
UNIT 19 COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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19.1 INTRODUCTION

When we talk of Colonial Historiography the first task is to remove a possible source of confusion. The term ‘colonial historiography’ applies to (a) the histories of the countries colonised during their period of colonial rule, and (b) to the ideas and approaches commonly associated with historians who were or are characterised by a colonialist ideology. In British India the term was used in the first sense and only since independence the second meaning of the term has come into prominence. Many of the front rank historians were British colonial officials, and the term colonial history, when it was used at all, was meant to refer to the *subject* rather than to the *ideology* embedded in that history. Today the ideology is the subject of criticism and hence the term ‘colonial historiography’ has acquired a pejorative sense. In this Unit we shall use the term ‘colonial historiography’ in both of these senses mentioned above.

In a sense 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 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 Pax Britannica, i.e. British Peace. We shall study this ideology in detail later but it is important to note here that lack of consciousness of the ideological dimension was a characteristic of colonial history writing. The influence of Leopold von Ranke and the positivist school of history had, for the major part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 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.

19.2 INFLUENTIAL WORKS OF HISTORY IN COLONIAL INDIA

Before we take up the question of the colonial ideology in historiography, let us try and get a clear idea of the historians we are talking about. In the eighteenth century there

were very few genuinely historical works. The British were perhaps too busy fighting their way to the top of the political pyramid in India to devote much attention to history. One of the notable writers in the historical vein in the eighteenth century was **Charles Grant**, who wrote *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of India* in 1792. He belonged to the 'evangelical school', i.e. the group of British observers who believed that it was the divine destiny of the British rulers of India to bring the light of Christianity to India which was sunk in the darkness of primitive religious faiths and superstitions. However, this kind of reflective writing on Indian society and history was rather rare till the early decades of the nineteenth century. By the second decade of the nineteenth century British rule in India had stabilised considerably and was about to enter a new period of expansion. By 1815 in Europe Britain was not only established as a first class power after Britain's victory over Napoleon and France, but Britain had also undergone the first Industrial Revolution and had emerged as the most industrialised country in the world. Britain's confidence in being at the top of the world was nowhere better displayed than in British writings on India, a country she dominated and regarded as backward. This attitude is reflected in the historical writings of the British from the second decade of the nineteenth century.

Just about this time, 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 entitled *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 Haileybury. By the 1840s the book was out of date and in his comments its editor H.H. Wilson pointed that out in 1844 (Wilson also pointed out many factual errors in the book); but the book continued to be considered a classic.

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 for two reasons. One of these reasons is often recognised: James Mill belonged to an influential school of political and economic thought, the Utilitarians inspired by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham. As an Utilitarian exposition of history Mill's history of India was also at the same time implicitly an Utilitarian agenda for British administration in India. The other reason for the immense influence the book exercised has not been recognised as much as one might have expected. This book perfectly reflected the cast of mind at the beginning of the nineteenth century which we have noticed earlier, a cast of mind which developed in the wake of Britain's victory in the Anglo-French wars for hegemony in Europe, and Britain's growing industrial prosperity. James Mill broadcast a message of confident imperialism which was exactly what the readers in England wanted to hear.

While James Mill had produced an Utilitarian interpretation of history, a rival work of history produced by **Mountstuart Elphinstone** is more difficult to categorise in terms of philosophical affiliation. Elphinstone was a civil servant in India for the greater part of his working life and he was far better equipped and better informed than Mill to write a history of India. His work *History of Hindu and Muhammedan India* (1811) 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 periodisation 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. While Elphinstone's works continued to be influential as a textbook, specially in India, a more professionally proficient history was produced in the 1860s by J. Talboys Wheeler. The latter 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).

If one were to look for the successor to Elphinstone's work as an influential text book, one would probably turn to the *History of India* by **Vincent Smith** who stands nearly at the end of a long series of British Indian civil servant historians. In 1911 the last edition of Elphinstone's history of 'Hindu and Muhammedan India' was published and in the same year Vincent Smith's comprehensive history, building upon his own earlier research in ancient Indian history and the knowledge accumulated by British researchers in the decades since Elphinstone, saw the light of day. From 1911 till about the middle of the twentieth century Vincent Smith's was the authoritative textbook on the syllabi of almost all Indian universities. While Vincent Smith's book approximated to the professional historians' writings in form and was unrivalled as a text book in summing up the then state of knowledge, in some respects his approach to Indian history seems to have been coloured by his experience as a British civil servant in India. 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 judgements about the course of history in India. For instance, time and again he referred to the fragility of India's unity and the outbreak of chaos and the onset of general decline in the absence of a strong imperial authority. The disintegration and decline experienced in ancient and medieval times at the end of great empires 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. As regards the potentials of the nationalist movement and the fitness of the Indian subjects to decide their own destiny, Vincent Smith did not pay much attention to that 'political' question.

The political question, however, was assuming increasing importance in the last years of British rule and a historical work more accommodative to the political outlook of the Indian nationalist movement appeared in 1934. This work, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* was different from all the previously mentioned books in that it was written from a liberal point of view, sympathetic to Indian national aspirations to a great extent. The authors were **Edward Thompson** who was a Missionary who taught for many years in a college in Bengal and became a good friend of Rabindranath Tagore, and **G.T. Garratt**, a civil servant in India for eleven years and thereafter a Labour Party politician in England. Given their background, both were disinclined to toe the line laid down by the civil servant historians of earlier days. Thompson and Garratt faced very adverse criticism from conservative British opinion leaders. On the other hand, many Indians found this work far more acceptable than the officially prescribed textbooks. This book, published less than fifteen years before India attained independence, is a landmark indicating the reorientation in thinking in the more progressive and liberal circles among the British; it was in accord with the mindset which made the transition of 1947 acceptable to the erstwhile imperial power. 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.

19.3 SOME OTHER HISTORIOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENTS

Till now we have focused attention on histories which were most widely read and attained the status of text books, and hence influenced historical imagination and understanding. There were other historical works not of that kind but nevertheless of historiographic importance.

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century two great authors wrote on India, though India was really not in the centre of their interest. One was Lord **Macaulay** whose essays on some great British Indian personalities like Robert Clive were published in *Edinburgh Review*. Macaulay's literary style made Indian history readable, though his essays were flawed by poor information and poorer judgement about the 'native' part of British India. It was a great change from the uncommonly dull and censorious James Mill's writings. Macaulay's lasting influence was the establishment of a tradition of writing history in the biographical mode; this was widely imitated later and hence volume after volume of biographies of Viceroys and the like and histories of their administration.

Sir Henry Maine's contribution was of another kind. A great juridical historian, Maine applied himself to the study of ancient Indian institutions while he was for a short period the Law Member of the Governor-General's Council in India. His *Ancient Law* (1861) and his work on Indian village communities were path-breaking works in history. Maine changed the course of European thinking on the development of law by looking at laws and institutions beyond the domain of Roman law. There were, however, few mentionable contributions by British Indian scholars to follow up Maine's tradition in legal and institutional history. His impact was limited to European scholarly work in the late nineteenth century and perhaps even beyond in the development of sociology in the hands of Max Weber and others.

In the area of legal history the works which British Indian authors produced were of a level different to, indeed inferior to Maine's. Thus for instance **Sir James Fitzjames Stephen**, also a Law Member of the Viceroy's Council, wrote a defence of British administration under Warren Hastings. Edmund Burke, he argued, was wrong in thinking that the punishment awarded to Nanda Kumar by Justice Elijah Impey was a case of miscarriage of justice. This was the subject of Stephen's *Story of Nuncoomar and the Impeachment of Sir Elijah Impey* (1885). In reaction to this an I.C.S. officer, **Henry Beveridge**, wrote in support of the impeachment and in condemnation of the trial and punishment of Nanda Kumar: *Nanda Kumar: a narrative of a judicial murder* (1886). Similarly, again in defence of previous British administration, **Sir John Strachey** of the I.C.S., wrote *Hastings and the Rohilla War* (1892). Thus there were legal historical debates about a thing in the past, Warren Hastings and his impeachment and Edmund Burke's criticism of British administration. The site of this kind of debate was history, but the hidden agenda was contemporary – to present British conquest and administration of India as an unsullied record which must not be questioned.

In the high noon of the Empire two very contrary tendencies of historical writing were displayed by two prominent authors. One was **Sir William W. Hunter**, the editor of a good series of Gazetteers and the author of a pedestrian work on the history of British India. From 1899 he began to edit a series of historical books called *The Rulers of India*. The series lauded the makers of empires in India – mainly the makers of the British Indian empire, though one or two token Indians, like Asoka and Akbar, were included. The series was endowed with government sponsorship and the volumes found place in official libraries and syllabi. The object was to present history in a popular form

and very often included not only solemn moments of resolve to do good on the part of an empire builder, but also cute stories of incidents in their childhood back home. The ‘hard-boiled types’ of empire builders were chosen for immortality in a biographical form – British civil servants who sympathised with India were excluded — and it was a caricature of the eighteenth century English tradition of writing history as biography.

Sir Alfred Lyall’s work, *Rise and Expansion of British Dominion in India* (1894), offers a contrast because he showed great originality in his methodology and interpretation, although one may disagree very fundamentally with the trend of his interpretation. In methodology his originality consisted of the use, in the manner of ethnographers, of his own observation and knowledge of contemporary Indian society, customs, institutions, etc. in order to understand the past events and processes. Thus he went beyond the textual evidence which most historians at that time depended upon. In his interpretation of Indian history Lyall projected the story on a very wide canvas, looking at the incursion of the British into India in the light of the entire history of the relationship between the East and the West from the days of the Greeks and the Romans. This wide sweep of history, resembling in some ways Arnold Toynbee’s wide-angled global vision of relationship between civilisations, was different from that of most British Indian historians of the nineteenth century. The third element of originality in Lyall was his theoretical position that India and Europe were on the same track of development, but India’s development was arrested at a certain point. This was also the view of Sir Henry Maine who wrote that Indian society had a ‘great part of our own civilization with its elements . . . not yet unfolded.’ India as an ‘arrested civilization’ was an influential idea in Europe but in India it had few takers. The nationalistically inclined intelligentsia rejected the view that India was just a backward version of Europe; they believed that India was radically different from Europe in the organisation of her society and state systems, and that India must be allowed to work out a different historical destiny rather than try to imitate Europe. At any rate, while in some matters Lyall’s interpretative framework may be questioned, his attempt to look at India as a civilisation merits recognition.

Finally, a noteworthy historiographic development that occurred in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century was the beginning of explorations in economic history. A basis for that had already been laid in the work of many British civil servants who examined economic records and formed broad conclusions about the course of agrarian relations and agricultural history. This they did as district collectors or magistrates responsible for ‘land revenue settlement’, i.e. fixation of tax on agricultural income in order that Land Revenue may be collected by the government. Among such civil servants an outstanding historian emerged: this was **W. H. Moreland** who examined the economic condition of *India at the Death of Akbar*, published in 1920. This work was followed up with another work of economic history on the period *From Akbar to Aurangzeb* (1923) and finally a history of *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (1929). To some extent Moreland’s approach was flawed by a preconceived notion that the economic condition of India was better under British rule than what it was in medieval times. He tried to prove this preconception by various means in his works, including his writings on Indian economics in the twentieth century. Moreover, his response to the Indian economic nationalists’ critique of British economic impact was far from being adequate. One of his junior contemporaries was **Vera Anstey** who wrote on similar lines; she taught at the University of London and wrote a standard textbook on *The Economic Development of India* (1929). However, her work lacked the historical depth which Moreland attained. Moreland’s outstanding contribution was to lay the basis of a new discipline of economic history. However, economic and social history remained marginal to the concerns of the typical colonial historians. This is evident from the classic summation of all the British historians’ work on British India in the volume in the *Cambridge History of India* (1929) edited by David Dodwell as well as P E Roberts’ textbook, *History of British India* (reprinted often since 1907). Neither

Indian economic and social conditions nor indeed the people of India were in focus in such works, their history was all about what the British soldiers and civil servants did in India.

19.4 COLONIAL IDEOLOGY IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

It will be an error to homogenise all of British historical writings as uniformly colonial, since different approaches and interpretative frameworks developed within the colonial school in course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, there were certain characteristics common to most of the works we have surveyed till now. However simplistic it may be, it may be useful to sum up these characteristics:

- An ‘Orientalist’ representation of India was common, promoting the idea of the superiority of modern Western civilisation; this is a theme recently brought into prominence by Edward Said and others, but the Indian nationalist intelligentsias had identified and criticised this trend in British writings from James Mill onwards.
- The idea that India had no unity until the British unified the country was commonly given prominence in historical narratives; along with this thesis there was a representation of the eighteenth century India as a ‘dark century’ full of chaos and barbarity until the British came to the rescue.
- Many late nineteenth century British historians adopted Social Darwinist notions about India; this implied that if history is a struggle between various peoples and cultures, akin to the struggle among the species, Britain having come to the top could be *ipso facto* legitimately considered to be superior and as the fittest to rule.
- India was, in the opinion of many British observers, a stagnant society, arrested at a stage of development; it followed that British rule would show the path of progress to a higher level; hence the idea that India needed Pax Britannica.
- The mythification of heroic empire builders and ‘Rulers of India’ in historical narratives was a part of the rhetoric of imperialism; as Eric Stokes has remarked, in British writings on India the focus was on the British protagonists and the entire country and its people were just a shadowy background.
- As we would expect, colonial historiography displayed initially a critical stance towards the Indian nationalist movement since it was perceived as a threat to the good work done by the British in India; at a later stage when the movement intensified the attitude became more complex, since some historians showed plain hostility while others were more sophisticated in their denigration of Indian nationalism. In general, while some of these characteristics and paradigms are commonly to be found in the colonial historians’ discourse, it will be unjust to ignore the fact that in course of the first half of the twentieth century historiography out-grew them or, at least, presented more sophisticated versions of them.

In essence colonial historiography was part of an ideological effort to appropriate history as a means of establishing cultural hegemony and legitimising British rule over India.

The basic idea embedded in the tradition of Colonial Historiography was the paradigm of a backward society’s progression towards the pattern of modern European civil and political society under the tutelage of imperial power. The guiding hand of the British administrators, education combined with ‘filtration’ to the lower orders of society,

implantation of such institutions and laws as the British thought Indians were fit for, and protection of Pax Britannica from the threat of disorder nationalism posed among the subject people – these were the ingredients needed for a slow progress India must make. Sometimes this agenda was presented as ‘the civilizing mission of Britain’.

What were the intellectual lineages of the colonial ideology as reflected in historiography? Benthamite or Utilitarian political philosophy represented Britain’s role to be that of a guardian with a backward pupil as his ward. It may be said that Jeremy Bentham looked upon all people in that light, European or otherwise. That is partly true. But this attitude could find clearer expression and execution in action in a colony like India. Another source of inspiration for the colonialist historian was Social Darwinism, as has been mentioned earlier. This gave an appearance of scientific respectability to the notion that many native Indians were below par; it was possible to say that here there were victims of an arrested civilisation and leave it at that as an inevitable outcome of a Darwinian determinism. A third major influence was Herbert Spencer. He put forward an evolutionary scheme for the explication of Europe’s ascendancy and his comparative method addressed the differences among countries and cultures in terms of progression towards the higher European form. It was an assumption common among Europeans, that non-European societies would follow that evolutionary pattern, with a bit of assistance from the European imperial powers. This mindset was not peculiar to the British Indian historians. In the heydays of mid-Victorian imperialism the British gave free expression to these ideas while in later times such statements became more circumspect. In the 1870s Fitzjames Stephen talked of “heathenism and barbarism” versus the British as representatives of a “belligerent civilization”. In 1920s David Dodwell’s rhetoric is milder, indeed almost in a dejected tone: the Sisyphean task of the British was to raise to a higher level the “great mass of humanity” in India and that mass “always tended to relapse into its old posture . . . like a rock you try to lift with levers.” (Dodwell, *A Sketch of the History of India, 1858-1918*).

19.5 IMPACT OF HISTORICAL WRITINGS IN COLONIAL INDIA

The above ideological characterisation applies to the dominant trend in historical thinking in the colonial school. But it will be inaccurate to apply this without discrimination. It is well known that among the British officers of the government of British India, as we all know, there were some like Thomas Munro or Charles Trevelyan who were widely regarded as persons sympathetic to the subject people although as officers they served an alien and exploitative regime; there were British officers and British Missionaries (e.g. C F Andrews, author of *Renaissance in India*, 1925) who sympathised with the National Congress; and there were also those, like say Garratt of the Indian Civil Service and later of the Labour Party in England, or George Orwell of the Indian Police Service who were inveterate critics of the empire. It was the same case with the historians. But the inclinations of lone individuals were insignificant in the face of the dominant tradition among the servants of the British Raj. Official encouragement and sponsorship of a way of representing the past which would uphold and promote imperial might, and the organised or informal peer opinion the dissident individual had to contend with. Our characterisation of the ideology at the root of colonial historiography addresses the dominant trend and may not apply in every respect to every individual historian. Such a qualification is important in a course on Historiography in particular because this is an instance where students of history must exercise their judgement about the range and the limits of generalisation.

It must be noted that despite the colonial ideology embedded in historiography in British India, the early British historians of India made some positive contributions. Apart from

the obvious fact that the colonial historians laid the foundations of historiography according to methodology developed in modern Europe, their contribution was also substantial in providing in institutions like the Asiatic Society and Archaeological Survey of India opportunity for Indian historians to obtain entry into the profession and into academic research. Further, despite an ethnocentric and statist bias, the data collected by the British colonial historians as well as the practice of archiving documents was and remains an important resource. Most important of all, the teaching of history began from the very inception of the first three universities in India at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (1857-1858). This had several unintended consequences.

The history that was taught under colonial auspices was highly biased in favour of the imperial point of view. The textbooks were those produced by the school of colonial historiography. Nevertheless, there was a positive outcome. First, along with the history of India by James Mill or Elphinstone, Indian students also read histories of England and of Europe and thus were implanted in the minds of the educated Indians the ideas of Liberty and Freedom and Democracy and Equity, as exemplified in European history, the lessons of the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution, the American War of Independence, the struggles of Mazzini and Garibaldi in Italy, etc. Any one familiar with the early Moderate phase of the development of nationalism in India will see the relevance these ideas acquired through reading history. Secondly, professionally trained Indian historians began to engage in writing history. Writing history on modern lines with documentary research and the usual apparatus of scholarly work was no longer a monopoly of the amateur historians of British origin. Indians professionally trained began to engage in research, first in learned associations like the Asiatic Society, then in the colleges and universities, and in the government's educational services, particularly the Indian Education Service.

Thirdly, and this is the important part, the history which the Indian students were made to read, the books by British civil servant historians of the nineteenth century, created a critical reaction against that historiography. The first graduate of an Indian University, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, repeatedly reviled the British interpretation and raised the question, When shall we write our own history? Rabindranath Tagore put it most eloquently: in other countries, he wrote, history *reveals* the country to the people of the country, while the history of India the British have gifted us *obscures* our vision of India, we are unable to see our motherland in this history. This reaction was typical of the intelligentsia in India and it led some of the best nationalist minds to search for a new construal of history. Thus there developed a Nationalist interpretation of Indian history, putting to an end the hegemony of British colonial historiography. Writing history became a major means of building the consciousness of a national identity. In the next Unit in this collection the Nationalist School of historiography has been surveyed.

19.6 SUMMARY

The term 'colonial historiography' has been used in two senses. One relates to the history of the colonial countries, while the other refers to the works which were influenced by colonial ideology of domination. It is in the second sense that most historians today write about the colonial historiography. In fact, the practice of writing about the colonial countries by the colonial officials was related to the desire for domination and justification of the colonial rule. Therefore, in most such historical works there was criticism of Indian society and culture. At the same time, there was praise for the western culture and values and glorification of the individuals who established the empire in India. The histories of India written by James Mill, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Vincent Smith and many others are pertinent examples of this trend. They established the colonial school of historiography which denigrated the subject people while praising the imperial country.

In such accounts, India was depicted as a stagnant society, as a backward civilisation and as culturally inferior while Britain was praised as a dynamic country possessing superior civilisation and advanced in science and technology.

19.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What is colonial historiography? Discuss some of the important works of historians who are generally associated with colonial historiography.
- 2) Do you think that all the works written by colonial or the British historians on India belong to the colonial school of history-writing? Answer with examples.
- 3) Discuss the basic elements of colonialist ideology contained in colonial historiography.