

*Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire*

Pramod K. Nayar

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James Mill's *The History of British India* (1817) was mandatory reading for those aspiring for the Indian Civil Service in British India. Indeed, this *History* and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) remained the central texts in the curriculum throughout the nineteenth century. Mill was ostensibly concerned with how to bring enlightenment to the "half-civilized" natives of India so as to justify the need for British rule. And so colonial ideology was designed to infiltrate the consciousness of the "natives" and secure their acceptance of the presuppositions and concepts of an alien power. Interestingly, Mill had never visited India, yet he made a virtue of it, claiming "objectivity" for his accounts. Such imaginative constructions of India formed the staple of Orientalism.

Pramod K. Nayar's book *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire* details and examines the manifold discourses that operated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in most parts of the world, providing legitimacy to imperial desire and the colonial project. Drawing upon a plethora of sources from history, anthropology, ethnography, archaeology, cartographic and administrative accounts, memoirs and letters, the book builds up a convincing thesis which unmasks colonial pretensions in relation to their *mission civilisatrice*. Nayar's focus is India (as it was constructed in the imagination of Europe). Ignoring several ways in which the Empire took shape and exploited other lands, notably Africa, where it generated specific forms of anti-colonial resistance, he restricts himself to the Indian subcontinent, perhaps because the Indian case could be seen as paradigmatic of the general colonizing dynamic.

The book methodically follows the chronology and trajectory of the British Empire in India, from the time it began to trade via the East India Company in the sixteenth century to the Independence of India in 1947. The year 1947 marked political decolonization, but ironically the lingering shadows of colonialism, far from being effaced, still haunt India, in the guise of neo-colonialism, in this present era of "globalisation."

The book is divided into six chapters which discuss the various facets, often intersecting, of colonial discourse and the founding narratives which constructed the colonial subject. After outlining the scope of the book in the first chapter, the author extensively deals with the effects of the narratives of travel and discovery by the colonials into the "exotic" Eastern lands in the second chapter. These real and imagined voyages

produced the “cultural imaginary” which became the springboard for further forays into the East. Contrary to the popular view that Empire was an afterthought of the British East India Company and was only triggered by the 1857 Mutiny, Nayar makes the point that the Empire was already in the making through the “cultural imaginary.”

The “discovery” of India, which began with the travel narratives of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had a deepening influence on the British Civil Society, the aristocracy and, more significantly, the Parliament. This “discovery” was to be enhanced by extensive documentation of indigenous knowledges and social practices which would subsequently be used in securing a material foothold in the colonizing enterprise.

Chapter 3 explores the Discourse of Difference attendant upon the constructions of the picture of Otherness presented in the so-called historical accounts of India. India in these accounts is pictured as exhibiting all negative features in its incomprehensible vastness, an image that could be neatly juxtaposed against the orderly European universe. Even the “good” orientalists like Colin Mackenzie and William Jones could not think beyond these European frames. The colonial “tropical” space of India was not merely an object of “discovery;” it became an inviting site for securing usable knowledge which was assiduously collected and deployed for the sake of imperial aggrandisement and material gain, both of which, in essence, defined the colonial project.

The British saw “difference” everywhere. The decline of the Mughal empire, symbolized by a ruined landscape, appeared so different from the prosperous and wholesome European climate and landscape. It provided justification for colonial intervention to dislodge purportedly despotic Mughal rule with its barbarian cultural practices. Mapping and surveys were carried out for the sole motive of profit making. It is about this time that British administrators also planned and constructed ‘hill stations’ as sanitized zones, since part of the colonial imaginary was the wistful longing for the domestic landscape. Even disease became a powerful marker of difference and the native body became a site for experimentation of theories of disease and cure.

Chapter 4 delineates the contours of Empire Management. India was viewed as a problematic space in terms of order and management, and so several strategies of control and containment were devised to bring order and discipline to the unruly natives. Towards the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, the new concept of a criminal—i.e., “dangerous”—class emerged in colonial administrative and ethnographic accounts, which referred to groups of free-floating populations who lived at the margins of society, and were seen as the main source of disorder and crime. Durkheim dispenses with any notion of the absolute normativity of society. Yet the criminal as a colonial subject was seen as a deviant other. The discourse on criminality fitted within the paradigm of “Orientalism.”

Chapter 5 deals with the ideology of moral and material progress that was manifest in the project of civilizing the colonial subject. As the

Empire got consolidated in the years 1790-1900, it used the discourse of reform and native degeneracy, providing the ideological foundation for the growing interventionist and repressive policies of the British. Nayar cites as an example the periodical, *Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India* (1859-60), which was launched to spread the views of progress of the mission of social regulation and the self-legitimization of colonial rule. The natives were promised not only material benefits but also moral enlightenment if they subscribed to an implicit faith in the hierarchy of human races. All cultural practices functioned under the broader framework of the British colonial administration, and the educational curriculum that was framed followed a rigorous codification, culminating in Macaulay's (in)famous Minute of 1835. Both Macaulay and Alexander Duff not only pleaded for English education but also advocated an evangelical mission for the intellectual and spiritual regeneration of the "degenerate" natives.

In the last chapter, Nayar writes about the English turning into "cosmopolitan" consumers through the process of "cultural mobility," whereby objects belonging to the "other" are appropriated for domestic consumption and showcased as unique possessions. The politics of imagination which formulated this aesthetic attitude was responsible for the changing cultural identity of the British.

Though it comes after such seminal studies of imperial discourse as by Mary Louise Pratt, Edward Said and David Spurr, Nayar's book makes a valuable contribution to colonial discourse studies. One cannot, however, ignore the view from the other side which holds that there was also a degree of colonial "transaction," which is why someone like the Hindu social reformer Rammohun Roy could welcome the British presence in India in as much as it helped redefine Indian modernity. The view that colonialism imposed entirely new modes of thought and belief on indigenous societies is not wholly true. It assumes, problematically, that colonialism was the most important of the various alien influences, and that its impact was the strongest and most lasting in India. These assumptions are questionable given the fact that several indigenous societies were resistant to change under colonialism, and that many aspects of the world-views that predominated in the past have survived till today, though in much attenuated forms.

#### Works Cited

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