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Scanning the history shelves of any of Britain's bookstores, one can see that historians of the British Empire in India writing for a larger audience are locked in a furious debate. One side bays with chests puffed out, 'Empire Good!' The other, eyes narrowed, hisses in response: 'Empire Bad!' Jon Wilson, with his new book, *India Conquered*, steps between the bayonets and the pitchforks and reminds us that the history of empire was far too interesting to be boiled down to such a facile debate. Although he makes clear his own opinion on the relative merits of empire within the first few pages, Wilson is not concerned to join that fight. Rather, he offers us a more thought provoking characterisation of the British Empire in India. Empire, he argues, was shaky and fragile. It was a succession of failures, defeats and near-misses. Behind nearly every apparently bold new initiative was a frantic desire to repair recent mistakes. The famed 'man on the spot' who governed British India was often anxious and lonely, huddled in a palanquin, stealing a glance at the country he ruled through a peephole. Wilson's refreshing approach to the history of the British empire in India is engaging, surprising and necessary.

In addition to offering his readers his interpretation of empire in India, Wilson provides us with plenty of new material. This is not another tired trot through the history of the Black Hole of Calcutta, the Mutiny, the Railways and Gandhi's campaigns. Although these well-known stories are not neglected, Wilson introduces us to new characters and events in often eloquently drawn vignettes. In addition to the Battle of Plassey, we are given the case of Moro Raghunath, an imprisoned Indian prince whose court case Wilson uses to discuss anxieties and debates over how the British thought they ought to govern India. Instead of running through the same story of the railways, we learn about steamships, useless for trade but invaluable for their promise to provide anxious administrators with more regular communication with their superiors. While Gandhi is not neglected, we are introduced to Haji Abdullah Haji Kasim, the founder of India's first modern bank, and an exemplar of the way Indians started building their own institutions as a precursor to self-rule. While many histories of empire in India are focused on the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Wilson lingers in the lesser-known but formative period of the 17th and 18th centuries, arriving in the age of nationalism only in the final third of the book. All of this marks a welcome break from existing works.

Perhaps the most surprising argument Wilson seems to make is to downplay the importance of India within the British Empire as a whole. It would not be a stretch to reason that the same anxieties, insecurities and near-catastrophes that fuelled empire building in India helped spur British activity from Central Asia to Southern Africa. Indeed, other historians have argued as much. Moreover, administrators circulated through the networks of empire bringing ideas and practices from India to newer colonies. Further, the pink corners of the map were often populated by Indian prisoners, indentured labourers, administrators and traders. Wilson's story pays only minimal heed to the links - intellectual, psychological, economic and demographic - between India and the rest

of the empire. He concedes only that there were brief moments, such as the First World War, in which India became vital to the empire as a whole. Wilson cautions us not to mistake rhetoric for reality when we read empire builders' claims of establishing peace or ruling by law in India. One wonders if the same applies to the assertion that India was the jewel in the crown of the British Empire.

Author's Response

Jon Wilson

During the last 20 years in the Anglophone world it's been difficult to escape public argument about the morality of empire. From Niall Ferguson to Nigel Biggar, Seamus Milne to Shashi Tharoor, whether they think 'Empire good!' or 'Empire bad!', protagonists in the debate assume that 'empire' is a singular subject we are already familiar with. My purpose in writing *India Conquered* was to challenge that assumption. As Taylor Sherman so wonderfully summarises, the book 'steps beyond the bayonets and pitchforks and reminds us that that the history of empire was far too interesting to be boiled down to such a facile debate'.

India Conquered attempts to break down the history of British political power in India into a geographically-dispersed sequence of interactions between Britons and Indians, to show that 'the idea of strong, consistent, effective British power in India was indeed a delusion'. Its disaggregative approach develops a sense of the continuous patterns of British activity (anxiety, paranoia, impatience and violence, as my reviewers note) without suggesting that Britain's empire in India was driven by a single set of interests or ideology, or by the intentions of a single group of (inevitably) men. Through specific detail about the lives of empires' protagonists and subjects, that approach was also intended to draw the interest of a non-academic readership.

It's a great pleasure that those intentions were well-understood and appreciated by most of the scholars who read and reviewed *India Conquered*. Even better is that the book provoked interesting questions; I'd like to thank each of the five reviewers for their engaged and thought-provoking responses. I'm glad to have persuaded Michael Dodson that writing general histories for a non-academic audience isn't a hopeless enterprise, for example. The challenges to me cluster around three sets of relations, which I'd like to briefly discuss in the rest of this response: between India and the rest of empire; between empire's myth of stability and reality of disorder and anxiety; and perhaps most importantly, between imperial institutions and the Indians entangled and subjected to them.

Taylor Sherman notes, rightly, that *India Conquered* 'downplay[s] the importance of India within the British empire as a whole', an argument she finds surprising. In doing so the book runs against the grain of a swathe of excellent scholarship on the migration and exchange of people, money, things and ideas within imperial 'circuits' and 'networks'; it also

challenges the move within some strands of scholarship to see every particular phenomenon as the effect of a global process of some kind. *India Conquered* de-globalizes imperial India for a mix of tactical, methodological and empirical reasons. To have constantly made connections and comparisons beyond India would have made a complex and unwieldy book impossible to write and read. I worry that much of the literature on imperial connectedness simplifies what happens in particular places. The recognition that similar processes happened elsewhere should not nullify the argument that the character of British (and post-imperial) state power in India emerged from encounters specific to place and time. Nor does it imply everything is linked up through an external system defined with an abstract terms. Instead, it merely calls us to write an intelligent comparative history. If there is an implicit argument about the nature of Britain's empire *beyond* India in *India Conquered*, it is that it was diverse and incoherent too, and never a singular or stable form of political power. Of course imperial India was connected to other parts of the world; India is a big place, historically a central node in the global economy, and people and things move. But not every connection was part of a system or even network; and there were many links that had nothing to do with empire at all. Britain's empire was a disparate collection of territories ruled by such radically incompatible forms of rule they rarely cooperated effectively. As Andrew Dilley and I argue in a (we hope) forthcoming article, to argue otherwise is to define 'empire' in such vague, almost metaphorical terms the concept loses any empirical purchase at all. For scholars to view everything happening in India through a global lens is (ironically) to be myopically influenced by the specific social conditions of our own labour; historians of South Asia must members of one of the most globally-connected fields of work in the world. In the process, we forget the importance of other, smaller scales to much of what happened in the past.

As Sherman rightly suggests, *India Conquered* does indeed challenge the assertion that India was 'the jewel in the crown of the British empire'. In retrospect, perhaps I didn't argue for the unimportance of India to British global power before the First World War as persuasively as I should have done. There's more work to be done here, not least in re-examining the argument Berrick Saul made now 57 years ago about the centrality of India to Britain's balance of payments. That work needs to begin with contemporary understandings about what the 'British empire' actually was. Many 19th-century British commentators didn't see India as a 'jewel' at all. Liberal imperial commentators emphasized the centrality of the white settler empire; J. R. Seeley thought British rule in India a temporary aberration against the normal pattern of 'English' expansion through settlement and colonization. Conservative and former imperial officers who thought India *should* be central to Britain's imperial vision often complained that it wasn't. One of the earliest uses of the phrase 'jewel in the crown' in reference to India (in the *Oriental Herald* in 1833) worried that such an important 'prize' should be 'so lightly estimated' by other Britons.(1b)

Nitin Sinha's perceptive review focuses on the gap between the aloof myth of order which I argue Britons discussing India tried to project, and the practical entanglement with the lives of their subjects. Sinha suggests *India Conquered's* effort 'to combine the two ... risks falling in between'. He's right of course, necessarily so: the gap between imperial order and the complex and unacknowledged connections which existed between Britons and Indians was the major source of empire's chaos. Chaos is another way to describe confusion or unpredictability, conditions in which the human effort to comprehend and tell coherent stories about what's going on repeatedly fail. *India Conquered* argues that India's British sovereigns were structurally incapable of telling meaningful stories about their rule. Their desire for domination prevented British administrators from acknowledging the role of Indian actors in shaping their own actions. Without that acknowledgement, British narratives of control ended up as a series of thin, anxious and abstract accounts which were quickly contradicted by the turn of events. Sinha suggests that I say 'in the last instance ... "order on paper" triumphs over the desired control on the ground', but I don't think I'm ever quite so categorical. As abstract and aloof as the British tried to make their rule, the local conditions of domination or otherwise always threatened to interrupt the official narrative. Violence always created a reaction, for example. The exercise of state power, by the army or revenue service, always depended on Indian agents who didn't share the goals and sensibilities of British officials. In a sense, my point is that a regime which desperately desired distance could not avoid proximity; yet, their desires prevented them from talking intelligibly about what was unavoidable. Perhaps *India Conquered* is too glib with its talk of the failed 'myth' of order against the 'reality' of chaos and anxiety; there are many different orders of real life, of course. But that language works because there was an important difference between the two: order always existed in the unrealised future, while anxiety, like chaos, was a condition pertaining to the present which British officers wanted to overcome.

Both Durba Ghosh and Gajendra Singh challenge *India Conquered* by asking what the book has to say about the Indian experience of empire. Ghosh is right to note an argument about 'the resilience of Indian social and political organizational forms' embedded 'perhaps too deeply. The book follows Faisal Devji's analysis of an idea (or more accurately, political practice) of India as 'an empire of distinctions', in which both diversity and hierarchy were carefully balanced and protected, enduring from the eighteenth century into the Gandhian politics of the early 20th century.(2b) To a degree, the restoration of that idea and its fusion with democratic practices after the traumatic chaos of 1947 explains the political stability of India for the first two decades after independence. The point of course is that that idiom was only one of many through which Indians made sense of their political situation. An important theme is the way in which the violent yet limited forms of imperial power incited resistance yet also allowed space for a range of Indian political and social forms. Often at a distance from the most concentrated sites of imperial

power, India under British rule was the scene of a far more interesting variety of ideas and social and political movements than the most crude brands of colonial discourse analysis would imply. Many – those which offered non-violence as a counter to a regime explicitly founded on force – developed through a direct engagement with imperial power. Many others did not.

This latter emphasis leaves me puzzled by Ganjendra Singh's review, to the point of wondering if he read the book I wrote. *India Conquered's* primary purpose, as Taylor Sherman notes, is not to challenge imperial nostalgia (there are plenty of other texts which do that better), but to make an argument about the character of Britain's regime in India and its relationship to Indian action. The 'Great Delusion' (the phrase 'imperial delusions' never appears in the book) discussed in chapter 15 is of the British empire's power and coherence, not its virtue or benevolence. Its argument is precisely (as Singh puts it) 'that the British did not always matter'; that claims about British agency were often empty and (to use Singh's words) 'hollow', and that empire's putative subjects acted with a force and logic not determined by imperial power. To give two practical examples. The book shows how the East India's Company's presence in India from 1740s-1760s, including the actions of India's supposed 'conqueror' Robert Clive, were shaped most of all by the dynamics of Maratha politics. Secondly, the book offers a genealogy of Indian nationalism showing how Indian political leaders created ideas and institutions challenging 'the logic of conquest', but which had a shape and rhythm that can't be understood only by looking through the lens of 'the colonizers'. Each of these arguments are made far more than 'two or three paragraphs'. Neither reflect phenomena which imperial officers were even conscious of, both relying on either scholarship or sources that hasn't been refracted through an imperial lens.

Perhaps the misunderstanding occurs because Singh thinks *India Conquered* is something that it does not claim to be. It is not a history of India, nor of Indian politics. It is a history, as Singh puts it of 'the British experience in India', in its very broadest sense, and thus of 'empire' in its complexity. As I argue above, that history can't be understood without understanding South Asians' actions beyond 'the prisms of the colonizers', but it isn't the only history of the subcontinent necessary or possible.

If Singh hasn't misread *India Conquered* in this way, the only sense I can make of his critique is that he thinks imperial power is not a subject worthy of study; that the only legitimate scholarship touching on South Asia exclusively focuses on the testimonies, actions and agency of the 'native' (what other word can one use if one adopts this position?) population of subcontinent.

Of course Singh's own scholarship belies this argument in practice. He describes his research interests as 'histories of colonialism in South Asia'. In a wonderful article on 'India and the Great War' (which sadly I hadn't come across while writing *India Conquered*) he reconstructs colonial political intentions alongside 'the politics of organized Indian nationalisms' during wartime. In the piece, Singh is concerned both with

the quick emergence of the idea of deploying Indian soldiers outside the subcontinent on an unprecedented scale, and the neuroses which their reliance on Indian troops caused amongst imperial politicians. He suggests that those neuroses had some kind of root in the existence of revolutionary terrorism, and that non-revolutionary Indian soldiers, existing 'between mutiny and obedience', didn't think or act as the British wanted them to. But, the very fact words such as 'fantasies' and 'anxieties' can be used to describe these beliefs suggests imperial ideas and actions had a logic of their own, which needs careful study. As Singh accepts, the 'prism of the colonizer' doesn't explain many things about the subcontinent; but it does need to be understood. Our chronologies even overlap, both *India Conquered* and Singh's essay arguing that the tensions evident during the war marked 'the beginning of the end of the British Raj in India'.(3b)

In his review, Singh accuses me of retracing 'the mark of deletion' which 'relegates the consciousness, heterodoxies and imaginaries of the colonized to vignettes of two or three paragraphs'. The reference is to Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, discussing Heidegger's discussion of the supposed way in which the 'western episteme' from Plato to the 20th century, had erased 'the question of being'. As much as I value Heidegger's work, his most absurd claim is that there a single system of thinking dominated 'the west' for more than two millennia. The idea of 'colonialism' as a single monolithic all-powerful structure of knowledge and power is similarly ridiculous. If that is Singh's point, I wholeheartedly agree.

Notes

1a) *Oriental Herald*, II, 9 (1833), 222.

2a) Faisal Devji, 'The mutiny to come', *New Literary History*, 40, 2 (2009), 411-30.

3a) Gajendra Singh, 'India and the Great War: colonial fantasies, anxieties and discontent', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 14, 2, (2014), 343-61.