

Editorial



## **Popular perceptions versus authoritative constructions of South Asian historiographies**

This summer of 2007 many parts of South Asia and in some communities of South Asian diaspora are commemorating two important colonial resistance events. Firstly the 250<sup>th</sup> year of Battle of Plassey and 150 years of Sepoy Mutiny. On 23 June 1757 East India Company under Robert Clive achieved a decisive victory against Nawab Sirajuddowla. Sepoy Mutiny occurred between January 1857 and April 1859 which consisted of a series of insurrections across the 'North-West provinces' in India that included massacres, looting and warfare that culminated in executions. 'The suppression of the Sepoys became another infamous chapter in the history of British colonial oppression' (Spencer-Jones, C 2005).

This year between 23 and 24 June, an East London based activist group (Brick Lane Circle) organised poetry reading session, a conference and East India Company walk to remember Polashir Juddho (Battle of Plassey). The East End of London is dotted with important sites and buildings that have historical links with Bengal. The area is also the home of the largest concentration of Bangladeshi people in UK. The main idea of the 250 years anniversary events by the Brick Lane Circle was to provide a focus and engage people from diverse backgrounds to explore the area's historical links with Bengal. It was an attempt to widen the public appreciation of the deeper historical connections between London's multicultural communities. In the informal setting conference Jon Wilson of King's College (University of London) talked on 'Military techniques and the organisation of state in 17 century Britain and Bengal' while the conference organiser Muhammad Ahmedullah graphically discussed the context, military tactics and the decisive impact of Mir Jafar's (Serajuddowla's military chief) betrayal. Nick Robins (the author of 'The corporation that changed the world: How the East India Company shaped the Modern Multinationals', Pluto 2006) charted 'The legacy of the East India Company in Britain and Bengal' while Mushtaq Khan (Soas, University of London) analysed 'The long-run economic effects of the British impact on Bengal'. Myself along with Arif Billah (Dhaka University and Soas) had the privilege to provide a joint presentation on 'Popular perceptions versus authoritative constructions of Plassey'. Based on my previously jointly edited volume with Karen D'Souza (Shakur, T and D'Souza K, 2003) and my last year's ongoing research on 'Ghettoised perceptions versus mainstream constructions of the English Muslims' (forthcoming Shakur, T et al 2008) we tried firstly to de-construct and later re-construct the colonial discourse. In our talk we firstly discussed the problems of

picturing historiographies of geography of empire in English as aptly raised by Ploszajska ‘Stories of great, heroic figures and epic moments in the history of British Geographay have thus produced uncritically by successive generations of scholars’ (Ploszaska, T, 122:2000).



We then looked into the constructions of popular perceptions of Plassey originating in Britain and America. For example last century’s children story writer Herriet Marshall’s ‘Our Island Story: A History of England for Boys and Girls (Marshall, H E 1906). In constructing the ruling Nawab of Bengal in 1757 she writes ‘But Suruj-ud-Daula was treacherous as well as cruel. He made promises which he never meant to keep, merely in order to gain peace. Now he tried in every way that he could to wriggle out of these promises. He secretly wrote to the French and asked them to help him against the British. He did all manner of things, changing his mind again and again ( op cit, p 397). It is interesting to note that the volume is now being re launched by the think tank group ‘Civitas’. Marshall’s works now reappear in electronic media (e.g. The Baldwin Project, Bringing Yesterday’s Classics to Today’s Children, introducing ‘Our Empire Story’ by H E Marshall).

In establishing ‘Propagation of the Imperial Constructions in the Post-colonial Popular Culture’ we analysed the Hollywood extravaganza ‘Clive in India’ made in 1935, directed by Richard Boleslawski and starring Loretta Young and Ronald Colman. The present day DVD blurb for the film read ‘This is a period piece, historical political drama set in the 1700s. It is a bit of British history, dealing with how India became part of the British Empire. Colman is excellently cast in the title role and Young, as his wife, is incredibly gorgeous in the lavish period costumes. Script is well written (if not completely accurate-what a surprise!) and production is lush...(B&W/dvd).

The journal begins with an article by Karen D'Souza where she attempts to interrogate the representation of female figures on her reading of Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Rich Like Us* (1985). She juxtaposes three essays by feminist intellectuals working in the field of postcolonialism in order to identify the degree of resistance or challenge to a culturally determined sense of nation, community, or selfhood. The author justifies why Sahgal's representation of sati requires to be comprehensively understood within the contexts of colonial and native literatures, which may also be examined and differentiated along lines of gender.

Ellen Bal and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff's paper makes a contrastive analysis of the Hindu-Muslim relations between India and Surinam and shows how two communities that are divided by religion can be unified with a single 'identity' when they integrate into their adopted country. The authors take up the cow slaughtering issue and compare the scenarios between India and post-boycott Surinam (many Hindus boycotted Muslims for a decade in the 1930s, commonly regarded as the 'dark page' in the history of *Hindostanis* in Surinam). Interestingly, the term *Hindostani* could not unify the two communities in India, but, as the authors conclude, 'in Surinam *Hindostanis* came to constitute an *ethnic diaspora* and not a *Hindu diaspora* with neither India nor Pakistan but Hindostan (i.e. pre-partition India) as their homeland'.

The diversity of the current issue is manifested with the inclusion of Fatihi's paper on colloquialism in Hindi and Urdu in northern India, which talks about the communicative role of colloquialism and slang. Taking up issues like the use and purpose of colloquialism, dialect and regionalism, the ephemeral nature of colloquialism and the types of people using colloquial language, the author concludes that a theory which seriously deals with the collective construction of meaning of colloquialism needs to take into account both the interlocutors as acting constantly and simultaneously on the interaction process.

in the final segment of the Article section Arif Billah goes back to history and attempts to find the contribution of the Muslim rulers in pre-colonial Bengal in the development of Bengali language and literature. The author contests the argument by Sukumar Sen (1992) that the development of Bengali literature was impeded by the Muslim invasion in the region and proves from studies by various scholars of Bengali literary historiography that Muslim rulers had always been supportive of the development of Bengali language and literature. Billah argued that Persian being the language of the Muslim rulers did not affect the development of Bengali, rather the Bengali language got its final shape and reached a literary status during the Muslim rule which encouraged local poets and composers to write their literary works in Bengali taking materials from Perso-Arabic and local sources.

Finally, there is a report of a seminar organised by the Social and Cultural Movements Group, based at Edge Hill. Roger Spalding reports on the paper presented by Professor Debal Singha Roy, who is based at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, and currently a Commonwealth Fellow at the Open University, Milton Keynes. Professor Roy spoke on: "The Changing Trajectory of Social Movements in Rural India: Practising Anomalies and Conceptual Dilemmas" where he focused principally on the state of West Bengal, by reviewing the numerous social movements that had emerged in that region from the 1940s to the 1980s.

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**Tasleem Shakur**  
**Salman Al-Azami**

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International Centre for Development and Environmental Studies (ICDES)  
Edge Hill, Ormskirk, Lancashire. L39 4QP, UK  
Tel: (+44) (0) 1695 584551 or 584573  
Fax: (+44) (0) 1695 584573 or 57997  
Website: [www.edgehill.ac.uk/icdes](http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/icdes)  
Emails: [shakurt@edgehill.ac.uk](mailto:shakurt@edgehill.ac.uk) and [salman\\_azami@yahoo.com](mailto:salman_azami@yahoo.com)