

## **South Asian Thought at the Dawn of the liberal Age, 1800-1840**

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Vice-Chancellor, Mr and Mrs Boyd, Trustees, Ladies and Gentlemen: it is an enormous honour to have been asked to give the 2007 Wiles lectures. When I look back at the list of distinguished historians who have given the Wiles lectures, I can hardly believe that I have been selected. One splendid feature of the list is that it includes a good number of historians of the extra-European world. I am delighted to be following in the footsteps of scholars such as Anthony Low, Terence Ranger and indeed Eric Hobsbawm, who included a good deal of Asian and African material in his classic lectures on nationalism. As we stand at the beginning of the Asian Century, I feel it is quite appropriate that my lectures focus centrally on India. Some of the material will inevitably be novel, or even complex for my audience, but I hope that the central drift of my arguments will remain clear.

My first lecture<sup>1</sup> concerns the dramatic emergence of constitutional liberal ideologies in the port cities of Asia in the aftermath of the revolutionary wars of 1776 to 1815. Small numbers of Asians began, after 1800, to argue for ‘mixed constitutions’, a degree of popular representation, free trade and the free press. They appropriated these themes from British or French writers, or by way of the limited contacts they had with resident European liberals. But in doing so, they transformed their meanings, reinterpreting them in the light of their own understandings of good government and human wellbeing.

The idea of constitution-making and popular representation became, like national sovereignty, an international ‘contagion’ after 1776, to use David Armitage’s metaphor.<sup>2</sup> The rage for constitutions made its first landfall in Europe in Poland in 1791. A little later, Asia had its own constitutional moment. But this Asian story begins not in Calcutta, or even London, but in Portugal. In August 1820 a revolution against royal despotism broke out in

Oporto, led by liberal army officers and members of the local Jacobin club. A popular constitution was declared. News of the revolution reached Goa, the Portuguese colony on the western Indian coast, through British newspapers in early 1821. In September, there was a sympathetic mutiny in Portuguese India against its reactionary Viceroy. Soon emissaries of the newly constituted Lisbon parliament, the Cortes, reached Goa and tried to stamp their authority on the territory with displays of armed force. In the midst of a bewildering series of coups and counter-coups, the Goa liberals, mostly *luso descendentes*, creoles, or descendents of early Portuguese settlers, issued an edition of the *Goa Gazette* that declared:

Unhappy is that Government, which in defiance of the general wish, endeavours to maintain itself by force of arms... In constitutional monarchies, the sovereign power, whence the legislature is derived, is necessarily indivisible and can only reside in the representatives of the nation legally assembled in the Cortes [the parliament] or national assemblies.’<sup>3</sup>

This dramatic demonstration of Rousseau’s general will in action was not lost on the sophisticated Indian merchant community of Bombay that had many commercial and family links with Portuguese India. The news also reached Calcutta almost immediately. The conflict in Goa found a strong resonance in the British settlements. The main grievance of the original Portuguese settler families and Eurasians of Goa was that they were excluded from major political office in Portuguese India.<sup>4</sup> Appointments were reserved for ethnic Portuguese from Portugal or its main colony, Brazil. Eurasians and Indian elites found themselves in much the same position in British India, and many were attracted to the ideology of constitutional liberalism.

In Calcutta, Eurasians of Portuguese descent, Indian Christians, European radicals, and a small number of Hindus, celebrated the Portuguese, Spanish and Latin American constitutions in newspapers, public meetings and dinners. One striking event took place in August 1822. This was a celebration of the second anniversary of the proclamation of constitutional government in Portugal recorded in the *Calcutta Journal*. The *Journal* was India's first daily newspaper, a radical liberal publication, edited by the former seaman, free trader, anti-slaver and Parliamentary reformer, James Silk Buckingham. Buckingham was soon to be arrested and transported back to Britain by the East India Company's government for impugning its honour in the press. According to the *Journal* the huge crowd gathered on the river Hughly included 'the enlightened Brahmin whose name is never mentioned without praise.'<sup>5</sup> This was Rammohan Roy, a main focus of tonight's lecture.

Rammohan was India's first consciously modern political thinker and a public man devoted to the renovation of the Hindu religion. Previous historians have interpreted Rammohan as a religious reformer, a 'Hindu Unitarian', an embodiment of the colonial bourgeoisie, or as a mimic and 'colonised mind.' I see him as a trans-national constitutional liberal thinker of a particular era. The *Calcutta Journal*, partly owned by Rammohan, demanded rhetorically, following the riverside meeting: 'who shall henceforth dare to say that Public Opinion is not favourable to the spread of liberal sentiments in India?'

At the subsequent dinner, the Portuguese revolution was symbolically and emotionally linked to other popular struggles against despotism across the world, including the despotism and monopoly of Company. Diners toasted the freedom of the Indian press, Jeremy Bentham, 'les liberales' of France, the Italian Carbonari and the Greek patriots. For

their part, distant Spanish, Portuguese and French liberals returned these compliments, eulogising Ramohan Roy in their publications as the herald of a new Asia.

These Wiles lectures are part of a project that aims to revive the intellectual history of modern Southern Asia as a field in its own right. Several colleagues in this room and many others are co-workers in this effort. By intellectual history we mean the history of how people reflected on and argued about their world in order to construct a reasoned articulation of its shape and meaning. This has been an under-studied field in modern Indian history in recent years. Since independence, the intellectual history of India has been submerged successively by Marxist social history, subaltern studies (history from below) and postcolonial cultural studies. A revival of intellectual history represents a challenge and an opportunity, rather than a threat to these other approaches. Obviously, political, social and intellectual histories are intimately related. Yet it is important not simply to 'reduce' intellectual histories to the class, gender- or, in the Indian case, caste position- of those who articulated concepts about politics and society. European intellectual historians are acutely aware of the broadly aristocratic class status of thinkers such as Hobbes, Hegel or Mill. But this is the starting point for an investigation of the intellectual and social life of the concepts they articulated or transformed rather than its end point. A similar methodological difficulty arises in regard to the trans-national life of ideas. These lectures will certainly suggest that there are many analogies and connections to be discerned between thinkers and public men in Britain, Europe, America and South Asia. But we cannot simply absorb India or Southeast Asia into global history, or posit a straightforward diffusion of ideas from West to East. Concepts take life as arguments at specific times and in specific places. This is broadly, the Pocock/ Skinner position on intellectual history.<sup>6</sup> Yet I am also aware that the reception and transformation of ideas was

always inflected by the history, traditions and inherited webs of allegiances, experiences, and meanings in any given society. This is broadly the Heidegger/ Gadamer/ Koselleck position.<sup>7</sup>

My lectures concern the making and unmaking of a liberal political, economic and social agenda, particularly in India (and through it in Britain), but also in Ceylon and Southeast Asia. By 'liberalism' I mean a set of programmes and ideological orientations rather than a coherent set of doctrines. These programmes were centrally concerned with the pursuit of *liberty*: political, economic and religious. Yet the very fact that most South Asians during this period were subjects of a European racial despotism meant, paradoxically, that Indians, Chinese, Malays and other Asians came quickly to demand a more constructive state and a more directive civil society to address their needs. This set conceptual limits to the ideal of personal liberty. Appropriately, the adjectives commonly used in north Indian languages for 'liberal', variants of *udartavad*, from the Sanskrit *udara*, 'noble' or 'generous', imply an active generosity, rather than the 'libertarianism' or 'negative liberty' ambiguously suggested by the English word and assiduously emphasised by some contemporary British intellectual historians.

I hope, too, that an investigation of an intellectual history for South Asia will contribute not only to Asian, but also to Western historiography. I aim to show how the meanings of western ideas were appropriated, transformed and even revealed more fully in Asia; and how in turn, Asian ideas were propelled into a global arena. At this stage, I am using mainly English-language materials, since English was pre-eminently the language of political and social (though not religious) comment for the Asian intelligentsia during the colonial period. But English itself influenced vernaculars such as Bengali and Hindi, while

the tones of these languages also echoed through the English writings of indigenous intelligentsia.

Finally, I am concerned here with the ideas of elite ‘public men.’ Their understandings, however, were later appropriated and used by self-professed representatives of women and non-elites. The converse was also true. Popular views of justice and religious or political liberty-the lived experience of popular ideas- subtly inflected and was reconstructed in elite thought. In other words, rather than constituting historiography as an epistemological hierarchy with ‘thought at the top’ and social and economic action layered beneath it, we should have in mind a model of the circulation of ideas through all social forms and their constant reconstruction in relation to social action.<sup>8</sup> This is implicitly recognised by studies that emphasise the role in Indian history of ‘subaltern intellectuals.’

This returns us to the question of the meaning of liberalism. Today, many post-colonial theorists and also, ironically, Western neo-conservatives use the word ‘liberal’ as a term of opprobrium. For postcolonial theorists, the emphasis in liberal thought and the broader ‘enlightenment project’ on the individual, on formal systems of representation and the ascendancy of reason, leads to a soulless, alienating modernity. In colonial situations, it is said, liberalism became a mask for a European racial despotism, ‘othering’ the native. At best, liberalism attracted a few natives greedy for office, oppressed by a western, modernist ‘episteme’ that severed them from an authentic indigenous culture. Now, there is no doubt that even in the hands the most illustrious European liberal thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill or Alexis de Tocqueville, certain liberal themes at certain times became pretexts for keeping supposedly backward peoples permanently in the ‘waiting room of history.’ But my concern here is to show how liberal ideas could also be transformed and reconstructed. Asians and

other colonised peoples could use them as battering rams, with which to break out intellectually from that ‘waiting room.’ In turn, the broader population took up and transformed ideas of liberty and representation. Leaders of popular movements employed them to emancipate their followers from the condescension of these very elites. As I hope to show, it was the very porous and contradictory nature of liberal doctrines and programmes that made possible these conceptual ‘breakouts.’

I now return to the history of Asia’s liberal constitutional ‘moment’ of the 1810s and ‘20s. The protagonists were a small number of resident British and mixed race liberals and an even smaller number of Indians and other Asians of clerical, priestly or merchant background, who had learned European languages. The key concepts these new ‘public men’ envisioned at this specific time were, to repeat: the mixed constitution incorporating a degree of popular representation, the free press, free exchange and a division of the executive from the judiciary and legislature. Rammohan Roy and his supporters in Calcutta, Bombay or Madras, did not themselves call for full representative government in India, as some British radicals and the younger generation of Calcutta students did. Rammohan, however, explored the Sanskrit texts to create a historical genealogy for a future representative government in India.

Rammohan argued that in ancient times there been a perfect constitution in Hindu India. According to the scriptures, the Brahmin, or priestly caste, leading the people, had once reached a civil pact with the warrior caste, following what Rammohan re-interpreted as an archaic and bloody revolution. For him, this accommodation seemed to anticipate John Locke’s compact within English society. As in the English case, social contract had preceded and legitimised the contract between government and people. But in India, over time,

Brahmins had become greedy and kings corrupt. This ancient constitution had decayed. It had been swept away by Muslim invaders and, had finally, succumbed to the despotism Company's despotism. Nevertheless, the fact that India had once created such a constitution was proof that its people were attuned to liberty and the exercise of reason.

Rammohan aimed to build an Indian 'public' or civil society from the ground up. Virtuous conjugal households, adhering to the pure doctrines of the most ancient religious texts, the Vedas, rejecting corrupt ritual, polygamy and polytheism, would create this good society. It would be inspired not by soul-less utilitarianism, nor irrational Trinitarianism, but by a kind of Hindu Unitarianism, propagated by his friends in the Brahmo Samaj (the Society of the Supreme Being). Soon Indians would begin to share in power and legislative authority. Company government would be tempered by the advice of learned Indians within the Subcontinent and a knowledgeable and reformed British Parliament beyond it. The Company's monopoly would cease; small numbers of educated European colonists would bring skills to India and help to keep Indian wealth in India. In addition, the representative element in the 'mixed constitution' of this 'creole' society would be extended by the appointment of Indian civil officers and the use of vernacular languages. Most important would be the jury system and the free press.

I turn first to the issue of the composition and power of juries. At this period, the jury, rather than the local legislative council, lay at the heart of the idea of representation for constitutional liberals in Britain's Asian territories. British precedent provided a model. Here, the so-called grand jury had the right to criticise and make representations to government on matters of public interest. The petty jury, which sat alongside it the grand jury, held the power of life, death and liberty in criminal cases and jurisdiction over property in civil ones,

of course. To political thinkers in Britain from Hobbes, through Blackstone to J. S. Mill, the jury was at the heart of the constitution, more important than parliamentary representation itself.<sup>9</sup> Ordinary Britons agreed. The jury was ‘the grand palladium of British freedom and security’, according to the Recorder of the Malayan settlement of Penang in 1807.<sup>10</sup> The English 1825 Juries Act gave jurymen the power to judge points of law as well as of fact.

These jury rights were, in principle extended, to British subjects overseas. Yet here, contemporary British ideologies of cultural and religious difference clashed with the requirement that the sense of the local community be represented in courts. Most Asians were explicitly debarred from selection for grand and petty juries. Hindus in particular, were excluded on the grounds that, as non-Christians, they were incapable of taking a meaningful oath, or more broadly, because they were morally depraved by long ages of despotism. Yet jury service in Asia solely by British-born whites, raised practical problems. Indian and Chinese merchants, who underpinned much of the credit of Asian trade, were excluded from being jurors in vital commercial cases. Being born in Asia, even Eurasian Christians were barred from service. The result was that unworthy persons- itinerant sailors, petty European merchants and hangers-on of Company -were compelled into jury service.

So, by the 1820s, Asians in the major port cities were already arguing strongly for a change in the Indian regulations to permit their countrymen to serve. The argument was: first, that respectable Indians (or Chinese) were morally fully capable of taking oaths and that their religions abominated lying. Secondly, Indians argued that an ancient system of jury, the *panchayat* (literally, a body of five men) had always existed. Here again, Rammohan and his peer in south India, the Mysore judge, Ram Raz, drew on history in order to envision a future Indian civil society.

The East India Juries Bill of 1826 theoretically allowed respectable people who were neither British nor Christian to serve on juries. In practice, the concession was widely circumvented. Yet Asian Jews, Armenians and Portuguese were called onto grand juries as early as the later 1820s in India and the British Malay world. The 1819 Charter of Justice for Singapore also specifically envisioned indigenous jury service, though Indian and Chinese jurors were apparently not called until the 1850s. There were calls in the Straits Settlement along the Malaya coast for the inclusion of ‘honest and lawful men from among the Klings and Chinese.’<sup>11</sup> In Penang, juries were said to represent the ‘interest of the island and its community.’ Respectable Parsi (western Indian) merchants appear on jury lists in Bombay from the 1840s. As a focus of political argument, the jury system, therefore, anticipated the great agitations and debates about popular representation that echoed on through the history of colonial Asia and Africa until the Second World War.

The third British context for the emergence of Indian and Asian liberalism besides the constitution and the jury was the issue of press freedom. This took fire in the 1820s, and also raged on throughout the century. According to the Indians, the press, like the jury and the constitution itself, had indigenous antecedents. These were the news writers of Mughal India who informed officials of infractions of justice and upheld the Emperor’s law. Rammohan’s Bengali newspaper, the *Sambad Kaumudy* (‘Moon of Intelligence’) functioned as just such a newsheet . It noted great events such as the fate of the liberal constitutions of Europe, but also pointed to acts of official oppression. Rammohan’s publications implicitly compared British exploitation in Ireland with India and elaborated the idea of the ‘drain of wealth’ from the Subcontinent. This was a moment of great ideological creativity. British radicals in India, such as Buckingham and Lester Stanhope, a close collaborator of Bentham, joined Indians in

opposing censorship of newspapers and the exclusion from the Company's territories of editors who had supposedly offended its governments. The agitation reached its peak in 1823 and 1824, when the government deported Buckingham and his deputy editor to a chorus of denunciation by British radicals and Indian liberals.

Thus, the constitutional liberal 'moment' was a trans-national phenomenon, even though it took different forms in different contexts. Joseph Hume, an old India 'hand' and radical liberal, speaking in Parliament on the East India Judges Bill of 1825, again emphasised the anomaly that only British-born subjects could serve as jurymen on criminal trials in India. As he pointed out, this limitation did not apply in Ceylon, Singapore or even Sierra Leone, where people of 'mixed race', Asians and freed Africans could serve.<sup>12</sup>

The references in the Indian debate to Ceylon raises some interesting issues of ideological exchange within the British Empire and comparisons in intellectual history. Ceylon, conquered by the British in 1798, had an earlier exposure to reformist liberalism even than India. The key figure here was Sir Alexander Johnston, Chief Justice of the island. During the 1810s, Johnston carried out a campaign for the abolition of slavery and forced labour service. He challenged the governor's power to imprison or expel people it considered undesirable, well before Buckingham's expulsion became a *cause celebre* in India. Johnston also argued that local Europeans and Ceylonese should be considered eligible for posts in the civil service.<sup>13</sup> Though the idea was not pursued, he called for a legislative council to be established in the island, comprised of elected indigenous as well as European representatives. This was a much more radical step than Rammohan himself ever envisaged.<sup>14</sup>

Indigenous ‘voices’ are difficult to locate in the early history of British Ceylon. There was certainly no vernacular newspaper or public man of the stature of Rammohan. In fact, one of the largest agitations mounted by Portuguese descendents, Tamils and Cingalese alike, had been far from liberal in any sense: it opposed the immediate abolition of slavery on the island. Ceylonese headmen and landowners represented this as a sequestration of property. But Johnston seems to have been open to the advice of indigenous headmen, including one member of the famous Bandaranaike family, which later provided two early prime ministers of independent Sri Lanka. In an island where British economic interests depended even more than in India on the compliance of indigenous headmen, merchants and factors, this was not surprising. Governments and chief justices in crown colonies also seemed broadly more liberal than those within the East India Company’s despotism. Yet the persistence of Ceylonese traditions of local assembly and jurisprudence may also have played its part. In the upland territories of the island, a *panchayat*-like system called the *gansabhava*- impressed Johnston and his successors.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary oriental scholars held this body to be an even purer remnant of the ancient ‘Hindoo’ or ‘Buddhist’ constitutions than could be found in India, as Ceylon had been less marked by Muslim invasion.

Ceylon did, however, find its constitutional liberals. A decade or more after Rammohan’s death in 1833, a public man appeared on the island much more comparable to the Bengali reformer. This was James Alwis (1823-78).<sup>16</sup> A Christian Sinhalese lawyer in Colombo, Alwis participated in the Ceylon League, founded in 1864, a typical mid-century reforming association. He was a member of the legislative council, a correspondent of later British radicals, such as William Digby, and a writer for the *Times of Ceylon* and the local learned journals. Alwis, though a Christian, spent much of his intellectual energy defending Buddhism against the attacks of evangelicals such as R.S. Hardy, author of *The British*

*Government and the idolatry of Ceylon* (published in 1839). Buddhism, argued Alwis, had 'broken the fetters in which Brahminism was bound.' Buddhism had created the 'integrated' and tolerant *constitution* of medieval Ceylon.<sup>17</sup> Reversing the argument of James and John Mill, he argued that Dutch and British colonialism had corrupted this true Buddhist constitution, leading to the fraudulent religious system of the present. It seems certain that Alwis knew of Rammohan and 'Hindu Unitarianism.' Alwis not only dwelt on the island's ancient constitutional system, but also distinguished active, this-worldly Buddhism from the staleness of the monastery. Alwis wanted to blend the antique tolerance of Buddhism with modern liberalism. For him, as for Rammohan, the press was essential. Alwis argued that, just as the Buddhist kings of old had attended carefully to reports on the condition of the people, the British should take careful note of the island's Tamil and Sinhalese newspapers.<sup>18</sup> Like Rammohan, Alwis disliked the doctrine of regular providential intervention in history, and like him again, he argued for the education of women and the importance of a chaste vernacular language.

I will now move to Southeast Asia. There are three respects in which we can see quite clear connections between India's and Ceylon's constitutional liberal 'moment' and similar movements of ideas in Southeast Asia or what Raffles called 'India beyond the Ganges.' In early 1819, it hung in the balance whether the authorities in London and Calcutta would allow Raffles to retain his newly founded colony of Singapore. Raffles had occupied the settlement and garrisoned it with a party of Indian troops returning from Sumatra. This was a move that clearly exceeded the orders of London and Calcutta. The Dutch, who had held the territory, were outraged. So it was far from an accident that the first Calcutta newspaper to raise an agitation in favour of the new settlement as a bastion of Asian free trade and British commercial benevolence was Buckingham's and Rammohan's new *Calcutta Journal*.<sup>19</sup>

Representing the popular opposition to the Directors' in the Court of Proprietors in London and expatriate and indigenous opposition to the 'new Moghul', the Company, in Calcutta, the *Journal* played an important role in frustrating the authorities' attempt to hand back Singapore to the Dutch monopoly. As I told the foreign minister of Singapore last year, Rammohan is conventionally known as the 'father of the modern India.' Perhaps he was also the 'father of modern Singapore.'

Though he was an East India Company servant, Raffles's own understanding of what he had done in Singapore owed much to this same trend of thought. He boasted in July 1823: 'the constitution which I have given to Singapore is certainly the purest and most liberal in India.'<sup>20</sup> Raffles had introduced a series of checks on the power of the Company in the port city. He set up a system by which twelve European magistrates were selected to aid in the governance of the settlement for one year at a time. In theory at least, the settlement's grand jury could include Eurasians and Asians. Raffles did, however, immediately draw in key Chinese and Indian leaders as his unofficial advisers and put them on the committee that drew up plans for the town's extension and development.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, he gradually excluded what he regarded as the backward Malay rajas from public life. Finally, the rhetoric surrounding the formation of Raffles's Singapore Institution of higher education is reminiscent of some of the themes that were being broached by British radicals and Unitarians and by Rammohan himself. The Institution was, Raffles proclaimed, designed to revive Chinese and Malay learning which had been corrupted by Muslim despotism and Chinese cultural stagnation. This move would presage the rise of a new civilisation in the East.

On this southeast section of the expanding arc of British colonial power, we also encounter a contemporary of Rammohan Roy's, who achieved a similar iconic status in another proto-nationalist historiography. This is Munshi Abdullah, whose *Hikayat Abdullah* and narratives of his travels to the various kingdoms of the Malaya peninsula rank as the first canonical texts of modern Malayan history. Like Rammohan, Abdullah's legacy was contentious and remains so. Some regard him as the first voice raised against the arbitrary tyranny of the Malaya rulers, others as a client of the British, a 'colonised mind' who unjustly accused the Malaysians of backwardness.

The Malay sultanate, of course, differed in crucial respects from its Indian equivalents, both Hindu and Muslim. And Abdullah's narrative has to be related very specifically to the tradition of Malay ruler-ship, the *Kerajaan*, as it was elaborated by early modern dynastic annals and Arabic histories. Anthony Milner has ably demonstrated this point. In Malaya, of course, there was no formal ideology of caste, nor much evidence of the sort of clerical establishment that worked for the Indo-Muslim kingdoms. To this extent, the targets of Abdullah's early liberal scorn differed significantly from those of his contemporaries in India.

Nevertheless, there are several respects in which we see traces of Asia's moment of liberalism reflected in the ideas of the Malay writer. First, both men emerged out of comparable indigenous traditions of thought. Rammohan's vedantic universalism was paralleled by Munshi Abdullah's Muslim universalism. Abdullah came of a south Indian Tamil-Arabic trading lineage, adherents of a Muslim tradition that balanced rationalistic teaching with Sufi mysticism. Rammohan himself had incorporated aspects of this tradition in his tract 'Advice to the monotheists'. Just as Rammohan was outcaste from his family for

consorting with Christians and pouring scorn on idol worship, so Abdullah was ostracised for learning English and consorting with British officials, such as Raffles and John Crawfurd.

The writings of Rammohan and Abdullah both reflected the specific debates of the 1820s and '30s. These have not been fully taken into account in what is generally a first class historiography of the Malay world. Abdullah, for instance, explicitly compared the equitable workings of the grand and petty juries, which he saw in Singapore and Penang, with the arbitrary justice of the sultans.

Again, while no indigenous newspaper was to be published in Southeast Asia until some years later, Abdullah was critically aware of the importance of printing and, like Rammohan, was associated with missionary attempts to create dictionaries of the vernacular languages. It was indeed in the significance that both men attributed to the moral and educational effects of the expansion of communication in the vernacular that their interests converged. Rammohan wanted a *sadh* (pure) Bengali, with neither too much Sanskrit, nor too much local argot. Abdullah castigated the Malays for not having a proper national language. Either they used Arabic, or they were illiterate. To both men, vernacular communication was not just a medium; it was the message of liberty, justice and community.

For Abdullah, the issue of the lack of a proper Malayan language raised the wider issue of Malay 'backwardness.' He wrote of Malays' 'inability to change or modernise their ideas. They utterly refuse to abandon the superstitions of the past.'<sup>22</sup> Here he has seemed complicit in the genesis of the colonial Malayan mythology of the lazy or fanatical native. There is no doubt that, like Rammohan's categorising of the attributes Indian peoples on the basis of climate, Abdullah's use of speech, education and juvenile upbringing, as measures of civilisation were partly derived from colonial ethnographies. Yet both men put these themes

into use in fierce indigenous debates about political and social change. Both believed that the spread of literacy and literate instruments could improve Asian people without generations of European tutelage. Both subtly reconstructed British stereotypes. Abdullah, for instance, compared the Malay rulers' illiteracy and failure to discipline their children with the practices of other peoples he admired 'the English, Indians, Arabs and Chinese.' By contrast, the British tended to disparage all these Asian peoples equally.

The press- that other icon of the liberal constitutional moment- was also a major source of debate in the Straits Settlements and Asian opinion itself was indirectly at issue. When Rammohan's and Buckingham's battles with the Indian authorities were at their peak, a related controversy broke out between the authorities in Calcutta, Penang and Singapore. In 1827 the semi-official *Prince of Wales Gazette* of Penang passed remarks on the Company's diplomatic activities in Siam, which were regarded as derogatory in Calcutta. The Calcutta authorities censured the Penang authorities. Penang reacted furiously, condemning the 'extreme latitude allowed to the press of Calcutta, where almost every subject, private and public, appears to be open to the most free discussion', including 'gross and unfounded' attacks on the Penang government.<sup>23</sup> Shortly afterwards the same government took action against the *Singapore Gazette* for alarming the 'native population' in regard to their religious opinions and sowing dissension in society through the airing of scandals. As in India, the authorities worried about the activities of expatriate radicals who condemned Tory taxation and its 'love of military despotism.'<sup>24</sup> They were also concerned that indigenous partisans of dispossessed local princes might use a liberated press against the Company's governments.

These controversies in Calcutta and on the Malay coast highlight an important aspect of modern political thought: its polarised and agonistic nature: positions are stated in the form

of arguments and counter-arguments. The Left/Right dichotomy is the most obvious manifestation of this. This is not to say that the polarisation of political doctrine was uniquely modern, of course. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, experience of revolution and reaction across the world had more precisely defined antagonistic political ideologies. From the 1800s liberal ideologies in India were in constantly in debate and contestation with various forms of neo-conservatism, British and Indian. The position adopted by the officials and clients of the East India Company in its arguments before the Privy Council and public discourse can best be described as 'bastard authoritarianism'-an assertion of authority reinforced by a notion of commercial contract. Liberals liked to portray the Company as a local variant of the reactionary powers of the Holy Alliance, or alternatively, as despotic successor to the Mughals. In fact, the Company's 'supreme government' in Bengal based its power on a variety of contingent and somewhat unsteady claims. 'Tory' officials certainly played on the vague need for trust in the wisdom of wise aristocratic governance supported by the established Church. Indeed, even in Calcutta, a libel against the Anglican Church could still be represented as a libel against all justly constituted authority. An oriental whiff of the Holy Alliance was certainly in the air. In theory, too, the governor general rested his claims to executive power on Royal Prerogative devolved to the Company by Parliament, untrammelled by the thicket of legislation that hedged it around in Britain and Ireland.

At another level of argument, however, Company officials and clients advanced a modern and, perhaps more sinister case: that neither Indians nor Britons could enjoy civil liberties in the subcontinent. Outside the presidency settlements, it was said, Indian subjects were effectively living under martial law or under the despotic government of indigenous rulers. Wellington himself had made this argument. The vast majority of British subjects in

India were there as servants of the Company, effectively under a kind of indenture. Alternatively, they were there under Company licence and that licence could be withdrawn at will. Here, the Company had recourse to arguments derived from the law of contract. Far from being a civil society in the making, the British in India should deport themselves as if they were working in the premises of a vast commercial organisation, or were indentured sailors on a merchant ship. As it happened, many Britons literally landed up in India and were not immediately deported because of the skills they brought. Yet the Company always claimed the right to expel them if it believed that they threatened the peace. *John Bull* the Calcutta Tory newspaper drove home the point by printing the covenant which Company servants and licensed inhabitants of its territories were supposed to have signed. They promised to 'behave conformable to rules, orders and directions of the said United Company or the presidents and councils of their settlements aforesaid.' The liberals and radicals responded with the argument that 'irresponsible and unlimited government is repugnant to English law', both at home and abroad. The 'will' of the governor general could not be the ground of just government.<sup>25</sup> There were such things as 'illegal instruments if they run contrary to English law.' The Company's contracts might be no better than an agreement in England by, for instance, which a man agreed to be sold into slavery. This, of course, would be nugatory in law.

Finally, officials endlessly stressed the importance of maintaining the 'face' and authority of Government in India since it was constantly threatened by Indian revolt or by the danger of mutiny by its own Indian troops. Not surprisingly, this argument was used persistently during the first Burma War of 1824-6, which saw the mutiny of the Company's sepoys in Bengal. Indian customs, it was said, were highly conservative and tampering with them by promoting western education or encouraging Christian missionary activity would

only arouse discontent. Partisans of the Company argued in sum that 'English liberties' did not in general hold in India and that there was 'no Indian public', a position precisely enunciated by Sir John Malcolm, but fiercely resisted by the liberals of the presidency cities and their Indian allies. It was this conservative position that led both British and Indian editors to try hard to create such a 'public' through the expansion of enlightened communication and the press.

Just as British liberalism was a foil for a developing colonial conservatism and vice versa, so the same was true for the small Indian public. Rammohan and the Brahmo Samaj countered not only by the old brahmanical hierarchy, but also by a kind of neo-conservatism that reached its apogee in the Dharma Sabha (Pious Association), an organisation opposed the ban on widow burning which Rammohan had urged. Two themes run through early Indian neo-conservatism: the need to protect Hindu knowledge from oppression and the need to preserve the purity and livelihoods of Indians from European colonisation.

Several seventeenth- and eighteenth century Indian and Indo-Islamic texts advert to the wicked, violent and polluting habits of Europeans in the subcontinent. But it was specifically in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century that a coherent neo-conservative ideology arose in Bengal, Bombay and Madras. It emerged in the context of debates about European knowledge, European colonisation, European medicine, widow burning and attacks on the life-style of the Brahmin. These debates raged between British and Indian editors but also between Rammohan and his neo-orthodox opponents.

As early as 1818, in response to manuscript collection by the European members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, a group of neo-orthodox Hindus formed the Calcutta Hindoo

Literary Society. Its purpose was reportedly to preserve the ancient Sanskrit texts from the assault of missionaries and European orientalists. According to the Society's prospectus, Hindu learning was under even greater threat than it had been during the 'oppression of the Muhammadan kings.' It is significant that Muslim rule came to serve the purpose of a rhetorical negative for both British proponents of the civilising mission in India and for Hindu conservatives in the same period. Later, with attacks by missionaries and Rammohan's supporters on widow burning the newspaper *Chandrika Patrika* was founded to protect Hindu religion from assault. By 1822 it was organising a subscription to establish a press to print Sanskrit books and found a library in which to house them, once again deploring the decline of traditional learning.<sup>26</sup> Finally in 1829, the Dharma Sabha came into being.

The *Chandrika* noted that in Bengal 'many in order to pass for very religious men, do not make use of any Europe goods.'<sup>27</sup> Yet, when ill, they drank things that they ought not to drink because indigenous medical practitioners were not provided with proper training, like European ones. Because the foreign government had not provided proper indigenous medical facilities, 'respectable people take medicines from such physicians as Telee, Maly, Saukhary, Augoory, Mochy and other similar low casts, who have not even heard the name Shaster [holy writ].'<sup>28</sup> Here we see a very early intimation of *swadeshi*, the consumption of home produce for religious and national salvation. This was to become the key ideology and practice of Indian nationalists nearly a century later. At the same time, the newly respectable of Calcutta were voicing a more articulate argument for ritual difference that was also to constantly be reinvented as a theme of Hindu neo-conservatism at least until the 1980s.

This was an emphasis on the particular importance of the soil of India itself. In answering Christian missionary attacks Hindu ideologues were inclined to claim the superior

spirituality of Hinduism, because meritorious acts were doubly virtuous when carried out on the sacred soil of India. Yet the early Hindu conservative ideology in Bengal also argued the negative of this: that pious Hindus could not leave India because of the ritual restrictions on crossing the polluting ocean. If India were to be subject to increasing European colonisation, therefore, Hindus would inevitably be oppressed and degraded because they could not emigrate for work. Two aspects of this deserve comment. First, these neo-conservative writers were implicitly comparing themselves both with Europeans and with Muslims. Europeans, when unable to sustain themselves in their own countries, could resort to emigration to the colonies. Muslims had the option of *hijra*- fleeing to a properly Islamic land, as several North Indian Muslim purist leaders had recently done. But this was not open to Hindus. Secondly, there was implicit here the idea of a national political economy. This was the case sometime before the German protectionist, Friedrich List's doctrines became known in Bengal. Alongside the danger to caste, the Dharma Sabha's petitions rejecting European colonisation specifically mentioned the loss of income that artisans were already suffering with the influx of Europeans into Calcutta. This seems to have been a response to arguments made by British authors – and indeed by Rammohan himself-that the settlement of several thousand British landholders in India would soon bring in its wake numbers of artisan specialists. So, by linking religious purity with economic well being, these early conservative ideologues were again anticipating important themes in the ideological arsenal of the future Hindu right.

I want to conclude by returning to some of the methodological issues I raised at the start of this lecture. The historian, S N Mukherjee's illuminating writings on Rammohan and his contemporaries in the 1960s and '70s depicted their ideas as a reflection of the rise of the bourgeois individual in early colonial India.<sup>29</sup> Mukherjee saw the conflict between them and

the Hindu conservatives as little more than an ideological mask for the historical transition to dependent capitalism. Mukherjee was writing at the high point of Bengali Marxism in the 1960s and '70s. Likewise, Sumit Sarkar, painted Rammohan as a kind of failed Nehru era secularist, who abandoned the pluralism of his tract 'Advice to the Monotheists' for a stale Hindu vedantism.<sup>30</sup> Sarkar was writing in the 1980s when the Indian left stood aghast at the rise of political Hinduism. Munshi Abdullah, for his part, became for some in independent Malaysia and Singapore, a liberal imperialist and denier of authentic Malayan-ness.

It is not that I think these views are all completely wrong. Historical judgement is heuristic, not determinant, and even the most teleological or 'presentist' position may help to refine our ideas. But these analyses tell us both too much and too little. Above all, they do not tell us enough about the lived experience of ideas and their power to move people to thought and action at particular times and in particular places. For related reasons, I am wary of a baldly applied Kosellek-type approach to the history of concepts, especially if it seems in danger of taking them out of context and tracing them through time in order to address our present discontents with Indian democracy, European consumerism or British and American foreign policy, for instance.

We need, therefore, to pay close attention to the meaning of ideas and arguments in their time. Take 'constitution' one of the key terms in this lecture: along with free press, jury and *panchayat*. At this time, the term constitution had a particular meaning for people as diverse as Rammohan, Buckingham, Raffles, or the Portuguese Eurasians of the Asian port cities. True, East India Company officials had pondered the 'Moghul constitution' in the 1770s and the 'constitution of the kingdom of Mysore' in the 1790s. But this earlier generation had been searching for a historicist idiom with which to legitimate British

domination. After the revolutions of 1776, 1789 and 1812, the term constitution was transformed into something very different. It became associated with the idea of the representation of the people; indeed, with a trans-national traffic in political emotion directed to the liberation of the people. In turn, Rammohan and others created an Asian genealogy for the idea of constitutional liberty and constitutional balance, which incorporated a view of the relations of castes within a perfect primeval civil society.

In tracing further a history of concepts it would quite legitimate to note that debates about constitution and representation continued unabated until the 1940s and '50s, when B D Ambedkar, the creator of the Constitution of the Republic of India, inherited the power and saliency of Rammohan's term. Yet by the mid-twentieth century the terms of debate, political argument and the wider social context, had changed the meaning of the word 'constitution' quite dramatically. Democracy and republicanism had swept away the 'mixed constitution' of the earlier period; the uplift of untouchables had created a wholly new meaning of caste and the independence struggle had revolutionised the meaning of the state. Our methodology needs to tread a difficult path between reducing ideas to a facile 'social context' and making them 'objects' that could be handed down through time like family silver. I am not quite sure how the balance can be found, but at least it should be kept constantly in mind.

So, Southern Asia's constitutional liberal moment of the 1810s and '20s had affinities with Europe and America's 'Machiavellian moment.' But the ideas of constitution, liberty and representation, which became matters of public political affect, as well as political theory, had been dramatically transformed by their geographical and historical context. Tomorrow I'll go on to examine the emergence of the idea of class and a 'benign sociology' of Asian subject peoples between the 1830s and the 1880s.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of part of this lecture has been published in ‘ An intellectual History for India’ ed. Shruti Kapila, *Modern Intellectual History*, 4,1, April 2007; I am grateful to all the contributors to that issue for their intellectual stimulation.

<sup>2</sup> David Armitage, *The declaration of Independence. A global history* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007)

<sup>3</sup> *Bombay Courier*, 19 January 1822, citing *Goa Gazette* of December.

<sup>4</sup> Pratima Kamat, *Farar Far. Local resistance to colonial hegemony in Goa 1510-1912* (Panaji, Goa, 1999), pp. 129-134.

<sup>5</sup> *Calcutta Journal*, 27 August 1822.

<sup>6</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics, I, regarding method* (Cambridge, 2002); JGA Pocock, *Virtue, commerce and history* (Cambridge, 1984)

<sup>7</sup> Jean Grondin (tr. Kathryn Plant), *The philosophy of Gadamer* (Acumen, London, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> As far as I understand it, this is similar to the approach suggested by Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy past and future*, edited by S. Moyne (New York, 2006), esp. pp. 58-76.

<sup>9</sup> J.S.Cockburn and Thomas A. Green (eds.), *Twelve good men and true. The criminal trial jury in England 1200-1800* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Y.K Lee, ‘The grand jury in early Singapore (1819-73), *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1872-3, 46, 2, 1973, 59.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Oriental Herald*, July-Sept 1825, p. 173.

<sup>13</sup> *The Colebrooke-Cameron papers. Documents on British colonial policy in Ceylon 1796-1833* ed. G.C Mendis (Oxford UP, 1956) 2 vols, intro. p. lvi.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Charter of Justice, 1810,’ *Ibid*, 2, pp. 200-207, et seq.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* I, 69-70

<sup>16</sup> Yasmine Gooneratne, *English literature in Ceylon 1815-78* (Colombo, 1968), p. 129 ff.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*’ p. 130; cf. Alwis, ‘On the Buddhist governments of Ceylon’, *Ceylon United Services Library Journal*, 1863.

<sup>18</sup> *Times of Ceylon*, 22 September 1864.

<sup>19</sup> M. C. Turnbull, *A history of Singapore 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur, 1977) p.11.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 26

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.p. 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> A H Hill (ed. Tr) Hikayat Abdullah., *JMBRAS*, 28, 3, 1955, p. 271

<sup>23</sup> Governor and Council of Prince of Wales Island to Court of Directors, 6 August 1827, ‘Complaints of the Singapore government against the press at Prince of Wales Island’ and of the government of Prince of Wales Island against the press at Singapore’, Boards Collections F4 952 27007, AA, BL.

<sup>24</sup> *Bengal Chronicle* 30 March 1827, in J. Burney to Swinton, Sec. Govt of Bengal 10 May 1827, *ibid.*

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<sup>25</sup> *Calcutta Journal*, 3 September 1822.

<sup>26</sup> *Chandrika Samachar*, *CJ*, 4 July 1822

<sup>27</sup> *Chandrika Samachar* extracted in *CJ*, 1 July 1822.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* *CJ* 12 July 1822.

<sup>29</sup> S N Mukherjee, *Citizen Historian* (Canberra, 1996)

<sup>30</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *A critique of colonial India* (Calcutta, 1986)