

# **‘In the cause of literature and science’: Learned societies in colonial India**

## **1. Research questions and scholarly background**

Production of knowledge in colonial India is a well-studied field. A perusal of recent surveys of the field impresses upon the reader the importance of knowledge as a category to analyze the colonial condition.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, we come across two kinds of positions. One set of scholars argue that the practice of colonial domination was not confined to the exercise of military power. It consisted of a pedagogical, subjectivity-formation aspect as well. Colonial regimes instituted and presided over elaborate projects to produce knowledge about the colonized people—the census, the public health campaigns, geographic and archaeological surveys etc. Gradually, the colonized learnt to interpret their world through the forms and categories which these projects produced. In other words, new colonized forms of subjectivities were fashioned, and ‘colonial ideas about India’ turned into ‘lived realities for ordinary Indians’.<sup>2</sup> This line of enquiry also opened up opportunities to explore the manner in which the colonized people offered resistance, and produced ruptures in these colonial exercises of domination. Another set of scholars argue for a correction in the position just described. They do not contest the insight that colonial projects of knowledge production played a significant role in the formation of new subjectivities. Rather, they seek to explore the process of knowledge production itself, and underline the role that Indian actors played in it. In this reading, knowledge production becomes less of a European project, and more one of collaboration. This line of enquiry does not seek to deny the violence, the ruptures and transformations that colonialism entailed. Rather, it unravels the ‘heterogenous origins and objectives of colonial knowledge,’ and emphasizes ‘the often unstable, ad hoc, and contradictory aspects of its formation and historical unfolding.’<sup>3</sup> It looks for the agency of the colonized subject not only in their resistance to but also in their engagement with the colonial regime. Thus, the field has seen a shift from analyses of hegemonic colonial discourses to more localized research into complex interactions between the agents of colonial rule and their Indian interlocutors.

Broadly situated in the second line of enquiry, this project seeks to study learned societies of colonial India as a specific site of knowledge production and dissemination. Available surveys reveal that a wide range of societies were established in the period which aimed at the formation and communication of useful

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<sup>1</sup> This preliminary discussion of the broad field of knowledge production in colonial India relies on two sources, Indra Sengupta and Daud Ali Ed., ‘Introduction’ in *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 1-15, and, Norbert Peabody, ‘Knowledge Formation in Colonial India.’ *India and the British Empire*, eds. Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Peabody, ‘Knowledge Formation in Colonial India.’

<sup>3</sup> Peabody, ‘Knowledge Formation in Colonial India.’

knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The presidency towns were first to host societies—the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded in 1784, the Literary Society of Bombay (the precursor of the Asiatic Society of Mumbai) was formed in 1804, and the Madras Literary Society was founded in 1817. Significantly, all three of these societies predated the establishment of the Royal Asiatic Society back in London in 1823. In course of time, other urban centers outside the Presidency towns of India also began to host learned societies—the Gujarati Vernacular Society was founded in Ahmedabad in 1848, Anjuman-e-Punjab was established in Lahore in 1865, the Karnataka VidyavardhakaSangha was founded in Dharwad in 1890, the UtkalSahityaSamaj was formed in Cuttack in 1903, and the Assam SahityaSabha held its inaugural session in Sibsagar in 1917. This brief list does not aim to be exhaustive. Rather, it suggests the wide prevalence of a particular form of civic exertion for knowledge in colonial India. The term ‘literary’ in the names of these societies in fact signaled a wider range of intellectual pursuits across the scientific and philosophical spectrum. Although the work of some of the major societies have not passed unnoticed by scholars – not least because their publications are the most widely available – they have usually only been cherry-picked for what they tell us about the ‘Bengal renaissance’, or the origins of sociology in India, or the varieties of ‘orientalism’. A comprehensive and comparative account of these societies and their role in the formation of colonial modernity in Victorian India is not yet available. It is this task that the project seeks to address.

We will briefly describe three of the specific areas to which the proposed conference will draw scholarly attention. The first area concerns colonial print culture. Several of these societies generated a lively print culture of transactions, quarterly and annual journals, and other ephemera. In one sense, this print culture had a global reach. In another sense, it was often oriented towards a local community. More often than not, this global and local awareness was part of the same society’s self-understanding. Let us consider for instance, the ‘Introductory Notice’ of the Madras Journal of Literature and Science dated 1833. On the one hand, ‘with the view of rendering the Madras journal as valuable and attractive as possible,’ the editor aimed to include in it ‘either in their original state or in a condensed form, any articles of a peculiarly interesting nature that may appear in the Journals of the Asiatic Societies of Calcutta, London, and Paris.’ On the other hand, the editor also tied the success of the journal to ‘the exertions of the community of this Presidency’, presented it as ‘an ornament to the literary stores of our community’, and aimed to highlight ‘the great and remarkable difference which exists in the people, their institutions, and usages, in different parts of the British territory in the East.’ Taking such global and local awareness as a point of departure, the papers at the conference will study different aspects of the print culture the learned societies generated.

The second area concerns the uneven histories of power these societies were embedded in. Some of these were ‘great’ societies and others considerably ‘little’. Let us consider two speeches delivered by two presidents to their respective societies. Speaking at the inauguration of the Literary Society of Bombay in 1804, Sir James Mackintosh, the chief judge of the presidency, expressed ‘the hope that knowledge is destined one day to visit the whole earth, and in her beneficent progress to illuminate

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<sup>4</sup> See, the ‘Index of Organizations’ in Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature 1800-1910, Western Impact: Indian Response*, New Delhi: SahityaAkademi, 1991. Also, the ‘Index of Organizations’ in Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956, Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*, New Delhi: SahityaAkademi, 1995.

and humanize the whole race of man', and saw the 'small but respectable body of men assembled here...as detachments from the main body of civilized men sent out to levy contributions of knowledge, as well as to gain victories over barbarism.'<sup>5</sup> This tone of imperial ambition that aimed to humanize the whole race, and gain victories over barbarism stands in sharp contrast to the second speech. Speaking at the fifth annual session of the Kishor Chandra UtkalSahityaSamalochanaSamaj held in 1900, Kishor Chandra BirabarHarichandan, chief of Talcher, a princely state of about three hundred and ninety-nine square miles in Odisha, expressed great joy that '[s]ubscriptions for the previous and present year are more or less paid in full. Whatever small amount remains, it is expected, will be collected shortly.' He decidedly concluded that '[t]heir eagerness to deposit the subscriptions conveys the affection the members have for their society...'<sup>6</sup> The repeatedly expressed satisfaction at the successful collection of subscriptions suited the position of the chief whose role in the colonial political economy consisted in effective collection and payment of land revenue. The two societies, the 'great' one of Bombay and the 'little' one of Talcher are embedded in diverse histories of power. The papers at the conference will reconstruct such histories.

A third area concerns local and vernacular traditions of knowledge production, and their interface with the colonial societies. Let us consider for instance the Scientific Society which Syed Ahmed Khan and other members of the local landed elite established in Aligarh in 1864.<sup>7</sup> Its declared aim was to cause 'the blessed morning of civilization to dawn on the night of ignorance and darkness which for ages has retarded the advance of this country.' Towards this purpose, among other things, the society translated English language works on scientific agriculture such as Robert Scott Burn's *Outlines of Modern Farming* into local language. Its landed members endorsed the practice of enclosures and the use of modern farming tools. A horticultural garden and a model farm was set up to demonstrate the use of modern water pumps, and cultivation of wheat, barley and American cotton. What value did such colonial-modern interventions ascribe to local knowledge traditions about agriculture? Did they seek to replace the older and indigenous or wished to integrate it with the new systems? Did the new models of farming take root in the local agricultural society? The transformations which precolonial traditions of knowledge production went through during the formation of the early modern dispensation and the subsequent ascendancy of the colonial modern will be of vital interest to the conference.

## 2. Aims and objectives

The conference aims to produce an edited volume of essays which will offer a comprehensive and comparative account of the work of learned societies in colonial

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<sup>5</sup> 'A Discourse at the opening of the Literary Society of Bombay.' By Sir James Mackintosh, President of the Society. Read at Parel, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1804. *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay Vol. I*. London: Printed for Longman, Hurst et.al., 1819, p. xi. Reprinted at the Bombay Education Society's Press, 1877. Archive.org.

<sup>6</sup> Presidential Speech. Chief of Talcher State, and President of the society. Delivered at the Royal Palace, Talcher, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1900. Letter to the Editor, *The UtkalDipika*, 9 June 1900. odiabibhaba.in.

<sup>7</sup> Arshad Ali Azmi, 'The Aligarh Scientific Society 1864-1867' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 1969, Vol. 31 (1969), pp. 414-420. The society's first meeting was held in Ghazipur.

India. Towards this purpose, it will bring together a set of scholars, from a variety of academic disciplines including literature, history, sociology and anthropology, who are presently engaged in research on various learned societies in different regions and linguistic traditions of India.

The conference will also aim to create a digital collection of primary materials on diverse learned societies of colonial India. This collection may be housed in the library of the IAS, and be open to the general public. This particular aspect of the project will generate further academic research into the field, and will also enable a fruitful interface between academia and the general public at the IAS.

### **3. Impact and dissemination**

As mentioned earlier, there are studies and histories of particular societies and their contributions. However, a comprehensive and comparative account of the work of the learned societies in the production and dissemination of knowledge in colonial India is not available to the best of our knowledge. The conference will aim to bring together a set of scholars who will contribute papers on a wide selection of such learned societies. The exercise will bring several disciplines into a dialogue, and thus enable us to furnish a comprehensive and comparative analysis. We will take six to eight months after the conference to submit the papers for publication.