

ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY, PATNA UNIVERSITY, PATNA

# *John Stuart Mill*

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# John Stuart Mill

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## John Stuart Mill

James Mill, (born April 6, 1773, Northwater Bridge, Forfarshire, Scot-died June 23, 1836, London, Eng.), was a Scottish philosopher, historian, and economist. He was prominent as a representative of philosophical radicalism, a school of thought also known as Utilitarianism, which emphasized the need for a scientific basis for philosophy as well as a humanist approach to politics and economics. His eldest son was the celebrated Utilitarian thinker John Stuart Mill.

## Early life and Career

James Mill was one of the countless Scots who, having been trained at home in strict frugality and stern Puritanic principles, have fought their way to success in England. He was born 6th April 1773 in the parish of Logie Pert, Forfarshire. His father, also named James Mill, was a village shoemaker, employing two or three journeymen when at the height of his prosperity. His mother, Isabel Feton, daughter of a farmer, had been a servant in Edinburgh, Her family had some claims to superior gentility; she was fastidious, delicate in frame, and accused of pride by her neighbours. She resolved to bring up James, her eldest son, to be a gentleman, which practically meant to be a minister. He probably showed early promise of intellectual superiority. He received the usual training at the parish school, and was then sent to the Montrose Academy, where he was the schoolfellow and friend of a younger lad, Joseph Hume (1777-1855), afterwards his political ally.

He boarded with a Montrose shopkeeper and remained at the Academy till he was seventeen. He was never put to work in his father's shop, and devoted himself entirely to study. The usual age for beginning to attend a Scottish

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university was thirteen or fourteen; and it would have been the normal course for a lad in Mill's position to be sent at that age to Aberdeen. He entered the university in 1790, and seems to have applied himself chiefly to Greek and to philosophy. He became so good a Greek scholar that long afterwards (1818) he had some thoughts of standing for the Greek chair at Glasgow.

After distinguishing himself as a Greek scholar at the University of Edinburgh, James Mill was licensed a Presbyterian preacher in 1798. He soon turned to teaching, however, and embarked on historical and philosophical studies. In 1802 he went to London to devote himself to a career in journalism. In 1804 he wrote a pamphlet on the corn trade, arguing against a bounty on the exportation of grain, and in 1806 he began his *History of British India*, 3 vol. (1817).

Mill became acquainted with Jeremy Bentham, who founded Utilitarianism, in 1808. As Bentham's chief companion and ally for many years, he adopted Bentham's principles in their entirety and did more to propagate them and to oppose the beginnings of Romanticism than anyone else. He was a regular contributor (1806–18) to the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, the *British Review*, the *Eclectic Review*, and the *Edinburgh Review* (1808–13). In 1811 he helped edit the periodical *Philanthropist* with the English writer William Allen, contributing his opinions on education, freedom of the press, and prison discipline. He also participated in the discussions that led to the founding of London University in 1825. In 1814 Mill undertook to write various articles on politics, law, and education for the six-volume *Supplement to the 4th, 5th, and 6th editions of the Encyclopædia Britannica*. As reprints they enjoyed a wide circulation in his time. One of the articles, "government," had considerable influence on public opinion in the 1820s. In it, Mill concluded that a representative democracy based on wide suffrage is a necessary element of good government. "Government," which was

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possibly the most succinct statement of the political theory of the philosophical radicals, helped prepare the ground for passage of the first Reform Bill by Parliament in 1832.

In 1819, two years after Mill's *History of British India* appeared, he was appointed an official in India House, despite his drastic criticisms in the *History* of British rule in India. He rose gradually through the ranks until he was appointed head of the examiner's office in 1830. The *History*, his major literary achievement, was the first full historical treatment of the British conquest of India. Mill harshly criticized the British administration of India, and during his 17 years with the India House he helped completely reform the system of government in the colony. However, the *History's* severe Utilitarian analysis of Indian civilization also popularized among European readers an image of the subcontinent as perpetually backward and undeveloped. Mill never actually visited India.

Mill was also influential in English politics. His writings and his personal connections with radical politicians helped determine the change of view from theories of the rights of man and the absolute equality of men, as promulgated by the French Revolution, to the claiming of securities for good government through wide extension of the franchise. His *Elements of Political Economy* (1821), an especially precise and lucid work, summarizes the views of the philosophical radicals, based primarily on the work of the economist David Ricardo. In this work Mill maintained: (1) that the chief problem of political reformers is to limit the increase of population, on the assumption that capital does not naturally increase at the same rate as population; (2) that the value of a thing depends entirely on the quantity of labour put into it; and (3) that what is now known as the "unearned increment" of land is a proper object for taxation. The

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enunciation of the second of these propositions is important in view of the use made of it by Karl Marx. Mill developed Bentham's doctrines by his explanation of the association of ideas. This theory, presented in Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 2 vol. (1829), centres on the interrelatedness of mental concepts.

## James Mill's history on India

The first important history of India came not from the Orientalists but from their great opponent James Mill, an official of the East India Company in London.

Just about this time, between 1806 and 1818, **James Mill** wrote a series of volumes on the history of India and this work had a formative influence on British imagination about India. The book was entitled *History of British India*, but the first three volumes included a survey of ancient and medieval India while the last three volumes were specifically about British rule in India. This book became a great success, it was reprinted in 1820, 1826 and 1840 and it became a basic textbook for the British Indian Civil Service officers undergoing training at the East India's college at Haileybury. By the 1840s the book was out of date and in his comments its editor H.H. Wilson pointed that out in 1844 but the book continued to be considered a classic.

Mill had never been to India and the entire work was written on the basis of his limited readings in books by English authors on India. It contained a collection of the prejudices about India and the natives of India, which many British officers acquired in course of their stay in India. However, despite shortcomings from the point of view of authenticity and veracity and objectivity, the book was very influential for two reasons. One of these reasons is often recognised: James Mill belonged to an influential school of political and economic

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thought, the Utilitarians inspired by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham. As an Utilitarian exposition of history Mill's history of India was also at the same time implicitly an Utilitarian agenda for British administration in India. The other reason for the immense influence the book exercised has not been recognized as much as one might have expected. This book perfectly reflected the cast of mind at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which we have noticed earlier, a cast of mind, which developed in the wake of Britain's victory in the Anglo-French wars for hegemony in Europe, and Britain's growing industrial prosperity. James Mill broadcast a message of confident

Imperialism which was exactly what the readers in England wanted to hear. Mill predominant motive in writing history was his desire to apply the utilitarian doctrine to the governance of India. He saw in the new Indian Empire a fertile field for utilitarian reforms towards which arguments was to be supplied by the decadent state of life and culture in India. For this purpose he deliberately attempted an evaluation of the Hindu and Muslim government and civilization in India and the evaluation was a sweeping condemnation of both. Begun in 1806 when the author was thirty-three, the History was published in 1818. It made a great impression. The court of Director of the East India Company appointed Mill to a senior post on their London staff. Ricardo prized Mill's work to the skies; Macaulay spoke of it in the house of Commons as the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since that of Gibbon. His Minute on India Education bore its mark. Mill's son, John Stuart Mill, described it as one of the most instructive histories ever written. H.H.Wilson, the leading Orientalist and the severest critic of the History, nevertheless judged it as still "the most valuable work up on the subject which had yet been published. The encomiums of Mill's

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work showed, more than its quality, the British attitude on utilitarian lines recommended by Mill seemed to suit the aims and needs of British imperialism.

## Sources and Methods

Since Mill had reached his conclusions even before he started work on his History, all that he needed was some kind of evidence. Employed in the offices of the East India Company in Leaden Hall Street, London, he had access to every bit of paper from India. Unfortunately he felt no need to benefit by the advances made by the orientalists in ancient Indian history. He had only contempt for William Jones and the other Orientalists who had learnt the Indian languages and drawn up their accounts from primary sources. Dismissing the Orientalist and their testimony, Mill depended on traveler's reports to point out the vast difference between the professions and practice of the Hindus.

In his indictment of the Hindus, Mill contravened all rules of historical methodology. Ignorance, prejudice, the quality of the sources and the manner of their treatment combined to give to his history its particular tone and color. If he felt that the Orientalist account of the Hindus was exaggerated, he should have applied to it a process of criticism to reveal the concealed truth instead completely dismissing it. For evidence in his indictment Mill relied on Robert More's account which was partial; on Buchanan who had tried and failed to learn Sanskrit and was prejudiced against the Indians; on Tennant, a most superficial observer and on Tytler who had known Indian society only through the criminal lawcourts. Committed to the view that Hindu society was barbarous Mill was highly selective in the use of evidence. He cited testimony when it was hostile to the Hindus, such as that of Abbe Dubois, the missionary, of Tytler and other men, but ignored favourable testimony. The massive evidence on the character of the Indians,

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collected in the parliamentary investigation of 1813, on the whole favourable to the Hindus, went unnoticed.

## **Influence of Mill's History**

The tremendous influence Mill's History had on British policy towards India could be seen in the numbers of times it went to the press. In 1848, H.H.Wilson, the leading orientalist of the day, produced an edition of Mill with elaborate footnotes, and an extension of the story from 1805 to 1834. The persisting influence of the book can be easily explained. It provided, as P.H.Philips observes, the main basis for British thought on the character of Indian civilization and on the way to govern India. Mill's History was established as a textbook at Haileybury College from 1805 to 1855, where the company civil service recruits were trained, and where a succession of eminent utilitarian and close sympathizers held senior teaching posts. Here at Haileybury, Mill's catechism worked. His History had provided the *raison d'être* of British rule in India and, trained along lines suggested by the book, the British administrators who came out to India began to entertain illusions of the permanence of that rule. British Indian Administration moved into a phase of imperial dogmatism, and complacency of its achievements in India.