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Indological Discourse and the Indian Knowledge System

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Abstract

History is always subject to contextual interpretations; these interpretations have served the purpose of constructing knowledge, as well as political tools to suit political interests. The 'pure history or 'less-corrupt knowledge of history' is rare for true knowledge seekers. The case of the discovery of true knowledge about India is also subject to such a typical tendency of historiography. Indology in the 18th Century emerged as a quest to understand India through the lens of the West at its inception. However, it underwent phases of development from the 19th to the 20th century, coinciding with the emergence of Nationalist ideologies. This paper attempts to explore the development of Indological discourse and unfold the various chapters of the Indian Knowledge System. Methodologically, the paper is limited to a historical and analytical enquiry, adopting the normative–factual tools that are somewhat limited in the discipline.

Keywords: Indology, Nationalism, Romanticism, Historiography, British

I. Introduction: The Construction of Knowledge about India

One can define Historiography as the way histories were written, why they were written, and by whom they were written, as well as the specific context in which they were written, and the ideological and intellectual foundations that shaped that history (Thapar, 2002, p. xix). The present discourse of Indian history emerged during the colonial era, shaped by external perceptions that would significantly influence future interpretations. This evolution began with the expansion of colonial rule across the subcontinent in the eighteenth century. European scholars, in their quest to uncover India's historical narratives, found themselves at a crossroads, struggling to discover histories that aligned with their preconceived notions of what history ought to represent—concepts deeply embedded in the ideals of the European Enlightenment. This gap between perception and reality set the stage for a complex and often skewed portrayal of India's past (Ibid.,p.1). There are two distinct approaches to Indian and Western historiography. In the case of India, there were no connected narratives of the happenings. The discovery and rediscovery of narratives of India was constructed on the basis of the Western method of historical enquiry. While the project of the European Enlightenment has given Europeans the methods of Historical enquiry, as seen, for instance, in Edward Gibbon's narrative about the Roman Empire. When the West engages with India's history, its methods and tools for historical enquiry were heavily Western-biased.

The engagement of the West in developing knowledge about India initiated the understanding of the differences between the West and 'Others'. Moreover, it is essential to recognise that the taxonomies emerging from natural history, by shaping secular definitions of what it means to be 'modern' and 'civilised,' have simultaneously underscored the distinctions and, regrettably, the perceived inferiority of non-European societies. This framing not only reflects a bias but also perpetuates a hierarchy that undermines the rich complexities of diverse cultures between the 'East' and the 'West' (Metcalf, 1997, p. 18). The Europeans attempted to develop the notion of 'other', which can be identified apart from Christendom. They define themselves as 'enlightened' meant viewing others as 'savage' or 'vicious.' Similarly, to see themselves as 'modern' or 'progressive' required portraying others as 'primitive' or 'backward.' This process of defining oneself in opposition to others was a key aspect of the Enlightenment initiative (Ibid.). The reason behind much of this activity was the conviction that a deeper understanding of the colony would lead to enhanced control and serve as a solid foundation for the power

wielded by colonial authorities. This understanding was considered essential to the very '*furniture of empire',* with the transformation of this knowledge proving just as crucial as its initial acquisition (Thapar, 2002, p. 3). Understanding the civilisation of India from a European perspective revolves around two core approaches: *Orientalism* and *Utilitarianism.* The discourse of Orientalism emerged from the studies conducted by British officials of the British East India Company, which was deeply involved in trade with India, both within the region and from England. As the Company expanded its administration, it became essential for its officers to comprehend local customs and traditions. This urgency drove them to study languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali, and Tamil, and to develop grammars in English that became crucial tools in their engagement with India's rich and diverse civilisation.

Secondly, their exploration of the philosophy of Hinduism revealed a captivating and bewildering journey. They found it very different from the religious philosophies that existed in the West; the West encountered a religion rich in diversity, often defying conventional definitions. It stood apart as a non-monotheistic faith without a singular historical founder or a definitive sacred text that encapsulated its teachings. Instead, Hinduism thrives on a tapestry of rituals, customs, and a complex social structure intimately linked to the caste system. This fascinating complexity left them both intrigued and perplexed, highlighting the profound differences that challenge our understanding of spirituality (Ibid.). They realised lately that there was a pressing need to shape these beliefs within the familiar frameworks of existing religions, making them more relatable and accessible. Scholars have argued that the Hinduism we recognise today, significantly distinct from its earlier forms, emerged largely from this process of reformulation. In India, a rich tapestry of diverse religions thrived, often enjoying the patronage of kings across multiple faiths. This stands in stark contrast to Europe, where a singular religion—Christianity—often monopolised state support, with royal favour frequently extending to only one of its branches: either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism.

II. Emergence of Indological studies and its various phases

Indology emerged as a significant academic field when European scholars began to delve into Sanskrit, a defining moment thought to have occurred in the late 18th century, specifically around 1784. Some scholars also refer to these attempts as Orientalist Studies. Following the completion of Alexander Dow's *History of Hindostan* (1770), a historical account of how India was subjugated and how it led to the growth of despotism, the British Governor-General, Warren Hastings, began studying how the people of India *had been in possession of law, which continued unchanged from the remotest antiquity.* (Metcalf,1997,p.9). Hasting under the influence of the project of the Enlightenment to learn various cultures and to develop a knowledge of 'cultivation of language and science' (Ibid). With a dual approach driven by curiosity to develop knowledge about India's cultural philosophy, and for administrative convenience under the patronage of Hastings, along with William Jones, the Asiatic Society was founded in 1784, accompanied by a regular Journal titled *Asiatick Researches* (Marshall, 2009, p.189). At the dawn of Western scholarly exploration, there was a compelling belief that the ancient Sanskrit texts held the key to the fundamental doctrines of Hinduism.

In 1776, N. B. Halhed took a significant step forward with the publication of *A Code of Gentoo Laws*. This work was the result of a unique collaboration with eleven Sanskrit scholars who meticulously crafted a text, sentence by sentence, from a variety of original sources. This carefully curated collection was first translated into Persian and then rendered into English. Halhed believed that this work would not only define the customs and traditions of the native people but also serve as a crucial resource for establishing a new legal framework in Bengal. Interestingly, during this period, a series of influential English translations of key Sanskrit texts were published, including the *Bhagavad Gita* (1785), *Hitopadesha* (1787), *Shakuntala* (1789), *Kutasamhara* (1792), and *Manusmriti* (1794). These translations were foundational in providing the Western academic community with a fascinating glimpse into an exotic civilisation that was both mysterious and profound, unveiling a treasure trove of knowledge and insights that captivated the eager intellectuals of the time. William Jones believed that there was a common ancestor for Sanskrit and European languages, leading to significant connections between Sanskrit,

Greek, and Latin. This laid the foundation for comparative philology. The rise of Indology not only intrigued European scholars but also contributed to India's journey of self-understanding.

(i)The Phase of its beginning

As a formal discipline, Indology began to take shape by the late 18th century. However, its roots can be traced even further back in time, during what can be termed its prehistory. While one might argue that the serious Western interest in Indian thought can be linked to the era of Indo-Hellenic interactions (the cultural exchange and trade between the Indo-Greek Kingdom). Even though the rich tradition of Sanskrit and Buddhist scholarship in Japan originated as early as 555 A.D., as a result of Buddhism's introduction through Korea. What's more important is to understand the dedicated pursuit of knowledge about India by inquisitive travellers and purposeful missionaries during the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries. Their earnest efforts to explore and understand this vast and intricate culture laid the groundwork for the academic study of Indology. For instance, Stevens (1549-1619) emerges as a prominent European scholar who made remarkable strides in exploring the depths of the Indian language, particularly Konkani. During his visit to Goa from 1581 to 1588, the insightful Italian Filippo Sassetti recognised the fascinating linguistic parallels between Sanskrit and Italian, highlighting the interconnectedness of cultures. Another pivotal figure, Giacomo Fenicio, who passed away in Cochin in 1632, produced an influential work that delved into Indian traditions as documented in the *Purāṇas*.

Further, the Italian scholar De Nobili (1577-1656) became the first European to dedicate himself to Buddhist literature, paving the way for future explorations of this profound philosophical tradition. Abraham Rogerius, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, gathered invaluable insights into Hindu mythology, religious practices, and societal customs through firsthand interactions with two *Brāhmaṇas* fluent in Portuguese. He published his work in 1651, which is likely the earliest comprehensive account of South Indian Hinduism. Rogerius was instrumental in introducing *Bhartṛhari's* verses to European audiences, thus fostering a vibrant exchange of cultural and intellectual ideas. This remarkable collaboration among these pioneering scholars underscores the tremendous impact of European thinkers on our understanding of Indian culture and tradition, illustrating a rich tapestry of cross-cultural interaction. Later in 1718, Bignon, the librarian of the Collège Royal (now known as the Collège de France), made a seminal effort by acquiring an extensive collection of Sanskrit manuscripts. This led to a distinguished Indian collection, further enriched by Calmette, who sourced the invaluable manuscripts of the Vedic *Samhitās* from South India, alongside the contributions of Father Beschi. Notably, Father Pon authored the first Latin grammar of Sanskrit and translated key works, such as the *Amarkoša*, while also sending a significant cache of manuscripts back to France. Furthermore, Father Coeurdoux astutely highlighted the striking resemblances between Sanskrit and the classical languages of Greek and Latin, doing so nearly twenty years before Sir William Jones famously articulated the shared ancestry of these languages during his third annual address to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in January 1786.

In his speech, he declared the profound truths of linguistic heritage, asserting that Sanskrit is not only more perfect than Greek, but also more expansive than Latin, and uniquely refined beyond both. The early foundations of Indology were laid by English scholars such as Jones (1746-1794), Wilkins (1750-1836), and Colebrooke (1765-1836). It was the German Romantics, such as Herder and Goethe, who truly captured the imagination of Europe with their passionate embrace of India's rich cultural heritage.

(ii)The Heroic Age of Indology

The period from 1850 to 1920 can undoubtedly be called the heroic age of Indology. During these changing years, this field of study experienced remarkable advancements, particularly in Germany, which emerged as the leader in this intellectual pursuit. The researchers began to adopt the effective methodologies of classical philology for Indology, establishing that India deserved to be examined with the same rigour as Greece and Rome. This shift allowed Indology to become increasingly integrated into the broader spectrum of humanistic studies in Europe. As has been aptly noted, Indology evolved into a genuine science that ultimately proved to be more enriching and

fruitful in the realm of human studies than research on Egypt, Assyria, or China. A significant distinction between Indology and disciplines such as Egyptology or Assyriology lies in the fact that, while Indology primarily focuses on the study of Sanskrit and Indian antiquities, it also engages with a vibrant and 'living' subject matter. No other civilisation has exhibited such uninterrupted continuity from ancient times to the present day as that of India. Orientalism inspired the imagination and quest for liberation in European Romanticism, contrasting sharply with the rigid structure of Neo-Classicism. The allure of Asian cultures created a new Romantic paradigm, promising a departure from classical Greek revival and offering a means to escape the constraints of Enlightenment rationality. This cultural shift fueled German thinkers like Herder and the Schlegel brothers, along with English poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, who sought solace in nature and Eastern fantasies amidst industrialisation. The Romantic movement thus embraced the mystical qualities of the Orient, viewing it as a path to freer artistic expression.

The Romanticism of Germans significantly shaped a mystical image of India, portraying it as a land of deep symbolism and giving rise to the concept of the "spiritual East". A stark dichotomy emerged, labelling Indian values as 'spiritual' and European ones as 'materialistic,' while neglecting the complexities of Indian society. Over the last century, this oversimplified view has been further endorsed by certain Indian factions, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of cultural values. (Thapar, 2002, p. 5).

(iii)The Scientific Indology in Europe

This period has witnessed the transition of the Romantic era, which has adopted a radical critical perspective towards India's classical tradition. During that period, the advancement of scientific Indology in Europe faced unique challenges that hindered its progress. The research under scientific inquiry was often the result of a superficial, conservative, and traditional approach to studying Indian sources. Even more concerning was the influence of occultists and mystics, who seized upon India's rich spiritual philosophy to craft extravagant and baseless theories designed to appease the curiosity of the seeking "*Western Illuminati"* (Dandekar,1977).

A Utilitarian Critique has been constructed based on the legalistic philosophy of Britain. The views of James Mill and Thomas Macaulay were foundational to the Scientific-Utilitarian critique. Mill's detailed periodic account of Indian History in his *History of British India (1817)* has developed a sense of the diverse and divided history of different religious philosophies in India. Karl Marx's concept of the *Asiatic Mode of Production emphasise*s despotism and stagnation as barriers to transformative change, particularly in comparison to Europe. The absence of private property created a direct relationship between the king and the peasant, eliminating the class conflicts necessary for societal evolution. Max Weber's study of India's religious landscape, specifically Hinduism, revealed a rigid caste system that prevented social mobility. Unlike the theoretical formulations of Marx, Weber focused on the absence of a Puritan ethic in Indian sects, which he viewed as essential for the emergence of capitalism in Europe. While some Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina sects showed some economic rationality, it was minimal compared to the frugality and investment culture fostered by the Puritan ethic in the West. This comparison emphasises the distinct cultural influences that shaped the development of capitalism in different regions (Thapar, 2002, p. 5).

III. The 19th-century Nationalist Indologist

In 1859, Max Müller wrote that *'Indians are a nation of philosophers and that the Indian intellect is lacking in political or material speculation; the Indian never knew the feeling of nationality*' (Friedrich Max Müller, 1860). Gibbon has said that the entire Oriental history is "one unceasing record of valour, greatness, degeneracy and decay" (Sharma, 2012, p. 1). While Green stated that "the empires of the East are, in main, tax-collecting institutions. They exercise coercive power on their subjects of the most violent kind" (Prasad, 1928,p.498). These thoughts were about India's knowledge tradition. dominate the bias of imperialist ideology.

In the late nineteenth century, Indian historians focused on political narratives and dynastic histories of rulers. By the early twentieth century, many became influential in the independence movement, reshaping the historical

narrative. Nationalist historians adopted positive colonial interpretations of early Indian history, challenging negative portrayals by arguing that institutions such as democracy and constitutional monarchy were integral to India's heritage.

The 19th century saw significant contributions from scholars such as R. Mitra, R. G. Bhandarkar, R. C. Dutt, A. S. Altekar, U. N. Ghoshal, K. P. Jayaswal, H. C. Raychaudhuri, R. K. Mookherjee, R. C. Majumdar, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, and H. C. Ojha. Pioneers like Bhagwan Lal Indraji, R.L. Mitra, and B.G. Tilak played a crucial role in exploring various facets of India's rich history, laying a strong foundation for advocating the nation's political and social advancement. However, it is important to note that many of these distinguished scholars were categorised into differing camps of thought, marked as either moderates or radicals in their approaches.

In 1887, R.C Dutt wrote an article titled '*Civilisation in the Brahmana period ';* this article deals with the justice observed by the righteous king in the Vedic era. Consequently, Purnendu Narayan Singh condemned Auckland Colvin's comment that the British had taught the people of India the aspect of fair rule. His article in 1894 argued that the British had ignored the system of governance that prevailed in Ancient India. In 1907, A.C. Das, through his article, supported the view of previous nationalists that it is a mistake to limit the form of government in India to only autocracy; he suggested that India did not follow absolute monarchy, but rather a *limited monarchy*. He had hinted that local self-government had existed in India. Prof. S.K. Aiyangar, through his thesis on *Cola* Administration, cited the existence of elected village Panchayats in early medieval times under the *Cola* dynasty.

In the early 20th Century, the school of Indology was greatly supported by the works of K.P. Jayaswal, who contributed an article to *Modern Review*, which later appeared as a significant contribution in the form of a Book titled *Hindu Polity.* This book has shown the significance of republics in ancient Indian History. He mentioned the popular assemblies, such as *paura* and *janapada,* which check on the power of the king. He concluded his book with the words that '*Golden age of his polity lies only in the past but in the future'* (Jayaswal, 2005,p.366). His conclusion presents a strong ideological case for complete independence, which was later greatly endorsed by Indian Nationalists. In 1916, P.N. Banerjee published his work "*Administration in Ancient India,"* in which he asserts that the ancient system of government should be described as a constitutional monarchy. Later in 1916, K.V. Ranawami Aiyangar, in his book *Some Aspects of Ancient Indian Polity,* discussed the armoury of ancient polity in terms of weapons. Two years later, in 1918, R.C. Majumdar had acknowledged the 'spirit of Co-operation'; he intended to demonstrate the greatness of India's cultural tradition. By 1922 B.K. Sarkar published his *Political Institutions and Theories of Hindus.* In his work, he condemns the Western intellectuals such as Hegel, Cousin, Max Müller, Maine, Janet, Smith, Willoughby and Huntington and suggests that the 'servile and degenerate of Asia of today' should be compared with Asia, which was the leader of humanity's progress. A year later, in 1923, U.N. Ghosal, in his *A History of Hindu Political Theories*, refutes Max Müller's view that India does not have its own concept of the state. He suggested that Buddhist political thought is a 'bold and avowed appeal to human reason'. D.R. Bhandarkar, in his "Some Aspects of Ancient Hindu Polity" (1925), quoted references from the *Arthashastra.* And suggested that it is no longer correct to assert that the Hindu mind did not contribute to the development of political theories and that the Indians never set up politics as an independent branch of knowledge. In 1927, V.R.R. Dikshitar strongly supported the idea of a great, glorious past. In *Local Government in Ancient India*, R.K. Mookerji suggested the presence of local government in ancient India. *Whereas* P.N. Banerjee's *International Law and Custom in Ancient India (1920)* suggested that International Law is not a *'Favoured Monopoly'* of the West, the Ancient Indian has a definite knowledge of the rule of international law according to which they regard their international conduct. S.V. Viswanath's *International Law in Ancient India* compared the First World War, which was characterised by a lack of morality, to *Dharmayuddha* in Ancient Indian traditions, which were fought according to moral principles. Other works in a similar duration, such as S.K. Aiyangar's *Evolution of Hindu Administrative Institutions in South India (1931),* dwell in the native form of constitutional government, whereas U.N. Ghoshal, in his *Contribution to the History of the Hindu Revenue System* (1929), defines the principles of taxation formulation in early times.

History plays a crucial role in shaping national identity and culture, making it a focal point of conflict between anti-colonial nationalists and their colonial counterparts. Interestingly, some colonial perspectives, notably those of the Orientalists, found a surprising resonance in nationalist literature. The discourse of nationalism seeks to anchor itself in historical legitimacy, which is why history becomes a deeply sensitive issue. While nationalist narratives may not always provide entirely new interpretations of India's past, they nonetheless serve as a formidable voice in the ongoing discourse regarding history and its implications.

IV. Conclusion

A brief assessment of Indology and the historiography of India reveals a complex interplay of colonial perceptions, intellectual developments, and the evolution of Knowledge about Indian history itself. The 18th-century efforts to develop Indology as an academic discipline were initiated with a European bias to seek knowledge of their colonial subject, curiosity about an unknown civilisation, and an attempt to maintain supremacy in knowledge of cultural traditions from their colonial subjects. The discipline of Indology has been tested through various phases of its development, from its initial beginnings to the Heroic Age of Indology, which coincided with German Romanticism, to the phase of Scientific Indology of Europe, which was heavily influenced by the Western 'scientific temperament' to the phase of native edition and might be correction in the discipline of Indology in the 19th century and 20th century parallel with the national movement of India. Indology continues to remain significant post-independence as a discipline, and a spark has been added to the field by the initiation of discussions on the Indian Knowledge System; however, the papers have limitations in tracing only its pre-independence foundational debates. The analysis concludes, without a doubt, that there are still more chapters waiting to be unfolded about Indian Cultural Heritage, and many more truths are yet to be revealed.

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