

Foundation of the Asiatic Society and the Discoveries of Cultural and Literary history of India.

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ABSTRACT: *The Asiatic Society was founded by Sir William Jones on 15th January 1784. Sir William Jones (1746-1794) was a scholar and an engaged man of languages, jurisprudence, literature and translations. Jones was the eloquent and significant personality closely connected with the leading figures of Britain, America and India during the American Revolutions and the initial period of British Raj. He mastered the languages, laws and literature of the major world civilizations. Jones arrived in India in 1783 as a judge of The Supreme Court of Calcutta. He studied and interpreted the culture of India through language study (Sanskrit). The Asiatic Society of India was formed mainly with an objective to initiate and enlighten the oriental knowledge available in history, scriptures, or regional texts in India or Indian subcontinent. The British and Indian scholars were engaged in systematic and thorough study of different knowledge systems so that our tradition of research and dialogue may be established. The Asiatic Society of India since its inception has been performing its role in full sincerity of its intentions. This research paper mainly aims to explore the Asiatic Society's role in the great discoveries of India's cultural and literary history in the initial period of British Raj.*

Key Words:

The Asiatic Society was established and founded by Sir William Jones (1746-1794) on Thursday, 15th January 1784. The idea of forming the society was originally conceived by Sir William Jones who had acquired significant familiarity with few of the Indian classics and devoted himself to oriental studies. He realized the necessity of an organized association for the advancement of oriental studies. He invited the affiliation of leading English men of that time in Calcutta for the formation of the society where united efforts could be taken to promote the oriental studies. His efforts warmly received by his friends and thirty gentlemen of elite English Community- Sir Robert Chambers (Chief Justice, Supreme Court), Mr. Justice Hyde (Puisne Judge, Supreme Court), Sir William Jones (Puisne Judge, Supreme Court), General John Carnac (Lieutenant-Colonel), Henry Watson, David Anderson, Henry Vansittart, Charles Croftes, William Chambers, Richard Johnson, John Shore (afterwards a baronet and then Lord of Teignmouth), Francis Gladwin, Charles Chapman, Nathaniel Middleton, Major William Davy, Charles Wilkins (afterward Knighted), Jonathan Duncan, John Bristow, Thomas Graham, Francis Fowke, Thomas Law, Captain Jonathan Scott, Francis Balfour, J. David Paterson, Ralph Broome, Burrish Crisp, Lieutenant James Anderson, Lieutenant Charles Hamilton, T. Reuben Burrow and George Hillarow Barlow gathered to exercise some definite determination on that day. Among them Sir Robert Chambers was the chair person and Sir William Jones opened the proceedings. He addressed the meeting and was excitedly received, and a final resolution was come to establishing the Society under the name of the 'Asiatick Society.' This research paper mainly aims to explore the major contributions of The Asiatic Society in the cultural and literary discoveries in the initial period of British Raj.

The beginnings of Indology are generally associated with the birth of the Asiatick Society and Sir William Jones is often described as 'the Father of Indology' (Mukherjee91). Sir William Jones associated with language studies, jurisprudence, literature and translations. Jones was the eloquent and significant personality closely connected with the leading figures of Britain, America and India during the American Revolutions and the initial period of British Raj. He was a man of languages and law. He mastered the languages, laws and literature of the major world civilizations. Jones arrived in India in 1783 as a judge of supreme court of Calcutta.

It was necessary to understand native mind and languages for these rulers so that they could know how to discipline, rule, and control their subjects because language is a product of culture, and culture is an amorphous compound of customs, rites and rituals belonging to a group that shares a particular culture. History tells us that when these cultural groups interact with other cultural groups, customs, rites and

rituals which are not basic to a given culture come to be adapted. The study of language reveals how these interactions occurred in history and the kind of results that they produce in the course of history.

A philologist, Sir William Jones aimed at understanding and demonstrating the relationship between and among the languages that are a part of the Indo-European group of languages. His ultimate aim seemed to find out the core that connects these languages. Language and Literature are inter-related and therefore the cultural context of history get reflected in the literary works. Jones had no plans to study the holy language of the Hindus- Sanskrit, but his profession as a judge required familiarity with the language, the other reason was possibilities of Wilkins's early return to England who had already mastered Sanskrit. Jones started to learn Sanskrit seriously and during his learnings he found the close affinity between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek. To quote his own words "The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists." (Mukherjee 95) led to the discovery of comparative and historical philology.

Through the classical sources the identification of Sandrocottas with Chandragupta Maurya is another huge discovery of the founder of the Society. "Chandragupta who was a military adventurer, became like Sandrocottas the sovereign of upper Hindustan, actually fixed the seat of his empire at Patliputra, where he received ambassadors from foreign princes and was no other than that very Sandrocottas who conducted a treaty with Seleucus Nicator (Mukherjee 107)." This discovery made public by Jones, who was busy in unveiling the Indian civilization to the learned world. The history of ancient India could be reconstructed by utilizing this discovery.

'To inquire into everything that is performed by man and nature', is the object of the Asiatic Society and Jones himself set about to achieve the goal, so nature is to be studied carefully and preserved. Jones lived in Alipur five miles away from the city and the crowd. In autumn he lived at Krishnagar in the heart of nature. There, he spent most of his time with the Brahmins discussing literature, philosophy and mythology. Sanskrit verses were composed by him for the children of Krishnagar. His life amid nature similar the hermitage of Kanva, the foster father of Sakuntala and the female protagonist of Kalidasa's famous Sanskrit drama '*Sakuntala*'. Peace and harmony among the all living creatures, animals, plants and human beings in the ashrama (hermitage) of Kanva charmed Jones. He came to know about Sakuntala in the late summer of 1787. Pandit Radhakant gave him the specimen of the play. He read the Bengali recension of the drama in a year with the help of his teacher of Ramlochan. He translated the drama first into Latin and then into English. The first English translation was published in Calcutta in 1789. To Jones Kalidasa was equal to Shakespeare both as a dramatist and as a poet.

To quote Jones' own words, "Whatever the age when drama was first introduced in India, it was carried to great perfection in its kind, when Vicramaditya, who reigned in the first century before Christ gave encouragement to poets, philosophers, and mathematicians at a time when Britons were as unlettered and unpolished as the army of Hanumat: nine men of genius commonly called nine gems attended his court and were splendidly supported by his bounty, and Calidas is unanimously allowed to have been the brightest of them (Mukherjee pp. 115-116)." To prove that the Hindus had a civilization in its own way equal to that of Greeks, he used the drama *Sakuntala*. It was the first translation of this drama in English. The admiration for Indian religion and philosophy grew in him year after year. He showed that India had excelled in arithmetic, geometry and logic.

Hindus can boast of three discoveries, the decimal scale, the game of chess and the science of grammar. The philosophy of Pythagoras based part of the *Sankhya* system of India. "He presented his theories about Indian Civilization in a dramatic way which infectiously spread the romantic fascination of India and her culture throughout Europe. He and his society evolved a methodology for the study of Indian history. His publication of *Sakuntala* and *Gita Govind* put Indian literature on the world map. After this no one could deny its merit (Mukherjee 121)."

Sir Charles Wilkins (1750-1833), was the writer in the East India Company and one of the founding members of the Asiatic Society. He was the first Englishman acquired the proficiency of Sanskrit language by devoting himself to the study of this language. He published a grammar of that language in 1779. He translated the *Bhagavadgita* which was published in 1785. He deciphered several inscriptions which were unintelligible to the Pandits of his time. He left India at the end of eighteenth century where he published a translation of the *Hitopadesa* and several extracts from the *Mahabharata*. He acquired Knighthood by King George IV for his high literary merits.

The hundreds of years passed on, centuries of arduous and unremitting efforts continued of the services rendered and ascribed to the cause of literature, culture, history and science by the Asiatic Society since its foundation. This research paper is a humble attempt to prove a source of satisfaction to the representatives of the Asiatic Society for the huge success with which they and their forerunners have worked for the advancement of knowledge.

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