

FORT WILLIAM COLLEGE, JOHN B. GILCHRIST AND THE *LINGUA FRANCA* OF INDIA

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Abstract:

John B. Gilchrist was the first colonial linguist of the Hindustani language, the widest spread language in North India. He designated it the *lingua franca* of India. Nevertheless, he was instrumental in promoting two styles of the language – Sanskritized Hindi in Nagari script and Persianized Urdu in Indo-Persian script. However, he himself loved the middlebrow tongue, which was neither Sanskritized nor Persianized language. But he played a crucial role in the divergence of the common language. Not only this but he was also responsible for associating these two forms with two religious communities.

Key Words: Hindustani, Gilchrist, Hinduwee, Hindustanee, lingua franca

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For the success of the colonial rule, the administrators gathered information about the socio-religious beliefs, practices and customs of the natives in order to make policies which they believed were supported by an age-old and well-established indigenous tradition. In the process, they viewed India merely as a conglomerate of various religions and castes. This biased view of the British divided pre-colonial history into Hindu and Muslim periods.¹ This was also responsible for the formation of separate Hindu and Muslim civil laws. This understanding of Indian society, later, took colonialists to enumerate Indians under the categories of caste and religion in the Census. The other important divisions in India, they believed, were regions and languages. The diverse regional cultures and traditions, hence, could not be understood without prior knowledge of vernacular languages. The colonial administrators sought to collect and disseminate information about vernacular languages. More importantly, their attempts to learn these Indian languages were also guided by the political objective to project themselves as close

to the indigenous people at least in the early stage of colonialism and thereby legitimize their role. One of the important institutions established to study the native languages was Fort William College. The College was established in Calcutta in the late eighteenth century. Bernard S. Cohn argues that institutions such as this one helped colonial officials in gaining command over Indian languages. And this “command over language” was crucial to the consolidation of colonial power in India.ⁱⁱ The College was inaugurated by Lord Wellesley in 1800. Eminent scholars of that time were asked to join the College. William Carey, an enthusiastic missionary, and John B. Gilchrist were the main persons in the College to study Indian languages, establish grammatical and lexical standards for their use and teach them to the officials under training.

William Carey was a renowned missionary of Serampur and had long been involved with the study of Punjabi and Bengali. In 1801 he published his celebrated book, *A Grammar of Bengalee Language*. Another book of his, *The Bengalee English Dictionary*, was published in 1815. John Gilchrist was interested in another important native language which he called “Hindoostanee” and designated it to be the *lingua franca* of India. He taught Hindustani to East Indian Company’s administrators. It was he who persuaded the Governor, Lord Wellesley, to establish the College. Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindustani were the main languages taught in the College. The College also published materials in Marathi, Kannada, Oriya and other native languages.

What impact did these colonial interventions have on the Indian languages, on the production of colonial knowledge and on the making of the colonial language policy? These are a few questions that need to be still answered. Surely, one impact was the development of modern Indian languages. The Fort William College published materials in the languages identified as Indian vernaculars along with materials in the classical languages such as Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. The College published the earliest prose form in many languages and thereby promoted prose writing in them. This process helped the literature of Indian languages evolve from their medieval verse form to the modern prose form.

However, there were also some negative outcomes of this colonial engagement with Indian languages. Here, we would exclusively focus on the impact of John B. Gilchrist’s work on his designated *lingua franca*, Hindustani. John B. Gilchrist and the Fort William College are accused of laying the very foundations of the Hindi-Urdu controversy.ⁱⁱⁱ Gilchrist, whose works on Hindustani grammar and dictionary were the first endeavours of an enthusiastic philologist to

study the most widely spoken language in north India, was a Professor of Hindustani at Fort William College.^{iv} He taught the language to the administrators in the College, often by unconventional methods. For instance, he introduced the Roman script for the language. He thought that this method could help a new learner learn the language faster than he otherwise would if he were to learn the script and grammar first. Trained as a medical practitioner, Gilchrist failed to establish his practice and became attracted to the flourishing business of indigo farming. He came to India with the idea of making money through this business. In the process of settling his business, he came in contact with locals from Bombay to Calcutta. Soon, he developed an interest in the language which he believed was being understood in most parts of India. He wrote, ‘This ancient tongue, under various modifications is to Hindoostan, exactly what the Saxon was to England, before the Norman Conquest’.^v The curious Gilchrist, with great enthusiasm for the language, decided to write a dictionary of this language when he found none. By doing so, he thought, he would help the new learners who wanted to study the native language. In 1786, he, with Major Kirkpatrick as co-writer, published a dictionary of Hindustani. Contrary to the views that later identified Gilchrist’s Hindustani with Urdu^{vi}, Gilchrist himself preferred a simple and understandable form of language. He wrote, ‘Hindoos will naturally lean most to the Hinduwee, while Moosulmans will of course be more partial to Arabic and Persian [as a source to Hindustani]; whence two styles arise, namely the court or high style and the country or pristine style, leaving the middle or familiar current style between them, which I have recommended as the best.’^{vii} Gilchrist observed that Hindustani was diverging into two forms – one, the court or high style which was facing a process of Persianization, and second, the country or pristine style. But he innovatively associated these two forms with specific religions viz. Hindu and Muslim. Despite his enthusiasm for the middle or familiar style of Hindustani, Gilchrist also introduced two written styles of Hindustani at Fort William College. He encouraged his junior colleagues in the Fort William College, the *munshis* such as Lalloo Lal and Sadal Misra, to write books in a language excluding Arabic-Persian influence.^{viii} The Fort William College was the first institution that published books in the Nagari script. Gilchrist himself wrote *Hindi Story Teller* in the Nagari script.^{ix} In a way, Gilchrist introduced Nagari script along with Urdu script to write Hindustani. The Fort William College published Hindustani texts in two forms – Hindustani in Urdu script i.e., in the Urdu language and Hindustani in Nagari script i.e., in the Hindi language. Moreover, Gilchrist mistakenly presumed that “Hinduwee” was an ancient version of

“Hindoostanee”. He imagined a past before the arrival of Muslims, in which “Hinduwee”, was a ‘pure’ form and the colloquial language of India. He even believed that Sanskrit was a polished and artificial form and was derived from “Hinduwee” by the ‘insidious Brahmans’.^x Given his lack of knowledge of the development and origin of Hindustani, he not only presumed a pristine form of Hindustani as “Hinduwee” but also associated it with the Hindus. He wrote, ‘before the irruptions and subsequent settlement of Moosalmans the Hinduwee was to India what the Hindoostanee is now to Hindoostan’.^{xi} Gilchrist identified a tendency of Persianization of Hindustani among the Muslims. He, however, was the votary of simple Hindustani over this Persianized Hindustani. Indeed, it was Gilchrist who proposed the name “Hindoostanee” for the simple and religiously neutral language.^{xii} However, it was quite odd that on the one hand, he considered Hindustani a neutral lingua franca (in terms of its lack of any religious/sectarian/communitarian affiliation), and on the other hand, he considered it as a product of corrupting influences of Arabic & Persian on a ‘pure’ indigenous “Hinduwee” after the arrival of Muslims. And, to minimize those influences he sought to encourage the writing of books in a language free from such influences. In his efforts to promote a de-Arabicized, de-Persianized Hindustani, he was seeking to artificially repurify Hindustani derived from ‘pure’ pre-Islamic “Hinduwee” and implicitly project it as the language of Hindus in opposition to Urdu that he would have implicitly considered as the language of Muslims. While leaning towards the middlebrow language, seriously engaged with the popular tongue, teaching the widest spread vernacular of India, and experimenting with the writing of Hindustani in Roman script, it was Gilchrist who unwittingly provided a bone of contention to the advocates of Hindi and Urdu. It was his understanding that there was an old form of Hindustani devoid of any Muslim influence that later in the nineteenth and the twentieth century attracted the advocates of Hindi. Hindi leaders, when they argued for Hindi, reflected Gilchrist’s idea that Hindi was an older and ‘purer’ version of Hindustani. They often believed, while rejecting the claims of Urdu supporters, that Urdu was corrupt and Hindi a ‘pure’ form.

The earliest attempt of writing Hindustani in two styles in two scripts perhaps led to no immediate impact. The language of most of the Fort William College’s publications remained Hindustani in Urdu script. Indeed, it was this form of Hindustani – Hindustani in Urdu script – which evolved further and was adopted as the vernacular of north India in 1837 when colonial language policy replaced Persian as the language of lower courts and education. However,

Gilchrist's designation of Hindi as an old and a Hindu tongue; and Hindustani Hindi's recent version and a mixed language was a more crucial thesis. This was an influential thesis as Hindi leaders repeatedly argued this while countering the claims of Urdu. We can argue that till the 18th century, there was not a single form of the language but there were many. The language of Amir Khusro's compositions, which khusro called Hindvi can be identified as the oldest version of Hindi (and also of Urdu). Similarly, the spoken language of NathpanthiSants was also identified as another old form of Hindi. The language was also called Rekhta, Dehalvi and Dakhani which were actually written literary forms of the language used in different regions. Simultaneously, several poetic forms of this language in various styles, such as in Braj, Awadhi and Kari boli, etc., developed in north India. Literary compositions in these forms were never restricted to any particular religion.^{xiii} Gilchrist not only ignored all such forms but subsumed them in only two forms, viz., Hindi and Urdu, and associated them with specific communities, Hindu and Muslim respectively. The impact was obvious. Within a century Hindi was propagated as a Hindu language, quite different from Muslim Urdu, though Urdu was still widely used by both Hindus and Muslims. Further colonial studies on the language of north India which was called *lingua franca* by Gilchrist only complicated the issue. Later works of colonial administrators show that the terms 'Hindustani' and 'Urdu' were used interchangeably for each other. J. Dowson named his work *A Grammar of the Urdu or Hindustani Language*, whereas John T. Platts' influential work was titled *A Grammar of the Hindustani or Urdu Language*. Both were published after the revolt of 1857. The next step in the teaching of Hindustani was the division of the language into Urdu and Hindi. The first separate Hindi grammar book was published by S. H. Kellog in 1875. Next was Fredric Pincotts's Hindi grammar which appeared in 1882. Thus, within a century, colonial language studies resulted in the division of a potential *lingua franca* into two literary forms and established the absence of any linguistic unity in India. Conclusively, we can argue that in the making of the well-known Hindi-Urdu controversy of the late nineteenth century, the colonial system of knowledge paved a very strong basis, which still needs to be studied.

ⁱ James Mill published *The History of British India* in three volumes in from 1817 to 1818, in which he introduced a community-based chronology of Indian history. The Book-I was dedicated to the history of British relation with India, the Book-II charts the history of 'the Hindus' and the Book-III discuss the rule of 'the Mahomedans'. See

James Mill, *The History of British India, Vol. I* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, first published in 1817 digital version 2010).

ⁱⁱ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Form of Knowledge*, pp.16-56.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sadiq-ur Rahman Kidwai abrogates Gilchrist with such allegations. See Sadiq-ur-Rahman Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the 'Language of Hindoostan'* (Rachna Prakashan: New Delhi, 1972).

^{iv} Kidwai clarifies that Gilchrist was the Professor of Hindustani and not the Principal of the College, as has been sometimes believed. He explains that the head of the institution was called Provost and only a Clergyman of the Church of the England could be the Provost of the College. Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the 'Language of Hindoostan'*, p. 48.

^v John B. Gilchrist, *The Oriental Linguist* (Calcutta: Ferris and Greenway, 1798), p. v

^{vi} Kidwai argues that Gilchrist's Hindustani was actually Urdu. See Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the 'Language of Hindoostan'*.

^{vii} Gilchrist, *The Oriental Linguist*, p. xxii

^{viii} Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the 'Language of Hindoostan'*, p. 138.

^{ix} Shardadevi Vedalankar, *The Development of Hindi Prose Literature in the Early 19th Century* (Allahabad, 1969) cited in Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the 'Language of Hindoostan'*, p. 138

^x Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, pp. 37-38.

^{xi} Gilchrist, *The Oriental Linguist*, p. v

^{xii} Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the 'Language of Hindoostan'*, p. 90.

^{xiii} For example, in Awadhi Tulsidas, wrote his famous *Ramacharita Manas*, while Malik Mohammad Jayasi wrote 'Padmavat'. Both are venerated as classical writings. Surdas and Ras Khan are well-known poets of Brajhasha.