

Celestial India

Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of
Indian Nationalism

Isaac Lubelsky

Translated by Yael Lotan

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SHEFFIELD OAKVILLE

Jones made another important contribution to the study of Indian culture with his 1789 translation of the drama *Sacountala* (usual spelling: *Śākuntalā*) by Kālidāsa, the great Indian author of the late fourth century CE.³¹ He had planned to do a series of translations of Indian legal and literary texts, but his illness and death at the age of 48 cut the project short. After his death, members of the Asiatic Society carried out some of these plans, and promoted the academic recognition of the Indian research. The first indication of this recognition came in 1833, when the Boden Chair of Sanskrit was created at Oxford University – the first of its kind in the UK. The man chosen to lead it, Horace Hayman Wilson (1786–1860), was a former president of the Asiatic Society, a post he had assumed in 1816.

Jones' view of the history of England, a country which had been conquered repeatedly before becoming a conqueror, expressed the sense of mission that characterized him and his associates. In his lecture to the tenth annual conference of the Asiatic Society, on 28 February 1793, he said:

the *Greeks* overrun the land of their forefathers, invade *India*, conquer *Egypt*, and aim at universal dominion; but the *Romans* appropriate to themselves the whole empire of Greece, and carry their arms into *Britain*... by this time the *Americans* and *Peruvians*... have peopled the continent and isles of *America*, which the *Spaniards*... discover and in part overcome: but a colony from *Britain*, of which CICERO ignorantly declared, that it *contained nothing valuable*, obtain the possession, and finally the sovereign dominion, of extensive *American* districts; whilst other *British* subjects acquire a subordinate empire in the finest provinces of *India*, which the victorious troops of ALEXANDER were unwilling to attack.³²

This description of the British Empire placed it on a historical sequence of empires from the distant past to the present, and appears to legitimize the English conquest of India. Given an almost deterministic conception of history, implying that there was always one or another empire in the world, Jones concluded that Britain's historic role, as the leading empire of its time, permitted her to

31. Kālidāsa, *Sacountala; or, the Fatal Ring; an Indian Drama* (trans. Sir W. Jones; London, 1902), first published 1789.

32. Jones, 'The Tenth Anniversary Discourse, On Asiatick History, Civil and Natural', in Cannon, *The Collected Works*, pp. 209–10.