
UNIT I PASSAGES TO INDIA

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to offer a point of entry into the novel *A Passage to India* by looking at the causes, the route, and the consequences of journeys in history and in fiction undertaken to reach India. Forster's understanding of various colonialisms will be considered so as to lead up to the novel itself.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace in nineteenth century European writing to assume that a passage made from England to India entails a complete revolution in cultural codes and values. Such a journey made in a P. and O., or a Peninsular and Oriental liner is loaded with a sense that the English voyager who makes it will feel a severance from the only civilised world known to him/her at Port Said, at the head of the Suez Canal. It is a journey with many resonances which are frequently contradictory. To begin with, the trip is heavy with a sense of loss. The known world has to be given up for the unknown and of course — so goes the common assumption — that which is known has to be superior to that which is unknown.

At the same time, political and moral imperatives make such a passage to India not only necessary but wholly admirable. **The business of empire involves not only the political governance of the conquered country, and the economic control of its markets, but the education and enlightenment of its subject peoples.** Hence the idea of the civilising mission to the colonised develops at this time, and its best-known expression of course comes in Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, 'The White Man's Burden'.

Take up the White Man's burden
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

All the premises on which this writing rests can and must be interrogated. First why are the colonised never granted the status of their own human individuality? They are described as wild beasts (who have been captured with difficulty) who are either demonic or immature. In no case are they seen as adults capable of deciding their own political and cultural destinies. Next why is only one value-system — that cherished by Caucasians — seen as possessing cultural superiority? There is no sense that the subject-peoples might have developed competing systems of their own which possess equal validity. Then why is Empire-building so entirely perceived as being a male activity? It remains debatable as to whether women are not worthy of being involved in this task, or whether such a task is not worthy of women. Finally why is it that when those who carry the White Man's burden are said to have gained the moral high ground, no mention is made of the political and economic gains that accrue to them? The use of the word 'burden' suggests that Empire entails moral advantages and practical disadvantages. In fact as our century has shown, the reverse is true.

I make these points not to demolish Kipling who is an incredibly complicated writer but to suggest that — writing as he does at the high noon of Empire — it is useful to pick up notes on which Forster — who writes in the twilight of Empire — sounds variations. The complexities that surround a journey out of England to India are handled in an 1890 poem by Kipling, 'The Exiles Line' which sets out the dynamics of the P. & O. voyage:

Linked in the chain of Empire one by one,
Flushed with long leave or tanned with many a sun,
The Exiles' Line brings out the exiles' line,
And ships them homeward when their work is done.

Bound in the wheel of Empire, one by one,
The chain-gangs of the East from sire to son,
The Exiles' Line takes out the exiles' line
And ships them homeward when their work is done.

The Exiles' Line is of course the Peninsular and Oriental Shipping Company whose passengers, the exiles line or the generations of Englishmen who serve their country while stationed in India, no doubt shoulder the white man's burden. But look at the complex little eddies of meaning here. Isn't there somewhere the notion that Empire-building is vaguely a criminal activity? Else why would Empire-builders be bound on the wheel, or indeed be part of chain-gangs, serving their sentence? The 'chain of Empire', the 'wheel of Empire' and 'the chain-gangs' all evoke a world of crime and punishment. Most of all, a passage to India is fraught with a sense of misery contingent on the exile from the known, the familiar, and the loved world that it entails.

Simultaneously however there is sometimes a sense of liberation that is the result of such a journey. The unacceptable face of Empire has what appears to be its most infamous expression in lines like these from Kipling's poem 'Mandalay': 'Ship me somewhere east of Suez where the best is like the worst, Where there aren't no Ten Commandments and a man can raise a thirst'. Here the suggestion seems to be that people like the speaker — who is socially and economically challenged — might find love and comfort more easily 'East of Suez' (in other words, on the Indian subcontinent) than in England because of the relaxation in social and moral codes that characterises South Asia. The question that remains is, does this sense of liberation — that is one result of a journey to India — have an acceptable face as well?

1.2 TITLE OF THE TEXT

1.2.1 Whitman's Poem as Source

As to the question we took up in at the end of the previous section, the answer is: Apparently it does. The more philosophically acceptable face of such a voyage may be seen in Walt Whitman's poem 'Passage to India' which in turn was a part of his epic *Leaves of Grass*. I give below an extended quotation so that its meaning may come across

Passage to India !

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first ?
The earth to be spanned, connected by network,
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be crossed, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.

Then not your deeds only O Voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be justified,
All these hearts as of fretted children shall be soothed,
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told.
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together,
The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified.
Nature and man shall be disjoined and diffused no more,
The true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them.
(O pensive soul of mine — O thirst unsatisfied — waitest not there ?
Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the Comrade perfect ?)

Initially this kind of writing seems both to exalt India and to exult in India as well. India appears to be at the centre of a grand providential design, and seems to stand forth as a miraculously synthesising one at that. The synthesis which is hymned here is prophesised as working on many levels. Personal union between individuals is crowned in marriage. International and inter-racial harmony is celebrated as well. Explorers and scientists join hands in this cosmic dance so that no field of human activity is omitted. All alienations characteristic of life here on earth will be healed. Human and nonhuman worlds too shall come together. No voyage can be more evocative at once of both mystical promise and mystical fulfillment than this passage to India.

Nonetheless several questions are raised by this poem. First it offers an essentialist reading. How is it that the poem does not mention even one particularising feature of India, whether political, social or economic ? It would seem that the poet's engagement is only with a never-never-land of his creation which has nothing whatever to do with the sociological and cultural realities of the subcontinent. It is as if India has no right to any existence or reality of its own and exists only as a territory to be colonised and governed by the poet's imagination. Next India is shown not to be peopled by its own citizens with their aspirations and challenges but by an amalgam of abstractions — races, voyages, scientists and achievers. Again no attempt is made to engage with specificities such as class, caste, gender, religion that may be used to describe a multicultural society. Then the hectic certitudes of mysticism — union among all peoples, union among all life-forms, and ultimately union with the divine, follow quickly upon each other. What are the predicates of this triumphalism, and what has this triumphalism to do with India ? Finally who is the 'Comrade perfect' for whom the soul waits, out of all time and space ?

These are to my mind some of the questions raised by Whitman's poem which is the source for the title of Forster's own novel. Some of these questions are answered, and others are side-stepped in Forster's adaptation of the first line quoted above for his title. To this title we may now turn.

1.2.2 Forster's Adaptation

At first glance the distinction between Whitman's opening line and Forster's title seems trivial. All Forster seems to do is to slip in the indefinite article before Whitman's phrase so that it now reads '*A Passage to India*'. In reality though he accomplishes a good deal through this apparently insignificant gesture. Tentativeness takes the place of certainty. 'A' passage suggests there may be many more passages than the one taken by the writer or indeed by any one or all the characters. This sense of competing routes also helps decentre the notion of the supremacy of the writer. If no one route is superior to the other, his own imagination can no longer claim hegemony over his territory. We do not then as readers have the passive role of map-readers. You and I might, if we wish, claim the right and indeed the duty of cartographers or map-makers since the writer does not claim he has discovered the only, or even the best route to India. Against Whitman's sense of self-generated and self-sustained romanticism then, it seems to me that this is a more self-examining and self-critical **Modernism**. This does not suggest the death of **Romanticism** though, for the title is still built around the ideal of an open-ended journey. At the same time its tentativeness suggests that the title questions its own primacy.

Looking still at the title, it isn't possible for me to say whether Forster himself considers the predicates of race, class and gender which I criticised Whitman for ignoring. I would like though to indicate a few slight parallels between the two writers. Both wrote during the aftermath of wars that revolutionised their societies. Whitman wrote after the American Civil war that ultimately brought the industrialised North and the agrarian south together in the federation that we know today as the United States of America. More than a century down the road the position of Civil Rights in such a society — one of the stated war-aims of the Union — is continually debated. Yet Whitman's own enthusiasm for this democracy led him to write an epic for it, *Leaves of Grass*, of which 'Passage to India' is a part. Forster began writing *A Passage to India* before the First World War and before its publication witnessed both the formation and the emasculation of the League of Nations (the predecessor to the UNO) the decline of the British empire after the war, and the rise of Gandhi. His tentativeness thus is explicable. Thus there are continuities and discontinuities in their attitudes but I'm not sure this argument can be pushed much further. Instead I'd like to look at Forster's attitude to earlier passages to India and to earlier colonialisms and colonists. To illustrate my argument I will use Forster's writings around the time of the publication of *A Passage to India*.

1.3 EARLIER PASSAGES TO INDIA

1.3.1 Babar

In terms of the chronology of conquest the first invader of India whom Forster discusses at any length is Babar, the founder of the Mughal dynasty. At first Forster treats Babar's aggressive foreign policy as being pretty much a practical application of Machiavelli's theory of statecraft. Forster's introduction of Babar though is surprisingly disarming: 'At the time that Machiavelli was collecting materials for *The Prince*, a robber boy, sorely in need of advice, was scuttling over the highlands of Central Asia'. Indeed this seems at first disquieting. Why should the fact of foreign conquest, based only on force and with the sole purpose of pillage and loot be trivialised in this way? I suspect that Forster's sneaking admiration of Babar's love of life, of friends, and also Forster's enjoyment of Babar's prose-style (as seen in the latter's autobiography) have something to do with it. Had this been Forster's only response to an earlier invasion of India, it would have been immature and insignificant.

But Forster's position is more complicated than this. He goes on to use Babar's disparaging account of India as an early model of the antipathy between the conqueror

and the conquered. At first he seems to get a good deal of mileage out of this comparison and to be in agreement himself with Babar's lack of sympathy for India and also with the British residents in India (the **Anglo-Indians** as he calls them) who subscribe to this account: 'His description of Hindustan is unfavourable and has often been quoted with gusto by Anglo-Indians. "The people," he complains, "are not handsome, have no idea of the charm of friendly society, of frankly mixing together no good fruits, no ice or cold water, no good food or bread in their bazars, no baths or colleges ...' He has small patience with a race which has never found either aesthetic or moral excellence by focussing upon details. Just as Forster seems to agree with these conquerors — both of time past and of time present — he stands aside from their criticism. He does this not because he suddenly finds some hitherto unsuspected virtues in India. Quite the contrary. He does this because he locates a surprising virtue in Babar that he does not find in the British. This is the ability Babar shows to respond to a value which according to Forster is central to all Indian cultures, the value of renunciation. Babar gives up his life so that his son Humayun might live.

Nothing in [Babar's] life was Indian, except, possibly, the leaving of it. Then, indeed, at the supreme moment, a strange ghost visits him, a highly unexpected symptom occurs — renunciation. Humayun, his son, lay sick at Agra, and was not expected to recover. Babar, apprised that some sacrifice was necessary, decided ... that it must be self-sacrifice. He walked ceremonially three times round the bed, then cried, 'I have borne it away'. From that moment...[Babar] ceased to exist ... like the smoke from the burning ghats that disappears into the sky.

I find this remarkable for what it tells me of Forster's understanding of the relationship between a ruler and his subjects. First it suggests that Forster's concern is not with governance as an end in itself but with the way in which the governance of a culture is impossible without an identification between the conqueror and the core-values of the conquered. What makes Babar a sympathetic figure for Forster is his grasping — accidentally or deliberately — of the Indian value of renunciation. I realise that this lays Forster open to the charge of essentialism. Why should he write as if there is only one cultural value-system in India, and why should he so arbitrarily place renunciation within it? Is Forster not guilty of continuing the cliché of the 'spiritual' East? Still, I find the passage worthwhile because it shows how Forster goes along with the mainstream culture of his time — that of the British ruling class — **only** upto a point. **First** he shares the criticism of India they make using Babar's own words. **Next** he goes on to show that Babar developed beyond this point and that he values Babar's later position of appreciation at least as much if not more than his earlier depreciation of Indian culture. **Then** the episode suggests Forster's own sympathy with the mainstream not of an early coloniser (Babar) nor of a contemporary coloniser (the British) but of the colonised. **Finally** the simile of the burning ghats shows how the expansion of Forster's political and cultural sympathies translate directly into an increase in the resources of his prose-style.

1.3.2 The East India Company

What happens then when Forster examines the cultural sympathies of the British? For a start he makes the point that as a nation and also as a colonial power the chief vice of the British people is their hypocrisy. By this he means that, as he explains, the British are guilty not of conscious wrongdoing but of what he calls 'unconscious deceit' which has led them to be thought of as '... the island of hypocrites, the people who have built up an Empire with a Bible in one hand, a pistol in the other, and financial concessions in both pockets' (*Abinger Harvest*, 20). Yet again Forster's criticism seems to be directed at the attitude of the coloniser rather than against the political and cultural realities of colonisation. He objects to the unhealthy nexus between empire, religion and commerce. earlier in this set of 'Notes on the English Character' Forster has already drawn attention to the strong commercial instincts in the British national character which have led to the description of the British as 'a nation of shopkeepers'. The empire was essentially a

commercial proposition with the colonies providing the colonial power with free markets, cheap human resources, raw materials and opportunities for employment. And as Forster explains elsewhere in the essay, religion becomes of significance to him only to the extent that it brings humanity into direct contact with the divine. When it functions only as another manifestation of imperialism and entails the demolition of other faiths, it becomes meaningless.

It is exactly this spirit of commercial aggrandisement based on force that characterises the establishment of the East India Company. Despite opposition for the Portuguese who had already come out as traders, the Company established factories at Surat (1612), Madras (1639), Bombay (1661) and Calcutta (1690). The Company however had been granted its original charter — giving it the right to trade — by Elizabeth I in 1600. This is the way in which Forster condemns the Elizabethan age: 'The Elizabethans, even the greatest of them ... increased our [i.e., Britains's] political power and glorified our race and are rightly commended on public occasions. But they were at once too violent and too hazy to contribute much towards the development of the human mind' [Advani, 173]. I do not suggest this is a fair comment on the Elizabethan age. But I offer it as a development of Forster's views about an empire built on commerce. Concerning the earlier essay I'd suggested the factors that annoyed Forster by their presence in a colonial situation, namely trade and religion. To my mind this later essay suggests the factor that annoys Forster by its absence from a colonial situation, namely philosophy. He indicates that colonialism in India — as carried out by the East India Company — prevented any adventure of the mind. In this sense Forster believes, since it blocked out thought, the Empire as founded by the company could only be temporary.

1.3.3 Government by the Crown

However unphilosophical Forster might find the colonialism of the company though, he finds the colonialism of his day and age even more dispiriting, as the imperial imagination grows increasingly mean-minded and alienated from Indian cultural realities.

After the Mutiny and the transference from John Company to the Crown the change began. The new type of official ... was harder worked, less independent and less in touch with the Indian socially So it followed that our conceptions of the land grew more sterile. The glamour of the nawabs and missionaries had gone, the kindly light of Tod and Sleeman had gone also. Our guides now were often Anglo-Indian ladies and their theme the disaster of intermarriage; that disaster obsessed and obsesses then, and the novels that exhibit it read as though written on an elephant's back, high above the actualities of the bazar. We were assured that there was no religion in the country, no literature, no architecture Official enthusiasm had petered out (Das, 1).

I don't quite see the point that Forster makes here as regards his specific examples. James Tod and William Sleeman wrote about the history of Rajasthan and the suppression of the Thugs in Central India respectively during the time of the same Company Raj which (I suggested earlier) Forster criticises sharply. Forster's general point however is well taken. Colonialism, when it leads to an alienation of the rulers from the ruled, does make any form of art impossible. Religion, literature and architecture are alike enfeebled because there is no dialogue between the ruled and the rulers. As a result while Company rule had used commerce to demolish thought, Forster condemns its successor, the direct rule of the Crown even more strongly. For under the Crown the imaginations of both the colonisers and the colonised were vitiated, as the former trivialised the artistic achievements of the latter. 'Enthusiasm petered out' precisely because it was official enthusiasm. And this official apathy is precisely the reverse of the sentiments of Babar as Forster interprets these. Babar, according to Forster, attacks the daily realities of Indian life and yet remained in touch with the realities of the Indian spirit. The Civil Service on the contrary, which administers India on behalf of the Crown ignores the daily realities of Indian life and is therefore ignorant of realities of the Indian spirit. Forster's attitudes to

the three colonialisms he examines, those of Babar, the East India company and the British government thus vary considerably. In general though Forster's attitude to a particular colonialism depends on the attitude it shows to the colonised territory, India.

1.4 FORSTER'S ATTITUDE BEFORE HIS FIRST PASSAGE TO INDIA

1.4.1 As an Individual

What then was Forster's own attitude to India before he came out on his first trip to this country in 1912? To begin with, he stressed the unofficial character of his visit. I suggested a little earlier that Forster believed that the official stand on Indian achievements was one of sterile apathy. In contrast he insisted on the personal aspect of his journey, at least in part because his feeling for India was coloured by two friends, Syed Ross Masood whom he had tutored briefly and Malcolm Darling, a college-mate who had gone on to the Indian Civil Service. Of Masood Forster wrote: 'My own debt to him is incalculable. He woke me up out of my suburban and academic life, showed me new horizons and a new civilisation, and helped me towards the understanding of a continent. Until I met him, India was a vague jumble of rajahs, sahibs, babus and elephants, and I was not interested in such a jumble, who could be? He made everything real and exciting as soon as he began to talk' (*A Passage to India* 7-8. Hereafter, *API*). I find this interesting because — whether or not Forster is to be believed here — the extract links India with a sense of liberation that earlier writers [see 1.1 and 1.2.1] had also noticed. The extent to which Forster rises above the jumble of clichés of which he writes here is of course debatable. The very fact though that he recognises such a jumble suggests the level of self-awareness of his personal response to India. This accent on individuality was valuable to Forster for another reason too. Throughout his career as a novelist he insisted on the need of an artist to engage with people rather than with faceless groups saying 'I am a novelist and my business lies with individuals not with classifications'. The significance of India to him, he insists, rests on the basis of a personal friendship.

My connection with India is peculiar and personal. It started because I made friends with an Indian, but for him I might never have gone to his country or written about it

It is on the basis of personal relationship that my connection with this strange country rests. I didn't go there to govern it or to make money or to improve people. I went there to see a friend. [Ganguly, 299]

I have some questions concerning Forster's attitude to India as expressed in these extracts. First, of what value is the response of an individual to the problems generated by a system, in this case the system of imperialism? A personal response alone is unlikely to bring about significant political or cultural change. Forster's remarks are typical of the retreat of liberalism into its own personal world when confronted by a political challenge too large for it to handle. Next, India is not necessarily stranger than any person or nation who describes it in this way. All too often the strange is either dismissed as inferior or worthy only of being ruled. Yet I believe there is some value in Forster's position. First he dissociates himself from the empire-commerce-religion nexus he has criticised elsewhere [see 1.3.2]. He stands aside from empire ('I didn't go there to govern') from commerce ('or to make money') and from religion ('to improve people'). To stand aside may empower him to criticise these forces more freely.

1.4.2 As a Novelist

Curiously enough this emphasis on personal relationships helped set Forster's next goal as a novelist. For Masood was the first person to urge Forster to write a novel on India.

He believed in Forster's ability to sympathetically feel for a situation even while analysing it. In 1911, a year before Forster's visit to India Masood wrote to make a suggestion: 'You know my great wish is to get you to write a book on IndiaIn you I see an oriental with an oriental view of life on most things Go on improving your imagination and with it your power of physically feeling the difficulties of another. That is what we call *tarass*' (Furbank, I, 194). Again I find the assumption that race determines attitude disturbing. But it suggests yet again the way in which personal and novelistic pressures, so to speak, fuel each other to influence Forster's attitude before he embarked on his journey to India.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

A passage or journey from England to India as seen by an earlier writer like Kipling is complex. It denies Indians — the colonised — their right to their own political and cultural destinies. It upholds British culture over non-British cultures, marginalises women and morally exalts imperialists. Imperialism in turn carries contrary implications of exile, guilt and liberation. Simultaneously India is seen in Whitman's poem 'Passage to India' as the symbol of mystical fulfillment, which has both positive and negative results. While it exalts India it does not analyse it in terms of race, class and gender specificities. Forster's adaptation of Whitman's phrase for the title of his novel suggests a greater self-examination and a move from Romanticism to Modernism. It allows the reader her own point of view and requires her to make her own journey through the text. Forster wrote about three colonial regimes before the publication of *A Passage to India*. These were the governments of Babar, the East India Company and the Crown. His attitude to any colonising power is shaped in turn by what he regards as its attitude to its colony, India. So his approval of them declines accordingly in descending order. Finally Forster's own attitude to India was shaped by his personal relationships and his goal as a novelist. His close friend Syed Ross Masood suggested he write a novel about India, while praising Forster's quality of *tarass* or imaginative sympathy.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Anglo-Indians

Forster uses this term to denote British people who lived in India. Please do not confuse this with current usages.

Cliche

A stereotyped hackneyed phrase.

Essentialism

A critical approach which suggests there are truths of universal accuracy and application.

Imperatives

Urgent, commanding requirements.

Interrogated

Questioned.

Modernism

A movement in the arts at the start of the twentieth century which uses devices such as multiple narratives, and points of view to offer a psychologically convincing presentation of reality. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are among the modernists.

Romanticism

A movement in the arts at the beginning of the nineteenth century which suggests that subjective reality (the landscape of the mind) shapes objective reality (the external landscape). Wordsworth and Coleridge are among the early Romantics.

1.7 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. Outline the connotations of a passage to India in late nineteenth century writing. What are the positives and the negatives of such a passage ?
- Q 2. What is your understanding of the phrase, 'the White Man's burden' ? Analyse its implications.
- Q 3. Indicate the possible advantages and disadvantages in Forster's insistence on the personal quality of his response to India.

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Primary material

E.M. Forster. *Abinger Harvest*. 1936, repr. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974

Secondary material

Furbank, P.N. *E.M. Forster: A Life*. 1977, repr. (in one vol.) Oxford, 1979.

Joonetilleke, D.C.R.A. *Images of the Raj*. London, 1988.

Greenberger, Allen J. *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism*. London, 1969.

UNIT 2 REPRESENTATION OF INDIA (A)

APPROACHES TO THE NOVEL

STRUCTURE

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Kinds of writing in the text
 - 2.2.1 The Travel Guide
 - 2.2.2 The History textbook
 - 2.2.3 The Romantic landscape
 - 2.2.4 Social comedy
 - 2.2.5 The Modernist quest
- 2.3 Kinds of writing about the text
 - 2.3.1 Studies in symbolism
 - 2.3.2 Studies in language
 - 2.3.3 Colonial-discourse analysis
- 2.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5 Glossary
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The two main objectives of this unit are (a) to indicate the various kinds of writing in *A Passage to India* and (b) to indicate various critical approaches which may be applied to the text. Taken together they suggest the wide range of representations of India: those offered by Forster in the novel and those offered by critics who have written about this and related texts as well. All illustrations from the text will be drawn from its opening chapter so please read Chapter 1 alongside this unit.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The epigraph to *Howards End*, the novel Forster published immediately before *A Passage to India* urges the importance of connection: 'Only connect the prose and the passion ... and both will be exalted'. I think of this as suggesting something of a clue to Forster's method in the later novel in the way it indicates the need to make links and connections between various levels of reality both within the text and outside it, between various kinds of literature with which Forster was familiar and between various contradictory political and cultural influences on the period over which the novel was written. This activity of building bridges and associations was one that was self-avowedly close to Forster's heart. As he once said 'My defence at any Last Judgement would be that I was trying to connect up and use all the fragments I was born with'. Does this activity suggest the need for *tarass* or imaginative sympathy — particularly when exploring a range of cultures — which was discussed at the end of Unit 1? Or does it suggest a concern with self-expression that may edge out political and cultural concerns outside the self? The answer is a matter of opinion but in either case please try to think of how a text, which results from such a need for connection, is likely to have within it several types of writing. I suggest that each kind of writing in *A Passage to India* is the expression of a particular kind of reality — historical, literary or philosophical. Furthermore each kind of writing produces a certain representation of India which in turn corresponds to that particular order of reality. I shall try to work my way through these types of writing in the order in which they appear in Chapter 1. Please keep your text open throughout this unit so that you can make your own readings and draw your own conclusions.

I will also discuss some well-known critical approaches to the text. I shall try to illustrate these approaches with examples from Chapter 1 and to suggest — as I see them — the strengths and the limitations of each. I shall also try to indicate how each kind of criticism produces a corresponding representation of India.

May I make a few suggestions here? **First** — although only Chapter 1 is used for the sake of convenience — illustrations of textual and critical practices set out in Unit 2 may be found throughout the novel. **Please** apply these arguments as freely as you wish. **Next** please don't worry if the arguments set out in this unit seem a little confusing at first. Use them only to get a sense of direction. Once you finish reading the text (perhaps after Unit 3) you might like to re-read Unit 2 to see how far you can apply its ideas. **Then** please do not apply any of the classifications mentioned here rigidly when you read the text. Both when you read this unit and when you read the novel you will see how each category of writing is both a stimulus and a response to another. **Finally** please feel free to disagree with any of the readings offered here, either those cited by the critics or those arguments put forward by me. Unit 2 will, I hope, suggest various ways of reading the text. It will work best however when you begin to map your journey through *A Passage to India*.

2.2 KINDS OF WRITING IN THE TEXT

2.2.1 The Travel-Guide

The very first thing that the text does, I think, is to trick the reader. Look at the way it opens:

Except for the Marabar Caves — and they are twenty miles off — the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely....The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guestThe very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving.

What does this kind of writing actually do? **First** it seems designed to help a reader 'place' a town in her mind by suggesting its importance on account of any natural, historical or architectural features it may possess. Conversely, as in this case, it helps the reader rate such a town as being of no significance since — bar the caves — Chandrapore has no extraordinary feature. **Next** the account seems designed to help a reader find her way around such a town. River, streets and buildings are 'placed' against each other so that the ugliness which marks one feature automatically touches the next. Again the reader's mind seems to be made up for her in advance. Even before she sees the town to decide for herself, the account appears to have taken her decisions for her. All its main features seem to have been rated. Indeed, so negative is the account in the particular and the general that she may well decide to give the town a miss. **Finally** the account seeks to transfer the meanness of the town to its residents. 'The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving'. The dismissal seems complete as people and places seem consigned to the dustbin where they belong.

What kind of an account is this? It is in fact very like a travel-guide designed to provide a tourist with as comprehensive an account of a country as possible before she embarks so that she can plan a pleasant and profitable stay. To help a tourist prioritise sights and places travel-handbooks usually have a system of rating. Indeed in his first two novels Forster had already had a good deal of fun with travel-guides. *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* had pointed out how limited were the insights offered by the Baedekar travel-guides to the culture of Europe in general and Italy in particular. Its practice of predetermining the interest of a place by awarding it an appropriate number of

stars was shown to be futile, as it could offer no reliable guide to the inner values of a place or its people. Now in *A Passage to India* Forster parodies the travel-guide by adopting its style while subverting the application of its contents. Place this extract from a survey of Bankipore — the real-life equivalent of Chandrapore, where Forster stayed with Masood on his first trip to India — alongside the opening of the novel. Keep an eye open for similarities and dissimilarities.

The city of Patna ... includes the suburbs of Bankipore and Jafur Khan's garden, an extent nearly of nine miles along the bank of the Ganges Many of the houses are built of brick, more however are built of mud with tiled roofs, but very few are thatched. To outward view they are exceedingly unsightly and slovenly, and are rendered peculiarly mean by the lower storey The inside of the town is disagreeable and disgusting, and the view of it from a distance is mean....Still, however, the appearance ... is very sorry, the predominant feature being an irregular high steep bank of clay without herbage, and covered with all manner of impurities. (Ganguly, 335)

To my mind, as far as notation of minor details goes, there is no great difference between Forster's opening and this extract from Francis Buchanan's Survey Report of 1811-1812. The difference lies in the application of these details. Buchanan is very clear that the town is disgusting and that is all there is to it. Forster appears to make the same connections but I think there is an important difference. Take for instance that sentence which is deeply offensive at first glance: 'The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving'. When I look at it more closely though I find myself asking, 'From whose point of view is the remark being made?' The answer I suspect is 'From the point of view of the remote travel-guide writer, or perhaps the travel-guide reader who naturally share the same biases'. Such a person is furthermore likely to be someone who is passing through India as a tourist with an eye for the well-known rather than for the obscure. It is for such a person that this representation of India is constructed. In fact, as the opening sentence shows, Forster has already demolished the spirit behind the travel-guide by insisting, not on well-known sights of Chandrapore, but on the less well-known feature: the Marabar caves. Except for these (and they are twenty miles out of town) the implication is that Chandrapore is not worth visiting. So what does the reader do? If she thinks of visiting the town she is warned, well in advance, that it is unremarkable. If she thinks of giving it a miss she is warned, again well in advance, that it has the extraordinary caves. This is what I meant earlier when I said that Forster preserves the format of the travel-guide while subverting its content. He appears to construct a model — India as the subject of a travel-guide — only to demolish it. The kinds of writing at work in the novel, and the resulting representations of India, are very much more complex.

2.2.2 The History Textbook

Next there is the model of the history textbook as Chapter 1 goes on to set out the history of Chandrapore 'Chandrapore was never large or beautiful but two hundred years ago it lay on the road between Upper India, then imperial, and the sea, and the fine houses date from that period. The zest for decoration stopped in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever democratic'. If the model of the travel-guide as suggested above [2.2.1] may be found in the novel, so may that of the history textbook. The travel-guide organises details spatially ('twenty miles off', 'along the bank') while the history book organises details temporally ('two hundred years ago', 'the eighteenth century'). Earlier [1.3.3] I had suggested that Forster sometimes plays one colonialism off against another. Now, in Chapter 1, he refers to two imperial governments. First there is the Mauryan empire, with its capital Patliputra (Patna) which is close to Bankipore (the Chandrapore of the novel). Forster had referred to the Mauryan empire in a review-essay written ten years before *A Passage to India* where he noted that the Mauryan empire had proved impermanent in contrast to Buddhism which had started under the Mauryas but had outlived it into the present day: 'The Mauryan empire is famous not for its extent or duration, though both

were remarkable, but for the edicts of Asoka' (Ganguly, 340). Then there is of course British India, the period during which Forster writes. Two points I think may be noted here. First Forster cuts across time and space to take a quick look at two imperialisms. I find the phrase 'then imperial' very clever. It decentres British India's notion of itself as being somehow unique by suggesting that India has known other imperialisms in time past. So by the time we read Forster's account of the British area in Chandrapore it has already been divested of its pretensions. It stands as only one phase in history. Other empires have preceded it and will by inference supersede it as well. Then Forster shows that both imperialisms have been anti-people. '... the fine houses date from that [the Mauryan] period. The zest for decoration stopped in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever democratic'. In other words, the Raj was not the first form of oppression to be known. Common people — if domestic architecture is a reliable index — have always known a life both ugly and mean whether ruled by the Mauryas or by the British who in their turn construct a township 'which charms not, neither does it repel'.

Why does Forster construct this historical model? I wouldn't care to choose one option over another, but I'll suggest a few. First this model as I've suggested before debunks British claims to uniqueness. Next it suggests that all imperialisms are fundamentally anti-democratic. This may seem a more radical point than it actually is because Forster's views on democracy are somewhat mixed: 'So Two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. Only Love the Beloved Republic deserves that' (Wasi, 61). Indeed even in this extract from the novel, Forster is careful to associate fine houses and dignity with Mauryan rule. His history textbook is not quite so clear on the class issue as all that. Finally if indeed Forster suggests such a two-edged proposition is he a critic of imperialism or an apologist for it? Does he suggest that because India has been conquered in time past its conquest in time present is justifiable?

2.2.3 The Romantic Landscape

Then there is an intensely Romantic mode of writing, usually reserved for descriptions of the landscape. This kind of writing is characterized by the way in which a subjective impulse colours and shapes external reality. Look for instance at this stretch of prose. 'The sky settles everything — not only climates and seasons, but when the earth shall be beautiful. By herself she can do little — only feeble outbursts of flowers, But when the sky chooses, glory can rain into the Chandrapore bazaars, or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon' (API, 32). At first it seems to be a lyrical description of a given landscape. It is a description, however, which I think is governed by a particular organising principle. This principle in turn is Forster's desire to show that there is a common factor that unites both sections of Chandrapore: the Indian and the British. I suggested [2.2.2] that both were ugly. Now, to show that humanity is not the only or even the greatest of his concerns, Forster shows his readers what the cosmos, or non-human nature, can do. The cosmic potential for beauty is shown here. Look at the deliberate contrast towards which Forster works. On the one hand he has shown us how the human world has always been characterised by alienation — whether race-based or class-based — and that this alienation has led to ugliness and meanness. On the other hand, in this extract he shows us how the world of nature pronounces a benediction or a final blessing over the human world by literally raining its beauty down on the city. The non-human world also sets aside all distinctions of class and race generated by the human world as the sky, the sun and the rain are shared alike by all humanity.

I call this Romantic writing because I think that the desire to organise external reality (the world of nature) emerges from within the writer's imagination. In other words I find this an example of how landscape becomes psychoscape. What begins as a map of a place ends as a map of the mind. I'd like now to look at the consequences of Romantic lyricism. It must be said, I think, that his reliance on Romanticism allows Forster some time and space within which he can mount a critique of imperialism. Seen from such a cosmic viewpoint the divisions that keep humanity so hopelessly fissured, and that are the

product of various imperialisms, are shown as being of no lasting importance. In a way this might be said to recall a line from Whitman [1.2.1]:

All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together/
The whole earth, this cold impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified.

At the same time I think Forster may be reckoned more radical than Whitman on this point as Forster's opening shows nature to be an active, deciding participant in the cosmic drama: 'The sky settles everything' The non-human world is thus brought into the novel to redress the imbalances and discriminations created by the human world. In this sense I think it is fair to say that Romanticism is used to facilitate a critique of imperialism.

Nonetheless the same charge of essentialism discussed in the context of Whitman [1.2.1] may be brought against Forster here. Yet again no attempt is made to consider the specificities — social, political or cultural — of the Indian situation. Is Forster using the beauty and an unexamined assumption of liberation that sometimes characterises this writing to gloss over such ugly realities? In other words is Romanticism ultimately being used as an escape-route away from the guilt of Imperialism?

2.2.4 Social Comedy

If the novel provided the reader with drama only on a cosmic scale, I would be tempted to say 'Yes'. However *A Passage to India* also works on the level of social comedy and the comic mode functions as a useful corrective to the cosmic mode. Take for instance this account of the Civil Station from Chapter 1: '...viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place It is a tropical pleasance, washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and peepul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars They glorify the city to the English people ... so that newcomers cannot believe it to be as meagre as it is described, and have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment'. Look at the curious way in which the writing works. First there is an eloquent overflow of feeling for the beauty that seems to be an integral part of the town when viewed from its British enclave of the Civil Station. The deliberate use of the archaic word 'pleasance' heightens this stereotypical Romanticised picture, rather like that of Coleridge's Xanadu where 'Alph the sacred river ran / Through caverns measureless to man / down to a sunless sea'. Next there is a slight change. The trees are given their common Indian names, neem and peepul, and are shown to hide the sordid realities of bazaar life. Then the reader is told that even if the trees look beautiful, the newcomer is warned to expect a meagre town. Finally the exotic pretensions of the description are punctured by the line about the disenchantment people feel when they are made to confront the ugly realities behind the leafy screen of the trees. Social comedy thus punctures easy Romanticism. The cosmic seems likely to win at first: the tropics are paradise, the river noble, and the trees are stronger than 'man and his works'. The comic is always at hand though and introduces the note of disillusionment by wryly pointing out that at the end of the day there is always a sense of let-down. So the intensely-imagined metaphysical presentation of India that was discussed earlier [2.2.3] is questioned from within by the comic mode.

2.2.5 The Modernist Quest

Ultimately there is also I think a modernist impulse that helps shape the novel. Chapter 1 for instance begins and ends on the same note: that of the challenge posed to order and rationality by the Marabar Caves. The very first sentence announces their extraordinary nature and the conclusion circles back to a reminder of the 'fists and fingers [that] are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves'. I suspect that the caves are used here to suggest a disturbance of a sane and unquestioning acceptance of the universe. They defy all rational attempts to classify them. To this extent they may perhaps symbolise a quest for meaning that, within the context of Modernism [see Glossary to Unit 1] could

turn in upon itself. Pushed to its logical conclusion such an argument might once again be used to press charges of essentialism against this representation of India. Once again the question may be raised as to whether this search for meaning might not lead the novelist to conceal problematic social and political issues concerning India. If so, can he be proved to have the vested interest of supporting empire at heart? I'm not sure we need to have a yes-or-no answer here though, largely because I find Forster's modes of representing India always varied and sometimes mutually corrective.

2.3 KINDS OF WRITING ABOUT THE TEXT

2.3.1 Studies in Symbolism

But Forster is not the only person who represents India. The critical industry that has concerned itself with *A Passage to India* has — while addressing the text — also constructed representations of India. I'll consider the specifics in Units 4 and 5 but just now I'd like to address more general trends in critical thought and method. Textual illustration will again come from Chapter 1 so please continue to keep your texts open.

Taking its cue perhaps understandably from Forster's own perception of fiction as art which should be 'melody or a perception of the truth' one of the influential critical trends to develop has been that which sees the novel as an extended symbolic system. The main assumption it makes is that the text works chiefly on the level of symbolic statement ... more than most novels it has to be absorbed and contemplated, meditated upon like a *mandala* before its yields its secrets' (Beer, 16). Following this is the further assumption that — broadly speaking — the meaning of the text is equal to the sum of the meaning of its symbols. Wilfred Stone's *The Cave and the Mountain: A Study of E. M. Forster* (1966) is the most comprehensive book-length study of the way in which the symbols of this novel convey universal truths about human psychology and experience. Here is an extract from Stone's book, from which I will try to illustrate his method:

The caves represent the unconscious in two senses — the repressed elements in the individual life and the survivals in modern man of the pre-historic and the pre-human, those elements that Freud termed the id, so that [the echo from the caves] is something before language ... [and] before morality. It is a time and condition that wipes out distinctions -- all the distinctions on which Anglo-India built its culture and empire. That is why it is so terrifying: to lower one's guard before the primal forces of the unconscious is ... nothing less than an abdication of all culture and a return to something like savagery (Beer, 22).

This way of approaching the novel then locates its meaning in the 'fists and fingers' of the Marabar Caves to which the opening chapter so compulsively returns. I will try to examine the Caves themselves in Units 4 and 5 but just now I'd like to suggest some consequences of giving the novel a largely symbolic meaning. First as the above extract indicates, it suggests that essential human experience is somehow a common denominator that cuts across distinctions of time, place, race, class and gender. But isn't human experience shaped by these distinctions? For instance, if we were to look at the novel as Western readers, our experience as members of a colonising culture are likely to differ from that of members of a former colony. Can there be any core of human experience that is universally true and not touched by distinctions of culture, history and gender? Next by reading the novel as an extended symbol, or an extended series of symbols, realities other than those that are cultural or historical are also ignored. Take for example comic reality. To me there is something comic about the phrase 'fists and fingers'. It is as if Forster, as tired as you and I might be of the stereotypical Romantic images of sky, rivers and rainbow, decides to humanise an essentially non-human landscape in this homely way. Of course the caves go on to be terrifying rather than homely but Forster (I think) plays for precisely this contrast. Finally the symbolic method represents India as more exotic than it is, since it holds that the novel has 'to be meditated upon like a

mandala'. Such an approach may suit a ruler as the exotic is distant and therefore can be shaped according to a ruler's will or a ruler's imagination. It may also suit a tourist since the exotic always has curiosity-value. But to what extent does it help our passage through the text ?

2.3.2 Studies in Language

With analyses of language I find myself much further down the road. Take the following extract for instance and place it (as this critic goes on to do) against the first paragraph of the novel:

So far as this text is ideological, it is an ideology which manifests itself as space — the space between cultures, the space beyond the human, the space which never will be sufficiently filled by aspiration or encounter The frequent use of the word 'nothing' in *A Passage to India* therefore supports my general argument that negation has ideological significance (Beer, 46-7).

First try to list the various forms of negation that occur in the opening paragraph: 'nothing extraordinary', 'scarcely distinguishable', 'no bathing steps', 'not to be holy', 'nor was it ever democratic', 'no painting' and 'scarcely any carving'. Next contrast this with the apparently positive constructions: 'Houses do fall, people are drowned'. Does this not suggest that meaning is to be found in the negatives which move the description ahead rather than the positives which carry a sense of black farce ? *Then* try to work out a possible consequence. Can it be that this is going to be a novel where what is either unstated or just mentioned will be more important than what is ceaselessly described ? In this case for example the Marabar Caves to which reference is made only twice in Chapter 1 are easily more important than the Chandrapore which is described in detail. **Finally** think about the theoretical significances of this critical model. At the end of this essay, the critic remarks 'Forster's work presages the end of empire, not simply of the Raj in India (though it does that) but also the end of that struggle for dominion which is implicit in the struggle for language and meaning — the struggle to keep man at the centre of the universe' (Beer, 58). Here I should say that I have divided views. I agree that — as with the negatives in Chapter 1 — I feel I am reading a text written towards the end of the Raj in the sense that the language draws attention to the power of the non-human and human worlds to survive various imperialisms. But doesn't the language draw a great deal of attention to itself ? After all we do not meet a single character or event in Chapter 1. We interact only with the language. And I find that puts a burden on me because — as in this chapter — I am forced to relate immediately to the novelist and to what *he* thinks and feels as he represents India. What do *you* think about language here ?

2.3.3 Colonial-Discourse Analysis

Analyses of writing about India focus with increasing frequency on the politics of the representation of India, whether these be the politics of race, the politics of class and the politics of gender. I have clubbed these three subdivisions together not because I think they are synonymous but because — with this kind of fiction — there has been a continuing dialogue between these subdivisions. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is an exhaustive exploration of the 'discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, socially ... and imaginatively' (Said, 4). In other words Said suggests that just as imperialism means political control in the field of government and economic penetration of markets it implies a certain representation of the East in literature. This stereotypical representation portrays the East as irrational, incapable of self-government and therefore open to the organising imagination of Europe. Subsequently Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) insists that class and gender are as important as race when it comes to understanding human experience. Neither Said nor Ahmad has written on Forster at any great length here so I will try to apply their ideas to Chapter 1 to suggest how these work. As far as the question of race goes, we are told about the Indian inhabitants of Chandrapore, the British visitors

to the town and the Eurasian community. I'll come to the question of class in a little while, but just now I'd like to suggest how race influences point of view. As I indicated earlier [2.2.1] I find the greater part of Chapter 1 written from the standpoint of a detached Western observer. But look at the second paragraph: 'On this second rise is laid out the little Civil Station, and viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts'. Now, this view of Chandrapore is wholly determined by race as the Civil Station has a population that is solely British. Only British residents therefore are likely to have access to a beautiful view of Chandrapore. To the Indians the town is completely ugly. At the same time, as I suggested earlier [2.2.4] this sense that Chandrapore is beautiful is a delusion. So the perspective the British have on Indian reality is one of loveliness, yes, but also one that is false. Race thus conditions point-of-view in an intensely ambiguous way.

What about the question of class? To my mind this is an incredibly dodgy proposition. For while Forster's narrative interrogates colonialism, it does little to examine class problems. I mentioned a little while ago [2.2.2] why I thought Forster's hesitation to take a radical stand on class complicates his position on colonialism. I'd like now to reinforce that point here with the help of another textual illustration: 'Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life'. It seems to me to make a very queer statement on the position of common people. Over the centuries various empires — Mauryan or British — have treated their subjects as people of no importance. Neither the life nor the death of such people is of any consequence to their rulers. So life has steadily eroded them and indeed passed from them to the inanimate town which now has the endurance of a low but persistent life-form. Is Forster's comment here a critique of a class-system under empire which takes away the importance of common people? Or is he content to merely note the fact and pass on, without making any commitment on the question of class?

I cannot find any evidence from Chapter 1 to discuss the issue of gender in Forster's representation of India so I will pick it up as I go along. Please be as open to this question when you read the text though, as you are to the questions of race and class. Remember that Ahmad's refinement of Said's model of colonial-discourse analysis is precisely this point: that class and gender are as important as race when it comes to discussing human experience. Try also to see (as I've shown how questions of race and class complicate each other) how questions of race and gender affect each other as well.

When a text is examined in this way it is clear that the reader can interrogate the premises on which a text is constructed so that its preferences and prejudices emerged clearly. From this point one can take these questions further. For instance, is Forster's position on race typical or atypical of his age? What in turn does this tell us of his times? However such an approach must be scrupulously handled so that a reader does not allow her own preferences and prejudices to colour the text. As an Indian woman I may note (as I just did) that there is nothing to say on the question of gender in Chapter 1. I may not draw conclusions though until I explore the text further to collect evidence on this point. Nonetheless the great advantage of readings such as these is that they take the complexities of the moment of production of the text, and of the moment of reception into account.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

Broadly two sets of representations of India may be seen. The first set comprises the different models of writing Forster uses in the novel. He uses the form of the travel-guide but subverts the content. He uses the model of the history-textbook to talk about various forms of imperial rule. He romanticises the landscape to criticise but also to gloss over empire. He uses social comedy and modernism to challenge and expand these representations of India. The second set comprises models of critical approaches to the text. The symbolic approach uncovers universal psychological truths but distorts the

political and cultural realities of India. The linguistic model can be used to focus on areas of textual difficulty (studies of language) that are symptomatic of areas of political difficulty (the loss of Empire). Models of colonial discourse focus on questions of race, class and gender at the moment of production of a text and at its moment of reception.

2.5 GLOSSARY

Moment of production

The period when a text is written, and the historical and cultural trends which shape that period

Moment of reception

The period when a reader interacts with the text, and the historical and cultural trends which shape that period

Pleasance

Pleasure-ground

Premises (in this context)

Basic assumptions of a text or argument, from which further inferences are drawn

Subvert

Overthrow or destroy from within

2.6 QUESTIONS (TO BE ANSWERED WITH THE HELP OF CHAPTER 1

- Q 1. How and why does Forster subvert the content of a travel-guide ?
- Q 2. What are the characteristics of Forster's presentation of history?
- Q 3. How and why does Forster romanticise the landscape ?
- Q 4. What is the relationship between EITHER the cosmic and the comic OR between Romanticism and Modernism?
- Q 5. Give the opening paragraph of Chapter 1 EITHER a symbol-based OR a language-based reading.
- Q 6. Use the factors of race AND class to analyse the second paragraph of Chapter 1.

2.7 SUGGESTED READING

Primary material

E.M. Forster

Two Cheers for Democracy (1948) repr. ed. Oliver Stallybrass, Abinger edn. 11 London 1972.

Secondary material

Beer, John (ed.)

A Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation. London, 1985.

Ganguly, Adwaita.

India: Mystic, Complex, Real. Delhi, 1990.

UNIT 3 HISTORY AND A PASSAGE TO INDIA

STRUCTURE

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 1912-1913
 - 3.2.1 In fact
 - 3.2.2 In fiction
- 3.3 1921-1922
 - 3.3.1 In fact
 - 3.3.2 In fiction
 - 3.3.3 In letters and essays
- 3.4 1945 and after
 - 3.4.1 Outside the novel
 - 3.4.2 As prophesied by the novel
- 3.5 Philosophy and history
 - 3.5.1 Influences on theme
 - 3.5.2 Consequences for reading
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The *immediate* objective of Unit 3 is to outline the various dramatic changes that took place in history between 1912 (the year of Forster's first trip to India) and 1960 (the year of his last recorded comment of political significance on the novel). The *ultimate* objective of this unit is to suggest how these changes in history shape the theme of the novel and the way Forster thought his readers might look at it. Please read the novel alongside this unit. Sections I and II of the novel will be used to illustrate 3.2 and sections II and III to illustrate 3.3 and 3.4. Give *A Passage to India* a very quick reading at this stage. You can do a more detailed reading of the novel after Units 4 and 5 which will be close examinations of the text.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of Unit 2, I used the phrase 'the moment of production' which suggests that the writing of *A Passage to India* took place at one point in time. This is not so. The novel as we have it, was begun by Forster on his 1912-1913 visit to India. The outbreak of the First World War (1914-1918) was one of the many reasons why Forster put it aside. He came out to India for the second time (1921-1922) bringing the draft of his incomplete novel with him and published it finally in 1924. He continued to write various essays on Indian art and mythology and made a third visit to this country in 1945. Forster frequently wrote (and spoke) on Indian art and mythology, publishing in 1953 *The Hill of Devi*, a collection of letters from his first two visits. I believe that *A Passage to India* as you and I read it today is a curious palimpsest comprising various layers of fact and fiction about the rapidly changing historical face of India. Of course these layers do not simply lie one upon the other. There is a good deal of blurring, overwriting, and erasure. I shall try in this unit to separate these layers so as to suggest the nature and extent of the

way in which the novel interprets history. I shall also focus on the way in which history and philosophy combine to contribute to the main theme of the novel.

Forster's own hope on his first visit to India was that it would somehow provide him with material for another novel. After the 1910 publication of *Howards End* he felt he had exhausted the only subject that could be handled in contemporary fiction, namely the relationship between the sexes. He had in any case lost interest in this subject and cast around for a new theme, anxious that he might have run out of possible subjects for fiction. As he wrote to a friend: 'You ask me about my work. I feel you too sympathetic to keep silent. I am dried up. Not in my emotions, but in their expression. I cannot write at all I see beauty going by and have nothing to catch it in I want something beyond the field of action and behaviour: the waters of the river that rises from the middle of the earth to join the Ganges and the Jamuna where they join. India is full of such wonders' (Furbank I, 249).

I think this letter suggests some useful clues about Forster's attitude to Indian realities before his initial journey here. *First* his use of the Saraswati (the invisible 'river that rises from the middle of the earth') indicates Forster's desire to somehow capture a metaphysical rather than a historical theme for his novel. *Next* it suggests Forster's wish to extend the frontiers of the novel as an art-form beyond an examination of reality ('something beyond the field of action and behaviour'). *Then* it offers an idea as to the importance of India for Forster. India was not only thought to be 'full of such wonders' (which as 2.4.3 suggests might be another extension of orientalism) but to be a means of exploring and expressing these philosophical truths. *Finally* the letter demonstrates Forster's desperate need for something that would ease his inability to write ('I am dried up') and his belief that India is what he needs to help him deal with this problem. All four intentions are ahistorical, that is, they have nothing to do with history. Yet (as I will demonstrate over the next three subdivisions) the novel has to use history and has to be altered by historical pressures, before it can claim to set history aside. How exactly does this work?

3.2 1912-1913

3.2.1 In Fact

Simultaneously however individual protest could not be ruled out. Forster had first-hand experience of this, for a young lawyer-friend of his burst out while riding with him 'It may be fifty or five hundred years but we shall turn you out' (Furbank, 258). The Morley-Minto reforms, culminating in the Indian Councils Act of 1909 had originally been anticipated by the Congress as likely to constitute an early step on the road to self-government. In fact though the Reforms had proved disappointing. Greater representation was given to Indians in the provincial councils but Britain was very keen to avoid any suggestion of parliamentary franchise. So the model of government offered by the Act was representative rather than responsible as far as Indian members were concerned. It was intended to appease the moderates in the Congress who were in favour of gaining Swaraj or self-government by means of constitutional reform. The extremists in the freedom struggle after the Surat split in Congress ranks in 1907 had become (by 1912-1913) less important. The Moderates led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Motilal Nehru dominated the Congress at this time. From the point of view of British rule, George V's Darbar of 1911-1912 had been the most spectacular event of recent times. The transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi had been announced at the Darbar. Unlike Forster's second visit to India then, the first took place at a time of relative political calm.

How, if at all, were these cross-currents to reappear in the novel?

3.2.2 In fiction

First this period of relative tranquillity is used as a point of reference in the novel. Although I hope to show that the greater part of the novel is influenced by Forster's

second visit I believe that the first visit appears as vaguely evocative of a Golden Age before politics blighted personal relationships.

[Hamidullah] was glad that Aziz, whom he loved ... took no interest in politics which ruin the character and career, yet nothing can be achieved without them. He thought of Cambridge — sadly, as of another poem that had ended Politics had not mattered There, games, work and pleasant society had interwoven, and appeared to be sufficient substructure for a national life. Here all was wire-pulling and fear (API 120).

I find it hard to know how to read this. It seems as if in terms of place an apolitical life is being treated as a luxury which India cannot afford for her people. It also seems as if the time for being apolitical has come to an end, certainly for the Indians and possibly even for the British. Next when the novel was published it was sometimes attacked for being inaccurate in matters of detail. E A. Horne, a Civil Servant, drew attention to anachronisms, inevitable in a novel written over a period of twelve years of political and social change: 'Even about the general background, however, there is a slight air of unreality. This is partly because the picture is out of date. The period is obviously before the war' (Furbank I, 128). To my mind though, there is value in a blurred atmosphere even if details are inaccurate. Take for instance one of the minor anachronistic details that Horne mentions, Forster's depiction of a Lieutenant-Governor. By 1924, this post was no longer in existence. Forster however makes Sir Gilbert Mellanby in the novel appear as Lieutenant-Governor, although such a post had been long since defunct. By creating this minor character though Forster casts light on the notion of political change. 'Sir Gilbert, though not an enlightened man, held enlightened opinions "The [Marabar] affair [he said] had been mishandled by certain of our friends up the hill" who did not realise that "the hands of the clock move forward, not back" (API, 257). Forster is, I think, being realistic here on the theme of political change. He suggests how the apparently new kind of official — Sir Gilbert — is as inept as the old since he too has been careful to keep away from the Indian peoples and from local details. That Forster slips up over this designation does not matter. What does matter is that two time-scales are used here: the past (suggested by the anachronistic official) and the present (where it is politically correct for the British to be polite and enlightened towards the Indians). Here Forster's point, I think, is that no change can be real under the Raj. Sir Gilbert's enlightenment is a sham and that highlights the major political theme: the more things change the more they remain the same.

Finally, comes the question of individual protest. I had alluded to this in 3.2.1 but since a similar remark appears in the novel embedded in material from subsequent periods, I will discuss it in the context of later visits, to which indeed I now turn.

3.3 1921-1922

3.3.1 In Fact

In complete contrast to the political dullness of 1912-1913, Forster's second visit took place at a time of intense excitement. The enthusiasm with which they had supported the British war effort during the First World War made Indians hope for a tangible step towards self-government in recognition of their cooperation. Instead the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms which produced the Act of 1919 were draconian measures providing for arrest and trial without any legal cover. Then came the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh (1919). With the emergence of Gandhi and his coordination of the freedom struggle came the call in 1921 for Satyagraha, or non-violent non-cooperation which meant 'good ethical [and] sound practical politics' [Nehru, 73]. The period has been described as follows:

1921 was an extraordinary year for us. There was a strange mixture of nationalism and politics and religion and mysticism and fanaticism.

Behind all this was agrarian trouble and, in the big cities, a rising working-class movement. Nationalism and a vague but intense country-wide idealism sought to bring together all these various, and sometimes mutually contradictory, discontents, and succeeded to a remarkable degree. And yet this nationalism was a composite force, and behind it would be distinguished a Hindu nationalism, a Muslim nationalism partly looking beyond the frontiers of India, and what was more in consonance with the spirit of the times, an Indian nationalism. For the time being ... all pulled together. It was remarkable how Gandhiji seemed to cast a spell on all classes ... and drew them into one motley crowd struggling in one direction (Nehru, 75).

A number of pointers concerning the political landscape of 1921-1922 emerge. **First** there is the sense of a multi-faceted struggle: politics, religion, agrarian uprisings and labour revolts come together. **Next** the emergence of Indian nationalism goes together with the fraught question of the rise of religious fundamentalisms which are not necessarily marked by national interests. **Then** there is the related problem of the relationship between the national movement and extra-national movements. The Khilafat movement (a pan-Islamic movement for the restoration of power to Turkey) was one such agitation. Yet there is also a sense that the concept of Indian nationhood, rising above communal loyalties is beginning to come alive. **Clearly** this has to do with the coming of Gandhi, the first genuinely all-Indian leader of the freedom struggle. In what way do these emerging trends in Indian political thought appear in the novel?

3.3.2 In Fiction

To begin with *A Passage to India* orchestrates at a crucial moment the notion of subaltern protest. In other words, groups of hitherto marginalised people are shown to come together against the injustice sanctioned by imperial rule. An excellent example is the way in which minority groups protest against the imprisonment of Aziz on the morning of his trial.

... queer reports kept coming in. The sweepers had just struck, and half the commodes of Chandrapore remained desolate in consequence — only half, and sweepers from the District, who felt less strongly about the innocence of Dr. Aziz, would arrive in the afternoon, and break the strike, but why should the grotesque incident occur? And a number of Mohammedan ladies had sworn to take no food until the prisoner was acquitted; their death would make little difference, indeed being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting. A new spirit seemed abroad, a rearrangement, which no one in the stern little band of whites could explain. (*API*, 218)

The extract suggests various sidelights on the fact of political struggle. **First** it cuts across barriers of class and gender to include sweepers and women respectively. Hitherto both groups have been cut off from the mainstream on account of untouchability and purdah. Faced with the necessity of protest both groups change their stand (and possibly society also changes its stand regarding them). **Next** — even allowing for the point-of-view to be that of a detached British observer — the protest is shown to be partial. The strike will soon be broken as far as the sweepers' protest goes, and the impact of the womenfolk on public opinion is thought to be negligible. **Still** the dynamics of the colonised-coloniser situation are seen to have changed. Precisely because of the sporadic, disorganised nature of the protest it is found to be difficult to predict and hence difficult to control. This makes it new and disturbing.

Religious fundamentalism relates to nationalism in a more problematic way. Aziz initially has a fleeting impulse to respond to the call of Islam over that of national commitment:

'... as a calm assurance came the feeling that India was one: Muslim; always had been, an assurance that lasted until they looked out of the door' (API, 119). Yet even as he thinks in this way and longs for a pan-Islamic federation with 'the sister kingdoms of the north' (present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) Aziz realises subconsciously that this is not the answer to the problems of India. At the end, when Fielding taunts Aziz by asking him what he thinks is to be the future of India, Aziz suddenly bursts out, having 'remembered that he had, or ought to have, a mother-land "India shall be a nation ! No foreigners of any sort ! Hindu and Muslim and Sikh and all shall be one ! Hurrah ! Hurrah for India !"' (API, 315). Has Aziz's vision for India matured so that he can look beyond communal stereotypes ? Earlier in the novel for instance there is a moment when communal stereotypes are used. Aziz — on meeting a Hindu acquaintance — wishes 'Hindus did not smell of cowdung' while the latter thinks Muslims are always violent. Each ruefully recognises the stereotype forming in the other's mind. I'm not sure there is a single answer to this question but I use these references to demonstrate Forster's handling of the relationship between Indian nationalism and communalism and between communalism and non-Indian aspirations.

The single most amazing erasure in the novel is that of Gandhi. Despite all that can be said about the shifting time-scale that it employs, the fact is that the novel includes indirect references to events shortly before its publication. When Mrs. Turton says (after the episode of the caves) that all Indians should be made to crawl as a particularly humiliating punishment, it is possible to see a parallel with the infamous 'crawling order' enforced by General Dyer in Punjab after Jallianwallah Bagh (1919). Aziz's arrest, which comes with the suddenness of a thunderclap, is an event that can take place only when measures as repressive as the Rowlatt Act of the same year are in force. How is it that when Forster is able to work other contemporary events into the novel he excludes Gandhi, the most vital contemporary individual ?

3.3.3 In Letters and Essays

One possible reason for this otherwise inexplicable erasure is the fact that Forster's 1921-1922 visit was spent by him in the princely state of Dewas (now part of Madhya Pradesh) as secretary to its Maharajah. Most of the matter for Section III in the novel (where Dewas appears as Mau) and all the material for *The Hill of Devi* (although this was published in 1953. Hereafter HOD) is derived from this visit. The chief consequence of this, historically speaking, is that Forster lived and worked in a state that was even more opposed to progress and the freedom struggle than British India. For the institution of princely states itself is anachronistic as Forster explains: 'There is no perceptible change here, indeed the atmosphere is in some ways less Western than it was nine years ago There is no anti-English feeling. It is Gandhi whom they dread and hate' (HOD, 89). Hence when in *A Passage to India* Forster writes the most 'Indian' section of his novel, namely 'Temple' and places it in princely India, it is understandable he cannot write of Gandhi. In such a setting Gandhi as a leader would have no place since the Princes seriously wonder why the British government does not ask them 'for the head of Gandhi on a charger' (*Abinger Harvest*, 370. Hereafter AH).

Another possible reason for the exclusion of Gandhi from the novel is Forster's intensely ambiguous attitude to the freedom struggle. On the one hand (as suggested in 3.3.2) the novel is sensitive in the way it records the complex faces of the national movement. On the other hand, I think it carefully avoids explicit comment on the movement. Further I believe this hesitation is the result of his ambivalence towards this historical change. As Forster says:

Non-co-operation is only one aspect of the wider tendency that envelops not only India in particular but all the globe — the tendency to question and protest ... A new spirit has entered India. Would that I could conclude with a eulogy of it. But that must be left to writers who can see into the future and who know in what human happiness consists. (AH, 379)

In other words the novel as a **chronicle** of historical events cannot be more — in the way it handles contemporary nationalism. On tour during his second visit Forster had encountered Indian crowds in Nagpur 'the most fanatical and anti-British in India, all contemptuous and indifferent, and many of them wearing the white Gandhi cap' (*HOD*, 123). The novel, while it describes Indian crowds at Mau is careful to consider only the farmers who are said to be in a state of ignorance that is bliss: 'Hindus sat on either side ... Hindus only, mild-featured men, mostly villagers, for whom anything outside their villages passed in a dream. They were the toiling ryot, whom some call the real India The assembly was in a tender, happy state unknown to an English crowd, it seethed like a beneficent potion' (*API*, 281). First the extract makes a point that is class-based: knowledge would mean power and perhaps the problems that go along with power. These people are the uneducated rural masses who (since they have no knowledge) can enjoy their state of freedom from responsibility since they know no better. Next it makes a communal point: the crowd is made up of people from one community who are shown to participate in their festival so as not to concern themselves with anything outside their world. Then the extract makes a race-based point: this kind of ecstasy is somehow available to Indians (here, solely Hindu) in a way that is not available to others. Finally it suggests (despite the face-saving phrase 'whom some call') that in the world of Mau, where the novel ends, anything in the outside world such as political or economic development is unreal as a dream is unreal. In this representation of India then, the novel suggests that history (for reasons of race, class and religion) is kept out. If the novel as chronicle does not go any further then, what about the novel as prophecy?

3.4 1945 AND AFTER

3.4.1 Outside the Novel

The prophetic note in *A Passage to India* relates to events which took place after 1924 and were foreseen by the novel. To begin with there was the Second World War (1939-1945) which, while it ended in victory for Britain and her allies also foreshadowed (in the rise of the United States of America and the weakening of Empire) the hastening of independence for South Asian colonies. India gained independence in 1947 at the cost of Partition. She went on to see various wars: with China (1962) and with Pakistan (1965 and 1971). Gandhi was assassinated in 1949.

Forster lived to see and comment on most of these events bar the 1971 war. In 1945 he made his third and last visit to India. He travelled to Jaipur at the invitation of the All-India P.E.N. (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) Club to attend a conference. Forster was very conscious of the fact that India was changing, for such a conference could never have taken place say, on his second trip to India. This time he travelled by air which was only the most obvious sign that the P & O passage to India, or the Exiles's Line [see 1.1] had changed. To Forster however the continuities in the evolution of Indian society were as important as discontinuities. As he spoke about the future of literature at the conference he found himself observed by women from the purdah gallery. As he said of himself and his fellow-writers 'We might be the future ... but we were observed by the past' (Furbank II, 261).

In general I find Forster's views on the changing geopolitical landscape of India puzzling. Nonetheless I also find them useful in suggesting — retrospectively as it were — the way in which he deals with history in *A Passage to India*. Take for instance the following remark:

...throughout I use 'India' in the old, and it seems to me the true sense of the word to designate the whole sub-continent. Much as I sympathise with the present government at New Delhi, I wish it had not chosen 'India' to describe its territory. Politicians are too prone to plunder the past. (*HOD*, 10).

It seems to me that Forster's representation of India sets aside, gently but firmly, considerations of both geography and history. The notion of a distinctly 'Indian' nation is questioned here. Can there be an Indian identity distinct from a South Asian identity? If so to what territory — geographical or imaginative — can it stake a claim? More importantly, who will be the citizens of such an Indian state? For such a remark does seem to contest their right to create their destiny and people their own territory.

Forster was conscious that with the passage of time his novel would increasingly suggest an India that could not be recovered. As he pointed out in a 1957 note on the novel: 'The India described in *A Passage to India* no longer exists either politically or socially. Change had begun even at the time the book was published (1924) and during the following quarter of a century it accelerated enormously Assuredly the novel dates' (*API*, 317). If the text then represents an India that was changing even while it was being published, how can a survey of later history add to an understanding of the text?

3.4.2 As Prophesied by the Novel

This is where the idea of the novel as prophecy becomes important. The novel anticipates with a high degree of prescience certain political events and trends. I do not find the events always challenging. Aziz is made to predict the Second World War in a way that many Indians in real life might have done: 'Until England is in difficulties we keep silent, but in the next European war — aha, aha!' (*API*, 315). History is also witness to the fact that when war broke out Indian commitment to the war-effort, though whole-hearted, was disturbed by Britain's refusal to consult her before entering the war.

More significant is the way in which the conclusion of the novel handles the developing trends of nationalism and internationalism. Fielding questions the value of nationhood in his last conversation with Aziz: 'India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the Arab nineteenth century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!' (*API*, 315). There are many ways of taking this account of nationalism. First the notion itself is shown to inspire comedy. It is hard not to laugh at the image conjured up here of a nation shuffling in like a shoddy late-comer because it is true to the outmoded nineteenth century concept of a nation-state. Next there is the sense of genuine regret. India — which once headed an imperial system as massive as the Roman Empire of old — is now to lose her dignity. As a nation she will be reduced to the insignificance of fellow-nation-states such as Guatemala or Belgium. Then I sometimes wonder why Indian nationalistic aspirations are mocked in this way. I suggested earlier [2.2.2] that Forster's views on democracy are somewhat mixed. The extract from the Fielding-Aziz conversation above suggests that Forster's views on the nation-state — the political expression of democracy — are similarly mixed. Therefore I am not sure whether Forster thinks nationalism will demean India or whether India is not fit for nationalism. I think that both views, however contradictory, are present in the novel. Then there is the question of internationalism. Towards the beginning of 'Temple' there is an interesting sidelight as the author refers to the theme of Aziz's poetry:

... they [Aziz's poems] struck a new note: there cannot be a mother-land without new homes. In one poem — the only one funny old Godbole liked — he had skipped over the mother-land (whom he did not truly love) and gone straight to internationality. 'Ah, that is bhakti; ah my young friend, that is different and very good. Ah, India, who seems not to move, will go straight there while the other nations waste their time.' (*API*, 290).

How does this extract work? First it suggests that nationalism (the motherland) is important only to the extent that it makes people feel 'at home' here on earth. Hence there is a need to create new homes. Next it explores the idea that nationalism is important not in itself but because it is a preparation for internationalism, or a sense of human community. Then this community is to be held together by a sense of oneness or

devotion (the idea of *bhakti*) which is to be its chief defining feature. Finally there is the feeling that India's apparent political stagnation (as seen in her inability to move from Empire to nation) will turn out suprisingly to be her chief advantage. She will pass over or skip the stage of nationhood (at which other nations halt) and move straight ahead to claim her place at the centre of internationalism.

I enjoy the speculation in the extract though I have some reservations about the direction it takes. On the one hand, it certainly gives India an almost mystical role to play in the world history of the future. On the other hand such writing lays Forster open to the same charge of essentialism brought against Whitman [1.2.1]. Since I've already opened that space for discussion though, I shan't repeat myself. Instead I'd like to focus on one of the ideas that develops from internationalism, namely the search of humanity for accommodation in this world. I think this is important because it forms, as I hope to show, a component of the theme of this novel, which is built around both history and philosophy.

3.5 HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

3.5.1 Influences on Theme

Forster's own attitude to the position of history in *A Passage to India* was I think, to separate himself from a direct treatment of a historical subject. At the same time he claimed a direct interest in philosophy, or rather in the treatment of a philosophical subject. This subject was the position of humanity, in other words, its accommodation, within the universe. As he wrote in 1960:

I began to write the novel in 1913, but the First World War intervened and it did not get published until 1924. Needless to say, it dates. The India I described has been transformed politically and greatly changed socially. I also tried to describe human beings; these may not have altered so much. Furthermore — taking my title from a poem of Walt Whitman's — I tried to indicate the human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds.

I feel that Forster here accomplishes a shift from a historical towards a philosophical interest in his treatment of India. I do not think that this is because he is unconscious of history. Quite the reverse is true. It is precisely because he is conscious of the enormous sociopolitical changes that have taken place on the subcontinent that Forster is keen to stand apart from the position of a historian. It is his awareness of historical change that makes Forster realise that the novel might have become outdated even while he was writing it, and not his ignorance of historical process. It might also reflect his ambivalence towards the shift from empire to nation. Therefore he draws attention to what he considers the organising theme of the novel: '... the human predicament in a universe ... not ... comprehensible to our minds' (*API*, 335). I will go on [in 3.5.2] to discuss the consequences of this turning away from history to philosophy but just now I'd like to expand on the philosophical theme of this novel.

Forster himself had explained the metaphysical quest that is at the heart of *A Passage to India* very much earlier when he claimed:

...the book is not really about politics, though it is the political aspect that caught the general public and made it sell. Its about something wider than politics, about the search of the human race for a more lasting home, about the universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky It is — or rather desires to be — philosophic and poetic (*API*, 25).

In other words, Forster's interest is not primarily in a historical representation of India as an end in itself. The fact that the novel deals with a historical problem of its own time —

the gradual dissolution of empire — has ensured its hold on the popular imagination. The novelist's intention has been, self-confessedly, to write a novel with a metaphysical search as its subject. This subject, he feels, is of universal interest and application. Simultaneously though this search for the accommodation of humanity is to be conducted against an Indian background. What are the consequences of this relationship between the author, history and philosophy, likely to be ?

3.5.2 Consequences for Reading

First I think this will mean that a reading of the novel which moves on the lines of historical pressures — as these register through predicates of race, class and gender — will be reading against the grain of the text. I don't think this is a bad thing. In fact it is more likely to yield valuable insights as it might lead the reader to ask questions of the text that the text does not always ask of itself, say, with reference to characters and incidents. *Next* it opens up an alternative space within which apparently ahistorical forces such as religion can be examined. *Then* it will enable the reader to analyse the shaping influences of **BOTH** history and philosophy in areas such as structure and imagery. *Finally* it will enable the reader to see history and philosophy not as oppositional forces in the novel but as cooperating to construct various representations of India.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

A Passage to India provides a chronicle of the changing historical face of India from 1912 (Forster's first visit to India) through 1921-1922 (his second visit) to 1924 (the year the novel was published). It is also a prophecy of historical trends that are valid even today. Forster first came to India intending to use his visit to write a philosophical rather than an historical novel. Yet the novel explores, and is subject to, historical pressures. The first visit offers a period of tranquillity in the novel as a point of reference. Its details are inaccurate in fact but accurate in spirit. The 1921-1922 visit analyses the dynamics of the freedom struggle and demonstrates Forster's ambivalence to the national movement. The novel prophesies the influences of nationalism, communalism and internationalism.

The novel's theme represents a movement from history to philosophy. Forster claims to explore the philosophical search for accommodation in the universe as undertaken by humankind. Yet this universal quest is enacted with reference → among other things — to the historical realities of India.

To give the text a historicist reading is to stand aside from the stated intentions of the author. Yet such a reading enables the study of characters and incidents on the basis of race, class and gender. It also offers an opportunity to examine religion, structure and imagery from within an alternative space. Finally a historicist reading uncovers the way in which history and philosophy work together to construct representations of India.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Ambiguous	That which allows more than one meaning
Ambivalence	The co-existence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes towards the same object
Ahistorical	Not concerned with history
Anachronism	An error assigning a thing to an earlier or a later age than that to which it belongs
Apotheosis	Glorification (used sarcastically in <i>this</i> context)
Charger	In <i>this</i> context, a large flat dish
Chronicle	A bare record of events in the order of time
Comprehensible	Capable of being understood
Contemporary	Belonging to the same time

Historicist	An interpretation that takes historical realities into consideration
Metaphysical	Philosophical, that which concerns thought
Predicament	A difficult position
Palimpsest	A manuscript in which old writing has been rubbed out to make room for new
Prescience	Foreknowledge
Ryot	An Indian farmer

3.8 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. How does Forster use historical events in the novel ? What conclusions from this can be drawn concerning his views on the Indian freedom struggle ?
- Q 2. To what extent does the use of the novel as prophecy seem to you to supplement its role as chronicle?
- Q 3. How and why (do you think) does Forster try to shift the theme of the novel from history to philosophy ?

3.9 SUGGESTED READING

Primary material

- E.M. Forster *The Hill of Devi and Other Indian Writings*.
Ed. Elizabeth Heine, Abinger edn. 14,
London 1983.
- Jawaharlal Nehru *An Autobiography*. 1936, repr. Delhi, 1982.

Secondary material

- Das. G. K. *E.M. Forster's India*. London, 1977.

UNIT 4 RACE, CLASS AND GENDER IN A PASSAGE TO INDIA

STRUCTURE

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Race
 - 4.2.1 Aziz
 - 4.2.2 Godbole
 - 4.2.3 Fielding
- 4.3 Class
 - 4.3.1 The unorganised sector
 - 4.3.2 Indian professionals
- 4.4 Gender
 - 4.4.1 Mrs Moore and Adela
 - 4.4.2 Adela
 - 4.4.3 Purdah
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Glossary
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to analyse the major characters in the novel. Episodes will be examined as and when they are relevant to this purpose. The three predicates used for this analysis will be race, class and gender. **Please** make sure you have completed your reading of *A Passage to India* **before** beginning this unit which presupposes a working knowledge of the text.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of Unit 3, I suggested that I found it rewarding to analyse the novel in historicist terms. I suggested further that history is not — in this context — a study of events so much as a study of forces of socioeconomic conditioning. I hope to show in this unit how three of these forces — race, class and gender — shape characters and episodes in *A Passage to India*.

Curiously the most articulate contemporary criticism of the novel was a protest against Forster's handling of both character and incident. Again, E.A. Hornie was the first to address this subject:

... it is of Mr. Forster's Anglo-Indian men and women that I wish to speak What is one to make of the women ? I think they are scarcely worth discussing, so inhuman are they without exception. And if these people are preposterous, equally preposterous are the scenes which they enact

And why is this ? Why are these people and these incidents so wildly improbable and unreal ? The explanation is a singular but a simple one. Mr. Forster went out to India to see, or to study, and to make friends of Indians. He did not go out to India to see Anglo-Indians; and most of what he knows about them, their ways and their catchwords, and has

put into his book, he has picked up from the stale gossip of Indians. Just as the average Englishman who goes out to India picks up most of what he knows about Indians from other Englishmen. It is a curious revenge that the Indian enjoys in the pages of Mr. Forster's novel which profess to deal with Anglo-Indian life and manners; [though] some would say a just one (Furbank II, 128-9).

What are the main features of this criticism of Forster's characterisation? **First** that Forster mishandles the question of race by accepting at second-hand all the stereotypical complaints that Indians make about the British without exploring the minds of his British characters from within. Notice, incidentally that Horne is not exactly racist in a simplistic way. He is conscious that hitherto in British literature about India, Indians have been discriminated against by British writers. Hence his reference to the 'curious revenge' enjoyed by Indians in *A Passage to India* which he says discriminates against the British. **Next** there is a suggestion that Forster is particularly unsound on the gender question in that maximum unfairness is reserved for British women in his novel. **Then** there is a passing reference to the role of the spoken voice in this matter of characterisation. Catchwords, gossip and conversation have together played a part in the inaccurate delineation of character and incident. **Finally** there is the cumulative effect of unreality that is the product of all these inaccuracies. People and events are alike improbable because they have not been observed with either historical or psychological accuracy.

Forster's response to this piece of criticism in turn helps move the argument along.

You say I don't like [the British] because I don't really know them. But how can I ever like them when I happen to like the Indians and they don't If I saw more of Anglo-India at work (or shared its work, which is the only sympathetic seeing) I should of course realise its difficulties and loyalties better and write about it from within. Well and good, but you forget the price to be paid: I should begin to write about Indians from without [i.e., from the outside, or superficially] You haven't seen that this lack of balance is inherent in the Indian tangle, and that if I got the club sympathetically true, Aziz's shanty would ring false and no longer move you (Furbank II, 129-3)

Some additional points may be found here. **First** there is Forster's explicit avowal that in a time of historic unfairness — reflected in the colonial conquest — it is not possible for a novelist to aim at psychological fairness while dealing with both the coloniser and the colonised. To write a novel under such circumstances is at least a gesture of political engagement since the novelist must take sides. In this case Forster claims that he attempts to redress the balance by positive discrimination, that is, discrimination in favour of the Indians. **Next** there is an implicit suggestion that the race-divide has also resulted in an economic divide. The notion of the Club suggests not only race-based segregation but also public spending. In contrast 'Aziz's shanty' suggests private poverty. Thus along with the issues of race and gender the question of class enters as well. To see how these issues affect character and episode though it is necessary to turn to the text.

4.2 RACE

4.2.1 Aziz

Aziz — the very first character to whom the reader is introduced — is initially 'all animation' and resolutely apolitical. Indeed I find his mood and perspective at the start very close to the way I instinctively approach the novel, which is natural because at this stage no other perspective is offered: 'Delicious indeed to lie on the broad veranda with the moon rising in front and the servants preparing dinner behind, and no trouble happening'. It is through his eyes that the reader is introduced to the world of the novel and this is important for two reasons. First it ensures that the introduction effected is

between friends since not only is Aziz with his friends, but he is concerned also only with friendship. That is why he avoids speaking of the English, not because they are the colonisers but because they bring discord into the conversation while he would rather 'shut them out and be jolly'. Throughout Aziz's warmest responses are evoked on the level of personal emotion. His meeting with Mrs. Moore at the mosque is important to him because of the bond of sympathy that is instinctively established between them. Although he is happy that she feels for him in the way he has been snubbed by her compatriots, his chief delight derives simply from the fact that they feel for each other, irrespective of nationality: 'The flame that not even beauty can nourish was springing up, and though his words were querulous, his heart began to glow secretly'. Again when Aziz is asked how he has planned an outing that cuts across the race-divide he insists that the picnic is an expedition of friends and has nothing to do with the racial origins of its members. What makes Aziz happiest, as Forster points out, is the fact that he can show his country off to those such as Mrs. Moore and Adela, who wish to see it for personal rather than official reasons.

Nonetheless — whether he wishes to recognise this fact or not — Aziz is entrapped within the colonial context as much as anyone else.

As he entered [the] arid tidiness [of the Civil Lines], depression suddenly seized him. The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India. He felt caught in their meshes. When he turned into Major Callendar's compound he could with difficulty restrain himself from getting down on foot, and this not because his soul was servile but because his feelings — the sensitive edges of him — feared a gross snub (*API*, 39).

What does this authorial intervention suggest? To my mind it indicates the way in which the historical and the psychological interpenetrate each other. Aziz's sensitivity is a little hard to take. It leads him to be unnecessarily irritable with Fielding as when he interprets Fielding's dismissal of art to mean that as an Indian he (Aziz) must be ignorant of art while Fielding simply means that art perhaps is not worth much thought. Most of all, the colonial context breaks Aziz's personality down after the Marabar case. Acting on impulse as always Aziz retreats to the Princely state of Mau which [see 3.3.3.] is a backward place.

However I am puzzled by some aspects of the impact of colonialism on Aziz. There is the question of his profession. For instance, Aziz is introduced not simply as a doctor but as a very competent doctor who is better than his boss, Major Callendar. The latter knows that had Aziz operated on Mrs. Graysford instead of himself, the old lady would have lived. Aziz is interested in reading more about his area of work than he actually needs and enjoys talking to Adela about his work, even if he talks for effect. It's true that (as Callendar sourly points out) Aziz is careless. After innoculating a patient against typhoid he drinks unboiled water himself. His enthusiasm for medicine nonetheless, is real. I find it very hard to accept that such a person would retire to a backwater like Mau, become the equivalent of a witchdoctor at the court of its decrepit ruler and allow his instruments to rust and his interest in medicine to fade. Even if I accept Forster's argument — that Aziz's instinct to escape from the constraints of British rule after the Marabar crisis is sound — I find it hard to accept the application of this argument to Aziz. What is the purpose behind such a portrayal? If it is only to show the degradation of the soul of the colonised under the impact of colonisation, it may be seen as radical. On the other hand, Fielding's restatement of this idea is problematic: 'Away from us [the British] Indians go to seed at once'. If Aziz's decline is put down solely to the fact that — being in a Princely State — he is away from the civilising influence of the British, I cannot accept it.

Another problem concerning the portrayal of Aziz's change under colonialism is that of his poetry. At the start Aziz's enthusiasm for poetry is genuine and contagious. Hamidullah, Mahmoud Ali and Syed Mohammed fall under the spell of his effortless and

extended quotations from Hali Iqbal and Ghalib. This happens the more easily because these selections from the poets buttress their conviction that India has always been Muslim and hence they will have a kingly role to play in it. This conviction is shared by Aziz too: who casts himself in an imperial mould occasionally: '... he seemed to own the land as much as anyone owned it. What did it matter if a few flabby Hindus had preceded him there, and a few chilly English succeeded?' In other words Aziz relies on cultural stereotypes as much as the British do. So, when at the end he is shown to have changed the subject of his poetic interest to social questions such as nationalism [see 3.4.2] and the position of women, the reader may be surprised. Its possible to argue that — under pressure of political harassment — Aziz has developed but I'm not quite sure how credible this development is.

On balance, however, I find Forster's treatment of the way in which history (the race-question) influences psychology (Aziz's nature), challenging. Its true that critics such as Nirad Chaudhuri have found Forster's creation unacceptable because Aziz lacks dignity and credibility. Its also true that Forster is not always sensitive. His comment that suspicion is the besetting limitation of an Indian, and his dramatisation of this in the latter half of the Aziz-Fielding relationship is clumsy. At the end of the day though, this lack of sensitivity is not just a limitation of the author. Isn't it part of the colonial situation? As Forster explains about the Aziz-Fielding relationship: 'When they argued ... something racial inevitably intruded — not bitterly but inevitably, like the colour of their skins: coffee-colour versus pinko-gray. Within the colonial framework the colonised cannot have a greater dignity or credibility than that exhibited by Aziz. Fear will intrude (as the extract quoted at the start of this section shows) even if it is only the fear of a gross snub. Given the political and cultural imperatives of race-based rule, an Aziz rather than a King Porus is the more likely result.

4.2.2 Godbole

A professor at the Government College in Chandrapore is introduced apparently as a figure of fun. 'He wore a turban that looked like pale purple macaroni, coat, waistcoat, dhoti, socks with clocks. The clocks matched the turban, and his whole appearance suggested harmony — as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed'. This opening description of Godbole is important because it indicates immediately the two major elements in Forster's characterisation of him: the comic and the cosmic that earlier [2.2.4] I had associated with Forster's representation of India. On the one hand, Godbole is very much a figure of slapstick. His clothes are a laughable combination of two cultures, he is greedy, he misses the Marabar picnic because he has miscalculated the length of a prayer and he dances in foolish abandon on the occasion of Janmashtami. On the other hand, Godbole is shown to be in touch with a level of mystical experience to which no one else in the novel has access. Thus when Fielding questions him about his feelings on Aziz's arrest, Godbole expands a point he has made earlier when he sings at Fielding's tea. Both good and evil are aspects of God, and represent respectively God's presence and God's absence. Yet God's absence is not the same as God's non-existence. God exists eternally and therefore a devotee such as Godbole is entitled to invoke God's presence and ask him to come. Evil, according to Godbole, is not so much a reason for despair as a reason for demanding God's presence the more urgently since evil too is part of the complex reality of God.

When I apply Said's paradigm [see 2.4.3] to Forster's treatment of Godbole, I am surprised at the congruence. Said suggests that Europe has traditionally constructed the Orient as 'other' than itself, with the Orient as mysterious, irrational, and therefore vulnerable both politically and imaginatively to the organising, governing powers of the West. Keeping this in mind, look at this comment on Godbole by Forster. Aziz is trying (at Fielding's tea) to get Godbole to speak of the Marabar Caves and Godbole keeps fending off the discussion: 'The dialogue remained light and friendly, and Adela had no conception of its underdrift. She did not know that the comparatively simple mind of the Mohammedan was encountering Ancient Night'. What exactly is happening here?

There's a very strange cultural contrast being worked out. Forster takes the notion of 'Englishness' as normative here. Adela is English but then since being English is the norm, no mention of her nationality is made. Notice that Forster does not describe either Aziz or Godbole as an Indian. Aziz is described in terms not of race but of religion — as a Muslim — and Godbole as 'Ancient Night'. In other words, Godbole's entire complex identity as a human being is defined only by one term, his religion. This in turn, by Forster's labelling of such a mind as 'Ancient Night' becomes unknowable, irrational and (as Said's theory suggests) vulnerable because inferior to systems of coherent rational thought such as those exhibited by the West and by Islam.

Nonetheless there is a point beyond which this argument cannot be pushed. In 'Temple', although the element of slapstick persists, Godbole's character develops so as to include an element of dignity. Strangely enough, I think this is the result of an exercise that fails rather than one that succeeds, namely, Godbole's attempt to sustain a moment of spiritual vision:

Thus Godbole, though she was not important to him, remembered an old woman he had met in Chandrapore days. Chance brought her into his mind while it was in this heated state, he did not select her, she happened to occur among the throng of soliciting images, a tiny plinter, and he impelled her by his spiritual force to that place where completeness can be found. Completeness, not reconstruction. His senses grew thinner, he remembered a wasp seen he forgot somewhere, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God. And the stone where the wasp clung — could he — no, he had been wrong to attempt the stone, logic and conscious effort had seduced, he came back to the strip of red carpet and discovered that he was dancing upon it. (*API*, 284)

Again Forster's characterisation of Godbole works on two levels, the cosmic and the comic. To begin with there is the description of Godbole as the *bhakt* or devotee who uses intense devotion or bhakti as a means to reach the divine. In an attempt to play God — or to mime God's creation and peopling of the world — Godbole attempts a synthesis. At this moment of mystical vision Godbole puts together a whole collage of people and images. So far this is a somewhat far-fetched cosmic exercise. And then comedy enters. It turns out that Godbole's effort has failed precisely because it was conscious and deliberate rather than spontaneous. He has tried to include even a stone in his vision and with this intrusion of reality, the vision collapses. For once therefore Godbole is treated not as a representative Hindu who carries a mystical burden which is too heavy for him or the novel to shoulder. He is treated instead as one who inhabits the same world of reality as everyone else in this section, a world that combines social comedy and a cosmic quest. Forster's characterisation of Godbole therefore while it relies heavily on cultural stereotyping succeeds briefly at such moments when the stereotype (here, that of the Hindu mystic) is placed within the context of social comedy.

4.2.3 Fielding

Fielding is introduced as a character who is suspected of being unsound by his compatriots in India because he associates socially with Indians and educates them. The profession of teaching in the context of any government based on force is itself revolutionary to the extent that education implies the encouragement of ideas and free thought. Fielding's conduct both at the Bridge party and at his tea suggests the determination with which he tackles the race problem. Unlike Turton, Fielding remains with the Indian guests at the Bridge party and the Indians respond by covering any minor social mistakes he makes. When tea is served he purposely avoids the Western snacks laid out and burns his mouth with gram. He invites Adela and Mrs. Moore to tea with Aziz and Godbole only because he knows these Englishwomen will not discriminate against Indians. In general Fielding believes that 'the world ... is a globe of men who are

trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of goodwill plus culture and intelligence'. Fielding's beliefs here are similar to those expressed by Forster in his 1941 essay 'What I Believe':

I believe in an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos their temple ... is the holiness of the Heart's Affections, and their kingdom, though they never possess it, is the wide-open world.

These ideas — expressed by Forster and attributed in the novel to Fielding — together go to make up the doctrine of liberal humanism. Its characteristics include first a belief that people are important in terms of their individualism and in terms of the personal relationships they form with those who think like them. In other words, people are more important than organisations and systems. *Next* such communities of like-minded individuals can be found throughout human history, cutting across all boundaries of cultures and classes. *Then* there is the sense that the creation of such relationships and communities is the best safeguard against brute force. *Finally* liberal humanism is closely related to love and this approach enables its proponents to feel they have access to the world of the heart.

How does this tie in with the characterisation of Fielding in *A Passage to India*? For a start he befriends Aziz wholly setting aside the racial divide. He remains on Aziz's side even when to do so means that Fielding is cut dead by the entire British community at Chandrapore. Again when he befriends Adela he does so because she has been a loser, not considering the fact that she belongs to the race which has cut him. However ignorant Fielding may be concerning any form of religion, he is ready to recognise, although only dimly, the impulse of love in Hinduism that he sees in both Stella and Ralph.

At the same time this is very much a novel where Forster explores the limitations of the philosophy of liberal humanism and these come across in his characterisation of Fielding as well. *First* it is unrealistic and also potentially damaging for any philosophy to set aside an existing political or social context and operate in a vacuum. When Fielding attempts to make friends with Aziz he behaves as if the racial divide simply does not exist. This is surely unrealistic. On the *personal* level Fielding is disappointed that his Indian friends lack dignity either in the pre-trial panic or the post-trial euphoria. He forgets that the colonial context itself denies the colonised any semblance of human dignity and appeals to a value they have been denied. On the *political* level this continual setting aside of the race question leads Fielding to be unimaginative and unsympathetic with regard to India's nationalistic aspirations as expressed by Aziz at the end of the novel [see 3.4.2 for the implications of these views]. *Next* it suggests the way in which liberal humanism is not a forward-looking philosophy. It does not look forward, any more than Fielding does, to a multicultural, pluralistic world. It sees only 'one true human tradition' just as Fielding always believes in Western European cultural values alone. For Fielding ultimately 'the Mediterranean is the human norm' and every other culture is a departure from that norm. He is unable to translate the delight he takes in European art to his Indian friends, because there is something exclusivist in the way he appreciates its use of colour and form. India for him is formless and therefore inartistic. *Finally* liberal humanism is an ineffective instrument for social and political change because — apart from love as a human value — it does not suggest any alternative programme for social action. At the beginning Aziz speaks of the way in which Indians respond to personal kindness when Fielding visits him. At the end, when it is clear that Fielding — and the way of life he represents — have nothing else to offer the India of the future, Aziz suggests Fielding and his compatriots leave. Fielding offers friendship but this, as Gandhi once said in another context, is a postdated cheque on a failing bank. There is no space in the colonial framework for personal relationships if they pretend the race-divide does not exist.

4.3 CLASS

4.3.1 The Unorganised Sector

The unorganised sector comprises those people in the novel who are without any bargaining power because they lack the education and the money to organise themselves into a collective or a group and gain influence. In *Howards End* (1910) the novel previous to *A Passage to India*, Forster remarks, 'We are not concerned with the very poor'. *A Passage to India* is a landmark in Forster's development as a novelist since for the first time he steps out of his habitually middle-class environment and considers 'the very poor', people who are outside the widest circle of social invitations and aspirations. These are 'people who wore nothing but a joincloth, people who wore not even that, and spent their lives in knocking two sticks together before a scarlet doll — humanity grading and drifting beyond the educated vision, until no earthly invitation can embrace it'. This apparent broadening of the canvas in terms of class works, I think, in a complicated way. On the one hand, it suggests that the novel engages with subcultures in India as well, people who have been cut off from socioeconomic realities since it reads as 'though written on an elephant's back' [see 1.3.3]. The novel — seen from this point of view — seems radical. On the other hand, I wonder whether Forster's depiction of marginalised peoples (the *punkahwallah*, the servant at Fielding's tea who listens to Godbole's song, and the servant at the Janmashtami celebrations who immerses the model of the village of Gokul) does not intensify rather than reduce their marginalisation. Do they have voices of their own or are they represented by a novelist who uses them for their value as tokens but does not attribute human complexity to them?

The *punkahwallah* receives the most extended treatment. To begin with he is presented as the very type of male beauty. At the same time, since he is outside any cultural, social or economic milieu to which any reader of the novel is likely to belong. He can be looked at from the outside. Indeed he can practically be ogled at since he is presented entirely as an object. Adela sees him the moment she enters the courtroom.

Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back ... and he seemed to control the proceedings. He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god — not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impress her. This man would have been notable anywhere: among the thin-hammed, flat chested mediocrities of Chandrapore he stood out as divine, yet he was of the city, its garbage had nourished him, he would end on its rubbish-heaps.

I must confess I feel very uneasy when I try to relate to this exercise in characterisation. Said's model of colonial-discourse analysis [4.3] suggests that race is the single most important factor in interpretation while Ahmad's extension of this model places class as an equally important factor. When I read Forster's account of the *punkahwallah* keeping these paradigms in mind I come up with contradictory responses. First I realise Forster's achievement with the *punkahwallah* in that he uses this figure to challenge the positions of race and class maintained by Adela and her supporters as they enter the room. They are middle-level administrators of the ruling race, he is an outcast, a pollutant expelled from the ranks even of the ruled. His very presence is beyond the range of their suburban experience. 'Something in his aloofness impressed the girl from middle-class England and rebuked the narrowness of her sufferings Her particular brand of opinions, and the suburban Jehovah who sanctified them — by what right did they claim so much importance in the world, and assume the title of civilisation?' Then Forster uses the *punkahwallah* to show that ultimately, the watertight compartments that categorise human experience are of no consequence. The race-divide and the class-divide are both

meaningless. Moreover his attitude to the trial is one of supreme unconcern. His complete aloofness in a sense places the Marabar case in perspective since he shows (through his remoteness) that it is unimportant. The case is dismissed in this sense even before the trial has begun. However I find the representation of the *punkahwallah* unacceptable on the whole because he is treated only as an object at whom Adela and the reader can look as much as they please, safe in the knowledge that since he comes from the lowest class possible, he will never be allowed to respond. He is never presented as a human being. He is only represented as such a figure without a voice and without a thought of his own. Yet he is deified as Fate itself, but are not all gods paid tribute only when they are safely silenced?

Indeed all those at the bottom of the class-pyramid are silenced. At Fielding's tea, a servant responds enthusiastically to Godbole's song to Krishna: 'The man who was gathering water-chestnut came naked out of the tank, his lips parted with delight, disclosing his scarlet tongue'. As with the servant of the Janmashtami pageant he is mute. It is as if Forster presents these people as objects of desire without any inhibitions because — both on account of their race and their class — they are exotic and therefore fit subjects for political and imaginative rule.

4.3.2 Indian Professionals

Unlike the unorganised sector which can be discussed along caste lines — being a feature peculiar to Indian society — Forster examines both Indian and British professionals. The former include Aziz and Panna Lal (doctors) Hamidullah and Amritrao (barristers) Das (Assistant Magistrate) Mahmoud Ali (pleader) Haq (police inspector) and Syed Mohammed (engineer). By and large then, the Indians in the novel are educated people, trained for their respective professions. They are shown to be in the process of creating a social network for themselves. The narrative begins with one such meeting at Hamidullah's house. Later, when Aziz falls ill, many of these people come to visit him. Although Das officially presides over the trial of Aziz, he goes to Aziz later on a personal level to ask for a prescription and a poem. The difficulties that even professional Indians face when they try to come together are many. While the novel is sympathetic on the whole towards the way in which this class towards a sense of national identity there are some areas of disappointment. I have referred [4.2.1] to the feeling of let-down that seems to me to mark Aziz's professional decline. Godbole is shown to change in a similar way.

4.4 GENDER

4.4.1 Mrs. Moore and Adela

Mrs. Moore and Adela provide an example of how people who belong in one sense to the elite (in that they are both members of the ruling race) belong in another sense among the subalterns (in that their roles are relatively marginal on account of their gender). This puts them in an unusual position. On the one hand, they are able to frame a critique of British rule from within since their viewpoints are by definition personal rather than official. On the other hand, precisely because they are women they are not thought to have a viewpoint other than that of their official protector (Ronny). Both have views on the Raj that are unorthodox. Mrs. Moore is convinced that the determining factor in personal relationships is love and also that this Christian principle — God is love — should be the basis of Empire. This vision that she projects is an alternative to the vision that Empire is based on force which British officialdom projects. Ronny dismisses her critique by telling himself that her vision is only the delusion of a sick old woman, inclined to foolish spirituality, and therefore need not be taken too seriously. Yet Mrs. Moore's alternative vision of India and the Indians cannot be dismissed lightly. Her grasp of 'the essential life' in Aziz is intuitive and enduring. It is intuitive in that she acquires it in one brief meeting and this leads Aziz to call her an 'Oriental' or one who instinctively knows whether she likes a person or not. It is enduring in that she conveys her feeling for Aziz

and for India in her letters to her younger children — Ralph and Stella — so that it lives into the next generation.

And yet, like other marginalised characters such as the *punkahwallah*, Mrs. Moore is silenced by the text. It is true she can do 'no good at the trial' to use Ronny's words as she has no evidence to give. At the same time there are different kinds of witnesses. Mrs. Moore's presence itself is an obvious reminder that there is a way of looking at Aziz and at the Marabar which is personal and not official. To the British she becomes a tiresome ghost who never gives up haunting them with the sense that she must be taken into account. Having made her voyage to India she dies at sea and her ghost — which accompanies the ship throughout the Red Sea — refuses to enter the Mediterranean which is the first European port of call. To Indians she becomes 'Esmi Esmoore' a goddess whose name is chanted like a *mantra*. Neither as a British ghost nor as an Indian deity though can Mrs. Moore speak. She is silenced on account of her gender.

4.4.2 Adela

Adela is characterised by her cry 'I want to see the *real* India'. The Collector throws a party for this purpose but India is presented to her only superficially 'as a frieze and not as a spirit'. Aziz is a little suspicious of this attitude of Adela's as he sees it only as a re-statement of the British ambition to rule India. Her dry rationalism does not win her any support either from the British or from the Indians. She also forfeits the sympathy of both sides by being ugly, which is again proof that the text does not award her gender-justice. At the trial, the remark that hurts her the most is '...the lady is so uglier than the gentleman'. It is a response to Macbryde's racist taunt and should not be taken out of context. Like Mrs. Moore though, Adela is silenced. We are neither told nor encouraged to inquire into what actually happens in the caves. So Adela is not heard. And since she is described as ugly she is, in a sense, dismissed as not fit to be seen either.

4.4.3 Purdah

This was begun in Northern India as a response to the fact of foreign invasion. At no time was it total, in the sense that women who worked on the land for instance were not in purdah. Hence purdah was always a statement that had resonance on all three counts of race, class and gender. As far as its treatment of Indian women goes, I think the novel is realistic. It shows us the immediate consequences of purdah at the Bridge party. As regards its far-reaching consequences, both Hamidullah and Fielding in conversation with Aziz point out that unless the status of women is altered India can never change. Aziz's poems speak of the fact that even if India wins political freedom she will never win cultural freedom until her women are free and equal. Fielding points out Aziz's hypocrisy — though he gives it an anti-national twist — by saying that as long as Aziz treats his mistress essentially as a nanny, gender-justice can never be given. Until gender-justice is ensured, Indian nationhood and Indian freedom are only distant dreams.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

A historicist reading of *A Passage to India* involves an understanding of how socio-economic factors of race, class and gender shape character and episode. Aziz, Fielding and Godbole are influenced by the colonial context in their responses to each other and to common contemporary issues: nationalism, internationalism, and liberalism. Class works as a filter that is seen in operation through caste and through the presentation of Indian professionals who try hard to develop a social fabric but lack political will. The position of Indian women in purdah is sympathetically examined. Gender-justice is not demonstrated by this novel which silences both Mrs. Moore and Adela who offer alternatives to the imperial vision.

4.6 GLOSSARY

Apartheid

segregation on the basis of race

Farce

comedy of ridiculous and extravagant humour

Feminism

movement to empower women

Frieze

a decorated surface

Marginalised

reduce to insignificance

Slapstick

low comedy

Vulnerable

capable of being wounded

4.7 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Analyse Fielding's tea-party so as to bring out the way in which race shapes the behaviour of any *two* of the following (a) Aziz (b) Godbole (c) Fielding.
- Q.2. Examine Forster's treatment of the following so as to show the strengths *and* the limitations of his attitude to class: the unorganised sector *and* Indian professionals.
- Q.3. Examine Forster's portrayal of Mrs. Moore and Adela so as to show that gender justice is denied them.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

Background material

Chakravarty, Suhash.

The Raj Syndrome. Delhi, 1979.

Edwards, Michael.

The Sahibs and the Lotus: The British in India. London, 1988.

Secondary material

Cavaliero, Glen.

A Reading of EM Forster. London, 1979.

UNIT 5 REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIA

(B) RELIGIONS IN THE NOVEL

STRUCTURE

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Christianity
 - 5.2.1 Background
 - 5.2.2 Specifics
- 5.3 Islam
 - 5.3.1 Background
 - 5.3.2 Specifics
- 5.4 Hinduism
 - 5.4.1 Background
 - 5.4.2 Specifics
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Glossary
- 5.7 Questions
- 5.8 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to analyse the ways in which Forster's representations of India are shaped by his attitude to the three major religions he encountered in his life and examined in his novel. These are Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Certain central organising images that give their names to the three divisions of the novel will be examined in this context. The interpretations given to these religions in this unit apply only to Forster's work and are not to be read as commentaries on these faiths or applied outside this unit.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

So far, particularly throughout Units 3 and 4, I have suggested specific historical events and general socioeconomic forces that help shape *A Passage to India*. I now wish to offer — not an alternative to such a historicist reading -- but one that examines historicity with reference to another kind of framework. This latter framework is constituted by Forster's responses to religions during his life and also by Forster's treatment of religions in the novel. Before offering this interpretation though I'd like to make a couple of points.

First Forster always claimed that — however interested he became in a religion — he did not necessarily believe in it. For example, on his last trip to India, Forster visited various mosques kneeling in them 'like a believer' (Furbank II, 260). On at least one occasion he emerged 'looking radiant'. Subsequently, towards the end of his life, he was asked if he would describe himself as an unbeliever. Forster replied that he would rather be called 'a non-believer'. Although he 'liked things about Krishna-worship' he explained he was not more inclined to believe in Krishna than in any other god. In other words Forster seems to have wanted to extract meaningful experiences from various religions — even if these were completely unlike each other — without believing as a worshipper in any one religion.

Secondly in developing the argument in this unit, I deliberately begin with Christianity and go on to discuss Islam and Hinduism. It is true that the tripartite division of the novel suggests — through its central images — that the order ought to be Islam, Christianity

and Hinduism. Nonetheless I begin with Christianity. Forster was baptised into a family that was nominally Christian. The Empire — his chief concern in this novel — was officially Christian. By force of circumstance rather than by choice then Christianity constitutes Forster's common denominator of experience. This is not to say that he likes it. Indeed it is when Islam and Hinduism are most unlike Christianity, rather than most like it, that Forster approves of them. Nonetheless Christianity provides Forster — in matters of religion — with a yardstick that is always available.

5.2 CHRISTIANITY

5.2.1 Background

Towards the end of his life Forster had a conversation with his biographer:

He said he didn't feel he wanted to know Christ: this had been an important factor in his loss of faith. If Christ were in the next room, would he want to go and meet him? Could one like someone who never laughed? Also, he lacked intellectual power: could one put up with the lack of that? (Furbank II, 306)

The conversation is suggestive in that it indicates some of the problems Forster had with Christianity at least to the extent they were related to its founder. **First** there is the suspicion that Jesus is somehow an unsympathetic figure. The implication is that Forster would not wish to meet Jesus even if (for argument's sake) this were possible. **Next** there is the related idea that Jesus is unsympathetic in that he has been presented as one who lacks humour and presumably the human sympathy that goes with it. **Then** there is the anxiety that somehow Jesus appears to be unwelcome company because he lacks intellectual stature.

Forster and his generation had reason to be suspicious of the nexus between Empire, commerce and Christianity [see 1.3.2] that had developed throughout the high noon of imperialism in the nineteenth century. Christianity had been used to give political conquest a moral legitimacy. At the best of times Forster distrusted missionary activity. He believed that it allowed the British the freedom to spend their surplus income with a sense of moral comfort, by enabling them to fund the conversion of conquered peoples from their inherited religions to Christianity. 'Missions in England began with the Industrial Revolution. Thanks to the development of machinery a pious and leisured middle-class came into existence who, mindful of the Gospel injunction, prepared to evangelise the heathen Some societies would have endowed art and literature with the surplus [the British] middle-class spent theirs in trying to alter the opinions and habits of people whom they had not seen'. In other words, Forster distrusts both the means and the end. The means employed are middle-class donations allied to the force of Empire. The end is proselytisation.

5.2.2 Specifics

The most detailed examination of Christianity in the novel is made through the character of Mrs. Moore. Earlier [4.4.1] I suggested that Mrs. Moore's corrective to the imperial vision is expressed in her belief — which is the cornerstone of Christian doctrine — that God is love. I'd now like to extend this idea by showing that Mrs. Moore's notion of Empire goes further. She points out that the Empire as it exists is valueless in a Christian sense because it is not based on love. In other words, the Christian critique of Empire — based on its doctrine and expressed in the novel through Mrs. Moore — is radical.

At the same time Christianity is shown to be unequal to meeting the challenge posed by India to the human imagination. This is dramatised by the episode of the Caves where — confronted by the echo — a crisis breaks out. 'But suddenly, at the edge of [Mrs. Moore's] mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all

its divine words from 'Let there be light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'bourn' [APV, 161] 'Let there be light' is the first statement made by God in the Bible to signal his creation of the world. 'It is finished' is the last statement made by Jesus before he died to signal that his work on earth was over. Taken together these statements are meant, I think, to imaginatively evoke a great deal of the Christian experience. The echo however challenges all categories of meaning based on the power of reason. It shows how all such categories can be broken down and made to seem nonsensical. Among the structures which are dismissed in this way are those of 'poor little talkative Christianity'.

Christianity is seen as pathetic because it is ineffectual. When it comes to Empire Christianity can only criticise it theoretically. In practical terms, at worst, it collaborates with Empire and at best can do no more than talk against it. To the extent that Christianity bases itself on reason and divides human experience into categories of good and evil it is flawed. Its approach is based on realism and therefore it cannot handle the challenge of unreason held out by the Caves. Christianity shows it cannot cope and all its statements become uniformly meaningless or distorted.

This distortion comes out in the last section where, in the midst of all the chaos of Janmashtami a banner with the words 'God is Love' is displayed. The choice of the language (English) and of the sentiment (which is Christian) have been made deliberately by the artist who has painted the banner to indicate the universal nature of God. The mistake of writing 'si' for 'is' however has various meanings. On the level of social comedy it suggests that yet again India and Britain have been unable to understand each other. One culture cannot be translated into another on these terms. As far as religion goes it cannot be easily understood.

Incidentally a sidelight is thrown on Christianity through an analysis of two missionaries — old Mr. Graysford and young Mr. Sorley — whom the reader meets only through their opinions. Neither can be faulted readily. They lead painfully simple lives: buy the cheapest train tickets, live in the poorest part of town, avoid the social and racial snobbery of the Club and preach that heaven is open to all, without reference to barriers of race and class. Nonetheless they are shown to be ineffectual. Unlike the church to which only the English go, the little church of the missionaries is open to all, English and Indians alike. Yet the former makes a loud appeal while the bells of the latter ring only feebly. They cannot convince any Indian seriously of the strengths of Christianity. The only time they win converts temporarily is during a famine. The doctrine they preach is one they cannot apply consistently. When asked whether Christianity is sufficiently open to all life-forms including monkeys, jackals and bacteria they hesitate and finally draw back. Christianity is thus shown to be insufficiently inclusive.

To what extent though can any argument be pushed without becoming absurd? Also, to what extent is it accurate to treat Christianity as a British religion simply because it is the official religion of England? Its place of origin is very close to that of Islam and this faith will be the next subject of inquiry.

53 ISLAM

5.3.1 Background

Forster's views on Islam before *A Passage to India* are perhaps set out most clearly in an early essay.

...the Mosque sets itself against a profound tendency of human nature — the tendency to think one place holier than another It does not fulfil what [to most Westerners] is the function of a religious building: the outward expression of an inward ecstasy. It embodies no crises, leads up through no gradation of nave and choir and employs no hierarchy of priests. Equality before God — so doubtfully proclaimed by Christianity — lies at the very root of Islam; and the mosque is essentially a courtyard for the Faithful to worship in, either in solitude

or under due supervision Since the edifice under consideration is a courtyard and not a shrine, and since the god whom it indicates was never incarnate and left no cradles, coats, handkerchiefs or nails on earth to stimulate and complicate devotion, it follows that the sentiments felt for his mosque by a Muslim will differ from those which a Christian feels for his Church. The Christian has a vague idea that God is inside the church, presumably near the east end [where the altar is]. The Muslim, when his faith is pure, cherishes no such illusion, and though he behaves in the sacred enclosure as tradition and propriety enjoin, attaches no sanctity to it beyond what is conferred by the presence of the devout [AH, 306-7]

This extended quotation helps indicate a good deal about Forster's response to Islam. **First** — at least in its early stages — it was strongly colored by Forster's reaction against Christianity. Whenever Forster notices a special characteristic of Islam it is seen by him as an improvement on Christianity. Next Islam seems genuinely democratic in both theory and practice unlike Christianity. The equality of Islam is one of experience in that all parts of the mosque are uniformly sacred. It is also an equality of worship in that there is no hierarchy of priests to interfere between the worshipper and God. **Then** since Islam worships a transcendent God (who is above his creation) all worshippers are equidistant from him.

5.3.2 Specifics

The first group of people to whom the novel introduces the reader are Muslim but this is not simply a communal point. As is later explained, one of the features of contemporary India is that educated Indians are in a state of difficult social evolution. They use whatever little external assistance they get. Religion already exists as a binding factor and so Hamidullah, Aziz and Mahmoud Ali use it, as an excuse to get together: '... the educated Indians visited one another constantly, and were weaving, however painfully, a new social fabric'. Even when Islam surfaces in their conversation it acts as a window onto poetry and not only as a religion in its own right '...the themes [Aziz] preferred were the decay of Islam and the brevity of love ... the name of the poet, Hafiz, Hali, Iqbal was sufficient guarantee. India — a hundred Indias — whispered outside beneath the indifferent moon, but for the time India seemed one and their own and they regained their departed greatness by hearing its departure lamented' [API, 38]

I find it difficult to respond to the picture of Islam presented here. Certainly it contributes to the romantic beauty of the evening, and it also contributes to the inner happiness of these people who are shown to be responsive to the arts. Yet isn't there an element of ambiguity present too? For one thing, Islam while associated with beauty is associated specifically with a sense of elegy, or the sense of the passing away of an age. While Aziz and his friends respond to this, they are also shown to be oblivious to the fact that a hundred Indias other than their private nation exist. They may seem to think of the decay of Islam but in fact as is shown this is submerged in their own sense of well-being. Does this suggest that Islam is seen here less as a religion than as a phase of human development?

I think this suggestion is strengthened by the subsequent description of Aziz's favourite mosque:

The front — in full moonlight — had the appearance of marble, and the ninety-nine names of God on the frieze stood out black, as the frieze stood out white against the sky. The contrast between this dualism and the contention of shadows within pleased Aziz, and he tried to symbolise the whole into some truth of religion or love. A mosque by winning his approval let loose his imagination. The temple of another creed, Hindu, Christian or Greek, would have bored him and failed to awaken his sense

of beauty. Here was Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and his thoughts found their home [API, 41]

Islam is presented in an extremely complex way here. First its beauty is shown to rest on a very ordering of experience. Indeed it seems to depend for its beauty on an almost black-and-white set of contrasts. Next there is a sense of cultural exclusiveness built into the appeal of Islam. Aziz is moved by the mosque because it *is* a mosque, not just because it is a beautiful building or because it is a place of worship. Then there is the promise of cultural coherence that Islam holds out to all its believers. It unites them as it is more than a religious or even a national promise. Islam offers the mind of the believer a kind of home.

This idea is important. Forster was to say that the theme of the novel was '... the search of the human race for a more lasting home ...' [API, 251]. Putting these ideas together it seems that Islam offers a certain accommodation to the human spirit. Yet what exactly is the nature of the accommodation offered by Islam? Does Forster suggest it here as a permanent resting-place for the mind or a temporary transit-house? Islam, however beautiful and sensitive as it is, might not be enough. It has room for the glory of life — God as the 'unattainable Friend' — but not for its horrors. Ultimately then Islam like Christianity is inadequate because it is exclusive.

5.4 HINDUISM

5.4.1 Background

Forster did not, however, reach this conclusion immediately. Indeed his initial response to Hinduism was one of confusion and alarm. As his stay in Dewas came to an end he found it a relief to turn from his Hindu working environment to be with his Muslim friends on holiday: 'I have passed abruptly from Hinduism to Islam and the change is a relief. I have come too into a world whose troubles and problems are intelligible to me [HOD, 152]. He expanded this idea in a letter:

The Hindu character is almost incomprehensible to us ... the more I know the less I understand. With the Mohammedans it is different. When after the nightmare of Gokul Ashtami, I stood on the minaret of the Taj in Agra, and heard the evening call to prayer from the adjacent mosque, I knew at all events *where* I stood and *what* I heard; it was a land that was not merely atmosphere but had definite outlines and horizons. So with the Mohammedan friends of Masood, whom I am meeting now. They may not be as subtle or suggestive as the Hindus, but I can follow what they are saying. [Furbank II, 99]

Yet while Forster's initial response to Hinduism is one of horror at its apparent chaos, his later responses to it are more complex and sensitive. This development takes place when he sees that the reason for this seeming chaos might be perhaps the all-inclusiveness of Hinduism.

This realisation is formulated by Forster in the course of an essay on temple architecture.

...the temple [is] the World Mountain on whose exterior is displayed life in all its forms, life human and superhuman and subhuman and animal, life tragic and cheerful, cruel and kind, seemly and obscene, all crowned at the mountain's summit by the sun. And in the interior of the mountain [is] revealed a tiny cavity, a central cell, where, in the heart of the world complexity, the individual could be alone with his god. Hinduism — unlike Buddhism, Islam and Christianity — is not a congregational religion: it bypasses the community and despite its

entanglement with caste it bypasses class. Its main concern is the individual and his relation to reality. [Advani, 85]

What are the points that emerge from these comments with regard to Forster's attitude to Hinduism? First he claims it embraces all life-forms. This emphasis on inclusiveness contrasts favourably with the exclusiveness of Christianity which Forster criticises in the novel [see 5.2.2]. Next is the readiness with which Hinduism — despite its broad-based appeal — seems to allow the individual complete privacy in her personal relationship with the divine. The individual is allowed this space because there is no priesthood. Then there is the attendant relief Forster feels when he finds Hinduism the only major religion not to insist on congregational worship. To his delight only the individual worshipper seems to matter. Finally Hinduism seems not to influence society for the worse.

On the face of it, it seems strange that Forster's views on Hinduism appear to have undergone such a change. How did this occur? Possibly his experiences in Dewas as the much-celebrated Secretary to a Hindu prince — and his retelling of these experiences in *A Passage to India* and *The Hill of Devi* — have a good deal to do with this. Forster's attitude to his stay in Dewas is complicated. Hinduism seems to irritate Forster because its external manifestations frustrate his search for beauty and for meaning. Thus he seems doomed to remain an outsider. How — if at all — would he come to acquire a measure of inwardness concerning Hinduism? I will go on to outline a possible argument but need first the help of an extended reference. The passage below is taken from Forster's account of the Gokul Ashtami celebrations at Dewas in *The Hill of Devi*:

What troubles me is that every detail, almost without exception, is fatuous and in bad taste. The altar is a mess of little objects, stifled with rose leaves, the walls are hung with deplorable oleographs, the chandeliers, draperies — everything bad. Only one thing is beautiful — the expression on the faces of the people, as they bow to the shrine and he himself is, as always, successful in his odd role. I have never seen religious ecstasy before and don't take to it more than I expected I should but [the Mahahajah] manages not to be absurd. Whereas the other groups of singers stand quiet, he is dancing all this time, like David before the Ark The minutes afterwards I saw him as usual, in ordinary life....(HOD, 104)

I think both the problem concerning Forster's attitude to Hinduism and a possible resolution are set out here. The problem is marked by his sense of the apparent incoherence and clutter in the celebrations. At the same time Forster realises that this appears chaotic only to the outside observer. The participants clearly see a purpose and meaning in the chaos since their faces in turn become blissfully serene. Moreover Hinduism seems to open up the possibility of a mystical vision. This is suggested by the parallel between the Maharajah of Dewas and David. David was a king of Israel who, according to the Bible, danced before the ark which contained God's word in a state of religious ecstasy. Throughout Forster stands on the sidelines as a confused observer. He is puzzled about the form of these celebrations which seem to lack order and beauty. He is also puzzled by the content of the religious experience which seems to him to alternate strangely with ordinary life. Nonetheless he comes to realise that both form and content are satisfying to believers. What direction does this give to his analysis of Hinduism in *A Passage to India*?

5.4.2 Specifics

To begin with the chaos consequent on Janmashtami is described again in 'Temple' with a difference in mode. It is as if two modes of writing [see 2.2.4 and 2.2.5] come together: those of social comedy and of the philosophical quest.

But the clock struck midnight and ...Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI KRISHNA and saved the world. All sorrow was

annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty and fear. Some jumped in the air, others flung themselves prone and embraced the bare feet of the universal lover Not an orgy of the flesh. ...But the human spirit had tried by a desperate contortion to ravish the unknown, flinging down science and history in the struggle, yes, beauty itself. Did it succeed ?' [API, 285]

I think this evocation of Hindu festivities shows a certain development in Forster's representation of Hinduism. He tries to show that there is a meaning behind what appears to be slapstick however annoying this may seem [see 4.2.2]. Forster's formula of 'Infinite Love' may not be acceptable. But it is a gesture, however incomplete, at the philosophical meaning behind the festivities. Forster shows that while both Christianity and Islam require the exclusion of some categories, Hinduism makes no such demand. Before it science, history and beauty itself which habitually require categories and entail exclusion must fall.

This however raises some problems in my mind. As regards beauty, I think Forster's final rejection of it — at least in its more obvious manifestations — suggests a certain maturity in the way he handles Hinduism. Islam was associated in 'Mosque' with an intensely romanticised notion of beauty is a marble mosque on a moonlit night. Christianity had evoked at least one conventionally beautiful image: those of Italian churches which celebrate the beauty of both line and colour. Hence if Forster is ready to write of Hinduism without evoking conventional ideas of beauty it does suggest a certain growth in his treatment of religion. Indeed he goes so far as to say here that Hinduism is remarkable precisely because it triumphs over stereotypes of beauty. But why should it be necessary for any religion to have to triumph over science and history? I have earlier [see 4.2.1.] suggested that it is a limitation for 'Temple' to depict an Aziz who — under the pressures of life in a Hindu state — gives up his scientific vocation. Surely it is not a prerequisite for Hinduism that science has to be abandoned, any more than history. Earlier [see 3.3.3] I had suggested the historical implications of Forster's portrayal of life in a Hindu princely state. Can it be that it is not Hinduism which is unable to cope with challenges of science and history in India but Forster's novel which cannot face this adventure ?

I believe it is the novel which is insufficiently radical. Earlier in 'Temple' there is this queer little interlude: 'The fissures in the Indian soil are infinite; Hinduism, so solid from a distance, is riven into seals and clans, which radiate and join, and change their names according to the aspect from which they are approached. Study it for years with the best teachers, and when you raise your head nothing they have told you quite fits' (API, 285). Notice the connection made between Hinduism and India. They are treated as being practically identical, a conclusion that may not be equally acceptable to all. Moreover, both India and Hinduism are seen as mysterious and irrational. Hence, if Said's paradigm [see 2.3.3] is applied here what will emerge is that yet again India is being shown as needing to be ruled by the organised, rational West. To the extent that Forster's treatment of religions feeds into his representations of India then I believe it to be interesting but flawed. For ultimately it treats India's cultural pluralism as a cause for concern rather than celebration and this to my mind is the reverse of the truth.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

Forster claimed an interest in more than one religion. Yet he preferred — in matters of faith — to be called a non-believer. As regards Christianity — the religion into which he was nominally baptised — he found Jesus lacking in humour and intellectual ability. Moreover he believed Christianity had strengthened class-restrictions in England and given empire-building an unacceptable moral legitimacy. Missionary activity was also repugnant to him. The novel dramatises Forster's views on the political and moral inadequacies of Christianity particularly in 'Caves'.

Islam seemed more democratic than Christianity: in the relationship it envisaged between its followers and Allah and amongst its followers as well. 'Mosque' demonstrates the strong social, cultural and aesthetic appeal of Islam. It holds out a promise of a spiritual home to the believer. At the same time this is shown to be based on a sense of cultural exclusiveness. Hence it is shown to offer only a partial approach to the quest of humanity for lasting accommodation

Hinduism is polytheistic and so appears to be characterised by its all-inclusiveness. Non-congregational, it allows the individual space to relate to her god. Hinduism despite the caste-system does not impede social structures and does not give conversion any place. As in the Janmashtami celebrations of 'Temple', Hinduism defies form and beauty to present a festival which — although chaotic and comic — allows the believer access to mystical experience.

Ultimately however *A Passage to India* recognises multiculturalism but does so within such a strong Orientalist paradigm that its representation of India is reactionary rather than radical.

5.6 GLOSSARY

Agenda	Programme of things to be done
Congregation	An assembly of believers in the act of worship
Radical	Favouring social and political reform
Fatuous	Silly
Mysticism	Direct communion with god
Oleograph	A print of an oil-painting
Polytheistic	The doctrine of a plurality of gods
Proselytise	To convert from one religion to another
Pluralism	Culture of various beliefs and communities
Reactionary	That which tries to return to past political conditions

5.7 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. Comment on the significance of the phrase 'poor little talkative Christianity'.
- Q 2. Analyse the symbol of the mosque so as to bring out the complex picture of Islam presented in the novel.
- Q 3. Outline your response to the adequacy (or otherwise) of the representation of Hinduism in the novel.

5.8 SUGGESTED READING

Background material

- Ackerley, J. R. *Hindu Holiday: An Indian Journal*. 1932, repr. Delhi, 1979.

Secondary material

- Advani, Rukun. *E.M. Forster as Critic*. London, 1984.
- Shahane, Vasant. *Focus on E. M. Forster's "A Passage to India"*. Bombay, 1979.

UNIT 6 PASSAGES FROM INDIA

STRUCTURE

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Landscapes
 - 6.2.1 Nature
 - 6.2.2 Culture
- 6.3 Motifs
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 - 6.3.2 Sound
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- 6.5 Let Us Sum Up
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- 6.7 Questions
- 6.8 Suggested Reading

6.0 OBJECTIVES

The *primary* objective of this concluding unit is to examine the symbolic use of landscape and motif in *A Passage to India* so as to show how Forster's concern with these elements of composition ultimately leads out of the novel to touch on more general artistic and philosophical issues. The *consequences* of these passages from India — as they are seen in adaptations of the novel for stage and screen — will be considered with reference to the novel.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

During the course of a series of lectures delivered at Cambridge on the subject of the history and nature of the novel as an art-form, Forster voices some significant regrets. 'Yes — oh dear yes — the novel tells a story and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different — melody or perception of the truth' [API, 320]. So far I have looked at issues in *A Passage to India*, which, in one way or another, have had something to do with the story both in its narrative and in its dramatic modes. In this unit though I'd like to look at what might be called the atmosphere of the novel as this is evoked by Forster's choice of landscape and motif. History, character, incident, and religion — analysed so far — have moved at least ostensibly in the direction of representing India and have thus constituted passages to India. I now hope to show that landscape and motifs — that comprise the atmosphere — constitute passages from India. I think it is the tug-of-war between these two sets of journeys that shapes the conclusion of the novel. I also suspect it was this sort of an unresolved crisis that makes *A Passage to India* the last novel Forster completed and published.

6.2 LANDSCAPE

6.2.1 Nature

Nowhere does Forster's inheritance of Romanticism — the ability to reorganise external landscape in the light of inner reality or psychoscape — show itself more clearly than in his symbolic treatment of natural landscape. Earlier I'd suggested two contradictory implications of his handling landscape. On the one hand it could be said that — as in Whitman's poem [see 1.2.1] it could be regarded as essentialist in that it deliberately distracted the reader's attention away from the political and social realities of life in colonial India. In other words, Forster's Romantic treatment of landscape could be seen as an extension of the imperial imagination that seeks to extend its control over territory that is exotic, hence inferior and vulnerable to domination. On the other hand [see 2.2.3] it can also be argued that romanticising the landscape challenges the categories imposed by empire. It shows that the forces of Nature — sky, rain and sun — are equally open to all regardless of race and class distinctions and thus criticises imperialism.

An example of the use of landscape to work out a journey away from the concerns of India towards the concerns of the West is the description of the false dawn that Adela encounters on her way to the caves. Adela sees what appears to be a spectacular sunrise only to find later that it has been a mirage. When the sun actually rises it does so without splendour. A little later she sees what appears to be a snake. Aziz and the villagers promote her delusion until she looks at it more closely and finds instead it is a tree-stump. The Indian landscape is shown to hold out a promise of exoticism it fails to keep. How is this description to be read? On the one hand it can be said that Forster's confidence in the power of the Indian landscape is so great that he is ready to run the risk of presenting it to his readers without the conventional trappings of Raj fiction. He is confident that it can make an impact without the glorious sunrise or the mysterious snake always associated with stereotypical representations of India. This interpretation will demonstrate the artistic and political maturity of Forster's treatment of India which is deluding only to those who approach it with the limitations and mistakes of the Western imagination. On the other hand it might also be argued that Forster's presentation of a muddled and chaotic India is very much in keeping with the Orientalist paradigm of an irrational and therefore inferior culture. Elsewhere, Forster wrote of a similar experience that had befallen him in Dewas: 'I call the adventure "typical" because it is even more difficult here than in England to get at the rights of the matter. Everything that happens is said to be one thing and proves to be another' [HOD, 59-60]. The landscape moves the attention of the reader away from the realities of India towards the needs of those who observe her. And these observers, by definition, are western. They demand that India offer them various things: spiritual healing, order, and exoticism. Once more then the focus of Forster's use of natural landscape is not a passage *to* India. Instead the focus is on a passage *away from* India towards Western concerns.

6.2.2 Culture

Further, I think that a similar sense of journeying away from India is evoked by Forster's selection of landscapes from the world of culture as well. Consider, for instance, the surprising fact that — in a novel which describes itself as a passage *to* India — the only two journeys of any length which are depicted are return-voyages *from* India to England. Mrs. Moore's departure from India is described in this way:

She watched the indestructible life of man and his changing faces, and the houses he has built for himself and god, and they appeared to her not in terms of her own trouble but as things to see. There was, for instance, a place called Asirgarh which she passed at sunset and identified on a map No one had ever mentioned Asirgarh to her, but it had huge and noble bastions and to the right of them was a mosque. She forgot it. Ten minutes later, Asirgarh reappeared. The mosque was

to the left of the bastions now. The train in its descent through the Vindhyas had described a semicircle round Asirgarh. What could she connect it with except its own name? Nothing; she knew no one who lived there. But it had looked at her twice and seemed to say 'I do not vanish'. 'I have not seen the right places', she thought, as she saw embayed in the platforms of the Victoria terminus the end of the rails that had carried her over a continent and could never carry her back. [API, 213-4]

How does such an extract work? First the landscape this time belongs to the world of culture in the sense that its components have been constructed by human hands: the fort of Asirgarh, the railway-tracks and of course Victoria Terminus. Next this scene takes on a life of its own quite distinct (as is indicated) from the life and the preoccupations of the human observer. Then it seems to speak directly about human experience. Although the landscape itself is inanimate its message seems to embody the circularity of human experience. Finally it appears to suggest that — given the circularity of human experience — it is futile to try to understand it or try to make any coherent statement about it. To the extent [see 2.2.5] that this is a novel which is — among other things — about the modernist theme of a quest for meaning then, this is a statement that poses a problem. For if human experience and meaning are indeed circular then the quest has turned in upon itself. It is right that this should be a moment of farewell and departure. For the novel as an art form is about human experience. If this is circular then neither the quest nor the novel can go on. A journey away from such a world therefore becomes imperative. This is underlined by the fact that at this point even the world of nature is evoked to emphasise the need for departure: '... thousands of cocoanut palms appeared all round the anchorage and climbed the hills to wave her farewell' (API, 214). In this way, the novel creates the ideal of a passage from India.

6.3 MOTIFS

6.3.1 Sight

The detailed images generated by the novel repeat this movement. The most important visual motifs or images are of course the Mosque, Caves and Temple that constitute the tripartite divisioning of the novel. I think though that it is possible to discuss these on the basis of Unit 5. I'd like to move on to consider small but important images that recur.

One of the more puzzling motifs in this category is that of the wasp. Mrs. Moore's tolerant attitude to the creature which she calls 'pretty dear' is contrasted favourably with that of the missionaries [see 5.2.2]. Their attitude of rejection of non-human life-forms is in turn contrasted unfavourably with Godbole's attempt to include it in his vision [see 4.2.2]. Since the wasp has been considered so far within various religious frameworks can it also be seen to have any non-religious significance?

This is just possible if the narrator's comments on India in general are considered. For instance there is a point when he takes a break from the narrative to say 'Most of the inhabitants of India do not mind how India is governed'. At first this sounds preposterous until it emerges that this is Forster's little joke. The 'inhabitants' are the lower animals and life-forms; squirrels, birds (and presumably) wasps. To begin with this seems a silly remark. Surely animals across the globe are blissfully apathetic to politics. Yes indeed, Forster seems to say, but there is a difference. 'Nor are the lower animals of England concerned about England, but in the tropics the indifference is more prominent, the inarticulate world is closer at hand and readier to resume control as soon as men are tired' (API, 126). Again I find this complex. When I read it I find I have two choices. For one, I can accept Forster's claim that 'the book is not about politics'. In that case it would seem that the novel is about the way in which people find accommodation for themselves in an atmosphere which is non-human, hostile, and ever-ready to take control. For another, I can set aside Forster's claim and give the novel, including this extract, a

historicist reading. In that case it will seem that this fits into Said's paradigm. The Orient is once again shown to be chaotic, irrational, and in need of Western organising rule. Regardless of which line of interpretation I choose -- whether symbol-based [2.3.1] or historicist [2.3.3] one factor is common. When Forster challenges his readers to consider the non-human world -- as he does through the recurrence of the wasp-motif -- he implicitly leads them to make their passage away from India. India is shown to be only the starting-point of a metaphysical quest.

Another puzzling visual motif centres around two characters, Ralph and Stella. As Mrs. Moore's children by her second marriage they might seem to be a simple continuation of her, as it were, into time future. I don't think however that it is quite so simple. They represent, I think, not a continuation of her metaphysical journey but a branching-off from it in a definite way. Mrs. Moore's original aim 'to be one with the universe' is one she herself sees as too simplistic. When she realises the horror of the Marabar, she ceases to wish for this union with a universe that can contain so much horror. Nonetheless though she leaves India she never actually reaches England as she dies on the way. Even her ghost refuses to enter the Mediterranean [see 4.4.1]. Her children, it is true, come to India, apparently on a quest. Fielding tries to endow this with significance, by suggesting vaguely that '[they] like Hinduism, though they take no interest in its forms' [API, 313]. What exactly does this mean? Surely this motif is not one of the continuation of the past into the present and presumably into the future. I think it is a motif that doesn't so much continue the old passage to India as initiate a new journey. This is a quest that is not discussed with any degree of specificity. Nonetheless one thing I think is clear. It is a journey which uses India as a point of departure rather than as a destination. Beyond that the novel has to lapse into silence as it cannot indicate the course and end of this new passage from India.

6.3.2 Sound

Recurrent motifs of sound or auditory images share similar resonances. There is the echo or BOOUM of the Caves which Forster said he felt somehow justified in trying 'because [his] subject was India. I think it is endlessly debatable as to whether Forster's use of the echo as an auditory image moves his subject closer or further. To begin with the echo stands for that which -- like the Caves [see 5.2.2] abolishes distinctions. In this sense it might be seen to offer a critique of the rational approach -- here seen as synonymous with the West -- by setting aside the only premises on which it functions. At the same time the echo has other, more confusing variants as well. There are 'the echoing walls of civility' at the Bridge Party which refer to the feebly polite conversation between Adela and Mrs. Moore on the one side and the Indian ladies on the other. However polite it may be, there is little or no genuine communication between them. The idea that the echo symbolises the demolition of all distinctions also means that it contributes to the erasure of all meaning. Again, as with the circularity suggested by the landscape, this may be central to the notion of the modernist quest [see 2.2.5 and 6.2.2]. By the same token such a blurring of experience completely wipes out cultural and social specificities. India remains firmly in the Orientalist bind of the unknowable, inchoate East. Like the images of sight, the images of sound also use India as their point of departure rather than as their point of arrival.

6.4 CONCLUSIONS

6.4.1 The Play

Curiously though two significant alterations of *A Passage to India* have been made that -- radically alter its atmosphere in terms of both landscape and motif. In 1956, Santha Rama Rau wrote a playscript on which Forster commented thus:

... I tried to indicate the human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds. This aspect of the novel is

displayed in its final chapters. It is obviously unsuitable for the stage, and Miss Rau — most rightly in my judgment — has not emphasised it, and has brought down her final curtain on the Trial Scene [*API*, 335]

Incidentally, it is surprising that Forster should doubt the dramatic suitability of a situation in which the universe is shown to be inexplicable. Is not this the major theme of the modern Theatre of the Absurd? But this is by the way. The reason the dramatised version is interesting to readers of the novel is because it provides a ready-made alternative model. In other words, it suggests what the consequences would be if the novel were to conclude with 'Caves' instead of 'Temple'. First the novel would have been much more like a detective novel instead of a metaphysical one. The important question to ask would be 'What happens in the caves to the characters?'. It would not be important to ask — as I think it is now — 'what happens to the perceptions of the readers as a result of 'Caves'? Also by concluding with 'Caves' rather than with 'Temple' yet again an ahistorical approach is confirmed. The most obvious way of getting readers to question and criticise Empire is to show the Aziz-Fielding relationship coming under strain. 'Temple' makes this possible. The play — by ringing the curtain down on a Fielding and Aziz happy with the verdict in 'Caves' — fails to do this. It suggests all is well in the best of possible worlds. Thus the interrogation of colonialism is completely ruled out.

6.4.2 The Film

Another alternative model is provided by David Lean's 1984 film version of *A Passage to India*. The film shot the third section in Kashmir which is far more picturesque than the Mau of the novel. The question of Hinduism is completely side-stepped. In other words, many questions that the novel asks are muted in the film. First there can by definition be no three-way dialogue between Islam, Christianity and Hinduism such as the novel suggests. The film thus suggests an essential continuity between Sections I and III with no attempt to comment on the consequences of religious exclusiveness and inclusiveness. Next there can be no questioning of the notions of aesthetic beauty or form either with reference to the portrayal of a religion or a nation. The novel decentres conventional notions of beauty and form [see 5.4.2] with regard to Hinduism in particular and India in general. The film however falls into the trap of portraying picturesque beauty at the end. I think this is damaging because [see 6.2.1] one of the concerns of the novel has been to show that this beauty is not part of India.

6.4.3 The Novel

Both play and film then offer alternative passages from India. But what about the novel as it stands? So far I have discussed certain aspects of the conclusions: its attitude to India's political aspirations [3.4.2] its impact on relationships [4.2.1 and 4.2.3]. Just now though, I'd like to focus on one particular feature of the conclusion, namely, the way it contributes to the notion of a journey with India as the point of departure and not the point of arrival.

'Why can't we be friends now?' said [Fielding], holding [Aziz] affectionately. 'It's what I want. It's what you want'.

But the horses didn't want it — they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet', and the sky said, 'No, not there' [*API*, 316]

Exactly what is happening here? First there is the point that Fielding's liberal humanism [see 4.2.3] misguidedly leads him to believe that a personal relationship between Aziz and himself can subsist even in the midst of the hostile political context of imperialism. He cannot understand that in such circumstances the personal is the political. Next there

is the problem of Forster's own sexual identity. By this time Forster had not only come to terms with his homosexuality but had also written (and suppressed) *Maurice*, a novel in which he deals with homosexual relationships. Forster did not wish to publish this and other fiction he had written concerning homosexuality as he did not wish to put his personal life and relationships under strain. In an extract such as this the homosexual aspect of the Aziz-Fielding relationship comes surprisingly close to the surface. **Most significantly** there is the question of the landscape. On the one hand it might seem to be radical. Landscape compels a reader to interrogate the situation and ask why two individuals cannot be friends until the answer emerges that it is the political context that endlessly defers and delays a personal relationship. On the other hand, why should the Indian landscape always to be shown to challenge the imagination? Can it never speak for itself, and has it always to be represented by Western rationalism? Earlier the novel had informed its readers that trouble befalls those who 'challenge the spirit of the Indian earth, which tries to keep men in compartments' (*API*, 141). Now again the picture presented is that of an Indian landscape which is irrational in its hostility and yet again in need of Western organisation and control. I believe that the conclusion of *A Passage to India* is marked by various kinds of tension, both political and personal. As regards aesthetics, this is in accordance with Forster's views as outlined in *Aspects of the Novel*. Forster suggests here that a conclusion is about 'completeness not reconstruction' and should concern itself with 'an opening-out, not a rounding-off'. The conclusion of this, his last completed novel, seems pretty much written to this prescription. Personal and political conditioning therefore come together to serve Forster's artistic purpose. All three factors — personal, political, and aesthetic — promote evasiveness. What could be more suitable from his point of view than to evoke an India which defers rather than denies fulfillment; an India from which therefore one must eternally take one's passage?

6.4.4 Forster's Subsequent Career

Gandhiji once remarked of Edward Thompson (a novelist roughly contemporary with Forster) that although Thompson had written a novel entitled *Farewell to India* he would never actually bid farewell to India himself. Surprisingly this was both true and not true of Forster. Forster always claimed that nothing in the world seemed to him 'to add up' and make sense after the First World War and that this was why he never wrote another novel. Indeed one of those who tried to draw him out from this state of despair was his old friend the Maharaja of Dewas who sent word through a friend saying 'Tell him from me to follow his heart and his mind will see everything clear' [*HOD*, 114]. Forster returned to writing, but not to the writing of fiction. He said later that like a rat he 'deserted the ship of fiction' and 'swam toward biography'. During this phase he continued to write on India and published reviews, essays and his travel-journal *The Hill of Devi* itself. A phrase that he uses in a review at this stage furnishes a clue to his method: 'I came away feeling ... that Hindu art ... was an achievement which I might interpret in view of my own experiences and needs'. This comment might well be extended to cover Forster's response to India, which is certainly evocative, but always personal rather than political. He never quite says farewell to India in his career and yet in another sense contrives to travel a fair distance on his passage away from India.

6.5 LET US SUM UP

I will now attempt to draw out the commonalities in all six units for this final summary although Unit 6 will of course be treated in greater detail. Please monitor your progress through the text against this step-by-step summary.

Earlier writers of Raj fiction such as Rudyard Kipling saw imperialism — especially as symbolised by a passage from England to India — as carrying complex implications of exile, guilt and liberation. Forster's novel adapts the title of a poem by Whitman but complicates Whitman's uncritical romanticism with an element of self-critical modernism. Forster's essays on colonialism before *A Passage to India* explore the three way nexus between empire, commerce and religion.

Two sets of representations of India emerge. Within the novel the models derive from the history text-book: Romanticism, social comedy and Modernism. The models made available by the critical industry include symbol-based studies, language-based studies, and colonial-discourse analysis.

The novel is a chronicle of the changing historical face of India from 1912 (when Forster first visited this country) until 1924 (when the novel was published). It is prophetic of certain historical forces. Forster claimed that the novel seeks to be philosophical rather than historical.

Nonetheless a historicist reading of the novel suggests how race, class and gender (which are forces of socioeconomic conditioning) shape character and incident. Such an interpretation can be supplemented by an analysis of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism as they shape the three divisions respectively of the novel.

The cumulative effect of all these lines of interpretation is to suggest that Forster's representation of India is imaginatively challenging and radical in appearance but reactionary in reality.

This position is strengthened by an analysis of the atmosphere of the novel, comprising landscapes and motifs. Landscapes in nature appear at first to constitute a critique of colonialism by suggesting that natural resources are accessible to all humanity irrespective of barriers of race and class. In fact, however they also help blur this critique by romanticising and thus constituting an India that conforms to the Orientalist paradigm: exotic and therapeutic and therefore fit only to minister to western needs, including the need to colonise. Landscapes from the world of culture suggest the circularity of human experience and the impossibility of translating it across cultures. Thus they embody the metaphysical quest of modernism but in doing so take the reader away from the sociocultural realities of India.

Motifs of sight and sound together present an incoherent, irrational India which seems in desperate need of western clarity and control. The stage and screen versions of the novel, and the novel itself, possess conclusions that evoke the notion of a passage not to, but from, India. This was to be the direction taken by Forster's subsequent career too.

6.6 GLOSSARY

Carion	The dead and rotting flesh of any animal
Embayed	Enclosed or embedded
Inchoate	Unfinished
Motif (in <i>this</i> context)	A dominant figure

6.7 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. Examine *either* a landscape of nature *or* of culture to demonstrate how it works out the ideal of a passage from India
- Q 2. Outline a symbol-based study of *either* images of sight *or* images of sound.
- Q 3. Suggest the political and artistic implications of placing the conclusion of the novel within the Orientalist paradigm.

6.8 SUGGESTED READING

Secondary material

Drew, John. *India and the Romantic Imagination*, Delhi, 1987.

NOTES