

Significant work over colonial imprint on Historiography in Indian context.

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INTRODUCTION-Before starting any discussion on the Colonial Historiography of India, we must glance over the situation of historiography during the time period concerned. Over the year's historiography – the scholarly activity of constructing and writing history – of India has undergone many significant changes which can be understood against the background of political and intellectual contexts in which they emerged and flourished.

These various schools are often presented and understood in terms of one school making way for the other in a neat forward progression, however, the reality is much more complex as there is considerable variety within the various schools along with dialogue and even conflict between them.

The 18th and 19th centuries were dominated by the by European scholars who were usually referred to as Orientalists or Indologists but they described themselves as “antiquarians”. Many of them were employees of East India Company and later the British Government and many of them had their reservations about the culture and history of India and tried to present it as inferior to that of Europe. However, some of them had ‘sympathy’ for India and its heritage like Mount Stuart Elphinstone and Thomas Munro.

School of Thoughts on Historiography -Every school has its own shortcomings and contributions. The contributions of the imperialists lay in their founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 which provided an institutional focus for scholars working in a number of related fields such as textual study, epigraphy, numismatics, and history. A major contribution of these scholars lay in their efforts to collect edit and translate ancient Indian texts. In this, they depended heavily on information provided by ‘native informants’ who were rarely acknowledged.

The decipherment of Ashokan Brahmi Kharosthi scripts were major breakthroughs by the school of the colonial historiography of India. Officers of the Geological Survey discovered prehistoric stone tools and laid the basis of Indian prehistory. The Archaeological Survey of India was established in 1871 and over the succeeding decades made an important contribution towards unearthing and analyzing the material remains of India. Some of the Orientalists like William Jones, H.T. Colebrook presented a glorious image of the ancient Indian civilization and tried to draw parallels between stories from the Bible and from those from the Indian scriptures

However, for all their glorification of ancient India, they viewed contemporary India (18-19th century) as inferior and backward. Most of them saw the British rule in India as necessary as they found the Indians lacking in discipline and modernity which was the result of centuries of stagnation.

A branch within the imperialist school was the Utilitarianist school of James Mill and T.B. Macaulay which gave an image of despotic rule and stagnation which prevailed all throughout the history of the subcontinent. These historians divided the history of India into 3 periods, namely the ancient and/or Hindu period, the medieval and/or Muslim period and the modern and/or British period which raised several questions such as ‘Is the religious affiliation of the ruling elite the best basis for labeling a period?’, ‘In that case, why is the third period labeled as British and not the Christian period?’, ‘How can it be applied to the reigns of the many ancient Indian kings who patronized Buddhism and Jainism?’ etc.

The Brahmanical perspective of ancient Sanskrit texts was often uncritically taken as being reflective of the Indian past. Social and religious institutions were critiqued from a western viewpoint. Indian society was presented as static and stagnant over the centuries. Race, religion, and ethnicity were often confused with each other and there was a tendency to exaggerate the foreign influence.

colonial history as a subject of study and colonial approach as an ideology are interconnected. The theme of empire building in the historical works of the British naturally gave rise to a set of ideas justifying British rule in India.

This justification included, in different degrees in different individual historian, a highly critical attitude towards Indian society and

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culture at times amounting to contempt, a laudatory attitude to the soldiers and administrators who conquered and ruled India, and a proneness to laud the benefits India received from Pox Britannica, i.e. British Peace. The influence of Leopold von Ranke and the positivist school of history had, for the major part of the nineteenth and twentieth century's, created a belief in the 'objectivity of the historian' and this made it difficult to perceive the possibility of ideological leanings in historians' discourse. The ideological dimension of colonial historiography was brought to the surface only in the post-independence critique of earlier historiography. This critique was launched mainly in India while, as late as 1961, C H Philips of the School of Oriental and African Studies of London, in *The Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, did not raise the issue at all in a comprehensive survey of historiography.

The term 'colonial historiography' applies to: (a) the histories of the countries colonized during their period of colonial rule, and (b) to the ideas and approaches commonly associated with historians who were or are characterized by a colonialist ideology. Many of the front-rank colonial historians were British officials. Today, the colonial ideology is the subject of criticism and hence the term 'colonial historiography' has acquired a pejorative sense.

Some significant work on Colonial Historiography

Grant: A hardcore evangelist, he authored *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of India* in 1792, with the conviction that it was the divine destiny of the British rulers to bring the light of Christianity to India which was sunk in the darkness of primitive religious faiths and superstitions. This attitude is reflected in the historical writings of the British from the second decade of the nineteenth century.

James Mill: Between 1806 and 1818, James Mill wrote a series of volumes on the history of India and this work had a formative influence on British imagination about India. The book was titled *History of British India*, but the first three volumes included a survey of ancient and medieval India while the last three volumes were specifically about British rule in India. This book became a great success, it was reprinted in 1820, 1826 and 1840 and it became a basic textbook for the British Indian Civil Service officers undergoing training at the East India's college at Hailey burg.

Mill had never been to India and the entire work was written on the basis of his limited readings in books by English authors on India. It

contained a collection of the prejudices about India and the natives of India which many British officers acquired in course of their stay in India. However, despite shortcomings from the point of view of authenticity and veracity and objectivity, the book was very influential. **Mount Stuart Elphinstone:** A resourceful civil servant in India served here for the greater part of his working life; Elphinstone was far better equipped and better informed than Mill to write a history of India. His work *History of Hindu and Muhammedan India* (1841) became a standard text in Indian universities (founded from 1857) onwards and was reprinted up to the early years of the next century. Elphinstone followed this up with *History of British Power in the East*, a book that traced fairly systematically the expansion and consolidation of British rule till Hastings' administration. The periodization of Indian history into ancient and medieval period corresponding to 'Hindu' period and 'Muslim' period was established as a convention in Indian historiography as a result of the lasting influence of Elphinstone's approach to the issue.

J. Tallboys Wheeler: He wrote a comprehensive *History of India* in five volumes published between 1867 and 1876, and followed it up with a survey of India under British Rule (1886).

Vincent Smith: Vincent Smith stands nearly at the end of a long series of British Indian civil servant historians. In 1911, Vincent Smith's comprehensive history, building upon his own earlier research in ancient Indian history, came out. The rise of the nationalist movement since 1885 and the intensification of political agitation since the Partition of Bengal in 1905 may have influenced his judgments about the course of history in India.

The disintegration and decline experienced in ancient and medieval times at the end of great empire suggested an obvious lesson to the Indian reader, viz. it was only the iron hand of imperial Britain which kept India on the path of stability with progress, and if the British Indian empire ceased to be there would be the deluge which will reverse all progress attained under British rule.

Edward Thompson and G.T. Garratt: They wrote *Rise and Fulfillment of British Rule in India* from a liberal point of view, which was sympathetic to Indian national aspirations to a great extent. The authors Edward Thompson was a Missionary and good friend of Rabindranath Tagore, while G.T Garratt was a civil servant and Labour Party politician in England. Despite criticism from Conservative British opinion leaders,

the book is a landmark indicating the reorientation in thinking in the more progressive and liberal circles among the British.

From James Mill to Thompson and Garratt, historiography had traveled forward a great distance. This period, spanning the beginning of the 19th century to the last years of British rule in India, saw the evolution from a Euro-centric and disparaging approach to India towards a more liberal and less ethno-centric approach.

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^"Harvard scholar says the idea of India dates to a much earlier time than the British or the Mughals".

