CHAPTER SEVEN

ASIANS AMONG EUROPEANS

After focusing on what Europeans essentially thought about themselves, we will now focus on what the Europeans thought about Asians. There is by now a vast literature dealing with the encounter between “us” (the Europeans) and the “Other” either inspired by the work of Tzvetan Todorov or an even larger corpus of postcolonial writing inspired by Edward Said (with François Fanon as its more distant progenitor).

And its significance cannot be gainsaid. In particular it should make historians using early modern European sources far more cautious toward them but there is in much recent postcolonial writings a double problem. On the one hand there is a risk of falling into agnosticism on what “Asia” actually is; “India” does not actually exist but is what the British made of it. There is no real India beyond the colonial archive. This not only (often under the banner of anti-colonial rhetoric) seems to grossly overrate the importance of the British, but is also a rather authoritarian position. It negates the idea that Indian subalterns can speak at all. It is besides a rather naïve one; if we cannot know India outside of the colonial archive how can we know at all that “India is what the British make of it”? That presumes we have some objective standard what is the “real” India and what it is not. Thus, many recent studies of “the production of colonial knowledge” start with at least questionable ideas about pre-colonial—the “real” India—which often seem to be dictated by an “ought to have been” rather than an “is.”

On the other hand the reading against the grain of this body of theory has a hazard of ignoring what writers are actually saying to put them into a conceptual box in which Europeans in eighteenth century Asia were not able to perceive any reality beyond their own European mental categories. Such a conceptual box additionally has a risk of reading present political preoccupations into the past—political correctness in retrospect. And, moreover, as Joan Pau Rubiès has brilliantly argued, it often simply assumes that the “Asians” themselves were objective witnesses.

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As Rubiès shows there is no reason why Vijayanagara’s poets writing in commission of the Emperor should have been any less biased or blinded by cultural prejudices than were European visitors; thus an elite-bias, thus a court-bias.2

One should approach Asian sources with as much caution as European sources and, as regards the Europeans, the aim should rather be to peel-off a skin of cultural and racist pre-conception to look at what the Europeans were precisely describing rather than reading against the grain. Furthermore, rather than assuming a monadic worldview of the Europeans, which they somehow took with them from Europe, we should remember that European conceptions and pre-conceptions evolved in dialogue with and were often molded by Asian views.

As Jürgen Osterhammel3 argued in a truly encyclopaedic study, the attitude of Europeans toward Asians underwent a profound shift in the eighteenth century that he has characterized as the disenchantment of Asia (Die Entzauberung Asiens). From a distant wonderland which was often seen as an example for Europe—still admired in the Sino-philic wave of the Enlightenment as an example for government and as the original home of spiritual wisdom by the German romantics and to some extent by the British Orientalists—“Asia” began increasingly to be seen instead as a problem: a dirt poor mass of ignorant peasants under despotic governments awaiting improvement by enlightened British, Dutch, or Portuguese rule.

Osterhammel’s argument is mostly focused on visions on Asia in the European literature, a matter beyond our remit, but to some extent a similar shift can also be discerned in the writings of Europeans in Asia. As the Europeans assumed jurisdiction over large groups of Asians, a language of, at least occasional, enchantment, and curiosity began to give way to one of improvement (as we will see in the fourth volume). As I will argue later on in detail this has to do with a shift in the way the state looked to its subjects, which was closely linked to the Enlightenment project in turn.

But perhaps rather there had formed—as Louis Dermigny put it in an equally beautiful as hard to translate essay—two myths;

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