

**Sanjay Subrahmanyam**, *Europe's India: Words, People, Empires, 1500–1800*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 394. US\$39.95.

This book on European encounters with India is a “history of knowledge formation” (44). When Western merchants began to learn the languages of India in the sixteenth century, they came to realize that “behind each of these languages was a complex culture and sometimes a very extensive literary tradition. Grappling with these traditions was necessary . . . if one wished to have a better sense of the ‘religious’ beliefs of those whom one encountered and wanted to convert to Christianity” (18). Furthermore, by the end of the century, India became an object of interest for secular Western intellectuals. *Europe's India* covers three hundred years of cultural contacts and explores European attempts at collecting, translating, and interpreting texts and artefacts from the Indian subcontinent, up until the establishment of the first institutions of academic Indology.

In order to cope with this wide temporal and spatial remit, Sanjay Subrahmanyam has focused each chapter on one or more protagonists, thus swimming against the current of the “fashionable” distaste for biography as a historical pursuit. The rationale behind this is mainly to avoid a “Whiggish” narrative of ever increasing clarity and understanding (211–13). The author emphasizes a disconnect between information and knowledge, since increasing contacts could result in a smaller set of stronger stereotypes resistant to new empirical data. When institutions were established, such as Calcutta's Asiatic Society, they tended from their “Olympian heights” to “infantilize” Indians (324). *Europe's India* therefore calls attention to the “forceful, contentious, contradictory language of the Enlightenment” (365) in relation to the non-Western world (in the words of Carlo Ginzburg). This is not to say that East and West could never meet, and the author rejects the notion of radical cultural incommensurability, as it is contradicted by the moments of rapprochement between the individuals in his story.

The Europeans involved were no theoreticians but were active in business and politics. What they wrote was often more like a “survival guide to India” than a sanitized lecture to read before the academies of Europe (234). *Europe's India* therefore tends to describe more than to analyze, preferring to quote historical actors in their own words. Yet it addresses, at times implicitly, questions of epistemological relevance that go beyond the issue of a power imbalance between East and West. The author avoids the toxic term “exoticism” and treads delicately around the issue of Orientalism, pointing out how excessive criticism of European scholarship of Asia may distort a neutral historical perspective. Other key questions are:

- Did stereotypes always hamper rapprochement? They could have a polyvalent role. Western intellectuals used a stereotypical view of India and its customs to proffer a critique of Old Régime Europe. It was also possible to turn the critique around and use anticlerical rhetoric to build an argument against the Brahmins.
- Was there a common European basis for understanding India (perhaps even a certain “will-to-knowledge”), or were national and personal understandings sufficiently different so that it is impossible to speak on such terms (215)?
- Did a dialogical situation result in more accurate knowledge? To what extent did an emotional engagement with the foreign culture impact the neutrality of knowledge?
- To what extent was information concealed in dealing with foreigners? Could a sphere of “colonial civility” be the basis for an uninhibited exchange of knowledge?

The book’s chapters are organized chronologically, with chapter 1 addressing the irony that the Iberian peninsula, despite its home-grown tradition of Islamic scholarship, had in the age of Vasco da Gama to relearn everything about Muslims along the way to India. (This was in contrast to Islamic, especially Ottoman, historiography, which had never lost its interest in Europe.) Chapter 2 makes it clear that understanding Indian religions was the first prerogative before further inroads into Indian civilization could be made. But this enterprise was fraught from the start in the sixteenth century, as Europeans’ notions of religion were determined by the impact of the Reformation as well as antagonism toward Islam. Where to place, in the margin of these enormous issues, the Asian “sects”? Seeing them as historical offshoots of Judaism was one solution.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Scotsman James Frazer (1712–54), who spent ten years studying Persian and Sanskrit in Surat and Khambayat. He authored a history of the Mughal emperors that argued for the legitimacy of their rule against the illegitimacy of the East India Company. Chapter 4 foregrounds different individuals: a Portuguese bishop who envisaged writing a coherent history of peninsular India; a French soldier whose administration of affairs on the Deccan plateau was itself an “epistemological feat” (238); a Swiss colonel who served the Mughal court and patronized Indian painting, music, and dance; and a Scottish official of the East India Company who commissioned artworks from Indian artists that “reflect a highly ethnographic bent of mind” and a positive attitude toward Hinduism (275). The final chapter shifts the focus toward texts in South Asian languages that discussed the “Franks” from the West. The author

laments the scarcity of these documents, which reveal little about epistemic attitudes, although Europeans were admired as bringers of curiosities, such as the organ-like musical instrument presented at the Mughal court in the 1570s.

The author relishes moments that contradict “the obstinate myth of a certain trajectory of European intellectual exceptionalism.” When the Zoroastrian Mirza Zul’fiqar visited India in 1652 he demonstrated, in contrast to his European peers, a refreshing “distance from an obsessive concern with the monotheism-polytheism dichotomy” (143). Sometimes “European observers tried to apprentice themselves to Indian knowledge- systems” (324); generally speaking, however, their “bias was largely geared to the hoarding of pragmatic information, which was located in a system of stereotypes and underpinned by a theory of ‘disguise’” (284). This latter term alludes to the seventeenth-century French traveler François Bernier, who spoke of the necessity of “adroit dissimulation” when dealing with foreigners, setting a precedent for the behavior of other Westerners in India (7). This foregrounding of “disguise” as a key theoretical concept is typical of how *Europe’s India* gravitates toward the *Realpolitik* of intercultural communication.

The “Empires” in the book’s subtitle are the Portuguese, British, and Mughal ones. The maritime ambitions of the Dutch Republic, by contrast, receive scant attention. The author does not fail to recognize Rembrandt’s exceptional interest in Mughal miniatures, but other Dutchmen are mentioned only in passing, such as the Leiden professor Erpenius, interpreter of Oriental languages for the Dutch state; the minister Abraham Rogerius, the first to translate a Sanskrit text into a European language; and the painter Philips Angel, who described the Hindu pantheon in word and image (see Corinna Forberg, *Die Rezeption indischer Miniaturen in der europäischen Kunst des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* [Petersberg: Imhof, 2015]). Subrahmanyam’s preference for individuals over institutions may explain why he ignores the Dutch East India Company, which established, alongside the Company of Jesus, the first stable network of knowledge exchange between Europe and India. But this leads him into error when he calls Rogerius a Catholic “priest” (he was a Calvinist) and fails to discuss the role of the Dutch protestant mission in India (324).

The grand panorama of *Europe’s India* contributes to the ideal of a global history of the humanities rooted in early moments of intercultural contact. The book has set a new standard for studies into how Early Modern European expansion affected knowledge of language, literature, history, and the arts.

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