

# Powerful Hermeneutics

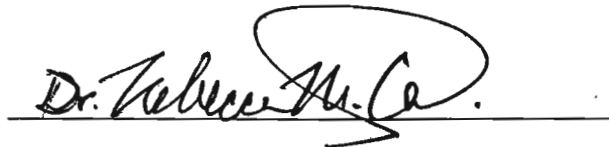
British Readings of Hindu Texts and Concepts in Late Eighteenth-Century Bengal

A Senior Thesis for Religious Studies by David Burman

May 7, 2011

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Rachelle Scott", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Rachelle Scott, Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Rebecca Klenk", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Rebecca Klenk, Secondary Reader

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David Burman

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## INTRODUCTION

### SCHOLARSHIP, CREATIVITY, AND CONTEXT

Before the late 1700's, relatively little attention was paid to Hindu religious traditions or to Hindu texts in Europe; not a single European known today had even learned to read Sanskrit, the language in which many of the texts are written. But in the 1770's, 1780's and 1790's, scholars from the British Isles began to arrive in increasing numbers in Bengal, a state on the Indian Subcontinent whose territory is now divided between the modern nation states of India and Bangladesh. These scholars began to take a keen interest in Hindu texts. One of them, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, read and analyzed texts with the help of Bengali religious scholars who could read Sanskrit while another, Charles Wilkins, became the first European to learn to read Sanskrit and used his abilities to produce an English translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*, now a text beloved to many Hindus and well-known around the world. Moreover, this outpouring of British-scholarship-in-Bengal went beyond mere translation and analysis. Another Briton, Sir William Jones, followed Wilkins by also learning to read Sanskrit, and produced translations of and essays on Hindu texts as well. But Jones also wrote original poetry about themes he encountered during his reading of Hindu texts. In one of these poems, a "hymn" dedicated to the Hindu god Kāma, Jones's enthusiasm for the subject matter comes through, as he writes in the voice of a worshipper of Kāma:

“ ‘Knowst thou not me?’ Celestial sounds I hear!  
‘Knowst thou not me?’ Ah, spare a mortal ear!  
‘Behold’ - My swimming eyes entranc’d I raise,  
But oh! They shrink before th’ excessive blaze.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, “A Hymn to Camdeo,” in Franklin, Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works, 100.

Whereas hardly a person in Britain or Europe had encountered any Hindu text before 1750, a deep interest in the content and themes found in these texts existed by the end of the century, and is clearly evident in this excerpt from Jones's poem.

This thesis will therefore seek to convey the enthusiasm with which Jones and his fellow scholars approached their work. But it will also take into account the context in which their work was carried out. As devoted and awed a worshipper of Kāma as the speaker of Jones's poem is, and as fascinated by Hindu concepts as Jones and his fellow scholars certainly were, this accumulation of British scholarship in late eighteenth century Bengal is not traceable solely to a sudden upsurge in interest in Hindu religious traditions among Britons. The scholars who undertook this reading, this analysis, or even the writing of original poetry were not merely scholars, were not visiting Bengal as curious travelers. They were servants (or in more modern parlance, employees) of the British East India Company, a trading organization that by 1770 had virtually taken political control in Bengal; these scholars were, in other words, agents of a colonial administration. It was this colonial context that enabled them to reside and conduct research in Bengal, and in fact it was the policies of the colonial administration that provided much of the initial impetus for their research. Although much of their scholarship ended up being conducted in their spare time in a setting distinct from their official duties despite the impetus initially provided by the administration, it was due to the Company's rise to power in Bengal that they were able to be Bengal at all.

Moreover, as agents of a colonial government, Jones, Halhed, and Wilkins and other British scholars possessed powerful voices. They were able to introduce many readers in Britain and Europe to Hindu texts and so influence the way Hindu texts, as well as Hinduism itself, was seen by the West. It thus becomes particularly important to understand how these scholars

analyzed these texts, how their analysis reflected the way Europeans of the time understood religious traditions, and how they sought to pass along their enthusiasm for the subject on to their audience. It also becomes important to understand how contemporary historians have described and defined this scholarly era, because the scholarship of Jones, Halhed, and their British contemporaries was well-placed to have a lasting influence on how Hinduism was historically understood in Europe and by members of the growing British colonial administration. Indeed, the colonial context in which this scholarship was undertaken serves as a reminder that no scholarly interpretation takes place in a vacuum; in the case of Jones, Halhed, and Wilkins, there was power behind their work.

On the other hand, these scholars were not wholly guided by the environment in which they lived; they were not mere vessels reproducing the historical contexts around them. Instead, they creatively harnessed the political and intellectual circumstances around them to make their work understandable. This thesis will therefore be concerned with the relationship between this scholarship and the contexts in which it occurred, and with how these scholars worked creatively within these contexts.

As already suggested, I will first argue that the colonial context of late-eighteenth century Bengal provided the groundwork that lay beneath this scholarly era, because it provided British scholars with the opportunity to study these texts on the Indian Subcontinent (with the caveat that this colonial context was not wholly determinative of the scholarship). I will also argue that even though their work was quite often not undertaken in direct connection with the policies of the colonial government, it was nonetheless quite powerful, because from their privileged position as scholars associated with a colonial power these men were able to profoundly influence their readers by passing along their conclusions and modes of analysis on through their

work. Finally I will argue that scholars must be careful before describing the work of these scholars as “Orientalist” scholarship, because “Orientalism” has meant slightly different things to different historians of this time period, but that “Orientalism” can still be useful term if it implies both the sincere enthusiasm of these scholars to learn about Hinduism-as-revealed-in-Hindu-texts and also the degree to which this scholarship was bound up with and was influenced by the colonial context in which it took place.

### **The Structure**

This thesis will have three chapters to deal with these three arguments. I will look at the context in which this research took place in Chapter One, and investigate how the underlying colonial context brought together a number of other factors or contexts that enabled this scholarship to occur. Since the British scholars who analyzed Hindu texts in the late eighteenth century probably would not have set foot in Bengal if the East India Company had not taken control there, I will first discuss how the Company underwent a transformation from a trading organization into a political power on the Indian Subcontinent. Then I will talk about a decision taken in 1772 by the head of the Company administration, Warren Hastings, in which Hastings resolved to sponsor the translation of Hindu legal texts in order to help the administration administer Hindu law over its Hindu subjects. This decision, I will argue, both provided this scholarship with much of its impetus and also helped dictate that the scholars carrying out this research into Hinduism would focus almost exclusively on Hindu texts. But because Hastings and the circle of scholars he gathered also studied texts that could not possibly be directly useful to the colonial government, I will also highlight the importance of other contextual factors in inspiring their work. In the late eighteenth century, I will point out, it would have been somewhat

normal for a wealthy Briton like Hastings to patronize scholarship and it would also have been quite possible for an intelligent middle-class Briton like Jones to obtain the necessary education in linguistics and other fields that could lead eventually to an ability to read a text in Sanskrit. When Hastings and Jones arrived in Bengal as agents of the colonial administration, I will conclude that the necessary factors that lay behind the scholarship that Jones and others produced had been put in place. I will argue all this with a major caveat however; just because a variety of contextual factors (with the colonial context underpinning them all) lay the foundations for the scholarship of Jones, Halhed, Wilkins and others does not mean that those factors dictated the course of their work. Rather, it gave room for their enthusiasm and creativity to play.

In the second chapter, I will analyze samples of the scholarship of Jones and Halhed, as well as the attitudes Hastings and Jones had towards the scholarship they sponsored (in Hastings's case) or carried out (in Jones's case). I will argue that even though their work was often unrelated to the policies of the Company administration, Jones in his scholarship and Hastings in his patronage had serious goals in mind; they wanted a wide audience in the West to have a better understanding of what Hindu texts said about Hinduism and were fully conscious of the opportunity the colonial context provided them. Both Hastings and Jones, I will conclude, thought that the accumulation of this knowledge would be a positive development in its own right, but would also make British rule more effective and more just. These goals in and of themselves made their scholarship powerful, but I will also argue that their work was powerful because these scholars both reflected and worked creatively within the intellectual context in which they worked. I will echo the scholarship of Richard King and Hans Georg Gadamer and point out that no act of interpretation takes place in a vacuum, but add that this fact does not preclude creative interpretation. Following on this assertion, I will discuss how some of the ways



in which these scholars understood religious traditions as eighteenth century Britons were reflected in their work and passed on to the audience, but I will also examine the ways in which these scholars employed the intellectual climate of their day to make their work more understandable. Often, this was done by explaining an unfamiliar concept by means of a reference to or a comparison with a more familiar concept. To show how this research embodied the goals Hastings and Jones had set for it, and to show how these scholars both reflected and worked within their intellectual environment, I will look at three samples from the work of Halhed and Jones: Halhed's preface to *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (a collaborative project of translation and analysis undertaken by Halhed and Bengali religious scholars), Jones's essay "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India," and Jones's poem "A Hymn to Camdeo."

Scholars have often called described British scholarship in Bengal during this era as "Orientalism," and I will critique the value of this word as a descriptor of this era in the third and final chapter. Although the word has had many shades of meaning, I will identify two broad ways that the word has been employed. The first use of "Orientalism" draws its inspiration from Edward Said's book of the same name and describes scholarship that seeks to fully understand every facet of a foreign society and place the resulting knowledge at the direct disposal of a colonial administration, to enable this society to be controlled. The second use of "Orientalism" envisions a more benevolent process. In this understanding of the word, which is embodied particularly in the work of David Kopf, the "Orientalist" scholars in late eighteenth century Bengal sought to encourage among Bengal's British rulers an understanding of Hinduism and an empathy towards the Hindus over whom they ruled, in sharp contrast to the efforts of later "Anglicist" scholars and administrators to impose British values on the Company's Indian subjects. Although both of these definitions of Orientalism provide useful lenses through which

to see the scholarship of this time period, I will argue that they both have limits. Kopf's benevolent "Orientalism" captures much of the earnestness and sincerity with which Jones and his fellow scholars approached their subject and with which they sought to improve their audience's understanding of Hinduism, but it lacks an emphasis on the extent to which these British scholars had the opportunity to define what Hinduism was given their intimate connection to the colonial administration. Said's idea of "Orientalism," applied to Jones by Richard King, does a much better job of drawing attention to this connection. Yet in their zest to describe Jones's scholarship as an effort to fully understand and essentialize Hinduism, Said and King miss the sincerity and curiosity with which Jones approached his work, traits that emerge more clearly from one of Jones's biographers, Michael J. Franklin. I will then conclude that if the word "Orientalism" is to be used in connection with this time period, then a more nuanced understanding of the word should be found that emphasizes both the enthusiasm with which Jones and his fellow scholars approached their work and the degree to which their scholarship was enmeshed within the colonial context in which it occurred. As an example of this nuanced understanding of "Orientalism," I will highlight Rosane Rocher's use of the word.

Finally, in a conclusion, I will sum up my argument and then briefly examine the long-term effect of this scholarship. Although the ways in which the work of Jones and Halhed continue to affect how Hinduism is understood today lies outside the direct scope of this thesis, I will gesture towards the consequences of their work in the conclusion, where I will examine how Jones, Halhed and their fellow scholars influenced later British scholars in India, and the extent to which Jones and his contemporaries are implicated in "defining" or "inventing" Hinduism with reference to the work of Brian Pennington.

## A Nod to Foucault

In a thesis that is concerned with the relationship between scholarship and power, it seems appropriate to mention the work of the twentieth-century French philosopher Michel Foucault before leaving the introduction. Foucault famously argued that “truth” is not something that functions as an objective measure of the world existing outside of the world; it is instead “a thing of this world”<sup>2</sup> and as such is enmeshed within the power relations inherent in all human societies:

“ ‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth.”<sup>3</sup>

In this assertion Foucault underpins a key notion lying behind the argument of this thesis: the scholarship of Jones and his contemporaries in Bengal was not an objective search for truth; instead it took place within the complex web of power relations that wove through the colonial context in which they lived and worked.<sup>4</sup> Foucault’s idea of the intellectual is also useful to my argument; for Foucault, an intellectual thinker does not introduce “universal” truth into a situation, but rather works within her or his position in the web of power relations within which she or he lives to affect how different ideas are valued; this intellectual can thereby still have great power, despite working on a more local and contextualized level.<sup>5</sup> This idea of the intellectual is reflected in the persons of Jones and Halhed and their fellow scholars; rooted in the contexts in which they worked, they worked creatively within those contexts to affect how

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, 379.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 380..

<sup>4</sup> Although I plan to argue for the enmeshment of this scholarship and power throughout this thesis, I will not often use the word “politics” or “political,” because, as will be seen, the relationship between these scholars and the colonial government was a complex one; the scholars were employed by that government and sometimes conducted research directly on its behalf, but at other times they analyzed texts more out of personal interest and a desire to spread knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, 380.

Hinduism was perceived by their audience. They worked in a context suffused with power, and had great power themselves.

## CHAPTER ONE

### FOUNDATIONS FOR ENTHUSIASM

In September of 1783, a well-known Welsh scholar of linguistics, law, and literature named Sir William Jones (he had been knighted by King George III earlier that year)<sup>6</sup> arrived after a long sea voyage with his wife in Calcutta, the administrative capital from which the British East India Company governed the northeastern Indian states of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.<sup>7</sup> The newly-arrived Jones had plenty to do; he had come to Calcutta to take up a seat as a judge on the highest-level court in Bengal, and he had a great deal of work to do to become acclimated to his new office; he had not brought the proper attire of a judge with him on his voyage, and so while he waited for his new tailor to furnish this attire, he borrowed “a white waistcoat &c. &c.” from a fellow judge on the court.<sup>8</sup>

But amidst his busy schedule, he found time to carry on an in-depth study of the textual traditions of the Indian Subcontinent, and he was particularly interested in Hindu mythology as narrated by ancient religious texts he was reading. In December 1783, just three months after debarking in Calcutta, he wrote to a fellow British resident in Calcutta with a request for information about a Hindu deity that had particularly piqued his interest: “Can you supply me with some poetical names of *places* in India, where *Camdeo* may be supposed to resort...?”<sup>9</sup> The following month, Jones wrote to Charles Wilkins, another British scholar of Indian textual traditions with a request that Wilkins read over a poem Jones had written and offer suggestions

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<sup>6</sup> Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, vol. ii, xlvi.

<sup>7</sup> By the late eighteenth century these three states had been welded into a somewhat homogeneous political entity; and so I will follow the common practice of using the word “Bengal” as a stand-in for all three.

<sup>8</sup> Jones to Sir Elijah Impey, early October, 1783, in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, vol. ii, 620.

<sup>9</sup> Jones to Richard Johnson, December 15, 1783, in *Ibid*, 624. The Hindu deity Jones referred to as *Camdeo* in this letter is *Kāma*.

for improving it. In so doing, Jones revealed why he had shown so much interest in Kāma in his letter of the month before: “I trouble you with a proof of my hymn to *Cāmdew*, and earnestly request you to send it back with the freest corrections...”<sup>10</sup> Just a few months after arriving in Bengal, Jones had written a poem to a Hindu deity based on his understanding of that deity’s mythology as discussed in Hindu religious texts. To help ensure that his poem, or “hymn,” was as an authentic representation as possible of Kāma, he had consulted with Wilkins, well-known for his translations of Hindu texts.<sup>11</sup>

Jones had been trying to gain an understanding of works of literature long before he came to the Indian Subcontinent however; biographical details from his early life reflect the aptitude and enthusiasm with which he approached literary studies. When he was twelve years old, he and a troupe of actors could not locate a copy of *The Tempest*, which they wanted to perform. Jones simply wrote out the play from memory.<sup>12</sup> By the age of 22 he was corresponding in Latin with a Hungarian nobleman named Count Charles Reviczky about Persian poetry.<sup>13</sup> Jones clearly had a deep and abiding interest in reading and researching works of literature written in many different languages.

Though this point comes through quite clearly in Jones’s writing and in revealing biographical details concerning his life, it is also a point that can be missed when Jones’s work is analyzed within the context of Britain’s growing political hegemony on the Indian Subcontinent. Much recent scholarly work into the scholarship of Jones and other British scholars in India in Jones’s time and later has located this scholarship firmly within the colonial context it took place. Not only could this British scholarship not have taken place if a British trading company

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<sup>10</sup> Jones to Charles Wilkins, January 6, 1784, in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, vol. ii., 625.

<sup>11</sup> Jones’s “A Hymn to Camdeo,” which was mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Cannon, *The Life of Oriental Jones*, 4, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 14.

was establishing itself as the preeminent political power on the Subcontinent, but much if not all of this scholarship directly or indirectly served the needs of the colonial administration. As Ronald Inden writes in his book *Imagining India*, the knowledge accumulated by British scholars working in India helped to enable the colonizing power “gain trade concessions, conquer, colonize, rule, and punish in the East.”<sup>14</sup> This may very often have been true, but Rosane Rocher has written that taking this view of British scholarship in India as “part and parcel of an imperialist, subjugating enterprise”<sup>15</sup> that Inden enumerates (and is based on the scholarly work of Edward Said) and then applying it to the work of specific scholars such as Jones obscures the particular nature of their scholarship.<sup>16</sup> Applying such a view to the work of Jones and his fellow British scholars in Bengal in the late eighteenth century can suggest that their work was somehow “cooked” by the colonial government, when in fact Jones and his contemporaries had a sincere and deep interest in and enthusiasm for the material they studied, and when much of their research was undertaken for purposes other than the direct support of the colonial government.

The colonial context in which the research of British scholars in Bengal during the late 1700’s took place is, however, critically important in understanding this research. Although Jones and other scholars such as Wilkins or Nathaniel Brassey Halhed were people whose views and actions did not always accord exactly with the wishes of the colonial administration, their research cannot be appreciated outside of context in which it was carried out. Talal Asad has written that “the process of European global power has been central to the anthropological task of recording and analyzing the ways of life of subject populations,”<sup>17</sup> and his point can encompass more than just the history of anthropology; all scholarship undertaken by Europeans

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<sup>14</sup> Inden, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” 215.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>17</sup> Asad, 134.

in places that had come under European colonial control was deeply affected by the colonial context in which it was undertaken. It was because of this context that Jones, Wilkins and Halhed were able to conduct their research and spread it to a wide audience; though their work cannot be understood as being simply a cog in a larger colonial machine, it did gain its impetus because of a colonial context. In Chapter Two, I will look at how these scholars conducted and presented their research, but in this chapter I will discuss the contextual background in which this research took place, because that context is so important to understand. This discussion will come with the caveat that Jones and his fellow scholars were also independent agents who did not conform to the expectations of a given context; their work was the result of an interplay between enthusiasm and context.<sup>18</sup>

The colonial context is best seen as an underlying factor that brought a number of other factors (or other contexts) together to enable this analysis of Hindu texts to occur. One of these more specific contexts did have a direct connection with the priorities of the colonial administration; it was due to a desire on the part of the colonial government to understand and apply Hindu (and Muslim) law that this research got much of its initial impetus. This was not the only reason it continued however. Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal from 1771 to 1785, sponsored the translation of Hindu and Muslim texts for this purpose, but also to fully play the part of an educated and well-off Englishman by being the impetus behind the discovery of a wealth of knowledge new and valuable to Europeans, as well as to satisfy a personal desire to see that Bengal's British rulers would have a better understanding and respect for Indian traditions. If Hastings's patronage reflected the expectations incumbent upon a British gentleman, the work of the scholars he sponsored in many ways reflected a scholarly environment in Britain that

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<sup>18</sup> I will analyze the relationship between these scholars' enthusiasm and the context in which they worked in more detail in Chapter Three.



encouraged men like Jones to pursue research in a wide variety of fields and to share their results with each other. In this way, the underlying context of increasing Company control over parts of modern-day India and Bangladesh brought more specific factors to the fore, creating and conditioning the space in which the analysis of Hindu texts took place. Again, the caveat is important to bear in mind: Jones and his fellow scholars likely would not have been able to pursue their research if the colonial context had not been there and if important expectations and opportunities had not encouraged them and the Governor-General who patronized their work, but they also were not pawns guided by a variety of historical forces. They creatively worked within these contexts to produce their work.<sup>19</sup>

The rest of this chapter, then, will be about the contexts in which they worked; and these contexts came to the fore because a British trading organization emerged, by accident and by design, as a significant political power on the Indian Subcontinent in late eighteenth century.

### **From Traders to Administrators**

For 150 years, governance and administration were the last things on the minds of traders and other servants of the English (later British) East India Company. From the time of its founding in 1600 through the middle of the eighteenth century, the Company's primary mission was to facilitate trade between Britain and the Far East; a chance for traders abroad and investors and directors at home to make a profit. In fact, the Company initially did not intend to focus on the Indian Subcontinent. But after the Dutch successfully attacked Company holdings in what is now Indonesia, the Company began to establish "factories" (small trading settlements) at various points along the Indian coast (with permission from local leaders). At these settlements, of which

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<sup>19</sup> The way they worked creatively within the contexts talked about in this chapter will be discussed in Chapter Two.

Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta came to be the most prominent, Company servants could trade goods, often giving British bullion for spices, silk, or cotton textiles.<sup>20</sup>

When these factories were first established, their English proprietors made no pretense of exercising political authority inland; in the late seventeenth century the Mughal Empire wielded authority across most of the Indian Subcontinent. But after the death of Emperor Aurangzeb I in 1707, the power of his successors began to wane, leaving authority to regional leaders (called “*nawabs*”), who became less able to assert power over European traders on the Subcontinent as the eighteenth century wore on. With more freedom to maneuver, the European trading companies began to get involved in local politics as part of an effort to get to exclude each other from the Indian trading market.<sup>21</sup> A vivid example of this European interference came when the British and French East India Companies supported two different claimants to be *nawab* of the Carnatic, a state on the east coast of India. In a war beginning in 1746, the British helped their claimant to victory, thereby excluding the French East India Company from the trading market in the area.<sup>22</sup>

One of the key leaders of this victory in the Carnatic, a Company servant named Robert Clive, played a key role in a similar intervention farther north. In 1756, the *nawab* of Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar became concerned about the actions of British traders based in Calcutta (now Kolkata), a city that had grown around one of the most important British trading settlements. Concerned about increasing Company influence in his territory, the *nawab* sent his armies to take Calcutta, which they did successfully. They didn’t keep it if for long. Company forces, led by Clive, landed in Bengal, and overthrew the *nawab* after obtaining the defection of one of his

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<sup>20</sup> Schama, 485.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 492-493.

<sup>22</sup> Moon, 19-20; 31.

generals, Mir Jafar.<sup>23</sup> After Clive's victory, Mir Jafar was then made *nawab* himself, although it was clear that he ruled at the pleasure of the Company: three years later he was removed when he failed to go along with Company policy, and yet he was reinstated when his successor unsuccessfully launched a rebellion against the Company.<sup>24</sup> Although Clive insisted that his actions were only meant to safeguard the Company's commercial interests, it was clear that the Company's role had changed. No longer solely a trading organization, it was now using armies to overthrow political leaders and replace them with rulers friendly to Company interests. Soon, it would gain the power to collect taxes.

In 1765, with the Company in firm control in Bengal, and with the Company's armies everywhere victorious, Clive arranged to meet Shah Alam, the titular Mughal Emperor (and so technically the ultimate sovereign of Bengal). At a ceremony in the city of Allahabad, Shah Alam formally conferred upon the Company the power of the *diwani* of the state of Bengal. This meant that the Company administration had the authorization of the Emperor to collect revenue in his name from major landholders (called *zemindars*) while the Bengali *nawab* retained the power of *nizamat*, or the power to lead troops and dispense justice. In practice, both the powers of the *diwani* and the *nizamat* rested with the Company, since the *nawab* increasingly ruled at the Company's discretion.<sup>25</sup> Although the Company's holding of the *diwani* was exercised in an indirect fashion for a few years (via the appointment of the *nawab* as deputy revenue collector), the directors of the Company in London (enticed by the possibility of a massive inflow of revenue from the supposedly extra fertile fields of Bengal) made the power more explicit when they declared in 1771 that the Company's policy was to "stand forth as

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<sup>23</sup> Spear, 22-24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 25-28.

<sup>25</sup> Schama, 502; Spear, 31-32.

Dewan” and assume the power of revenue collection directly.<sup>26</sup> Although the Mughal Emperor technically retained sovereignty over Bengal, there was now no doubt whatsoever who really held power: an association of Britons that had not long before been dedicated to little more than seaborne trade. That same year, the Company directors appointed a new Company servant to be Governor-General over this new dominion.

### **The Importance of Texts**

When Warren Hastings took power in the Company-held territories in Bengal and its environs, he immediately began to put his stamp on the emerging colonial administration. Armed with the just-discussed authorization of the Company directors for the administration to take on revenue collection directly, Hastings began to centralize the principal functions of government around his own person,<sup>27</sup> even going so far as to rename certain streets in Calcutta himself, without delegating the task.<sup>28</sup> As part of his effort to place tax collection and the administration of justice under the auspices of the colonial government, Hastings decided that rather than attempt to impose British law on the population of Bengal and Bihar, the administration would instead see to it that Muslims in the Company territories would be subject to Muslim law while Hindus would similarly be subject to Hindu law (at least concerning matters not directly associated with the health of the administration). This policy, Hastings believed, would create harmony between the people of Bengal and Bihar and the Company administration, because no alien laws would be tyrannically imposed. Thus, according to Hastings’s Judicial Plan of 1772, “in all suits regarding inheritance, marriage, caste, and other religious usages, or institutions, the

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<sup>26</sup> Moon, 146-147.

<sup>27</sup> Spear, 58-59.

<sup>28</sup> Edwardes, 47.

laws of the Koran with respect to Mahometans and those of the *Shaster* with respect to Gentoos shall be invariably adhered to.”<sup>29</sup>

As the above decree suggested, Hastings believed that religious texts were the sources in which Muslim and Hindu laws were to be found, and thus it was Hastings’s decision to administer justice through Hindu and Muslim legal texts that opened up space for Company servants to begin reading and analyzing religious texts. As Rosane Rocher has pointed out, this decision was a particularly important one, because it sought “to find the source of laws in books rather than in local customs,” although, as Rocher adds, most Hindus in eighteenth-century Bengal knew very much about the contents of the Hindu texts that Hastings wanted to have translated.<sup>30</sup> As a result of this decision, Hastings began sponsoring the translation of Hindu legal texts, and helped to ensure that much of the subsequent British study of Hinduism focused almost exclusively on Hindu texts.

Before 1773, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed was a struggling Company writer (or clerk), who spent much of his time trying to overcome his boredom by writing poetry and trying to win the hearts of several of the small population of British women in Calcutta. But he became quite proficient at Persian through his work as a clerk (he was often called to be a translator), and this fact, along with his credentials of an education at the University of Oxford (though he never earned a degree), made him in Hastings’s eyes the perfect candidate to head up an ambitious project.<sup>31</sup> In order to make the administration of Hindu law practical and workable for the Company administration, Hastings believed that a set of laws would have to be gleaned from a

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<sup>29</sup> Qtd. In Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” 220.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 221. Rocher states that if Hastings had desired to apply local customs to the administration of Hindu law (which she considers possible), he probably did not do so out of a fear that many in Britain would consider these customs to be proof that Hindus in Bengal were “illiterate” and “uncivilized” and unworthy to be subject to their own laws. Also from Rocher, 221.

<sup>31</sup> Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millenium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, 1751-1830*, 24-25, 40, 43-44.

variety of Hindu texts and then translated from Sanskrit into Persian and English. The first step in what ended up being a three-year process was to have a number of Indian *pandits* (or Indian scholars of Hinduism generally coming from the Brahmin class) who knew both Sanskrit and Persian translate this collection of laws into Persian, which was the language of administration throughout India. Then, to make the work understandable to Company administrators, Hastings called upon Halhed to translate the work from Persian to English. The result was the publication in 1776 of *A Code of Gentoo Laws*.<sup>32</sup> It was as a result of a decision taken right at the top of the colonial administration that Company servants like Halhed began to find opportunities to read, translate, and think about Hindu texts. Thus, British analysis of Hindu texts began in earnest in this period due to a decision Hastings made to help directly improve the efficiency and justness of the Company administration.

### **The Hastings Circle**

But as has been seen, much of the scholarship carried out by British scholars in Bengal in the late 1700's was not undertaken directly on behalf of the colonial government. Certainly Hastings did more to patronize scholarship than would have been absolutely necessary for the conduct of his administration. He gathered around him a group of Company servants who doubled as scholars – Halhed, John Gilchrist, Charles Wilkins, Thomas Colebrooke, and eventually Sir William Jones – and sponsored their inquiries into a wide variety of subject to do with the Subcontinent (Hastings's scholars, sometimes referred to collectively as the Hastings circle, never specialized in any one area).<sup>33</sup> He set his sights beyond India as well; in 1774, he sent a Company servant named George Bogle to Tibet to find out all he could about Tibetan

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<sup>32</sup> Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millenium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, 1751-1830*, 48-51.

<sup>33</sup> Schama, 510.

government, religion, laws, and even cooking, and to send back Tibetan rhubarb and walnuts to Bengal;<sup>34</sup> “remember,” Hastings admonished Bogle, “everything you see is of importance.”<sup>35</sup> It was due in large part to Hastings’s enthusiasm and support that much of British scholarship on the Subcontinent occurred (including the analysis of religious texts with which this thesis is concerned). Yet Hastings’s enthusiastic embrace of this world of scholarship and patronage seemed to go beyond a desire to make Hindu and Muslim laws available to the Company government.

If Hastings’s patronage of scholarship became somewhat detached from the direct requirements of his administration, the possibility that Hastings was motivated by more than the desire to run an efficient government opens up. This possibility is explored by Peter J. Marshall in his article “Warren Hastings as Scholar and Patron.” Marshall in this article concedes that it is possible to identify at least an indirect administrative motive in much of Hastings’s patronage, other motivations are also clearly evident; in total, Marshall finds four broad motivations that often worked together to make Hastings the patron he was. One of these motivations is political; besides the already-explained use translations of Muslim and Hindu legal texts could have for the government, Marshall identifies administrative utility in other actions as well (Bogle’s Tibetan expedition was partially designed to promote trade with Tibet for example).<sup>36</sup> But Marshall is very keen to note the nonpolitical in Hastings’s patronage, and the other three motivations are nonpolitical, or at least not directly political. For example, Marshall argues that Hastings was himself very interested in aspects of Indian linguistics and culture and in the flora and fauna of the Subcontinent. Hastings’s own interest in the research thus becomes Marshall’s second

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<sup>34</sup> Marshall, “Warren Hastings as Scholar and Patron,” 252.

<sup>35</sup> Qtd. In *Ibid*, 254.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 252-253.

motive. He could speak Persian and Urdu and read a great deal of Persian poetry,<sup>37</sup> and he was sure to stock his garden full of the widest range of Indian flora as possible.<sup>38</sup> Marshall would agree with the argument made earlier that no historical figure's actions can be reduced to a simply adherence to a set of contextual factors; Hastings clearly had a great personal enthusiasm for scholarship, an enthusiasm reflected in his own amateur scholarship and in his sponsorship of others.

Context was still important however, and although Marshall certainly believes Hastings's personal interest to have been quite sincere, he also argues that his interest did not occur within a cultural vacuum. "The temptations for a man in [Hastings's] situation to have simulated such curiosity would have been strong,"<sup>39</sup> Marshall writes, thus introducing the third motive: a well-off gentleman in Hastings's day could garner a great deal of respect by engaging in amateur scholarly work himself and also by sponsoring the scholarly work of others. In support of the veracity of this motivation, Marshall cites Hastings's instructions to Bogle before the latter left for Tibet, in which Hastings expressed a hope that it Bogle's travel journal would be published under his auspices:

"I feel myself more interested in the success of your mission than in reason perhaps I ought to be; but there are thousands of men in England whose good-will is worth seeking, and who will to the story of such enterprises in search of knowledge with ten times more avidity than they would read accounts that brought crores to the national credit, or descriptions of victories that slaughtered thousands of the national enemies."<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, scholarly accounts of travel and research in unfamiliar areas were popular back in Britain, and Hastings seems to have desired recognition that he had helped sponsor such research. The fourth motive Marshall finds at work within Hastings was a desire that Britons

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<sup>37</sup> Marshall, "Warren Hastings as Scholar and Patron," 245-246.

<sup>38</sup> Edwardes, 198.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall, "Warren Hastings as Scholar and Patron," 254.

<sup>40</sup> Qtd. in Ibid, 255.



both in Britain and on the Subcontinent would be better able to understand and respect the people over which the Company now held dominion; this motive will be discussed more extensively in the next chapter.<sup>41</sup> Although these second, third and fourth motives could certainly be said to link indirectly with the health of Hastings's administration, Marshall nonetheless distinguishes them in important ways from the realm of the political; these motivations were also profoundly cultural and personal. Marshall thus issues a reminder that the causes of Hastings's patronage were not fully enmeshed within the workings of the Company's administration; many motivations lay behind this initial impetus that lay behind the glut of British scholarship on the Subcontinent in the late eighteenth-century. However, even if these motivations were not always directly political, the colonial context must be kept in view; Hastings would not have been able to patronize research on the same scale if he had not also been the leader of a colonial administration.

Thus, Hastings's enthusiastic patronage gave some Company servants like Halhed the opportunity to begin scholarly careers, but it also helped to create an environment in which scholars already established in Britain could be enticed to come to the Subcontinent to work on behalf of the administration. Just as a study of the motives behind Hastings's patronage reveals much about the context in which British scholarship in Asia got much of its impetus, a study of the background of one of these scholars reveals a bit of the intellectual context that shaped this scholarship. This was an era in which a somewhat well-to-do Briton (noble birth was not required) with the ability to gain expertise in a variety of areas could establish himself in Britain and across Europe as a pre-eminent scholar. Laurence Brockliss has written that the "Republic of Letters," or the seventeenth and eighteenth century network made up of scholars across Europe who kept in correspondence with each other, was thriving in the late 1700's. More and more

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<sup>41</sup> Marshall, "Warren Hastings as Scholar and Patron," 256.

scholars in Britain especially were joining the network (and thus establishing their national and international reputations). Moreover, Brockliss argues, the network they were joining was increasingly inspired by the notion that the good scholar ought to apply a curious enthusiasm to a wide variety of subjects and disciplines (the network in this period had not yet fractured along lines of specialization; scholars who studied botany would write to scholars who studied Plato, and scholars often lacked a clear area of specialty).<sup>42</sup>

The existence of this burgeoning scholarly network with its emphasis on curiosity and what might now be called interdisciplinary research helps to further explain Hastings's boundless enthusiasm for scholarship of all different types. In addition, it helps to explain why a scholar such as Jones was able to take advantage of his natural abilities despite a lack of noble birth and become a well-respected scholar without a clear area of focus, and why he eagerly began researching anything and everything to do with the Subcontinent when he eventually came to Bengal. Jones was a commoner, born to a somewhat well-to-do Welsh family in 1746.<sup>43</sup> After completing his education at Harrow and Oxford, Jones eventually became a lawyer,<sup>44</sup> but he was becoming more well-known for his scholarly work. By the age of 22 he had effectively joined the Republic of Letters; as was seen earlier, he was corresponding in Latin with a Hungarian nobleman named Count Charles Reviczky about Persian poetry.<sup>45</sup> By the 1770's he had solidified his reputation as an eminent scholar of linguistics, law, and literature (both Asian and Western) among other subjects. Jones had thus fully imbibed the spirit of the late eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, and he took that spirit of curious and wide-ranging inquiry when he went to Bengal in 1783.

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<sup>42</sup> Brockliss, 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Mukherjee, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>45</sup> Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones*, 14.

Indeed, although Jones and his fellow scholars, as well as Hastings, had a great deal of personal enthusiasm for the scholarship they patronized and undertook and were not wholly animated by the contexts in which they worked, these contexts nevertheless make up the foundations on which that enthusiasm could work. These Britons took inspiration from an intellectual climate that encouraged research into a variety of fields (including the study of Hindu texts that is the subject of this thesis), and also were spurred on by Hastings's desire to deploy Hindu law as summarized in Hindu legal texts, but all of these contexts or factors would not have been brought into play were it not for the underlying colonial context. If a trading organization had not decided to interfere militarily and politically in the affairs of the Indian Subcontinent, if that organization had not started to collect taxes and appoint Governors-General to administer its affairs on the Subcontinent, and if that organization had not become a great power on the Subcontinent, then the interests, scholarship and patronage of Hastings, Halhed, and Jones would not have come into play.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BUSINESS AND PLAY

In 1784, a servant of the British East India Company named Charles Wilkins completed a remarkable feat of scholarship. Wilkins had not come to Bengal with a reputation as a scholar; he was just a Company “writer” (or clerk) when he first arrived, but that began to change after he became friends with Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, already well-known for his translations of legal texts from the Hindu tradition. As was seen in the previous chapter, Halhed had not directly translated Hindu texts from Sanskrit into English, instead relying on the *pandits* with whom he worked to first translate the texts into Persian, allowing him to then render the text into English. The result was *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, also mentioned in the previous chapter. Wilkins, however, began to learn Sanskrit in the late 1770’s (with Halhed’s encouragement), and soon embarked on a direct Sanskrit-to-English translation of the *Bhagavadgitā* (a well-known text that makes up a part of the larger Hindu epic known as the *Mahābhārata*). When the work was complete, it marked the first time a Briton had translated and published a Sanskrit text.<sup>46</sup>

But Wilkins’s project was not just a feat of translation; it was part of a growing effort by British scholars resident in the East India Company’s still recently-won colonial territories in and around Bengal to understand the meaning of ancient Hindu texts. In a preface to his translation, Wilkins expressed his conviction that the *Bhagavadgitā* serves as a good source of information about Hinduism, at least as it was interpreted by those members of the Brahmin class with whom he worked: “The *Brāhmāns*,” he wrote, “esteem this work to contain all the grand mysteries of their religion.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Marshall, “The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century,” 11-12.

<sup>47</sup> Wilkins, 23.

Wilkins's translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* was many things: pioneering feat of linguistics, a translation of an important Hindu text, an investigation into the nature of Hinduism itself; but it was not a piece of scholarship that had direct relevance to the functioning of the colonial administration. The efforts of British scholars, with the assistance of Indian *pandits*, to translate legal texts in this era were certainly political-these translations were undertaken for the express purpose of helping the British colonial government in Bengal administer Hindu law. As Michael J. Franklin has noted, these administrative concerns did not lie behind Wilkins's project, which was conceived of as a translation not of a set of Hindu laws for use in a court (like Halhed's *Gentoo Code*) but rather as a text whose meaning shaped the tenets of the Hindu religious tradition.<sup>48</sup> On the surface at least, Wilkins seems to have been motivated solely by an intellectual interest in Hinduism-as-revealed-in-texts.

Yet Warren Hastings, the British Governor-General of Bengal, thought that Wilkins's translation could aid his administration at least indirectly even if it lacked a direct application; indeed it was Hastings who encouraged and enabled Wilkins to carry on his work. After Wilkins had begun to learn Sanskrit, Hastings gave him a leave of absence from his duties as a Company writer to begin translating the *Mahābhārata*, and in 1784, when Wilkins was still working through the larger work, Hastings evidently encouraged Wilkins to separately submit a section he had already completed: the *Bhagavadgītā*.<sup>49</sup> Once he had Wilkins's preface and translation, Hastings wrote an introductory letter to the work and then saw to it that the *Gītā* with his introduction and Wilkins's preface was sent to the Board of Directors of the East India Company

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<sup>48</sup> Franklin, "General Introduction and [Meta]historical Background [Re]presenting 'The Palanquins of State; or, Broken Leaves in a Mughal Garden,'" 15.

<sup>49</sup> Marshall, "The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century," 12.

in London to be published.<sup>50</sup> For Hastings to sponsor the translation and then disseminate it so widely was an odd step for a Governor-General to take, given the project's seeming lack of political relevance. Hastings agreed that Wilkins's project and his own introductory letter lacked direct utility, but he still believed it to have some political value; as he put it in a letter to a friend: "My letter to Mr Smith<sup>51</sup> introducing Mr. Wilkins's Translation of the Gheeta is also Business, though began in Play."<sup>52</sup>

### **Playful Scholarship, Serious Aims**

In the previous chapter, it was argued that even though Hastings and the circle of scholars he patronized had a sincere interest and enthusiasm for reading and analyzing Hindu texts, their patronage and scholarship cannot be understood outside of the colonial context in which it was undertaken. But it was also argued that their work was not always guided directly by the priorities of the colonial government; the scholarly environment in which they worked and the personal interest they had in the material was important too. These latter concerns seemed to animate Wilkins's project, yet Hastings still thought it could accomplish something important, something that could even indirectly aid the colonial administration. If, according to Hastings's definition in the quote above, "business" meant tasks connected with the colonial administration (or the work of the statesman), while "play" meant investigations into languages, literary works, and religion (or the work of the scholar), then Hastings thought that Wilkins's translation of the *Bhagavadgitā* could connect the two. Somehow, Hastings thought, scholarship of ancient Hindu

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<sup>50</sup> Rocher, "British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government," 228; Schama, 510, 512.

<sup>51</sup> Nathaniel Smith, the director of the East India Company.

<sup>52</sup> Hastings to Jonathon Scott, December 9, 1784. Qtd. in Franklin, "General Introduction and [Meta]historical Background [Re]presenting 'The Palanquins of State; or, Broken Leaves in a Mughal Garden,'" 15.

texts, even if it had no direct link to the health of the colonial administration, could still accomplish serious goals that might benefit the Company government in some way.

Sir William Jones expressed similar sentiments in a letter he wrote in March of 1785. Early in that year, the same year in which Wilkins's translation was published in Britain, Hastings was recalled by the home government, and while the Company administration awaited the arrival of his replacement, Sir John Macpherson took over as acting Governor-General. This change may have made Jones a little nervous; as has been seen, Hastings was an enthusiastic patron of investigations into Hindu texts. Macpherson was a less well-known quantity. Whatever he was feeling, Jones wrote to Macpherson a month after Hastings's departure with what appears to be a desire to establish a good working relationship with the new Governor-General. First, Jones wrote that he hoped good relations would continue between the executive and judicial branches of the colonial government; a fairly logical hope to express, given Jones's position as a judge on the highest-level court in Bengal. But then Jones turned to argue for the relevance of something seemingly much less relevant to the Company administration. "Lord Bacon," Jones wrote, "if I remember right, advises every statesman to relieve his mind from the fatigues of business by a poem, or a prospect, or any thing that raises agreeable images." To give Macpherson the opportunity to take this advice, Jones then announced that he was enclosing something he had written: "I send you for your amusement, what has amused me in the composition, a poem on the old philosophy and religion of this country, and you may depend on its orthodoxy." After this disclosure, Jones closed the letter with a sly suggestion that such "relief" and "amusement" as might be gained from the perusal of Jones's poem and other literature could have beneficial effect on the administration of Bengal: "The time approaches

when I must leave these recreations, and return to my desk in court, where however a knowledge of the Hindu manners and prejudices may not be useless.”<sup>53</sup>

What Jones had enclosed was “The Enchanted Fruit: or, The Hindu Wife,” a long poem he had written based on the story of Princess Draupadī as it appeared in the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>54</sup> This poem was for Jones, as he wrote to Macpherson, a “recreation,” an entertaining poem yes, but not a text with a direct connection with his work as a judge or Macpherson’s work as Governor-General. Yet Jones also maintained to Macpherson that his poem could edify just as much as it entertained. “You may depend on its orthodoxy,” Jones wrote, concerning what the poem said about Hindu “philosophy and religion.” In order to help achieve this edifying effect, Jones attached a great many footnotes to the poem, to help explain unclear terms; for those readers unsure of what the “*Setye Yug*” was, a footnote at the bottom of the page cleared it up: it was “the *Golden Age of the Hindus*,” (Jones’s italics).<sup>55</sup> Thus, Macpherson had received an entertaining poem meant to enlighten him on what Jones perceived to be the key tenets of the Hindu tradition. What’s more, in Jones’s final sentence about the usefulness of knowledge about “Hindu manners and prejudices” to his work as a judge, Macpherson had received an indirect admonition that knowledge about Hinduism would be useful to him as Governor-General.

Jones and Hastings thus both identified important connections between scholarly “play” and “business;” scholarship undertaken out of personal interest could accomplish serious goals. Some of these connections indirectly linked the goals of the scholarship with the good of the administration. One connection, suggested by Jones to Macpherson, would occur when knowledge about the Hindu religious tradition as gained by the reading and analysis of Hindu

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<sup>53</sup> Jones to Macpherson, March 12, 1785, in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, 668-669.

<sup>54</sup> Franklin, *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works*, 80.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, “The Enchanted Fruit; or, The Hindu Wife,” in Franklin, *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works*, 81.



texts could assist the colonial government's understanding of what Jones called the "manners and prejudices" of a great portion of the Bengali population. A second connection, evident in Hastings's effort to have the *Bhagavadgitā* published in Britain, occurred when British scholars investigating Hinduism in Bengal endeavored to present their research in a way that would make it understandable in Britain. As a result of this connection, these scholars imagined, people in Britain would understand that the East India Company ruled an area with great cultural richness, and Hastings's policy of promoting the use of Hindu law would be upheld.

Though these connections scholarship of Hindu texts and serious goals identified by Hastings and Jones envisioned the indirect aid of the colonial administration, Jones and his fellow scholars did not always work on behalf of the administration; more generally they worked to pass on previously unknown knowledge to a large audience. In short, they hoped to have a wide influence. When it is remembered that they would not have been able to carry out their research had a colonial government not existed, then it could be said that their work harnessed power to have the power to influence. Located between the colonial context in which it was undertaken and the wide audience it was meant to reach, their work began in "play" did indeed end up in "business."

Jones certainly recognized that his scholarly endeavors were closely related to the colonial context in which he worked and that, as a result, he had an opportunity to reach a wide audience. At one point while studying Hindu texts alongside Bengali *pandits* at a university in Bengal,<sup>56</sup> he wrote to his former pupil, George Spencer, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Spencer, about how he located his scholarly work within the colonial context in which he worked:

"To what shall I compare my literary pursuits in India? Suppose Greek literature to be known in modern Greece only, and there to be in the hands of priests and philosophers; and suppose them to be still worshippers of Jupiter and Apollo;

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<sup>56</sup> Jones to Spencer, 4-30 August, 1787, in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, 754.

suppose Greece to have been conquered successively by Goths, Huns, Vandals, Tartars, and lastly by the English; then suppose a court of judicature to be established by the British parliament, at Athens, and an inquisitive Englishman to be one of the judges; suppose him to learn Greek there, which none of his countrymen knew, and to read Homer, Pindar, Plato, which no other Europeans had even heard of. Such am I in this country; substituting Sanscrit for Greek, the *Brahmans*, for the priests of *Jupiter*, and *Vālmīcī*, *Vyāsa*, *Cālidāsa*, for Homer, Plato, Pindar.”<sup>57</sup>

Here Jones does not suggest that his “literary pursuits” are an integral part of the functioning of the colonial government, but he does identify the establishment of that colonial government as the backdrop to his research. Because the British have set up a colonial administration in Bengal and given support British scholars like himself, Jones considers that he is able to unearth and spread wide knowledge about Hinduism from his study of Hindu texts, knowledge previously kept by “priests and philosophers.” Thus, Jones’s pursuits for him were not just mere intellectual exercises or “play,” they were meant to unlock knowledge that had previously been locked. From Jones’s perspective, it might be said that the Company’s administration was not just meant to confer material wealth on its British sponsors back home, but knowledge as well.

### **Creative Contextual Interpretation**

In this way, the colonial context within which these scholars worked conferred a power on them, a fact they often recognized, and the remainder of this chapter will discuss how they deployed that power in their scholarship. In this connection, it is useful to think about the ways in which they worked within the political and intellectual contexts in which they lived. In his book *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the Mystic East*, Richard King focuses on these questions. In order to illustrate how these scholars operated within their

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<sup>57</sup> Jones to Spencer, 4-30 August, 1787, in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, 755-756.

contexts, King makes use of Hans Georg Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics. Gadamer, a twentieth-century German philosopher, thought of hermeneutics as being something much broader than a method of interpreting sacred texts (although it can include that). Gadamer's hermeneutics encompass all of human life. Rather than potentially having something approaching wholly absolute and wholly objective knowledge, Gadamer argues that humans constantly make interpretations about the world around them based on their unique perspectives, perspectives that are conditioned by the contexts in which humans live.<sup>58</sup> Thus human life is always a constant process of contextualized hermeneutics; this is why Gadamer classifies his idea of hermeneutics as ontological and not methodological.<sup>59</sup> Yet just because humans are unable to state absolute and objective truths about the world in which they live does not mean that it is impossible to advance powerful interpretations: on the contrary, Gadamer argues in his seminal work *Truth and Method* that the contextualized world in which people live provides a large arena within which interpretation is possible:

“It is not only that historical tradition and the natural order of life constitute the unity of the world in which we live as men; the way that we experience one another, the way that we experience historical traditions, the way that we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitutes a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened.”<sup>60</sup>

As King suggests, Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics provides a useful framework in which to understand how the textual scholarship of Jones, Halhed, and others functioned within the colonial context in which it was undertaken; that context provided them with a wealth of material to peruse and the means to transmit their findings widely. There is even a sense in which

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<sup>58</sup> King, 72-73.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>60</sup> Gadamer, xiv.

Jones recognized in an almost Gadamer-like fashion the degree to which his location as a British scholar in Bengal “opened” him to great opportunities to have influence.

Yet King also applies Gadamer’s hermeneutics to the intellectual climate in which these scholars worked. As was mentioned earlier, Gadamer argued that having absolute knowledge was impossible; one can only make sense of the world within the framework of the intellectual traditions with which one is familiar. As King points out, these late British scholars in Bengal were no exception: they read and interpreted as eighteenth-century Europeans inspired by the assumptions many post-Enlightenment Europeans made about religious traditions. This intellectual context had important consequences for their scholarship. One consequence King identifies is that these scholars thought of sacred texts as largely constitutive of religions, and so they read texts and talked with Bengali Brahmins who knew these texts well, while making little effort to investigate how the non-literate population of the region engaged in religious practice.<sup>61</sup> Another assumption evident in their work was that religious traditions evolve as society evolves, and that Protestant Christianity represented the pinnacle of this evolution: the Hinduism they found in the texts they studied therefore was less perfectly evolved than their own tradition. This is not to say that Jones and Halhed sought to incorrectly represent Hinduism, nor that they sought to portray it in a negative manner, but it is to say that the intellectual ideas around them encouraged them to represent Hinduism in certain ways. These scholars disseminated their research with serious aims in mind, but in a way they were even more powerful than they realized; by bringing their assumptions to bear on their scholarship, they passed these assumptions on to the wide audience that they intended to reach.

Yet even as this is borne in mind it is also important to remember that these scholars did not simply reflect their intellectual climates without exhibiting creativity. Perhaps there is a sense

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<sup>61</sup> King, 62, 66, 68.

in which their assumptions about the way religious traditions operated “crept” into their work without the scholars realizing it. But just as often Jones and Halhed (the two scholars whose work will be considered in this chapter) used their intellectual context to help make their work understandable. Both were aware that their largely Western audience had very little familiarity with the Hindu texts that they were analyzing, and so Halhed and especially Jones sought to make the lesser-known concepts that they discussed understandable through comparisons with or references to the known. As a result, Hindu deities, practices and literary forms were often explained through references to Christian or Greco-Roman deities, practices, and literary forms, so that Jones’s and Halhed’s readers would be better able to make sense of their analysis.

Subsequent analysis of their work will help show how Halhed and Jones did this, but at this point it is worth pointing out that their method is important when considering the history of religious studies as a discipline. As Luther Martin points out, comparison between or among religious traditions is so common that “comparative religion” as an academic discipline is often considered to be synonymous with “religious studies.” If so, it is significant that Martin adds: “the modern field of comparative religion was born, like that of anthropology, largely of the encounters with other cultures consequent upon seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western exploration and colonialism.”<sup>62</sup> The work of Jones and Halhed therefore occupy an important place in the origins of the modern-day study of religion; they were among those Westerners who studied previously unfamiliar religious traditions in the wake of European colonialism, analyzing these traditions by comparing them to traditions with which they were more familiar.

Jones and Halhed thus worked creatively within a specific political and intellectual context to produce translations and analyses of the Hindu texts they studied, or even poems based on their content. In my analysis of a number of case studies of their work that follows, I

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<sup>62</sup> Martin, 45.

will look at how they did this, paying particular attention to the ways in which they reflected the assumptions they had about the nature of religious traditions, and how they sought to make the unknown known through references to or comparisons with what would already have been known to their readers. In the end, I will try to show, this sort of analysis of their work demonstrates its powerful nature even further; their analysis was passed along to their audience through an analytical lens that was colored by their assumptions and their tendency to compare what they studied to what they and their audiences were already familiar with. Here again Hastings's dichotomy between "business" and "play" seems pertinent; Jones may have considered his scholarly work with Hindu texts to be an "amusement," (what Hastings might call "play"), but in his efforts to produce interpretations that would be understandable to his audience and as a result increase their knowledge about Hinduism-as-revealed-in-texts, he was exercising power. His work (and that of Halhed), ended up in "business."

### **Nathaniel Brassey Halhed: Beyond Legal Utility**

Although this chapter focuses on scholarly projects undertaken without any direct relevance to the Company administration, the first case study comes from a project that was at least commissioned to assist that administration. But as will be seen, this project extended beyond the purposes for which it was initially undertaken. As was seen in the last chapter, Hastings sponsored the creation of *A Code of Gentoo Laws* by Halhed and a group of *pandits* to help his administration administer Hindu law to Hindus.<sup>63</sup> When he submitted the work for publication, Halhed wrote an extensive preface to the *Code* that in many ways reflected the purpose for which the project had been undertaken: Halhed began by extolling the colonial

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<sup>63</sup> Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millenium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed 1751-1830*, 48-49; 51.

administration's wisdom in preserving the use of local law in Bengal; just as the Romans had maintained their empire by not suppressing religious traditions in the areas they conquered, so would the Company thrive in Bengal through "a well-timed toleration in matters of religion."<sup>64</sup>

However, the bulk of Halhed's preface did not deal with how the *Code* would be deployed by the administration; instead he endeavored to explain the significance of the various laws, myths, and practices found in the compilation to the Western study of Hinduism as a whole. Halhed ranged wide in the preface, commenting on how the various selections that made up the *Code* explained concepts from karma (called "the transmigration of souls" by Halhed),<sup>65</sup> to what is now often referred to as the Hindu caste system (the "four great tribes").<sup>66</sup> In common with this broader scope, Halhed identified a use for his and the *pandits'* project beyond its stated purpose: not only would the *Code* place a valuable tool into the hands of the colonial government, it would also function as "a complete refutation of the belief too common in Europe, that the Hindoos have no written laws whatever, but such as relate to the ceremonial peculiarities of their suspicion."<sup>67</sup> For Halhed, what the *Code* said about Hinduism was important not just for its legal utility. Its dissemination among British and other European readers would shape their view of Hinduism and perhaps bring them to agreement with Hastings's policy of upholding Hindu laws in Bengal. His preface then demonstrates how administration-sponsored scholarship of Hindu texts could easily move away from the specific purpose the administration had set for it to broader attempts to understand Hinduism. Yet this less immediately useful analysis still served serious purposes; the "play" was both rooted in and ended up as "business."

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<sup>64</sup> Halhed, 'The Translator's Preface to *A Code of Gentoo Laws*,' in Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, 142.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 142.

Rooted in the colonial context and designed to reach a wide audience, Halhed's preface was thus a powerful piece of scholarship. An attention to how Halhed reflected and worked within his intellectual climate helps to clarify the nature of the preface's power. First (and somewhat obviously), by drawing his conclusions based on a translation of a compilation of Hindu texts and commentaries, Halhed reflected the Enlightenment-era tendency to see texts as determinative of religious traditions. In addition, Halhed was in tune with the idea that religious traditions become more rational and refined over time as society itself becomes more rational and refined, and he used this idea to help explain a Vedic ritual. At one point in the preface, Halhed made a comparison between on the one hand a ritual described in the *Code* (the *Áśvamedhá*, called the "Ashummeed Jugg" by Halhed) and on the other hand the ritual of the scapegoat described in Leviticus 16:21-22, because both involve somehow placing the all of the transgressions of a group of people onto an animal and then the banishment of that animal into the wilderness. The only difference was the animal involved; in the case of the *Áśvamedhá*, this animal was a horse, and it was a goat in the case of the Levitical ritual. Halhed argued that just as the Israelites of Moses's time were so close to barbarism that they must have literally believed their sins were placed on the head of the scapegoat, so did most Hindus in his own time literally believe that their transgressions were placed on the horse.<sup>68</sup> This comparison became for Halhed an indication of the differing levels of rationality that Hinduism and Protestant Christianity had reached in his own day. While "the more wise" had come to see that the ritual of the scapegoat did not involve the literal transfer of sins onto the goat, but was rather a "representation of the

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<sup>68</sup> Halhed, 'The Translator's Preface to *A Code of Gentoo Laws*,' in Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, 145, 147-149.



doctrine of absolution,” the vast majority of Hindus still believed in the literal veracity of the *Aśvamedhá*.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, Halhed’s analysis of Hinduism was colored by the attitudes many of his day had toward religions, but he also worked within the particular intellectual context to make his work more understandable: his comparison between the *Aśvamedhá* and the Levitical ritual did not just reflect his views about how religious traditions evolve but also functioned as a device that helped his readers understand an unfamiliar ritual through a reference to a more familiar one. Halhed’s interest in his subject matter went far beyond its legal utility; he was interested in what the texts he read said about Hinduism more broadly. But though this intellectual interest might be described as “play,” Halhed had serious aims in mind when writing his preface; his work was meant to have influence. Placing Halhed in his historical context helps to clarify the nature of that influence: as a British scholar who worked with the colonial administration, Halhed had the power, within the parameters of the intellectual context in which he worked, to define to some extent how his audience understood Hinduism.

### **Sir William Jones: Creative Comparison**

With Jones the distinction between business and play was more clear-cut. As was discussed earlier, Jones came to Bengal to serve as a judge with the colonial judiciary, and one of his principal scholarly projects during his time in Bengal was a translation of a Hindu text with potential ramifications for making and administering law called the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*; like Halhed’s project, this translation was meant to help the colonial administration administer Hindu

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<sup>69</sup> Halhed, ‘The Translator’s Preface to *A Code of Gentoo Laws*,’ in Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, 147-148. Halhed conceded that a small number of Hindus had advanced more “allegorical” interpretations of the *Aśvamedhá*, but these interpretations were so at odds with one another that they “precluded each other from all pretensions to infallibility [sic].”

law. This project was obviously “business,” and where Halhed edged almost imperceptibly into “play” in his writing, Jones made a clear distinction (as Rocher stresses) between his “public duties” and scholarship undertaken out of “amusement.”<sup>70</sup>

But as has already been argued, Jones not only recognized that he was able to engage in this scholarly “play” because there was a colonial government in Bengal, and that his scholarship also embodied a form of “business;” he also aimed to use his position to pass on his analyses of Hinduism-as-revealed-in-texts to a large audience in the West. Soon after he arrived in Bengal in early 1784, Jones, Wilkins, and a group of other British scholars formed the Asiatic Society, which Jones saw as a venue for the gathering and dissemination of a wide array of knowledge in every conceivable field about the Indian Subcontinent (as well as the rest of Asia).<sup>71</sup> Although Jones tried and failed to secure official political backing for the Society by asking Governor-General Hastings to accept the presidency of the group,<sup>72</sup> he nonetheless clearly meant for the work of the Society’s scholars to spread knowledge about Asia far and wide. Jones’s work as president of the Society was separate and distinct from his work as a judge, but it was nonetheless a role in which he sought to accomplish serious goals.

Thus, even though Jones may have made a clearer distinction in his scholarship (in which his investigations into Hinduism was an important part) than Halhed between projects undertaken for the administration and projects undertaken out of a humanist interest, his “amusements” were nevertheless intended to have powerful effects. His approach to Hinduism was also similar to Halhed; like the final translator of the *Code*, Jones generally saw the essence of Hinduism as being located in ancient religious texts, and also like Halhed, Jones’s conception

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<sup>70</sup> Jones to Warren Hastings, 20 October, 1791, in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, 900. Qtd. in Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” 232.

<sup>71</sup> Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones*, 203-204.

<sup>72</sup> Hastings declined the offer because he felt Jones was the most qualified to take up the role. Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones*, 205-206.

of Hinduism rested on the on the notion that religious traditions evolve over time as society evolves. But concerning this latter notion, Jones's approach did differ somewhat from Halhed, and this point of difference was closely connected with Jones's theories about linguistics. "I allot an hour every day to Sanscrit," he wrote at one point to Sir John Macpherson, "and am charmed with knowing so beautiful a sister of Latin and Greek."<sup>73</sup> Sanskrit, Jones believed, was similar enough linguistically to the languages of classical Western civilization that it must have originated from the same source as Latin and Greek. It was this theory above all that has made him well-known after his death.<sup>74</sup>

Jones's view on Hinduism's relation to Greco-Roman religion was an almost exact analogue. From similarities among the mythologies surrounding Greco-Roman deities and Hindu deities, Jones concluded that the common ancestors of the people who came to reside in the Mediterranean world and the Indian Subcontinent once held mythological traditions in common before they eventually split off from each other. Thereafter, the mythologies of the two groups became distinct, but at the same time retained certain unmistakable similarities.<sup>75</sup> Jones also asserted that some of these similarities between Hindu and Greco-Roman mythology could be traced to lore based on real events that were recorded in the Book of Genesis.

Jones's analysis of the similarities between the Roman deity Saturn and the Hindu deity Manu (called "Menu" by Jones) provide an excellent example of his approach. In his essay "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India," Jones noted that Saturn was often represented on Roman coins as the stern of a ship. To explain this, Jones cited an account of Saturn written by first century BCE writer Alexander Polyhistor, in which Saturn constructs a vessel designed to hold

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<sup>73</sup> Jones to Macpherson, Nov. 1786, in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, 727.

<sup>74</sup> Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones*, 243-246.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India," in Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, 196.

people and animals in the midst of a great storm. Jones then turned to an account of Manu from a section of the *Bhāgavata Purāna* that he had translated, in which Manu is known as Satyavrata, and is king of Dravira on the east Indian coast. In the text, the whole world is about to be inundated by a rising ocean due to the general depravity of the people. Satyavrata, however, shows kindness to the deity Heri when Heri takes the form of a fish, and, as a result, Heri warns him of the coming inundation, and tells him that he will be given a vessel in which he and his families and pairs of every kind of animal could safely wait out the storm.<sup>76</sup>

For Jones, the similarities of these stories about Manu and Saturn indicate that both tales came from a common source, and that both were based on what for Jones was the historically true flood that was described in Genesis 6-9; just as Polyhistor's account of Saturn was a "fable raised on the true history of Noah," the story of Manu/Satyavrata was the "story...of Noah disguised by Asiatick fiction."<sup>77</sup> Jones thus saw the Hindu tradition as revealed in the texts he read in something of the same light as Halhed, but instead of seeing Hinduism as being as simply less evolved than Christianity, Jones suggested that in its textual traditions it had in some respects branched away long ago from the proper understandings recorded in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>78</sup>

Studying what interpretations were passed along to his audience is particularly important in Jones's case because Jones specifically designed his work to be interpretable to European readers, thus making his writings potentially even more influential and powerful. Michael J. Franklin, author of a short biography of Jones and an editor of a collection of his works, asserts

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<sup>76</sup> Jones, "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India," in Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, 203-207.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 204-205.

<sup>78</sup> This should not obscure Jones's fascination with Hinduism, nor the sympathy he showed towards it upon occasion. He wrote at one point to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Spencer: "I am no Hindu; but I hold the doctrine of the Hindus concerning a future state to be incomparably more rational, more pious, and more likely to deter men from vice, than the horrid opinions inculcated by Christians on punishments *without end*," (Jones's italics). Jones to Spencer, 1-11 September, 1787 in Cannon, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, 764.

that Jones sought to make Hinduism more understandable to his Western readers by comparing the unknown to the known. Thus, Jones's assertion that Greco-Roman and Hindu mythology have a common origin just as Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit have a common source becomes not just an historical argument but also a device aimed at making aspects of Hinduism and Indian culture more understandable, in much the same manner that Halhed's comparison of the ritual of the scapegoat with the *Āśvamedhá* not only reflected Halhed's idea that religious traditions evolve but can also be understood as a device aimed at making his subject more understandable for his audience. Speaking about the broad spectrum of Jones's research on the Indian Subcontinent, Franklin argues that comparisons between the unfamiliar and the familiar characterize Jones's work:

“Can alien cultures ever be fully understood? It helps, of course, if you can favourably compare that culture's ancient language with Greek and Latin, its sages with Plato and Pythagoras, its leading dramatist with Shakespeare. In order to encourage a European audience to make an imaginative leap into the uncharted waters of Hinduism, the uncommon sources of his original poetry and translation, Jones attempted to establish common ground.”<sup>79</sup>

Just as Hindu and Greco-Roman mythology had “common ground,” so also did Jones try to make Hinduism understandable through the establishment of “common ground” with his audience. It is important to note that even though Jones's interpretations of Hinduism were certainly affected by the intellectual climate of his time,<sup>80</sup> he did endeavor to present an authentic version of Hinduism to his audience. But irrespective of how authentic it was,<sup>81</sup> this effort to

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<sup>79</sup> Franklin, *Sir William Jones*, 98-99.

<sup>80</sup> And as Franklin notes (Franklin, *Sir William Jones*, 99) the very process of comparing unknown Hinduism to known aspects of Western culture could itself have a biasing “Eurocentric” effect.

<sup>81</sup> Franklin, *Sir William Jones*, 99. King would take inspiration from Gadamer and say that no interpretation in the context in which Jones worked can be authentic, while Franklin argues that by attempting to make Hinduism understandable while simultaneously not sensationalizing his subject matter marked his interpretations as being at least closer to authenticity.

make his work more understandable certainly added power to interpretations by enhancing their potential influence.

In the above quote, Franklin references “original poetry,” and, as has been seen, one of the mediums through which Jones sought to disseminate his interpretations of Hinduism was through self-composed poetry. Not only could the content of Jones’s poem enlighten his audience by for example comparing a Hindu deity with a more well-known Greco-Roman deity, but Jones could also add footnotes or an introduction explaining certain concepts that would otherwise be unfamiliar.<sup>82</sup> The poetic form could connect the less familiar to the familiar as well, by presenting the unfamiliar in a familiar (and entertaining) style of writing.

One of these poems, “A Hymn to Camdeo,” written in 1784, affords an excellent example of Jones’s approach.<sup>83</sup> In contrast to the poem he sent to Macpherson, in which he used footnotes to elucidate passages of his poem that might not otherwise have made sense to his readers, Jones preceded the poem itself with a short explanatory preface, called “The Argument.” In this passage, Jones described the attributes of the Hindu deity to whom the poem was addressed (Kāma, whom Jones calls “Camdeo” in the title). To make Kāma more understandable to his audience (and also in reflection of Jones’ historical beliefs regarding the relationship between Hindu and Greco-Roman mythology), Jones wrote that he “appears evidently the same with the *Grecian* EROS and the *Roman* CUPIDO,” (Jones’s italics and capitol letters), thereby establishing that the more familiar Cupid is an analogue for Kāma. Jones then whetted the audience’s appetite for the differences that the poem would show between Kāma and Cupid: “but the *Indian* description of his person and arms, his family, attendants, and attributes, has new and

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<sup>82</sup> As has been seen, Jones used footnotes like this in his “The Enchanted Fruit: or, The Hindu Wife.” For example, when Jones wrote of “Mahadew” in the poem, he clarified the identity of this entity in a footnote: “the Indian JUPITER.” Jones, “The Enchanted Fruit; or, The Hindu Wife,” in Franklin, *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works*, 84.

<sup>83</sup> This poem was referenced briefly in both the Introduction and Chapter One.

peculiar beauties.” Jones spent the remainder of “The Argument” explaining the aspects of Kāma’s mythology that would appear in the poem.<sup>84</sup>

With the reader thus appropriately oriented to the subject, the poem or “hymn,” then began. The poem continued to perform the edifying function of explaining Kāma’s mythology, but now with an added imagery that the poetic form provided Jones. So Jones spoke of how Kāma’s bowstring of bumblebees receive a description emphasizing the senses: “With bees, how sweet! But ah, how keen their sting!”<sup>85</sup> Color and mood meanwhile dominated Jones’s description of the group of dancing women who followed Kāma’s consort Rati (“Retty” to Jones): “And in her train twelve blooming girls advance,/ Touch golden strings and knit the mirthful dance.”<sup>86</sup>

By conveying not only the facts of Kāma’s mythology in the poem, but also some of the human senses he saw as being associated with this deity, Jones could not only hope to simply educate his audience about Kāma, but also to perhaps give a sense of what it was like to worship Kāma in a very intimate and tangible way. This aim was also reached by having the speaker of the poem be a worshipper: “I feel, I feel thy genial flame divine,/ And hallow thee and kiss thy shrine.”<sup>87</sup>

In Jones’s hands then, “A Hymn to Camdeo” became a means by which the unknown could become known through a variety of references to the known. One reference is the comparison between Kāma and Cupid, who would have been quite familiar to a Western audience. The poem also referenced the known by being written in a familiar form; certainly the use of separate stanzas, and an aabbccdde rhyme scheme would have been nothing especially

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<sup>84</sup> Jones, “A Hymn to Camdeo,” in Franklin, *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works*, 99.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

new to his British readers. The poem was additionally presented as a “hymn” just as a Protestant song of worship might be. Another reference to the known occurred when Jones spoke about senses, sights, and moods that would have meant something to his readers through the use of vivid words like “sweet,” “sting,” “golden,” and “mirthful.” Finally, the poem embodied the perspective of one who knows, since the speaker of the poem is a worshipper of Kāma. This hymn was not merely an abstract description of a deity Jones’s readers would have known little about; instead it tangibly placed the reader in the midst of Jones’s idea of what worshipping Kāma was like, and it did so by means of Jones’s references to the familiar. This is indeed a powerful poem, given the effect Jones designed it to have on its audience

In some ways, Jones’s poetry was the most “play”ful form of interpretation of Hindu texts in which a British scholar in Bengal could engage (“play” again referring to scholarship undertaken because the subject material interested the scholar). Not only was it not written with any political objectives in mind, in a sense it did not even embody the same sort of scholarly work that Halhed carried out in the introduction to his *A Code of Gentoo Laws* or that Jones himself carried out in his “On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India.” Also more so than these other two works, “A Hymn to Camdeo” was literally playful; it was fun to read. But Jones nonetheless hoped that the poem would increase the knowledge his audience had about Hinduism. Jones’s fellows in the Asiatic Society were not just entertained by it; as Franklin points out, they found the poem to be a “correct specimen of Hindu mythology.”<sup>88</sup> By rooting his interpretation in a connection between Hindu and Greco-Roman mythology and presenting it through connections between things unknown and known, thereby connecting with a wide audience, Jones connected his “play” with business. As was earlier argued, connections like these were themselves rooted in a connection between the scholarly work of Jones and others

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<sup>88</sup> Qtd. in Franklin, *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works*, 98.



and the political context in which it occurred; Jones's "play" not only ended in business, there is a sense in which it began in business as well. Finally, although Jones's "play" was not undertaken with directly political goals in mind, but rather out of "amusement" and a desire to have wide influence, he did suggest that his work could have an indirectly positive influence on the colonial administration; he hinted as much when (as was seen earlier) he sent another of his poems, "The Enchanted Fruit; or, The Hindu Wife," to Macpherson with the letter suggesting the poem would be useful to the acting Governor-General in his administrative duties.

### **Warren Hastings: Intellectual Enrichment via Colonial Rule**

In the summer of 1785, a Londoner might have found and perused a publication entitled "The Bhāgavat-Gītā, or Dialogues of Krēṣṇa and Ārjūn; in Eighteen Lectures; with Notes." Having opened this publication up, this Londoner might then have read the following, under the heading "Advertisement":

"The following Work is published under the authority of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, by the particular desire and recommendation of the Governor General of India; whose letter to the Chairman of the Company will sufficiently explain the motives for its publication, and furnish the best testimony of the fidelity, accuracy, and merit of the Translator."<sup>89</sup>

This was, obviously, Wilkins's translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*, and this hypothetical Londoner would have by now realized that Governor-General Hastings found something had a particular interest in its dissemination.

As has been seen, Halhed and Jones had serious goals in mind even when they investigated Hindu texts in ways that could not possibly have a direct use to the Company administration. They hoped to reach a large audience and influence the way that that audience

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<sup>89</sup> Wilkins, 3.

thought about Hinduism. They also recognized that it was because the Company had established a government in Bengal in the first place that they were able to carry out this research. They knew, then, that there was a connection between their “play” and business. What they did not do, normally, was to directly tie the results of their research with the viability of the Company administration, though Jones seemed at least seemed to be thinking of this connection in his letter to Macpherson. In his introductory letter to Wilkins’s translation, the letter to the Chairman of the Company referenced in the quote above, Hastings made this connection in a couple of ways.

First, he sought to show that Wilkins had produced a high-quality translation of a culturally rich text, thereby suggesting that the scholarly activities of Company servants like Wilkins were bringing previously-unknown treasures to the attention of the West. Hastings conceded that the *Gītā* might have its flaws; one that could “scarcely fail to make its own impression on every correct mind” was “the attempt to describe spiritual existences by terms and images which appertain to corporeal forms.”<sup>90</sup> But as long as its European readers did not judge it by the standards of European literature, which was not “applicable to the language, sentiments, manners, or morality”<sup>91</sup> of a society from which Europe had long been disconnected, and instead read the translation on its own terms, than its brilliance could not fail to be recognized – in the case of the flaw Hastings found, a recognition that the *Gītā*’s original author described “spiritual existences” using “images which appertain to corporeal forms” in order to make these spiritual existences comprehensible to readers more familiar with tangible items would help to excuse would might otherwise be a serious defect.

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<sup>90</sup> Hastings to Nathaniel Smith, in Wilkins, 10.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 7.

In the end then, considering both the brilliance of the work itself and the eminent qualifications of Wilkins as its translator, Hastings partially abandoned his own injunction that the work should not be compared to Western standards of literature and asserted that Wilkins's translation was of equal worth to other European translations of ancient works, such as "the best French versions of the most admired passages of the Iliad or Odyssey."<sup>92</sup> The hypothetical Londoner would have understood from Hastings's introduction that she or he had a classic in their hands, a classic that had been brought to him due to the scholarly efforts of Company servants. Hastings, then, seemed to think that Wilkins's translation could serve as an advertisement for the Company's colonial project, which enabled such a treasure to be made available to Europe. This is the point Franklin makes when he describes Hastings's effort to get the Company to publish the *Gitā* in Britain as an attempt to ship "cultural capital...from the colonial capital [sic] to enrich metropolitan Enlightenment."<sup>93</sup>

In addition to highlighting the benefit government-sponsored scholarship could bring to Europe, Hastings also tied the value of such scholarship to the quality of the colonial administration itself. During a time in which Company servants in the Indian Subcontinent were regularly accused of corruption, Hastings argued that the pursuit of knowledge about Bengal was a practice conducive to the enrichment of virtue in a way that trade was not; as Hastings admonished, virtue was a quality "that the Company must rely [on] for the permanency of their dominion."<sup>94</sup> Thus, increasing knowledge could make Company administrators more morally conscious, and this in turn would have a direct effect on the justice and ultimate worth of the Company administration, as Hastings asserted in this famous and oft-quoted passage:

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<sup>92</sup> Hastings to Nathaniel Smith, in Wilkins, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Franklin, "General Introduction and [Meta]historical Background [Re]presenting 'The Palanquins of State; or, Broken Leaves in a Mughal Garden,'" 13.

<sup>94</sup> Hastings to Nathaniel Smith, in Wilkins, 12.

“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:...it attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our own countrymen the sense and obligation of benevolence. Even in England, this effect of it is greatly wanting. It is not very long since the inhabitants of India were considered by many, as creatures scarce elevated above the degree of savage life; nor, I fear, is that prejudice yet wholly eradicated, though surely abated. Every instance which brings home to observation will impress us with a more generous sense of feeling for their natural rights, and teach us to estimate them by the measure of our own. But such instances can only be obtained in their writings: and these will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long since ceased to exist, and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance.”<sup>95</sup>

Hastings thus articulated an understanding that saw all British scholarly enquiries into Hindu texts as having at least an indirect utility for the Company administration. Such “accumulation of knowledge” would help administrators better understand the people they governed, and so make the administration more just.<sup>96</sup> In addition, this scholarship would have an enduring value even after Company rule in the Indian Subcontinent came to an end: by spreading cultural knowledge far and wide, it would be a “gain of humanity.” The work of Wilkins and others like him would be a means by which the benefits of British rule in Bengal could survive long past the colonial administration’s existence.

This is not to say that Jones or Halhed or Wilkins had precisely the same set of goals in mind when they translated a text or explained its significance or wrote a poem inspired by it. But it is to argue that they had serious goals in mind when they patronized such research (in Hastings’s case) or actually did the research (in the case of the circle of scholars Hastings gathered around him), and that to accomplish these goals they worked creatively within the

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<sup>95</sup> Hastings to Nathaniel Smith, in Wilkins, 12-13.

<sup>96</sup> By spreading this knowledge to metropolitan Britain, Hastings also likely hoped that British readers would better understand the policies of the colonial administration toward Bengal’s Hindu inhabitants, since they would have a better understanding of the values of these people as shown in their sacred texts. Here as elsewhere, the textual bias of this scholarship that King highlights is quite evident.

political and intellectual contexts in which they lived, passing on their modes of interpretation on to their audience. These scholars may have studied Hindu texts out of a purely humanist interest, but they also hoped to affect the way people thought about Hinduism. They were by no means governing when they read and analyzed Hindu texts, but they were exercising power.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “ORIENTALISM”?

In 1798, the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said published a work for which he is now famous, *Orientalism*. In this book, which now underpins much of the study of the colonial and postcolonial time periods in Asia, Said takes as his starting point the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798 and 1799. When he arrived in Egypt, Napoleon brought with him not only a large French army, but also a large team of “Oriental” scholars in a wide variety of fields whose mission was to find out everything they possibly could about Egypt and then publish their collective results. The result was the publication between 1809 and 1828 of the *Description de l’Égypte*, a twenty-three volume work that embodies what Said means when he uses the word “Orientalism.”<sup>97</sup> For Said, Orientalism describes three related phenomena: first, the study by Western scholars of Asia or the “Orient,” second, a general attitude held in the West towards the Orient that sees the Orient as a collective entity that is separate from the West or the “Occident,” and third, the set of Western institutions set up to define and control (or “deal with”) the Orient.<sup>98</sup> Said finds all three of these phenomena present in the efforts of Napoleon and the scholars in his train to rule Egypt and to open what had been to them a wholly separate and “obscure” society to French scrutiny.<sup>99</sup>

This effort began what for Said was a manner of thinking about, defining and ruling over the “Orient” that characterized colonialism (particularly French and British colonialism) from Napoleon’s day onwards, and continues to affect how Westerners see Asia to this day. Yet though Said identifies Napoleon’s expedition as being point at which Orientalism began to

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<sup>97</sup> Said, 80-84.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 83-84.

dominate Western discourse, he also points to the work of Sir William Jones as being a prominent effort to “invade” the Orient intellectually prior to the work of Napoleon’s scholars,<sup>100</sup> and many scholars before and after Said wrote *Orientalism* have spoken of the projects undertaken by Warren Hastings and his circle of scholars in terms reminiscent of Said. After all, the elements that characterized Napoleon’s expedition (occupying armies and scholars eager to open up an unfamiliar and fairly different set of cultural traditions to European examination) also characterized the activities of the British East India Company administration in Bengal in the 1770’s and 1780’s.<sup>101</sup>

Another historian, David Kopf, has also used the word “Orientalism” to describe the work of Jones, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, Charles Wilkins, and their fellow scholars (as well as Hastings’s patronage of them), but he has given the word more of a positive spin. While recognizing that the work of these scholars embodied efforts both to find out about and rule the people of Bengal, Kopf and a few other historians identify these efforts as being sincere attempts to understand the people under their control and to govern them according to their own laws and traditions. Kopf therefore speak of a benevolent Orientalism,<sup>102</sup> in subtle contrast to Said’s conception of a more disdainful endeavor to thoroughly know and dominate the Orient while maintaining a healthy distance from it. Kopf contrasts this benevolent Orientalism with the sort of British research and rule that occurred in Bengal after the departure of Hastings and particularly in the nineteenth century, which he sees as embodying a philosophy of “Anglicism.” Kopf defines “Anglicism” in terms that also embody some of what Said suggests by

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<sup>100</sup> Said, 76.

<sup>101</sup> The idea of applying Said’s idea of “Orientalism” to India (Said he applies it mostly to Western colonialism in and conceptions of the Middle East) is traceable in large part to Ronald Inden. In his book *Imagining India*, he writes about British understandings of India and Hinduism in terms that recall Said, though Said is primarily concerned with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rather than with the work of Hastings’s circle of scholars; see Ch. 1, pg 3.

<sup>102</sup> Kopf, 22.

“Orientalism” (an effort to govern and fully know “Orient” while at the same time maintaining a healthy distance from that same “Orient”) while adding additional elements (less of an emphasis on research into Indian cultural traditions, more of an emphasis on governing Bengal according to British principles, and an increasing clamor for the introduction of Anglican missions into the Subcontinent).<sup>103</sup>

The question this chapter will attempt to answer is whether the patronage of Hastings and the work of his circle of scholars that made up the focus of the previous two chapters are best seen as being the sort of benevolent “Orientalism” just described (in opposition to later “Anglicist” modes of government and scholarship) or whether it better fits with Said’s rather more negative view of “Orientalism,” or, as a third option, if it straddles these two definitions of the word. To begin to answer this question, it will be necessary to first further explore the Orientalist/Anglicist dichotomy espoused by Kopf and to some extent by Simon Schama.

### **A Change in Attitude?**

Although the colonial project as a whole troubles him, Schama, a British historian, nonetheless views the colonial administration during Warren Hastings’s time as Governor-General rather positively. While conceding that Hastings and his circle of scholars did not view Indian cultural traditions to be “equal” to those of Europe, Schama also favorably views Hastings’s efforts to improve British understanding of the people of the Subcontinent and refute the idea that they were “scarcely above the degree of savage life.”<sup>104</sup> Going a bit further than Schama, David Kopf surveys the policies and ideology of Hastings and the works of his circle of scholars and proclaims that they demonstrate a “tolerance” for Hinduism and Indian traditions,

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<sup>103</sup> Kopf, 236.

<sup>104</sup> Schama, 510, 512; the quotation comes from the block quote from Hastings’s letter to Nathaniel Smith that is reproduced at the end of the previous chapter.



and also describes them as “Orientalists.”<sup>105</sup> Both Kopf and Schama, then, view the scholarly endeavors undertaken under Hastings’s patronage favorably, and while Schama implies that their sincere efforts require a reexamination of the implied negativity of the word “Orientalism” as it is used in this particular historical context,<sup>106</sup> Kopf actively uses “Orientalism” in a positive way.<sup>107</sup> For both Schama and Kopf, if Hastings, Jones, Halhed, Wilkins, and others are to be described as “Orientalists,” that word will have to have a positive spin.

Part of the reason Schama, Kopf, and a few other scholars seek to use “Orientalism” in a more positive manner when referring to Hastings and his circle of scholars is because of the contrast they draw between what Kopf calls the Bengal Renaissance with what came after. As Schama describes it, the pressures brought to bear on the British Empire in the late 1770’s and early 1780’s laid the foundations for a reorientation in how the Company administration would relate to the British government and how the Company administration would rule its holdings in the Subcontinent. With the loss of the American colonies in the war of 1775-1783 came an increasing conviction that Britain was not governing its overseas territories effectively. Among some leaders in Parliament (especially Edmund Burke), the idea that Hastings was corrupt was growing. Rather than governing Bengal according to the best enlightened British principles. In the view of Burke and others Hastings was becoming a despot, wasting money and oppressing the Bengalis over whom he ruled. Eventually, in 1785, Hastings was recalled from his position, and not long after his return to Britain, he stood trial before Parliament to answer for a variety of

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<sup>105</sup> Kopf, 22.

<sup>106</sup> Schama, 510.

<sup>107</sup> It should be noted that Kopf’s book *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* predates Said’s *Orientalism*, having been published in 1969, while Schama’s work *A History of Britain Vol 2: The British Wars 1603-1776*, was published well afterwards, in 2001.

charges related to allegations that he had misruled Bengal. It was not until 1795 that he was finally acquitted.<sup>108</sup>

Many in Britain clearly believed that the British Empire could survive the crisis brought on by the loss of the American colonies and Hastings's perceived misrule in Bengal only if the nature of Company rule in Bengal were changed. In Hastings's place, the British government sent Charles Cornwallis, the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Cornwallis, to be Governor-General of Bengal; he arrived in 1786.<sup>109</sup> Although he had surrendered a British army to a combined American and French force at Yorktown, Virginia in 1781, thus hastening the independence of the United States, Cornwallis was not deemed responsible for that defeat and so was entrusted to go to Bengal and inaugurate a different sort of Company rule there.

This new sort of rule would begin at home, in Britain. Bradley Benefield has argued that a new governing ethos, which he calls "patriotic improvement" was arising among the upper classes of Britain during this time period, one that saw the model of virtue as residing in the enlightened gentleman who respected the rule of law and social order, was a patriotic supporter of the king, and sought to diligently increase the yield of his farmlands.<sup>110</sup> In the wake of the loss of the American colonies, Benefield argues that the governing elite sought to export this growing domestic ethos to Britain's overseas dominions:

"After the American rebellion, many Britons were anxious about the future of the Empire. However, the new British elite would not idly watch the Empire collapse...Convinced patriotic improvers fostered agricultural, moral, and social improvement domestically, while the British government, through appointments and colonial policy, exported patriotic improvement throughout the Empire."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Schama, 512-513.

<sup>109</sup> Sir John Macpherson, who was referenced in the previous chapter, was interim Governor-General until Cornwallis arrived.

<sup>110</sup> Benefield, 15, 21-22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 37.

Cornwallis, Benefield argues, fully embodied the patriotic improvers' idea of the British gentleman as the virtuous landowner and thus became the agent sent by the government to import this ideal of social order and agricultural improvement into Bengal.<sup>112</sup> As Governor-General, he tried to do exactly that. In the Permanent Settlement that Cornwallis introduced in 1793, the members the *zemindar* class of Bengal, who had previously collected taxes on farming yields, were now made outright owners of farmland in the manner of a British aristocrat. Assured that their land would now pass to the next generation, the *zemindar* class would have the incentive to invest in the farmland, thereby increasing the bounty of Bengali farms and spreading the ethos agricultural improvement across Bengal.<sup>113</sup> Cornwallis's time as Governor-General thus marks an important milestone in the history of the Company administration in Bengal; there was now a concerted effort at work to import British ideas about society into the Indian Subcontinent.

Along with Cornwallis's efforts to reform land revenue by introducing British practice came a shift in attitudes toward Indian cultural traditions as well. Just as Cornwallis thought that the colonial administration could be made more efficient by transforming the *zemindars* into analogues for British landowners, British intellectuals in the Subcontinent increasingly urged that British morals and religious traditions likewise be introduced. Such a step could, many thought, fix the harm brought on by what was increasingly coming to be seen as a degenerate religious tradition. In 1792, a Company servant named Charles Grant wrote a tract entitled *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain*, in which he compared the relative worth of British and Indian civilization and found the latter wanting.<sup>114</sup> Searching for the

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<sup>112</sup> Benefield, 60-62.

<sup>113</sup> Wickwire and Wickwire, 65; Schama, 514-515.

<sup>114</sup> Embree, 141.

source of the degeneracy of Indian civilization, Grant found it in Hinduism, which he saw as a religion wholly lacking in truth or honesty:

“Abandoned selfishness was the distinguishing mark of Hindu character...Discord, hatred, abuse, slanders, injuries, complaints, litigations, all the effects of selfishness unrestrained by principles, prevail to a surprising degree.”<sup>115</sup>

Such an unprincipled tradition had held sway over Indian society as long as it had, Grant believed, because the Brahmin class had built up and used the caste system to hold it together and oppress everyone else.<sup>116</sup> For Grant and other British scholars of Hinduism and Indian society at that time, British rule provided a chance for a new and more principled ruling power to watch over the Indian people. Writing about Grant as well as other Britons who made similar arguments, Percival Spear writes that “for them...Britain was now the trustee of India’s moral welfare.”<sup>117</sup> Where Hastings had argued for the use of Hindu and Muslim law in the Company courts and not given a thought to introducing Christianity, early nineteenth century British parliamentarians such as William Wilberforce were arguing for the introduction of Christian missions on the Subcontinent.<sup>118</sup>

Analyzing this intellectual shift, Kopf argues that the “Orientalism” of Hastings and his scholars was “defeated” by this new attitude, which he describes using the term “Anglicism,” or the effort to introduce values British values (strictly speaking, values that their British champions saw as universal) into its overseas territories.<sup>119</sup> For both Schama and Kopf, there was a clear shift in the ideology of the Company administration: by the nineteenth century, the “Orientalism” of Hastings’s day had gone away in favor of a new attitude that saw Company servants as the

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<sup>115</sup> Qtd. in Embree, 145.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>117</sup> Qtd. in Spear, 135.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>119</sup> Kopf, 236.

moral stewards of the Subcontinent, an attitude characterized by an effort to create Indian society in the image of British society, and by an increasingly unsympathetic attitude by Britons toward Indian religious and cultural traditions.

### **Complicating the Dichotomy**

This does not mean that Hastings and his circle of scholars are best seen as “Orientalists” in Kopf’s mold, partially because, in many ways, this simple dichotomy between Hastings’s “Orientalists” and the “Anglicist” era inaugurated by Cornwallis does not hold up. While it is true that there was a definite shift both in how the East India Company governed Bengal and in how many Britons thought about Indian culture and the extent to which the British should or should not seek to change it, the break was not as clean as it may seem. Rather than being seen as two wholly distinct philosophies, what Kopf describes as “Orientalism” and “Anglicism” can better be described as two sets of ideas that Britons working for the Company could draw on; often they drew from both. Sometimes, a Company servant could exhibit characteristics that could be described as “Anglicist” in some circumstances and characteristics that could be described as “Orientalist” in another. Perhaps the only reason this Company servant is remembered more as an “Orientalist” or an “Anglicist” might be because his position within the Company administration predisposed him to think and act in ways commensurate with one or the other of these philosophical attitudes.

The relationship between Cornwallis and Sir William Jones provides an excellent example of this phenomenon. Jones and Cornwallis are known to history for different reasons; Jones as the hyper-versatile scholar who tried to find out as much as he could about Hinduism and Indian culture, and Cornwallis as the British landowner who tried to import British ideas

about agriculture, taxes, and class rank into Bengal. Surely Jones, with his enthusiasm for all things Indian, would have been classified as an Orientalist while Cornwallis would be classified as an Anglicist. When it is considered that Jones spent most of his time in Bengal with Cornwallis as Governor-General, one might indeed expect the two to have been at loggerheads.<sup>120</sup>

This was not at all the case. It was mentioned in Chapter Two that one of Jones's projects was a translation of the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, a Hindu text whose injunctions could potentially be used as the basis for a legal system; as with Halhed's *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, this project was undertaken to assist the colonial administration in its efforts to administer Hindu law. Garland Cannon points out that Jones's efforts to translate the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* found a willing supporter in Cornwallis.<sup>121</sup> As one might expect of the Governor-General sent to Bengal to regularize the Bengali agricultural revenue system and bring order to Bengali society and the Company administration, the vast majority of Cornwallis's correspondence with the Directors of the East India Company in Britain has to do with taxes, government appointments, and the movement of armies, but in one report to the Directors in late 1788, Cornwallis writes favorably of Jones's project (which also included efforts to translate Muslim legal texts) and his support for it:

“Few circumstances have given me a more sincere gratification than the voluntary public-spirited proposition of Sir William Jones to engage in the arduous undertaking of translating and forming a compilation of Hindu and Mussulman laws from the highest and most approved authorities of the respective religions, to be applied for the use and guidance of our native Courts of Justice...considering it singularly fortunate for this Government to be able to obtain the assistance of such a person, I could make no hesitation in granting from the public purse the

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<sup>120</sup> When Jones arrived in Bengal in 1784, Hastings was just a year away from being recalled. From the time of Cornwallis's arrival in 1786 to Jones's death in 1794, the two were in Bengal together, Cornwallis governing and Jones researching and sitting at court.

<sup>121</sup> Cannon, *The Life and Times of Oriental Jones*, 286-287.

moderate monthly sum that he required for defraying several articles of contingent expense.”<sup>122</sup>

Here is Cornwallis the “Anglicist” sounding very much like Hastings, when Hastings commissioned Halhed to perform a similar task. This does not mean that Cornwallis was the enthusiast for scholarship that Hastings was, but it does mean that his actions were determined less by an ideological shift from Orientalism to Anglicism and more by his perception of the challenges facing him as Governor-General. To meet some of these challenges (especially those to do with agriculture and revenue collection), Cornwallis sought to import British modes of administration, thereby reflecting the enthusiasm of the English gentry for agricultural improvement and the exportation of this ethos to the Empire.

But Cornwallis did not just bring these British modes of administration into Bengal because of an ideological inclination to “Anglicize” Bengal, but also (perhaps mostly) because he thought that these methods would be effective. It would be less effective, Cornwallis thought, to try to introduce British cultural traditions to the Bengali people. Where later British “Anglicists” would urge the establishment of Protestant missions, Cornwallis discouraged such a step. At one point in his Governor-Generalship, it seems that he had received a request from the Bishop of Salisbury that he consider introducing Protestant missions in Bengal. In a response to the Bishop, Cornwallis wrote that this though he would very much like to see this occur,<sup>123</sup> he thought that such missions would not only be unsuccessful, but also potentially dangerous to the continued existence of the Company’s armies, which were made up of men who Cornwallis thought would be unhappy with the introduction of Christian proselytization:

“The pride and bigotry of the Mussulmen, and the dreadful consequences to themselves and their families for ever attending the loss of caste to the Hindoos

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<sup>122</sup> Earl Cornwallis to the Court of Directors, Nov. 3, 1788, in Ross vol. 2, 541-542.

<sup>123</sup> Earl Cornwallis to the Right Rev. The Bishop of Salisbury, Dec. 27, 1788, in Ibid, 397.

[which would presumably occur if they converted to Christianity], must in my opinion prove insuperable bars to any material progress in the propagation of the Christian religion...It is likewise a matter for serious consideration, how far the imprudence or intemperate zeal of one teacher [that is, an overzealous Protestant missionary] might endanger a Government, which owes its principal support to a native army composed of men of high caste, whose fidelity and affections we have hitherto secured, by an unremitted attention not to offend their religious scruples and superstitions.”<sup>124</sup>

Though he might have sympathized with the bishop’s request, Cornwallis was guided here by political priorities; he believed that such a step could threaten the survival of the colonial administration. He may have reflected the intellectual attitudes of his day, but Cornwallis was more a practical administrator and less an “Anglicist” ideologue.

If his relationship with Jones helps to demonstrate that Cornwallis cannot be considered an Anglicist, it also serves as another reminder of the extent to which Jones’s work was wrapped up in the colonial project. If he was enthusiastic about finding out about Hinduism-as-revealed-in-texts and disseminating his knowledge widely, he certainly had no qualms about the fact that he was working either on behalf of or indirectly because of the colonial administration. This was seen in the last chapter, but his cooperation with Cornwallis provides another example of the extent to which Jones was able to define what Hinduism was and (in the case of his translation of the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*) to put this knowledge at the direct service of an administration that was ruling over the Bengalis. Cornwallis may not have been an ideological Anglicist, but it is hard to see Jones as a wholly beneficial Orientalist in the Kopf mold either.

### **Two Views of Sir William Jones**

The fact that Jones was not just a scholar but also a full participant in the machinery of the Company administration argues against his scholarship being seen as an embodiment of the

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<sup>124</sup> Cornwallis to the Right Rev. The Bishop of Salisbury, Dec. 27, 1788, in Ross, vol. 2, 398.



beneficial “Orientalism” spoken of by Kopf and to some extent by Schama. It might therefore follow that his work (and by extension the work of Halhed, Wilkins and others who were also employed by the East India Company) is best seen as “Orientalism” as Edward Said defines it: an attempt by Western scholars to make themselves the most knowledgeable experts about a wholly foreign society and then to put that knowledge to the use of colonial governments. The effect would be to make Jones and his fellow scholars the exclusive arbiters of knowledge about India.

It is in this manner that Said writes about Jones in *Orientalism*. For Said, Jones’s wide-ranging research had this effect: “to gather in, to rope off, to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning.”<sup>125</sup> At greater length, Said continues in this same vein:

“To rule and to learn, then to compare the Orient and the Occident: these were Jones’s goals, which, with an irresistible impulse always to codify, to subdue the infinite variety of the Orient to “a complete digest” of laws, figures, customs, and works.”<sup>126</sup>

Said concludes that in Jones we have an early example of the attitude that became increasingly prevalent in the West, that Westerners should be the arbiters of all knowledge of the Orient.<sup>127</sup>

Said’s attitude is echoed in many ways by Richard King, who writes in *Orientalism and Religion* that, for a historian, there is little to choose from between Jones and later Britons whom Kopf might label “Anglicists.” For example, King writes, just as James Mill created an essentialized version of Hinduism and Indian history in his 1818 work *The History of British India*, Jones similarly essentialized Hinduism by his introduction to Europeans of a “textualized”

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<sup>125</sup> Said, 78.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 78.

Hinduism.<sup>128</sup> Thinking of Jones's translation of the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* and his position as a judge in Bengal, King continues:

“The most significant nodes of William Jones' work are (a) the need for translation by the European, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and cultures; (b) the desire to be a law-giver, to give the Indians their own 'own' laws; and (c) the desire to 'purify' Indian culture and speak on its behalf...In Jones's 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.”<sup>129</sup>

For King, then, most of the distinction between Kopf's Orientalists and Anglicists disappears upon a closer examination of someone like Jones. As a result, King's analysis of Jones therefore tacks quite close to Said's; for both writers, the colonial context and power relations inherent in Jones's scholarship make up that scholarship's most salient feature.

But while King sees Jones as an “Orientalist” in Said's sense, one of Jones's most recent biographers takes a slightly different approach. In his book *Sir William Jones*, Michael J. Franklin seeks to understand Jones's creativity and enthusiasm. For Franklin, there is a sense in Jones in his work did not try to control or “rope off” knowledge about Hinduism (to use Said's phrase), but rather to open himself and his readers into a new world of religious literature. Jones as presented by Franklin is always seeking out and developing a great enthusiasm for “new vistas”<sup>130</sup> in his scholarly work; to show how enamored of his subject material Jones was, Franklin quotes him: “I am in love with the *Gopia*, charmed with *Crishen*, an enthusiastick admirer of *Rāmā*.”<sup>131</sup> Franklin goes on to assert that, as a result of Jones's great love for the contents of the texts he was reading, he sought to present his analysis of this material in such a way that his sincere enthusiasm would rub off on his audience, who would hopefully gain a more

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<sup>128</sup> King, 87-88.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>130</sup> Franklin, *Sir William Jones*, 85.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 85.

sympathetic view of Hinduism. The result, Franklin argues, was that Jones subverted the expectations Bengal's British rulers had about the religious traditions of the people they governed. Speaking about Jones's theory that Western languages and religious traditions share a common origin with Indian religious traditions and languages, Franklin writes:

“At a time when few Europeans expected to find either refinement or family [the word family here suggests the common origin of Western and Indian culture] in India, this postulate did much to adjust pre-conceptions of cultural superiority, introducing disconcerting notions of relationship between the rulers and their black subjects.”<sup>132</sup>

In other words, an understanding of the ways in which Western and Indian culture and religion were related could help cultivate greater understanding and empathy on the part of the servants of the East India Company who ruled Bengal (as well as on the part of other European readers of Jones).

For Franklin, the most important way that Jones sought to have his readers imbibe understanding and empathy was to use comparisons to or references to familiar concepts as a way of explaining the unfamiliar, a device discussed in the previous chapter. Franklin recognizes that such a device ensured that the understandings Jones's audience had of Hinduism reflected Western concepts and ideas, but insists that Jones saw no other way to cultivate understanding among his readers than by using the known as a bridge to the known:

“It is arguably patronizing – even Eurocentric – to use [comparisons to the known] to lend Hinduism a measure of *gravitas* and classical decorum, but it would seem that Jones carefully judged the capacity of his audience to accept the alien. Certainly his refusal to sensationalize in the manner of earlier and later portrayals of Hinduism reveals a profound and enlightened respect for Vedic thought.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Franklin, *Sir William Jones*, 90.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Thus, where King likens Jones to nineteenth-century British “essentializing” interpreters of Hinduism, and where Said finds in Jones many of the same tendencies that marked the scholarship of British and French “Orientalists” throughout the colonial era, Franklin emphasizes Jones’s distinctiveness. According to Franklin, Jones worked creatively within the intellectual context in which he found himself to pass on his sincere enthusiasm for Hinduism and Indian culture as revealed in Hindu texts, and to help Bengal’s new rulers gain an empathetic understanding of the textual traditions of many of those they ruled.<sup>134</sup>

Jones is thus remembered in different ways by historians, and it is striking to note that there seems to be a connection between the aspects of Jones’s work that an author chooses to emphasize and that author’s overall assessment of Jones. King and Said seek to understand Jones within the broader historical context of the intellectual and political developments that accompanied colonialism in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Since Jones’s work was part and parcel of a larger process in which Western rulers defined the parameters around which the cultural traditions of the peoples they governed were understood, King and Said come away with a negative view of Jones. Franklin, on the other hand, does not spend so much energy focusing on how Jones related to this broader history, and instead writes about Jones’s own interest in his work. Perhaps as a result, Franklin comes away with a different picture; the Jones that Franklin writes about pursued his work with zest and enthusiasm, creatively found ways to pass on his enthusiasm for his material to his audience, and sought to have his audience gain an empathetic understanding of the textual traditions held dear by many of the people over whom the East India Company ruled.

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<sup>134</sup> In this sense, the Jones that Franklin presents was similar to Hastings, who, as was seen at the end of the previous chapter, similarly wrote that he wished that Bengal’s British rulers would gain an empathetic understanding of the people over whom they ruled.

### **Hastings's Circle of Scholars as Foucauldian Intellectuals**

If the scholarship of Jones and his colleagues from among Hastings's circle of scholars is viewed through one of these two analytical lenses, then it becomes possible to understand their work as embodying one of two sorts of "Orientalism."<sup>135</sup> They could be Orientalists in the King and Said mold, seeking to attain knowledge about the traditions of the people of Bengal and then taking control of that knowledge and deploying it on behalf of the colonial administration. They could also be Kopf's more benevolent Orientalists, exhibiting a deep interest in the Hindu texts they read, and, as in Franklin's picture of Jones, seeking to pass that sincere enthusiasm on to a wide audience in the West, hoping that an equally sincere empathy and understanding for Hinduism among that audience would result. It is my contention that both of these views are largely correct, and that if Hastings's circle of scholars is viewed in the terms of only one of the two views, their work will be less well-understood.

Both understandings highlight important factors that lay behind their work and its place in history. A sense of how these scholars fit within the broader historical context of British rule in India can be gleaned from King and Said; Said points out the extent to which Jones's work was entwined within the workings of colonial government. King does the same, and also shows how the work of Hastings's circle of scholars and their nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors reflected the intellectual climate in which it was undertaken; the priority these scholars placed on the study of texts, for example, reflected the assumption many of them had that texts were constitutive of religious traditions. In essence, studying the work of these scholars through the lens of King and Said shows that these scholars could have done the work they did had the colonial government not existed and given them support, and that they were able to

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<sup>135</sup> With the caveat that there is a great deal of variance within each of these two views.

capitalize on the opportunity afforded them by this colonial context to reach a wide audience and to some extent define the parameters around which that audience understood Hinduism.

King and Said therefore provide a reminder that Jones, Halhed, and their colleagues did not conduct research in a wholly objective way; rather, they worked within a context, a context that was particularly suffused with power. In this way, both King and Said recall Michel Foucault's conception of the relationship between truth and power that was flagged in the introduction. In this passage that was also quoted in the introduction, Foucault argues that no search for "truth" can be conducted outside the systems of power that are inevitably present in all human societies:

“ ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth.”<sup>136</sup>

The endeavors of these scholars to produce coherent analyses of the Hindu texts they read therefore was not an objective search for knowledge,<sup>137</sup> but a process inevitably colored by the contexts in which they worked.<sup>138</sup> Their work cannot be understood without reference to the colonial context in which they worked.

Franklin would not disagree with this statement, but his emphasis on Jones's great enthusiasm for his material and the creativity with which he presented it points to another important point. I now return to Foucault's conception of the intellectual that was also flagged in the introduction; following from his conviction that the search for truth is inextricably bound up with the power relations of human societies, Foucault argues that "the intellectual" operates

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<sup>136</sup> Foucault, 379.

<sup>137</sup> Whether or not these scholars were searching for "truth" in their analysis would be the subject of another paper.

<sup>138</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer would also be in complete agreement on this point; see the discussion of Gadamer's conception of "hermeneutics" on pp. 33-35.

within “the specificity of the politics of truth in our societies.”<sup>139</sup> In other words, anyone who advances an interpretation of any sort does so within a specific historical context. But that is not to say that it is impossible to work creatively within a given context. Foucault goes on to assert that the intellectual can exhibit a powerful agency within the “regime of truth” in which she or he lives: “the intellectual can operate and struggle at the general level of that regime of truth.”<sup>140</sup> With the caveat that human activity cannot take place independent of the contextual “level” in which it takes place, Foucault thereby argues that humans can exert a great deal of power by operating creatively within this contextual level.

There is a sense, then, in which Hastings’s circle of scholars can be labeled Foucauldian intellectuals; they worked within a specific context, but their work was not wholly dictated by this context. They possessed and deployed an independent agency within their historical era. While Said’s work conception of Orientalism provides an invaluable lens through which to view the production of knowledge within European colonial contexts, that lens can also obscure the agency of scholars like Jones or Halhed, as Rosane Rocher suggests:

“Edward Said’s sweeping and passionate indictment of orientalist scholarship as part and parcel of an imperialist, subjugating enterprise does to orientalist scholarship what it accuses orientalist scholarship of having done to the countries east of Europe; it creates a single discourse, undifferentiated across space and time and across political, social, and intellectual identities.”<sup>141</sup>

These eighteenth-century British scholars in Bengal did not work in a vacuum, but neither were they automatons conforming to a given discourse. It is very important to understand the world they lived in, but Rocher’s critique of Said serves as a reminder that they were unique people who reflected that world in unique ways. By emphasizing both their contextual

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<sup>139</sup> Foucault, 380.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 380.

<sup>141</sup> Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” 215.

environment and the ways in which they worked creatively within that environment, an understanding of Jones and his contemporaries as Foucauldian intellectuals helps to explain why these scholars sometimes seemed to be “Orientalists” in Said’s mold, seeking to deploy knowledge on behalf of the colonial government, and at other times seemed to be creative investigators totally enamored of the Hindu texts they were reading. Both were true. Said and King are not wrong to place Jones within the broader history of British scholarship in India, nor is Franklin wrong to emphasize Jones’s enthusiasm for his subject material, but putting their views together gives the clearest picture of Jones.

The question remains as to whether “Orientalism” is a useful word to use to describe Hastings’s circle of scholars and their body of work. This is a tricky proposition; as has been seen, the word can have multiple meanings, and its different meanings often conceal important aspects of these scholars’ work. Of the two meanings that have been briefly and incompletely surveyed in this chapter, Said’s “Orientalism” tends to cover over the independent agency of these scholars, while Kopf’s more benevolent “Orientalism” (which is echoed in certain ways by Franklin and Schama) is less attuned to the ways in which the Hastings circle’s work was affected by the colonial and intellectual contexts in which it was carried out.

Considering the tendency of the word “Orientalism” to obscure some of the complexities of the scholarship it seeks to describe, it might make sense to discard the term, taking a cue from Rocher when she describes her method as “purposefully disaggregative;”<sup>142</sup> perhaps a careful enumeration of this scholarship’s complexity would be more useful than seeking to assemble all of this complexity as the single aggregate “Orientalism.” On the other hand, “Orientalism” has a particularly evocative power to describe, whether it conjures up images of a scholar trying to describe and control knowledge about the people over whom the colonial government is ruling,

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<sup>142</sup> Rocher, *British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government*, 240.



or if it conjures up images of a scholar reading through a text with great interest and seeking to pass that interest on to others in his work. Indeed, although she recognizes that the term can be obscuring, Rocher continues to use the word “Orientalism” in her work, while still maintaining her disaggregative approach by plumbing the complex depths that lie behind the word.<sup>143</sup> The elements that the use of the term “Orientalism” can conceal must be borne in mind, but if the word suggests something of the sincere enthusiasm with which these Britons sought to study Hindu texts, or the important effects the existing colonial and intellectual contexts had on this scholarship, or the power their analysis had to define Hinduism for its readers, then the word “Orientalism” can retain its usefulness.

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<sup>143</sup> Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” 215-216, 220, 225, 230, 240-241.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **POWERFUL HERMENEUTICS**

In a sense, this thesis has been about hermeneutics. Certainly Jones, Halhed, and Wilkins engaged in hermeneutics according to the traditional understanding of the term, that is, they sought to interpret the meanings of the texts they read. But theirs was more than just a simple exercise in interpretation. In their readings of Hindu texts, Hastings's circle of scholars sought to gain an understanding of an entire set of cultural traditions and then open up their new-found knowledge to the West. This was an ambitious task, and it would not have been carried out if its undertakers had not had a great interest in the texts with which they worked; and I have tried to show that Jones and Halhed and their patron Hastings all had a deep fascination for the content of these texts. Their work was therefore a hermeneutical exercise born at least partially out of enthusiasm for the subject.

But I have also tried to show that their work is not understandable outside of the historical context in which it took place, and here the work of Hans Georg Gadamer as discussed in Chapter Two becomes helpful. As Gadamer argues, no act of hermeneutics or interpretation (the two words are nearly synonymous for Gadamer) is completely objective; all human effort to understand the world is conditioned by the contexts in which this effort to understand occurs. The explosion of British scholarship of Hindu texts in late eighteenth-century Bengal is no exception; however interested Jones, Halhed, and Wilkins were in the texts they read, their scholarship may be called an exercise in contextualized hermeneutics, taking inspiration from Gadamer. Their research might not have happened if Hastings had not supported the work of Halhed and Wilkins and been part of the attraction that led Jones to Bengal, and despite his own

interest in ancient texts, Hastings might not have been so eager to provide that support had it not been fashionable for an upper-class British man in the late 1700's to patronize scholarship in a wide variety of fields. If context is important when considering why this scholarship took place, it also affected the content of this scholarship. As Gadamer would stress, it would not have been possible for Halhed or Jones to approach their work objectively; of a necessity their interpretations were conditioned by the ways eighteenth century Europeans understood religion. Their scholarship thus reflected the ideas that texts are constitutive of religious traditions, and that religious traditions evolve over time as society evolves.

But by far the most important contextual element to consider when studying the work of these scholars is the colonial context. If the British East India Company had not been establishing and consolidating a colonial government in Bengal in the late eighteenth century, then Hastings, Halhed, Wilkins, and Jones likely never would have arrived in Bengal, and it would not have mattered how fashionable it was for Hastings to patronize scholarship, or how Jones's and Halhed's predispositions affected their work, or how interested they were in Hindu texts. But the colonial context did more than bring other factors into place to lay the groundwork; the scholarship was deeply enmeshed within the colonial process itself. Hastings's own interest in scholarship and the expectation that he would patronize played an important role in the support he provided to the scholars he supported, but as has been seen, his immediate motive in commissioning translations of Hindu texts was to aid the colonial administration in its efforts to understand Hindu law. Although much of this scholarship came to lack any direct utility to the administration, Hastings and Jones still hoped that the knowledge gained as a result of the study would help the British better understand the people over whom they now ruled (and so make British rule more just and more effective), and that the very fact that this scholarship was being

carried out would be a demonstration of a benefit of colonial rule: it could bring new knowledge to the West.

The advancement of any interpretation is to some extent an act of power, since the advancer of that interpretation is able to pass on her or his interpretation to others and potentially change their views, but the interpretative efforts of Hastings's circle of scholars were particularly enmeshed within systems of power relations, since the scholars themselves and their patrons were also agents of the colonial government and saw the scholarship as being related to the health of the colonial administration. Since power formed the key contextual element that lay behind the work of the Hastings circle, the work of these scholars could be called powerful hermeneutics. Their scholarship had its origins in a context subsumed in power relations, and as a result was potentially powerful itself. Jones was quite aware that he had a privileged position as a scholar who accompanied a conquering power, as he demonstrated when he compared his situation to that of an Englishman arriving in Greece shortly after Greece has fallen to English control. Just as this hypothetical Englishman made use of his position to uncover Greek mythology and make it known to the world, Jones, Halhed, and Wilkins made use of their position to uncover the themes they found in Hindu texts and open up this knowledge to the world. Just as the Company administration had the responsibility and the power to govern Bengal, Jones and his fellow scholars and their patrons recognized that they had the responsibility and the power to attain knowledge previously unavailable to Europeans and pass on knowledge about Hinduism-as-revealed-in-texts.

It is with an attention to the power that lay behind their work, that samples of Halhed's and Jones's scholarship have been discussed in this thesis. A key argument was that Jones and Halhed were not simply vessels, simply reflecting their contextual environments, but were

instead independent agents who worked creatively within these environments to produce powerful interpretations. One of the ways in which they creatively made use of their contextual environment to make their work more understandable was to try to make concepts that might otherwise be mysterious to their readers known through comparisons or references to concepts better known to a Western audience; the Hindu god Kāma was thus analogous to the Greco-Roman god Cupid while the Vedic ritual of the *Āsvamedhá* is analogous to the ritual of the scapegoat found in the sixteenth chapter of Leviticus. When this aspect of Jones's and Halhed's scholarship is considered, combined with the way their analysis reflected Western ideas about religion, it becomes evident that these scholars were to an extent able to use their position to create somewhat new ways to understand Hindu traditions. That is power indeed.

Yet although this thesis has tried to show that the hermeneutical work of Hastings's circle of scholars was rooted in a powerful context and was itself very powerful, it has not looked at the long-term effects this scholarship had on the course of British colonialism in India and on how Hinduism has been and is perceived among Hindus and non-Hindus. However, a brief glance at the historical legacy of this scholarship does reveal it to have left a lasting impact, although not entirely in the way Jones and Hastings intended. Summing up recent scholarship on the lasting effects of Jones's work, Brian Pennington points out that the way Jones (as well as his immediate contemporaries) tended to see Hinduism differed from British colonial administrators and intellectuals of the nineteenth-century. As suggested in Chapter Three, Britons in the early and mid-1800's often saw Hinduism as a degenerate religion; Pennington agrees, and adds that many of these same Britons also viewed Hinduism as being fully understandable. By contrast, Pennington points out, Jones saw Hinduism as diverse and complex, with further mysteries

constantly cropping up.<sup>144</sup> There is thus a sense in which Jones's interpretations of Hinduism did not take hold among the British rulers of the Subcontinent, but Pennington, citing the work of Kate Teltscher, argues that what Jones and his fellow scholars did had a lasting effect even if what their interpretations were ultimately less influential. Because Hastings's circle of scholars viewed themselves as the primary stewards of knowledge about Hinduism, they established what Teltscher calls "a tradition of mastery" that outlasted their lifetimes.<sup>145</sup> Hastings may have hoped that knowledge about Hinduism-as-revealed-in-texts would help the Company administration be more just, and Jones may have hoped that he could open up a vast trove of new cultural knowledge to the West, but by setting a precedent in which British scholars working on behalf of the colonial administration and presenting themselves as the primary arbiters of knowledge about Hinduism, they created the space for later British scholars in India to consider themselves arbiters of knowledge about Hinduism, and advance their interpretations under this guise.

The Hastings circle thus helped to set a precedent in which the colonizers would possess and mobilize knowledge about the colonized. But their legacy extends farther than that. Rosane Rocher argues that the scholarship of Hastings's circle has helped set some of the parameters by which Hindus and non-Hindus continue to understand Hinduism. For example, Rocher asserts, the great emphasis Hastings and Wilkins placed on the *Bhagavadgītā* when the former sponsored the latter's translation of the text has reverberated through history as prominent Hindu leaders such as Ram Mohan Roy and Mohandas Gandhi have all placed emphasis on the *Gītā* in their efforts to improve the position of Hindus within British-ruled India.<sup>146</sup> Pennington is quick to argue that neither Hastings's circle of scholars nor British scholars of subsequent generations

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<sup>144</sup> Pennington, 3.

<sup>145</sup> Qtd. in Pennington, 103. Quote is from Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600–1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 223.

<sup>146</sup> Rocher, "British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government," 228, 241.

have in any way “invented” Hinduism (that would be to overstate British power, according to Pennington),<sup>147</sup> but it could be argued that the late eighteenth century British scholars in Bengal helped to frame much subsequent thought and debate about Hinduism, first because they affirmed the central importance of texts to Hinduism and second because they emphasized particular texts. This past November I was walking through the University of Tennessee’s campus when I was approached by a man offering me a copy of an English translation of the *Bhagavadgitā* and extolling its spiritual usefulness. Tracing the use of the *Bhagavadgitā* between 1785 (when Hastings sent Wilkins’s translation to London) and now would be the topic for another thesis, but I thought that in that moment, the hermeneutics of Hastings’s circle of scholars was exerting power on UT’s campus.

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<sup>147</sup> Pennington, 4.

## APPENDIX

### A HYMN TO CAMDEO

By Sir William Jones

*Source: Michael J. Franklin. Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995, 99-103. Jones wrote the hymn and the accompanying "argument" (an explanatory section) in late 1783 and early 1784.*

#### THE ARGUMENT

The *Hindú* God, to whom the following poem is addressed, appears evidently the same with the *Grecian* EROS and the *Roman* CUPIDO; but the *Indian* description of his person of his person and arms, his family, attendants, and attributes, has new and peculiar beauties.

According to the mythology of *Hindustán*, he was the son of MAYA, or the general attracting power, and married to RETTY or *Affection*; and his bosom friend is BESENT or *Spring*: he is represented as a beautiful youth, sometimes conversing with his mother and consort in the midst of his gardens and temples; sometimes riding by moonlight on a parrot or lorry, and attended by dancing girls or nymphs, the foremost of whom bears his colours, which are a *fish* on a red ground. His favourite place of resort is a large tract of country round AGRA, and principally the plains of *Matra*, where KRISHEN also and nine GOPIA, who are clearly the *Apollo* and *Muses* of the *Greeks*, usually spend the night with musick and dance. His bow of sugarcane or flowers, with a string of bees, and his *five* arrows, each pointed with an *Indian* blossom of a heating quality, are allegories equally new and beautiful. He has at least twenty-three names, most of which are introduced in the hymn: that of *Cám* or *Cáma* signifies *desire*, a sense which it also bears in ancient and modern *Persian*; and it is possible, that the words *Dipuc* and *Cupid*, which have the same signification, may have the same origin; since we know, that the old *Hetruscans*, from whom great part of the *Roman* language and religion was derived, and whose system had a pear affinity with that of the *Persians* and *Indians*, used to write their lines alternately forwards and backwards, as furrows are made by the plough; and, though the two last letters of *Cupido* may be only the grammatical termination, as in *libido* and *capedo*, yet the primary root of *cupio* is contained in the three first letters. The seventh stanza alludes to the bold attempt of this deity to wound the great God *Mahadeo*, for which he was punished by a flame consuming his corporeal nature and reducing him to a mental essence; and hence his chief dominion is over the *minds* of mortals, or such deities as he is permitted to subdue.



## THE HYMN

WHAT potent God from *Agra*'s orient bow'rs  
Floats thro' the lucid air, whilst living flow'rs  
With sunny twine the vocal arbours wreath,  
And gales enamour'd heav'nly fragrance breathe?

Hail, pow'r unknown! For at thy beck  
Vales and groves their bosoms deck,  
And ev'ry laughing blossom dresses  
With gems of dew his musky tresses.  
I feel, I feel thy genial flame divine,  
And hallow thee and kiss thy shrine.

"Knowst thou not me?" Celestial sounds I hear!  
"Knowst thou not me?" Ah, spare a mortal ear!  
"Behold" –My swimming eyes entranc'd I raise,  
But oh! they shrink before th' excessive blaze.

Yes, son of *Maya*, yes, I know  
Thy bloomy shafts and cany bow,  
Cheeks with youthful glory beaming,  
Locks in braids ethereal streaming,  
Thy scaly standard, thy mysterious arms,  
And all thy pains and all thy charms.

God of each lovely sight, each lovely sound,  
Soul-kindling, world-flaming, stary-crown'd,  
Eternal *Cáma*! Or doth *Smara* bright,  
Or proud *Ananga* give thee more delight?

Whate'er thy seat, whate'er thy name,  
Seas, earth, and air, thy reign proclaim;  
Wreathy smiles and roseate pleasures  
Are thy richest, sweetest treasures.  
All animals to thee their tribute bring,  
And hail thee universal king.

Thy consort mild, *Affection* ever true,  
Graces thy side, her vest of glowing hue,  
And in her train twelve blooming girls advance,  
Touch golden strings and knit the mirthful dance.

Thy dreaded implements they bear,  
And wave them in the scented air.  
Each with pearl her neck adorning,  
Brighter than the tears of morning.  
Thy crimson ensign, which before them flies,  
Decks with new stars the sapphire skies.

God of the flow'ry shafts and flow'ry bow,  
Delight of all above and all below!  
Thy lov'd companion, constant from his birth,  
In heav'n clep'd *Bessent*, and gay *Spring* on earth,  
    Weaves thy green robe and flaunting bow'rs,  
    And from thy clouds draws balmy show'rs,  
    He with fresh arrows fills thy quiver,  
    (Sweet the gift and sweet the giver!)

And bits the many-plumed warbling throng,  
Burst the pent blossoms with their song.

He bends the luscious cane, and twists the string  
With bees, how sweet! but ah, how keen their stings!  
He with five flow'rets tips thy ruthless darts,  
Which thro' five senses pierce enraptur'd hearts;  
    Strong *Chumpā*, rich in od'rous gold,  
    Warm *Amer*, nurs'd in heav'nly mould,  
    Dry *Nagkeser* in silver smiling,  
    Hot *Kiticum*, our sense beguiling,  
And last, to kindle fierce the scorching flame,  
*Loveshaft*, which Gods bright *Bela* name.

Can men resist thy pow'r, when *Krishen* yields,  
*Krishen*, who still in *Matra*'s holy fields  
Tune harps immortal, and to strains divine  
Dances by moonlight with the *Gopia* nine?  
    But, when thy daring arm untam'd  
    At *Mahadeo* a loveshaft aim'd,  
    Heav'n shook, and, smit with stony wonder,  
    Told his deep dread in bursts of thunder,  
Whilst on thy beauteous limbs an azure fire  
Blaz'd forth, which never must expire.

O thou for ages born, yet ever young,  
For ages may thy *Bramin*'s lay be sung!  
And, when thy lory spreads his em'rald wings,  
To waft thee high above the tow'rs of kings,  
    Whilst o'er thy throne the moon's pale light  
    Pours her soft radiance thro' the night,  
    And to each floating cloud discovers  
    The haunts of blest or joyless lovers,  
Thy mildest influence to thy bard impart,  
To warm, but not consume, his heart.

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