

COLONIAL OR IMPERIALIST APPROACH IN INDIAN HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY (PART-2)

(PG SEM-1, CC:1, HISTORIOGRAPHY)

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SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

Although there have been a large number of colonial historians, we will select only four important colonial historians for discussion. They have been chosen because of their relative importance in the development of colonial historiography in particular and Indian historiography in general. Two of these historians had a negative attitude towards Indian civilization. These were James Mill and Henry Elliot (John Dowson was basically an editor of Elliot's work which was published posthumously). On the other hand, two other historians – Mounstuart Elphinstone and Vincent Smith – were generally appreciative or less critical of Indian civilization.

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

JAMES MILL

Although Robert Orme was the first official colonial historian of India, James Mill (1773-1836) is considered as the foremost among the founders of colonial historiography. His History of British India (written between 1806 and 1818 and published in six volumes) was the most influential book on Indian history during the nineteenth century. Although it was titled as a history of the British India, its first three volumes covered the ancient and medieval India and the only the next three volumes were concerned about the British rule in India.

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

Conceived and written in opposition to the Orientalist writings in India, particularly that of William Jones, this book was a 'source of the deepest and most lasting prejudices against Indian civilisation'. Mill never came to India, did not know any Indian language, and based his work entirely on partial study of books and materials on India written and collected over the years. He did not have much use of the voluminous data gathered by the East India Company from India, and wrote a mainly judgmental history.

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

In this form of history, if facts for a particular argument could not be found about one country, facts about other countries could be supplied to fill the gaps. He did this to degrade and demean the Indian, particularly the Hindu civilisation. Yet, his book was adopted as a textbook for the young civil servants who came to India. Mill represented the mindset of the rising imperialist middle classes in Britain in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the reason for the success of his book can be explained by this factor.

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

Mill conceived history ‘as a process of civilisation’. Moreover, while William Jones tried to find closeness between British and Indian cultures, Mill emphatically laid stress on ‘the evolutionary gap between contemporary Indian society and the progressive West’. Mill divided Indian history into three compartments – Hindu, Muslim and British. He believed that before the coming of the British, all Indian rulers were despotic and autocratic. On all parameters of civilizational achievements, Mill placed India at the bottom among various countries, with the European countries on top.

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

Mill completely rejected the Orientalist idea that ancient Indian civilization was among the best in its times. Instead, Mill asserted that it was a 'hideous state of society' with its degrading and pernicious caste system. According to him, despotic kings and superstitious priests made the Hindus the 'most enslaved portion of the human race'. James Mill regarded Hinduism as an incoherent and irrational system of belief totally dominated by the Brahmans, and written in a language of 'unparalleled vagueness'.

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

According to him, the ancient Hindu religious texts, the Vedas, were 'all vagueness and darkness, incoherence, inconsistency and confusion'. They form 'one of the most extravagant of all specimens of discourse without ideas.

The fearless propensity of a rude mind to guess where it does not know, never exhibited itself in more fantastic and senseless form'. The ideas expressed in Hinduism 'are in the highest degree absurd, mean and degrading' and, he wrote: No people, how rude and ignorant so ever, who have been so far advanced as to leave us memorials of their thoughts in writing, have ever drawn a more gross

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

and disgusting picture of the universe than what is presented in the writings of the Hindus. In the conception of it no coherence, wisdom, or beauty, ever appears: all is disorder, caprice, passion, contest, portents, prodigies, violence, and deformity. Even in the field of literature, in which the ancient Indians were regarded as excellent, Mill criticizes them. According to him, Mahabharata and Ramayana, are not only mere extravagant and unnatural ... but are less ingenious, more monstrous and have less of anything that can engage the affection, awaken sympathy or excel in administration, revenge or terror ... They are

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

excessively prolix and insipid. They are often, through long passages, trifling and childish to a degree which those acquainted with only European poetry can hardly conceive of the style in which they are Colonial History Writing composed... They exhibit imperfection, inflation, metaphors ... obscurity, tautology, repetition-verbosity, confusion, incoherence...

SOME IMPORTANT COLONIAL HISTORIANS

In this way, James Mill set an extremist tone to downgrade Indian civilisation and culture. Although his views about Indian civilisation were not always accepted by other colonial historians, he nevertheless was quite popular among general British readers.

(To be continued)