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THE USE OF HISTORY IN THE IMPERIAL AGE: THE CASE OF JAMES MILL

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> If we admit, with the philosopher, that our judgement of others is a measure of ourselves, there is no better touchstone of any generation than the way it views the past, that is to say, the history it writes. Whether or not history is, or should be, philosophy teaching by example, it reveals, consciously or unconsciously, the philosophy of the historian and, measurably, that of his audience and of the generation to which they both belong.
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> Wilber C. Abbot: *Adventures in Reputation*

Out of the eighteenth century's Romanticism which had inculcated an interest in classical studies, in ancient civilizations, and in restoring the lost or forgotten treasures of human accomplishments, grew a more specialized concern for human progress. This led to the redefinition of the frontiers as well as the contours of history. 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 with 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 with 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.[1]

Despite these shortcomings that the use of philosophy in history manifested, 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 civilizaton, 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.[2]

While the British historians were learning these new skills, their audience was avidly waiting for their portrayals of the past. 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".[3] 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 even an historian of Macaulay's calibre 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."[4] 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 moe romantic and reassuring than the past of their colonies where their imagination and literary skill could find all that was needed to quench the thirst of their readers – backward people, strange manners, untold miseries, and above all the way their countrymen were handling the situation. The loss of the American colonies was fresh in their minds and historians like Robertson, who had planned to include the history of British settlement 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 would have been a good introduction to the settlement of British Colonies, will suit very ill the establishment of independent states.[5]

The historian was certainly not going to let this happen again with the British empire in India. It was in this social and intellectual atmosphere that James Mill's *The History of British India* appeared. It had all the ingredients of becoming an instant success: a philosophy (Utilitarianism) aimed at reforming the 'slave like' peoples of India which could also 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 politics 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 the future generations of the British rulers in India.

The study of a work of this magnitude calls for the understanding of the author's philosophy, his motive, his influence, and the impact of his findings on the future developments. This brief note is an attempt to delineate Mill's description of the Hindus and the Muslims and his intellectual legacy which underlay the subsequent achievements and policies of the British in India.

James Mill was born in 1773 in the parish of Logie-Pert, Forfarshire. The son of a shoemaker, James owed much of his education to his mother who sent him to the parish school and later to the Montrose academy. His studies at the University of Edinburgh were financed mostly by Sir John Stuart, a local laird. At the University he distinguished himself as a Greek scholar. In 1798, he acquired a licence to preach but gave up this profession after a while and devoted himself to teaching history and philosophy as a private tutor. In 1802, he accompanied his patron, Sir John Stuart, to London to earn his living as a journalist.

It was during his stay in London that James Mill became a disciple and a publicist of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and remained very loyal to his cause until his death in 1836. Jeremy Bentham who. . . is credited with more than forty works is best known for his philosophy of utilitarianism. Though his writings are "sadly dificient in clarity", yet one comes across a passage which clearly depicts his philosophy.

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it . . ., *The principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.[6]

Then Bentham goes on to explain the factors leading to the pleasure and pain and asks the governments to weigh the balance, if it is on the side of pleasure, it shows the good tendency of the government but if it is the other way, then it manifests "the general evil tendency". This principle could best be illustrated by imparting the greatest happiness to the greatest number. Outlining his theory of utility, he further observed:

> By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question or what is the same thing in other words, to promote or oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore, not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.[7]

It was under the influence of these views that Mill wrote on various issues concerning liberty, government, jurisprudence and colonies. His monumental work, however, was *The History of British India* which appeared in 1817, 1818 and 1819 in four volumes. This book brought him fame and financial support.

James Mill had never been to India, nor did he know any Indian language. None the less, 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 rulers feel the need of 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 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, social system with the possible exception of literature where they fared slightly better. Enthusiasts like Sir William Jones, who had written favourable on 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.[8]

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 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 Mughul 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 Mughuls did not adopt the Hindu religion, "it was because the religion and institutions of the Hindus admitted of no participation, and because the Moghuls had already embraced a more enlightened faith".[9]

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 unpro-

voked 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.[10]

In Mill's estimation, Hindu India showed no evidence of positive element in its social, religious, and political structures; Muslims, though possessed 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 upto the British, coming from the most superior of all civilizations, to transform India on the lines that was best for the people of this region which obviously meant the political philosophy of Jeremy Bentham.

Mill's book brought the Utilitarians in intimate contact with the 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 which he proudly disclosed in a letter to a friend:

> It is the very essence of the internal government of 60 millions of people with whom I have to deal; and as you know that the government of India is carried on by correspondence; and that I am the only man whose business it is, or who has the time to make himself master of the facts scattered in a most voluminous correspondence, on which a just decision must rest, you will conceive to what an extent the real decision on matters belonging to my department rests with the man who is in my situation.[11]

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 text book 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".[12]

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 own day".[13]

Champions of the Hindu Civilization, however, were furious at Mill's findings. Warning readers against his prejudices, H.H. Wilson, editor of the *History of British India* (1848), 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 every imperfect knowledge, with materials exceedingly defective, with an implicit faith in all testimony hostile to Hindu pretensions, he has 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 said 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".[14] Mill's account of the Hindus continued receiving harsh and often justified reviews by his countrymen. A historian of the post-Colonial age accused him of not just being prejudiced against the Hindu "but a whole civilization, indeed almost the whole human race. For no people could be as degraded as Mill pictured the Hindus without humanity being degraded by kinship with them."[15] But the fact was that the kinship existed and therefore, the only alternative to degradation was to elevate them to a higher status. The Hindus, even if they emerged less civilized and barbarous, needed special care and treatment. The reading of Hindu history convinced the British policy-makers of their humble and polite nature and their servility. Comparing them to the Muslims, James Mill remarked "In truth, the Hindu, like the eunuch, excels in the qualities of a slave".[16] Muslim was, after all, the ruler from whom they had snatched the empire, he was "more manly, more vigorous".[17]

Mill's picture of both the Hindus and the Muslims was dark. Acceding to 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]

Well-wishers of the British future in India did not see any reason to correct the adverse remarks of Mill on Muslims, they were quick, however, in view of the possibilities of a better understanding between the Hindus and the British and a better appreciation of the achievements of the latter regarding the 'liberation' of the Hindus from the alien rule of Muslims, to undertake historical works which could present a different picture of India. Hindus belonged to a great civilization which was undermined by the Muslim rule; and under the British, they had a unique opportunity to revive their values and restore their culture, and if possible, to reform their institutions under the 'benign' influence of the British rule.

NOTES

1. Douglas Stewart, *Life of Robertson* (1801), quoted in J.R. Hale, ed., *The Evolution of British Historiography*, Cleveland, 1964, p. 23.
2. Thomas P. Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing: 1760–1830*, New York, 1966, p. 10.
3. J.R. Hale, *op.cit.*, p. 36.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 35
5. *Ibid.*, p. 31
6. Jeremy Bentham: *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

(1789) passage reproduced in Eugene Weber, *The Western Tradition*, Boston, 1965, pp. 609–610.

7. *Ibid.*

8. James Mill, *The History of British India*, Second edition, London, 1820, Vol.II, pp. 135–138, 140–141, 167.

9. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 147 fn.

10. *Ibid.* p. 256

11. James Mill to Dumont, quoted in Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford, 1959, p. 48.

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

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

14. H.H. Wilson, ed., *History of British India*, London, 1948 pp. vii-viii.

15. Thomas P. Peardon, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

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

17. *Ibid.*

18.

18. *Ibid.*