

ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY, PATNA UNIVERSITY, PATNA

# HENRY THOMAS COLEBROOKE

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CC-12, Historiography, History of Bihar & Research Methodology

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### Introduction

During the colonial era (mid fifteenth to early twentieth centuries' CE), when European countries involved themselves in the affairs of Asia, a great need for understanding the indigenous people arose as a necessity for satisfying general curiosities and maintaining order (David Smith, motive and needs of orient lists). No easy feat, Europeans enlisted the help of prominent leaders to generate methods of categorizing and governing. Inspired by concurrent religious, political, and intellectual discourses, either through private endeavors or through joined efforts, these leaders examined various cultural components of Asian natives and saw that both language and religion were among the more important components one should apprehended in order to find success. One result of this endeavor produced the Asiatic Society, founded by Sir William Jones in 1784 CE, in which leading scholars compiled the data they collected in what was called the

### Asiatic Researches

. This twenty volume serial included work from scholars such as Alexander Hamilton, Charles Wilkins, and H.H. Wilson. But one prominent member proved to be highly influential to contemporary understandings of the indigenous people's languages and religions, more specifically, of Sanskrit and Hinduism, albeit, recently, he has fallen into

## **HENRY THOMAS COLEBROOKE**

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obscurity: Henry Thomas Colebrooke. This essay will analyze the work produced by H.T. Colebrooke within the Asiatic Researches in an effort to evaluate how the West interpreted the category “Hindu.” By means of a cursory literature review, three categories I have found to be most prominent in of 220 Colebrooke’s work to aid in developing the present argument: Colebrooke’s language, accuracy& authenticity, and his development of the theological and philosophical understandings of Hinduism. As a result of this literature review, I conclude that his sterile approach to his studies demonstrated that Hinduism was a religion of incredible piety, intricate ceremonies, and profound logic. His approach, being devoid of value judgments other scholars contemporaneous to him so often used, proved him to be a superior Oriental’s who, unfortunately, has fallen into obscurity. This review, indeed, must be cursory, for the space allotted could not encompass the entirety of his work. I hope that I can accurately put forth the evidence to support this argument within the parameters allotted to me.

### **H.T. Colebrooke (1794-1815 CE)**

Henry Thomas Colebrooke is recognized as the one of the greatest Orient lists to have lived. His background is that of a disenchanted Londoner who was handed an unlucky lot in life when his father, George Colebrooke, director and chair of the East Indian Company (1767 & 1769 CE), promised him a job at The Company only to find that, when he arrived in India, there was no job waiting for him. He abhorred the

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European society in India but, fortuitously, was handed the opportunity to explore the country and fall in love with it while simultaneously providing him with a job. Once established in India, sufficiently, he came across the works of Charles Wilkins and developed an appreciation for Sanskrit. Through perseverance, he ended up mastering the language and committing to a profession of scholarly work. His first work, “On the Duties of a Faithful Hindu Widow,” gained for him recognition by other scholars and landed him a place among the scholars of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. According to Rocher and Rocher, Colebrooke was uninterested in attending meetings of the Society. They state, “Although Harington had him appointed a member of the committee of papers on his arrival, he failed to attend meetings until 12 January 1803.