Problems, Controversies, and Compromise: A Study on the Historiography of British India during the East India Company Era

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This thesis titled
Problems, Controversies, and Compromise: A Study on the Historiography of British
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ABSTRACT

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Problems, Controversies, and Compromise: A Study on the Historiography of British India during the East India Company Era

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This essay explores the historiography of the British Indian Empire, specifically during the East India Company Era. Discussing issues such as Mughal decline and regional formalism, East India Company ‘sub-imperialism’ and the nature of the Company itself, and knowledge formation and ‘colonial discourse theory,’ this essay interrogates the scholarship of the period from the British imperialists and orientalists themselves through to scholarship of the present day. One of the most contentious issues debated in the scholarship is whether historical change occurs from the top-down or the bottom-up. Both arguments are considered along with an examination of how the original intention of the Subaltern School to explore history from the bottom-up was hijacked by politicized, postmodern scholarship that sought to erase Indian agency from the historical record. The essay concludes by staking out new ground for future scholarship and providing models and frameworks for how to do so.
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INTRODUCTION

An April 2016 InsiderHigherEd article entitled “The Religious War Against American Scholars of India” rings out like a shot from the first paragraph, observing that “a cultural and religious war is raging in which Western academics are the enemy.”¹ Reporting on the smear campaigns against highly respected Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollack, Hinduism professor Wendy Doniger, and Western academic institutions more generally, author Elizabeth Redden taps into deep-seeded postcolonial anxieties about alleged misrepresentations of India and Hinduism in Western academia among members of the Hindu right.

Many have long observed the rise of the Hindutva movement, which views India as not a secular but a Hindu nation, as the primary impetus for these contestations of representations of India and Hinduism in the academy, but one of the most salient insights of the article is that the Hindu right possesses an unlikely ally in this fight—the academic left. “Cleverly exploiting the tropes of anticolonialism,” philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum² contributes to the article, the Hindu right utilizes the fact that Western scholars are not Indian (and if they are Indian then they are ‘collaborators’) with the

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hopes of appealing to those who might perceive insults to India or Hinduism as the product of “callous American orientalist scholars.”

One example of the way that the Hindu right manipulates the atmosphere, rhetoric, and tools of progressive activism is Hindu American Foundation’s effort in launching the #DontEraseIndia Twitter campaign in response to recent revisions to California K-12 textbooks. Contentiously, the revising faculty group argued that it is not accurate to describe the religion of ancient India as “Hinduism,” and, in an effort to promote inclusivity with other South Asians and highlight diversity within India itself, the faculty recommended certain references to India be replaced with “South Asia” or “Indian subcontinent.” Far from a malicious campaign to erase India due to the ingrained racism of Western academics, the faculty group was ironically attempting to deploy the same social progressive norms of inclusiveness and diversity often used by those who criticized them most virulently. More seriously, however, is the fact that the attempt to put forward empirically sound and thoroughly researched scholarship is being met with efforts to silence these academics and their studies.

Although certainly staking its own claim to controversy, the scholarship of British India specifically is not nearly as so contentious as is the scholarship on India more generally. But these norms and maxims within the present political and academic environment are nevertheless reflected within the scholarship. It is impossible to avoid this type of rhetoric nowadays, especially considering the growing skepticism and hostility with which some treat Western scholars studying non-Western regions. This is

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3 Redden, “The Religious War Against American Scholars of India.”
4 Redden, “The Religious War against American Scholars of India.”
not to suggest that there are not indeed inherent obstacles to this. When I travelled to India last summer to study Hindi, it astonished me with how dramatically my understanding and knowledge of India evolved in the mere three-and-a-half months I was there—I was clearly on quite a learning curve.

However, this is not to suggest that this task is impossible—far from it. To suggest that one is unable to acquire knowledge about a culture because that person does not hail from that culture is ‘problematic’ on a few different points. First, it assumes cultures are immutable; to the contrary, they are constantly in flux. Second, the proposition that one cannot learn about another culture, when ultimately taken to its logical conclusion, shuts down all learning, dialogue, and exchange of ideas between people, which should never be the goal of any academic. And, third, it suggests that facts do not exist independently of what we make of them. If I stand in a circle with three other people, and I drop a pencil, it does not matter if every single one of us believes that the pencil will not fall; each time I perform this demonstration, gravity will bring the pencil to the floor.

Of course, this analogy cannot be precisely applied to historical scholarship, given that one cannot replicate the past in a controlled environment in the same way one can with gravity. It is for this reason that John Lewis Gaddis, comparing the task of a historian to that of a painter attempting (ultimately, in vain) to duplicate the scene of a dramatic landscape onto canvass, advises that it is important for historians always to show their “ductwork on the outside of the building.”

It is my hope that I have

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successfully shown my work and thought process in this essay, as it is primarily designed as a tool to introduce and familiarize readers with a complex, diverse, and contentious set of issues within the British Indian scholarship. In doing so, I hope to break free of politicized, simplistic ways to understand these scholars and their works with the intention of engaging more fully with their often surprisingly overlapping, if varied, arguments.

It may seem odd, then, for one to argue for the meritable contributions from two schools of scholarship diametrically opposed to one another, often in a volatile manner. To briefly summarize, the Cambridge School (which, to clarify, is not restricted to Cambridge scholars or scholars who trained there) is marked by intensive archival research and a focus on the writing and actions of English-speaking elites. This emphasis on history driven by the elites has undergone criticism, however, for overemphasizing the agency of elites in lieu of a more diverse cast of actors. It also has been criticized for its depiction of nationalist leaders as especially susceptible to bribery as well as its exaggeration of the role of Indian collaborators in the British imperial state. However, this school produced several quality works that, because of their emphasis on interaction between colonizer and colonized, restored agency to colonial subjects in a way that its critics have yet to realize, in addition to removing the teleology of India as a nation-state from their analysis by focusing on the complex political interplay at the regional or local levels.6

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The Subaltern School hails from a more diverse background than the Cambridge School. Critical of the Cambridge School’s emphasis on elites and material self-interest, the Subalterns were also opposed to nationalist or Marxist historical works on India, due to the former’s sycophantic view of nationalist icons, and the latter’s focus on a very narrow definition of power that is grounded in class relations. The Subalterns attempted to recover histories of the masses heretofore overlooked, introducing new ways to read the archives ‘against the grain’ and utilizing oral history. The Subalterns, however, soon began to focus on culture, knowledge, and power as inseparable and mutually constitutive. Influenced by theorists such as Gramsci and Foucault, and the ‘colonial discourse critics’ that followed in their wake, these scholars began to reexamine not just what we know about India, but how we know it, critiquing Enlightenment epistemology and rationality. Ironically, however, these scholars have in turn produced works entirely preoccupied with elites and imperial hegemony, becoming the exact thing they rebelled against in the first place, rejecting notions of a limited empire in lieu of exaggerated imperial power and omnipotence.7

This description of these two historical traditions are not to suggest that scholars can all safely be lumped in with one or the other but merely to place two markers within the scholarship around which readers can begin to maneuver. These paradigms can also imply erroneous, fool-hearted dichotomies dividing scholars into groups that are ‘pro-empire’ and ‘anti-empire.’ As one will see, there are considerable overlaps between varying groups of scholars on these topics. And, to some degree, scholars associated

7 Peers and Gooptu, 4-6.
more with the Cambridge School often come across as just as scathing of the moral precept of ‘empire’ as those associated the Subaltern School. To argue for a more complex and dynamic history of the colonial encounter, as many Cambridge School scholars call for, is “not to dismiss the obscenity of imperialism,”\(^8\) and it most certainly is not to claim that colonialism “never happened,” as Partha Chatterjee polemically accused.\(^9\) Moreover, the suggestion of scholastic malice toward India is surely not represented by the reality—scholars who study India do so because they love India, not out of some sort of malevolence toward it.

I would never suggest then that a historian should avoid analyzing the past with one eye to the present—in a way, responsible historical scholarship is grounded in its contribution to how the public understands the world in which it exists. But too often, it seems, that scholarship is unnecessarily hinged upon the author’s politics—and this can result in scholars talking past one another. It is my hope that in this essay that I have caught some of these missed opportunities to revise and resolve some of the disagreements, contradictions, and gaps in the scholarship for the reader in a manner that has not been done before. In the process, I will explore the dynamics of complex historical processes during the era of East India Company’s conquest of India that assist understanding of some of the most pressing issues and legacies confronting the modern Republic of India today.

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PART I: COMPETING NARRATIVES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY INDIA

Developments in the recent historiography of British India have resulted in a scholarly turn toward complex, regional differences in lieu of simple, broad explanations of social and political change during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although the British did possess an overarching rhetoric of Enlightenment epistemology, modernization, and universal values, in British officials' day-to-day administration of India, many recent historians argue that they developed their policies based on regional needs or demands, be them real or perceived. In this sense, the British were dependent on pre-colonial political and social formations internal to India, especially various regional successor states that emerged during the eighteenth century. It is thus important to explain the events and historiography of the eighteenth century in order to provide a strong foundational understanding for what came after.

Internal Factors: Mughal Decline or Regional Formalism?

During the reign of the Emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707), the Mughal Empire that was first consolidated by Emperor Akbar in the late sixteenth century was at its territorial apogee. Aurangzeb oversaw the expansion of his empire during his reign, especially to the south. Capable of commanding one of the largest armies in the world at the time, the Mughals conquered the last Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan in the 1680s, parts of the Hindu southeastern coastline, the Hindu Marathas of the western Deccan in 1689, and the Maratha capital of Satara in 1700. However, by the time of the emperor’s death in 1707,
the imperial finances were strained to the max, and Mughal governance had become stretched too thin over newly annexed territory far from the imperial center in Delhi.¹⁰

One of the most classic texts on Mughal India is Irfan Habib’s *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707* (1963). Habib argues that the agrarian system of Mughal India was defined by a three-way contradictory relationship of exploitation and contestation between the ruling class, *jagirdars*; the landholding class, *zamindars*; and the peasantry, the *khud khas* and *pahi khas*. This unsteady system, Habib argues, detracted from the Mughal state’s ability to increase production or revenues in the long run, given that the self-interested *jagirdar* would “sanction any act of oppression that conferred an immediate benefit upon him, even if it ruined the peasantry and so destroyed the revenue-paying capacity of that area for all time.”¹¹ Peasants often responded to these circumstances by leaving the land, and, when placed in between the *jagirdar* and the peasantry, the *zamindars* often led the latter in armed revolt.

This narrative, that the imperial system collapsed upon itself due to the very structures of the system, has dominated much of late Mughal scholarship, although inevitably opposition has arisen. Critics have observed that it may be difficult to attach firmly links between exploitive *jagirdars*, agrarian resistance, and Mughal decline, and it could also be argued that agricultural production was increasing as was the land under cultivation.¹² Satish Chandra has argued that this *jagir* crisis was nowhere near as

¹² Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 292.
commonplace as Habib portrays, and that the primary reason for the decentralization and collapse of Mughal authority was a divided nobility with a lack of loyalty who put narrow self-interest above the continued functioning of the Mughal system.\textsuperscript{13}

André Wink has built upon this work in his own groundbreaking study, arguing that the primary mode with which the Maratha expanded, and indeed by which all Indians understood sovereignty, was what he identifies as ‘\textit{fitna}.’ An Arabic term, \textit{fitna} referred to the “normal political mechanism of state-formation or annexation… [with] a mixture of coercion and conciliation,” and, specifically in the Indian context, “sovereignty was primarily a matter of allegiances; the state organized itself around conflict and remained essentially open-ended instead of becoming territorially circumscribed.”\textsuperscript{14} By way of this interpretation, the eighteenth century appears to be less of a decline from stability into volatility and more a continuation of prior, long-lasting understandings of imperial land sovereignty.

These recent scholars have argued that given that the conclusion of the British Raj is visible in hindsight, the orthodox eighteenth-century narrative has been overly inundated with the theme of Mughal decline. Squished in between the splendor of the seventeenth-century Mughals and the unrivaled power of the British Raj in the nineteenth century, this depiction of decline is a superficially attractive explanation. Most forcefully refuted by C. A. Bayly in \textit{Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire}, this

\textsuperscript{13} Satish Chandra, \textit{History of Medieval India} (New Delhi, India: Orient Longmans, 1982), 73.
revisionist reinterpretation considers Mughal ‘decline,’ after which the East India Company stepped in to fill the power vacuum, an inadequate explanation for the rise of the East India Company as a territorial power in India. Rather, buttressed by the observation that certain regions, including Bengal, Awadh, Moradabad-Bareilly, and Benares, increased revenues from Aurangzeb’s death in 1707 to mid-century (Bengal, in particular, increased revenue a whopping 40% between 1722 and 1756), these critical reexaminations argue that the slow consolidation of new social structures in the eighteenth century more adequately explains the rise of the Company as a territorial power than does merely reducing it to Mughal ‘decline’.

These arguments center on the development of three new social groups and relationships that significantly altered the social order of the subcontinent. The first rising group were the ‘revenue farmers.’ These were often members of the old nobility, either Hindu or Muslim, who were able to combine military power with the ability to manage cash and trade. These revenue farmers took ‘farm’ of a territory in return for a cash payment to its ruler while pocketing the difference. Indicative of a surviving and even

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15 See, for example, H. H. Dodson, *Cambridge History of the British Empire*. Vol. 4.5: *Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1929).
17 For such an example of revisionist work on Awadh, see Richard B. Barnett, *North India between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British 1720–1801* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980).
burgeoning commercial economy in late Mughal India, these revenue farmers did not possess the loyalty or military ethos of the mansabdars, marking the rise of a new self-interested class in the socio-political make-up of late Mughal India.

The second group were Indian merchants of traditional Hindu or Jain commercial castes. As the Mughal nobility and the treasury declined, these groups rose in importance due to their expanding moneylending practices. Moving capital from one part of the country to another, they came into contact with European merchants, mutually benefitting from the rise in one another’s importance. Even far from Delhi in the south, local merchants played an increasing role in regional politics. The growth of moneylending, coupled with revenue farming, increased the amount of funds available for local rulers. These rulers in turn put money into their military forces, which stimulated commercial activity in regions that were able to exert autonomy from Delhi. Ashin Das Gupta also noted that the increased Mughal reliance on European companies to protect the Indian Ocean sea lanes motivated coastal merchants to ally themselves with Europeans, in addition to fostering the Europeans’ own territorial ambitions.

This second group was specifically identified by Karen Leonard in her development of the ‘Great Firm’ theory of Mughal decline (1979). Leonard argued that bankers, integral to the Mughals during the height of their power, lost confidence in Mughal authority during the mid-seventeenth century and in turn migrated to regional power centers, benefitting the East India Company while depriving the Mughals of

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essential capital.\textsuperscript{23} This theory has not come without criticism, notably from J. F. Richards, who argued banking houses were not an essential component of the Mughal financial system and their migrations occurred later than Leonard suggested.\textsuperscript{24} However, the essence of Leonard’s argument, that continuities of societal transformation can be discerned long before Mughal decline, still holds considerable merit.

The third group that revisionists argue complicates ‘declinist’ narratives was the new local gentry or landholding class. The decline of the Mughal empire, ironically, may have resulted from the rapid success of their earlier expansion during the reign of Aurangzeb. Muzaffar Alam argued that local gentry (\textit{zamindars}) prospered in imperial service, and due to this they were able to separate themselves as stable, autonomous landlords throughout much of northern India.\textsuperscript{25} More than that, they began to tax markets and trade and seize land as hereditary to which previously they merely had prebendal rights. Contrary to notions of pure, zero-sum decline, this represented instead a redistribution of political power and wealth from the centralized Mughal authority to slowly consolidating regional groups. These emerging autonomous groups increasingly allied themselves with European trading companies on the periphery as a buttress against the Mughals or local rivals, which would have important consequences in drawing the

East India Company closer within the internally volatile political situation in India, especially Bengal.\textsuperscript{26}

These transformations represent the gradual commercialization of the subcontinent under loose Mughal authority; more than merely the increase of money in the economy, Bayly argued that these developments “meant the use of objective monetary values to express social relationships,” representing a significant step in the formation of modern India.\textsuperscript{27} Whereas Mughal decline revealed these consolidating interests, on the other hand the latter was, at the same time, an impetus to decline itself. These revisionist historians have come under criticism for focusing too much attention on Bengal and Awadh, which saw increased agricultural production and the consolidation of new social dynamics, and their opponents also question the usefulness of emphasizing the formation of regional powers given that by the end of the century these very powers would become annexed under the Company, their economies crippled.\textsuperscript{28} However, given that these same areas and groups that emerged out of Mughal decline are the same areas and groups that became the foundation of the British colonial state, the revisionists’ contribution should not be dismissed so lightly.

This revisionism has earned approval among scholars in diverse historical schools of thought and backgrounds. However, (and it may seem to be an odd quirk of history that they find themselves in agreement with the British imperialists’ themselves) this revisionism has not won acceptance among many scholars of Indian background. The

\textsuperscript{26} Lakshmi Subramanian, \textit{History of India, 1707–1857} (New Delhi, India: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 40–41.
\textsuperscript{27} Bayly, \textit{Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire}, 11.
\textsuperscript{28} Lakshmi Subramanian, 22.
bullish portrayal of eighteenth-century economies, the strength of the regional powers, the presumption that British rise to power depended a great deal on collaboration of Indian elites, and, especially, the emphasis on continuity between precolonial and colonial India have all been rejected by many Indian scholars of the period.

“Central to all objections” is the insistence on the break in continuity of the British rise to power—“the British are seen not as actors in what was essentially an Indian play, but as alien aggressors.”29 Whereas revisionists portray the internal political crisis in Bengal as merely being exploited by the Company,30 many Indian authors object by insisting that the internal political crisis itself was deliberately engineered by the “sub-imperialism” of the British traders.31 Contemporary sources lamenting economic disruption that they associated with the decline of the Mughals and the rise of the Company are held up by some scholars as ostensible proof that the evidence is inconsistent with the revisionist narrative,32 but these sources are almost always coming from the perspective of the Mughals. Art historian Hermann Goetz long ago demonstrated that, at least among the art world, eighteenth-century Indians were not

universally afflicted with such moroseness.\textsuperscript{33} Bayly, likely anticipating these types of
counterarguments directed against his work, observed that the “differentiated and
hierarchical nature of power in India” meant that “localities could sometimes be shielded
from changes at a wider level,” which “creates ambiguity and contradictions in historical
analysis.”\textsuperscript{34}

Of course, one should be quick to note that disagreements between historians and
scholars often do not so conveniently delineate along their respective nationalities, and
likely have as much to do with differences in respective ideologies and ways of reading
the sources as they do by the lived experiences of the authors themselves.\textsuperscript{35} For example,
famed British Indian historian Burton Stein was less than convinced by John McLane’s
revisionist work on Bengal.\textsuperscript{36} Along the same lines, Sushil Chaudhury and Om Prakash
took a lively debate over the mid-eighteenth-century South Asian economy from journal
articles aimed at one another to historical monographs doing the same. Chaudhuri paints
a grim view of the East India Company’s impact on the South Asian economy, with the
early eighteenth century reaping increased revenues and the latter half of the century
experiencing catastrophic famine and economic decline.\textsuperscript{37} On the flip side, Prakash takes
a more complex view, citing evidence for benefits and drawbacks of the Company to the

\textsuperscript{33} Hermann Goetz, \textit{The Crisis of Indian Civilization in the Eighteenth and Early
Nineteenth Centuries: The Genesis of Indo-Muslim Civilization} (Calcutta, 1938), 2.
\textsuperscript{34} Bayly, \textit{Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire}, 13.
\textsuperscript{35} D. A. Washbrook, “Review: Eighteenth-Century Issues in South Asia,” in \textit{Journal of
\textsuperscript{36} Burton Stein, Review of “Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-Century Bengal,” by
John McLane, \textit{Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of
\textsuperscript{37} Sushil Chaudhury, \textit{From Prosperity to Decline: Eighteenth-Century Bengal} (New
Delhi, India: Manohar Publishers and Distributers, 1999).
eighteenth-century economy, pushing the date for full subordination of the South Asian economy to the European economy back to the nineteenth century.\footnote{Om Prakash, \textit{European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-colonial India} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).} It is clear that explaining the divide within these controversies cannot be so simply attributed to Western scholars having not yet ‘decolonized’ their thinking. The complexities of these debates themselves—and the deeply contentious and politicized implications that are associated with them—have more to do with any polarization of the historical discourse than the nationalities of the authors themselves.

The overemphasis on imperial hegemony by both the empire’s supporters and its detractors is another issue that many recent efforts have attempted to correct. Both the Mughal and the British empires, for all their distinguishing idiosyncrasies, were defined more by insecurity than hegemony.\footnote{Bayly, \textit{Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire}, 13.} Exaggerated focus on the latter have played into familiar rise and fall narratives that rely on a binary that appears inadequate in explaining imperial events and processes.\footnote{Antoinette Burton, \textit{The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism} (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.} Since the 1960s, scholars have increasingly come to see British policy in India as having been impacted more by day-to-day Indian realities rather than notions of an official imperial ideology, especially during the early years of the East India Company. This debate in imperial historiography—hegemony versus insecurity, local realities versus imperial ideology—is one of the most contentious, long-lasting questions toiled over in British imperial historiography; therefore, given its importance, a more detailed discussion of the debate will be provided in Part II of this essay.
Moreover, to characterize the Company’s rise as an ‘alien’ phenomenon is to sidestep the fact that the Company was interconnected with the formation of regional powers taking place in the same Mughal system as the rest of its contemporaries on the subcontinent. In Bengal, Awadh, and Hyderabad, ‘successor states’ emerged and began to have their own diplomatic relations with the Company. In the south, the Mysore polity became stronger in alliance with the French at their port in Pondicherry, especially later under leaders Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan, and in the west, a loose confederation of Maratha polities grew in strength and opposition to Mughal power. All of these successor states operated within the ritualistic framework of the Mughal political system in order to stake their legitimacy, including the British.41

The Mughal emperor, for his part, attempted to use both the British and the Marathas, the two most formidable powers competing for supremacy of India, to his own ends and interests. In this sense, “both sides merged into the other.”42 On the face of it, the East India Company state had, as P. J. Marshall frames it, “appeared to become Indian rulers. They won power through Indian political processes and their rule depended on the yield of Indian taxation levied through Indian administrative systems.”43 From the perspective of its contemporaries on the subcontinent at mid-century, the East India Company was merely yet another polity playing the contentious game for supremacy in India; it would not have seemed likely without the benefit of hindsight that in a little over half a century the British would be the paramount power in India.

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43 Marshall, "The British in Asia,” 505.
As vitally important as it is to understand the complex local realities in the early eighteenth century into which the East India Company fit, there is an even longer tradition of top-down histories of the East India Company that attempt to explain its trajectory to a territorial power in India. As polemical as debates about the respective value of top-down and bottom-up histories can be, both approaches can be useful analytical frameworks and even complement one another, in this case perhaps necessarily, given Marshall’s conclusion that both internal and external factors were important in explaining the Company’s conquest of India.44 The call for more bottom-up histories of British expansion persists,45 but the extensive top-down literature available remains valuable for those seeking understanding of how a private business enterprise with a few thousand servants came to rule a subcontinent of roughly 200 million people. Eschewing simplistic narratives of Mughal decline or British superiority, a consideration of historical debates over interests and motivations internal to the East India Company before Plassey is warranted.

External Factors: The East India Company—Body Politic or Body of Traders?

If pre-Plassey matters internal to India have dominated much of the recent scholarly debates, then those students of external factors (internal to the Company and/or the metropole) have occupied an important although less frequent place alongside them. The first major contribution following independence was Holden Furber's influential

*John Company at Work* (1948), in which he demonstrated how private trade among the Company's servants factored into the events leading up to the decision to annex Bengal. Throughout his career, Furber insisted that the foundations of the British Indian state rested inextricably upon this inland trade, known as "country trade," carried about privately by the Company's servants.46 He quite correctly noted that it is impossible to estimate individual servant’s motivation to work for the Company without attributing this private trade, for no servant would sign up for the uncertainties and dangers of Company service for the small salary they were provided.

Although we should set aside his unconvincing reliance on external factors in lieu of more fully encompassing explanations of the rise of the Company that also attribute internal developments in India, Furber is important because he was an early advocate of a continuity thesis between pre- and post-Plassey. Although scholars like Bayly and Marshall later stressed both internal and external developments (while focusing most of their work on revising historical accounts of internal developments), they nevertheless built upon Furber's works. Most interestingly, scholars who argue that the British intentionally devised the internal crisis in Bengal by 'sub-imperialistic' means build on the work of Holden Furber, whether they attribute him or not.

Philip J. Stern builds on this continuity thesis by dispelling the notion of Plassey being the watershed in the development of the Company's imperial, territorial ethos. Making the journey from dissertation, to journal article, to historical monograph, his 2012 study *The Company-State* argues that more than just an ignorant body of traders, the

Company conceived of itself as a territorial body enforcing English law long before Plassey. In support, Stern provides documentary evidence of ambitious, militarist Company officials with early territorial aspirations. He rightly notes the sovereignty it wielded within the factories it established along the Indian coast—Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta—the Company enforced English law and in some cases collected taxes from lands nearby. Indeed, Stern argues that from the moment of its very foundation, the conception of the Company was that of a government over its employees, and from that point forward existed as a political body.47 Stern’s argument, at the very least, convincingly demonstrates that the Company did not have to go look far beyond its founding origins to transform itself into a governing state in India.

One anecdote Stern provides as evidence concerns the 1695 controversy in Emperor Aurangzeb’s court when pirates under the command of Henry Avery attacked two Mughal ships. The Mughals blamed the Company servants at Surat and arrested them, demanding that they take future responsibility for the protection of sea lanes. The Company’s President at Surat, Samuel Annesley, saw this as an opportunity to claim sovereign rights for the Company over the sea lanes, ports, and even the Mughal ships themselves.48 Typically seen as indicative of the Company’s commercial activities at the time, Stern argues that they are in fact representing the Company's early territorial ambitions. Although it may be difficult to claim this represents a general, widespread


imperial ethos within the Company at such an early stage, it lends itself well to a
continuity thesis.

Indeed, Stern appears to charge himself with the task of dispelling Thomas
Babington Macaulay's 1840 remark that the pre-Plassey Company consisted of "mere
traders, ignorant of general politics, ignorant of the peculiarities of the empire which had
strangely become subject to them." He succeeds more at contesting the first two notions
than the third. Indeed, the third seems unfair of Macaulay in the first place, given that it is
a historical anachronism. The generation of Company servants did not grow up with the
British Empire that Macaulay's generation did and thought of that 'first' British empire
very differently than contemporaries thought of the 'second' British empire. As Robert
Travers observes in his study of imperial ideology in the eighteenth century, this first
empire was envisioned as a Pan-Atlantic group of free white, Protestant, commercial
settlers, in which the Company’s activities in Asia were peripheral. This sense of empire
grew out of opposition to continental despotism and with a patriotic loyalty to
republicanism. The East India Company, which was founded in part largely to oppose
its Dutch and Portuguese counterparts, fit firmly within that ‘first imperial’ ethos.

However, the empire that came after the American Revolution and the Warren
Hastings Trial became something much different (which will be a major topic of
discussion in the next chapter). Therefore, it appears unconvincing to fault the Company
for not having a coherent imperial ethos before it had developed one, nor does it seem

50 Robert Travers, Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in
convincing that the Company in the seventeenth or even the early eighteenth century had even the slightest notion that they were displacing Mughal power in India, whatever their territorial ambitions may have been. Traditional scholarship maintains that the Company did not envision itself as a territorial or imperial power and that their imperative to trade persisted until the mid-eighteenth century, and recent scholarship generally supports that view.  

Stern contests this dichotomy between first and second empires, however. Arguing that the emphasis of distinction between Atlantic and Asian empires is an intellectual tradition inherited from John Seeley’s famous proclamation of an empire “won in a fit of absence of mind,” 52 Stern invokes the famous words of two other great British imperial historians by claiming this emphasis on the commercial and political distinctions between Atlantic and Asian empires may be only ‘the tip of the iceberg.’ 53 Stern buttresses his argument by observing the ways in which bullion made its way from the Americas to the Mughal court. However, this only appears to reaffirm that the East India Company was complementary to the Atlantic empire in a commercial capacity. Likewise, he demonstrates how the East India Company gained its charter through the help of its Atlantic counterparts, and how one of its most important leaders in the late seventeenth century, Joshua Child, kept the Atlantic Empire very much in mind while aggressively expanding the Company’s interests. 54

54 Ibid., 700–701.
All in all, however, Stern’s argument seems to support the notion that the Asian Empire was modelled after the commercial Atlantic Empire, rather than the Asian Empire resembling, in the early eighteenth century, what it became in the early nineteenth century: a ‘modern,’ civil, political, and military imperial power—indeed, the paramount power on the subcontinent, difficult to envision for the eighteenth-century observer. His argument that more similarities should be identified between the British Atlantic and British Asia is met with welcome ears, however. There certainly is more civil and political history to the early Company than is acknowledged by those who emphasize its commercial aspects, and the Company certainly did not grow in isolation to the British Atlantic Empire. Stern has added a valuable critique to studies of both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean by broadening the scope of both subjects.

This bodes well with the continuity thesis, but where it falls short is in its overemphasis on a coherent political and imperial ethos that had yet to develop in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Nor had the Company developed a body of civil politics that had become an entirely separated entity than the British state itself. Certainly, it had developed its own interests and independence by the time of Plassey—the ‘country trade’ of its private traders is a good example. And the Company-State certainly could be described as an early modern state in both operational terms and the ways in which it conceived of itself, although not yet the modern state it became a hundred years later. But it was also inextricably tied to the politics of the nation-state and that nation-state’s geopolitical realities.

The most important of these geopolitical realities was undoubtedly the war(s) with France. As noted previously, the eighteenth century imperial ethos was marked by
opposition to continental despotism—in more specific terms, France. Britain fought a series of wars with France throughout the ‘long’ eighteenth century, and its empire in Asia was tied up in these global conflicts. It is interesting then, that there is a dearth early political and military histories of the East India Company in lieu of histories focused on developments internal to India. G. J. Bryant observes that this may be due to concern at being labelled an “orientalist, triumphalist, militarist, or determinist”—a most unfortunate consequence of the recent outpouring of postmodernist scholarship, given the importance of political and military history in explaining how the British Indian state came to be.55

Indeed, Bryant contests the notion put forward by scholars such as Stern that the origins of the imperial military state date back to the founding of the Company. This ‘imperialist foundations’ argument (as one might describe it) ignores, he claims, a major difference in the Company's outlook, grand strategic ethos and means between the earlier period and its tentative, and at first reactive but nonetheless substantial, intrusion into Indian affairs which began in the later eighteenth century, and also, even more, with the assured territorial expansion that followed at the end of the century and into the new one after the British Government assumed overall supervision of the Company's political enterprise in 1784.56

Addressing Stern and other scholars’ emphasis on aggressive personalities like Joshua Child, Bryant argues that judging from Company policy before and after Child, ‘maverick’ personalities such as these were probably far less frequent than the norm, based on Bryant’s own documentary research. All the same, Bryant illuminates how

56 Bryant, 2.
Child’s 1686–1688 decision to launch a naval and military expedition to India was not to conquer territories or create colonies but to force the Mughal court to accept its freedom of trade and sovereignty within its three small coastal settlements. Child’s efforts were met with failure, and the Company was forced to request to trade again in the Empire in addition to paying a fine for the return Bombay Island. Clearly, regardless of Child’s ambitions, the British were not at a position to impose any sort of power on India and were dependent on the internal developments in the half century that followed the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 before the Battle of Plassey in 1757. It would have taken impressive foresight for a contemporary to predict what was to come.

Rather than positing a continuity thesis, then, Bryant argues that the rise of British power in India was marked instead by three major discontinuities in its grand strategy in which the Company, despite its peaceful, commercial vision, became marked by a ‘forward’ policy (without a clear, overarching imperial vision) that transformed it from a trading enterprise to territorial power, with trade persisting as its main interest even long after it had become a state. The discontinuities he identifies are 1744, when the British and France extended the War of Austrian Succession to their holdings in Asia; 1765, when Clive secured the diwani of Bengal and Bihar from the Mughal Emperor; and in 1784, when the British Crown assumed supervision of the Company under Pitt’s India Act.

Although one appreciates the definite breaks each moment provides in the eighteenth-century narrative (especially the last one—more on that in the next chapter),

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57 Ibid., 3.
58 Bryant, 6.
there is perhaps more continuity there than Bryant gives full due. For example, he provides an overlapping continuity framework—interest in profit—that ties together the pre-1744 and post-1784 Companies. Also, by demonstrating how Company grand strategy aligned with the British state’s grand strategy during the wars against France, he portrays a Company that is consistently an extension of the British state, merely to varying degrees between the period of 1744 to 1784, while at the same time associating increasingly within the politics of the local governments—an unstable situation.

Moreover, building off the framework of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, I have argued in my previous works that the seemingly bountiful discontinuities and contradictions associated with British imperial rule can in fact represent an overarching continuity of discontinuity in which flexible state structures adapted based on local circumstances and realities. One might also interpret the discontinuities of the mid-eighteenth century that Bryant identifies to be within this flexible British imperial framework.

When the War of Austrian Succession ended in 1748, the poor showing by British forces, along with suspicion that France would continue to undermine the Company in India, motivated the British to increase the quality of their forces in India. Indeed, the volatile nature of Indian princely governments provided European companies legal protection for pursuing their war aims even when their national governments were not at war with one another. During the next twelve-year contest (1749–1761), the British

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worked to subvert the allegiance of French allies on the subcontinent while working to secure the support of their own allies, which impacted the nature of grand strategy in India. This era represents both the patriotic apex of British republicanism versus French totalitarianism as well as the burgeoning status of the Company within the complex interplay of Indian politics. By entangling itself within the “volatile Indian dynastic and interstate politics characteristic of the period,” thinkers such as Robert Clive and Warren Hastings believed that the Company could not withdraw only to return later to negotiate again with the princes who they had previously abandoned.

It is therefore a significant conclusion of this chapter that, in order to understand the events leading up to Plassey, it is necessary to understand both the internal developments in India and external developments (those internal to the Company and to Europe). It was a direct consequence of the wars with France that caused the British traders in Calcutta to enhance their fortifications there. It was a direct consequence of the expanding revenues of Bengal that motivated the young nawab Siraj-ud-daula, more independent from the Mughal court than his predecessors, to strike at the British traders in response to their haughty defiance of the nawab’s order to desist fortification. It was a direct consequence of the Company’s desire to secure trade and wealth for its servants and shareholders and the political pressure to counter the French threat that caused Clive to assemble his forces at Madras to mount an offensive against the nawab in response. And it was a direct consequence of the volatile Indian political situation, specifically in

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60 Bryant, 14–15.
61 Ibid., 7.
Bengal, that provided Clive an opportunity to turn members of the Bengali nawab’s court against him, all but ensuring victory at the Battle of Plassey.

Bryant characterizes the second discontinuity, Clive’s securing of the diwani in 1765, as a “more deliberate and clear-sighted” decision. Although it is certainly true that Clive had a better idea of the future in 1765 than he did in 1757, this appears to be yet again an example of Clive securing profits for the Company, which was in the interest of observers in Westminster, given the Company’s financial strains from the recent wars. However, such funneling of land revenue in India to British shareholders was certain to elicit criticism. After the Company annexed Bengal and acquired the diwani, its Directors as well as the British Government were concerned by the inability of the Company to preside over a territory as a sovereign imperial state, in addition to positing moral qualms with such a prospect. These debates over a body of British traders governing over a distant land, rich in culture, tradition, and resources, grew as concerns mounted over the Company’s servants plundering of northeastern India, invoking massive famine and the collapse of Bengal’s economy. These critics derided those who returned as “nabobs,” a distortion of the term “nawab,” which referred to a Mughal provincial governor.

If this chapter stresses the continuities leading up from the pre-Plassey period to the post-Plassey, then the major discontinuity this chapter emphasizes is the (gradual) evolution of an imperial state ideology between the middle-to-late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth-century. This evolution began with the acquisition of the diwani in

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63 Bryant, 7.
1765, continued to take shape during the assertion of the British Crown’s supervisory role over the Company in 1784, and had transformed itself into something new entirely by the ascension of British paramountcy in India (generally recognized to be following the conclusion of the Third Maratha Wars) in 1818. By the first event, the imperial ethos was still an Atlantic-based, commercial vision, focused on the profitability of trade and shareholder dividends. Although critical questioning of Company governance began to murmur in many corners, profits (and private riches) continued to be the primary concern of the Company during this early period.

By the second moment, questions discussed for decades over proper governance in India had come to the forefront of parliamentary business with the passage of the India Act of 1784. Wedged at a moment between ‘first’ and ‘second,’ ‘Atlantic’ and ‘Asian’ empires, these disputes reflected the disparity in ideas about imperial governance, represented by the respective stances of Warren Hastings and Edmund Burke. As Robert Travers notes in his important study on eighteenth-century imperial ideology, binary notions of similarity or difference, prevalent in nineteenth-century imperial ideology, have limited usefulness for understanding eighteenth-century debates.64 A more useful framework for eighteenth-century imperial discourse is the notion of an ancient constitution. Early modern British politics was inundated with rhetoric about the ancient English constitution, which extended to British outlook on the world at large; the world

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64 Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India*, 18.
was dispersed with ancient constitutions. The job of the British administrator in India was to ‘discover’ the ancient constitution of India in order to govern it most effectively.

To Burke, the unnatural nature of British rule in India meant that uncovering an ancient constitution was a futile endeavor, better left to native authorities. India was no backwards, ‘savage’ civilization in Burke’s eyes (juxtaposing the Indian with the Native American). Rather, India was one of the most culturally rich civilizations in the world, for whom the ‘Grand Mogul,’ no decadent figure, was the symbol of the noble power of Asiatic empires. Indeed, contrary to later anachronistic notions of the British colonizing India in order to extract raw resources for their factories in the metropole (which are envisioned to have magically appeared at some arbitrary date designated to be the beginning of what was known as “the Industrial Revolution”)67, India at this time remained one of the world’s largest exporters of manufactured textile goods; at the time it was British consumers buying Indian manufactured goods, not the other way around.68

Burke’s view was not unique or inconsistent with much of the popular view of the Company in England. Given the Company’s ties to the monarch dating back to Queen Elizabeth’s granting of its charter, following the Glorious Revolution and the assertion of parliamentary authority over the Crown, the houses of Parliament served as a voice of

67 This misreading of colonial history in the context of the Industrial Revolution was perhaps first and most forcefully articulated in Eric J. Hobsbawm’s *Age of Revolutions* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962).
68 See, for example, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, “Trade and Empire in Awadh 1765–1804,” in *Past and Present*, No. 94 (February 1982), pp. 85–102; for an example of a response to this type of claim, see Marshall, “Debate: Early British Imperialism in India,” in *Past and Present*, No. 106 (February 1985), pp. 164–169., 164.
opposition to the Company throughout the eighteenth century. Stern argues that this dispute was “not only over political economy but the proper nature of colonial sovereignty; as such, the debate that ensued was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the Company’s slow incorporation into the British state and empire in the eighteenth century.”69 The dilemma surrounding the Company’s sovereignty in India seemed to threaten not just the notion of a Pan-Atlantic, free, commercial empire but also the liberal nature of British constitutional politics itself.70

The controversy of the ‘nabob’ highlights the complex evolution of imperial ideology and constitutional politics during this time. As Company officials returned home enriched from their tours in India, they were derisively referred to as ‘nabobs.’ Nabobs were despised in England for having supposedly unrestrained avarice and having been corrupted by ‘Asiatic’ influences. English women who returned from India, dubbed ‘nabobinas,’ though numerically tiny, captured a disproportionate amount of domestic scourge as they best represented both proper British virtues and the perceived potential for vice.71 Diamonds became an ironically conspicuous symbol of nabob avarice due to the ease in smuggling them back to Britain.72

Perhaps central to opposition toward nabobs was the latter’s inherent challenge to notions of gentry ethics, for which income earned purely at an administrative distance and without industrial corruptibility was the only respectable way for a gentleman to

70 Travers, Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India, 5.
72 Ibid., 223.
accrue wealth. From the late 1750s to the 1780s, the British public was forced to reconcile this dramatic change with their ingrained understanding of the nature of British society. As Cain and Hopkins note, it was Edmund Burke’s view that “the genius of the English… was to infuse tradition with modernity, thereby preserving it,” and it was out of this controversy that the ethics of what Cain and Hopkins identify as “gentlemanly capitalism” was born. These gentlemanly elite, generally possessing a classical liberal arts, Greco-Roman education from either Oxford or Cambridge, a paternalistic sense of duty toward the administration of governance, and an overarching moralistic notion of a “civilizing mission,” would make up the backbone of the Colonial Office and took a decisive role in the administration of the British Empire. The conclusion of the nabob controversy would culminate in developing this integral physical and ideological component within the British imperial system. Indeed, the nabobs themselves attempted to integrate themselves within the upper echelon of British society the only way they knew how—by buying land from which they could collect revenue at an administrative distance.

Anthropologist Nicholas B. Dirks is skeptical of the culmination of the nabob controversy, chalking up domestic criticism of the Company as simply a “national expression of bad conscience,” suggesting that it was merely a cover that was designed to “harness imperial power—and wealth—securely to Britain.” Dirks began his research

74 Cain and Hopkins, 130.
during the Clinton impeachment trial, which, he argues, distracted the nation and allowed for the Bush administration to take advantage of 9/11 in order to achieve their ultimate goal of invading Iraq. Dirks's comparisons to the contemporary world do not end there, extending to linkages between East India Company and modern companies like Haliburton and Monsanto.

As John Gaddis might approvingly observe, at least Dirks shows his ductwork on the outside. Dirks stringently attacks recent imperial historical scholarship, particularly the five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*, for ostensibly ignoring “the explosion of revisionist writing that has subjected most histories of empire to withering critique,” but it seems like Dirks is the one who has missed much of the boat on the recent revisionism. Dirks employs traditional, top-down historical methodology in his work and operates under the assumption that the British had the power to do whatever they wanted—be it 1757 or 1857—in India. This puts him at odds with recent scholars such as Antoinette Burton who argue that imperialism was defined more by insecurity than hegemony, in addition to the bulk of British imperial scholarship that suggests that the British were not in the position to call themselves the dominant power in India until roughly 1820.

In doing so, scholars might very well accuse him of ignoring the historical agency that indigenous actors played in the narrative of the long eighteenth century. Pay no mind to this critique, Dirks insists. Just as scandals began to be associated with India and not

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77 Dirks, *The Scandals of Empire*, 27.
with empire, the British increasingly preferred not to take responsibility for imperial expansion, rather placing the blame upon India whenever possible. This is merely a deceptive tactic begun by imperialists themselves before being taken up by their admirers in the Western academies over a century later. It is true that historical documents naturally reflect the topics of works concerning them, and, in particular, regarding British imperial history, Burton notes that “colonial administrative concerns became imperial historiographical ones.” However, the supposition that this is a conspiracy that involved historians and imperialists colluding across time and space is hardly convincing, to say the least.

Dirks’s work provides an example of a polemic that has gained widespread popularity among the general public. While in India during the summer of 2016, any time I brought up the fact that I am a British imperial historian, Dirks is a name many folks mentioned in response as a scholar with whom they are familiar. Even if it is not a historian’s goal to produce works of history that are as widely read or targeted to as wide an audience as Dirks’s, it remains important that we address these types of works so as not to support the notion that scholars of British India and their historiographical debates can be safely organized into categories of ‘pro-empire’ and ‘anti-empire.’ As we have seen, and will continue to see, these debates take on a remarkable complexity that quickly transcends readily identifiable camps such as these.

For all of Dirks's cynicism, Burke's tirade against Hastings in the famous impeachment trial of 1786-1794 appears to be an effort on the part of Burke to return

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rogue, despotic, Company governance of India under the eyesight of republican institutions. Travers observes that the "lengthy and eloquent attacks on the person of Warren Hastings were closely related to a particular neo-Roman conception of politics."\(^81\)

In the wake of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), the reasons for the Republic's demise into imperial authoritarianism were on many a Briton's mind. In this reading of Roman history into the British present, the decline of the Republic in ancient Rome was directly correlated to the growth of empire, facilitated by rogue generals who grew popular discontent, tipping the scales against the balance of power within the Roman republican institutions. For Burke, "the prosecution of Hastings' villainy was a necessary measure in preserving the national character and the checks and balances of the British constitution."\(^82\)

However, the debates during the impeachment trial centered on Indian history and the Mughal constitution. Hastings was adamant in his belief in the rights of government in relation to landowners, property, and sovereignty during his tenure as governor-general, and this grounding of the Company's inherited Mughal powers from the nawab of Awadh in the ancient constitutional framework of India was his defense for dispossessing the raja of Benares in 1781, which was the subject of his first impeachment charge. The forceful articulation of this belief in his opening remarks would be badly exploited by Burke throughout the trial; for Burke, Hastings "had simply made 'the corrupt practices of mankind' into 'the principles of Government,' gathering them up to 'form the whole map of abuses into one code, and call it the duty of a British

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\(^{81}\) Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India*, 217.

\(^{82}\) *Ibid.*
Attacking Hastings' notion that there could be an ancient constitution which entrenched arbitrary despotic authority in Indian society as nonsensical and paradoxical, for "if there was indeed an ancient Mughal constitution, then this was sufficient proof of stability, fixity and legal government to render the notion of despotism redundant."

This proposition was even more absurd, in Burke's view, when considering that the body claiming this arbitrary, despotic authority was nothing more than a commercial company. Burke argued that Hastings received his power from two sources: Parliaments royal charters granted to the Company, and the grants and charters given to the Company by the Mughal Emperor; it was preposterous to argue that "the Mughals had delegated a despotic power to their subordinated governors." Moreover, Hastings, a mere deputy of the Company and by extension the British Crown, was presumptuous in his assuming this delegated power fell to him and not Parliament. It is in this sense that "Burke was the prophet of a reconstructed imperial sovereignty" in which the Parliament takes its rightful place as the representative government for millions of subjects across the globe.

Perhaps some of Dirks's cynicism is warranted.

For all the focus on the dramatic rhetoric of Edmund Burke or on the scorn the English masses directed at the nabobs, little historiographical attention has been paid to the self-representations of nabobs themselves. Travers argues that “in part because of this, the process of ideological rearmament that accompanied colonial state-formation in

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86 Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India*, 220.
eighteenth-century India has remained obscure.”

Rehabilitating some of Dirks’s points that are bogged down within his polemical straw man tirade against contemporary historians, Travers observes how imperialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (“often employed by the imperial bureaucracy”) created a type of reverse Whig history in which Indian society had degraded into a dark age. The corruption of the nabobs was just a symptom of the ailment of decadent Mughal society, whereas India thereafter was uplifted by far-sighted leaders such as Hastings and Cornwallis, while being effectively managed with the gradual implementation of parliamentary oversight. Despite Dirks’s insistence, this narrative has been generally set aside by most recent scholars in lieu of the more adequate explanations detailed within this chapter.

Where this narrative still clouds contemporary scholarship, as Travers perceptively discerns, is in the presumption that nineteenth-century imperial ideologies such the ‘civilizing mission’ and ‘orientalism’ also define eighteenth-century imperial ideologies. Certainly the roots of the former can be identified during the latter, but, as Travers observes, in “eighteenth-century British debates about India, the rhetoric of barbarism and civilization was cut across by view of the world as a set of ‘ancient constitutions’, closely related to the particularly ‘genius' of different peoples.” In this sense, Warren Hastings emerges not as an eighteenth-century ‘orientalist,’ trying to rule India in image of an ‘oriental despot,’ but as an Englishman whose “attempt to found British authority on an ancient Indian constitution was as much an attempt to align the

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87 Ibid., 6.
88 Ibid., 10.
89 Travers, Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India, 8.
Company government with contemporary British idioms of political legitimation as an accommodation to Indian forms of rule.”\textsuperscript{90}

Similarly, the controversy between ‘orientalists’ and ‘anglicists’ over English education in India in the 1820s and 1830s was “read back” into the history of the eighteenth-century British India. Warren Hastings, notable for sponsoring scholarship on Indian laws, religion, and history, was identified as an orientalist, whereas Lord Cornwallis, notable for advocating English Whig forms of administration, was identified as an anglicist.\textsuperscript{91} Travers adds an important refutation to this understanding by clarifying that anglicism, “in the sense of using British notions of good government as a source for policy in Bengal, and orientalism, in the sense of justifying policy by reference to some notion of entrenched oriental custom, were not distinct schools of thought in the eighteenth century” but rather linked methods by which political agents were necessitated to justify their policies.\textsuperscript{92}

Hastings’s and other British officials’ patronizing of Indian scholarship has incited controversy regarding the creation and utilization of different forms of knowledge by the British colonial state and particularly how this affected the self-perception of colonial subjects. Ever since literary critic Edward Said’s “Orientalism” was released in 1978, a flurry of books arguing for what they term ‘colonial discourse theory’ have been published.\textsuperscript{93} These works contest the Enlightenment epistemology that “universal and objective truths about the human condition may be ‘discovered through the exercise of

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 15–16.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 16.
Reason”; instead, colonial discourse theory, building off the works of philosopher Michel Foucault, argues that all knowledge is relative to the context to “those who ‘construct’ it”; examining “conditions under which various ‘knowledges’ were produced.”94 In the British imperial context, this meant that any knowledge the British uncovered about India was the “product of a closed system of reasoning,” with “its only reference-points for representing ‘Others’” being “internal to itself.”95 Moreover, these scholars argue that British imposition of the Other on the Indian served as a tool for epistemological conquest by justifying the imperial project as a civilizing mission, all the while insisting on the universal objectivity of the ‘truth’ of British superiority to the Indian.

Indeed, the British did commission for the creation of extensive works on India. The setting up of colleges at Fort Williams in Calcutta and Fort George in Madras contributed greatly to the creation of scholarship that informed ideas about Indian history, religion, and society. Brahmin pandits played a crucial role for early British administrators due to their necessary language skills and their ability to accumulate local knowledge. The search for knowledge generally took one of two forms—exploration/explanation or enlightenment—and took place in both official and private spheres within the Company apparatus in India. The first form was far more pressing and served not just as a means of effective administration but also legitimacy. The second form similarly was not just to satisfy curiosity but also to acquire essential information.96

95 Ibid., 597.
96 Frykenberg, “India to 1858,” 194.
This search for knowledge, derided later as ‘orientalism’ was not something unique to the British. The notion that it was expected of a ruler to study and understand local customs was an understanding of political pragmatism that the British shared with the Mughals. As such, contrary to notions of a major discontinuity associated with the coming of Company rule, the company inherited a pre-colonial system from the Mughals in which the populace relayed local conditions to the ruler. Moreover, British understandings of Indian society did not take place in a closed loop, as postmodernists assert. They were informed by local indigenous actors as much as if not more than they were informed by their own European biases, and therefore are a part of a long dialectical process in which both colonizer and colonized played an equal part.

One would be hard pressed to argue that the British search for knowledge did not serve as an epistemological tool of conquest. It undoubtedly enhanced their ability to govern effectively and thus conquer more effectively, although the growing distance between ruler and ruled in the decades leading up to the 1857 Rebellion exposed the cracks that had grown within this system. The argument that the British deliberately and nefariously created forms of knowledge that informed the Indian of his or her weak and decadent nature in relation to the superiority of the British is not wholly convincing, however, and reads the history backwards. Much like how European slavers did not start out in the 1500s with an already ingrained understanding of racial hierarchy, the British did not go to India in the eighteenth century with the notion that it was a weak, decadent society destined to be uplifted by Western society’s progressive, liberal-minded reform,

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though they certainly were convinced of the superiority of their own institutions, as might have their Mughal counterparts.

Rather, having already risen to power in India through the complex, gradual historical processes outlined within this chapter, the British found themselves lording over a subcontinent of some 200 million people and encountered a need to explain this situation. It is at this moment when the British began conceptualize a Whig history in which racially inferior Indians, suffering from a dark age, were uplifted by the civilizing British. This racial, imperialistic narrative had not yet developed by the mid-eighteenth century, when Company motivations were still dominated by profits and trade and ideology defined by an ingrained notion of uncovering the ‘ancient constitution’ of India.

One point on which both Dirks and revisionist historians might agree was that after the India Act of 1784 and the Warren Hastings trial, British society came to terms with their identity as both liberal constitutionalists and imperialists. With the ‘first’ empire smoldering in the ashes of the American Revolution, the British plunged on from 1784 forward as a liberal and yet imperial nation, unconcerned with the previous contradictions associated with the mercantilist empire coupled with the semi-autonomous East India Company, which was from the 1784 India Act on safely monitored under parliamentary authority. Meanwhile, the East India Company would go on periodic territorial offensives that culminated in its emergence from a mere regional power in India in 1784 to the unquestioned paramount power on the subcontinent less than forty years later.

Indeed, Bryant identifies the 1784 India Act as his third moment of significant discontinuity in the eighteenth century, marking the Company’s reorganization as a
“political agent of the state” and “fully integrated into the British Government’s global grand strategy.” Whereas the East India Company had laid down its roots in eighteenth century India as a commercial venture (i.e., the goal was to make money), it had by the 1780s become more fully entwined with British global strategic concerns. These goals centered on countering the French—and in India, their allies in Mysore and the Maratha confederacy. This deep-seeded historical current, in which the British came to India to trade, then defended those trading interests against the French in repeated conflicts in a rivalry that stemmed from the other side of the globe, culminating in British offensives against France’s Indian allies (and ultimately British consolidation as the paramount power in India), is what Bayly calls the “ricochet effect.” Bayly observes that many histories of imperial history end with the demise of the old colonial system in 1783 and begin again after 1815, treating the Napolonic Wars as a sort of aberration. These histories coalesce around Robinson and Gallagher’s thesis of the imperialism of free trade, and, as such, begin again around 1830, thought to be a period of liberal reform. The exception, Bayly notes, is Vincent Harlow’s classic “The New Imperial System, 1783-1815” in The Cambridge History of the British Empire, vol. ii. However, Bayly reveals a paradox in Harlow’s account. Harlow identified this period as

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98 Bryant, 10.
100 Robinson and Gallagher, “The Imperialism of Free Trade.”
corresponding with the growth of “order and justice” within the colonial system that
typified liberal imperialism.102 Bayly argues that Harlow’s own work undermines this
correlation, however, in its accounting of the ways in which the British during this period
attempted to centralize power within colonial territories, displacing non-European “from
positions of all but marginal political authority.”103 In this sense, the British were
replicating a system of European authoritarian rule in colonial settings to counter
revolutionary France, the ‘ricochet’ Bayly observes linking geopolitical events in Europe
to those in India. Indeed, following the defeat of Tipu Sultan in the Third Anglo-Mysore
War, the British public celebrated the triumph within the context of loyalist opposition to
revolutionary France.104 Therefore, whereas Bayly and Bryant would ultimately disagree
on the question of whether 1784 marked a significant discontinuity, they both agree that
the colonization of India had more to do with the lasting legacy of Anglo-French rivalry
than an overarching understanding of liberal imperialism or imperial ideology.

However, P. J. Marshall argues that this explanation is not entirely sufficient.
Observing that explanations that involve internal Indian political instability and the
Anglo-French rivalry do well in “explaining why the British equipped themselves with
the means of conquering territory and why they sought to intervene in Indian politics,”
Marshall argues that “there is still a wide gap between military ascendancy and

102 Harlow, 129.
103 Bayly, Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830 (New York,
104 Marshall, ‘‘Cornwallis Triumphant’’: War in India and the British Public in the Late
Eighteenth Century” in War, Strategy, and International Politics. Essays in Honour of Sir
Michael Power, eds. Lawrence Freedman, Paul Hayes and Robert O’Neill. (Oxford, UK:
diplomatic influence on the one hand and outright control of territory or even the creation of virtual satellite states, as in Oudh or the Carnatic, on the other.”  

In Marshall’s view, “the progression from military ascendancy to domination of territory was neither an inevitable one nor one that was consciously willed.”  

Rather, it was driven “by the willingness of the British to use the new forces at their disposal in the pursuit of what were in their eyes strictly limited objectives which would not seriously compromise the independence of Indian rulers.”  

The British did not devise to destroy the internal Indian political system, but their repeated demands and use of force brought about this result. Marshall cautions against the deployment of simplistic economic stereotypes to explain British expansion, but ultimately concludes that both political and economic factors are essential in this narrative.

Bayly’s point about historians reading back ‘imperialism of free trade’ into the 1780-1830 period nevertheless has merit. He concedes that “no-one would doubt that the rise of the rhetoric of free trade was one of the key themes of the period, or that pressure of free trade proved an important component of imperial expansion in several areas.”  

However, Bayly insists that there are “good reasons” to doubt whether “free-

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106 Ibid., 38.
107 Ibid.
109 Although she does well to de-center Bengal in scholarship of the early East India Company period, Pamela Nightingale’s study Trade and Empire in Western India 1784-1806 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970) is an example of a study imposes the later orthodoxy of free trade and its agency in British expansion onto an earlier period within which it does not fit.
trade imperialism was the only, or indeed chief, motive power behind British expansion,” and when it came to India, Bayly argues that “the financial and military momentum of the East India Company’s army was the mainspring of expansion with free traders no more than the fly on the wheel.” \(^{111}\) It is important to distinguish the chief economic motives of the Company during this time—trade was not yet as so important to Company coffers as were India’s territorial revenues.

For all of the complex, intertwined economic, military, and political factors that explain Britain’s expansion, the importance of individual agency should not be understated. For example, this is illustrated well by comparing the Third Anglo-Mysore War with the Fourth. The Third began in December 1789, when French ally Tipu Sultan began an offensive against Travancore, a former ally of the Company. Governor-General Cornwallis, renowned for his virtuosity, was brought to India to reform the Company’s business under his leadership. However, even the ostensibly anti-imperialistic Cornwallis was drawn into the conflict, interpreting it as a call to war against the Company and its allies. The British negotiated alliances with the Marathas and with the Nizam of Hyderabad, both of whom invaded Mysore along with the British. By 1792 Cornwallis defeated Tipu outside his capital of Seringapatam, and, though the following treaty was harsh on Tipu, forcing him to concede massive territory and monetary indemnity, Cornwallis has been widely praised among British historians for his moderation in not annexing the whole of Mysore outright. \(^{112}\)

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\(^{111}\) Bayly, “Imperial Meridian,” 9-10.
\(^{112}\) Marshall, “‘Cornwallis Triumpant,’” 57.
When Marquess Richard Wellesley arrived as Governor-General later that decade, he imposed a more forward, imperialistic approach. He first expanded the previous subsidiary alliance, which allowed them to provide troops to allied native states in exchange for that state to pay for the maintenance of this force. In addition, a resident was placed in these states, and the states could not conduct a relationship with a power other than the British. When they could not pay for these forces, British allies would surrender territories from which the British would collect revenues to pay for their army. The British had long experimented with this type of indirect rule in Awadh, and Wellesley transformed the system further so that most of the native states would cede their political authority to the Company. When it was discovered that Tipu Sultan was in secret negotiations with the French, Wellesley took the opportunity to conquer Mysore outright, and then Mysore was reincorporated within Wellesley’s subsidiary alliance system.113

Wellesley next turned to the other great threat to the British position in India—the Marathas. Stewart Gordon argues that, at this point, a tumultuous conflict between the Marathas and the British was inevitable—“every other polity (with the exception of the Punjab) was a subsidiary to one or the other.”114 Wellesley first moved to consolidate British territorial power in northern India against the Marathas by demanding the concession of territories from the Nawab of Awadh and the increase of British forces stationed there, arguing against both the growing French threat via the Marathas and

Awadh administrative incompetence for justification. Now that Awadh had been established as a secure buffer state against Maratha power, who recently underwent a civil war between the Indore and Sindhia polities, the time was ripe for Wellesley to lobby London successfully that decisive action was necessary to stop the establishment of a French state on the banks of the Yamuna.115

When the Second Marathas war broke out in 1803, only the Sindhia and the Raja of Berar were in a position to confront the Company. After taking Delhi and the climactic battle at Laswari where the British crushed the Marathas’s French-trained army, the Sindhia and Berar were forced to capitulate to British demands. This proved to be the nail in the coffin for the Marathas confederacy.116 Wellesley’s tenure as Governor-General ended in 1805, but the British and Maratha positions on the subcontinent had already been drastically and irreversibly altered. The Maratha Confederacy was finally abolished at the conclusion of the Third Maratha War in 1818, and with it the French threat to the British in India has been extinguished.

Robert Travers argues thus that it was within the context of the French revolutionary wars that “a more confident and unified British imperialism in India was announcing itself as a sharp break from an imagined history of ‘Asiatic despotism.’”117 The British imperial ethos in India was as such inextricably tied to global events, especially those back home. And yet, as I hope Part I has demonstrated, the internal

115 Lakshmi Subramanian, History of India, 1707-1857, 73.
116 Gordon, 172.
Indian narrative of the eighteenth century is vital to understanding the expansion of British power in India. It is also my hope that this chapter has established some sense of order for the reader on the interweaving of these complex historical processes. The historical currents which brought about the British Raj are embedded deep within the histories of both the Indian subcontinent but also Great Britain and its European rivalries. A careful reading of the scholarship highlights contrasting interpretations of historical evidence, of course, but it is my belief that many of the different interpretations enumerated above are not so much mutually exclusive as they are overlapping pieces to the broader puzzle. In the following Part II of this essay, I will attempt to establish order on this collage of competing narratives by examining some of these individual pieces of the puzzle in greater detail.
As discussed in Part I, recent revisionism within the British India historiography has resulted in both a reexamination of classical historical issues associated with the colonial encounter in India and a burgeoning of new issues, mostly centered around the question of how the British acquired and indeed formulated knowledge about India. In the first part of this thesis, I examined these issues as they related to the various competing narratives recounting the rise of the English East India Company to a position of dominance in India during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In this second portion, I will analyze these issues and historiographical controversies on their own terms and in much greater detail.

Official Ideology or Local Realities?

One of the most central concerns of British imperialists themselves, as we have briefly explored with figures such as Warren Hastings, was determining how to understand and govern India—should this be based on an official ideology of liberal imperialism, or should this be based on realities on the ground in India? Naturally, preoccupation with this question has been reflected into the British Indian scholarship—did the British base their rule more on official ideology or day-to-day local realities?

One of the most famous historians to set out to this question was Eric Stokes. Stokes wrote his classic study *The English Utilitarians in India* (1959) on the ways in which divergent utilitarian beliefs and theories in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth came to dominate British governance of India. Whereas evangelicals shared the utilitarian belief that people were essentially the same everywhere—whether they were Indian or
European—they rejected utilitarian confidence in the rule of law. Stokes argues thus that it was these authoritarian aspects of utilitarianism that came to dominate British governance of India, rather than its liberal aspects. For many of the British Indian thinkers in Stokes’s study, the Indian Civil Service represented the best virtues of governance—an efficient, rationalized bureaucracy that would rule India with a steady, just hand. Drawing on James Mill, author of *History of British India* (1818) and employee of the East India Company, who identified the three main functions of progressive government to be administration, law, and revenue, Stokes traces the utilitarian ideological impact on the Raj’s handling of these three basic issues of governance through other later figures such as Thomas Macauley and Fitzjames Stephens, concluding that late nineteenth-century imperialism can trace its heritage directly back to the triumph of utilitarian governance in India.

Or perhaps not. Stokes followed up his original study nearly twenty years later with a collected work of essays entitled *The Peasant and the Raj* (1978). In this study, he retreats from his previous conclusion about utilitarian influence on imperial ideology, cautioning instead that shifts in formal ideological attitudes or policy should not be overemphasized and arguing that excess attention to formal policy has misled past historians about the realities of British rule on the ground. Stokes argues that the most direct impact of colonial conquest and rule impacted the upper levels of society, with village levels receiving indirect and uneven change through intermediary channels. This dynamic owed more to the preexisting structure of agrarian society than to British

innovation, as a result of Britons’ attempt to preserve the old land tenure system and its relationships.¹²⁰

Thomas Metcalf has more recently attempted to tackle this question of official imperial ideology. In his study *Ideologies of the Raj*, which is clearly much inspired by Stokes’s original work, he attempts to divide British perceptions of India into, first, those who perceived India as something similar to England, and second, those who saw India as something different. Metcalf ultimately comes to a different conclusion than Stokes in his study on utilitarianism, however, in his judgement that the most enduring and influential perception was that of Indian difference. Metcalf supports this assertion by arguing that even the liberal principles that assumed all humans were inherently similar and rational plays a large role in propagating the elements of Indian difference—by attacking the barbarism and evils of the East they ironically embedded those same perceived exoticisms in the European mind.¹²¹

According to Metcalf, as British patriotism developed, its imperial identity grew with it. Part of that imperial identity was its ‘civilizing’ mission to spread Enlightenment liberalism and sound governance to the world’s ‘backwards’ peoples. One of the key conflicting perceptions was that of ‘Oriental Despotism’—the type of absolutism commonly associated with a master and a slave. When the East India Company began its governance in South Asia, part of their ideology was the uncover Indian’s ancient laws and culture in order to become this Oriental despot, and with the trial of Warren Hastings,

the British were able to legitimize their rule by creating a government that ruled in the effort to advance Indian civilization—juxtaposing the aspects of ‘difference’ (Oriental despotism) with that of ‘similarity’ (liberal, utilitarian, universalist principles). By the Mutiny of 1857 these liberal principles of rationalistic similarity gave way to insistence of Indian difference. Notions of an Aryan race with a glorious cultured past that had degenerated with their ‘Tartar’ foes explained why the Indian differed so from the Briton, which also explained why the masculine Punjabi differed from the effeminate Bengali—drawing contrast to the ordered, rationalist European society.

However, Metcalf’s study invoked considerably poignant critiques in its book reviews. With the help of Travers, we already saw in Part I how nineteenth-century understandings of Indian difference and similarity are often anachronistically read back into the eighteenth century and applied to Warren Hastings—Metcalf appears to fall victim to this trap. Moreover, many of Metcalf’s reviewers observe that his articulation of the Raj’s ideology is woefully incomplete and hopelessly fractured (which is why Metcalf carefully chose the plural “ideologies” for his title). Metcalf admits that clear articulation of an imperial ideology is sparse in the historical record; however, he does not seem to have a problem portraying British understandings of Indian difference as monolithic.

As such, some reviewers have complained that parts of Ideologies of the Raj reads more as a laundry list of racist stereotypes with little contextual basis for understanding.

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122 Robert Travers, Empire and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century India.
the history of these racial notions let alone an explanation for how they help us understand imperial ideology.\textsuperscript{124} He fails to consider how indigenous voices factored in to the development of imperial ideologies and the British acquisition of knowledge about India, and this necessarily jades much of the picture, as it also fails to account for the ways in which local realities impacted imperial governance. Indeed, Frykenberg observes in his review of Metcalf’s book, “the impulse to ‘invent’ ideologies for the Raj, regardless of whether they actually existed, seems to concern the author more than those who ruled in India.”\textsuperscript{125} Not only was imperial ideology not monolithic in any sense (let alone explicitly expressed), but it also contrasted in time and space far more than Metcalf gives credit.

Metcalf’s study fits very much within another tradition of scholars and historians that have concerned themselves with the question of colonial knowledge—how the British came to understand India. This work has increasingly taken on a binary focus—traditional, Eurocentric, ‘top-down’ history and/or innovative, Indocentric, ‘bottom-up’ history. Imperial historians, for their part, often overlooked indigenous agency in the formation of the British Raj, either judging the Raj as a necessary evil or that India never needed ‘reconstructing’ by “foreign intrusion.”\textsuperscript{126} However, bottom-up historians argue that British policy was almost always “shaped by hard realities of events occurring on the

ground”—stressing “Indian realities” over imperial “purpose.” A more in-depth discussion of the topic of ‘knowledge formation’ is included later on in this essay.

Land Revenue Administration: The Cornwallis and Munro Systems

One of the most interesting case studies from which to apply these different top-down and bottom-up methodologies is revenue collection and land administration. At first glance, the universalist, Whig Lord Cornwallis and his tenure as governor-general of India might be described as a form of top-down imperialism. An Anglicist who believed in the superiority of English law and institutions, Cornwallis’s tenure has been often associated with a series of reforms intended to correct the avarice notably displayed by Warren Hastings and many other Company servants. With the goal of maximizing commercial revenue while providing for military and political security, Cornwallis instituted the Permanent Settlement in 1793, which fixed land revenues in place for Bengali landlords, known as zamindars.

This might appear to be a mere replication of the English gentry system of which Cornwallis was most familiar, but Cornwallis intended for the Permanent Settlement to provide the most internal consistency within the Bengali system as possible. Many scholars have criticized the Permanent Settlement for demanding too high of revenues—and fixed, at that, giving no flexibility for years with bad harvests—but Marshall observes it was not steep revenue demands by the British that destroyed many of the old zamindars. Rather, the British decision to change the political structure by forcing zamindars to cede legal authority to the British that placed unbearable strain on many of

the zamindars. Unable to enforce law and order now that the zamindaris’ personal armed forces were disbanded, the Permanent Settlement also placed rigid English properties laws on what were previously flexible and indeed constantly changing property understandings, which created new tensions in rural areas.\(^{128}\)

Therefore, although Cornwallis’s Permanent Settlement was in many ways intended to reflect local Indian realities on the ground, “under the Company the zamindars passed from being great territorial magnates who effectively enforced their own law to being men who exercised certain rights defined by a law that was both laid down and enforced from above.”\(^{129}\) Small zamindars were more successful adapting to the Permanent Settlement, figuring out how to utilize the Company system to their advantage. However, the lawlessness experienced on the larger estates proved difficult for the British to manage, especially in the first few decades of the nineteenth century.

Frykenberg’s study on the Guntur District also demonstrates the limits of the zamindar-based, Permanent Settlement. Chronicling the years from 1788-1848, when the Guntur District suffered greatly under British rule, faced with an anachronistic moneylending system, repeated natural disasters, and (Frykenberg’s focus) the zamindari land revenue system inherited from Bengal under Cornwallis. Frykenberg portrays this administrative land system to be so decadent, stagnant, and convoluted that by the time of British rule, some zamindars were sharing power over villages with one another, which


\(^{129}\) *Ibid.*, 139.
presented locals a perfect opportunity to take advantage of British rule amidst the confusion. 130

The zamindari system was administrative in character, seeking to obtaining a steady revenue while establishing a form of indirect government by giving lands in a “quasi-feudal” grant.131 The zamindars however did what they could to hide resources of the region from the Board of Directors, and for fifteen years competed with one another in their indulgence. The settlement worked out between zamindars and ryots varied by each locality and were renegotiated annually. However, this cooperation was short-lived due to the myopic, wanton administration of the zamindars. The zamindars continued to extract as many resources as they could, while the villagers used whatever method of deception to hide what they could from taxation. As the zamindars became unable to pay taxes, the district was ‘held in trust’ by the Collector in what was called Amani Management.

The British faced three issues: administrators were challenged first in their control of district personnel, second in their dealings with village leaders, and third in their attempts to implement a workable land revenue system. There was also a shortage of experienced officers in the zamindari organizations; likewise, the terms British collectors served were extremely short, meaning one could not stay and accumulate necessary knowledge and experience.132 Company servants elsewhere in India were motivated to come up with different, more localized solutions.

131 Ibid., 40.
132 Frykenberg, Gunter District.
The most important of these figures was Sir Thomas Munro, governor of the Madras Presidency from 1819 to his death in 1827. Although not uncontroversial, as evidenced by a debate over what to do with his statue in Chennai (present-day Madras), Munro is regarded as something of a hero in India, one of the few British colonialists viewed to have stood up for Indians and to have challenged the racialized stereotypes that grew increasingly common throughout the nineteenth century.133 Having opposed the Cornwallis Permanent Settlement as early as 1807, Munro established a different revenue system that he would apply to Madras during his tenure of governor.

After the Court of Directors discovered the extent of corruption and damage the Cornwallis system was causing to the Madras Presidency, they introduced the ryotwari system under Munro, under which governing powers were centralized and retained by the state government; instead of trying to protect people from the government, the ryotwari system sought to protect people from oppressive local leaders and speculators by means of the state. Each ryot was considered the proprietor and paid taxes directly to the government. This plan was only adopted after considerable resistance over the years, and policies often became neutralized or erratic for at times the Cornwallis system and the Munro system existed in the same district, so they tended to cancel each other out.134

There has been plenty ink spilled over Thomas Munro, but the principal biography on the Madras governor was crafted by Burton Stein. Interestingly, Stein’s Munro comes off as a figure just as concerned and preoccupied with top-down

134 Frykenberg, Gunter District.
administrative concerns as those being reflected bottom-up from local Indian realities. Stein argues that two factors benefitted Munro’s tenure system: first, his ability as a writer “to transform essentially pragmatic and political arrangements into a principled system,” and second, influential superiors in London that believed the Cornwallis system was wrong for India.\textsuperscript{135} Thus Munro’s system, based not only on economic arguments by Adam Smith but also Edmund Burke’s moral and political arguments, found advocates on the Parliamentary Commissioners for Affairs in India, or the ‘Board of Control.’ Munro was not just revolutionary but also cautious: he believed that the zamindars would be important in gradually working towards establishing a local ryotwari system. The zamindars were so in debt that they needed to pay portions of their tribute to the Company to the moneylenders; by this method the credit of the region was not undermined. Stein additionally demonstrates how the Cornwallis system and Munro system were simultaneous developments in thinking about land governance, not separated by a generation as often portrayed in the scholarship.\textsuperscript{136}

Stein does not necessarily contradict the heroic portrayal of Munro in imperial historiography but adds to it. Stein’s Munro is a product of the eighteenth century and not yet of Victorianism – he is no Romantic nor Utilitarian. He introduced scientific principles of survey, settlement, and assessment in his granting of proprietary rights to the Indian peasantry – for this he has often been cast as a humanistic hero for the Indian peasant; Stein’s depiction is much more complicated. Stein argues that heroes like Munro


\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
were needed in late Victorian and Edwardian imperial Britain. But Stein illuminates that Munro was not only popular with Indian peasants but also British elite. He also comes across as a figure aiming to strengthen imperial rule in India, rather than weakening it. Contrary to past interpretations, Munro was not just reviving the ancient Indian land system but establishing one that was politically expedient by removing the barrier for effective government that was the zamandari landlords. This understanding complicates the very nature of the Munro system itself by considering it not as a paternalistic reform for the Indian peasant but a facet of the Raj’s growing state strength.137 All these insights delivered via biography, Stein demonstrates the usefulness of this oft-dismissed genre in adding additional depth of understanding for these basic historiographical issues associated with British colonial governance in India.

If these aspects of the Raj’s emerging strength in directly administered territories have been given extensive attention by scholarship, then the ways in which the East India Company indirectly administered territories has been given not quite as much attention. Michael Fisher’s Indirect Rule in India represents both a rare glance into this understudied topic and a call for additional exploration, especially among non-English sources in these indirectly ruled princely states.138 Evolving from the system of Subsidiary Alliances, the British preferred to rule many territories of India indirectly, keeping the internal political system intact while installing a resident in the princely court to oversee all of that state’s diplomacy and external communications. According to

137 Stein, Thomas Munro.
Fisher, this was not a system universally and coherently implemented from the top-down, and indeed both the Board of Directors in London and the governor-general seems to have paid little attention to princely affairs, instead subordinating an extraordinary amount of flexibility to their residents in the princely courts, supporting whatever administrative decisions the residents chose to take *ex post facto*. Coupled with the fact that indirect rule was cheaper, Fisher observes that the perception grew among British officials that direct rule was more likely to invoke nationalist aspirations than indirect rule.\(^{139}\) Therefore Fisher argues that the legacy of the residency system in India during the Company was that it became seen as the “ideal type” of rule, and was thereafter implemented across all of India as well as the empire at large.\(^{140}\)

However, Marshall argues that Fisher’s argument is tenuous on these grounds; despite the large degree of agency Fisher assigns to the residents themselves and their role in pushing the boundaries and British expansion, after 1858 annexation was explicitly disavowed by London. This hardly seems like a ringing endorsement of the residency system under Company rule. As Marshall adroitly observes, the residency system before 1858 was a driver of imperial expansion, whereas the forms of indirect rule that were implemented across the empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were concerned with imperial consolidation; the line Fisher draws from the residency system during the Company era to later systems of indirect rule is murky at best.\(^{141}\)

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\(^{139}\) Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India*, 11.
Knowledge Formation: Colonial Discourse Theory and Its Critics

As discussed previously in this essay, one of the most contentious issues in imperial historiography has been the subject of ‘knowledge formation.’ For this next section, I will draw heavily on Norbert Peabody’s excellent chapter on “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India” in Oxford History of the British Empire: India and the British Empire, in addition to Michael S. Dodson’s study on the topic, Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture, India, 1770-1880. Both titles are recommended for readers looking for additional reading on the topic; however—if I might stake my own claim to originality here—readers may find analysis of some titles a bit more detailed than in Peabody’s essay, whereas the following is surely more concise than that of Dodson’s. I have also attempted to organize them in a clear, logical manner that will illuminate the complexities of arguments that are not only contentious within the scholarship of British India and South Asian studies specifically but also in a more general sense—the question “How do we know what we know about India?” is not just a question that occupies the thoughts of those academics and students within the esoteric confines of university ivory towers, but also concerns anyone who encounters India or ideas about India in the present day.

Frykenberg divides knowledge seeking during the East India Company’s rule of India into two basic forms—first, explanation and exploration, or, second, enlightenment. The first form was more pressing, seeking to provide for not only the company’s survival

but also its legitimacy. The second was not just due to a natural yearning for knowledge but also to provide essential information. The pursing of Indian sources for knowledge came in two forms, official and private, a search that became later known as ‘Orientalism.’ Although historical research continued after Crown rule took place of the Company, it did not “enjoy the same degree of historical enthusiasm in Britain” until the British left India.144

Associating the creation of forms of knowledge about Indian history, culture, and languages with the domination of the imperial state, a storm of scholarship has emerged inspired by the ground-breaking Orientalism by Said, which argues that the ‘West’ has developed and maintained an “image of the non-Western world as degenerate, exotic, despotic, essentially religious, effeminate, and weak”—“in short, the mirror image, or ‘Other’, of the West.”145 Said’s argument makes clear that he believes that there are concrete links between Western scholarship and imperialism, ushering the new field of ‘colonial discourse analysis.’ Said constructed these arguments by building off the works of Michel Foucault, who established the connection between power and knowledge through his analysis of the ways in which various, seemingly benign, modern European state institutions teach people to govern themselves, which he termed “governmentality,” on which later scholars built in their theorization of “colonial governmentality.”146

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144 Frykenberg, “India to 1858,” 199.
145 Dodson, Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture, 2.
It is important to distinguish the difference between what Said means by ‘Orientalist’ and by what eighteenth and early nineteenth century British officials meant by ‘orientalist.’ The latter, exemplified perhaps best by Warren Hastings, attempted to rule India by retrieving knowledge about Indian history, culture, law, religion, and traditions, with the goal of replicating a legitimate form of Indian government, which can be drawn in contrast to Anglicanists such as Lord Cornwallis who believed in the superiority of English institutions, law, and customs, and especially believed in the importance of English-medium education. In Said’s point of view, however, Anglicanists and orientalists are all Orientalists (capital “O”).

Said’s study represents a critique of scholars who in the 1960s and 1970s “idealised the role played by European scholar-administrators within an ‘intercultural’ (i.e. colonial) setting, and portrayed the European intervention into Asian historical and cultural analyses as essentially beneficial to Asian society.” For example, Garland Cannon described the scholarship of eighteenth-century self-proclaimed ‘orientalist’ Williams Jones as “a humanistic exchange of material and cultural resources that maintains a deep respect for human rights and the brotherhood of man.” Similarly, David Kopf in 1969 praised the orientalist researchers in the early British administrative state of Bengal for having invoked a “renaissance” of cultural and civilizational renewal and rediscovery. More recently, William Dalrymple in his study *White Mughals*

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147 Dodson, 2.
portrays interracial relationships within the colonial context with a positive valuation, which he argues typifies the character of the early, eighteenth-century British empire, which he depicts as cosmopolitan and tolerant.\footnote{William Dalrymple, \textit{White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India}. (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2003).}

Similar to Said, Bernard Cohn’s work \textit{Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge} is a classic referential point within the colonial historiography. A sociologist of India, Cohn outlines three different modalities within the historiography of British colonialism in India: first, inquiries into revenue and land tenure; second, the ideological construction of the nature of Indian civilization, which he describes as legitimizing discourse of Britain’s civilizing mission in India; and third, the histories of the British themselves in India.\footnote{Bernard Cohn, \textit{Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India}. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).}

The production of texts about Indian society—“grammars, dictionaries, treatises, class books, and language translations”—created a discursive formation that “had the effect of converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects”; this knowledge and the Indian holders of the knowledge were transformed into “instruments of colonial rule.” By producing knowledge about India within a European framework, within a ‘colonial discourse’, Cohn argues that the Europeans gave Indians a history.\footnote{Cohn, 21.}

Cohn argues that the British, in order to legitimize their sovereignty in India, agreed in the existence of an ancient, though in decline, Indian state system. The company appropriated the Indian legal system much in the way they saw their own, especially when it came to collecting land revenue. Cohn asserts forward modalities of
investigation that imposed Western conceptions of value on Indian society. The British viewed India as having no history—having not progressed and not having written records. Moreover, the British argued that each civilization to have entered India throughout the ages subsequently declined, which gave a stern warning for Britons not to assimilate themselves.

Cohn concedes that the Company depended on functionaries to give them information on prices, currencies, products, markets, networks, government, diplomacy, and personalities, and these functionaries had the language skills to operate as intermediaries for these purposes. However, Cohn argues that in the end, Company officials eventually simply made the effort to learn Sanskrit and Persian with the intention of displacing these intermediaries. Dodson observes that “much like Said’s understanding of Orientalism, colonial discourse is fashioned from within European prerogatives and preconceptions, or from within a European way of knowing, which Cohn elaborates by reference to the investigative modalities of European thought and scholarship”—Cohn’s conclusion is that the colonial state’s institutions played the principal (and, at times, sole) role in the ‘reordering’ of Indian knowledge and the ‘re-making’ of their meanings.

One primary example of such a colonial state institution is the census. One of Cohn’s central contributions is his observation of how British accumulation of numerical data on caste was not referential but generative. Cohn argues that the use of caste to

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153 Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge.
154 Dodson, 7.
155 Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,” in An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays (Delhi, 1987).
provide order on undifferentiated data resulted in creating many of the characteristics that scholars assumed to be an ancient, immutable constant of Indian society. Rather than objectively reflecting Indian realities that exist independently from the perspective and influence of the colonial state, the colonial censuses “actively created many of the social forms that they purported to describe.”¹⁵⁶ The British then, by way of the census, established “a process of classifying and making objective”¹⁵⁷ that created new ways to represent group identities, “but they also gave practical form to those representations by establishing new institutional ‘arenas’ of political struggle and contestation through which those representations could become a lived reality for ordinary Indians.”¹⁵⁸ Cohn demonstrates that even resistance to the colonial state is inextricable to the state and therefore cannot be thought of in isolation as an Indian reality.

Cohn’s works have sparked numerous studies along similar lines. Rashmi Pant argues that specific bureaucratic aspects of the actual implementation of the census established various discursive practices that standardized, simplified, and codified caste identities.¹⁵⁹ Richard Saumarez Smith examined how the census changed from “an instrument of tax to an instrument of knowledge” during the nineteenth century as caste identities were removed from the varied local contexts from which they existed and fit

¹⁵⁷ Cohn, “The Census,” 250.
within a more “synthetic vision of the whole of Indian society.” Arjun Appadurai added to these insights by observing that the census classifications were indicative of universalizing forms of knowledge that found their grounding in Western technologies. Appadurai hence argues that the census was more regulatory than referential, and was used as a tool to discipline both natives and wayward members of the colonial bureaucracy. Similarly, Nicholas Dirks in his influential study *Castes of Mind* examines the powerful role of the “colonial leviathan” by way of its “cultural technologies of rule” in established caste as India’s principal social determinant; therefore, the conquest of India is described in these studies as a wholesale “conquest of knowledge.”

However, Norbert Peabody has responded by demonstrating that early British administrators were typically uninterested in censuses that were differentiated by caste identities. To the contrary, many British officials were opposed toward caste-centered approaches as they were difficult to administer and too unwieldy. British preference was for simpler schemes grounded in gender, age sets, and/or occupational or sociological categories. In fact, the censuses’ focus on caste resulted from British employment of local Indian officials to collect the census. These local officials based their work on late pre-

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colonial household lists, known as khanasumaris, that were based on caste. The consequences of this meant that even when unprompted by British officials, Indian officials produced colonial census data that were differentiated by caste.

Peabody argues that there are two interrelated reasons why data on caste was important to the indigenous polities in the late pre-colonial and early colonial era. First, “caste difference was one of the principal ways through which differential tax obligations were assessed and local hierarchies of privilege were established.” Different castes were not just taxed in different manners but also at varying rates, with privileged castes reaping more favorable rates. The “enumeration of caste identities thus became important in administering the structure of privilege and status within many pre-colonial polities,” which explains how and why native officials entrenched caste-based hierarchies favorable to them with Indian society by working through the colonial state censuses.

Second, data on caste was important for the state to monitor its revenue. Peabody rejects recent portrayals of pre-colonial polities as fiscally naïve, pointing toward growing evidence that many of the larger, more centrally located polities were extremely interested in increasing their revenues and controlling the flow of cash to fund their militaries. As this pre-colonial system of Indian finance grew increasingly dynamic,

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164 Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 93.
165 Ibid.
167 Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 94.
these polities developed highly complex administrative bureaucracies that employed Brahmans and other literate or numerate ‘scribal’ castes who possessed the skills to carry out these duties.\textsuperscript{168} The notion an Indian society ordered by “caste” and Hinduism” was “long embedded in the discourse of Brahmanic elites.”\textsuperscript{169} Therefore, the status and privilege of these scribal groups increased dramatically during the late pre-colonial era, which by the era of colonial conquest had created tension and conflict with the older landed aristocracy.\textsuperscript{170}

By the colonial era, many of these literate caste members transitioned to work within the colonial bureaucracy, shaping the ways in which the British understood Indian society so as to perpetuate and enhance their locally privileged statuses.\textsuperscript{171} Moreover, by making information about caste central to the census and especially the colonial state’s revenue collection, they made their skills and duties indispensable to their British superiors. Certainly, Britons’ own sense of a hierarchical, aristocratic society blended well with what they were told by their Brahman employees; as Sheldon Pollack observes, “the pre-existence of a shared ideological base among indigenous and colonial elites may have been one contributing factor to the effectiveness with which England consolidated

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[170] Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 94.
\item[171] Susan Bayly, chapter 4.
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and maintained its rule.”

Peabody argues that with time, the British began to use caste data in the disciplinary manner described by authors such as Smith, Appadurai, and Dirks, but by then these literate Indian officials had cemented their enhanced status within the colonial bureaucracy, becoming “indispensable arbiters of caste custom and privilege.” Therefore, although the application of colonial discourse analysis to the censuses revealed important insights, critics such as Peabody and Susan Bayly have responded to and built on these types of works to develop a more robust understanding of the role of colonial censuses in the colonial administrative bureaucracy and Indian society at large.

Additionally concerning to scholars who are writing in the wake of Said are representations of sati, or the practice of widows ritually self-immolating on their husband’s funeral pyre. Lata Mani for example argues that the representations of sati were developed within the context of colonial domination, and therefore reflected a European understanding of the role of Hindu scripture within Indian society generally. Observing that the prohibition of sati in 1829 “has been canonized in imperial and nationalist texts as a founding moment in the history of women’s emancipation in modern India,” Mani forcefully pushes back against characterizations of sati as being emblematic of Indian society at large, arguing that it was an extraordinary, caste-specific practice, and criticizing the colonial state’s debate over the issue for its misunderstanding of the

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173 Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 94.
practice and for overlooking the individual agency of the widows involved. Perhaps ironically, then, Mani’s epistemology rejects the notion that Indian actors were able to influence colonial knowledge, being instead simple conduits of information which is then understood within a European framework.

Scholars writing in Said’s wake have not only eviscerated British figures who were self-proclaimed orientalists but also later Anglicinist, universalists such as James Mill and Charles Trevelyan. Gauri Viswanathan provocatively charges in her *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study & British Rule in India* that the study of English is inextricably connected to exertion of colonial power, as Said argues, a “tool of epistemological conquest.” For Viswanathan, this is no mere slight connection, but the explicit intention of the British to implement English education as a direct form of political control. Viswanathan suggests, then, that one cannot faithfully conduct the study of English today without recognizing its imperialistic connotations. Similarly, Ronald Inden argues in his study *Imagining India* that Western scholarship on India consists of a variety of essences representing Indian society such as caste, Hinduism, and the village lifestyle. Arguing that Indian social and historical agency has been suppressed by these representations, Inden portrays an Indian society that is governed not by free will or

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human agency but an essentialized, ‘Otherized’ notion of Indian life imposed from above by the British imperial state.  

These studies have been met with considerable criticism, however. Dodson observes that scholars such as Mani, Viswanathan, and Inden tend to focus primarily on British evangelical and liberal-utilitarian writers of the nineteenth-century. By doing this, they anachronistically obscure the distinctiveness of the eighteenth-century as well as they treat all English education the same. Frykenberg scathingly remarks in his review of Viswanathan’s study that “formal English education India actually began at least thirty years earlier than the author seems to realize,” in the Hindu kingdom of Tanjore, at the request of local Maratha Brahmans. Moreover, not all British writers during the colonial era thought the same way across time and space. Ironically, by characterizing the British as all possessing the exact same views on India, these authors fall victim to the same totalizing, monolithic (and, indeed, Eurocentric) generalizations with which Said originally charged Europeans. The possibility that British across time and space had disagreements—or even that Britons within the same time and space—does not seem to dawn on many of these scholars.

Along those same lines, as we have seen previously in this essay, “there has been an abiding tendency among many analysts to retrospectively interpret the literary representations of the early colonial encounter through the institutions and sensibilities of ‘high’ colonialism of the later nineteenth century.”

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179 Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in India,” 80.
reading of history is in part a consequence of their “overly narrow understanding of discourse insofar as they locate its power almost exclusively in textual representations without an adequate consideration of how these representations relate to and are informed by wider administrative structures of the state and technologies of rule.”

It is yet another unfortunate irony of this area of scholarship that this connection was the signature insight of Foucault and even (albeit erratically applied) Said as well.

Viswanathan’s essay on Elihu Yale’s plot to acquire Fort St. David is yet another example of scholarship that reads the nineteenth century anachronistically back into the early colonial era. Viswanathan argues that Yale’s yearning for territorial expansion reflected “imperial ambition” for “national aggrandizement” that was only stopped by the Court of Directors due to mere jealousy.

Yet, by assuming Yale’s desires reflect a wide culture of British imperialism that possessed an expansionist ethos, “Viswanathan is surely jumping the gun by a good century.” Yale was just as likely motivated by his adaptation of Indian notions of shared sovereignty and decentralized territory than an intoxicating culture of British imperialism, “yet Viswanathan characteristically resorts to anachronism to forestall any inquiry into this type of influence.”

This trend to read colonial history backwards has resulted in a few interconnected distortions in our understandings of colonial discursive formations. The first problem is that it “tends to render discourses as unduly monolithic, integrated, and stable over time,

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183 Ibid., 81.
obscuring any meaningful history of contradiction, contestation, and transformation.”

These discourses are often claimed to have been formed at some point in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and then persisting, consistently as a static and universal entity, from that point on. Another glaring irony is that if previous generations of ‘Orientalist’ scholars were guilty of denying a history to India, then many of those scholars who endeavor in so-called post-Orientalist critique similarly “have largely transposed that timeless fixity onto Western intellectual history.” Although Peabody concedes that it is “distorting to label these characterizations of the West as ‘Occidentalism’ or ‘Orientalism in reverse’” because these representations of the West did not overlap with wider state institutions and technologies of rule as was the case with ‘orientalism,’ “these characterizations nevertheless unduly homogenize both the synchronic multiplicity and diachronic mutability of Western thought about India.”

Along these lines, David Washbrook argues that much of colonial discourse analysis fails to appreciate the “extent of the ‘revolt’ against Enlightenment Reason” in their tendency to “obscure the contribution of Romanticism to European thought, making European culture, at least in the imperial age, virtually synonymous with the Enlightenment’s drive for Universalism and Modernity.” Moreover, Washbrook challenges “colonial discourse theory’s claims to escape either Europe or the Enlightenment.” Observing colonial discourse theory’s reliance on Romantic precepts

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184 Ibid.
185 Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 82.
186 Ibid.
188 Ibid., 604.
itself, Washbrook concludes that “it is difficult to see how ‘Europe’ is to be rejected on the basis of ideas which are patently European themselves” and that “rather than escaping Europe, colonial discourse theory merely cites one of its own philosophical traditions against another.”\(^{189}\) It is due to this contradiction that some historians such as David Kopf,\(^ {190}\) Ernst Gellner, and Bernard Lewis\(^ {191}\) oppose the work of colonial discourse theory as a matter of principal, arguing that such works are themselves a form of “neo-colonialist, Eurocentric nihilism” that is “anti-historical and deeply antithetical to responsible historical scholarship.”\(^ {192}\) Much like Shakespeare’s engineer from Hamlet, then, colonial discourse theory hoists and impales itself upon its own petard.\(^ {193}\)

This generalization of Western thinkers and thought also distorts Appadurai’s salient observation that the disciplinary effect of institutions such as the census were intended just as much for the colonial bureaucracy itself as much as it was for the native population. The fixation of cultural studies on Macaulay’s famous Minute on Indian Education of 1835, which outlined his vision for a class of Indian natives that was “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect,”\(^ {194}\) has obfuscated the fact that the “great Indian education debate” between

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 605.
\(^{192}\) Frykenberg, “India before 1857,” 207.
\(^{194}\) Macaulay’s famous “Minute on Indian Education” of 1835.
anglicists and orientalists was waged for well over half a century among British administrative officials before the anglicists won out (and even then, never quite fully).\textsuperscript{195}

The second problem with the teleological reading of colonial discourse is not only that it attributes astonishing foresight to its earliest historical agents “but it also simultaneously denies any formative significance to their own contemporary, situationally determined agendas.”\textsuperscript{196} This “denial” results in removing discourses from the historical contexts from which they emerged.\textsuperscript{197} Peabody, writing in response to Inden’s broad-reaching study, demonstrates through the example of early nineteenth-century British official James Tod that post-orientalist attempts to read back the late nineteenth century understandings of caste onto Tod conceal his reflections on nationalism. As opposed to promoting an insurmountable divide between Europe and India, Tod developed a “more segmentary relationship between the two” that created useful links between Europe and India.\textsuperscript{198} His interest in the lasting bonds between select Indian groups was influenced by the contemporary global rivalries that were being waged in European and extra-European settings. This wider imperial perspective (in contrast to a more specific, localized outlook) meant that the British needed to establish alliances with key Indian groups in their struggle against their European rivals, which Tod attempted to

\textsuperscript{196} Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 83.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 83.
accomplish by appealing in his writings on Rajput kinship to burgeoning nationalist discourses.\textsuperscript{199}

The third problem with the anachronistic reading of colonial history is that it conceals the “precise conditions under which colonial knowledges were initially formulated.”\textsuperscript{200} By ignoring the processes by which elements of knowledge are assembled and created, colonial discourse critiques assume that colonial discourse was made in a day and stayed that way from that moment forward. Their creation and implementation was “rarely uniform, coordinated, or, initially, all-encompassing,” and, “as a result, they did not induce among Indians a complete amnesia of alternative ways of knowing and being, which were derived from indigenous knowledge systems.”\textsuperscript{201}

Additionally, even when colonial ways of knowing were systematically implemented, they never completely erased indigenous ways of knowing, which owes “to the ways in which the two, while often overlapping, were never completely coterminous, and the degree of incommensurability between colonial and indigenous ways of knowing meant that native knowledges never became completely obsolete.”\textsuperscript{202}

Similarly, this problem turns our attention to another glaring flaw in many post-orientalist studies—their tendency to overlook complex processes of discursive formations and their varied contexts has resulted in an inevitable concealing of Indians as agents in their own history, rather than mere objects of that history.

\textsuperscript{200} Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 84.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{202} Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 84.
The tendency to reduce Indian agents to mere objects of history was not the original intention of the Subaltern School out of which so many of these problematic studies have appeared. To the contrary, the original goal of the Subalterns, developed in the early 1980s, were to demonstrate how the history of subaltern groups were suppressed as a consequence of the elite bias in historiography. Members of the Subaltern School intended to restore the agency of the subaltern as a self-constituting reality, who, although weakened by the hegemony of the colonial state, is a fully conscious entity. A product of the New Left, civil rights, and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of academics pressed for the recognition of working classes, women, ‘blacks,’ and gays in the name of “history from below.” This reclamation of subaltern agency was the primary argument of one of the founders of the Subaltern School, Ranajit Guha, followers of whom also introduced new ways of interpreting existing colonial sources by reading them ‘against the grain,’ or, in other words, by interrogating what the sources do not say just as much as what they do say, which is important given the rarity of subaltern sources.

However, by the end of the 1980s, colonial discourse theory had quickly overshadowed the contributions of the Subaltern School, which itself, as a consequence, transitioned from “‘recovering the subject’ to explaining why the subject was ultimately unrecoverable.” The fact that subaltern actors are underappreciated in the

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203 Eric R. Wolf, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley, 1982).
204 Ranajit Guha, “Dominance Without Hegemony and Its Historiography,” Subaltern Studies, vi (Delhi, 1989), 210-309. See also Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1983).
205 Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 85.
historiography was no longer attributed to bias; it now was a historical fact, and as such, Indian historical agents disappeared again from colonial history. For post-Orientalists, when the British arrived in India, Indians merely became passive onlookers, and when they did resist or interact with the colonial state, they did so in ways that were predetermined by the colonial discourse and only resulted in furthering the colonial discourse’s hegemony. Ashis Nandy argues therefore that colonialism “creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter.”

Thus this argument perceives resistance as inherently intrinsic to the colonial discourse from which it emerged and, indeed, argues then that resistance reinforces the subjugation of the subaltern rather than liberating or altering it.

However, Rosalind O’Hanlon has observed that this development operates under the assumption “that discourses have an existence which is prior to, and hence unsullied by, the interventions of those over whom they have jurisdiction.” These scholars assume that colonial discourse was formulated under a purely Western epistemological and administrative context without any Indian response affected it. O’Hanlon argues however that this assumption does not reflect the far more complex history associated with the formulation of colonial discourse, for the development of orientalist scholarship was dependent on the native informants who possessed the authority and expertise to accumulate it. These informants then manipulated (both intentionally and unintentionally) the information, often to serve their own needs. Therefore, “the seemingly omnipotent

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classifications of the Orientalist were vulnerable to purposeful misconstruction and appropriation to uses which he never intended, precisely because they had incorporated into them the readings and political concerns of his native informants.”

It was clear that far from fulfilling its initial goal to reclaim the history of the subaltern, a new historical revisionism was needed to build on the early work of the Subaltern School in order to explore more fully the ways in which subaltern actors impacted the colonial state under which they were subjugated.

It would be unfair to suggest that this much-needed revisionism has taken place totally outside postmodern circles. Homi Bhabha’s study complicates colonial discourse analysis by observing its inherent instability within the geographic space of colonialism. Due to this fact, colonial discourse can never be as authoritative as it (or its detractors) purports to be, which results from a ‘slip’ in meaning that both creates misunderstanding in addition to allowing for subversive redeployment, or ‘hybridity.’ Thus, ‘resistance’ in Bhabha’s view is not an inherent component of the colonial state, but a product of actors refusing to accept the subjugated position inscribed to them within the colonial discourse, which dismantles the Self-Other dialectic that studies argues is essential for colonial hegemony.

This notion of ‘hybridity’ helps reveal a more dynamic history of knowledge and culture by recognizing the ways in which meaning is “negotiated and contested” as opposed to being “a unilateral and authoritative imposition” from the colonial state.

209 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).
210 Dodson, Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture, 9.
Although often rejecting Bhabha’s ‘postmodernism,’ other writers working within the revisionist South Asian historiography have implemented the dynamicism of Bhabha’s ‘hybridity’ within their own studies as well. Thomas Trautmann has argued that European understandings of Indian forms of knowledge did not result in wholesale replacement of one by the other but rather a fusion of the two intellectual traditions. In his study on nineteenth-century orientalist philology, for example, Trautmann demonstrates the ways in which discipline coalesced around both the European tradition of philology and the Brahmanical tradition of *Vyakarana* (the science of grammar and linguistics) directly in opposition to false claims by European philologists that all Indian languages derived from Sanskrit. Trautmann argues convincingly that neither tradition could have arrived at the conclusion that Dravidian languages did not originated in Sanskrit without the other. Afterwards, Vyakarana methods of identifying the roots of words and applying rules governing their systematic transformation continued to influence philological practices. Trautmann’s argues thus shows how pre-colonial forms of knowledge continued to inform colonial forms of knowledge well within the colonial era, without the type of totalizing colonial dominance so commonly depicted in cultural and literary studies.

C. A. Bayly, of the Cambridge School, has argued forcefully for the consideration of pre-colonial forms of knowledges and institutions persisting still within the colonial

211 Ibid.
context. Positing that the postmodern, colonial discourse theory argument, that Europeans
could not understand the lands and people that they ruled because of conceptual biases
that gave legitimization to conquest, is too extreme, Bayly instead presents a much more
complex portrait in which European conceptions approached approximate realities, and
when they did not do so, this had more to do with ignorance and insecurity than that of
hegemony: “The problems the British faced in understanding and controlling events in
south Asia derived as much from the shape of India’s information order and the
superficiality of colonial rule as from any particular cultural bias or prejudice resulting
from the assimilation of knowledge to power”213 This conclusion has been a valuable
contribution to the historiography of not just India but also the British Empire and
imperial studies more generally, motivating scholars to interrogate the ways the British
empire was affected by its limitations in addition to simply its strengths.214

Bayly thus avoids ignoring the agency of native agents in his work by citing the
ways in which existing information systems were central to knowledge acquisition for the
colonial state, drawing contrast to the acculturated knowledge or ‘affective knowledge’
the British were able to acquire in South Africa via intermarriage and conversion. The
British information system in India was instead modelled on the system that they aimed
to inherit from the Mughals, in which the populace relayed local conditions to the ruler,
which proved problematic for Britons to implement due to the decentralized nature of

213 C. A. Bayly, Empire and Information, 7
Mughal institutions. European assumptions about governance were likewise confused by the apparent sharing of authority between the Mughal Emperor and the nawabs.

Building off his argument in *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Bayly thus emphasizes the continuity of pre-colonial India with the colonial era. For example, Bayly argues that the British did not alone developed religious self-consciousness, but rather these were earlier indigenous constructions of society that were utilized by the colonials. He makes the same observation of race and caste, noting that India’s Asian conquerors used both to describe their subjects. Bayly argues then that British understanding of Indian society was more influenced by lack of reliable information and filling in the gaps than consequences of orientalist stereotypes. The inverse could be true, too; when a Jesuit priest was able to provide reliable amount of information on the Jats, the result was an exaggerated British fixation with that group.\(^{215}\) In doing so Bayly provides an alternative explanation to Trautmann’s suggestion that British actors were motivated by “Indomania” than by “Indophobia.”\(^{216}\) Additionally, Bayly shows how the literate Indians employed by the colonial state were not thought of by contemporaries as treasonous collaborators—opinions were far more ambivalent than this. By showing the ways in which colonial knowledge was acquired by assembling various diverse sources of information, Bayly demonstrates why orientalist knowledge never developed “a coherent system of thought,” but instead “remained self-

contradictory, fractured and contested,” providing a convincing portrayal of the multifariousness of British thought towards India.\textsuperscript{217}

Bayly argues that the orientalist stereotypes, such as Persians and Afghans being barbarians hell-bent on Islamic conquest, the Sikhs as pacific but aggressive due to meat diets, and Rajputs as corrupt, were not tools of epistemological conquest but tools to conceal ignorance. But then Bayly argues that it was also to confer a degree of respectability on the Bengal government as knowing India—is not this legitimization of conquest, therefore, a “tool of epistemological conquest”?\textsuperscript{218} Indeed, even post-Orientalism critic Michael Dodson agrees with “Said’s principal thesis that the practices of orientalism were devoted, first and foremost, to the advancement and empowerment of the colonial state.”\textsuperscript{219}

Bayly is on much surer ground when he argues that Indians were active and not passive agents in their own construction. As Phillip Wagoner has similarly argued, “far from being mere passive informants,” Indian intermediaries “contributed actively to the production of new epigraphic knowledge, and more fundamentally, even to the definition of epigraphy itself as a method for historical enquiry.”\textsuperscript{220} However, while providing tremendous insight into the ways in which fears and anxieties impacted British intellectual engagement with native subjects, Bayly provides less analysis of the engagement from the Indian point of view. Rather than portraying Indian agents as

\textsuperscript{217} Bayly, \textit{Empire and Information}, 370.  
\textsuperscript{218} Bayly, \textit{Empire and Information}, 53.  
\textsuperscript{219} Dodson, \textit{Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture}, 5.  
human actors with specific agendas and exploring the ways in which they went about enacting those agendas, Bayly’s Indian subjects come across as disinterested and neutral. Therefore, the indigenous agency in Bayly’s work still constitutes a reaction to the colonial state rather than operating of its own accord and in its own interests, and without demonstrating the precise ways in which indigenous information was formed, he may not have escaped the claims of colonial discourse altogether.\textsuperscript{221}

Eugene Irschick corrects this flaw admirably in his study \textit{Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895}. Irschick uses a case study of the Jagir and the Tamil in South India to demonstrate how the conceptions of land and lifestyle of both “right” castes (which tied themselves to local areas) and the “left” castes (which conceived of belonging to expansive space and a history of mobility) were redeveloped in a dialogic, heteroglot way to form the communities and territories in which Tamil country was based.\textsuperscript{222} In this process, locals and British formulated not just conceptions of one another but also conceptions of one another’s past—Irschick explores the ways in which this conception of past was used to create the future.

This process was utilized by different groups for their own reasons: the British desired a fixed, productive society, whereas Tamil nationalists sought an identifiable culture and past, with all factions seeking to control land and resources, the disputing dialogues of which changed over time. The reconstruction of society during this era then resulted in the fixation of locals in specific villages and homes and the rise in prestige of

\textsuperscript{221} Dirks, \textit{Castes of Mind}, 309.
sedentary agriculture, which simultaneously increased the state’s authority; Irschick traces this development through the dialogues back to impulses from both the British and key local groups. In doing so, Irschick provides a revealing explanation of what local Indian actors yearned to achieve through their interactions with the British.

Local types of landlords called *mirasidars* played an integral role in the development in this agricultural reordering of society. Irschick demonstrates how these *mirasidars* enhanced their control over local agrarian society by shaping British notions of the preexisting agrarian order within an idealized past with the intention of fixing a previously mobile agricultural labor force to lands that the *mirasidars* claimed they controlled. Then, they used this increase in status and power to keep their tax rates owed to the British at historic lows. Remarkably, as a result, the *mirasidars* were able to manipulate the colonial state to enact their agendas in spite of the latter’s primary goal of maximizing agrarian land revenue.\(^{223}\)

Contrary to the arguments of scholars such as Said, who argue that colonial discourse was a willed imposition of colonial values to dominate a weaker civilization, Irschick argues this was instead a long, continuous process with many local actors participating simultaneously with the British to create new knowledge and retrieve ‘original’ societal structures. Cautioning that the historian must be wary of according meaning to an individual voice, as that voice was determined by other contemporary sources both in agreement and discord, Irschick supports Bayly’s and, more recently, Antoinette Burton’s argument\(^{224}\) that British policy was more often defined by insecurity.

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\(^{223}\) Irschick, *Dialogue and History*.

\(^{224}\) Burton, *The Trouble with Empire*. 
than it was by hegemony. Although taking criticism for failing to account for the emerging asymmetries in power between British and Indians throughout the nineteenth century, Irshick has provided a valuable model of how to interrogate the process by which knowledge was created in the colonial context. As his study focuses on a specific local context in South India, one looks forward to the impending likelihood that similar analysis will soon be provided in other Indian localities.

Dirks has rejected this development in revisionist historiography to emphasize Indian agency within a dialogic process. Arguing that there is an inherent necessity to limiting Indian agency within the context of colonial domination, Dirks charges that Bayly and Irshick’s arguments that colonial knowledge was dependent on native sources is akin to “blaming the victim” by demonstrating their complicity in imperialism. Yet Dodson, noting that Dirks’s polemic “borders on parody,” argues that “the foregrounding of the inequitable nature of Britain’s empire through broad invocations of colonial power in itself seems only to reify an ahistorical understanding of the processes of imperialism.” The complex and dynamic nature of both the colonial state and the processes by which the state came to understand both itself and the people it ruled—and vice versa—requires an equally robust analysis. This argument is not to suggest a moral defense of imperialism, but rather, as Paul Gilroy observes that even within historical examples of the most brutal oppression imaginable, the cultures, histories, and consciousness of the colonizers and colonized are not “sealed off hermetically from each

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225 Washbrook, “South India,” 482.
226 Dirks, Castes of Mind, 303-315.
227 Dodson, Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture, 10.
other” but impacted each other in complex and often astonishing ways through “fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation”—or by thinking of these historical agents as within the same historical-analytical space. 228

Colonial knowledge of science is another heavily debated topic among colonial discourse theory advocates and their critics. George Basalla, tracing how ‘science’ from European contexts was implemented in the non-European periphery, argues for a three-stage ‘diffusionist’ paradigm that explains how Western science took data from non-Western areas of conquest, imposed Western science onto the non-West via European scientists, and then finally developed postcolonial national scientific traditions. 229 This model thus rests on the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between Europe, which possessed scientific knowledge, and the ‘non-scientific’ areas of the world under the yoke European imperialism, and indeed, Dodson observes that although “the diffusionist model is largely ahistorical in its generalising sweep,” it nonetheless “has retained a surprising degree of currency in the historiography of ‘colonial science.’” 230 For instance, Roy MacLeod has taken the diffusionist model a step further identifying “five stages” which include even earlier phases that he defines by metropolitan dominance over science. 231

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Scholars have responded with works attempting to transcend the dichotomy of metropoles and peripheries in the movement of scientific knowledge by breaking “the exclusive link between Europe and the possession of ‘science.’”²³² By emphasizing India’s pre-colonial scientific advances and their importance in the development of science and scientific disciplines during the colonial era, scholars enhance our understanding of science within a global context. These works also developed “a recognition of a hybridised Indian-colonial science, in which European scientific knowledge and practice is adapted, or inflected, to specific social, cultural, and political contexts by Indians themselves, including the cause of nationalist modernity.”²³³ For example, rejecting the diffusionist models and their metropoles and peripheries, Tony Ballantyne argues instead that empire should be thought of as a ‘web’ due to the ‘integrative’ manner by which knowledge was disseminated.²³⁴

Indeed, many Europeans, especially early in the colonial encounter, did not find all forms of indigenous knowledge as flawed or inferior to European forms of knowledge. In fact, in areas such as botany, medicine, metallurgy, astronomy, mathematics, and even textile production, Indian expertise was actively sought out by Europeans due to their perceived superiority. As Richard Grove demonstrates in his caste study of botany, pre-colonial forms of botanical knowledge were instrumentally in the transformation of the

²³² Dodson, Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture, 10.
²³³ Ibid.
field of European botanical science.\textsuperscript{235} Although Peabody argues that Grove overstates his argument that this represented a form of Indian epistemological hegemony in botany as this system of knowledge was still circulated in the colonial context within European institutions and frameworks,\textsuperscript{236} Grove demonstrates how, early in the colonial encounter, some European attitudes can be accurately described as what Trautmann calls “Indomania,” as opposed to “Indophobia.”\textsuperscript{237}

Kapil Raj’s study on \textit{Relocating Modern Science} similarly argues that science was not a mere imposition of the British upon India nor was it a simple European appropriation of indigenous forms of knowledge. Instead, Raj “aims to advance an alternative vision of the construction and spread of scientific knowledge thought reciprocal, albeit asymmetric, processes of circulation and negotiation, a vision at odds with current post-colonial thinking.”\textsuperscript{238} Placing this notion of the “circulation” of knowledge within the “contact zones” articulated by Mary Louise Pratt,\textsuperscript{239} Raj concludes that certified forms of knowledges “would not have come into being but for the intercultural encounter between South Asian and European intellectual material practices.”\textsuperscript{240} Although he does not illuminate the precise ways in which the asymmetries

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{235} Richard Grove, “Indigenous Knowledge and the Significance of South-West India for Portuguese and Dutch Constructions of Tropical Nature,” \textit{Modern Asian Studies}, 30 (1996), 121-143.
\item \textsuperscript{236} Peabody, “Knowledge Formation in Colonial India,” 87.
\item \textsuperscript{237} Trautmann, \textit{Aryans and British India}.
\item \textsuperscript{239} Mary Louise Pratt, \textit{Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation} (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), pp. 6-7.
\item \textsuperscript{240} Raj, 13.
\end{itemize}
of power impacted this ‘circulation’ of knowledge, Raj’s model of ‘circulation’ is a valuable alternative framework to the ‘diffusionist’ model proposed by Basalla yet so deeply criticized within the historiography.241

Dodson’s essay on James Ballantyne, superintendent of Benaras College in the mid-nineteenth century, accounts better for the ways in which asymmetries of power impacted this circulation of knowledge.242 Ballantyne added to the college curriculum specific forms of ‘useful knowledge’ that were based on Western science with the intention of challenging pandits’ faith in the authority of the Vedas. Many pandits even assisted in this project by translating European scientific systems into Sanskrit. However, pandits responded with a reaffirmation of their own belief systems by demonstrating how Western scientific knowledge was “a reflection of that which could already be accounted for in the shastra.”243 Despite Ballantyne’s scheme impacting the ways that pandits understood the shastra, the pandits nevertheless remained consistent with the essence of Brahmanical learning being an activity of recovery rather than discovery—in this manner, by demonstrating how European systems of analysis already existed in Indian intellectual traditions, the pandits were able to undermine British claims to sole authority over these forms of knowledge. Thus, while it is true that, as Saidian perspectives insist, this form of resistance necessarily took place within the context of colonial discourse, these pandits also took the arguments for the justification of the British colonial state and

241 Ibid., 4-5.
turned them on their head. These types of acculturated intellectual developments would have profound impacts later during the age of Indian Nationalism and the road to independence.

Along similar lines, Sumit Sarkar has demonstrated how colonial discourses were never able to erase fully older native knowledge systems due to specific manners, contexts, and temporalities involved in their introduction. For example, the introduction of the clock in Bengal to track work time did not blind Bengalis to imperial dominance and in fact drew increased attention to it. Bengalis still possessed memory of the alternative Indian forms of recurring time based on the cycle of the yugas. Sarkar shows how this memory did not result in a form of tragic resistance in which traditional norms were run roughshod over by colonial oppression. Rather, Sarker argues that the Bengalis critiqued and combined elements of both knowledge systems as they reconstituted local norms and understandings.244

Although not concerning himself specifically with colonial science, Kenneth W. Jones has provided a helpful framework with which to understand how to understand the circulation of knowledge within the colonial sphere. In his examination of socio-religious reform movements, Jones divides such movements up into two different types. The first, transitional movements, “had their origins in the pre-colonial world and arose from indigenous socio-religious dissent”—these movements, by the colonial era, “made little

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adjustments” in response to this new environment. The second, acculturative movements, “originated within the colonial milieu and was led by individuals who were products of cultural interaction,” caught between two civilizations, East and West. Religion played a dual role in British Indian society: “it sustained and justified the established social order while also providing an instrument for challenges to that order.” Thus Jones provides a helpful disentanglement of the ways in which indigenous social movements interacted within the ‘colonial milieu,’ and hopefully new works are soon to be released that applies this analytical framework to other issues and problems within the historiography of ‘colonial discourse theory,’ among both its advocates and detractors.

246 Kenneth W. Jones, Socio-religious Reform Movements in British India, 3.
247 Ibid., 14.
CONCLUSION

This essay has aimed to demonstrate what both colonial discourse theory advocates and its detractors have added to the scholarship of British India under the East India Company. Naturally, when considering opposite ends of an ideological continuum, there is an inclination to choose one side over the other. However, my hope is that I have demonstrated, at least on some level, the inextricable value of both scholastic traditions—especially going forward. Without one we would have never had the other, and both traditions inform our ability to create additionally vital contributions to the scholarship in the future.

This articulation of two opposites ostensibly existing in relative harmony is not an attempt at a cop-out in lieu of a more resounding and conclusive message. Colonial discourse theory has, to steal a phrase, “problematic” implications for historical research. This essay is therefore broadly sympathetic to the arguments set forward by Washbrook, Frykenberg, Kopf, and others that much of the scholarship produced in the wake of Said suffers from anti-historical, anti-intellectual, nihilistic impulses that inhibit responsible, analytical historical scholarship. Much of this essay has thus explored the numerous problems caused by this scholarship, the necessary corrections made to it, and the opportunities in the future for further research, reflection, and analysis.

At the same time, this essay has also been sympathetic to the original articulators of the Subaltern School who aimed to retrieve the histories of the non-elite actors from the historiographical bias against them (and then critical of those who hijacked this scholarship to serve their own, often politicized, ends). The studies invoked by this initial and yet seemingly abandoned scholastic movement are still by-and-large waiting to be
written. Too often, the agendas and indeed histories of average, every-day historical agent coming from the ‘bottom up’ in society are overlooked. Even those who claim to be speaking for the oppressed continue to work towards suppressing the history of the oppressed by way of their fixation on the elite. Perhaps ironically, then, these studies never escape the gaze of the colonial state they originally were so eager to eschew.

Certainly, elites are vital agents of historical change and should be treated as such. But, even when taking a step back and looking at the temporal and geographic realities of the British colonial encounter in India, one should quickly realize that their story cannot be the full one. The British—at a time before electricity, combustion motors, or the telegraph—colonized a subcontinent of roughly 200 million people, with the number of Britons on the subcontinent only barely registering in the tens of thousands, all on the other side of the globe during a period when transmitting a single message from England to India could take months. This historical fact simply could not have occurred if not for some historical agency rising from the bottom up, both in the ways that Indians interacted with and responded to the British colonizers, and the ways that the British colonizers reacted and responded to local Indian realities.

Much in the sense, then, that many revisionist scholars have argued for a hybridized understanding of knowledge within the colonial discourse, we should have a hybridized, holistic appreciation of both where the British Indian historiography is today and where it is going tomorrow. Disentangling the intricate web in which colonial information was created and circulated and all the complexities inherent in these processes is now the task inherited by a new generation of scholars, as denizens of both the Cambridge School and the Subaltern Schools increasingly are taking on emeritus
status and receding along with the subjects of their works into posterity. It is my hope that this essay not only demonstrates the need for the continuation of this type of work but also identifies specific areas of exploration that will prove useful for this new generation of scholars.
REFERENCES


