

**Book Review**

**Muhammad Shafique, *British Historiography of South Asia: Aspects of Early Imperial Patterns and Perceptions*, Islamabad: National institute of Historical And Cultural Research, Centre of Excellence, Quaid e Azam University, 2016, Pages 171**

Reviewed by

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*British Historiography of South Asia: Aspects of Early Imperial Patterns and Perceptions* by Dr Muhammad Shafiq is a collection of his research articles published between 2002 to 2012 concerns his understanding of the patterns and perception of British Historiography of South Asia. These papers provide a link between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries historical discourse with the current paradigm of historical knowledge of South Asia. Though they are written in different times, yet they altogether form a uniform pattern of understanding of South Asian past prevailing by the mid nineteenth century and provide a critique of modernist approaches towards the historical discourse of South Asia.

This book is well written, lucid accessible to broad public and satisfies the critical abilities of a curious reader as it provides a wide range of reflection on the nature of British historiography of South Asia. It is written in the light of postmodern paradigm of historical knowledge. The author used deconstructionist approach toward ideas, so it unifies different methods and concepts in a single theme of evolution of historiographic patterns. Arguments are cogent, analytic but sometimes overlapping.

As the name of the book suggests, this is a case study of British historiography of south Asia, consequently, British occupy the central place in it because they ruled South Asia for 200 years and left a profound impact politically, culturally, intellectually and institutionally<sup>1</sup>. British showed an intense interest in understanding the past of South Asia so they can pave a way for the policy making of east India company. The purpose of the study is to unveil and understand perceptions emerged from the patterns of British historiography of South Asia.

Author used conceptual analysis to understand the multitude of British historiography. The term India and South Asia are used interchangeably. These papers altogether form a new discourse and introduces a new paradigm of understanding historiography of South Asia by analysing characteristics of British historiographic patterns and perceptions of South Asia.

Overall, Shafique challenges historians claim of the objectivity of history and sheds light through coherent and comprehensive analysis on the subjectivities of British historiography of South Asia. He analysed British historiographic patterns in modern intellectual concerns. Firstly, identity which is now a day's major concern of social scientist and humanists, history plays a major role in the formation development and preservation of identity and tradition. Secondly, the linguistic turn in the twentieth century challenged the nature of history by raising questions on its status of being construction or representation of the past? And thirdly, if all history is contemporary history<sup>2</sup>, then the subjective nature of history can be revealed which resulted in the understanding of history as a discourse which connects past with the subjectivities of historians.

There are three aspects of British scholarship, orientalism, imperialism, modernity. Shafique didn't focused on the orientalist aspect of historiography because of its limitations<sup>3</sup> rather he justified imperialism as an appropriate aspect to reach and understand the pattern and perception of British Historiography. The term India and south Asia are used interchangeably as the concept of continent is best suited with the modern term of south Asia for the previously used term India in British historiography.

Philosophical development of Europe led to the emergence of new patterns of understanding Indian past, it also involved the subjectivity of historian in the form of biasness that can be seen in the methodology with the concept of empire. With this development a shift occurred from indigenous to modern pattern of historiography which can be seen and identified in the last decades of eighteenth and first half of nineteenth century.

These papers identify the purpose behind forming the concept of civilization and explain that how the concept of races, nations and regions were unified to replace the concept of religion and empire to form the concept of civilization.

Most of the papers are about the purpose, nature and method of British historiography of South Asia. First paper, *Postmodern Discourse on the Nature of Historical Knowledge* provides a theoretical foundation for other dimensions of historiography as identified by the writer. Author analysed the relationship of historical knowledge and modernity resulted in the form of historicism and history as a discipline. Though he analysed modernity and postmodernism very well, but his analysis is inclined towards postmodernism the subjectivity of history. In analysing historians claim of history as science he looks more inclined toward Gadamer's hermeneutics.

In opening of the second paper British Historiography of India: *A Study in the late Eighteenth Century Shift of Interest*, writer under Gadamerian influence establishes a subjective point of view of history. He explains that the shift in the method of understanding past developed because of the trends and changes in Indian situation from Muslim India to Hindu India. Muslim ruled Indian for centuries and till late eighteenth century Indian history was considered as Indo Muslim History. The study of Indian history began in late seventeenth century and the source of that history were the travellers of Europe. James Fraser was the first to study Hindu religion and Sanskrit and can be credited as the founder of the British historiographic tradition of South Asia, but his history revolves round the Muslim state, until the late eighteenth century. Under the administration of Hastings British started studying Indian past,

like Sir William Jones the father of Indology neglected Muslim India and focused on Hindu tradition. He further identifies that the reason of shift in the interest has not only intellectual ground but also the development of philosophical development in Europe but also India becoming a centre of trade subjugated land. When British came into India they had only trade interests, the information they have till the late nineteenth century was for self-education and interest but by the late nineteenth century British historians seemed more interested in Indian politics, they propagated the similarity between Hindu and Christian civilization and used Hindu majority as an ally. They propagated the confrontation between Muslim and Hindu civilization, the purpose behind all that was to solve their administrative and political problems and to promote British imperialism. This not only changes the method and model of historical studies but also the perception of the forces involved in the development of Indian past making Muslim destructors ancient Indian heritage.

*Coalescing the Romance of Antiquity, Literature Orient and Imperial Justice: Sir William Jones and the Birth of Indology*, focuses on William Jones' oriental romance, Indology and his intellectual contribution in changing the pattern and perceptions about studying the past of South Asia. For Jones history is not merely the collection of past events but a collective philosophy of all nations. Author endorses Indology as the source of change and the cause of the extension of British imperialism.

*Empire, Law and History: The British Origin of Modern Historiography of South Asia* focuses on the motive behind the study of Indian history and customary law, imperial administration wanted to control the minds of people and sustain imperial power in India. The discussion opens with two assumptions that Indian society was a historical and modern historiography of South Asia owes its debt to British. Author explores the evidence that British's urge to rule resulted in their studies of India, and because of these legal studies new method of historiography emerged. In doing so British administrative jurists played an important role it was their research about the indigenous law that forged ties between historiography of

South Asian laws and writing of general history of India and south Asia.

In fifth paper *Antecedents, Precedents and Tradition: The Early Nineteenth Century English Historiographic Literature on India* author establishes the fact that history, science and literature though known as the different fields work together. Literature needs fact even myths and chronical show realities of human experience, history is a part of literature, so in this paper he focuses on the historiographic literature of India, its. He establishes his argument by shedding light on the fact that in Mughal emperor Jahangir's era when British got in contact with India, they wrote about their observations, but they were not following strict historical method. By the end of the eighteen century such literature was categorised under history as they followed the method of historiography. The purpose behind this paper was to evaluate British historiography of South Asia, as the author explain the importance of the topic by analysing two aspects of British historiography of South Asia, because of the negative image it created about India in west. Firstly, it is known as the imperial literature and secondly vehicle of change. He further explores that the pre-British historiography started with the Muslim rule in India, Muslim historiography though divided in political history and other has one thing in common the belief in Islam, and content to culture. The history that was written in Sultanate was the history of ruler critically evaluating their actions and consequences and providing guidelines to the future. Mughals and British adopted the same read- made pattern of history, but Mughals made changes in it they strength the tradition of autobiography and biography, and they collected record for better administration. This tradition was later adopted by British historians and a new rational beginning a secular tradition emerged.

In *Discourse on Christianization of India: William Tennant's British Self-Righteousness and Future Impression* writer highlighted the mindset of historians and scholars under the influence of post-structuralists and postmodernists-----After establishing the thesis on the nature and purpose of historiography here he tries to explore the dynamics of and

identifies a possible pattern to the relationship between religion and empire during the end of eighteenth and beginning of nineteenth centuries constituting the tapestry of British historiography of South Asia. This paper as its name suggests focuses on the thought of William Tennant ex-chaplain in East India Company. The writer through Tennant's thought also identified the changing thought paradigm of eighteenth and the beginning of nineteenth century as he further explores that in the beginning of nineteenth century an individual British mind was able to influence masses. The paper begins by highlighting the views of Jacob S. Dharmaraj's views that the colonial missions and Christian missions were associated with each other. He further cites Wishwanathan, P.J. Marshal and Robert Eric Frykenberg to endorse and establish his argument. Dharmaraj points out the relationship between missionaries, colonial structure and monetary injustice. Writer further refers to the research of modern historian Jeffery Cox. Cox while analysing the problems of Christian minorities, identified that in colonies that were under East India Company, people converted to Christianity not for religion but for material gains. Prior to this eighteenth century was considered as the century of conflict between missionaries and East India Company. Writer comprehensively then further analysed the arguments of William Tennant. William Tennant was known as Preacher Willie; he won a prize on his writings regarding Christianization of India. As an Evangelic he saw Christianity as the combination of knowledge and civilization and took it as his own criterion of evaluating progress. His writing consists of information and guide line to others identifying the failure of mission and how it can be improved. He tried to convince his country-men that it is only through religion British can establish a strong rule in India. Tennant focused on the analysis of Hindu, Muslim and British rule in India for the purpose of betterment of British rule in India. He criticizes Muslim rule as full of defects but also good administrators in the light of subject-ruler relationship. Tennant was against the influence of French revolution in India, at that time Tipu of Mysore was the major exponent of French revolution and against the British rule in India. 'During his stay in India, he had struggled hard for the reformation of the Company's administration through

the revival of religious activity. He had agreement with the commercial-imperial motives of the missionary work.’<sup>4</sup> The writer is of the view that Tennant’s views were the replica of C. Grants views. Who also emphasized on the importance of religion for the strength of British rule, the former differed from him as he analysed the era of Akbar and its economic and political aspects and the latter on Aurangzeb and his religio-political thought? At the end of the article writer analysed the flaws and defects in Tenants’ arguments as he ignored Charles Grants moral arguments for the justification and legitimacy of British Indian Empire, and used worldly manifestations for essential religious arguments only to support imperial motives. This argument resulted in the charter of 1813 justifying of opening the Indian land for missionary activities.

In *Contesting Criteria: Colonial British Scaling of Indo-Muslim Civilization* writer shifts his insights from the relation and role of religion and empire in the understanding of the tapestry of British historiography of South Asia, new threads are added regarding the criteria and scaling of Indo-Muslim civilization in postmodern perspective. Paper opens with the theses that the history of Indo-Muslim civilization was written by British of the colonial period, and the postmodern vision of understanding and analysis of Muslim civilization of India is based on this historical perspective. The purpose of studying British historiography of eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is important to understand the current image of Muslims of South Asia. The scale on which British evaluated Indo-Muslim civilization vary because of the conflicting criteria they adopted based on different purposes etc. to win favours from authorities. Scale was defined as to evaluate the civilization to measure the status of societies. Conflict of scale depends on the contest of criteria. Writer cites Lucien Febvre who defines civilization as a criterion to distinguish a society against savagery and barbarianism. Febvre, amalgamated the understanding of civilization with the eighteenth-century conception of history. The role of history was then for multiple purposes considered to address the issue of public and political

importance and to behavioural and institutional development of society. Writer further argues that history of South Asia was mostly written by the elite and administrators of East India company for the purpose of resolving the issues of East India Company and securing its future. Writer applied the modern concept of history and civilization in Indian situation to evaluate the colonial British historiography of criteria and scale which was based on geo-cultural temporal and religious grounds for Indo-Muslim civilization. The modern scale of civilisation is based on progressivism, previously it was based on absolutism, the emergence of enlightenment divided the view of human societies into civilized and uncivilized by the rise of colonialism. In eighteenth century Europe was in transition stage so they saw India as a Mughal India after that stage was passed Hindu came in focus and they divided India into political and cultural India. They saw Indo Muslims in comparison to Hindu's and Christian and British. The scale and criteria developed by the British contained two to five poles of civilized and uncivilized, savage, barbarians, uncivilized, semi civilized. British the scaled then scaled themselves as modern and labelled Muslims as medieval. Moreover, the writer surveys different school of thought such as utilitarian, romanticists and missionaries who form the fabric of the contest on scale and criterion of civilization. He concludes that the scale left a profound impact on the latter developments of European schemes for the understanding of history and civilization, he bolstered his argument by referring to Max Weber, Lord Acton, Croce and Collingwood. The paper ends on referring to Toynbee's synthesis of all criteria and scales which is based on literature, religion, philosophy and empire. In his understanding, Indo-Muslim fail to find a place of their own, but an alien intermixture of Hindu and Muslim Civilization.

Second last paper *Historiography and Identity: A Mid Nineteenth Century Perspective for Postmodern South Asia* focuses on the purpose of writing history. Writer established his theses by referring to the definition of history given by John Lewis Gaddis and interprets that history or 'historiography tends to understand identity and projects some sort of mature



identity: an identity perceived through historical process and the consciousness of that process'.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as he already established that the major material about south Asia was written in Colonial period, this paper focuses on the pre crown period and analyses the relation between two eras which reflects two different approaches. His main focus is on Elphinstone version of history. After 1857 British rule tried to unify Indian identity on western paradigm. This results in focus on the mid nineteenth century (1830-1840s) to explore any unbiased view of history. Elphinstone synthesized utilitarian romanticists and ethno-regional approach. He was a profound historian and diplomat. He has a sympathetic approach towards Indian history and culture. Elphinstone accepted the romanticist view of Indian civilization brought Muslim rule in the fold of Indian Civilization. He sympathetically treated Muslims of India a separate nation, but does not accept the unity of Muslims in the concept of Ummah. He understood the difference of nations and their traits as a result he proposed that Indians should be treated in accordance of their traits and culture, and endorsed the idea that company should have maximum authority to deal with Indigenous affairs. Writer summarizes the paper by referring to Charles Grant Duff, James Tod, J.D Cunningham as they tried to 'apply new western thought and institutions such as nationalism, liberalism and utilitarianism to the Indian scene'.<sup>6</sup> Writer concludes that though post colonialists and subalterns criticise the construction of knowledge of colonial period yet they use the same paradigm to combine the modern trends with British empire. They totally ignored the paradigm constructed by Elphinstone, Charles Grant Duff, James Tod, and J.D Cunningham, neglecting concept of indigenous nationalism, identities and using the same paradigm of colonial era.

Last thread of tapestry of British historiography of South Asia; *Modern Concept of Civilization: A Reassessment of its origin, Nature and Development* is strongly connected to the previous two papers they altogether form a thesis of writer on the concept of civilization. This paper was published on the time of

the death of Huntington, the author of *Clash of Civilization*. Writer highlights the idea that 'civilization' is a modern concept. It is blighted by the assumption that this concept is 'historian craft' and the result of the changes, progress occurred in the West during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Writer while comparing with other papers establishes that imperialism played a pivotal role in the development of modern western dynamic of socio-political construction. The concept of civilization has become a tool of political, cultural and academic dominance. Since 1990s it has been used in three forms end of history, clash of civilization and global civilization. Though the concept of Huntington became popular but this three-dimensional debate raised many essential questions about the nature of concept. Writer in his previous article comprehensively elaborated the contest of criteria and scale, this article is reminiscent a bit about criteria and scale of the previous. The writer concludes that the concept of clash is essential in the concept of civilization, as it weaves and unifies the concept of nation into a broader concept of civilization. This concept is used for the hierarchy of different societies with special reference to South Asian history. 'In this context, it seems a broader application of the understanding of the concept of civilization coming out of south Asian experience.'<sup>7</sup>

Overall this book is well written informative to both experts and common reader. This book is an actually a conceptual analysis of British historiography of South Asia, containing a postmodern perspective of history. Knitting beautifully numerous concepts in a single frame. However, there are two things of worth mentioning writer sometimes uses too long sentences, which takes time to understand the concept, secondly it needs a glossary of both concepts and figures.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Shafique, *British Historiography of South Asia: Aspects of Early Imperial Patterns and Perceptions*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

<sup>7</sup> ibid