

CHAPTER 2

Modern Historians of Ancient India

Colonialist Views and Contribution

ALTHOUGH educated Indians retained their traditional history in the form of hand-written epics, Puranas and semi-biographical works, modern research in the history of ancient India started in the second half of the eighteenth century because of the needs of the colonial administration set up by the British. When Bengal and Bihar came under the rule of the East India Company in 1765, they found it difficult to administer the Hindu law of inheritance. Hence, in 1776, *Manusmriti*, (the law book of Manu), which was considered most authoritative, was translated into English as *A Code of Gentoo Laws*. The pandits were associated with British judges to administer the civil law of the Hindus and the maulavis to govern the same law of the Muslims. The initial efforts to understand ancient laws and customs, which continued largely until the eighteenth century, culminated in the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 in Calcutta. It was set up by a civil servant of the East India Company, Sir William Jones (1746-1794), who translated the drama known as the *Abhijnana-shakuntalam* into English in 1789; the *Bhagvadgita*, the most popular reli-

gious text of the Hindus, had been rendered into English by Wilkins in 1785. The Bombay Asiatic Society was set up in 1804, and the Asiatic Society of Great Britain was set up in London in 1823. William Jones emphasised the point that originally European languages were very much similar to Sanskrit and Iranian languages. This aroused the interest of Germany, France, Russia and other European countries in Indological studies. In the first half of the nineteenth century chairs in Sanskrit were established in England and several other European countries.

The greatest push to Indological studies was given by the German-born scholar F. Max Mueller (1823-1902) who spent most of his time in England. The Revolt of 1857 was a great eye-opener. It was strongly realised in Britain that it badly needed a deeper knowledge of the manners and social systems of an alien people over whom it had to rule. Similarly, the Christian missionaries wanted to find out the vulnerable points in the Hindu religion to win converts and strengthen the British empire. To meet these needs ancient scriptures were translated on a massive scale under the editorship of Max Mueller. Altogether fifty volumes, some in several parts,