

Title—India and the British Empire
Authors—Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu
Year—2016

Categories: India, Colonialism, British Empire, Culture, Politics

Place: British Raj

Time: 1750-1950

Argument Synopsis:

Peers and Gooptu's essay collection is focused on Indian colonial history, and specifically aims to transcend the familiar analytical and historiographical binaries that tend to dominate histories of colonial India. In particular, the essay collection seeks to challenge the binaries of colonialism and liberalism, tradition and modernity, resistance and collaboration, and metropole and periphery. The collection contains fourteen essays that explore different aspects of India's colonial history. A few essays touch on the peculiarities of liberalism in the Indian colonial context and its long-term legacies. In their introduction, Peers and Gooptu stress the importance of viewing Indian colonial history within a local frame. The introduction attempts to survey the last thirty years of historiography on India's colonial history, highlighting the prevalence of the aforementioned binaries. The collection provides a fresh understanding to the nature of the Raj by transcending the binary oppositions so inherent in Indian historiography. The most striking change in the historiography in the last thirty years has been the shift in focus to the implicit authoritarianism of colonial liberalism—legal, political, and economic.

All of the essays attempt to introduce readers to the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in British India, while highlighting new areas of research that have emerged in the last thirty years. Peers and Gooptu present their collection as a corrective to the flaws of the Cambridge School, the Subaltern School, and the cultural turn; notably the move away from binary thinking. In an essay about the environment, it is argued that the British profoundly changed the nature of India in terms of transitioning to a sedentary agricultural population. In the late seventeenth century, between 60-65% of India's population was made up of peasants, by the late nineteenth century that had risen to 80-85%. The Raj provides a good example of the military-fiscalism of the British Empire, in which political and economic liberalism were subordinated to the financial needs of maintaining a huge Indian army.

Peers' essay "State, Power, and Colonialism," argues that India's primary imperial function was as a garrison state, or a state economy dominated by military spending at the expense of civil liberties. Peers demonstrates how India's early nineteenth century monopolistic control of cash crop exports served the purpose of securing British economic and military superiority. Washbrook's "The Indian Economy and the British Empire" reinforces the argument that colonial India was a garrison state. Gooptu's essay emphasizes the distorting effect that British military structures had on the political evolution of the Raj's successor states.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Most profound change, in terms of the environment, brought by British colonialism was the shift from a nomadic to a sedentary population caused by agriculture
- Challenge the implicit romanticism of subaltern writing on cultural nationalism by viewing Indian nationalism(s) through the lens of other dynamic collectivities, such as caste, religion, region, and gender
- Importance of placing Indian colonial history within a regional frame