

SIR WILLIAM JONES
SAVANT EXTRAORDINARY AND CULTURAL ENVOY

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Shri A Ranganathan, an eminent free lance journalist, whose writings have appeared in several prestigious magazines and newspapers, was invited to deliver a talk on SIR WILLIAM JONES, who rendered distinguished service in the cause of Indian cultural revival.

The paper recapitulates the extraordinary work accomplished by Sir William Jones in the short period that he came to live in India.

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By A. RANGANATHAN

The translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* by Sir William Jones in 1789 was an epoch-making event in the history of cultural relations between India and the West. Indeed its impact on history has been more profound and far reaching than even that of the French Revolution, in the ultimate analysis. And Sir William had unveiled the vistas of a new world of ideas — a new era in Oriental scholarship and historical writing as well as a new movement in the spheres of comparative philology, comparative literature, English poetry, Sanskrit poetry and Indian historical writing.

William Jones was educated at Harrow and at University College, Oxford. In 1774 he was called to the Bar and tried to make himself “not only the technical but the philosophical lawyer”. And in the wake of a distinguished career at the Bar, William Jones embarked on his Indian voyage in 1784. Furthermore while sailing on the high seas, Jones had charted the future course of his studies and compiled a list which included subjects such as the laws of the Hindus and Mohomeddians, modern politics and the geography of Hindusthan the best mode of governing Bengal poetry, rhetoric and morality of Asia and the music of the Eastern nations.

Almost immediately after his arrival in Calcutta, Jones founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in order to conduct an “enquiry into the history and antiquities, arts, sciences and literature of Asia”. And in 1786, Jones made an historic announcement to the Asiatic Society: “The Sanskrit language, whatever is its antiquity, is of wonderful structure; more exquisitely refined than either. Yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of the verbs and forms of the grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which perhaps no longer exists. There is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the *Gothick* and the *Celtick*, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and *Old Persian* might be added to the same family”- Thus Sir William ushered in. the science of comparative philology, which was subsequently developed by Bopp, Max Mueller and Grimm. Again Sir Charles Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Sir William Jones' translation of *Kalidasa's Sakuntalam* opened out the comparative approach to the study of literature.

Furthermore, the modern study of phonetics in Europe which owes much of its inspiration to the ancient Sanskrit grammarians was begun by Jones. Also, as an Orientalist, Jones initiated a tradition of scholarship which was continued by H. T. Colebrooke, H. H. Wilson, J. G. Buhler, Sir Monier Williams, W. D. Whitney and many others whose lifelong labours have shed light on several dark corners in Indian history. And Jones' researches ranged from Indian mysticism, poetry, music and Persian thought to ancient India's explorations in science, public administration and the law.

“It was in 1845,” Max Mueller tell us in his Preface, “when attending the lectures of Eugene Burnouf that my thoughts became fixed on the edition of the Rig-Veda”. And Max Mueller had accomplished far more for the Vedas than what the Alexandrian scholar achieved for the text of Homer. For he inspired a revolution in thought which may be

compared to that brought about by Charles Darwin in the world of biology. Actually the study of the Vedas led him to the twin sciences of comparative philology and comparative religion. “If I were asked”, he once said, “what I considered the most important discovery of the nineteenth century With respect to the ancient history of mankind, I should answer by the following short line :

Sanskrit *Dyaus Pitar* — Greek *Zeus Pater* = Latin *Juppiter* = Old Norse *Tyr*.

In the inaugural lecture which Max Mueller delivered as the first professor of comparative philology at Oxford in 1868, he argued that “a Comparative philologist without knowledge of Sanskrit was like an astronomer without knowledge of mathematics”. Again in the same lecture he commented: “We may date the origin of Comparative Philology, as distinct from the Science of Language, from the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta in 1784. From that time dates the study of Sanskrit, and it was the study of Sanskrit which formed the foundation of comparative philology”. Similarly, the development of Comparative Religion in the nineteenth century was due to Max Mueller Sir Edward Tylor and Sir James Frazer — Max Mueller’s edition of the *Sacred Books of the East*, translated by various scholars in fifty volumes, Sir Edward Tylor’s works on *Primitive Culture* and *Anthropology* which pioneered the anthropological approach to the study of religion as well as the anthropological vistas unveiled by Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. In fact, Max Mueller described these different works on the Science of Religion as “an introduction to the comparative study of the principal religions of the world”. Again Max Mueller inaugurated the study of Comparative Mythology. Furthermore, viewed in historical perspective, this mantle of Sir William Jones fell upon Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy who gave the twentieth century not merely the disciplines of comparative aesthetics and comparative iconography but also continued the Jones tradition of exploring the possibilities of comparative literature as well as the Max Mueller approach to the study of comparative religion with special reference to the dialogue of traditional cultures and the relations between Hinduism and Buddhism. More significantly, it would seem particularly illuminating that both Max Mueller and Ananda Coomaraswamy made use of the comparative method in interpreting the significance of Ramakrishna. And the comparative method which is so lovingly and meticulously handled in Max Mueller’s work on Ramakrishna as well as in Coomaraswamy’s essays on ‘The Vedanta and Western Tradition’ and ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance’ not only deepens one’s understanding of such luminous figures as Sankara and Ramakrishna Paramahansa, but also views the meaning of Indian philosophy in the perspective of Comparative Religion.

Here is a rendering from Kalidasa’s *Kumarasambhava* - a poem on Uma’s state of mind — one of Jones’ best, and more importantly a translation typical in its mythopoetic density, in its allusiveness and delicacy:

*“She spoke and o’er the rifted rocks her lovely form with pious frenzy threw;
But beneath her floating locks
And waving robes a thousand breezes flew,
Knitting close their silky plumes,
And in mid-air a downy pillow spreading;
Till, in clouds of rich perfumes
Embalmed, they bore her to a mystic wood;
Where streams of glory shedding
The well-feign’d Brahman, Siva, stood.”*

In his *Hymn to India*, Jones translates a dream of Mount Meru as he experienced it:

*“Hail, mountain of delight
Palace of glory, bless'd by glory's king!”*

And the *Hymn to Lakshmi* is a poem of captivating tenderness:

*“Daughter of ocean and primeval night,
Who, fed with moon beams dropping silver dew,
And cradled in a wild wave dancing light,
Saw'st with a smile new shores and creatures new.”*

Jones' companion *Hymn to Saraswathi* is composed in a poetic idiom which reaches beyond the personal:

*“These are thy wondrous arts,
Queen of the flowering speech,
Thence Saraswathi named and Vani bright!
Oh, joy of mortal hearts,
Thy mystic wisdom teach.”*

His description of the ‘Ganga’ is intimate; the feminine imagery is expressed in the motions of assured language:

*“How sweetly Ganga smiles, and glides,
Luxuriant o'er her broad autumnal bed!
Her waves perpetual verdure spread,
Whilst health and plenty deck her golden sides”*

And his description- of Surya in his *Hymn to Surya* reveals the Jonesian ability to make use of imaginative vision and yet retain the method of reason; he celebrates the glory of the Sun with his characteristic sophistication:

*“Fountain of living light,
That o'er all nature streams,
Of this vast microcosm both nerve and soul;
Whose swift and subtle beams,
Eluding mortal sight,
Pervade, attract, and sustain the effulgent whole;
.....
Lord of the lotus, father, friend, and king,
O Sun! Thy powers I sing”.
.....
Since thou, great orb! With all-enlightening ray
Rulest the golden day,
How far more glorious He, who said, serene,
Be, and thou wast — Himself unformed, unchanged, unseen.*

Jones was a scholar-poet, and some of his hymns to the Hindu deities are among the finest poems in the English language. Here is a piece which is memorable not only for its exotic sonority; it opens the gates of reason in an Indian setting to a new world of European Sensibility:

Wrapt in eternal solitary shade,

*Th' impenetrable gloom of light intense,
 Impervious, inaccessible, immense,
 Ere spirits were infus'd or forms display'd
 Brahm his own Mind survey'd,
 As mortal eyes thus finite we compare
 With infinite in smoothest mirrors gaze:
 Swift, at his look, a shape supremely fair
 Leap'd into being with a boundless blaze,
 Those fifty suns might daze."*

Jones had entered into the spirit of Indian poetry and remarked that “the notion of infinity” constituted an important element in the entire range of Sanskrit Literature. Again, in his reflections on the Indian conception of art, he argued that “in the literature of the Hindus, all nature is animated and personified; every fine art is declared to have been revealed from heaven; and all knowledge, divine and human, is traced to its source in the Vedas, among which the Sama Veda was intended to be sung”. And his architectonic view, of the symbolism, poetry and music of ancient India as well as his profound knowledge of Sufism enabled him to write his celebrated essay *on the Mystical poetry of the Persians and Hindus*.

Jones has a high place in the history of English poetry; but his influence is even more significant than his actual poetic output. According to R. M. Hewitt, Sir William Jones’ *A Hymn to Narayana* inspired Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*.

Here is the first stanza of Jones’ *Hymn to Narayana*:

*Spirit of spirits, who, through ev'ry part
 of space expanded and of endless time,
 Beyond the stretch of lab'ring thought sublime,
 Badst uproar into beauteous order start,
 Before heaven was, thou art,
 Ere spheres beneath us roll'd or spheres above,
 Ere earth in firmamental ether hung,
 Thou sat'st alone; till, through thy mystic love
 Things unexisting to existence sprung,
 And grateful descant sung,
 What first impelled thee to exert thy might?
 Goodness unlimited. What glorious light
 Thou power directed? Wisdom without bound.*

It is clear that India fills Jones’ veins and the veins his lines, as he articulates the poetics of the ancient Sanskrit poets. Incidentally, in a letter (dated 14 April 1785) to Sir Charles Wilkins, Jones observed: “The subject (Narayana) is the sublimest that the human mind can conceive; but my feeble Muse cannot do justice to it. Again, interestingly enough, the first four stanzas of Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (which is a poem in seven stanzas) are Wordsworthian — obviously unlike Wordsworth at his best — in style. And look at the first stanza of Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*

*“The awful shadow of some unseen power
 Floats through unseen among us, - visiting
 This various world with as inconstant wing*

*As summer winds that creep from flower to flower, -
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,
It visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance;
Like hue and harmonies of evening,-
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,-
Like memory of music fled,-
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer or its mystery”.*

Mr. Hewitt is probably right in the sense that some of the lines in the two poems — Jones’ poem on *Narayana* and Shelley’s. *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* — are shot through with a ray of Wordsworthian luminosity.

“Jones’ translations”, wrote Marie E de Meester, in her *Oriental Influences in the English Literature of the Nineteenth Century*” were read by most literary men of the nineteenth century and their influence is visible in the most famous poets of that period. Southey and Moore often quote Jones’ works in their copious notes; that Shelley and Tennyson borrowed from him in their *Queen Mab* and *Locksley Hall* has lately been proved by Prof. E. Koepell. Byron also seems to have read some of his works”. Sir William himself had foreseen the value of Eastern poetry in his *Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations*. He wrote that if Eastern languages are studied “a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light which future scholars might explain and the future poets imitate”.

The mantle of Sir William Jones fell upon Sir Edwin Arnold—the distinguished author of *The Light of Asia* — in the field of Oriental poetry. Furthermore, the extensive influence of Sir William Jones’ translations on English poetry can be seen in Emerson’s *Brahma* and *Hamatreya*, A.E.’s *Oversold*, *The Veils of Maya*, *Om* and an *Indian Song*, W. B. Yeats’ *Anushaya* and *Vijaya*, *The Indian Upon God* and *The Indian to his Love*. J. S. Blackie’s *Trimurti* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* which ends with a few lines from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

Distinguished as a poet, he was even more distinguished as an historian in the sense of being a path-finder. Indeed Jones identified the celebrated Indian ruler Chandragupta with the *Sandracottas* of Greek historians and Pataliputhra with *Patalibothra*, which marked the beginning of “Indian historical writing unmixed with fable”. Here it is well to note that Sir William’s inquiry was continued by George Turnour who identified the piyadasi of the Asokan inscriptions with the Buddhist Emperor Asoka of the pali classic *Mahawamsa*. These important discoveries helped not only in recovering but also in reconstructing the lost pages of ancient Indian civilization. And this knowledge was marshalled with skill and authority in *Ancient India* — a work of historical scholarship which was edited by Rapson in the Cambridge History of India Series.

Perhaps Sir William was most distinguished as an Orientalist. The Jones argument revolved round the thesis that ancient Indian Civilization was derived from the Vedic sensibility. “From the Vedas” wrote Jones “are immediately deduced the practical arts of Surgery and Medicine, Music and Dancing, Archery, which comprises the whole art of war, and Architecture, under which the system of mechanical arts is included”. He had also written two interesting papers on ‘The Cure of Elephantiasis’ and three on Ornithology and Zoology apart from specializing in a variety of subjects which included Indian Botany and the Indian game Of chess. He was also a pioneer in the Western study of Indian chronology.

Summing up, Sir William Jones was a pioneer in three entirely different spheres of

thought — Indian poetry, a scientific study of Indian history and Oriental scholarship. His mind knew no frontiers of race or colour, nationality or religion. His place in the history of ideas is assured as the father of the concept of East-West Cultural Co-operation. In fact, his pioneering work was done at a time when ideas such as the “International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation of the League of Nations” (the predecessor of the UNESCO) were hardly known. He was at once good and great, gentle and noble, painstaking and brilliant, penetrating and versatile. One of the moist tender and moving tributes ever paid to him by a friend of his, “It is happy for us that this man graced the shores of India. Sir William Jones symbolizes for us, man’s eternal quest for human brotherhood on the plane of ideas. And it was in the republic of the ancient Sanskrit poets that his superlative intellect found ample scope for creative expression.
