



Carey A. Watt, Michael Mann. *Civilizing Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia: From Improvement to Development*. London: Anthem Press Central Books Ltd, 2011. 337 S. ISBN 978-0-85728-830-1.

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C. Watt u.a. (Hrsg.): *Civilizing Missions in South Asia*

Ideas and practices to civilize other people and cultures, which are often described as ‘civilizing missions’ are by no means a new phenomenon. Under ever-shifting guises such as ‘improvement’, ‘development’ and nowadays ‘building-capacity’, they were used and still continue to be used in many places around the world. The persistence, influence and adaptability of civilizing missions to changing political, social and cultural environments have attracted considerable scholarly attention in the last fifteen years, particularly in studies related to western colonialism/imperialism and to efforts of a society’s internal uplifting. Boris Barth / Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Zivilisierungsmissionen. Imperiale Weltverbesserungen seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, Konstanz 2005; Harald Fischer-Tiné / Michael Mann (eds.), *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission. Cultural Ideology in British India*, London / New York 2004; Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize. The Republic Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*, Stanford 1997.

The present edited volume by Carey Watt and Michael Mann builds on both these themes with a focus on civilizing missions in South Asia. Thereby, the civilizing agenda of the British colonial state in the 19th and 20th centuries is re-addressed in several chapters. However, more importantly, the volume sheds light on the “tensions, ambiguities and paradoxes of civilizing missions carried out (a) by the Raj, (b) by various missionary and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and (c) by Indians themselves” (p. 12).

The volume starts with an insightful introduction by Watt who presents academic and public debates about the

Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan as contemporary instances of civilizing missions. Subsequently, nine chapters follow in a rough chronological order, divided into four parts. The first two articles under the section ‘The Raj’s Reform and Improvements’ explore the British civilizing efforts. In the piece titled ‘Conjecturing Rudeness’ (pp. 37–63), Adam Knowles examines James Mill’s ‘History of British India’. Although, the book was based on conjecture and aimed at British readers to make them aware of their own ‘rudeness’ (p. 38), Knowles highlights that it became famous for providing the ideological basis for British rule in India. Written in 1817, when the East India Company was on its way to become the paramount power on the sub-continent, Mill’s book helped to legitimize colonialism by introducing discourses of ‘colonial difference’. This ‘difference’ was also emphasized by British commentators on the aesthetics of Indian art, who pleaded for its ‘improvement’ and ‘civilization’. However, how far the British were able to transform the Indian society or art through the ideas of ‘improvement’ is a debatable issue. In his contribution ‘Art, Artifacts and Architecture’ (pp. 67–89) Michael Mann shows that the British verbal commitment to introduce improvement did not prove successful due to financial and ideological constraints.

The second part of the volume ‘Colonialism, Indians and Nongovernmental Associations’ comprises three articles that analyze the complex and ambiguous nature of civilizing missions in the colonial period. Jana Tschurennev’s chapter on ‘Incorporation and Differentiation’ (pp. 93–124) looks into educational initiatives in

India in the early 19th century. While examining the civilizing agendas of missionaries and school societies, Tschurenv traces the transformation “from elementary education as an informal private activity towards standardized public institutions” (p. 94). Furthermore, she shows how in this process negotiations and compromises were necessary not only to accommodate the conflicting tendencies within these agendas, but also to serve the local colonial needs and issues of class, gender and caste. A transnational perspective of civilizing missions is offered in the chapter on ‘Reclaiming Savages in “Darkest England” and “Darkest India”’ (pp. 125-164) by Harald Fischer-Tiné. Fischer-Tiné examines the work of the Salvation Army, which aimed at the moral purification and material uplift of ‘savages’ in the ‘metropolis’ (Britain) and in the ‘periphery’ (British India). By stressing the mutual influences and information of both dimensions (p. 126), he adds to a more pronounced understanding of civilizing mission that “were by no means synonymous with European colonialism nor were they geographically restricted to colonies and ‘zones of influence’ in the non-Western parts of the globe” (p. 150). In the last chapter in this second section called ‘Mediating Modernity’ (pp. 165–189), Andrea Major addresses the complex relationship between the British colonial government and social reform initiatives in early 20th century India. By taking up the example of the Hindu Child Marriage Restraint Bill she shows that civilizing agendas in the guise of reformist projects were not free from conflicting tendencies. While aiming to legitimize imperialism through ‘improvement’, the drafting and introduction of the reform bill was restricted by political expediencies (p. 165). The proposal of the bill by Indian social reformers points, as Major concludes, to the internalization of the civilizing mission by Indian nationalists (p. 185).

This internalization is further outlined and explored in the third part of the volume called ‘Indian “Self-civilizing” Efforts c. 1900–1930’. In her paper ‘Civilizing Sister’ (pp. 193–215) Shobna Nijhawan analyses how questions of improvement and development for Indian middle class women were discussed in Hindi women periodicals in the 1910s and 1920s. Thereby she argues that the female writers appropriated and transformed discourses of civilization and reform by claiming that only active female citizens could save the Indian nation and help winning Indian independence (pp. 208f.). Another example for self-civilizing missions is provided by

Prashant Kidambi in his article ‘From “Social Reform” to “Social Service”’ (pp. 217–239). Kidambi explores the civilizing activism of Indian middle class in Bombay that was often informed by an understanding to ‘reclaim’ the ‘depressed classes’ and therefore employed a range of disciplinary projects to ‘civilize’, ‘uplift’ and ‘improve’ the urban poor. He argues that the displayed social service was not only an important contribution to the nation-building project, but also supported the middle-class demands for public leadership in the early 20th century (p. 235).

The fourth part entitled ‘Transcending 1947’ includes two chapters that trace the continuation of certain aspects of Indian civilizing missions from the colonial to the post-colonial period. In her article ‘Female Infanticide and the civilizing mission’ (pp. 243–269) Shahid Perwez explores the social and political responses to this phenomenon in contemporary Tamil South India. Based on extensive field work, Perwez argues that recent government initiatives to reduce female infanticide, such as the Cradle Baby Scheme and the Girl Child Protection Scheme, are implicit continuities of rhetoric and practices to civilize (p. 264). Finally, Carey Watt in his article examines the relationship between ‘Philanthropy and Civilizing Missions’ (pp. 271–316) by taking up three case studies that encompass a period of more than 140 years. By looking into charitable efforts of the East India Company after 1820, into initiatives aiming at social service and philanthropy by Indian organizations between 1890 and 1947 and into the philanthropic approach of the Nehruvian state in the 1950s, Watt highlights various continuities, such as the creation of difference between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘backward’ people or the emphasis of disciplining the latter (pp. 302f.).

The volume closes with an ‘Afterword’ (pp. 317–328) by Michael Mann which not only explains the origins, but also summarizes the outcome of the civilizing mission. The volume is a very well-written contribution to the history of South Asia. By analyzing various transnational entanglements the books also adds to our understanding of global history. By covering a period of over two hundred years, from the late 18th century until the early 21st century, the collection offers interesting insights into the changes and continuities of civilizing ideas and practices from the colonial to the post-colonial state on the South Asian subcontinent.

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