



Translating India: Orientalist Jones and his 'rustic' *Sacoontala*

Introduction to the Author:



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Abstract: The *Abhijnanasakuntalam* of Kalidasa had been an object of greater attention than any other literary text in Sanskrit. Sir William Jones translated it first into English in 1789. The play was later on translated into various European languages, including German, Italian, French and Spanish. The translation of the play can be seen as materialist West's hunt for romanticism, exoticism, idyllic, rural and spirituality. The paper aims to analyse the prevailing social, cultural and political ideologies which influenced Jones' translational enterprise, asserting that his translation was not just an academic exercise but was surcharged with politics, power and ideology.

Keywords: orientalism, translation, colonialism, rustic, romanticism,



Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms and the fruits of its decline

And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, feasted, fed,

Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself in one sole name combine?

I name thee, O Sakuntala! and all at once is said.

Goethe's verse on *Abhijnanasakuntalam* captures the West's charm for the play. First translated by Sir William Jones in 1789, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* of Kalidasa had been an object of greater attention than any other literary text in Sanskrit. The play appealed to the romantic sensibility of the west as Romila Thapar asserts:

Romanticism preferred the less orderly aspect of the Greco-Roman past and looked for the exotic, the unusual, the irrational, the emotional and the imaginative as against the real. The availability of literature from the Orient revealed another world. It was move away from the European civilization to the imagined fantasies of societies outside Europe, and from a time long past.ⁱ

Translation of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* could be seen as an impersonal and apolitical act because the text was literary in nature. The text did not serve any overt political, historical or religious purposes. Unlike other translations like Halhed's *A Code of Gentoo Laws* or Jones' *Manusmruti* which served direct practical concerns. Halhed's Code and Jones' *Institutes of Hindu Law* or *The Ordinances of Menu* was used to know about India's legal system. Jones' translation of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* had no specific political needs in mind. But the translation was not purely an aesthetic or creative exercise. Jones mistranslated as well as deleted those *shlokas* from the text which he found erotic in content. The major effort was to provide information of the text and in



such an effort the literariness had been done away with. The information was also molded according to the taste of the Europeans and according to prevailing social and cultural norms. Tejaswini Niranjana in her essay “Translation, colonialism and the rise of the English” from her book “Siting Translation” explains:

The most significant needs of William Jones’ work were (a) the need for translation by the by European, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and culture; (b) the desire to be a law-giver, to give the Indians their own laws and (c) the desire to ‘purify’ Indian culture, and speak on its behalf...In Jones’ construction of the ‘Hindus’, they appear as a submissive, indolent nation unable to appreciate the fruits of freedom, desirous of being ruled by absolute power and sunk deeply in the mythology of an ancient religion.ⁱⁱ

The translational enterprise operated in colonial contexts to construct European authority, whether that authority be of an eminently practical kind for the extension of the structures of rule, or as a cultural authority for the effective representation of the colonized as somehow ‘other.’ Halhed’s *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776) or Jones’ translation of the *Manusmriti* were used to know about India’s legal system. These texts served the practical purpose where the major effort was to understand the laws of the natives so that they could be ruled better. Translations of literary texts such as *Abhijnanasakuntalam* served the purpose of creating a cultural authority by attributing certain qualities, thus was an act involving representation as well as creating an image about the oriental India.

The play befitted Max Muller’s description of India “consisting of idyllic village communities where people were gentle and passive and spent their time meditating”ⁱⁱⁱ which was evoked by Kanva’s *ashrama*. This was supplemented with “the eroticism of the play, where



eroticism was also linked to the primitive.”^{iv} William Jones acknowledged the beauty of the language but the erotic thought that it reflected was considered less noble. This reflected the weakness of Indian civilization. He thought it would be more appropriate therefore to delete such passages. Translations during colonial period were target-oriented translations that took into consideration the fact that the target readers were not familiar with linguistic and cultural milieu. Sir William Jones domesticated the play to suit the morality of his target readership despite his praise for Kalidasa, Jones felt apologetic about the explicitness of the text. The reference to ‘heavy hips’ of Sakuntala in Act1 by Dushyanta was toned down to ‘elegant limbs’ by Jones.

Although Orientalists like Jones idealized India’s ancient past and drew resemblances between the East and the West, but at the same time they considered contemporary Hinduism and Indian society as corrupt and fallen, and thus in need for reform. The view presented India’s classical past as a Hindu golden age, or a pristine Aryan society which had fallen into decline and decadence. Consolidation of this view was the major agenda behind translating Indian Classical texts and representing them as rich source of morals, cultural ethos, apart from knowing about Indian laws and history in order to rule better.

The play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* served the purpose of solidifying the myth of having same Aryan ancestors. The play seemed to William Jones the best example to present himself as an idealized figure of the wise oriental statesman and philosopher and; the hermits of the *ashrama* as simple and virtuous savage. By translating Sakuntala, Jones became an idealized oriental philosopher and the simple anchorites of *Kanva’s ashrama* fulfilled the criteria of virtuous savage. The play befitted the Western perception of Indian exoticism where people were uncivilized and



lived in hermitages without any material and worldly concerns. This could be seen as one of the reasons that the play was translated by many British translators during colonialism.

Williams Jones was influenced by the ideals of French revolution and Romanticism which were propagated by Rousseau and others like William Wordsworth. In Jones' translation one of the major efforts was to present *ashrama* people as pious and spiritual which became representative of India to the West. Sir William Jones' use of phrases such as "groves devoted to religion", "sequestered grove", "holy grove", "forest peopled only by simple anchorites", "abode of holiness", "holy habitation", "grove devoted to piety" and "sanctuary of virtue" for *Kanva's ashrama* instead of hermitage or *ashrama*; shows his intent to explain his Western readers the spirituality of India by explaining the meaning of hermitage. This is an obvious strategy of appropriation and assimilation.

In William Jones' translation, the authorial extensions are made in italics, pointing towards the translator's conscious attempt of being explicit and interpretative at the same time. For instance, William Jones' "[*Approaching, and looking at it with pleasure*]... [*She stands admiring it.*]" where the translated phrases later used by Monier Williams would have been appropriate (p.26) "[*Approaching the plant and looking at it.*]... [*Continues gazing at it.*]" The tendency of Jones to extend the phrase highlights is tendency of appropriation and elaboration. Jones' translation is not as empirical as the anxiety of native approval always bothers him. In fact the book begins with a preface that chronicles the myths of Hinduism. William Jones' effort was to provide an "authentick picture of old Hindû manners, and one of the greatest curiosities that the literature of Asia has yet brought to light." Jones' translation is prosaic and at best can be described as of a



working nature only. More than the poetry, the emphasis is on its subject matter in terms of the revelation of Indian system through the text and issues pertaining to Indian system of spirituality.

William Jones although claimed in his preface that “I then turned it word for word into English, and afterwards, without adding or suppressing any material sentence, disengaged from the stiffness of a foreign idiom, and prepared the faithful translation of the Indian drama, seems to have less regard for the original” but his translation contradicts such claims. The purpose of Jones’ or Williams’ translation was not to set an example of creative translation but to make Shakuntala known -- to make a text known was indeed one of the major concerns of nineteenth century translators. The enterprise is purely intellectual as the translators do not evince the requisite empathy with aesthetic beauty of the text. The purpose is to make the Indian laws, culture, custom and tradition known to the west.

The play was seen by Jones as an epitome of Hindu culture despite the fact that it presented social and gender inequalities. Therefore, his views about Hindu past are embedded in his ideals of sexuality and feminine virtue. “The Shakuntala of the play became an ideal Indian woman encapsulating the beauty of womankind, but more than that her portrayal as a child of nature was what attracted the German romanticism the most. The identification of the heroine with nature was an appropriate counter to the crafted women of neo-classicism.”^{vi}

Jones’ translation served as an important document to know about Hindus and their past. His translational choices indicate that in order to present past as magnificent to his English readers he emphasized certain elements. Thus Jones effort to present an authentic picture of great Hindu past affected his translational strategy and it seemed to be intertwined with popular stereotypes regarding eternal Hindu character and stagnant Hindu way of life, thus he emphasized the eternal



Hindu deference for despotic forms of political authority. The essentialised assumptions about Hindu culture which are prevalent in Jones' translation is homogenized tradition, degraded civilizational glory and pristine ideas of womanhood. Translational changes, preface to his translation and choice of his words reveal that Jones' translational enterprise had political motivations and was not a disinterested scholarly project. What need to be emphasized here are the images of an idyllic, pastoral Indian life released by Jones' Sakuntala.

William Jones belonged to the tradition of Edmund Burke who admired Indian system and pleaded that India should be governed by her own laws. Therefore, translation of ancient Indian texts allowed colonial authorities to interpret and "verify" indigenous laws on their own terms. From a legal point of view, translation was also very useful in the realm of administration. Legal interpretation translated legal codes from its source culture, encoding it in British understanding. As western interpretations were viewed as more trustworthy and legitimate than the suspected indigenous interpretations, Niranjana sees this type of relationship as reinforcing hierarchical relations of power.

The play was translated with least empathy of the translator. In his efforts to convey the information or message, the literariness was done away with. The play *Abhijñanasakuntalam* was praised for its aestheticism and literariness, but Jones' translation was bereft of any such aestheticism and the major effort seemed to convey the information. Thus, form was marginalized in the endeavor to convey the content of the play. In an effort to draw inferences and knowledge about Indian culture, past and its customs, he neglected the poetic beauty of the verses of Kalidasa. It became evident from the fact that he rendered the translation of the play in prose instead of verse.



Moreover, orientalists used the translated texts to create a just and benevolent image of the British rulers: “The underlying effort in the translation is to move from the position of misconception to acceptance of the role of Britishers as Indian administrators.”^{vi} So translation was used to create a positive picture of the Britishers and to justify their position as administrators in India. The act of translating ancient Indian texts also presented them as restorer or preserver of Indian cultural heritage and also gave them the credit of internationalizing native texts to outside world.

The oriental translations not only created perceptions about India to Western readers but also influenced Indian subjects. Niranjana argues “European translations of Indian texts prepared for a Western audience and provided to the educated Indian a whole range of Orientalist images...[The colonial subject] preferred, because of the symbolic power attached to English[,] to [...]discourse.” In this way, translation became a natural method for colonized subjects to create self-conceptualizations and to re-create ways of accessing status, especially with the replacement of the administrative language of Persian with English as the official language of India in 1835.

Frivolity and the pursuit of pleasure were considered destructive of character; pain and discomfort, on the other hand, were felt to be preeminently useful in character-building. Consequently, India came to be valued not for its pleasures, or promise, but precisely because it was possible to be desperately unhappy there.^{viii}

British translators tried to compare their role in India as just and tedious as the rule of ancient Aryan rulers such as the character of Dushyanta. Sir William Jones translates:

Every petitioner having attained justice is departed happy; but kings who perform their duties conscientiously are afflicted without end. ---The anxiety of acquiring dominion gives



extreme pain; and when it is firmly established, the cares of supporting the nation incessantly harass the sovereign; as a large umbrella, of which a man carries the staff in his own hand, fatigues while it shades him. ^{ix}

Extraordinary business of British Indian life had parallels to *Dushyanta's* ruling in India. Jones translation of the verse reflects as if he considered the ruling of king in ancient India similar to East India Company's rule in India. Phrases "cares of supporting a nation" and "trouble to sovereign" reflect "white man's burden". Jones' use of words "petitioners" and "justice" were the influence of his own occupation as a judge. There were no such references in the play. The colonizing enterprise and translation actually served to feed particular representations of the British to their colonial subjects in India in order to establish the image of the benevolent and just British ruler governing the Indian people. There was an effort that Indians should have traditional sentiments towards British government in the way Indians have reverence for ancient kings.

In translating the lines related to Dusyanta Jones seemed to emphasize the portrayal of king's character as law-abiding, someone who is entirely dedicated to his duty, a kind and gentle monarch, and a legitimate symbol of centralized power and authority. Even in his preface to the play, Jones barely talks about the eponymous heroine whom he introduced in the personages of the play as "heroine of the piece" but talks at length about the Dusyanta the "emperor of India". He even describes the entire lineage and history of Puru race and the ancestry of the king but nowhere discuss the origin of Sakuntala.

During late 18th and 19th centuries missionaries were spreading Christianity in India. Some Britishers feared that Christianity will lead to awareness about democracy and Independence in Indian people. William Jones tried to introduce the tenets of Hinduism, but one can he did not do



so because he admired Hinduism but because he feared that Christian ideals might enlighten Indians to fight for freedom and will bring democracy. Jones was an aristocrat and his position as a British administrator implies that he wanted a stable and everlasting dominion over India. So the major agenda behind his translations of Hindu texts and developing a legal system was the underlying intention to rule India permanently.

Many of Jones' admirers consider his translation of Sakuntala as an instance of an apolitical stance, a disinterested endeavor and see it as a proof of his admiration towards Indian culture and its glorious past. No doubt, Jones attitude is somewhat different from the 19th century utilitarian and Anglicist scholars like James Mill and Macaulay who were very critical of Indian culture, religion and rejected the idea of Hindu glorious past; even considered English literature far superior than Indian literature which according to them is not of much worth. Jones' translation, in a sense, contributed to make the Sanskrit texts known to the Western audience and even the worth of Indian literature was also acknowledged by the Western scholars such as Goethe, Herder and many others.

Unlike Mill and Macaulay who openly condemned Hindu culture, Jones in the preface to his translation asserts that he wants to present the 'authentic picture of old Hindu manners'. Even if we consider that Jones' translational enterprise was not for practical reasons, still his translational effort like other Oriental scholars is intertwined in generalizations and essentialism related to Indian people, Indian culture, ancient traditions and even Indian weather. Therefore, one can infer that Jones' translation was not just an academic exercise but his translational effort was surcharged with politics, power and ideology.

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ⁱ Thapar Romila, Sakuntala: Texts, Readings and History(New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999) 217.

ⁱⁱ Tejaswini Niranjana, Siting translation: HISTORY, POST-STRUCTURALISM, AND THE COLONIAL CONTEXT(Oxford, England: University of California Press, 1992)13

ⁱⁱⁱ Romila Thapar.214

^{iv} Ibid.214

^v Sir William Jones, Sacontala or The Fatal

Ring(http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/shakuntala_jones/) 8.

^{vi} Romila Thapar. 208.

^{vii} Francis. G. Hutchins, The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1967)43.

^{viii} Ibid. 29.

^{ix} William Jones.45.



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