



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIII / 2022

Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ISBN 979-12-5496-365-0 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5496-366-7 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXIII, 2022

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it		www.viella.it	

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THE HISTORIAN, THE COLONIAL PAST OF INDIA, ITS PERSISTENCE,
AND THE DUTY OF ENQUIRY

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Aditya Mukherjee, *Political Economy of Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2022, pp. 592 (ISBN: 978-93-5572-180-8), Hard-cover price ₹1950; \$84.95; £74.95.

From many points of view, India's relationship with colonialism is not a closed chapter in the country's history. Although British rule over the sub-continent ended 77 years ago, its legacies are still alive today, partly open and visible, partly veiled in a kind of colonial mentality that still permeates layers of Indian society. Since independence, the country's relationship with the former colonisers, as well as with Europe and the "West" in general, has been marked by several contradictory phases. From Jawaharlal Nehru's efforts to give India a leading role among the non-aligned countries in the 1950s to the slow but inexorable failure of socialist-inspired state economic planning in the 1980s, successive governments have grappled, and continue to grapple, with the long shadow of almost two centuries of colonisation, seeking, of course, to build and consolidate an economic system that would allow the country to grow and the population to improve in terms of wealth, education and quality of life. At a deeper level, however, India, like many other former colonial countries, has to contend with the persistence of a particular mindset that implicitly ascribes to the colonial experience the merit of having brought "residual or partial" benefits. The old self-representation that the colonisers' efforts were not only an exercise in domination but also a mission to bring civilisation and progress to the backward areas of the world is still very strong.

It may not be too surprising that this kind of prejudice still permeates the mentality of very large strata of the former colonisers' societies, although it should raise many questions that debates about the effects of colonialism in terms of economic exploitation and the diffusion of a hegemonic culture of superiority hardly go beyond academic circles. In recent years, popular movements in North America and Europe have directly or indirectly addressed the evils of the colonial experiences and attempted to reorient collective memory towards a more conscious understanding of the ongoing imbalances that are direct effects of colonial exploitation. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, which started in the United States and touched most of Europe, have highlighted the need to openly reflect on issues such as slavery and colonialism, to engage mainstream media and a wider public. In parallel, many museums and curators have begun to re-

think the ways in which institutions can raise awareness of such issues, redesign their spaces and collections in such a way that the display of heritage and art becomes a tool to stimulate critical thinking and promote historical awareness. Although these examples show that coming to terms with colonial experiences – and their legacies – can reach an increasingly wide audience, such discussion is still almost completely absent from school curricula.

Primary and secondary school textbooks hardly propose analyses of how colonial rule was structured to transfer resources from the colonies to the metropolises, or how cultural hegemony sustained economic exploitation and produced equal evils in the form of racism, communitarianism and collective violence. Instead, the sections devoted to European ‘expansion’ over the rest of the world are usually imbued with an aura of benevolence based on the assumption that domination was the almost natural outcome of Europeans’ greater progress (technological, cultural and economic) and that such progress somehow passed on to the colonised societies. This understanding is so widespread that until recently one could read in a very popular history textbook for Italian middle school (8th year) published by the leading educational publisher (Mondadori scuola) that:

Britain [...] was indeed also a bearer of civilisation, especially in India [...] where the British built power lines and railways, banned the suicide of widows who were burned alive at their husbands’ funeral pyres, and fought the caste system.

Having organised public administration down to the smallest detail, they entrusted it to Indian officials and clerks, coordinated by freely elected local councils with legislative and executive powers.

Indian elites have learnt a lot from these experiences of self-government and democracy, and it is perhaps no coincidence that India today not only occupies one of the first places among industrialised nations, but is also the largest and most stable democracy in Asia.

Even if an Italian textbook cannot just be considered the sole representative of a cultural orientation, a thorough analysis of history textbooks in general shows that the bias of reading European colonialism and imperialism through the lens of the civilising mission is still pervasive. Even more, it shapes the way history is still taught and passed on to new generations of middle and high school students.¹ This situation has produced a dichotomy between public debates that are increasingly and sometimes violently - as in the case of the ‘attacks’ on statues following the Black Lives Matter movement - critical of the legacies of colonialism, and a tendency to downplay the negative effects of European colonialism in the long run. And even though

1. These statements are based on the analysis of four sets of history textbooks for Italian middle and high schools, published by mainstream publishing houses Mondadori Scuola, Pearson-Paravia and Zanichelli.

there is general agreement in public opinion to condemn colonialism, there seems to be a great lack of knowledge about how exactly colonialism harmed colonised countries, what the instruments of exploitation were and how they functioned [e.g., Sierp 2020].

While these examples give an insight into the ubiquity of a colonial mindset in European societies, contradictions and ambiguities about colonial legacies are also commonplace in India. When confronted with his country's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in June 2022, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, speaking at the Globsec Forum (2 June 2022), stated: «Somewhere Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems. That if it is you, it's yours, if it is me it is ours» [Outlook 2023]. Apart from this explicitly and openly polemical statement, Jaishankar's position reflects an underlying impatience with Western hegemony and geopolitical constructs that has been recurrent - albeit with differences and particularities - among Indian political elites since independence. Besides, in recent years debates about caste discrimination, the increasing marginalisation of religious minorities or the consolidation of *Hindutva* as a shared cultural framework, mostly bring into question the legacy of British colonial rule. In the last three decades, historians and to some extent anthropologists have made great efforts to investigate and assess the multiple and sometimes unpredictable effects of colonial domination, the organisation of power and administration affected patterns of mutual recognition, modified group solidarities and produced new tensions and forms of identification. Since the 1990s, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism at the centre of Indian political life has certainly been the most visible example of such a dynamic, as its origins question the ways in which the British dealt with religious communities as political entities and allow us to examine the persistence of episodes of collective violence in the post-independence period.² Moreover, in recent years, the persistence and increasing media exposure of caste discrimination have fuelled debates within and outside academia, in which, in turn, the role of British colonialism is often questioned.³

Among all these debates, one of the aspects that has been more thoroughly studied and at the same time neglected in public debates is the long-lasting impact of colonialism on the economy of both the metropolis and the periphery. Again, it is only in recent years that parts of these debates have begun to reach the mainstream media and break through the surface of silence in political and collective culture, largely thanks to increasing at-

2. For a classical study into British legacies in exacerbating communal issues see Pandey 2006; for an introductory overview of the debate, see Bayly 1985.

3. A reference point on the issue has become Dirks 2001. For more recent works, which have both discussed and reframed Dirks theses, see in particular Sarkar 2014. Also, for an example of how the debate reached mainstream media see Chakravarti.

tention to the massive impact of slavery on the global economy and Western hegemony, which mass movements such as Black Lives Matter have helped to expose. As a result of increasing media attention to slavery and racism, for example, the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University established a Legacies of Enslavement Advisory Group in 2019. The report the group published three years later, in September 2022, acknowledged that the university derived «significant benefits» from slavery, both through donations and direct investment in the South Sea Company, a firm involved in the slave trade.⁴ This and other examples have certainly helped to draw attention to Europe's colonial past in a way that challenges the still widespread prejudice of the civilising mission.

In this perspective, Aditya Mukherjee's work certainly represents one of the clearest and most grounded analyses of the various features of the colonial economy, the ways in which its organisation slowed the rise of a capitalist class in the subcontinent, affected labour relations, and fed back into the postcolonial project of development and economic reform. *Political Economy of Colonial and Postcolonial India*, a collection of essays written between the 1970s and the present, situates the understanding of the subcontinent's economic history in the broader framework of the history of global integration of markets and mobilities in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the rebalancing in the decolonisation decades of the 20th century. In the context of debates on colonial legacy that are slowly reaching a wider audience, Mukherjee responds ideally by grounding the analysis on the mechanisms of exploitation that explain one of the fundamental truths about British colonialism in India: that during nearly two centuries of rule, Britain rose from an almost insignificant economy to the leading power in the global political and economic scenario at the end of the 19th century, while India went from being the second richest economy (after China) to a backward one [ch. 1-2, in particular pp. 62-70.].

The numerous explanations for this trend form the main body of the book and propose a reading of the various aspects of the colonial experience that focuses on showing how maximum economic exploitation was the main objective of colonialism until India's independence in 1947. Even though the theory of Drain was formulated as early as the 1880s, Mukherjee deepens its scope in at least three directions: first, in line with the work of other Indian economic historians of his generation, such as Utsa Patnaik, the author not only explains the broader political framework that underlay the outflow, but also analyses the ground-level mechanisms and financial implications that enabled the British government to transfer huge capital to the metropole until the end of its rule [pp. 78-90; but also ch. 3 for an

4. The news appeared in all major media around the world. See, e.g., *BBC News*, 2022.

interesting comparison with Indonesia].⁵ Secondly, the book is very attentive to make connections and understand how economic exploitation was based on the construction of a cultural hegemony based on the assumption of superiority, efficiency and rationality. In this sense, the stereotype of the civilising mission appears as just another tool in the service of economic exploitation [pp. 150-155]. Third, the study is extended beyond the formal end of the colonial era to follow the struggles to define the character of the postcolonial state in terms of political projects, mobilisation, but also national and cultural belonging.

The trajectory that is taken into account is not just that of a country under colonial domination: the history of India is here inserted in both a broader time frame and a wider geo-political perspective. In line with recent historiography that inscribes colonial histories in long-term and global perspectives, this collection of essays is a useful reading for those who wish to better understand the economic history of modern India, as well as for readers who might be interested in redressing the impact of colonialism as a phenomenon that is inextricably intertwined with global dynamics of economic integration, mobility and dependency [e.g., Pomeranz 2000; Cooper 2005]. There is no possible understanding of contemporary India without a deep knowledge of the socio-economic and political premises set up by colonialism, and a conscious acknowledgment of the continuities and legacies that from colonial experience extend up until today. At the same time, with striking clarity Mukherjee reminds us that the wealth and the prominent position that former colonial countries still enjoy in global geopolitical balances of power is pinned on the history of economic exploitation and extraction of wealth brought about by European countries over about two centuries.

And if a reassessment of the extent of European colonialism on economic, as well as cultural, balances has eventually, although with great difficulties, broken the boundaries of academic debates, Mukherjee warns us of the intellectual ambiguity still embedded in large portion of the social sciences, where Eurocentric positions are assumed as methodological presumptions without being discussed enough [pp.457 ff]. Too often within and outside academia, colonial past is dealt with as a concluded experience, an era – in terms of historical periodisation – that ended with the decolonisation process in the decades following World War II and that can now be viewed with detached, if not even benevolent, eyes [p. 459-462]. While debates assessing the effects of colonial experiences and their legacies are rightly increasing, bringing these issues to a more public level, the author reminds us that the «colonial paradigm» is still dominating the mindset of

5. With regard to evaluating the actual amount of capital transferred from India to Britain, a 2018 article on *Al Jazeera* [2018], based on Utsa Patnaik's analysis, rose great debates, claiming that the *drain* could be set at 45 trillion dollar from 1765 to 1738.

large strata of society, not only in global north but also in former colonised countries of the global south. Much is still to be done to challenge the widely accepted idea that colonialism, after all, was a driver of civilisation or at least economic progress.

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