

# Orientalism and Neo-Hinduism

## Lecture II

### Research, Education and Administration: Asiatic Society and the College of Fort William



MUMBAI

CHENNAI

# Hinduism as Religion

## Colonialism and 'religion' in Indian context

- Christian criticism and religious foundation of social manners
- Scriptures as religious scriptures, social manners as not justified by scriptures
- Brahmo Samaj as christian-like religious organization

# The policy of Warren Hastings

- Establishment of the post of Governor-General
  - 'Bengal and Bihar, for the first time in centuries, were seriously underpopulated for two generations. [...] Many of the *zemindars* or hereditary farmers of the revenue, were ruined as the result of inability to collect regular assessments from a reduced and enfeebled peasantry. [...] The loss both of artisans and cultivators caused a steady decrease in the Company's profits and so hurried on the financial crisis of 1772 which led to state interference in the Company affairs.' (P. Spear (ed.): *Oxford History of India*, p. 502-3)
- Warren Hastings
  - was '[h]imslef proficient in South Asian languages, [and] he saw a a direct correlation between an acculturated civil servant and an

# Basic elements of Hastings's policy

- (1) To rule effectively, one must love India, to love India one must communicate with her people; and to communicate with her people one must learn her languages.' (Kopf, 21)
- (2) Hastings aimed not only at producing an acculturated class of English civil servants, but at providing the means by which Indians might revitalize their own culture: encouraged bodies of learned pundits to settle in Calcutta, and supported them while they translated out of the Sanskrit into more acceptable dialects, the poems and mythological and moral treatises of their native land. He founded colleges for the instruction of native youth in the laws and usages of their own country. He held out inducements to the study by natives of English literature and English science.
  - Example: Jonathan Duncan (in India 1772-1811) - proposal (1791) for establishing a Hindu College "for preservation and cultivation of the Laws, Literature and Religion of that Nation at this Centre of Faith [Benares]. [...] It

# Hasting's policy

- 1773: proposal for the establishment of a professorship of the Persian language at Oxford university – studies of Persian and possibly Hindustani (Urdu) before coming to India.
  - No success - until 1790 (when Cornwallis provided each man holding the title of writer with extra 30 rupees a month to engage a *munshi* (tutor) in Persian - nothing took place in this direction.
- » Stimulation of self-study of languages by financial inducements for those able to translate necessary documents. » Coterie of selected aides personally inspired by Hastings with a love for Asian literature. Among the earliest:
  - **Charles Wilkins** [1<sup>st</sup> translation of *Bhagavadgita* (1784) and *Hitopadesa*] - came to Bengal in 1770.
  - **Nathaniel Halhed** [1775, Eng. translation of the most important Hindu law books – from the Persian translation by pundits]

# Importance of scholarship

- Urgent need of translating Hindu and Muslim laws into English for the use of average Company representative.
- Translation of Company regulations into the languages of the Indian people,
  - 1788 Nathaniel Halhed published a *Grammar of the Bengali Language* intended for the use of other civil servants. However, extracting 'authentic' language from Muslim and Portuguese influences
    - inspiration for William Carey
    - direct way to a renaissance in Bengali language and literature. (Kopf, 20)
- Need to reproduce official documents in Oriental script » the rise of printing and publishing in Calcutta.
  - Charles Wilkins, nephew of the English printer - by 1778, he had

# Asiatic Society of Bengal

- Formed 1784, first intent - to publish the series of translations of oriental classics. But the lack of funds led them to publish the papers read at their meetings instead of that. Thus *Asiatick Reserches* began (1788) and "was eagerly read by European scholars, who welcomed the first fruits of original research in India." (Kopf, 34).
- What brought the fame to the first Orientalists such as Jones or Colebrook were not so much their translations as their profound analytical works and generalized views which were provided in them and which, as Jones later admitted, were not fully justifiable by the available sources (Kopf, 38).
- Aims of Society: knowledge and dominance – Jone's first presidential address:
  - "inquiry to the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia' was a means to the end of discovering truths about 'Man

# Background of Orientalists: 18<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment Thinking

- **First Orientalists** - "classicist rather than "progressive" in historical outlook, cosmopolitan rather than nationalist in the view of other cultures, rationalist rather than romantic in the quest for "**constant and universal principles**" that express the **unity of human nature.**" (Kopf, 22)
- (Cultural) **tolerance** » based on idea of **unity of mankind**: Voltaire's nature "establishes everywhere a small number of invariable principles: thus the foundation is everywhere the same, and culture produces different fruits." (Kopf, 23)
- Hence idea of "**history of civilizations**": not uninterrupted progress toward Utopia, but cyclical movements **from greatness to decline** (Gibbons Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire): hence concept of '**dark ages**'.
- Believe "[T]hat far the **greater part of mankind, during the greater period of recorded history**, has lived (except indeed, when oppressed and corrupted by Christian powers) more happily and humanly, under laws and customs more free and more and equitable, more **in accord with natural religion and morality**

# Construction of Golden Age

## William Jones

- **Degeneration and glorious past**
  - Contemporary Hindus were degenerate. They, however, according to what show the sources like Sanskrit language and literature, the Laws of Manu, six system of Indian Philosophy, religious myths and symbols, sculptural and architectural remains etc., must have been "splendid in arts and arms, happy in government; wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge..." (39) in their past.
- **Period of Golden Age**
  - In 1786 may have been the first seriously to consider that India's golden age period as a culture lay in a remote,

# Construction of Golden Age

- H. T. Colebrook:
- the West 'owes a debt of gratitude' to the civilizations of Asia for their contributions in the arts and the sciences. In fact, 'civilization has its origin in Asia.' Now, whereas the West was taking large strides forward, Asia was in the state of decline. The way to help Asians, was to 'investigate' the history of their cultures 'with the hope of facilitating ameliorations of which they may be found susceptible.'(Kopf, 40).
- Each discovery or rediscovery of Vedic India was contrasted with the peculiarities of contemporary Hindu society. Demonstration from textual sources that the voluntary immolation of widows in Bengal was a departure from authentic tradition. ['On the Duties of a Faithful Hindu Widow', *Asiatick Researches*] And it was he also who first sought the origins of caste system and found "the many discrepancies between ancient textual requirements and actual contemporary practices ['Enumeration of Indian Classes', *Asiatick Researches*] (Kopf, 40).
- discovery of 'the unity of the Godhead,' or a monotheistic tradition, in ancient India

# The College of Fort William

***Wellesle's Extension and Development  
of the Hasting's Oriental Project  
- For the Sake of Safe Administration***

1. Assamese
2. Bengali
3. Bodo
4. Gujarati
5. Hindi
6. Kannada
7. Kashmiri
8. Konkani
9. Malayalam
10. Manipuri
11. Marathi
12. Nepali
13. Oriya
14. Punjabi
15. Sanskrit
16. Sindhi
17. Tamil
18. Telugu
19. Urdu

Of these 19 languages, Sanskrit, Sindhi and Urdu are not major languages of any State/Union Territory.

Bodo was included in the list of scheduled languages in 2003 by a constitution amendment.

Note: The statistical data shown for the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar for both maps include the data for the newly carved out states of Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand respectively.



