CHAPTER EIGHT

CULTURAL ENCOUNTER, RECIPROCITIES, AND MUSLIM RESPONSES (APPROX. 1750–1870)

The socio-economic and political developments following the decline of the Mughal Empire and the beginning of European colonial power had a profound impact on both the colonialised culture and the colonialisier. The changes were reflected in normative aspects underlying the process of colonialisation, eventually finding their way into scholarship. In this context projection is considered a cultural technique for self-affirmation and demarcation, assigning a collective (negative) identity to the (colonialised) “other”. This process of “othering” had different purposes: the other was denigrated, and the colonialists generated their identity in a specific colonial context, ultimately for the purpose of control (see also Chap. 9). Indeed, some European enlightenment figures had even gone so far as to use the “Orient” as a didactic background to criticise their urban societies, thereby setting out the frame of reference for their identities. The literary technique of contextual alienation and distancing, such as can be found in Montesquieu’s “Persian Letters” (1721) or Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Citizen of the World; or Letters from a Chinese philosopher, residing in London, to his friends in the East” (1762), was born in this period. These and subsequent processes of projection were connected among, others things, with the fact that Europeans, as colonial masters, advanced to confront the world outside Europe. There they were faced with attitudes and norms that also forced them to question their perceptions. In doing so, they also tended to accept some of these strange ideas, and thus exposed themselves to some sort of cultural hybridisation which could then only be overcome by reconstructing their own culture as something “pure”, in contrast to the “degenerate”, “impure” culture of the colonialised. The construction of “purification”-discourse—vis-à-vis the hybrid

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other—was a proven device to establish a unilateral power-relationship that helped foster a global colonial identity and culture, the core of which lay in Europe. In this way, collective antagonisms developed, so that even the Oriental crusades which had been critically evaluated by European enlightenment scholars, were now for the first time perceived in terms of cultural clash. Analogously, Europe and Asia were constructed in the eighteenth century and very predominantly in the nineteenth century in terms of arenas of power politics. For instance, it was during this time that the eastern borders of Europe were conceptualised, with the Balkans and Transoxiana being considered as buffers or gaps between the two.³

Encountering the Orient. Imaginaries and reciprocities

Growing foreign interest in India provided the background for these developments. By the end of eighteen century, more and more Europeans, especially British, had come to India while some Indians had gone to Britain. It was during this period of flux that mutual perceptions changed, particularly so between 1790 and 1820. Gradually the newcomers from Europe came to dominate the economy and started demanding the use of the English language and imperial manners in spheres in which they operated. This type of cultural interaction was reflected in colonial efforts started under Charles Cornwallis (1738–1805), Governor-General from 1785–93. His efforts to reform the administration were informed by a policy of racist exclusion, nourished by cultural and religious ideas, whereby he replaced all senior Indian officeholders by Company servants. The reason given was that every Indian was assumed to be corrupt by nature.⁴ Only British employees could guarantee morality and honesty of character. This orientalist (in Edward Said’s sense of the term) discourse of alterity and identity was to have an important role to play later, as we shall see below and in the following chapters.

Based on various practical-philosophical ideas, nineteenth century colonial politics was perceived and consequently legitimised as evolu-