
Fort William College and Colonial Knowledge Production: John Gilchrist's Role in the Development of Urdu

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Fort William College as a pivotal institution in the institutionalization of empirical scholarship in colonial India. However, its primary motive was to serve the administrative needs for the smooth functioning of the administration and to create a class of people who were Indian in blood and English in test, as mentioned in Macaulay's Minute on Education of 1835. This study will further examine the documentation of the college's activities, including its institutional role in sponsoring, financing, and distributing important linguistic works for administrative and educational purposes, with special reference to John Gilchrist and his contribution to the development of Urdu. With a focus on John Gilchrist's linguistic and pedagogical contributions to the development of Urdu, this paper explores the role of Fort William College in the institutionalisation of empirical scholarship in early colonial India. The College, which was founded in 1800, served as a vital training ground for East India Company officials by producing information and teaching languages in a methodical manner.

The East India Company was established in 1600 as a commercial company and subsequently rose to prominence in India. It created the College of Fort William, a significant hub for Indian languages, and encouraged Orientalist language studies to train administrators. John Gilchrist's contributions to Urdu are the main subject of this work.



Colonial success relied on cultural and knowledge-based control techniques in addition to economic and military might. As a cultural endeavour, colonialism relied heavily on knowledge to establish and maintain dominance (Cohn, 1996, p. ix).

On the last day of 1600, a charter of the British monarch permitted the foundation of the English East India Company, a joint-stock company of London merchants, to carry on trade in the East. As a rival to the Dutch East India Company, the English East India Company was granted special privileges. It was given a monopoly over all trade between England and Asia and permission to export bullion from England to finance this trade (Dube, 2014, p.6).

On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, W. C. Taylor, in an address to the Royal Asiatic Society in London, declared that the British had revealed India's literary heritage to the world and argued that studying Oriental literature was important for promoting trade and commercial success. He concluded by linking knowledge with power (Taylor, 1835).

In the Minute in council at Fort William, dated 18th August 1800, Marquis Wellesley, while mentioning the reason for the establishment of the Fort William college, writes that:

The British Possessions in India now constitute one of the most extensive and populous Empires in the world. the duty and policy of the British Government in India therefore require, that the' system of confiding the immediate exercise of every branch and department of the Government to Europeans educated in its own service, and subject to its own direct control should be disseminated as widely as possible, as well with a view to the stability of our own interest, as to the happiness and welfare of our Native Subjects (Roebuck, 1819).

The College of Fort William is one of the most significant and interesting institutions of nineteenth-century India. This College, founded in 1800 by Wellesley to impart general education to the young British civil servants, remained an active Centre of Indian language studies for about thirty years. It continued to function as an establishment to conduct examinations in Indian languages for another two decades after 1830. (Das, 1978, Preface) Nonetheless, the College was established for a different purpose altogether. And that purpose was precisely to help towards the growth of an efficient civil service in India (Das, 1978, p. 1).

Sisir Kumar Das, in his book *Sahibs and Munshis*, an account of the college of Fort William, expressed:



Long before Wellesley, Hastings recognised the value of having a solid command of Indian languages. According to Spear, he was the first to comprehend Indian culture as a foundation for effective governance. He was undoubtedly fascinated by various Indian languages, yet it is questionable if he truly understood Indian culture. He attained "mastery of Urdu and a fair competence of Persian, which in a few years distinguished him from the ruck of young Englishmen" while in the Company's junior grade until 1752 (Das, 1978, p. 1-2).

In addition to having a passing familiarity with Persian, the language of the Muslim court, Hastings had become fluent in Bengali and Urdu because he understood that the fastest path to a people's heart is through their native tongue. With plenty of time for introspection, Hastings sat in a rural Bengali town and marvelled at the country's size, richness, and diversity, but most importantly, the age and grandeur of its civilisation (Kopf, 1969, p. 15).

In the race for patronage benefits, John Gilchrist maintained a commanding lead between 1800 and 1804, primarily because of the acknowledged importance of Urdu. In 1801, Gilchrist was asked by the College Council not only to prepare and publish textbooks for his students but to "develop a complete system of Hindustani Philology (Kopf, 1969, p. 15).

I now have the pleasure to send to Beurer the Three Hundred Copies of my Oriental Linguist, for which the Right Honourable, the Governor-General, has lately subscribed and has already paid me accordingly on the Humble Company account. The whole 300 copies, and put up in sheets and in 15 bundles, each containing twenty copies, for which I beg you will favour me with a receipt (Gilchrist, 1798, p. 2).

The above document is an official letter written by John Gilchrist to D. Campbell, sub-secretary in the Home Public Department, dated 16th November 1798. Provides direct evidence of the close relationship between orientalist scholarship and colonial governance in British India. Gilchrist's forwarding of three hundred copies of his Oriental Linguist, formally subscribed to by the governor general and paid through the East India Company's account. It indicates how linguistic knowledge was institutionally sponsored by the colonial state.

In 1759, Dr John Borthwick Gilchrist was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. After completing his early schooling in Edinburgh, he attended the nearby George Heriot's Hospital to study medicine. In 1782, Gilchrist touched down on the Bombay coast. He travelled to India to work for the East India Company.

Gilchrist, a linguist, grammarian, and advocate for Urdu, arrived in India while working for the East India Company. Gilchrist realised as soon as he arrived in India that he would have to become fluent in



the local tongue. He began attempting to acquire the Indian language. The kuliya of Sauda thus provided him with a great lot of assistance. He also intended to create a lexicon and grammar of the Indian language during this time, but he was unable to obtain any supplementary materials about the rules. He must therefore learn all of the Indian language's rules on his own (Begum, 2020, pp. 61–63).

Gilchrist came to see that the political and economic interests of the East India Company depended on his understanding of Indian languages. He started arranging grammatical norms and honed his linguistic skills while working at Fatehgarh. According to Dr. Francis Balfour, he asked Governor-General Warren Hastings for a year of paid leave in 1785 so that he might continue this study.

In order to pursue his linguistic research, Gilchrist left Fatehgarh in April 1785 and moved to Faizabad. There, he discovered that similar works had already been published and that another researcher, Kirkpatrick, was also gathering vocabulary and grammatical rules. Gilchrist was disheartened by this. He came to Benares to live with his friend Dr John Peter Wade after becoming gravely ill. In Benares, his health improved, enabling him to carry out further studies.

Gilchrist travelled from Benares to Calcutta in late 1788 to print Kirkpatrick's lexicon and become acquainted with the nature of his work. Gilchrist finished compiling the English-Indian Dictionary here. This series' first volume was initially published in Calcutta in 1786, and its second volume was released in 1790 (Begum, 2020, p. 64).

Gilchrist was granted permission by the Governor-General in 1787 to go to the Benares area and plant indigo to fund his academic endeavours. He decided to live at Ghazipur, where he remained from 1787 till 1794 before relocating to Calcutta because of his poor health. His two most important publications, *Indian Grammar* (1796) and *The Oriental Linguist* (1798), were published in Calcutta. His grammar book used Roman script for learners and included comprehensive chapters on linguistic norms, pronunciation, and examples in both Urdu and English. In addition to the grammar, Gilchrist offered first-hand narratives of his experiences in India as an appendix to the lexicon.

When Governor-General Lord Wellesley visited Calcutta in 1798, he expressed gratitude for Gilchrist's work. Instruction was poor at the time because language training depended on munshis, who frequently could not speak English. Gilchrist suggested that before instructing government personnel, munshis should receive training in fundamental Persian and Indian languages. The Oriental Seminary was founded in January 1799 as a result of Wellesley's acceptance of this concept. The school operated from



February 1799 until November 1800, and Gilchrist was hired as a teacher in December 1798 (Begum, 2020, p. 68).

Dr Gilchrist is the author of many Hindustani works. A comprehensive list is given in Dr Grierson's Linguistic Survey of Hindustan, Volume IX. A few may be mentioned here

- (1) A Dictionary, English and Hindustani, in two parts, published in 1796 A. D
- (2) Oriental Linguist, an Introduction to the Language of Hindustani in 1798 A D
- (3) Hindustani Grammar, Calcutta, 1796.
- (4) Hindustani Philology.

The Oriental Linguist by Gilchrist was revised and reissued between 1809 and 1820. By depicting Indians mostly as servants and providing useful conversational guidelines for young British males in India, the 1809 edition reinforced colonial power relations through language training (Gilchrist, 1809).

A group of Indian academics were assembled at the College under his capable and compassionate supervision, and they not only produced textbooks for the new officers but also established a standard of prose for Urdu and Hindi. Scholars had left Delhi after the fall of the Mughal Empire, and Doctor Gilchrist's generosity and nurturing care brought notable but not particularly prominent scholars to Calcutta. Doctor Gilchrist made a significant contribution to the cause of Urdu with the assistance of other European officers of the College, including Captain Abraham Lockett, Professor J. W. Taylor, and Doctor Hunter. The College's principal authors were Mir Amman, Afsos, Husseni, Lutf, Hyderi, Jawan, Lallulal, Nihalchand, Ikiam Ah, Wala, Syed Mahomed Munir, Syed Bashir Ali Afsos and Madanlal Gujrati

Wellesley recognised the importance of Gilchrist's work and appointed him the head of the Fort William College. Gilchrist could not remain long, but he resigned his post owing to ill-health in 1804 on a pension. So great was his love for Hindustani that after staying in Edinburgh till 1816 A. D., he "removed to London and undertook private tuition in Oriental languages to candidates for Indian services." In 1818 A. D., he accepted the Professorship of Hindustani at the Oriental Institute, Leicester Square, established in that year by the East India Company but closed in 1825. Gilchrist continued to hold classes privately for about a year when he handed them over to the orientologists, Sandford Arnot and Duncan Forbes. He died at the age of eighty-two in Paris in 1841 A. D (Saksena, 1927, p. 243).



Bernerd S Cohn, in his work *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge*, expressed that:

Men like Carey and Gilchrist's concerns about organising and teaching Bengali and Hindustani, two vernacular languages, made the relationship between knowledge and power even more evident. Teaching the imperative forms and lexicons necessary for everyday interactions with servants and other inferiors took up a large portion of Gilchrist's work. Gilchrist was a representative of a new generation of British officials who were wary of the classicism of much Orientalist scholarship. Gilchrist actively harboured prejudices against Brahmans and native elites, whose motivations were thought to be inadequately aligned with the straightforward command structures that would serve as the foundation for colonial rule. However, even the great philologists Jones and Halhed, as well as their nineteenth-century successors, such as Ellis, Campbell, Brown, and Caldwell, believed that the comparative methods of European scholarship rendered the knowledge held by natives only in an empirical and unformed sense scientific, universal, and useful. Native Indian scholars, who provided all the resources needed to master a language, were progressively denigrated and disregarded as the nineteenth century progressed (Cohn, 1996, p. xiv).

A significant milestone in the institutionalisation of empirical research in colonial India, particularly in the field of language studies, was the establishment of Fort William College. The College turned linguistic knowledge into an academic and administrative tool by emphasising rigorous documentation, practical training, and vernacular instruction. John Gilchrist became a key character in this institutional structure, and his contributions greatly influenced the evolution and standardisation of Urdu in the early nineteenth century. His cooperation with Indian academics and munshis at Fort William College facilitated the production of literary collections and multilingual materials, thereby increasing Urdu's influence in both intellectual and bureaucratic spheres.

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