

Negotiating Scottish ‘distinctiveness’ (?): Unmasking the British Conquest and the Construction of Empire in the 19th Century Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

India in the 19th century encapsulates a very different and contesting Scottish dimension to the expansion of British Empire. The Scottish legacy in the field of British colonial enterprise has been blurred over the time. Scotland, which was once a colony of the English, was incorporated in the Great Britain in the Union Act of 1707. But distinction between Scottish and English was never made. Thus, in the field of literature we do not find distinct Scottish identity of the contributors like- Walter Scott, R. L. Stevenson, Adam Smith, Thomas Carlyle- to name a few. They are placed in the ‘English literature’ without due emphasis on Scottish background and influence. Similarly, the common notion of the British imperial enterprise has masked the contribution of the Scottish administrators working under the British. Now, in the context of India when we talk about ‘Scottish Orientalism’, we need to focus on the already blurred identity of being ‘Scottish’ in the dominant English field. The Union Act (1707) between England and Scotland produced a space for the Scottish people to participate in the British imperial enterprise. This paper focuses to unmask the role of some of the Scottish scholar-administrators working under the British for a distinctively Scottish contribution to the expansion of the British imperial activities that helps to explore the nature of the intellectual and religious engagement. The study offers a distinctive Scottish Orientalist school as Scottish participation of empire remains open ended and it argues for a complex assessment of Scottish individuals who though shared some philological and philosophical interests and assumptions, nevertheless diverged in many other respects.

Keywords: Empire, hegemony, Orientalism, Scottish-distinctiveness, Scottish Orientalist school

Introduction

The well-known account of the British Empire in India that commenced around 1600 with the incorporation of East India Company draws attention of most of the intellectuals so that the exploitations exercised towards the subject people can be reassessed and some moral responsibilities can be inflicted upon the British Raj for its ‘brutish’ rule for more than two centuries. Sashi Tharoor in his explosive May 2015 Oxford Union speech turned book *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016) explores how disastrous British rule was for India- ranging from the drain of national resources to Britain, the destruction of the Indian textile, steel-making and shipping industries and the negative transformation of agriculture. Tharoor demolishes the arguments of Western and Indian apologists for Empire on the supposed benefits of British rule, including democracy and political freedom, the rule of law and the railways. Again, for Tharoor, the few unarguable benefits – the English language, tea and cricket – were never actually intended for the benefit of the colonized subjects but introduced to serve the interests of the colonizers.

This historiography of the British Imperial rule in India comes under the scrutinizing lens of Sashi Tharoor in his book *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016). These claims can also be validated by an earlier essay - "Orientalist Constructions of India", published four decades earlier than Tharoor's book, in *Modern Asian Studies* in 1986 by Ronald Inden, Professor of Indology at the University of Chicago. What differed Inden from that of Tharoor is that while Inden takes the theoretical stance for the formulation of colonial episteme through hegemony, Tharoor broadly labelled it as British Raj without any marker of Scottishness and Englishness and henceforth called the supposed benefit of the colonial rule as 'Enlightened Despotism' without any Scottish distinction. Interestingly, religion and caste which were at the core of the Colonial enterprise of division enabled the British to produce knowledge of the natives and also they were taught to internalise it. In the 19th century, the trio - James Mill (author of *The History of British India*, published between 1817 and 1826), Thomas Babington Macaulay (famous for his *Minutes of 1835 on Indian Education*) and Friedrich Max Muller (the German Indologist working in Britain) - had established a colonial construction of the Indian past based on the superiority of religion and caste where Hindus (as descendents of the Aryans) were given the prominence of being indigenous to India and Muslims were excluded from the essential national narrative. This history became the received narrative to most of the intellectuals working on Indian history and it gave birth in the 20th century to the two-nation theory and helped to divide the country.

At this very juncture, this paper endeavours to reassess the popular received narrative of Indian historiography. In the 19th century India, the role of some of the Scottish scholar-administrators for a distinctively Scottish contribution to the expansion of the British imperial activities explores the nature of the intellectual and the religious engagement that contests Inden's argument, as the distinctive Scottish Orientalist school in Scottish participation of empire remains open ended and it argues for a complex assessment of Scottish individuals who though shared some philological and philosophical interests and assumptions, nevertheless diverged in many other respects.

Since India remained one of the chief interests for the colonial masters, the study of India became necessary for colonial rule and expansion. As this study of India was done through the lens of the colonial masters, India was produced as the 'other' as opposed to the Western 'self' (Said, 1978, p.2) - taking cue from Edward Said's discussion on orientalism in his polemic work *Orientalism* (1978). Orientalism presents a way of thinking that leads to the binary between 'the East' and 'the West'. An orientalist disseminates his interpretation through writing and teaching about the orient that creates conception of the West as 'subject'- the 'self' and the orient as 'object'- the 'other'. So, the construction of India for the colonial masters was to be an uneducated, uncivilised, rude and barbaric nation. So, the term 'orientalism' receives in this context a pejorative sense because a dichotomy between the East and the West is always present.

Now, to disambiguate the phrase 'Scottish Orientalism' in the title, it is imperative to focus on the Scottish distinction amidst the European rulers in India. Since Scotland was incorporated in the British territory to form the United Kingdom, in the process of British colonisation, Scots were included too. For administrative as well as missionary purpose, we find some Scottish scholar-administrators in India who studied and observed the richness of India in the field of economy, education, culture and religion. Certainly, these Scottish scholar-administrators shunned the European superiority and approached towards defining India in its own terms. Among these Scottish scholar-administrators and missionaries we find- Charles Grant, David Hare, Alexander Duff, William Drummond who were missionaries but contributed significantly in the field of education and reformation of Bengal and in a large scale in India;

William Jones advocated for classical learning and he became a Sanskritist and established the Asiatic Society (1784) for studying oriental languages and researches; Thomas Munro, John Malcolm and Mountstuart Elphinstone emphasized on the classical languages and approached towards a native-based governance in India; Alexander Hamilton, John leyden, James Mackintosh, William Crawford, Vans Kennedy approached a philological study of India that helped them understanding the origin, development and evolving history of India.

Contextualizing Orientalism and Distinctive Scottish Interventions

Since most of the Europeans constructed India from the Western perspective, India was portrayed as uneducated, uncivilised, barbaric and rude nation that needed to be upgraded through Western education and culture. The Orient was a subject not well studied by the 19th century European writers and thinkers like John Stuart Mill, Arnold, Carlyle, Dickens, Newman, Macaulay, Ruskin, George Eliot who had definite views on race and imperialism that eventually denigrated the Orient. If this be the common perspective of Orientalism, in the context of India a different attitude from the Scottish scholar-administrators is found in their approach towards India. They studied and understood the Indian culture, religion, language, education and economy and advanced towards making of the orient not through conjectural means but as what India actually is.

The common meaning of orientalism that has acquired pejorative sense, a different kind of orientalism can be seen from the Scottish scholar-administrators. However, the Scottish scholar-administrators are called orientalists because they advocated for the making of India not through Western means (as Saidian Orientalism explores), but by understanding the richness of the orient. So this kind of orientalism is pre-Saidian in nature and concept and can be termed as 'constructive orientalism', as Bayly called in his *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social communication in India 1780-1870* (1996), that was a self-fulfilling scholarly venture to acquire true knowledge and to get involved in a cultural exchange with the native scholars, rather than Saidian or post-Saidian orientalism that seeks empowerment of the colonial state.

The coming of the Scots in India was primarily intended to serve the British interest of colonialism. However, remaining within the colonial power the interventions of the Scots in the 19th century India is significant in assessing the Scottish contribution towards India. The Scottish contribution to the field of education and reformation in India is evident when David Hare stepped in Calcutta in 1800. His interest was laid upon the study of the native society of Calcutta and he devoted himself in the field of education and social reformation, rather than his own business. He became a close friend of the other reformist figure of Bengal- Raja Rammohan Roy who formed "Atmiya Sabha" in 1815 which aimed at developing the 'moral condition' of the native Hindu society through the activities of "Brahma Sabha" to disseminate Western system of scientific education against the prevalent superstitions, monstrous idolatry and inhuman custom of Suttee rite in the Bengal society. Rammohan's establishment of "Atmiya Sabha" in his house was supported by Hare for its aim but he differed with the suggestion of establishing a college to purge the minds of the native youths from the "pernicious cants" (Mitra, 1877, p. xii). With the initiative of Hare it resulted into the establishment of Hindu College (Later on Presidency College and today's Presidency University) in 1817. The importance of David Hare in pushing native Bengal towards a modernised society is also evident from the fact that he was also associated with a number of schools - "School Book Society" (1817) that was for preparing and publishing text books in English and Bengali; "School Society" (1818) that was for establishing new English and Bengali schools in Calcutta. Hare also "started, managed and personally supervised "Simla

School”, “Arpuli School” and “Pataldanga School” to impart education to the poor students” (Mitra xviii). He was also behind the idea of promoting education of the women in Bengal.

Hare played an important role in bridging the different ideological approaches of the British crowned educationists and hence he advanced to put synthesis between the East and the West. The first approach was of the ‘Anglicist’ school headed by Macaulay advocated for replacing Indian culture for Western with English as the medium of education. This was supported by Rammohan Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore and others. The second school was called as ‘Orientalists’ who were in favour of dissemination of Western science and education and advocated for Sanskrit and Arabic. This school had two different opinions- one in Bengal with Hastings and Minto to claim for Sanskrit and Arabic as medium and the other was in Bombay with Munro and Elphinstone that advocated for vernacular language. David Hare in this clash of rival ideologies put synthesis with his comment:

... [T]rue realisation of this aim of education must organically and naturally grow from within. Transplantation or grafting of a foreign culture into the traditional culture of a country might be necessary for the transfusion of life into it in times of decay, but this must be done on the natural soil of its cultural traditions. (Mitra, 1877, p. xx)

Apart from David Hare another Scot deserves mention is William Drummond (1785-1843). He was a theological dissenter. He ran the Dhurromtollah Academy in Calcutta. He strongly condemned Phrenology (his work *Objections to Phrenology*, 1829) and was inclined to induce free thinking among his students by carry forwarding the Scottish Enlightenment. Henry Derozio who later became the influential young teacher of Hindu College between 1828 and 1831, was taught in the Academy of Drummond. Derozio’s followers, The Young Bengal, shunned the orthodox Bengali culture and literature and espoused Western ways for their debates on poetry and philosophy conducted in English language. This new age spirit of freedom of thought and expression opened up the gateway of the world to this section of society in Calcutta through the medium of English which subsequently stirred the entire country.

In the evolution of modern India, the first Scottish Church Free Mission missionary by Revd Alexander Duff (1806-1878) played an exemplary role. The role of the missionaries in shaping the indigenous Bengal society is evident when Duff shouldered on the responsibilities of the church movement. Duff came to India in 1830 for missionary purpose from the Church of Scotland. He believed in the development of the whole with English as the medium of instruction. Duff had three different phases in India- 1830-1834, 1840-1851 and 1855-1863. He was a good friend of both Rammohan and Hare. Duff was the superintendent at the General Assembly institution (now Scottish Church College) where science and English were taught with the aim of introducing progressive value system to Indian students. He taught at Hindu College where he ignited the minds of the students for freedom of thought and expression. He worked at Serampore Press with William Carey and published books on Bengali grammar and Bible in Bengali. This step to return to the vernacular language Bengali alongside English education by Duff marks a shift from the early British Orientalists’ advocacy of classical Sanskrit literature during Hastings’ time in the approach of imparting knowledge to the natives. Thus the Scottish intervention in the field of modern education in India helped to shape much of the intellectual horizon of Bengal Renaissance. Through the Scottish impact a reverse track to meet the West was created which is exemplified by both Rammohan and Dwarkanath as they both visited England and died there.

The contribution of the Missionaries’ linguistic and educational work marked a significant development of modern Bengal. The Asiatic Society in Calcutta was founded on 15th January, 1784

by William Jones, an outstanding scholar from Oxford, who arrived in Calcutta on 25th September, 1738 as a Puisne judge of the Old Supreme Court. While others were thinking of individual research and study, Jones was the first to think in terms of a permanent organisation for Oriental studies and research in a large scale in India.

The interventions by certain Scots affected the religious thinking, education in Bengal society that informed the wave of change. From around the mid nineteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century the Scottish Orientalists contributed to the socio-cultural, religious and literary debates affecting the social reality and ideology of the times in Scotland and India. Their approach resulted from the ideas generated during the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Jane Rendall has remarked

...the extent to which the Scottish Enlightenment offered a conceptual framework for the understanding of complex and alien Asian societies has been underestimated. (Rendall, 1982, p. 69)

Scottish Enlightenment invented the modern world through its ideas. The Act of Union in 1707 gave Scotland opportunity to work within and benefit from British enterprise. The Scottish Reformation (1638) introduced democratic spirit to Scottish culture by offering schools in every parish and establishing up of Scottish Presbyterianism. The Scottish Enlightenment deemed man as a product of history and an animal of his environment. The thirst of knowledge and the willingness to challenge the dogmas became the spirit of Scottish Enlightenment. The Scots were influenced by the philosophy of Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) who believed that people are born with an innate moral sense of what is right and what is wrong, "that man is not inherently selfish and his search for personal and public happiness is justified from this sense of moral judgement" (Herman, 2001, p. 73). Many years later this liberal thinking by the Scots was exemplified when Indian National Congress was formed with the founder members like Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912) and Sir William Wedderburn (1838-1918) became also the President of Indian National Congress, both of whom were Scots. Another businessman from Scotland, George Yule (1829-1892) also became the President of Indian National Congress. David Hume radically observed that reason is and ought to be the slave of passion and it is people's discretion to lead that passion in a constructive way. Adam Smith in his notable work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) explored the nature of human progress that enables one to place himself in another's position with a sense of fellow feeling. Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), the Scottish polymath, put the disparate works of the Scottish school together as a system, "a system of classical liberalism that provides the conceptual tools they could use as a framework they could use for their analysis of Asian cultures" (Powell, 2010, p. 9). The Scottish Enlightenment with its insight enabled human beings to free themselves from the constructed myths and see the world as it is.

William Robertson (1721-1793), the Principal of the University of Edinburgh, was a notable historian who wrote while residing in a metropole in Scotland about a distinguished sophisticated civilisation in India that facilitated a cultural exchange between the East and the West in his 1791 volume of *An Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*. The Scottish Orientalists who were writing in India like Quintin Craufurd (1743-1819) and his *Sketches chiefly relating to the History, Religion, Learning, and Manners, of the Hindoos* (1792) became significant by endorsing a similar perspective which is very much in the line of the scholar-administrators like Sir Thomas Munro (1761-1827), Sir John Malcolm (1769-1833), Hon'ble Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) and the Muir brothers of Kilmarnock, John Muir (1810-1882) and Sir William Muir (1819-1905) whose study of the original sources of Vedic and Arabic civilisation are seminal works by the Scottish Orientalists (Powell, 2010, p. 10).

The other side of the perception of India through Scottish discourse is effected by another Scot, James Mill (1773-1836) in his six volume work *The History of British India*, published in 1817. Mill's *History* was a recommended seminal text for the British personnel who came to rule India. They considered this *History* as a source of knowledge which told them of the inherent 'evil' and 'corrupt' nature of the Hindu and 'depravity', fuelled by his superstition and 'primitive' religion (Mukherjee, Fraser and Sen, 2017, p. 6). Initially the British used 'Hindu' as a synonym for everything 'Indian' which later on used for the religious majority of the sub-continent. Such misreading and misinterpretation of Indian culture by Mill justified the coloniser's sense of superiority that led to a sense of disinterest among the East India Company servants and the employees of the Raj in Indian culture, literature, and the historical continuity of a civilisation that had been validated earlier by Orientalists like Robertson (Mukherjee, Fraser and Sen, 2017, p. 7).

Scottish researchers like Sir Ronald Ross (1857-1932) who won the Nobel Prize in 1902 was born in India and William Roxburgh (1751-1815), a botanist, was the first superintendent of the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta (1793-1813). They conducted research in India and contributed to the field of science in India. Sir Daniel Hamilton was associated with the rural communities in the Sunderbans by providing cooperatives and micro credits. The marginalisation of Indian history through written discourse by not setting foot in India And through the experiences gathered by second hand experience is another way of validating Western superiority by Mill who claimed expertise in Indian history from the metropole in Scotland. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) while enjoying the membership of Governor General's Council in India consolidated Mill's argument in his *Minute of Education* (1835) by passing judgement that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Sharp, 1920, p. 109). He also dismissed the continuous literary richness of India in Sanskrit and Arabic that was over 3000 years old. These views were instrumental in creating facts about India that India could be written about, assessed and branded as inferior without understanding the people and their context and thereby constructing myth of Indian barbarism and decadence against western rationality and superiority negating the view that was prevalent and practised during the Scottish Enlightenment.

Conclusion

The Scottish presence among the large number of English rulers though might be counted as putative; it bears significance separating itself from the dominating colonial English rulers keeping its own ingenuity by not setting themselves on the highest strata in the colonised India, for Scotland has always been different from the English system. The Scottish people spoke Gaelic and Scot, not English, until they came under the Great Britain in the Union Act of 1707 that merged England and Scotland to form a new kingdom. David Armitage has argued that England and Scotland retained their particular religious and political institutions and remained, in more respects, divided by Protestantism than united by it. Consequently England offered various posts to Scottish descents in the East India Company. Though they remained original in keeping their national identity, they were often passed off as English and officially they were British too. Thus, David Hare has been called an 'Englishman of Calcutta' by Mary Carpenter, the educationist, in the later part of the nineteenth century and John Malcolm who later became Governor, becomes the 'bright faced English boy' in the opinion of the imperialist historian J. W. Kaye.

The reception of the colonial natives and their culture in India by the hands of the British and the Scottish (though all the Scots were not in the same vein) differs in observing, describing, and assessing India. The Scot was a part of the dominant hegemonic colonial British group who

held themselves apart in the strata of the British among the largely populated natives. The Scots who were in the same vein of their British compatriots contribute to form a colonial discourse that observed and assessed India through the lens of a dominant nation whose capital flowed from India. Again, the ideas and approaches by the Scottish scholar-administrators reveal the contrary nature of Scottish orientalism to the popular self-imagined European thought of superiority. The nature of the study of India by the Scottish scholar-administrators who were less masters of and more contributors to and reformers of India remain in focus in this study. The contribution of the Scottish scholar-administrators in the socio-political context of India brings to the fore the influence of Scottish Enlightenment upon.

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