

Early Indian History and Western View

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Abstract

India, the land and its culture, has quite often found place in the Western narratives of East. When Alexander of Macedon touched Jhelum during his ambitious campaign towards Indian treasures, he had brought many scribes along with him to register the events. These historians' accounts, and many more later, helped Europeans build an impression about Indian way of life. This trend of writing continued, even during the modern times. With establishment of English supremacy over Indian sub-continent, the curiosity – as reflected earlier in these descriptions – gave way to interpretations meant to understand the Indian part of the British Empire. This paper examines the western views about the past of India and their objective value for narrating Indian history.

The story of Indian Civilisation is told by many, with multiple approaches to look towards its origins and evolution through the ages. Apart from indigenous historical accounts, the narratives of visitors to India at different points of time in history are available to us. Ideally, these accounts should be objective – presenting a true picture of Indian past aloof from biases of nationality or ethnic attachments. But still, it is common to find the accounts of foreign nationals falling short on the parameters a history should be written. The purpose of their contact with India becomes the bias to see this huge country. For example – the Chinese accounts reflect the zeal of an ardent Buddhist; while the British historians of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot leave aside the imperialist approach – often leaving history unattended in the realm of some imaginative literary piece. The utopian concept of objectivity in history suffers most.

The study of India was interesting for western scholars not only for mere intellectual curiosity. A large part of efforts made in this direction was to meet the missionary objectives as well as imperialist plans. The Europe accepted the importance of Sanskrit, the age-old language of India and the grand source of Indian literature. The knowledge of Sanskrit was pursued as 'the parent of almost every dialect from the Persian-Gulf to the Chinese Seas'. The 'Brahmin Jesuit' Roberto di Nobili (1577-1658) is believed to be the first European to be proficient in Sanskrit. His work *L'Ezour Vedan*, however, is not an honest writing and was penned to compare Vedic texts with virtues of Christianity and is found filled with false Vedic references to achieve missionary objectives. German nationals Jesuit Heinrich Ruth and Jesuit Johannes Erust Hauxleden, both well versed in Sanskrit grammar, are

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other early examples. Father Paulinus came to India in 1774 and translated Sanskrit text Amarkosh and some grammatical treatises into Latin. French national, Jesuit Jean Francois Paio, introduced the six Indian schools of philosophy to the western world. An Austrian Carmelite, Fra Paolino, is also known for his notable contribution to understand Sanskrit and its literature. His works include *Systems Brahmanicum* (1792) and *Reisen ach Ostindien* (1798), which are about Indian languages and Indian religious thought.

The missionaries realised that their most potent approach for conversion could only be through the knowledge of vernacular languages. Monier Williams quotes the will of Colonel Boden, founder of the Professorship in Sanskrit at the University of Oxford, in the preface of his Sanskrit-English dictionary that 'the special object of his munificent bequest was to promote the translation of the scriptures into Sanskrit, so as to enable his countrymen to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion'. The objectives are clear and therefore presence of a religious bias in their accounts should be expected by modern historians before relying on these works to gather information about Indian past. Yet, these efforts fuelled further academic interest in India.

Apart from the missionaries, scholars like Filippo Sassetti (1544-88), Le Gentil, Jean Sylvain Bailly, Joseph de Lisle and Pierre Sonnerat associated with Indian studies from a non-utilitarian point of view. Sassetti was a Florentine merchant and was amongst those who believed in a definite relation between Sanskrit and principal languages of Europe. William Jones, later in 1766, indicated towards a common source to these languages. In phonology, Sassetti classified fifty-three elements of the Sanskrit alphabets based on tongue and mouth movements. Gentil and Bailly studied the texts related with Indian Astronomy. With the Britishers the phrase Oriental Studies became popular. John Marshall, from East India Company, translated Bhagavata Purana.

Oriental studies was a European enterprise, the scholars and readers were both European; and Indians – inert objects of knowledge. Orientalism was developed more rapidly after East India Company's 1757 victory in the province of Bengal. This required a basic knowledge of the local people in order to understand them to rule. Learning Sanskrit and Persian helped its officers to achieve this goal. Many of them later translated and published old Indian texts in English. Thus we have *The History of Hindustan* by Alexander Dow and a translation of *Dharmshastra* by Nathaniel B. Halhead. William Jones, H.T. Colebrooke, John Shore, Francis Gadwin, Wilkins and many others also translated and published Indian texts. Warren Hastings, for administrative needs, encouraged studies which involved investigation into the laws, customs and cultural history of India. To facilitate this the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded in 1784.

The intellectual focus was on India now, as it was never before, with spread of orientalist knowledge to European universities. Oxford University had a chair of Sanskrit in 1832 followed by Cambridge in 1867. Allied languages like Pali and Prakrit also received attention and scholars like Monier Williams contributed to the vast area of Indology. E.B. Cowell published a translation of Kalidasa's *Vikrmorvashiya*. He stayed for nearly a decade in India before joining Cambridge as the first professor in Sanskrit. He was equally adept in Indian philosophy, comparative philology and Persian. He also

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translated the Jatakas from Pali to English. At Cambridge, a scheme to write comprehensive history of India evolved, along with attempts to arrange ancient Indian chronology. *The Chronology of India* by Mabel Duff was an attempt to achieve this objective. She also presented the political history of India in a chronological manner. J.W. McCrindle is known for his publications in *Indian Antiquary*, including translation of the *Indica* of Arrian. His two other notable works are – 1) *The Invasion of Alexander the Great, as described by Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus, Plutarch and Justin*, published from London in 1893; and 2) *Ancient India, as described in Classical Literature* published in 1901.

Cambridge History of India was published in 1922. Its first volume deals with the history of India from the earliest times to the middle of the first century AD. The book underlines political achievements of Alexander and Ashok, while other names do not get much attention which was needed. Yet, this volume strikes at the fallacy that India had no accounts of its history before the advent of the Islam. E.J. Rapson, editor of this volume, is known for his many other works on political and numismatic history of India. Similar to him was F.W. Thomas, Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University, also contributed on the history of Western Kshatrapas and Kharvela of Hathigumpha inscription. A.A. Macdonell, R.B. Whitehead, and S.W. Edwards were some other scholars who are known for their contributions to oriental studies.

Oriental views were later challenged by emergence of nationalist historiography, which became popular in the 1920s and 1930s with the change in general perception towards history with growth of national movement. British theories for culture and civilisation of India were challenged and attempts were made to reinterpret the abundant source material from the nationalist perspective. Nationalists are also credited with looking beyond the boundaries of northern India and consequently aiding to the growth of regional histories.

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