference analogous to the difference of the natural colour of the two races."³⁶ Grant made this comment in a work designed to show that Indian depravity was not due to inherent causes but to ones entirely subject to remedy. The furthest thing from his mind was the suggestion that Indians were morally blackened *because* they were dark in color, but it was precisely this view which gained currency in subsequent years. Climatic explanations of Indian depravity were amplified by racial notions which conceived that, whether the result of climate or not, Indians constituted a distinct and inferior race.

Thus, extreme sexuality, which Montesquieu had attributed to the climate, and to which, he presumed, anyone would be subject if he lived in the tropics, was now identified not simply with the heat but also with the "darker races." Englishmen were not prepared to concede that Indian residence increased their own sexual appetites, or those of their womenfolk, and thus found it necessary to attribute Indian inclinations to something more than the climate. Miss Martineau felt the majority of the "supposed constitutional vices of our Indian natives" were actually the result of training and circumstances. The only exception to this rule she specified was "lust" which she felt compelled to add: "standing of the common man, from whose vocabulary they were taken." It was not a matter of racial superiority or inferiority, he went on, but of acknowledging a racial difference which, in the case of the Hindu, "is of such a character and extent that the great body of our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation."

Isaacs, *Images of Asia*, p. 284.

³⁶ "Observations," p. 33.

mit "may probably be implicated with a basis of race, though mainly due to training."³⁷

"Training" had seemed a more than adequate explanation to the reformers. The Evangelicals had argued that Indian religion was the cause of Indian depravity; to later generations, Indian religion seemed a reflection of Indian depravity, not its cause. The "dark" and "tropical" Indians were assumed to possess, in common with Negroes in Africa and America, sexual impulses unknown to Europeans. Such impressions, moreover, were not permitted to remain the disinterested observation of outsiders, for the Victorians chose to conceive Indian sexuality as a direct physical threat to themselves. It was a "well-known fact" to the British community in India that "darker races were physically attracted by the fairer, but not vice versa."³⁸ This would not have been so easy to confirm in the early portion of the nineteenth century, when sexual relations between Englishmen and Indian women were common. In fact, the bulk of testimony seemed to be on the opposite side. "The deep bronze tint is more naturally agreeable to the human eye than the fair skins of Europe," wrote Bishop Heber, "since we are not displeased with it even in the first instance, while it is well known that to them a fair complexion gives the idea of ill-health."³⁹ What was "well-known" in 1829 was just the reverse of what was "well-known" fifty years later, and it is clear that it was amongst the English rather than amongst Indians that this reversal had taken place. Indians had not suddenly reversed their ideas about the attrac-

³⁷ Martineau, *Suggestions*, p. 96.

³⁸ "Here Mr. McBryde paused. He wanted to keep the proceedings as clean as possible, but Oriental Pathology, his favourite theme, lay around him, and he could not resist it. Taking off his spectacles, as was his habit before enunciating a general truth, he looked into them sadly, and remarked that the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not *vice versa*—not a matter for bitterness this, not a matter for abuse, but just a fact which any scientific observer will confirm." Forster, *Passage to India*, pp. 218-19.

³⁹ Heber, *Narrative*, 1, 4. Philip Mason discusses the Victorian notion of tropical sexuality, in *Prospero's Magic*.

tions of English complexions, or suddenly developed sexual passions previously unnoticed. The change was the result of the influence of revulsion and fear, shame and insecurity, of the attempt to justify dislike and defensiveness by the perception of an imagined threat; in other words, of changes in British attitudes for which Indians could scarcely be held responsible.

A similar evolution in British thinking was taking place in regard to those Indian characteristics which had been considered by the reformers to be the result of India's long-standing political disorder; Indian servility, quarrelsomeness, obsequiousness and dishonesty—the absence, in short, of the open, honorable, and manly conduct which Victorians valued so highly. "A predisposition to cunning and childish subtlety exercised upon words" was "one of the greatest weaknesses of the natives."⁴⁰ Chaotic, indiscriminate, mendacious self-seeking was everywhere rampant, splitting even families apart:

Discord, hatred, abuse, slanders, injuries, complaints and litigations, all the effects of selfishness unrestrained by principle, prevail to a surprising degree. Seldom is there a household without its internal divisions and lasting enmities, most commonly, too, on the score of interest. The women partake of this spirit of discord. Held in slavish subjection by the men, they rise in furious passions against each other, which vent themselves in such loud, virulent, and indecent railings as are hardly to be heard in any other part of the world.⁴¹

The reformers commonly ascribed such conduct to the unsettled conditions of Indian life and India's subjection throughout many years to erratic and rapacious despots. The Abbe DuBois, for instance, wrote,

I think that we may take as their greatest vices the untrustworthiness, deceit and double-dealing which I have so often had occasion to mention, and which are common to all Hin-

⁴⁰ Fitzjames Stephen, *Memorandum on the Administration of Justice*, no title page or page number, copy in National Archives, New Delhi.

⁴¹ Grant, "Observations," pp. 28-29.

dus. It is quite impossible to fathom their minds and discover what they really mean; more impossible, indeed, than with any other race. He would indeed be a fool who relied on their promises, protestations, or oaths, if it were to their interest to break them. All the same, I do not think that these vices are innate in them. It must be remembered that they have always been until quite recently under the yoke of masters who had recourse to all sorts of artifices to oppress and despoil them. The timid Hindu could think of no better expedient with which to defend himself than to meet ruse with ruse, dissimulation with dissimulation, and fraud with fraud. The prolonged use of weapons for which excuse may be found in their rulers, ended by becoming a habit which it is now impossible for them to get rid of.⁴²

And yet it could be argued that Indians were deceitful, not because they had been so long oppressed, but rather because they were suited for no other condition. Macaulay, for instance, noted that "During many ages [the Bengali] had been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable."⁴³ Macaulay felt Bengali "deceitfulness" was "constitutional" and that the fact the Bengali had been trampled on for so long was not simply an unfortunate accident but rather no more than he could expect. The Victorians, with their emphasis on physical strength and martial prowess, were not inclined to consider a propensity to be conquered only a minor flaw. If Indians were often conquered, it was because they were weak, not because they were unfortunate, and weakness to the Victorians was the hallmark of an inferior race.

The Victorians pictured the decadence and disarray of Indian society as a reflection of Indian racial character rather than the primary deterrent to its true expression. The decline of enthusi-

⁴² Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, pp. 306-307.

⁴⁸ Macaulay, "Warren Hastings," in *Essays and Poems*, pp. 566-67.

asm for remaking Indian society and replacing Indian religion led to a more general acceptance of the notion that Indian society and religion were only what Indians deserved. If it were assumed that the condition of Indian society was not the result of a chain of unfortunate historical accidents but, instead, an expression of the peculiar genius of the Indian people, it followed that attempts at total social or religious reform were futile. Conceiving of Indian society in this fashion became a sufficient explanation for leaving it as it was. Indians were thought incapable of appreciating or adopting successfully superior British habits and institutions.

Undoubtedly the subtlest and most influential procedure for suggesting an inherent Indian racial inferiority was that which implied, with seeming generosity, that Indians were children requiring protection. The young Winston Churchill spoke fondly of Indians as "primitive but agreeable races."⁴⁴ To John Beames, his Sikh language instructor seemed "Like most Panjabis of those days . . . a kindly, simply-hearted old child."⁴⁵ Such was now the attitude which many Englishmen held toward the representatives of a civilization which had attained sophistication at a time "when the ancestors of English dukes still paddled about in wicker canoes, when wild in woods the noble marquis ran."⁴⁶

It had been common from the time of James Mill to identify developed civilization exclusively with the European variety, and to designate Indian culture—its antiquity notwithstanding—as characteristic of an early stage of human development. Indians were lumped together with other non-European peoples, all of whom were pronounced primitive because of their lack of European culture. A further consideration was that within India Englishmen had begun to turn their attention to peoples who fitted more closely the stereotype of childlike primitivism, to the

⁴⁴ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life, A Roving Commission*, New York: Scribners, p. 104.

⁴⁵ Beames, *Memoirs*, pp. 100-101.

⁴⁶ G. O. Trevelyan, *Competition Wallah*, p. 217.

peasant cultivators and tribal groups whom the British could patronize and encourage as supporters against the emerging urban middle classes.

The likening of Indians to children might not have been politically oppressive if the stress of the analogy had been—as in Mill—on the prospects for Indian maturation. C. E. Trevelyan spoke confidently in 1838 of the time when Indians would "grow to man's estate."⁴⁷ By those no longer enthusiastic to witness Indians entering into "man's estate" such phrases might be retained but implicitly extended over an indefinite span of time. It was also possible to abandon the concept of the child's maturing altogether, and to consider the Indian's childlike state a permanent condition.

One way of arguing this contention was to state that Indians showed early promise which was later unfulfilled. J. C. Marshman, in testimony before a Parliamentary committee in 1853, stated that "A native boy at the age of 16 is much sharper and much more advanced than an English boy of the same age; but you will find that the native, after he has left school, very rarely improves himself."⁴⁸ G. O. Trevelyan noted James Mill's comment that Indians "display marvellous precocity in appreciating a metaphysical proposition which would hopelessly puzzle an English lad," adding: "This is high praise as coming from the father and preceptor of John Stuart; for it is hard to conceive a metaphysical proposition which could have hopelessly puzzled John Stuart at the most tender age."⁴⁹ Sir Ashley Eden argued that child labor legislation was unnecessary in India because "A child of eight in Europe is a helpless baby: in India he is almost a man of the world."⁵⁰

These men were possibly correct in their observations. Stanley

⁴⁷ C. E. Trevelyan, *On the Education of the People of India*, London, 1838, p. 187.

⁴⁸ *Parliamentary Papers*, (H. C.), 1852-1853, Vol. xxix, question #8722, 21 July 1853.

⁴⁹ G. O. Trevelyan, *Competition Wallah*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon*, London, 1953, p. 58.

Elkins has examined the comparable contention made about slaves in the American South, and concluded that slaves did possess the qualities of early precocity and subsequent apathy which were attributed to them, but that this was a result, not of their racial character, but of the system of slavery itself, that the childishness of the adult slave was a product of the system in which he found himself, and not a justification for that system.⁵¹

The theorists of Indian childishness might be answered in the same fashion. In 1838 C. E. Trevelyan observed that

Native children seem to have their faculties developed sooner, and to be quicker and more self-possessed than English children. . . . When we go beyond this point to the higher and more original powers of the mind, judgment, reflection, and invention, it is not so easy to pronounce an opinion. It has been said, that native youth fall behind at the age at which these faculties begin most to develop themselves in Englishmen. But this is the age when the young Englishman generally commences another and far more valuable education, consisting in the preparation for, and practise of some profession requiring severe application of mind; when he has the higher honors and emoluments opened to his view as the reward of his exertions, and when he begins to profit by his daily intercourse with a cultivated intellectual and moral society. Instead of this, the native youth falls back on the ignorant and depraved mass of his countrymen; and, till lately, so far from being stimulated to further efforts, he was obliged to ask himself for what end he had hitherto laboured. Every avenue to distinction was shut against him; and his acquirements served only to manifest the full extent of his degraded position . . . what may we not expect from these powers of mind, invigorated by the cultivation of true science, and directed towards worthy objects!⁵²

Trevelyan agreed that Indian ambition and intellectual vigor

⁵¹ Elkins, *Slavery*, Chap. in.

⁵² C. E. Trevelyan, *Education of People of India*, p. HI.

flagged with the end of adolescence, when the period of rote learning ended and the time for original thought and professional application was reached. But Trevelyan sought an explanation for this not in a theory of innate racial characteristics but in an examination of the social factors conditioning motivation. The degraded state of Indian society, far from challenging the individual to further exertions beyond schoolwork, increased its demands on the individual as he matured to conform to its constricting traditions. And what Indian society encouraged British government completed by refusing access to participation in the government of the country.

The Indian, possessed of precocious verbal facility, adept at memorization, was thought to falter when something more was required, when intellectual progress resulted only from prolonged self-discipline and original inquiry. Similarly, Indians were depicted as skillful in the execution of projects but deficient in the qualities of leadership. An argument of general application to the problem of self-government, it was most fully developed in relation to the army. British officers never tired of eulogizing the martial qualities of their native troops, or of emphasizing their utter helplessness without the direction of European officers. Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief from 1885 to 1893, reported that an old Indian soldier once addressed these words to him: "*Sahib, ham log larai men bahut tex hain magar jang ka bandabast nahin jante.*" ("Sir, we can fight well, but we do not understand military arrangements.") To these words, Roberts added the following exegesis: "What the old soldier intended to convey to me was his sense of the inability of himself and his comrades to do without the leadership and general management of the British officers."⁵³ Sir Patrick Grant, writing on July 16, 1858, recorded his opinion that Indian sepoy "have no confidence whatever in the very best native officers, and deprived of their European officers (as I think it will be ad-

⁵³ Roberts, *Forty-one Years in India*, 1905 edn., 1, 183, quoted by Nirad Chaudhuri in "The Martial Races of India," *Modern Review* (Calcutta), July 1930, p. 46.

mitted late events have abundantly made manifest) except behind walls or other protection native troops are a mere armed rabble."⁵⁴

Men such as Roberts and Grant believed that Indians were incapable of assuming leadership, and illustrated their point by reference to the trusting simplicity of the ordinary soldiers in the ranks. But the British officer class was not ordinarily recruited from among ordinary British soldiers. Sir Charles Napier considered the better sort of Indian absolutely on a par with English officers. Arguing in 1853 for better treatment for Indian officers, he wrote, "The fair-faced beardless Ensign, just arrived from England . . . has the makings of a first-rate soldier, so have the Native Indian gentlemen at his age."⁵⁵ Napier answered the theorists of the innate childishness of the Indian soldier just as Trevelyan had answered those who talked of the failure of early Indian precocity, attributing the current state of affairs not to Indian inability but to the lack of opportunity.

The majority of Victorian Englishmen, however, assumed that all Indians possessed childlike qualities that were ineradicable, and were, moreover, too devoid of innocence, too dangerous to be considered only children. Kipling's phrase "half devil and half child" was a literal description of the common attitude. Indians were "at once childish and ferocious,"⁵⁶ possessed of a "mixture of treachery, childishness, and ferocity that could be bred only in the same jungle with the tiger who crouches, springs, gambols, and devours."⁵⁷ Indian childishness was a racial quality which did not promise an advance toward maturity, but rather was permanently linked to the menace and

⁵⁴ Letter of Grant's, in "Appendix to Minutes of Evidence taken before the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Organization of the Indian Army," *Parliamentary Papers*, (H.C.), 1859, "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to inquire into the Organisation of the Indian Army."

⁵⁵ Sir Charles Napier, *Dejects, Civil and Military, of the Indian Government*, London, 1853, p. 255.

⁵⁶ Edwardes and Merivale, *Henry Lawrence*, p. 337.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

power of grown men—men who could be tamed but never entirely trusted. Sexual aggressiveness, constitutional deceitfulness, and the incapacity for maturity and leadership were combined in the conception of Indians as grown children whom the British had the difficult task of chastening and commanding. It seemed vain to hope that such children would ever develop further or be in a position to dispense with the services provided by the parent nation.