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**Nairra Nissar Shah**

Research Scholar, Centre of  
Advanced Study, Department  
of History, Aligarh Muslim  
University, Aligarh,  
Uttar Pradesh, India

## Reflections in colonial credo in India

**Nairra Nissar Shah**

### Abstract

The British rule in India was based on many set ideologies and opinions that they had, over the time, created, deduced and sometimes concocted. They continuously emphasized on the 'difference' that set them apart from natives. To sustain the rule they came up with new, exceptional theories of governance. These were sometimes taken with a pinch of salt, sometimes forcefully shoved down the unwilling throats of Indians. This paper focuses on how the colonial rule was imposed upon natives by developing an undesirable symbiotic relationship between the ruler and the ruled, in which the former accrued benefits most of the times, at the latter's expense. They conveniently took the glorious things from India's past, correlated them with theirs and branded or generalized everything else as savage and inferior to them.

**Keywords:** British, race, superiority, India, colony

### Introduction

The British in India, had taken upon themselves the task of 'civilizing' the savage and saving the pagan from the hellfire. They exercised their power initially by refraining from meddling with ancient establishments, societal structures, beliefs of the natives howsoever shaky and bizarre they seemed. But it was impossible to carry out the administration without making contacts or without involving the natives in, at least, the lowest levels of administration. By getting more and more involved with the natives, in the collection of revenue and administration of justice, British became convinced of their dishonesty and perfidy and hence, considered every single Indian to be untrustworthy. 'Every native of Hindustan, I verily believe, is corrupt', as Cornwallis once generalized.

The medieval Christian world viewed 'East' as fanciful alien land of miracles and monsters. From the seventeenth century, with various momentous intellectual and philosophical movements like Enlightenment, rationalism, and scientific study of comparative religion and quest for greater knowledge of India, the 'East' was described instead through the taxonomic structure of eighteenth century natural science. Much of this description was commiserating as it looked for underlying unities that united the 'Man' family. But it further widened the gaps between Europeans and the 'Other'.

James Mill's History of British India articulated the liberal perspective about Indian culture. 'Light taxes and good laws, nothing more is wanting for national and individual prosperity all over the globe', Mill advocated, to liberate India from the shackles of immobility and inaction. His viewpoint was based on a hierarchical categorization of cultures. Those living in primitive freedom were the highest of beasts, followed by slave societies and finally paternal tyranny, as shown in the Inca state of Peru, India, China and Egypt where general supervision was under the government and a lot was left to the discretion of individuals to accomplish. At the same time, the British tried to clearly demarcate between 'religious' and 'secular'. They wanted to stay out of shrine management and limit state operations to 'secular' concerns only, though they always found themselves playing the role of negotiators in conflicts revolving around shrine land and succession. There was no attempt to introduce Christianity at first, since it was believed to worsen the conditions and sow the diseased seeds of fear and apprehensions. Despite the obvious manifestation of Indian enmity exposed by the events of 1857, Britain's legitimacy to rule India was never questioned. No one in Britain, or among British in India contemplated fleeing India. The insurrection, on the other hand, created a feeling of pure valor and self-assertion with its ruthless retaliation among the British against those who dared to resist.

**Corresponding Author:****Nairra Nissar Shah**

Research Scholar, Centre of  
Advanced Study, Department  
of History, Aligarh Muslim  
University, Aligarh,  
Uttar Pradesh, India

A new imperialism supported new vision of India by the later decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was now to be valued as 'jewel in the crown' with no more desperate attempts to make it a poor replica of Europe. There was something about India that the British could never afford to ignore. The glory of its past, antiquity of its languages, magnificent art and architecture, grandeur of the ruling dynasties, were some of the things that so impressed the foreign that they very conveniently chose to draw parallels with their own past. As Henry Maine argued in the effects of observation of India on modern European thought, a whole universe of Aryan organizations, traditions, laws and beliefs were shared between India and Britain. As a result, India was a part of 'family of mankind to which we belong'. But considering them at par with their own culture and past was something that would have contradicted the British claims of 'civilizing' people inferior to them. So Maine argued, those Aryan institutions had 'been arrested in India at an early stage of development'. The country was, as a result, barbaric.

The Victorians set out to organize and categorize Indian's 'difference' in line with scientific methods of knowledge. For them, and indeed for Europeans more generally, history played a critical role in organizing the world around them. They used it to build an identification, a secure niche for themselves and a set of relationships that would define their interactions with the world outside and would easily position their own 'progressive' society at the zenith of development. As a result, the study of India became a part of a wider scholarly project. Western preeminence was no longer only asserted, as James Mill had done, but was accepted owing to the scientific superstructure that sprang around it. Thus, Victorian science put India into a hierarchical relationship with Europe, thereby supplying the stable ground of legitimacy for the British to rule. As John Burrow remarked, 'mankind was one not because it was everywhere the same, but because the differences represented different stages in the same process', and so British were the *chosen ones*. The seeds of contemporary Europe's social and political systems developed from India's old institutions, which were linked to those of Europe by their common Aryan background. Maine maintained that the old Aryan institutions had survived in India partially due to the country's physical isolation, bounded by the Himalayas and the sea, and partly due to the fact that all subsequent migrations after the Aryans had only a little impact on the Indian social order. With the population shielded from outside influences, 'Brahminical religion' and the caste system had preserved the society's 'old natural elements', as well as its corollary ideas and institutions.

In early decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century, fascinating new discoveries followed the ground-breaking study of the Sanskrit language done by the individuals like Jones, Halhed and Colebrooke in the 1780s and 1790s. The decipherment of the brahmi script, which revealed the presence of the third-century B.C. Ashokan period; the discovery of Gandhara craftsmanship in the northwest, which revealed ties between India and old-style Greece; and the interpretation of the Chinese explorer Fa Hsein's record of his visit in the fifth century A.D., which, along with the discovery of the Ajanta caves in 1819, gave verifiable profundity to the Guptas and Buddhist experience in India. When confronted to these set of circumstances, the English could no longer reject India as a

nation of 'changeless' primitive regions. India's long past had to be quickly interpreted and placed at a lower rung in the hierarchy of civilization, than theirs. They could obviously reinforce their supremacy by bringing up characteristics like individualism and liberty that had been ingrained in western civilization, or, could demonstrate their mechanical prowess of establishing railways and communication networks by the dint of which they had conquered India. That is exactly what they did to prove their superiority.

Initially the Aryan theory amounted to apparent parallels in certain words and patterns of grammar between Sanskrit and most European languages. Based on these similarities, Sir William Jones then argued for common ancestor of all those who spoke these languages. Jones made no attempt to link language to race. However, as comparative philology became more refined, particularly as crafted by German researcher Max Muller, Jones' roughly linked language family took new shape and was now given ancestral home in southern Russia, from which the Aryans as they were now known, were believed to have fanned out to conquer and colonize vast swathes of land from Northern India to Western Europe. This set the footing for the Aryan race to be looked upon as apart and superior than the other races. Aryanism piqued people's interest and started showing more appeal in racial theory, from 1850s onwards. But it was fundamentally different from 'scientific racism' which attempted to measure physical features such as the size of brain and shape of the head. The finest application of such 'sciences' as craniometry was found in the process of evaluating the racial characteristics of Africans, and blacks in particular. In the eyes of English, Africans lacked any kind of history and were seen as savages with no written records, thus, their bodies alone could describe their survival in nature. India's long history could not be dismissed with the same derision as those of Africans.

The decline of Aryans began when they engaged with the Dravidians as they migrated down the Gangetic Valley. The result being 'intermixing of blood of stronger and weaker races'. This theory proved advantageous as it not only provided account of different paths followed by India and England but could also arrange England's 'progress' corresponding to India's decline, and thus identifying the precise phases of India's descending course.

Buddhism was seen as a panacea for the oppressed for it was without the taint of strange notions and religious despotism of Hinduism, which contributed so much to its vilification by the Victorians. Buddhist workmanship, for example, in Sanchi, shifted towards a European aesthetic that emphasized simplicity of design and true representation of nature. Gandhara, one of its schools, was often regarded as most important since it incorporated western classical forms. People were dispersed without a pioneer or protector after the disintegration of the Mughal Empire. The political structure within which they had lived was disappearing in total disarray. Eventually the British considered it to be their divinely ordained duty to improve recurrent lawlessness and misrule that India had been subjected to. Inconsistencies in race and language were neglected, the similitudes demanded by Aryan theory were accommodated and differences were bolstered to secure enough room for British to rule.

The 'difference' that the British conceptualized with India crossed the realms of not only race and history, but gender also. Robert Orme wrote, 'we see throughout India a race of

men, whose make, physiognomy, and muscular strength convey ideas of an effeminacy which surprises when pursued through such numbers of the species, and when compared to the form of the European who is making the observation.' The Victorians used their own distinctive gender roles as yardstick to measure growth in every civilization. The more dignified the position of women in a society, the higher its civilization.

As English troops in India were not allowed to marry and the epidemic of venereal disease incapacitated large numbers of officers, authorities sought to make a supply of prostitutes available in cantonments. This policy came forth officially as Contagious Diseases Act of 1868. But the treatment meted out to Indian prostitutes quickly threw light on the glaring discriminations practiced in India. For instance, moral reformers fought for freedom of prostitutes from registration and worked for emancipating the 'fallen women'. No such efforts were made or even talked about for Indian counterparts. No freedom of movement was prescribed for Indian prostitutes, and 'almost every Indian woman outside the seclusion of *zenana* could thus potentially be suspect as a prostitute, and a bearer of disease'. The 18<sup>th</sup> century theories of environment determinism partly seemed to have originated the idea of Indian effeminacy. Scorching heat and dry and dusty weather supplanted virility and valor with effeminacy. Even the staple diet, rice was considered to be easily digestible and requiring little labor, that properly suited this effeminate race. Following the mutiny, the British sought to reduce the confusing variety of India's people, eager to control them without changing its existing social structures or interfering in their 'beloved' vague traditions. India was defined as 'a laboratory of mankind' or a 'living museum'. After the mutiny this was transformed into an official project, and organized into a 'structured framework- kind of a grid' similar to that used to classify animals. It included 'characteristic specimens' of each tribe, their costumes, complexion, and also their essential character. Such discriminatory attitude could be seen in almost every facet of administration, like the army, which after the mutiny was organized 'with a view to the full development of race efficiency'. The Bengali 'Babus' or English educated Indians, were specially denigrated for they sought to imitate English ways. Muslims were seen as aggressive, tyrannical and masculine; Hindus were lazy, docile, effeminate. While the Mughals were mostly exempted from harsh criticism, their 18<sup>th</sup> century successors were not, whom the British had set out to succeed. India's inferior race, disease ridden environment, sluggishness, fatalism among other things, were partly the result of its climate, yet, it was the legacy of this race i.e. imperial durbar model, where titles were awarded and homage offered, which the viceroy proudly emulated. Surrounded by his loyal subjects, he easily imagined himself as the successor of Mughals.

The British were never willing to consider India at par with them. Britain's Indian subjects might be 'our people', whose development and social, moral and intellectual upliftment was their 'self-proclaimed' responsibility but it always had an underlying insistence on 'difference' that set them apart.

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