

Ambivalent Representation of India and its Politics in Hodges's *Travels in India*¹

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Abstract

This paper analyzes ambivalent representation of India in William Hodges' Travels in India. The exploration of politics behind such representation can be interesting area to investigate. The writer has tried to portray the contradiction between ruins, antiquity, and depopulated habitation on the one hand; and modification, cultivation, and populated habitation, on the other. The horrendous act of sati has been depicted in a smart way as Hodges does not criticize Hindu tradition of self-immolation of wives for the death of their husbands; while the same custom was declared illegal and punishable later by English rulers in India during colonial time. Similarly, Hindu art and architecture has not been observed with the spectacle of Greek art which was considered model worldwide; rather it has been depicted as superb and guided by climate, culture, and geography of its own. Promod K. Nayar's notion of imperial sublime, Saree Makdisi's Romantic imperialism, and Julie Reiser's idea on writer as shared nervous system of circumstances have been used to strengthen the argument. The study concludes that the ambivalent representational stances created in Hodges' narrative try to justify English rule in India in the consolidation phase of the empire. Previous studies highlighted deserted landscape, customs, populations mainly focusing on the representation of Hindus, their art, architecture, the Muslim indolence resulting in devastation and ruin. This study, however, investigated the ambivalent representation and its politics behind the portrayal of the need of English presence in India for modification and habitation. Finally, this study also throws light on the gap for future research on the circumstances that led to the development of negative representation of the natives in colonial writing.

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I

William Hodges (1794), in his travel narrative— *Travels in India* written during the consolidation phase of British rule in India in the late 18th century— appears to be an enthusiastic observer of the manners and customs of Indian inhabitants. His positive or negative perspective on representation of India and its people has received considerable critical responses. Guest (1989), for instance, has observed the depiction of Hindus in the beginning pages of the narrative and finds Hindus represented by “feminine docility of their manners” (p. 36), they are described as “passive”, “attentive and responsive to Europeans” (p. 36), and represented in terms of “beautifully feminine outline of their bodies” (p. 38). Moreover, Guest also finds the contrast in the representation of Hindu and Muslim cultures that Muslim culture is constructed implicitly as masculine, whereas Hindu culture is attributed to be more feminine in character. Looking from the 18th century perspective, these images do not seem to be derogatory. But postcolonial interpretation of Hodges’s depiction of Hindus as meek and mild species, led the critics argue this as effeminizing attitude. According to Ashis Nandy, effeminacy is “femininity in masculinity..., final negation of man’s political identity, pathology more dangerous than femininity itself” (as cited in Krishnaswamy, 2002). By observing at few Hindus and their general appearance at the coast, Hodges seems to be constructing reality about Hindus rather than truly representing them. Constructed reality is close to the knower’s world view and epistemology. It seems that he landed on the coast with his readymade knowledge of Indian history that Hindus were conquered in India by Muslims, and hence, he saw them feminine. Indeed, Hodges distances himself from the shocking experience of sati and presents impartial perspective on the custom without judging it from European eye; *Travels in India* receives much of critical discourse. Quoting Shruver (2008) at length:

Earlier, when the British are no longer than traders in India, *sati* is portrayed as a horrific and incomprehensible practice used to maintain the social order. Later, as the British consolidate their hold over India and Baptist missionaries arrive, they can no longer afford to be mere spectators, but have to take position . . . Then *sati* is depicted as a custom imposed and upheld by corrupt and hypocritical Brahmins

and followed by a religiously zealous and misguided Hindu population . . . (P. 39)

Shrurer (2008) further argues that before the British hold over India, “for about three decades” (p. 39), Hodges’s like impartial representations were made. After British strong hold, however, Christian missionaries highlighted the custom, although, according to Shrurer (2008), “it was never a widespread phenomena in India” (p. 19), as “only one among 430 Hindu widows immolated herself between 1814- 1829 in the Bengal Presidency” (p. 19). Hodges has also hinted at the existence of hypocritical Brahmanism strong hold civil society that influenced other strata of society in valorizing sati.

The depiction of landscape, desolation and ruins of forts and other structures in Travels in India, as have been represented by a set of opposites like barren/ cultivated, uninhabited/ populated, ruins/ modifications, poverty/ prosperity, beautiful/ sublime and so on, has created another set of critical discourse. At this juncture, Nayar (2004), asserts that it as an “Eighteenth century aesthetic of sublime furnished a ready tool with which the traveler articulated specifically colonial themes. . . , the rhetorical transformation of the Indian landscape from a site of sublime desolation and danger to potential improvement” (p. 3811).

My point of departure, in this paper, however, develops from the problems like: is the politics behind the positive representation when so much about India had been depicted negatively later? Why does the writer establish the contradiction between ruins, antiquity, and depopulated habitation on the one hand and modification, cultivation, and populated habitation on the other? Why is the horrendous act of sati depicted positively, while the same custom was declared illegal and punishable later? Why does the writer not look at Hindu art and architecture with the spectacle of Greek art which was considered model worldwide, rather Hindu art as superb and guided by climate, culture, and geography of its own? After the close textual analysis, the paper reaches to the tentative hypothesis that all these problematic stances are created because of the writer’s justifying British rule in India to the readership at home that they are protecting the mild and meek Hindus, by being in their side, from the clutches of violent Muslim invaders, and working for the dignity and wellbeing of their homeland. In order to enforce the argument, I have applied Saree Makdisi’s idea of Romantic imperialism that British Romantic writers basically go with British world view and thinking. I have also utilized Pramod K. Nayar’s notion of imperial sublime and Julie Reiser's notion of writer as a

shared nervous system of circumstances, to analyze the reference of desolation, ruins, and transformation in the narrative.

II

As the place was “untrod by an artist” (p. 152), Hodges (1794), in *Travels in India* chooses to commence his journey from Benares, ancient city of Hindu civilization, “where manners are three thousand years old... polished behavior which usually mark the most highly civilized state of society” (p. 60). His feelings of Benares are captured in his writing in detail. He finds Hindu culture in Benares unadulterated by other cultures. It has advanced system of water supply and drainage. Hodges answers to those who have stereotypical negative images about India, by creating positive images. It is faulty to say that India is uncivilized, primitive, and barbaric. Edward Said’s formulation on orientalism do not explicitly function here. I quote Hodges (1794) at length:

During my studies at Benares, when I was making drawings of some Brahmins, and several other persons who were entering and departing from a temple named VissVisha, my attention was called to the building itself, and the more I regarded it, the more I was surprised to discover the ornaments upon it which were familiar to my eyes.(P. 62)

The writer may be describing Vishwonath Temple, which he calls “VissVisha”, the description shows ornaments, arts, wealth, decorations are the symbols of civilized society. Quality and variety of ornaments show India as civilized society. He has presented positive picture of India in general and Benares in particular, throughout the book. The manner of presentation is seen positive but packed up with politics, since the author is traveling India during the consolidation phase of British imperialism to the east.

Although “the Grecian Architecture comprises all that is excellent in the art” (p. 64); Hodges does not take it as a model to describe Indian architecture. Rather he has the opinion that art is guided by climate, culture and geography. Varieties of art and architecture have their own originality. He doesn’t see Indian art through European eye. Such a unique architecture, Hodges (1794) observes, is under the threat of Muslim invaders:

Nearly in the center of the city is a considerable Mahomedan mosque, with two minarets: the height from the water to the top of the minarets is 232 feet. This building was raised by that most intolerant and ambitious of human beings, the Emperor Aurungzebe, who destroyed a magnificent temple of Hindoos on the

spot, and built the present mosque, said to be the same extent and height as the building he destroyed.(P. 61)

By depicting the ruins of the forts, deserted villages, avalanche and vestiges of buildings and structures throughout the book, Hodges shows that Hindus suffered greatly under Muslim rule in India. So he sees English Government's duty to cultivate and reconstruct the desolation and ruins. Hodges systematically portrays that Muslims were villain to Hindus. They destroyed magnificent Hindu art and architecture. According to Julie Reiser (2009), writer is a part of "culture's shared nervous system" (p. 79) who transmits affect from writer to reader. Hodges' historical writing can also be read as, using Reiser's term, "archive of affect" (p. 78) that can evoke the past and help us understand particular historical time. Eighteenth century India through the eye of an English traveler seems impressive. He is writing for the readership at home. He tries to accumulate sympathy of the Hindus for the justification of English rule in India.

The representation of Indians in Hodges's *Travels in India* can be exemplified in the lines, "the Hindoos are chiefly husbandmen, manufacturers, and merchants, except two tribes- the Rajpoots, who are military, and the Brahmins, who are ecclesiastics. The Musselmans may be classed as entirely military..." (p. 34).Hodges must have read about Hindu caste system and their division of labor beforehand. He is welcomed and saluted by Hindus, upon his arrival on the harbor from the ship. He gets surprised by their strange dark faces, strange manners and behaviors. What surprised the European most is "women carried on men's shoulders on pallankeens, and men riding in horseback, clothed... like women..." (p. 4). Looking from the perspective of that time, all these representations seem realistic. As they were fed up with the Muslim invaders, they must have found themselves secure near Europeans. But hospitality to the guest is inherent quality in their values. The sense of controlled schism in the Hindus described must have developed either from their religious value or from the fear they went through due to Muslim suppression.

William Hodges travelled to India as an artist. Although he was supported by Governor General Warren Hastings, English officials, Residents, and escorted at various places by English army, he tries to maintain balance in representing India. He also has British world view, similar to his contemporaries like William Jones, Edmund Burke, and Hastings, for looking India. Burke has the opinion that there is vast sea between India and England, both material and cultural, "if we undertake to govern the inhabitants of such a country, we must govern them upon their own principles, and maxims, and not

upon ours. He is creating a sort of Romantic imperial sublime. We must not think to force them into the narrow circle of our ideas; we must extend ours to take in their system of opinions and rites..." (as cited in Makdisi, 1998, p. 100). Makdisi (1998) interprets "the sea hence also an obstacle" (p. 102), which cannot be crossed without making careful observation.

Britain lost its North American colonies after American independence in 1776 and Hodges wrote his travel narrative in 1794. This shows British motive on capitalist shift from slave labor and North American colonies to the extension of imperialism to the east. For that they used rhetorical strategy, as Joshi (2021) has pointed out: "Romantic sympathy, moral sentimentalism, and new rhetoric of sensibility in order to assess British compassionate humanitarianism and the capitalist revisionist strategy of economic shift in the changed context after the loss of its North American colonies" (p. 59). Therefore, whether or not to rule India by Britain was not the question, but how to rule India and extend their empire was the concern of Burke and his contemporaries. By writing this travel narrative, Hodges also assists British rulers in India. It can be read as the colonizer's strategic gaze to colonized subjects, by appearing to their side, even if it be pretention. Hodges (1794) participated in military campaign against Rajah Cheyt Singh (p. 49). He sketched paintings of Chunar fort (p. 55). On Hastings' request he also made the drawings of Bijaigarh forts and military stations of Pateeta and Lutteepoor (p. 84). The drawings helped them fighting war and making strategy.

Hodges (1794) appears impartial in describing *sati*. Although he had already heard of the "most horrid custom amongst... the most mild and gentle of the human race" (p. 79), he conducts a research on that death custom, about its beginning, and finds that it as a voluntary act done by Hindu widows out of "fidelity and affection" (p. 80) to their deceased husbands. He finds that "the heroic acts of few women brought about a general custom, the Brahmins had given it the stamp of religion..." (p. 80). When we look at the custom from the perspective of that time, we find it realistic representation. He does not say that this is very good custom, neither does he say that it is horrendous and barbaric act. He just describes it as it is. But he blames Brahmins for the continuation of the tradition, as they interpreted it to common people that way. He has portrayed the system of *sati* as sublime, the romanticization of some strange act, on the one hand, and defending the act by writing that "it was not widespread phenomena in India" (Shrurer, 2008, p. 19), on the other hand. Later Christian missionaries highlighted *sati* as horrendous act, in order to spread their religion to India.

Hodges (1794) depicts the ruins and desolation in Benares, Gazipur, Etaya, Futtypur Sicri and the like on the one hand, and juxtaposes them with reconstruction, cultivation, and populated habitation in Madras, Bhagulpur, Calcutta, Patna and the like. In Benares, for instance, “surrounding the city are many ruins of buildings... there are still vestiges of some of the ornaments...” (p. 62). Through the journey to Etaya, Hodges “observed scarcely a spot in cultivation, the villages of which several, were in ruins, and the whole presented almost one uninterrupted scene of desolation” (p. 109). In Futtypur Sicri and the area around, the villages had been “plundered and burnt, and all the inhabitants massacred...” (p. 130). Some of the cities where Governors and Residents have established their forts, like Fort St. George in Madras, Fort Williams in Calcutta and the like, have been depicted in the process of cultivation and habitation. Calcutta, for instance, is depicted as the “mixture of European and Asiatic manners... coaches, phaetons, single horse chaises, with the pallankeens and hackeries of the natives- the passing ceremonies of Hindoos-... more novel and extraordinary than any city in the world...” (p. 16). By writing all these evidences, Hodges in a way, hiding colonial ideology that India is the land of mystery and riches, rather in the situation of terror and woe it is justification of their worth being in India that people were in pathetic situation and the country in devastation and ruin. According to Nayar (2008), travelers in their narrative struggled to prove the “transformation of the Indian landscape from a place of threat to a *locus amoenus* . . . by the English” (p. 76). By presenting the juxtaposition between places in ruin and the places in transformation, Hodges also seems to be doing the same task, only English could have transformed India into a pleasant place, as Nayar (2008) writes, “a shift from desolate Indian past to the wonderful Englished present” (p. 89). Ruins and devastation indicate the despotic governments, desolation, and deserted villages of the past, whereas, cultivation and populous towns indicate the presence of the benevolent English governments.

Sometimes Hodges forgets the boundary between artist and ruler, he transforms himself from observer to participant. During the time of Madras habitation, for instance, he writes, “our Government behaved on this melancholy occasion with their usual humanity and liberality; and not only public but also private relief was afforded...” (p. 6). He owns the credit by writing “our government”. English government was the “protector, and not the oppressor, of the people” (p. 17). He writes of his involvement in the campaign against Rajah Cheyt Singh, as I have described above. He also writes of his involvement in the civilizing to outcaste savage people beyond the hills of Baagulpoor,

with Mr Cleaveland. He writes the details of how the savage people are transformed into a battalion of new English soldiers and how tax system was established among outcaste people by influencing the village chiefs (pp. 89-90). Stuebe (1973) writes, "During Hodges's two-and-a-half-year stay in Northern India Hastings granted him an annual salary" (p. 659). These all instances show that Hodges was involved in justifying English rule in India to the readership at home.

III

To conclude, Hodges sees things from the perspective of 1780s circumstances when British Empire was seeking a safe landing shift from its lost North American slave colonies to the East. Moreover, he attempts to portray India positively but this does not mean that he was against English rule in India. The ambivalent representation of India has been seen to be Hodges' politics. He has constructed India positively only to consolidate British rule in India in the beginning period of their imperial advancement to the East. Since reality is close to the knower's world view, Muslim and British invaders tried to construct India by means of their own epistemology. This only distorts reality. So, representation of truth by others cannot be true representation, but only construction of truth based on viewer's epistemology and world view. As a colonial employee, he justifies English rule in India through his travel writing. No matter how powerful the empire proves itself to be in foreign land, it cannot flourish without justifying their activities to its people at home. Justifying one's rule in foreign land, however, is not an easy task. As a result, he passes through lots of contradictions and ambivalences throughout his book *Travels in India*. He depicts India once rich in culture, art and architecture, and hence civilized, but due to internal problems, the country in devastation and ruin, places being deserted and no traces of cultivation, needing the English to convert the place into *locus amoenus*, a pleasant place to live.

The depiction of *sati* in a positive manner, without interfering it, may have been to serve an exotic and strange taste to the European readership, or viewing things from the perspective of that time the writer might have influenced by the custom. He does not represent native Hindus as violent and barbaric as had been the tradition of stereotypical representation in the past. They are represented as mild and meek and feminine, suffered greatly by Muslims. He does not look at Indian art and architecture from the perspective of Greek model either. Hindu art and architecture, guided by its own climate, culture, and geography is superb in itself. Such a rich civilization has fallen under the clutches of indolent and despotic Muslim rulers, and has faced the ruins and devastation, hence in

need of protection from 'benevolent English government'. In this way, Hodges justifies English activities in India to the readership at home that they are protecting the mild and meek Hindus, by being in their side, from the clutches of violent Muslim invaders, and working for the dignity and well being of their homeland.

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