

# **COLONIAL OR IMPERIALIST APPROACH IN INDIAN HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY (PART-3)**

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

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# MOUNTSTUART ELPHINSTONE

While James Mill had never been to India, Elphinstone (1779-1859) had lived in India for a long time as an administrator and scholar. His familiarity with Indian society, literature and languages resulted in his better understanding of India. He was also critical of Mill's history for its cynicism and a very biased account of Indians and Indian civilization. He did not accept Mill's narrow utilitarian framework either. He believed that although Mill's history was popular in Britain, it would not get the similar reception in India. Elphinstone was very critical of Mill's work and considered it prejudicial to the Indians. He wrote: I see that Mill is much more candid in

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the English part of his History ... than I found him in the native part; his harshness lying more in sneers and sarcastic expression than in colouring the facts, or even judging of them. I believe he is mistaken in some of his opinions, and that he goes too much into controversy instead of giving results.

**(Cited in S.C. Mittal 1995, vol. 1: 61)**

Elphinstone's *History of Hindu and Muhammedan India* (1841) and the unfinished *History of British Power in the East* were written as a rival account of India which differed from Mill's history in several respects.

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He was more appreciative of Indian cultural achievements. He thought that the Eastern countries in general, and India in particular, had reached a high level of civilization in the ancient past compared to many other countries, including the European countries. He admired the early Indian achievements in various branches of literature, philosophy, mathematics, religions, and law. He believed that ‘Hindus were once in a higher condition, both moral and intellectual, than they are now; and, as even in their present state of depression, they are on a footing of equality with any people out of Europe’ (cited in Upadhyay 2016: 440).

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The learning of the ancient Hindus was of a high order and ‘they were already in possession of a light which was but faintly perceived even by the loftiest intellects in the best days of Athens’. He considered the Hindu civilization superior to their rivals in the ancient world because of their many intellectual achievements. He felt that in several fields the ancient Indians were ‘the teachers and not the learners’.

He wrote:

There is no question of the superiority of the Hindus over their rivals in the perfection to which they brought the science. Not only is Aryabhatta superior to Diaphantus ...

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but he and his successor press hard upon the discoveries of algebraists who lived almost in our own time. (**Cited in S.C. Mittal 1995, vol. 1: 65**)

In this sense, the early Indians were so advanced that they ‘lived almost in our own world’ (cited in S.C. Mittal 1995, vol. 1: 64). He also did not think that the caste system was a divisive or inhibiting factor in the cultural and intellectual development of India. He wrote that ‘Notwithstanding the institution of caste, there is no country where men rise with more ease from the lowest rank to the highest. The first

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nabab (now king) of Oude, was a petty merchant; the first peishwa, a village accountant; the ancestors of Holcar were goatherds and those of Sindhia slaves' (cited in Upadhyay 2016: 440).

In the last part of his *History*, he covered the rule of Muslim kings in India. He tries to present a balanced view of this period also. He put his point across by comparing the rule of Akbar with that of Aurangzeb and was appreciative of Akbar for his tolerant policies which earned him the loyalty of his Hindu subjects also and

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led to the unity of the country. On the contrary, he criticized the rule of Aurangzeb, who overturned Akbar's tolerant and inclusive policies which resulted in the alienation of the Hindus. Aurangzeb's bigoted policies gave rise to the rebellions among the Marathas, Sikhs, Jats and others. However, despite his praise of past Indian rulers, Elphinstone, like other colonial historians, believed that in his contemporary times the superiority of the Western civilization was uncontested. He also never doubted the legitimacy of the colonial rule and its beneficial effects of Indians.

(To be continued)