

BRITISH AND EUROPEAN SANKRITIST SCHOLARS AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF INDIAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY



Prof. Dr. P.Jagadeesan

Abstract: *During the period of British rule in India and especially under the Governorship of Warren Hastings, a new trend emerged among linguistic scholars of England, to study the Oriental languages and their ethnology. These new Orientalist scholars like Sir William Jones, H.H. Wilson, Max Mueller and others used their studies of Sanskrit works to romanticize about the Indian past by glorifying the Aryan civilization as an extension of the Indo-European.*

However, such theories that Sanskrit language was superior, soon became unacceptable to other scholars like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sir Henry Maine - both Indian and Western. They were of the view that the efforts spent on Sanskrit studies is of no benefit to the common people, as only Brahmin students were entitled to and educated in it.

Yet, such studies flourished under the British rule only because of their objective to foster a master idea of the dark-skinned savage Indian vs. the fair-skinned civilized European. Even after the discovery of the pre-Vedic, non-Aryan, Indus Valley

Civilization in the 1920s, the Aryan racial theory continued as an extension of Indo-European civilization. Latter-day scholars like Leon Poliakov have questioned such appropriations and have dwelt on the independent achievements of pre-Aryan India and of post-Aryan, Dravidian India.

Warren Hastings became Governor of Bengal in early 1772. As second in council at Madras, he had shown skill, courage, and integrity and such good conduct earned him promotion to Bengal.

Though the consolidation of the company's rule in Bengal looked as his apparent task, but a far greater one was the preservation of British possessions from deadly danger without and bitter schism within. Hence, he found the Company a commercial corporation turned revenue farmer, he left it one of the great powers of Indian sub-continent.

Hastings was guided by the instructions given by the Board of Directors which specifically included that, "We now arm you with full powers to make complete reformation".¹

Warren Hastings's governorship was also significant for other features than those of politics and war. The atmosphere of the Mughal cultural traditions under which he lived for long had kindled oriental interest in him and made him acquire oriental knowledge and he learned Persian, the diplomatic language and Bengali, the local language along with a working knowledge of Urdu and with some Arabic.

Hence, in that line of interest, 'he encouraged Sanskrit studies and patronized William Wilkins in his attempt to translate Bagavat-Gita and encouraged Halhed in his compilation of Hindu law based on a Persian translation from the Sanskrit compiled by ten pundits.²

During this period a new awareness and interest emerged among some linguistic scholars of England on the study of Oriental languages and their wisdom. This attitude had already developed in them with regard to Persia and other middle-eastern countries with whom the contacts of the western nations were already in existence for centuries of time. These western scholars were called themselves as Orientalists.

These Orientalists also had some knowledge about the cultures and wisdom of the Aryan Indian Society through Persian translations of a few Sanskrit works belong to scholars of the Muslim rule of India.

The establishment of the empire in India in the 18th century and the initiatives taken by the government towards a transition of governance of reformation had also thrown open India, one of the oldest land of the human race with all its intellectual and cultural antiquities to the Orientalists.

This new development provided a direct access to the Aryan culture for which they

qualified themselves in Sanskrit and they classify themselves as the New Orientalists.

Sir William Jones, a learned linguist, already a Persian and Arabic Scholar came to join as a judge of the Supreme Court at Calcutta.

Warren Hastings encouraged his interest in Sanskrit and supported the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. On the refusal of Warren Hastings to accept the office of the President, Sir William Jones had accepted the office of the President of the Asiatic Society. By his patronage of Oriental learning particularly of the Sanskrit works, Aryan wisdom and art and by his continuance of the traditional methods of administration, Hastings placed himself in the line of the great Indian monarchs.

In his first discourse as president of the Asiatic Society William Jones observed, "It gave me an inexpressible pleasure to find myself in the midst of so noble an amphitheatre which has ever been esteemed the nurse of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the productions of human genius abounding in natural wonders and infinitely diversified in the forms of religion and government, in the laws, manners, customs and languages, as well as in the features and complexions of men"³

Though a group of distinguished European scholar-administrators have contributed for the flourishing of this society, but the most famous among them was Dr. John Wilson a scholar of distinction in Sanskrit and Zend.

He explained the object of the Society's research as the physical aspects and produce of the country, the monuments and records of its history, the intellectual, moral and economic condition of its tribes, its languages in respect of origin, structure and style, its religions in principle and practice and its civil and criminal jurisprudence.⁴

'British Indomania was evolved not born. To persuade this idea, it become necessary to find out evidences and circumstances on which the British enthusiasm for India began in the 1760's shortly after the battle of Plassy and continuing till the early decades of 19th Century. British Indomania was above all a deliberately built-up structure by the scholars of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

On the acquaintance of the British and European Scholars with Sanskrit of the Indian Aryan a new theory of language arose called the Indo-European language family. This includes, roughly, the Sanskrit and some languages in North India the Sinhala by Sri Lanka, Persian and the European languages.

According to Sir Henry Sumner Maine, Europeans began to study Sanskrit in the eighteenth century and the bases considered for common nationality prior to this were quite different.

In the beginning of the British Indian empire the British wished to have some intimate knowledge about the Indians,

By that they were aiming to know who are the Indians, their place among the nations of the world and how they are related to the British. These enquiries that had belonged to the realm of universal history which is based on ethnology.

Hence, 'a new Orientalism came into being that was centered on India and, for few decades the production of it was practically a monopoly of the scholars of British-Indian Calcutta before it was established in Europe.⁵

Consequently India, increasingly, became a source for British ethnological discourse and Britain became the centre for its debates.

The new ethnology was guided by the groupings of languages. Hence, it was race that appeared, increasingly, to be the object of the ethnology of Indo-Europeans: "For the new theory of language has unquestionably produced a new theory of Race" (Maine 1875:9) The people who were the first speakers of languages of the Indo-European language family had long since come to be called, by a name taken from Sanskrit Arya (arya) or Aryan"⁶

'This Indo-European or Aryan Concept with certain formal properties of its own have been more or less stable from its inception in the eighteenth century'.

Hence "the invention of the modern concept of the Aryan" dates back to the nineteenth century and is part of what Nancy Stepan refers to as 'Race in Science', which was so central to European perceptions of the human population and of the cultures of others. References to the arya in the Iranian Avesta and the Indian Vedas surfaced through comparative philology and provided a ready label.

Trautmann argues that British Sanskritists supplied the theoretical structures which dominated and directed the construction of the ethnologies of India" Thus two types of Orientalism need to be problematized and investigated: the knowledge produced by European scholars and the European representation of the Orient.⁷

The new Orientalist scholars like Sir William Jones, Henry Colebrooke, H.H. Wilson and others used their studies of Sanskrit works and development of knowledge about India (The Aryavarta) to romanticize the Indian past by glorifying the Aryan civilization along with their cultural wisdom and social institutions with excitement and admiration.

"The European perception of India was also colored by the empathy of Max Muller for Vedic Sanskrit, culture, but more importantly, by his contribution to the creations of the notion of an Aryan race as drawn from Sanskrit texts.

The Rig Veda was always utilized and elaborately depended on by these scholars to find support for their theory of the racial interpretation of Indian civilization.

"The origins of Indian history were said to lie in the conquest of the dasas by the aryas, who thus introduced their 'superior' language, Sanskrit, and its accompanying culture and came to dominate Indian history in their diffusion across the subcontinent.⁸

But the days were not too far for this theory that Sanskrit was the superior and richest language became not acceptable to many scholars of Indian and foreign.

A letter which Raja Rammohan Roy wrote in December, 1823, and was forwarded to Lord Amherst, the Governor-General through R. Heber, Lord Bishop of Calcutta. It contains a strong protest against the Government proposal to establish a Sanskrit school under Hindu Pandits. Rammohan exposes the uselessness of such an institution in the following words:

"This seminary (similar in character to those which existed in Europe before the time of Lord Bacon) can only be expected to lead the minds of the youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use to the possessors or to society. The pupils will there acquire what was known two thousand years ago with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since then produced by speculative men.

He points out at length how the young students of this seminary would merely waste a dozen years of the most valuable period of

their lives by acquiring the niceties of Sanskrit grammar, speculative philosophy of Vedanta, obsolete interpretations of Vedic passage in Mimamsa, and the subtleties of the Nyaya Sastra.

If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the schoolmen which was the best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner the Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness.

In this letter the Raja gave a very forceful expression to the view which was held by a large number of Indian and Europeans both before and after him.

The amount spent on Sanskrit College or School is of no benefit to the people in general, for only Brahman students are admitted there. Besides, institutions for teaching Sanskrit were never wanting in this country, and Sanskrit education would not have suffered much even if Government had not extended its patronage to it. It is further to be remembered that Sanskrit learning only enable a man to prescribe Sastric rules, and serves no other useful purpose.⁹

But the Orientalists, specifically called the Hindu Aryans were identified basically with their exclusive use of the Sanskrit language and its culture. Hence it was from India that the language and their culture spread to the West Asia subsequently to Europe.

Sir Henry Marine in his Rede lecture on (1875) on "the effects of observation of India upon European thought" he spoke on the disinterestedness of the Britons (of late nineteenth century) on Indian subjects while at the same time the European enthusiasm on that of India became raged.

The raging enthusiasm of European perhaps might be the affirmative impact on the Max Muller`s definition of the Aryan theory and its racial connection with the Europeans.

The modern concept of the Aryan was invented in the Nineteenth Century. This was derived from the `race in Science` theory of Nancy Stephan which was so central to European perceptions of the human population and of the cultures of others.....' Reference to the Arya in the Iranian Zend-Avesta and the Vedas of the north India derived from comparative philology that provided the ready brand name.

According to Trautmann it is the British Sanskrit scholars who provided the theoretical structures which dominated and directed the construction of the ethnologies of India.

The British and European encounter with Indian sub continent takes on to a scene in which orphans separated at a tender age are reunited many years after- the story as family reunion.

The genus of love which the many species include not only erotic love but also such forms of human solidarity as familial love-including the mechanical solidarity of brothers in a segmentary lineage.

Accordingly, at the outset on the relation of Britain and India the probe was made on the basis of this Aryan story. To use the phrase of Max Muller, `we are long lost kin, we are Aryan brethren`.

In the British Orientalist point of view, the Aryan theory of India has always been an identity of kinship among the two nations.

The sustenance of the Aryan theory of Orientalists and the consequent discussions tend to find out the necessary ways to bound the Indians with the British rule based on some

form of love, whether of solidarity of `firm attachment, loyalty of friendship`.

In 1875, when Britain was at the height of its power in India, Sir Henry Maine addressed the question of the effects of India as object of study upon European thought in the Rede Lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge.

"For the new theory of language has unquestionably produced a new theory of Race.... There seems to me no doubt that modern philology has suggested a grouping of peoples quite unlike anything that had been thought of before. If you examine the bases proposed for common nationality before the new knowledge growing out of the study of Sanskrit had been popularized in Europe, you will find them extremely unlike those which are now advocated and even passionately advocated in parts of the Continent.... That peoples not necessarily understanding one another's tongue should be grouped together politically on the ground of linguistic affinities assumed to prove community of descent, is quite a new idea." (Sir Henry Sumner Maine, `The effects of observation of India on modern European thought`)

Victorian Britons who were in the process of creating a "science of man" that concerned the respective claims of language and physique. By century's end a deep and lasting consensus was reached respecting India, which was called the racial theory of Indian civilization: that India's civilization was produced by the clash and subsequent mixture of light-skinned civilizing invaders (the Aryans) and dark-skinned barbarian, aborigines (often identified as Dravidians). The racial theory of Indian civilization persists to this day. But it is the crabgrass of Indian history.

The History Faculty Library, in the Old Indian Institute Building at Oxford, there is a foundation

stone with Sanskrit verses inscribed in modern Nagari script at the entryway.¹¹

"This building, dedicated to Eastern sciences, was founded for the use of Aryas (Indians and Englishmen) by excellent and benevolent men desirous of encouraging knowledge. The High-minded Heir-Apparent, named Albert Edward, Son of the Empress of India, himself performed the act of inauguration. The ceremony of laying the Memorial Stone took place on Wednesday, the tenth lunar day of the dark half of the month of Vaisakha in the Samvat year 1939 (=Wednesday, May 2, 1883). By the favor of God may the learning and literature of India be ever held in honour; and may the mutual friendship of India and England constantly increase!"

To note, the building is "for the use of Aryas" (aryopayogini), and the Official translation instructs us that this is to be taken in an inclusive sense, to mean both Indians and Englishmen.¹²

Although the word Arya is a Sanskrit on the construct in question is unmistakably European and by no means native to Sanskrit. It comes from the European study of Sanskrit in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries discovery that Sanskrit was very similar to ancient Greek and Latin and more distantly to the modern languages of Europe led to the unexpected groupings of languages and people to which Sir Henry Maine alludes.

The passage quoted with its official sanctioned translation "for the use of Aryas (Indians and Englishmen) the word Arya is here intentionally used on the basis of newly developed ethnological theories as the Aryans belong to the Indo-European race.

Secondly the last line of the aryavarta which is anciently referred to North India but in this with the meaning of India as a whole.

Hence, in the early Colonial period the British and the European Scholars had shown an enormous enthusiasm to magnify everything that was Indian, because of its aspects of novelty-mythical and mystical apparently because they were carried away by their racial and linguistic identities of Aryan and Sanskrit.

In the early 19th century, the name for the language family and its people were divided into four main groups based on the Bible narrative of Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japhet.

This notion and the problematic place of India in it appears to have a very long genealogy, extending back to Islamic writers of an early period, for whom Indians were a source of wisdom and science as well as black descendents of Ham. For example, Said ibn Ahmad Andalusī, in his eleventh century ethnology (1065:11), says that the Indians were the first nation to have cultivated the science, and that although black, Allah ranked them above many white and brown peoples. The opposition of the negritude to science doubtless has to do with the darkening face of slavery in the international slave trade, both European and Middle Eastern, as elucidated in a masterly article by William McKee Evans (1980) ("From the land of Canaan to the land of Guinea; the strange odyssey of the 'Sons of Ham'.")¹³

During, particularly after the mid of nineteenth century, "In British eyes India presented the spectacle of a dark-skinned people who were evidently civilized and as such it constituted the central problem for Victorian anthropology, whose project it was to achieve classifications of human variety consistent with the master idea of the opposition of the dark-skinned savage and the fair-skinned civilized European"¹⁴

To this project India was an enigma and the intensity of the enigma deepened in the course of the nineteenth century, bursting into scholarly warfare over the competing claims of language and complexion as the foundation of ethnological classification.

However the Aryans of the Vedas, just like other Aryans outside India fought each other as regularly as they battle with non-Aryans. So, it is reasonable to conclude that some of the people who spoke Aryan tongues called themselves Aryans.¹⁵

Aryan was to be taken as linguistic term with no reference to ethnic unity.

For all that there actually were people in antiquity who called themselves Aryan and were called Aryans by others.

The notion of barbarous India to which Aryan civilization descended has been largely widespread, and the number of books which tell us of southern Indian civilization is not as large as one might wish.

Elliot Smith argues to give more importance to maritime contact between Egypt and India in estimating some what more highly the importance of the possible backward conveyance of culture elements from India westwards and the independent achievements of pre-Aryan India and of post-Aryan Dravidian India.¹⁶

The word 'Aryan' is legitimate enough provided the definite meaning is attached to it as a name for the invaders from the northwest who introduced the Sanskrit language into India. It is illegitimate if used to imply the theory popularized by Max Muller that an ancient "Aryan" race of men, superior to the other races, spread from the original "Aryan home" **somewhere** in Europe or Asia over India, Persia and Europe displacing the previous occupants

all regarded an inferior mentally, physically and culturally and bequeathing to their descendants the various languages of the Indo-Germanic family'.¹⁷

Even after the discovery of the pre-vedic Indus civilization in the 1920s, the centrality of the Aryan racial theory continued. The people of the Indus civilization were either regarded as non-Aryans conquered by the Aryans or else attempts were made and are being made even vigorously today, to describe the Indus civilization as Aryan.¹⁸ But the paradox is that again it is not by any professional historians, but by the racialists of Aryan group.

For us, of the twentieth century, the name Aryan has different, far more sinister connotations, associated forever with the Nazi atrocities of the recent past, it continues in the present through racial hate groups who use it to evoke the full force of the racist idea: mental differences among races that are original and unchangeable: the superiority of whites; the preservation of the racial purity of whites by separation from Jews, blacks, Asians, and others. Through these associations the name Aryan joins the memory of deeds that have defined for us the farthest extreme of human evil.

The discovery of Sanskrit's relation to the languages of Europe and through it the creation of historical linguistics, it is hardly surprising therefore that the use of "Aryan," so popular up to World War II, is now poison for linguists and has given way completely to Indo-European.¹⁹

The Aryan concept is the central idea of twentieth-century fascisms, and the fact that it was developed by scholars raises the question of the role scholars have played in preparing the way for these appropriations. Ethnological ideas belong inescapably to the realm of moral

reasoning, and their misuses are properly subject to moral evaluation. The need to combat the appropriations of science by Nazis, segregationists and hate groups has led to the writing of a number of books exploring ways in which linguists and ethnologists have provided the materials for such appropriations and in some cases participated willingly in them.²⁰

“Leon Poliakov’s *The Aryan Myth* (1974) is very good treatment of the Aryan concept and anti-semitism, written from a depth-psychology viewpoint. Martin Bernal’s ambitious *Black Athena* (1987) ; (to comprise four volumes) touches this issue, in that the author makes the case that anti-semitism was the primary reason European scholars of the nineteenth century abandoned the idea of Egyptian origins of Greek civilization in favor of the newly discovered Indo-European connection..... However, as we shall see, India and Egypt were not opposed but intertwined in the beginnings of the Indo-European idea, and remained so until the non-Indo-European character of the Coptic language of Egypt became clear and the hieroglyphics were deciphered. If anything, nineteenth-century European and Euroamerican discussion of Egypt, so far from driving a wedge between the ancient Egyptians and the Greeks, tended rather to make the Egyptians white, uniting them with the Greeks and driving a wedge between them and black Africans. This is especially so in the *Types of mankind* of J.C Nott and George R. Gliddon (1854).²¹

Bibliography:

1. SPEAR PERCIVAL, *The Oxford History of Modern India*, 1978, P.58
2. Ibid, P.69
3. DATTA.K.K. *Social History of Modern*

India, P.205

4. Ibid; P.208
5. TRAUTMANN, R.THOMAS, *Aryans and British India*, 1997, P.3
6. Ibid, P.2
7. THAPAR ROMILA (Forward) *ibid*,
8. *Ibid*, (Forwarded by THAPAR ROMILA) P.XI, XVI
9. *Ibid*; P.XII
10. MAJUMDAR, R.C, *British paramountcy and Indian renaissance*, B.V.B. 2007, P.35
11. TRAUTMANN *ibid*, P.1
12. *ibid*, P.4
13. *ibid*, P.5
14. *ibid*, P.3
15. *ibid*, P.3
16. KOSAMBI.D.D; *The culture and civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, 2007, P.73,74,75.
17. SLATER GILBERT, *The Dravidian Element in Indian culture*, 1987, P.6.
18. *Ibid*; P.7
19. THAPAR ROMILA, *ibid*;
20. TRAUTMANN, P.14
21. *Ibid*,
22. *Ibid*, 15

About the Author:

Dr. Jagadeesan is the former Vice-Chancellor of Bharathidasan University, and also the former Head of the Department of History in the University of Madras.

He also held the post of distinguished member of the State Planning Commission for Education and Social Justice in the Government of Tamilnadu. He has served on various committees of the Central and State Governments and the Madras High Court, including the High-Level Committee on the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project.

Dr. Jagadeesan is a Senior Research Fellow at the Indian Council of Historical Research. His specializations are: Indian Society and Culture - Ancient and Modern, Social Institutions, Nationalism and Sub-nationalism, Education and its Relevance for Social Change, and the Rediscovery of South India. He was bestowed the prestigious award of 'Distinguished and Eminent Historian of Tamilnadu' by the Tamilnadu History Congress at its 21st Annual Conference. He has published 12 books and 82 papers thus far. He also served as the Editor for the Proceedings of South Indian History Congress and the Bulletin of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies, Japan. ◆