



Sir William Jones and ‘Manusmriti’: A British Initiative for Harmonious State in The Early Period of British Raj

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Abstract

Sir William Jones (1746-1794) was a man of languages, jurisprudence, literature and translations. 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. He studied and interpreted the culture of India through language study (Sanskrit). As a farsighted judge and administrator, he translated the Laws of Manu (Manusmriti). As a translator, he interpreted the culture of India and later as a creator, he wrote several articles as well. This research paper aims to signify the motives of Sir William Jones behind the English translation of the ‘Manusmriti’.

Keywords: Sir William Jones, Manusmriti, Sanskrit.

Sir William Jones was a famed polyglot, translator, poet and jurist who lived in India as a Judge of Supreme Court of Bengal for the East India Company from 1783 until his death in 1794. During his stay in India, he published several volumes of translations, prose researches and poetic compositions on Arabian, Persian and most importantly Sanskrit literature and language studies.

The battle of Plassey (1757) provided foothold to the English on Indian soil, but Warren Hastings, Governor General of India, laid the foundations of the British administration in India from 1772. Kejriwal (1988) suggests that Hastings undoubtedly had British interests at heart, but at the same time, he ‘loved the people of India and respected them to a degree no other British ruler has ever equaled.’ Further, Hastings saw neither the need nor the desirability of importing English laws and customs and burdening the Indian people with them. He specially enjoined that ‘in all suits regarding inheritance, marriage, caste and other religious usages and institutions, the laws of the *Koran* with respect to Mahomedans and those of the *shaster* with respect to *Gentoo* (Hindu) shall be invariably adhered to; on all such occasions the *Moulvies* or *Brahmins* shall respectively attend to expound the law, and they shall sign the report and assist in passing the decree.’(p.23) For the advancement of this policy Hastings, encouraged Nathaniel Halhed to compile *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776).

Jones was appointed as a judge in India, but before his appointment, one of his objectives was to codify English law, not according to Blackstone’s definition of law as ‘a rule prescribed by a superior power’, but as ‘the will of the whole community as far as it can be collected with convenience.’ Jones made it his great object to produce digests of Hindu and Islamic law for applying this concern to his new colonial context. Joneses was on the tour by the Ganges to Benaras and back by way of the

ancient cities of Gaya and Gaur in the winter of 1784-85. Jones was getting feel for this wonderful country. He met with the persons who corresponded him and stalking the valuable manuscripts. Among them his most valuable possession was the 'Manusmriti' - A copy of the legal code of Manu, the ancient law-giver. To replace the Halhed's, he planned to use it as the basis for a new compendium of Hindu law.

Jones' plan was to study the country's history and culture. He had no intention to learn Sanskrit because he thought he could depend upon Charles Wilkins, who had by then acquired a reputation for his knowledge of Sanskrit language. Wilkins was still the only Englishman who had acquired the mastery of the Sanskrit. But soon Jones realized that if he did not acquire the command over the Sanskrit, the language of Hindu law books, he could not be able to do justice to his judicial work and intentions. When Wilkins announced his intentions to leave India, he decided to learn Sanskrit. Sanskrit is considered as a language of Gods and no Brahmin was ready to teach the sacred language to a foreigner, so the problem in learning Sanskrit was to find a good teacher for Jones.

In the autumn of 1785, the Joneses moved to Krishnagar, sixty miles upriver from Calcutta. At Nadia, they rented a bungalow and there, Jones approached the local Brahmins for Sanskrit study. Despite considerable cash inducements, the local Brahmins refused and finally absconded for religious festival. At last Pandit Ramlochan who was not a Brahmin agreed to teach him with some reservations. For the next six years the Joneses returned to Krishnagar in every autumn. According to Keay (2001), Sanskrit proved an extremely difficult language even for a polyglot. But in the words of Jones 'I am learning it more grammatically and accurately than the indolence of childhood and the impatient of youth allowed me to learn any other' (p.30). After Wilkins, Jones was the second who acquired the command on Sanskrit. The knowledge of Sanskrit intensified his desire for knowledge of India.

After acquiring knowledge of Sanskrit, Jones occupied with the preparation of the Digest of Hindu law. Jones desired that the natives of India were governed according to their own laws. He was aware of the difficulties of putting this into practice. He decided to translate the Ordinance of Manu (*Manusmriti*). The translation was extremely important not only because the native advisors (*Maulvis and Pundits*) were not always trustworthy, but also because English judges usually could not be expected to learn native languages in which the laws of native framed. The translation of the law books could be enabling English judges to ensure and deliver justice effectively. For the compilation task, Jones offered free service, asking the Company only to pay the cost of employing *pundits* and *maulvis*. His proposal was accepted, and Jones was involved in the project of translation, devoted all his leisure to the task.

According to Pachori (1993), this celebrated rendering of *Manava-Dharmasastra (Manusmriti)*, published by the Bengal Government in 1794, has justly received perhaps the largest applauses for any of Jones's translations from the Sanskrit, Arabic, or Greek. Intended as one of the several sources for his digest of Indian law, which was designed to permit British officers to govern in accord with Indian laws and religions, this pioneering version may have become the basis for later

studies of other *smritis* (such as Narada, Yajnavalkya, Brahaspati among many). This monumental first translation of the Brahmanic code opened the startled eyes of the Christian West to the richness and antiquity of Hinduism and was reprinted in part as late as 1911 (in Watford). (p.199)

In the Preface of '*Institute of Hindu Law*' or '*The Ordinance of Menu*', Sir William Jones stated, "It is a maxim in the science of legislation and government, that Laws are of no avail without manners, or, to explain the sentence more fully, that the best intended legislative provisions would have no beneficial effect even at first, and none at all in a short course of time, unless they were congenial to the disposition and habits, to the religious prejudices, and approved immemorial usages, of the people, for whom they were enacted; especially if that people universally and sincerely believed, that all their ancient usages and established rules of conduct had the sanction of an actual revelation from heaven: the legislature of Britain having shown, in compliance with this maxim, an intention to leave the natives of their own Laws, at least on the titles of contracts and inheritances, we may humbly presume, that all future provisions for the administration of justice and government in India, will be conformable, as far as the natives are affected by them, to the manners and opinions of the natives themselves; an object, which cannot be possibly be attained, until those manners and opinions can be fully and accurately known." (Pachori, 1993, p.199)

Conclusion

The above considerations led Sir William Jones to translate the treatise '*Manusmriti*', 'a system so comprehensive and so minutely exact, that it may be considered as the '*Institutes of Hindu Law*'. (Pachori, 1993, p.199) While coming to the conclusion, it would be fair to say that Jones translated the treatise with great diligence and zeal, he was sensitive to Indians, he desired not to burden them with British laws. He wanted to administer Indians with their own laws for the harmony between the British and the Indians led him to the translation of the treatise and should be acknowledged as a British initiative for the harmonious bridge between the two respectively in the early period of British Raj.

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