



postScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies ISSN: 2456-7507
<postscriptum.co.in> Online – Open Access – Peer Reviewed – UGC Approved
Volume III Number ii (July 2018)

Goswamy, Soumya. "Reconstruction of a Nation: ..." pp. 170-177

Reconstruction of a Nation: British Attempts at Cross-Cutting Researches in Colonial India

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Abstract

The interdisciplinary approaches to scholarly writings have become quite common today in any discipline. However, visualization of the components not as independent areas of knowledge but as parts of a unified whole are essential while doing this. All these concerns though extremely important, may become irrelevant in comparison to a much bigger and broader consideration that underlies all scholarly endeavours. It is the question of the intention and purpose behind any research activity. Why is a project undertaken and who are the stakeholders in it? In order to find an answer we need look into the circumstances and contexts that contribute to such understandings and also make use of hindsight for tracing and evaluating such development. This paper proposes to use this advantage of hindsight to visit and understand how this very notion of progress was being perceived by the British in India and what efforts were being taken to comprehend the alien native society through their attempts at writing the history of the conquered land.

Keywords

history, reconstruction, colonialism, imperialism, society, culture, civilisation

Interdisciplinary approach in dealing with the varied aspects of human phenomena has become the striking characteristic of modern day studies. Individual fields of study with its exclusive conceptual tools are being used on the one hand for interpreting problems unique to that discipline and again, on the other hand, for collaborative efforts in decoding puzzles of overarching concepts of social significance. The horizons have broadened to include peripheral interests along with the basic course of study. But inter-disciplinarily comes with its own baggage too. There is a growing need for cooperation and a sense of understanding of the unity that becomes the underpinning of the intellectual pursuit. It is a complex process which at times may produce difficulties in overcoming the hurdles of subject specific demands. Secondly, mere co-existence of classified and analysed information or facts cannot suffice the needs of academic inquiry. Such attempts may fail to accomplish the desired result of finding a comprehensive answer to the common and basic conceptual scheme. It is important as well as necessary on the part of the experts to visualize the components not as independent areas of knowledge but as parts of a unified whole that permits the utilisation of the variables, more so when seeking explanations for a long time basis. However, all these concerns though extremely important, may become irrelevant in comparison to a much bigger and broader consideration that underlies all scholarly endeavours. It is the question of the intention and purpose behind any research activity. Why is a project undertaken and who are the stakeholders in it? If development and progress of mankind is the essential goal of intellectual vocations, then are these terms linear and one-dimensional? Or do they become multifaceted words when projected through the prism of time and space? To seek answers to these we need look into the circumstances and contexts that contribute to such understandings and also make use of hindsight for tracing and evaluating such development. In this paper I wish to use this advantage of hindsight to visit and understand how this very notion of progress was being perceived by the British in India and what efforts were being taken to comprehend the alien native society through their attempts at writing the history of the conquered land. I intend to do this by focusing on a few stalwarts of the period.

I

After being drawn into the whirlpool of Indian politics from the initial status of traders in the second half of eighteenth century, the British had been constantly grappling with the various problems of governance and revenue generation. The exigency of the situation had called for the British to make inroads into the complex Indian culture. Thorough

and intimate knowledge of the colonized became the key to the success of colonialism in India. This resulted in taking up the massive projects on their part to familiarize themselves with Indian history, culture and society. Cross-cutting multi-disciplinary researches were embarked upon and massive schemes were patronized by Britain to garner knowledge about India.

One important aspect of this endeavour was that the history of the Indian sub-continent needed not only to be understood but also reconstructed. It was observed that medieval Indian history had more or less been recorded by the Indo-Muslim historians. However, Indians or rather the Hindus, according to the British, had hardly any useful knowledge or historical records of their ancient past. Therefore the onus of reconstruction of the ancient period fell on the Englishman. One of the first attempts, besides the initial missionary engagements, was that of the Indologist or Orientalist, who relied mostly on literature and archaeological evidences. Coming from the intellectual-cultural milieu of the eighteenth century European Enlightenment and Romanticism, the Orientalists endorsed the view of the unity of all human history. Intrinsic to this was the scientific spirit of historical reconstruction and the urge to unravel the mysteries, not only of the remote civilizations but also far-off eras.

The greatest of the Orientalists was Sir William Jones. Jones came to India as a judge of the Supreme Court at Calcutta and was already well trained in languages like Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic and Persian. Upon reaching India he became extraordinarily interested in the Sanskrit language. He translated Kalidas's *Shakuntala*, Jaydeva's *Gita Govinda* and the *Manusmriti*. Jones also invented the system of transliteration and was the first person to put forward a plan for classification of Indian plants and animals, and was instrumental in compilation of books on Botany, Zoology, Astronomy and Philosophy. Another pioneering work of his was a treatise he authored on the theory of Indian classical music. '*On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos*' (Tagore 125) which was written in 1784. With the support of Warren Hastings he again founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. This was a remarkable development as the Society became the fountainhead of Indological studies. Jones delivered eleven annual discourses before the Society of which eight were on history. The zeal and enthusiasm of recovering the past led Jones in 1786 to put forward his theory of the common origin of Indo-European languages. He believed that India enjoyed its golden era in a remote period of history and this he corroborated by declaring that the closeness that existed between words of Sanskrit, old Persian and most modern European languages indicated a common origin of these in a mother language. He further advanced to propose

that the people speaking this common Indo-European group of languages must have belonged to a common nucleus race and that is known to us as the 'Aryans' (Sreedharan 391).

It was this assumption of Jones that coloured all intellectual endeavours of the Oriental scholars. Thus Indological Studies, with its twofold agenda of the critical examination of ancient Indian texts and documents and archaeological discovery and analysis of old inscriptions, coins and monuments, began in full vigour. Henry T. Colebrook, a professor of Sanskrit at the Fort William College, concentrated his research on Vedic India and came up with his famous *Essay on the Vedas or the Sacred Writings of the Hindus* in 1805. Max Muller, a German Orientalist and language scholar in Oxford learnt the Sanskrit language and edited the whole text of Rig Veda, (1845-79), wrote the *History of Sanskrit Literature* (1859), and his interest in mythology led him to study comparative religion and publish *The Sacred Book of the East*.

However, such erudite ventures alone could not satiate the thirst for knowing the unknown. James Prinsep was able to decipher the meanings of the old Brahmi alphabets of the Asokan inscriptions in 1834 after a period of seven years of intense labour. The floodgates to Mauryan and Buddhist studies opened up for historical investigation. Alexander Cunningham, the founder and creator of Indian Archaeological Survey, was also an avid writer. Some of his works include *Inscriptions of Asoka*, *Coins of India*, *Book of Indian Eras* etc. He started excavations at Sarnath and Sanchi and took up similar tasks in many other areas including those at Taxila. Such was Cunningham's inspiration that archaeological endeavours in India would eventually unearth the remains of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa and jolt the world out of its incorrect belief that Indian history began with the Aryans.

The Orientalist's journey into India's ancient past undoubtedly opened the avenues of historical research based on modern methods of reconstruction followed in the west. These scholarly enterprises brought India to the limelight in the world by showcasing its civilization of three thousand years. But in spite of these developments, Orientalists views were not only fanciful at times but also tainted by the presupposition of the supremacy of the White Aryan race. The camouflaged vested interests of the colonial race could seek validation in claims that all things of merit had to have an origin in the west.

II

The British Imperialist historiography was essentially based on this very presumption and started with the coming of John Shore and his friend Charles Grant, who in his *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain*,

recommended the application of Christianity and western education to redeem the static and semi-barbaric society of India. They found a supporter in James Mill, Bentham's disciple and a Utilitarian, who believed that Indian society, was no longer contributing to the general human welfare and hence needed to be transformed by western ideas and knowledge that could be maintained through proper laws administered by a despotic government. Therefore James Mill's *The History of British India* (published in 1818) became a representation of such doctrines. Disregarding the Orientalists and using a prejudiced methodology of a biased selection of evidences, Mill condemned both Hindu and Muslim civilizations in India and argued that British rule was a better option. The book had a massive influence on British policy towards India as it went to press in 1818, 1820, 1826, 1840 and was also established as a textbook at Haileybury College from 1805-1855 where the Company's civil servants were trained. Mill's tradition was further strengthened by another development in India, that of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It was considered a proof of the validity of his arguments. However, a few exceptions could be seen in their own limited ways in Mountstuart Elphinstone's *History of Hindu and Mohammedan India*, James Grant Duff's *A history of the Marathas*, James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*.

The underpinnings of late nineteenth century imperialism needs to be viewed in the light of some arrogant, false and self-satisfying concepts which were prevailing in the west at that time. Racial superiority of the White, fed by evolutionary theories of 'survival of the fittest', the Aryan master race and Social Darwinism, legitimized them to reign over the inferior. This logic was given a humanitarian camouflage by what Rudyard Kipling calls 'the White Man's Burden' (Sreedharan 409-410). It emphasized the duty of bringing good governance, education, material well-being and moral upliftment to the colonial people under the White Man's care; because it was believed that the non-Whites were completely unprepared to make choices for themselves.

Most of the historical writings on India during this period came from the British Imperialist Administrator-historians who, equipped with such doctrines, defended and justified the British imperialism through various arguments. James Fitzjames Stephens's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1873), Henry Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861), J. Tallboys Wheeler's *History of India from Earliest Time* and Alfred Lyall's *Asiatic Studies* and *The Rise and Expansion of British Dominion in India* (1894) are examples of such endeavours. India had passed under the British crown after the Mutiny and more direct and permanent control was needed.

William Wilson Hunter was a leading British historian of India whose earliest work *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868) tried to sketch the historical growth of Bengal and the condition of its society by using the common Aryan race theory. He held the institution of caste in India to be the reason for its lack of development and its inevitable submission to Muslim and European rule. According to him the creation of a united Indian nation could only be brought about by the assistance of the British. *The History of British India*, his most important book, saw the British relationship with India to be the result of constant adaptations to historical forces Britain itself had set in motion and with the help of a western educated class and a strict fatherly attitude Indian society could be modernized to world standards.

Vincent Arthur Smith was in Indian Civil Service and after retirement produced the *Early History of India* in 1904 and the *Oxford History of India* in 1919, along with some other works. These were essentially political histories, and although he aimed at having a judicial and impartial spirit, he considered the inherent weakness of the Asiatic tribes to be the reason for Alexander's progress. He, paradoxically, criticized the *Arthashastra* for its autocratic character and maintained that despotic British rule was a necessity, which was proved by the Indian desire for political unity as expressed in India's acceptance of British rule. W. H. Moreland primarily focused on the economic aspect of history in his books *Agriculture of the United Provinces* (1904) and the *Revenue Administration of the United Provinces* (1911) and envisaged the role of the British as impersonal agents of economic change in India.

III

The western assumption of the Indian past, its society and culture gave rise to certain stereotypes that influenced history writing on India. One of these was the concept of a static and unchanging society right from the time of the Aryans. This lack of change was the cause behind the lack of development. James Mill's division of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods tried to demarcate the last period as a category posited against a combined Hindu-Muslim entity. Adding on to this was the idea of Oriental despotism which was considered to be the result of the indifference of Indians towards politics. But these perceptions changed with time and gave rise to a new attitude by which the British became determined to do Indians good in spite of themselves. They believed that Indians had become incapable to judge what is good for them due to the rotten condition they had been forced into by the previous regimes.

However, it can be noted that these changes were hardly any changes in the real sense of the word. They were only various expressions of the basic idea for the justification and continuation of British rule in India. The British administrative historians accepted the common Aryan racial theory and tried to find answers for the differences that had developed between the European and their Indian counter-parts, in the caste system prevalent in Indian society. The evangelical Christian attributed the degradation of the native society to the Hindu religion. In spite of their diverse approaches; the bottom-line for all such writing was the power of the political element. Indian history was always presented from the British point of view and incidents and images of the indigenous society were only used to portray primitiveness, difference and decadence. Thus, in spite of the various approaches, reconstruction of the Indian past had to be on the terms and conditions prescribed by colonialism and it became the reality as well as the responsibility of the British historians of the time.

However, these enterprises were bound to create a rebounding effect on the indigenous population. The very logic on which such colonial projects had been established, in turn encouraged the colonised to re-examine their own identity and restructure their past in order to understand their dissimilarity from their master. It was a difficult task on the part of the latter as they had been nurtured under the very complex circumstances of imperialism. Indian history written by the Indians had to steer its way through pitfalls, confrontations and re-examinations. This paradox probably initiates a totally different story of the journey of Indians from diffidence through ambivalence to self-reliance. And this journey of reconstruction and re-evaluation of the past continues even today in independent India. It undoubtedly should. However, if the job of the historian is to engage himself in understanding the evolution of human society from a historical perspective, where society includes every aspect of peoples life, then projections of human life where vested interests become a part of the agenda and seek validation from theories of social science, tend to create distortions. (Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice*) With the Englishman no longer around to be held responsible, biased histories of today would only help to prove that we have not liberated ourselves from the colonial legacy.

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