

Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space

By Manu Goswami

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The task of the book is “to overcome the limits of methodological nationalism, which has enshrined categories such as *national space* and *national economy* as natural and has authorized the incarceration of multiscalar and multitemporal processes within state-delimited territorial boundaries.” This view, Goswami asserts, has not only informed nationalist thinking and writing but also subaltern historiography, which has often told the story of a national space coming into being, rather than being produced. Goswami plots an alternative story by looking at geo-historical imaginations and imperial economic exigencies and policies of the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century.

Goswami asserts that national space, a notion that implies a territorial-political isomorphism, began to come into being, oddly enough, in the post-1857 era, in the new kind of imperial regime affected by the transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown in November 1858. The change lay in the shift from mercantile to territorial colonialism, where instead of the colonies being thought of as ‘foreign markets,’ they began to be imagined as ‘internal supplements’ to the British-imperial whole. This idea found its theoretical formulation in J.S. Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and its practical formulation in the highly interventionist imperial regime of post-1857 India. The new regime hinged on “occupying space, producing space,” which was achieved by the greater bureaucratization of the state machinery, investment in railways, postal and other communication networks, introduction of paper currency, and an educational policy that fostered the sense of a territorial-geographic entity of India as colony. While these several practices were ‘internalist driven,’ and sought to create a relatively homogenous and easily controlled and navigable space, colonial economic policy continued to be ‘externalist,’ as India

served as the buffer space, producing cheap raw materials for England, and absorbing its surplus manufactured goods.

The very state machineries in fact effected this double movement. Thus the railways, which helped to create an idea of a political-territorial isomorphic entity of ‘India,’ (which was picked up by the nationalists) was first built to transport cotton cheaply from the inner-lying districts of the Deccan to the coast. Furthermore, there was ‘un-evenness’ in this process of homogenization. Thus, paper currency that sought to standardize and centralize monetary exchanges in fact failed to take off for a long time, and well into the late nineteenth century, merchants were still using the native *hoondies* for credit transactions and money transfer. Similarly, despite an educational system that stressed geographic-cartographic space, and hence ‘historical’ time, puranic conceptions of time continued to inform everyday temporal consciousness, such as the formulation of the “novel experience of the disciplinary time of *chakri* (wage labor) in colonial bureaucracies, mercantile offices, and shop floors...[through] the dystopic idiom of received Puranic *kali-yuga* narratives.”

All of these go well to show how the territorial-political isomorphic space of India as empire, and then nation, was produced. What is less clear is the way the figure of ‘un-evenness’ that was constitutive of the production of India moves in the book. At times it appears as a contradiction, as when Goswami states that “the very practices that homogenized socio-spatial relations also produced internal differentiation and fragmentation”. Sometimes this ‘un-evenness’ is achieved in ‘bad faith’, when the railways that were supposed to ‘connect’ in fact created such a lopsided mode of communication that during the famine of 1876-79, there was no effective transportation grid to provide relief measures. At other times the ‘un-evenness’ is seen as the figure of the past in the present, as in the remnants of Puranic temporal imaginations in early twentieth century India. Sometimes it is simply as a stage in development, when the introduction of paper currency that was supposed to unify and standardize money transactions in fact became quite unwieldy as in the initial

years, currency was issued at the presidencies of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, and could only be used as exchangeable tender within the respective district circles.

Goswami does not offer a reading of these 'un-evennesses,' and this is perhaps the one shortcoming of the book. For Goswami's

argument to truly counter the idea of the 'organicist' production of India (which is a simplification of subaltern historiography to begin with), the disjunction and unevenness need to be theorized for an alternative model to emerge. In general, however, the book is a good read, especially for an understanding of the post-1857 landscape of India.

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