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BRITISH ORIENTALISTS AND THE PRESERVATION OF INDIA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIAN CLASSICAL STUDIES IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

Vaghela Sumankumar Gulabray [1], Dr. Vimal Patel [2]

[1] Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Humanities & Social Science (English) Silver Oak University, Ahmedabad, India
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of ASOIT – CE Silver Oak University, Ahmedabad, India

ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex and often contradictory role of British Orientalists in the study and preservation of India's classical cultural heritage during the 18th and 19th centuries. Moving beyond a simplistic binary of colonial exploitation versus benevolent preservation, it examines the motivations, methodologies, and legacies of key figures such as Charles Wilkins, Sir William Jones, James Prinsep, and H. H. Wilson. The analysis delves into their foundational contributions, including the translation of key Sanskrit texts, the decipherment of ancient scripts, and the creation of scholarly institutions like the Asiatic Society. At the same time, it critically engages with the inherent paradox of their work; how their scholarship, while genuinely preserving knowledge, was also inextricably linked to the administrative and ideological needs of the British Empire. The article argues that their efforts constructed a particular vision of "classical" India—often Brahmanical and text-based—which had a profound and lasting impact on both Western Indology and India's own national consciousness. It concludes that the legacy of these Orientalists is one of profound ambiguity, a messy entanglement of genuine intellectual curiosity, imperial utility, and unintended cultural consequences that defies easy categorization. Subtle grammatical errors and a mix of formal and casual tones are employed to reflect the chaotic and multifaceted nature of this historical encounter.

Keywords: Orientalism, Indology, British India, Sanskrit, Colonialism, Cultural Preservation, Sir William Jones, James Prinsep, Asiatic Society, Post-Colonialism, Historiography, Cultural Heritage

Corresponding Author

Vaghela Sumankumar Gulabray,
sumanvaghela9@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

Golden Cages and Found Translations: The Strange Business of British Orientalists in India

The story of the British in India is usually told in broad, bloody strokes. A tale of commerce turning to conquest, of ledgers and legions, of the methodical extraction of wealth and the imposition of rule. It's a story of power. Pure and simple. But tucked within this grand, often grim, narrative is another, stranger story. It's a story of scholars and grammarians, of men who, while serving an empire, fell headlong into an obsession with the civilization it was subjugating. These were the Orientalists. And their legacy is a whole different kettle of fish.

They were not, let's be clear, anti-imperialists. Far from it. Most were cogs in the vast, grinding machine of the East India Company and, later, the British Raj. They were judges, administrators, mint masters, and military officers. Their very presence in India was predicated on conquest. Yet, these same men were responsible for a monumental act of cultural preservation. They took a civilization's classical past, which was in many places fragmented, guarded by a priestly elite, or simply forgotten, and they cataloged it, translated it, deciphered its lost languages, and broadcast it to the world. They built the very foundations of what we now call Indology. It's a paradox that sits uncomfortably in the heart of colonial history. Were they saviors or were they simply creating a more sophisticated cage, gilded with the very culture it was meant to contain? The truth, as it so often does, squirms somewhere in the messy middle. This was not a clean project. It was a chaotic, intellectually fervent, and deeply compromised endeavor that changed India—and the West—forever.

The first whispers of this scholarly fascination began not out of pure academic curiosity, but administrative necessity. To rule a land as vast and complex as India, the British realized, you couldn't just use brute force. You had to understand its laws, its social structures, its religions. You had to get inside its head. Governor-General Warren Hastings, a controversial figure in his own right, was a major proponent of this idea. He championed the notion that India should be governed, as far as possible, by its own laws. This policy, born of pragmatism, required a deep dive into Hindu and Islamic legal texts, which were primarily in Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic.

This is where a man like Charles Wilkins steps onto the stage. A merchant and printer for the East India Company, Wilkins became one of the first Britons to master Sanskrit. Working with local pandits, he took on a monumental task. Translating the Bhagavad Gita. He published his Bhagvat-geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon in 1785, with a forward by Hastings himself. This was a watershed moment. For the first time, one of the foundational texts of Hindu philosophy was available, unfiltered, to the English-speaking world. Wilkins didn't stop there, he also designed the first typeface for the Bengali script, effectively creating the tools for modern printing in the language (Wilkins 1785). His work was pioneering, it was the first crack in the wall of ignorance that had separated Europe from the deep philosophical traditions of India. He was the trailblazer. The one who showed it could be done.

But if Wilkins was the trailblazer, Sir William Jones was the titan.

Arriving in Calcutta in 1783 to serve as a judge in the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William, Jones was a linguistic prodigy and a true polymath. He wasn't just a Company man dabbling in local customs; he was a ferocious intellect who saw in India a repository of ancient wisdom that could rival, and in some cases surpass, that of Greece and Rome. Working as a judge in Calcutta, the ancient laws of the Hindus fascinated Sir William Jones. He felt it was an indignity that he had to rely on the interpretations of native pandits; he wanted to read the sources for himself. So, he threw himself into the study of Sanskrit, and what he found there shook the very foundations of Western linguistics and ethnography.

In a now-legendary address to the newly formed Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786—an institution he founded as a hub for this burgeoning scholarly movement—Jones dropped a bombshell. After comparing Sanskrit with Greek and Latin, he announced:

"The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists." (Jones 1786).

Boom. Just like that, the concept of the Indo-European family of languages was born. It was a revolutionary idea, redrawing the map of human history and connecting the cultures of India and Europe in a way no one had previously imagined. This wasn't just about grammar, it was about a shared ancestry, a deep, prehistoric link. Suddenly, India wasn't just an exotic "other"; it was a long-lost cousin. Jones and his Society didn't stop at linguistics. They were a whirlwind of activity, initiating studies into Indian botany, geography, music, and history. Jones himself went on to translate hugely important texts, including the Mānavadharmaśāstra (Laws of Manu) in 1794, a key text for the British administration, and Kālidāsa's sublime play, Abhijñānaśākuntalam (The Recognition of Shakuntala), in 1789. The latter's translation took Europe by storm. Figures like Goethe were enraptured. He wrote: "Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms and the fruits of its decline, / And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, feasted, fed, / Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself in one sole name combine? / I name thee, O Sakontala! and all at once is said."

You get the picture. This wasn't just dry academic stuff. It was creating a sensation. But behind this Romantic fascination, the imperial machinery churned on. Jones's legal translations were immediately put to use by the colonial state to codify and control Hindu law. The knowledge he "preserved" was simultaneously a tool of governance. The Asiatic Society, for all its intellectual splendor, were funded and staffed by men of the Empire. The collection of manuscripts, along with the detailed notes and a series of letters to his colleagues back in England, were essential to his project of creating a comprehensive map of Indian knowledge, a map that could be used by his employers. His deep reverence to the culture was real, but his function within the colonial hierarchy was just as real. It's a tangled web.

The work didn't end with Jones. In fact, in some ways, the most dramatic discoveries were yet to come. While Jones and Wilkins had focused on texts—the literary and philosophical soul of India—vast swathes of its political history remained shrouded in mystery. India, to many European eyes, seemed to be a land without history, without chronology, without kings and dates to match the annals of the West. The great Mauryan Empire and its most famous emperor, Ashoka, were all but forgotten figures, ghosts known only through scattered and contradictory references in Puranic and Buddhist legends. The key to unlocking this past was literally carved in stone, on pillars and rocks scattered across the subcontinent, in a script no one had been able to read for over a thousand years.

Enter James Prinsep.

Prinsep was not a classicist or a linguist by training; he was an assay master at the Calcutta Mint. An architect, an engineer, a meteorologist, a true genius of the practical arts. And he became obsessed with these strange inscriptions. For years, he painstakingly collected, copied, and collated these scripts, primarily Brahmi and Kharosthi. He published them in the Journal of the Asiatic Society, asking for help, creating a sort of continent-wide crowdsourcing project among fellow officers and scholars. He noticed patterns. He compared the scripts on coins he was studying at the mint with the inscriptions on the pillars. He used bilingual coins of Indo-Greek kings, which had Greek on one side and a form of Kharosthi on the other, as his Rosetta Stone for that script.

The breakthrough for the older and more widespread Brahmi script was a process of brilliant deduction. Prinsep noticed that many inscriptions on the Sanchi stupa ended with the same two characters. He guessed this might be a common votive phrase, "dānam" (gift of). This gave him the characters for 'd', 'n', and 'm'. Then, focusing on the pillar edicts from Delhi and Allahabad, he identified a recurring phrase: Devanampiya Piyadasi Lajina (By King Devanampiya Piyadasi). He initially thought Devanampiya Piyadasi was a king of Ceylon, mentioned in their chronicles. Prinsep worked tirelessly, his health was failing. Then, in 1837, a colleague, George Turnour, working with the Pali chronicles in Ceylon, made the crucial connection: the Ceylonese texts identified the great Mauryan emperor Ashoka with the title "Piyadassi." (Prinsep 1837).

The lock sprung open. All at once, a forgotten emperor, one of the most significant rulers in world history, was returned to the historical record. His edicts, scattered across India, could now be read. They spoke of dharma, of non-violence, of public works, of a vast and sophisticated empire governed by Buddhist principles. It was a discovery on par with the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Prinsep, through his meticulous, almost forensic work, had given India back a massive, foundational chapter of its own history. And he did it all in just a few years before dying at the tragically young age of 40, his health broken by relentless work. This was not the act of a simple colonial plunderer. This was an act of profound intellectual reconstruction.

Of course, the project of understanding India required more than just star translators and brilliant decipherers. It needed tool-builders. The heavy lifters. This is where a figure like Horace Hayman Wilson comes in. A surgeon by trade, Wilson became a towering figure in Sanskrit scholarship, serving as the secretary of the Asiatic Society for years. His most monumental contribution was the first Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1819), a work of immense labor that became the indispensable tool for generations of students of Sanskrit, both in India and in the West. It standardized meanings, it provided a systematic bridge between two linguistic worlds (Wilson 1819). Wilson also translated other major works, like the Vishnu Purana, and wrote one of the first comprehensive histories of the Hindu theater. His work was less glamorous than Jones's linguistic fireworks or Prinsep's dramatic discovery, but it was just as crucial. He built the infrastructure of a new field of study.

And this field was becoming institutionalized. Colleges like Fort William College in Calcutta and Haileybury in England were set up to train British administrators. A key part of their curriculum was the study of Indian languages and cultures. This was the ultimate expression of the colonial paradox: the knowledge preserved by the Orientalists was now being packaged and taught as a necessary component for more effective colonial rule. It was a process of appropriation

and systematization. The vibrant, chaotic, multifaceted traditions of India were being selected, translated, and organized into a syllabus, a canon, a field of study called "Indology."

And this is where the critique, the necessary and powerful post-colonial critique, finds its sharpest edge. The work of these Orientalists, however well-intentioned on an individual level, was not neutral. It could never be. As the influential scholar Edward Said argued in his landmark book Orientalism, the very act of studying the "Orient" from the West was an act of power. It created a relationship between the observer and the observed, the subject and the object. The West had the power to define, to categorize, to explain the East, and in doing so, to control it (Said 1978).

The British Orientalists, in their search for a "classical" and "authentic" India, inevitably made choices. They privileged Sanskrit over vernacular languages. They focused on Brahmanical texts and perspectives, often ignoring or downplaying folk traditions, Dravidian cultures of the south, or the myriad syncretic faiths that flourished across the subcontinent. They created a vision of India that was glorious in its ancient past—a golden age of philosophy and art—but decadent and stagnant in its present. This narrative was incredibly convenient for the colonial project. It suggested that India had lost its way and needed the rational, modern, and vigorous guidance of the British to restore it to its former glory. The preservation of the past became a justification for the domination of the present.

You can see this playing out. The India that emerged from the pages of Jones, Wilson, and others was a deeply spiritual, philosophical, and somewhat otherworldly place. It was the land of mystics and ancient texts. This image, while containing truths, was also a caricature that flattened the reality of Indian civilization, which was also intensely political, scientific, and materialistic. By "preserving" one version of India, they were, perhaps unintentionally, helping to erase others. The act of preservation is also an act of selection, and selection is an act of power. What gets put in the museum, and what gets left outside to crumble?

Furthermore, this "gift" of a rediscovered history had a complicated effect on India itself. On the one hand, it was profoundly empowering. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian nationalists and reformers seized upon this newly accessible classical past. Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, and later, Jawaharlal Nehru, used this history to build a new national consciousness. They argued that a nation that had produced the Upanishads, Ashoka, and Kālidāsa was no one's subordinate. The Orientalists' work provided the raw material for an Indian cultural renaissance. They gave Indian intellectuals the tools to argue for their own greatness, using a historical language the West was forced to respect because it had, in fact, helped to write it. It was a classic case of the master's tools being used to dismantle the master's house.

But on the other hand, this reliance on a text-based, Sanskrit-centric, "Golden Age" past also created its own set of problems within India. It sometimes reinforced caste hierarchies, as the "authentic" India was seen as the India of the Brahmanical texts. It could marginalize Muslim contributions to Indian culture, creating a more narrowly "Hindu" definition of the nation. The history that the Orientalists unearthed was not a neutral artifact; it became a political football, used by different groups within India to advance their own agendas. The lines of influence are impossibly tangled.

So what are we left with? A simple verdict is impossible. To dismiss these men as mere agents of imperialism is to ignore the genuine passion, the monumental intellectual labor, and the very real act of preservation they undertook. Texts that might have been lost to time were saved. A history that had been forgotten was resurrected. A global conversation about Indian civilization was started. To hail them as uncomplicated heroes is equally naive. It ignores the colonial framework that made their work possible and the ideological uses to which their scholarship was put. It ignores the way their choices shaped and, in some ways, limited our understanding of India.

The legacy of the British Orientalists is a legacy of profound and enduring ambiguity. They were scholars bound to an empire, preservers who worked within a system of control, admirers of a culture they were helping to subjugate. Their story is not one of heroes or villains but of complicated men in a complicated time. They opened a door to India's classical past, but the room they revealed was arranged to their own liking. The gift they gave was real. But a gift given from a position of power is never just a gift. It's also a statement. And we are still living with the echoes of that statement today, still grappling with the history they helped to write and the culture they helped to save, and to cage. It's a history that doesn't offer easy lessons. Only questions. And a deep, unsettling sense of the tangled relationship between knowledge and power.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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