

EXPLORING ORIENTALISM IN EARLY COLONIAL

INDIA (C.1784-C.1883)

Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930) or 'Bloody Balfour' as he was popularly known, gave a lecture in the House of Commons on 13th June 1910, on the controversial issue of the British presence in Egypt. He belonged to the Conservative group in the Parliament. He said,

Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self-government ... having merits of their own... You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. All their great centuriesand they have been very great... have been passed under despotism, under absolute government. (Said:2003, 32-35)

This passage indeed indicates the irrationality that was active behind the division between the 'masculine West' and 'feminine East'. There were many more instances of depicting British officials over a long period, especially after the 1830s to propound this type of opinion. It is quite easy to assume that when Edward Said was writing the book *Orientalism* in 1978, he picked up these instances to establish another irrational conviction of domination of the West over the East invariably throughout the colonial period. Interestingly after some years of Balfour's lecture Rajshekhar Basu, a renowned Bengali writer wrote a story *Ulto-Puran*, where he argues,

Of late, we hear that self-governance is the birthright of the Britons. But my dear Britons, what kind evidence is provided by your history? You had never known what independence was. You spent your days of subordination first under the Romans, and

then under other vandal tribes like the Anglians, the Saxons, the Danes and the Normans. Those who once came to your country as conquerors had been conquered later by other races. It is impossible today to distinguish between the conquerors and the conquered... you have not been able to preserve your distinct identities. (Basu:1927, 100-101)

There is nothing inherently true or false in the above-mentioned representations. Such claims can only be contextual, contingent, and functional. British attitudes towards India encompassed a variety of layers. Colonial state-building and the formation of knowledge are the processes that went on side by side from the advent of the Britishers in India. The earlier colonial administrators of the East India Company were deeply indulged in knowing the country that they were governing. In doing so, they have altered the lenses through which the West sees the East and the East comprehends the West. But historical realities and historical perceptions can be quite different. Orientalism as a historical perception has been geared up during the post-colonial period of history-writing. Orientalism as epistemology is needed to be differentiated from Orientalism as theory, as propounded by Edward, Said from 1978 onwards. The relationship between colonialism and the rise of Orientalism is multi-layered. The works of the early Orientalists in rejuvenating the country's past created a layer in the society that can alter the linear analysis of the East-West binary. Colonial state-building and the formation of knowledge are the processes which went on side by side from the advent of the Britishers in India. The earlier colonial administrators of the East India Company were deeply indulged in knowing the country that they were governing. In doing so, they have altered the lenses through which the West sees the East and the East comprehends the West. By the end of the eighteenth century there was a growing curiosity among the Englishmen in England and in India about the Company's Indian territories. The heritage of India, its flora and fauna, customs, everything became the nodal point of interest

among the early administrators. The establishment of the Asiatic Society in 1784 ushered a new era in this direction. Through this institution the interaction between the colonizers and the colonized was carried on as a multi-faceted process through which both molded each other. Bengal was the first Indian territory that came under the direct rule of the East India Company. The legacy of the governmentality which prevailed during the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Bengal was a mixture of India-wide sovereigns like the Mughals and local principalities. The acquisition of power by the East India Company through the *diwani* rights had brought long-lasting changes in Bengal as well as in India. My argument is that in the light of the post-colonial studies, the coming of the East India Company can also be interpreted as the exposure of India to the world through a complicated process of acculturation. Connection with the outer world was there since the flourishing time of the Indo-Roman trade in ancient India. But this period of European connection had fostered a unique image of India in the eyes of the whole world that altered the way by which Indians investigated into their own self. In the post-colonial era, the term 'Orientalism' as epistemology has been merged with the term 'Orientalism' as a discursive process by which the West dominates the East.

In 1832, James Tod, a Scottish romantic Orientalist and James Mill, a renowned liberal Utilitarian, gave testimony to the Parliamentary committee assessing the performance of the East India Company for the revision of the Company charter. Their testimony marked the sharp contrast between the views on the nature of the Company rule, as well as about the nature of inquiry and knowledge of India. The Orientalist perspective recognized the uniqueness of the Indian civilization and regarded the Indians as having potential for self-rule. On the contrary, the Utilitarian perspective viewed the Indians as

barbarians, incapable of self-rule. These contestations continued to animate British thought and policies from 1858 to 1947. Evangelicals and Utilitarians, in the guise of a just rule laid the ground for the justification for Britain's permanent control in India. When Tod was writing his *Annals and Antiquities* during the mid-1820s, Mill's History was widely circulated. In David Arnold's line it can be said that the detailed work on the deeds and legends of the Rajput princes, in Tod's Annals had given Indians their first 'national history' that many of his contemporary fellows like Mill and early Orientalists considered to be lacking. Tod's work is one of the greatest examples of the Orientalist scholarship. Analyzing the Orientalist scholarship with the power-knowledge dictum following Edward Said is irrelevant in this context. From 1757 onwards, the merchants and soldiers of the Company had taken the responsibility to act as the sovereign which required a proper understanding of the society they were about to rule. The military background of the early Orientalist scholars was never a mere co-incident because that helped them to gather first-hand information which helped them to comprehend the indigenous society in a clear way. This new responsibility along with the urge for knowing the country was crucial behind the working of the early Orientalists. This period from 1784 to the mid-1800s was marked by a pluralist, progressive and universalist view of history-writing which was much influenced by J. G. Herder's cosmopolitanism. When Jones started to deliver his famous discourses, this early cosmopolitanism got its strong foothold in the British empire and the colonial queries about the subcontinent got a new shape. This was possible because of the varied multi-cultural dimension of Indian society. Under this rubric the Asiatic Society of Bengal initiated the search for a true history of ancient India. The identification of *Sandracottus* with Chandragupta by William Jones in his 10th Anniversary Discourse in 1795 in the fourth

volume of the *Asiatick Researches* or various articles by Colonel Francis Wilford on different subjects connecting chronology and history of ancient India, were the benchmark of that urge. Apart from the Puranic traditions, legends, there were only two trustworthy provincial chronicles, *Rajatarangini* of Kashmir and the *Mahavamsa* of Ceylon. As Thomas Trautmann argued for a conjectural colonial knowledge regarding the development of historical philology, the same process can be applied in the context of the development of historical writings during this early period of colonial rule. Studying history and writing history are totally two different things. Because, as Keith Jenkins has aptly argued, the gap between the incidents of the past and historiography of the present is ontological. The epistemological presuppositions should be guided by the goal of gaining empirical knowledge. In addition, it can also be said that the schemata of a historian always should be neutral in nature. Apart from this, the notion of the supremacy of the Victorian Age that was propounded by the British officials from the middle of the nineteenth century was against the dominant logic of the era- the primacy of temporality. My main argument in the context of this whole analysis is that the passion of the colonial masters for a 'civilizing mission' from the latter half of the nineteenth century was the result of the efforts of the orientalist scholars throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The nature of inquisitiveness changed with the nature of the rule. But there was a simultaneous process of invoking the past history of India. Max Muller, the famous German Indologist traveled to London in 1846 to extend his research on the translation of the *Rig Veda*. But the environment in which he was studying was different from that of William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke. Henry Maine, a revered British Historian, delivered a lecture before the Senate of the University of Calcutta in 1864, on the reservations on the linguistic affinities

of the Hindus. He also argued that though it is infallible as a theory, it would not help the Hindus. This designation makes sense at all, or even becomes politically useful over time and across locations, is due, I argue, to its uneven and shifting status within the Orientalist discourse and the way it adapts and even transforms itself vis-a-vis colonial governmentality. This is a two-way traffic- decision-making in colonial governmentality, particularly due to its bureaucratization, is premised on, and in turn feeds into, this knowledge. But, at the same time, the same processes continuously transform this knowledge within the realm of political expediency and effectivity. Many scholars have argued that in the following decade after the Great Mutiny of 1857, racial behavior toward the 'natives' had increased, but in my opinion, there was obviously efforts to categorize the population, not to segregate them. My thesis ends in the decade of the 1880s when a series of publications, aiming at the categorization of the Indians, were taking place. For example, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (1883) by James wise, *The Tribes and the Castes of Bengal* (1891) by H.H. Risley, *The Indian Musulmans* (1871) by W.W. Hunter. Thus, my efforts sincerely aim at describing the nook and crevices of Orientalism as an epistemology and how it differed from Saidian indictment of it, and how the emergent colonial administrative tone of racism was related to it.

In the first chapter of the thesis, my primary concern will be to differentiate both meanings of Orientalism as an epistemology and as a discourse, from each other through a critical examination of the patronization of indigenous cultures and customs by Warren Hastings, the works and contributions of Sir William Jones and the Asiatic Society, contextualizing them within the vast politico-philosophical framework of contemporary colonial India. The fundamental problem of Hastings's reign was how to legitimize the

Company's territorial acquisitions within the enduringly mercantile idiom of sovereignty. Hastings recognized the positive associations between the commercial sovereignty and the flourishing apparatus of gaining knowledge about the indigenous customs, lifestyles etc, could be the only way to legitimate the acquisition and patronizing these kinds of efforts became central to his administration and legacy. In a letter to Lord Mansfield, dated 20th January, 1776, Hastings sought approbation of his endeavors to render *Gentoo Laws* familiar to the inhabitants of this country and in Britain as well. He encouraged the translations of the Laws by the competent personalities like Nathaniel Halhed. Hastings arranged a London publication of Halhed's *Gentoo Laws*. Its preface provided the first English account of Sanskrit. His theories concerning the familiarity of Sanskrit with the classical European languages were further enhanced by William Jones in his 'Third Anniversary Discourse' in 1786. The textual and qualitative dimensions of Indian research simultaneously underpin the notions of legitimacy and continuity in the subcontinent and in the metropolis. Clive Dewey in his book *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* has argued that the behavioral pattern of the human being is more directed by the vested ideas rather than vested interests. The *zeitgeist*, as Matthew Arnold coined the term in 1840 to describe the 'spirit of the age' can also be effective in the understanding of the works of Warren Hastings and his fellow Orientalists in the late eighteenth-century Bengal. Hastings like his many contemporaries had the ability to perceive the complex things like, societies, economies, and polities, as they really were. The nature of the British Empire during the late eighteenth century was very much complex as comprehended from the distinction between the terms like colonialism and imperialism. Just as Hastings and other contemporaries, the life and works of William Jones, an eminent Orientalist, was far

from being entangled within a linear explanation as made by Edward Said. In an era, imbued with the Enlightenment philosophical zeal, these discourses written by Jones marked nothing but a continuation of the efforts to connect the universal with the particular.

In the second chapter I have dealt with the contributions of Charles Wilkins and H.H. Wilson in translating India's scriptural religious and judicial traditions. To the early British administrators, ancient Indian scriptures were a source of wonder. The vast body of knowledge, it offered to them, was incomparable. Though it is easy to differentiate between law and religion in the western countries, in Indian society from the age of *dharmaśāstras*, both are non-differentiable social entities. According to Schopenhauer knowledge involves a relationship between the subject and individual knower. This relationship entails a deeper bonding between the two. Opposing to Kantian notion of a distinction between representations and their objects, Schopenhauer talked about simply representations and 'thing-in-itself' and no other objects. This 'thing-in-itself' eventually came to be identified with 'will'. Contextualizing this philosophical bent in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth-century colonial India, it can be argued that the religious and judicial scriptures became the main focus of attraction which according to the Orientalists represented the exact 'thing-in-itself'. Long before the formulation of Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia', early Orientalist scholars in India had found newer diversified meanings in the Indian language. Their engagement with the Indian literatures and language was according to their own intellectual perceptions which was imbued with the Enlightenment zeal and ardor. During the governorship of Warren Hastings, two types of scholars were emerging in colonial India. There were one group of British scholars who took interest in Indian literatures to satiate their own thirst of knowledge and there was another group of

scholars who wanted to know the indigenous customs, society to strengthen the British rule. But both of these efforts initiated an interaction between the *pandits* and the British scholars which ultimately led to the creation of knowledge-nexus. This interaction laid the ground for intensive translation works in the future.

In the third chapter, I have made an argument that the long-lasting consequences of phenomenon like colonialism with all its negative impulses, still leaves space for rejuvenating the way of understanding the circulation of scientific knowledge universally. The surveying techniques applied by Colin Mackenzie, James Rennell, in early colonial India cannot be overruled simply as the benefits of the few. Their inquiries though were conducted under a colonial government, the broader social and political context of their work and its application should be taken into consideration. J D Bernal once argued that the existence of knowledge depends on the proper diffusion of that knowledge, otherwise it becomes static. In his book, *Science in History*, in three volumes, he described a universal history through the development of science and technology and also stated that the deciding factor for human survival was scientific and technological competence. This scientific and technological competence cannot be bounded only by Baconian 'Solomon's Society' which is more a scientific utopia. The members of the Solomon's Society prefer the accumulation of knowledge over the accumulation of material wealth. Francis Bacon in his book, *New Atlantis*, has argued that God has bestowed King Solomon with both the material and intellectual fortunes because he was seeking not riches but knowledge. The self-serving notion of science as depicted in *New Atlantis* was supplemented by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, in 1776. It established the notion that the self-serving interests of the few and the well-being of the many need not to be mutually exclusive. The

democratization of knowledge and the laissez-faire circulation made each other strong in this way. Both the 'Solomon's Society' and the *Wealth of Nations* declared that the individual intellectual enrichment and individual commercial profit led to the common good. This type of pro-capitalist notion cannot be the only parameter to judge the contributions of British scholar-administrators in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India. When Edward Said's phenomenal work *Orientalism* was published in 1978, the main thread of criticizing the European domination over the rest of the world was developed on the basis of this kind of pro-capitalist normative discourse. But this normative discourse has been challenged by scholars like Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, J D Bernal, Joseph Needham, and many more. There is a difference between the knowledge-seeking nature of the 'Solomon's Society' and the universalist diffusionist approach as described by J D Bernal. The relationship between empiricism and empire is a collaborative but not absolutely linear one. The coming of the Europeans opened up the new vistas for the Indian advancement and this process made progression by incorporating the pre-existing indigenous knowledge system, not by excluding them. Thus, the works of Colin Mackenzie could not be comprehended without the efforts of Boria, a South Indian Brahmin. Similarly, James Rennell had repeatedly mentioned the contributions of the indigenous as well as patronage from the Company authority which added additional momentum to his works. The process of discovering the 'Orient' within Orient was rather a cultural synthesis and an antithesis of Saidian 'Orientalism'. Thus, the pleasure of learning, the tenacity to pursue it in adverse situation as shown by these early scholar-administrators deserves a much deep-insightful reading beyond the East-West binary. It may appear in mind that Colin Mackenzie, James Rennell, were not conventional Orientalists as the term, 'Orientalist' demands some

expertise over indigenous languages, customs and cultures. Mackenzie himself in many writings had admitted his lack of knowledge in indigenous languages that made him dependent on the local translators. But the works, compiled by them had left an immense impact on the contemporary Orientalist works. After the death of Mackenzie in 1821, his widow sold his collections to the East India Company in 1822 and the mammoth task of cataloguing them fell into the hands of H.H. Wilson. Nicholas Dirks in an essay, *Autobiography of an Archive*, has argued that when H.H.Wilson took over the work of compiling Mackenzie collection, his chief priority was to satisfy his own credentials for the status of an esteemed scholar. He was succeeded in doing that as he secured the Boden Chair at Oxford in 1833. The process of perceiving the past history of some place is not only a complex one but also multi-dimensional. The works of Colin Mackenzie in South India is relevant in this perspective. During the late eighteenth century the ‘western methods’ of perceiving past and writing history were gradually imported to India through the works of various Orientalist scholars whose whole-hearted contributions, though shaped by contemporary political events, can be regarded as pioneering works in the case of initiating scientific methods in comprehending India’s own past. Here the ‘western method’ denotes the Rankean model of writing history which emphasized basically on the individuality of the historical development. The first maps drawn by James Rennell or the antiquities collected in the South India by Colin Mackenzie, or the numerous contributions made by early colonial ‘scholar-administrators’ to comprehend India’s past, were just the steps ahead towards this direction of making India’s past visible to a broader audience.

In my fourth chapter I have shown that during the Governor-Generalship of William Bentinck (1828-1835), the dynamism created by the institutionalized Orientalist

visions in the Indian society in the earlier period, had been replaced by the urgent need of reform. Within this turbulent political context, James Prinsep and Alexander Cunningham continued their restless search for India's past for the sake of the formation of knowledge system which enriched the process of history writing in India till date. The kind of 'Orientalism' they practiced during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India cannot be categorized as the Saidian indictment of 'Orientalism'. In the book *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India (1600-1800)*, by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the authors argued that the historicity of the genealogies, chronicles, the proses and verses should be judged by their *texture*. With respect to this view, it can also be said that, British historians had initiated a new kind of archival history which helped Indians in the later period to mingle with the broader global network of knowledge production. What is crucial here is to understand the emerging new historical parameters which on the one hand, were not delegitimizing the older version of the past written in verse but, were simultaneously constructing an archive with those texts and literature which could be used as raw materials in creating new histories on a universal scale.

In the concluding note, it can be said that the study of the Indian grammar, languages and histories by the non-Indians was not a new trend as the trend was there since the coming of the Jesuits during the Mughal period. With the coming of the East India Company, the nature of investigations changed as the investigators were the foreign rulers themselves. As a result, the search for knowledge, and the urge for knowing the indigenous customs, and histories, were interpreted through the power-knowledge decorum which was fostered by the post-colonial discourse of history writing. I have chosen the decade 1780s

for the starting point of my thesis as it marked the establishment of the Asiatic Society and the decade 1880s as it marked the emergence of institutionalized study and categorization of the Indian subjects on the basis of the studies of the early Orientalists. In comprehending the indigenous society newly emerged racial notion mingled with the previously existing Orientalist notion. I have concluded my thesis in this juncture.

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