Historiography and Identity: A Mid-Nineteenth Century Colonial Perspective for Modern South Asia

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Abstract

The paper evolves around the thematic assumption that historical consciousness reflected in historiography primarily tends to understand the identity innate in the historical process and project it for a 'purposive implementation'. Whether British historiography was an 'imperially motivated' and 'politics centered' exercise to build 'Indian identity', neglecting the socio-cultural identity? This is the logical question which emerges out of the subaltern, alternate and anti-colonial post-modern concepts of history and historiography. Elphinstone's History of India reveals the consciousness of a more romantic and dynamic process of development of Indian Identity, fabricating cultural 'Nations', to construct an Indian Civilization and this mid-nineteenth century model provides an alternate view to resolve the current crises and conflicts of identity in South Asia.

Introduction: Conceptual Framework

The post-modern writers, especially anti-colonial and subaltern, have very sharply criticised the current state of knowledge, being disseminated in the third world, with a belief that it is based on the paradigm developed through colonial construction of history. [1] Current politico-geographical identities form the crust of this sort of knowledge.

Writing of history or historiography reflects the development of 'historical consciousness' and aims at developing a 'historical consciousness'; rather it is a process of 'identifying the facts making an intelligible sense of continuity' to understand an existing

identity or to develop one for the future of the society. For John Lewis Gaddis, this sense of continuity is 'the landscape of History' and this sort of historical consciousness reflects 'the maturity of history' as a process. Therefore, historiography primarily tends to understand 'identity' and project some sort of mature identity: an identity perceived through historical consciousness. [2]

The large sum of material on South Asian history is contributed by the 'colonial masters', the British. [3] It is believed that modern construction of South Asia is based on the colonial understanding of South Asian history. However, the hypothesis ignores aspects of the development of British Empire and historiography for the empire. In the same way, an ignorance of the difference between the evolution of understanding of South Asian history and British Indian policy seems pertinent?.

The purpose of this paper is to open a window to the exploration of evolution of British view of South Asian identities projected through history. The period of the British Crown is generally focused to understand the colonial construction of modern South Asia and the period of Company's rule is generally neglected. This pursuit shall focus on the pre-crown period of British administrative-intellectual understanding of South Asian identities reflected in the British Historiography, to prepare a ground to compare it with the mature colonial [4] construction of post-colonial South Asia and for the analysis of the relations between two periods which reflect two different approaches.

The significance of this study emerges out of the nature of British rule. The British had almost established their rule over India and they were trying their level best to understand the racial, cultural and national characteristics of the people in order to rule them in accordance with their national traits and create a rationale for making the British rule permanent. Although some Utilitarians and Missionaries were anxious enough to apply the western liberal and Christian model to the administration of British Indian Empire, [5] yet an overwhelming majority of the administrators, having a feeling of romance with Indology, were graciously devoted to administration of Indian affairs according to indigenous traditions, customs, laws and belief system. [6] The term 'Indian Tradition' was elaborated in two ways:

First that India is a Continent or a subcontinent and should be treated in this way and; second that India is a civilization and should be treated in this context.

However, the view of India as a continent or subcontinent went through a revolutionary suppression after the 1857 uprising, under the consciousness of the strength of imperial rule and rather than developing an understating of South Asian identities to administer the region, the British began attempts to construct a uniform Indian identity according to their own interests, on the western imperial paradigm. Therefore, the search for a much unbiased view of the British brings the mid-nineteenth century into sharp focus.

The term mid-nineteenth century, in this perspective, is used in a very loose format, with a view that by the year 1850 a crucial change had begun to emerge in the British perception of India, which became mature very soon after the 1857 events. Thus, the mid nineteenth century in the current context represents 1830s and 1840s or second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Early British Concept of Indian Identities

The early British concept of identity of the region now called 'South Asia' was primarily based on a psychic phenomenon of political and commercial exploration and expansion in the backdrop of 'dynastic imperial' perception with a vague and loose geographical sense. The region was perceived through a vague ancient idea of world geography in its combination with medieval dynastic-imperial-political structure indicating greatly fluctuating geographical boundaries as 'Mughal Empire'. [7] In the mid-eighteenth century *English Universal History,* the region was considered synonymous with the Mughal Dynasty as followers of Muslim political and religious creed. [8] Robert Orme's idea of 'Indostan' was limited to Deccan and Delhi. [9] However, by the end of the eighteenth century a shift from political to cultural contents of history began, which distinguished between political and cultural aspects of the region, [10] resulting in the emergence of the concept of 'Hinduism" and 'Hindu India' as a civilization, still with a vague idea of geographical boundaries. The main exponents of this idea were William Jones, Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Romantic school, all linked with a centralized form of administration. Thus the concept has a centralized imperialism in its core.

As the idea of cultural identity was initially disseminated from the British centre of politics, Bengal, therefore, a growing sense of 'Bengali Renaissance' and 'Bengali nationalism' was the main

undercurrent of the idea challenging the concept of the perfect uniformity between 'civilization' and 'nation'. [11]

The challenge was not a new one. A number of empiricist administrator intellectuals had either presented their observations on the geo-political, racial, cultural and linguistic divisions of the regions or had shown their disagreement with the romantic school of administrators. A number of works had been published on different geo-cultural identities contesting the concept of nation in this context. [12] In the early Nineteenth century the trends had become prominent. Marks Wilks' *Historical Sketches of the South of India* (1806), John Malcolm's *Sketch of the Sikhs; a Singular Nation who Inhabit the Provinces of the Punjab, Situated between the River Jumna and Indus* (1812), Charles Stewart's *History of Bengal* (1813) Charles Grant Duff's *History of the Marathas* (1828) and James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829-32) are the best example of the British perception of the nations inhabiting the continent of India. The trends were systematized by a noble British administrator Mountstuart Elphinstone in the mid nineteenth century. Elphinstone tried to harmonize these views about differing Indian nations with a concept of Indian civilization through a framework of unity of the region as a 'subcontinent' and 'unity of civilization'. The perspective can be explored through a vast range of historical literature. As the views of Mountsuart Elphinstone encompass all contending views, therefore, his understanding of the region forms the central part of ongoing debate.

Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) and Indian Identities

Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) as a most able diplomat, administrator and historian of the British India is well known for his sympathetic approach towards indigenous Indian cultures and history [13] harmonizing oriental romanticism, utilitarianism and ethno-regional romance. The romanticists were propagating the status of Indian civilization on the classical level, which was destroyed by foreign Muslim rule. The utilitarians were propagating a very barbaric and rude picture of the ancient Indian civilization, which was to some extent brought to a better point than the ancient, by the foreign Muslims rule. Elphinstone's own contemporary ethno-regional romanticists had challenged the concept of the unity of Indian civilization.

Elphinstone accepted the romantic view of the classical status of the ancient Indian civilization. Differentiating between the Muslims and Indo-Muslims, Elphinstone depicts a sense of continuity in Indian history and civilization and brings the Muslims into the fold of Indian civilization and looks at the Muslim Empire in India as an evidence of the process of evolutionary advent of a whole Indian civilization of different racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious nations,

Elphinstone, educated in Scottish philosophical and intellectual tradition, had to face a conflict between enlightenment, evangelicalism, romanticism and utilitarianism. [14] His Indian career [15] not only provided him an opportunity for deep observations into the different regions and sections of Indian society, but also provided him opportunities to visit adjacent countries such as Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan and Egypt. The contemporary intellectual debate on British Indian administration through the study of Indian history as seen in the different schools of British thought attracted his attention. [16] The classical background combined with the ground realities of British Indian administrative environment attached Elphinstone with the Scottish romantic school. [17] The formation of the Literary Society of Bombay boosted this romantic interest in Elphinstone's thought. Elphinstone not only learnt the Sanskrit and Persian languages, but also got a thorough understanding of Indian cultures and civilization. [18] However, his years after retirement formed his real bent of mind for writing a history of India. The contemporary hot debate on Indian affairs in the perspective of Mill's *History of British India*, [19] along with Duff [20] and Tod's works [21] on Marathas and Rajputs led him to write his *History of India* [22] which has been considered 'the summing up'[23] of debate on Indian affairs. It has policy-oriented purpose, having an apology for the company's activities and policy guidelines for the future of British Indian Empire.

Purposive view of history combined the romantic 'amusement'[24] with utilitarian, philosophical or theoretical pursuits,[25] not ready to treat mythology as history, he sharply criticized Mill's pure rational and Euro-centric approach [26] and saw history as a narration of events in terms of cultural environment. For that, a comparative methodology seems to be a priority for Elphinstone. Elphinstone was therefore more interested in the minute details to draw solid theoretical conclusions on the regional basis. He emphasized the use of facts with judgment to make a consistent and coherent sense of history out of a mass of fables and

gossip. [27] Elphinstone saw every history in its connection with the general history of the species. However, cultural differences appear to Elphinstone a phenomenon worth studying.

Elphinstone widened the romantic criterion for the study of a civilization and nation from William Jones' literature and mythology[28] to James Mill's institutions and philosophy. Religion appears to be only one expression socio-cultural phenomena. So he evaluated religious leadership as social devotees. Therefore, Indian identities were indigenous social cultural and geographical realities for Elphinstone.

Elphinstone was interested in the political history of the Mughals as predecessors and legitimate rulers of India and in the history of the dominant nation of the area in which he was serving since long: the land of the Marathas. [29] As his colleague, James Grant Duff undertook the project of the *History of the Marathas*. Therefore, Elphinstone diverted his attention towards Mill's unit of historical studies, civilization. Although, for Elphinstone civilization was an integrated approach to society, his focus remained on politics and empire as embodiment of nation and civilization. Elphinstone adopted a comparative approach to measure the development civilization and nation. His treatment of the Indian Muslims is sympathetic in the sense that he accepts Indian Muslims as a separate nation in the Indian subcontinent and antithetic in the sense that he does not believe in the unity of Muslim "Ummah" [30] as a nation. This formed the basis of Elphinstone's treatment of Indian identities and administrative as well as policy treatment of these identities. Combining the national traits with the civilization, Elphinstone had a deep rooted understanding of difference among the nations and national traits of the people South Asian region and identified the common traits or spirit as civilization. In this way he propagated the view that the Indians should be treated in accordance with their national traits and the imperial relations with the Indian subjects should be established on this principle. So, administrative policies as well as authority should be deputed on this principle. Elphinstone rejects the view of the establishment that the control of the crown's parliament on Indian administration should be upheld. Rather, he supports the monopoly of the East India Company on the ground that parliament could not understand the indigenous Indian situation. Therefore British Indian administrators should be given maximum authority to deal with the indigenous situations. In this sort of perception, nation was considered a people united through language, culture, tradition,

and politics, having a sense of organized indigenous system of government with a mature leadership, either under Imperial rule or independent self-rule. [31]

Elphinstone's treatment of India was determined by European romantic philosophical vision as well as by the concept of geographical, cultural and linguistic nationalism, supported by political leadership. Scottish enlightenment led him away from the concept of divine religion and emerging historicism linked him with the method of historical treatment of culture and current issues for their solution in western nationalist context. The boundaries of India were determined by natural means [32] and Indus formed the Western frontiers of India with its tributaries. [33] Afghanistan, Punjab and Sind were considered the 'areas adjacent to India' and Balochistan never was a part of Indian subcontinent. Hindu civilization was perceived as a 'sister civilization' of Greeks, based on mythological beliefs and system of Deities [34] and India was considered a 'sub-continent' rather a 'continent'[35], consisting of four major geographical units: Hindostan, Deccan, Gujrat and Bengal. [36] Bengal and Gujrat were considered independent natural units. [37] However, the region northward from the Vindhiya range, Hindostan, was identified to consist of four major natural geographical units: basin of Indus, basin of Ganges, the Desert and high tracts called central India. The region south of Vindhiya, known as Deccan was seen to consist of Nerbudda valley, Tapti, Ghats and the South. [38]

These four regions were inhabited by a number of nations; three occupying independent regions: Bengali, Gujrati and Kashmiris; six in Deccan: Tamil, Canara, Telgu, Mahrattas, Uriya and Andhra; [39] four in Hindustan: Rajputs, Jats, Rohillas and Malawi; [40] the Muslims were treated in usual British manner of foreign invader composed of four nations: Tartars, Arabs, Afghans and Persian, framing a new identity as Indian Muslim. [41] In this way Elphinstone identified at least thirteen nations in the continent of India. The major part of Elphinstone's understanding was framed by Elphinstone's personal experiences in the South and South west. Yet, he had a well enough view of Eastern parts of India. However, like the majority of British men, Elphinstone had not conceived the concept of Indian nations inhabiting the Northern highland.

However, in the post 1857 agenda, the western frontiers of India were extended to Makran and Balochistan, including the Punjab and Sind. Indian mythological civilization took the form of

one religious nation as counter part of Muslims, suppressing the identity and liberty of mythological religions. [42]

Conclusion

Summing up the mid-nineteenth century observed a grass root level conflict between newly emerging European politico-intellectual institutions and the imperial objectives. Although romaticization or criticization of ancient Indian civilization proved to be one of the most influential tools of imperialism against the Muslim rule for the British, yet, the people like Charles Grant Duff, James Tod under the mentorship of Mountstuart Elphinstone and J. D. Cunningham tried their level best to apply new western thought and institutions such as nationalism, liberalism and utilitarianism to the Indian scene. Elphinstone observed a grass root level social, cultural, linguistic and political differences among the Indian population and identified at least ten nations in the region, focusing Eastern, central, southern and western India and neglecting the northern India. Although the people like Duff, Tod and Cunningham had to face a harsh criticism of the British East India Company's administration on the charges of neglecting the cause of the company and its colonial commercial interests through the promotion of the cause of indigenous national traits yet, Elphinstone's *History* was made the part of curriculum of East India Company's administrative services college, Hailbury, that he had maintained the integrity of the Indian Empire through the concept of unity of Indian civilization. Inspite of the fact that the subaltern and post colonial intellectuals have sharply criticized the colonial construction of knowledge, they seem to following the same paradigmatic model of civilization to consolidate modern imperial trends or the legacy of the British Empire. They seem to be neglecting the concept of indigenous nationalisms in India and feel themselves not at ease to apply the modern nationalistic perception of Duff, Tod, Elphinstone and Cunningham to the construction of modern South Asian political, cultural and social identities. Rather, they seem to be committed with the continuation of colonial paradigm to establish a specific cultural and political hegemony over the region.

As the intellectual foundations of the thought system which was the base of Elphinstone and his school has become mature now, there is sufficient reason to believe that neglect of such type of

identity politics forms the crux of the chaos and discontentment prevalent in the region and the solution of the issues seems connected with the issue of the maturity of the sense of history closely associated with political identity. Maturification and recognition of such identities in political terms can be expected to produce a peace congenial environment in the region, defaming the current state of conflicts and resurgences of disunity.

Notes and References

1.   See for example Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and Its Implications*, Calcutta, 1988; Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies, vols. 1-6*, Delhi, 1982-89; David Arnold & David Hardiman, ed., *Subaltern Studies VIII Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*, New Delhi, 1994; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History From the Tagus to the Ganges*, New Delhi, 2005.

2.   John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History How Historians Map the Past*, New York, 2004, First chapter.

3.   Crane, Robert I., *The History of India: Its Study And Interpretation*, Washington, 1958, p. 1.

4.   The history of colonial South Asia needs a sort of time scale to measure the evolution of socio-political and cultural identities in the region. In this context the period of British contacts with the subcontinent can be divided into five spans: commercial, commercial colonial, colonialism and mature colonial; commercial: before 1757; commercial colonial to 1857; colonialism to 1935 and mature colonial which became the legacy for the independent states of the region to 1947. This division can be debated in the academic circles which may help determine the place of colonial legacy in the current socio-political and institutional state of the region.

5.   See for Example James Mill, *History Of the British India*, 3 vols., London, 1817; William Ward, *View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoo: a minute description of their manners and customs and translations from their principal works*, Madras, 1863; Bearce, G.D., *British Attitudes Towards India 1784-1958*, Oxford, 1961.

6.   See for details Aronson, *Europe Looks At India, A Study in Cultural Relations*, Bombay, 1946

7.	See the map of the Mughal Empire in Irfan Habib, *The Atlas of the Mughal Empire*, Delhi, 1982, Map OA.

8.	John Swinton, "A Description of Hindostan or the Empire of the Great Mogol", in *English Universal History*, London, 1759. Also see J. Rennel, *Memoirs of a Map of Hindostan or the Mughal Empire*, London, 1783.

9.	Robert Orme, *A History of Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan*, London, 1763.

10.	Muhammad Shafique Bhatti, 'British Historiography of India: A Study in the Late Eighteenth Century Shift of Interest', *Quarterly Journal of Pakistan Historical Society, Vol. L, No.3, July-September 2002*, pp. 85-104

11.	See reference no 1.

12.	See for example J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Events Relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan*; Hamilton, *History of Rohillas (1776?);* Francis Gladwin, *A Narrative of Bengal…* (1788).

13.	See for details T.E. Colebrooke, *Life of the Mountstuart Elphinstone*, London, 1884, p. 357; Also see J. S. Cotton, *Rulers of India: Mountstuart Elphinstone*, Oxford, 1892.

14.	His father was the Governor of Edinburgh and his uncle was one of the directors of East India Company. Elphinstone got his upbringing during a period when The Enlightenment was being divided into the issues of its sub-interest. Elphinstone's environment was under the influence of Scottish enlightenment. If this enlightenment had produced Benthamite utilitarianism during the period of Elphinstone's growth, a reaction to The Enlightenment's extreme rationalism had emerged in the form of romanticism. However, the emergence of evangelical thought had also been taken as a reaction to the Enlightenment's deistic formation of thought. See for details J. S. Cotton, *op. cit.,* chapter II.

15.   Elphinstone spent more than thirty-one years in India from 1796 to 1828. During this long stay in Indian, Elphinstone served on different posts in the Company's administration from the assistant to the Governor of Bombay.

16.   Elphinstone had developed a thorough taste for reading. By the 1805 he had read a lot of works written on all aspects of intellectual curiosity including, philosophy, classics, literature, languages, history, geography, etc.

17.   See for details Jane *Rendall*, "Scottish Orientalism: From Robertson to James Mill" , *The Historical Journal*, Vol. XXV/1, (June 1982), pp. 43-69.

18.   Elphinstone's Papers present his deep attachment with Indian culture and civilization. At a number of occasions Elphinstone expressed his deep attachment with the Indian culture in written. For examples see Elphinstone Papers, MSS. Eur. F 88 in Oriental and India Office Library at British Library, London.

19.   James Mill's *History of British India* was published in 1817 in six volumes and was considered a master piece on Indian affairs. It has been published several times all over the world since 1817. It occupied the place of a compulsory book of reading for the officials of the East India Company until the publication of Elphinstone's *History of India*.

20.   On the back up of Elphinstone James Grant Duff, a Scottish and relative of Elphinstone, wrote *History of Marathas*, on the basis of original sources which was published in 1828.

21.   Tod wrote *Annals of Rajhistan* and *Travels in Western India*.

22.   Mountstuart Elphinstone's History of India was first published between 1839 and 1842. Since its first publication, so many editions of the book has been published. For the current study, 1889 edition of Elphinstone's History of India, with notes and additions by E. B. Cowell, published by John Murray, London, is used for references.

23. J.S. Grewal, *Muslim Rule In India: The Assessment of British Historians*, Bombay, 1970.p. 130.

24. Elphinstone Papers, MSS. Eur. F 88, Journal dated, 7.12.1829.

25. His History of India presents theoretical as well as philosophical concepts related to all aspects of Indian civilization. The division of the history into books and chapters in evolutionary way reflects a clear sort of theory and he philosophizes it for the administrative purposive.

26. T. E. Colebrook, *op. cit.*, II, p. 355

27. Elphinstone's Letter to Grant Duff dated 20 April 1822, Elphinstone Papers, MSS. Eur. F.88

28. See for detail S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study In Eighteenth- Century British Attitude to India*, Cambridge, 1968, chapter I, passim..

29. Elphinstone Papers, MSS. Eur. F.88, Journal dated 1.1.1834 to 1.3.1834, p. 133.

30. Community consists of all who believe in Islam.

31. This view of nation is very well applied to the Marathas in his policy treatment as well as in his history. For details see his history of *Rise of the British Power in India*, London, 1842 chapters on Marathas.

32. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *History of India the Hindu and Mahometan Period*, ed. E. B. Cowell, London, 1889, p.1 ib.

33. *Ibid.,*p.1.

34. On this point Elphinstone agrees with Colebrooke. Ibid., p.

35. *Ibid.,* p. 234.

36.	*Ibid.,*pp. 1-3.

37.	*Ibid.,*p. 3.

38.	*Ibid.,* pp. 2-3.

39.	*Ibid.,*pp. 237-245.

40.	*Ibid.,*pp. 226-235.

41.	*Ibid.,*book V.

42.	See any Map of British Empire in the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, London, 1909.