

Colonial Historiography: An enquiry into its ideological dimensions in Indian context

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ABSTRACT

Colonial historiography involves writing history of a colony by the metropolis, according to its own needs and understanding. In Indian context, we find that many schools of thought developed regarding it over the years. The orientalist were fond of Indian religion and culture, especially its ancient period. The Utilitarians on the other hand were complete opposites of them. They found all flaws in India. Its culture was seen as stagnant and decadent, which could only be cured under British rule. With the setback of 1857 and rising national consciousness, the conceptions of historians regarding India became even worse. India was portrayed as a disunited geographical entity, which housed followers of many religions, culture, traditions etc. It was only under the iron grip of British rule that India could hope to even exist! An important thread which ran around all these views was the continuation and strengthening of British rule in India, and the varying ideas, beliefs were designed to serve this purpose. Though there were some positives as well, but they were far outnumbered by the negatives.

1. Introduction

Historiography can be defined as the study of the writing of history, based upon critical examination of sources, selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods.¹ As an academic discipline, it tries to understand the methods, techniques which historians employ in order to study a particular historical work or subject. As such it has developed various approaches over the years. Colonial historiography is one such approach which is commonly associated with historians who were or are characterised by a 'colonialist ideology' i.e. a belief that history of the colony should be written in accordance with the understanding and needs of the metropolis. It not only served the purpose of justifying the rule of the metropolis over the colony, but also helped in maintaining a strict ideological control over it. European historiography underwent great changes in the Enlightenment era. Theological and metaphysical interpretations gave place to more rational and scientific theories. By the time the British established their authority in India they had formulated their historical ideas and had been much influenced by the Enlightenment school of historiography.² They came to India with prior notions about what history is, what is its nature and how it is to be written. A need was felt to understand the history of the colony, in order to govern her better and establish greater control over it. However the inability of scholars to find any such 'Histories of India' which was in accordance with the European view, led them to describe Indian civilization as being an 'a-historical' one. Belief in other worldlines, religious rituals and dogma, a 'cyclic' conception of time etc. were cited as reasons for it. Fired by the zeal of Enlightenment, the rulers took upon themselves the responsibility of writing down the history of the Indian people.

2. The Orientalists

The idea of 'Oriental Studies' began with the translation of the legal codes, such as the Dharmasastras under the

auspices of the Asiatic Society of Bengal(1784) because Indian civilization was considered to be synonymous with Hinduism and Sanskritic elements, with other religions and languages remaining in the background. The so called Orientalists or Indologists included important names like William Jones, Henry Colebrook, Charles Wilkins, Horace Hyman Wilson and later Max Muller etc. Similarities were found between Sanskrit and other Indo-European languages. Jones argued that Sanskrit, Greek and Latin were so closely associated in roots and grammar that no philologist could examine the three of them without believing them to have sprung from the same common source.³ The Aryan stock and the Vedic age were eulogized as being completely pristine and full of all good. He even tried to fit the knowledge obtained within the prior known Christian narrative of the world. Orientalists were people suspicious of the way things were going on in their home countries of Europe, especially after the coming of industrialization. Thus they searched for utopias elsewhere, and according to them the Orient held immense possibilities in this respect. The idea of orientalism was believed to bring about another Renaissance in Europe. Colebrook and others were influenced by the sense of history advanced by Voltaire: history was not just a chronicle of political events but a record of the growth of civilizations. Seeing from this perspective, Asia (specifically India) appeared to be in a state of decline, while the west was taking large strides forward.⁴ British were claimed to be harbingers of peace after the tyrant muslim rule; and thus it was in the interest of the native people to ensure the continuation of the British rule. Thus a civilizing mission was a part of British thinking from the beginning itself. Ashish Nandy has aptly summed it up in the following words- "Colonialism minus a civilizational mission is no colonialism at all".⁵

3. Utilitarians

The 19th century was a great age of facts. Ranke, called the father of modern history was the greatest champion of such a tradition. Arguing against moralizing history, he claimed that the task of a historian was 'simply to show how it really was'.

The Positivists also backed such a view. The idea was that first the facts should be ascertained and then conclusions should be drawn from it. In Great Britain, this view of history fitted in perfectly with the empiricist tradition which was the dominant strain in British philosophy from Locke to Bertrand Russell.⁶ By the 19th century, Britain had established its dominance on the world stage, especially following the defeat of Napoleon. It sought to control and subdue other countries, under the dictum of 'Pax-Britanica'. British rule had also been thoroughly and firmly established in India. The Mughal empire, Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad, Mysore, Marathas etc. had all been forced to seek security under the British sword. It now considered itself to be the 'paramount power' of India. The period also saw the popularity of the idea of free trade and Utilitarianism in Britain on the back of maturing industrial revolution. The Charter Act of 1813 abolished the monopoly of East India Company and allowed the entry of private British merchants (except in trade in tea and with China), free traders and Christian missionaries in India. The British interests now required India to be a supplier of raw materials and market for their finished goods. These circumstances had a bearing upon the thinking and perspective of the historians. In accordance with the changing needs, emphasis was now put upon the superiority of the occident over the orient. It was claimed that only under the British tutelage, India would be able to free herself from the shackles of despotism. The best name representative of such a thought was- *James Mill (History of British India)*. Mill divided the Indian history into that of Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization and British.⁷ The classification in itself is faulty as it periodizes Indian history in a way such that early two periods were characterized by particular religions, while the last i.e. the British period was associated with that of a nation. It is notable that Mill had never himself visited India and all his beliefs were based upon his readings of accounts of British officers who had served or spent time in India. He popularized the biased Utilitarian approach (Mill was a proud follower of Jeremy Bentham, considered to be the founder of the Utilitarian approach) which talked of all good things for his own home country, but was not ready to extend the same to a subject, 'uncivilized' colony. It became a standard book for British India civil servants who underwent training at the East India college (Hailebury) and also the first medium of interface for an average British citizen, who wanted to know about India. Other important names were- *Mountstuart Elphinstone (History of Hindu and Muhammeden India, History of British power in the east)*, *Lord Macaulay* etc. They were thoroughly supported by the newly coming Christian missionaries who came into the 'land of heathens' in order to carry out the noble task of large scale conversions so as to spread the gospel of the Bible. Evangelicals sought to promote vernacular languages so as to make Bible available to all the natives. India's culture was seen as stagnant, trapped into myriad customs and rituals which lacked the ideals of rationality and scientific outlook. The most important characteristic feature of Indian society was termed to be the popularity of 'Oriental Despotism'- a system of government consisting of a despotic ruler with absolute power and presence of self sufficient village communities. The surplus produced by the village communities was creamed off by the despotic ruler and his court⁸. This according to them was the pattern both during ancient and medieval time. Another area highlighted was the presence of caste system- a

method of maintaining social hierarchies on the basis of birth which served to segregate people into different groups and frustrate economic progress. The ways proposed to save India were bringing about appropriate legislations, changes in the educational system (promotion of English as the medium of education), culture and ethics of the society so as to develop in words of Macaulay- 'Brown Englishmen'.

4. Enlightened despotism

The conceptions about India became even worse from the other half of 19th century. British were thoroughly alarmed by the rebellion of 1857, various peasant and tribal revolts and the rising sentiment of nationalism, which was gradually gaining strength. It was emphasised that India was not a nation and never could ever dream to become one on its own, because it was just a geographical piece of land which housed followers of many religion, race, caste, culture and beliefs. These multi-faceted units were disunited and could only be controlled under the iron grip of a strong Imperial power. The unlimited continuation of British rule for endless time to come was thus declared to be the only way to save India. The British on their part were only doing the noblest of acts by civilizing the uncivilized. New ideas such as 'white man's burden', 'enlightened despotism' were constructed. The high priests of such an ideology were- Rudyard Kipling, Vincent Smith (History of India), Herbert Risley etc. Social Darwinism was used to claim the legitimacy of British rule. Just as the fittest species were able to dominate others in the struggle for existence (theory of natural selection), British having overpowered others and come to the top could legitimately claim to be superior to others and hence the fittest to rule. We witness an increase in ethnographic and anthropometric studies of the Indian populace. The insistence was on collecting data so as to maintain a corpus of 'colonial knowledge'.⁹ Scientific theories over race were used not only to explain simply people's skin colour, but also their civilizational and cultural attributes. 'Nature' it was claimed linked black skin, a small brain, and savagery!¹⁰ In pursuance of the official policy of 'divide et impera', attempts were made to create wedges between different communities. This was consciously tempered by creating competition for limited employment and other benefits that could have been offered only by the state. Hindus and Muslims were described as two different nations, northern India- the abode of the 'Aryans' was claimed to be different from that of the 'Dravidian' south and various castes were termed to be water tight compartments having no interaction with each other. In India specific context, communalism came to be defined as the ideology which emphasizes upon the distinction, even antagonism between followers of different groups, even though differences between followers of different religions, cultures existed in western world as well. It was used frequently in official public correspondence, discourses such as Morley-Minto, Montague-Chelmsford reports etc. and soon became part of common vocabulary. The meaning of the term has from that time stagnated to refer to this particular aspect, which is widely different from its original meaning.¹¹ It was not that such differences did not exist but they were deliberately highlighted and pronounced. These circumstances led to fragmentation of the Indian society into many 'interest groups', each vying to catch the attention of the government, to fulfill

their own petty interests. However names of some historians like Thompson and Gerrat (Rise and fulfilment of British rule in India) , Thomas Munro, Treveleyan etc. should also be mentioned, who didn't completely followed the set pattern and were much more liberal and sympathetic towards India.

5. Conclusion

In view of the above discussion, it would be safe to conclude that colonial historiography was biased, incomplete and erroneous in many places. It was deeply effected by a colonialist ideology. Although it needs to be congractulated for begining a scientific and rational enquiry of the Indian history, introducing western ideas about history in the country and establishing history as a subject of study which could be

studied and taught. But the general view was painted according to the need of maintaining the British rule, whether it be orientalism, utilitarianism or enlightened despotism. Differences were deliberately created or widened if they already existed. There was active contribution from British rulers in fanning of problems such as commmunalism, regionalism etc. The legacy of these policies have sieved down even to our times and have been the cause of much unrest.

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