

EUROPEAN ORIENTALISM

Orientalism, Western scholarly discipline of the 18th and 19th centuries that encompassed the study of the languages, literatures, religions, philosophies, histories, art and laws of Asian societies, especially ancient ones. Such scholarship also inspired broader intellectual and artistic circles in Europe and North America, and so *Orientalism* may also denote the general enthusiasm for things Asians or “Oriental”. Orientalism was also a school of thought among a group of British colonial administrators and scholars who argued that India should be ruled according to its own traditions and laws, thus opposing the “Anglicanism” of those who argued that India should be ruled according to British traditions and laws. In the mid 20th century, Orientalists began to favor the term *Asian Studies* to describe their work, in an effort to distance it from the colonial and non-colonial associations of *Orientalism*. More recently, mainly through the work of the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said, the term has been used disparagingly to refer to the allegedly simplistic, stereotyped and demeaning conceptions of Arab and Asian cultures generally held by Western scholars.

As a scholarly practice, Orientalism emerged in the late 18th century European centres of learning and their colonial outposts, when the study of the languages, literatures, religions, law, and art of East Asian societies became a major focus of scholarly attention and intellectual energy. In that era, the number of Europeans doing research on East Asia dramatically increased, and new forms of institutional support in universities and scholarly associations encouraged such studies and their dissemination. A frequent theme of that scholarship was that Asia had once been host to great civilizations that had since fallen into their current state of decay. Many Orientalists, as they came to be called, were connected to a colonial bureaucracy, but others were not, and their positions on colonial varied. Orientalism as a scholarly field was dominated by research in the French, English, and German languages and associated centres of learning, and its subjects ranged geographically from the North African Mediterranean to East and Southeast Asia. One of the most significant discoveries of

Orientalists was that Sanskrit and many European languages were related to each other, which implied that Europe and India shared historical origins. That discovery has been credited with giving rise to the comparative method in the humanities and social sciences.

In the wake up of that Orientalist research, scholars and artists tool up ideas about Asian societies, art, and traditions in their intellectual and creative works, and images of and ideas about Asia or specific peoples or parts of it became common tropes in popular literature and even décor. Thus, Orientalism was a significant philosophical and aesthetic movement that reached well beyond the specialized circle of Orientalist scholars, especially in the 19th century.

The terms *Orientalism* and *Orientalist* first took on a markedly political meaning when they were used to refer to those English scholars, bureaucrats, and politicians who, in the late 18th century and early 19th centuries, opposed changes in British colonial policy in India that had been brought by the “Anglicists”, who argued that Indian ought to be ruled according to British laws and institutions. The Orientalists, in contrast, insisted on the primacy of local laws and traditions; some of those Orientalists conducted research on ancient or traditional Indian laws and legal structures in an effort to codify them for use by a colonial bureaucracy. Ironically, however, British efforts to understand, codify and govern according to what they believed to be local tradition often brought about significant changes in social and political life in India.

IMPACT OF ORIENTALISM IN INDIA

The impact of Orientalism in India can be traced back with the beginning of Indian Archaeology in mid of 18th century, when academic interest in the Indian antiquities began. This interest is best expressed in the writings of the French language scholar, Anquetil du Perron, who is better known for his translation of the Upanishads, and the Danish engineer,

Carsten Niebuhr, who also reported on the archaeology of Arabia and Persia. Both emphasized the need for a systematic and scholarly study of Indian antiquities. This was also the time when a French geographer, J.B.B. D'Anville, discussed the possible location of the famous site of Pataliputra. To understand this specific geographical interest we have to remember that in classical antiquity, people from the Mediterranean lands were frequent visitors to India and some of them also wrote books on her, which have generally survived only in fragments. The memory of India, thus, was never lost from the European mind. There was also an element of contact between Europe and India possibly throughout the middle-ages. The names of the major ancient Indian cities were known from the classical sources, and by the middle of the 18th century there was a specific geographical interest to identify them on the ground. Pataliputra, the ancient Mauryan capital described by the Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court, Megasthenes, was one of these cities. D'Anville incorrectly identified Pataliputra with Prayag at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna. However, it is not the correctness of such identifications which matters; what is important is that around the middle of the 18th century the old classical references to Indian cities were being remembered and sought to be understood in modern terms. Incidentally, Pataliputra's correct identification with modern Patna had to wait till 1788, when the second edition of an English geographer's book, *Memoirs of a Map of Hindustan*, was published. The geographer concerned was James Rennell, who collaborated with J. Tieffenthaler, a German missionary, and du Perron, to produce a three volume study of Indian historical geography in 1786-88.

We must also realize that in the second half of the 18th century there was considerable philosophical interest in the antiquity of India in Europe, especially among the philosophers of the French Enlightenment. In their quest to move away from the dogmas of Biblical tradition, these scholars, who included Voltaire and Diderot, first looked towards China and then towards India as centres of civilization and culture.

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