

Race Matters: Orientalism and Religion, India and Beyond c.1770–1880

SHRUTI KAPILA

Tufts University, USA

Abstract

In tracing the history of the concept of race, this article revises the conventional view that race acquired significance only after the mid-nineteenth century in colonial India. Instead, it situates the history of race in the connected realms of enlightenment science in both the metropolitan and colonial worlds and in the public sphere of Indian print culture. From the 1770s onwards the emerging ‘science’ of race was intimately related to orientalism and was salient for civilisational concepts, above all, religion. Precisely because it was a capacious concept that encompassed both cultural and biological ideas, race became an inescapable category for world-comparative distinctions between human types and religions, but it also held implications for the role of empire. Phrenology was a popular dimension of this set of ideas and found votaries among both imperial and also Indian literati of radical, conservative and liberal political opinions. The Calcutta Phrenological Society became an active site of debate on these issues. Yet in the popular realm of vernacular print culture analogous notions of physical typology and distinction (particularly *samudrikvidya*) remained distant from such concerns. As a form of ‘insurgent knowledge’ *samudrikvidya* was part of the techniques for the reconstitution of an Indian selfhood. Race then was not only a powerful concept, but also one that was remarkably mutable in its meanings and uses from the eighteenth century onwards.

As part of his busy routine in the early 1820s, George Murray Paterson would spend an hour each day over several weeks, contemplating what he called the ‘truth of differences’. For this ponderous

Shruti Kapila is Assistant Professor of History at Tufts University, MA, USA. She can be contacted at Shruti.Kapila@tufts.edu

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business, he had placed on a table in his bungalow in Calcutta two rows of skulls. In the first row, Paterson had positioned one 'Hindoo' skull between two European skulls and in the second row, one European skull between two 'Hindoo' skulls.¹ The young assistant surgeon with the Bengal Medical Service had felt compelled to undertake this discipline. Prior to arriving in Calcutta, Paterson had spent a few months in the neighbouring province of Bihar. Living there on the banks of the Ganges, he wrote that 'he could seldom [leave] his boat or bungalow . . . without noticing the very large and prominent head' of a devotee by the river. Conducting medical rounds in villages or while reading at home, it would seem the devotee Paterson had curiously decided to call 'Adam' was unavoidable: unavoidable for the sheer size of his head. Paterson had also decided that 'Adam' was a 'Hindoo of genuine descent' and a Brahmin. By 1830, Paterson had died in Southampton but by then he had 'manipulated over three thousand Hindoo skulls', collected, trafficked and displayed a large number and had also written 'The Phrenology of Hindoostan'. Paterson was perhaps a zealous but by no means a lone eccentric. Indeed, skulls were the objects of this truth of differences and, observation and induction were the methods of the moment.

This article considers the idea of race and the emergence of racial 'science' in relation to India, and its reception and transformation within the British and Indian public sphere between 1770 and 1880. During this period the key element of what were regarded as precise racial sciences was to interpret human type through the measurement and distinction of skull type. This method sought to classify and assess differences between races, and by extension the capacity of races, by analysing the human skull. Different mental faculties were thought to be embodied in, and formative of, the structure of the skull. This type of cranial assessment differed in important respects from later anthropometric attention to the skull, which after the explosion of evolutionary theory in the 1860s, posited a much clearer line of descent for humanity and the so-called 'races' that composed it. The article shows that from the 1770s onwards ethnologists attempted to fit Indians into the developing typologies of early racial science. The article critiques the view that civilisational status derived from classical models rather than early forms of racial typology dominated early British and European understandings of India.

¹ George Murray Paterson, 'On the Phrenology of Hindoostan', *Transactions of the Phrenological Society*, vol. I (1823), p. 433.

Following the eighteenth-century works of J. F. Blumenbach, the German physician and naturalist who classified humans into five types and is known for inventing the term 'Caucasian', a series of British scholars, in particular J. C. Prichard, considered the founding figure of British social anthropology, continued to address the problem of where to locate Indians in their racial typologies. A network of scholars, some closely connected with East India Company officials, contributed to the emerging typologies. By the 1820s, moreover, Indian literati, above all Raja Rammohan Roy, were associated with this project. Indian phrenology developed, within a space that adjoined, but did not overlap with indigenous sciences that predicted human character on the basis of physical type and were developing rapidly through the new print media.²

The article seeks more broadly to interrogate and reconfigure colonial and Indian intellectual history. It argues that the importance of race in the history of ideas of British India and India itself has been consistently underrated, and particularly for this earlier period. In this instance, western orientalism and Indian national sensibilities have come together to occlude the importance of race and to insist on what might be called India's 'civilisational exceptionalism'. Orientalist scholarship, even after Edward Said's intervention, has been happy to preserve its apparently benign status by emphasising the salience of civilisation and language. If race is considered at all for this period, it is in the context of the degenerative effects of climate on human types rather than an interrogation on the nature of those types themselves or, indeed how those types came to be defined, described and demarcated.³ From all these perspectives, India can still be seen as exceptional. It was seen as the site of an ancient, literate and commercial society, which Adam Smith could insist was almost on a level with that of Europe. Alternatively, it could be portrayed as part of the Aryan linguistic group with the heroic status of William Jones's findings still lauded. Race on the other hand, it

² The approach here is schematic and not comprehensive and other facets such as caste and linguistic-regional identity are outside the purview of this article. On recent revisions of the concept of race in other contexts see especially Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth Century North America* (New York, 2004) and Jonathon Glassman, 'Slower than a Massacre: The Multiple Sources of Racial Thought in Colonial Africa', *American Historical Review* 109:3 (2004), pp. 720–54.

³ Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India 1600–1850* (New Delhi, 1999).

would seem, happened to other people and places and civilisational status, however much orientalised, seems to have defined the place of India. This is a dominant trope of comparative colonialisms. This is however, not to assert that all colonial experience and historical processes and transformations across societies and cultures were the same. That would be (if I can use the word) wrong headed! Indeed, the article considers the implication and connection between race and civilisational concepts such as religion and language. Nor is this article undertaking a study of colonial policies of exclusion and their effects in the making of racial identities.⁴ Instead, the article seeks to examine the changing place of the Indian in the early theories and typologies in the changing history of race and their engagement and transformation in the Indian public sphere. Over three distinct and related sites, the article seeks connections between the networks of enlightenment science, the transactions between the metropolitan and colonial worlds and the public sphere of colonial print culture. In so doing, it situates the intersection of race and orientalism, race and religion and the place of typology in the reconfiguring of Indian selfhood. As a history of the concept of race it situates India and the 'Hindustani' in emergent racial typologies and discusses their relationship to classical orientalism. Secondly, the issue of comparisons between races is interpreted in the context of the shifting ideological identity of the British Empire. This issue was connected with the attempt to historicise empires and religions. Finally, the article considers indigenous techniques and understandings of physical difference and typology. These were part of the repertoire of techniques for the making of the modern Indian self.

As this article shows, a significant section of British and European intellectuals, even during the age of the Scottish enlightenment, considered Indians to be closer to black Africans, or black Malays, than they were to white 'Caucasians'. These early racial typologies, soon afterwards associated with phrenology, intersected with and informed classical orientalism in ways that have not been adequately investigated. Consequently, the teleology that posits a drift within European and Indian thought from an enlightened, even 'multi-cultural' classicism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century

⁴ Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1792–1805* (London, 1980) Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, 1995).

to a brief period of heightened racial awareness at the end of the nineteenth century is untenable.⁵ Race mattered throughout, though in different ways and with different consequences. In so doing it mutated its meaning and its points of application.

I Enlightened Networks: Race, Orientalism and Degeneration

The first English usage of the term, 'race' as Michael Banton has shown can be traced back to as early as a 1508 poem by the Scotsman William Dunbar in which the meaning of race strictly referred to humanity's descent and dispersal through the Bible. Biblical ideas cast a long shadow well into the eighteenth century. By then the question of descent was approached through the question of what the human race was, an issue that bore a particular relation to the emergent classifications of plants and animals. Here thinkers in Continental Europe, particularly Karl Linnaeus and his French contemporary Buffon, became prominent as they were immersed in the question of the nature of so-called 'animal and human variety'. Buffon's work had initially rejected the idea of species but then he revised his own work by suggesting 'environmental' explanations for the nature of differences. Buffon's pointing out to the connection or the effect between the environment and the organic or physiological was highly suggestive and it was the search for an apposite correlation between the organic, mental or hidden and the environmental that animated much German Enlightenment thought.⁶ Between 1775 and 1795 and coterminous with Kant's reflections, Johann Frederick Blumenbach developed in his book, *On the Natural Variety of Humankind* (and in its various revisions) the classification of five human types. This remains the basis of national censuses even today.⁷

Blumenbach was a medical doctor and physiologist who emerged from the school of precise anatomical sciences that developed in the German university cities of Jena and Gottingen in the eighteenth century. More broadly, however, he participated in what might be

⁵ But see David Arnold, 'Race, Place and Bodily Difference in early Nineteenth Century India', *Historical Research* 77:196 (2004) and Sudipta Sen, *A Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York, 2002).

⁶ Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 17–78.

⁷ J. F. Blumenbach, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1795) republished in *The Anthropological Treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach* edited and translated by Thomas Bendyshe (London, 1865).

called the north European enlightenment. As in the case of the so-called Scottish enlightenment, internal agricultural development and external exploration provided a huge stimulus to the natural and human sciences.⁸ Blumenbach became professor of medicine at Gottingen.⁹ This was not entirely without significance since Gottingen University was established by King George II and its main aim was to 'escape religious and scholastic' constraints back in the British Isles. Further, Gottingen was a major 'conduit for Scottish romanticism' and both Scottish and German enlightenment thought had a shared interest in the question of race.¹⁰ Here Blumenbach began his work on race theory that culminated in his massive disquisition on the human skull, *Collectionis suae craniorum diversarum illustratae decades* (Gottingen, 1790–1828). This occurred against the background of the excitement that had been created by the findings of Karl Linnaeus as he moved from the study of plant to animal and human species.¹¹ In particular, the debate about the status of the orang utan and the extent to which it marked or failed to mark the difference between man and animal appears to have informed Blumenbach's study. It had become essential to categorise humans and to mark them off decisively from animals. To this extent, Karl Marx a later admirer, was correct in seeing Blumenbach as a progressive scientist in that he insisted the African black or the southeast Asian 'negrito' was, in fact, a human and not an animal. As Marx wrote in the posthumous festschrift for Blumenbach in the 1840s, 'At the . . . time when the negroes and the savages were still considered as half animals, and no one had yet conceived the idea of emancipation of the slaves, Blumenbach raised his voice, and showed that . . . they were not inferior to those of the European . . . even though the greatest possible differences existed'.¹²

It was with the second edition of his book in 1781 that Blumenbach categorised humans into five types: namely Caucasian, Asiatic, American, Ethiopian and Malay. As his nineteenth-century commentator Thomas Bendyshe points out, for Blumenbach, the

⁸ C. A Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004).

⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 13th ed (1910), vols. 3–4.

¹⁰ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Jersey and London, 1987), p. 215.

¹¹ William Lawrence, *A Short System of Comparative Anatomy translated from the German of J. F. Blumenbach* (London, 1807).

¹² K. F. H. Marx, 'Life of Blumenbach' (1840) republished in Bendyshe (trans. ed.), *Anthropological Treatises*, p. 9.

principal races were initially only three that is, the Caucasian, Mongolian and the Ethiopian. The Mongolian and the Ethiopian were 'extreme degenerated' forms but we must alert ourselves here to the fact that for Blumenbach 'degeneration' referred not so much to 'deterioration' but to 'modification' of form in successive generations and types.¹³ So the Mongolian and the Ethiopian represented the greatest difference in type from the Caucasian. The other races for Blumenbach were what he called 'transitional'. In other words, the Native American was a transitional or a 'passage' from the Caucasian to the Mongolian and similarly the Malay was a transitional passage from the Caucasian to the Ethiopian.

But as with Linnaeus before him, these groupings were constantly challenged at their limits and with new findings. Not only did Blumenbach receive much new data from German and Baltic sources, but also through a connection with Hanoverian England, he was in touch with the expansive world of exploration through the Royal Navy and the English East India Company. Moreover, Blumenbach was also the Court Physician to King George III thus allowing him access, a role in and a connection with the late eighteenth-century pursuit of gentlemanly and imperial science. Testifying to this connection and the support that provided him items of material culture that was to form the evidential basis of this human typology, Blumenbach dedicated the popular edition and the English translation of his book to that iconic figure of this period, Sir Joseph Banks.¹⁴ Banks had helped Blumenbach in procuring skulls from the Americas and the islands in the Southern Ocean and during Blumenbach's visit to London in 1791–92 had also made a vast range of drawings and paintings of 'exotic peoples' available for the anatomist.¹⁵ Through the Gottingen circle, Blumenbach kept an intimate contact with Cook's voyages even when Banks himself was marooned from these endeavours of exploration. Here the astronomer, Georg Forster who accompanied Cook played an important role.¹⁶ It is almost certain that at this point Blumenbach had no skulls from the sub-continent though by the time of his death in 1833 in his vast collection of skulls, he had

¹³ Thomas Bendyshe, Preface, *Anthropological Treatises*, pp. viii–xi; Banton, *Racial Theories*, p. 22.

¹⁴ J. F. Blumenbach, *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa Editio Tertia: Praemissa est Epistola as Virum Perrillstrem Joseph Banks* (Gottingen, 1795).

¹⁵ Blumenbach, *Natural Variety* in Bendyshe (ed. trans.), *Anthropological Treatises*, p. 161.

¹⁶ Bernal, *Black Athena*, p. 478.

but two from the region.¹⁷ He relied, however, on visual material – paintings and drawings and had a significant collection relating to the sub-continent – to discuss the issue of such transitional types such as was the Hindustani.¹⁸ The question was how did the vast civilisational area of the sub-continent fit into this racial categorisation based on physical appearance and colour.

Visualising the ‘Hindustani’: Colours of Climate

The ‘Hindustani’ posed a challenge for Blumenbach not only because of the lack of physiological material like skulls and skeletons but also because of the so-called degeneration or modification of features such as skin colour defied easy classification. And it can be argued that it was precisely because of the issue of colour and its modification, that visual material played perhaps a more important role for Blumenbach when discussing the conundrum of the typology of the ‘Hindustani’. The evidential apparatus of Blumenbach’s classification, for instance placed the Hindustani visual material in two places. He placed a painting of a ‘Hindustani’ woman given to him by the well-known London antiquary Samuel Lysons under the category of ‘Caucasian’.¹⁹ Blumenbach had taken the term ‘Caucasian’ from Mount Caucasus because according to him especially its southern slope ‘produces the most beautiful race of men’.²⁰ Blumenbach had also assumed that not only was white beautiful but it ‘was the original colour of mankind’ mainly because as he had argued it was ‘more difficult for dark to become white but very easy for white to degenerate into brown’. This degeneration of colour then also explains why Blumenbach adduced as evidence paintings of two historical Mughal persons as not ‘Caucasian’ but classified them as evidence of the ‘shape of Mongolian skulls’. Kasim Ali Khan, the former nawab of Bengal who was deposed by the East India Company and another painting of a Hindustani woman

¹⁷ Rudolph Wagner, ‘On the Anthropological Collection of the Physiological Institute of Gottingen’ (1856) in Bendyshe, (ed. trans.), *Anthropological Treatises*, pp. 347–55. Perhaps the largest collection of skulls from the sub-continent belonged to the anti-abolitionist Samuel Morton of Philadelphia see, J. C. Nott, ‘Comparative Anatomy of Races’, in J. C. Nott & G. R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: Dedicated to the Memory of Samuel George Morton*, (London, 1854), p. 450.

¹⁸ Bendyshe (ed. trans.), *Anthropological Treatises*, pp. 159–62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

namely the wife of the last Mughal emperor Shah Alam were described as 'Mongolian'. This categorisation was more a recognition of the 'origins' of these erstwhile rulers since as he put it for 'obvious causes they come very near the Hindoostanee in appearance'.²¹ Blumenbach like other German romanticists such as Herder was not only concerned with sentiment and skulls but also with the question of human origins and variety. Nature and in particular landscape played a significant role here. So while it seems ludicrous that the term Caucasian is as literalist as a reference as to the slopes of a particular mountain, it is less ludicrous when one considers that it also refers to the place where Noah's Ark landed in the Southern Caucasus.²²

At this point, the emerging European romantic ethnographic thought made a critical turn. Herder turned his eyes eastwards and placed human origins in the Himalayas stating the belief that 'mankind in its purest forms', what were called the Aryans came from the Highlands of Asia. Herder's call of, 'Let us scale the mountains laboriously to the summit of Asia' was alas well heeded by the end of the nineteenth century.²³ Blumenbach himself took this call fairly seriously and arranged to see the Company artist Tilly Kettle's representations of Tibetans that were ostensibly drawn 'from the nature' in 1775. The paintings that he saw are now part of the Royal Collection and were shown to him by none other than Warren Hastings, the patron saint of Orientalist scholarship.²⁴ And quite like Warren Hastings or perhaps, because of Warren Hastings, by the time Blumenbach returned from London to Gottingen in early 1792, among other things that he had collected there was an 'Indian woman, a native of Bombay [to work] as a servant to his household'.²⁵

At the centre of this visual material was the question of colour and how that related to the origins and variety of humans. Towards that end Blumenbach's use of visual ethnography and collections derived from the East India Collections helped him to make the claim that the original inhabitants of 'Hindoostan' were dark and that the tyranny of climate 'effeminised' and darkened 'stronger northern nations' who came and accommodated themselves to the sub-continent. Climate in other words, at once made conquest possible because of its

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bernal, *Black Athena*, p. 219.

²³ Ibid., pp. 219–20.

²⁴ Bendyshe (ed. trans.), *Anthropological Treatises*, p. 270.

²⁵ Ibid., Note 3, p. 270.

effects of ‘softness’ on the so-called original inhabitant of the sub-continent and at the same time it degenerated the conquerors. Here, Blumenbach cited the collections of Charles Townley (1737–1805) and the representations of the Elephanta Caves as ‘characteristics of the ancient Indian’.²⁶ In seeking the origins and colour of the original inhabitant, Blumenbach tied together a causal link between colour, climate and conquest. As he wrote,

Egypt, however, and India this side of the Ganges afford us the clearest examples of all. For as this peninsula has been frequently subdued by the most different nations, because the first conquerors becoming effeminated by living in such a soft climate were at last conquered by other and stronger northern nations who came after them, so also their appearance seems as it were to have accommodated itself to the new climate. In fact, we only know the racial aspect of the old possessors of India and their manifest characteristics from the most ancient works of Indian art, I mean those stupendous statues, which are carved out in a wonderful way in the subterranean temples of the islands of Salsette and Elephanta . . . The more modern conquerors of India, that is, the Mongolians, have lost much of their original features under a new climate, and approached nearer the Indian type, of which I have had ocular experience from the Indian pictures . . .²⁷

In addition to these pieces of visual evidence, Blumenbach also referred to the engravings in Cornelis de Bruin’s Persian and Indian travels. Cornelis de Bruin (or de Bruyn, 1652–c.1726) was a Dutch portrait painter whose *Reizen over Moskovie, door Persie en Indie*, illustrated with engravings from his own drawings, was published in Amsterdam in 1714. But a more important influence for Blumenbach was the man who replaced Joseph Banks on Cook’s second expedition, the painter and naturalist William Hodges. William Hodges is primarily seen as a picturesque artist, but his role as a pivotal informant on the emergent typologies of race has not generally been mentioned. And if it is, it is limited to the context of the Pacific. This was demonstrated by the single exhibit in the recent exhibition on Hodges at the National Maritime Museum which neatly replicated a very old division of the world.²⁸ Hodges proved critical in that he directly linked the world of Pacific and Southeast Asia with that of India. These voyages of discovery were indeed ‘physical journeys’ and the

²⁶ Ibid., *Archaeologica*, Vol. III, Tab. 25, 26, 27.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Geoff Quilley and John Bonehill (ed.), *William Hodges 1744–1797* (New Haven, 2004).

passage to India entailed a prior passage to Africa from Europe.²⁹ Such global comparisons between so-called races became embedded with the increasing planetary expansion of the British Empire. Not quite unlike Hodges's most recent critic the art journalist Brian Sewell who questioned why a 'second rate artist' like Hodges was given a full exhibition, Blumenbach too was measured in his response to Hodges. Though impressed by his drawings and paintings of Tahitian, Tongan and Indian native heads, he felt that they were too romantic and unscientific. Instead Blumenbach cited Hodges's travel narratives as they related to the changing colours of the humans from one Ocean end to the other. Citing Hodges's, *Travels in India during the Years 1781, 1782, 1783* (London, 1784) Blumenbach writes in the final version of his work,

The complexions of the people on the Coast of Coromandel and to the southward, are considerably darker than those to the northward. It is also to be observed, that the native Hindoos are generally darker than the Mussulman, who originally came from Tartary and Persia. The latter may in fact be called a fair people; and I have even seen many of them with red hair and florid complexions. It is a well known fact, that when a Tartar or Persian family has resided in India for a few generations, their complexions have considerably deepened. The Mogul family of the house of Timoor, I understand, are of a deep olive complexion.³⁰

The key concerns in Blumenbach's work emerged from the assumption that it was only humans who were capable of living in all kinds of climates and this issue was related to the question of physical typology as it emerged through modification or degeneration. Blumenbach points to the question of both internal differences in type on the sub-continent and he posits this distinction in relation to so-called non-natives and specifically the Mughals. A generation after Blumenbach, these distinctions and the question of 'original' and 'native inhabitants' would be explicitly related to the historical unfolding of empires and instead of colour, religion would become the causal category of explanation of physical differences.

One important feature of Hodges work, however, was its two-fold character. On the one hand, he sketched and painted human heads and types. On the other hand, he recorded images of the great scenes of ancient Hindu and Muslim civilisation, the Sharqi palace at Jaunpur,

²⁹ I am grateful to Dr Richard Drayton for this insight.

³⁰ J. F. Blumenbach, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (London, 3rd edition, 1795), p. 3.

the ghats of Benares, and so on. In other words, there was a close if unanalysed connection between the development of racial science and the orientalist mapping of Indian civilisations, their rise and fall. By the time high classical orientalist scholarship emerged into the learned world it was already permeated by the idea of the physical and mental development of races. William Jones and his generation were therefore not part of a benign enlightenment project that predated the emergence of European racial ideology but they were implicated in its very origins.

This same sensibility can be seen in the work of the other picturesque artists Thomas and William Daniells, artists and travellers whose precise drawing of both architectural and physical types would have been more congenial to Blumenbach and his followers. The Daniells are known for their famous series of paintings of the great buildings and ruins of north and south India, *Views of Hindustan*. Again, the British tradition in particular regards them as purely part of the genre of the picturesque, almost as a refuge from empirical observation. In fact the Daniells also recorded human heads and types on a large scale. Thomas Daniell made a large collection of images of the heads of Khoikhoi, Xhosa and Khoisan inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope which became staple sources for European race theorists. The picturesque as much as the realist water colourists of this period did the work of ethnographical record. As Andrew Bank pointed out, at least until the 1830s, there was a close connection between Indian 'orientalism' and the categorising of types of south African 'natives', one that has been largely forgotten since the academy divided into Indian and African studies. The Daniells also produced a number of sketches of 'the heads of young Indian men' and representations of southern Indian 'tribal' groups such as the Karavas.³¹ In their later journeys through India and the China coast, they remained acutely aware of racial typology and the manner in which it intersected with the influence of climate and the fall of civilisation.

Blumenbach's preoccupations became embedded in British and British-Indian life through the work of James Cowels Prichard (1786–1848). Prichard was a medical doctor, linguist and ethnologist who worked most of his life distant from gentlemanly circles of London, Edinburgh, Oxford and Cambridge and lived instead in Bristol. On the one hand Blumenbach and his connection with the Company and with

³¹ C. A. Bayly (ed.), *The Raj* (London, 1990). Entry 122, i & ii, pp.108–9.

the material culture of South Asia have remained entirely unnoticed because this period has almost singularly been interpreted as one belonging to the romantic Orientalist phase. Prichard and his work, on the other hand, within the historiography of South Asia have been seen primarily through the Orientalist-Sanskrit lens. From this viewpoint, Prichard is seen to be at odds with the broad transformations of nineteenth-century thought. In particular, he is thought to fall firmly in the middle of two ends of the Orientalist spectrum, of the earlier generation of William Jones and Colebrooke and the later-nineteenth-century shifts in scholarship as represented by Friedrich Max Muller. As has been noted by various authors, German ethnology was 'naturalised' in Britain by Prichard and Prichardian ethnology was paradigmatic of British ethnology in the first half of the nineteenth century.³² Thomas Trautmann to this extent is right in identifying Prichard as representative of the 'lost generation of evolutionism between the eighteenth and late nineteenth century'.³³ Further, from the vantage point of race theory, Prichard's methods and influences are seen to belong to the earlier and late-eighteenth-century milieu of climate and environmental determinism.³⁴ By bringing together these seemingly distinct vantage points, however, Prichard emerges not so much a 'lost' figure at odds with the unfolding history of both orientalist scholarship and race theory but rather as an individual who straddled these two realms of investigation and resolved the apparent contradictions between them.

In 1813 Prichard wrote the influential three-volume Blumenbachian work entitled, *Researches into the Physical History of Man*. Published in several editions, the first and the second edition of the work in the 1826, are entirely contradictory in the explanation of the question and cause of racial difference.³⁵ In its initial version, though primarily working within the Blumenbachian framework, Prichard's conclusions were entirely at odds with Blumenbach on the question of origin, modification and the question of colour. Here, he revised Blumenbach by asserting that the original colour of the human race was black.

³² Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 132–3. Also see, Banton, *Racial Theories* and George W. Stocking, 'From Chronology to Ethnology, James Cowles Prichard and British Anthropology 1800–1850' George W. Stocking (ed.), *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (Chicago, 1973).

³³ Trautmann, *Aryans*, p. 167.

³⁴ Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions*.

³⁵ George W. Stocking, 'From Chronology to Ethnology', in George W. Stocking (ed.), *Researches*.

Prichard's insistence on mankind's original 'negritude' was indeed as radical as it was unpopular at the time. Secondly, according to Prichard this original state of blackness was modified into lighter shades by the effects of civilization. In Prichard then we have the earliest connection between race and civilization. In other words, Prichard asserted that race was both the marker and the cause of civilization. In between the various versions of the *Physical History of Mankind*, and twenty years after its first edition, Prichard published his treatise *The Eastern Origin of the Celtic Nations proved by a comparison of their dialects with the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Teutonic Languages* that appeared in 1831. This corpus taken together rather than as seen as discrete episodes in an individual's intellectual biography then presents us with a foundational moment in the amalgamation of the linguistic-civilisational typology and its physiological-racial representation. Moreover, and critically for both these sets of works—the physiological works and the linguistic works, the key sources remained classical orientalist scholarship.³⁶ As for Blumenbach, and so for Prichard, Indians were closer to 'negro' Africans than to white 'Caucasians'. Intellectual history, orientalist scholarship and Indian nationalism have conspired to forget the 'negro' Indian and have consistently remembered only the Aryan Indian.³⁷

Citing the orientalist Francis Wilford who shared Prichard's predilection for connecting the Egyptian and the Indian and in them saw the original civilisation, Prichard wrote,

In several parts of India the mountaineers resemble Negroes in their countenance, and in some degree in their hair, which is curled and has a tendency to wool... It is reasonable to suppose that the barbarous tribes preserve most of their original character of the nation, for the first colonists were in all probability rude people. The better orders in India, as in other countries, have gradually improved by civilization, and have acquired a different aspect... 'It cannot reasonably be doubted, that a race of Negroes had pre-eminence in India'.³⁸

For Prichard, this connection between the supposed original 'negritude' of the Egyptian and the Indian was part of the larger inspiration that he took from William Jones in seeking the unity of

³⁶ The key sources for Prichard were the orientalists William Jones, H. T. Colebrooke, and Francis Wilford and the naturalist Francis Buchanan.

³⁷ As Prichard wrote, 'The former Hindoos were Negroes', in Stocking (ed.), *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, p. 392.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

Indians with Mankind as a whole.³⁹ But once again, the question of the transition of colour and the consequences of climate, as in the case of Blumenbach proved to be inescapable for Prichard. The effects of considering this question together with the orientalist material and the physical typology had however dramatic different consequences. In attaching an internal distinction of colour between lighter Aryans, the purveyors of civilisation and Sanskrit, and the original darker inhabitants Prichard therefore provided a full exposition of the Indo-Aryan theory.⁴⁰ This was based both on language and colour. In other words linguistic typology, racial typology and the division of light and dark colours were tightly knitted together in Prichard. Rather than being at odds with either prevalent ideas of race or orientalism Prichard emerges as an influential figure who decisively connected race, colour, civilisation and language. The point, therefore emerges quite clearly that linguistic and civilisational analysis following Jones was not an alternative to racial theorising but part of the same intellectual project. Indeed, the two were closely allied, representing two methodologies, which purported to investigate the shared problem of the emergence of human and civilisational differences and types. Indeed, the Blumenbachian conundrum of where to classify the Hindustani was thus resolved by Prichard. The answer was that the original inhabitants of the sub-continent were black and consequently their civilisational salvation lay with the so-called outsider. This intellectual link between race, civilisation and the role of the ‘outsider’ in building empires in the sub-continent persisted in the thinking of mid-nineteenth-century figures such as the orientalist H. H. Wilson.

James Cowles Prichard, however, represents a significant break from the earlier period at least in terms of the shift in the social basis of the pursuit of science and new knowledges. As noted earlier, Prichard did not belong to the gentlemanly world of letters. A related shift was the popularisation of these ideas of physical typology. The early decades of the nineteenth century were captivated by phrenology that purported to be a ‘science’ of character as interpreted through the shape and size of the skull. As Roger Cooter states, ‘Phrenology for most of

³⁹ James Cowles Prichard, *An Analysis of the Egyptian Mythology* (London, 1819) and the comparative work, James Prichard, ‘Temperaments’ in his *Cyclopedia of Practical Medicine*, vol. 4 (1845), pp. 349–63 republished in Roger Cooter (ed.), *Phrenology in Europe and America*, vol. I (London, 2001).

⁴⁰ J. C. Prichard, *The Eastern Origin of the Celtic Nations proved by a comparison of their dialects with the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Teutonic Languages* (London, 1831).

the nineteenth century was rather like psychoanalysis for most of the twentieth: always more than a controversial theory of mind and science of character, it was a way to inform, describe and organize all ‘human nature’.⁴¹ As a ‘dogma of enlightenment and hope’ phrenology was ambitious in its scope, taking in its sweep issues of religion, mental faculties, social institutions and progress.⁴² At the same time it was a hands-on and an empiricist method of interpreting and predicting individual and collective character through skull measurement. While seen as a key part of the intellectual and cultural life of nineteenth-century Britain, the critical role of phrenology in the public life of imperial ideology and questions of religious reform in colonial India has largely been ignored. Moreover, the circulation of physical and material culture of skulls between the metropolitan and colonial worlds proliferated and involved both high-minded ideologues and popular pamphleteers. Phrenology represented a new set of agents, interventions and meanings both in the concept of race and the meaning of physical distinction that predominantly intersected with the issue of religion.

II. The Calcutta Phrenological Society: Race, Religion and Regeneration

Soon after he arrived in Calcutta in March 1825 George Murray Paterson, whom we have encountered at the beginning of this article, founded the Calcutta Phrenological Society.⁴³ Having previously written the ‘Phrenology of Hindostan’, he had also made close links with and had a regular corresponding relationship with George Combe in Edinburgh, the figurehead of phrenology. He arrived in Calcutta less as a representative of the metropolitan societies in Edinburgh or elsewhere to the ‘outer peripheries’ and more as an advocate, firm believer and a key figure in phrenology.

⁴¹ Roger Cooter (ed.), *Phrenology in Europe*, vol. I, p. xv. See also Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1984).

⁴² Cooter, *Phrenology*, p. xviii.

⁴³ ‘Letter from Dr. Murray Paterson to a friend [George Combe] in Edinburgh’, April 23, 1825, *The Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* (hereafter, *PJM*), vol. III, Aug. (1826), pp. 101–4. It is the same letter as Paterson to Combe, 23 April 1825, George Combe Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh (hereafter, NLS) Ms 7216, ff. 48–9.

Three years earlier, Paterson had given the first set of skulls from the Indian sub-continent to Combe's Society in Edinburgh.⁴⁴ He had collected ten of these skulls through Raja Rammohan Roy who had passed on the skulls directly to Paterson, expressing a willingness to send him 'as many' more as would be 'sufficient' for the 'researches'.⁴⁵ While based in London and in less than a year between 1823–4, Paterson provided four further Indian skulls for the Royal College of Surgeons, donated the 'frontal bones' of a fourteen-year-old Bengali girl to Combe and made Indian skulls available to interested people in London. Some of these were displayed at a venue in the Strand that was 'visited daily'.⁴⁶ Whether Rammohan Roy further aided Paterson's acquisitions is unclear. Ironically, the dead Rammohan later himself became the object of an extensive phrenological analysis. Nevertheless, what is clear is that Paterson and those similarly inclined later had little difficulty in acquiring skulls and bones from the sub-continent.⁴⁷

While such micro-histories of collection and traffic are worth investigating in their own right, their significance goes beyond the burgeoning of museology in the Victorian world. For one thing, they point to the manner in which, to use Tony Ballantyne's phrase, the 'webs of empire' became flows of material objects and concepts rather than simply a historian's heuristic device. In forging a nexus of collection in the periphery destined for display and analysis in the metropolis, these activities brought discrete locales within the Empire into close connection and at the same time hierarchised the relationship between the metropolis and the colonial world.⁴⁸ It

⁴⁴ Letter from George Combe to George Murray Paterson, 22 March 1823, George Combe Papers, NLS Ms 7382, f. 238.

⁴⁵ Letter from Ram Mohan Roy to George Murray Paterson, 10 March 1822, cited in Paterson, 'Phrenology', *Phrenological Transactions*, pp. 433–4.

⁴⁶ Letter from G.M Paterson to George Combe 16 May 1823, 28 January 1824, and 13 April 1824 NLS, Ms. 2713, ff. 9–10, 166–7, 168–9, respectively.

⁴⁷ Henry Harpur Spry, 'Some Account of the Gang Murderers of Central India, Commonly called Thugs. Accompanying the Skulls of Seven of Them', *PJM* vol. VIII (December 1832 – June 1834), pp. 511–24.

⁴⁸ This is not to assert that the metro-colonial is a relationship of superior-inferior (à la Basalla) and indeed, that the metropolitan and the colonial must necessarily be seen in a single analytical frame. At the same time, in making the connection explicit between the two runs the danger of a flat, isomorphic history, Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (London, 2001). George Basalla, 'The Spread of Western Science', *Science*, no. 156 (1967), pp. 611–22. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda' in Frederick Cooper and Anna Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 1–48.

was the circulating and unequal nature of the relationship between the metropolitan and the colonial periphery that preconditioned the making of new knowledge forms from botany to anthropology and new ideas in social and political thought ranging from liberalism to Aryan race theory. Secondly, and specifically in relation to the changing history of the idea of race, the Indian sub-continent retained a profound presence. At key moments, whether it was in Blumenbach's time or in the popular world of mid-nineteenth-century phrenology, the Indian was central, represented as an object of investigation to be classified through his own physical remains. The reduction of Indian pasts and cultures to texts went in tandem with the physical reduction of its peoples to measurable objects. Historians have increasingly interrogated the meaning of race in two distinct forms, namely the biological-physical and the cultural-civilisational. Many would argue that 'race' ought to be confined to its biological meaning.⁴⁹ This division may appear to clarify the concept, but in fact limits it. As the following discussion will show, it was precisely the same authorities that were interested in the significance and classification of physical differences that were also deeply enmeshed in debates concerning religion. If language and its orientalist preoccupations informed and paralleled the initial global histories and typology of race, then from the late 1820s on, the changing history of race had come to centre on religion as its co-accomplice. At a broader level this shift signalled the recasting of relationships of dependence in the Empire from imperialism to colonialism.

It was within this context of shifting and re-forming imperial ideologies that Paterson returned to Calcutta. Now more a zealot than an amateur, Paterson had also played a major role in setting up the Phrenological Society in London, a place which he had found particularly conducive to his endeavours since as he thought 'busts and outlines' were *de rigueur* in the parlours and drawing rooms in that forever 'fashionable' city.⁵⁰ Calcutta though not wanting in fashion, would presage a different fortune for phrenology. There was, however, a broader point of comparison between the metropolitan and Calcutta in the nature of the social composition of their phrenological

⁴⁹ For instance, Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Delhi, 1995), Introduction.

⁵⁰ Letter from George M Paterson, London, to George Combe, 1 January 1823, NLS, Ms. 2713, ff. 164–5.

societies. Following its establishment by Paterson, the Calcutta Society's founding president was Clark Abel who was the physician to the Governor-General, Lord Amherst. This imperial connection had originally been established by Joseph Banks, at whose behest Abel had accompanied Amherst on his 1816–17 mission to China. Abel had then followed Amherst to India.⁵¹ A keen collector of plants and natural curiosities, Abel was a surgeon and an influential figure both in the Bengal Medical Service and the Calcutta Medical College. Like other executive committee members such as the surgeon Charles Egerton or the engineer William Forbes, and others who succeeded him as president, including John Grant the surgeon-general of the Calcutta hospital, Abel clearly belonged to the elite section of the imperial bureaucracy. Such individuals were also involved in other high-minded societies that required both a certain class background and also high educational qualification for membership. These were bodies such as the Asiatic Society, the Horticultural Society and the Calcutta Medical and Physical Society.⁵² Unlike these other contemporary societies in Calcutta, however, the Phrenological Society was not a closed-club of gentlemen with scholarly interests. The Society's executive body included mixed-race men from the lower end of the imperial hierarchy such as John Matthew Dove and many others who belonged to the commercial world such as the merchant William Carr of the Union Bank and a later partner in the prominent agency house Carr, Tagore [Dwarkanath] and Co.⁵³ With the Phrenological Society's membership standing at forty in the first year, Paterson himself gave a series of public lectures on the discipline at the Asiatic Society.⁵⁴ These lectures were well attended, with 'flocks of visitors' viewing the ninety casts of heads that Paterson had exhibited for public display in the halls of the Asiatic Society. He continued to collect and display skull casts from the different provinces of the sub-continent and beyond as far as Burma. He was greatly aided in their display by the European artisans in Calcutta, including the commercial engraver de Savignac

⁵¹ Abel, Clarke (1780–1826), naturalist and surgeon, *DNB* entry by B. D. Jackson revised by P. E. Kell (Oxford, 2004). Also, Clarke Abel, *Narrative of a Journey in the Interior of China* (London, 1818).

⁵² *Bengal Directory and General Register*. . . 1825 (Calcutta, 1825/6?), p. 365.

⁵³ *Ibid.* Also, *Bengal Annual Register and Directory for the year 1831* (Calcutta, 1831), Appendix, p. 249.

⁵⁴ Letter from George Murray Paterson to George Combe, 23 April 1825, NLS, Ms. 7216, ff. 48–9.

and the cabinet-makers William and Mary Mandy who functioned as the society's figure-casters.⁵⁵

Though no key members of the society were Indian at this time, it is unlikely that the audiences for the lectures were exclusively the British residents of Calcutta. It is difficult to judge what Indians made of their skull casts on display (bemusement perhaps?), though within two decades, by the mid-1840s, the Phrenological Society in its second incarnation in Calcutta was exclusively an Indian society.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the first Society certainly attracted a good deal of interest from the British residents, sparking off much vitriolic and at times satirical opposition from within the imperial fold. In a damning satire, John Trotter, a medical doctor with the East India Company in Calcutta made out that phrenology was unintelligible and in an ironic vein wrote under the pseudonym, 'Bascapo' meaning 'low head'.⁵⁷ More serious, however, were the blows that Paterson received from a fellow-member of the Society, the proprietor of the Dhurumutollah Academy, David Drummond. Drummond too like Paterson collected a 'considerable number of skulls' and as he put it 'for these are not a scarce article on the banks of the Hooghly', but found them not only illegible for the decoding of character but equally described the phrenologists' fascination with the head as a 'palpable absurdity'.⁵⁸ An influential figure and teacher to the young Henry Derozio, Drummond took exception both to the methodology of phrenology and to Paterson's brand of evangelical politics.⁵⁹ A believing Christian, Drummond deemed the evangelisation of Indian society impossible, but thought that a thorough reform of existing Indian religious practices would ensure the permanence of empire

⁵⁵ Ibid. Clark Abel provided the skull of a Burmese soldier to the Society. Also, *Bengal Directory*, p. 365. de Savignac also engraved heads for Company artistes like George Chinnery whose key patron was also Abel, see Patrick Conner, *George Chinnery 1774-1852 Artist of India and the China Coast* (Suffolk, 1993), p. 115.

⁵⁶ On bemusement see Gyan Prakash's discussion on Indian responses to museums in his *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, 1999) and on reactions to bodily measurements by ethnologists, Crispin Bates, 'Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry', in Peter Robb (ed.) *The Concept of Race*.

⁵⁷ Don Jose Bascapo (alias John Trotter) *Travels in Phrenologasto* (Calcutta, 1825) reprinted from London in 1827, was a popular pamphlet used much by those who claimed phrenology as a 'psuedo' science.

⁵⁸ David Drummond, *Objections to Phrenology* (Calcutta, 1829), p. 191.

⁵⁹ Thomas Edwards, *Henry Derozio, the Eurasian Poet, Teacher and Journalist* (Calcutta, 1884), pp. 10-21.

and the regeneration of Indian 'mental' capacities.⁶⁰ An aggressive pamphleteer Drummond's campaign did have a significant impact in that at least it ensured that the Society did not become missionary in its zeal either for Christianity or phrenology. While socially not rigid, ideologically the society seemed to hold within its fold the imperial spectrum ranging from the evangelical Paterson to the radical-whiggish beliefs of Drummond. For close on a decade the Society functioned from the premises of *Hurkaru* Press and Library, which published an early newspaper promoting radical politics in the Indian Empire. Indeed, this complex of institutions functioned as a critical avenue for debating and disseminating ideas of race, religion, the role of empire and the nature of collective mentalities. Despite its controversial beginning, the study of phrenology proved to be enduring and both the Society and Paterson's own writings outlived him.

'Hindoo' Skulls: Slavery, Religion and the Imperial Script of Difference

The world of phrenology shared much with the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers who had set themselves the project of charting the material stages of civil society as reflected in religious culture.⁶¹ For phrenologists, too, the delineating of liberty was stagial and embodied in religion and its institutions. Religion along with the phrenological fixation on the shape and size of the skull became a critical site of debate for historically evaluating the quality of civil society and the role of empire in relation to it.⁶² This was not altogether accidental. These sets of ideas and debates were taken up in the specific political context of the contemporary debates about Atlantic slavery and emancipation that repeatedly turned on the issue of religion and evangelisation.⁶³ They also took place simultaneously with the

⁶⁰ Drummond, *Objections*, pp. 181–9.

⁶¹ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 1767 with an introduction by Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh, 1966). Also Adam Ferguson, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers, Moral Sentiment, Happiness and National Felicity* (Paris, 1805).

⁶² George Lyon, 'Essay on the Phrenological causes of the different degrees of Liberty enjoyed by different Nations', *PJM*, vol. II (1824/5), pp. 598–619 and vol. III (1825/6), pp. 223–51.

⁶³ Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion and Reform, 1830–1841* (Oxford, 1987), Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867* (London, 2002).

debates surrounding practices such as Sati that within the imperial imagination increasingly came to embody the nature and essence of Hinduism.⁶⁴ Moreover, according to a certain phrenological worldview, though the shape and size of the skull (and by extension mental capacities) were fixed, institutions, especially religious institutions, were thought to be key developmental influences that were causally related to mental capacities.⁶⁵ The interlocking play between two different stagial theories, one of religion and the other of race, not only informed these sets of concepts but they also bore on the nature of the imperial mission. Indeed, phrenology represented the dominant intellectual moods of the moment, encapsulating ideas of empire, empiricism and the pious Christian ethos of improvement.⁶⁶

A believing Christian, Paterson above all, was instrumental in putting these issues within a single programme. This programme charted skull-sizes according to race, configured the nature of religious institutions and envisioned an empire of a Christian calling.⁶⁷ Paterson's 'Phrenology of Hindostan' boasted that he had examined and manipulated over three thousand Hindu skulls from 'every province from Cashmere to Cape Comorin, and from the banks of Indus to the forests of Aracan'.⁶⁸ Paterson had explicitly set out to adjudicate on the truth of the differentiations made by Blumenbach whose cranial comparison and method he endorsed, but whose three-tier racial typology he found to bear 'distinctions far too general to be of much service'.⁶⁹ Specifying and explaining difference, Paterson not only compared various mental faculties supposedly deduced from skulls, but sought to integrate the nature of religion and its effects as

⁶⁴ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley, 1998).

⁶⁵ Combe is remembered today above all for his role in the propagation of secular school education particularly in Scotland.

⁶⁶ This is especially representative of those who sought to use phrenology beyond the domestic frontier of Britain and of those phrenologists who mapped comparisons between the Hindu and the African, see below. Combe himself was cautious in his approach to Christianity.

⁶⁷ On his beliefs see George Murray Paterson, *Sacred Lemmas or Analysis of Scriptures Historical, Prophetic and Evangelical according to the Science of Analogies* (Calcutta, 1826).

⁶⁸ Paterson, 'Phrenology', p. 445. He further manipulated skulls of those confined in the Calcutta Lunatic Asylum that he called a 'picture of passive imbecility, than a heart rendering scene of raving mania or of moping melancholy', *ibid.*, p. 446. On the relations between colonial psychiatry and phrenology see Shruti Kapila, 'The making of colonial psychiatry, Bombay Presidency, 1849–1940', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 2002.

⁶⁹ Paterson, 'Phrenology' pp. 432–3.

a causative principle for physical differences. There were two major thrusts to Paterson's phrenology. Firstly, he expended great effort in arguing that Hinduism was not a revealed religion and as a result was given to a loose morality. This seeming lack of a strict moral code signified Hindu 'barbarity' specifically in relation to practices such as Sati and polygamy that were held to represent the ethos of Hindu religious life.⁷⁰

Secondly, for Paterson, imperial influence was beneficial. In seeking a contiguous geography of the Mughals and the British Empire, Paterson went on to assert and prove that the 'brain in the [Mughal administered] provinces enjoy a superior organization to the provinces of other divisions'.⁷¹ Muslims, however, were typified as with 'overbearing insolence, superstition and sensuality'.⁷² In Paterson's view then only with the 'light of the Gospel, Hindoos in British India will change in cerebral organization'.⁷³ Skulls, in this interpretation, now became pre-eminently the raw material for writing the script of empires of religion. The Muslim presence in the sub-continent, for Blumenbach, Paterson and later H. H. Wilson was something more than a political precedent for British rule; it was proof that empire literally increased the mental capacity of its subjects. Paterson, if not always persuasive, certainly had the gift for controversy wherever he went. The publication of his article generated more heated words that continued to reverberate even after his death. Having mounted a comparative discussion of Hindu and European skulls and Hinduism and Christianity, the wider political implications of race, empire and evangelicism were by no means lost on the readers and audiences of his lectures, both Indian and British.

These 'skull wars' ranged well beyond India and encompassed racial theories for the Empire as a whole, particularly Africa. The Sheffield based poet, phrenologist and constitutional radical, James Montgomery, in critiquing the fatalist implications of phrenology, challenged Paterson's assertions by positing a comparison between Africans and Hindus.⁷⁴ Steering clear of a detailed empirical analysis

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 431–43.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 445.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ James Montgomery, *On the Phrenology of the Hindoos and Negroes with Strictures Thereon by Corden Thompson* (London, 1829) read before the Literary and Philosophical Society of Sheffield, February 7, 1827. On Montgomery see, Cooter, *Cultural Meaning*, pp. 219, and 291.

of skulls or the materiality of mental dispositions, Montgomery instead used a historicist method to explain the fixed features of the skull and provided a highly selective account of the nature of rule and conquest on the sub-continent. For Montgomery, the Hindu 'spirit' was 'not dead but sleepeth' as a direct consequence of the nature of imperial rule from the Mughals to 'those colonists who call themselves Christian', including the British.⁷⁵ Montgomery's version of the stagial theory was the standard and enduring orientalist version of the sub-continent's past—of an enlightened antiquity followed by a barbarous, degenerate and static Hinduism and within this version of the past the place of Islam was evacuated of its meaning and reduced to a series of conquests.⁷⁶ His was an imperial script of creating a historical and sequential genealogy of empire or what he called the 'yoke of Tartarian, Mahomedan and European usurpation'.⁷⁷

The question of the African in such a comparative scheme as Montgomery's was two-fold. In the first instance, the aim was to put Paterson's comparative frame into a new imperial-historical hierarchy. Implicitly sharing the Blumenbach-Prichard set of comparisons, the Hindu for Montgomery came to represent a more meaningful comparator with the African (as opposed to the European), not only because this comparison alluded to the earlier questions of human origins and differences, but importantly because it signified a new geography of empire and a new set of imperial agents—Christian, and as he thought, British.⁷⁸ Secondly, the question of slavery and by implication emancipation was part of the purposive logic of both the comparative assessment of races and the emancipatory effect of Christianity. Christian emancipation of slaves, according to Montgomery, elevated the otherwise 'grotesque' features of the African.⁷⁹ His abolitionist and evangelical position was undoubtedly radical but no less imperial than Paterson's. This radicalism was a particular challenge to those phrenologists for whom the size of the skull was 'incontestable' in signifying a place in the racial

⁷⁵ Montgomery, 'Phrenology', p. 13

⁷⁶ Ronald Inden, 'Orientalist Constructions of India', *Modern Asian Studies* 20: 3 (1986) 401–46.

⁷⁷ Montgomery, 'Phrenology', p. 12.

⁷⁸ This included comparisons also with Native Americans, *ibid.*, p. 24–5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 27–31. See also. George Combe, 'Phrenological View of the Question of Colonial Slavery', *PJM*, vol. VIII (1832/4), pp. 77–92.

hierarchy.⁸⁰ Such seemingly oppositional arguments not only negated the place of religion but squarely saw the purpose in delineating comparisons as purposeful in so far as they made explicit to ‘those who affect sovereignty [to] deliberately survey the characters they wish to control’.⁸¹ Such counter-arguments were indeed anti-orientalist in asserting that ‘antiquity has too many charms’ but ‘yielding[ing] too ample a field for ideal imaginings, to be passed over in silence’ and instead filling this silence with the essence of skulls.⁸² Imperial rule was then not so much a civilising necessity but quite simply, natural.

In the comparative imperium of race and civilisation, the difference posited between the African and Indian emerged within the political context of slave emancipation and colonialism. Indeed, the hierarchical ordering of ‘the African’ and ‘the Indian’ is at least as old as the anxieties related to the identity of the second British Empire. It was a comparison that made ideologically coherent the imperial project across the whole range of lands and peoples.

Callipers in Calcutta: Religion and Regeneration

While Paterson’s writings became the undoing of the Phrenological Society in Calcutta, the ideas surrounding religion and mentalities assumed a life of their own and one that was quite distinct from the imperial-metropolitan debates on the same issues. In 1845, Kali Kumar Das launched another Calcutta Phrenological Society.⁸³ For close to a decade, Das was its president and an active pamphleteer and publicist who interpreted phrenology to reformulate questions concerning the relationship of Christianity and Hinduism in Bengal. Unlike the composition of the earlier society, members of Das’s society were Bengali Hindus, whether practicing or not. Other members such

⁸⁰ Corden Thompson, ‘Strictures on Mr. Montgomery’s Essay on the Phrenology of Hindoos and Negroes’, in Montgomery, *Phrenology*, pp. 35–62. Thompson was a senior physiologist at the Sheffield General Infirmary.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 57. Any number of such articles could be cited from this period from the *PJM*. See for instance, Anon, ‘On the character and cerebral development of the inhabitants of Ceylon’, *PJM*, vol. VII (1832), pp. 634–52, or the world-comparative Anon, ‘On the coincidence between the natural talents and dispositions of nations and the development of their brains’, *PJM*, vol. V, pp. 1–23.

⁸³ Collycoomar Doss (Kali Kumar Das), *Address Delivered before the School Society’s School, for the Purpose of Establishing the Calcutta Phrenological Society*, 7 June 1845. (np. nd.).

as Neel Kamal Mitra and Nobin Chandra Bose were, like Das himself, also active in other societies, notably the Bethune Society and the Calcutta School Society that became parallel sites of debate on related questions of religion and western education.⁸⁴ Das was in his twenties when he set up the society. He had previously been educated at the Calcutta Medical College, though in all likelihood he did not complete his degree. Significantly, he was taught by one of the key figures of western education in early nineteenth-century Bengal, David Hare, whom he hero-worshipped.⁸⁵ Hare, as David Kopf has written, was an educationalist who not only prepared young Bengali men to gain entrance to the Hindu College, but was also a staunch humanist, a non-believing Christian and a prominent interlocutor for the Brahma Samaj.⁸⁶

The new society's ideological position resembled a paler version of the heretical tradition of Derozio's 'Young Bengal'. Phrenology's second life in Calcutta was therefore close to the Hindu reformist world of modernised religion, western education and Christian missionary activity. While it is unclear whether Das himself was a Brahma, he and other members were certainly sympathetic to the Brahma Samaj.⁸⁷ Most members were from lower to middle orders—school masters, medical men and merchants.⁸⁸ Wrestling with the merits or otherwise of Christianity, Vaishnavism and Shaivism, by the mid-1840s Das had rejected religion altogether. As he put it, 'my hatred towards the Hindu religion, my belief in Phrenology, my opinions on the Christian religion . . . have made me an object of every person's ridicule [sic] and sneers'.⁸⁹ Das often became embroiled in public arguments with missionaries such as Alexander Duff, not so much on the question of conversion, but on the efficacy of religion itself. Further, for him the Brahma belief in the revealed nature of the

⁸⁴ See for instance, *The Proceedings and Transactions of the Bethune Society, from November 10th 1859, to April 20 1869* (Calcutta, 1870), *Bengal Directory and Annual Register for 1855* (Calcutta, 1855), Part VIII.

⁸⁵ Collycoomar Doss (Kali Kumar Das), *General Reflections on Christianity...* (Calcutta, 1845), pp. 172–3. On David Hare, David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, 1979), 40–7.

⁸⁶ David Hare arrived in Calcutta around 1800 as a watchmaker but then became involved in higher education for Bengalis. A popular figure when he died in 1842 he was followed to his grave by a crowd numbering in thousands.

⁸⁷ *Proceedings and Transactions of the Bethune Society*, p. cxxxvii.

⁸⁸ Letter from Nobin Chandra Bose to George Combe, Calcutta 7 August 1847, NLS, Ms. 7283, f.64.

⁸⁹ Kali Kumar Das, *General Reflections*, p. 241.

deity was not the prime source of rationality.⁹⁰ Indeed, the material nature of the mind was the source of universal rationality, the basis for reform and Das's religion.

For Kali Kumar phrenology was to be an 'active instrument of regeneration'. Like the Scottish thinkers and phrenologists that he admired, Das used the idea of the historical unfolding of collective mental capacities as signifying the nature and cause of the 'downfall of empires and republics'. The role of phrenology in Calcutta for Das was then to identify faculties and equally to deploy phrenology to 'dissipate the erroneous notions which now so despotically rule over [my] countrymen'. Implicitly he acknowledged that colonialism was neither natural nor a necessity, but the historical outcome of the manner in which the British had forged a happy fit between their given mental faculties and educational and political institutions. This is what had made the British Empire possible. Conversely, and sharing much with reformist beliefs, the hold of religion and its institutions according to Das had led to decline and servitude for India. Rational, scientific and in particular English education together with an understanding of the 'peculiarities of their [Indian] mind' would lead not simply to regeneration, but would 'frame a [suitable] system of government'.⁹¹ In short, neither religious reform in itself nor battling with Christian missionary activity would suffice, for what was needed was a thorough revision of Indian psychological disposition.

Das did, however, believe that mental capacities were 'innate' and that humanity was not 'equal'.⁹² He was given to the usual phrenological fascination with the head and though no collector, Das 'observed' heads of criminals in the Chandranagore gaol. Holding forth on the 'Phrenological Development of the Bengalees', he believed that the Bengali was equal to the European in capacities of craftsmanship, commerce and logic. He reserved his criticism for the Bengali's intellectual orientations. Though 'one of the most intelligent peoples on the face of the globe', their 'lack of degree of interest in . . . history' was not only a cause of his lamentation, but it had made the 'Bengalee head . . . deficient'.⁹³ Das, though, primarily saw

⁹⁰ *Proceedings and Transactions of the Bethune Society*, pp. xxxii, cxxxvii.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Also, Doss, *Address*, p. 2.

⁹² 'A short history of phrenology', *The Pamphleteer: A Journal of Phrenology, Sciences in General and Arts*, vol. I, no. 1, edited by Cally Coomar Doss (Calcutta, 1850), pp. 3–17. Also, Das, *General Reflections*, pp. 104–5, 111–2, Doss, *Address*.

⁹³ 'Phrenological development of the Bengalees', *The Pamphleteer*, vol. I, no. 3 (1850), p. 67. On questions of the place of Europe in Bengali sensibilities see Tapan

his endeavour not in terms of a rationalist mission, but as a programme that at once was critical of colonial policies and at the same time sought to promote 'affection between nations'. He declared his 'political, religious and social views' as of 'the most liberal stamp'.⁹⁴

While Das was somewhat of an eccentric he nevertheless persisted with his own peculiar brand of phrenology and politics for close to a decade through the Society and later he became increasingly active in the Bethune Society.⁹⁵ Kali Kumar though did belong to that mid-nineteenth-century intellectual milieu which was at once eclectic in its approach to interrogating and locating the place of religion in culture and was, at the same time, immersed in a laissez-faire liberalism. This indeed was not the domain of 'high thought' but what C. A. Bayly has called the 'lived experience of ideas'.⁹⁶ Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, phrenology in the Indian context would service a range of political ideas, thus dislodging it from a doctrine and technique that made the skull legible or that positioned a race or religion definitively in a global hierarchy. Speaking at the Brahma Mandir in Lahore in 1885 on the need to foster the spiritual nature of 'patriotism', Jadunath Mazumdar, for instance, sought to use phrenology to identify faculties but equally saw it as a bridge between rationalism and religious beliefs. He argued that 'Phrenology, which has now passed beyond the domain of speculation into the religion of science, is the safest guide to tell a man what one is most fit for doing'.⁹⁷

Indeed, at the height of the fiercest criticism of phrenology in the metropolis, the figurehead of 'national science', Mahendralal Sircar, proposed a similar interpretation in a guarded public defence of phrenology.⁹⁸ While critiquing the 'never-ending dispute' on the

Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (Delhi, 2nd ed., 2002).

⁹⁴ 'Our Plans and Objectives', *The Pamphleteer*, vol. I, no. 1 (Calcutta, 1850), p. 1.

⁹⁵ On a portrayal of the eccentricities of head measuring see the character Balaram in Amitav Ghosh's, *The Circle of Reason* (Delhi, ed., 2000). Among others who pamphleteered on phrenology include Nursing Chunder Haldar of Bhowanipur who converted to Christianity, see for instance his *Practical Uses of Phrenology* (Calcutta, 1884), *Phrenological Relations of the Brain in its Mental Functions* (Bhowanipore, 1885).

⁹⁶ C. A. Bayly, 'Liberalism at large: Mazzini and transformations in Indian political thought' (Mss), Plenary Lecture delivered at Tufts University, 7th April 2005.

⁹⁷ Jadu Nath Mazumdar, *The Substance of Two Lectures on the Requisites of a True Patriot and Marriage its Social and Spiritual Aspects* (Lucknow, 1885).

⁹⁸ Mahendra Lal Sircar, *On the Physiological Basis of Psychology* (Calcutta, 1870). This was a reworked version of essays that were published a year before in the *Calcutta*

difference between ‘man and brute’ or ‘whether all our ideas are innate or acquired’, Sircar saw phrenology instead as necessary, in that it gave ‘a local habitation and a name’ for the psychological elements. As Mazumdar echoed later, for Sircar, phrenology enabled a rational relationship between the essential union of the godly and the scientific. Phrenology’s purpose for Sircar then was not to design ‘undue generalizations’ or decipher ‘radical minor differences’, but its purpose lay in forging a nourishing relation between religion and science.⁹⁹ In the context of the explosion of Darwinian evolutionary theory, science for him was neither a replacement for religion nor even a particular threat to it. Rationality was, in other words, not the sole domain of science, nor ‘idols’ the preserve of religion. Phrenology for Sircar instead was a means to enable a rationalistic and mutual co-existence of what by the latter half of the nineteenth century were two distinct approaches to the human future. As he put it, ‘the highest truth of science and the highest truth of religion are one’.¹⁰⁰

The concluding section of this article will discuss the place of phrenology and related techniques in the popular Indian print media of the later nineteenth century that aimed to interpret physical signs and popularised questions concerning the reinvention of the Indian self. However, before this discussion falls into the neat and enduring historiographical trap that sees the later nineteenth century exclusively as a period of emergent nationalism with reform as its ally, it is appropriate to return briefly to another key moment in the century, the 1857 Rebellion to assess the place of race, phrenology and orientalism in the Indian Empire.

While phrenology was reinterpreted in form, purpose and meaning in mid-to late nineteenth-century Calcutta and beyond, it was not as though Combe and the concerns of the Edinburgh intellectuals had become disconnected from India. On the contrary, over the years, Nobin Chandra Bose continued to communicate with Combe. As was to be expected, Combe took a distinctly patronising view of Das and his

Journal of Medicine, and was delivered as a lecture at the Canning Institute, Howrah in April 1869.

⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 2–3, 8, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Mahendra Lal Sircar, *Moral Influence of Physical Science*, Lecture delivered at the Town Hall, Calcutta, on January 7, 1891, p. 18. On an extended discussion on Sircar’s interpretations on religion and science see Kapila, ‘Making’, pp. 215–225. On Sircar’s life-history see Sarat Chandra Ghosh, *Life of Dr. Mahendra Lal Sircar* (Calcutta, 1935). On Sircar and ‘national science’ David Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 154–9.

cohorts, happy to hear that Calcutta had a phrenological society, but taking ‘no responsibility for the society, either moral or pecuniary’.¹⁰¹ The relationship between Combe and the second Calcutta society was restricted to the exchange of books on phrenology and instruments such as callipers that Combe sent to the Society’s library, on occasion for a fee and sometimes as gifts. There was little or no exchange of views and ideas.¹⁰² Unlike Paterson, who had become for the world of phrenology, a key informant and interpreter of things Indian, Bose though enthusiastic as a correspondent, restrained himself from giving his views even when Combe explicitly asked for ‘valuable additions to our stock of information’.¹⁰³

Combe, though, was relentless in his search for information, especially during the dramatic years 1857–58. In this he was eventually aided by the orientalist H. H. Wilson.¹⁰⁴ In that year, the question of ‘Phrenology of Hindostan’ resurfaced with Combe repeatedly soliciting Wilson’s views on Paterson’s work. Initially hesitant, Wilson tried to convince Combe of the ‘redeeming’ character of Hindu philosophy even though according to Wilson ‘they [Hindus] had little encouragement to exercise their intellectual faculties’.¹⁰⁵ Wilson dismissed Paterson’s work, which he knew ‘intimately,’ on the basis that it ‘generalised too confidently’ and Paterson would have needed ‘some ten or twelve years experience to give weight to his opinions’.¹⁰⁶ In keeping with his scholarly bent, Wilson proclaimed that differences existed between the Hindus from one region to another and having ‘looked at a variety of Hindu heads’ for him ‘there were considerable differences . . . in heads of up-country Hindus, Bengalis and the people of the South’.¹⁰⁷ Further, for Wilson, Rammohan Roy was an exception who simply could not be compared with his

¹⁰¹ Letter from George Combe to Nobin Chandra Bose, 15 Dec 1846, NLS, Ms. 7390, ff. 573–4.

¹⁰² See for instance from George Combe to Nobin Chandra Bose 4 February 1848, NLS, Ms. 7391, f. 297, Letter from Nobin Chandra Bose to George Combe 7 December 1848, NLS, Ms. 7289, f. 80.

¹⁰³ Letter from George Combe to Nobin Chandra Bose 15 December 1846, NLS, Ms. 7390, ff. 573–4.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from H. H. Wilson to George Combe 27 July 1836, NLS, Ms. 7241, f. 189. Combe and Wilson were connected by family ties.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from H. H. Wilson to George Combe 22 May 1858, NLS, Ms. 7374, ff. 122–3.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from H. H. Wilson to George Combe 10 July 1858, NLS, Ms. 7374, ff. 124–7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

countrymen.¹⁰⁸ Having set out the view that ‘difference of race is as much the cause of physical variety as variety of country’, Wilson by 1858 had turned to making comparisons—physical and mental—between the Hindus and Muslims of the sub-continent.¹⁰⁹ In so doing he deployed, like others before, him a panoramic and synoptic historical method. He saw history in terms of Hindu-Muslim relations and established the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as a pivotal figure. Muslim rule up to his reign had been ‘latitudinarian’ in terms of ‘faith’. However, having initially pleaded for inserting regional difference, Wilson then reduced this difference to colour and physical features, writing that ‘intermixture has made the Mohammedans very much the same as Hindus’. He added, ‘[i]n the upper provinces and among the higher orders, they are generally fairer and stouter men, but the lower classes are as black and slightly made as the lower class Hindus, especially in Bengal & the South’.¹¹⁰

It is perhaps worth citing the text at length since Wilson’s ‘Description of the Natives’ was specifically written for Combe and is not part of his published works. He went on to describe the innate, savage-like character not only of Muslims, but inherent in the very nature and character of the ‘Asiatic’.

When a Mohammadan is not debilitated by profligate habits to which he is much more addicted generally speaking than a Hindu he is more energetic and determined . . . But every Mohammadan high or low, learned or ignorant is a fanatic and whatever he may appear . . . he is an intense hater of every Christian . . . The spirit of the 8th century is as rampant as ever in the 19th . . . renders him treacherous and when opportunity serves turbulent and savage. The Hindu . . . is more submissive and tractable and although less energetic than the Mohammadan . . . In general his disposition is more gentle and kind than that of the Mohammadans but he also may be roused to acts of savage barbarity by inadequate provocation. This seems a characteristic feature of the Asiatic Character, and is as noticeable among Arabs Persians Turks Tartars Burmese and Chinese as Hindus.¹¹¹

This demonology of race and religion, however, did not remain an entirely private piece of communication between Combe and Wilson. Writing in the press and explaining the nature of British rule and

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Anon, ‘Phrenological Analysis of Rammohan Roy’, *PJM* vol. VIII (1834), pp. 577–602.

¹⁰⁹ H. H. Wilson’s ‘Description of the Natives of India’ (unpublished and written for George Combe), 14 January 1858, NLS, Ms 7437, ff. 83–9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., ff. 85–6.

¹¹¹ Ibid., ff. 86–8.

Indian rebellions, Combe extensively and on occasion verbatim used Wilson's 'Description'.¹¹² Interestingly, in attributing his debt to Wilson, he did not describe Wilson as an orientalist, lest he be thought to be dealing with vague abstractions. Instead, Combe described Wilson as a man of the 'medical profession,' adding that he was someone who 'had acquired the languages of India'.¹¹³ Thus, the events of 1857–8 further hardened and demonised ideas of differences of physical type and religion.¹¹⁴ However, neither was the question of race and its intersection with language and religion entirely the outcome of the historical events of 1857–9, nor did the idea of racial difference only then make an appearance in the sub-continental horizon. Indeed, as this article has shown, by the time of the Rebellion, race had had a long history of nearly a hundred years and had been intimately associated with the origins of cultural orientalism itself.

III. Typifying Destiny: Insurgent Knowledge and Techniques for an Indian Selfhood

'But even Plato knew that class and conditioning and so forth have an inalterable effect on the individual. It seems to me that psychology is only another word for what the ancients called fate'.

'Psychology is a terrible word.'¹¹⁵

"Every shape (*Aakar*) and dimension (*Parimaan*) is full of meaning. If they are not why do they exist? That they exhibit difference (*bhinnata*) must be the reason behind their existence and that is also why we must believe in *samudrikvidya*" (knowledge of material signs).¹¹⁶

The previous sections were concerned with the concept of race as embodying the notion of physical difference and the manner in which

¹¹² Letter from George Combe to W. R. Young, 'Our Rule in India', 6th February 1858, *The Scotsman*, 19th February 1858 (unpaginated).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ See for instance, the discussion of the 'simian like features' of a fakir hung during the mutiny, R. W. Reid, 'Exhibition and description of the skull of a Microcephalic Hindu', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 24 (1894–5), pp. 104–8, plus Plates.

¹¹⁵ Conversation between Professor Julian Morrow and Richard Pape in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (London, 1992), p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Seetakant, *Mudrasamudrik athva Manushchya Svabhavaachi Parakh* [Mudrasamudrik or the examination of human nature] (Khanpur, n.d.). I am grateful to Mrunal Patnikar for his help at the Marathi Granth Sangrahalaya, Mumbai.

this concept intersected with such ‘civilisational’ ideas as language, religion and empire. Race became a more potent concept and was significantly transformed as it circulated and specified its points of application between the metropolitan and colonial worlds. The following section switches to a related and analogous site of popular and vernacular print culture in the nineteenth century. This brief discussion here aims to place in context and seek meaning of a range of practices that sought to interpret a codified set of human physical signs. This knowledge was disseminated through the widening realm of print media from 1850. These practices of reading bodily markers and affixing meaning to them were grouped together in a broad set of a popular genre referred to as *samudrik* or *samudrikvidya* (knowledge of material signs). They shared two broad philosophical assumptions with phrenology and race. First, physical marks were both signifiers of difference and a means of understanding it. Secondly, these physical signs of distinction were believed to be predictive in nature. Thus, for race and phrenology alike, the shape and the size of skull were indicative of an aggregative set of distinctions of type. Critically, these typologies of difference were then placed on a hierarchical and comparative ladder of a progressive racial destiny. *Samudrik* practices for deciphering the meanings of physical distinctions were, however, radically different from the interpretation of physical signs in both racial typologies and the popular pursuit of phrenology.¹¹⁷ Fundamentally, the point of application for *samudrik* practices of decoding and giving meaning to markers of physical distinction was at the level of the self. In other words, the operative logic was diametrically opposite to that of race and phrenology. In the latter, (individual) skull and other physical materials were representative of a type. For *samudrik*, on the other hand, the self or the individual carried unique signifiers and marks of physical distinction that needed to be rendered meaningful. Further, it was the random nature of the presence of signs on the entirety of the body and in relation to the head and face that needed a coherent strategy of interpretations. It was quite unlike the case of phrenology for which the key signifier of distinction, the head or the skull was a fixed one.

In giving the origins and history of *samudrik* Ishnarayan Joshi a self-styled *samudrik-visharad* (expert) primarily identified it first and foremost as a set of practices of divining destiny through the

¹¹⁷ *Samudrikvidya* was also referred to and was synonymous with *Lakshan-gyan* or Knowledge of character and *Mudravigyan* or the science of signs and expressions.

eye.¹¹⁸ Indeed the eye or observation according to him gave salience to the interpretation of signs of character (*lakshan*). Systematising it anew as a body of knowledge, Joshi saw *samudrik* as a method and technique contiguous with astrology and palmistry on the one side and phrenology (*kapal-samudrik*) and physiognomy (*mukh-samudrik*) on the other. However, he asserted that westerners (*paschatya desh vasi*) in recent times had divided these practices into separate fields, but that in the past these were intimately related and were unified as a repertoire of techniques of reading character and destiny through physical imprints and shapes.¹¹⁹ Rectifying this recent atomisation, Joshi then set out to piece these practices together.

Written in a simple and accessible Hindi, Joshi's short book, like other pamphlets and books on the subject of *samudrik* in Hindi, Marathi and other vernaculars, aimed to provide a tool-kit or a do-it-yourself manual for interpreting the meaning of physical difference and were directed at a wide readership. Joshi and similar other writers were popularisers of these sets of techniques, offering their books at a cheap price and illustrating them with diagrams of heads, faces and hands that were dotted with symbols of distinction. The knowledge of *chinh-lakshan* (signs of character) was deemed necessary in predicting and ordering the events of an individual's life-time. Supposedly, this would enable him or her to gain a sense of control over the unpredictable nature of life-events. According to these authors therefore, *samudrikvidya* was a means to equip the individual with a simple matrix of cause and effect as deduced from bodily markers.¹²⁰ The nature of life-events was predicated on bodily signs of distinction that were seen to be carriers of character. Typically, the entirety of the human body was seen as the surface of readable signs with the face

¹¹⁸ Ishnarayan Joshi, 'Samudrik-Shastra ki utpatti tatha itihās' [Origins and history of Samudrik-shastra] in his *Mukhakriti-Rahasya* [Mysteries of the Shape of Faces], (Bhopal, 1935), p. 1. All translations from Hindi are mine.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–3.

¹²⁰ One of the earliest printed texts in Hindi, Radhavallabh Charan, *Granth Samudrikam* (Calcutta, Burra Bazaar, n.p., 1849) is similar to Joshi's text but does not provide a commentary on the origins of these practices. Banwari Lal's *Kautukratnaprakash* (Chintamani Bookseller, Furrukhabad, 2nd ed., 1862) a small 15 page pamphlet and a similar handbook to the above claimed to have sold out within days of its publication. Lithographs such as Pandit Keshoo Prasad's, *Jyotish Sar or the Essence of Astrology* (n. p., 1868) published by the author used a mixture of Sanskrit and *bhasha* included extensive discussion on *Samudrik*. Early nineteenth century Sanskrit manuscripts on the same include *Samudrika*, British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, Or. Mss. Hindi B 41 and Or. Mss. 13254.

and head being the surface that emanated the greatest density of such signs. These standardised sets of physical referents included lines and formations of lines in certain patterns, the most common being the symbols of the bee (*brhamar*) and the moon. This can be illustrated with a representative dictum from a nineteenth-century Marathi text: '[A] man with a high forehead with small conch like marks in the area of the forehead or if there is a bee-like mark or a half-moon just above the eyes; if such a man is born in a poor family, he would later become wealthy and pompous in life'.¹²¹

Such dictums were in effect fortunes of (physical) character in which fate operated as an archetype of consequences. Mundane and this-worldly, the predictive calculus of *samudrik* practices aimed to anticipate events and their consequences in terms of wealth or poverty, success or failure and happiness or sadness. This mode of interpretation regarded the individual or the self as the bearer of destiny. Yet in some crucial aspects *samudrik* practices were relational in content. This was especially true in the area of distinctions between men and women. *Samudrik* was gendered in that the shape and meaning of signs were seen to hold different meanings if they appeared on the body of women as opposed to men. The fate of men, in turn, was inextricably linked to the bodily signs of women. Bodily marks in *samudrik* texts were in the main categorised as auspicious (*shubh*) and inauspicious (*ashubh*) signs. While authors like Joshi categorised all signs in their differential meanings for men and women others such as the Maharashtrian writer, Bhave clearly placed the onus of inauspicious consequences for men on the female. The signs in question referred mainly to the potential of conjugal bliss, questions of longevity of key male family members and issues of chastity. To give one such typical example, Bhave states that 'a woman with a large forehead and chubby cheeks shall suffer a lot and will be a liar' and further 'she will suffer as an adulteress along with her paramour' or as Joshi asserted, 'a woman with a small forehead will bring losses to her brother-in-law', so on and so forth.¹²² A female forehead then had to be just right, not too large but not small either! The implication

¹²¹ Vaman Pandurang Shastri Bhave, *Samudrik aani stri-purush shareer lakshan vidya* [Samudrik and the knowledge of bodily signs in men and women] (Mumbai, 1889), n.p.

¹²² Bhave, *Samudrik*, n.p. and Joshi, *Mukha-kriti*, p. 11. Some of the other texts in Marathi on the same include Shverkar Govindshastri, *Samudrik Lakshanam* (Mumbai, 1881), Ramchandra Sakaharam, *Samudrik*, (Pune, 1879), Patwardhan Raghunath Moreshawar, *Samudrik Shastra* (Pune, 1920).

though was no less clear, in that the fate of conjugal and other kinds of bliss was premised on the character of the female as it made itself visible through shapes and signs of her physical distinctiveness.

The key social outcome that needed to be foretold according to these practices was the pursuit of an ideal union between a man and a woman. Indeed, their origins were traced to the perfect union embodied by the bonds between the god and goddess Shiva-Parvati and Vishnu-Lakshmi. Joshi speculatively placed the origins of this knowledge first in the classical tale of Vishnu's encounter with Lakshmi and then in Shiva's encounter with Parvati. But he simultaneously claimed that the popularity of these practices could be authenticated through the *Ramayana*.¹²³ In most other texts the origins of *samudrik* practices remained hazy, though most authors referred vaguely to their presence in un-named Sanskrit texts of deep antiquity. This tendency to trace origins to un-named but nevertheless Sanskrit texts then was a means of authentication of the sort that Sudipta Kaviraj has described as a 'gratuitous reverence for the past'.¹²⁴ Arguably, antiquity was a classic claim of the modern. Nevertheless, the claim that these were specifically and uniquely Indian (*bhartiya*) practices was more firmly stated though this claim was elaborated variously by different authors. Joshi pointed out that these practices were part of the classical past, but offered little genealogical specificity. Nevertheless, since that past had precluded a place for independent researchers (*svatantra shodhak*), they had, according to him, fallen out of historical use. He went on to explain that the progress (*unnati*) of such disciplines hence had become confined to western nations.¹²⁵ This was presumably a reference to phrenology. Though they were an implicit critique of Brahminism, *samudrik* practices had little in common with the norms of Hindu reformist world of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religion. This was because they were precisely the aspects of Hindu customs that according to the reformist worldview needed disciplining. Reformers thought such practices fostered fatalism, hindered progress, or saw these as irrational and simply un-modern. As a conjecture, it can be argued that these authors were deliberately vague about Sanskrit genealogy and sources precisely because these and especially the Vedas had fast become a monopoly

¹²³ Joshi, *Mukha-kriti*, pp. 1–2 and also Bhave, *Samudrik*.

¹²⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Two Histories of Bengali', in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley, and Delhi 2003).

¹²⁵ Joshi *Mukha-kriti*, p. 6.

of the reformists who argued not just for the antique origins of Indian modernity but also attempted to situate scientific disciplines in a hoary but Indian past.¹²⁶

In an anticipation of reformist criticism and dismissal of such practices, Seetakant in the introduction to his work *Mudrasamudrik*, acknowledged that the major objection to them was that they lent credence to fatalism.¹²⁷ Yet he argued that fatalism was neither a simple idea nor that it detracted from a sense of power over the self. Quite the opposite, according to him *samudrikvidya* was a highly important and utilitarian art (*ati-upyukt kala*) for a complete understanding of human nature. Dividing approaches to the study of human nature into two kinds, Seetakant reserved his criticism for those that gave primacy to circumstance in the understanding of human character and labelled such approaches as status-quoist (*paristhitivad*). Conversely, he argued that destiny was as an accumulation of imprints of past actions (*sanchitkarm*) and that had a dynamic relationship with will-power (*icha-shakti*). The interplay between inherited imprints and the power of the mind to will the self into action, he argued, is what made *samudrik* practices possible and salient. Hence according to Seetakant, they simultaneously centred the self as not only the bearer but also as the agent of destiny. Psychological (*manovaijyanik*) elements had the power and capacity to direct events and mould circumstances and Seetakant went on to assert that such an understanding was not only the correct interpretation of fatalism and destiny (*prarabdhi*), but was not contrary to the Vedanta, as the reformists asserted.¹²⁸ For him, fatalism was primarily misunderstood as an abnegation of the power of the self over actions. By tracing the sources of these techniques through Vedantic and monistic thought, he not only critiqued the idea that circumstance embodied the self, but also at a foundational level he was critical of prevalent approaches in both scientific and reformist thought which privileged dualism between mind and matter, the inner and outer and the self and the universe. By reinterpreting the idea of fatalism and by linking it to the inherent powers of the mind, *samudrik* was thus established as a set of techniques for a will to self.

In effect, *samudrikvidya* and related practices were both cosmologies of the self and techniques for the fortification of the self. Indeed,

¹²⁶ On 'Hindu Science' see David Arnold, *Science and Gyan Prakash*, *Another Reason*.

¹²⁷ Seetakant, *Mudrasamudrik*, 'Praastavik' [Introduction] n.p.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

the reconstitution of the self is a dominant preoccupation of Indian popular knowledge in this period.¹²⁹ In turn, phrenology was thus not translated into vernacular thought in a simple sense, but was set in the context of analogous practices that were not moored in western scientific ideas. In so doing, *samudrik* demarcated a distinct set of use and purpose from disciplines such as phrenology. Phrenology saw physical types as racial destiny that functioned as a social theory—a social theory that resembles a ‘big-bang theory’ or an ‘explain-it-all theory’ of human destiny, sweeping in physical difference, history, religion, and empire. *Samudrik* knowledge and practice was instead deployed as an everyday technique of the self in the world in relation to others. The self, rather than race or civilisation was the immanent site of difference. The self was believed to emanate a dense code of signifiers that needed to be decoded and deciphered in any attempt to manage and seek power over the unpredictability of an individual’s destiny. This sort of typology served as a prefiguring or an anticipation of things to come.

However, it was not as though the meaning and interpretations of physical differences remained entirely bound in *samudrik* literature untouched by phrenology. In fact phrenology itself was not merely translated but reinterpreted in the vernacular. As early as 1849 Combe’s works were translated into Bengali in the form a small handbook.¹³⁰ This occurred in the same year as one of the first handbooks of *samudrik* in Hindi was published in Calcutta, and while Kali Kumar’s phrenological society was active in the city. Like later books that sought to translate and reconfigure phrenology, authors like Radhavallabha Dasa’s translation borrowed the basic form and the categorisation of the mind into thirty-five faculties, that Combe had adopted from Franz Gall. Yet any fidelity to Combe’s phrenology or to his understanding of the nature of mental dispositions ended there. The arbitrary number of thirty-five faculties was somehow retained. However, not only was there little commonality between Combe’s and Dasa’s descriptions of those faculties, but the latter divided them into three broad types of mental dispositions and their related physical expression. Reordering Combe, the mind in Dasa’s rendering

¹²⁹ An elaboration of this issue will appear in Shruti Kapila, *Governments of the Mind: Psycho-Sciences and Selfhood in Colonial India*, forthcoming.

¹³⁰ Radhavallabha Dasa, *Manatattava-sarsangraha: A treatise on Phrenology compiled and translated from the English of Dr. Spurzheim and Mr. Combe* (Calcutta, 1849). I am indebted to Neilesh Bose for his translation from the Bengali.

of phrenology had three broad types of faculties namely of action/will (*Karme/Iche*), faculties of thought that referred to self-consciousness (*aatmadar*) and finally intellect/character (*Bodh/Brittii*).¹³¹ These of course were all indigenous categories of consciousness. Nodding in the direction of Combe, Dasa argued that the skull was a key embodiment of the character of the mind. But for Dasa, a greater significance lay in the interior nature of the capacities of the mind that were signalled by physical distinctions.¹³² Endorsing the phrenological importance of measuring physical difference, Dasa nevertheless steered clear of deploying it as a world-comparative theory. Instead, even though he did not acknowledge or mention practices like *samudrik*, in content his work shared much with them, especially in terms of their purpose. While he did not venture into the question of destiny Dasa saw phrenology primarily as a technique of self-knowledge that enabled the identification of faculties for the self to express itself. As in *samudrik* texts, the self was a dynamic expression of self-will and action that determined the nature of character and was made apparent by physical distinction.

While Dasa did not overtly invoke the authority of science, the measurement of character through phrenology came down to a matter of truth and falsehood for him. However, other scientifically trained authors such as Shridhar Narayan betrayed a deep ambivalence on the question of science. In a translation and reinterpretation of phrenology nearly a century after Dasa, Narayan was Janus-faced on the question of science. Indeed he lamented the experimental turn in scientific practice and instead, echoing earlier authors, he reasserted the non-dual nature of relations between mind, character and physical difference but held monism to be a more scientifically plausible claim.¹³³ Indeed, this was a two-way relationship of translations of concepts. Not only was *samudrik* literature translated into English, but equally, popular handbooks and abridged encyclopaedias of science that proliferated in vernaculars like Hindi included both *samudrik* and phrenology in their folds of useful and accessible knowledge.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Dasa, *Manatattava*, pp. 1–2.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 8–16.

¹³³ Shridhar Narayan Shrangpani, *Mudravigyan athava Manav-svabhav darshan-shastra* [Mudravigyan or the Philosophy of Human Nature] (Indore, 1935), pp. 118–22. He was palace-surgeon at the princely state of Indore.

¹³⁴ Anon, *Vidyasagar: Indian Pocket Cyclopaedia* (Aligarh, 2nd ed. 1911) Anon, *Samudrik-Sastram or the Hindu Science of Palmistry* (Calcutta, 1909).

In the colonial public sphere of print, it was not only an ambivalent attitude to science that informed *samudrik* and phrenology alike, but these practices were also widely deployed to forge a relationship between the realms of spirituality (*aadhyatm*) and science (*vigyan*). An eclecticism of approach informed the reinterpretation of phrenology as a technique for the decoding of the self. Indeed, this reconfiguration at times collided directly with phrenology and propelled the hybrid techniques and knowledges into a this-worldly and quotidian purpose centring on the self. Primarily deployed outside elite circles, these reinterpretations further dislodged the purposive logic of phrenology as a world-comparative theory of difference. *Samudrik* was one of a related set of techniques that proliferated in this period aiming to source the powers of the mind for the fortification and transformation of the self. Such knowledges and practices were primarily not ordered into particular disciplines nor were they institutionalised. Instead, they circulated and were disseminated through the cheap medium of print. Critically, they belonged to the politics of rationalism and the making of the self that were not easily incorporated into either the domains of science or religious reform. On the contrary, these practices were fundamentally unstructured and thus posed a challenge for both liberal and reform-minded publicists and elites. These practices and knowledges might indeed be described as insurgent. They were insurgent not so much in a negative sense but because the term captures the range of ideas that were related to, but could not be easily disciplined into the established and normalising domains of science, religion or the nation.¹³⁵ These practices, as in the present case of *samudrik*, interrupted and intersected with all these domains but are imperatively not constitutive of them. Moreover, reformist and liberal thought alike had an ambiguous relationship towards them, not only were they popular, but at the same time these practices traversed and shared their agenda of the modern reconstitution and empowerment of the self. Again *samudrik* and similar techniques that invoked destiny and fatalism did not easily fit into given ideas of (scientific) rationalism or a progressive religion. Ironically but not surprisingly, eugenicist and racial thought became embedded in and formed a dominant part of the reformist world-view of the Arya Samaj.¹³⁶ Insurgent practices then did not merely co-exist with reformist and scientific ideas but shadowed them. Questions of the discipline, the control

¹³⁵ Shruti Kapila, *Governments of the Mind*.

¹³⁶ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*.

and the making of the Indian self were then not simply the preserve of reformers, but spilled into domains not necessarily contained by them.

Historians have increasingly paid attention to the nature and place of print culture in colonial India. Following Benedict Anderson, print culture in colonial India has primarily been seen as a function of, or as a facilitator and condition for the formation of national identity.¹³⁷ As such, much of the cultural work of print has remained largely ignored. Indeed, historians have seen the nineteenth century predominantly as a neat, transitive chronology of reform, religious revivalism and emergent nationalism. Though undeniably nationalism is a key and overarching rubric of modern identity, the modern self is at once less than and more than the national self.

Conclusion

This article has traced the centrality of the concept of race for South Asia. Historians find the compulsions of datelines irresistible and in this sense this article has revised the given understandings, both from the perspectives of British and Indian history, that it was the events of 1857 that marked the key watershed for the salience of race in the sub-continent. It has critiqued the view that orientalism was the dominant interpretative rubric for earlier European and British understandings of India. Instead it has shown the intimate connection between orientalism and race and the significance of a civilisational concept like religion for race. Further, orientalism worked in an intellectual field of force created by emergent racial knowledges and typologies.

The issue of race and the typology of difference were at the heart of the so-called Scottish and north European enlightenment. Rather than discrete projects, the article has shown the connections between

¹³⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: An Enquiry into the Origin of Nations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993). Insightful critiques of Anderson include Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000). A growing number of studies of print culture and its relation to identity include Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2001), Francesca Orsini, *The Hindu Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the age of Nationalism* (Delhi, 2002), Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (Delhi, 2002), and Veena Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites and the Public Sphere: Western India under Colonialism* (Delhi, 2002).

them and their implication with imperial ideologies and science. This article has challenged the view that the eighteenth-century project that emphasised the value of civilisations and their emergence through 'stages' was abruptly replaced by an emphasis on racial typology after about 1850 or 1860. Enlightenment thinkers such as Blumenbach had long been concerned with racial types and measured them through cranial structure and colour. This concern with race was embedded in notions such as romanticism and the civilisational merits of art, architecture and attire, which have been seen quite apart from them. Indeed, William Hodges and his ilk were as ethnographic in their preoccupations as they were concerned with the picturesque.

India thus was no exception. Far from being a culture only associated with a developed classical antiquity like Europe, India was at the centre of the debates on race from the mid-eighteenth century. The inheritance of William Jones and Aryan theory has been considerably over-emphasised both by modern Indian and European scholarship. There remained considerable doubt about the position of India in the typology of race. For many, indeed for the foundational race theorist themselves, Indians were closer to the black negro than to the European. There remained consistent conflict and unease about the relationship between civilisation, race and colour from the late decades of the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. From Blumenbach and Prichard for whom Jones's generation of scholarship furnished evidence of race, colour and language to H. H. Wilson and even Max Mueller in the later nineteenth century.

In this extremely long-lived but changing pattern of thought, civilisational concepts such as religion intersected with race and there was a mutually reinforcing relationship between them. The early decades of the nineteenth century onwards saw the popular expression and interest in reading difference and character through the physical typology of skulls. Phrenology represented a key shift in the social basis of knowledge. Moreover, institutions like learned societies created networks between places and individuals and became sites for debates on the question of empire and religion. Race also confounds given understandings and expectations about liberal and conservative political ideologies in the nineteenth century. In one sense, Kali Kumar Das while being zealous for phrenology was a classic liberal who believed that education itself would deliver equality of civilisations. Europeans like Prichard on the other hand though radical could believe that civilisation could change race and colour. These, moreover, were not simply limited to elite preoccupations.

Phrenology took off in India because it spoke to a wide range of issues of religion, education and the psychological remaking of the self.

Moreover, within the public sphere of debate and print, phrenology and the question of physical typology were reinterpreted both in form and content and dislodged from their original meaning. The world-comparative sweep of physical typology and the stacial theories of religion and civilisation were instead put to entirely different intellectual and political purposes. Not only did phrenology service different political ideologies of religion and patriotism, for scientifically minded intellectuals such as Mahendra Lal Sircar it offered an apposite critique of evolutionism itself. Further, indigenous ideas of interpreting physical distinction notably *samudrikvidya* became popular techniques for the reconstituting of the Indian self. The pervasiveness of elite and popular interest in typological knowledge empowered new notions of the self to configure the capacities and destiny of the self and a means to straddle religion with science.

From the point of view of historiography, this article's purpose has been to critique a number of positions. These are first, the inward or internalist nature of history of science; secondly, an imperial history that consistently traces events and ideas elsewhere back to the British Isles and, thirdly, the nationalist belief in India's exceptional status in the history of race. Instead, it has tried to forge connections between these interlocked histories and processes. While aiming to re-centre the importance of race and reconfigure intellectual history, it also holds out the underlying hope of shifting the emphasis from a much-rehearsed understanding of the seamless play between colonial knowledge and Indian agency and towards a history of the concepts themselves. In so doing, the aim is to forge a history of connections between colonial India and the wider world that does not exclude the issue of power. Equally importantly, the article has attempted to specify the changing place, meanings, practices and interpretations of the protean but powerful concept of race.