

Understanding Eighteenth Century French Writings on India: Between Empire and Ideology

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Abstract:

This research paper delves into the intricacies of eighteenth-century French writings on India, exploring the nuanced interplay between imperial aspirations and ideological constructs. It examines a diverse array of texts, including travelogues, diplomatic correspondence, and philosophical treatises, to unravel the complex discourses surrounding French perceptions of India. Through a critical analysis, the study elucidates how these writings reflect and reinforce colonial ambitions, cultural biases, and philosophical paradigms prevalent during the Enlightenment era, shedding light on the multifaceted relationship between France and India in the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Eighteenth century, French writings, India, empire, ideology, colonialism, Enlightenment, cultural biases, philosophical paradigms, colonial ambitions, diplomatic correspondence, travelogues.

In his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said famously characterized Orientalism as a Western way of projecting fantasies about the East. Saidian framework, despite many revisions, has dominated modern scholars' assessment of European travel accounts of India. Despite overwhelming and compelling arguments made by several scholars against Said's simplistic binaries of East and West, Said's formulation continues to be a popular one.¹ An important corollary of the Saidian formulation is that all western writings about the East are seen embedded with the colonial project, across time, even if they explicitly condemn the colonial project.²

1. Sumit Sarkar, "Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writing of Modern Indian History," *Oxford Literary Review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 205–224; Ronald Inden, "Orientalist constructions of India," in *Imperialism* (Routledge, 2023), 94–136; David Smith, "Orientalism and Hinduism," *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 2022, 21–36.

2. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Penguin, 2003),

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