The Politics of British Orientalism: Evangelism and the Aryan-Dravidian Dichotomy | IndiaFacts

Evangelism and the Aryan-Dravidian Dichotomy

That we Indians still hold on to the idea of there having been an ‘Aryan invasion’ of our country is an indication of how minds are colonized. Removing this theory (garbed as fact) from our school textbooks can be a powerful way to reclaim our heritage.

Knowledge is Political

Any knowledge that does not strictly fall within the boundaries of the physical sciences can be, fundamentally, knowledge that is ideological. This means two things. Firstly, its character is determined by the ideological biases, interests, and agendas of those who produce it. And secondly, that it might be consciously deployed to induce people to think in certain ways. Take, for instance, the discipline of economics. Its major strains – Marxist and liberal – are ideological biases of groups of economists and are used to promote the socialist or the free-market agendas. Take, for instance, the discipline of economics. Its major strains – Marxist and liberal – are the ideological biases of groups of economists and are used to promote the socialist or the free-market agendas.

Understanding ‘Orientalism’

From the eighteenth century till the end of WWII, there existed, to borrow a phrase employed by the historian of ideas, Edward Said, “the system of European or Western knowledge about the Orient.” This knowledge mainly took the form of a post-colonial theorist, called it “the system of European or Western knowledge about the Orient.” This knowledge mainly took the form of philological (relating to the study of languages) and historical investigation of the Orient.

In this article I seek to discuss the politics of the British protagonists of a now forgotten, but once very influential, idea called ‘Orientalism.’ To be more particular, I will seek to uncover and analyze a crucial bias that the British and their agendas that it eventually made them pursue. But before I do this, let us try to make some proper sense of what I mean by “Orientalism.”
The Evangelical Bias of British ‘Orientalism’

The rule of the East India Company (hereafter EIC) can be said to have formally commenced in the Indian Warren Hastings assumed charge in Kolkata (then Calcutta) as the first Governor-General of its territorial | were producing bits and pieces of ‘Orientalist’ knowledge. They were urgently required – to administer an that the EIC now ruled. Thus, in the year 1776, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (1751-1830), an employee of the Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits (here ‘Gentoo’ is a transliteration of Hindu). It was a clumsy rendering Vivadarnavasetu – produced in Sanskrit by a group of Brahmans hired by the EIC. The Vivadarnavasetu con from the authoritative Sanskrit textual sources; alongside, the Brahmans had also prepared and included i prescriptions.[4](#_edn4) The text was meant to be used by the judges of the EIC when deciding disputes bet up the Code with A Grammar of the Bengali Language; it was placed before the Board of the EIC by Warren I (# edn5) Presumably, the Grammar was to help the EIC officials pick up Bengali, so essential if they were to Bengali-speaking Indians. Meanwhile, Charles Wilkins, another EIC functionary who designed the Bengali for the printing of the Grammar, was working on a translation of the Bhagwend Gita (eventually published in British ‘Orientalism’, however, genuinely took off only after the indefatigable William Jones’s (1746-1794) Supreme Court of Judicature – the topmost court in the EIC’s domains. Much before he had even thought of seriously engaging in ‘Orientalist’ researches – he had published a Grammar of the Persian Language in 177 epithet ‘Persian Jones’. [7](#_edn7) Understandably, when he found himself in the ‘Orient’, in India of all plaknowledge was whetted beyond measure. Thus, within months of arriving in India, the ship bearing him re 1783, Jones sought to create an ‘Asiatic Society’ to systematize and coordinate the ‘Orientalist’ researches efforts bore fruit and the Asiatic Society was formally founded by a gathering of the EIC folks on 15 Januar the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William.[8](# edn8) Thereafter, Jones immersed himself in discover incredible ardor. He employed Brahmans to teach him Sanskrit and published his translation of Kalidasa’s (entitled Sacontala, or the Fatal Ring: An Indian Drama by Calidas) and that of the Manusmriti in 1794 (enti Institutes of Manu).

However, as he undertook these ‘Orientalist’ labors, a certain bias never left Jones. Throughout, he remain creed, Christianity. Jones definitely admired aspects of Hinduism. For example, its “concept of the hereafter, rebirths till the soul attains liberation. But he held no doubt, as he implied in the preface to his translatrixcountry had been blessed with the “only true revelation”[10](# edn10) – the one that the Bible contained. T historian Thomas R. Trautmann. According to him, “there was no question in Jones’s mind that Christiani (# edn11) This certitude, in fact, was one reason why Jones was making such an intense study of the Sanskri textual references that verified the Biblical narrative – so much better if the scriptures of the non-Christianity. Trautmann, thus, points out that Jones was much enthused by the Puranic story of the great “independent confirmation of the flood of Noah” and “fortified Christian truth against the skeptics.”[12](#

What Jones had been doing was by no means exceptional. Before him, another EIC employee by the name 1798) had begun studying the scriptures of Hinduism with the intent of buttressing Christianity. As Traut believe, and publicly declared, that the Hindu scriptures completed the Biblical narrative and supplied its l (# edn13) In fact, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed too, in later life, after leaving India, sought to find support for C
By the early decades of the nineteenth century, Indo-centric 'Orientalist' researches had caught on in Great Britain with a full-blown evangelical intention, not just a subtle bias towards verifying the Christian truth with the help of certain individuals in the British 'Orientalist' establishment who felt that India could be properly Christianized only after a full understanding of her and her classical heritage. One of them was Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1860) who was a surgeon in the employ of the EIC. Apparently, he ardently wished to 'save' the natives of India from their ignorance, which he thought was due to the fact that not enough of the Christian clergy bothered to learn Sanskrit. The result of this was that he was unable to freely communicate with the Hindus and “failed to exercise their influence over them.”

Another old EIC hand, Lt.-Colonel Joseph Boden, too had similar ideas. For a military man his thinking was as follows: ‘a more general knowledge and critical knowledge (sic.) of the Sanskrit language will enable us to understand the minds of Hindus one had to understand it fully. For this, Wilson believed, it was essential that the missionaries contest and destroy it. We also learn from Muller’s biographer, Nirad C. Chaudhary, that to persuade the adherents of the Brahmo Samaj to declare themselves Christian.

The whole election episode left Max Muller very bitter. He passionately desired the Boden Professorship as a New Testament scholar and was the right man for the job. He was a scholar of Sanskrit, and his forte was classical Sanskrit which “lived and breathed in the current speech” of the Indians. Hence, his researches, which were on the religious texts composed in classical Sanskrit, were to be of great importance. Presumably because, as the linguistic usages of these texts survived in the everyday speech of the Indians, they also did. The diligent Prof. Williams will help the missionaries understand and weed them out. Seems quite convinced by his claims. In a handbill it distributed in Oxford, they urged Williams’ election to the Boden Professorship. The ultimate objective of both Muller and Williams was, thus, identical. Both were driving at a fuller understanding of the Rig Veda –

"It is the root of their (Indians’) religion, and to show what that root is, is, I feel sure, the only way of uprooting the last 3000 years (italics mine)."

On the basis of what we know about him, and what has survived of his private correspondence (quite a lot of it), it was not because of his scholarship alone. One of the charges that the supporters of Muller made against Williams was that he was not a native of England. But, though of German birth, he was by then effectively a British subject. Muller was residing in Oxford, England since 1846 (he continued to do so till his death in 1900), was married to an English lady, and had made himself an insider to the British ‘Orientalist’ establishment. This was why the evangelical drive of Indo-centric British ‘Orientalism’? This question attains further importance.

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Construction of the Aryan-Dravidian Dichotomy

Some years after H.H. Wilson took charge as the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford, a young man arrived in India. The twenty-four year old Robert Caldwell (1814-1891) landed in Chennai (then Madras) in 1840 as a missionary of the London Missionary Society. Had Wilson met Caldwell, he would have liked the young man. Caldwell freely admitted he did not learn Sanskrit, but he acquired mastery over another classical Indian language – namely, Tamil. His efforts drove him into ‘Orientalist’ researches – he eagerly took to studying the language, religious beliefs, and civilization. The impact of Caldwell’s racial theory has been major and extremely malevolent. In fact, it is grist to the mill of the separatist Tamil politicians in the 1960s originated with Robert Caldwell.

Caldwell’s theater of operations was the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu where he sought converts in the late 1840s. He was, however, not very successful. Frustrated, he appears to have ascribed his lack of success to the minds of the Nadars. Caldwell, thus, writes the American anthropologist Nichols B. Dirks, came to think ‘Brahmanic belief’, he will also efface the influence the Brahmans had over the Shanars (and all other non-Brahmans) detached from the body of Hinduism and rush in droves to embrace the cross.

Caldwell, in order to attain his objective, immersed in philological speculations (contained in A Comparati South-Indian Family of Languages which he published in 1856). Their outcome was his claim that Sanskrit were Brahmans and their religiosity. He contended that “Brahmans had brought Sanskrit with them when they south, along with a strain of Hinduism that emphasized idol worship.”[22](#_edn22) The original Tamil religion, he contended, “in claiming the [civilizational and religious] independence of the Tamils, he Christian conversion.”[23](#_edn23) As though this was not mischievous enough, Caldwell did more – he ascribed ‘racial’ identity and imagined that India had a history of ‘race wars’. Caldwell averred that Brahmans were moved southwards as “colonists and instructors” once the Dravidians were militarily defeated by the Aryans.

By the end of the nineteenth-century, this malicious ‘race theory’ had become a “settled fact” – that India was wake of a military clash between “invading...Sanskrit speaking Aryan” and dark-skinned “aborigines”[25](#_edn25) defeated and subjugated. The canonization of this idea had a lot to do with the fact that no other than Max Muller did the researches. He opined that all speakers of Indo-European languages, irrespective of their complexion, made it, Muller thought that “the same blood ran in the veins of the soldiers of [Lord] Clive as in the veins of those who Indra killed with his weapon (Rv. V, 29,10), are probably meant for noseless...”[27](#_edn27)

“But now a new field of ‘knowledge’ had emerged in Europe – that of ‘race science’ – wherein racial taxonomy was identified with the skin color of human groups. It was unacceptable to ‘race science’ that dark Indians and white Europeans had the same blood running in their veins, not to mention that dark skinned peoples were capable of building civilizations on their own. Muller now put forward the hypothesis that he came up with was that, a fair-skinned ‘Aryan’ race. He very nearly teased the Rig Veda to find evidence that it was the result was still meager. It appears that Muller himself was aware how flimsy the foundations of his hypothesis were.
It is important to know that “Muller himself later abandoned his interpretation of the word sipra, so that even a single word (anasa) in a single passage [of the Rig Veda] (RV 5.29.10)...” That we Indians still hold on to the idea of an ‘invasion’ of our country is an indication of the supreme extent to which our minds are colonized. Removing school textbooks can be a purposeful step towards decolonizing them. If not, this malevolent theory helps us kids for what it is – an outcome of the politics of British ‘Orientalism’.

References


[12] *Aryans and British India*, p.58.


[16] *Scholar Extraordinary*, p.221.


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