
Orientalist Projection of Muslim Expansionism in Medieval South Asia: A Critical Analysis

Imtiaz Hussain

PhD Student, Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: wattooimtiaz777@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the Orientalist portrayal of Muslim expansion in medieval South Asia, shaped largely by Eurocentric ideologies and colonial interests. While many Orientalist historians depicted Muslim rule as despotic and culturally destructive, they ignored its peaceful dimensions and lasting contributions. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of hegemonic Orientalism and Peter Heehs' call for a differentiated view, the study analyses how contemporary European thought influenced historical narratives. Through the contrasting case studies of James Mill's Utilitarianism and Mountstuart Elphinstone's Romanticism, it highlights the varied and often conflicting representations of Muslim expansionism within Orientalist historiography.

Key Words: Orientalism, Despotism, Invasions, Expansions, Utilitarianism, Romanticism, Indigenous Responses, Colonial, Nationalist, Projection

Introduction

The expansion of Orientalism was directly proportional to the growth of colonial conquests. As European colonizers advanced, Orientalist discourse rapidly spread. The evolution of Orientalism unfolded in distinct phases in South Asia. It began with early travellers and observers in the sixteenth century and gradually developed into a well-organized institutional framework by the mid-twentieth century. Orientalism spanned diverse fields about South Asia such as language, religion, art, architecture, archaeology, governance and history. However, all knowledge produced under Orientalism served specific colonial objectives.

The Orientalist historians viewed the arrival of Muslims in medieval South Asia through a Eurocentric lens, often portraying it negatively and emphasizing themes of conquest, despotism, and cultural decline. While addressing Muslim conquests and expansion in the pre-Mughal period, Orientalists failed to offer objective analysis. Instead, they projected a negative image, driven by their underlying colonial agenda of reinforcing European superiority. Moreover, a critical review of the literature reveals that Orientalist historians wrote under the influence of contemporary intellectual movements in Europe, such as the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Utilitarianism. These ideological currents shaped and were reflected in their interpretations and imaginations of medieval Muslim expansion in India.

In this context, the present study seeks to explore how Orientalists projected Muslim expansionism in medieval South Asia. It provides an overview of Orientalist interpretations concerning Muslim conquests, expansion, and rule during the medieval period. Specifically, it critically examines James Mill's portrayal through the lens of his Utilitarian approach and Mountstuart Elphinstone's interpretation shaped by Romanticist ideals, treating both as case study to highlight contrasting intellectual influences within Orientalist historiography of pre-Mughal era.

Orientalism in South Asia

In the beginning, Orientalism focused mainly on Islam and the Orient was seen not just as a geographical region, but specifically as the Islamic East (Lewis, 1994). The Oriental studies were driven by commercial and missionary interests rather than political ones. But over time, the scope of these studies expanded. Orientalists began to include the West's power relations with the East, cultural differences between the two regions, and the way the Orient was

described in texts. (Curtis, 2009). Edward Said has explained the different shades of Orientalism and its relation to European culture, thought, and power, focusing on the European sense of superiority and control over the East (Said, 1978). Furthermore, Mushtaque Ali Abbasi comprehensively argues how Orientalism originated and gradually prevailed over the East, particularly South Asia (Abbasi, 2023)

Orientalism did not emerge abruptly in South Asia; rather, it crystallized through a century-long evolutionary process. During the formative stages of European growth in the sixteenth centuries onward, India had already achieved a remarkable level of progress. The desire to explore India became an ambition for every European sovereign. Adventurers set sail for Indian waters, gradually turning exploration into a race to discover India and gain access to its valuable trade commodities. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British all competed to establish a foothold and expand their presence.

Travelogue and memoirs of these early travelers and adventurers laid the foundation of Orientalism in India (Jouhki, 2006). The first phase of Orientalists and their works includes; Sir Thomas Roe's (1581-1644) *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul* (Roe, 1993) Joannes De Laet's (1581-1649) *Description de l'Inde Orientale*, (Description of the East Indies), Edward Terry's (1590-1660) *A Voyage to East-India*, (De Laet, 1927) Geleynssen de Jongh's (1594-1648) *Dagh Register* (Daily Register), William Hawkins's (d. 1613) *Early Travels in India 1583-1611*. William Finch and Samuel Purchas's work, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, Francisco Pelsaert's (1595–1630) *Remonstrantie* (Remonstrance of the State of the Mughal Empire), Jean Baptiste Tavernier's (1605-1689) *Travels in India*, François Bernier's (1620-1688) *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, John Chardin's (1643–1713) *Travels of Sir John Chardin in Persia and Other Eastern Countries*, and John Ovington's (1653–1731) *A Voyage to Suratt in the Year 1689* (Terry, 1777).

This first phase of European engagement with India, represented by key figures mentioned above, was shaped by travelogues and personal observations based on their experiences in contemporary India. Many of these travellers were directly connected to the Mughal court, which allowed them access to observe Mughal administration and governing institutions firsthand. Their trade-related missions also facilitated interactions with various communities and exposed them to the diverse geography of India. The valuable information they gathered was widely appreciated across Europe once compiled and published. European readers,

including scholars and policymakers, came to view India largely through the lens of these early Orientalists.

Because these accounts were produced during the period of Muslim Mughal rule, they often left a specific impression of Muslim governance in India, frequently portrayed with a negative connotation (Anjum, 2023). This portrayal generated scepticism about Muslim rulers among European audiences. Not only were common readers influenced by such narratives, but a more lasting effect was that later Orientalists adopted similar tones when they began compiling general histories of India, perpetuating the biases introduced by their predecessors.

The views of early Orientalists about Muslim rule in India were shaped by certain fixed ideas. While some of their observations seemed neutral, many of their writings included stereotypes and general criticisms that showed Muslim rulers in a negative light. When we look closely at their accounts, we find that most European travellers of that time described India and especially Muslim rule with a biased point of view.

This is what Edward Said explains in his essential theory of Orientalism. He believes that Orientalist's projection of the east is entirely uniform and they had similar intentions and ideas. They did not just describe the East as it was but often presented it in a negative way to achieve their specific goals and never deviated from their narrative. According to Said, "whatever change occurs in the knowledge of Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability and durability of latent Orientalism is more or less constant" (Said, 1978). Analysing the early travellers writing how they viewed their contemporary Mughal rule reveals uniformity in their projections; like, Francois Bernier described Muslim rule and the Mughal Emperor as a form of Oriental Despotism. He believed that the emperor ruled in a way where he had complete control, and the people were like his slaves (Bernier, 1791.).

De Laet also saw Muslim rule of absolute power, governing without any written laws (De Laet). Edward Terry portrayed the Mughal government as arbitrary, unlimited, and oppressive (Terry, 1777). William Hawkins described the Mughal rule as barbaric, cruel, and stubborn, with the power to take anyone's land. According to Ovington, the whole of India was under the Mughal Emperor, whose relations with citizen never been ideal (Ovington, 1929). Similarly, Thomas Roe observed that there were no written laws and that the king ruled by his own command (Roe, 1993). Tavernier added that all the land under the emperor belonged to him, as he had complete control over the entire country (Tavernier, 1925). Their views about kingship were not just limited to the Mughals, they held similar opinions about India as a whole.

A new phase of Orientalism emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the British began to annex Indian territories. British colonial administrators, military officers, officials from various fields, and missionaries became interested in learning and understanding Indian languages, and translating them into European ones (Karāmat, 2024). Among their many interests, Indian history stood out. During this period, the field of historiography mainly focused on translating existing historical texts. However, during this time, history was written with more practical and objective goals in mind, mainly to serve British interests. The British studied Indian history and used it to achieve their own purposes. Alexander Dow (1735–1779), a Scottish officer who served with the British East India Company in Bengal, came to India around 1760 and translated important Persian texts into English, mainly, *Tarikh Ferishta*. His most well-known work is *The History of Hindostan*, published in three volumes between 1768 and 1772, which includes translations of Persian historical accounts. In the preface of his book, Dow clearly explains why he compiled Indian history. He wrote, “The political connection of Great Britain with India imposed the obligation of knowing the history as well as the politics of India; for without a knowledge of India and its past, no successful policy could be formulated, whether in politics or government.”

Dow studied the Muslim period of Indian history very closely. According to him, there were only two main Muslim dynasties. The first was the Afghan dynasty, which he believed began with Mahmud of Ghazni and ended with Tamerlane’s invasion. He saw Tamerlane’s invasion as a prelude to the Mughal Empire. Because of his deep interest in Muslim history, Dow even considered Ahmad Shah Abdali as the start of a possible second Afghan dynasty. Based on his understanding of history, he encouraged the British authorities to take control of all of India. He argued, “The time was certainly ripe for a new empire in India. If the British would not supplant the Mughals, the Afghans would”.

Dow’s view of Muslim expansion in India has been viewed under influence of Enlightenment. He projected Muslims as invaders who were proud, aggressive, and led by violent tribal chiefs. He believed they were easily tempted by the wealth of Hindustan. According to him, the people of Hindustan became rich through farming on fertile land, but the warm climate made them lazy. This, he said, made it easy for Afghan invaders to take over. Dow also claimed that new groups from the mountain regions helped the Afghans rule Hindustan for about four hundred years. The expansion of empire depends on vigor of princes. However, those princes were oppressive, tyrannical and indulged in excessive pleasure, wealth and luxury. Dow considered Muhammad Tughluq responsible for decline of first dynasty (Elliot & Dowson, 1867–1877).

Dow's historical writing shows the influence of Enlightenment thinking. For him, the main focus of study was human beings and the state, which he saw as the most important human institution. He rejected myths, supernatural events, and the idea that religion should guide the state. Because of this view, he strongly criticized Muslim rulers for relying too much on divine mercy.

Dow was not the only one who viewed the medieval Muslim conquests through an Orientalist perspective. Other Orientalist historians also looked at that period in a similar way. Robert Orme (1728–1801), a British official in India, in his book *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan*, published in 1778, compared British conquests with those of the medieval Muslim rulers (Grewal, 1970). This example shows that Orientalist historians had a strong interest in the history of Muslim expansion in India. It also suggests that they were aware of, and perhaps even felt challenged by, the past power of Muslims in the region, seeing them as their main rivals in India.

Between 1750 and 1850, Orientalist writings became quite important, as many British scholars tried to learn as much as they could about India. However, their efforts were shaped by a specific Orientalist viewpoint, often seeing Muslims as political and religious rivals. This bias is clear in their works. For example, William Jones focused on Hindu laws and preferred them over Islamic (Muhammadan) laws, which created a sense of division (Heehs, 2003). James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, published in 1832, presented Prithvi Raj Chauhan as a true hero while ignoring the historical victory of Muhammad Ghuri. Tod based his account mainly on the *Prithvi Raj Raso*, a sixteenth century poem that is not considered a reliable historical source (Tod, 1920). This was another example of misleading the Indian people, a trend that became stronger over time.

In his book *The Ancient Geography of India*, Alexander Cunningham introduced the idea of an “invasion theory” by describing the northwestern routes into India as the “invading gates” of the country (Cunningham, 1871). This was an attempt to highlight the medieval Muslim invasions that came through these routes. By constantly focusing on these invasions, Cunningham helped create a lasting image of India as a land repeatedly attacked from the northwest. This narrative was also used to justify British rule, presenting the British as protectors or stabilizers in a land seen as historically vulnerable to foreign invasions.

The book *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians*, compiled by H. M. Elliot and edited by John Dowson, gave a biased picture of Muslim rule and expansions in medieval India.

By selecting some of those parts from Persian histories that showed Muslims in a bad light, the book created a negative image of their arrival and rule. It became popular across India and was followed by many Anglo-Indian historians. The real problem started when these ideas were taught in schools and colleges. This filled young minds with false and biased views about history.

As a result, it caused serious misunderstandings between Hindus and Muslims. Many believe that a large part of today's communal hatred in India comes from such textbooks, which showed Muslims badly to Hindus, and Hindus badly to Muslims, and hurt the foundation Indian's self-respect. K. A. Nizami, in his supplement to *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* by Eliot and Dowson, criticizes Sir Henry Elliot for his casual and often uninformed approach to Muslim expansion in India. Nizami argues that Elliot, without understanding the historical context or the patterns behind the successes and failures of minor dynasties from Iran (Ajam), hastily labelled Mahmud of Ghazni as merely a plunderer. Elliot's limited knowledge of Muslim rulers is also evident in his mistaken claim that Shihab al-Din Ghuri won the Battle of Panipat. Moreover, basic questions, such as when and how the Ghurids converted to Islam are completely ignored, even though they are essential for understanding Muslim conquests in India (Nizami, 1981).

During the third phase, around the early twentieth century, history writing in India began to improve. A major change was that trained Orientalist historians, rather than earlier travellers, adventurers, soldiers, or officials, started writing Indian history in a more systematic way. This shift is seen in works like V. A. Smith's *Oxford History of India* and Stanley Lane-Poole's *Medieval India under Mohammedan Rule*. However, despite this progress, the influence of a biased Orientalist view still shaped how history was written and understood.

Muslim expansionism in medieval era, widely projected by Orientalists as an end of Hindu classic age and decline of Vedic age. Several Orientalist worked for revival of Hindu religious books which became a matter of Hindu pride and identity (Jouhki, 2006). Peter Heehs argues that many Orientalist ideas were accepted and used by Indians as part of their own identity. Concepts like the Vedic period being a golden age, India as a deeply spiritual land, the focus on caste, and the idea of Hinduism as one great religion were, to some extent, created by Orientalists. Educated Indians accepted these ideas or changed them to support Indian nationalism. During the independence movement, Orientalist writings were used to build a national identity. For example, the Bhagavad Gita was seen as a holy book for all of India, and

the Hindu Renaissance used Orientalist works to shape modern Hinduism and the idea of India as a nation.

Peter Heehs disagrees with Edward Said's idea of essential Orientalism, which became so influential that the term "Orientalism" is now often used too loosely to describe any negative Western view of the East. In response to Said's focus on the Middle East, Heehs discusses *Indian Orientalism* and argues that it had different forms. He explains that not all Orientalists shared the same views, rather, their approaches changed depending on the time, context, and personal influences (Heehs, 2003).

J. S. Grewal makes a similar argument, stating that Europe was going through several intellectual movements during the 18th and 19th centuries. Therefore, the writings of Orientalist historians should be understood in the context of the movements that influenced them. For example, James Mill's historiography was shaped by utilitarian ideas, while Elphinstone's work was influenced by Romanticism. To study how Orientalists portrayed Muslim expansion, this research focuses on two distinct schools of thought as case study: Mill's utilitarian approach and Elphinstone's romantic approach.

James Mill's Projection of Muslim Expansionism

As a Utilitarian, James Mill supported major social changes in British India. He based his ideas on long discussions about what he and others saw as the level of civilization in India. Like other Utilitarians, he took a negative view of Indian society and its past, often describing it as backward and in need of reform through British rule (Grewal, 1970). Utilitarianism emerged in late 18th-century England through the work of Jeremy Bentham, who, in 1789, argued that human actions should be guided by the principle of utility, that is the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Bentham's utilitarianism developed during a period of intense social and legal reform in Britain, aiming to replace outdated traditions and laws with rational, evidence-based principles (Schneewind, 1998). His ideas were later advanced by James Mill, helping to shape liberal thought in Britain and significantly influencing education, politics, and colonial governance, particularly in India.

James Mill and the Utilitarian's believed that the main purpose of government was to bring about "the greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number." To achieve this, the government should protect people's right to enjoy the results of their hard work. They believed this was the only proper role of rulers. Mill argued that only a legitimate ruler can be trusted to protect interest of his countrymen. These ideas, based on Utilitarian thinking, shaped how Mill

wrote about Indian history. He used this way of thinking to judge Indian society and called for reforms in line with British values. This approach also became his tool for comparing Hindu and Muslim civilizations in his *History of British India*. James Mill was the first British historian to write a full history of India, covering all main periods and events. His book, *The History of British India*, was published in 1817 and became very popular. Within ten years, it was printed in several editions.

The famous writer Macaulay praised Mill's work and said it was the best history book since Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. After the success of his book, Mill got a well-paid job as Assistant Examiner at the India House (Majeed, 1990). He was reputed as one of the most respected historians. For the first time in history, James Mill divided Indian history into distinct chronological periods. He began with ancient India and continued up to the contemporary rule of the East India Company. In his *History of British India*, the second book is dedicated to the Hindu period, while the third focuses on the Muslim period, thus, he was the first to formally divide Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods.

Mill gave particular attention to the Muslim era, devoting nearly half of his work to it, reflecting his deep interest and critical analysis of that period. Javed Majeed argues that James Mill's *The History of British India* laid the theoretical groundwork for the liberal project aimed at liberating India from its own cultural traditions. Mill's work was not merely a critique of Indian society or British colonial administration; more significantly, it treated British India as a testing ground for Utilitarian principles. Through this lens, Mill offered a broader critique of Indian civilization as a whole both Hindu and Muslim.⁴¹

Although James Mill focused more on Hindu civilization, his discussion of Muslim history in India cannot be separated from his views on Hindu society. There is no doubt that he gave much more attention to the Hindu part of Indian history than the Muslim part. Mill believed that there were two separate civilizations, Hindu and Muslim, before British rule, and he made formal comparisons between them. He compared their social systems, governments, laws, economies, religions, philosophies, sciences, arts, morals, and historical writing. His judgment of Muslim achievements was closely linked to how he saw and evaluated Hindu civilization. James Mill favoured several aspects of Hindu civilization.

He appreciated the social manners of the Hindus and did not describe their rulers as despots. Mill also praised Hindu art, echoing the admiration previously expressed by William Jones. He considered Hindus to be intelligent and skilled, especially in the field of technology. In fact, he

compared ancient Hindu society to other great early civilizations such as the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. When it came to discussing Muslim civilization and their arrival in South Asia, James Mill framed his analysis in contrast to Hindu civilization. Like many other Orientalists of his time, he overlooked the peaceful arrival of Muslims as settlers, migrants, and traders. Instead, he focused mainly on their entry into India as invaders, emphasizing conquest and violence rather than cultural exchange or integration.

Mill's assessment of Muslim conquests and expansion in India was guided by a fundamental question: whether Hindu civilization advanced or declined as a result of Muslim rule. To answer this, he believed it was necessary to compare the achievements of both Hindus and Muslims across various aspects of life, such as governance, society, culture, and knowledge. Mill believed that Muslim conquerors, being part of the broader contemporary Islamic civilization, should have developed their subjugated populations. Instead of promoting progress, however, they contributed to the decline of the existing classical Hindu civilization. According to him, the early Muslim conquerors came from the Arab and Persian worlds. Their systems of governance and institutions were, in many ways, superior to those of their contemporaries, yet they failed to apply those standards in the regions they ruled. (Mill, 1817).

The Arab conquest of Sindh, for example, did not reflect the advanced state of the Arab world at the time; in fact, governance in Sindh deteriorated even further than it had been under its previous rulers. Mahmud of Ghazni, who held a prominent position in the Persian world and was an extraordinary figure surrounded by renowned scholars, did not transfer any of his personal virtues to the Indian territories. Nor did he transmit the cultural and intellectual qualities of the Persian world to India. Instead, he focused on plundering and looting Indian lands and lacked any significant administrative plan for the territories he conquered.

The Ghaurids and the later rulers of pre-Mughal era, adopted a similar pattern of invasions like Mahmud, conquests, and expansions, but lacked any rehabilitative plan for the conquered Hindu regions of India. An even greater distance can be observed between these Muslim rulers and the indigenous Hindu civilization. This is how Mill assessed Muslim expansion in India through a Utilitarian lens, by evaluating both Hindu and Muslim civilizations, and ultimately portrayed Muslim expansionism as having a negative impact on the pre-existing classical Hindu civilization.

Mountstuart Elphinstone and Pre Mughal-Muslim Era

Mountstuart Elphinstone offered a different narrative of Indian history. Belonging to the Romanticist school of thought, his portrayal of Muslim India was entirely distinct. He stands out as perhaps the only figure of his kind among the extensive group of Orientalist historians. Having spent a long period in India, Elphinstone joined the East India Company's service in 1795 and developed a deep interest in Indian politics and culture, becoming well-acquainted with local norms and values. In 1800, he spent seven years in the Deccan, particularly in Poona and Nagpur. In 1808, he was sent on a political mission to Afghanistan, during which he documented a history of the region, *Account of Kingdom of Caubul*, published in 2015. Upon returning, he was appointed Governor of Bombay. In 1827, Elphinstone resigned from his governorship and returned to England, traveling through various countries of ancient civilization, such as Syria, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Italy, and France, gaining much insight from his journey (Colebrooke, 1884).

Elphinstone's *History of India*, published in 1841 in two large volumes, was well-received and attracted many readers. He focused especially on the period before the Mughal rule. Out of the eight books in the work, two deal with the Muslim period before 1526. He was the first British historian to give separate attention to the Arab conquest of India. He wrote two chapters about the Central Asian dynasties, including a discussion of the Ghaznavid dynasty. He also gave one full chapter to Mahmud of Ghazni and another to the Ghaurids. In the second volume, he covered the period from 1206 to 1526 (Grewal, 1970). Elphinstone gave special importance to the Arab conquest of Sindh. Unlike other Orientalist historians, he saw it as the first step that encouraged later Muslim conquests in India.

He also praised the Arabs for their respectful and kind attitude toward the people they ruled. However, he saw Mahmud's conquests in India and his control over Punjab as a major turning point in Indian history. Unlike Mill, Elphinstone admired Mahmud's remarkable qualities and believed he played an important role in changing the political situation in India.⁴⁸ However, Elphinstone considered Muhammad Ghauri as the founder of the Muslim Empire in India. In his second book, he described the period from 1206 to 1526 as the age of consolidation of Muslim rule, beginning with Shams ud-Din Iltutmish. He credited the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate to Ala ud-Din Khalji, under whom the empire reached its widest boundaries. Elphinstone looked closely at how early Indo-Muslim governments worked and also at who the Muslim conquerors were. The Arab rule in Sind followed a careful and peaceful policy. Muhammad bin Qasim invited local princes to support him, and after the war, he made Dahar's

prime minister a ruler to protect the old customs and traditions of the area. Unlike Mill, he gave special attention to Mahmud.

He noted Mahmud's alliances with Hindu princes and the employment of Hindus in his army and administration in Punjab, suggesting that his actions were driven by political considerations rather than religious motives. Elphinstone viewed Muslim rule in India as distinct from that in other Muslim countries. On his way back to England, he visited Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Afghanistan places where he had already spent some time. He observed that in those regions, Muslims had converted most of the population to Islam. However, in India, Muslim conquerors never attempted mass conversions. India was unique in that nine-tenths of the population remained unconverted.

Elphinstone argued that the survival of India's old customs was due to the fact that Muslim rulers largely allowed existing systems and traditions to continue. Elphinstone believed that the success of Indo-Muslims in their military expeditions was partly due to their ability to build a kind of compromise with the non-Muslim communities of India. He saw this as a major factor in their success. He cited examples such as the cooperation of local Rajas in suppressing rebellions and the relationship between the Hindu Raja of Mandore and Alauddin Khalji. Elphinstone praises local born Muslim Sultans for their victories, like Muhammad bin Tughluq and Akbar whose policies were primarily political than religious, which enabled Tughluq to conquer, at one time, almost entire India except Orrisa, and parts of the Western Coast. Elphinstone's view about the medieval Muslim era highly differs with other Orientalists. He portrayed different aspects of Muslim era which were intentionally criticized by rest of contemporary historians. Under influence of his Romanticist approach, he cordially praised art and architecture of Muslim era too. (Elphinstone, 1841)

Conclusion

The Orientalist portrayal of Muslim expansion in medieval South Asia was deeply influenced by Eurocentric frameworks and prevailing Western ideologies. Various Orientalist historians depicted Muslim expansion into the Indian subcontinent as acts of loot and plunder, often characterizing it as the beginning of the decline of Hindu civilization. The Muslim period was commonly projected as an era of despotism, cultural stagnation, and violent conquest. These narratives, shaped to serve colonial interests, reinforced notions of Western superiority while overlooking the nuanced realities of Muslim society, including peaceful trade, cultural

contributions, and spiritual influences that played a significant role in the subcontinent's historical development.

While Edward Said emphasized the uniformity of Orientalist thought through the lens of hegemonic dominance, scholars like Peter Heehs offer a more nuanced perspective, arguing that Orientalism in India evolved through distinct phases, shaped by differing intellectual and ideological influences. The historical writings of Orientalist historians were often informed by contemporary European schools of thought. By examining two contrasting case studies James Mill's Utilitarianism and Mountstuart Elphinstone's Romanticism this study reveals divergent interpretations of Muslim expansionism in medieval South Asia.

James Mill, writing from a Utilitarian perspective, viewed Muslim rule in India as a period of religious intolerance, despotism, and moral decay. He dismissed the entire Muslim era as a dark age that disrupted the supposed harmony of ancient Hindu civilization and hindered progress. In contrast, Mountstuart Elphinstone, influenced by Romantic ideals, acknowledged the dynamism of Muslim society and praised its contributions to administration, culture, and architecture. He regarded the arrival of Muslims as a transformative moment that introduced significant historical change, including new systems of governance and cultural synthesis.

These contrasting views highlight the importance of situating Orientalist narratives within their intellectual contexts. While both historians operated within the broader Orientalist framework, their differing ideological leanings produced markedly different assessments of Muslim expansionism, underscoring the complexity and diversity within Orientalist historiography.

References

- Abbasi, M. A. (2023). Orientalist approach in historiography. *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, 44(2), 63–80.
- Anjum, F. (2023, October). *Oriental despotism and Mughal imperial ideals: A comparative analysis*. History Marg. <https://www.historymarg.com/2023/10/oriental-despotism-and-mughal-imperial.html>
- Bernier, F. (1916). *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656–1668* (A. Constable, Trans.; V. A. Smith, Ed.; 2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1891)
- Colebrooke, T. E. (1884). *Life of the Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone* (Vols. 1–2). John Murray.
- Cunningham, A. (2002). *The ancient geography of India*. Munshiram Manoharlal. (Original work published 1871)
- Curtis, M. (2009). *Orientalism and Islam: European thinkers on Oriental despotism in the Middle East and India*. Cambridge University Press.
- De Laet, J. (1975). *The empire of the Great Mogol: A translation of De Laet's Description of India and fragment of Indian history* (J. S. Hoyland, Trans.; S. N. Banerjee, Ed.). Munshiram Manoharlal. (Original work published 1928)
- Elliot, H. M., & Dowson, J. (2013). *The history of India, as told by its own historians: The Muhammadan period* (Vol. 2). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1867–1877)
- Elphinstone, M. (1841). *The history of India: The Hindu and Mahometan periods* (Vols. 1–2). John Murray.
- Grewal, J. S. (1970). *Muslim rule in India: The assessments of British historians*. Oxford University Press.
- Heehs, P. (2003). Shades of Orientalism: Paradoxes and problems in Indian historiography. *History and Theory*, 42(2), 169–195.
- Jouhki, J. (2006). Orientalism and India. *J@rgonia*, 8, 1–20.

- Karāmat, S. T. (2024). Orientalist approach in questioning Muslim women's identity in pre-partition India: Case of seclusion. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 801–808. [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024\(5-II\)73](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024(5-II)73)
- Lewis, B. (1994). *Islam and the West*. Oxford University Press.
- Majeed, J. (1990). James Mill's *The history of British India* and utilitarianism as a rhetoric of reform. *Modern Asian Studies*, 24(2), 209–224.
- Majeed, J. (1992). *Ungoverned imaginings: James Mill's The history of British India and Orientalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Mill, J. (1817). *The history of British India* (Vols. 1–3). Baldwin, Cradock, & Joy.
- Nizami, K. A. (Ed.). (1974). *Politics and society during the early medieval period*. People's Publishing House.
- Nizami, K. A. (1981). *Supplement to Elliot and Dowson's history of India: Vol. II. Ghaznavids and Ghaurids*. IAD Publishers.
- Ovington, J. (1994). *A voyage to Surat in the year 1689* (H. G. Rawlinson, Ed.). Asian Educational Services. (Original work published 1929)
- Roe, T. (1993). *The embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615–19* (W. Foster, Ed.). Asian Publishers.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Schneewind, J. B. (1998). *The invention of autonomy: A history of modern moral philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tavernier, J.-B. (2001). *Travels in India* (V. Ball, Trans.; W. Crooke, Ed.; 2nd ed., Vols. 1–2). Asian Educational Services. (Original work published 1925)
- Terry, E. (1777). *A voyage to East-India*. J. Wilkie.
- Tod, J. (1920). *Annals and antiquities of Rajasthan* (W. Crooke, Ed.; Vols. 1–3). Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press.

Copyright: © The Authors Licensing.

This article is open access and is distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest: Author (s) declared no conflict of interest.

Citation: Non.

Article info:

Article received: 1 May 2026

Article accepted: 08 June 2026

Article published: 28 June 2026