

Douglas M. Peers, Nandini Gooptu. *India and the British Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 366 S. ISBN 978-0-19-925988-5.

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## D. M. Peers u.a. (Hrsg.): *India and the British Empire*

It has long been an historical truism to describe the Indian subcontinent as one of the most brilliant jewels in the nineteenth-century British imperial diadem. It was crucially important to Britain's identity as a global superpower even if, as David Washbrook's chapter in this collection demonstrates, its economic contribution to the empire was more ambiguous. And, in the twentieth century, the end of British rule in India is often regarded as marking a crucial watershed in the imperial career of the subcontinent's erstwhile colonial ruler. Given all of this, then, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that India has had to wait so long to take its place among the companion volumes that accompany the highly acclaimed *Oxford History of the British Empire*. This volume redresses that situation and, in doing so, it adds to what Douglas Peers and Nandini Gooptu describe in their introduction as 'a remarkable efflorescence' of historical studies of colonial India over the past generation (p. 1).

The purpose of the *Companion Series*, of which this volume forms a part, is to pursue themes that could not be adequately covered in the main series of five volumes, incorporating recent research and providing fresh interpretations of significant topics. This collection builds on the groundwork laid in the original five-volume *History* in interesting and thought-provoking ways, suggesting new directions for future scholarship. Taken together, the essays collected here provide a deep engagement not just with the history of British India, but with the historiography of that subject. It needs to be read in conjunction with, rather than as an alternative to, the chapters about India in the five-volume *History* series. The

book engages in critical debates about the nature, impact and legacy of the British imperial connection with India. Broadly speaking, it addresses the ways in which the British relationship with India affected economic, political, environmental, social, cultural, ideological, and intellectual contexts from a range of perspectives. Furthermore, as Peers and Gooptu remark, the influence of historical scholarship on British India has stretched far beyond the shores of the subcontinent. For example, the widespread adoption of the term 'subaltern', and its attendant analytical frameworks for examining power relationships and their imbalances, signals the impact of this historiography on wider debates in imperial history. It is only fitting, therefore, that this volume engages very directly and thoughtfully with key historiographical concepts and discussions. Many of the contributions to the volume, for example, work to investigate and complicate the traditional pattern of binary oppositions that have characterised South Asian history, such as colonizer/colonized, imperialism/nationalism, and modernity/tradition.

Chapters by Douglas Peers, David Washbrook and Norbert Peabody offer rich discussions of the ways in which India divided opinion in Britain in the early colonial period, as well as its contribution to the British economy and nascent British imperial state. There was never unequivocal support in Britain for the East India Company's growing empire in the subcontinent. People like Adam Smith and Alexander Dow, in his *History of Hindoostan* published in 1768, railed against the Company and its policies as baleful influences on both

Britain and India. Despite their misgivings, however, India 'became the crucial pivot in a multilateral system of imperial economy' (p. 54). Washbrook makes the vital point that the military capacity of the Company's burgeoning armies provided the perfect foil for British naval power, buttressing Britain's geopolitical interests east of the Mediterranean. In doing so, the Company helped to create and sustain opportunities for British trade, investment and profit that outweighed anything to be obtained bilaterally from India.

Mark Harrison's chapter on networks of scientific knowledge – both within the subcontinent itself, as well as those connecting it to the wider world – is an important contribution, and reflects the general tenor of the collection. Too often, Harrison argues, men of science working in India have been described as 'fact-gatherers', reliant on senior figures in Britain for the analysis of their data (p. 194). Harrison's own work, along with those of an increasing number of other historians, has been at the forefront of recent attempts to question this interpretation. He suggests that the picture was more complicated than this rather simplistic analysis allows. Officials in India working with local and indigenous forms of knowledge created their own networks of knowledge exchange and often bypassed the imperial metropolis in the process. In many cases, in fact, they established alternative nodes of scientific expertise, situating places like Calcutta and Madras as 'centres' in their own right.

Christopher Pinney's chapter on the material and visual culture of British India provides a refreshing addition to the collection, opening the topic up to a range of frequently overlooked historical sources and historiographical traditions. He points, for example, to the frequency with which empire has been discussed in the absence of the visual art, statuary, public architecture, costume, and interior décor that sustained all empires. Pinney suggests that 'the "material history" of the British Empire is more than simply a 'supplement' to – or a set of illustrative embodiments of – a history of which we are already familiar' (pp. 232–3). In the context of this collection, from the late eighteenth century onwards, India was focus of an immense project of visualization, objectification, and categorization: popular panoramas, history paintings, a profusion of lithographs, aquatints and engravings, exhibitions, photography. In light of this evidence, Pinney argues for a widening of the scope imperial historiography to encompass questions of materiality and visualization.

The editors' claim that the history of imperialism is more than merely a bilateral relationship between 'core' and 'periphery' is something borne out very powerfully in the contributions that they have selected for inclusion here. Taken as a whole, the collection posits an alternative view of imperial connections as matrices of overlapping and intertwining networks. And, in doing so, a more nuanced picture of British imperialism in India emerges.

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