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# The Asiatic Society and its Vision of Science : Metropolitan Knowledge in a Colonial World

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The Asiatic Society established by William Jones in 1784 was inspired by a quest for truth, knowledge and enlightenment. Its model was the Royal Society of London (1660). By the 18th century science had dramatically changed European philosophy, culture and society. The obsession with the rationalist pursuit of knowledge, the will to explore the world, to venture into untrodden territories and to find order and laws in the apparent chaos of nature, informed European rationalist epistemology. Science was integral to that agenda. The Royal Society came to epitomise that search, the endeavour for truth, in the 19th century.[1] In 1820, Sir Humphrey Davy, on taking the chair at the ordinary meeting of the Royal Society, lectured on 'Present State of Royal Society and the Progress and Prospect of Science'. He concluded with such assertions.

> Gentlemen, to conclude, I trust in all our researches are shall be awakened by our great masters, Bacon and Newton. ... I trust that those amongst us who are so fortunate as to kindle the light of new discoveries, will use them, not for the purpose of dazzling the organs of intellectual vision, but rather No enlighten us, by showing objects in their true forms and colours; that our philosophers ... will look, where it be possible, to practical application in science, not, however forgetting the dignity of their pursuits, the noblest end of which is, to exalt the powers of the human mind and to increase the sphere of intellectual enjoyment, by enlarging our views of nature,...[2]

Steven Shapin's thesis of the social legitimisation of truth in 17th century England argues that the making of knowledge in general takes place on a moral field and mobilises particular appreciation of the virtues and characteristics of types of people.[3] The *Gentleman* in seventeenth century England was a person who was trusted to speak the truth. He was accounted to be such a man who had no inducement to misrepresent fact or to shift his commitment towards reality. It was for this reason that the early Royal Society had aristocrats as its most prominent members. But such a

sociological approach to the question of truth by itself cannot explain the rise of 'truth' as an objective social virtue. Any hegemony does justify itself through an articulation of its conformity to the truth. Thus in 17th century England, where the 'gentleman' was emerging as a dominant social and cultural entity, his *ability* to speak the truth would be obvious. What remains to be answered is why science became such a crucial component in that truth. Why did Boyle take up science or natural philosophy the way he did? Why did only certain aspects of its complex project involving Christianity and natural philosophy, appear as 'truth'?[4] The ascent of 'truth' as an objective social value and that of science as the dominant truth can be traced in the nature of European Enlightenment thought, which had placed truth and reality as its basic moral value along with humanism. 'Authority', 'testimony', 'evidence', and 'truth' had become the dominant concerns and concepts like 'truth' and 'fact' were entrusted with new moral significance when introduced in the field of natural philosophy.[5]

The establishment of the Asiatic Society has to be seen in correspondence to such an intellectual development. William Jones, while writing a paper for the Asiatic Society expressed his similar concerns for 'truth' and 'vision',

> It is painful to meet perpetually with words that convey no distinct ideas, and a natural drive of avoiding that pain excites us often that (sic) to make inquiries, the result of which can have no other use than to give us clear conception. Ignorance is to the mind what extreme darkness is to the nerves; both cause an uneasy sensation, and naturally we love knowledge as we love light, even when we have no design of applying either to a purpose essentially useful.[6]

To this was added the Asiatic Society's particular agenda of a search for the Orient—the 'Other' of the Occident. What made the project more challenging, the 'darkness' more engulfing was the geographical and cultural location of India so far away from Europe. It posed new challenges to the scientific theories originating from the Centre. Baconian science in the colony had to conquer nature in a strange and remote land. Jones, while inaugurating the Asiatic Society, found this task of exploration and investigation almost daunting;

> I could not help remarking, how important and extensive a field was yet unexplored, and how many solid advantages unimproved, and when I consider with pain that, in the fluctuating, imperfect and limited conditions of life, such inquiries and improvements, could only be made by the united efforts of many.[7]

Thus the spirit of exploration became central to these scientific pursuits. Jones' instructions to his colleagues were very clear, "... you will investigate whatever is rare in the stupendous fabric of nature, will correct the geography of 'Asia' by the new observation and discoveries..."[8] Science in the colony manifested itself in an obsession to synthesise and order a strange and complex world. *Asiatic Researches,* a journal published from



the Society, defined its scientific activities as an urge, (to) 'acquire an accurate knowledge of facts to a synthetic explanation of particular phenomenon...'[9]

This was the primary logic for the major scientific surveys in colonial India. Map-making formed an important pre-occupation. The initiation of detailed topographical surveys based on a rigid framework, was undertaken around the closing years of the 18th century when the Great Trigonometrical Surveys were started by William Lambton. Lambton wanted to ascertain the great geographical features of this country on correct mathematical principles, the maps of every district could then be combined into one general map.[10] The purely map-making work of the Survey of India, however, began at an earlier date-1767. By the 2oth century it had surveyed and mapped 1,304,453 square miles of India and Burma out of a total of 1,884,640 square miles.[11] Map-making in the colonies had become and remained the primary of object of survey. So much so that Sir Sidney Burrand, Surveyor General of India, reviewing past work of the department, commented as late as 1905, 'The primary object of a national survey is the making of Maps, and all operations subordinated to that end...'[12] In a major way Lambton's Trigonometrical Surveys served the important purpose of mapping the Indian Empire. It not only provided a highly effective informational weapon, it also provided what Matthew Edney calls 'structures of feeling', the transformation of the subcontinent from an exotic, unknown region into a well-defined geographical entity.[13]

The need and the process of arranging and institutionalising the scattered materials of Indian natural world was illustrated in the words of the geologist, captain J. Campbell:

> In collecting information on Indian geology, the greatest difficulty appears to be, that the number of people, who have time and opportunities of the pursuit, are very few; but if everyone who chooses to attend to the subject, would apply himself, to compile accurate description of the part of the country, adjacent to their station, one should soon have a valuable collection of the geology of isolated spots, which those who are employed by the government in those scientific pursuits could soon and easily connect together.[14]

To order the natural world it was necessary to first organise its study. The need was to institutionalise scientific research particularly devoted to the collecting and collating of scientific information. Discussing geological researches, Campbell added,

> In the furtherance of this end, a geological society would be of the utmost advantage,—they would receive and assist in the discussions of such information, compare specimens, have chemical examinations made, and afford that information and direction to tyros which no printed work on the subject could give—and particularly any individual of the society who has had the advantage of studying the science practically in Europe, could then afford the most valuable information, in identifying minerals with those of Europe.[15]