Coalescing the Romance of Antiquity, Literature, Orient and Imperial Justice: Sir William Jones and the Birth of ‘Indology’

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Abstract:  
Two hundred years of ‘Indology’ have developed a very controversial heritage which is misconceived as the concept of ‘Indian Nationalism’ owes its origin to ‘Indology’. The recent debate on the nature of ‘Indology’ is restricted to a uni-linear approach of the romance of ancient literature. It ignores the internal dynamic, necessity, process and mechanism working behind the emergence of ‘Indology’ as a potent field out of ‘orientalism. All this can well be approached through a comparative analysis of Sir William Jones’ (1746-1794) thought as an ‘orientalist’ and ‘Indologist’. This paper revolves around the theme that Jones had a romance of antiquity, literature, orient and justice, which he found best, coalesced with ancient Indian Sanskrit literature. However, the mechanism and romance of Jones’ ‘Indology’ widened the gulf between major components of Indian society.

I. Introduction  
During the last two centuries, ‘Indology’ has emerged as a dynamic discipline, encompassing all aspects of the study of ‘things Indian’, from places and people to history, culture, arts, literature and philosophy. This dynamism of ‘Indology’ is the outcome of a long process of application of western romantic thought to the Indian state, society and politics in imperial and colonial perspective. Having genetic origin from ‘Orientalism’, ‘Indology’ emerged pregnant with its thematic assumptions, techniques, methods, purposes and ideas and brought fundamental changes in the intellectual and political outlook of the subcontinent. A number of identical aspects of the region such as the concept of ‘Indian Nationalism’, ‘Hindu Tawa’, ‘Bengali Renaissance’, and revival of Sanskrit language and literature along with the view that India is a potent centre of civilization since ancient times owe its origin to the emergence of ‘Indology’. Yet, the concept appears to be a coinage of foreign intellect of British, same as the ‘orient’ is the coinage by the west on the foundations of ‘self’ and ‘other’.

The recent interest taken in the ‘Indology’ as a dynamic field of study, by the literary circles and Literary Journals of Urdu language seem to be disseminating paradoxical perceptions. Although the underlying assumption appears to be the inculcation of literary romance of ‘ancient India’, to develop a sense of harmony and socio-cultural unity within the region, it appears to be the application of ‘self and the ‘other’ approach to the public relations of Indian and Pakistani people and indicates a domination of current political themes on literature and history.
The general emphasis of the recent debate has been on the introduction of ancient Sanskrit literature and things attached to it or on a simple introduction of the contributors to the study of ancient India,(Malik, 2002; Tareen, 2007) neglecting the emergence of ‘Indology’ as a dynamic discipline, with an extended scope to British imperial administration as opponent of Mughal Muslim Empire. The recent studies approach two hundred years of ‘Indological Studies’ with a linear view of ‘antiquarian literary romance’ and ignore the internal dynamics of ‘Indology’ as well as its communal-cultural and racial impact. The purpose of this paper is to explore such issues. A classical romantic foundation of British Romantic Movement against eighteenth century extreme rationalism, indigenous law’s place in colonial British administration and British intellectuals’ views about the ruling elite of India need to be explored to understand the specification of ‘Orientalism’ and ‘Asiatics’ to ‘Indology’. These neglected aspects can best be analyzed through the study of life and works of Sir William Jones (1746-1794), the Orientalist (Arbury, nd) and ‘father of Indology’. The paper is written with the intention to serve this need with a thematic assumption that William Jones had a very broad spectrum of romantic ideas including antiquity, literature, orient and Imperial justice which could best be coalesced in ‘Indian studies’. Therefore, William Jones devoted himself for ‘Indology’.

II. Sir William Jones (1746-1794).

Sir William Jones has been honored as originator of the theories which are considered as outcome of ‘Indology’ such as ‘Indian Renaissance’, ‘Bengali Renaissance’ and ‘Indian Nationalism’. (Panda, 1990, p.23) At an initial stage of the development of Indian studies, Jones and Indology appear to be two sides of the same coin. For a long time the Orientalists and Indologists of repute not only accepted and followed Jones’ themes and theories but also elaborated his concepts on new models and evidences.

Born in a well-known Wales-origin family of London, in an age of enlightenment, William Jones was brought up by his mother. Her traditional approach to education at home inculcated a love for classics in Jones’ heart, which was nourished during his education at Harrow and Oxford from 1753 to 1769 in classical languages, literature and history. Classical heritage of ancient Greek-Roman civilization, the simplicity of logic working behind the laws, customs, traditions and system of administration, reflected in literature,(Jones, 1781, 1791) had impressed upon his mind greatly. The democratic nature of classical state, society and government inculcated in Jones’ thought a sense of individuals’ rights and a love for liberty which developed devotion for the cause of English constitution, Whig philosophy and American war of Independence (1774-1778). Jones was ‘charmed by old literature and inspired by ancient wisdom’. On the model of Cicero and Milton, he wished young men to be educated a combination of the education of a gentleman, a man of letters and wisdom of the ancients. (Mukherjee, 1968, pp.23-24) Therefore, he tried to harmonize modern developments with that of the ancient history. History, for Jones, was rather a philosophy taught by ‘the accumulated experience and wisdom of all ages and all nations, than merely a sort of knowledge to collect examples from the human past. Jones saw history as the development of language and literature, reflecting even ‘religious laws of society’ (Jones, 1807, I, pp.156-7; III, pp.1-9). The

1 A classical Roman poet of ancient Roman Empire.
2 Milton (1625-1660) was a famous English poet of Reformation period and views.
progress of arts, sciences and letters as well as virtue, wisdom and prosperity were more fascinating and ‘tangible achievement’ for him than wars and conquests. The perception developed a romance of geographical, linguistic and cultural diversities as bases for the human progress, promoting ‘universal humanitarian values’. Jones was interested in the preservation of this diversity through the placement of oriental civilizations in the world history in comparison with the Western.

Jones’ literary career can be divided into two periods; (a) Period of his oriental romance (1770-1783); (b) As ‘Father of Indology (1784-1794). During both the periods of the study of Asian civilizations, classical age and literature seem to be central to Jones’ thought and method.

III. Jones’ Oriental Romance

Jones’ romance of European ancient classics and his contemporary imperially motivated orientalism find a combination in the comparative study of relations between ancient oriental and European arts, crafts, literature and institutions through history of racial mythology, which extended the scope of his concerns to the ancient Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Roman, Italian, Indian, Chinese and Persian literature and language.

Jones’ contemporary Orientalists were looking at the orient as a distant, primitive, irrational and inferior entity as compare to the European civilizations, ancient or modern. There was developing an opinion that this primitive and irrational entity should be replaced with that of the modern and rational European civilization. For Jones Greek-Roman antiquity and literature were the basis of modern Europe, which could not be completely understood and sustained without a curious study of the orient. The writings of the Asians possessed pure reason and an Aristotle or a Plato; (Canon, nd, p.7) therefore were indispensable ‘to complete the history of universal Philosophy’ (Jones, 1807, III, p. 233). He insisted that the conquest of Constantinople by the Muslims was the potential date for the beginning of renaissance in Europe and hoped that spread of oriental learning would stimulate another renaissance in Europe (Grewal, 1975, p.39). He showed a complete agreement with Alexander Dow on the view that there was a sort of religious prejudices, intellectual sloth, inability to learn oriental languages, ignorance of oriental literature and blindness to its merits among the Europeans. The absence of material incentives, lack of the orientalists of taste and scarcity of books on the orient had been responsible for this ‘curious kind of self conceit’ (Dow, 1770). Through such arguments, Jones highlighted the pragmatic value of oriental learning for imperialism. The views provided Jones a high place among the orientalists. He became member of the learned societies and was assigned a translation work from oriental history by the King of Denmark in 1772 as his main interests were Arabic and Persian languages and literature.

‘Arabic Jones’

Well versed in Arabic language, Jones analysed the ancient Arabic civilization as an extension of Greek-Roman civilization on the model of Edward Gibbon (Gibbon, 1990). Considering pre-Islamic Arabia as a ‘perfect society’ (Jones, 1807, III, 30), having ‘exalted virtues’, Jones was much impressed by its simplicity, bravery and love for

3 A view that man is a basic source of unity in the universe and in this way man’s rights should always be protected and all the institutions should work for the welfare of man.
liberty as depicted in the pre-Islamic Arabic literature, especially, in ‘Saba’ Mua’laqat’ (Jones, 1782).

Jones’ romance of Arabic literature was hampered by his division of classical and Islamic Arabic literature. Arabic language as an embodiment of Islamic precepts came in direct conflict with his romance of classical antiquity, mythology and literature as well as Christianity. Contrary to Gibbon’s view, for Jones, Islam was responsible for blocking the way of literary and cultural progress in Arabia. The ideal of universal God of Islam came directly in conflict with his Christian, classical and romantic concepts of metaphysics and mythology. A centralized system of government established by Islam to achieve the purpose of political unity among the Arabs appeared, in Jones mind, as a check on the traditional Arab sense of liberty and natural way of life, especially when it serve the cause of Islamic conquests. Therefore, he condemned the destruction of traditional Arab ‘idolatry’ and mythology by the Muslims. The perception of Islam as an anti-classic and relatively new religion, establishing non-traditional trends in the state, society and belief, Jones equally applied to the Arabic language and literature, which diminished his interest in the Arabic language and literature.

‘Persian Jones’

However, his real interest seems to be attached with Persian language and literature having classical antiquarian origin and compatibility with the classical western world. He was of the opinion that Persians had been great theists, possessed metaphysics, great architecture and probably, sciences and arts. They were one among the civilized nations of the world and the Persia was ‘the finest part of Asia’ (Jones, 1807, XII, p.342). For Jones the growth of Persian civilization was the outcome of developments in Persian language, and the development of Persian language was due to the enlightened behaviour of Persian people, both passing through a long evolutionary process (Ibid, V). Jones, admiring Persian poetry, translated a number of poems into English and compared them with that of classical European poetry. He drew parallels between the oriental ‘masters’ and European ‘classics’ (Jones, 1810). He translated A Persian Song of Hafiz and felt himself ‘like a drop of water in the Hikayat-I-Sadi’ (Jones, 1807, XII, p.342). He believed that Rumi in his ‘Masnavi’ and Hafiz in his ‘Ghazals’ had given an immortalized expression towards their beneficent Creator (Jones, 1807, II, p.13). Jones romance of Persia goes so high that he found best of oriental despotic administration under Nadir Shah, possessing universal value system of despot, conquerors and scourges all over the world, whether in Europe or in Asia. Considering Nadir Shah a conqueror hero, Jones compared his conquest of India with that of classical conquests of Alexander the Great. His mild treatment of Mughal emperors and princes of Sind and restoration of their throne become fascinating examples of oriental despotism for Jones. S.N. Mukherjee is of the opinion that in his presentation of Nadir Shah, ‘Jones was only eager to make Asia appear more acceptable to Europe’. However Jones had serious reservations about the Arabic and Persian civilization par language and literature.

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4 This expression can be found in the works of Jones very commonly. It is just because of his love for antiques and classics determined by the romantic criterion.
5 A term applied to long poems having a common subject.
6 A short lyric poem.
7 Nadir Shah was the king of Persia. He ruled over Persia. In 1739 Nadir Shah attacked India and played havoc. His massacre and plunders of Delhi are well known in Indian history.
However, Jones’ treatment of Persian was same as that of Arabic literature. Under the Muslim rulers and due to Persians’ conversion to Islam, Persian language and literature was dominated by Islamic-Arabic literary themes, with which Jones had no affiliations.

IV. Jones’ Romance of Imperial Justice and Indian Law

Getting reserved his place as an orientalist, Jones’ financial problems turned his eyes towards the East India Company’s administration as an orientalist. By then India had a political identity known with Muslim identity and Persian nobility, demanding oriental concern with Arabic and Persian literature, which Jones readily had.

After a long struggle of ten years, he joined the East India Company’s Bengal services as a Judge of Supreme Court in 1784. His Indian career turned him towards a focus area of oriental studies, which was “Indology”. He continued his classical, linguistic and oriental theme in the Indian studies. In this perspective, his perceptions had multi-fold purposes. He intended to guide the policy makers, apologize for his own conduct of the affairs of justice as a judge and to develop a harmony between the rulers and the ruled on the moral ground of classical relations between the Indians and the Europeans. It marked a prominent change in his literary and intellectual attitude. His romance of classical antiquity, literature, orient and his professionalism diverted his attention from Arabic-Persian romance to Indian romance which gave birth to ‘Indology’ and made him ‘the father of Indology’.

Before his arrival in Indian, Jones had a very vague idea of pre-Muslim politics of India. He considered it divided into three parts and placed Assam on the map with Malayan peninsula. For him, India’s ancient system was based on feudalism and contributed nothing important to human experience. However, After his arrival in India, within a short span of time, he came to the conclusion that European ideas about India were very vague. India had inherited a very rich ancient civilization. In this regard, there was an extreme desire to enhance the study of Indian sciences, arts, literature, state and society. It could be useful for the Europeans in bringing about both, another renaissance in Europe and a sound system of government to rule over India. J.S.Grewal is of the opinion that:

Before Jones, Indian history had been almost synonymous with Indo-Muslim history, after Jones, it became almost synonymous with Hindu history. The Muslims were moved from centre to the periphery of the history of the subcontinent. (Grewal, 1975, p.32)

Jones’ Judicial assignment seems to be instrumental in the shift of his interests. At the time of Jones arrival in India, European population in India was under the influence of a superiority complex against inferiority of the indigenous population. The British East India Company was facing a harsh criticism for mal-administration of the Indian affairs. The Company’s officials were going to be charged with corruption and lawlessness. The exploitation of indigenous population on the part of British ‘Nabobs’ (lord) was the burning question of the times. (Spear, 1963)

Jones as a Whig had faith in the rule of law, the separation of power, the sanctity of private property and mild government. The central theme of his ideas was the
protection of the individual, his person, property and freedom. (Jones, 1792, p. xiii) He wanted twenty four million British Indian subjects to benefit from his ideas at least by giving them their own laws. However, Jones was afraid that the people had never experienced the political freedom and if liberty could be forced upon them, it would make them as miserable as the cruellest despotism; but in spite of all that, he rejected Bernier, Montesquieu and Dow’s theory of absolute despotism. He believed that Indians could not have flourished, if the despot had to be the owner of all property, and if people had no experience of private property. The Indian princes never had been above the law, nor they pretended to have unlimited legislative powers. They were always under the laws believed to be divine with which they never claimed any power of dispensing. (Jones, 1792, p. xii) His visit of the island of Johanna administered on Arab style developed his opinion that an enlightened despot free of the pressure of nobility could administer the state well with the help of scholar-governors and ministers. (Mukherjee, 1968, p. 126) He argued that during the Muslim rule the provinces were governed according to the Muslim laws. However, the Muslim rulers recognized the authority of the Hindu laws between the Hindu litigants. On the rights of property, he observes:

…by the Mughal constitution, the sovereign be not the sole proprietor of all the land in his empire, which he or his predecessors have not granted to a subject and his heirs; for nothing can be more certain than that land, rents and goods are in the language of Mohammedan lawyers, property alike alienationable and inheritable…No Musalman prince in any age or country would have harboured a thought of controvert these authorities. (Jones, 1792, p. 9)

On these evidences, he advised the Company that the Indian should be governed according to their own laws on the model of benevolent and enlightened despotism. He was of the opinion that it would be unworthy of the British government to impose their system on the Indians. For ‘a system forced upon the people invincibly attached to opposite habits would in truth be a system of cruel tyranny’ (Ibid). Therefore, as a judge in the company’s administration, Jones was interested in the administration of justice according to the local norms, customs and rituals, which was almost a settled principle of justice in Britain. He was annoyed with the company’s administrators’ continuous interference in the affairs of justice and exploits of the local population through the interpretations of the indigenous issues in the western manners. By focusing the indigenous laws, Jones seems to be checking the growth of the involvement of the administrators of the Company in the affairs of justice. The conflict between administration and judges had already been crucial since 1770. Jones seems to be separating historical and customary evidences for the freedom of justice from the pressure of administration, although aiming at strengthening the British Empire. Therefore, he advised that the British should follow the example of benevolent and enlightened despotism of Indian princes. (Mukherjee, 1968, p. 126) and it “will secure the permanence of our [British] dominion”. (Jones, 1792)

These ideas and perceptions of Jones strongly coalesced with his antiquarian, literary and oriental romance. As all ancient literature form some sort of religious belief and moral system, so Jones had a strong belief in the wisdom and strength of the ancient religions and moral system as foundation of all modern developments, reflecting continuity in human history and interchange of belief system, sources, institutions,
mythology and literature among the civilizations. Thus relations between mythology, religion and rituals become a customary law supported by history and promote a voluntary obedience of common people to religious leadership.

Jones felt his romance of antiquity, literature, and orient satisfied in the study of Indian customary law. He applied all his oriental theories to the Indian civilization. What the complaint he had about the Europeans neglect of oriental studies and what the plea he had taken for the promotion of oriental studies, Jones shifted to ‘Indology’. For developing the Europeans’ interest in Indology, he seems to be highlighting those aspects of Indian history, culture and civilization, which had close resemblance with the European culture, institutions and history. In this regard, he emphasized over ancient Indian history and culture and neglected his original plans of work on Muslim India.

V. Medieval Muslim and Jones’ Contemporary India Ousted

On his way to India, Jones had planned a schedule of study to execute in India. In this plan of study, a large share was granted to the natural features of India. However, Muslim law, Mughal constitution and contemporary India were also the dominant fields of study. Developing his interest in the study of Indian law through the study of ancient Sanskrit literature, Jones not only neglected the history of Muslim India, but also neglected the contemporary India. Although, he referred to the history of Muslim India in his writings, made translation of Al Sirajiyyah or Mohammadan law of inheritance and wrote a treaties on the Mohammadan Law of Succession to the Property, but such works were mere translations to facilitate his work as a judge. In these works he did not accept the divine nature of Shariah Laws but interpreted these laws in terms of Arabic culture. On the history of Muslim India, he could still suggest publicly that a perfect history of Mughal India could be compiled from the Persian sources beginning with Ali Yazdi’s Zafarnama and ending with Ghulam Husain’s Siyar al-MuTa’khirin. (Jones, 1807, III, p.213) However, Jones set history of India before the Mohammadan conquests as his chief ‘desideratum’. (Grewal, 1975, p.37)

In Jones new scheme of research, the Persian and Arabic became the language of Islam and Muslims which did not formed his central theme. Jones treated Indian Muslims as a foreign imperial and cultural force which failed to dominate India. Therefore he suggested that the Muslims should be treated according to their own religious law. Although the Muslim rulers in India patronized the arts, sciences and literature, promoted luxurious way of life and style of living, introduced the Persian language and literature in India, yet, contributed nothing remarkable. (Jones, 1807, V, p.424) This style had replaced the pure feelings and simple living style of Indians. The images did not match with Jones classical romance and imperial justice.

VI. ‘Asiatic’ Society of Bengal becomes ‘Indological’

Very soon after his arrival in India, in January 1884, in a meeting of the learned men of Calcutta, Jones announced the establishment of Asiatic Society of Bengal. The main object of the society was to promote the research on Asiatics (Niya Zamana, May 2009) and to provide opportunities to analyse discuss and exchange the knowledge of, and views about Asiatics. Practically, its aim was to help the Company in administrating India through the understanding of indigenous ways, laws and methods, of which Jones was a devoted advocate. In his first discourse, Jones stressed on the pragmatic value of Asia as a ‘nurse of sciences’ and the ‘inventress of delightful and useful
All aspects related to Asiatics could be discussed from the platform of the society. The area of interest included history, antiquity, numismatics, chronology, genealogy, religion, culture, politics, manners, customs, laws, soil, natural resources, products, wild life, relations and problems of the indigenous population.

However by the time, Jones shifted the focus of society’s activities to ‘Indology’. As The East India Company patronized its activities, the Society established its office in Calcutta Supreme Court and Jones used his personal influence to promote the activities of the society, its meetings were attended by high officials, some times by the Governor General, which helped promote ‘Indology. The romance of ‘Indology’ became so powerful that it even neglected the original concerns of the society. In 1885 Francis Gladwin, a founding member of the society and in charge the Company’s press, issued two journals: *Asiatic Miscellany* and *New Asiatic Miscellany*, focusing Persian language, literature and history in India. In the Preface he wrote:

> …while these works of imagination give us a title to the notice of lovers of poetry, the more solid productions of an historical and political kind afford us a claim on the attention of the learned and the curious. (Asiatic, 1786, preface)

Gladwin did not place his name on the title page of the Journals as editor. He wished that society should own the intellectual ownership of the journal, but Jones nourished new administrative and intellectual elite, having concern with Sanskrit language and literature, was not ready to own a publication having interest in the medieval content or language. The tendency even neglected the contemporary ‘Hindustani language’ (Akhter, 2008) as it has more relevance with Persian and Arabic than Sanskrit. In this way, the Asiatic society and Jones challenged the method developed by the Fort William College.

Later, the society published its own Journal, devoted to ancient India, in the name of *Asiatick Researches* which later took the name of *Journal of the Asiatick Society of Bengal*. In the early period, most of the papers presented in the society’s meetings and published in the journal were written by Jones. In the fifty years after its establishment, only a few papers related to the Muslims of India were presented in its proceedings. Among them some were related to numismatics.8

**VII. Indology Established**

The Society and Journal under the auspices of Jones attracted the attention of a large number of the Company’s officials such as Charles Wilkins, Nathaniel Halhed, John Shore, Francis Gladwin, John Carnac, Jonathan Duncan and William Chambers, H.H. Wilson, Charles Grant Duff, H.T. Colebrook, etc. For Asiatic Society, India meant Hindu India therefore Hindu civilization was their central focus. It adopted the Jones’ pattern of the assessment of Indian civilization, on the model of antiquity, literature and relations and resemblance of Indian civilization with the classical European civilization, for the self education and self understanding of Europeans in India. Hinduism emerged as a more ancient system having a rich mythological literary heritage under this pattern. It found some sort of similarities between the classical Greek-Roman civilization and Hinduism. (Jones, 1807, III, p.233)

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8 A survey of the contents of *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*. 
The society revived the classical romance of India through research in classical literature. Under the auspices of Greek-Bactrian empire, Magasthenes’ *Indica* had generated a romance of India as an ancient centre of civilization, (Magasthenes, nd) Trogus Pompeius, romance of mythological worrier gods and heroes’ Strabo and Arrian9 of an ancient geo-political unit, (Maurice, 1795, I,) and Diogenes of Indian “gymnosophists”10 This Indian Romance had prevailed on the minds of European intellectuals throughout the middle ages. Revival of Greek-Roman arts and literature by European renaissance and rise of classicism had bridged this classical romance of India with that of modern romantic thought.

VIII. Conclusion

‘Indology’, on the model of ‘orientalism’ appears to be the product of eighteenth century Western intellectual mechanism which was nourished by the British pragmatic romance of customary law. Paradoxically, ‘Indology’ did not reflect the literary romance, rather a rational and utilitarian philosophical debate to understand the societal complxities and to solve the colonial administrative problems, at its early stages of development. Therefore, ‘Indology’ became a dominant part of British imperial debate, advocating the application of administrative mechanism of ancient indigenous Indian civilization to British colonial Indian administration.

The legal-administrative structure of ‘Indology’ coalesced with antiquity, literature, orient and justice through a mechanism developed by William Jones as ‘Father of Indology’ which converted it into a ‘romantic movement’ having wider concerns with language and literature. Promoting mythological thinking, Jones rejected the long standing inter-cultural concern, narrowed the scope of Indian civilization, divided the Indian society into indigenous and foreigners, created a gulf between rulers and ruled, and marginalized the Muslim elite, races, culture, language and literature. The marginalization rather a conflict has become a permanent mechanical part of South Asian states and society as well as the epistemology developed to study the region in terms of ‘things Indian’ and ‘things non-Indian or ‘things indigenous’ and ‘things exotic’.

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*9* Starbo and Arrian were two famous geographer-historian of first century B.C. Roman empire who wrote *Historical Geography of Roman Empire* in Seventeen volumes.

*10* The ancient Indian Yugis or religious mendicants who were well versed in Vedas or Hindu scripture. In this regard they were not only masters of philosophy, but also of physical science, which are now termed as Marshal Arts.


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