Colonial Lists/Indian Power forcefully demonstrates the active agency of the periphery or “subaltern” in fostering new identities in southern Indian under British colonialism. Michael Katten, the book’s author, dismisses more conventional views that colonialism imposed new categories and identities from above, or conversely that subalterns forged new identities mainly out of resistance to the colonial system. Instead, Katten views the process of category creation and identity formation as being dialogic, wherein subalterns learned and used the colonial system to their advantage toward creating and asserting new identities. Many “colonial” categories, Katten thus contends, were formed “from below” and these proved to be longer lasting and more meaningful to inhabitants of the periphery than categories imposed “from above” such as region and nation.

Each of the four core chapters of the book deals with a particular process that involved and impacted Telugu speaking communities in the northern coastal districts of the Madras Presidency (the coastal region of today’s Andhra Pradesh). In each of these chapters Katten demonstrates how peoples on the periphery created and asserted new forms of identity that ultimately became recognized as fixed categories (“lists”) under the colonial system.

Chapter 2 focuses on boundary disputes in this region under British East India Company rule. While the new administration provided a new context for settlement of such disputes, Katten demonstrates how local “experts” were often required for determining boundaries. With boundaries settled and determined, people of the periphery came to adopt a new identity, that of “villager.” Chapter 3 illustrates the ways Telugu speakers asserted self-identity and influence through the use of petitions written to East India Company officials. Growing self-assertion could be discerned through transformations in the writing style of these petitions from the late eighteenth- to the mid-nineteenth centuries.

Chapter 4 entails an analysis and comparison of different versions of the Bobbili Katha, a popular tale based on a tragic historical event that took place in northern Andhra during the late eighteenth century. Katten argues that as the telling of this story progressed through history, it gradually asserted a new social identity, that of caste, the warrior Vellama caste in particular. His view of Vellama caste identity formation during the nineteenth century contrasts with older views of caste being inherently Indian in nature and also more recent views of caste being mainly the product of colonialism.[1] While Katten masterfully analyzes and compares different historical versions of this tale, he appears to give too much power to the narration itself in the construction of caste identity. What influenced the narration of the story to change remains largely unexplained. Katten’s assessment of the Bobbili Katha mirrors in many ways that given by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subramaniam in Textures of Time (2003), though the respective assessments share in common only an 1832 recitation of the story. Each set of authors shows how each version of the story can be viewed as an alternate historical text, each with “its own variety of realism, its own sense of sequence and motivation, its own notion of cause.” However, compared to the authors of Textures of Time, Katten views the Bobbili Katha has having evolved to promoting a distinct caste-based world view, a world view that remains prevalent, as is evident in a 1950s movie version and contemporary folk performances of
this epic story.

The final and most extensive chapter of the book examines the evolution of “weaver” as a social category. Again Katten contends that this category was constructed more on the periphery and entailed various communities who shared a common profession forging together a supra-caste identity to strengthen themselves under East India Company rule. Eventually and oddly enough, “weaver” became an established social category in colonial “lists,” along side other indigenously named castes. The strengthening of weavers though community-building contrasts with conventional views of economic historians that show the weakening position of weavers due to the decline of foreign textile trade within the region during the early nineteenth century.[2] Katten contends that such economic historians generally neglect non-economic factors, especially in the domestic sphere, which allowed weavers to maintain a strong presence in localities.

Though Katten successfully demonstrates the strong agency of Telugu speaking peoples in contending with the colonial system and shaping and asserting their self-identity, he concludes that eventually new categories and identities reached an ending point in their evolution. At this point the colonial system asserted the upper hand over indigenous agency. Thus village boundaries became set causing the decline of village people power, petitions stopped climbing the colonial administrative ladder and the language of the petition became frozen in the colonial archive, the Bobbili Katha came to promulgate a society in which caste distinctions were paramount, and the new category of weavers became victim to their declining importance in international trade and their resulting “orientalized,” Gandhian image of being in dire straits. So, in the end, even though he may not have intended to, Katten appears to point to the ultimate failure of successful Indian agency during the colonial era.

Colonial Lists/Indian Power has much relevance to broader scholarship on identity and nationalism; however, the arrangement of the book, particularly the Introduction, diminishes the book’s effectiveness in catering to a broader audience. Important and very readable “notes” on identity and nationalism appear as appendices to the Introduction instead of being more effectively directly incorporated into the Introduction.

Finally, Colonial Lists/Indian Power provides an opportunity to compare a conventionally published book to that published in the emerging electronic medium. Being among the first six monographs published under the Gutenberg-e project, Colonial Lists/Indian Power demonstrates certain pitfalls in electronic publishing that can be easily rectified as this medium progresses.[3] Navigating the book is often problematic. (For example, a “back” link from a photograph or document often places one back at the beginning of a chapter instead of at the point reading was halted.) Editing of an electronic text seems more lax, as evidenced by numerous errors (typos, book titles not italicized, etc.), many of which transferred to the printed book. Given that an electronic book is more malleable than a printed book, these errors could be easily rectified. These deficiencies aside, the electronic version greatly enhances understanding of the book and of the historian’s craft, and illuminates the legacy of this history. Village boundary disputes are better understood and visualized with links to contemporary photographs of village boundary markers, such as lines of palm trees, roads, or embankments; photographs of early nineteenth century handwritten petitions and other documents in Telugu and English, including palm leaf manuscripts, demonstrate the diversity of sources Katten consulted; clips from the 1950s movie version of Bobbili Katha and contemporary folk performances of the story, as well as contemporary photographs of story sites and statues of story heroes, enhance understanding of the place of this story in contemporary popular culture; and contemporary photographs of various textile patterns from the region and video clips of weavers in action counter the more conventional image of a profession that was strongly injured by colonialism. Such visual images will be especially helpful to readers unfamiliar with the Telugu-speaking landscape. To specialists of Telugu culture, Katten provides links to many documents, including the entire 1832 Telugu manuscript rendition of the Bobbili Katha.

In sum, the printed version of Colonial Lists/Indian Power, while perhaps easier to read, lacks the masala of its e-book counterpart. The latter version is extremely useful and perhaps would be better received, along with other Gutenberg-e publications, if sold together with the printed book. A small note to readers of both versions: while footnote numbers begin anew with each chapter in the electronic version, footnotes run sequentially throughout the entire printed version. Neither version of the book contains an index or glossary of terms, though the lack of an index is rectified in the electronic version by a search function.

These deficiencies aside and regardless of which version of the book is read, Colonial Lists/Indian Power is a welcome addition to scholarship on a lesser examined
region of India and in furthering an understanding of British colonialism in India “from below.”

Notes


[3]. For a more extensive assessment of the first six monographs published under the Gutenberg-e project, see Patrick Manning, “Gutenberg-e: Electronic Entry to the Historical Professorate,” American Historical Review, 109, no. 5 (December 2004), 1505-1526.

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