

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone,

Today, we're going to talk about a well-known debate from colonial India—the Anglicist–Orientalist controversy. On the surface, it looked like a serious disagreement. The Anglicists wanted Indians to be educated in English, learn Western science, and follow European ideas. The Orientalists, on the other hand, believed that India's ancient traditions and classical languages like Sanskrit and Persian should be preserved and taught. At first, it seems like these two groups were completely opposed. But if we look more closely, we'll see that they actually shared something important: both had a poor opinion of India's present. The Anglicists thought India needed to be “civilized” through Western education. The Orientalists praised India's past but believed that its present had become weak or fallen. So, even though they seemed to disagree, both sides supported the idea that India needed help and guidance from the British. This shared belief helped justify British rule and control. In this lecture, we'll look at how this hidden agreement between the two groups worked, and how it helped the British maintain their power. We'll also think about how these old debates still influence the way we see education and culture in India today. In this lecture, I have used a variety of sources like Rajeswari 'sunder Rajan's essay *After 'Orientalism': Colonialism and English Literary Studies in India* and Romila Thaper's introduction to the book *History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* and the introduction to Gauri viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*. Now let us begin the lecture.

The colonial rule in India was not simply an imposition of direct domination over the native subjects, it was a project of cultural appropriation, too. An integral part of this cultural reconditioning was the introduction of education in the colony. In this context, we should particularly need to remember that the form of education under the colonial rule was not meant to truly enlighten and emancipate the native subjects in a way that would enable them to challenge the structures of power. On the contrary, it was specifically designed to create a class of intermediaries—subjects who could loyally serve the colonial administration, while remaining ideologically subordinate. In other words, education in colonial India was not just about knowledge transmission. It was a deeply political process, closely connected with the British imperial project and its so-called civilizing mission.

The Charter Act of 1813 which allocated state funds for education in colonial India was the first formal step in this direction. The charter announced that “a sum of not less than one lac rupees in each year shall be set apart and applied for the revival and improvement of literature, and the encouragement of learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India” (486). The Charter Act of 1813 can undoubtedly be considered the first official intervention on the part of the British state in the field of Indian education. It clearly deviated from the Company's earlier policy of non-interference in the social and cultural affairs of the natives in the colony. Under the increasing pressure from Christian missionaries and British reformers, the charter also introduced a new provision for the promotion of Christianity in Company's territories. The Act reflected the emerging contradictions in the colonial

discourse. On one hand, it conceded to the demands of the missionary for educational expansion which the evangelists saw as a necessary prerequisite for spreading Christianity. But at the same time, the Company was cautious about radically disrupting the social and cultural Indian society by aggressively pushing English education or religious conversion. This shows two things here: On one hand, the British were under pressure from missionaries and reformers who believed that education was a tool for spreading Christianity. So they wanted more schools and more teaching of English. On the other hand, the East India Company was still trying to avoid upsetting Indian society too much. They didn't want to push Western education or religious conversion too hard because they feared backlash or instability. This tension shows that there was no clear agreement on whether education in India should be about promoting Christian and Western values, or respecting and continuing Indian traditions.

This lack of clarity on the question of nature of education to be implemented in the Empire left open the question of whether Indian learning or western systems of knowledge should be prioritized in educational institutions. This eventually led to a heated debate over the nature of education in the colony. While a group of intellectuals called the Orientalists favoured the policy of encouraging oriental literature in classical languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, another sect known as Anglicists stood for the promotion of Western education. While anglicists were primarily represented by Thomas Babington Macaulay, the orientalist camp was led by scholars like William Jones. This debate ultimately culminated in Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835), which dismissed Indian classical knowledge as inferior and advocated for creating a class of English-educated Indians to assist in administration. Macaulay who was totally critical of the native systems of knowledge in his famous Minute on Education (1835) observed: "I have never found one among them [the orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Macaulay was totally dismissive of India's past and its knowledge tradition. He opined: "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected to form all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or social philosophy, the relative position of the nations is nearly the same."

Macaulay argued that the aims of education in the Empire was to create a group of intermediaries who could serve as an effective channel between the imperial masters and the native subjects. He opined that what was needed was "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." Macaulay believed that the British Empire needed a group of Indians who could help them govern the country. These people would be Indian by birth and appearance but would think, speak, and behave like the British. In other words, they would adopt British values, education, and ways of life. Macaulay thought that by educating a small group of Indians in English and Western ideas, they could act as intermediaries—go-betweens who would help the British rulers communicate and control the rest of the Indian population. This idea was part of a larger strategy of colonial control. Rather than converting everyone or using only British officials, the empire could rule more efficiently by training a local elite to serve its interests.

So, the idea wasn't to truly liberate or emancipate the masses, but to create a class of educated individuals who could serve as intermediaries, helping maintain and reinforce the colonial system. This process involved moulding a group of elites who were familiar with Western systems of governance, education, and bureaucracy, and who could manage the colonial apparatus on behalf of the imperial powers. It's a key aspect of colonial governance where

"civilizing" the local population didn't mean empowering them but rather training a select few to uphold colonial structures. Governor-General Lord William Bentinck supported Macaulay's minutes and took side with the Anglicists cause, thereby leading to the official adoption of English as their medium of education. This decision sidelined traditional learning institutions. But, in spite of the upper hand of the Anglicists in the academia, the efforts of the Orientalists to keep up interest in the classical knowledge system undoubtedly bore fruit. Particularly important among their initiatives is the establishment of the Calcutta Madrasa by Warren Hastings (1781), the Benares Sanskrit College by Jonathan Duncan (1784), and the Asiatic Society of Bengal by William Jones (1791).

Now a crucial question will emerge—were the orientalists the well-wishers of Indian knowledge systems without any ulterior motives? Well, this does not imply that the actions of the Orientalists to promote the classical epistemologies in India were unmotivated. In essence, both the orientalists and anglicists had an imperial agenda to serve. We may feel that the aggressive "Anglicists" and the sympathetic orientalists are very far removed from each other. But on a closer look we will see the undercurrent of solidarity beneath the thin veneer of their opposition. What is the basis of this solidarity? The basis of this solidarity was that both the anglicists and orientalists were contemptuous of Indian present. We already saw that the Anglicists, proponents of Western education and thought, believed that the path to 'civilizing' India lay in introducing English language, literature, and science. They dismissed traditional Indian knowledge systems as outdated and irrelevant, emphasizing instead the superiority of European intellectual traditions. Their aim was to reshape Indian minds to align with Western ideals and rationality, often couched in the language of progress and enlightenment. On the other hand, the Orientalists claimed to value India's ancient traditions and classical knowledge, and they advocated for the preservation and promotion of Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic learning. However, their appreciation was limited to a romanticized and static vision of a glorious Indian past. Even as they celebrated India's heritage, they largely dismissed its living culture and present social forms as degraded remnants of a once-great civilization. Thus, beneath the surface-level disagreements—Anglicists pushing for English education, Orientalists for classical Indian learning—lay a shared belief: that contemporary India was intellectually, morally, and socially inferior. This common disdain for the Indian present formed the basis of their solidarity. Their visions of education, governance, and reform, though differently articulated, were underpinned by a paternalistic attitude that viewed Indians as needing direction, improvement, and redemption—either through Western modernity or a sanitized version of their own past. This reveals how colonial epistemologies operated in tandem, even in conflict, to justify domination and reshape Indian society through frameworks that denied the value of its present.

It is also important to note that both Orientalists and Anglicists were very much representatives of the British colonial project and they were both primarily concerned with making administration more efficient. Both these groups primarily comprised civil servants, judges and missionaries. The only difference between them was their approach towards administration. While the Anglicists believed that English education would bring about modernity, the Orientalists were of the view that modernity could still be achieved through Indian classical languages. The observation of W.A Macnaghten is interesting in this context. He says, "if we wish to enlighten the great mass of the people of India we must use as our instruments the languages of India...our object is to impart ideas, not words." But the Orientalists, like their Anglicists opponents, were also equally contemptuous of contemporary India, its culture, and peoples. They wanted to replace India's present and its contemporary time with a superior past, and advocated the widespread study of Sanskrit, instead of the

contemporary vernacular. The point is made amply clear by Gerald and Natalie Sirkin. He says, “The impracticability of the vernaculars for higher education, and the excessive delay that would result from the use of the vernaculars as the medium of instruction, were generally agreed upon by both parties. . . . The Orientalists were not prepared to argue against the predominant view that the objective of higher education in India was the introduction of useful knowledge that is, Western learning.”

Romila Thapar in her ‘History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300’ observes that

“Much of this activity [of the orientalists] was fostered by the belief that knowledge about the colony would enable a greater control over it and would provide a firm foundation to the power that the colonial authorities exercised. This was thought to be ‘the necessary furniture of empire’” (*Early India* 3).

The aim behind the establishment of the Fort William College at Calcutta in 1800, for instance, was specifically to teach the British officials the local language and tradition. So, it is evident that the Orientalist discourse also served as an effective ideological tool for the smooth functioning of the imperialist project. The orientalist project was also problematic in many other ways. By presenting Sanskrit literature and other scholarly disciplines from what they called the Hindu period (ranging from the origins to 13 C.E.), the Orientalist historiographers indoctrinated the idea that only Early India marked the heyday of Indian civilization, and what followed the ‘Early Indian Period’—namely the Medieval period—was a period of decadence and stagnation without any remarkable high points of cultural achievements. According to Devy, “the attitude of history implicit in Indological works ranging from Halhed’s *Grammar of Bengali* (1780) to Max Müller’s *India: What can It Teach Us?* (1882), considers the Indian heritage as once glorious but now decadent force” (*After Amnesia* 32). Presenting the western intervention as the sole panacea for the restoration of Indian civilization to its past glory, the orientalist historians emphasised the necessity of their ‘civilizing mission.’ Since the orientalists’ engagement with the scholarly disciplines from the past remained only at the level of reconstructing a ‘glorious’ past to juxtapose it with the present state of ‘decadence’, they paid little attention to ensure the continuum of traditional epistemologies or to create new works in this tradition. Even the Indian scholars who were working in this area could not pose a resistance to this general trend. Such a disposition also led to the total denigration of the classical knowledge produced during the medieval period. They also had no interest in preserving or promoting Indian languages purely for their own value.

By now, it is clear that it was the imperialist agenda that shaped both the Anglicist and Orientalist positions. They, in spite of their apparent differences, held the common view that India was in a state of decline and disorder, requiring an immediate intervention from the British rule in the form of a civilizing mission. Any attempt to present the debate as a conflict between "good" Orientalists and "bad Anglicists" totally overlooks their shared role in the colonial project of controlling and defining Indian knowledge. As I earlier pointed out the orientalist scholarship did not end in 1835, even though lost its official support from the state. It continued to flourish under German and French academics. Scholars like Max Müller, who held the Chair of Oriental Studies at Oxford, played a significant role in this tradition, notably beginning the publication of the *Sacred Books of the East* in 1875.

The Orientalist project of learning Sanskrit was also not devoid of any ulterior motives. First, the colonial administration believed that having a proper knowledge about the customs and traditions of the influential Hindu community was necessary to rule the colony with

minimum amount of damage. For this, they needed a deep and thorough understanding of Indian legal, religious and social structures. Being the language in which Hindu shastras were written, Sanskrit was central to the systems of knowledge governing the Hindu lives. One of the first major attempts in this regard was the codification of Hindu law. Nathaniel Halhed's *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, published in the year 1776, was one of the first translations of the Hindu legal texts. H.T. Colebrooke's *Digest of Hindu Law*, published in 1801 further enhanced the scope of this project by including the field of dharmashastra laws into their ambit of enquiry. This process also played a significant role in freezing Indian law into rigid, textual forms, neglecting the many customary practices that used to historically govern local disputes. The European scholars also included the knowledge they obtained from their Sanskrit studies in the school curricula of colonial education to ensure that Indians learned about their own heritage through a British lens. It is significant to note here that through their interest in Indian past and Sanskrit culture, they could very well present themselves as the custodians of indigenous traditions.

The European interest in Sanskrit was also connected with Europe's own attempt to rediscover its past. Many European scholars like Max Muller considered Sanskrit as a lost key to the chest of their own past. This conception was the result of the formation of the Indo-European language theory which proposes that a large number of languages spoken across Europe, South Asia, and parts of Central Asia descended from a common ancestral language, called Proto-Indo-European (PIE). The theory aims to explain the similarities among languages like Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Persian, and many Germanic languages. This theoretical framework also helped the orientalist scholars argue that India was not a foreign land, but was an unidentified extension of Europe itself. This enabled the orientalist scholars to legitimize the civilizing mission and warrant their claim that European rule in India is not a foreign rule, but a rightful continuation of historical ties. The British was portrayed as the rightful heirs to India's ancient knowledge, now responsible for restoring it to its lost greatness.

As the Indo-European connection gained traction further, it changed from being a mere linguistic idea to a racial and civilizational theory. The term "Aryan," which was originally used to signify the noble clans in the Rigveda, was co-opted by European scholars to establish the superiority of Europeans themselves. By the late 19th century, many European nationalists employed this theory to ascertain their own racial superiority. They even went to the extent of saying that the "Aryans" of India and Europeans shared common ancestors. They opined that while European Aryans flourished, Indian Aryans stagnated due to a variety of reasons. This shows that the study of Sanskrit by European scholars was not a pure academic endeavour, but a powerful political and ideological project. While it helped the preservation and promotion of ancient knowledge and texts, it also served the imperial interests of the colonial masters. By framing Sanskrit as part of Europe's own legacy, European scholars could also claim that India's past was their own and they were not really the outsiders.

Having discussed all the major points, let us now summarize the lecture. At first, it looked like the Anglicists and Orientalists had very different views—one wanted Western education in English, and the other wanted to protect India's ancient traditions and languages. But deep down, both groups thought poorly of India's present. The Anglicists wanted to "fix" India through Western ideas, while the Orientalists only respected India's past, not its current state. So even though they seemed to disagree, both believed that India needed British help. This shared belief helped support British control. In this lecture, we'll see how this hidden

agreement worked and how it still affects how we think about education and culture today. The colonial study of Sanskrit was not a neutral academic pursuit but a deeply political project aligned with imperial goals. British administrators believed that a deep understanding of Hindu customs and traditions—rooted in Sanskrit—was essential for efficient governance. Texts like Nathaniel Halhed's *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776) and H.T. Colebrooke's *Digest of Hindu Law* (1801) sought to codify Hindu law, freezing it into rigid textual forms and sidelining the fluidity of customary practices. Through such efforts, colonial power shaped Indian legal and social life while asserting control over native traditions. Sanskrit was also introduced into colonial school curricula, not to empower Indians, but to enable them to see their own heritage through a colonial lens. This allowed the British to position themselves as custodians of India's ancient knowledge systems. Simultaneously, European interest in Sanskrit intersected with their search for historical roots via the Indo-European language theory. Scholars like Max Müller saw Sanskrit as a vital link to Europe's own ancestral past. This linguistic connection was soon racialized, with the term "Aryan" repurposed to argue for the superiority of European civilization over its Indian counterpart. By claiming a shared Aryan ancestry, Europeans framed their rule in India as a natural and legitimate continuation of a common heritage. Thus, the Orientalist engagement with Sanskrit served dual purposes: preserving texts while reinterpreting them to bolster colonial authority. It allowed the British to claim that they were not outsiders, but rightful inheritors and restorers of India's ancient legacy.