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The Asiatic Society: A Courtroom Meeting That Rewrote Language History

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The Asiatic Society: A Courtroom Meeting That Rewrote Language History

The Asiatic Society began in Calcutta in 1784. It studied Asian languages, history and nature. Its records changed scholarship, but its early membership excluded Indians.

This lesson explains The Asiatic Society: A Place for Studying Asia in short steps, one card at a time.

The idea in brief

- Read about **Who founded the Society?**.
- Read about **What did Jones say about languages?**.
- Read about **How did the Society share research?**.
- Read about **How were Ashoka's edicts read?**.
- Read about **How did the institution change?**.

Who founded the Society?

Who founded the Asiatic Society?

15 January 1784: About thirty European men met in the Supreme Court's Grand Jury Room in Calcutta.

William Jones, a British judge, proposed the group. Chief Justice Robert Chambers chaired that first meeting.

Jones became its first president. Warren Hastings, the Governor-General, was its patron.

The group aimed to study Asia's history, languages, arts, sciences and natural world.

Its first name was the **Asiatick Society**. The old spelling used a final "k."

At first, Indians could help its research but could not join as members. Indian membership began in 1829.

This gap matters. The Society studied Indian knowledge while many Indian scholars lacked formal power within it.

Why does the founding story matter? It shows that Asian learning was studied by a mixed group. Europeans held the seats, but they relied on Indian helpers. Keep both parts in mind.

Jones had reached Calcutta in 1783 as a judge of the Supreme Court. He already loved languages. He wanted a place where scholars could share what they learned about Asia.

In his first address, Jones said the Society would study "Man and Nature." That meant human works and natural products alike. Texts, coins, plants, rocks and animals were all fair subjects.

Calcutta was then the capital of British India. Judges, officers and merchants lived there. This crowd of educated Europeans supplied the first members. They paid a fee and attended meetings.

Why did a society like this start in Calcutta and not in London? The answer is access. Original manuscripts, temples, inscriptions and living scholars were all in India. A study of Asia needed to happen near Asia.

The early meetings were held in the evening and followed a simple routine. Members read papers, discussed them, and chose which ones to print. Rules for membership were kept short.

Sources: asiaticsociety.culture.gov.in; asikolkata.in

Quick check 1. Did William Jones chair the first meeting in January 1784? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓



The Asiatic Society building, Park Street, Kolkata. Photo by SayantanRoni, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

What did Jones say about languages?

What did William Jones say about languages?

2 February 1786: Jones gave his third yearly talk to the Society.

He compared Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. He noticed similarities in verb roots and grammar, not just a few matching words.

He argued that chance could not explain all those patterns. He suggested that the languages came from a common source.

He also saw possible links with Gothic, Celtic and Old Persian. His talk did not produce a complete family tree.

Comparative linguistics studies languages side by side to trace their history. Later scholars developed methods and the Indo-European family model.

Jones built on Indian language learning and help from Sanskrit scholars. Indian Sanskrit teachers helped him learn.

Do not say one speech invented an entire field. Nor did Jones prove one exact lost language on his own.

Notice the careful words in Jones's talk. He suggested a common source. He did not claim to prove it. Exam options that say he proved everything are usually the wrong ones.

Jones studied Sanskrit with Indian pandits. He also translated Kalidasa's play Shakuntala into English. It was printed in 1789 and found readers in Europe.

He supervised a digest of Hindu law, too. Courts needed such a guide because judges could not read the old legal texts. Pandits did much of the real work.

Jones died in Calcutta in 1794. He was buried in South Park Street Cemetery. The Society he started kept growing after his death.

A clue for exams: Jones is linked to the 1786 talk, Shakuntala and the founding of the Society. Prinsep is linked to Brahmi. Do not swap them.

Why did Jones's idea excite people? Before him, many Europeans thought Latin and Greek stood alone. A link with Sanskrit meant that languages far apart in space might share an old root. That was a

surprising thought in the 1780s.

The words for father, mother and the numbers show the pattern. Sanskrit pitar, Latin pater and English father sound alike. Such matches are what comparative linguists study.

Sources: sites.units.it; asiaticsociety.culture.gov.in

> **Quick check 2.** Did Jones suggest a common source for Sanskrit, Greek and Latin in 1786? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How did the Society share research?

How did members share their findings?

A **journal** is a regular collection of research articles. These publications carried work on languages, inscriptions, plants and more.

The 1832 journal did not simply begin after the earlier series ended. The two publications overlapped for years.

The Society also built a library and collections. This helped preserve manuscripts, objects and research records.

A learned society works like a shared notebook. Members read papers aloud, then printed the best ones. Anyone could later check the work and build on it. That is how local findings reached readers abroad.

The first volume of Asiatick Researches appeared in 1788. It was the Society’s earliest publication. Later journals followed it.

The Society also began a series called Bibliotheca Indica in 1849. It printed Sanskrit and Arabic texts for scholars. Such editions made old manuscripts easier to study and compare.

James Prinsep edited the journal from its start in 1832. He also served as the Society’s secretary. His articles covered coins, inscriptions, weights and even science.

Printing mattered because manuscripts are fragile. One fire or flood could destroy a unique copy. A printed volume put many copies in many libraries.

Think about how a paper travelled. An author read it in Calcutta, the Society printed it, and ships carried copies to Britain and Europe. Readers there then sent letters and replies. Slow, but it worked.

Many papers dealt with practical things like medicinal plants, rivers, astronomy and local customs. Not all were equal in quality. Later scholars corrected many early errors.

Sources: asiaticsociety.culture.gov.in

Quick check 3. Did the 1832 journal begin while Asiatick Researches still existed? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How were Ashoka's edicts read?

Brahmi is an ancient writing system. Many early Indian inscriptions used it.

James Prinsep compared letters on coins and stone inscriptions. In 1837, he worked out key parts of the script.

That opened many edicts for reading. Some carried the royal title **Devanampiya Piyadasi**.

Other evidence helped link this title with Ashoka. Do not credit one repeated word or one scholar with every step.

The Society holds an Ashokan inscription. It also published work that let others test and build on Prinsep's reading.

Rajendralala Mitra later became its first Indian president in 1885. His rise followed decades after Indians gained membership.

Reading a lost script is like solving a puzzle. You compare shapes, test guesses, and drop the ones that fail. Each correct match helps with the next. Many people worked on such puzzles, not one.

Prinsep also worked on Kharoshthi, another ancient script. Coins with both Greek and Indian writing helped him. A bilingual coin works like a dictionary, because a known script explains an unknown one.

The Society's collections grew so large that it needed more space. Its museum later became the Indian Museum in Kolkata, set up in 1814. That museum is among the oldest in Asia.

Its Park Street building was finished in the first decade of the 1800s. It still holds rare books, manuscripts, paintings and coins today.

Remember the chain of ideas. Coins gave clues, clues gave letters, letters gave words, and words opened the edicts. Ashoka's own messages then became readable again.

Ashoka's edicts spoke of kindness, tolerance and moral conduct. They were cut on rocks and pillars across a huge area. After the script was lost, no one could read them for many centuries.

Once Prinsep's reading spread, scholars across India copied inscriptions and sent them to Calcutta. This team effort revealed a ruler whose name had almost vanished from memory.

Sources: asiaticsociety.culture.gov.in

> **Quick check 4.** Did Prinsep's 1837 work help people read Brahmi inscriptions? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How did the institution change?

How did the institution change over time?

The name changed with the times. The first was *Asiatick Society* in 1784.

It later used *Asiatic Society of Bengal*. In 1936 it took the name *Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*.

After independence it returned to *The Asiatic Society*. Official accounts differ on whether to date that final change to 1951 or 1952.

Early members were Europeans. Indians joined from 1829 and gained leadership over time.

The Society helped preserve texts and objects. Yet colonial officials also used research to classify and govern people.

Orientalism is a name for European study and portrayal of Asian societies. It could value Indian learning while placing European voices above Indian scholars.

Indian teachers, translators and writers shaped this work. Their roles should be visible beside the famous European names.

Names are useful clues in exam questions. A name tells you the period and the political setting. If an option mixes an old name with a later date, check it twice.

Dwarkanath Tagore was among the first Indians admitted in 1829. Other wealthy Calcutta families followed. Membership at first meant money, English and social standing.

In 1984, Parliament passed the Asiatic Society Act. It declared the Society an institution of national importance. The Society still works from Kolkata.

This long story shows a pattern. An institution can begin in a colonial setting and still become part of a nation’s heritage. Both facts can be true at once.

Colonial scholarship had a mixed record. It saved texts and sparked interest in the past. It also often ranked cultures and ignored local voices. A balanced answer on this topic mentions both gains and limits.

Today the Society runs a library and a museum, and it holds lectures and exhibitions. Its rare book collection draws researchers from many countries.

Sources: asiaticsociety.culture.gov.in

Quick check 5. Has the institution kept one name without a break since 1784? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. Did Rajendralala Mitra become its first Indian president after Indians gained membership? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam angle: keep people and dates apart

What might exams ask about it?

A useful answer links Prinsep to Ashokan edicts. It also gives credit to other scholars and evidence.

For language history, say Jones proposed a common source. Later research built the Indo-European model.

One more habit helps. Write the person, the year, and the achievement as a short chain. Then test each option against the chain before you choose.

Match the name to the era. Asiatick Society means 1784. Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal means 1936. The Asiatic Society means the post-independence name.

Match the person to the act. Jones founded the Society and gave the 1786 talk. Prinsep edited the journal and read Brahmi. Mitra became the first Indian president in 1885.

Watch for absolute words like only, first and entire. They make an option risky. Most careful statements about this Society use softer words like helped or began.

Quick check 7. Are Jones and Prinsep linked to different breakthroughs? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 8. Were the Calcutta and Bombay Asiatic societies the same institution? True or false? *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. On what date was the Asiatick Society founded in Calcutta?

A. 15 January 1784

B. 2 February 1786

C. 1 January 1788

D. 10 March 1829

See answer ↓

2. Who proposed the Asiatick Society and became its first president?

A. William Jones

B. Warren Hastings

C. Robert Chambers

D. James Prinsep

See answer ↓

3. Which Governor-General was the first patron of the Asiatick Society?

A. William Bentinck

B. Lord Cornwallis

C. Warren Hastings

D. Lord Wellesley

See answer ↓

4. In which year did the Society begin admitting Indian members?

A. 1784

B. 1829

C. 1857

D. 1885

See answer ↓

5. Who became the first Indian president of the Society in 1885?

A. Ram Mohan Roy

B. Dwarkanath Tagore

C. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

D. Rajendralala Mitra

See answer ↓

6. In which year did Prinsep's Journal of the Asiatic Society begin publication?

A. 1788

B. 1832

C. 1857

D. 1905

See answer ↓

7. Which discourse of William Jones in 1786 suggested a shared origin for Sanskrit, Greek and Latin?

A. Second Discourse

B. Third Discourse

C. Final Discourse

D. First Discourse

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The founding meeting took place on 15 January 1784. It was held in the Grand Jury Room of the Supreme Court. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** William Jones proposed the Society and led it as president. Robert Chambers chaired the first meeting. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** Warren Hastings accepted the role of patron. His support gave the young body official weight. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** Indians could join from 1829. Before that, only Europeans sat in the membership. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** Rajendralala Mitra was the first Indian to hold the chair. He was a noted scholar of Sanskrit and antiquities. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** The Journal began in 1832 under James Prinsep. It later carried his reading of the Brahmi script. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** The Third Discourse, delivered on 2 February 1786, made the claim. It helped start comparative linguistics. ↑ Q7

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** Robert Chambers chaired the meeting. Jones proposed the Society and became its first president. ↑ 1
2. **True.** He based the idea on strong links in grammar and verb roots. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The publications overlapped for years. ↑ 3
4. **True.** His work opened many inscriptions, including Ashokan edicts, for reading. ↑ 4
5. **False.** Its name changed several times. ↑ 5
6. **True.** Indians gained membership in 1829. Mitra became president in 1885. ↑ 6
7. **True.** Jones spoke about language links. Prinsep worked on Brahmi. ↑ 7
8. **False.** They were separate societies. ↑ 8

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