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From the Koh-i-noor to the *Hitopadesha*: Consumption of Indian Antiquities in the Colonial Market

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Abstract. The paper examines both tangible and intangible materials that had a ritualistic value for Indians and once taken into the colonial market became objects of antiquity. The famous Koh-i-noor diamond was one such object which was a symbol of imperial sovereignty but once brought into the global market became a thing of antiquity. The meaning of certain objects change when moved from one place to another. It is this cross-cultural global contact that gives things their new meanings, and in this context the essay also looks at the *Hitopadesha*, a text on morals and ethics, 'the most popular story-book of India' as Max Muller called it. It is in the process of getting transferred/translated/transformed that such antiquities acquired a new meaning. The essay brings out the complex and ambiguous imperial dynamics of appropriating, recreating and canonization of such tangible and intangible antiquities from India.

Keywords: Indian antiquities, Koh-i-noor, *Hitopadesha*, Colonial Market, Exhibitionism.

Antiquities are objects that are time specific and culture specific. How objects are created, the changing ways in which they have been used, and how they have been understood and experienced over time and place, determine how they shape our understanding of antiquities. The meaning and significance of such objects is never static; it keeps shifting, changing and influencing the times in very varied ways. In a global context, the eighteenth century was particularly a profoundly material age. In an age marked by transformations in the movement of people and capital, of new lands being discovered, of imperialism and colonial expansion, of capitalism and new forms of communication, of rationalism and scientific discoveries, commodities began to play a crucial role in a new defining of identity both for the individual and the newly formed nations. The enabling factors which made this possible were undoubtedly the chain of effects of 'enlightenment' and 'modernization'. The movement of people, objects and biological species was primarily driven by a free market based on inequality, exploitation and proprietorship. At the same time, it was precipitated by scientific curiosity of exotic people and species, of the desire to collect and document for the sake of 'knowledge'. European repertoires of knowledge

production were deeply impacted by access to global commodities and encounters with the 'exotic'. The mobility and encounters in the Age of Enlightenment brought new meanings to people and objects. The most mundane of object could take on a different meaning and significance in a new setting. Recent scholarship is not only studying network of different institutions and places generating and circulating knowledge, but also investigating new connections between knowledge and the places of its production, of objects circulating through different spaces.¹ Schillings and Wickeren argue that «knowledge is produced in the interaction of humans, objects, and the spaces they are situated in».² Charles Withers has recently pointed out that the Enlightenment was «a geographical thing» which was, he argues, a multiplicity of geographical locations, such as scientific/savant or agricultural societies which have to be taken seriously as spaces for the distribution and production of knowledge in the 18th century³. Material objects are a means of highlighting certain aspects of personal, social and cultural identities, a complex process which involves a wide range of associations and conceptions based on use and practice. It is through the use and practices by human actors that the context and meaning of different objects are brought into interplay in the processes of knowledge production.

Tacit knowledge is then an eminently social process, founded upon a deep connection between human agents and their material surroundings, based largely upon experience and practice of human actors, and passed on over time and generation. This is based on formal/informal, stated/unstated habits, conventions, associations, and practices in social interaction – all tied not just to human agency but also to include the non-human. The signifier and signified of material/immaterial, tangible/intangible objects is the specific alignment between what it means in a particular time and space and what it is perceived as in another time and space. This bond between the signifier and the signified can be severed and reconstructed, infused with new meanings and new values over time and place. Meaning can be inscribed and/or discursively constructed. The history of tangible/intangible objects can provide valuable understanding of past sensibilities and values, and dimensions of human evolution and social changes. It shows how meaning of

objects is shaped by human intentionality and provides a blueprint of societal codes and practices.

The formative period of British Antiquity study coincides with a time of political stability, rapid economic growth, exploration of new places on the map, and the need to record for posterity. Antiquarianism was profoundly influenced by two historic developments: the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery. Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th century interest in other people and their material culture was superimposed by the flowering of the Enlightenment and Romanticism in England. The Royal Society of Antiquaries evolved from a group of intellectuals interested in the history of antiquities. The Society was founded in 1718, and aspects of pre-Roman Britain were the first to attract attention. The term 'Antiquity' or 'Classical Antiquity' has been synonymous with the ancient Greco-Roman civilization. The late Victorian and Edwardian fascination with everything Greek or Roman was a product of contemporary British imperialism, as can be seen in the predominantly Greco-Romano-centric collections in the British Museum and the Museum of London. From 1861 to 1888, Hellenic antiquities dominated in these museums, making it the largest and most representative collection of Greek/Roman originals in the world⁴. The preference for Roman and Greek antiquities were to highlight Britain's global power by hinting at the parallel with these glorious ancient empires. Some recent scholarships explore engagements with Greco-Roman Antiquity across Europe and beyond in the 18th century, and the ways in which Classical antiquities were perceived and studied during the age of Enlightenment, and how they served the formulation and affirmation of new ideals⁵.

Classical Antiquity was peripheral to the West. It was constricted in time, geographical space and civilization that was essentially organized on a East-West rubric. It signals a regional, relational, and critical orientation that is too often Eurocentric, and yet invites questions of comparison across and between cultures. The tendency is to reproduce binarisms by homogenizing civilizational categories, categories of the 'exotic' or the 'global', that reinforce the exoticism or antiquity of the East in contrast to the progress and modernism of the West. Too often, an East-West frame also invokes either the harmonious 'meeting' of one and another, or the encounter of two opposing worlds. Such hierarchical

¹ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford 1991; D. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003.

² P. Schillings and A. van Wickeren, *Towards a Material and Spatial History of Knowledge Production: An Introduction*, «Historical Social Research», 40, 2015, 1, pp. 203-218.

³ C. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007, p. 5.

⁴ 'Museum Representation of Roman Britain and Roman London: A Post-Colonial Perspective' by Martin Polm. *Britannia*, vol. 47. 2016, 209-241, 212.

⁵ C. Harker, J. Jacob, J. Süßmann, eds., *The Reception of Antiquity in the Age of Enlightenment*, Leiden, Brill 2021; D. R. Kelley, ed., *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* by, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) and London 1991.

dialectics are invariably linked to power structures, and that producing geographical knowledge has most frequently, in one way or the other, been entangled with the exercise of power or control over other world regions. Some historians speak of the symbiotic relationship between geography and imperialism, and it has been argued that accumulation of knowledge was as much about geography, as it was deeply concerned with power, and the legitimation, reproduction, and perpetuation of a self-image and a self-definition of territory⁶.

The article studies the attitude of the West towards objects, and the ways in which the Western world has seen and responded to the Eastern material world. In the context of colonial appropriation, I will try to bring out the complex and ambiguous imperial dynamics of usurping, recreating and canonization of two such tangible and intangible antiquities from India. The essay explores the ways in which the meaning of certain objects change when moved from one place or context to another, and how cross-cultural global contact gives things their new meanings. One, is the famous Koh-i-noor diamond, which was a symbol of royalty/sovereignty but once brought into the global market became an object of antiquity. The other is the *Hitopadesha*, an ancient text on morals and ethics, «the most popular story-book of India» as Max Muller called it⁷, which in the process of getting transferred and translated acquired a new meaning.

A diamond, known among the Greeks as *adamas*, was an indestructible material. Owing to the fact that a diamond was the hardest object in nature, which no metal or mineral could cut or grave any impression upon, the diamond literally meant ‘unconquerable’, or ‘indomitable’. India has been known as a prolific source of diamonds for the longest time, producing by far the greatest number of celebrated diamonds. Of all of them, the Koh-i-noor is the most famous, having weighed more than 787 carats in its original state, according to Jean Baptiste Tavernier the French gem merchant who visited Aurangzeb’s court between 1638 and 1665⁸ [Fig. 1].

Few, if any gems have so prominent a position in legends and history as the original Koh-i-noor. More than 5000 years ago, the ancient Hindu literatures mentioned the Syamantaka Jewel that hung around the neck of the Sun God and gave him his brilliance. The popular tale represented the gem as an emblem of glory, prosperity and brilliance. Some chroniclers claim this to be the

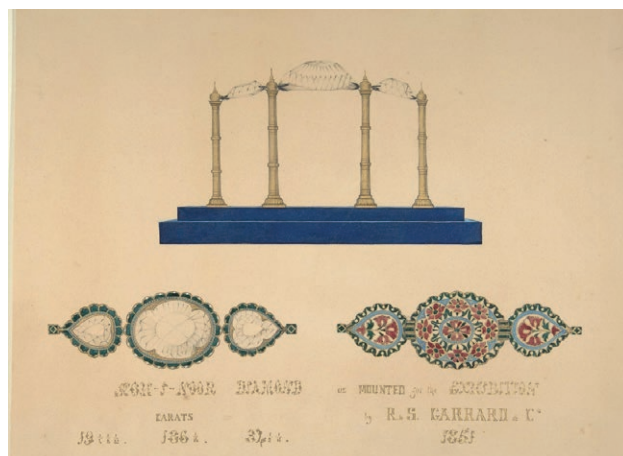


Fig. 1. Drawing of Koh-I-Noor Diamond, 1851. Artist: R. S. Garrard & Co. The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1966.

original Koh-i-noor, but that is obviously not likely. But what emerges from such mythical tales is the importance of the stone in the life of the ancient people, how essential it is for the welfare of the kingdom, and the inevitable rivalry, strife, violence, and community feuds that erupt as consequences of the ownership of such jewels. Lord Krishna, the Preserver in the Hindu Trinity, is said to have been associated with this rare gem, and it was his wisdom and sagacity that enabled him to decide that the gem must be worn only by a virtuous and pure person⁹. The aura of myth and legend associated with jewels was seen throughout, with the Mahabharata mentioning the divine jewel that Yudhishthira wore. It is not difficult to see how over the years the Koh-i-noor, a historically identifiable stone, has attained the status of a legendary and mythical symbol of indomitable and eternal power, and also the very essence of Indian life and spirit.

The Koh-i-Noor, meaning mountain of light, before it ended up in the British Crown Jewels by the mid-1800s, had a long history of court intrigues, with all the lore, romance, blood, and drama. Its murky past was shrouded with myth and mystery, including a rumor that the diamond is cursed. Although it is impossible to know exactly when the Koh-i-Noor came into the Mughals’ possession, there is a definite point at which it appears in the written record. When the Mongols attacked and plundered Agra, the royal family of Agra offered a huge diamond to the Mughal ruler Humayun as peace offering, a stone weighing 186 carats that was

⁶ M. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographic Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997.

⁷ M. Muller, *The First Book of the Hitopadesa: Containing the Sanskrit Text*, Longman, Roberts, & Green, London 1864, «Preface», p. VII.

⁸ See F. M. Endlich, *Diamonds*, «The American Naturalist», XII, 7, July 1878, pp. 419-30: 423.

⁹ For the complete tale, see S. Howarth *The Koh-i-noor Diamond: The History and the Legend*, Quartet Books, London/Melbourne/NewYork 1980, pp. 15-24.

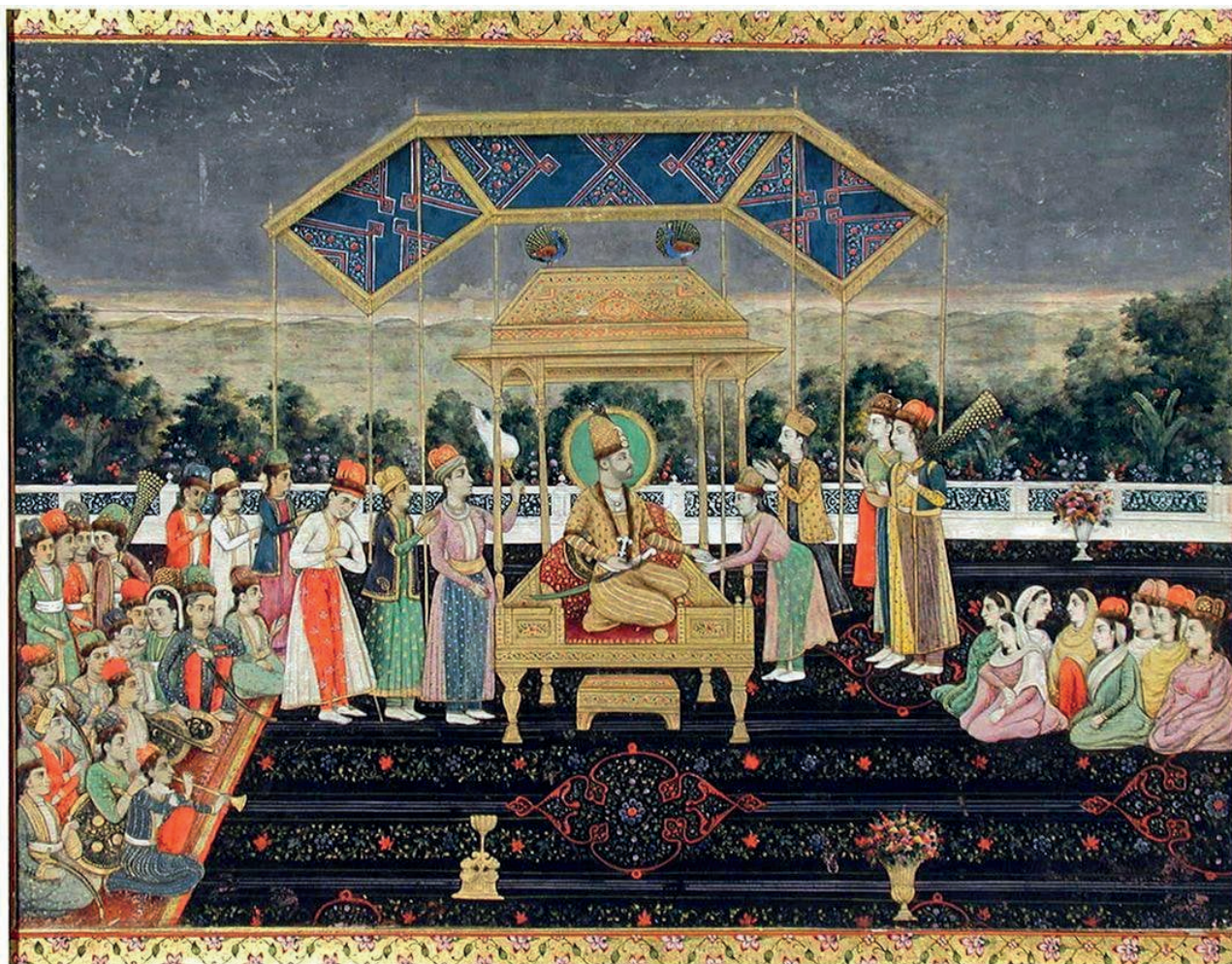


Fig. 2. Nadir Shah on the Peacock throne, 1850. From Wikimedia Commons.

said to be «worth half the daily expenditure of the world». The diamond came to be known as Babur's Diamond has been often identified as the Koh-i-noor, and for the first time becomes a definite historical object. Tavernier's journals mention the «Great Mogul», a splendid diamond that was presented to Shah Jahan. There is a great deal of confusion and different interpretations and theories to identify which one of these was the Koh-i-noor. In 1628, Shah Jahan commissioned a magnificent, gemstone-encrusted throne. Among the many precious stones that adorned the throne was the Koh-i-Noor diamond. The diamond was lodged at the very top of the throne, in the head of a glistening gemstone peacock. For a century after the creation of the Peacock Throne, the Mughal Empire retained its supremacy in India and beyond. When Nadir Shah invaded Delhi in 1739, amongst the looted treasure was the Peacock Throne. The story goes that when Nadir

Shah saw the diamond for the first time, he exclaimed «Koh-i-noor», the «Mountain of Light», and the stone got its name by which it became a legend [Fig. 2].

The Koh-i-Noor would remain away from India for the next 70 years, in a country that would become Afghanistan. It passed between the hands of various rulers in one blood-soaked episode after another, acquiring a fanciful reputation of ill-luck and curses for those who owned it. After decades of fighting, the diamond returned to India and came into the hands of the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1813, whose particular affection for the gem ultimately sealed its aura of prestige and power. Worn by Ranjit Singh, known as the 'Lion of Punjab', as an armband, with the Koh-i-noor set between two smaller ones on either side, the gem seems to have held a far greater symbolism for him [Fig. 3].

Singh's elevation of the diamond as a symbol of triumph and a source of great pride was a major turning



THE KOH-I-NOOR, OR MOUNTAIN OF LIGHT, IN ITS ORIGINAL SETTING.

Fig. 3. Koh-i-noor arm-band, as it was originally presented to Queen Victoria. From Wikimedia Commons.

point in its history¹⁰. Dalrymple and Anand also maintain that this was a pivotal moment when the stone was esteemed not just for its beauty or monetary value, but as a symbol of potency, as «a crowning achievement, the seal on his status as the successor to the fallen dynasty» of Ahmad Shah Durrani¹¹. William Osborne, the military secretary to Lord Auckland the governor-General, who visited Singh's court valued the diamond at three million sterling¹². During the last few days of Ranjit Singh's life, when the monarch lay dumb and paralysed, the Brahmin priests tried their best to get him to assent to donating the diamond to a Hindu temple. It was due to the timely intervention of the guardian of the treasure house that the jewel was protected and remained in the kingdom. It was no longer a personal possession that could be given away on the whim of an individual, even if the individual was the King. The jewel had attained an abstract status, symbolic of 'a people', of the crown and the kingdom.

After Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, which was followed by a violent period, the British East India Company imposed the terms of condition of a treaty which meant that Ranjit Singh's 10 year old son Duleep Singh had to sign a legal document that required him to give away the Koh-i-Noor and all claims to sovereignty. On 6 April 1850, the diamond made a journey in an iron-bound chest to England passing through dramatic vicissitudes, some of it albeit exaggerated, before it reached Queen Victoria's court. The Koh-i-noor was subsequently presented to Victoria in 1850 on the occasion of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the East India Company's charter by Maharaja Duleep Singh rather than through the East India Company. The

bypassing of the Company was not what Lord Dalhousie the then Governor-General in India was happy about, but in a letter in 1849, he expressed why such a symbolic handing over was important:

[My] motive was simply this: that it was more for the honour of the Queen that the Koh-i-noor should be surrendered directly from the hand of the conquered prince into the hands of the sovereign who was his conqueror, than that it should be presented to her as a gift [...] by any joint-stock company among her subjects¹³.

Dalhousie was triumphant. «I have caught my hare», he wrote, and further added:

The Koh-i-noor has become in the lapse of ages a sort of historical emblem of conquest of India. It has now found its proper resting place¹⁴.

The defeated young Maharaja was compelled to offer the diamond directly to the Queen in a staged ceremonial *darbar*, and Dalhousie justified it thus:

The Koh-i-Nur [sic] has ever been the symbol of conquest. [...] I have a right to compel the Maharaja of Lahore, in token of his submission, to surrender the jewel to the Queen, that it may find its final and fitting resting-place in the crown of Britain¹⁵.

Two years later when Singh traveled to England to meet the Queen, he sat for a portrait. In an ironic symbolic reversal of roles, the painting depicted the diamond-studded Victoria, and Singh wearing a miniature of Victoria around his neck.

From there, the diamond became a special possession of Queen Victoria. It was displayed at the 1851 Great Exhibition in the specially constructed Crystal Palace in London [Fig. 4].

The most prominent imperial display was the Indian court, suggesting an untapped vast resource of wealth and resources. Exhibitionism, consumerism and spectacle were part of a conscious re-working of identities. It was an 'age of exhibitions', fashioned by the inter-cultural contact with the outside world, and the need for the interrogation and display of Britishness¹⁶. To quote

¹⁰ I. Balfour, *Famous Diamonds*, Christie, Manson and Woods, London 1997, p. 167.

¹¹ W. Dalrymple and A. Anand, *Kohinoor: The Story of the World's Most Infamous Diamond*, Juggernaut, New Delhi 2016, pp. 82-3.

¹² Howarth, *The Koh-i-noor Diamond*, cit., p. 111.

¹³ Quoted in J. Mehta, *English Romance; Indian Violence*, «The Centennial Review», 39, 3, Fall 1995, pp. 611-657: 615.

¹⁴ Dalhousie to Hobhouse, 9 April 1849. In Dalrymple and Anand, *Koh-i-noor*, cit., p. 2.

¹⁵ Quoted in D. C. Kinsey, *Koh-i-Noor: Empire, Diamonds, and the Performance of British Material Culture*, «Journal of British Studies», 48, 2 (Special Issue on Material Culture), pp. 391-419: 396.

¹⁶ L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 1992.

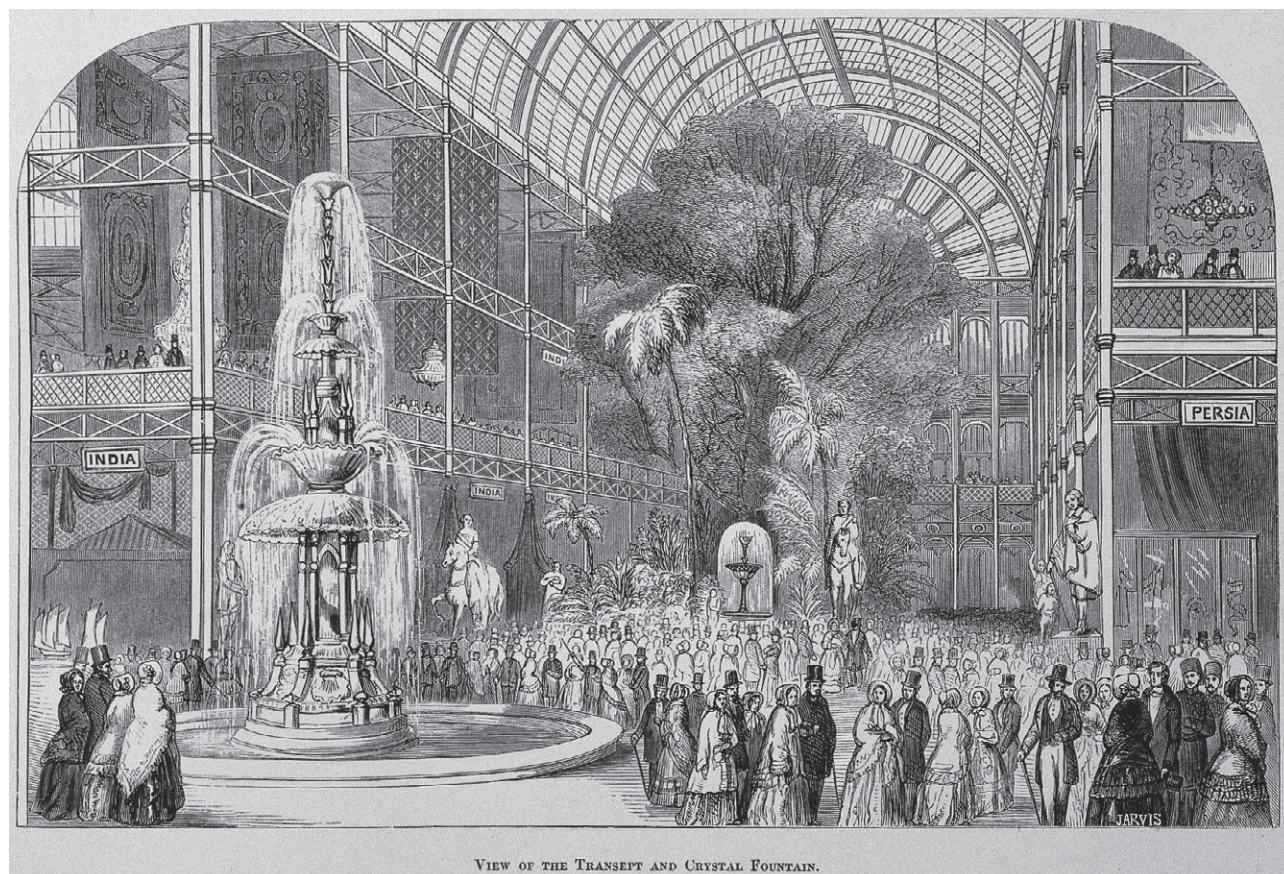


Fig. 4. The Great Exhibition, London, 1851. Wikipedia.

Hoffenberg, «Exhibitions were part of the self-conscious reworking of fluid national and imperial identities» in this era¹⁷. The centerpiece of the show of the world's greatest empire was the diamond that had caught the imagination of the public¹⁸. The usually staid *The Times* gushed about the Crystal Palace whose «sides shone in the sun like the Koh-i-noor itself». Many of the 6 million spectators who came to the exhibition came specifically to see the diamond. It was to be admired as Dalhousie had said, as «a historical symbol of conquest». The jewel lay in a gilt cage, exhibited as a captured product of imperial plunder. No clear narrative was presented as to how it came into Queen Victoria's possession, «exactly how it passed from the jewel-room of Lahore to its present resting place – whether it became British property by seizure or forfeit, or whether it fell to the Queen by

tribute»¹⁹. But the British public was dismayed at how simple it was. «Many people find a difficulty in bringing themselves to believe, from its external appearance, that it is anything but a piece of common glass», wrote *The Times* in June 1851. «To ordinary eyes it is nothing more than an egg-shaped lump of glass. [...] Unhappily, the Koh-i-Noor does not sparkle [...] the most curious thing is not the divinity, but the worshippers»²⁰. Many visitors were mistaken into thinking that the Koh-i-noor was the enormous crystal that occupied the central place in the exhibition. Newspapers and magazines, like the *Punch* gently satirized the disillusioned reaction of the provincial folk when they saw the «greyt Dimun under that brass kage» [Fig. 5].

The *Illustrated London News* regarded the Koh-i-noor as 'gigantic, but somewhat rough and unhewn',

¹⁷ P.H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2001, p. XIV.

¹⁸ J.A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999.

¹⁹ Lord Ellenborough is a Napier Togatus, «*The Times*», 27 May 1851, p. 5.

²⁰ J. Tallis, *Tallis's History of the Crystal Palace*, John Tallis, London 1852, vol. I, p. 150.



Fig. 5. *Punch*, 1851, Vol. 20, p. 200. Google Book.

clearly a metaphor for India²¹. The Indian aesthetic had valued the stone for its size, and the importance it held as a symbol of conquest. It was not just a stone that was monetarily invaluable; it had its own immeasurable and intangible worth as a symbol of honour. The western aesthetics perceived the value of diamonds based on looks – on lustre and flawlessness. The *Illustrated London News* stated that «its marketable value would increase» if it was cut by a European diamond cutter²².

Given its disappointing reception, Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, had the stone recut and polished. The diamond was «properly treated» and «refined» – a process that reduced its size by half but made the light refract more brilliantly from its surface. It was unrecognizable from its former shape and size. The *New-York-Semi-Weekly Tribune* of September 1852 praised it as «unsurpassed by any diamond above the ground in shape, lustre and beauty»²³. The diamond thereby became an ornamental gem which Victoria wore as a brooch. Following widespread rumours that the stone was cursed if it was worn by men, her Majesty

²¹ The «*Illustrated London News*», 17 May 1851. Quoted in J.A. Auerbach, *Empire under glass: The British Empire and the Crystal Palace, 1851-1911*, in J.McAleer and J.M. MacKenzie, eds., *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2015, p. 115.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ B.P. Dean, *Thoreau and 'The Celebrated Koh-i-noor Diamond*, «*The Thoreau Society Bulletin*», 242, Winter 2003, pp.6-7.



Fig. 6. The Koh-i-noor-diamond in the British crown. Wikipedia.

ordered it to be set in her tiara. It was eventually mounted in the crown of Queen Elizabeth II during her coronation and became part of the Crown Jewels of British monarch [Fig. 6].

From an emblem of pride of an indomitable people, the stone had acquired a whole lot of new meanings. Firstly, it had become a prized acquisition, an exhibition of imperial glory that identified with permanence and indestructibility. For the British, owning the jewel of India, was literally the jewel in their crown, a symbol of prestige and power and possession of the land and people. Secondly, the diamond had been feminized. In the Indian context, the royal male bodies have been always heavily adorned with jewelry. In Indian courts, jewelry rather than clothing was the principle form of adornment and a visible sign of court hierarchy, with strict rules being laid down to establish which rank of courtier could wear which gem in which setting. Worn on the turbans and arms of men, the Koh-i-noor diamond was an emblem of conquest that expressed the wearer's divinity, prosperity, authority, and noble virility. Danielle Kinsey and others have focused in particular on the diamond's transformation from a power symbol of royal Eastern men into an accessory for royal British women: «The diamond registered more as an emblem of a frivolous, feminized, and Orientalized luxury commodity»²⁴.

²⁴ Kinsey, *Koh-i-Noor*, cit., p. 392.

By staging the diamond on the female body, the bejeweled Indian male body was aligned to extravagance, vanity and effeminacy. Thirdly, the recutting and refashioning of the Koh-i-noor became symbolic of the colonial civilizing mission. One cannot fail to see the symbolic integration of the tangible and the intangible fantasy – of the jewel and the conquered people to whom it belonged. Maharaja Duleep Singh, the disinherited boy-king who had been coerced to hand over the jewel, was now living in Britain, a darling of English society. Singh had adopted Christianity, had received a British education, and lived much of an English gentleman's life. Singh had become a charming specimen of what Macaulay had envisioned: «a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect». The Koh-i-noor's transformation to suit the taste of the English echoed the polish and refinement of the colonial subject to fit in the British high society. The reconstitution of the stone to make it pleasing and acceptable to the western sensibilities was similar to the agenda of civilizing mission which conveniently hid a very latent schema of colonial exploitation. If the weight of western science and machinery was literally brought to change the structure of the diamond, the pressure of education and religion was constituted to bring about a change in the colonized subjects' identity. In both cases, the being and the thing were seen as commodities, raw unformed lumps that had to be polished and cut out. The shifting of beings and things in time and space thereby performed different cultural, economic, and ideological work for different audiences. Since its arrival in England, the Koh-i-noor has been reserved exclusively for the adornment of queen consorts, and in keeping with the myth associated with the diamond, it has never been worn by a male.

As material objects and ideas moved between continents and communities, and the colonized and the colonizer had to increasingly depend on each other for 'knowledge', the crucial role of the construction and reconfiguration of knowledge became an important and challenging factor. Imperial knowledge was institutionalized and diffused in the form of material culture and ideas. The social nature of knowledge formation and its circulation is today evident from the increasing works on imperial encounters where the attempt is to look for 'contact zones' and unifying narratives to trace larger connections between the East and the West²⁵. Scholarly attention has been recently directed at how knowledge moves, gets negotiated, even contested, and is continuously moulded in the process. Prominent imperial his-

torians like C. A. Bayly contested the theory of a simple diffusion of power emanating from a pre-existing centre. Rejecting the idea of a hegemonic and Eurocentric nature of colonial knowledge, they argued for a circulation of knowledge. Bayly's *Empire and Information* presented a fresh perspective by proposing an alternative historical critique of colonialism and knowledge in eighteenth and nineteenth century India, by «deconstructing the notion of orientalism»²⁶. His criticism of the excessive connivances between knowledge and power was echoed by David Washbrook who critiqued the centre theory of knowledge production²⁷. James Secord in his seminal article *Knowledge in Transit* has argued that the frameworks for understanding the larger narratives of science have been largely constrained, and «we need to grapple with the circulation of knowledge at the right scale»²⁸. Kapil Raj posits that not just scientific knowledge but knowledge per se is not a one way dissemination but «a constantly shifting process in which both sides participate, and that makes such encounters complex historical events and moments of discovery»²⁹. Either way it cannot be denied that knowledge formed an essential part in the establishment of the British Empire in India. Indeed as each of these perspectives throws a new light on this intercultural encounter, it can be argued that the dialectics of diffusion of knowledge have been shaped at different times and space through contestations, collaborations and compromises.

To further the discussion on the connection between appropriations of antiquities and British imperialism in 18th-19th century, an important Orientalist project of late eighteenth century colonial India was the translation of the *Hitopadesha*. The *Hitopadesha* is a collection of short didactic stories written in the form of a chain of simple stories of animals with human characteristics, with each story emphasizing a moral. The *Hitopadesha*, literally meaning beneficial advise and originally written in Sanskrit has been regarded as a canonical text and is an integral part of the psyche of Indian children brought up on the moral and philosophical themes of the stories. In the late eighteenth century this text gained prominence when British orientalist William Jones and Charles Wilkins translated this into English. In 1786

²⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Information Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 370.

²⁷ D. Washbrook, *South India 1770-1840: The Colonial Transition*, «Modern Asian Studies», 38, 3, July 2004, pp. 479-516.

²⁸ J.A. Secord, *Knowledge in Transit*, «Isis», 95, 4, Dec 2004, pp. 654-672: 672.

²⁹ K. Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe. Seventeenth to nineteenth centuries*, Permanent Black, New Delhi 2006, p. 8.

²⁵ M.L. Pratt, 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 4.

Jones brought to everyone's attention the fables of the *Hitopadesha*, which he declared to be «the most beautiful, if not the most ancient, collection of apologues in the world»³⁰. This was then prescribed as a manual for instruction in the Fort William School in Calcutta. This became a standard school book and its stories were seen as an ideal model of moral instruction to inculcate the doctrine of prudence and policy and for the acquisition of virtues. Subsequently this was taken up by the English missionaries as a valuable teaching aid, for the moral improvement of the 'natives' and to infuse them with Protestant ethics like honesty, diligence, etc. With the help of Indian scholars, this went on to be translated in Bengali many times and was used as a primary educational material in Bengali schools. The nineteenth century then saw many more moral manuals in the form of short stories being written both in English and Bengali.

The enabling factors which made this possible were undoubtedly the chain of effects of 'modernization'. Industrialization, the introduction of the printing press, formal schooling, increasing literacy especially amongst the middle class, all contributed to the rational and scientific temperament of the age. When the East India Company established its political paramountcy in Bengal, education played an important role in legitimising their position. Education was considered a key to improve the general condition of humanity and stress was given on 'useful knowledge'. When Warren Hastings took up office in 1784, he was quick to acknowledge: «Every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state: it is the gain of humanity»³¹. That colonial knowledge was principally to construct colonial power has been substantially unmasked³². It has now been extensively argued that British oriental research and writing in India during 18th and 19th century was to serve the purpose of consolidating a growing Empire. Beginning from the early initiatives of Orientalists like William Jones and Charles Wilkins, and then the intellectual enterprises of the scholars at Fort William College in Calcutta to translate and reproduce Indian languages and literatures, the effort has been to «convince while they command»³³.

What frequently gets overlooked and unrecognized is the complex and ambiguous dynamics of such knowledge formations. The second half of the paper focuses on aspects of appropriating, recreating and canonization of «the most popular story-book of India» in order to understand orientalism's projection of ancient Indian scholarships in general and moral literature in particular. What got to be archived and consequently to be prescribed as a canonical textbook in schools was not just simply conducive to the empowerment of a colonial state, but a result of complex, intricate reasons and motives. It is often quite forgotten that such productions and formations of knowledge were collaborative Indo-European works done with the active assistance and participation of some «sensible natives»³⁴. Behind such apparently authoritative Eurocentric garnering of knowledge were the often indiscernible indigenous interests to forge their particular visions of identity and power. What were the major impulses for reviving an early Indian text to impart moral lessons in schools? Was it just plain admiration for the wisdom of an ancient civilization or was there a more insidious purpose in initiating such discourses on morality amongst the colonized subjects? What response did this elicit from the indigenous readers and what place did this text occupy in the moral pedagogy of modern India? More importantly, what needs to be seen are the ways of fostering a particular community's definitions of ethics and emotions, and how particular ethics and values of a community are then recreated and represented. Again, it is remarkable how such 'antiquities' from the past, with definitive values were appropriated and further used by the Bengali literati for their inherent interests.

The *Hitopadesha* was probably written in the sixth century A.D in Sanskrit. The identity of its author can be ascertained from the concluding verses of the *Hitopadesha* which mentions a Hindu scholar, by the name of Narayana Pundit who lived and enjoyed the patronage during the reign of King Dhavalachandra of Bengal. Written in the form of a chain of simple stories of animals with human characteristics, the *Hitopadesha* like the *Panchatantra* is an integral part of the psyche of Indian children brought up on the moral and philosophical themes of the stories. Narayana compiled his materials from various sources known at that time, notably the *Panchatantra*, and perhaps also borrowed his ideas from Chanakya's *Arthasashtra*³⁵. The *Hitopadesha* has been

³⁰ Quoted in C. Wilkins, *Fables and Proverbs from the Sanskrit: being the Hitopadesa*, George Routledge and Sons, London 1885 [1787], p. 10.

³¹ Letter of Hastings to N. Smith, October 4, 1784. Quoted in D. Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1969, p.18.

³² B.S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1997. E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1978.

³³ N.B. Halhed, *A Grammar of the Bengali Language*, Hoogly 1778, p. II.

³⁴ See W. Carey, *Dialogues intended to facilitate the acquiring of the Bengalee Language*, Printed at the Mission Press, Serampore 1818, «Preface».

³⁵ B. Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta 1996, fn 128.

considered «the father of all fables»,³⁶ the originator of all future fables by Aesop and Pilpay. Written originally in Sanskrit, it was rendered subsequently into Persian, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and Nepali [Fig. 7].

The Mughal Emperor of India, Akbar commended his Vazir, Abdul Fazal to render it into an abridged familiar style and published it under the title *Ayar Danish*, or *Criterion of Wisdom*³⁷. Winternitz's research shows that the evidence of fables existing in India can be traced way back to the 2nd century B.C.³⁸. Such collections of stories for religious and moral propaganda can be seen before in the *Jataka* stories, the narrative literature of the Buddhists, and the *Panchatantra*³⁹. The *Hitopadesha* clearly derives its inspiration from these earlier collections of stories, especially *Panchatantra* and «one other book» as the author mentions in the introductory stanzas of his work⁴⁰ [Fig. 8 and 9].

The work consists of four books – I: *Winning of Friends*; II: *Dissension among Friends*; III: *War and IV Peace* – and includes 17 stories and numerous epigrams⁴¹. Characterized by «the didactic and sententious note» and abundant «ethical reflections»⁴², this book was the *nitī-sashtra* («Essence of Conduct») intended as an educational manual for the sons of kings to be instructed in the science of political and ethical policies.

It was not until the *Hitopadesha* engaged the attention of the English Orientalists that so much attention has been bestowed on it. It was Sir William Jones, the English Orientalist who introduced Sanskrit literature to the West. During his brief stay of eleven years in India he mastered the Sanskrit language and made an invaluable contribution to literature in general by producing the first English translations of some of the greatest gems of Sanskrit literature. In 1784 he founded the Asiatic Soci-

³⁶ Wilkins, *Hitopadesa*, cit., «Introduction», p. 12.

³⁷ See *ivi*, and E. Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels: From the Sanskrit of the "Hitopadesa"*, Smith Elder and Co., London 1861, «Preface», p. X.

³⁸ Ludwik Sternbach's well researched *The Hitopadesa and its Sources* provide an invaluable insight into the inspiration for this collection of fables. But there is insufficient research work to categorically indicate its influence on other works of this genre. Ludwik Sternbach's work *On the Influence of Sanskrit Gnostic Literature on the Gnostic Literature of old Java and Bali* («Indologica Taurinensia», 1977, pp. 198-288) is a significant contribution in this direction. See also *Id.*, *The Hitopadesa and its Sources*, American Oriental Society, New Haven 1960.

³⁹ M. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. III, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi 1967, pp. 205-6.

⁴⁰ One of the most popular books written originally in Sanskrit is the book known as *Kalila wa-Dimna*, a bestseller for almost two thousand years.

⁴¹ Of the 600 epigrams 273 have political ideas, 222 are concerned with worldly wisdom, and 103 have a moral or religious theme. See Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, cit., vol. III, p. 328, fn 1.

⁴² A.A. Macdonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Munshi Ram Manoharlal, Delhi 1958 [1900], p. 368.

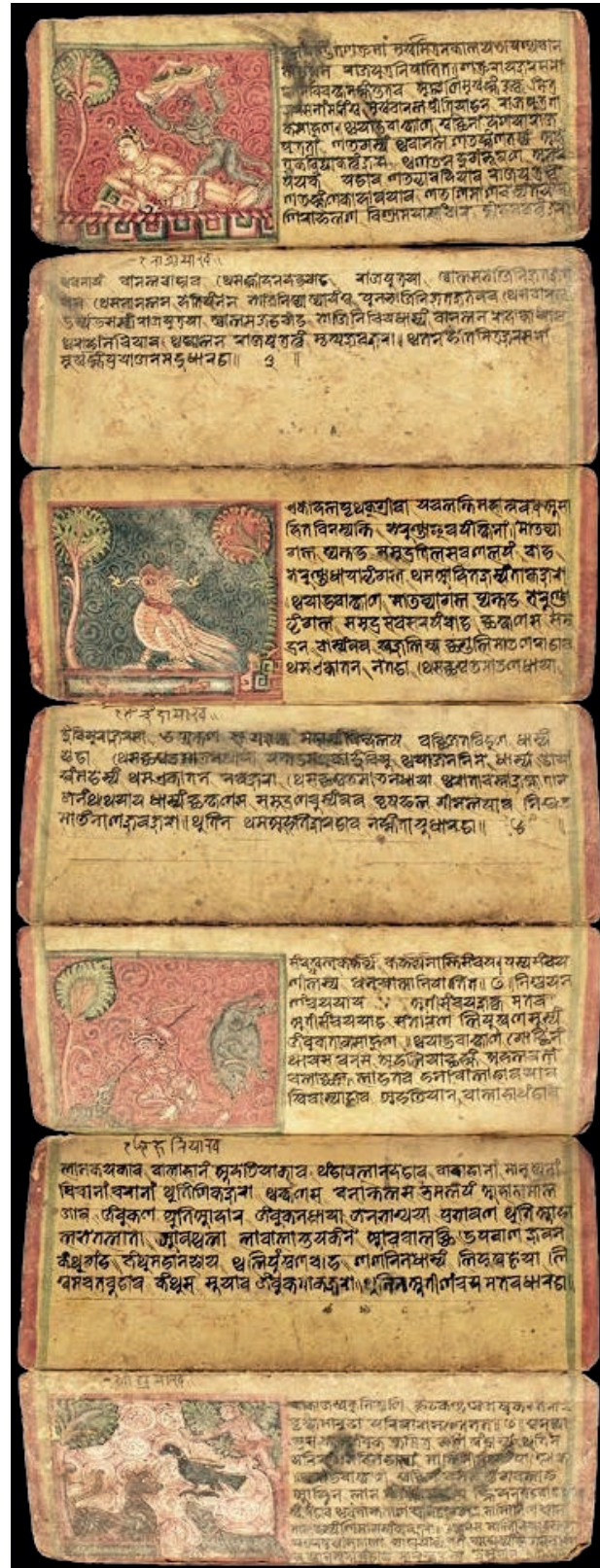


Fig. 7. The *Hitopadesha* - Nepalese manuscript, 1800. From Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 8. Kalila-wa-Dimna. The two jackals, Kalila and Dimna. Arabic illustration, 1220. Wikipedia.

ety of Bengal to encourage Oriental studies. In 1786 Jones brought to everyone's attention the fables of the *Hitopadesha*, which he declared to be «the most beautiful, if not the most ancient, collection of apologues in the world. [...] I am not disinclined to suppose that the first moral fables that appeared in Europe were of Indian or Ethiopian origin»⁴³. Jones' «Great Discoveries» were obviously intended for European readers to convey the religious and secular 'Indian' ideas to the West. English language readership in Calcutta was a minority, the dominant demographics being predominantly Bengalis⁴⁴.

Jones' friend and contemporary, Charles Wilkins' English translation of the *Hitopadesha* came out in 1787. In the Preface to this text he traces the antecedents of the *Hitopadesha*, and writes:

⁴³ See Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement*, cit., p. 140 and Wilkins, *Hitopadesa*, cit., p. 10.

⁴⁴ In the late 1830's there were 3138 English in Calcutta as compared to 1.200.318 Hindu Bengalis and 45.067 Muslim Bengalis. See T. Bhat-tacharya, *World of Learning The Material Culture of Education and Class in Nineteenth Century*, in M. Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* by, Ohio University Press, Athens (OH) 1952, p. 20.



Fig. 9. Painting by Syrischer Maler, 1354. From the *Panchatantra*: Rabbit fools Elephant by showing the reflection of the moon. From Wikimedia Commons.

The ancient Brahmins of India, after a great deal of time and labour, compiled a treatise [...] in which were inserted the choicest treasures of wisdom, and the perfectest rules for governing a people. This book they presented to the Rajahs, who kept it with the greatest secrecy and care. About the time of Mahommed's birth, or the latter end of the sixth century, Noishervan the Just, who then ruled in Persia, discovered a great inclination to see the book [...] He went to India; where, after some years' stay, and great trouble, he procured it. [...] Noishervan ever after, and all his successors, the Persian kings, had this book in high esteem, and took the greatest care to keep it secret. At last Abu Jaffer Mansour zu Nikky, who was the second Khal-iff of the Abassi reign, by great search got a copy thereof in the Pehluvi language, and ordered Iman Hossan Abdal Mokaffa, who was the most learned of the age, to translate it into Arabic. This prince ever after made it his guide, and not only in his affairs relating to the government, but in private life also⁴⁵.

This above quote emphasizes the value of this ancient 'treasure of wisdom' and the great pains taken by generations of kings and learned scholars to preserve it. Wilkins further asserts that «the Brahmins of the present times are totally ignorant» of the origin and composition of this narrative and gives credit to Sir William Jones for his «surprising talent [...] in seeking fresh sources of knowledge and promoting their cultivation»⁴⁶.

Sir Edwin Arnold too in the editorial introduction to his 1861 English translation of the *Hitopadesa* considers it a «treasure» which «holds the key to the heart of modern India». The *Hitopadesa*, he says, «is a work

⁴⁵ Wilkins, *Hitopadesa*, cit., pp. 11-12.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 9.

of high antiquity, and extended popularity. The prose is doubtless as old as our own era; but the intercalated verses and proverbs compose a selection from writings of an age extremely remote»⁴⁷. Like the earlier Orientalists, Arnold was quick to realize the immense potential of this valuable repository of ancient knowledge and wisdom. These comments thus indirectly hint at the present apathy and obliviousness of the Indian scholars towards the treasures of their own culture and literature, and recognize the contributions of Orientalists who brought out these jewels from the abyss of the past.

The phenomenal rediscovery by the Orientalists of the ancient treasures that comprised a lost Hindu Golden Age was not simply a quest of «those constant and universal principles that express the unity of human nature» as David Kopf had stated⁴⁸. Kopf, in chap. II («The Orientalist in Search of a Golden Age»), posits the Western philosophical ideas of 18th century and asserts that the cultural interaction of the Orientalists was strongly characteristic of their idea of tolerance, positive sympathy and appreciation of diversity of other cultures. Postcolonial studies have sufficiently highlighted how the politics of colonialism was based on the art of managing the assent of its subjects. Obviously, a colonial system assured its continuation and perpetuation by inducing the colonized to accept new social norms and cognitive categories. The 'psychology of colonialism', according to Ashis Nandy was assumed on «a clear disjunction between India's past and its present»⁴⁹. This disjunction in spite of its inherent contradictoriness postulated an India that had a glorious bygone past but its present was beset by degradation. The argument was that the India that Jones and other Orientalists like him appreciated was now fallen to abysmal depths. The erstwhile Mughal rule was particularly blamed for this ruin and retrogression, and the colonial rule was posited as a modern benefactor which would bring about improvement in society. Such a purpose is amply clear from Arnold's observation:

A residence in India, and close intercourse with the Hindoos, have given the Author a lively desire to subserve their advancement. No one listens now to the precipitate ignorance which would set aside as "heathenish" the high civilization of this great race; but justice is not yet done to their past development and present capacities. If the wit, the morality, and the philosophy of these "beasts of India" (so faithfully rendered by Mr. Harrison Weir) surprise any vigorous mind into further exploration of her literature,

and deeper sense of our responsibility in her government, the Author will be repaid⁵⁰.

Evidently the author's «deep sense of responsibility» spurs him for the «advancement» of the «beasts of India». It was this participatory responsibility that legitimized imperial rule and the construction of nations. It was the representation of culture through its objects and ideas by a new class of cultural 'experts' by which both producers and consumers of such culture could become citizens of the British Empire. These experts authored, shaped, supervised and pronounced categories of knowledge and forms of social identity which if adhered to would enable the heathenish 'beasts' to be included in the race of civilized beings.

The contributions of Jones and Wilkins in translating classical texts, and Baptist missionaries like William Carey and Marshman in printing vernacular dictionaries, grammar books and text books at the Serampore Press are undoubtedly valuable. Such efforts have been seen as what Kopf terms as a «Renaissance», a recovery of the forgotten literary compositions of the past, and a significant revival of the language and literature of a «Golden Age». As William Jones emphatically declared, «I am convinced that whatever changes we make in our opinions, we always return to the writings of the ancients as to the standard of true taste»⁵¹. Such a renaissance referred to a revitalization of a definite pre-Mughal period of Indian history. Historically, it implied that the Mughal period was a transitory period of medieval barbarity which saw a breakdown of traditional Hindu principles and values, and neglected the glorious culture and civilization of ancient India. This implicitly aimed to displace the supremacy of the Muslim rulers by discrediting their rule, and tried to legitimize the advent of the English rule which was seen as encouraging and reviving the glorious past of the Hindus. Wellesley too thought that his College would undo the wrongs done by the previous rulers.

In the disorder which preceded the fall of the Moghul Empire and the British conquests in India, all the public institutions calculated to promote education and good morals were neglected, and at length entirely discontinued. The institutions at Calcutta and Bunarus may be made the means of aiding the study of the laws and languages in the College at Fort William, as well as of correcting the defective moral principles too generally prevalent among the Natives in India⁵².

⁴⁷ Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels*, cit., pp. IX-X.

⁴⁸ D. Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance*, cit., pp. 22.

⁴⁹ A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1983, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels*, cit., pp. XI-XII.

⁵¹ S.N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth Century British Attitudes to India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1968, p. 44.

⁵² T. Roebuck, *Annals of the College of Fort William*, printed by Philip Pereira, Calcutta 1819, p. XXIV.

The mercantile image of the East India Company was increasingly modified and reconceived as a moral enterprise to educate and civilize the subject people. The Pious Clause of the Charter Act of 1813 was to finally confirm that «it is the Duty of this country, to promote the interests and happiness of the native inhabitants of the British dominions in India, and that such measures ought to be adopted as may tend to the introduction among them of useful knowledge, and of religious and moral improvement»⁵³. As has been often pointed out, «the ‘pious’ clause simply gave formal definition to current practice [...]»⁵⁴. The spread of moral education for the ‘improvement of the natives’ was tacitly practiced by missionaries like William Carey even before the inclusion of the Pious Act.

When the College at Fort William was set up the nature of the Company’s disagreement with Wellesley was over the purpose of the institution. Whereas Wellesley stressed the importance of Oriental teaching as a valuable tool to facilitate better administration, Charles Grant, the Director of the Board regarded Westernization as a more efficient way. Wellesley’s aim was to train the newly appointed recruits of the Company to undergo «an assimilation to Eastern opinions»⁵⁵, «in the laws and regulations and in the languages, a knowledge of which is hereby declared to be an indispensable qualification»⁵⁶. The Company regarded the College as a potential centre for the gradual evangelization of India, and much before they openly introduced this clause in the Charter of 1813, it is evident from what Charles Grant, wrote in a letter to the Rev. David Brown dated 19 June 1810, «believing the Institution to be capable of producing considerable effects, not political only but religious and moral [...]»⁵⁷. When Wellesley set about to open an ‘Oxford of the East’ and the need for school books arose, the *Hitopadesha* answered the purpose very well. It ideally served the purpose of both Wellesley who found the newly appointed Company officials «totally incompetent and ignorant of the languages, laws and usages and customs of India»⁵⁸, and Grant who was in favour of Westernization. Grant had no sympathy for Oriental learning and was critically opposed to

the teaching of Oriental literature in the college. But the canonization of such Oriental texts as important teaching manuals served very well to uplift the ‘natives’ who were considered to have ‘fallen’ from their past glory during the ‘dark period’ of pre-Muslim India⁵⁹. As William Jones had put it, «how degenerate and abased so ever the Hindus may now appear [...] in some early age they were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge»⁶⁰. Evangelism in the guise of moral tales and fables was seen as the solution to improve what was pronounced as a race of ‘degenerate and abased’ people.

The *Hitopadesha* was the book to be most frequently translated into English and Indian languages by the Fort William scholars. Apart from the two English translations by Jones and Wilkins, it was introduced by H.T. Colebrooke as «the first Sanskrit work to be published in Europe» and used as a textbook in the College. It has been claimed that «no less than ten Bengali translations appeared between 1801 and 1840»⁶¹. The following were the books directly translated or inspired by the *Hitopadesha*, published in different Indian languages by the College of Fort William:

Hitopadesha, 1802. Translated from Sanskrit to Bengali by Golaknath Sharma.

Hitopadesha, 1808. Translated from Sanskrit to Bengali by Mrityunjay Vidyalkar.

Hitopadesha, 1808. Translated from Sanskrit to Bengali by Ramkishore Tarkachuramani.

Ukhlaqi Hindee, 1803. Didactic tales from *Hitopadesha*, translated from Sanskrit to Hindustani by Mir Bahadur Ali.

Rajneeti, 1809. A translation of the *Hitopadesha* from Sanskrit to Brajbhasha by Lallujilal.

Khiraad Afroz, 1815. Translated from Persian to Hindustani by Hafizuddin Ahmad. Revised and compared as *The Illuminator of the Understanding* by Thomas Roebuck, Acting Secretary and Examiner in the College of Fort William, in two volumes.

Anvari Suhaili. Written in 15th century by Mullah Husain Waiza-khalifi. A Book of Fables in Persian printed by Major Charles Stewart in 1805⁶².

As can be seen from the recurrent translations of the *Hitopadesha*, it was the most extensively used popular textbook to impart moral lessons in the Fort William College. It functioned as a major book for didactic and moral improvement both in English and Indian languages. The *Hitopadesha*, with its simple engaging tales

⁵³ Pious Clause, Section 33, Resolution 13.

⁵⁴ A. Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2004, p. 74.

⁵⁵ S. K. Das, *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William*, Orion Publications, Calcutta 1978, p. 28.

⁵⁶ A.K. Ghosal, *Civil Service in India, under the East India Company*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta 1944, pp. 244-45.

⁵⁷ Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, cit., p. 28.

⁵⁸ Wellesley’s Minute in Council, dated 18th August, 1800 in Roebuck, *Annals of the College of Fort William*, cit. p. XX.

⁵⁹ See Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones*, cit., p. 47.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 39.

⁶¹ Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement*, cit., p. 142.

⁶² See Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, cit.

which captured the readers' attention, and a final ethical summation which highlighted the moral, was seen as an ideal model of moral instruction. The introduction to the *Hitopadesha* professes to inculcate «the doctrine of prudence and policy» and says: «As the impression made upon a new vessel are not easily to be effaced, so here youth are taught prudence through the allurements of fables»⁶³. In the Book, the King hands over the charge of his sons to the learned Pundit Vishnusharma for the «acquisition of virtue». The teacher then proceeds to impart wisdom and learning to the Princes by telling them tales of diligence, honesty, friendship and virtue. Learning is idealized as a source of all virtues, which is rewarded by worldly success, fame and victory. *Vidya* (knowledge) is considered as a benefactor, a protector from all evils.

Learning to a man is a name superior to beauty; learning is better than hidden treasure. Learning is a companion on a journey to a strange country; learning is strength inexhaustible. Learning is the source of renown, and the fountain of victory in the senate. Learning is a superior sight; learning is a livelihood; and a man in this world without learning is as a beast of the field⁶⁴.

The *Hitopadesha* was a secular version of Protestant ethics which laid stress on hard work, and moral upliftment. The didactic teachings of such books were seen as an ideal means of moral improvement also in eighteenth century England. In England at this time, the moral books written by the evangelical Martha and Hannah Moore and Sarah Trimmer were gaining prominence and were published by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in the 1790's. They used short exemplary stories in the first school books to be adopted for the poor for their moral improvement⁶⁵. Maria Edgeworth, the English educationist too suggested that the type of school books to be prescribed for children ought to be entertaining. From the late eighteenth century onwards and all through the nineteenth century 'useful knowledge' in the form of tales, parables and fables came to be regarded as a compulsory component of elementary education in order to impart the necessary distinction between vice and virtue, especially among the poor and the deprived.

It was not a mere coincidence therefore that moral pedagogy was introduced as a reformation tool to highlight and correct the moral depravity of those who had to be subjugated. Economic and social deprivation was often associated with moral decadence, and it was assumed that those who were 'superior' were obliged to reform social profligacy. Sir Edwin Arnold in the Preface to his English translation of the *Hitopadesha* asserted that it was his «residence in India, and close intercourse with the Hindoos» that gave him «a lively desire to subserve their advancement»⁶⁶. Again in his long introduction to *A Glossary* (1825), Sir Graves Chamney Haughton emphatically stated that the role and object of the newly established educational institutions was «bettering the condition of the natives»⁶⁷ and «anxious to facilitate the progress of the student, I have from time to time prepared elementary and other works filled for the purpose»⁶⁸. He fervidly eulogizes the «exquisite beauty», «the sublimity», «the appropriateness», «the profound speculations» and «the native genius» of the moral writers of Oriental Literature of India⁶⁹, and reminds those who complain of the Indians being morally degenerate that the latter have had to struggle against savage invaders, anarchy, intolerance and despotism.

Much of the evil is the inevitable effect of circumstances, that may disappear under our enlightened Indian government. It should be its object to make them act up to their own moral axioms; this is the first step to their improvement, and is well worthy of our beneficent system of legislation⁷⁰.

He further observes that should the Company officials not perform their duties zealously «she [India] will relapse into a state of anarchy and misery greater than that from which the skill and valour of the British arms have rescued her»⁷¹.

Such observations became an important determinant for the way the relationship between the colonizers and colonized were to be fashioned in the next few years and its long term resultant effect on pedagogy. The image of the colonizers was then diffused from an aggressor to that of a benefactor. The belief that the essentially virtuous Hindus' moral degeneration was due to historic circumstances and their upliftment depended

⁶³ Wilkins, *Hitopadesha*, cit., pp. 18-19.

⁶⁴ Wilkins, *Hitopadesha*, cit., p. 27.

⁶⁵ «My object is not to teach dogmas and opinions, but to form the lower classes to habits of industry and virtue» (H. and M. More, *Mendip Annals or, A Narrative of the Charitable Labours*, James Nisbet and Co., London 1859, p. 6). The effort was to make school sessions entertaining and varied. See *Hints on how to run a Sunday School*. Also see: H. More, *Christian Morals*, Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, London 1813.

⁶⁶ Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels*, cit., «Preface», pp. X-XI.

⁶⁷ G. C. Haughton, *A Glossary, Bengali and English, to explain the Totā-Itihas, the Batri's Singhasan, the History of Raja Krishna Chandra, the Pumsa-Parikhya, the Hitopadesa* (Translated by Mrityunjaya), Printed by Cox and Baylis, London 1825, p. X.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. XI.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. VII.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. X.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. XI.

upon the present 'enlightened' rulers, began to be more conspicuously echoed by Indian scholars and Sanskrit pundits who played pivotal roles in the introduction of such early schoolbooks. Short didactic stories and fables like the *Hitopadesha* were considered suitably adapted to Native students, and a number of school manuals were being written in that particular style⁷². By drawing on a repertoire of moral tales and parables from the classical literature of an ancient civilization, the emphasis was being laid on a sense of collective identity. The *Hitopadesha* was emblematic of a community that shared the same geographical space, customs, laws, and particular ethics and values. These were the stories, myths, tales shared by a community of people over the ages. In short, the myths and the legends bound the people together, gave them a sense of belonging and identity. As Sudipta Kaviraj puts it: «This 'themselves' of which the stories are told is constructed, partly by these stories themselves»⁷³. In a way then these stories are the emotional repertoire of a people, enabling them to be what they imagine themselves to be. Such popular shared narratives from the past have been considered to be one of the dominant factors that consolidate a community.⁷⁴ Timothy Brennan in his essay, «The National Longing for Form», too has emphasized the dependence and inseparability of the two: «Nations, then are, imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role»⁷⁵. By the time Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), one of the greatest Bengali novelists began to write, Indian vernacular literature had become a major platform for the discussion of social, intellectual and political issues. Realizing the special religious connotation that narratives from the past have for the Indians, Bankim made full use of it in his historical novels. His essays and narratives probed into the reasons for India's subjugation. He laid stress on the need to remember the past, to chronicle one's own history, of creating a mass consciousness by reviving the cultural, literal and folkloric⁷⁶. This, as Eric J. Hobsbawm sug-

gests, can be seen as the first phase of nationalism⁷⁷. As the sense of community and collective belonging became stronger in the nineteenth century, the revival and canonization of classical texts emphasized the emotional signification of the collective identity that emerges from such literary discourses. It augmented the need to counter the essentialist colonial stereotyping of Indians. It invited the members of a particular group to identify with a 'national' language and a 'national' character and persuaded them to imagine themselves as part of a larger community. Such ideologies proved successful in coalescing a group of people ostensibly divided by religion, community, caste and language. The past became a potent formative factor to stir up, discover, and shape the present. The use of the *Hitopadesha* as a school text over a period of hundred years indicate how the repertoire is moulded and shaped differently in order to answer new challenges of shared meaning and belonging.

One can see a parallel in the ways the two Indian antiquities were being presented to the world. One which appeared as 'common glass' was cut, polished and made brilliant till it shone and was ultimately appreciated by the discerning Western enlightened sensibilities. The other was a deliberate fashioning of an epistemology based on selection and translation of a particular normative 'Indian classic'. The use of the *Hitopadesha* and the showcasing of the Koh-i-noor indicate the renegotiation with the past, the ancient, and the traditional, to answer the new challenges of identity and belonging in the enlightened modern period. A glorification of the Hindu past was seen during the Nationalist Movement in India, and in a classic case of history repeating itself, can be seen in the Hindutva wave in present times. The National Central Education Board of India has as part of its 'syllabus rationalisation' exercise dropped certain portions on the Mughals from its school textbooks⁷⁸. These have been termed 'irrelevant' for modern day learners. There is a stress on a Hindu history of India and a conscious downplaying of erstwhile Muslim rulers of India. The present government is strongly advocating the use of classical languages like Sanskrit and trying to popularize ancient scriptural Indian texts. In its Vision and

⁷² Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's (1820-1891), Bengali Primer, *Barnaparichay*, and his other works like *Kathamala (Select Fables of Aesop, 1856)* and *Nitibodh (Moral Lessons, written in collaboration with Rajkrishna Bandyopadhyay in 1851)* typically indicate the strong influence of Moral Books produced in England, particularly based on William and Robert Chambers' *Moral Class Book* (1839).

⁷³ S. Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India. Politics and Ideas*, Permanent Black, Delhi 2010, pp. 104-5.

⁷⁴ See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London and New York 1983; H. K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990.

⁷⁵ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, cit., p. 49.

⁷⁶ Bankim in his essays '*Bharatbarsha paradhin keno?*' (*Why is Bharatbarsha subjugated?*), '*Bangalir Kalanka*' (*The Bengali's Dishonour*) and

'*Bharat Kalanka*' (*Bharata's Dishonour*) analyses the reasons for the subjugation of India. See B. Chatterjee, *Vividha Prabandha, Bankim Rachanabali, Part I*, Tuli Kalam, Calcutta 1986.

⁷⁷ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 12.

⁷⁸ In early 2022, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) had announced its decision to remove certain chapters on Mughal history from school textbooks. See «Why NCERT removed chapters on Mughals from history syllabus. Explained», *Livemint*, updated 5 April 2023. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/why-ncert-removed-chapters-on-mughals-from-history-syllabus-explained-11680677937093.html>. [Accessed on 11/7/2023].

Road Map, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) encouraged the use of Sanskrit as «the voice of India's soul and wisdom», a «link between India's past and present», «the vehicle of Knowledge Tradition of Bharat» whose «treasure has not been explored and applied to the extent it deserved»⁷⁹. Harnessing antiquity has and will always have a very definite agenda that revolves around composite factors like identity, hegemony and ideology.

⁷⁹ Vision and Road Map For the Development of Sanskrit Ten year Perspective Plan, Government of India, Ministry of Education. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/Report-CVRM.pdf. [Accessed on 11/7/2023].