

PREFACE

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In a recent appraisal of the nature of the enterprise of intellectual history, it was remarked, not for the first time, that the “the only history of ideas to be written are histories of their uses in argument”.¹ Though perhaps not in such a self-conscious manner, the essays in this issue consider the transformative capacity of ideas. Modern intellectual history in the European and American context grew out of a critique of the dominance of social history; by contrast, it has received little or no attention in the field of colonial and modern South Asia. Despite the vibrancy of the field in general, the two major works in Indian intellectual history were written almost half a century ago. Eric Stokes’s *English Utilitarians and India* and Ranajit Guha’s *A Rule of Property for Bengal* were both concerned with the making of the regime of colonial political economy.² These two important books took the major site of the generation of ideas to be the colonial state and the major actors to be its official intellectuals. Interestingly, both these historians later moved away from intellectual history to social history and the experience of the peasantry. It is an ironic tribute to their books that the subsequent focus of much South Asian historical scholarship has been on the nature of the colonial state and its relation to politics, economy and society. However, the emphasis on the power and the work of ideas, in Stokes’s and Guha’s initial formulations, slowly but surely gave way to “ethnographies of the state”. A related historiographical move emphasized the politics and culture of resistance, as indeed did Stokes and Guha in their later work.

The essays in this collection arose initially out of a concern internal to the historiography of modern South Asia, namely the need to move on from the entrenched positions of the so-called “Chicago” and “Cambridge” schools. For more than a decade, the shadow of Edward Said and the almost unrecognizable

¹ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume I Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002), 86.

² Exception remains in the case of political theory; see especially Uday S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Chicago, 1999).

ghost of Michel Foucault have haunted the field, and have had the particular effect of centring it on the power of colonial knowledge in the “Chicago” version and on Indian agency in the “Cambridge” version. While such issues of epistemology, governmentality and reflexivity remain highly significant, the debate has increasingly moved towards interpretative closure.³ Meanwhile, political thought, in particular, has remained under-studied and, in so far as it is studied at all, locked in as an adjunct to the political history of the Indian nation state. The essays in this collection all seek, instead, to examine the meaning and the life of ideas in colonial South Asia. At the same time, a diverse set of questions, methods and persuasions have marked the individual contributions.

In this brief preface there are two central but difficult questions that require attention. First, what is it that intellectual history can offer the field of the history of South Asia? One point is that it can critique and circumvent the narratives of the nation and empire that have constrained scholarship and militated against the interrogation of ideas and their purposes within the South Asian context. It can also dispel the strong presentist teleology which has informed the interpretative focus, for example the nexus between early nineteenth-century orientalism and late colonial nationalism that has recently acquired a mantra-like status. Equally, political history has been primarily written in modular terms of a “liberal phase” followed by “religious nationalism” or religious reform and later “mass” nationalism. Such modular approaches have obfuscated much of the Indian intellectual innovation and reflection of the period.⁴ The contributors to the collection have been mindful of the need to relate their arguments to unfolding political events but do not collapse political thought into them in any simple manner. In a critical sense, therefore, these essays are not rehearsing the history of the nation even though most reflect upon themes that have long been the preserve of nationalist histories. Again, religion has been treated as an open set of ideas that was expressed in terms of political theory, rather than as an essence of South Asian culture or as simply a political instrument of late colonialism or Indian nationalism. Finally, the collection locates the political thought of South Asia within a global context, while avoiding the temptation of merely absorbing South Asian history into world history.

³ For a summary of the positions see William Pinch, “Same Difference in India and Europe”, *History and Theory*, 38, 3 (1999), 388–407. Emblematic of this debate, the two key works remain those of Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996) and C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication, India 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁴ See Manu Goswami, *Producing India* (Chicago, 2004) for a repositioning of political economy as a counter-interpretation to the modular history of the nation.

The second and related question is, what can the study of South Asia do for intellectual history? All of the contributors to this collection question the assumption that concepts were diffused across the globe in a readily assimilable manner. Instead, we all argue that ideas and concepts only operate in a particular historical and cultural context and in so doing are transformed. Further, the analysis of this process of transformation often provides considerable insight into those concepts themselves. For instance, liberalism in Bayly's essay on Rammohan Roy emerges as a positive doctrine rather than simply as a doctrine of absence of coercion and this reinforces recent reinterpretations of liberalism in the British context. Moreover, such an enterprise can uncover neglected or assumed aspects of European history. In accounting for "Germanism", for instance, Sartori clarifies and deepens the distinctions between the meanings of "Rome" and "Greece" for contemporary ideas of culture and empire. Or, again, Kapila's essay makes it clear that Herbert Spencer's anti-imperialism was a position against the state rather than a theory of liberal imperialism itself. Finally, studying South Asian intellectual history compels scholars to take cognizance of a wider range of methods, texts and actors than any established canon of Western political thought would permit.

This preface ends by giving a synoptic account of the arguments of the contributions. For Wilson, who traverses the same terrain as Stokes and Guha, the idea of governmental practice is critical to the disruptive moment of colonialism. This challenges the idea of metropolitan "influence" that framed these earlier studies. For both Bayly and Jalal the global conjuncture offers a way of reinterpreting the thought of apparently well-known figures. Bayly, in putting Rammohan Roy into an international context of liberal constitutionalism, offers correctives to the received meaning of Indian liberalism and relocates Roy's "reformism" accordingly. With a similar methodological manoeuvre, Jalal resituates the "secularist" Muslim leader Maulana Azad's politics within the global world of pan-Islamism. By contrast, Devji overtly poses the question of the disjuncture of ideas at a global level and asks how, in late nineteenth-century Muslim thought, that disjuncture was productive of a political theory of the present.

Sartori explicitly moves away from representational issues of culture. His alternative approach to the imagining of particular categories belies the notion of "cultural contact" as the context through which ideas travelled or were recast. The immanence of "Germanism" in Bengal is understood not simply as the derivation of an originary idea. Instead, Sartori argues that German philosophy was already "over-determined" by Victorian thought. Taken together, the essays by Sartori, Dodson and Majeed, albeit with quite different points of view, ask new questions by circumventing the Saidian paradigm of power and representation. For Dodson, social practices that precondition epistemologies themselves enable the reconstitution of categories such as antiquity and history. For Majeed, literary

strategies help account for radical innovations of the self's relation to the nation and interiority. Finally, the question of the nation in these essays is neither a neatly anticipated category nor one that can subsume the whole political life of ideas during the period. Bose disrupts the received canon of nationalist thought and its relation to religion by revisiting the polity as imagined by Aurobindo Ghosh. Kapila, in explaining the analogies and disjunctions between Spencer and radical nationalist thought, considers the politics of the self as both under- and over-determined by the nation, but as in no way synonymous with the nation.

At a superficial glance, the articles here would seem to follow the rhythm and trajectory of the established narrative of political thought, moving easily from constitutional liberalism to nationalism. Yet, though by no means exhaustive, the essays reposition categories of religion, culture, self and the nation in a way that both intersects with and disrupts this neat unfolding of the "big ideas" of the last two centuries. While putting at their centre the power and life of ideas, these essays taken together open up discussion of an intermediate history of connections between ideas and practice, and between South Asia and the global arena of modern intellectual history.

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