

Book Review

Niaz, Ilhan., *The State During the British Raj: Imperial Governance in South Asia 1700-1947*. 312pp., Oxford University Press (OUP) Pakistan 2019

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Densely packed with details of institutional developments during the British Raj, the noted Pakistani historian Ilhan Niaz has produced a cogent analysis of the major changes in practices and arrangements that resulted from the colonial era introduction of the rule of law, political representation, civilian control of the military, the concept of constitutional legitimacy and civil society in the Indian subcontinent. Niaz places these developments in the context of long established South Asian traditions of autocratic and arbitrary rule. Writing of the Mughal empire, he declares 'The Timurid Empire was an autocracy mediated through a bureaucratic service nobility... The successor states that emerged from the Timurid Empire were, like it, arbitrary polities ruled by autocrats or autocratic elites that attempted to extract resources on the pattern they were familiar with' (p.54).

Niaz links the step change in institutional developments with Britain's governing traditions which were 'freakishly different' in evolution to that of all previous South Asian Empires and States (p.221). He acknowledges that technological change, for example in communications, also underpinned institutional development, but he might well have expanded this argument. Pragmatic responses to existing Indian socio-economic conditions formed, in his estimation, another factor in the colonial era transformation. Finally, Niaz goes on to point out that in some instances, such as the introduction of meritocracy in higher level bureaucratic appointments, measures introduced in British India even predated reform in the metropole. 'The British Indian state', he declares, 'evolved in a manner that went against the aristocratic grain of Britain and the arbitrary practices of recruitment previously prevailing in India' (p.77).

The book's author pulls together a large range of primary sources to provide the wider background for his argument about the transformative impact of colonial governance. Evidence is included from the ancient Indian empires, but the

focus is mainly on the Mughal empire and its successor states. While the Raj, for example its land revenue operations, built on pre-colonial administrative legacies, Niaz argues convincingly that there were profound changes in the overarching administrative culture and its processes. In a wide-ranging argument, he is not shy of drawing comparisons with China, and even, perhaps in a little too much detail, U.S. policing when discussing the characteristics of law enforcement in British India (see pp. 105-7).

The volume maintains that historians of South Asia have neglected colonial India's institutional transformation because of their emphasis on nationalist struggle. Yet, he argues, the changes introduced by the British form a crucial legacy for what he terms India's 'stable' and Pakistan's 'unstable' constitutional democracies (p.276). In their absence, both states would probably be 'unstable autocracies.' This emphasis on the significance of a joint colonial inheritance reverses the trend in scholarship which has sought to understand the contrasting post-colonial political trajectories of India and Pakistan, at least in part, in terms of the different political economies and political culture they inherited from the Raj.

The conclusion of *The State During the British Raj* maintains that there is evidence of a post-colonial 'reversion' to arbitrary rule. In an assessment that has policy recommendations for both India and Pakistan, Niaz declares that, 'to reject the British imperial legacy is to condemn South Asia to repeat the mistakes of the past and, in doing so, succumb to the pre-British norms of exercising power' (p.227). This theme has been explored in more detail in his earlier publications, such as *The Culture of Power and Governance of Pakistan, 1947-2008* (Oxford University Press, 2010); *Understanding and Addressing the Administrative Aspect of Pakistan's Civil-Military Imbalance* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications 2015).

Historians may well agree that the legacies of British rule have exerted a long-term impact on India's and Pakistan's post-colonial development. Niaz's assessment would also gain considerable support with respect to the transformative effects, in colonial India, of the introduction of private property in land, of representative politics and of a vibrant civil society. Some writers would however call for greater nuance with respect, firstly, to the possibilities of an Indian rather than colonial modernity; and secondly, regarding the ways in which the Raj froze as well as transformed existing gender, class and caste hierarchies. Leading on from this, new civil society arenas along with political representation can be understood as entrenching established landholding elites and creating the circumstances in which communal and caste/tribal identities took on new and more competitive forms. Niaz displays awareness of all these issues, but passes over them to develop his main argument. Similarly, the volume plays down the Raj's highly differentiated impact. This was a feature of its institutional development, alongside its more readily recognised uneven socio-economic impact. Representative democracy, for example, had hardly emerged in British Balochistan before independence. It did not exist in tribal areas and Princely States that were to be incorporated in north western Pakistan.

The volume might have explored the intriguing implications arising from the fact that the Raj both modernised and 'traditionalised' India. This was manifested as much in the future heartland of Pakistan, the Punjab, as in its peripheral areas. Commercialisation of agriculture, private property in land and massive infrastructural development went hand in hand with the bolstering of customary law, the entrenchment of landed elites and the creation of clientelistic politics, revolving around landlord-tenant, spiritual leader-follower (piri-mureedi) and clan (biraderi) ties.

The Raj institutionalised these elements in its definitions of 'agriculturalists' and 'non-agriculturalists.' Political representation and patronage established a loyalist landlord domination of politics. The entrenched clientelism, in what Jinnah termed the 'corner-stone' of Pakistan, is seen by many scholars as an important feature in post-colonial political development. Firstly, it has hampered the establishment of strong political institutions that could consolidate democracy; secondly, it has nurtured a pool of elite support that can be co-opted by military regimes. This colonial inheritance has thus possessed profound long-term consequences.

The volume is nonetheless clear in its general objective to call for a scholarly and policy reengagement with colonial institutional history. Colonial achievements have been obscured, Niaz maintains, by the 'condescension' of 'Americanism, Marxism, Hindu and Islamist theodicy and mainstream postcolonial and nationalist perspectives' (p.9). Much of the material that the book provides is well crafted to support a scholarly recovery of the Raj's governance, its achievements and legacies. The volume is not only timely, but cogently argued. It contains many dozens of interesting

details. I am however left wishing for a greater assessment of the differentiated impact of colonial legacies of governance and the ways in which they have unbalanced the post-colonial landscape. The question arises as to whether this inheritance been more important than the 'wilful neglect' of the processes of colonial institutional development in South Asia which the volume highlights? Setting this to one side, Ilhan Niaz has clearly produced an important study. It forms a valuable addition to his earlier explorations of the political culture and governance of contemporary South Asia.