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Lorch, Marjorie (2020) The East India Company Language Policy in the early 19th Century. *FIBIS: The Journal of The Families in British India Society* 43, ISSN 1740-3219.

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THE EAST INDIA LANGUAGE POLICY IN THE EARLY 19th CENTURY

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I have been investigating the life of Thomas Prendergast, Esq. (1807-1886) for several years due to my interest in his innovative contributions to foreign language learning and teaching in the 1860s and 1870s.²¹ Unlike most European authors of foreign language textbooks at this time, Prendergast had spent his life working as a Civil Servant in the East India Company (EIC) in Madras. I was interested to understand his own language learning experiences in this role, in order to determine how he came to develop his extremely popular series of “Mastery Method” books when he retired to Cheltenham in 1859.²²

As there was little biographical information already available, and no personal papers to draw on, I needed to take a different approach to investigating Prendergast’s life story. I soon learned of FIBIS, and its members provided many invaluable starting points for this journey of discovery. In the process, I had to acquaint myself with the type of language training a young gentleman would receive in preparation for EIC work in India in the early 19th century. In this article, I will describe some of the personal challenges Prendergast faced, and paint a picture of the wider context of the EIC Civil Service in Madras from the 1820s to 1850s.

By the early 19th century, the EIC ruled large portions of India, employing both an army and an imposing civil administration. This included the collection of taxes, operation of law courts and administration of public works. Although Prendergast had come from a family of EIC military men, he submitted a petition to become a Writer instead.²³ This led to his admission in the relatively new EIC training institution to prepare him for his life in Madras. The East India College founded in 1806 in Hertford Heath (later renamed Haileybury College) educated those headed for the elite corps of the Indian Civil Service.²⁴

At the time Prendergast was beginning his training in 1825, there were both internal and broader public questions being asked about how well-equipped

²¹ I have to add the disclaimer that Prendergast is not a personal relation and my curiosity is an entirely academic one. For more details on Prendergast’s life and work see my publications 'Investigating the Biographical Sources of Thomas Prendergast’s (1807-1886) Innovation in Language Learning', in *The History of Language Learning and Teaching in 19th and 20th Century Europe*, ed. by Nicola McClelland and Richard C. Smith (Oxford: Legenda, 2017), and 'A Late 19th-Century British Perspective on Modern Foreign Language Learning, Teaching, and Reform', *Historiographia Linguistica*, 43 (2016), 175-208.

²² Thomas Prendergast, *The Mastery of Languages; or, the Art of Speaking Foreign Tongues Idiomatically* (London: Richard Bentley, 1864). This was followed by a Handbook and five foreign language manuals on French, German, Spanish, Hebrew and Latin.

²³ His father was General Sir Jeffrey Prendergast (1769-1856) who was knighted for his action in the Mysore war.

²⁴ Those headed for a military career, like Prendergast’s brothers and cousins would attend The East India Company Military Seminary at Addiscombe, Surrey.

candidates actually were for their roles in the EIC Civil Service.²⁵ Public debates and concern expressed in Parliament resulted in calls for a more robust system of examinations, particularly with regard to foreign languages. In response, the EIC changed its approach to the use of Indian Classical and Vernacular languages which had an effect on the students' education. It also affected the expectations of Civil Servants' ability to communicate with non-English speaking individuals in the course of their work in India. These practices can be traced through Prendergast's experience. In this article I outline the changes to EIC language policy in the first half of the 19th century with respect to professional practices.

When Prendergast entered the East India College, one of their many illustrious teachers was the Reverend Thomas R. Malthus, FRS (1766-1834). He was the author of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) who taught Political Economy at the College from 1806 to 1835. Malthus was partly responsible for the examination of admissions applicants. Although Malthus defended the College's curriculum and examination system, there were external demands for successive changes to these requirements.²⁶ In order to be admitted up to the 1820s, students had to sit exams in Greek, Latin and Arithmetic.²⁷ By 1826, the year Prendergast graduated, entrance requirements were strengthened to include the knowledge of at least two Latin classical texts, the parts of the Greek testament, Greek grammar and common rules of Arithmetic.

Students would typically stay at the training College for two years. The curriculum was modelled on the "liberal education" at Cambridge University. Required subjects included Classics, Mathematics, Law, Political Economy and History. There were other compulsory subjects intended to prepare students for their future jobs working in government roles in India. These included Hindu Literature, the History of Asia, and the languages Sanskrit, Persian and Hindustani. At the end of their studies, students would sit another set of exams to determine whether they would gain a place in the EIC. These exams were on Greek, Latin, Mathematics, English, History, Geography, Paley's "Evidences"²⁸ and Moral Philosophy.²⁹

The East India College employed a number of language professors who taught Arabic, Bengali, Telugu, and Marathi. One prominent teacher at this time was Sir Graves Chamney Haughton FRS (1788-1849), the Bengali scholar who helped found the Royal Asiatic Society. Another was Francis Johnson (1796-1876), the author of the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Persian, Arabic, and English*, 1852. Even with these expert teachers, students typically only gained rudimentary knowledge of Indian languages at the beginning of the century. This was thought to be due to

²⁵ Danvers, Frederick Charles. 1894. *Memoirs of old Haileybury College*. London: A. Constable & Co.

²⁶ Malthus, Thomas. 1817. *Statements respecting the East India College*. London: John Murray.

²⁷ James, Patricia. 1979. *Population Malthus: his life and times* (Routledge: London).

²⁸ William Paley's (1743-1805) books: *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (London, 1794) and *Natural History: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802) were leading textbooks on Christian thought of the day and were the subject of examinations at Cambridge in the first half of the 19th century.

²⁹ Lowell, A. Lawrence. 1900. *Colonial Civil Service*. London: Macmillan & Co.

the lack of final language exams to provide incentive.³⁰ To address this, external examiners were brought in to test students in the languages they would need for their work in India. One noted examiner was Sir Charles Wilkins FRS (1749 – 1836). He was the first English translator of *Bhagavad Gita* and invented the first printing typeface for Bengali. Even with this added provision, language learning at the East India College was only expected to provide beginner level proficiency.³¹ ³² It was assumed that new Civil Servants would develop more knowledge of particular languages as needed once they began their posting in India.

Upon successfully completing their studies at the College, those newly posted to India, such as Prendergast, were expected to pass exams in one or more Indian languages. These were held at Fort St. George, Madras. The exam requirements for demonstrating proficiency in Indian languages also became successively harder. By the 1820s, candidates were asked to translate official documents from Hindustani into English, and were tested on their conversational fluency on business and legal matters. Interestingly, the details of individuals' EIC language examination performances were regularly published in the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*.³³ Even with these rigorous tests in place, it is not clear how much functional language ability these newly arrived appointees actually had. There was the option of continuing language studies at Fort St George. Some may also have gained additional proficiency in the local vernacular(s) through on the job experiences working with interpreters.

In this context, it is important to remember that many new British Civil Servants would have actually been born in India, as Prendergast was.³⁴ Since descendants of a family would work for the EIC for generation on generation, many of their children would have been born and grown up where their parents were posted. When older, they would have been sent back to England to attend school and perhaps training to enter the EIC themselves. This meant that many at the beginning of their EIC careers, like Prendergast, were actually returning to India where they had spent their childhood.³⁵ Growing up in Anglo-Indian households would have provided these children with the opportunity to learn the local vernacular(s). Exposure to these languages would have come through the company they kept with the multilingual house staff and their own children. In this context,

³⁰ Up to 1814 there were no exams in any Asian languages. Fisher, Michael H. 2001. 'Persian Professor in Britain: Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim at the East India College, 1826-44', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 21: 24-32.

³¹ Stephens, H. Morse. 1900. An account of the East India College at Haileybury (1806-1857). In: *Collonial Civil Service*, ed. by A. Lawrence Lowell. London: Macmillan & Co.

³² There were many language prizes awarded to students at the EIC College but none were won by Prendergast. Danvers, Frederick Charles. 1894. *Memoirs of old Haileybury College* (Constable: Westminster).

³³ Prendergast's weak and limited performance and five other applicants' much more impressive attainments were reported the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, 1828, January to June, pp. 232-33.

³⁴ Prendergast was baptized at Fort St. George, Madras. "Thomas Prendergast." In *India, Births and Baptisms, 1786-1947, India Office Records*. British Library.

³⁵ Prendergast lived in Madras for most of his childhood. He was sent back to England to attend Harrow School when he was 12 years old.

many English children picked up the “chi-chi” Indian-English dialect.³⁶ Nevertheless, the language of childhood would not serve the adult EIC Civil Servant in mastering the formal and technical aspects of the written Indian languages.

There appears to have been a great deal of variation in whether those in the EIC had mastered the local Indian languages, or relied on interpreters and translators in their work. The EIC policy on what language should be chosen for public instruction in India was also changing. In 1835, Thomas B. Macaulay FRS FRSE PC, 1st Baron Macaulay (1800-1859), who served on the Council of India, instituted a dramatic change in Indian language policy.³⁷ He initiated the creation of a dedicated corps of local interpreters for indigenous languages to support the English-speaking government officials and public institutions. This meant that there was less expectation that British Civil Servants would communicate directly with the Indian people they ruled in their own language. As part of a larger shift, Macaulay called for the abolition of schools that taught Indian scholars the classical languages of Sanskrit and Arabic-- the medium of their own ancient cultural texts in religion, law and science. This was to be replaced with public institutions that delivered instruction in English. Prendergast himself was instrumental in founding just such a school, following the proposals set out in Macaulay’s *Minute on Education*. The Pithapur Rajah's College was founded in 1852 in Cocanada (currently known as Kakinada) where Prendergast was then posted. It represents one of the earliest institutions to provide English education to Indian boys in south India, and still exists today.³⁸

It appears that while Prendergast was exposed to many languages in the course of his childhood and schooling, there is little evidence to indicate that he excelled at them. Although it is likely that many of his peers and colleagues did become proficient in the local Indian languages, the expectation that EIC Civil Servants would need to speak in them was waning in this period. The institutionalization of English over the Indian languages was a Victorian intervention.

³⁶ Buettner, Elizabeth. 2004. *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

³⁷ Macaulay, Thomas Babbington. [1835] 1965. Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835. In: *Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839)*, ed. by Henry Sharp. National Archives of India: Delhi. pp. 107-117.

³⁸ Hemingway, F.R. 1915. *Madras District Gazetteers: Godavari* (The Superintendent, Government Press: Madras), p. 157.