Ignorance of Triumphant Imagination: History and Colonialism in British India

Muhammad Aslam Syed

"The English in India are the representatives of a belligerent civilization. The phrase is epigrammatic, but it is strictly true. The English in India are the representatives of peace compelled by force. The Mohammedans would like to tyrannize over Hindus in particular, and in general to propose to every one the alternative between the Koran, the tribute, and the sword. The Hindus would like to rule over Hindus at least according to the principles of Brahmanical religion. They would like to be able to condemn to social infamy every one who, being born a Hindu, did not observe their rites. They would like to see suttee practised, to prevent the remarriage of widows who were not burnt, to do away with the laws which prevent a change of religion from producing civil disabilities, to prevent a low-caste man from trying or even testifying against a Brahman; and Mohammedans, and Hindus, and Sikhs would all alike wish to settle their old accounts and see who is master."

Sir James Stephen

"Considerations of political prudence compel us to tolerate much that we should wish to alter, and to abstain from much that we might desire to see accomplished, but subject to this most essential condition, our duty is plain. It is to govern India with unflinching determination on the principles which our superior knowledge tells us are right, although they may be unpopular."

Sir John Strachey

These statements are faithful portrayals of the British perception of India and the way that perception — the superior

knowledge — guided them in the art of governing India. They also provide the most essential ingredients of Orientalism — displaying knowledge with confidence and using it with arrogance. The British historical writings on India, however, deserve to be treated on their own merit rather than being studied under the rubric of Orientalism. There are several reasons for this statement. In the first place, Orientalism needs to be understood, like other Western mental constructs, as a product of Western thought explaining, emphasizing or perhaps, in a sense, justifying the Western mode of perceiving the East. Even its controversial aspects appear to be not as an attempt to defend or condemn its intellectual overtones but simply to have the option of giving it a philosophy or leaving it un-named, accepting it as a symptom of distorted historical imagination or rejecting it as an exaggerated statement of political activism and, more importantly, to struggle against great intrinsic difficulties involved in studying an alien culture or to protect the conservatism of established academic practices.

Secondly, India or today's South Asia was not and that is true even today, an easy area to study. Its vast territory, long history, complex social systems, various linguistic and ethnic groups, numerous sects and religions, festivals and fairs, temples and mosques, unpredictable acts of nature and perhaps even more unpredictable acts of men were some of the features that challenged the investigating skills of the writers during the last century as they do perhaps even today. Writing on India and administering her went hand in hand. It was neither easy nor feasible, from the British point of view, to separate the practical and mundane affairs of the state from the academic treatment of the "wonder that was India."

Moreover, the presence of Islam in India was a unique feature of the sub-continent. The British had known Islam in a different situation — a strong, powerful and in many ways a superior rival that had challenged the Western Europe at every level of experience. "As a practical problem, it called for action and for discrimination between the competing possibilities of Crusade, conversion, co-existence, and commercial interchange. As a theological problem it called persistently for some answer to the mastery of its existence: what was its providential role in history — was it a symptom of the world's last days or a stage

in the Christian development; a heresy, a schism, or a new religion; a work of man or devil; an obscene parody of Christianity, or a system of thought that deserved to be treated with respect?"[1] These questions had puzzled the minds of the theologians, philosophers, and statesmen in the past.

The nineteenth century, however, presented a different picture. The Muslims had lost their political as well as social power not only to the British but also to the Russians and the French. Europeans explained these political changes not by pointing to their superiority in science and technology, but by arguing that Islam was on its way to decline and Christianity marching forward. Norman Daniel shows us that this was the familiar claim of the age. Here is a passage from his book, *Islam, Europe and Empire.*

"...*Papers for Thoughtful Muslims,* published by the Christian Literature Society for India, and entitled *The Lands of Islam,* considered the Islamic world in the light of these points: A Low State of Civilization, Defective Education, Legalized Slavery, Degraded Condition of Women, Misgovernment, Unjust Laws (that is against Christians), General Decline of the Lands of Islam, Effects of Islam, Christianity the Religion of Progress. It proceeded largely by quoting well-known authorities and public figures; here is Gladstone: 'I see that for the last fifteen hundred years Christianity has always marched in the van of all human improvement'; and Lord Houghton on the Quran:

> "So while the world rolls on from change to change, and realm of thought expand, the Letter stands without expanse or range, Stiff as a dead man's hand".[2]

The British could now display with confidence what their forefathers were ambivalent about: the status and role of Islam in history. But Islam had not yet said its last words. Even in despondency and despair, it was not Christianity but Islam where the Muslims sought refuge. "The Musulmanns seemed to be sealed up in their delusion. They cannot bear a single syllable of Mahometanism to be disputed.... Some very great revolution to humble them will most likely take place before their conversion..."[3], wrote an angry missionary. But the revolutions came, the Muslims faced crisis after crisis, and even when "It pleased the Lord of Hosts on that occasion to crown the British arms

with success (a reference to the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799), and to deliver His servants from the perils that encompassed them"[4], the Muslims remained loyal to the teachings of Muhammad (SAW). This remained a source of constant annoyance to their new masters.

While this aspect of the nineteenth century was distressing for the Muslims, it was indeed a watershed of almost all major intellectual and social movements. History also experienced a major change. It emerged as philosophy teaching by examples. History was no longer an exercise in reliving the past; it had a purpose, a direction, and in many cases, even the phases of that direction were known — each phase marked by the idea of progress — through which mankind had to pass to attain a 'civilized' status. The historian could discredit a religion, a civilization, or a people by interpreting the past in the light of a particular philosophy. He could, at the same time, magnify the achievements of a people by weaving into history the intellectual fibre of his own times.

In England, these views — essentially the product of the French Enlightenment — shaped what came to be called "New History". For the English historians, steeped in a narrative tradition, this philosophical element in history posed a problem: "Where did you put it?" Commenting on this issue, Douglas Stewart wrote:

> It became fashionable after the example of Voltaire to connect with the view of political transactions, an examination of their effects on the manners and condition of mankind, and to blend the lights of philosophy on the appropriate beauties of historical composition. In consequence of this innovation, while the province of the historian has been enlarged and dignified, the difficulty of his task has increased in the same proportion: reduced as he must frequently be, to the alternative either of interrupting unreasonably the chain of events, or by interweaving disquisition and narrative together, of sacrificing clearness to brevity.[5]

Despite these difficulties, this method gained popularity. History became more pragmatic, more concerned with correcting public policy and more confident about its conclusions and judgements on the past. The historian, therefore, brought into focus modern history which appeared "most nearly analogous to present conditions". With the result that "primitive ages as ages of barbarism, and medieval civilization, as the product of

ignorance and superstition, were held unworthy of the investigation of enlightened men or at least worth examining solely as the introduction to modern civilization".[6]

While the British historians were learning these new skills, their audiences were waiting for the appropriate historical materials. It was a time when the reading public wanted to know more about the 'barbarians' and the 'ignorants'. They were not simply interested in understanding the past, they wished "to be transported backward in a historical capsule which would release them at some picturesque period in the past, where they could wander among the cottages of the poor and watch some unfortunate roasting for heresy".[7] What is more revealing is that the historian knew this; he wanted to be read, and read widely. It was perhaps, in this spirit that Macaulay wrote to a friend: "I shall not be satisfied unless I produce something which shall for a few days supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies".[8] In order to satisfy this social need and to win the hearts of young ladies, the historians looked outside the frontiers of their motherland. And what could be more romantic and reassuring than the past of their colonies where their imagination and literary skill could find all that was needed to fulfil this intellectual curiosity — backward people, strange manners, untold miseries, humiliated Muslims who had embarrassed the West for along time and above all the valour and the courage with which their countrymen were handling the new situation. The loss of the American colonies was fresh in their minds. Robertson, who had planned to include the history of British settlements in America in his book, could not hide this loss to his history. He wrote:

> I long flattered myself, the war might terminate so favourably for Great Britain that I might go on with my work. But alas! America is now lost to the Empire and to me, and what could have been a good introduction to the settlement of British colonies, will suit very ill the establishment of independent states.[9]

It was in this social, intellectual, and political milieu permeated with religious superiority that historical writings on India were undertaken. While the emphasis and the choice of topics dealt with in these histories differ according to the choice of the authors, their themes almost invariably portray the superiority of the Western culture over the Indian. It is not that

these authors were ignorant of the other aspects of South Asian people that could convey a different message, they simply were not interested in bringing out those that their readers did not want to know. This is true of even great names like Dante who depicted Muhammad (SAW) as a mere conqueror, not because he was unaware of the other sides to his character, "but because the portrayal of these would have been incompatible with the absurd image stereotyped on the minds of his readers".[10] We begin this analysis with the history of James Mill.

James Mill:

Mill's *History of British India* appeared in 1817, 1818 and 1819 in four volumes. It had all the ingredients of becoming an instant success: a philosophy (Utilitarianism) aimed at reforming the 'slave like' peoples of India which could serve as a reminder to their British masters of their moral and legal duties in that land of their 'miserable' and 'strange' subjects; a compendium of their religions, manners, and policies appended to a detailed study of the British rule to satisfy the imagination of the readers as well as to fulfil the requirements of writing a modern history; and a message wrapped in strong and sweeping terms for the present and future generations of British rulers in India.

James Mill had never been to India nor did he know any Indian language. Nonetheless, he was fully aware of the value of history as a vehicle for the manifestation of his political philosophy. He made extensive use of this discipline to propagate the ideas of his friend and master, Jeremy Bentham. He wanted to make the British realize the need for effecting reforms in India. His *History* is a faithful portrayal of this objective which he demonstrated by dispelling whatever positive image of India existed among his fellow countrymen, by convincing them of the superiority, in every age, of the European civilization over the Oriental heritage, and by providing the Benthamite principles of legislation and government as the measuring rod of the achievements of British rule in India.

Mill's *History* is extremely unsympathetic towards Hindu civilization. He finds nothing commendable in Indian culture; Hindus appear to him barbarous in almost every respect; in their laws, religion, manners, and social system. The only

possible exception was literature, where they fared slightly better. Enthusiasts like Sir William Jones, who had written favourable things about India, were found to be "betrayed into nonsense". Mill was disturbed to see that a mind so pure, so warm in the pursuit of truth, and so devoted to original learning as that of Sir William Jones, should have adopted the hypothesis of a high state of civilization in the principal countries of Asia.[11]

Responding to the common belief that the Muslim invasion of India had reduced them (Hindus) to a 'state of ignorance and barbarity', Mill stated that the Muslim rulers merely substituted 'sovereigns of one race to sovereigns of another', they did not change the social structure of the Indian society, they did not change their language, they did not displace them from their possessions, and for the most part, the legal and administrative pattern of the society remained as it was at the time of their invasion. The Mughal rule in India, for Mill, was as good or bad as the Hindu governments had been previously. Hindu institutions, therefore, experienced no change during this period. Muslim conquest of India appeared to him like "the conquest of the Chinese by a similar tribe of Tartars". If the Mughals did not adopt the Hindu religion, "it was because the religion and institutions of Hindus admitted of no participation, and because the Mughals had already embraced a more enlightened faith".[12]

Mill's account of the Muslim rule in India is as brief and sketchy as that of the Hindu period. In comparing the two civilizations, however, he noted that the former was superior to the latter in all spheres of life. Still like all despotic governments, Muslim rule in India was a monotonous tale of unprovoked aggression, unprincipled ambition, insurrection, disorder, insecurity and tyranny. Conceding that the Persians, Arabs and Turks were superior among the Asian peoples, he claimed that Europe, even in Medieval times, had a higher civilization.[13]

In Mill's estimation, Hindu India showed no evidence of any positive element in its social, religious, and political structures; Muslims, though possessing better institutions, did not bring any substantial change in Indian society with the result that India remained as savage and as barbarian as it was at the dawn of history. Now, it was up to the British, coming

from the most superior of all civilizations, to transform India on the lines of the Utilitarian philosophy.

Mill's book brought the Utilitarian into intimate contact with Indian affairs: in 1819 James Mill, and four years later, his son, were admitted into the executive government of the East India Company. This position brought him immense power and control over the policy makers of India.[14] In addition to his influence on the executive side, Mill's book emerged as an important landmark in British scholarship on India. It ran into innumerable editions and was an established textbook at Haileybury College where the Company's civil servants were trained from 1809 to 1855. His views influenced almost every branch of knowledge on India. In spite of its defects, Macaulay once declared that Mill's *History* was "on the whole, the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since that of Gibbon".[15]

Even more important was the lasting impact of his work on the graduates of Haileybury, on those who believed in the school of Bentham, on Mill's friends like William Bentink, and the whole generation of the British rulers of India who very rarely questioned the wisdom and judgement of the earlier champions of British imperialism in India. He, undoubtedly, "has exercised great influence on British writing and thinking on India, which has persisted down to our day".[16]

Those who were sympathetic to the Hindu culture, however, were furious at Mill's findings. Warning readers against his prejudices, H.H. Wilson, editor of 1848 edition of Mill's *History,* told them of Mill's shortcomings and went to the extent of suggesting that the author would have modified some of his severities had he lived to revise his work. Condemning his attitude towards the Hindus, Wilson wrote:

> With very imperfect knowledge, with materials exceedingly defective, with an implicit faith in all testimony hostile to Hindu pretensions, he had elaborated a portrait of the Hindus which has no resemblance whatever to the original and which almost outrages humanity.

Continuing his indictment of Mill, he stated that Mill's *History* "is chargeable with more than literary demerit: its tendency is evil; it is calculated to destroy all sympathy between the rulers and the ruled".[17] Mill's picture of both the Hindus and the Muslims was dark. Conceding only a marginal superiority to

the latter, he was convinced that "the same insincerity, mendacity, and perfidy; the same indifference to the feelings of others; the same prostitution and venality, are conspicuous in both".[18] Whereas Mill's account of the Hindus continued receiving harsh but justified reviews by his critics in the West, his study of the Muslim India did not receive a similar treatment. Perhaps, his description of Muslims suited the imagination of his readers.

Mountstuart Elphinstone:

The strength and the weakness of Mill's history may be measured by a consideration of Mountstuart Elphinstone's approach to Indian history. His book, *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods,* appeared in 1839. After serving in various diplomatic and administrative posts, Elphinstone retired from the service of the Company as Governor of Bombay in 1827. Whereas Mill's book was written on Utilitarian principles, in Elphinstone's work, we see the characteristics of the Romantic movement as well as the earnestness of Evangelicals.

It will be interesting to note how he planned this book. Some of the topics covered in the Hindu period are: Government, Administration of Justice, Religion, Manners and State of Civilization, Changes in Law and Cast, Present State of Philosophy (with emphasis on 'Resemblance to some of the Greek schools, especially to Pythagoras'), Astronomy and Mathematical Science, Chronology, Language, Literature, The Fine Arts, Agriculture and Commerce. This period ends with appendices containing the Greek accounts of India with selections like 'Favourable opinion entertained by the Greeks of the Indian character'. Here is his review of one of the selections:

> The Indians are described as swarthy, but very tall, handsome, light and active. Their bravery is always spoken of as characteristic; their superiority in war to other Asiatics is repeatedly asserted.... They are said to be sober, moderate, peaceable... so reasonable as never to have recourse to a lawsuit; and so honest as neither to require locks to their doors nor writing to bind their agreements. Above all it is said that no Indian was ever known to tell an untruth.
>
> We know from the ancient writings of the Hindus themselves, that the alleged proofs of their confidence in each other are erroneous. The account of their veracity may safely be regarded as equally incorrect; but the statement is still of great importance, since it shows what were the qualities of the Indians that made most impression on the

> Macedonians, and proves that their character must have undergone a total change.[19]

Obviously, he is responding to Mill's dark picture of the Indian society. His last sentence is noteworthy: how did the Indians undergo a total change? What happened to their morals and manners? The answer is in the subsequent periods of their history. India was calm, peaceful, prosperous, and with a high state of civilization until the Mahometan (SAW) period began.

The beginning of the Muslim period is familiar: the followers of a false prophet, an imposter whose meditations had brought him to the verge of insanity, bent upon destroying what is good in mankind appear on the horizons of India. This is not a statement from the medieval polemics against Islam, but from the pages of a learned and enlightened work on India by a gentleman from the nineteenth century British aristocracy. Here is a further elaboration of the mission of the Prophet of Islam:

> At the commencement of Mahomet's preaching he seems to have been perfectly sincere; and although he was provoked by opposition to support his pretensions by fraud, and in time became habituated to hypocrisy and imposture, yet it is probable that, to the last, his original fanaticism continued.... But whatever may have been the reality of his zeal, and even the merit of his doctrine, the spirit of intolerance in which it was preached, and the bigotry and bloodshed which it engendered and perpetuated, must place its author among the worst enemies of mankind.[20]

What follows is logical and true to Elphinstone's opening remarks about Islam: wars, assassinations, intrigues, forcible conversions, fraud, deceit and debauchery. If the Muslims in India had achieved some sophistication in their art and architecture, it was simply because they had come in contact with a superior Hindu civilization. Even then Europe had displayed a far superior sophistication in arts. Here we find him comparing the floral pattern of the marble screen inside the Taj Mahal with the work of some Italian artists:

> In the minute beauties of execution, however, these flowers are by no means equal to those on tables and other small works on 'Pietra Dura', at Florence.... The mosaics of the Taj are said, with great probability, to be the workmanship of Italians. It is singular that artists of that nation should receive lessons of taste from the Indians.[21]

The builder of the Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan impresses him with the peace and prosperity that his kingdom experienced

during his regime. Then he feels uneasy and argues that "whatever might be the relative excellence of his government, we must not suppose that it was exempt from the evils inherent in a despotism: we may assume some degree of fraudulent exaction in the officers of revenue, and of corruption in those of justice". Even after these assertions of alleged misgovernment, Shah Jahan appears embarrassing to our author. He reverts to his usual defence of Modern Europe:

> But, after all allowances, the state of the people must have been worse than in an indifferently governed country in modern Europe.... A fair object of comparison would be the Roman Empire, under such a prince as Severs: we should there find the same general tranquility and good government; the same enjoyment of physical happiness, with the same absence of that spirit which would tend to increase the present felicity, and which might afford some security for its duration beyond the life of the reigning monarch. The institutions, traditions and opinions which remained from better times must, even in this case, have given a superiority to the European empire.[22]

If Shah Jahan could not escape the charges of misgovernment, one could imagine the fate of Aurangzeb. "Of all the kings of India", Elphinstone wrote, "Aurangzeb is the most admired among the Musalmans. There are few who are quite blind to the lustre of Akbar's character, but fewer still whose deliberate judgement would not give the preference to Aurangzeb". The reason for his popularity could be found in his religious views:

> The real defect was in his heart. Had he been capable of any generous or liberal sentiment, he would have been a great prince; his subjects would not have been alienated by his narrow views on religion.[23]

The same religious views, however, were largely responsible for the sufferings of Hindus:

> They were excluded from office; they were degraded by a special tax; their fairs and festivals were forbidden; their temples were sometimes insulted and destroyed;... but it does not appear that a single Hindu suffered death, imprisonment, or loss of property for his religion, or, indeed, that any individual was ever questioned for the open exercise of the worship of his fathers. Yet such is the effect of mutual jealousy and animosity, in matters of religion, that the most violent outrages have seldom raised up so obstinate a spirit of resistance as was engendered by the partiality and prejudice of this emperor.[24]

This was an explanation of the circumstances under which the good manners of the Hindus had undergone such a transformation! He also anticipated in this statement what was

going to play a crucial role in the Hindu national movement: the anti-Aurangzeb feelings as adopted by Tilak in the Shivaji festivals. One is really at a loss whether to cry or to laugh at such a perverted reading of history where fantasy and imagination are mixed with facts to denigrate a sizeable portion of mankind.

If Mill's book could be charged with "evil tendency", Elphinstone's work deserved even a harsher condemnation. On the contrary, E.B. Cowell, who edited this work in 1866, claimed that "the author had been so long engaged in Indian politics, that he could at once enter into and unravel all those endless details which render Asiatic history so confused and difficult; and I question whether this portion of his *History* will ever be superseded".[25] He was certainly aware of the additions and corrections that the first part of the book needed. So much so that the spellings of the Hindu names were corrected but "the Arabian prophet is Mahomet, but all others of the same name are Muhammad". Why this dichotomy? Mahomet was a legacy of the Crusades, it was an image, message that was familiar to the reading public, the continuation of this name would bring the memories of the bad times alive and the reader would find some solace at the humiliation of Mahomet's followers!

While Mill's book was taught at Haileybury College, Elphinstone's book became "a standard textbook in the examinations of the Indian Civil Service at home and the Universities in India".[26]

Elliot & Dowson

The most important of all these works was the monumental history of Sir Henry Elliot. A graduate of Haileybury, Elliot "did more than anyone else to perpetuate the Mill tradition in writing on Indian history".[27] He learned Persian, visited various libraries in India, and collected chronicles and histories on the Muslim Empire from the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries. With the help of John Dowson, he translated and edited selections from these sources which were published between 1867 and 1877 in eight large volumes under the title: *The History of India as told by its own Historians.* Since its publication, this work has served as the basis of almost all major

writings on Indo-Muslim history, including Sir Wolseley Haig's *The Cambridge History of India.* Even more important was its impact on the policy-makers of India. C.H. Philip says about the influence of Elliot:

> He strikes a note which was caught by John Strachey in the field of administration, by Fitzjames Stephen in law and political thought, by Kipling in literature, by Sir John Seeley in history, and by Curzon in government.[28]

This work, which emerged as a guide to generations of historians and administrators, opened with a revealing introduction. Comparing the historians of the Muslim period with those of the British, Elliot wrote:

> The historians of the Delhi emperors have been noticed down to the period when new actors appear on the stage.... and when the full light of European truth and discernment begins to shed its beams upon the obscurity of the past, and to relieve us from the necessity of appealing to the Native Chroniclers of the time, who are, for the most part dull, prejudiced, ignorant, and superficial.[29]

Ignorant of the social and cultural histories written by Muslim historians, Elliot declared that Muslim historiography was devoid of description of society, agriculture, local judicature and other public and private institutions. Therefore, these accounts had "no intrinsic value" and it was "a misnomer to style them histories". These historians had not treated their "Caesars with the fidelity of Suetonius", but they had adopted instead the "Congenial sycophancy of Paterculus" with the result that he had to "extort from unwilling witnesses, testimony to the truth of these assertions".[30]

Apart from displaying his own calibre as a historian, Elliot, like all other Utilitarians, was presenting the official view of the East India Company. To justify their annexations, the Company's officials had accused the dethroned Muslim chiefs of violence, plundering, and debauchery. These chiefs, Elliot inferred, provided a good example of how their predecessors had ruled their subjects. Continuing his censure of Muslim rule, he stressed that in his times the fear of British supremacy and the "dread of interference" was always a check on the tyranny of these "parasites", whereas, there had been no such restraints on the activities of the earlier Muslim rulers.[31]

His portrayal of the Hindus under the Muslim rule is "of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and confisca-

tions, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them". This made him extremely upset whenever he found those Hindu authors who had "servilely turned to flatter the vanity of an imperious Muhammadan patron". Lamenting on their attitude, he exclaimed that from "one of that nation we might have expected to have learnt what were the feelings, hopes, faiths, fears and yearnings of his subject race". But poor Elliot could not believe that Hindu historians spoke of "the light of Islam shedding its refulgence on the world", of "the Illustrious Book", and even opened their works with a "Bismillah" followed by the conventional ode to the unity of God and "laudation of the Holy Prophet". It constantly disturbed him that these authors, whom he called "a slavish crew", lavishly praised the Muslim rule even in the days of the later Mughals when the decline of Muslim power seemed to free Hindus from the necessity of speaking highly of their masters. He was hopeful, nonetheless, that once this "long oppressed race" was liberated from the "tyranny of its former masters", Hindus would treat the history of their native land objectively and would "give vent to the natural language of their heart".[32]

Elliot's principal aim was to "dispel the mist of ignorance" and "make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of our rule". He addressed himself to the critics of the British government, who yearned for the return of Muslim rule. These "bombastic *Babus*.... who rant about patriotism, and the degradation of their present position", would realize that the historical figures who dazzle them with their splendour and achievement deserve to "be held up to the execration of mankind".[33]

To those who believed that the Mughals had paid more attention to the works of public welfare, Elliot's answer was "a few *sarais* and bridges — and these only on roads traversed by the imperial camp". And then even if it was true, the motives of the Mughals were selfish: "The extreme beauty and elegance of many of their structures it is not attempted to deny; but personal vanity was the main cause of their erection". Ali Mardan Khan, who had constructed canals, was accused of doing so, "not with any view to benefit the public but for an ostenta-

tious display of his profusion".[34] He cautioned his readers not to misunderstand his characterization of some works as "excellent, admirable, or valuable", as he had used them not with reference to the quality of their contents but to their literary skills only.[35]

Determined to find material derogatory to the image of Muslims, Elliot was thrilled whenever he stumbled upon an anti-Muslim Hindu writer. Referring to a Hindu historian, Sadasukh, who had compiled a monograph on Indian History, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*[36] under the auspices of the Company in 1819, he wrote: "It is gratifying to find him taking every opportunity to praise the English, expressing his gratitude for the evils from which they had saved his country, and contrasting their administration with that of the Muhammadans".[37] Reproducing in detail the scorn that had been poured by this unknown employee of the British on Muslim rule, Elliot left no stone unturned to magnify and exaggerate its adverse opinions on Muslim history.

Elliot's work achieved tremendous popularity. The fact that it was a discriminately selected compilation of the readings from the original sources, gave it more authenticity which was seldom overshadowed by his evil designs and bad faith that he so unashamedly manifested in his editorial remarks.

John C. Marshman:

The process of history writing that had started with James Mill actually culminates in Elliot's History. What followed was mostly editing and updating except the *History of India* written by Marshman. At the request of Calcutta University, Marshman, a Baptist missionary, wrote this book in 1867. James Mill's adverse remarks on Hinduism had awakened the feelings of sympathy and kinship for the Hindus. Elphinstone had established the similarities between classical Hindu thought and Greek thought which would further cement the bond between the rulers and their subjects; and Elliot had highlighted the impact of colonial approach to history through his selections from the original sources. The only thing that was left was religious interpretation of India's past and if possible the discovery of a kinship between Hinduism and Christianity. Marshman was the man for this job.

Convinced of "a mysterious but inexorable necessity" which had made the British rulers of India, Marshman saw a divine plan in this process of history:

> A company of merchants in London thus became the instrument, under the mysterious but wise and benignant agency of Divine Providence, of establishing the British empire in India with all its attendant blessings, and of leading the way to the extension of European supremacy throughout Asia, and the substitution of a civilized dominion for the reign of barbarism.[38]

Marshman's history opens with a general introduction of India's geography, climate and society. Then, after a few pages that are devoted to the early history of India, we read about the great Hindu king, Vikramaditya who is presented not only as a fine human being but also one who believed in the one infinite and invisible God. This academic and religious setting leads to the birth of Jesus Christ:

> Fifty-six years after the accession of Vikramadityu, Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, became incarnate in the land of Judea, and made an atonement for the sins of men, by offering himself as a sacrifice. On the third day he rose from the dead, and after giving his disciples a commission to proclaim to mankind the glad tidings of salvation through his redemption, ascended to heaven. One of his disciples, St. Thomas, is generally supposed to have introduced Christianity into India, where he obtained many converts. The Hindu legends present so many points of similarity with the facts of the New Testament, as to leave little doubt that the events connected with the life and death of the Saviour of mankind were widely disseminated through India, and embodied, though in a distorted form, in the writings of Hindu poets and sages.[39]

The next four pages are devoted to a story which we will read later and then Muhammad (SAW) appears. This is Marshman's view of the Prophet of Islam:

> Muhammad (SAW) was born at Mecca, in Arabia, in the year 569 A.D., and at the age of forty, announced himself a prophet commissioned by God to convert the human race to the "true faith", by the agency of the sword. Having, by force of his genius and eloquence, gained many proselytes in his native land, he raised an army of Arabs to subjugate the four nations to his power and his creed,... From the birth of Muhammadanism, its votaries were animated with the resolution to establish, by force of arms, a universal monarchy in which there could be but one law civil and religious, one prophet and one creed.[40]

The story that I mentioned earlier is about the Rajput family of Chittore. One of their rulers, Goha, married the grand

daughter of the Persian King who had married the daughter of Maurice, the Christian emperor of Constantinople. This Christian princess gives birth to a child, Bappa, who is ".... the Hindu *Sooraj,* or son, the descendent of a hundred kings, the undisputed possessor of the honour of Ramu, the patriarch of the solar race, from whom other Hindu princes, before they can succeed to the throne of their fathers, must obtain the *teluk,*.... is in fact, the offspring of a Christian princess".[41]

After establishing this kinship, Marshman imagines Muhammad Bin Qasim, the Arab conqueror of Sind, advancing towards Chittore, and here Bappa, the youthful prince who has a Christian mother and a Hindu father, "not only completely defeated him, but expelled him from India"![42]

This newly discovered matrimonial relationship between the Hindus and the Christians was not simply aimed at inculcating the feelings of mutual love and respect, but also to identify the common enemy. "So lofty was the ambition which animated the early successors of Muhammad", Marshman stated, "that their arms were triumphant at the same time on the banks of Ebro and Gangaes, and they aspired to the conquest both of Europe and India".[43]

We know that most of what Marshman wrote would actually come under the category of imagination rather than historical inquiry. That is not the issue; one could easily dismiss all these works as a product of arrogance, mischief, and distorted vision. But that was not how these books were treated in the nineteenth century. Not only were they considered the best specimens of the English scholarship, but also as a statement of successful people. There were many amongst the Hindus and the Muslims who could see the evil behind this new version of history but they were considered to be less developed and inferior by the Europeans, and their case could easily be treated with disdain. Just as the socially successful do not need any argument to prove their superiority, the socially miserable, even if they have better reasoning, can easily be brushed aside.

One thing that comes very clearly out of this ignorance of triumphant imagination is the repeated assertion of the cultural superiority of Europe not only in the nineteenth century but in all times. India's best times should not be compared with

the Europe even in the dark ages; only the Roman empire could safely be considered for comparison. It is difficult to believe that these writers had not studied the European history or had forgotten their own history of the Tudors and the Stuarts. They knew it but they were reluctant to share it with the Indians. This is how John Strachey expresses his indignation over what he calls "the teaching of false history":

> Disparagement of their own countrymen has always been one of the common failings of unwise Englishmen.... They find in the supposed crimes of the founders of our Indian empire and unfailing source of invective and obloquy. This false history has been taught by our schools, colleges and universities, and believed by the educated Natives of India to be true. It is impossible that this should not have a serious effect on their feelings towards their English rulers.[44]

And it did have an effect:

> Much of the hostile attitude we meet within India is due to the books we have placed in hands of school boys: we have fed them with the invectives of Milton and Burke, and they, with their great imitative faculty, have conceived that we stand to the people of India in the position of the Stuarts and the Georges towards the people of England. This sort of education is dangerous fare for Asiatic brains. It seems to dislocate all the foundations of what they know and what they feel, to deprive them of moral stability, and they perturb their souls with irresolution to their very depths.[45]

Therefore, history, as I said in the beginning, was to be used as an aid to justify and strengthen the British rule in India. They wanted the Indians to know only that much as would keep them loyal to the *Raj* and under the illusion of the British cultural superiority.

The other striking feature of these writings is the contempt of Islam. Although Gibbon had put the Europeans at ease by assuring them that the "menace of Islam was only a memory that might serve to warn Europe not to indulge too freely in the prospect of endless security", for the British, the Muslims in India, were altogether a different phenomenon. No humiliation seemed big enough to shake their faith in the teaching of Islam and devotion to the prophet. This made a painful impression on the British mind. They saw no danger from the overwhelming majority of the Hindus: it was the Muslim "menace" which could endanger the British empire in India. Expressing his concern over a possible revival of Islam in India, Sir William Hunter warned his countrymen: "If India

becomes Muhammaden, it may develop an energy which, though temporary, may last for centuries.... It may rise to great heights of a certain kind of Oriental Civilization.... To prevent this conversion of an empire to a false and entirely non-progressive creed, the force of Christianity should be used".[46]

The British colonialism thus approached history with a philosophy of social superiority of the West which could be displayed through a selective reading of the past. India emerged as a land of the unfortunate and the depressed people whose fates were sealed because of successive intrusions and subversions of the Muslim invaders. It served two purposes: Firstly, history of India would be a history of two peoples — the Hindus and the Muslims — and secondly, the British could rescue the glories of ancient India from the legacy of the Mughals which had been haunting a major portion of India's population for a long time. In this process, the two communities could only share a contempt for each other's past and all the illusions of a common golden age would be dispelled from the minds of the Indian intelligentsia. The British were to emerge not as plunderers of the wealth of the sub-continent but as the saviours of its true heritage.

How successful were the colonial masters in achieving these objectives is evident from the subsequent developments in Indian political thought where, in addition to so many other factors, history probably appeared as the major source of strengthening and sharpening the invective of the two parallel nationalisms in South Asia.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages,* Harvard University Press, 1962, p.3.

2. Norman Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire,* Edinburgh University Press, 1966, p.266.

3. Ward, quoted in E. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India,* Cambridge University Press, 1967, p.218.

4. James Hough, *The History of Christianity in India,* Vol. III, London: Seeley and Barnside, 1839, p.335.

5. Douglas Stewart, *Life of Robertson* (1801) quoted in J.R. Hale, (ed.), *The Evolution of British Historiography,* Cleveland, 1964, p.23.

6. Thomas P. Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writings: 1760-1830,* New York, 1966, p.10.

7. J.R. Hale, *op.cit.,* p.36.

8. *Ibid.,* p.35.

9. *Ibid.,* p.31.

10. Asin Palacios, quoted in Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England,* Yale University Press, 1977, p.204.

11. James Mill, *The History of British India,* Second Edition, London, 1820, Vol. II, pp.135-138, 140-141, 167.

12. *Ibid.,* p.147.

13. *Ibid.,* p.256.

14. James Mill to Dumont in Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India,* Oxford University Press, 1959, p.48.

15. Speech on the India Bill, 1833 quoted in Thomas P. Peardon, *op.cit.,* p.270

16. C.H. Philips, (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylone,* London, 1961, p.219.

17. H.H. Wilson, (ed.), *History of British India,* London, 1848, pp.vii-viii.

18. James Mill, *op.cit.,* Vol. II, p.457.

19. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India,* London: John Murray, 1905, 9th edition, p.262.

20. *Ibid.,* pp.294-295.

21. *Ibid.,* pp.588, f.n.

22. *Ibid.,* p.587.

23. *Ibid.,* p.655.

24. *Ibid.,* p.656.

25. E.B. Cowell, "Advertisement to the fifth edition", in *Ibid.,* p.vii.

26. *Ibid.,* p.viii.

27. C.H. Philips, *op.cit.,* p.226.

28. *Ibid.,* p.227.

29. Henry M. Elliot, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, 8 volumes, Lucknow: Kitab Mahal, n.d., Vol. I, p.xvi.

30. *Ibid.*, pp.xviii-xix.

31. *Ibid.*, pp.xx-xxi.

32. He was referring to Bahadur Singh's *Yadgar-i-Bahaduri* (1833), see Vol. VII, p.417; and Umro Singh's *Zubdatul Akhbar* (1820?), see Vol. VII, p.374.

33. Henry M. Elliot, *op.cit.*, Vol. I, pp.xxi-xxii.

34. *Ibid.*, p.xxiii.

35. *Ibid.*, p.xxvii.

36. The title must not be confused with *Muntakhib-ut Tawarikh* written by Abdul Qadir Badayuni.

37. Henry M. Elliot, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, p.405.

38. J.C. Marshman, *The History of India from the Earliest Period to the Close of Lord Dalhousie's Administration*, 3 vols., London: Longman, Green, 1867, Vol. II, p.27.

39. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p.20.

40. *Ibid.*, p.24.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, p.25.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Sir John Strachey, *India: Its Administration and Progress*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1903, p.276.

45. M. Jules Harmand, quoted in *Ibid.*, p.275.

46. W.W. Hunter, "Islam and Christianity in India", *The Contemporary Review*, No. ccvix, Vol. liii, February 1988.