

# **COLONIAL OR IMPERIALIST APPROACH IN INDIAN HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY (PART-4)**

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

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## HENRY ELLIOT AND JOHN DOWSON

Henry Elliot (1808-1853) and John Dowson (1820-1881) are considered as important colonial historians who prepared a comprehensive collection of Indo-Persian histories. Elliot's initial historical work on India was the *Bibliographical Index to the Historians of Muhammedan India* (1849), followed by a short book on the Arabs in Sindh (1853). His main work, however, was eight-volume *History of India as told by its own Historians*, published after his death between 1866 and 1881. These selections from India have been used as important sources, which was edited and finalised by John Dowson. For many decades, these selections from the writings of the medieval historians of India

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have been used as important sources by medieval historians. But some historians have also criticized them, because these colonial historians distort the actual picture of medieval Indian polity and society.

The *History of India* was not ‘a simple reproduction of the writings of the medieval Indian historians, but a prejudiced filtering process’ within larger European academic convention (Upadhyay 2016: 443). One important purpose of Elliot was to provide information about the agrarian history of medieval India, the rural social classes and the methods of collecting revenues, because they were not much known in the middle of the nineteenth century.

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But his aim was larger. He wanted his selections to serve broader academic purpose of creating ‘useful depositories of knowledge from which the labour and diligence of succeeding scholars may extract materials for the creation of a better and more solid structure’ (cited in Wahi 1990: Colonial History Writing 71). This interest in the reconstruction of the Muslim history of India was reflected in Elliot’s persuasion of the Company to preserve the books and manuscripts in the libraries of the Nawab of Awadh despite financial constraints. He was also in touch with the Orientalists such as H.H. Wilson and corresponded with them.

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Yet, the colonialist bias was clear in the severe denigration of the Muslim rule. Even Indo-Muslim historiography was not spared. H.M. Elliot declared that they were no better than annals: It is almost a misnomer to style them histories. They can scarcely claim to rank higher than Annals... They comprise, for the most part nothing but a mere dry narration of events, conducted with reference to chronological sequence, never grouped Philosophically according to their relations. Without speculation on causes or effects; without a reflection or suggestion which is not of the most puerile and contemptible kind; and without any observations calculated to interrupt the monotony of

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successive conspiracies, revolts, intrigues, murders, and fratricides... Where fairy tales and fictions are included under the general name of history we cannot expect to learn much respecting the character, pursuits, motives, and actions of historians.

(Cited in Upadhyay 2016: 414)

Even when 'we are somewhat relieved from the contemplation of such scenes when we come to the accounts of the earlier Moghul Emperors, we have what is little more inviting in the records of the stately magnificence and ceremonious Observances of the Court, and the titles, jewels, swords, drums, standards, elephants,

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and horses bestowed upon the dignitaries of the Empire'. So, Elliot wrote:

If the artificial definition of Dionysius be correct, that "History is Philosophy teaching by examples," then there is no Native Indian Historian... and [of] very bad ones, we have ample store, though even in them the radical truth is obscured, by the hereditary, official, and sectarian prepossessions of the narrator; but of philosophy, which deduces conclusions calculated to benefit us by the lessons and experience of the past, which adverts on the springs and consequences of political transactions, and offers sage counsel for the future, we search in vain for any sign or

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or symptom. Of domestic history also we have in our Indian Annalists absolutely nothing... By them society is never contemplated, either in its conventional usages or recognized privileges; its constituent elements or mutual relations; in its established classes or popular institutions; in its private recesses or habitual intercourses. In notices of commerce, agriculture, internal police, and local judicature, they are equally deficient.

So, Elliot said, these medieval historical works 'may be said to be deficient in some of the most essential requisites



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of History... In [these medieval] Indian Histories there is little which enables us to penetrate below the glittering surface, and observe the practical operation of a despotic Government and rigorous and sanguinary laws, and the effect upon the great body of the nation of these injurious influences and agencies' (Elliot's Preface to History of India, 1867, vol. 1, xix-xx). Their history depicted Muslim rule in a very negative light. According to them, the Muslim rule was disastrous for the Indian people in general, and the Hindus in particular. The

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Muslim rulers were generally despotic and tyrannical who never gave a thought to the welfare of their Hindu subjects. Oppression, exploitation and denial of religious freedom to the Hindus were quite common.

The Hindus were attacked, massacred, enslaved and converted, their temples and other places of worship were looted and destroyed, and their women were abducted and enslaved or forced into marriages. These statements made in Elliot's 'Preface', first published in 1849 and

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later given in the famous History in 1867, clearly followed the two-nation theory in all respects, and considered the British rule a major advance in every way and a deliverer of the Hindus from Muslim tyranny. Elliot and Dowson sharply divided the Muslims and Hindus in India, by equating medieval India completely with the Muslims.

According to them, although the Muslims did not remain foreigners in India, the government and its laws and

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policies were overwhelmingly tilted in favour of the Muslims. The Hindus always remained the subjects. During the whole of medieval period, there was no freedom for the people and no economic progress. Thus, Under such rulers, we cannot wonder that the fountains of justice are corrupted; that the state revenues are never collected without violence and outrage ; that villages are burnt, and their inhabitants mutilated or sold into slavery ; that the officials, so far from affording protection, are themselves the chief robbers and usurpers ;

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that parasites and eunuchs revel in the spoil of plundered provinces ; and that the poor find no redress against the oppressor's wrong. From this, they concluded that 'the common people must have been plunged into the lowest depths of wretchedness and despondency. The few glimpses we have ... of Hindus slain for disputing with Muhammadans, of general prohibitions against processions, worship, and ablutions, and of other intolerant measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and

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confiscations, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them, show us that this picture is not overcharged...’

(Elliot’s ‘Preface’ to History of India, 1867, vol. 1, xx-xxv).

They argued that the British colonial government had done more for the people of India, particularly the Hindus, in fifty years than the Muslim governments had done in five hundred years. The colonial government built roads, canals, bridges and introduced many schemes of public welfare

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which far surpassed any administrative measures undertaken even under the best of the Muslim rulers. They thought that the British rule was the best for India, as it was benevolent and held and administered India for the benefit of the Indians. They argued, When we see the withering effects of the tyranny and capriciousness of a despot, we shall learn to estimate more fully the value of a balanced constitution. When we see the miseries which are entailed on present and future generations by disputed claims to the crown, we shall more than ever value the principle of a

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regulated succession, subject to no challenge or controversy. In no country have these miseries been greater than in India. In no country has the recurrence been more frequent, and the claimants more numerous.... we have already, within the half-century of our dominion, done more for the substantial benefit of the people, than our predecessors ... were able to accomplish in more than ten times that period...

Elliot's Preface to History of India, 1867, vol. 1, xxv-xxvii

(To be continued)