



## The Chaos of Empire: The British Raj and the Conquest of India, by Jon Wilson

Dinyar Patel

To cite this article: Dinyar Patel (2018) The Chaos of Empire: The British Raj and the Conquest of India, by Jon Wilson, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 41:1, 240-242, DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2018.1412859](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1412859)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1412859>



Published online: 28 Jan 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 65



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

works to the history of language use and literary production. If we accept that ‘an Urdu literary culture developed reflexively in parallel to lexicography’ (p. 192)—and Hakala strongly suggests we should—we must bend our necks, move beyond the stubborn intransigence of those who consider literature a treasure house stocked only with the best and the ‘greats’, and move to consider the non-canonical, the quotidian, even the popular, and the production and consumption of literature and its meanings beyond the elite and canonical, rarefied and reified. This volume is in some ways an important corrective to this tendency—hardly unique to Urdu literary scholarship—and particularly appropriate as lexicography enters online, interactive domains in the twenty-first century (pp. 199–200). Even here, however, Hakala provides a South Asian precedent to a kind of crowd-sourced lexicography in H.H. Wilson’s mid nineteenth-century glossary, the failure of which seemed, in his own words, ‘far from creditable to the public zeal and philological proficiency of the East-India Company’s Civil Service’ (p. 65). If the balance between public interest and proficiency is a hard one to strike in such cases, it is certainly not so in *Negotiating Languages*.

David Lunn

SOAS University of London, UK

✉ dl24@soas.ac.uk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1450-1255>

© 2018 David Lunn

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1412858>



**The Chaos of Empire: The British Raj and the Conquest of India**, by Jon Wilson, New York, PublicAffairs, 2016, 584 pp., US\$29.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9781610392938<sup>1</sup>

This is an important book. For too long, historians have treated British rule in India as some sort of hulking superstructure: all-seeing, all-knowing and all-powerful, guided by particular ideologies through which it reshaped the subcontinent. Jon Wilson rubbishes much of this through a simple and provocative argument. The British imperial regime, he contends, was a fraught endeavour. Its guiding lights were not ideology and coherent policy, but rather nervousness, fear, paranoia and other similarly visceral emotions. It sought power for power’s sake. ‘The British empire was never a project or a system’, he states. ‘It was something far more anxious and chaotic’ (p. 9). Instead of confident political leaders and ideologues bent on a civilising mission, the Raj was propped up by lonely, homesick Britons whose fingers twitched nervously near the triggers of their muskets and rifles. The result was a history of violence: ‘In practice, British actions prolonged and fostered chaos far more than they cultivated security and prosperity’ (p. 498).

Violence is, indeed, a central theme of Wilson’s story. He argues quite persuasively that, from the seventeenth century onward, the British refused to engage in an Indian political culture that stressed constant communication and mediation between competing groups and interests. From the early East India Company officer to the latter-day district collector, Britons had little interest in talking to Indians. They instead attempted to communicate through the barrel of the gun. ‘Britons believed that they could only profit with recourse to violence’, Wilson notes (p. 5). Consequently, they ‘walled themselves off from local society’, constructing forts and conducting business through intimidation, threats and humiliating locals, exhibiting

---

1. This book was originally published as *India Conquered: Britain’s Raj and the Chaos of Empire* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

behaviour that 'seemed to display the small-minded psychology of the embattled bully' (pp. 77, 75–6).

It was a spectacularly unsuccessful strategy. Indians soon formed a terrible impression of these *angrez* interlopers. Not surprisingly, the East India Company suffered many a humiliating defeat through its policy of constant provocation. In Wilson's book, we read of several long-forgotten episodes that nevertheless heightened the paranoia and anxiety of Britons in India: for example, the brutal massacre of Company employees at Anjengo in 1721, payback for their quarrelsome and insulting behaviour. But the British did not learn: 'Defeat was followed by a desire for revenge and for new lands to conquer' (p. 79).

By constructing a history of defeats, setbacks and humiliations, Wilson helps restore some balance in scholarship on colonial India. Many post-colonial works, Saidian or otherwise, tend to dwell on the European colonial scholar or official: it is he (and, rarely, she) who wields the ideology, power and knowledge that reshape colonial society. The colonial subject is, consequently, reduced to a passive bystander in some grand imperial project. In Wilson's work, Indians emerge as significant actors who regularly send the British scampering to the closest fort or waiting ship. Thus, we have Kanhoji Angre, the Maratha admiral who inflicted a series of devastating defeats on British forces in Bombay in the early eighteenth century. Significantly, Wilson argues that, even after major victories, the British did not succeed in establishing any sense of real control or order. They still refused to properly communicate and negotiate with their new subjects. The period between 1798 and 1818, when the British supposedly consolidated their power across most of the subcontinent, was in fact beset by constant conflict. Indians regularly resisted the Company's policies and launched insurgencies; the prospect of raids by Pindaris sent shivers of fear down many a British spine. 'Operations to suppress insurgency after the supposed moment of "conquest" were more violent than conquest itself, and still left British authority shaky' (p. 167).

This narrative of violence, intransigence and paranoia works well through the Mutiny-Rebellion of 1857, but it becomes more wobbly afterwards. Focusing on infrastructure such as railways and irrigation, or the introduction of famine camps in the late nineteenth century, Wilson tries to outline 'a new kind of British power on the subcontinent', but the result is a little muddled. It might have been more fruitful to instead pursue different types of violence that the British committed during Crown Rule; for example, violence through neglect. Cavalier regard for Indian life condemned tens of millions to death during the devastating famines of the late nineteenth century. Millions more suffered through the Raj's unwillingness to properly fund education, health and sanitation. These were some of the central grievances of India's early political reformers and nationalists. Through the language they employed (exhibited in works such as Romesh Chunder Dutt's *Indian Famines: Their Causes and Prevention*), we know that they recognised official neglect as a fundamentally violent act.

Additionally, Wilson could have avoided pursuing some arguments. He claims that, prior to World War I, 'India played little significant role in Britain's projection of power overseas. Neither economically nor militarily did Britain rely on the subcontinent' (p. 390). This is simply not true. Militarily, the 'Great Game' with Russia had far wider strategic implications beyond the subcontinent. Furthermore, Indian troops were regularly deployed abroad (this was another early nationalist grievance), such as to Abyssinia in 1867 and 1868, or to northern China during the Boxer Rebellion. It is far more difficult to dismiss India's economic importance to Britain. As the producer of the opium by which Britain satiated its appetite for Chinese tea, or as the giant customer base for Lancashire cloth, India was an absolutely vital component in the British economic calculus.

These are comparatively minor points. They do not detract from Wilson's overall accomplishment in producing an innovative and sweeping narrative of British Indian history, one

that is also thankfully free of jargon and over-theorisation: for this reason, *The Chaos of Empire* would make for recommended reading amongst the general British public. Wilson argues that, in 1947, the ‘collapse of British power in India was marked by remarkable (*sic*) little stress or anxiety’, and that most Britons quickly reconciled themselves to the new geo-political realities (p. 494). In light of Brexit—which, to be fair, took place after the book was written—and the recent upsurge in imperial nostalgia, it is clear that this process of reconciliation is not quite over. By titling his last chapter ‘The Great Delusion’, Wilson has unwittingly given fit commentary on historical memory and amnesia in Great Britain today. Hopefully, certain readers will take the hint.

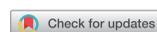
Dinyar Patel

Department of History, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA

 Pateldi@mailbox.sc.edu

© 2018 Dinyar Patel

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1412859>



**Tamils and the Nation: India and Sri Lanka Compared**, by Madurika Rasaratnam, London, Hurst & Co., 2016, x + 353 pp., Appendices, £22.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781849044783

It is certainly refreshing to read a study that does not join the facile chorus of condemnation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Tamil nationalism as ‘terrorist and evil’. Madurika Rasaratnam argues powerfully and with compelling evidence her case for looking at the LTTE as a legitimate expression of national aspiration, simultaneously denouncing Sinhala-Buddhist pretensions to national and political hegemony. Her comparative approach contrasting nationalist politics and the political aspirations of movements in Tamil Nadu and in Sri Lanka is original because it is rarely employed in this way.<sup>1</sup>

The author asks why movements with nearly identical core values and aspirations took such different trajectories: she puts it down to differential processes of political mobilisation in India and Sri Lanka that tied perceptions of ethnicity and nation into different narratives. The key activities that shaped these processes she defines as the ideological framework, the incorporation of significant cleavages and interests, and ensuring support through direct political mobilisation. In turn, these processes led to an inclusive perception of Indian national identity, whereas, in Sri Lanka, it turned out to be divisive. After a detailed introduction setting out her analytical framework and an overview of the theoretical and empirical literature, the first part of the book describes developments in India and Sri Lanka alternately from colonial times onwards. Rasaratnam argues that the development of a certain type of national and ethnic identity and aspiration is neither static, nor inevitable or structurally determined. More important than structure, she says, are social and political processes and the type of political mobilisation that follows. She maintains that in Indian—or better Congress—perception, India was composed of different groups and ethnicities whose agendas did not have to be overcome or eliminated, but needed to be incorporated into the national project on the basis of their very differences. In this view, Tamils (later Tamil Nadu) were unquestionably an

---

1. Dagmar Hellmann, *Tamil - Sprache als politisches Symbol* (Heidelberg: Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1984), has a small chapter.