

Europe's India - Words, People, Empires, 1500-1800

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In this history of representations and knowledge formation Sanjay Subrahmanyam turns a historian's gaze to the problems both implicitly and explicitly embedded in all histories of the early modern and modern world: why did Europeans represent and construct India and by extension, the non-European world in the ways that they did? Why and how did these constructs evolve? Wading through territory inexorably shaped by Edward Said and responses to Said's *Orientalism*, Subrahmanyam deploys his broad linguistic expertise and impressive range of reading across multiple and often separate historiographies, to puncture the possibility of any simple answer or theoretical claim. Overarching narratives of linear transformation and unchanging essentialism – that European depictions of India were shaped primarily by the gradual increase in access to accurate empirical information, the process of secularization, or alternatively, were marked by a fundamental incommensurability between observer and observed – are rejected at the very outset. In lieu of such totalizing frameworks, Subrahmanyam underscores the impossibility of a single narrative about how Europe's India emerged by highlighting the multiplicity, fragmentation, contradictions, and ambiguities within and across European constructions of India. In order to make this case Subrahmanyam analyzes a multiplicity of actors and their locations within diverse cultural, institutional and political economic milieus, and consequently, the divergent imperatives at play in the resulting textual and artistic productions. Yet even as Subrahmanyam critiques the tendency to assimilate a variety of European accounts into a monolithic history of Orientalist knowledge formation, he does outline the development, albeit uneven, of particular representational tropes, changing infrastructures of information gathering in tandem with evolving political economies, as well as a major shift, if not convergence of sorts, in European perceptions towards the late 18th century. Further, he emphatically demonstrates the constancy of asymmetries of knowledge and fraught encounters even in the absence of colonial rule. Given the focus on delineating the complexities of specific contexts from which multiple visions of India emerged, *Europe's India* does not pretend to offer a panoptic vision of European engagements with India over the course of three centuries. Rather, each chapter of this self-admittedly tentative account conducts a close analysis of a handful of texts to tease out the emergence of particular, often ambiguous visions of India among many others. By privileging detail and erring on the side of including lengthy quotes from primary sources, Subrahmanyam has woven together engaging narratives of early modern itinerancy and encounter with incisive criticism of existing historiographical grand narratives.

Subrahmanyam's gift for the telling anecdote and eye for tracing connections across geographies and historiographies is on immediate display in the introduction. Following the careers of two Frenchmen in 17th-century India – François Bernier and Augustin Herryard – the introduction raises a concern central to the entire book: what analytical significance does a shared European identity have? What do two Frenchmen and their conceptions of India have in common? Both Bernier, a figure familiar to students of Mughal history, and the less commonly known Herryard articulated their entanglement in Mughal patronage networks, expressing close affective ties with prominent Mughals such as the *am?r* Danishmand Khan and the Emperor Jahangir, while also stressing their distance and detachment from the society in which they had become socially, politically, and economically involved. Equally, both maintained close links with other Europeans, including Englishmen and Iberians, and were involved in Indo-European commercial networks. Subrahmanyam indicates that these similarities in patterns of self-presentation and engagement with Indians and other Europeans strengthens the case for deploying 'European' as a meaningful category. Yet Subrahmanyam also notes that, such similarities notwithstanding, Bernier and Herryard held radically different religious views, practiced dissimilar professions, espoused divergent commercial philosophies, and by extension, unique notions of India. By foregrounding these individual but comparable biographies Subrahmanyam demonstrates the ambiguities and complexities simultaneously binding and separating Europeans from Indians as well as each other.

The first chapter, titled 'The Indo-Portuguese moment' examines how a number of 16th-century Portuguese chroniclers and writers, both with and without personal experience of travelling to and visiting India, went about compiling and composing histories of India and thus charts the emergence of recognizable patterns, if not the institutionalization, of processes of knowledge gathering and knowledge production. Subrahmanyam is particularly interested in the ways by which the authority of such histories was established, whether through the citation of apparently authoritative Indian texts or the weight of personal experience and first hand observation. The chapter details the transformation of not only the Iberian tradition of the *crónica* but also the Perso-Islamicate genre of *t?r?kh* over the course of the 16th century as composers of both sought to make sense of the other. For instance, João de Barros, a royally appointed scholar who wrote from the comfort of home, laid claim to having incorporated Arabic and Persian sources into his histories of Portuguese exploits in the Indian Ocean. Subrahmanyam masterfully identifies one of Barros' sources to be Mir Khwand's *T?r?kh-i Rauzat*. That this same work of *t?r?kh* also invited the scholarly attention of Pedro Teixeira, a Portuguese traveler resident at Hurmuz, allows Subrahmanyam to delineate the distinct ways in which two Portuguese men in different parts of the world could engage with Perso-Arabic texts, and the variations in processes of translation. While Barros relied on a host of intermediaries for translations of parts of the text, Teixeira was able to produce extensive albeit loose translations of the text in light of the ease of access he enjoyed to these textual traditions in Hurmuz. Amusingly and tellingly, the growing import of citing Perso-Arabic materials led to a subsequent chronicler's invention of an entire corpus of texts in order to furnish a semblance of textual authority in a work based largely on oral testimony. Subrahmanyam's attention to the lives and impulses of a number of chroniclers and travelers reveals the ways in which the specificities of geographic location within an empire shaped both the political stances of individuals and the accounts that they produced. In particular, Subrahmanyam illumines the unique considerations of emergent colonial elites in outposts of the Portuguese empire. The production of information and knowledge by those who claimed permanent residency in India was intimately bound to their self-interested desire to project superiority and indispensability for the accomplishment of a task of imperial importance. It is in such moments that we see how intra-colonial politics and intra-European rivalries were constitutive of various knowledge gathering projects.

It is in relation to the ethnographies produced by such apparently superior observers of India, that Subrahmanyam introduces some brief but important reflections on the phenomenon of 'caste', a subject that has inspired much consternation in South Asian historiography. Placing Nicholas Dirks' claim that caste was an entirely modern phenomenon produced by the conditions of colonial modernity in India, alongside Sumit Guha's emphasis on the longer history and significance of caste and its connection with longstanding Western racial ideologies, Subrahmanyam offers a far more nuanced account of how caste emerged, and the

role of Portuguese actors in producing such a concept. Examining the production, circulation and legacy of a text composed by an Augustinian friar named Agostinho de Azevedo towards the close of the 16th century, Subrahmanyam argues that this text did indeed describe caste as a totalizing and coherent social system and inaugurated a more specific connotation of the idea of caste. Nevertheless, as Subrahmanyam quickly points out, Azevedo's influential account of caste did not fix and delimit the fluidity of caste or *casta* as a concept. Rather his account existed amidst the persistence of caste as a loose and pliable notion that could be used in a range of contexts.

The succeeding chapter, entitled 'The question of "Indian Religion"' asks how Europeans understood the religious practices of India's gentile population, and examines how these practices came to be understood under the rubric of religion. In studying these representations, this chapter also makes note of an important transformation: the rapidly growing density of texts about India towards the close of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th. Subrahmanyam prefaces the chapter with an overview of Talal Asad's celebrated critiques of the concept of religion, as well as the relatively lesser known work of the historians Carmen Bernard and Serge Gruzinsky – titled *De l'idolâtrie*. These scholars' insistence on the formative impact of Christian models of thought in defining perceptions of religion in non-Christian or extra-European spaces informs Subrahmanyam's exploration of a fascinating compilation addressing religious practices across the world – namely, Bernard Picart's *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, which was published in multiple volumes in the 1720s and 1730s. Parsing the several texts on India included in this compilation, Subrahmanyam stresses the mutual contradictions rampant across these explanations of 'Indian religion'. These close readings, however, also show the shared impulse, in at least some of these texts, to create the possibility of comparison and even a universal framework by drawing resemblances and equivalences between the practices of Indians and those of more familiar monotheistic faiths. While such texts parallel Bernard and Gruzinsky's account of European representations of Meso-American religions, other sections of the *Cérémonies et coutumes* describe a bewildering array of groups and practices that defy classification as a single religion. The editorial effort to make such confusing and contradictory accounts less so indicates a reversion to some of the constituent texts' tendency towards creating commensurability. The final section of the chapter turns to the illustrations included in Picart's *Cérémonies et coutumes*. Here, as in the preceding account of the textual contents, Subrahmanyam painstakingly maps out the networks of circulation that connected Europeans to local informants and artists, to other European traders, scholars and collectors; as well as the relative influence of the accounts and illustrations of preceding travelers and writers from across Europe. Not unlike the first chapter's scrutiny of corresponding Mughal efforts to include Europeans in Persian histories and even translate works of Christian theology and Indic religions, this chapter concludes with an allusion to the contemporaneous *Dabist-i maz'hib*, an ethnographical and comparative compendia of the various religious and spiritual practices prevalent in India.

Chapters three and four are explicitly biographical in their orientation, charting the broader political economic transformations as well as persistent ambiguities of the 18th century through the careers and writings of a number of European men. While these chapters are clearly meant to demonstrate the vitality of biography as a historical method, the choice of these men, none of whom were conventional intellectuals or Enlightenment thinkers, is also designed to transform the ways in which intellectual history, especially the history of the Enlightenment, is typically written. By honing in on figures whom we may regard as men of action, Subrahmanyam attempts to center the tropes that emerged in the course of negotiating difficult political, military, and economic affairs, and thus, construct a fuller, less rarefied account of the development of European discourses. Chapter three, titled 'Of co-production' focusses on the East Indian career of the Scotsman James Fraser in the first half of the 18th century, particularly his intimate engagement with Persianate learning and forms of erudition in the combined capacity of student, translator, historian and collector. That Fraser fashioned himself as a master of not only the Persian language but also South Asian modes of civility and etiquette was not merely a symbolic display of cosmopolitanism. Rather, it both echoed and constituted his posturing in the faction-ridden politics of the Company, local power struggles on the western coast of India, as well as his arguments in favor of Mughal sovereignty. Subrahmanyam presents Fraser's career as broadly exemplifying both growing European access to Indian manuscripts and knowledge

systems, as well as the continuing fact of the relative political marginality of European states. The ascendancy of the English East India Company to the position of de facto sovereign in the second half of the 18th century frames the discussion in chapter four, titled 'The transition to colonial knowledge'. The biographies of the four Europeans analyzed here – a Portuguese bishop, the French East India Company's servant Bussy, the Franco-Swiss adventurer and collector Polier, and the Scotsman Alexander Walker – allow Subrahmanyam to sketch out the emergence of some major changes consonant with the period's political economic transformations, especially in contrast with the world of James Fraser. For one, Subrahmanyam argues that the second half of the 18th century marked the consolidation of a shared sense of European identity and separation, even superiority to 'Asiatics' irrespective of confessional, national, and regional differences. Further, he notes that European political hegemony also created the conditions for a greater, even self-critical, European engagement with South Asian modes of knowledge and in turn, Indian engagements with the idea of Europe. Fittingly, the conclusion turns to 'India's Europe', the rise of first-person accounts of Europe in the late 18th century and unsurprisingly, the diverse concerns underlying these accounts.

As the density of detail featured in this review itself will make apparent, *Europe's India* is a richly researched work of meticulous granularity. The level of intricacy and proclivity for extended description and narrative may prove irksome to readers who would prefer more in the way of explicit analysis. Equally, some readers might object to the sometimes jarring incorporation of historiographical discussions into the author's narrative. While such concerns are not invalid, it is worth applauding the effort to synthesize a deep archival engagement with broader historiographical commentary. Beyond matters of style and structure, this work is an important contribution to a host of historiographical conundrums. Subrahmanyam's emphasis on colonial transformations and the emergence of the phenomenon of 'colonial knowledge' – a position grounded in careful readings of the writings of multiple Europeans – marks a valuable addition to the thorny and much debated question of whether the advent of colonial rule was characterized by continuity or change. That Subrahmanyam strives to contextualize his protagonists' individual idiosyncrasies and impulses in broader institutional and political histories without wholly subsuming them reveals a rare commitment to both the biographic and the macrohistoric. Significantly, this work's acute attention to ambiguities and textual textures, not to mention its refusal to play the game of apportioning blame or celebrating the sympathy of a European for India, serves as a powerful rebuke to efforts to present 'pre-colonial' encounters and representations as neutral and entirely devoid of power relations. At the same time, this quality rebuffs the tendency of some postcolonial scholarship to eliminate discussions of European actors on grounds of their presumed uniformity and unwavering commitment to violent imperialism.

Ultimately, *Europe's India* raises more questions than it answers. Chief among these is the question of the relationship between the establishment of British political dominance and the rise, even institutionalization, of European attitudes of contempt and superiority towards India and Indians. The evolution perceptible between the careers of James Fraser and Alexander Walker is presented as an organic product of British ascendancy. Yet it is not entirely clear why British dominance would lead inexorably to not only a particular convergence in British conceptions of India, but also those of other Europeans. To address this issue, one has to engage with the violent and virulent political contestations over what the British Empire would look like in the late 18th century, and examine why a centralizing, exclusionary model of empire superseded the possibilities of a more inclusive, politically diffuse model that could have incorporated local elites at the highest levels of government. Meanwhile, the effort to explain rising consciousness of a shared European identity in contrast to an Asiatic one despite frequent intra-European warfare and French defeat in India invites a consideration of not only Atlantic and more global histories of empire and colonialism, but also the development of race as a construct. This work's fascinating suggestions about the inception of a true 'colonial civility' with the consolidation of British rule prompt us to ask why it turned out to be the case that, as Subrahmanyam himself points out, reliance on Persian histories and even the cultivation of the Persian language quickly vanished from the repertoire of British commitments. On a methodological point, *Europe's India* is largely focused on manuscript collections, historical narratives, scholarly and ethnographic compilations, and some personal writings. Subrahmanyam is skeptical of the possibility of treating the writings of traders on business matters as important source material given the absence of much that

resembled social or cultural knowledge. Yet, it appears to me entirely possible, in keeping with this book's project of writing more holistic cultural and intellectual histories, that one could use apparently mundane records of political economic information to glean a sense of how social and cultural perceptions of India and Indians filtered into, and were, in fact, central to the humdrum workings of European traders. These figures encountered and made sense of a diversity of exotic items such as pepper, and moreover, regularly interacted with Indian merchants, laborers, and purveyors of such goods. That a peppercorn might initially appear to be less complicated than a manuscript steeped in a long textual tradition should not preclude us from taking the perceptions of middling, commercially minded historical actors any less seriously. That *Europe's India* provokes such a breadth of inquiries is clear indication of the broad readership that it richly deserves.

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