

Book Reviews

India and the British Empire

Edited by Douglas M. PEERS and Nandini GOOPTU
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 366 pp.
ISBN: 978-0199259885 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by L. Michael RATNAPALAN
Yonsei University, Korea (Republic of)

doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12773/arwh.2013.1.2.309>

The General Editor of *the Oxford History of the British Empire* once explained that it only became possible to write the original series in the wake of the changed geopolitical climate of the 1990s. While colonialism had had its day, its critics had apparently been on guard for signs of a revival in its academic fortunes. In a similar way, at the outset of this excellent companion volume of recent research on British India, the editors explain that their subject has ‘reached somewhat of an impasse’ due to conflicts over the nature and legacy of the Raj (p. 6). Given the fractious nature of the terrain, their plan to offer ‘ways forward for the writing of India’s history’ (p. 3) seems ambitious. After three productive but stormy

decades we may only hope that the study of the ‘jewel in the crown’ is on the verge of a less polemical era.

This new volume is well organized and the chapters link together convincingly in terms of both themes and perspectives. Roughly, the first half of the book consists of longer (30 pages) articles that cover large themes in political, social, and economic history, while the second half consists mainly of shorter (20 pages) articles that consider relatively recent developments in research, such as law, science, environment, and visual culture. Despite the variety, in as wide-ranging a field as the history of the relations between India and the British Empire the internal coherence of a collection might not be considered as much of a virtue as it would perhaps be for other subjects.

The chapter that follows the editors’ introduction is Douglas Peers on “State, Power, and Colonialism.” Peers emphasizes ‘military fiscalism’ as *the* essential logic of the British regime’s decision-making about colonial India, which, understood as leading to regional variations, provides a good argument for the differences between a post-colonial “democratic” India and a “militarized” Pakistan. David Washbrook develops Peers’ opening themes by asking awkwardly reasonable questions about the colonial economy and outlining the centrality, for Britain, of maintaining an active and expansive military force in South Asia through the calculation of India as a “pivot” for expansion “east of the Mediterranean” (p. 54). His exploration of pre-colonial economic logic in South Asia also helps to better explain the economic and social disintegration of that region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by examining sequentially the East India Company’s engagement with a dynamic south Asian system.

Norbert Peabody’s contribution is a jaunty critical review of ‘discourse theory’ relating to colonial India. Much like Washbrook’s article, it takes the form of an embattled conversation with other scholars about the various positions on the subject that have emerged in recent years. Rosalind O’Hanlon’s essay is also a closely argued critical survey of the field, which in her case is the complex relation between colonialism and Indian social identities. She

makes a case for the true ground of colonial “modernity” in India being within processes of “sedentarization” and “the consolidation of scribal and commercial elites” power “within new kinds of vernacular public sphere” (p. 132). The Banjaras, itinerant cattle herders who were also an important mercantile group, emerge as one of the uncategorizable heroes of this new post-binary perspective on British India. Sumit Sarkar then draws on his long experience of studying Indian nationalism to reflect on the shifts and trends in historiography and to defend colonial era nationalism for its “remarkable...capacity for internal debate, change, and auto-critique” (p. 165).

Sandra den Otter’s meaty chapter on colonial law and legal authority is refreshing for its direct recourse to primary sources and for its concrete portrayal of the paradoxes that are sometimes only alluded to elsewhere. Similarly, Mark Harrison’s clear-eyed account of “networks of knowledge” during the early post-conquest years effectively challenges the notion that all colonial scientists thought the same and were essentially subservient to the metropolitan establishment. Mahesh Rangarajan in his wide-ranging survey of environment and ecology confirms the general conclusion of the book that, while the colonial era taken in sum appears to mark a watershed in certain respects, “the breaks look less polarized in the light of further work” (p. 228). Christopher Pinney’s article is perhaps the most problematic in meeting its stated aim. In his chapter he attempts to show the uniqueness of the visual methodology that he posits in contrast to what he describes as “orthodox” histories of India. While I am not convinced of the success of his approach, he does introduce vibrant, sometimes striking visual sources into a largely text based field.

Javeed Majeed’s article is a patient and lucid analysis of one of the ‘problems’ in the study of South Asian literatures, in which he successfully shifts the critical ground to a more complex, eclectic and creative notion of South Asian writers and their work. Tanika Sarkar’s clear prose and critical approach provide just the right frame for her chapter, a smart, insightful exploration of themes relating to gender that manages to remain both complexly human

and historical. Vijay Prashad's polemical interpretation of the *desi* diaspora, although informative and wide-ranging, left some unverified assumptions and seemed uneven in its coverage. His main claim is that the presence of nationalism in the homeland means that modern (meaning post-nineteenth century) Indian migration is the only one that should be considered a 'diaspora.' However, since India was not a nation during the period that his analysis begins it is surprising that he does not explain the conditions for incipient forms of nationalism.

At the end of the volume, Nandini Gooptu provides an excellent concluding analysis of the political legacy of colonialism, in which there is also a welcome comparative look at India and Pakistan since independence. Her chapter offers a particularly vibrant engagement with the work of Sudipta Kaviraj and others in an attempt to restore South Asian agency and inter-group competition to the narrative of "colonial modernity." Like the other contributions, it is an argument for and a justification of historical methods and approaches to understanding the South Asian past.

As this brief overview indicates, the volume is a little uneven. It would have been more vibrant if there had been fewer chapters on politics and more on areas such as urban development and popular culture. The editors could also have trimmed the rather repetitive developments of the Cambridge school v. Subaltern Studies narrative, which turns up in several chapters. Indeed, large sections of the book can be seen as part of a dialogue with subalternist historians and their academic successors. In this sense, the essays are perhaps better appreciated less as introductions to research themes and rather as trenchant arguments in battle-hardened debates. The novice is advised to tread with care. Take, for example, Norbert Peabody's dismantling of Gauri Viswanathan for her ahistorical reasoning, in which one of her essays is described as "a blatant, but nonetheless representative, example of [the] predisposition to read early colonial history anachronistically" (pp. 80-81). David Washbrook's essay on the Indian economy under the British Empire can be taken as a disquisition into subalternist assumptions about the impact of colonial rule on India. The

more experienced scholars contributing to this volume are biographically tied to the historiography of the past 30 years and its attendant controversies, and this needs to be understood to properly locate their analyses.

The Oxford History of the British Empire provided a sustained and coherent response to academic fragmentation. Its very success might call into question the need for additional volumes, but this collection richly offers the additional depth, new research and fresh interpretations that will continue to enliven an exciting field of historical studies. Readers of this journal might especially note that, while Indian historiography's impact in other areas has been felt for several years, there is a strong indication here that the political and economic history of India under British rule is increasingly being framed within a distinctively Asian sphere.

The East India Company: The World's Most Powerful Corporation

By Tirthankar ROY
New Delhi: Allan Lane, 2012. 268 pp.
ISBN: 978-0670085071 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by Yukihiisa KUMAGAI
University of the Ryukyus, Japan

doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12773/arwh.2013.1.2.313>

After experiencing the “Hindu rate of growth”, India has been enjoying rapid economic development in the current globalized economy, in which the narratives of the British East India Company give modern multinational enterprises a meaningful historical lesson in many respects, including organisational structure, business practices, and morality. Roy's easy-to-read book on the Company's trading activities with India is a part of Penguin's *The Story of Indi-*