

ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY, PATNA UNIVERSITY, PATNA

Vincent Smith

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Vincent Smith

Vincent Smith (1848-1920)

Vincent Artur Smith does not belong to the group of what E.T. Strokes calls Philosophic historians. Smith was born in 1848 in Dublin, the son of a prominent doctor who was also a well known amateur numismatist and archaeologist. Smith joined the Indian Civil Service in 1869, and served in what is now Uttar Pradesh. After retirement in 1900, he taught Indian history at Dublin.

By the time Smith wrote, a vast corpus of new source materials had been brought to light, and the chronology of ancient Indian history had been placed on a firmer footing. In 1904 he produced his famous Early History of India incorporating the advances made in the knowledge of India's past. In 1919 appeared the Oxford History of India. In the interval between the two books Smith also wrote The History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon, and several lesser works. Both the Early History and the Oxford History were great successes as standard textbooks in Indian colleges and universities.

Pragmatic View and the Subjective Element

Smith shared with the other administrator historians of India, the pragmatic view that those desires of knowing modern India and solving its numerous problems must know its ancient history. In the Early History he aimed to present the story of ancient India in an impartial and judicial spirit. But he knew well that even the most direct evidence is liable to unconsciousness distortion, as some degree of subjectivity is inevitable for it is impossible for the historian to altogether eliminate his own personality however great may be his respect for the objective fact.

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Sympathetic Treatment of Ancient Indian Civilization

Smith, like Elphinstone, is sympathetic in his treatment of ancient Indian civilization. In his *Early India* he rejects a view quite common in his day that all that was good in early India owed to the influence of Hellenistic ideas. Western influence on India was very small. He admires the art of India, though not her literature. Failing to realize, as A.L.Basham observes, that canons of taste differ from culture to culture, Smith writes that the Rajput epics are rude, and Bana's *Harsacharita*, though containing passages of admirable and vivid description, is an irritating performance, executed in the worst possible taste. For Smith, the Gupta period was a time not unworthy of comparison with the Elizabethan and Stuart period in England.

Imperial Strain

But the *Early History* and the *Oxford History* are primarily political histories, and in this aspect Smith becomes an imperialist historian. Here the impartial and the judicial spirit leaves him. The political moral that he draws from ancient Indian history is starkly imperialist. Out of the 478 pages of the *Early History of India* covering the period from 600 B.C to A.D 1200, sixty-six are devoted to the Indian campaigns of Alexander. Smith writes "The triumphant progress of Alexander from the Himalayas to the sea demonstrated the inherent weakness of the greatest Asiatic armies when confronted with European skill and discipline. In point of fact, however, King Purushothama or the tribes of northwestern India, whom Alexander confronted, did not possess the greatest Asiatic armies. The classical writer themselves alludes to the Nandas. Smith concedes that Seleukos's treaty with

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Chandragupta as humiliating to the Greek king. The historian especially admires the India of the Guptas. India had probably never been governed better after the Oriental manner than under Chandragupta-II. The Arthashastra is criticized for its autocratic and Machiavellian character, and its penal code is stigmatized as ferociously severe. Autocracy and despotism- the only political forms known to ancient India- are for Smith, forms which do not admit of development, and for this reason, presumably, India has not developed. But the despotic sway of the British over India has not benevolent and necessary. The paramount lesson of Indian history is the ever present need for a superior controlling force to check the disruptive forces always ready to operate in India. The description in the Early History of India of the condition of northern India after Harsha's death is an unconcealed justification of the continuation of British rule in India. Here Smith gives the reader a notion of what India always has been when released from the control of a supreme authority, and what she would be again, if the hand of the benevolent despotism which now holds her in its iron grasp should be withdrawn.

The Imperialist strain runs through the later Oxford history too. Smith tells us that the desire of the Indians for political unity is shown in their acquiescence to British rule, and in the passionate outbursts of loyal devotion to the king Emperor. E.B.Havel, a pioneer in the sympathetic study of Indian art and the author of the History of Aryan Rule in India (1918), believed that the Aryans were responsible for all that is good in India, especially the rural democracy of the Panchayats, and the rule of law. But

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unlike other British historians, of India he arrived at a different conclusion. Both Englishmen and Indians being Aryans, England should encourage India's aspirations for self-government under the British crown, for they are in keeping with Aryan tradition. The following passage is Havel's criticism of Smith's appeal to early India. It must be peculiarly humiliating to the Indian to be constantly told by their rulers... that freedom has never spread her wings over their native land, that they are heirs to untold centuries of Oriental Despotism Whether intentional or not, no greater spiritual injury can be done to a people than to teach them to despise the achievement of their forefather. To overvalue them can hardly be a mistake.