

Introducing Colonial Discourse

Considering those travelers before me had few of them been in those parts where I had been, or at least not dwelt so long there, I venture to offer some novelties, either passed over by them, or else not so thoroughly observed. (Fryer 1698)

It was impossible to contemplate the ruins of this grand and venerable city, without feeling the deepest impressions of melancholy. I am, indeed, well informed, that the ruins extend, along the banks of the river, not less than fourteen English miles. (Hodges 1990 [1793]: 117)

What the learned world demands of us in India is to be quite certain of our data, to place the monumental record before them exactly as it now exists, and to interpret it faithfully and literally. (Prinsep 1838: 227)

The Bengalis seemed infinitely to prefer literature, law, and politics to anything that required some physical as well as mental exertion . . . When I introduced gymnastics, riding, and physical training in the colleges, they heartily accepted these things, and seemed quite ready to emulate Europeans in that respect. (G. Campbell 1893: 273–274)

The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child: that is to say, kindly, but with great firmness. (Steel and Gardiner 1909: 2–3)

John Fryer, writing in the seventeenth century when the English East India Company was still a trading company seeking rights and routes,

Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire, First Edition. Pramod K. Nayar.
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seemed desirous of conveying to his fellow countrymen the uniqueness and “novelties” of India. Fryer was writing when much of India had not quite been “discovered” by the English, and hence his anxiety to unravel the vast territory’s mysteries. By the time William Hodges wrote his account, the English had settled into both trade and local politics, and their attitudes toward all things Indian were beginning to ossify. Hodges rejects India as just another ruined civilization. If Fryer sought to convey awe, Hodges hopes to invoke pity for the wonder that was India. James Prinsep, writing a few decades after Hodges, saw his role as a faithful historian-archaeologist, who would offer authoritative interpretations of the country through a compilation of data that mapped India’s difference from other places. George Campbell announces to his countrymen that the moral and physical improvement of the indolent and effeminate race of Indians is possible through sport and discipline, while Flora Annie Steel and Gardiner caution the English on how best to deal with the Indian – as somebody childlike, weak, vulnerable, gullible.

In each of these extracts we find a particular image of the colony and the natives being produced: the undiscovered, mysterious India; the ruined civilization; a vast and varied Indian culture; the morally degenerate Indian and the childlike Indian. This is not an exhaustive sampling of the ideas, attitudes, and approaches that the English internalized and exhibited toward its greatest colony, India, nor does it hope to cover the enormously diverse and diffuse set of representations of Britain’s other colonies, or other European colonies. But even this short inventory indicates the sheer plenitude of such representations about India. This variety of representations, in which India is projected, presented, analyzed, and evaluated, constitutes the subject of the present book – representations that are found in a corpus of colonial texts dating back to the 1550s. These texts were produced even as colonial discoveries, battles, conquests, administration, domination, and renovation proceeded from the 1580s till roughly the mid-twentieth century. It is within these texts and representations that we can find embedded and expressed the attitudes that informed and influenced the practices of colonial rule.

Colonialism was a process by which European nations found routes to Asian, African, and South American regions; conquered them; undertook trade relations with some of the countries and kingdoms; settled for a few centuries in these places; developed administrative, political, and social institutions; exploited the resources of these regions; and dominated the subject races. Colonialism was characterized by military conquest; economic exploitation; the imposition of Western education, languages,

Christianity, forms of law and order; the development of infrastructure for a more efficient administration of the Empire – railways, roadways, telegraphy; and the documentation of the subject races’ cultures (history, ethnography, archaeology, the census). While military, economic, and political processes are central to the colonial process, the last item in the catalogue above – documentation of the subject races – has perhaps been the subject of the greatest volume of postcolonial studies since Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978).

How the Europeans thought and wrote about their empires was the focus of Said’s epoch-making work. Arguing from the premise that to represent the non-European culture was a form of colonial thinking, Said showed how literary, historical, anthropological, and other texts carried within them the same politics as those that inspired military and economic conquests. “Colonial discourse” is the study of these texts and representations. “Discourse” is here simply the conversations, representations, and ideas about any topic, people, or race. It is the context of speech, representation, knowledge, and understanding. It determines what can be said and studied and the processes of doing so. It is, in short, the *context in which meaning itself is produced*. Discourse is produced *about an object by an authority* possessing the power to make pronouncements on this object. The Asian nation or people or culture was the object about which the Europeans produced information, documentation, representations – discourses. Asians became the object of analysis, examined, categorized, studied, and judged by European writings about them. Asia became, thus, a field of study. In such a situation, the Asian need not have a say in how s/he might be studied. That is, the colonial discourse that constructed the Asian as an object of study did not account for the Asian’s views or resistance, pleasure, or displeasure in the matter. Discourse thus flows one way: by the European about the Asian. It is in this one-sided flow of discourse that we can discern the power relations that mark colonialism. Colonial discourse masks the power relations between races, cultures, and nations. It makes the relations *seem* natural, scientific, and objective. Colonial discourse therefore produces stereotypes from within European prejudices, beliefs, and myths. Thus the myth of the effeminate Bengali male was a centerpiece of European discourses from the mid-eighteenth century. Over a period of time, this unprovable, prejudiced, and seriously questionable stereotype was treated as an objective description even by natives. Masquerading as philanthropy, the civilizing mission or scientific observations, these stereotypes and representations, enabled the Europeans to attain and retain power over the natives. As we

can see, discourses of the effeminate native naturalized a myth, a stereotype, so that it passes as true knowledge or authentic observation. The power relations of colonialism do not allow for dissenting discourses (though they did exist, as we now know from the work of the Subaltern Studies Group). It rejected alternative opinions, views, and representations as inauthentic, inaccurate, or irrelevant. Thus only one discourse, that of the European, was allowed to dominate. Colonial discourse, therefore, plays a major role in the management of racialized imperial relations.

“Discourses” are not innocent reportage or fictions of the mind. They do not simply *reflect* an event or a person in the form of an image or a description. Discourses define and constitute the reality of that person or event for the viewer, listener, and reader. That is, it is impossible to know a person or event outside the representations of the person or event. Discourse is not reality, but it is the only means of accessing that reality. For example, to understand the magnitude of a disaster, we should have a definition, a frame in which disaster is measured. With this frame in our mind we perceive the events, and categorize them as a “major” disaster or a catastrophe. Discourse studies analyzes these frames through which we see the world, experience and understand it. Colonial discourse studies is therefore the study of the various kinds of representation through which the Europeans described, catalogued, categorized, imagined, and talked about Asians or Africans. It believes, after Said, that representations represent a form of textual knowledge of the non-European. Such a knowledge is a preliminary moment to colonial military or economic conquest.

Let us take an example here. When the British were planning an intervention in India’s succession politics (in various kingdoms, notably Arcot in southern India and Awadh in the north) from the 1760s through to the 1850s, they began not with military conquest. Over a period of time the colonial statesmen and commentators built up a textual archive in which they demonstrated:

- the tyranny of the local monarchs;
- the pathetic state of the subjects;
- the chaos that would follow the succession battle.

Together, these representations became a set of justifications for military and political intervention into the affairs of those kingdoms. Thus the representations, produced by the colonials themselves, became the cause to invade. In what was a circular but insidious move, the colonial commentator

offered as step 1 a *hypothesis*: the local king was a tyrant and his subjects were an oppressed lot. Then, in step 2, the later commentators would quote these predecessor texts as *evidence* that the king was a tyrant. As Edward Said notes, both hypothesis and evidence came from the same group of people. “Discourse” in this case, cuts across genres (fiction, poetry, drama, travelogue, history texts, anthropological tracts, treatises in law, etc.) and media (visual, print, speeches). Colonial discourse studies therefore examines common themes, ideas, stereotypes, and such constructions of the non-Europeans in European texts.

What emerges from this discussion is that colonial discourse *produced* for the European’s consumption the Asian, African, or South American in particular ways. El Dorado (South America), the “dark continent” (Africa), the decadent (India), and the empty (Australia, Canada) were *textual* creations, in history books, geographical primers, travel narratives, literary texts, etc. But these textual creations were real in the sense that they informed the imagination of the Europeans. “Much have I traveled in the realms of gold,” wrote the English Romantic poet John Keats in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” thus telling us how powerful a text can be in enabling a man to explore distant and ancient realms. In similar fashion accounts of distant places made them come alive to the European mind, tempting them, inspiring them, inducing anxiety, but above all getting them interested in these geographically distant and culturally unfamiliar areas. These regions became real places with supposed and specific qualities (gold, primitiveness, decadence, and emptiness respectively) for the Europeans. They constituted the cultural imaginary of the Europeans right from the fifteenth century. By cultural imaginary I mean the textual (visual as well as written) archive that became a collective unconscious for the Europeans. The cultural imaginary is the shared ideas, prejudices, and beliefs about the non-European world produced as an effect of the discourses. The cultural imaginary is not just a collection of myths – it has a very powerful material, emotional, and social *energizing* effect upon the people. The Europeans, having internalized this cultural imaginary, began to:

- quest for these mythic, decadent, and empty continents;
- see themselves as a superior race; and
- quest for an empire.

Discourses therefore framed the non-European nations and cultures in particular ways, leading to the emergence of a cultural imaginary which in

turn facilitated and justified a collective thinking about the non-European regions as possible colonies. Colonialism, to phrase it differently, was the consequence and manifestation of a set of representations (discourses) and beliefs (cultural imaginary). This formulation does not at any point suggest that the Europeans were either deluded into conquest (though it was said that the British Empire was achieved in a “fit of absence of mind”!) or that colonization was merely a textual phenomenon. Rather, it suggests that there is a close connection between the discursive apparatus (as we can think of the textual archive produced about the non-Europeans by the Europeans) and the political, economic, and social structures and processes of empire. This book examines the discursive apparatus of the Empire, with specific reference to India, but also treats the colonial discourses that produced India as a colony as symptomatic of the larger imperial discourses that constructed Africa or Southeast Asia.

Colonial discourse studies, of which this book is an example, demonstrates how:

- native, colonized Indian society was subjugated through particular discourses as effectively (and maybe even prior to) as it was subjugated by military, economic, and political means;
- specific institutional forms of control – police, medicine, natural history, reform laws – were created to ensure that the natives remained subjugated and perceived only in certain ways;
- all forms of representations (arts, history, history texts, literature, medical treatises) controlled the images of the natives;
- these images in turn naturalized the racial and cultural differences and the subjugation of the natives;
- these discursive processes justified and led to the installation of “corrective” mechanisms – institutions and practices such as the English schooling system, the law, the medical system, the imperial hunt, the Church – to keep the natives under control.

Colonial discourse studies is a scrutiny of the history of European ideas that pays attention to social forces, institutional mechanisms, and power structures that influence thought, ideas, and knowledge formations.

Several writings of the colonial period reveal anxieties, and while imperial anxieties are not the subject of this study – which focuses only on the more *confident* colonial discourses – it is salutary to keep them in mind when reading English writings on India and the tropics. In other words, one must

be alert to the *anxiety* that marks colonial discourse, and not see it only as a strident, monolithic, and supremely arrogant one.

The process of colonial conquest and domination was uneven across Asia, Australia, South America, and Africa. The European nations differed in their approaches, and colonial processes were very often adjusted to local and regional requirements and societies. Thus, Australia was treated as an “empty” space into which the white settler arrived. India, on the other hand, was already a renowned civilization by the time the first Englishmen arrived in the sixteenth century – and hence could not be treated as *terra nullius* (“empty land”). Africa was treated as a savage, “dark” country with its mysterious tribals and gorgeous, if untamed, wilds. Any study of colonialism, therefore, needs to account for these differences across the three major continents or else risk homogenizing colonial domination as similar and uniform the world over. Frederick Cooper criticizes this tendency in postcolonial studies:

One can pluck a text or a narrative from Spanish America in the sixteenth century, or from the slave colonies of the West Indies in the eighteenth century, or from a moderately prosperous twentieth-century cocoa planter in the Gold Coast, and derive a lesson that conveys a generalizable meaning. (2007: 405)

Colonial powers used local and regional resources, resistance to colonialism was also localized, and hence such a homogenizing critique of colonialism erases specificities.

Such a comparative approach is beyond the scope of the present book, however. Instead it takes as its locus of examination the largest empire of the modern world, the British, and restricts itself to the subcontinent, portrayed as the “Jewel in the [British] Crown.” Understandably, this means ignoring some crucial aspects of colonial discourse. For instance, there are no accounts of the savage cannibal that Peter Hulme (1992) notes of European writings on South America. Instead we get European commentaries on the magnificence of India’s ancient temples and the decadence of the Indian kings. There are no accounts of the empty or unexplored spaces of India’s landscape (as was the case in Africa, in the writings, say, of Mungo Park). Instead what we see are descriptions of a frightening illimitable, borderless Indian landscape. Despite these lacunae, this book suggests, it is possible to see the discourses in English writings on India as iconic of colonial discourse *in general*.

The book studies the ways in which the British in their various non-fictional writings presented India to readers. It demonstrates how the cultural imaginary of the Empire, with its constituents of racial superiority, the civilizing mission, aesthetic elements, law and order imperatives, and the scientific organization of the topography, fauna, flora, and people was embodied in a diverse variety of texts. Its textual material is therefore deliberately uneven and varied: travelogues, administrative reports, memoirs, letters, diaries, medical advice, exhibition catalogues, anthropological tracts, and parliamentary debates. It also cuts across, again deliberately, texts produced by different kinds of Englishmen and women: traders, physicians, wives of colonial administrators, priests, soldiers, politicians, archaeologists, ethnographers, and artists. The book uses hundreds of samples of textual representations to prove rather than merely illustrate. This enables a study of the discourses as manifest *across* texts and individuals, thereby demonstrating the extent, expanse, and tenacity of these representations.

The book follows a chronology of the British Empire in India, starting with the period of trade and initial contact in the sixteenth century, to the early twentieth. It examines in individual chapters several kinds of discourses through which India was viewed, explored, ruled, and negotiated in the 400 years of the British–Indian encounter.

Chapter 2 examines the theme of Indian “discovery” in British writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. “Discovery” was a key *discourse* that constructed India in particular ways in European writings of travel and exploration of this period. The chapter argues that these writings of Indian “discovery” reveal a shift in the discourse from *imagination* to *inquiry*. The colonizing discourse of discovery had three related components:

- the *imaginative exploration* and the fantasy of discovery;
- the *narrative organization* in the form of reportage of what was seen; and
- the explication and documentation of the discovered through a process of *inquiry*.

The Englishman (whether trader, ambassador, sailor, cook, or just adventurer) traveling to India was *prepared* in his imagination for India through the cultural imaginary of already circulating fables and narratives of wealth, excessive eroticism, pleasure, danger, and profit. As he traveled through India he recorded his *experience* of the actual “discovery” of the East and compiled it into a readable personal account. Then he proceeded to *inquire* about, explain, and document what he observed. The chapter

argues that we can discern a move in these writings from the *imagining* of what could be discovered in the East to the *ordering* of what was discovered. The discourse of discovery, the chapter proposes, organized India into a *knowable, manageable entity in and through narrative forms such as the inquiry, bringing this “distant” space into the realm of the known*. The discourse of discovery brought the otherwise incomprehensible, completely different Mughal Empire into the fold of known objects, setting it up for examination and scrutiny.

Colonial discourse between the 1760s and 1850s is the subject of Chapter 3. The chapter explores the construction of the tropics as a space of difference, or otherness, arguing that this construction emerges from the need to point to India’s irreducible difference which would reinforce *English* identity. It further argues that the construction of the space of difference then entails attempts to *contain* and *regulate* this otherness in forms that could be less threatening and thereby underscore *British possession* of the space of difference. Difference was encoded primarily as two forms of the exotic in colonial writing. The sentimental exotic mapped sights of difference in a rhetoric given primarily to the aesthetic-emotional and the scientific exotic was the investigative mode, seeking precision, accuracy, and realism in a rhetoric of disinterested inquiry. The chapter demonstrates how, in the domains of natural history, the human sciences and medicine, the survey and the artistic representation, the historical account and the exotic painting, contribute to the mapping of Indian difference. The discourses of difference in the 1760s–1850s period exhibit a shift, the chapter shows, *from the Indian exotic to the colonial exotic*. The colonial exotic distinguished and distanced India from England and sought to preserve the boundaries of us/them and Indian difference. But it also brings the distant colony that emerged into visibility through exoticization into the European fold of “known” spaces.

Chapter 4 focuses on “empire management” in the Victorian age. Yet again a discourse of control and dominance, the discourse of empire management is examined in specific domains: law and order, landscape (including the imperial hunt), and domestication. The discourse of administration and control kept the subjects under surveillance. It imposed in visible ways – architecture, regulation of roads and railways, the organization of space – the imperial presence on the colony. The discourse classified, categorized, and ordered diversity and the unknowns of colonial spaces and peoples. The chapter examines the discourse on native criminality, architecture and town planning, and domesticity (English domesticity

in India). It argues that empire management was also achieved through grand spectacles. The discourse of imperial display and spectacle marks a process of “imperial improvisation” in the spectacle of empire. The spectacle of empire, embodied in the 1877 Delhi Durbar, served to *transform governance, dominance, and political power into a grand spectacle for the natives to see and revere*. Imperial structures “naturalized” themselves by becoming acceptable to the natives and by generating an aura around itself. This acceptability and aura were made possible by improvisation and the production of the spectacle of empire. It is this trajectory the chapter maps: *from dominance and control to spectacles that naturalize the Empire*. Empire management moves from domestication to spectacular visibility, where the former is evidenced by an organization of colonial space while the latter involves the creation of a whole new identity of the colonial ruler.

In Chapter 5 I turn to the civilizing mission of the Empire. The civilizing mission dovetailed into the one on dominance and control: a discourse of reform, rescue, and moral and material progress. The chapter examines colonial writings which argued a case for the *rescue* of allegedly subjugated native women, treated social *reform* of the barbaric races as a bounden *duty* of the ruling race, and saw the *moral progress* of the natives as intimately connected to their *material progress* under benevolent colonial rule. It takes the domains of discipline (including sports), upbringing (including education), salvation (religion), and rescue-reform (gender) for its study of colonial *social regulation*, treating it *as a colonial project that was aimed at social transformation*. Such a *cultural conquest and renovation of the colony led to the self-legitimization of the colonizer*. Through a reading of missionary texts, educational tracts, and reformist debates about female infanticide and widow-burning, the chapter demonstrates that the civilizing mission established the moral superiority of Britain and was a mode of self-fashioning and self-legitimization because it situated the British as the humanitarian leaders of the world.

In the final chapter, I turn to the aesthetics of the colonial encounter. I look at the ways in which India was incorporated through aesthetic representations and consumption into English culture *in England*. It shows how writings by archaeologists, ethnographers, art historians, administrators, and museologists worked to decode Indian aesthetics where the “decoding” continues the colonial project of interpretation and therefore the production of knowledge about India. The colonial administrator’s monopoly over the interpretations of India’s history, aesthetic traditions, and cultural forms leads to the self-fashioning of the colonial commentator as the



scholar-colonial. It was manifest in the museumization and conservation campaigns for Indian antiquities, ruins, and artifacts.

India was also consumed in the form of its artifacts and commodities in Britain. This consumption in tourism was paralleled by the spectacles of empire staged for the benefit of the English at home. Analyzing the pageants and exhibitions of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, the chapter argues that aesthetics was as much about English identity as it was about understanding India. In the widespread availability and use of India products during the Victorian period, the chapter argues, a *cosmopolitan taste came to be identified with Englishness*. Such a cosmopolitanism was seen as the ability to *reform* English aesthetic traditions by appropriating other traditions from around the world. Finally, this imperial cosmopolitanism was *rooted in an insular Englishness, but one which looks out at the world*. It takes pride in being an imperial England, where one takes pride in the English ability to widen the horizons of territory and culture, of taste and dominion.

