

## India, Halhed and the Early British Orientalism

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### I

Nathaniel Brassey Halhed<sup>1</sup> belonged to that small group of British scholars who came to India in the seventies of the eighteenth century and contributed significantly towards the emergence of Oriental Studies, then a new discipline. Halhed's eminence has been eclipsed by the brilliance of his friend Sir William Jones, the finest of all British Orientalists. He is chiefly remembered today as the first Englishman to write a Bengali grammar. His *A Grammar of the Bengal Language*, published in 1778, is one of the pioneering attempts towards a scientific study of the Bengali language. It is also a landmark in the history of Bengali printing press since Charles Wilkins, another illustrious friend of Halhed, cut the Bengali types for the first time and used them in this book. The significance of this work, however, cannot be properly appreciated unless it is studied in relation to the intellectual activities of British scholars and administrators in eighteenth century India in general and to the other works of Halhed in particular. I propose, therefore, to concentrate more on the attitude of Halhed to Indian culture in general than on a description of his Bengali grammar, if only because with the works of Halhed began a great intellectual encounter, though in unfortunate historical circumstances, between England and India, and *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* is a direct product of that encounter.

"The path which I have attempted to clear," wrote Halhed in the preface to his Bengali grammar, "was never before trodden."<sup>2</sup> When he made this statement, he was not aware—and I wonder if anyone else was aware at that time—that Manoel Da Assumpcam, a Portuguese missionary, had written a book entitled *Vocabulario em idioma Bengalla a Portuguez*<sup>3</sup> which was published from Lisbon in 1743, eight years before Halhed was born. In strict

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<sup>1</sup> The major source of information about Halhed is the *Dictionary of National Biography*, VIII, London, Oxford University Press, 1908, pp. 925-6. Abbreviated as DNB.

<sup>2</sup> Halhed, N.B. *A Grammar of Bengal Language*. Hooghly, n.p., 1778, preface, p. xix. Abbreviated as GBL.

<sup>3</sup> See *Manoel Da Assumpcao Bengali Grammar*, ed. and tr. by S.K. Chatterji and P.R. Sen. Calcutta, Calcutta University, 1931.

chronological sense, Manoel must be regarded as the first grammarian of Bengali. Nonetheless, Halhed's statement cannot be altogether dismissed. Neither was Halhed aware of the existence of Manoel's grammar nor is there any evidence to show that any Bengali scholar in the eighteenth century took any interest in the study of the grammar of his own language. It is not true that there was no tradition of grammatical learning in India before the advent of the Europeans. On the contrary, the corpus of grammatical literature in India was very rich and copious, and grammar formed an important component in traditional Indian education. But the Indian scholars, though deeply engrossed with the problems of Sanskrit grammar, and to some extent with that of Arabic and Persian hardly felt the necessity for preparing grammars of the living languages around them. There was no pedagogic necessity for a Bengali grammar since Bengali was not *studied* at a higher level. And most probably Bengali scholars did not consider Bengali, a language spoken by the common man, to be a proper subject for scholarly investigation. Scholars in other parts of the country too behaved more or less in a similar manner. So, it was the European scholars who wrote first grammars of modern Indian languages. But they were written for the European students of Indian languages and not for their native speakers. While Manoel wrote for the benefit of the young missionaries keen to spread the message of Christ in Bengal, Halhed wrote for the benefit of the British civil servants. Nevertheless, philological studies centering round these languages emerged with works written with similar intentions. It was Father Beschi, an Italian Jesuit, who wrote the first grammar of modern Tamil, and Angelos Francis, a Portuguese, who wrote the first grammar of Malayalam in Latin in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Urdu is indebted to John Gilchrist for its first grammar and dictionary, Sindhi to Ernest Trumpp and Panjabi to William Carey. It is hardly necessary to multiply the examples. What is important to note is how the initial enquiries into the languages and laws and religions of this country resulting from a utilitarian motive developed and matured into an academic discipline of far-reaching consequences. The Christian missionaries learnt Indian languages with a view to translate the Bible. But one must also remember that the foundation of the study of comparative philology was laid in this country by Robert Caldwell, a Christian missionary, when he published *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Languages* in 1856. It is well known that the British administrators' interest in modern Indian languages was not prompted by any intellectual curiosity. They learnt our languages for immediate practical necessity. But it is also true that a group of scholars and scholarly administrators went beyond the confines

of immediate necessities. Through their labours emerged a new intellectual movement which took a concrete shape in the Asiatic Society of Bengal established in 1784. Halhed left India in 1785, and he hardly took any serious interest in Oriental Studies after that period. But what he did between the years 1772 and 1784 was extremely significant. If the year of the publication of Charles Wilkins' translation of the Gita into English can be described as the dawn of Oriental Studies, Halhed can be called the morning star of British Orientalism.

Halhed, son of a director of the Bank of England, was born on 25 May 1751. It was a time when India had become a familiar name in England, and Milton's description of a fleet—"Close sailing from Bangala"—had become a part of the actual experience of English sailors. Robert Orme wrote *A General Idea of the Government and People of Hindostan* in 1752 and *History of the Military Transactions of the British Nations in Hindostan* eleven years later. These books won the praises of Walter Scott and later of Macaulay. It is not unlikely that Halhed acquired familiarity with India through the writings of Orme. Halhed studied at Harrow and later at Christ Church, Oxford. During his student days, he became friendly with two talented persons, namely, Richard Binsley Sheridan and William Jones. They represented, as it were, two different areas of human activity to each of which Halhed felt strong attraction. He dreamt of a literary career: at the age of twenty in 1771 he along with Sheridan published a translation of some of the epistles of a mid-fifth-century Greek writer Aristaenetus. The choice of such an obscure writer on erotic theme did not bring any success to Halhed. It did not receive any attention in England though it was reprinted in W.K. Kelly's *Erotica* in 1854, twenty-four years after Halhed's death. In fact, the muse of poetry did not favour him at all. Later in his life, he wrote a few verses in imitation of Martial, which we are told, showed "keen power of epigram" but were "suppressed on account of their personal allusions."<sup>4</sup>

The year 1771 was also the year of the publication of the grammar of Persian by William Jones who initiated Halhed in the study of Persian and Arabic. Around this time, Halhed was passing through a series of personal problems. In 1770, he collaborated with Sheridan in producing a play *Jupiter* and asked several people, including Jones, and probably Garrick, for help to ensure its theatrical success. And most probably this was the time when he was in deep love with Elizabeth Ann Linely (1754-1792), "celebrated for her singing in oratorios, and for beauty and virtue." Later she became the model of St. Cecilia and the

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<sup>4</sup> DNB, *op. cit.*

Virgin of Reynolds, and, as far as I could check, also the subject of a painting of Thomas Gainsborough. From a letter of Jones dated March 1, 1770 written to Halhed in beautiful Latin,<sup>5</sup> we know that he was a very sad man at that time. Jones writes, "Please write in Latin, if you will, and in a cheerful vein, since we must remove the sorrow which seems troubling you." Our conjecture is that the cause of the sorrow was Elizabeth's attitude to Halhed. Elizabeth was married to Sheridan after a romantic courtship involving an elopement and two duels between Sheridan and one Major Mathews in 1773 when Halhed was in the midst of his translation of Hindu Law in Calcutta. In that very letter Jones advises Halhed, "Keep up your attention to cultivated literatures and also be devoted to the arts and dedicated to philosophy." He was always devoted to cultivated literatures by which Jones obviously meant Greek and Latin. He had also studied history and religion, as we can see from his later writings but we do not know if he had taken any serious interest in grammatical studies.

From another letter of Jones<sup>6</sup> dated 18 August 1772 written to Viscount Althrop, it is known that by that time Halhed had acquired considerable fluency in Persian. Jones writes, "I received a letter from him (i.e., Halhed) the other day, partly in Persian and partly Latin, dated from the Cape of Good Hope. He was on his way to Bengal ... [H]e enlarges a great deal upon the leisure which so long a voyage affords for the study of languages, and above all of Astronomy."

Halhed reached Bengal in 1772 as a writer of the East India Company and within a short time attracted the notice of Warren Hastings who had become Governor of Bengal that year. The young man of twenty-one entered into a new phase of life. He took a new road altogether. He wanted to be a poet and a playwright. Could he think at that time by any stretch of imagination that he would be remembered even two hundred years later as the first grammarian of a language he was yet to learn? And did he feel, as one often does when one has to make a choice in life, and murmur like one of our modern poets:

I shall be telling this with a sigh

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<sup>5</sup> Letters by Williams Jones written either to Halhed or mentioning him are to be found in the *Collected Letters of Sir William Jones*, in two volumes, ed. Garland Cannon, Oxford, 1970. The first volume contains one letter by Jones written in Latin (pp. 46-8). There are five other letters containing reference to Halhed and to *A Code of Gentoo Law* (abbreviated CGL).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-5.

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.

## II

Warren Hastings, in the words of Percival Spear, was the first British administrator “to understand Indian culture as a basis for sound Indian administration.”<sup>7</sup> Hastings, one of the Romantic figures of mid-eighteenth-century Calcutta, had developed a love for exotic languages and literatures. He learnt Persian and Urdu and some Bengali too. He took the initiative towards the creation of a Chair of Persian at Oxford though without success, founded the Calcutta Madrasa, wrote an erudite introduction to Wilkins' *English translation of the Gita*, and took personal interest in the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He was the first British administrator to realise the immense importance of the knowledge of Indian languages for an effective administration. In 1773, when he appointed the first Committee of Revenue, he chose those who knew Persian and Urdu superseding the usual claims of senior officers. The few young men of scholarly attainments whom he found competent and useful were Jonathan Duncan, Charles Wilkins, Halhed and later William Jones. A couple of years before the arrival of Halhed, Wilkins came to Calcutta; he studied Sanskrit, translated the *Gita*, and in the words of one of his contemporaries, “gave to Asia typographic art.” Duncan who reached India in 1772 learnt Persian, Urdu and Bengali. His Bengali translation of the *Regulations for the Administration of Justice in Court of Dewany Adawlat* in 1785 happens to be the first printed prose-work in Bengali. Halhed, who must have started learning Sanskrit soon after his arrival in Calcutta, was asked by Hastings in 1774 to prepare a translation of a compendium of Hindu Law. That work was published two years later from London under the title *A Code of Gentoo Laws*. Halhed and Wilkins soon became great friends. He inspired Wilkins to study Sanskrit, and the evidence of their deep friendship is nowhere so pronounced as in *A Grammar of the Bengal Language*.

Hastings appointed a group of Sanskrit scholars to prepare a digest of Hindu Law as enumerated in the ancient texts. That was first translated into Persian and then into English by Halhed. One may recall that *A Code of Gentoo Laws* was published a year after the execution

<sup>7</sup> Spear, P. *The Oxford History of India*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 513.

of Maharaja Nandakumar who was tried at the Supreme Court by judges who had no knowledge of Persian or of any Indian language. Whether Hastings aspired to be an Indian Justinian is indeed debatable, but there is little doubt that he was very anxious to acquire a thorough understanding of the languages and laws of India. His as well as Halhed's curiosity to understand the cultural patterns of India prompted Halhed to compare their situation with that of the Romans studying Greek. In the preface of *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, he writes:

[M]uch of the success of the Romans may be attributed, who not only allowed to their foreign subjects the free exercise of their own religion, and the administration of their own civil jurisdiction, but sometimes, by a policy still more flattering, even naturalised such parts of the mythology of the conquered, as were in any respect compatible with their own system.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, there exists a similarity between the two situations, Romans learning Greek and Englishmen Indian languages. Halhed refers to the similarity once more in the preface to his Bengali grammar.

The similarity, however, must be studied with some reservation. The result of the contact with Greek letters through Livius Andronicus was far-reaching in Roman society. That contact helped Rome to acquire a new vision of life which was manifested in her art and literature. Romans were so fascinated by the Greek language and literature that even a fiery defender of the purity of Roman culture such as Cato turned to the Greek language in his later years. The victors learnt the language of the vanquished simply because they accepted the superiority of their subjects in certain spheres of creative activity. In India, on the other hand, the British learnt the languages of their subjects for different reasons. And, unlike the Romans, they never read Indian literature with any aesthetic interest. Livius, Naevius and Ennius gave Rome a new literature on Hellenic model but neither Jones nor even Edward Fitzgerald in the nineteenth century contributed anything to the main streams of English literature. Jones' translation of Oriental poetry and his original compositions such as the "Hymn to Narayana" failed to sustain any lasting effect, and Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*, though immensely popular in Victorian England, can hardly be compared with the Roman response to Greek poetry. The statement of Halhed, however, was made at a time when

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<sup>8</sup> CGL. Preface, pp. ix-x.

Europe's knowledge of Indian civilization was extremely inadequate and therefore, her response to India was still very superficial. This testament of Halhed embodied the hope of an enthusiastic young man which was never fulfilled. He hoped and believed that like the Romans, the British too would try to absorb some elements of Oriental civilization. But what he believed even more strongly was that a study of Indian languages and laws would foster a spirit of understanding between the ruler and the ruled, as evidenced by the following statement of his:

The Romans, a people of little learning and less taste, had no sooner conquered Greece than they applied themselves to the study of Greek. They had adopted its laws even before they could read them, and civilised themselves in subduing their enemies. The English who have made so capital a progress in the Polite Arts, and who are masters of Bengal, may, with more ease and greater prosperity, add its language to their acquisitions; that they may explain the benevolent principles of that legislation with decrees they enforce; that they may convince while command and be at once the dispensers of Laws and science to an extensive nation.<sup>9</sup>

### III

*A Code of Gentoo Laws* is divided into twenty-one chapters based on authoritative legal texts including the *Manu Samhita* and the *Mitakshara*. Although it was prepared with great care and translated into English by a competent man, it was not free from glaring defects. In 1788, William Jones observed that the Persian interpreter had supplied him (ie., Halhed) only with a loose injudicious epitome of the original Sanskrit in which abstract many original passages were omitted.<sup>10</sup> In another letter, Jones wrote, “a translation in the third degree from the original must be as you will easily imagine, very erroneous.”<sup>11</sup> Halhed in fact had very little freedom in designing the work. Jones' translation of the *Manu Samhita* and Colebrooke's *Vivadabhangarnava*, both published in the last decade of the eighteenth century, removed some of the basic shortcomings of Halhed's work. Its defects and errors notwithstanding, *A Code of Gentoo Laws* still remains a fascinating document. Its long and copious introduction

<sup>9</sup> GBL. Preface, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Cannon, *op. cit.* Letter to the first Marquis of Cornwallis, dated 19 March 1778, p. 797.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter to Arthur Lee dated 28.9.1778, p. 821.

is extremely valuable if only because here Halhed anticipated certain ideas and views of the Orientalists who came after him. Halhed devotes fairly long space to the Sanskrit language and speaks about its grammar and versification and its affinities with other languages. He writes:

The Sanskrit language is very copious and nervous but the style of the best authors wonderfully concise. It far exceeds the Greek and Arabic in the regularity of its etymology, and like them has a prodigious number of derivatives from each primary root. The grammatical rules also are numerous and different though there are not many anomalies.<sup>12</sup>

Two years later, Halhed went a step forward when he wrote in the preface to the Bengali grammar, “I have been astonished to find the similitude of Sanskrit words with those of Persian and Arabic and even of Latin and Greek,” and conjectured that they all derived from the same source.<sup>13</sup> Eight years later Jones declared:

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of 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 be produced by accident. So strong indeed, that no philologer could examine all three, without believing that they have sprung from some common source, which perhaps, no longer exists...<sup>14</sup>

It is true that G.W. Leibnitz assumed in his *Miscellanea Berolinesia* (1710) that most of the languages of Asia and Europe were descended from one language. But his observation had no

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<sup>12</sup> CGL, preface, p. xxiii.

<sup>13</sup> GBL, preface, p. iv.

<sup>14</sup> See the third anniversary discourse delivered at the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal on 2 February 1786, included in *The Works of Sir William Jones*, ed. Lord Teignmouth, Vol. III, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1807, p. 34.



real basis. It was, as Pedersen calls it, “some sort of inspired intuition.”<sup>15</sup> Halhed's statement, on the other hand, was based on certain observed facts. He did not substantiate his statement with data, but when Bopp published his famous work on the conjugation system of several European languages along with Sanskrit and Old Persian in 1816, Halhed's statement was vindicated in ample measure.

In fact, this introduction abounds with observations in respect of possible affinities, not only linguistic in nature, but cultural affinities between India and Europe, and Hinduism and Judaism. For example, Halhed finds it “remarkable” that the days of the week are named in the Sanskrit from the same planets to which they are assigned by the Greeks and Romans: *Ravi* and *Solis*, *Soma* and *Luna*, *Mangal* and *Martis*, *Vudha* and *Mercuri*, *Vrihaspati* and *Jovia*, *Shukra* and *Veneris*, *Shani* and *Saturni*. Max Mueller felt a comparable thrill when his teacher wrote on the black-board in parallel columns the numerals and pronouns and certain verbs in Sanskrit and Greek and Latin. He felt they opened a *new world* before him and he recalled later how a new historical consciousness dawned in him. This new historical consciousness, which created several disciplines such as Comparative Philology and Comparative Mythology, first appeared in the writings of Halhed in its embryonic form.

The battle of the Mahabharata, the Kurukshetra war between the Kurus and Pandavas, reminds Halhed of the battles in the Homeric epics. He notices the similarities between the ritual of scape-goat among the Jews and the horse-sacrifice, the *ashwamedha*, of the ancient Hindus. When he mentions Viswakarma, the divine architect and engineer, Halhed exclaims, “Was it a chance or inspiration that furnished our admirable Milton with exactly the same idea, which had never before occurred to a European imagination?”<sup>16</sup>

All these observations of Halhed record a sense of joy and wonder that comes from one's contact with a new world and new experience. His appreciation as well as his occasional criticisms of this new world was not prejudiced either by any imperial pride or by any romantic longing for the exotic. He commends the wisdom of the Hindus and laments their “most deplorable ignorance in some of the practical sciences, particularly geography.”<sup>17</sup> He describes the Hindu legal texts as depositories of “genuine sentiments of a great and

<sup>15</sup> Pedersen, H. *The Discovery of Language* (1931). Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1962, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> CGL, preface, p. liii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

flourishing people,” but does not hesitate to criticise the attitude of Manu, along with the author of the *Proverbs*, towards women. He finds a “striking resemblance between the two which are so censorious or so unjust as to deny the possibility of excellence in the female sex.”<sup>18</sup> Halhed's comments on Sanskrit literature and Hindu Law and Mythology too, though not always accurate, are significant. He stands apart from the average Englishmen's insularity and from the racial pride of scholars and administrators like Macaulay, and also the uncritical enthusiasm of later Indophiles. Like his friend William Jones, he had a cosmopolitan mind.

#### IV

Some scholars are sceptical about Halhed's knowledge of Sanskrit. It is true that he did not translate any Sanskrit text. But that he studied Sanskrit quite intensively is evidenced from his observations on that language. The section on the versification in Sanskrit contains some interesting comments on the general nature of Sanskrit poetry. He gives a few specimens of Sanskrit verses and observes, “The specimens give us no despicable idea of the old Hindoo Bards. The images are in general lively and pleasing, the diction elegant and concise and the metres not inharmonious.”<sup>19</sup> His reading in Sanskrit poetry was not as wide as that of Jones or Colebrooke, and his samples are certainly not very exciting. I quote some of them along with Halhed's own translation, they being the earliest specimens of English translation of Sanskrit poetry.

*pitā ca ṛṇavān śatruḥ mātāśatruraśīlinī*  
*bhāryā rūpavati śatruḥ putrah śatrurpanditah*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. Ixi.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. xxviii.

<sup>20</sup> *ṛṇa-kartā pitā śatrur mātā ca vyabhichāriṇī*  
*bhāryā rūpavatī śatruḥ, putrah śatrur apanḍitah*

It is claimed that King Sudarshana had heard this in Narayana's *Hitopadesha* (circa 800-950 CE). While the meaning of the two verses is exactly similar, the first line is differently worded in the first verse.

A father in debt is an enemy to his son.  
A mother of scandalous behaviour is an enemy (to her son).  
A wife of beautiful figure is an enemy (to her husband).  
A son of no learning is an enemy (to his parents).

*šašinā ca nišā nišavā ca šaši*  
*šašinā nišayā ca vibhāti nabhah*  
*payasā kamalam kamalen payah*  
*payasā kamalena vibhāti sarah*

The night is for the moon and moon is for the night,  
When the moon and the night are together it is glory of the heavens.  
The lotus, or water-lily, is for the stream, and the stream is for water-lily,  
When the stream and the water-lily meet, it is the glory of the canal.

*svajano nayāti vairam parahita vuddhir vināśakālepi*  
*chedepi candana taru surabhayati mukham kuthārasya*

A good man goes not upon enmity,  
But it will be inclined towards another even while he is ill-treated by him,  
So even while the sandal tree is falling.  
It imparts to the edge of the axe its aromatic flavour.

*sajjanasya hṛdayam navanītam*  
*yad vadanti vibudhāstadalikam*  
*anya deha vilasat paritāpāt*  
*sajjano dravanti no navanītam<sup>21</sup>*

The good man's heart is like butter,

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<sup>21</sup> According to the informant of Halhed this verse is from Vedic texts. Halhed, however, was quick to understand the falsity of the information. He knew that very few pundits could read the Vedas at that time (CGL, p. xxxi).

The poet says, but herein they are mistaken,  
 Upon beholding another's life exposed to calamities,  
 The good man melts, but it is not so with butter.

These verses, of course, cannot be considered fine specimens of Sanskrit literature. It seems Halhed perhaps had no acquaintance with the major poets of Sanskrit, at least at the time when he was engaged with the translation of the Hindu Law. But he had certainly read the *Gita* by that time as one finds the following translation of one of the verses of the *Gita* in the introduction of *A Code to Gentoo Laws*:

As throwing aside his old habits  
 A man puts on others that are new;  
 So, our lives quitting the old  
 Go to other newer animals.<sup>22</sup>

Halhed's interest in Sanskrit literature, although very limited, remained alive even after his return to England. His correspondence with Warren Hastings reveals that between 1800 and 1816 he made considerable progress with an English translation of the *Mahabharata* from a Persian version.<sup>23</sup> It was the period when Halhed was associated with Richard Brothers whose ideas, we are told, resembled Oriental mysticism.

What intrigued Halhed most was the Hindu view of History as well as the allegories and symbolisms obscuring the meaning of Hindu texts. He, like other scholars of that time, was baffled by the Hindu view of time which refused to make any distinction between mythical and historical. Halhed warns his readers that Hinduism cannot be examined by the standards of Christianity or standards which are generally employed in understanding Christianity. The Hindus, he observes, claim equal right to assume the veracity of their own scriptures and “esteem the astonishing miracles attributed to a Brihma (Brahma), a Ram or Krishen (Krṣṇa), as facts of the most indubitable authenticity and the relation of them as most strictly historical.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, this was the basis of a series of controversies between the

<sup>22</sup> CGL, preface, p. xv.

<sup>23</sup> DNB, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> CGL, Preface, p. xv.

exponents of Hinduism and of Christianity in the nineteenth century. *The New Testament* from the very beginning was largely in writing and the period of oral tradition was very short in the history of Christianity. Both *Old* and *New Testament* are based upon a theory of Deity as the Lord of History. The spatio-temporal order is not an endless series of cycles but leads to a climax which is at the end of, but beyond, history.<sup>25</sup> The Hindu sacred books, on the other hand, belonged exclusively to the oral tradition for a long time, and the Hindu theory of Deity does not provide a framework to determine the significance of historical events. It was certainly difficult for a man born and brought up within a Judaic-Christian tradition to appreciate the Hindu who assigned his sacred texts to a period infinitely more remote than is authorized by the belief of the rest of mankind. Halhed exclaims in exasperation, “[A]ll computation is lost and conjectures overwhelmed in the attempt to adjust such astonishing spaces of time to our own confined notions of world's epoch.” One might notice an echo of this feeling in the words of Goethe who wrote to Humboldt in 1826 about Indian art: “They draw my imagination into the formless and the diffuse,”<sup>26</sup> the “limitless spaces” of the Hindu world made him as bewildered and uncomfortable as was Halhed. He noticed, rather naively though, a similarity between the Hindu division of epochs: *satya*, *treta*, *dwapara* and *kali* and those mentioned by Moses. *Dwapara* in which men are said to have thousand years of life corresponds with the Mosaic era of Antediluvians, and the commencement of the *Kali yug* comes very near to the period of deluge. Halhed must have been shocked and amused when the Brahmin pundits brushed aside all his theories by declaring “all their scriptures were written before the time by us allotted to Noah and that the Deluge never took place in Hindustan.”<sup>27</sup> So baffled was Halhed that it was not possible for him to fix any date of the texts he translated.

George Costard (1710-1782) in a review of *A Code of Gentoo Laws* in 1778 disputed the high antiquity claimed for the texts which formed the basis of Halhed's work.<sup>28</sup> Halhed suggested the possibility of settling some of the problems of date through collateral proofs. He found correspondence between some parts of the institutes of Moses and those of Manu. He thought it was “not utterly impossible that the doctrine of Hindostan might have been

<sup>25</sup> Bouquet, A.C. *Sacred Books of the World*. Maryland, Penguin, 1954, pp. 203-4.

<sup>26</sup> Letter written to Humboldt, dated 22 October 1826.

<sup>27</sup> CGL, preface. p. xl.

<sup>28</sup> DNB, *op. cit.*

early transplanted into Egypt and thus have become familiar to Moses.”<sup>29</sup> But there is hardly any evidence to show that Jewish law is in any way indebted to the Hindu law. What is, however, interesting in this attempt is Halhed's thoughtful analysis of certain ideas and concepts common between Manu and the author of *Proverbs*, as well as between the Brahmins and the Levites. There are scholars who believe that the Jews during their deportation period became familiar with ideas current in Mesopotamia and certain Hindu ideas did infiltrate in that area at that time. But it is quite possible that the Hindus and the Jews had developed their legal thought independently of one another. Halhed, however, finds very interesting parallels between the Levites and the Brahmins: both being a priestly class enjoying certain prestige in the society. Moses prohibited the rest of the people from any intercourse with the profession of priesthood. Levites were asked to avoid contact with the people who were supposed to be “unclean.” And so were the Brahmins. The chapter XV of *Leviticus*, which certainly was at the back of Halhed's mind, enumerates various types of unclean which can be compared with the Brahmanical view of the unclean.

The chapter XX of *A Code of Gentoo Laws* entitled "Of What Concerns Women" reminds Halhed of Solomon who, in his words, “has as much experience in women as any pundit in any of the four jogues (auga i.e., epoch).”<sup>30</sup> A striking resemblance between the author of *Proverbs* and Manu in respect of their unfair attitude to women prompts Halhed to reflect on the position of women in Asia in particular. “Women have been the subjects,” writes Halhed, “not the partners of their lords. Confined within the walls of a Harem or busied without doors in drudgeries little becoming their delicacy.” It is not the attitude towards women alone but the similarity between the two codes in many other respects which encourages Halhed to think that they had “originally some remote affinity to each other though conjecture cannot possibly trace the source of the connection.”<sup>31</sup>

Halhed's primary intention was to study a culture unfamiliar to him in comparison with a culture more known. His studies eventually led him to realise a basic unity in human culture. What he admired in Hindu culture was this faith in unity. He described the short essay written by the pundits who helped him in his translation not only as “a piece of dignity and sentiment and feeling towards all their fellow creatures of every profession” but also as

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<sup>29</sup> CGL, preface, p. xliv.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxviii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxxii.

“an article of faith among the Brahmins that God's all merciful power would not have permitted such a number of different religions, if He had not found a pleasure in beholding the varieties.<sup>32</sup> It is Halhed, too, who found pleasure in beholding the varieties in human life and culture and who always looked for a thread of unity among them. May be because of this attitude the idea of an affinity between Sanskrit and Persian and Greek and Latin flashed in his mind long before Jones' more assertive statement. This attitude is reflected in an ample measure in the concluding remarks of his in the preface to *A Code of Gentoo Laws* pleading for the necessity of the comparative study of jurisprudence.

[T]hey (ie, the Hindu legal texts) abound with maxims of general policy and justice, which no particularity of manners or diversity of religious opinions can alter, as they may become useful references for a number of national and local distinctions in our own sacred writings, and as the several powers of the mind, in the gradual progress of civilization, may be judicious comparisons from hence be investigated almost to their first principles.<sup>33</sup>

## V

Within two years after the publication of *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, Halhed's *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* was printed. Several Bengali scholars have tried to discover a link between the two works. The former contained a glossary of Indian words, a considerable number of which is Bengali. But it would be too much to claim that “what began in *A Code of Gentoo Laws* matured in the grammar of the Bengali language.”<sup>34</sup> The real binding force between the two works is Halhed's concern to ensure the possibilities of “intercourse between the Government and its subjects” at various levels. Soon after his arrival in Bengal, Halhed found that Bengali “was the sole channel of personal and epistolary communication among the Hindoos of every occupation and tribe. All their business is transacted and all their accounts

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xlviii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. lxxiii-iv.

<sup>34</sup> Das, S. *Bangla Gadya Sahityer Itihas*, Revised ed., Calcutta, Dey's Publishing, 1962, p. 29. Also see Chattopadhyay, S., *Bangla Sahitye Europiya Lekhak*, Calcutta, Farma K.L.M., 1972, p. 113.

are kept in it.”<sup>35</sup> A knowledge of Bengali, therefore, was extremely necessary for any British officer. He wrote a grammar of Bengali not because he had any special love for that language but because he found that language useful for the officers of the East India Company.

When Halhed wrote the Bengali grammar he had no model before him. “It was necessary,” he wrote, “that I should make up my own choice of the course to pursue and of the landmarks to be set for the guidance of future travellers.”<sup>36</sup> His ideas and attitudes towards language must have been formed under the influence of grammatical thinking in contemporary England. He was born and brought up at a time when new ideas in respect of linguistic studies had dawned in England. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary was published in 1775 when Halhed was a mere child, but as a young man he must have consulted that work whose chief aim was to preserve the “purity” of English. Johnson wrote, “I have studiously endeavoured to collect examples from the writers before the Restoration, whose works I regard as the wells of English undefiled, as the pure source of genuine diction.” Even before Johnson, several scholars and writers had become too anxious about the purity of English. In 1698, four years after the establishment of the French Academy, Daniel Defoe proposed the formation of a similar academy “to establish purity and propriety of style.” Dryden, too, in his dedication to *Troilus and Cressida* talks about “certainty of words and purity of phrase,” and William Warburton complained in 1747 that the English tongue was “destitute of a standard because it has neither a grammar nor a dictionary to guide us through this wide sea of words.” This concern for purity and also for standardization of style was reflected in Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) which became the most influential English grammar of that century. One year earlier, another grammar entitled *The Rudiments of English Grammar* was published. That was written by Joseph Priestly, a versatile writer on many subjects, including Chemistry, who advocated the primacy of usage. “The custom of speaking,” he wrote, “is the original and only standard of any language.” Lowth's approach on the other hand was strongly prescriptive. He believed that “the principal design of a grammar of any language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that language and to enable us to judge every phrase and form of construction, whether it is right

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<sup>35</sup> GBL, preface, p. xiv.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix.



or not.<sup>37</sup> Even a casual glance at Halhed's grammar would convince anyone that these notions and principles had strongly influenced his study of the Bengali language.

Halhed recorded what he observed, but so strongly was he guided by the notion of purity that he was highly critical of the state of Bengali in respect of the preponderance of Perso-Arabic vocables in everyday Bengali speech. He knew that Bengali had been exposed to the influences of Persian and Arabic and Portuguese and English. He had noticed that quite a few English words, *decree*, *appeal*, *warrant*, *summons*, to cite a few examples, had already been naturalised in Bengali. But Halhed wrote, "I have avoided with some care, the admission of such words as are not natives of the country, and for that reason I have selected all my instances from the most authentic and ancient compositions."<sup>38</sup> While he was aware of the importance of loan-words in a language, he was also determined to present a grammar of "pure" Bengali. He culled all the examples from verse, particularly from the *Mahabharata* of Kashiram Das and *Annadamangal* of Bharat Chandra Ray, Bengali literature of that time being written entirely in verse. The only specimen of prose that he could collect was written in Persianised Bengali. Like Monsieur Jourdain of Moliere, he did not realise that Bengalis around him had been speaking prose all the time. But alas, how many Bengali grammarians realised that even hundred years later.

Many Bengali scholars have praised Halhed for his emphasis on Sanskrit in explaining the rules of Bengali. S.K. De, for example, writes, "One merit of this book consists ... in the fact that Halhed was fully alive to the intimate relation of Bengali to Sanskrit."<sup>39</sup> Halhed, however, did not insist on accepting the categories of Sanskrit grammar in understanding Bengali; his analysis of Bengali case system as well as his observations on Bengali number and gender are examples to this effect. But his notion of purity and corruptness was so strong that it often acted as a hindrance to his understanding of the current Bengali. While discussing pluralization in Bengali, to give an instance, he writes, "In the modern and corrupt dialect of Bengali the syllable *raa* is sometimes added to the nominative

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<sup>37</sup> See Dinneen, F.P. *An Introduction to General Linguistics*. New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1967, pp. 157-61, and also Gleason, H.A., *Linguistics and English Grammar*. New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1965, pp. 68-70.

<sup>38</sup> GBL, preface, pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>39</sup> De, S.K. *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1962, p. 77.

of a singular noun to form a plural.”<sup>40</sup> His observation is accurate but he describes that as corrupt, and censures such usages. Perhaps he believed in arresting linguistic changes and restoring “past glories” of a language. Speaking about the Bengali pronunciation of sibilants - Bengali alphabet distinguishes between dental, palatal and retroflex sibilants though they do not show any contrast – Halhed comments, rather irritatingly that the modern Bengali “equally careless and ignorant of all arts but those of gains, indiscriminately gives the sound *sh* to each of these three characters (*i.e.*, characters representing the palatal, dental and retroflex sibilants) and applies them indifferently.”<sup>41</sup> However justified he may be in rebuking the Bengalis for their moral lapses, there is hardly any reason why the Bengalis should not speak their language the way they speak. Halhed did not know that merger and split of phonemes were common features in the development of any language. He did not notice that three sibilants had already merged into one sound at the proto-Bengali stage.

Halhed accurately observed that the verb to do (*karā*) was often construed in Bengali with a noun. “The number of verbs,” he wrote, “used by them is very insufficient to the beauty and energy of a language.” He condemned the practice of using a verbal phrase consisting of a noun followed by the verb *to do*, instead of a verb (*e.g.*, *nibedan kari*, “submission I do,” instead of *nibedi* “I submit”). He finds the same feature in modern Persian also which replaces simple verbs by Arabic nouns and Persian auxiliaries.<sup>42</sup> Halhed disliked this feature and prescribed that Bengali writers should avoid nouns and *karā* type construction. About eighty years later, a Bengali poet tried to introduce large number of denominatives avoiding the *karā* type constructions but his bold and heroic experiments remained confined only to his writings.

It is easy to find faults in Bengali grammar written by a foreigner two hundred years ago.<sup>43</sup> But one must admit that Halhed's grammar is a valuable document in the history of

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<sup>40</sup> GBL, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>43</sup> The Rev. James Long created a wrong impression, inadvertently though, about Halhed's knowledge of Bengali. In an article (*Calcutta Review*, 1850) he wrote, "so remarkable was his proficiency in colloquial Bengali that he has been known to disguise himself in a native dress and to pass as a Bengali in assemblies of Hindus." Long confused the author of Bengali Grammar with his nephew N.J. Halhed who studied at the Fort William College and later



prose, though Halhed did not live to see that stage of Bengali literature.<sup>46</sup> But he was the first man to speak eloquently about the potentiality of Bengali prose. He wrote that Bengali prose would be “much better calculated both for public and private affairs by its plainness, its precision and regularity of construction, than the flowery sentences and modulated periods of the Persian.”<sup>47</sup> This was perhaps the first ever praise for Bengali which had hardly any prestige at that time. Bengali became a powerful instrument of expression of a new thought and experience within a century. That thought and experience were the results of an encounter between two cultures, namely British and Indian, which started with Nathaniel Brassey Halhed.

(Lecture delivered at the National Library, Calcutta, in 1978.)

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<sup>46</sup> See, De. S.K., *op. cit.*, Das, S.K., *Early Bengali Prose*, Calcutta, Bookland Private, Ltd., 1966.

<sup>47</sup> GBL, preface, p. xvii.

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