

# **COLONIAL OR IMPERIALIST APPROACH IN INDIAN HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY (PART-5)**

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

**DR.MD. NEYAZ HUSSAIN  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR & HOD  
PG DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
MAHARAJA COLLEGE,  
VKSU,ARA(BIHAR)**

# VINCENT SMITH

Vincent Smith (1848-1920) is considered as the most important colonial historian in the last phase of British colonial rule in India. He is also regarded as the most important colonial historian of India after James Mill. His *Early History of India* (1904) was a very successful book on Indian history which went through several editions. His more comprehensive *Oxford History of India* (1919) was also held in high regard. Both these works were prescribed as standard textbooks in Indian colleges and even schools.

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Apart from these, he also published *History of Fine Arts in India and Ceylon* (1911), and *Indian Constitutional Reform Viewed in the Light of History* (1919). His important achievement was to present Indian history on a firm chronological basis organized around political events, dynasties, and great individuals. Smith's books presented an authoritative summation of the state of knowledge up to his times. Therefore, his histories were unrivalled as textbooks in most Indian universities for many decades to come. Vincent Smith generally presented his histories as a balanced and impartial view of India. In his *Oxford History* Smith gives his own idea about his history

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writing on India, in which he emphasized that, contrary to the opinion of many people, the Indian history did not begin with the British colonial rule over India:

The value and interest of history depend largely on the degree in which the present is illuminated by the past... A new book on Indian history must be composed in a new spirit, as it is addressed to a new audience. Certain is that the history of India does not begin with the battle of Plassey, as some people think it ought to begin, and that a sound knowledge of the older history will always be a valuable aid in the attempt to solve the numerous problems of modern India.

(Cited in A.L. Basham in C.H. Philips (ed.), 1961: 267)

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Because of his professional approach, Smith's history avoided the value judgments found in writings of many colonial historians. Moreover, he also provided a coherent account of the political history of India before the Muslim conquest. He claimed 'to present the story of ancient India in the form of a connected narrative' and 'with impartiality' (cited in Upadhyay 2016: 444). Although he was an admirer of Greek achievements in arts, literature, culture, and military matters, he was also highly appreciative of the Indian kings such as Chandragupta and Ashoka Maurya (in the third and fourth centuries BCE), the Gupta Emperors (fourth to fifth centuries CE), and

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Harsha (seventh century CE). He wrote that the rule of these Indian kings could be compared with the best rulers in Europe.

However, he thought that after the death of Harsha, disruptive forces began to operate which resulted in the fragmentation of Indian polity. A big number of small states emerged which constantly fought with each other draining the resources of the country. This anarchic state of affairs continued for many centuries and the weak Indian states could not resist the attacks by Arabs, Turks and Afghans. Except for brief periods of centralized administration, he argued, the general tendency in Indian

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polity and society was that of fragmentation. According to him:

Harsha's death loosened the bonds which restrained the disruptive forces always ready to operate in India, and allowed them to produce their natural results, a medley of petty states, with ever-varying boundaries, and engaged in unceasing internecine war. Such was India when first disclosed to European observation in the fourth century B.C., and such it always has been, except during the comparatively brief periods in which a vigorous central compelled the mutually repellent molecules of the body

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politic to check their gyrations and submit to the grasp of a superior controlling force.

**(Cited in A.L. Basham in C.H. Philips (ed.), 1961: 271)**

Thus, according to him, central authority in the form of benevolent despotism had to be imposed from outside to check the natural tendency of disunity in India. According to him, ‘No form of government except the autocratic was...suitable to Indian conditions’. Thus, the British rule was needed to maintain unity and rule of law and to save Indian people from the ‘hideous state of society’ (Upadhyay 2016: 444). He asserted that his history of India would ‘give the reader a notion of what India always



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has been when released from the control of a supreme authority, and what she would be again, if the hand of the benevolent despotism which now holds her in its iron grasp should be withdrawn'

**(cited in A.L. Basham in C.H. Philips (ed.) 1961: 271).**

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## SUMMARY

Colonial historiography was evolved by the colonial administrators and scholars who wanted the colonial rule to continue. Their history-writing was an attempt to know about India, shape Indian history into European forms, and utilize it for intellectual dominance. There were several differences between various colonial historians. However, all of them were convinced about the superiority of modern Western civilization and all of them wanted that the British rule over India should continue smoothly. The colonial histories written over a period of two centuries,

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from the middle of eighteenth to the middle of twentieth century, provided the ideological justification for the colonial rule in India.

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