

10-1-1998

Review [untitled]

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Recommended Citation

MacMillan, Margaret, "Review [untitled]" (1998). *History Publications and Research*. Paper 1.
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C. A. BAYLY. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*. (Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society, number 1.) New York: Cambridge University Press. 1996. Pp. xiv, 412. \$64.95.

This is an unusual book, not least because it delivers far more than it initially promises. What appears at first sight to be a discussion of the tools of empire, in this case intelligence and surveillance of their Indian subjects by the British, is in fact a wide-ranging and subtle exploration of systems of knowledge and how these affect, and are affected by, the relations between rulers and ruled. Writing with an unrivaled familiarity with the sources and a firm grip on recent theory, C. A. Bayly has produced a fascinating study that marries social, material, and intellectual history and that has implications far beyond this particular period in Indian history.

One of Bayly's key assumptions is that there exists an "information order," which incorporates not merely the means of collection and communication of information but organized knowledge or knowledges. That order is as much an actor in social change as, say, technology or capitalism. Without its penetration and cooption of Indian knowledge, the East India Company would not have been able to conquer India's independent states. When it could not gather adequate intelligence, in the case of Nepal and Burma, it repeatedly ran into trouble. Even in India, where the British had a greater body of information and more informants, they did not always get it right. Paradoxically, in fact, as the British withdrew from intimate contact with Indian society and became more "scientific," amassing quantities of statistical information or classifying Indians by caste, they knew India less well. Hence the shock of the rebellion of 1857.

Part of what happened in 1857, Bayly argues, was a battle of ideas. The British conquest clearly challenged Indian society both at the political level and in a more fundamental way. Many Victorians, secure in their technological and military superiority, asserted that Indian knowledge was inadequate or wrong. Even those British who took a less bleak view tended to assume that Indian learning was frozen at the level of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Indians, for their part, had a keen awareness of what the British presence meant for their society. "You have already conquered our bodies," a missionary was told, "and are in a fair way to conquering our minds also" (p. 244).

There existed, at a subcontinent level, a critical public that reacted to this challenge at least two generations before the nationalist movement of the 1880s. Prints of heroes and deities, almanacs, ballads, traveling players who satirized drunken and lecherous British officers, even gossip—all helped to foster an Indian perspective. It was amazing, reported Bishop Reginald Heber in 1823, how much Indians, even those who did not know English, knew about events in Europe. Although there was less discontinuity than is

sometimes assumed, with Indians continuing to use traditional methods of communication, they also adapted new technologies; in 1857, rebels used the post office and the press to communicate with one another. Among other things, this suggests that Indians were not the passive material, as they are sometimes portrayed, on which imperialism worked.

We are left not with two monolithic worlds confronting each other but with a much more complex picture of internal debates and competing knowledges, of systems that used and influenced each other. When the British began to explore Indian astronomy and medicine, many hoped that India might settle European debates. This in turn encouraged Indians to reexamine their own knowledge. Indian scholars appropriated European learning with care, accepting and rejecting what suited them. The distinguished Muslim thinker Sayyid Ahmad, for example, tried to produce "rational proofs" to support Indian cosmology. In spite of the assumptions in recent works on "orientalism," there was no single, unitary knowledge on the British side—or the Indian. Moreover, imperfect though that knowledge might be, each side knew something of the "other."

Bayly's evidence is drawn almost entirely from northern India; it would be helpful to know more about the south. And how much did developments in India reflect global changes? This is an important and stimulating study that, quite properly, leaves questions to be explored further.

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