

SAW Conference on Writing histories of ancient mathematics – Reflecting on past practices and opening the future, 18th-21st centuries

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organized by Karine Chemla, Agathe Keller, Christine Proust and the SAW group
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Uses of histories of mathematics

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Dhruv Raina (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India & SAW Project)

The Translation of Sanskrit and English Mathematical Works: The Relationship between the History and Contemporaneity of Mathematics in Nineteenth Century India and England

Abstract – Towards the end of the eighteenth century British Indology, in part guided by the reflections of mathematicians associated with the Scottish Enlightenment such as John Playfair, began exploring the traditions of Indian astronomy and mathematics. These explorations and search for Sanskrit manuscripts did not commence de nouveau but were informed by the imaginaries invented by several Indological traditions that preceded this effort. These early efforts culminated in the invention of a canon that was said to characterise the Indian mathematical tradition and set of the collection and translation of Sanskrit manuscripts. It could be argued that with the publication of Colebrooke's *Algebra*, a phase of British Indology comes to an end. In the next phase tropes and memes concerning the Indian mathematical tradition that appeared in Colebrooke's opus circulated amongst networks of European mathematicians and stabilised in their writings. 'The Analytics' amongst whom we could count George Peacock and August De Morgan engaged historically with these histories of the Indian mathematical tradition for a variety of reasons. This paper attempts to show the close relationship between their efforts to find a place for mathematics teaching in a liberal curriculum in England, their explorations into the history of mathematics in order to bring some clarity into mathematics teaching and the practice of mathematics and their own scientific research. In India on the other hand, this paper attempts to argue that East India Company officials, involved in education in India, drawing inspiration from the works of Colebrooke, sought to employ algebra as a bridge between the British mathematics curriculum and the multiplicity of South Asian mathematical curricula. In particular, I shall attempt to discuss the efforts of George Jervis Ritso who commissioned the translation of De Morgan's *Elements of Algebra* and the *Elements of Arithmetic* into Marathi and Gujarati.