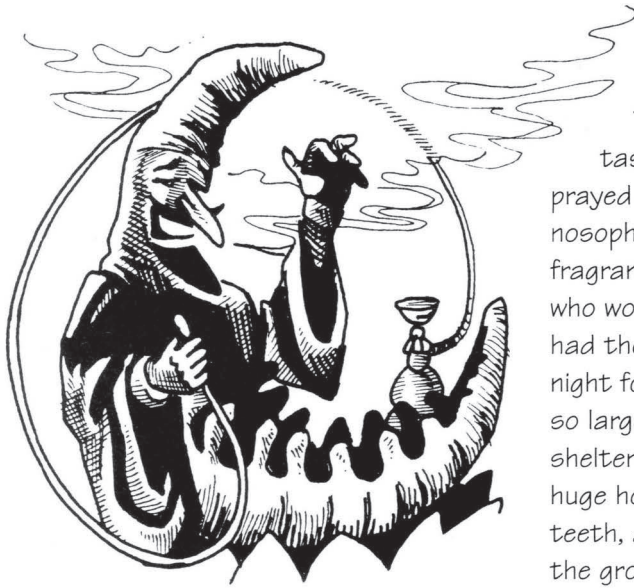


INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of years before Kipling wrote: "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," East and West had been encountering each other. There were, of course, barriers. It was hard, for instance, to walk, ride a horse, or sail from Europe to Asia—especially when you had to cross towering mountain ranges, thick belts of jungle, empty wastes of desert, and vast uncharted stretches of ocean. But these obstacles did not discourage such early explorers as Megasthenes and Marco Polo.



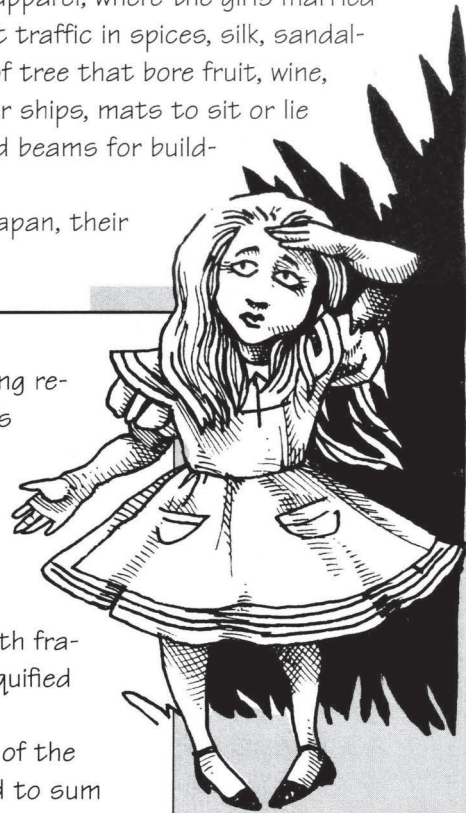
These men brought back fantastic tales: of wise men who prayed in the water naked, of gymnosophists (yogis) who subsisted on fragrances rather than foods, and who worshipped cows; of kings who had thousands of wives, one each night for 1,000 nights; of great snails so large that three or four men could shelter in their shells (tortoises); of huge horses with gigantic ears, teeth, and noses that reached to the ground (elephants), of people who

washed the walls of their houses with cow dung, who killed nothing and ate no flesh, but subsisted on roots, rice, and milk; of folk who worshipped idols—some shaped like cows, some like monkeys, some like buffaloes, some like peacocks; of regions where the men and women went about virtually naked, with a cloth bound round their middle, and no other apparel; where the girls married at age five or six; where merchants did a great traffic in spices, silk, sandalwood, and sugar; where there grew a species of tree that bore fruit, wine, oil, sugar, vinegar, cords, coals, thatch, sails for ships, mats to sit or lie on, wood for houses, brooms for sweeping, and beams for building ships (the coconut palm).

All this they wrote of India. Of China and Japan, their stories seemed equally bizarre.

Like Alice in Wonderland encountering the hookah-smoking Caterpillar, the West has long regarded the East as an exotic Other. But this Other was dark, feminine, mysterious, and submissive—an Oriental Other with tremulous gazelle-like eyes dark as lotus blossoms; alluring, dark-nippled breasts; an undulant dark-limbed body; nectar-like lips; smooth thighs; deep navel; flowing hair; breath fragrant as flowers of paradise, voice soft as liquified moonlight; and a mouth sweet as mango.

This image created an inaccurate picture of the Orient, a misrepresentation that attempted to sum



up an entire swath of geography and cultures stretching from the cedars of Lebanon to the Zen temples of Japan. The image sought to shape this huge, unknowable mystery into something knowable and known, dreamily feminine and submissive. By producing such images, the West began to imagine and fantasize a feminine Orient, an amorous Orient, a passive, subjective, introverted, and weak Orient—a dark love-bunny Orient unable to speak for herself, but in need of a Western voice for expression.

And what a voice the West gave the Orient!

When, for example, in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante wrote of Mohammed, the poet depicted him inhabiting one of the lowest regions of Hell. There Mohammed is punished by being eternally sliced in twain from his anus to the top of his head!

Alice: His sin?

Caterpillar: Being a false prophet.

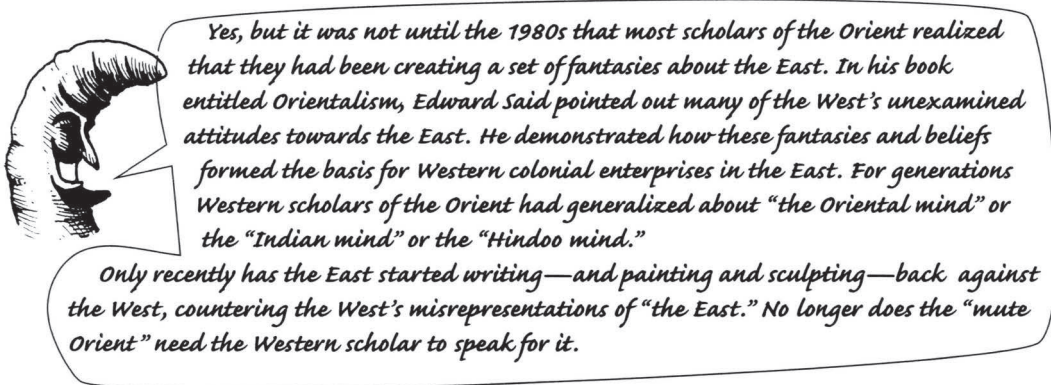
But if Westerners underrated “the Orient,” they overrated it as well. Western scholars typically showed interest in the Classical Eras and Golden Ages of Eastern civilizations—their great scriptures, works of art, philosophies, and religions. They were never so interested in their Oriental contemporaries: their hopes, desires, sufferings, and uniqueness.



And it is much the same today. Orientalists still tend to study the great philosophies of the East. Western orientalists know more about the great historical past of the Orient than most inhabitants of the Orient.

The Western orientalist imagines the Orient as eternal, unchanging, exotic, sexually insatiable, mystical, passive, subjective, introverted, spiritual, weak, primitive, mute, and silent. On the other hand, he imagines the West as virile, masculine, powerful, materialistic, extroverted, analytic, and objective.

Alice: Aren't these just clichés and stereotypes?

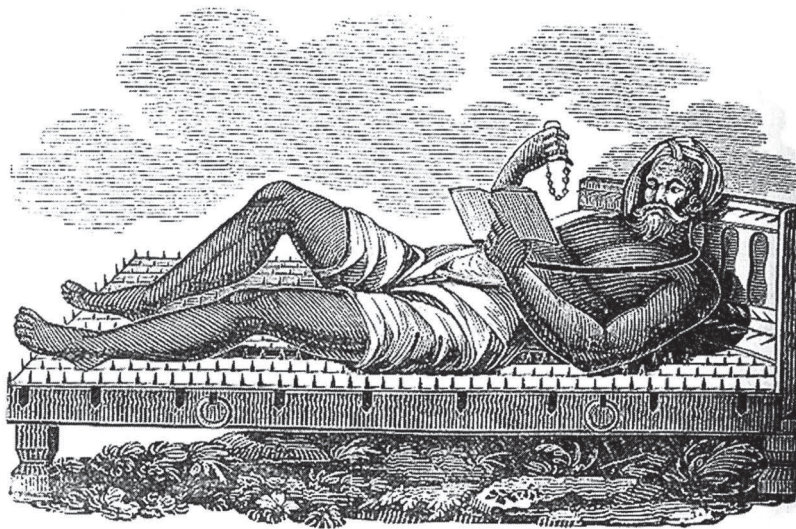


THE PHILOSOPHIES & RELIGIONS OF INDIA

India. The very name conjures up images of snowy Himalayan peaks that seem to rise even higher than the moon's orbit, of icy waters tumbling swiftly over dizzying precipices, of deep, thunder-voiced waterfalls blending in with the growling of young bears in their caves, of breezes bellowing through stands of bamboo, of the drone of bees intoxicated with sips of sweet mango blossoms, and of the resonant mantras of yogis chanting in their caves.

Just as the Himalayan summits rise up as the measure of all mountains, for many Western thinkers, Indian spirituality—exemplified by the meditations of yogis in their caves—has come to represent the peak of Indian culture. Yet there is a problem with these kinds of images. For Westerners have thought of India as a land of Gods sitting serenely atop pink lotuses floating on the cosmic waters; of Gods who have magically sprouted 3 heads and 5,000 arms; of naked fakirs sleeping on beds of nails; of snake charmers mesmerizing dark-hooded cobras; of elephants bathing in the moonlight; of turbaned rajahs twiddling their dark, ornate mustaches while entwined with their lovers in impossible knots of flesh; of swarms of sagacious sahibs, worshippers, and sadhus swallowing sweetmeats.

The problem is that these are all Hindu images. And although introductions to Indian philosophy tend to center on Hinduism, India is far from being all Hindu. Verily, Hindus make up only about 60 percent of a diverse population of over 400 distinct religious communities. The waters flowing down from those Himalayan peaks quench the thirst not only of Hindus, but of Jews, Parsis, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims—to name just a few.



And just as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand harbor native populations celebrating their own religions and philosophies, and speaking their own languages, India teems with a million tribal peoples speaking their own unique tongues and worshipping in distinct ways. India's population speaks 325 languages, representing 12 language families. India, in other words, is so ragtag, so multiform, that one does it violence by attempting to reduce it to a single, Hindu culture.

Geography has been a major force in the shaping of Indian religion and philosophy. For the subcontinent of India hangs like a giant triangle from the underbelly of Asia: To the north and northwest tower some of the world's highest mountains, the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush, and the Sulaiman ranges. Eastward, dense tracts of jungle present an impenetrable barrier. A coastline humming with breakers pulsing in from the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean embraces the remainder of the subcontinent. For thousands of years these natural barriers discouraged foreign invaders from all but one direction: the West. Kipling's famous line "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," was possible only because a great Western power—the British Empire—did meet India, and conquered her. And similar meetings have been taking place for thousands of years. As each wave of Western invaders entered the subcontinent, Indian religion and philosophy changed.

Indian philosophy, is something like a banyan tree. Called "The Many-footed," banyans, for thousands of years, have provided shade, forming natural outdoor meeting rooms that have acted as schools, temples, and marketplaces.





The banyan begins its life as a single trunk that rises from a tiny seed. Yet its widespreading branches eventually form a vast canopy, spreading out to shade an entire acre. As these branches expand outward, they send down aerial roots that reach the ground, penetrate it, and become secondary trunks, often rivaling the original trunk in size. So substantial are these aerial root-trunks, that often one cannot distinguish them from the original.

The six trunks forming the basis of Indian religious and philosophical thought are, in historical order, as follows:

The Indus Valley Trunk (c. 3000-1500 B.C.)

The Indo-Brahmanical Trunk (c. 1500-600 B.C.)

The Indo-Shramanical Trunk (c. 600 B.C.-300 A.D.)

The Indic (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain) Trunk (c. 300-1200 A.D.)

The Indo-Islamic Trunk (c. 1200-1757 A.D.)

The Indo-Anglican Trunk (c. 1757-present)

The entire lush, tangled canopy of Indian religious and philosophical systems with all its Gods and Goddesses, images, and symbols, rests atop these major trunks. What's more, this banyan tree of Indian religions and philosophies is a **talking tree**. It talks to itself, and has been doing so for thousands of years. For religion and philosophy, in India, have never been a single, unified tree. This talking tree sounds and resounds with the ongoing conversations, snippets of gossip, polemics, arguments, criticisms, and plagiarisms each trunk has exchanged with all the others, down through the ages.

THE INDUS VALLEY TRUNK (c. 3000-1500 B.C.)

INDUS VALLEY, INC.

The word “Hindu” was originally a Persian term for the area of the Indus River. Then, Alexander the Great called the people who lived on the banks of the Indus Hindus.

However, long before Alexander the Great came to India—long before Hinduism existed—an ancient civilization thrived on the banks of the Indus. Scholars know very little about this ancient Indus Valley civilization. They do know that, like the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the settlement flourished because it lay in a great river valley. From about 3000 B.C. to about 1500 B.C. it covered 750,000 square miles. Then, suddenly, it disappeared.

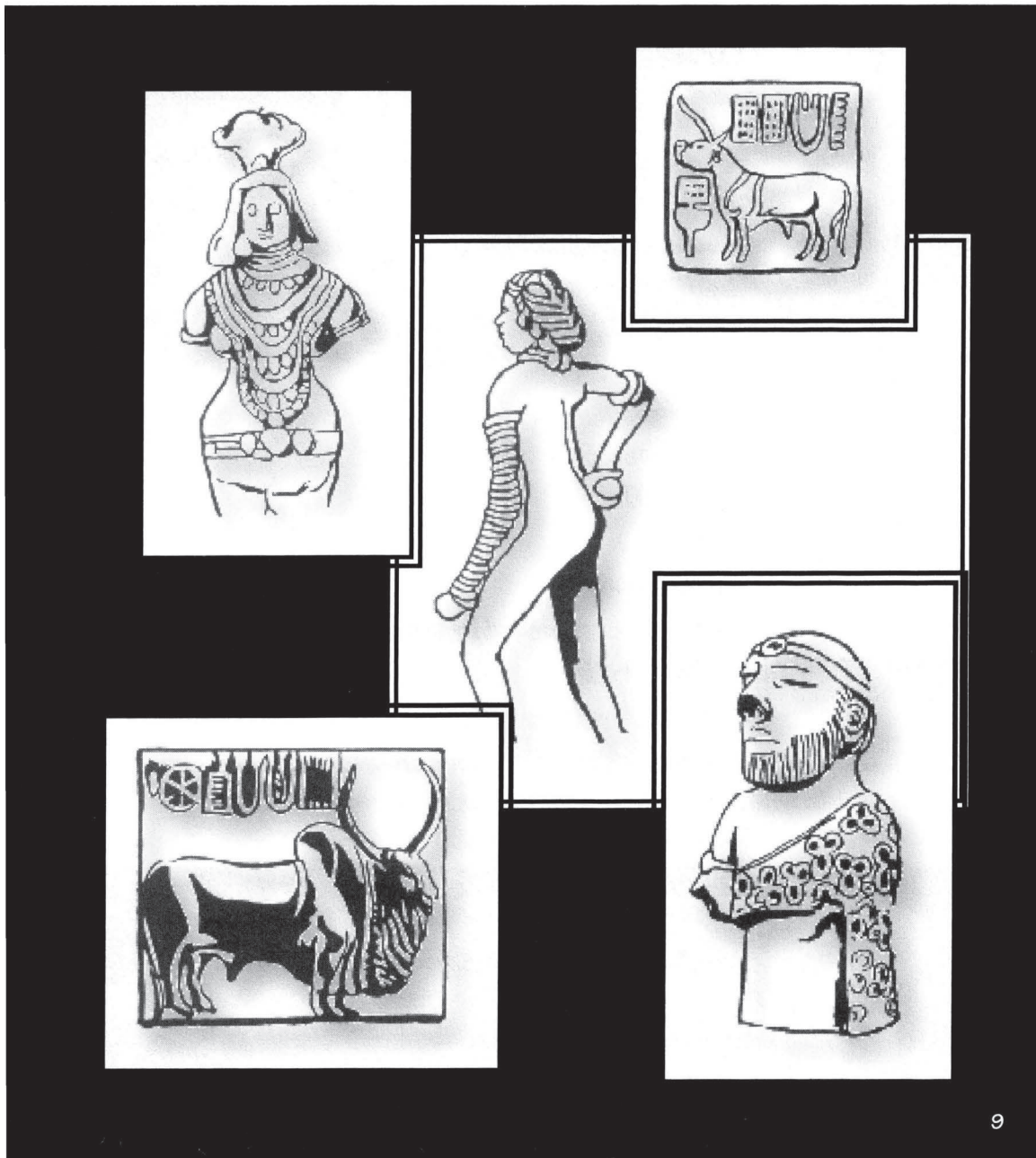
Its two largest cities, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, sheltered some 80,000 inhabitants in orderly, streets laid out in an east-west/north-south grid. The citizens enjoyed the benefits of a public drainage system, municipal wells, and even public garbage collection. Everything was so uniform that even the size of the bricks from which the houses were built were the same.

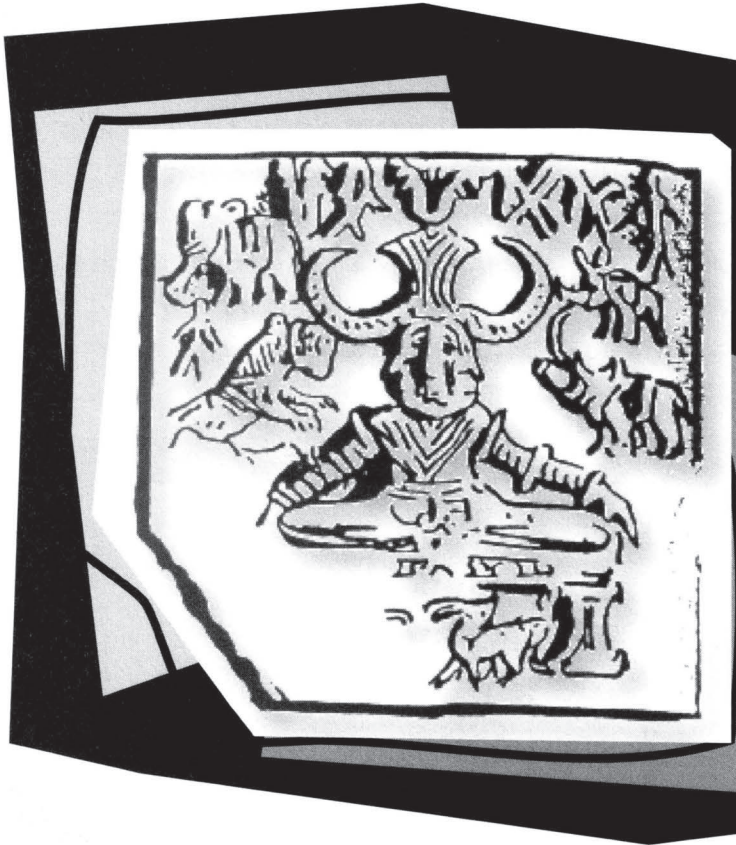


HARAPPA'S BAZAAR

Fortified citadels, sitting atop raised mounds, crowned both Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Surrounding these were government halls and temples. The view from these raised citadels took in streets teeming with shoppers. In fact, the great bazaars of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, seemed to have served the same function in the ancient world as shopping malls do today. And it was through their arts and economic power—rather than arms—that their influence spread. Archaeologists have found very few weapons, but lots of intricate jewelry made of shells from the Gulf of Oman, gold from Afghanistan, and copper from far inland. These artifacts indicate that the bazaars sat in the very hub of a vast network of trade routes. Evidently, their artisans were wonderfully skilled.

What little we know of the religion and philosophy of the Indus Valley is based on the temples and various objects within them. These temples surrounded vast central courtyards with large central bathing areas for ritual bathing. Flanking the bathing areas were brick platforms—possibly used for ritual altars. Archaeologists have unearthed large numbers of lithe terra-cotta figurines, possibly goddesses, and numerous soapstone seals inscribed with a script that no one has yet convincingly deciphered.





On one of these seals, however, is the image of a horned figure positioned in what appears to be a yogic posture. The figure, which has three faces, looks out on a veritable zoo of animals, which surround him. Is he, as some scholars argue, an early form of the Hindu God *Shiva*, Supreme Yogi, Lord of Creatures? Nobody knows.

Archaeologists have also unearthed large numbers of polished stone phalli. Many of these elements:

- ⊗ **ritual bathing**
- ⊗ **altars**
- ⊗ **goddess worship**
- ⊗ **a yoga god surrounded by animals**
- ⊗ **phallus worship**
- ⊗ **a concern for social order**
- ⊗ **architecture laid out in an east-west grid**

are found in what later would be called Hinduism.

Alice: What happened in between?
Caterpillar: Well, that brings us to our next trunk—the Indo-Brahmanical.