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‘The Most Subtle–Minded and Profoundly Devout People in Asia’: Alfred Lyall on Hinduism, Caste and the State in Colonial India

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In his president’s address to the (not yet Royal) Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1892, Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) mentioned several anthropological matters of interest that lay outside its own auspices, including work in India by experienced administrators with anthropological expertise, such as ‘Sir Alfred Lyall, Mr. Risley, Mr. Ibbetson, and Mr. Crooke … whose published writings hold important places in our science’ [1]. By the end of the nineteenth century, H. H. Risley (1851–1911), Denzil Ibbetson (1847–1908) and William Crooke (1848–1923), who were one generation junior to Lyall, were the leading anthropologists of British India, but Lyall’s own presence on Tylor’s list is more surprising. The important anthropological publications of the other three men, who all actively promoted ethnographic inquiry in India as well, were their ethnographic reports on tribes and castes, in which they also contributed to anthropological debates about, for example, the origins and functions of caste, and the relationship between totemism and exogamy [2]. Lyall, however, whom Philip Mason called a ‘man of letters’ who ‘appreciate[d] intensely all intellectual pleasures’, was a historian and poet, as well as an anthropologist [3]. He was, moreover, an unusually perceptive and sympathetic observer of Indian society and especially Hinduism, the religion of Asia’s ‘most subtle-minded and profoundly devout people’ [4].

Lyall wrote extensively throughout his life, but his scholarly reputation in the

anthropological field was mainly based on articles first published in leading British periodicals and later collected in two volumes of *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social*, first published in 1882 and 1899 [5]. Tylor specially mentioned Lyall's 1891 Rede lecture on Hinduism, which described the 'whole panorama of religious ideas' within it, 'from the worship of fetish-stones and of the deified ghosts of British officers, to Pantheism' [6]. Tylor also praised Lyall's lucid style, which contributed to his wide readership in Victorian England and India, although he was sometimes wordy and hard to follow. Today's readers are also less likely to appreciate his periodic passages of ornate prose, let alone his poetry, and may find his classical and biblical allusions perplexing. In any case, though, Lyall's writings – in comparison with those of Risley, Ibbetson and Crooke – look relatively slight, so that one of my aims in this article is to explain why Tylor and others regarded him as an important anthropologist of colonial India.

Early Life and Official Career

Alfred Comyn Lyall was born on 4 January 1835 in Coulsdon, a small town in Surrey, but he spent most of his childhood in a village in Kent, where his father was the Church of England vicar. He was a pupil at Eton College, the famous public school, from 1845 to 1851. In 1853, his uncle nominated him for a place at Haileybury, the East India Company's training college, where students stayed for two years to prepare themselves for careers in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), the elite administrative corps of the British Raj, especially by studying Indian languages [7]. If they passed the examinations at the end of the course, they could join the service, as Lyall did in 1855. He then sailed for India and took up his first appointment as a junior district officer (assistant magistrate and collector) in January 1856 in Bulandsharh district, about 70 kilometres east of Delhi in the North-Western Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). Lyall was one of the last members of the ICS to graduate from Haileybury, because the recruitment system was reformed in 1855, so that candidates were selected by competitive examination, instead of nomination.

Bulandsharh is close to Meerut, where the great rebellion or 'Indian Mutiny' – or 'Sepoy Mutiny' – broke out in May 1857 and for more than a year Lyall was actively involved in fighting the rebels [8]. He blamed the rebellion on the Muslims and their fanatical hate of the British, and his antipathy towards Muslims and Islam lasted all his life, according to his biographer Mortimer Durand [9]. In late 1858, after the rebellion ended, 'Company rule' gave way to 'Crown rule', as authority over the government of India was transferred from the East India Company to the British government. Lyall was next appointed, in 1862, as a district officer in Agra, also in the North-Western Provinces. In 1864, he was transferred to Nagpur in the Central Provinces (now in eastern Maharashtra) and promoted to the position of deputy commissioner in charge of several districts. Three years later, he was further promoted to the commissionership of West Berar, which adjoined the Central Provinces to the south-west. (Berar, formally the Hyderabad Assigned Districts, was an area of Hyderabad princely state whose revenue was taken by the British; it was also administered by its British resident

from 1853 until 1903, when it was made into a division of the Central Provinces.) In 1873–1874, Lyall worked in the government of India's Home Department and in 1874–8 he was the governor-general's agent in Rajputana (now Rajasthan), that is, the government's representative to the territory's twenty princely states and chiefships. After a period back in England, he served in the Indian government's Foreign Department and went as an emissary to Kabul. He reached the pinnacle of his career as lieutenant-governor of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh in 1882–1887. Lyall retired from the ICS in 1887 and sat on the Council of India in London, which advised the secretary of state for India, from 1888 until 1902; he died on 10 April 1911. His younger brother, James Broadwood Lyall (1838–1916), who was also an ICS officer, served as the lieutenant-governor of the Punjab in 1887–1892.

Castes, Tribes and Religious Groups in the Central Provinces and Berar

For five years in the late 1860s, Lyall was 'marching every cold season, and almost always in a different district or province', and he was probably right to believe that very few Englishmen had 'seen the interior of so many districts' [10]. During this period he learned a great deal about 'native life', but Lyall's vocation as an official anthropologist started in 1866–1867, when an ethnological exhibition was held in Jubbelpore in the Central Provinces (now Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh). Richard Temple (1826–1902), the head of the Central Provinces government, supported the exhibition, at which members of 'aboriginal tribes' or 'wild creatures' would be exhibited 'for the edification of their more civilized fellow-humans', in the egregiously racist language Temple reportedly used. Other ethnological exhibitions and congresses were also proposed in India in the 1860s, but only the one in Jabalpur ever took place [11]. Its ethnological committee was chaired by Lyall, whose report, which was a survey of the region relying on information of variable quality from district officers, listed social groups by district and classified them broadly in accordance with George Campbell's (1824–1892) scheme in his influential 1866 paper, 'The Ethnology of India', so that the region's 'indigenous tribes' were classified by language-cum-race as Kolarians or Dravidians, with a separate 'Inferior and Helot' category for untouchable and marginal communities [12]. Lyall observed, too, that some tribes, such as the Bygah (Baiga) and Binjwar, were being 'gradually Hinduized in language and creed', a process he highlighted more than once in later work [13]. The report also included a basic table of tribal languages, as well as an unusably small quota of anthropometric measurements for about thirty tribal men (and one woman) who were brought to the exhibition and probably displayed at it, though no ethnographic information seems to have been collected by interviewing them.

The systematic anthropology of British India developed alongside the decennial censuses, which started in 1871–1872, but before then more limited censuses were carried out in various parts of the subcontinent, including one in the Central Provinces in 1866 [14]. Lyall himself completed one in Berar in 1867, although the data in his short report, which were not collected by enumerators from

households, were mainly based on information sent in by Berar's district officers. The report's most substantial section was its discussion of a table on the 'principal Divisions of the People of Berar', which listed the main castes, tribes and religious groups, with their population numbers [15]. Lyall's objective was 'to define the various denominations by placing them in categories or classes' in order to facilitate understanding of 'the actual state of existing social and religious institutions here in Berar'. However, he said, it was difficult 'to distinguish between sects, races, professions, or pure castes', because there was a 'continual "*morcellement*"' in Hindu society, which 'instead of becoming homogeneous, is continually being split up'. Hence, 'any classification based on mere denominations must lead to confusion', so that Lyall made the table's classes 'very broad' [16].

Some of them were particularly broad. Thus for 'Hindus the old Vedic division into four great castes [*varna*s] has been maintained simply because no better could be found, though in fact, only the Brahmins have kept up the demarcation', by which he seems to have meant that members of the Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra varnas normally identified themselves by specific caste (*jati*) names. Despite its limitations, Lyall's Berar report did include some information about the internal caste divisions of the three highest varnas. He also divided the Shudras, who formed the majority of the population, into seventeen separate, mainly occupational castes. Eleven different tribal groups were listed under 'aborigines' and eleven 'Hindu sects' were tabulated separately, ranging from major groups such as the Lingayats and Jains to the tiny grouping of twelve individual ascetic renouncers or 'Suniasees' (Sanyasi). One supplementary table recorded twenty-eight Muslim subdivisions (grouped into five categories) and another listed nineteen 'out-castes', some of them further divided, which were mainly untouchable, Dalit communities. Briefly describing the 'out-castes', Lyall stated that they could not be included in the caste system strictly speaking, 'although they adore after their own fashion Hindu deities, and gradually adopt Hindu prejudices as they rise in the world', another reference to Hinduisation [17]. In later Indian census reports, the multitude of Shudra castes were sometimes classified in more detail, as they were, for example, in the 1872 Central Provinces report, which divided the 67 castes by occupation into eleven groups [18]. On the other hand, few of them subdivided Muslims, Dalits and Hindu religious groups more finely than Lyall's report.

Around the same time as Lyall was writing his two reports, Temple asked him and two colleagues to compile a gazetteer for the Central Provinces by editing the material sent in by district officers, which was published in 1867 [19]. Lyall also edited the Berar gazetteer, published in 1870, in which some chapters or parts of them were written by Lyall himself, although the rest of it consisted of edited versions of district officers' reports. The volume covered the normal range of topics, including one chapter on the population that reproduced the contents of Lyall's 1868 census report, together with a fuller description of the caste system and its associated marriage rules, and a fairly detailed discussion of popular religion; both the latter sections were written almost entirely by Lyall [20].

In describing caste and other social divisions in his census reports and gazetteers, Lyall revised Campbell's classificatory scheme to make it more specifically applicable to the Central Provinces and especially Berar. Nonetheless, compared with the classification systems based primarily on occupation or social status developed in the later decennial census reports, Lyall's discussion of the 'divisions of the people' was still quite short and simple.

Rajput States and Indian 'Feudalism'

While stationed in Rajputana in 1874–1878, Lyall wrote an article on the Rajput princely states, in which one of his main objectives was to show that they were often misunderstood by applying inappropriate Western ideas of nationality and feudalism [21]. In these states, he declared, the British had preserved 'the only ancient political institutions now surviving upon any considerable scale in India', and they ruled them indirectly as 'native states' within the Indian empire. Their Rajput kings or chiefs were not recent conquerors, but the hereditary heads of clans that had ruled for centuries, and all or almost all of each state's lands were partitioned among Rajputs, who controlled its political and military organisation. Below the martial, landowning Rajputs were the 'cultivating classes, mainly belonging to castes and clans whom the Rajputs overcame', whose members lived in villages and paid rent to their superior landlords. Most Brahmans and members of mercantile castes lived in towns. The rest of the population mainly comprised people from artisan, service and other miscellaneous castes, as well as Untouchables and tribal groups. The 'interior constitution' of Rajput states 'suggested the analogy of feudalism', and they were indeed called 'feudal' by James Tod (1782–1835), their most knowledgeable historian. There were genuine similarities with the medieval European system and some Rajput states had moved further into a 'feudal stage' than others. Yet the analogy was misleading, because a 'radical distinction' existed between 'feudal and tribal' systems and, according to Lyall, the relationship between Rajput rulers and dependents was fundamentally based on kin and affinal ties that were always stronger than those between a feudal lord and his vassals, which depended on their agreed exchange of protection against external enemies for military and other services. In concluding his article, Lyall favourably contrasted the Rajput states, which 'have shown stability, and are worthy of free men' with India's unstable and tyrannous 'native despotisms', and he bemoaned their almost inevitable decay in the face of modern economic and political change, before it was clear 'how the void which they will leave can be filled up' [22].

In the post-colonial period, Lyall's critique of Tod has been periodically cited by scholars debating how 'traditional' Indian states are best characterised and whether feudalism, usually conceptualised as a pre-capitalist stage in socio-economic development, existed in India in a comparable form to Europe. Like all debates of this kind, it has sometimes degenerated into sterile definitional quibbles over terms such as 'feudal' and 'tribal'. Sometimes, however, it has productively highlighted similarities and differences that are significant for comparative analysis; Richard Fox, for example, in his 1971 work on kinship and

the state in India, contended that both Lyall and Tod had shown that 'European feudalism and Rajput principalities' could be seen as 'closely related political patterns', which modern scholars have too often overlooked [23].

Kinship 'Fictions' and the Formation of Clans and Castes

Lyall wrote his article on the formation of clans and castes, which had a broader comparative scope than the one on Rajput states, during a period of leave in England in 1876 [24]. Accounts of the origins of nations, he stated, normally began with tribal society and then explained how tribal units, usually with the 'cement' of religion, were 'fused into larger masses of people and better-defined territories', sometimes slowly, but often quickly under the pressure of conquest as happened in the Roman empire. Very similar processes probably took place in parts of India 'under great centralising governments', such as the Mughals, but elsewhere 'the tribal period has survived … and still mainly influences the political formation', which in colonial India was a mixture of ancient and modern princely states with irregular frontiers that varied greatly in size. In these states, one could investigate 'the survival of a very rudimentary stage of society, which has existed more or less throughout the world', wherein status and position in society were fundamentally settled by kinship and religion, as exemplified in the Rajput states by 'two institutions – the pure clan by descent and the religious order' [25].

Kinship, however, was primary and Lyall discussed it at length, though not always clearly, partly because his use of terminology was inconsistent. He focused especially on the Hindu 'law of intermarriage', which ruled that people must marry inside their own endogamous tribe or caste and outside their exogamous clan or family, the agnatic kin group. Exogamous clans in central India were 'great circles of blood relationship' that could include thousands of individuals who could not lawfully intermarry. Lyall also ambiguously called these exogamous groupings 'circles of affinity'. He compared the Rajput clans with those found among the aboriginal, non-Aryan hill and jungle tribes, such as the Bhils, as well as the 'irregular' tribes of mixed ancestry, such as the Minas, a robber tribe that absorbed outcasts and refugees. Besides the Minas, Lyall had investigated several other irregular tribes, which were 'neither pure clans of descent nor castes, but seemed to be in a state of transition'. On the basis of his own observations, though his terminology was again ambiguous, he reasoned that if a number of families were gathered together into an exogamous group that was unusually successful in war under a good leader, it might attract more members so that his circle developed into a recognised clan. After the leader's death, he might become an eponymous heroic ancestor, whose reputation kept the clan together and, if it remained successful, its members could command the 'market for wives', so that they were less tempted to split up or break exogamic rules to enable men to marry. Eventually, such a clan came under 'the patronage of Brahmans' and acquired 'the dignity of orthodox prejudices'. But while some clans grew and absorbed outsiders, other clans decayed, so that there was 'constant decomposition and reproduction of groups at different stages'. Although Lyall,

following Henry Maine (1822–1888), emphasised the importance of 'fictions' for the formation of genealogically mixed, 'impure' clans, he also observed that adopting non-relatives was rare in central India. There clans and tribes tended to amalgamate 'under the name and influence of the most successful groups', and a real or fictional connection to a 'hero' counted for most [26].

After discussing clans in ancient Europe and western Asia, as well as India, Lyall turned to the effects of kinship combined with religion. He suggested there was a similarity between a tribe and a religious sect, because both were made up of a notable leader's followers. Moreover, since a sect could become a caste by restricting marriage and other external interactions, there was an analogy between the formation of a tribe and that of some religious castes. On the other hand, only a minority of sects with unusual leaders turned into castes; conversely, relatively few castes had any kind of religious origin, whereas many more were occupational groupings that did not develop from any combination of kinship and religious factors. Hence this part of Lyall's article mostly concerned the formation of clans, rather than castes, but he hoped it would help others who were 'working by the comparative method at the foundations of history and sociology generally', including those in early institutions in Europe [27]. Lyall's data and theories were gradually supplanted by the voluminous material in the decennial census reports and tribes and castes handbooks, but Maine, whom Lyall probably had in mind (and I discuss further below) certainly was helped, as he acknowledged a few years later. It is noteworthy, too, that Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) reviewed both volumes of *Asiatic Studies* very favourably and particularly praised the articles on clans and castes, and on popular Hinduism [28].

Popular Hinduism and Witchcraft in Central India

Lyall's account of popular Hinduism in the Berar gazetteer was expanded in several articles, most of them reprinted in *Asiatic Studies*. I shall particularly discuss two early articles on religion and witchcraft in central India, as well as the Rede lecture he delivered in 1891 after retiring from India [29].

Lyall's principal objective in the first of these articles was to describe 'the actual condition, character, and tendencies of the [Hindu] religious beliefs now prevailing in one province of India', that is, Berar; his description of 'religious beliefs' also covered rituals and religious practices in general. He especially wanted to depict the 'astonishing variety' of ordinary people's religion and its constantly changing character, as well as to show how greatly polytheistic Hinduism differed from monotheistic Christianity and Islam. Hinduism's heterogeneity and changeability were directly related to the partible structure of Hindu society, because social divisions, especially of caste, prevented religious consolidation, while the multiformity of religion subjected society to perpetual splitting. 'New objects of adoration are continually being discovered and becoming popular', he wrote, and they stimulated the emergence of new 'prophets' and 'holy men', who often founded sects that could become subcastes. Hence in India, Lyall contended, 'all Hindu religions belong to the *fissiparous* order; they have the property of

disseverance into portions, each of which retains life and growth' [30].

Lyall sought to make his exposition of complicated 'beliefs and liturgies' intelligible by classifying worship in Berar into eleven 'grades', which roughly proceeded from the lowest to the highest 'stages of religious thought'. The first grade, the 'worship of sticks and stones', was successively followed by the worship of animals, formless spirits, dead relatives, and heroes or other exceptional people, and then 'departmental deities' with particular powers or responsibilities (for example, as protectors against disease), and finally the eleventh grade, the worship of the 'supreme gods of Hinduism' (primarily Vishnu and Siva), which was prescribed by the 'Brahmanic scriptures'. These grades, he thought, comprised 'all the different kinds of Fetichism and Polytheism which make up the popular religion of Berar'. Yet all of them were 'deeply tinged throughout by the strong skylight reflection of over-arching Brahmanism, whence the topmost classes now pretend to derive their meaning immediately. … [However] these ideas are not so much the offspring of Brahmanism as its children by adoption', for they were types of popular religion subsequently given meaning by 'some expert Brahman to justify or authorise the custom'. In the language of modern scholars, Lyall was explaining here that the 'non-Sanskritic', 'little-tradition' grades of popular religion had to be understood as transformations or 'refractions' of Brahmanical, 'Sanskritic', 'great-tradition' Hinduism, which the high-caste, high-class elite regarded as authoritative. In a longer description of the grades, Lyall mentioned several typical instances of upward movement, whereby, for example, a dead man became a kind of miracle-working saint, who next acquired supernatural characteristics; gods then entered his life story, which turned into a sacred myth, and finally the man became an avatar or incarnation of Vishnu or Siva, for whom the Brahmans 'provided … a niche in the orthodox Pantheon'. In conclusion, Lyall reiterated the importance in popular Hinduism of the constant generation of local gods, often from 'dead kinsfolk and friends', some of whom might be promoted in the pantheon. Moreover, 'polytheism still prevails and multiplies' throughout the country and 'the Brahmanic system … shows no signs of vital decay', although Lyall also suggested that 'simple paganism' might disappear in modern India, a theme he took up in later writings as well [31].

In his article on witchcraft, Lyall argued that it was always distinct from religion in India, although witchcraft – which was commonest in low-status social groups – was very close to fetishism. Witchcraft beliefs and practices were perceived as separate from those of religion, because they were demarcated in India, like they had been in Europe, by the 'two antagonistic ideas' of dependence on supernatural will and of independence from it. That in turn reflected perennial doubts about the deities' intervention in human affairs, as well as notions that human beings might be able to control the natural world through knowledge and use of its ways. Thus for example, if people found that the gods did not alleviate their suffering from disease, in spite of all their prayers and offerings, they might blame witches and seek them out for revenge and punishment. It was true that witchcraft could assume a 'supernatural impression', despite its separation from religion. Yet it also resembled embryonic medicine, but because the 'aboriginal physician' was never

given credit for cures produced by his ‘simple human knowledge’, he had to resort to ‘occult and mystical devices’ that mixed religion and medicine [32].

In polytheism, Lyall claimed, the idea developed that the gods mainly interfered ‘on the side of virtue’ and were not unjust, cruel or malicious, so that misfortune was blamed on witches, rather than ‘revengeful or malignant’ deities. Moreover, as the ‘nobler Hindu deities [rose] higher towards the clouds above’, they ceased to trouble themselves with people’s petty complaints, let alone their ‘dirty squabbles’. People who were suffering might appeal to the highest deities first, but if that did not work, they would turn to lower deities, and then to human ‘ecstatics, ascetics, and saints’ and finally ‘shamanists’. Below them, where a ‘moral man’ would not go, were the witches and the beginning of the ‘black art proper’. Lyall then compared witchcraft among Hindus with its equivalent in earlier European Christianity and, in more detail, among Indian Muslims, who generally condemned and disowned it. In the final analysis, he concluded, we should also recognise that even the ‘most grotesque and ridiculous’ witchcraft techniques could contain some real observations of natural phenomena that pointed towards ‘something like mental independence’ from superstition, as well as rudimentary scientific materialism [33].

Lyall’s article on witchcraft included a considerable amount of ethnographic data and analysis, and the modern literature confirms much of his account. But it also contained excessive speculation about, for instance, witchcraft’s origins or primitive man’s thoughts when first making fire without sacrificing. The reader can ignore these passages, but more problematic is Lyall’s key argument that religion and witchcraft were distinct in Hinduism, whereas, as he actually showed, there was practically a continuum between witches and the lowest deities and their ‘hedge priests’. Lawrence A. Babb, who did fieldwork in central India in the 1960s, firmly placed witches – who had both human and non-human powers and characteristics – within the pantheon, but at the bottom below the little local deities and alongside malevolent ghosts and spirits. Everywhere, too, witches are commonly believed to be closely associated with fierce, violent deities, as they are in central India, where they dance for and worship both the murderous goddess Kali and Siva’s terrible form Bhairava, who agrees to let them kill a number of people if they give him some of the blood [34]. Moreover, whether some Hindu deities actually were or are regarded as cruel or malicious is less clear-cut than Lyall suggested. Undoubtedly, Hindu gods and goddesses are not seen as positively malignant, but some of them – like Kali and Bhairava – are ferocious and very easily angered by human misconduct or disrespect. In addition, people may look on divine punishment as excessively harsh, especially if inflicted on children or other innocents as well as the miscreants. All in all, therefore, ethnographic data demonstrate that the distinction between deities and witches has normally been far more blurred than Lyall proposed.

‘Superstitions and Philosophies’ in Hindu Polytheism

Lyall’s Rede lecture on ‘Natural Religion in India’ in 1891 was a broader and more sophisticated exposition of Hinduism than his article nearly twenty years earlier, though some of the content was very similar. He began by stressing the differences between Hinduism, on the one hand, and Christianity and Islam, plus Buddhism, on the other, which he regarded as the world’s four chief religions. Thus ‘Hindu’ denotes not only a person’s religious affiliation (like ‘Christian’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Buddhist’), but also his ‘country and parentage’ (unlike the other three), because a Hindu is probably an ‘inhabitant of India’ and certainly ‘an Indian by birth and descent’. Lyall contended, too, that Hindus were ‘the sole surviving representatives of a great polytheistic system’ that was dominant before the rise of the other three historic religions. He further insisted that ‘Indians are not a rude and unintelligent folk’, but (as we have seen) mentally subtle and profoundly devout. Hinduism, however, was unsystematic, so that it comprised ‘a loose and luxuriant growth of religious fancies and usages’, ‘rude worship and high liturgies’, and ‘superstitions and philosophies’. By looking closely at popular Hinduism today, he also claimed, ‘we can best form a notion of ancient polytheism’, especially ‘when it was the religion of the civilised world under the Roman Empire’ [35].

Lyall introduced his concept of ‘natural religion’ rather hazily, but then explained that he meant a religion in which the existence and actions of ‘superhuman beings’ were inferred from what actually happened to human beings in the physical world, so that the ‘model of divinity’ was suggested by ‘capricious and freely acting Nature’. Such a religion, like nature, was constantly reproducing itself in different ways and was ‘throwing out varieties of rite and worship according to the changing needs and conditions of the people’. In no other ‘modern country’ besides India has ‘natural religion’ been ‘undisturbed’ for so long or ‘reached anything like the height or expansion that it has attained’ there. Consequently, in Hinduism, which is a growing religion, ‘one can discern the earliest notions, rude and vague, among the primitive jungle tribes’, as well as ‘the same ideas and practices … in more distinct and reasonable shape, among the settled classes’, and these can then be followed ‘upward until they merge into allegory, mysticism, or abstract philosophical conceptions’. Lyall did not think India actually contained any very unusual types of ritual or worship, but it was distinctive because their ‘various forms and species’ coexisted in one country at one time, whereas elsewhere – for example, in Christian Europe, where paganism largely disappeared centuries ago – they did not. Thus India, past and present, ‘presents an almost unique opportunity for the comprehensive study of the history of Natural Religion’ [36].

Lyall particularly examined the multitude of divine beings in popular Hinduism, the characteristics of Vishnu and Siva, the abstract doctrine of pantheism that was the philosophical theory of natural religion, as well as the religion’s wide range of rituals and the continuing prominence of sacrifice. He said in conclusion that his

aim was to show the 'vast difference in religious ideas and observances that separates the lower from the higher beliefs in India', which were nevertheless not seen as 'mutually hostile or inconsistent', because the higher ones 'tolerate, adopt, and interpret the lower', and even ordinary worshippers can quite easily reconcile 'shifting multiformity at the base … with changeless Unity at the summit' [37]. Like almost all Victorian thinkers, Lyall was a social evolutionist who assumed that 'primitive' or 'savage' societies, cultures and religions could be distinguished from 'advanced' or 'civilised' ones. He plainly shared many of the prejudices about the 'natives' that were common among Europeans in the subcontinent as well. Nonetheless, his understanding of popular Hinduism was better informed and subtler, and more sympathetic and tolerant, than that of most official anthropologists and ICS officers, as well as the majority of Victorian writers on India and religions in general. I do not know whether that sympathy was enhanced by Lyall's antipathy towards Islam, but it is possible, if only because contempt for polytheistic Hinduism was commonly linked with pro-Muslim attitudes among the British in India.

Lyall partly revised his lecture in a later essay, in which he strongly emphasised that the philosophical religion of Brahminism gives all the deities and rituals of popular, polytheistic Hinduism a 'higher meaning' and interprets each of them as a 'symbol of some aspect of universal divinity'. Hence the 'gross idolatry of the people is defended, and connected with the loftier ideas', so that ordinary worshippers can be brought towards an understanding of Hinduism's more abstract truths, notably that 'all phenomenal existence is a kind of illusion', all deities are merely 'manifestations of the Supreme Being', and the ultimate goal is liberation from the cycle of rebirth, whereby the soul may 'become united with spiritual infinity'. After reiterating these arguments, Lyall compared Hinduism favourably with Christianity and Islam, which 'have trampled out and destroyed' the lower forms of worship, instead of explaining them. He ended his essay by noting that although innovations such as 'orderly government' and 'scientific methods of inquiry' were arriving in India and elsewhere in Asia, European influence was 'mostly industrial and political' and he was therefore unsure how Asian spiritualism and religion would be altered. Nonetheless, he restated his conviction that 'the antique polytheism will probably disappear, though slowly' and he anticipated 'an ethical reform on the old foundations', which he did not identify, although he was presumably thinking about Hindu reformist movements like the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj, which were very influential during the colonial period in combating what they saw as superstitious accretions to pure Vedic Hinduism, such as idolatrous polytheism [38]. In 'Brahminism', Lyall again wrote about Hinduism sympathetically, but adopted a more philosophical and elitist perspective than in his earlier articles.

On Friedrich Max Müller and James G. Frazer

Lyall discussed other anthropological writers infrequently, but he did criticise Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) and James George Frazer (1854–1941) both severely and interestingly, but very differently. Müller was one of the nineteenth

century's leading Sanskritists, philologists and religious scholars, whose writings strongly influenced numerous Victorian anthropologists, positively or negatively, so that he had an 'interesting contrapuntal relationship to the development of British anthropology', to quote George Stocking [39]. Lyall first took issue with Müller over his 'Westminster Lecture on Missions' delivered in 1873, although some of his original criticisms were toned down in the article included in *Asiatic Studies* [40]. Among the 'historical' world religions, Müller drew a sharp distinction between Buddhism, Christianity and Islam ('Mohammedanism'), which were missionary religions from the beginning, and Judaism, Brahmanism and Zoroastrianism, which were not; Müller, like Lyall, used the term 'Brahmanism' to refer to textual, philosophical Hinduism, as opposed to its popular forms. In his article, Lyall described how non-Aryan tribes from outside the caste system were raised to the status of low-caste Hindus, for example, by persuading Brahmans (normally low-ranking ones) to perform rituals for them or by getting their 'humble deities … properly Brahmanised as incarnations' of Hindu gods. Brahmanising, in Lyall's view, was how Hinduism or Brahmanism typically proselytised, so that Müller was wrong to contrast it with Christianity and Islam as a 'non-missionary' religion [41].

Müller, in answering Lyall with a paper 'On the Vitality of Brahmanism' in 1874, began by insisting that the 'scientific', comparative analysis of 'book-religions' must be a study of their canonical texts, notwithstanding the desirability of investigating their local, popular varieties. His main point, however, which was clearly valid, was that 'the spreading of the truth and the conversion of unbelievers' was always 'a sacred duty' in the missionary religions, so that Brahmanism counted as one only if 'proselyte' could mean someone who has simply adopted a new religion, rather than being invited or persuaded to do so. On the other hand, Müller also claimed that although Brahmanism could 'absorb' tribal people from 'half savage races, with their rough-hewn jungle deities … and may even raise them to a higher stage of civilisation', it could not convert Christians, Muslims or Buddhists 'back to idol worship', a more primitive type of religion, so that 'Brahmanism was dead'. In this passage, Müller meant that Brahmanism was no longer developing progressively. However, his blunt description of it as 'dead' – and probably his contemptuous remarks about ordinary Hindus who, for instance 'worship Siva, a monster with three eyes, riding naked on a bull, with a necklace of skulls for his ornament' – plainly provoked Lyall, who in his preface to *Asiatic Studies* reiterated his conviction that Brahmanism is not 'dead or even moribund', because it constantly brings in large numbers of people who can 'share more or less in its ritual' [42].

Lyall's concept of 'Brahmanising' – which he had first coined as 'Hinduizing' in the 1860s – was cited by Émile Senart (1847–1928) and Célestin Bouglé (1870–1940), when they discussed the relationship between tribes and castes [43]. Risley also discussed Lyall's concept in the introduction to his handbook on Bengal's tribes and castes, and used it in a number of ethnographic entries [44]. Lyall himself did not mention the Brahmanisation and upward mobility of low castes – as opposed to tribes – but he clearly anticipated M. N. Srinivas on 'Sanskritisation' by nearly a

century, even if he has rarely, if ever, been credited for it [45].

Lyall also strongly criticised Müller's theory of myths in 1875. Müller consistently argued that all Aryan deities appearing in myths are personifications of natural forces and phenomena, which is demonstrated by the etymology of their names. Hence philology was the only true basis for comparative mythology and the older theory of Euhemerism, in which all polytheistic deities were seen as divinised human beings, was rejected. Lyall, however, contended that although some Hindu gods and goddesses obviously were personifications of nature, the evidence showed that many popular deities, past and present, better fitted the Euhemerist theory. He also pointed out that the Brahmanising process occurring among tribal groups 'greatly increases the supply of gods', as 'homely jungle hero[es]' eventually become minor deities. Hindu polytheism, by virtue of how its deities typically originated, therefore differed from its more evolved Graeco-Roman equivalent [46].

Lyall renewed his criticisms of Müller in 1897 when reviewing *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, his last major book on the subject [47]. Although the 'distinguished scholar' was still defending his long-held views on the origins of Aryan deities and on etymological analysis, Lyall remained thoroughly sceptical and wondered why Müller insisted that etymology proved that deities always and only originated in nature. If Helen of Troy, for instance, could be 'nothing but the beautiful dawn', the 'vital scenes and characters of the Iliad [would] melt away into mythological cloudland'. Yet the abduction of women and disputes over beautiful brides have frequently caused fights, so how can we be sure that Homer's story was not based on such an event? [48] In short, said Lyall, Müller's claims about the origins of Helen and other Aryan deities were implausible and unprovable.

Lyall's use of empirical data on Brahmanised 'humble' deities to criticise Müller's claim that Hinduism was a 'non-missionary' religion was praised by John Morley (1838–1923), who strongly favoured checking 'our literary theory-mongers by the results of observation *in situ*' [49]. Morley was a friend of Lyall's and editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, which published many of his articles. (Morley, who was also the Liberal government's secretary of state for India in 1905–1910, knew Lyall in an official capacity as well.) In 1889, Morley wrote a very favourable reader's report on the manuscript of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which was published a year later and made him famous. Frazer's approach to 'Aryan' mythology and primitive religion differed fundamentally from Müller's, but he was of course another 'literary theory-monger', so that Morley's approbation of Frazer's work seems curious [50]. Lyall, however, disagreed and criticised Frazer severely and at length [51]. In particular, he repeatedly attacked his manipulation of unconnected examples from all over the world to generate speculative, far-reaching theories about, say, sacrificial rituals and divine kings, as well as to advance specific assertions, such as 'Buddhism … borrowed from savagery' and not vice versa. As Lyall pointed out, the notion that Asia's old and 'powerfully organised religions … have not influenced enormously the petty superstitions within their range' was

highly implausible [52]. It was also wrong, as many ethnographies of popular Buddhism show.

It is important that Lyall's criticisms of Müller and Frazer mainly arose from his own knowledge of popular Hinduism, acquired on the ground either by himself or by observant district officers whose reports he read. They clearly foreshadowed the criticisms made by twentieth-century anthropologists of 'armchair anthropologists', such as Frazer and (by extension) Müller, who lacked any sound, empirical and contextual knowledge of the non-Western religious beliefs and practices they wrote about at such length.

On Henry Maine and the British Government of India

Lyall wrote numerous articles on Indian political questions, as well as a history of British rule in India, which were not contributions to anthropological knowledge, so I only discuss them briefly here. On Indian political matters, however, as well as more generally, Lyall admired Henry Maine and his work, largely concurred with his outlook, and wrote an eloquent posthumous tribute to him [53]. Maine, as the Law member on the viceroy's council, was responsible for India's legal affairs in 1862–1869 and, as Eric Stokes explained, the 'great lesson' he taught and Lyall learnt was the need for restraint in pressing modern, Western reforms upon Indian society, lest they led to its rapid disintegration [54]. Thus Lyall declared that the main problem faced by the British government in India during the previous thirty years of Crown rule had been 'the adjustment of the mechanism of a modern State to the habits and feelings of a vast mixed multitude in various stages of what we have decided to call Progress'. The government 'enforces certain general principles of modern polity', but it has had to do so without violating the strong, age-old religious ordinances and social usages underpinning the laws people obey. If the government were to succeed, a sound understanding of the people's laws, customs and traditions, which were in fact quite flexible, was imperative. Maine's body of work, said Lyall, had probably done most to promote this understanding, to dispel 'wide and lofty deductions' made from 'scanty data', and 'to arrange and extend our ideas' on past and present society in India [55].

Maine, as is well known, believed that Aryan civilisation was divided into a 'progressive' European branch and a 'stationary' Indian one, and that contemporary India was arrested at much the same stage of development as Europe in the time of the Roman Empire and early Christian era. In support of his thesis about 'stationary' India in his own Rede lecture in 1875, Maine cited Lyall's evidence on religion and caste in central India because, he said, it showed that their combined influence had been a 'powerful preservative' of 'primitive custom and idea'. Indeed, claimed Maine, in central India 'Brahminism' – or more accurately it together with popular Hinduism – 'reproduces the old heathen world which Christianity destroyed. There prevails in it something like the paganism of classical antiquity' [56]. Thus Maine's conviction that 'primitive Aryan groups', 'institutions' and 'ideas' were arrested in India at an early stage of development

was partly based on Lyall's material on religion and caste. Maine sought to confirm his claim by investigating in particular 'one great institution, Property', and he then reached his familiar conclusion that the primitive or ancient ownership of land by large kin groups had eventually given way to modern ownership by individuals or small families [57].

In a later essay on East European 'house communities', which compared them with Hindu institutions, Maine again cited Lyall's observations in central India. He also endorsed (and overstated) the latter's criticisms of Tod's 'extremely misleading' references to Rajput feudalism, insisting that the 'true instructiveness' of the Rajput case lay in its illustration of 'the method of tribal formation and development' through which 'Aryan consanguinity grew to its perfect form' [58]. In analysing this process, Maine relied on Lyall's distinction between 'pure' tribes and clans, each with a putatively real genealogy and a direct line of descent from a single ancestor, and 'impure' ones with mixed ancestry. He also cited Lyall's significant discovery that among the Rajputs a kinship connection to a 'hero', rather than an adoptive relationship, was the principal fiction for the formation of 'impure' clans, which eventually became 'pure' clans whose members believed they were the true patrilineal descendants of the founding hero [59].

Maine, of course, influenced the later development of anthropology and social theory much more than Lyall. Nonetheless, in evaluating Maine's work, we should recognise how freely he acknowledged Lyall's superior knowledge of Indian society and drew on the latter's work to support his own ambitious theorising.

Analogising the Roman Empire and the British Raj

Although he broadly subscribed to the same Victorian ideas about Aryans as Maine, Lyall merely alluded to the notion of 'progressive' versus 'stationary' Aryan civilisations when discussing Indian society and religion. Instead, as Stokes explained, Lyall 'elaborated a subtle and profound historical theory', which was ultimately political, to explain the arrested state of Indian society. Thus in Europe, as kinship ties weakened, a 'sense of nationality' had developed, which held occupational groups together in a wider community. In India, however, the process that had occurred in Europe stopped short, so that occupational groups were merely 'strung together by the religious institution of caste'. The main reason for this difference was that in India, strong, stable national states failed to develop and replace unwieldy ones dependent on the ruler's personal strength. For Lyall, this theory had practical lessons to teach about British rule in India, because it demonstrated that 'over-centralized Asian despotisms' were unstable [60]. The colonial government must therefore resist its own centralising tendencies, for example, by preserving the partly autonomous princely states in Rajputana and other regions. And he concluded his history of British India by declaring that his countrymen, 'after the high Roman fashion', had built up 'an immense polyglot empire' in India, but to engage in 'excessive centralization' would undermine its lasting stability [61].

Lyall emphasised, too, that the British differed from all previous rulers of India by refusing to invoke religious legitimation for their authority, and by assuming duties in response to natural disasters – such as the provision of famine relief – which their predecessors, who did not, generally blamed on supernatural causes, such as the deities' wrath. In his view, severing the connection between the right to rule and religious belief was a 'very delicate operation' that was potentially dangerous. The possible outcome could even be 'that the English legions, like the Roman, will tramp across the Asiatic stage and disappear, and that the clouds of confusion and superstition will roll up again' [62]. For Lyall, indeed, 'all political survey of India' reiterated 'the profound impression of the analogy between the English dominion in Asia and the vanished empire of Rome' [63]. In one way or another, therefore, when Lyall – like Maine and other Victorians – analogised the Roman Empire and the British Raj, they were often conveying a warning about the Raj's eventual decline and fall as well.

A longer discussion of Lyall's political theory and his comparison between Rome and British India is beyond the scope of this article, as well as my own expertise. Briefly, though, it was of course germane to Lyall's understanding of India that he was well versed in the classics, just like Maine and Victorian intellectuals in general. Thus, for instance, he was sure that reading about the gods and goddesses in the Iliad or Aeneid helped him understand the Hindu deities he encountered in central India. He further believed that Hinduism was part of the 'great polytheistic system' preceding the rise of the monotheistic faiths, and that Hindu polytheism would probably fade away under the Pax Britannica in colonial India, much like the pagan polytheism of Greece and Rome under the Pax Romana in the early Christian era. But this prediction has obviously turned out to be wrong, even though Hinduism has changed considerably since the turn of the twentieth century, so that discussing it further is largely pointless. It was and still is much more significant that despite his imperialist convictions and Victorian prejudices, Lyall's ethnographic interpretation of popular Hinduism was unusually sympathetic, intellectually sophisticated and in many respects far ahead of its time. The essays on religion – together with the studies of caste, kinship, the Rajput states, and the impact of British rule – also fully confirmed Tylor's judgement about Lyall's important place in the nineteenth-century anthropology of India.

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[1] Tylor 1892: 401-402.

[2] Risley 1891; *Census 1881 Panjab* (report by Ibbetson); Crooke 1890 (expanded in Crooke 1896).

[3] Woodruff 1954: 64, 67; Mason wrote his history of the ICS under the pen name 'Woodruff'.

[4] Lyall 1907: 290.

[5] Most of Lyall's major articles are listed by periodical and date of publication in Durand (1913: 477-478).

[6] Tylor 1892: 407; Lyall 1907: chap. 5.

[7] Students at Haileybury normally studied Sanskrit and Persian, and Hindustani or another Indian vernacular, and sometimes other languages as well. Lyall (like many others) thought the education at Haileybury was mediocre, so it is unclear how much he learnt or how well he knew Indian languages.

[8] At first, Lyall (like other civilian officials) tried to keep order and fight the rebels in his district with Indian soldiers who remained 'loyal'. Later he volunteered to join a British cavalry contingent and was involved in extensive fighting against the rebels in the wider area.

[9] Durand 1913: 67–71 and chap. 6 *passim*.

[10] Lyall quoted in Durand 1913: 137.

[11] *Asiatic Society of Bengal, Proceedings, 1866*, p. 188-189.

[12] Campbell 1866.

[13] *Report of the Ethnological Committee, Jubbulpore Exhibition of 1866-67*, p. 5. See also Fuller 2024.

[14] *Census 1866 Central Provinces*.

[15] *Census 1867 Berar*, table 8, p. 12-17.

[16] *Census 1867 Berar*, p. 12.

[17] *Census 1867 Berar*, p. 14.

[18] *Census 1872 Central Provinces*, p. 33-35. After 1867, the next Berar census was in 1881.

[19] Lyall, Dods and Browning 1867.

[20] Lyall 1870: chap. 11.

[21] 'The Rajput States of India' (1876) in Lyall 1899: chap. 7.

[22] Lyall 1899: 219, 223-225, 243-244, 259-264.

[23] Fox 1971: 133-135, 142-150.

[24] 'On the Formation of Some Clans and Castes in India' (1877) in Lyall 1899: chap. 6.

[25] Lyall 1899: 162-169.

[26] Lyall 1899: 170-187; cf. Maine 1891: 272-282.

[27] Lyall 1899: 194, 201-202.

[28] Maine 1895: 219-220; Mauss 1899.

[29] 'Religion of an Indian Province' (1872) and 'Witchcraft and Non-Christian Religions' (1873), in Lyall 1899: chaps. 1 and 6; 'Natural Religion in India' (Rede Lecture, 1891), in Lyall 1907: chap. 5.

[30] Lyall 1899: 2-8.

[31] Lyall 1899: 9-12, 26-30, 31-33, 37-39.

[32] Lyall 1899: 102, 114, 118.

[33] Lyall 1899: 119-120, 122-127, 129-130.

[34] Lyall 1899: 121; Babb 1975: 203-206, 243-245.

[35] Lyall 1907: 288, 290, 292.

[36] Lyall 1907: 293-294.

[37] Lyall 1907: 322.

[38] Lyall 1901: 87-88, 92, 99, 101-105.

[39] Stocking 1987: 56.

[40] Müller 1880: 251-280; ‘Missionary and Non-Missionary religions’ (1874) in Lyall 1899: chap. 5.

[41] Lyall 1899: 135-141.

[42] Müller 1880: 314-316, 318, 321, 324-325; Lyall 1899: xii–xiii.

[43] Senart 1930: 80-81; Bouglé 1971: 56, 208 n. 97. (Lyall was also cited on other topics by these two authors.)

[44] Risley 1891: xv–xix; see also Fuller 2023: 135, 155.

[45] Srinivas 1952: 32 and *passim*.

[46] ‘On the Origin of Divine Myths in India’ (1875) in Lyall 1899: chap. 2, p. 39-50, 53-55.

[47] ‘Origins and Interpretations of Primitive Religions’ (1897) in Lyall 1907: chap. 4.; Müller 1897.

[48] Lyall 1907: 275-283.

[49] Durand 1913: 173.

[50] Ackerman 1987: 81, 96.

[51] ‘The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion’ (1890) in Lyall 1907: chap. 3.

[52] Lyall 1907: 193.

[53] Lyall 1888.

[54] Stokes 1959: 313-320; 1961: 396-401.

[55] Lyall 1888: 130-132.

[56] Maine 1895: 216-217.

[57] Maine 1895: 220, 225-227.

[58] Maine 1891: 269.

[59] Maine 1891: 272-282.

[60] Stokes 1961: 396-398, 400.

[61] Lyall 1910: 389-390.

[62] ‘Influence upon Religion of a Rise in Morality’ (1877) in Lyall 1899: chap. 3, p. 92-98.

[63] Lyall 1899: xiv. See also the interesting essay by Judith Plotz (2012).