

Postcolonialism and the study of Indology in India: A Reading of Selected Works of K. K. Handiqui

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Abstract

Postcolonialism as a field of studies has not only evolved as a mean to understand the process of control and exploitation of colonizers, but it has also posited counter-readings to the existing colonial discourse that has long dominated the colonized mind. Postcolonial counter-readings operate through various means and agencies such as myths, legends, language, history, science, mathematics, culture, art etc. The primary task of such postcolonial counter-readings is to posit a kind of resistance and an anti-imperial stance to ideological constructs that colonialism has offered. This article looks at this kind of anti-imperial stance in the field of Indology in India. It hypothesizes that Indological research can also be considered an important genre in postcolonial studies as it posits an anti-imperial stance to the existing colonial discourses. In connection to this, a notable body of scholarship by K. K. Handiqui, an eminent Indologist of twentieth century Assam, India proves to be a significant area of study and research where elements of postcolonialism can be traced.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Indology, K. K. Handiqui

Colonialism is more than a physical invasion of territories by imperial power. It is also an invasion of the mind. It can be agreed upon that the process of colonial domination was not expanded solely through military prowess, but it is also accelerated by ideological discourses formulated by the colonizers that exercised a pervasive influence on the minds of the colonized. Postcolonialism is often identified as an anti-imperialism movement. However, it can also be defined as a critical theory that seeks to investigate colonial ideological constructs through which the imperial power take control of the colonial subjects. In this sense, postcolonialism operates as a counter-narrative to colonial or imperial discourses in history, language, science, art, literature, medicine, religion and belief.

There have long been attempts by postcolonial scholars in various to establish counter narratives to the existing colonial discourse. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), the negritude movement initiated by Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Dipesh Chakravarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) are regarded as landmarks in postcolonial thoughts.

In his famous work, Edward Said accentuates the fact that colonialism is an act of construction of the East by the West. Through such a construction of the East, or 'the Orient' as Said has termed it, that certain ideological discourses become instrumental for the West to exploit and to rule the East. On this he wrote:

The orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable expression...the main thing for the European visitors was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate...the Orient is an integral part of the European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically

as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial style...(Said *Orientalism*, 1, 2)

...in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient. (Said *Orientalism*, 3)

Frantz Fanon also articulates the psychological effects that colonialism has in the minds of the colonizer and the colonized. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon highlights a pervasive psychological impact of racialized point of views and prejudices that the colonizer formulated and imposed upon the natives. Since the 1990's literary critics and theorists had been engaged in the task of a reading or re-reading colonial texts to "study the effects of colonial representations in literary texts" (Cuddon 2014, 551). A lot of efforts was given to destabilization of colonial ideologies and representations found in European texts such as fiction, poetry, history, prose, social as well as cultural constructs to offer an alternative. Such re-readings of colonial texts offer a kind of challenge to the established colonial ideologies where the colonized have been assigned the position as the 'other', and very often as an inferior.

Colonialism also exercises a strong influence on language, history, culture, and various other sources of knowledge. In their task of destabilizing colonial ideological constructs, postcolonial thinkers suggest various ways to counter colonial ideological discourse and to provide a space for dialogues and negotiations. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak articulates a form of postcolonial resistance through a construction of history and the voice of subaltern as a resistance to the colonial ideological construction of history. In her Preface to *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak observes that:

My aim, to begin with was to track the figure of the Native Informant through various practices: philosophy, literature, history and culture. Soon I found that the tracking showed up a colonial subject detaching itself from the Native Informant. After 1989, I began to sense that a certain postcolonial subject had, in turn, been recording the colonial subject and appropriating the

Native Informant's position. (Spivak 1999, ix)

According to Prof. Pramod K. Nayar, Postcolonialism is “possible through such a resistant reading, where we identify the ideological grids of the so-called literary texts, when we begin to develop a different historical narrative other than the one handed down to us by the colonial discourse” (Nayar 2010, 163). In his essay “*Orientalism Reconsidered*” Said emphasized on the point of the consciousness of ebbing an orient and then resistance to it (Said 2001, 200). Echoing Spivak to a great extent, Dipesh Chakrabarty in “*Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History*” has offered a postcolonial response to the construction of history as following:

It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history—that is, “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university—is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian”, “Chinese”, “Kenyan”, and so on...in this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions, in the name of this history. (Chakrabarty 2008, 27)

Indian postcolonial thinkers and critics like Spivak, Chakrabarty, Ranajit Guha and others have been constantly engaged in the task of re-defining national identity and history by reconstructing the idea of history through their works on the subaltern and marginalized classes that seldom appears in the colonial framework of Indian history. Guha one of the most prominent Indian scholars and pioneers on the subaltern studies whose significant works like *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (1998), *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995* (1997) amongst others have remained influential in re-defining the idea of history thus providing a resistance or a counter to certain colonial ideological historical constructs.

II

The scholarly discipline of Indology provides another important arena for postcolonial discourses and resistance readings. It contains a

variety of possibilities and scopes of a counter-agency to existing colonial ideological discourses and narratives by asserting an identity resisting imperialism by going back to the conventional legacy of knowledge and thought.

The study of history, culture, language and literature of India basically known as Indology has been an area of interest of Europeans since the earliest times. However, a very formal and academic discussion of Indology began in the nineteenth century in British India with the consistent efforts of William Jones and August Wilhelm Schlegel particularly. *The Asiatic Society of Bengal* and the *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* were very instrumental in promoting the study of Indology in India. Prior to this Indological discussions also constituted an important area of German scholarship. Germany had a profound fascination for Indology. On the cause of the study of Indology in Germany, Douglas T. McGetchin claims that the study of Indology in Germany was promoted and encouraged believing that it would “emphasize the importance of ancient India to science, particularly the new science of comparative grammar”. It was also believed that the discipline “added to the project of science in the German University system” (McGetchin 2009, 102). On the scope and potentiality of the study of Indology in India R. N. Dandekar remarks:

Indology may be said to have come into being when European scholarship discovered Sanskrit. This is generally believed to have happened in the closing years of the eighteenth century, that is, round about 1784 in which year the world’s first Asiatic society was founded in Calcutta...till then the treasure of Sanskrit had remained the sole property of a few Brahmanas...Indeed, the birth of Indology not only proved an exciting and stimulating experience for the intellectuals of Europe, but it also marked, in a sense, the opening of a new chapter even in India’s own effort at self-understanding. (Dandekar 1977-1978, 525)

The discipline of Indology covers a wide area from Classical Sanskrit to the study of the history, literature, culture and language, art and architecture of India. There has been a constant debate on the scope and potentiality of Indology. On attempting to view the study of Indology as

a postcolonial agency it must be borne in mind that study of Indology was at different times motivated by different purposes. It cannot be denied that the development of Indology was at times instigated with the very purpose to substantiate British colonialism (Pattanaik 2016). In “*Four Types of Indology*” Devdutt Pattanaik highlights the four types or schools of Indology. They are European, American, Diasporic and Indian. While the European school of Indology justifies British colonialism, the American school of Indology offers a challenge to colonialism, thus taking sides with the subaltern. The Diasporic school of Indology which is a recent development in Indology is primarily concerned with the task of explaining and understanding Hinduism and India. The India school of Indology importantly seeks to break “away from the Western paradigm” thus challenging the “assumptions, approaches of Western scholars” (Pattanaik 2016). However, true to what Dandekar has remarked as excerpted above Indology was importantly marked by “India’s own effort at self-understanding” (Dandekar 1977-1978, 525).

It is important to note here that the “India of Indology is no longer limited to the Vedic, epic and classical India; it also embraces pre-Vedic India, tribal India, and Greater India, besides of course, medieval India and modern India” (Dandekar 1977-1978, 535). Indian identity in terms of its history, language, culture, literature, art and architecture has been so diverse and dynamic in nature that it is quite difficult to be conceptualized in general terms. Nevertheless, the study of Indology has to a great extent unveiled India’s history, literature, language, culture that dates back to the ancient times. Most significantly such a recourse to the ancient study of India contains possibilities to a great extent to counter and resist the colonial ideological discourses that has more than often considered India and the other colonies it invaded as ‘oriental’ with a history, culture, literature that has completely been a construction of the west. Studies in Indology have unearthed the historical, cultural, literary, religious, philosophical and importantly the scientific background of India that has been subjugated by the west.

III

Krishna Kanta Handiqui, the founder Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University, Assam, India, was one of the most learned Indologist of

twentieth century India who was noted for his immense scholarship and research in Classical Sanskrit and Indology. Interestingly, Handiqui writing in twentieth-century India, gave his entire life and effort in deciphering texts from the Indian classical tradition and offered the world three important texts namely *Naiṣadhacarita* of Śrīharṣa, *Yaśastilaka* And Indian Culture and *Pravarasena's Setubandha*. His study of these texts and the translation that followed of *Naiṣadhacarita* and *Setubandha* is an evidence of his credibility in Classical Sanskrit and Indology.

Considered to be one of the most complex epics in Sanskrit Śrīharṣa's *Naiṣadhacarita*, a twelfth century Sanskrit epic is a broad recounting of the Nala-Damayanti episode instigated in the *Mahabharata*. In the words of Handiqui (1965) "the episode to which Śrīharṣa devotes about two-thousand eight hundred verses is related in less than two hundred couplets in the *Mahābhārata*" (xliii). Such an extensive dialogue of the story in Śrīharṣa's *Naiṣadhacarita* revolves around concepts of virtue and vice, love, honour, duty, questions of right and wrong, benevolence, charity, jealousy etc. In his Preface to the first edition of *Naiṣadhacarita* of Śrīharṣa, Handiqui states (1965):

There is here a conflict of emotions, a clash of love and duty, rare in Sanskrit poetry, but which is not without its appeal to the imagination of the modern reader. This is perhaps the most universal element in Śrīharṣa's treatment of the Nala story and furnishes evidence of the poet's power to handle tense moments of emotions and pathos. The *Naiṣadhacarita*, like other *Kāvya*s, has its full share of epigrams and ethical reflections, the most remarkable of which are perhaps those glorifying the individual conscience as the criterion of right and wrong. (xi).

Through the romance of Nala and Damayanti, the poet Śrīharṣa gives a picture of the Indian philosophical doctrines (Gogoi 2011, 103). The epic is considered to be a repository of the various philosophical and religious doctrines like the *Vaisesika* doctrine, the *Nyaya* doctrine, the *Buddhist* doctrine etc. (Gogoi 2003, 60). It is also important to note that the epic is "a repository of traditional learning" which "contains literary, lexicographical and socio-religious data, important for the study of the cultural history of medieval India" (Handiqui 1965, xii). In his

Foreword to Krishna Kānta Handikai Aru Naiṣadhacaritar Jiliṅgani
Prof. Mukunda Madhava Sharmah observes:

The intricateness of the Naiṣadhacarita made it a hard nut to crack, so much so that no Indian or non-Indian could venture to translate this epic into any non-Sanskrit language, till K. K. Handiqui took the challenge and did it, and he did it in such a grand style and with such a degree of perfection that he immediately shot up to a high degree of eminence and earned an unstinted mead of universal approbation (in Gogoi 2011, vi).

The translation of the epic as *Naiṣadhacarita of Śriharṣa* was first published in 1934 in Lahore (then in India) by the Punjab Oriental Series till its third and last edition by the Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, Poona in the year 1965. It must be noted that right from its initial publication Handiqui's research and translation have drawn the attention of Indologists, Sanskritists and scholars from both India and outside India as well. To a certain extent it was the difficulty and obscurity involved in an understanding of the epic both in terms of its subject matter and language that it remained quite unfamiliar and unidentified to most of the scholars both in India and abroad. In this sense it will not be wrong to say that Handiqui's translation and analysis as reflected through the long introduction and the notes that he provided made this somewhat ignored epic understandable, intelligible and also accessible to the people who otherwise might possibly have remained unaware about it. Handiqui has not only given an English translation of the main text but has also decoded the various philosophical, religious, socio-cultural concepts of the time and dispersed it through his notes and the appendices that he provided along with the translation. Furthermore, his compilation of a comprehensive Sanskrit language dictionary has proven to be of massive importance to scholars on philology. Interestingly, what makes the translation more significant is Handiqui's deep study and inclusion of the unpublished critical materials and commentaries in his translation. All these clearly highlights the aptness and proficiency of Handiqui not only as a translator solely rendering the main text in terms of language but also as a scholar of classical learning and Indology given the depth to which he entered the text and disseminated it amongst the masses.

His profound knowledge of classical texts is also evident in his dissertation *Yaśastilaka and Indian Culture* that was initially published in 1949. *Yaśastilaka*, a Jaina religious romance was composed by Somadeva in 959 A.D. In his Preface to the first edition of *Yaśastilaka and Indian Culture* Handiqui highlights the importance of this religious romance as:

an encyclopaedic record of literary, socio-political, religious and philosophical data, valuable for the study of the cultural history of India, and particularly of the Deccan, in the tenth century and thereabouts, when the Rastrakuta empire still held sway in that part of the country. (Handiqui 1968, ix)

The romance presenting the medieval court life in India also gives a picture of the historical testimony of the period as well as the religious practices of the time through the temple of Candamari which was considered as “a horrid place, frequented by the terrible female spirits known as the Mahayoginis, and a crowd of fanatical votaries, engaged in outrageous forms of self-torture” (Handiqui 1968, 22). Handiqui highlights in his study how the work is an evidence or a testimony on the life and society and the kind of tantric religious practices prevalent at the time. In this regard, Handiqui also brings to light the active involvement of Jainism in the growth and expansion of Indian culture and the Sanskrit language particularly. Handiqui discusses at length in his study the various philosophical and religious set of guidelines like the Vaisesika doctrine, Buddhist doctrine, Samkhya doctrine, Vedanta, Jaiminiya, Carvaka, Pasupata, Kulacaryas and Saiva doctrines that he interpreted in Somadeva’s poem. He insists that “the aims of *Yaśastilaka* is to illustrate the doctrine of ahimsa, the work is designed to be a comprehensive manual of Jaina doctrines, and the object of Somadeva is to provide entertainment as well as religious instruction, and help forward the propagation of the Jaina faith” (Handiqui 1968, 246).

In the preface to the Second Edition of *Yaśastilaka and Indian Culture* the editor’s H. L. Jain and A. N. Upadhye state that Handiqui’s “exhaustive study of the *Yaśastilaka* has been, in a way, epoch-making and has inspired a number of other scholars to follow this model while studying other Indian classical texts” (cited in Handiqui 1968, vii). Handiqui’s detailed study and analysis of Somadeva’s *Yaśastilaka* discloses

his exhaustive reading, knowledge and grasp of Indology and Classical Sanskrit language and literature that was received with huge amount of applause from scholars like Prof. L. Renou. Renou remarked:

Mr. Handiqui gives a precise account of what is known about the activities of the literary circles and the religious sects of the 10th century. Then follow an analysis of the work...

....the Yasatilaka, properly interpreted, is a sort of encyclopaedia of Jainism, and Mr. Handiqui has overlooked nothing for explaining the facts of dogmatics, disciplines and ethics which are described or alluded to in the work. With the help of the Yasatilaka and a vast amount of information literary and epigraphic, Mr. Handiqui describes the position of Jainism in the tenth century and records the controversies or conflicts with diverse Hindu sects and eventually with the Buddhists. Here is a study which had not been made before, at least on such an extensive scale... (cited in Gogoi 2003, 83)

Handiqui's critique and analysis of the *Yaśastilaka* has been considered as an important documentation on the literary, social, political, historical, archaeological, religious and philosophical practices of the time. It also significantly documents the need of philosophical and religious systems like Jainism with its concept of ahimsa in the shaping of Indian civilization and culture thus forming an important aspect of its history.

Yaśastilaka and Indian Culture was followed by another significant contribution by Handiqui in the field of classical Indian studies through his translation. *Pravarasena's Setubandha* published in the year 1976 remains by far an undisputed scholarly achievement of Handiqui based on a very important source from the Ramayana. Initially written in Prakrit this fifth century epic is considered to be one of the highest works in the genre of Mahakavya. Handiqui's comprehensive study as reflected through the notes and annotations on the text makes the translation a significant record of Classical Sanskrit and Indology. Generally available in three different versions, the content of *Setubandha* circles around a segment from the Ramayana. It deals particularly as in the words of

Handiqui with “the story of Rama from the return of Hanuman from Lanka with the tidings of Sita to the death of Ravana, with special emphasis on the construction of the great causeway between the mainland and the island” (Handiqui 1976, 2). Initially written in Prakrit the poem is believed to have found prominent references in Dandin’s *Kāvyaḍarśa* and Bana’s *Harṣacarita* which are considered as significant works in Sanskrit literature. Its main or principle story to do with the defeat of Ravana by Rama is loaded with many philosophical and moral issues and also highlights some of the socio-religious practices prevalent at the time, such as the concept of Saivism.

In his Foreword to *Pravarasena’s Setubandha* H. C. Bhayani has observed:

The difficult task set to himself by Prof. Handiqui was primarily to recover and ascertain the original meaning and implication of Pravarasena’s verse. The enormity of the effort involved in such an undertaking can be figured out by considering the fact that for this purpose one is required to deal with a thousand years textual confusion and wild overgrowth of divergent interpretations. Moreover, the earlier commentaries are lost...this made it quite difficult for the commentators in numerous cases to spot scribal errors, decide genuineness of a reading and give the correct meaning of an expression without indulging in guess-work. (in Handiqui 1976, 5)

Mr. Bhayani’s Foreword to Handiqui’s translation undoubtedly brings to light Handiqui’s efficiency and expertise in translating and analysing the text.

Born on July 20, 1898, to Radhakanta Handiqui and Narayani Handiqui in Jorhat, K. K. Handiqui had a fortunate upbringing. After the completion of his matriculation examination from Jorhat Government High School, Handiqui studied in Cotton College, Guwahati. He considers the two years of his education in Cotton College as an important phase in his academic career. It was primarily because in Cotton College “he had the opportunities to learn from renowned teachers, to get encouragements from his elders like Surya Kumar Bhuyan, to meet

senior college mates like Banikanta Kakati who topped in the University examination” (Goswami 2018, 41). Perhaps this goes true also of his education in Calcutta University where he was the only student who opted for Vedic literature. As such he had the privilege to study under the tutelage of an erudite Sanskrit professor like Pandit Sitaram Shastri who undoubtedly has supplemented his learning of Classical Sanskrit and Indology. Besides, it will also not be wrong to say that Handiqui was quite affected by the European culture and education which must have been the result of his long period of stay in London, Paris and Germany particularly. His prime intention in going to London in 1920 was to earn a doctorate in Sanskrit (Sattar 47). However, he changed his decision and enrolled himself in Oxford University and was inclined to study language. It also needs hardly any explanation on the kind of research on classical scholarship and on Indological studies in which Germany was very much engaged at that point of time. His literary engagements in the form of the translations and critical analysis he had undertaken after his return to India reveal his interest in classical scholarship, a tradition of learning that he has also imbibed during his stay in Europe, particularly in Germany.

It is important at this point also to take into account the period in which Handiqui belonged. Prof. Malinee Goswami observes:

Handiqui lived and worked in the times when his nation was going through a transition from one century to the next... The eventful nineteenth century ushered in new ideas, ideals and ideologies, new outlook and lifestyle, not only to Assam but also to the entire India subcontinent. Actually it was the nineteenth century in which modern Assam came into being. (Goswami 2018, 29).

The economic, social and political changes that Assam had gone through after it was taken over by the rule of the East India Company proved to be promising in implementing better transport and communication, facilitating educational support both in terms of English education provided by Christian missionaries as well as in terms of the traditional education which the British Government assisted as well.

It is interesting to note that in the context of the Modern Assam, the kind of texts that Handiqui preferred for translation and study were, Śriharṣa's *Naiṣadha-carita*, Somadeva's *Yasastilaka* and Pravarasena's *Setubandha*. This is possibly an indication to the kind of importance and significance that he conferred to Classical Sanskrit and Indology. In fact, in quite a number of his articles and essays where his scholarship also rests indisputably, he has shown the rich and dynamic aspect of India in terms of its culture, literature, history, art and architecture as well as science and medicine. Handiqui's interest and engagement with the study of Indology as discussed above through his works possibly brings to mind his intention to highlight India's rich historical past, its affluent heritage. Handiqui was not overtly voicing a counter to the colonial ideological discourses through his works. But it is important to note that at a point of time when the nation was immersed in modern amenities and the blessings of modern life, Handiqui sought to make a detail study of ancient narratives loaded with various philosophical, religious, cultural and literary facets that were proof in themselves of the rich historical, literary, philosophical, religious and cultural past of India. It is also important here to consider the fact that Handiqui took pains to translate the classical Sanskrit texts in English, possibly with a view to make the general masses aware about the richness of the texts.

It has already been discussed above that postcolonialism primarily rests on the very idea to offer resistant and counter to certain ideological discourses that were an upshot of colonialism. As such postcolonial critics and thinkers were engaged in the constant task to dismantle the colonial ideological discourses that undermined India's own historical, cultural, literary, social and political distinctiveness. Handiqui's study and promotion of Indological studies might be understood as a post-colonial attempt to resist the colonial ideological discourses that have in many ways either suppressed India's history and culture or have used it entirely for colonial or imperial purposes so far.

It is true that the colonial rule literally ended by the time Handiqui was writing most of his articles, books and translations. However, the fact that colonialism was more an invasion of the mind of the colonized than a physical invasion can be considered in understanding Handiqui's involvement in Indology as a postcolonial deportment.

Handiqui possibly must have comprehended the superlative part of Indian history embedded in the works he translated and studied and hence must have felt it necessary to make the rich Indian tradition and culture be recognized and made identifiable.

In his introduction to *The Battle for Sanskrit Is Sanskrit Political or Sacred? Oppressive or Liberating? Dead or Alive?* (2016), Rajiv Malhotra states that by engaging themselves in the study of Sanskrit or Indology or South Asian Studies scholars are “intervening in modern Indian society with the explicitly stated view of detoxifying it of ‘poisons’ allegedly built into Sanskrit and its texts” (Malhotra 2016). It will not be wrong to say that the ‘poisons’ that Malhotra has referred to in his observation as quoted above can also be suggestive of the imposition of colonial ideology and discourse on an understanding of the Indian or the Asian subcontinent. It is as an answer to such colonial underpinnings that the study of Indology can be aimed at. K. K. Handiqui’s endeavour in unearthing the rich heritage of India through its literature, culture and history is a noted instance of postcolonial thought and endeavour.

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