

Teaching South Asia beyond Colonial Boundaries

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Abstract: Because of the methodological innovations of *Subaltern Studies* in the 1980s and 1990s, most historians' familiarity with South Asian history is limited to the colonial or modern period. While the subalternist view is undoubtedly useful, it does not provide much help in thinking about what came before or after the colonial period. This limited context may prove to be a problem for a nonspecialist constructing a full course in South Asian history or adding South Asia content to a course that seeks to break down area studies or nation-state boundaries. This article provides a starting point for such an enterprise. It reviews the South Asian history textbooks available in the market and identifies some of the scholarship that would suit courses or units organized by theme or by a larger Asian geography. It also reviews some of the collections of primary sources that could be used in such coursework.

Keywords Textbook; Primary sources; South Asia; History

Historians of nearly every part of the world have acquainted themselves with histories of colonial South Asia, primarily through the work of the *Subaltern Studies* group and the various discussions that have arisen from it (Ludden 2002b). For all the good that this reading and discussion has done, few historians outside of those specializing in South Asia have given much thought to locating the history of colonial South Asia within either a longer chronological trajectory or a broader geographical context (beyond core-periphery dynamics). In this article, I do not intend to radically change this predicament, but this pattern of limited reading does pose a problem when an East Asia specialist, for example, is asked to teach a course in South Asian history or desires to add South Asia content to a thematically-oriented course. There is no single solution to this sort of problem, but one or two good textbooks and a carefully selected set of primary sources can do much to help situate colonial South Asian history in a broader context of time and space.

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TEXTBOOKS

While the market appears to offer several options for textbooks on the history of South Asia, the offerings are limited in a variety of ways. Although many options are available for East Asian history (e.g. Ebrey, Walthall, and Palais 2009), no major publisher of academic textbooks has produced a narrative-plus-sources, magazine-stock textbook for South Asian history. Most textbooks of South Asian history are single volumes, with a small number of maps and plates, and average 300 pages in length (with a range of roughly 200 to 450), excluding back matter. Most textbooks attempt a panoptic chronological scope, but the great majority of those books do not allot equal time to the various periods of South Asian history. For example, about half of Burton Stein's posthumous *History of India*, recently edited by David Arnold, deals with the period after the dissolution of the East India Company in 1858, as does Peter Robb's *A History of India* (Stein 2010, Robb 2002). Barbara Met-

calf and Thomas Metcalf's *A Concise History of India* spends a bit more than half its length on this period (Metcalf and Metcalf 2002). Although it does not follow this same chronological marker, David Ludden's *India and South Asia: A Short History* spends about half its length on the "modern" era (Ludden 2002a). Thomas Trautmann's *India: Brief History of a Civilization* achieves the reverse; about a quarter of its length deals with the colonial and postcolonial periods combined (Trautmann 2010). Trautmann's compression of modern history might be a fair corrective to the general trend in textbook periodization, but the emphasis on a "classical India" that produced "mentalities" prior to Islam risks providing fuel to the flames of Hindu chauvinist historiography. In any case, a course that intends to give equal time to South Asia's historical periods will need to use multiple textbooks, or a combination of a single textbook with other scholarly literature.

Some instructors may not want a textbook attempting a full chronology, especially if the South Asia content is to fit into a geographically broad or thematically-organized course. Crispin Bates' *Subalterns and Raj: South Asia since 1600* is probably the best book for its stated time period, but it is too lengthy and detailed to be used with other texts in a one-semester survey of South Asian history (Bates 2007). Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose's *Modern South Asia*, now in a third edition, could be combined with other texts covering periods before 1500 (Bose and Jalal 2011). One such text could be Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot's *India before Europe*, perhaps the only excellent book for the period between 1000 and 1750 (Asher and Talbot 2006). Another text could be Burjor Avari's *India: the Ancient Past*, which covers the Neolithic era through the construction of Chola and Turkish states up to the twelfth century (Avari 2007). Although it is not technically a textbook, because its chronological scope is limited to the time period a few hundred years before and after 100CE, Richard Davis' recent *Global India* makes important challenges to the standard periodization of South Asian history and demonstrates South Asia's linkages to the rest of Eurasia. It is also short enough to be combined with a textbook covering the same time frame (Davis 2009).

Even if they do not cover all periods of South Asian history, most textbooks share a remarkably durable periodization, although other possibilities are beginning to appear. Periodization has to some degree been standardized since the publication of James Mill's *History of India*, and affirmed in an important way by Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India* (Mill 1817, Nehru 1946). In defense of empire, Mill proposed that India had an "ancient" period of cultural production and political stability, followed by a "medieval" period in which Muslim forces plunged India into a period of political and cultural penury. This was followed by a period of British tutelage, in which just administration and English knowledge would rebuild India from the wreckage of the medieval period. Nehru amended this periodization by valuing the British period negatively and adding a "modern" or "nationalist" period, in which independent India would rebuild itself through political, economic, and cultural self-sufficiency. The two-volume *A History of India* published by Penguin in 1965 was long the work that defined this periodization for a nationalist history of India (Thapar 1965, Spear 1965). Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund's *A History of India*, now in a venerable fifth edition, does probably the best job of balancing attention among the many periods of South Asian history, but it is most closely the inheritor of a nationalist historiography (Kulke and Rothermund 2010). Although they do not follow this periodization strictly, their treatment of "the Freedom Movement" (note the singular) and "the Republic" betrays an adherence to Nehruvian, if not Congressite, visions of India, best captured in Rothermund's close-up photograph of current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (Kulke and Rothermund 2010, 258). Pakistan appears only periodically, as an

irrational provocateur in India's political history; the comparison of Jinnah to Shylock in the narrative of Partition provides a tellingly uncharitable starting point (Kulke and Rothermund 2010, 231-2). The most recent edition of Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India* also cleaves closely to the Indian nationalist formula, and enjoys a long list of other faults, including spending only one twenty-two-page chapter (of a nearly 500-page book) on "The Impact of Islam (ca. 711-1556)"; a failure to recognize environmental change, particularly in the well-documented period after 1860; and the stunningly Orientalist claim that "the enervating effect of heat on Indian productivity is a factor that can hardly be underestimated" (Wolpert 2009, 4). For all of the complaints of historians about the Mill or Nehru periodization of South Asian history, few textbook authors have done anything to generate a new model. Ludden has done so in *India and South Asia*: two key innovations are, first, the creation of a period defined by the formation of a political idiom that he calls "sultan" but applies to regional powers from the post-Gupta successor states through the Mughals, and, second, the imagination of a way to think about Partition as an event couched in political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual trends that neither ended nor began in 1947—in other words, a historical event rather than a historiographical watershed.

Textbooks tend to waver between using "India" and "South Asia," although in many cases the history of states other than the Republic of India tends to be pushed to the margin or ignored altogether. In part, this is a marketing decision: only Bates (2007) and Bose and Jalal (2011) use "South Asia" rather than "India" in the title. Ludden's (2002a) use of both "India" and "South Asia" allows him to make a point about the intellectual tension between the two terms. Constructions of "India" that use mountain ranges (Himalaya and Sulayman) and the Indian Ocean as impregnable boundaries may be convenient but are constantly problematized by the historical and continuing movement of people, material objects, and ideas. We know a great deal about South Asian history from records left by Chinese, Arab, and other intellectuals and travelers (Gordon 2008, Davis 2009), and many groups of people, primarily from the Middle East and Central Asia, established expatriate communities that became fully integrated into South Asian social and cultural relations. The smaller number of records of South Asians migrating or circulating to other places in precolonial periods has given rise to past claims that South Asians did not or could not make such long-distance migrations. However, Stephen Dale's work on Multani traders and David Rudner's on Chettiar merchants, for example, suggest that migrations from the geographically central parts of South Asia to distant destinations were not only common but also relatively well documented (Dale 1994, Rudner 1994). Such narratives rarely if ever make more than a fleeting appearance in panoptic textbooks.

A more helpful approach to the problem of "India" and "South Asia" might be to think in terms of mobility or circulation. Ludden (1994), in challenging the notion of "Indian civilization" in South Asian historiography, set out an argument for the centrality of human mobility to South Asian history. Markovits, Pouchepadass, and Subrahmanyam have presented the concept of circulation as the movement of more than just people and material objects but also "information, knowledge, ideas, techniques, skills, cultural productions (texts, songs), religious practices, even gods" (Markovits, Pouchepadass, and Subrahmanyam 2003, 2). Although no author has written a textbook with circulation as its organizing principle for thinking about "India" or "South Asia," circulation could provide a useful pedagogical framework for discussing textbook reading assignments. Additionally, one could use Stewart Gordon's *When Asia Was the World* for getting students to think about the connectedness of people, ideas, and material objects across Asia, even into its European and African margins. Its narrative style is very accessible to introductory-level students,

but its focus on travelogues puts a significant burden on the instructor to provide the South Asian context (Gordon 2008).

In the absence of or in conjunction with textbooks, other scholarly works may support pedagogies based on theme. While one cannot adequately survey the state of scholarship within the field of South Asian history in a short article, one can suggest that much of the new scholarship tends to be focused on subjects or issues relating to certain themes or topics: Dalits, previously called Untouchables; gender; Maoists and Naxalites; science, technology, and medicine (STM); environment; and regions, typically within postcolonial India. Interest in religions or religious groups, including religious nationalisms, has declined somewhat since the fall of the BJP government in the 2004 election, which also marked the arrival of Dalit and lower-caste political parties on the national electoral scene. A unit on caste, for example, in a thematically-organized introductory course could use Susan Bayly's contribution to the *New Cambridge History of India*, Nicholas Dirks' *Castes of Mind*, or Christophe Jaffrelot's *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India* (Bayly 1999, Dirks 2001, Jaffrelot 2011), though Dirks and Jaffrelot may require some interpretation for novice readers. However, the aforementioned shift in Indian politics—and the increasing prominence of Maoist groups—has resulted in an increase of explicit attention paid in *Subaltern Studies* to Dalits and by historians in general to Dalit questions (e.g. Mayaram, Pandian, and Skaria 2005, and Rawat 2011). For a unit on gender, Geraldine Forbes' *NCHI* volume or Radha Kumar's *History of Doing* are good starting points for thinking about women's history but are perhaps less useful to get students to think critically about gender categories and the historical processes of their construction over the very *longue durée* of South Asian history (Forbes 1996, Kumar 1993). They also don't account well for the religious inflections of gender, for example in the cases of female soldiers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, women's organizations of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or mothers of Lashkar-e-Tayyiba recruits in Pakistan (de Mel 2007, Sarkar 2005, Haq 2007).

Perhaps the other aforementioned themes deserve a more detailed presentation, but some themes that tend to be less popular recently may better serve the purpose of breaking down the boundaries of South Asian history. While most readers of this journal are probably familiar with the work on inter-Asian trade under the rubric of "Silk Road" or "Silk Route," some late twentieth century work on Indian Ocean trade can fill out the picture (Chaudhuri 1985 and 1990, Das Gupta 2001). More recently, interest in this theme (over land or seas) seems to be dwindling (despite some exceptions, e.g. Levi 2002, Hanifi 2011). Scholarly analysis of economic development and agriculture is available these days chiefly through the periodical *Economic and Political Weekly*, environmental history work (e.g. Agrawal 2005, Saikia 2011), and the slightly problematic political science and economics genre of "how to do business in India" (e.g. Kumar and Sethi 2005).

PRIMARY SOURCES

As in most fields of history, one may obtain primary sources for pedagogical use through published collections, published single items (such as autobiographies), web-based resources, and materials drawn from one's own research. By "published collections," I mean what are often called "document readers"—multiple sources written by a wide range of authors, selected and annotated by one or more editors, linked to a long chronological period—rather than the collected works of a single author, such as *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Gandhi 2000-01).¹ Because of the limitations of published collections, and because nonspecialists are unlikely to have research materials relevant to South Asia courses or units, published single items and particularly web-based resources are the most

promising avenues for finding good primary sources for classroom use.

Published collections make certain kinds of primary sources available, but their modes of selection and organization make them pedagogically problematic. The most well-established of this genre are the now two volumes of *Sources of Indian Tradition*. The subtitle of the first volume, “From the beginning to 1800,” is a bit deceptive, since it is really organized by religious tradition: Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh (Embree 1988). Many interesting documents are available here, but they must be handled carefully in order to avoid leading students to organize the South Asian past as the editor of this volume chose to do. Volume Two, subtitled “Modern India and Pakistan,” is equally misleading, since it consists of the writings of major Westernizing, reformist, and nationalist thinkers according to canons defined by the nationalist histories of India and Pakistan (Hay 1988). Although the second edition made some changes to the selection of documents (de Bary 1958), it includes no sources that provide the intellectual argument for Bangladeshi nationalism, for example; there are no thinkers from the other, smaller nation-states of the region, either.² B. N. Pandey edited *A Book of India*, first published in 1965 and available in reprints (Pandey [1965] 1977). His selections are all decidedly short and therefore suitable for introductory level courses, some short enough to permit students to read and analyze them in class. However, the scheme for selecting and organizing the extracts is arbitrary, and it would require a fairly substantial investment of time to read through all of the entries to see what would be most useful. Sadly, this seems to be the complete list of published primary source readers. This was to have changed in 2013, when Routledge had scheduled to release a reader edited by Bose and Jalal, as a companion to the third edition of *Modern South Asia*.³ However, there do not appear to be on the publishing horizon any collections that include sources produced before 1600.

Although published single items appear to be in the gradual process of being replaced by digitized sources, they remain relatively easily accessible and provide an indispensable experience as objects of analysis both inside and outside the classroom. Single items come in two broad categories: sources that are stand-alone publications (usually available as new editions or reprints) and those included in other kinds of publications. The first category includes autobiographies. While many are likely to be familiar with Gandhi’s autobiography (Gandhi 1927-29), Stephen Dale reminds us that the Mughal emperor Babur’s was one of the earliest “modern” autobiographies anywhere (Dale 1990).⁴ It also provides ample detail for thinking about the material life and exchange between Central and South Asia, the cultural and intellectual habits of Central Asian Muslims, military strategies and administrative rewards—in short, the *mentalités* of the Central Asian ruling classes. The *Baburnama*’s length requires instructors to use excerpts, which also applies to many other single sources available in print, such as the Kautilya *Arthashastra* and al-Biruni’s *India* (Kautilya 1992, Sachau 2000). Works of literature also permit an exploration of interpretive angles or themes that run through the course. For example, Kalidasa’s *Recognition of Sakuntala* can sustain discussion of gender and *varna* norms in ancient India, but it also allows for discussion of drama as a literary genre and stage performance as a social event (Kalidasa 2001). In another example, one could assign any of several poems, short stories, or novels written in the immediate aftermath of Partition in order to gauge the effects of those events, at least on the literati. I have used Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), but a much superior novel is Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* (1950).⁵

Finding primary sources published in other works requires a substantial investment of time, including the arrangement of copyright clearances, but the pedagogical rewards can be great. For example, I want students to get a sense of the physicality of writing,

even though few palm leaf or paper objects survive from the period before about 1000 CE. Edicts carved in stone in the Mauryan era (4th-3rd century BCE) are certainly available in translation, but most surviving writing samples exist as etched into copper plates. I use a facsimile, Sanskrit transcription, and translation of a pair of copper-plate inscriptions from medieval Gujarat (late 6th century CE; Mirashi 1955, 38-44, 57-66). Obviously, I don't expect students to be able to read Sanskrit, but I want them to see how language and script change over time. I also want students to think about the political relationships between people and how objects like land and temples are used to mediate or express those relationships. In later parts of the course, students read translations of paper documents relating to the properties belonging to a religious institution in northern Punjab, for the same thematic purpose (Goswamy and Grewal 1969, 83-99, 109-16, 125-47, 376-8, 381-2, 385-90). In another theme in my course, I want students to think about the why and how of governmental information gathering by reading the documentary fruits of that process. I use a selection from the *A'in-i-Akbari* which shows production and price data (over time) for one administrative unit of the Mughal Empire (Jarrett 1949, 68-93, 315-38). Later in the course I ask students to search for specific pieces of information in the District Gazetteers for Punjab, originally published between 1884 and about 1935. This gives students a sense of the panoptical ambition of the colonial government as well as the gazetteer's pragmatic focus.⁶ These few examples can hardly begin to scratch the surface of the sources available for teaching the material, political, and social history of South Asia; a flood of other options are available for other themes one may wish to pursue. It may require talking with a South Asia specialist to find the best source, and if a specialist is not at hand, a quite large group is available through the H-Asia list.

Current websites vary in quality, but in total they offer a broader range of sources than available in any single print collection. For discussions of the Indus Valley Civilization, the Harappa.com site is indispensable (Khan). As one can tell from a few clicks, the site is full of information, research reports, and other materials. The 3-D rendering of IVC sites allows students to imagine more clearly what a town might have looked like during this period in this region (Belcher). The site also has very short film clips from the early twentieth century, which include professional newsreels and hobbyists' works. The Fordham Internet History Sourcebook has some useful items, mainly for very old or very recent periods (Halsall). South Asia Resource Access on the Internet (SARAI) has some useful items, mainly for the most recent periods (Columbia University Libraries). The Digital South Asia Library (DSAL), hosted by the University of Chicago, includes sources breathtaking in their completeness—for example, the Imperial Gazetteer of India, which is fully searchable and includes atlases with their own zoomable interface (University of Chicago). But the breadth of sources seems oddly limited, as though an ambitious project suddenly ran out of institutional support. By far the most useful gateway site for primary sources is maintained by Frances Pritchett at Columbia (Pritchett). Some of her items link to DSAL sources, but most link to sites that are otherwise difficult to find. They cover all of the periods of South Asian history, although more attention is devoted to precolonial periods and the territory included in modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Some parts are organized alphabetically rather than topically, so nonspecialists will get more out of this site after having become familiar with the characters and plot of the history they want students to learn. Most of the above-mentioned sites include some maps, but the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection at the University of Texas has a particularly well-organized selection of maps, which can also be used to help students think about shifting political boundaries and the ways different mapmakers imagined the world included in "South Asia" (Univer-

sity of Texas Libraries). Those interested in the lively visual culture of South Asia will find a series of galleries accompanied by critical essays in the Tasveer Ghar site (Tasveer Ghar). Although one could ask students to analyze an image or two without reading the linked essays, the authors of these pieces do a very good job of teaching readers how to look at both single and sets of images. As libraries and archives obtain greater levels of funding for digitizing their resources, web-based collections of primary sources are likely to increase in number, scope, and depth.

CONCLUSION

No single primary source, and no single textbook, is sufficient to push the history of South Asia beyond the geographical/political boundaries of colonial India (or the postcolonial Republic of India) or to situate the history of colonial India within a broader causative framework that deemphasizes, if not effaces, the old boundaries of 1757 and 1947. Whether in an entire course or in segments of a broader course, a judicious combination of textbooks and primary sources can begin moving students toward a conceptualization of South Asia that is not merely colonial—the immediate cause of the “now”—but that recognizes the limits of colonial India as a product of a series of historiographical choices.

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NOTES

1. I also exclude collections of primary sources, often digitized, meant for purchase by institutions, such as the Foreign Office files published by Adam Matthew Digital, “FO India, Pakistan and Afghanistan,” accessed September 5, 2012, <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/Collections/FO-India.aspx>.
2. Frances Pritchett, on her website, suggests that a major revision of both volumes of this work is forthcoming from Columbia University Press, although no target date is noted. If the tables of contents on the website will be retained in the print publication, then the revision will not answer some of the critiques I have made above. See Pritchett (*Sources of Indian Traditions*, Columbia University Press).
3. Routledge has not made this reader consistently searchable on its website. The release date was provided by Pamela Moukrim, Administrative Support Clerk, Taylor & Francis, LLC, in a personal communication to the author, March 20, 2012.
4. The best available edition of the original text is Thackston (1996).
5. *Pinjar* is available in English translation in Pritam (2009). Accounts of Partition given by those outside literary circles tend to be embedded in secondary scholarship; see for example Menon and Bhasin (1998).
6. Sang-e-Meel Publishers (<http://www.sangemeel.com>) have reprinted the Punjab District Gazetteers (and others) over the past fifteen to twenty years; digitized versions of the original gazetteers (and even the Settlement Reports on which the gazetteers are based) are available through Google Books, although I think students lose something of the materiality by reading this way.