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Indian Government and Rulers

On the basis of their perception/representation of Indian government and rulers, British commentators can again be classified into the two broad schools identified earlier – ‘primitive’ and ‘degenerate’. Both assumed that Indians were incapable of proper self-government. This once again was because Indian structures resembled Britain’s but were simultaneously quite distinct and alien. When the writers analysed the features they were, as before, stymied by the parallels/differences. How, for example, could a British commentator/observer explain or understand a legal system which seemed to function entirely on the basis of the authority of the ruler, rather than on written laws – even though there were written laws, both Hindu and Muslim? Part of the problem was India’s size – Britons were observing a variety of systems but they insisted on seeing it as unitary. Furthermore, Indian government was not based on the assumptions of the British – the landowners or rich elite did not necessarily ‘choose’ the government, they were the government. Besides, there was the problem in many areas of a ‘foreign’ Islamic ruling class with primarily Hindu subjects. Rather than attempt to investigate the systems properly, most commentators chose to report on superficial aspects, even responding on the basis of the Christian-Islamic rivalry they were familiar with. Indian Islamic government was therefore seen as either militarist, imposing its will on a passive subject people, or as decadent, while Hindu government was seen as being similar to the Hindu religion, confused, static, tradition- and/or custom-bound.

The primary response was one of Muslim-bashing because the form of government most familiar to the British in India was Mughal or a derivation of it in one of the empire’s successor states. For example, an article in the Gentleman’s Magazine in 1757 describing Bengal as ‘one of the most fruitful countries in the world, superior even to Egypt itself’ noted disapprovingly that it suffered

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from a government that was 'arbitrary, and he [the prince] is master of the lives as well as the goods of his subjects', and the historian Dow asserted that 'The faith of Mahommed is peculiarly calculated for despotism.' Dow's explanation was detailed:

The [Islamic] legislator...derived his success from the sword, more than from his eloquence and address. The tyranny which he established was of the most extensive kind. He enslaved the mind as well as the body. The abrupt argument of the sword brought conviction, when persuasion and delusion failed.

Comparing the Hindus and the Muslims Dow noted that 'Those countries, governed by native princes, which lay beyond the devastations of the Mahommedans, are rich, and cultivated to the highest degree.' In his opinion Islam had been able to impose itself on India because Hinduism had affected the natives adversely: 'Mild, humane, obedient, and industrious, they are of all nations on earth the most easily conquered and governed.' In his reading, therefore, Islamic rule in India was a 'primitive' form imposed on a 'decadent/primitive' people.

Another issue that exercised minds was whether India was better off under British rule than under its own rulers. While most accepted that British rule was probably preferable, they did not necessarily accept that British rule as it existed at that time - i.e. Company rule - was the appropriate form. Dow was one of those to attack the Company, even informing his readers that prior to Siraj-ud-Daulah Bengal 'was one of the richest, most populous, and best cultivated kingdoms in the world. The great men and merchants were wallowing in wealth and luxury; the inferior tenants and the manufacturers were blessed with plenty.' According to him much of the trouble began when the Company took control:

The good fortune which had at first forsaken us, returned to our arms; and, by the assistance, or rather opportune treachery of Jaffier, one of his generals, he was deposed and murdered. We raised the Traitor, as a reward for his convenient treason, to a throne still warm with the blood of his lord; and the measure seemed to be justified, by our apparent inability of retaining the conquered province in our own hands... The civil wars, to which a violent desire of creating Nabobs gave rise, were attended with