Resurgence of Colonial Perspectives in Contemporary Indian Historiography

Abstract:
The revisionist view of colonialism which seeks to portray colonialism in a positive light has now become once again fashionable, though it actually repeats colonial arguments which are often more than a hundred years old, dating from the 19th century. In the economic sphere it is being argued (Niall Ferguson, Tirthankar Roy, Meghnad Desai, etc.) that colonialism had a positive impact on the colonies, creating the conditions for capitalist development. This approach includes the denial of the critical role played by colonial surplus appropriation in the transition to capitalism in Europe and North America (Kocka). Surprisingly this is true even among a section of the Left (Maurice Dobb, Perry Anderson, Robert Brenner, etc.). An engrained eurocentricism evident even among the most sophisticated Marxists historians, like Eric Hobsbawm, perhaps explains this. However, others on the Left (such as Irfan Habib, Sven Beckert, A. K. Bagchi, etc.) question this view. In the political sphere, too, the resurgence of the colonial position is not limited to clearly neo-colonial trends represented by the so-called Cambridge school (Anil Seal, B. R. Tomlinson, etc., with stiff competition from Oxford, cf. Judith Brown, Maria Misra, etc.), but is now finding takers not only among ‘radicals’ like Arundhati Roy, and the motley stream occupied by post modernism, ‘post-colonial’ culture studies, subaltern studies, but also among some Marxists like Perry Anderson. They have launched a vicious critique of Indian nationalism and the Indian nation state, demonizing every nationalist icon that emerged in India from the secular platform of the Indian National Congress (from Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Azad to Jawaharlal Nehru), using essentially the tools of analysis perfected by the colonial Indian state. The talk will discuss these developments and attempt to deconstruct the underlying rationale.

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