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# The Image of India & Hinduism in William Jones' "Hymns" to Hindu Deities

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## Abstract

William Jones' hymns to Hindu deities of India use ideas of translation and originality in order to provide a poetic and cultural space where the hymn syncretically demonstrates both a British and Hindu religious exegesis. A few fundamental questions arise: how was Hinduism represented? Who was representing it? From what sources were the poets gaining their impressions and understanding of religion? In what way were religion, in general, and the poet's representation of it specifically received? Jones's importance in my thesis lies in the fact that it would be utterly impossible to answer any one of these questions without mentioning his name and giving some account of his life and works. Drawing upon Michael J. Franklin's *Sir William Jones: Selected Prose and Poetical Works and Romantic Representations of British India*, I want to emphasise Jones' syncretic tendencies within the multi-cultural and multi-faith environment of metropolitan India rather than in the ideals of European Enlightenment.

[**Key Words:** Hinduism, Sir William Jones, politics and poetics of representation]

During the early nineteenth century India's sudden geopolitical and economic importance led to a burgeoning interest in and study of its culture by British and Europeans alike – particularly on the subject of religion. As Joyti Mohan writes, because of his stature in Europe's intellectual community, Voltaire's writings on India were widely read and they enhanced the charm of Hinduism to begin its ascent into the intellectual mainstream of European Enlightenment thinking. There have been a number of worthy critical studies investigating India's influence on the British literature. For example, Raymond Schwab's pioneering *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (1958) first broached the subject by recognising and identifying the frequency with which India was a topic of literary concern. Schwab argues that "The Orient served as alter

ego to the Occident" (Schwab 43), suggesting the way in which the two complemented each other, rather than competed with – or controlled – the other. As Dalrymple writes:

Beneath the familiar story of European conquest and the Rule in India, and the imposition of European conquest and the rule in India, and the imposition of European Ways in the heart of Asia....the Indian conquest of the European imagination...widespread cultural assimilation and hybridity: what Salman Rushdie-talking of modern Multiculturalism has called Chutnification. Virtually all Englishmen in India at this period Indianised themselves to some extent (Dalrymple 123).

Thus it is relevant to contextualise Jones' *Hymns* within a framework of bi-lateral and

unilateral assumptions of postcolonial theory laid out in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which views Jones as the leading architect of Britain's imperial ideology. Warren Hastings, the governor general of East India Company, implemented a policy of ruling India on its ancient laws, according to their own ideas and prejudices. From these policies, Hastings led a sustained effort to fund and support attempts of the British to learn, read and translate Hindu mythology into English. In 1787 "The Monthly Review" exhibits such an attitude when they write that

An acquaintance with Indian literature in general might have the most beneficial effects. It might even tend to redeem the national character, by teaching Englishmen to consider the nation of India as men, as beings entitled by heaven with the same facilities, the same talents, and the same feeling with themselves (*The Monthly Review* :35).

In the midst of such colonial attitude, Indian literature like the *Bhagabat Geeta* offered not only a way to learn about another religion and culture, but also redeem the national character from these offences in the fostering of a cross-cultural appreciation of each other's common humanity--one sanctioned by both a British and Hindu "Heaven". These policies find their greatest success once Jones took up the study of Sanskrit, Hindu mythology and Hindu folklore. The eleven years Jones spent in Calcutta were the most productive of his literary life, which almost singularly centred on introducing, explaining, and representing Hinduism to a British and European audience, as exemplified primarily by his composition of nine hymns to Hindu deities. While other missionaries, such as William Carey, undermined Sanskrit as "sacred nothings", Jones prided himself upon saying that he spoke "the language of Gods" (Jones 167). In this way Jones becomes synonymous with Hinduism in the Romantic period. Sir William Jones was the pioneer of philosophical studies

in India and was, finally, the first Englishman to respond poetically to the Indian setting. He is the first Westerner to render Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* into English and make the Occident aware of the richness of Sanskrit to Anglo-Indian literature.

The translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* by Sir William Jones in 1789 was an epoch-making event in the history of cultural relations between India and the West. Indeed its impact on history has been more profound and far reaching than even that of the French. Jones had unveiled the vistas of a new world of ideas—a new era in Oriental scholarship and historical writing as well as a new movement in the spheres of comparative philology, comparative literature, English poetry, Sanskrit poetry and Indian historical writing (Ranganathan 3).

Jones's nine hymns to Hindu deities, which belong to the late eighteenth century, are addressed to Camdeo, Prakriti, Indra, Surya, Lakshmi, Narayana, Saraswati and Ganga. His first hymn, addressed to Camdeo, is the first view of Hindu Mythology presented in English poetry. I shall prove his mastery in intermingling East and West by suggesting that the Sanskrit word 'Dipaka'---one of the several names of Kama---and the English word 'Cupid' have an original linguistic connection. The Hindu god Camdeo is no doubt the counterpart of the Grecian Eros and the Roman Cupido, but in Hindu mythology a peculiar course of events attends his life and attributes so that his very name rouses romance and beauty. This hymn recalls to one's mind the description of love full of romantic exuberance in Swinburne's *Atlanta in Calydon*. His second and third hymns are addressed to Prakriti in her two aspects: Durga and Bhabani. "Prakriti" is the cause of creation and the means of discrimination, and "Purusha", the manifestation of the Parabrahman, assumes the body and experiences the dualities of the world: good and bad, joy and sorrow, which are the contrivance of Prakriti as "Maya". The theme

of the first of these two hymns, "The Hymn to Durga", is borrowed from Kalidasa's *Kumarsambhavam* in Sanskrit. The second hymn, "The Hymn to Bhabani", manifests the destructive side of the Mother, the third hymn is devoted to her benevolent aspect. The conception of a female power or "Sakti" being responsible for the creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe is not uncommon in both Eastern and Western mythologies. Sri Aurobindo assigns *The Mother* the attributes of Wisdom, Strength, Harmony, and Perfection. Robert Graves similarly conceives of an all-powerful, all-pervading Female power in his poems, while Swinburne depicts the picture of "Aphrodite" like that of Bhabani: at the emergence of these goddesses the whole universe leaps into life (Mukherjee 87).

In his fourth hymn "The Hymn to Indra", Jones tries to establish once again a linguistic affinity between 'Jupitar' of the West and Indra or 'Dyupatir' of Sanskrit. Both of them are the rulers of heaven, the god of thunder and rain. "The Triple Divinity" of the Eastern mythology is the personification of the sun. The sun is a visible symbol of light, and can be supposed to be the manifestation of the Almighty who is light. His fifth hymn is addressed to Surya, which echoes the sacred Gayetri incantations, such as *Asavadityo Brahma* (Brahman is the light). The hymn opens in praise of the power of all-pervasive Surya, which is called Karmashakti (the observer of all doings):

Lord of the lotus, father, friend, and king,  
O Sun! Thy powers I sing

...Since thou, great orb! With all-enlightening ray/  
Rulest the golden day,  
How far more glorious He, who said,  
serene, Be, and thou wast/Himself  
unformed, unchanged, unseen  
(Rangnathan 4).

His sixth hymn, "A Hymn to Lacshmi", is a celebration of Lacshmi or Sri as the Ceres of India. Jones salutes the goddess and describes the wonder of her birth when the Milk Sea was

being churned by gods and demons for gaining nectar:

Daughter of ocean and primeval night,  
who fed with moon beams dropping silver  
dew, And cradled in a wild wave dancing  
light, Saw'st with a smile new shores and  
creatures new (Rangnathan 5).

Jones presents Lacshmi as the goddess of plenty, but I shall show how she manifests her fierce aspect also. His seventh hymn is addressed to Narayana, with whom Lacshmi is united, and they both take upon themselves the protection of the world. The hymn is an ineffable vivification of the miracle of creation. Whenever man slides into folly and the film of sin covers his eyes, God does descend to redeem him. Jones utilised his knowledge of *Gita*, as he writes: "Whenever there is damage to Dharma, O Arjuna! Then indeed I am born in every yuga for the establishment of Dharma". Actually these lines are the English rendering of "yatha yatha hi dharmasya Glanirbhavati bhārata! Dharmasamsthāparthaya! Sambhavami yuge yuge..." (7). Referring to heaven's messengers and the lot that attends them when they descend in human incarnation, Sri Aurobindo too expresses the same idea in *Savitri*: "To live with grief, to confront death on her road, / The mortal's lot became the Immortal's share" (Naik 83).

Jones's "Hymn to Saraswathi" is composed in a poetic idiom which reaches beyond the personal: "These are thy wondrous arts, Queen of the flowering speech/ Thence Saraswathi named and Vani bright! Oh, joy of mortal hearts,/Thy mystic wisdom teach" (Rangnathan 6). His description of the 'Ganga' in *Hymn to Ganges*, is intimate; the feminine imagery is expressed in the motions of assured language:

"How sweetly Ganga smiles, and glides,  
Luxuriant o'er her broad autumnal bed!  
Her waves perpetual verdure spread,  
Whilst health and plenty deck her golden  
sides" (7).

In “A Hymn to Narayana”, Narayana is presented as the Omnipresent, Omnipotent and the Omniscient. My objective is here to bring out the poetic sensibility of Jones with which he skilfully presents his incandescence which may dazzle and blind someone’s eyes. According to the Vedas and Puranas and even according to the Egyptian and Persian theology, the world is the visible manifestation of the Invisible God, and Narayan is this “Spirit of Spirits” (Johnson 34). Jones romanticised Religion, his poetry is subsumed by philosophy, and his hymns clearly inspired Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. Shelley’s transition from the early atheistic materialism to the mystical pantheism of the later mature works might have been due largely to the influence of Jones. Again in a *Letter* to John Thelwall (added to an autograph copy of “Kubla Khan”), Coleridge describes Narayana’s ideal imaginative state using Hindu mythological imagery:

“I should much wish like the Indian Vishnu to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of lotus and wake once in a million year ... just to know that I was going to sleep a million more years” (Coleridge 228-229).

The holy text Wilkins translated, the *Bhagvat-Geeta*, tells the story of Krishna, an earthy incarnation of Vishnu the Preserver:

“I am generation and dissolution, the place where all things are repositied, and the inexhaustible seed of all nature ... I am death and immortality: I am entity and non-entity ... I am the soul which standeth in the bodies of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things” (80).

The omnipresence which Krishna symbolises and embodies here represents a monotheistic Hinduism which Wilkins, Hastings, and Jones were all eager to promote in terms relative to Unitarianism, which Europeans and Britons alike could understand. There was a perfectly

sound reason for such comparisons to be made, namely, there was no other language available to contextualise a foreign religion such as Hinduism within terms comprehensible to Europeans, or enunciate, and thereby translate, accurately its theology which delved deeply into unfamiliar esotericism and mysticism. P. J. Marshall notes in *British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth century*:

The attitude of the great mass of Europeans who came into contact with Hinduism was always either ridicule or disgust. Books were filled with accounts of a multiplicity of deities, repellent images and barbarous customs (Marshall 99).

In contrast, Jones advanced a representation of Hinduism that was monotheistic, moral, and pious. Jones’s fascination with Hinduism impels him to find and negotiate a constant mode of expression in order to translate faithfully Hinduism’s spiritual validity in the face of prejudices. First, the concept of religion is problematic in that it is not free from Western Christian theological presuppositions and is inextricably bound up with colonialism and modernity. Secondly, orientalist and Christian missionaries construct Hinduism with their own biblical presuppositions. Fourth, Hinduism is perceived largely through the lens of Brahmanical textual and ritual traditions or textual Hinduism is given primary consideration. Fifth, there is a hermeneutical issue concerning the interface between reason and imagination. Whereas Western oriental thought is represented as rational and masculine, Indian thought is considered as associated with imagination - a bit feminine.

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