



Institutionalising the ‘Orient’: Scholarly Networks, Philological Power Structures, and the Construction of ‘Indian’ Antiquity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the institutionalisation of Orientalism in South Asia as an amalgamation of the Enlightenment curiosity of the West and the power structures of the colonial statecraft. It depicts how, with the advent of Orientalist institutional infrastructure, the Orientalist project of knowledge construction had shifted from individualistic, diffracted scholarly pursuits to an epistemic nerve centre for the British East India Company, providing it with the necessary social taxonomies, legal framework and historical narrative to justify its colonial conquest and prolonged exploitation. This paper uses a historical-analytical method to highlight the role played by Orientalist institutions such as the Asiatic Society and the Fort William College to essentialize and stereotype the South Asian culture, history and identity by constructing colonial knowledge on South Asia. This paper further explores how Orientalist philological tools were weaponised to construct a ‘golden age’ in Indian antiquity and helped the colonial narrative that envisaged how the present colonial subject had presently ‘degenerated’ from their own ‘glorious ancient past’ and required British guardianship to overcome this ‘degeneration’ and restore their ‘glorious civilisation’. Special attention is given to the early Orientalist scholars like William Jones from the Asiatic Society and John Gilchrist from the Fort William College at Calcutta, as well as the broader transimperial Orientalist networks that linked Calcutta to the broader world of colonial



knowledge. Ultimately, this paper concludes by depicting contesting legacies of Orientalism and the paradox of colonial knowledge production in the construction of cultural and historical identities of South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The institutionalisation of Orientalism in South Asia represented a perfect convergence between the Enlightenment curiosity of the West towards the East and effective colonial statecraft. Orientalism is not just a scholarly movement, an amalgamation of individualistic academic pursuits, but rather an institutionalised phenomenon facilitated by robust scholarly networks, most remarkably, the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta. Even though it started as a scholarly pursuit, it later transformed and worked as the epistemic nerve centre of the British Colonial administration. This transformation of personal intellectual pursuit to an institutionalised knowledge production occurred as the British East India Company (EIC) sought to stabilise its administrative set-up and started providing the bedrock of validation of its authority beyond just military coercion (Kopf, 1969, pp.17-22) These institutions certainly provided various administrative tools, such as numerous legal frameworks, social taxonomies and historical narratives that suit the necessity to govern non-European societies by the various European states, and they provided these framework by codifying languages, laws and religions of the subcontinent (Gulabray & Patel, 2024).

THE BRITISH EAST INDIAN COMPANY AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE AND ITS CREATION:

The evolution of Orientalism is heavily correlated with the changing nature of the British East India Company's sovereignty. As the East India Company transitioned from a mercantile corporation to a full-fledged territorial colonial state primarily in the mid-to-late 18th century, the ideological defence of colonialism and the nitty-gritties of their colonial administration started heavily depending upon the Orientalist knowledge production of the Asiatic Society and Fort William College, Calcutta. Joshua Enlitch termed this transition of the East India Company's sovereignty as 'idiom of sovereignty' from a commercial to a territorial focus (Ehrlich, 2023, pp. 1-21)

The Commercial Idiom and the Philosophy of 'Conciliation'



The earlier epoch of British colonialism under the British East India Company, especially during the lord Warren Hastings, the company had operated through the commercial idiom, engraved in the concept of conciliation, The concept of ‘conciliation’ used by the British East India Company was both for acquiring and producing knowledge, and for reconciling the diverse political and socio-cultural communities of the subcontinent. Hastings argued that the patronage of ‘Indian’ learning, like the foundation of Calcutta Madrassa in 1789, surely would ‘imprint on the hearts’ of the Indians and British a sense of obligation and mutual benevolence (Ehrlich, 2023, pp. 21-60).

This approach, taken by Hastings, is not just a ‘romantic fascination’ but rather a practical strategy taken by the colonial state of India under the British East India Company to maintain the early shaky colonial state. By supporting the ‘ancient constitution’¹ of Bengal, Hastings ultimately aimed to foster colonial authority by ‘consent’ rather than simply raw coercion. This ‘commercial idiom’ of the British East India Company certainly prioritised the patronage of the traditional elites of the subcontinent and maintained and preserved the indigenous local and social framework in the name of conciliation by the standardised knowledge constructed by the early orientalist scholars (Mills, 2025; Ehrlich, 2023, pp. 21-28, 30-45)

The Shift to a Territorial Idiom

By the 1820s and 1830s, the British East India Company’s commercial idiom had begun to fade; the Company was now establishing itself as a territorial ruler and a commercial hegemonic monopoly. This shift in approach led to a redefined idiom of sovereignty that emphasised cultivating ‘popular affection’ in their colonised subjects through state-sponsored education and socio-cultural reforms rather than mere elitist scholarly patronage. The whole Orientalist-Anglicist debate over patronising the indigenous languages of the subcontinent and providing English education to Indians reflects the deep-seated shifts in institutional priorities. The ‘territorial idiom’ is characterised by the shifts of the institutional priorities, from patronising the traditional elite and social superstructure at the time of the early colonial phase of the British East India Company, to moving towards mass English education and the adoption of Western scientific standards as a primary measure to gain ‘India’s civilizational progress. These institutional shifts are marked as a ‘slow death’ of the philosophy of ‘conciliation’, as the colonial state felt the necessity to have more direct forms of social engineering (Ehrlich, 2023, pp. 20-25, 180-200).

¹ The concept of ‘ancient constitution’ is an ideological framework used by the British officials in the late eighteenth century to justify their rule after conquering a province in the Indian subcontinent. Rather than any written document is imagined, indigenous legal-administrative structure, primarily derived from a romanticized view of the Mughal Empire, that the British officials are self-claimed to restore.



THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BENGAL: THE INSTITUTIONAL SOUL OF ORIENTALISM IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, was founded by Sir William Jones on January 15, 1784 and stood as the premier institution to study Asian arts, history, Languages, sciences and antiquities. Jones, a polyglot and a judge of the Supreme Court, Calcutta, envisioned the Asiatic Society that would replicate the model of the Royal Society of London, but with a specific scope and focus. (Simmonds, 2024)

The Asiatic Society was established during a meeting of thirty British residents at the 'Grand Jury room' of the Supreme Court of Calcutta. While the then-Governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings, was offered the founding presidency of the Asiatic Society, he declined and handed over this role to William Jones. The Society was initially named the 'Asiatick Society,' later removing the letter 'k' and eventually renaming the Society's name as the 'Asiatic Society of Bengal' in 1832 (Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 2002; Simmonds, 2024)

The institutional structure of the Asiatic Society allowed for the consolidation of the fragmented observations about Asia into a unified structure of knowledge. Members of the Asiatic Society, primarily British civil, military, and judicial officers, of the British colonial state contributed to research in the field of history, art, Languages, sciences, arts, and Literature of Asia. The Asiatic Society's journal, the *Asiatick Researches*, was first published in 1789 and became an essential source for analysing and studying novel research findings in the fields of antiquities, arts, literature, sciences, languages, culture and the history of Asia in a very limited span of time (Ehrlich, 2023, pp. 56-59).

The Global Connections and Orientalist Scholarly Networks

The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, was never a completely isolated scholarly institution, but rather part of an expansive complex network of scholarship. The Asiatic Society of Bengal's correspondence with scholarships in the fields of Asian history, art, arts, antiquities, language sciences, and literature and exchange of the unified knowledge generated from the vast researches of the respective fields through the society's journal, *Asiatick Researches* certainly linked Calcutta with London's *Royal Society* the Paris's *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* and the other numerous branches and sub-branches of the Asiatic Society throughout the south-east Asia (Ehrlich, 2023, pp. 85-87)

Additionally, the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland was founded in London by one of the early British Orientalist scholars, Henry Thomas Colebrook, in 1823 with the intention



to serve as an extended ‘metropole’-based centre for the activities of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. These scholarly networks effectively created a transimperial research paradigm that informed particular colonial policies throughout South and South-East Asia. For instance, Shanghai’s North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (NCBRAS), founded in 1857, led the ‘knowledge production of Tibet’, shifting their research from a missionary-led evangelical cultural inquiry to a professionalised fieldwork-based Anthropology and Sociology (Mills, 2025).

Institutionalising Empirical Scholarship

The Asiatic Society, Calcutta’s role in institutionalising research based on empirical evidence, was certainly essential for the early shaking colonial state under the British East India Company for their administrative scaffolding. By the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, Calcutta had emerged as the most prominent city under the British Empire for producing scientific and empirical knowledge about Asia. The Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta consciously used some of the empirical research methods, such as linguistic classification, ethnographic survey-based research and material possession of the historical sources that were employed in their research. Additionally, members of the Asiatic Society had done the first systematic linguistic studies and constructed an elaborate Grammar for the Indian Languages, which was gradually used by the British East India Company as one of the effective administrative tools.

Additionally, the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, was the first in Asia to classify the South Asian society through systematic and empirical ethnographic studies of Anthropology and sociology, which was later used by the colonial state to make a vast, diverse population of the subcontinent into governable colonial administrative units (Spoelder, 2023, pp. 95-126).

PHILOLOGY, COLONIAL POWER STRUCTURE AND MOSAIC MAPS OF CIVILIZATION

Philology was the most effective intellectual tool for the early Orientalist scholars of India to understand the origin of ‘Indian civilisation’ and its relationship with the European Western civilisation. The Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta sought a highly textual method to understand Indian civilisation and society, which is why Philology had played such a crucial part in the Orientalist project. The linkages of the two distinct civilisations, the Indian civilisation and the Western European civilisation, were first established by the historic philological linkages of the Indo-European language family. This proposition of historical linkages between the Indo-European language family was first posited by Sir William Jones’s *Third Anniversary Discourse* of 1786 (The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 2002).



The Indo-European Philological Hypotheses and Biblical Genealogy

Sir William Jones's observation in his *Third Anniversary Discourse* of 1786 that the intertwined affinities of Sanskrit, Greek and Latin could not be produced by mere accident or coincidence of isolated linguistic development but indicate a historical 'mosaic ethnology'. Thomas Trautmann further elaborated this proposition by mapping all the civilizational affinities between 'Indian' and European civilisation by going back to the biblical narrative of 'Noah's Arc', the story of Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japhet.

However, Jones' philological tree reflects numerous biblical narratives and myths. Ironically, while his predecessors, who envisaged Europeans as Noah's son Japhet. Sir William Jones diverged from that and made a significant shift by terming 'Hindus' as the descendants of Ham, Noah's other son. These flawed 'Hamitic hypotheses' allowed for the connection of 'Indians' with Egyptian and the Greeks with a vast, far-fetched and albeit scientifically false assumption. This far-fetched 'Hamitic hypotheses' also helped to build the orientalist narrative of India's 'glorious past' and 'degenerated present' and project the 'Indian' civilisation as an 'infant' position rather than an overtly 'advanced' European civilisation, which later helped the colonial state of India to justify their colonial exploitation in the name of assistance to civilisational 'advancement' (Lorenzen, 2019, pp. 163-190).

The Orientalist Conflict of Chronology

One of the most crucial institutional challenges of the early Orientalist scholarship is that of appropriating the vast and enormous timelines of the antiquity of the Indian subcontinent with the short and limited available chronology of European biblical narratives. Vedic texts presented the cyclical 'Yugas', spanning millions of years, which early Orientalist Scholars like William Jones dismissed as nothing but a 'mythological exaggeration' to appropriate it with their approximate 4000-years of post-flood time window. Conversely, the Archbishop Ussher calculated that the 'Great Flood' would be dated to 2348 BCE. However, the initial overt emphasis on biblical literalism of the early Orientalist scholars dismantled many ambitious projects of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, on constructing an empirical prehistory of India. It is later, with the scholarships of the Orientalist scholars, such as Thomas Colebrooke and James Prinsep, that the Orientalist project of the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta began to sideline the biblical mythological narratives on 'genesis' in favour of more empirical and scientific study of Oriental Subjects in Asia (Lorenzen, 2019, pp.163-190).

Philological Mappings and Orientalist Spatial Control



The systematic study of the philology of indigenous languages across the Indian Subcontinent by the early orientalist scholars of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, operated as an effective tool of spatial and social control. By establishing the Indo-European language families, the early Orientalists, such as William Jones and later ethnologists, constructed rigid social taxonomies. The amalgamation of comparative philology and ethnology at the time of the early decades of the nineteenth century led to the establishment of ‘conventional wisdom’ on the Aryan Invasion thesis in Western scholarship on South Asia. This theory envisaged that the fair-skinned ‘Aryans’ had invaded the Indian subcontinent from the north-west frontier of the Indian subcontinent, bringing the ‘Sanskrit’ language and the glorious civilisation together, hence it justified the colonial conquest and exploitation in India for the colonisers by providing a historical justification of the British presence as a ‘returning’ superior race to their ancestral roots (Fuller, 2024).

SANSKRIT AND ORIENTALIST CONSTRUCTION OF ‘GOLDEN AGE’

The orientalist discovery of Sanskrit was crucial in forming an idealised antiquity of the Indian subcontinent based on the ‘golden age’ proposition of the early Orientalist scholars on India. Early Orientalist scholars such as Sir William Jones and Thomas Colebrook viewed Sanskrit as an open repository of the ‘golden past’ of the pristine ‘Indian civilisation’ which had been presently ‘degenerated’ by the local subaltern ritualistic socio-cultural and religious tradition, folklore, oral tradition, the ‘oriental despotism’ and ‘priestly frauds’ (The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 2002).

The Orientalist Textualisation of ‘Hindu’ identity

The Orientalist project, from its very inception, tried to create a unified, monolithic and singular ‘national identity’ by generalisation, standardisation and essentialising of diverse socio-cultural and religious traditions across the Indian subcontinent. However, the early Orientalist scholars on India, in their essentialised project of constructing a monolithic identity out of the diverse and multicultural identity, essentialized and excluded various socio-cultural and religious communities other than the so-called ‘upper-caste’ Brahminical fraction of the broader framework of ‘Hindu’ religious tradition. This Orientalist essentialism and ion exclusion is in two folds. The early Orientalist scholars, in their project of creating a monolithic and singular national identity for ‘India’, firstly, had excluded all other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and other Shramanic traditions present in the Indian Subcontinent. And, secondly, it had excluded the diverse and historically antagonistic various religious sects within the broader religious framework of ‘Hinduism’, such as ‘Shaivism’, ‘Shakta’, ‘Vaishnavism’, etc., by essentialising and generalising a diverse and multicultural religious framework and making it into a



monolithic one religious tradition. Conversely, one of the striking ramifications of Orientalist textualisation of the ‘Hindu’ self is that it excluded the so-called ‘lower castes’, ‘untouchable Dalits’, and other subaltern religious formations within the broader framework of Hinduism by textualising ‘Hinduism’ and reducing it to only Brahmanical texts like *Manusmriti*, *Dhamashastra*, etc., and overlooking the rich spatially diverse local subaltern ritualistic traditions, folklore and oral traditions within the broader framework of Hindutva. The early Orientalist scholars envisaged that the textual classical Sanskrit culture was the source of India’s golden past and present, spatially diverse, local subaltern, oral-driven ritualistic traditions based on regional ‘vernaculars’ were the ‘degenerated’ form of India’s ancient civilisational heritage (Dirks, 2003, pp. 81-106, 198-202).

APPLIED ORIENTALISM: FORT WILLIAM COLLEGE AND THE ‘VERNACULAR’ LANGUAGES

While the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta focused on building the basic tenets of colonial knowledge production by standardisation, generalisation and essentialization of diverse and multicultural socio-religious traditions and made it into a monolithic and unified cultural entity. The Fort William College at Calcutta focused more on the ‘applied orientalism’, the systematic application of Orientalist knowledge constructed by the Orientalist project of colonial knowledge construction through its language pedagogy. The then Governor-General of Bengal, Lord Wellesley, founded the Fort William College at Calcutta, the capital of the British Empire in South Asia, to create a class of European civil servants as a bridge to the enormous cultural chasm between the colonised ruled and the coloniser ruler. This college, from its very inception, heavily tried to apply the knowledge generated by the orientalist project of the Asiatic Society in the domain of colonial administrative and bureaucratic machinery of the company (Naz & Begum, 2026, pp.362-368)

The Hindustani Philology and the Role of John Gilchrist

John Gilchrist was a pivotal figure in the applied orientalist project of the Fort William College of Calcutta. However, unlike classical Orientalist thinkers such as Sir William Jones, who was more philosophical and an antiquarian in his approach towards Orientalism, John Gilchrist was more pragmatic and empirical. Gilchrist, with some Indian Munshis (teachers), focused on teaching the imperative forms and the basic lexicons that were essential for day-to-day communication to the European civil servants trainees at the Fort William College at Calcutta. Gilchrist’s pedagogy of teaching the indigenous knowledge of the Indian subcontinent, such as Urdu and Hindustani, was a radical departure from the classical Orientalist framework of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Gilchrist's usage of Roman script over



the original Perso-Arabic script for teaching Urdu and Hindustani was certainly designed with the utilitarian interests of effective and faster training of British civil servants.

Furthermore, under the supervision of Gilchrist, a group of local Munshis compiled and standardised the first modern textbook of Urdu and Hindustani language, which seemingly started a standard modern prose style in the respective languages. The colonial state explicitly patronised Gilchrist's effective project of the application of Orientalist knowledge by the then Governor-General of Bengal, formally subscribing to numerous copies of John Gilchrist's *Oriental Linguist* (Naz & Begum, 2026, pp. 362-368).

Institutional Rivalries Within the Empire and Rise of the Haileybury College

The Fort William College at Calcutta was certainly an ambitious and expensive endeavour within the broader framework of the Orientalist project and colonial knowledge construction. However, the high cost of operating and maintaining the Fort William College and its explicit grand vision and outlook for the Orientalist scholarship eventually attracted numerous criticisms from within the colonial administrative framework and most explicitly from the Directors of the British East India Company. The Directors of the British East India Company at London perceived that maintaining the Fort William College was an unnecessary financial burden on the Company's expenditure, and this perception seemingly led to the establishment of the East India College at Haileybury in 1806. The establishment of Haileybury College reflects the broader ideological shift of the upper management of the British East India Company; they started discarding the Fort William College's pedagogy that gave a broader emphasis on the relatively deep cultural immersion of the European civil servants posted in the Indian subcontinent and started patronising the narrow, relatively more utilitarian pedagogy of Haileybury College that emphasizes acquiring minimalist functional skills for the European civil servants posted on India prior to their arrival to the Indian subcontinent (Kopf, 1969, pp. 43-66).

CONTESTED LEGACIES OF INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS OF ORIENTALISM: AMBIVALENCE AND RESISTANCE

The most crucial paradox of the Orientalist project of colonial knowledge production is its role in the birth of India's anti-colonial nationalism. While the Orientalist project is designed for the colonial rediscovery of India's 'glorious past', it is embedded in an institutional framework to justify their colonial conquest and exploitation in the Indian subcontinent. However, the Orientalist project of colonial knowledge production eventually provides some of the effective ideological tools to the anti-colonial thinkers for cultural and political self-determination.



Additionally, the early Orientalist scholar had created a narrative of India's 'glorious ancient past' and 'degenerated-digressed' present, by constructing the Orientalist binary of a 'rational' and 'materialist' West and a 'spiritual' and 'irrational' East. But ironically, anti-colonialist thinkers ranging from Bal Gangadhar Tilak to Jawaharlal Nehru heavily drew on the Orientalist narrative of India's 'glorious past', to build their respective cases to throw off the British colonial yoke. The colonial scholarship that originated to justify the British colonial conquest and prolonged exploitation by terming the British colonialism as 'guardianship' of the fallen Indian civilisation that had presently 'degenerated' from its 'ancient glorious past', but later anti-colonial thinkers appropriated the orientalist project of knowledge production to project their civilizational readiness for their cultural and political independence (Gulabray & Patel, 2024)

CONCLUSION

The institutional foundation of Orientalism has established an enduring infrastructure that continues to influence contemporary South Asian Studies as a discipline and the postcolonial identity of India. Orientalist institutions in India, such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the Fort William College and the broader transimperial scholarly networks, had transformed South Asian knowledge into a corporate academic discipline that is inextricably linked with the demands of Ethnocentric scholarship. The multifaceted weaponisation of colonial knowledge to essentialize and stereotype the socio-culturally diverse South Asian identities is still relevant in Western academic discourses on the Indian Subcontinent. Although the Saidian anti-orientalists and the postcolonial critiques had effectively unmasked Ethnocentric biases and the 'epistemic violence' of the Orientalist project of colonial knowledge production. But even today, the colonial archives and Orientalist institutions and taxonomies remain as fundamental baseline sources from which modern scholars engage with the history and cultural studies of South Asia. The rampant legacy of the Orientalist scholarship and colonial knowledge production reflects the notion that the construction of knowledge is never natural but is always subject to subjection to the power structures and domination.

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