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The Colonial Transition: South Asia, 1780–1840

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The seven papers in this special issue focus primarily on the development of British colonial rule between the 1780s and the 1840s.[1] Over the course of these decades, the East India Company extended and consolidated its political and military control throughout much of the Indian subcontinent. Many of the crucial developments in the formation of the colonial state occurred during this period. These include the conquest of Mysore and the defeat of the Marathas, the implementation of the Permanent Settlement, the reforms undertaken during the Viceroyalty of Lord Bentinck, the introduction of Utilitarianism and missionary activity, the establishment of the Trigonometrical Survey, the development of the systems of control based upon indirect rule in the 'princely states', the emergence of new concepts of 'race' and social hierarchy, and the reshaping of British social life in South Asia. Outside of India, Ceylon's maritime provinces were captured from the Dutch and, in 1815, the interior Kandyan kingdom was annexed, paving the way for the island's transformation into a Crown colony focused on plantation production. In Britain, too, there was a growing interest among the public in the British territorial possessions in South Asia and an increasing awareness that this empire helped to define Britain as a great national power within Europe. For these reasons alone, this period, which begins when the Company was seeking to entrench itself as the de facto ruler of Bengal and ends

[1] The inspiration for these essays was a workshop conducted at Dartmouth College in December 2001, funded by the Rockefeller Center. The subject was 'South Asia, 1780–1840: The Early Transition to Colonialism.' In addition to the seven contributors, other scholars participated as paper-givers and discussants. This introduction has benefited greatly from the general conversations and the specific suggestions and comments shared during the workshop. We would particularly like to mention our debts to Sugata Bose for his stimulating comments on the paper of David Washbrook. We also like to thank Manu Goswami, John Hurd, Ayesha Jalal, Prasannan Parthasarathi, Mridu Rai, Josna Rege and David Rudner.

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shortly before the 1857 rebellions and the formal end of the Company rule, requires serious attention by historians.

For several decades after independence, the early colonial transition captured the interest of historians, and much research was conducted on the establishment of colonial power, the first revenue settlements, and the religious and economic policies of the East India Company. There existed a clear sense of certainty in the profession that the onset of colonial rule marked a radical break in a variety of respects from the era that preceded it, often thought to have been characterized by war and chaos.[2] But more recently the focus of scholarly attention has shifted to both later and earlier periods. Profoundly new ways of looking at South Asian history have clearly emerged. Some historians have turned to intensive examinations of South Asia during the eighteenth century, and their research has resulted in important propositions about the social, economic, and political forces within the subcontinent that ultimately resulted in colonial rule. Those working within 'subaltern' history and those influenced by post-modern approaches to colonial discourse and culture studies have tended to focus on the 'high imperial' phase of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These studies have enabled us to comprehend better both the ways the colonial state projected its authority and how Indians from every social and economic group were able to subvert and manipulate at least some of that colonial power.

No doubt, significant work on the period of the 'colonial transition' has continued despite the development of these strong areas of concentrations. In a fascinating series of books, for example, C. A. Bayly has examined changes in South Asian society and in the nature of British rule between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and David Washbrook has contributed a large number of important essays that cover the same period.[3] The work of historians such as

[2] This characterization was effectively challenged by, among others, Richard B. Barnett, *North India between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[3] See, for example, C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For a selection of D. A. Washbrook's work, see his 'Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3 (1981), 649–721; 'Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History c. 1720–1860,' *Modern Asian Studies* 22, 1 (1988), 57–96; 'Economic Depression and the Making

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Lata Mani, Eugene Irschick and Nicholas Dirks, just to name a few, have introduced new analyses of the state and its workings during this period.[4] Yet, many historians, we suspect, would be hard pressed to articulate how these studies add up to some coherent new perspectives of the colonial transition akin to the reevaluations of both earlier and later phases. Some perspectives of the period run in contradiction to each other, while the implication of others to some grander view remains unclear. Large gaps in our understandings of many subject matters have become evident as historical research appears on other periods. These include the role of the metropole in the formation of imperial policy, the origins of colonial racial thinking, the refashioning of gender roles, the workings of early colonial law, the economic effects of colonial revenue policy, and of the realignment of India's place in world trade networks. As a result, the form and character of colonialism between 1780 and 1840, the ways in which British rule changed over time and between places (Ceylon and Bengal, for instance) still remain quite unclear. These concerns are now attracting a new generation of historians, a number of whom are represented in this volume.

Continuity vs. Change in Historiographical Perspectives

As has been pointed out by Partha Chatterjee, Sunil Khilnani, and, most recently, by Seema Alavi, much of the historiographical debate concerning colonial rule in South Asia has centered on the degree, extent and meaning of colonial practices and ideologies.[5] The relevance of the period from the 1780s to the 1840s to these debates has been a bit murky, in large part because historians do not agree about when and perhaps if colonialism effected major transitions in

of Traditional Society in Colonial India, 1820–55,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6, 3 (1993), 237–63.

[4] Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[5] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 14–34; Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1997), 219–21; Seema Alavi, 'Introduction' in *The Eighteenth Century in India*, ed. by Seema Alavi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–56. Chatterjee, Khilnani and Alavi provide reviews of the historical literature as it relates to the impact of colonialism on India, a sense of which we can only sketch here.

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South Asian society and politics. Some scholars have questioned the power of the early British rulers to alter radically the structures of South Asian society, often by highlighting the considerable agency of Indian elites in the establishment of Company power. These historians to a great extent turned away from an examination of the role of the metropole in the colonial transition and toward the internal dynamics of the subcontinent. In some cases they argued that the transformative capabilities of colonialism were relatively weak and that any motivation on the part of administrators, businessmen, and army officials to alter societal structures to fit colonial needs was often tempered by the fear of provoking resistance or alienating needed collaborators. Unmistakable and identifiable imperial ideologies, it was often assumed, developed only in the later nineteenth century. Historians of the eighteenth century suggested that many of the social and economic changes once thought to have been brought about by colonialism and global capitalism preceded the imposition of British rule, and that these reflected indigenous developments far more than they did the 'impact' of European expansion.[6] This 'revisionist' approach has stressed the internal dynamics of South Asian society and de-emphasized the role of the metropole.[7] Some scholars have even questioned whether early Company rule can even be characterized as 'colonial', given the continuities with earlier regimes and the incorporation of South Asian actors.

Of course, many historians who identify continuities between post-Mughal indigenous polities and the East India Company state also recognize significant shifts and transformations, especially during the early nineteenth century. David Washbrook, for example, has argued that the thirty years after 1820 saw changes that he has characterized as 'peasantization' and 'traditionalization', processes of colonial restructuring that made Indian society and economy more amenable to the dominance of British capital.[8] C. A. Bayly, a scholar

[6] See, for example, Eric Stokes, 'The First Century of British Colonial Rule in India: Social Revolution or Social Stagnation?' *Past and Present* 58 (1973), 136–60; Washbrook, 'Law State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India,' 649–721; Burton Stein, 'State Formation and Economy Reconsidered,' *Modern Asian Studies* 19, 3 (1985), 387–413; Frank Perlin, 'State Formation Reconsidered,' *Modern Asian Studies* 19, 3 (1985), 415–80; and Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*.

[7] Robert E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District, 1788–1848: A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India* (Oxford: Clarenden Press, 1965). See also Irschick, *Dialogue and History*.

[8] Washbrook, 'Progress and Problems', 57–96.

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who not only stresses the importance of eighteenth-century changes within Indian society and economy to the making of British rule but also emphasizes the pre-colonial foundations upon which colonialism was established, nevertheless describes the significant ways in which the Company, after 1790, changed and manipulated Indian forms and techniques of rule. He especially notes the Company's adoption and subsequent alteration of indigenous information systems.[9]

But despite the nuanced character of the arguments of some revisionists, critics of this perspective have strongly disagreed with a picture that emphasizes continuity, the pre-colonial origins of colonialism, and a gradualist picture of change. These critics have insisted that Company rule was distinct and thus 'colonial' almost from its inception and that the establishment of empire quickly induced a profound rupture in South Asian society and economy. Sudipta Kaviraj, for example, writes that the colonial state 'did not emerge out of the internal logic of evolution of earlier Indian society, and had little by way of internal relation to do with the state it came to succeed in India'.[10] He sees the Company raj as fundamentally different from previous indigenous states in that many of the Company's conceptions of rule were imported from Britain. Kaviraj qualifies his view by suggesting that although Company power represented a break on a conceptual level, colonial practices were slower to manifest themselves. The whole direction of his argument, however, is to emphasize change rather than continuity. Advocates of this approach have been very critical of the perspective of the eighteenth century revisionists. 'There is something magical about a "historical theory"', argues Partha Chatterjee, in critiquing Washbrook and others, 'that can with such ease spirit away the violent intrusion of colonialism and make all of its features the innate property of an indigenous history'.[11]

1780–1840: Reconsiderations of Colonialism

When the contributors to this volume first came together to discuss their work, it became clear that they were dissatisfied with the oppositions implicit in the continuity/transformation dichotomy. Only

[9] C. A. Bayly, 'Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India,' *Modern Asian Studies* 27, 1 (1993), 3–43; see also his *Empire and Information*.

[10] Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse, Hegemony,' in *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India*, ed. by Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks (London: British Academic Press, 1994), 28.

[11] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 32.

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one of their papers, that by David Washbrook, attempted some overall characterization of the nature of the early Company state. His essay here on South India during the first decades of British rule certainly builds upon the foundations of his earlier work, but complicates any easy characterization of his position by pointing out some ways in which the colonial order was truly novel. On the one hand, he calls into question a view of Company rule that would stress the alienness of the new form of power: the British in South India often framed policy debates in terms of interpretations of Indian custom; there existed sexual, social and financial relationships between British and Indian segments of Madras society that long outlived changes in the Bengal Presidency; the Madras administration often adjusted itself to local society in ways that put it at odds with both Calcutta and London. He also draws our attention to the ways in which South Indian society and state were already taking on many of the characteristics of 'early modernity' during the eighteenth century, independently of the extension in Company rule. Washbrook cautions us to acknowledge that Company power was rarely expressed uniformly or identically throughout its territories, and that colonial rule between 1770 and 1840 may be characterized, in part, by strategic accommodations and a high degree of involvement in South Indian society and politics. However, in drawing a nuanced picture of Company rule in South India, Washbrook does indicate a number of transformative elements that were introduced into the political landscape of the subcontinent as British rule consolidated itself. These changes include the reliance of the Company on sea-borne power that stretched back to London, its ability to eliminate its European rivals (with profound implications for Indian state-making), and its efforts to fulfill its global military and economic responsibilities. Above all, he stresses the Company's denial of any of claims by labour to protection and patronage, claims that had been well-established in the practice of earlier regimes. Colonialism, then, so altered the economic and political landscape that by 1850 South India had become an impoverished shadow of what it had been a century earlier.

The remainder of the essays focus on what might be called the more everyday aspects of the making of the empire, with studies ranging from revenue policy to the effects of colonialism on gender, social and political relations. Taken as a whole, the papers turn away from a focus on the question of whether early colonialism was a creature of consistent accommodation or unrelenting interventionism within South Asian society. Instead, they examine the particular, everyday

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uses of colonial power and suggest some of the processes by which the colonial state both included and marginalized non-elites, whether Indian or British, women or men.

The actual subject matter of these essays is wide ranging. Robert Travers examines the high policy debates within the Company regarding the appropriate land tax demands in Bengal during the late eighteenth century. William Pinch explores the processes by which descendants of Hindu ascetics in Bundhelkhand gained and lost claims to local authority and pensions in the early colonial context based upon their ability to establish the 'legitimacy' of their descent. Durba Ghosh focuses on domestic violence cases brought before British judges in Calcutta between 1770 and 1840, highlighting the reasons Indian women may have resorted to the courts but also the ways these cases ultimately served to bolster European authority. John Rogers examines how in Sri Lanka, in contrast to developments in India, the colonial reforms of the early 1830s prompted the articulation of racial and national categories while discouraging religious and caste distinctions. Michael Fisher looks at the political missions of Indian princes to England between the late eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. Ian Barrow examines the maps of India and Calcutta published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge during the 1830s and 1840s and analyzes the extent to which these maps served to involve the British working classes in empire.

Collectively these essays do not themselves set out some new, singular and perfectly consistent interpretation of this period. In part, this is because they draw a picture of a state that was marked by multiple levels of power and characterized by serious internal contradictions. They suggest a view of the first decades of colonial rule that is profoundly more complicated than any polar position, and that draws upon assumptions and arguments implicit in the views of both the revisionists and their critics. Crucially, they provide a picture of a political order that was more formidable and transformative than is consistent with a thesis of straightforward continuity, a state and an associated economy that did bring about profound alterations in social relations. The essays provide evidence that early colonial discourses, policies, structures and economic institutions rendered powerless or marginal wide sets of social groups and regularly extinguished established social practices and modes of pursuing power and justice. They highlight the role of the colonial order in undermining the dynamic, pluralistic, and competitive character of eighteenth-century

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society and in facilitating the development of a more fixed, sedentary order based upon more narrow constructions of 'tradition'. They also insist that developments in the metropole did impinge on the workings of the empire on the subcontinent, and could touch the lives of rather ordinary people.

Yet at the same time the essays provide a picture of a state that was not simply related to high imperial rule in some teleologically straightforward manner. They stress the role of eighteenth-century change in influencing the kinds of social and political structures that could develop in the nineteenth century. Rogers, for example, notes how a history of Portuguese and Dutch rule in the maritime provinces of Ceylon helped to condition the early sociological understandings of the British on the island. Washbrook suggests that South India during the eighteenth century was experiencing changes—e.g. the development of vernacular literature, the formation of ethnic identifications, commercialization, and the rise of more centralized forms of rule—that strongly affected the character colonialism would take and the 'impact' it would have. The essays also depict a colonial regime that elicited the involvement and incorporation of South Asian groups more successfully and that insinuated itself more deeply into South Asian society than the revisionists' critics might accept. Some of the essays delineate a dynamic picture of smaller actors involved in attempting to negotiate a place for themselves within the new order, often by manipulating the structures of colonial power and the idioms of colonial rule. As Fisher shows, Indian princes often struggled to maintain their influence and status, not through the mobilization of resistance on the subcontinent, but by sending diplomatic missions to London itself. In Bengal, Travers demonstrates, the processes by which changes in the land tax were instituted during the late eighteenth century were in part the result of alliances of large zamindars with factions within the East India Company who regularly evoked theories prevalent in debates about taxation in Britain. In the Calcutta courts, Ghosh offers evidence that a rhetoric of fairness animated the proceedings, perhaps encouraging otherwise disempowered Indian women to feel that justice could be served by the colonial state. The seeming ability of Indians to seek redress for wrongs committed by Company officials by taking recourse to British standards of evenhandedness are traits also noticed by Pinch. The efforts by the *gosain* community to co-operate with the state and to believe in the state's role as an arbiter of justice suggests that the Company was able to demonstrate some degree of hegemony.

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Of course, the often negative results for many South Asians are powerful proofs that compliance, even complicity, were sparingly rewarded. Even in Britain, as Barrow suggests, the first tentative attempts by the middle and upper classes to interest the emerging working classes in becoming partners-in-empire were motivated by desires to pacify what was thought to be an unruly and dangerous segment of the population.

Thus, in addition to drawing attention to how colonialism and colonial capitalism intervened in South Asian society and how that intervention further transformed already-changing social, economic and political institutions and transactions, the essays also show, on a micro level and through empirical research, the petty workings of colonial decision-making in which some South Asians were seemingly empowered at the expense of others. The colonial state is shown to have changed over time, less through grandiose ideologies and plans of imperialism or impersonal bureaucratic rules, than through the agency of specific actors in very concrete political settings. Although their conclusions may not present a coherent 'school' of thought on the character of colonialism during this period, they nevertheless make more complex some of the categories that have been relied on by scholars, particularly the dichotomies of continuity and rupture/transformation, tradition and modernity, hegemony and dominance, indigenous and alien, perhaps even pre-colonial and colonial.

The overall impression presented by these essays is that between 1780 and the 1840s the Company and the Crown were able to consolidate their power throughout their South Asian colonies. They were able to do so in part because of the application of relentless military force and economic coercion. However, also crucial to that success was the continued incorporation of Indians, elites as well as non-elites, in addition to the attempted involvement of the working classes in Britain, within an empire that was seemingly organized in such a way that those groups were led to believe that benefits would result from their participation. Thus, the Calcutta courts spoke a language that suggested to poor Indian concubines that their voices and grievances might be heard and recognized. The Philip Francis camp within the Calcutta Council responded to zamindar complaints against the supposed excesses of Warren Hastings' *amini* commission. Deposed and dispossessed Indian princes or former *gosain* warlords believed that appeals to high British authority might result in a reversal of injustices and their re-instatement in positions of local

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power. The working classes within Britain were educated about the British empire and invited to participate, even vicariously. In all these cases, the assumption was that the empire provided structures and procedures that, if understood and acted upon, might redound to the benefit of South Asian actors. In most cases, however, the results of engagement and participation were hardly profitable. Indeed, the ideals of justice and, to some extent in the Bengal land tax debates, of common cause were largely chimerical. The power of colonialism lay to a great extent in its ability to continue to entice and incorporate South Asians and the working classes on terms that were increasingly beneficial to British capital, military and governmental establishments.

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