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0521663601 - Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870

C. A. Bayly

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## Introduction

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A central purpose of this book is to examine British political intelligence in north India between the 1780s and the 1860s. It describes the networks of Indian running-spies, newswriters and knowledgeable secretaries whom officials of the East India Company recruited and deployed in their efforts to secure military, political and social information. It considers how the colonial authorities interpreted and misinterpreted the material derived from these sources. It draws attention to the gaps, distortions and ‘panics’ about malign ‘native’ plots which afflicted the system of imperial surveillance within north India and, for comparison’s sake, outside its borders, in Nepal, Burma and beyond the north-western frontier. Finally, the book examines the extent to which intelligence failures and successes contributed to the course of the Rebellion of 1857–9, the collapse of the East India Company’s government and the form of the following pacification.

The quality of military and political intelligence available to European colonial powers was evidently a critical determinant of their success in conquest and profitable governance. Equally, this information provided the raw material on which Europeans drew when they tried to understand the politics, economic activities and culture of their indigenous subjects. The book, therefore, addresses some of the most traditional as well as some of the most recent and controversial issues in imperial and south Asian historiography.

The study also concerns communication and the movement of knowledge within Indian society, examining the role of communities of writers in the bazaars and the culture of political debate. It is a study of social communication in the sense used in Karl Deutsch’s pioneering work.<sup>1</sup> It considers those specialists who helped to articulate indigenous systems of knowledge and keep information, ideas and gossip flowing: the astrologers, physicians, experts in the philosopher’s stone,

<sup>1</sup> Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication. An enquiry into the foundations of nationality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge, 1974).

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midwives, marriage-makers, and other knowledgeable people who brought news from one community and region to another. It was the density and flexibility of indigenous routines of social communication which explains why north Indians were able to make such striking use of the printing press, the newspaper and the public meeting once those innovations finally began to spread rapidly amongst them in the 1830s and 1840s. While modern Indian history should certainly not be depicted as a single grand narrative culminating in the emergence of nationalism, the density of social communication demonstrated by this book does, in fact, help to explain why political leaders in a poor country with a relatively low rate of general literacy should have been able to create a widely diffused and popular nationalist movement so early.

These two systems – the colonial state’s surveillance agencies and the autonomous networks of social communicators – overlapped and interpenetrated. But the overlap was incomplete. The meeting between British and Indian agencies was riven by suspicion, distortion and violence. For here, at the point of intersection between political intelligence and indigenous knowledge, colonial rule was at its most vulnerable. Here, new communities of knowledgeable Indians which used the colonial state’s communications and ideologies independently of it, or against it, began to emerge even in the early nineteenth century. As the expatriate newspaper, *The Friend of India*, remarked in 1836, echoing the administrator, Sir John Malcolm, ‘our Indian Empire is one of opinion’ and ‘the progress of knowledge’ would probably ‘entail the separation of India from England’.<sup>2</sup> A contemporary British officer, seeing a pile of newly printed vernacular books in the office of Mountstuart Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay, exclaimed in similar terms: ‘it is our highroad back to Europe’.<sup>3</sup>

Neither Indian historians nor historians of other European dependencies have paid very much attention to the intelligence or propaganda systems of colonial powers,<sup>4</sup> though intelligence studies have become a major industry for European and American historians who have come to regard political surveillance and social communication as a critical

<sup>2</sup> ‘Report of the General Committee for Public Instruction’, *Friend of India*, 27 Oct. 1836; cf. J. Malcolm, *Political History of India* (London, 1826), I, 82. He defined ‘opinion’ in terms of ‘Gramscian’ ideological hegemony as ‘that respect and awe with which the comparative superiority of our knowledge, justice and system of rule, have inspired the inhabitants of our own territories . . .’ I am grateful to Mr Nigel Chancellor for pointing out the original reference.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in K. Ballhatchet, *Social Policy and Social Change in Western India, 1817–1830* (London, 1957), p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> But see Milton Israel, *Communications and Power. Propaganda and the press in the Indian nationalist struggle, 1920–47* (Cambridge, 1994).

feature of the modern state and society.<sup>5</sup> Recent works on India have considered the related area of ‘colonial knowledge’ or ‘discourse’, focussing on the learned theories of orientalism, rather than on day-to-day information and its sources.<sup>6</sup> Several scholars, too, have begun to consider the ‘native informant’ and the impact of the press and print capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, state surveillance and social communication remains a poorly studied area. By contrast, some of the more important works of fiction to emerge from the Indo-British encounter are located precisely on that cusp between British intelligence and indigenous knowledge. Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*,<sup>8</sup> to take the most celebrated example, introduces a cast of characters which find pale reflections in this study. In Kipling’s novel the reader meets Kim himself, the Eurasian spy in the Great Game of espionage in central Asia, and Hurree Babu, the learned native informant. Alongside them Kipling memorably pictures the eddies of news and gossip flowing down the Grand Trunk Road from Lahore to Banaras, carried onward by Afghan horse-dealers, Hindu bankers and pilgrims destined for the holy places of Hinduism and Buddhism.

### The information order

The book seeks to establish a broad framework for the study of these two elements – state’s intelligence and social communication – by using the concept of the ‘information order’. This term has been adapted from the work of the economic geographer Manuel Castells who has written of the ‘informational city’.<sup>9</sup> Castells treats the new information technology

<sup>5</sup> For the early modern period, Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic 1675–1740. An exploration of communications and community* (New York, 1986); P. Fritz, ‘The Anti-Jacobite intelligence system of the English ministers, 1715–45’, *Historical Journal*, 16, 1973, 265–89; H.A. Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Oxford, 1990); for the modern period the journal *Intelligence and National Security*, R.J. Poplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence* (London, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The most celebrated example is Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Nicholas Dirks, ‘Castes of Mind’, *Representations*, 37, winter 1992, 56–77; Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History. Constructing South India, 1795–1895* (California, 1994); Francis Robinson, ‘Technology and religious change. Islam and the impact of print’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 1, 1993, 229–51.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: knowledge and the fantasy of empire* (London, 1993), pp. 22–30, who notes that in *Kim*, social knowledge has become coextensive with military intelligence; in the Indian system they had always been closely allied.

<sup>9</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Informational City. Information technology, economic restructuring and the urban-regional process* (Oxford, 1989). No ‘information’ can, of course, be perceived and ordered unless the observer has conceptual paradigms within which to apprehend it. Our use of the word ‘information’, however, implies observations perceived at a relatively low level of conceptual definition, on the validity of whose claims to truth people from different regions, cultures and linguistic groups might

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of the late twentieth century as a type of social formation rather than as a simple adjunct to existing economic forces or a neutral technological process. He shows how in north America after 1960, information technology changed the pattern of urban living, speeded processes of de-industrialisation and income differentiation, and 'de-skilled' large parts of the work force, especially those already disadvantaged such as poorly educated minority groups and women. What is important about his approach is that he sees the generators of knowledge, the institutions of information collection and diffusion and the discourses to which they give rise as autonomous forces for economic and social change. They are not reduced to the status of contingencies of late-industrial capitalism or the modern state. Knowledge itself is a social formation; knowledgeable people form distinct and active social segments with their own interests. For Castells, intellectual property, including education, was as much the foundation of social class and economies as financial or landed property was for earlier generations of social theorists. Rather than being residual categories relegated to the end of the history book in chapters entitled 'intellectual developments' or 'communications', these considerations should be central to studies of social change. Such an approach ought to bring benefits to Indian history, a subject whose proponents have until recently been preoccupied with the sociology of institutions to the detriment of the sociology of knowledge. Equally, Indian intellectual history has been more radically divorced from its social context than in many other areas of historical study. It needs to be restored to that context.

What we have called the information order should not be seen as a 'thing', any more than a state or an economy is a thing; it is a heuristic device, or a field of investigation, which can be used to probe the organisation, values and limitations of past societies. It is not separate from the world of power or economic exploitation, but stands both prior to it and dependent on it. It can be considered to have a degree of autonomy from politics or economic structure. Thus some powers, or powerful groups, with finite economic resources and little brute force – the Republic of Venice in the eighteenth century<sup>10</sup> or the House of Rothschild in the nineteenth, for instance – have had exceptionally well-organised and flexible information systems which allowed them to make

broadly agree. 'Knowledge' implies socially organised and taxonomised information, about which such agreement would be less sure. In north Indian languages 'information' would be rendered by words such as *khabr* and *suchna*; knowledge by *ilm* or *vidya*, though under some circumstances *vidya* might mean something more akin to 'occult' knowledge, while spiritual knowledge would be represented by *gyana* or *jnan*.

<sup>10</sup> Venice maintained a complex system of internal and external espionage, besides controlling the movement of the commercial secrets of glassmaking, etc.

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their limited caches of power and resources work harder. Likewise, societies at similar levels of economic development, when judged by per capita income, had different styles of information order which shaped their capacity to change internally or resist external pressures.

In early modern societies, the information order was decentralised, consisting of many overlapping groups of knowledge-rich communities. It was not mediated as in contemporary industrial societies by a dominant state or commercial communications sector. Schooling and literacy were specialist resources open only to particular elites who used their learning as badges of status. Knowledge was only slowly becoming a public good, a citizen's right, or an adjunct of state power. As yet, it was deeply embodied in the status of the particular informant or knowledge community. Kings and their officials collected and deployed knowledge in unstandardised forms because what should be known was not yet determined by any dominant notion of a critical bureaucracy or public. All the same, the school, the royal writers' chancellery, the public scribe, the spy, the runner, the body of physicians and astrologers, and other specialists tended to make up a loosely-knit constellation of powers in society. In Indian soothsaying as in its European equivalent, all these actors were conjoined under the sign of Mercury, messenger of the Gods, or Budh-Graha, affording us an indigenous licence for the category.<sup>11</sup>

Viewed from the perspective of information, however, pre-modern societies differed greatly from one another in the status and uses of literacy and also in the quality and effectiveness of the systems of information collection and distribution deployed by the state and other agencies. Later Tokugawa Japan, for example, supporting more than 40 per cent male education, mass lithography and a system of commercial horseback messengers,<sup>12</sup> stands in sharp contrast to contemporary societies, such as the Ottoman Middle East<sup>13</sup> and South Asia, which possessed broadly similar levels of per capita wealth. In the latter two societies, lithography was slow to develop and a clerical elite monopolised literacy which was the preserve of little more than 10 per cent of the male population. The level of state surveillance common in Tokugawa Japan was also rarely aspired to in India, though comprehen-

<sup>11</sup> The *Bhuvana-Dipaka* cited in M. Ramakrishna Bhat, *Essentials of Horary Astrology or Prasnepadavi* (Delhi, 1992), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> K. Moriya, 'Urban networks and information networks', in C. Nakane and S. Oishi (eds.), C. Totman (tr.), *Tokugawa Japan* (Tokyo, 1990), pp. 97–124; as early as 1692, 7,300 book titles had been published in Japan. Kyoto alone had 494 publishing houses in the eighteenth century. *No book* was published in India, by Indians, until c. 1800.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: the historian Mustafa Ali. 1541–1600* (Princeton, 1986).

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sive records of land measurement and assessment had evolved early in the subcontinent. In contrast again, the early modern states of south-east Asia were more concerned with counting people than with counting revenue, partly because they were constrained by shortages of labour rather than of cash. Burmese and Thai rulers, therefore, organised general population censuses earlier than their counterparts in India and parts of west Asia.

These differences were partly determined by economics. Monetised economies required different forms of knowledge collection and archive-making from those where customary labour dues or shares of produce were taken by the elites. At the same time, differences in ideology and religious practice also moulded contrasting information orders. The reformed Buddhist hierarchies of early modern Thailand and Burma, for example, attempted to impart standard rules of life to the wider population<sup>14</sup> in a way which was impossible for the loose networks of Indian Brahmin priests. Monks and kings consequently encouraged a more widespread system of popular education than existed in most parts of north India.

### Colonial knowledge

European colonial states faced obvious problems in engaging with the information order of a conquered society, an essential task if they were to build an intelligence system capable of securing their grip on the territory's resources. The conquerors needed to reach into and manipulate the indigenous systems of communication in new colonies. But because these indigenous systems differed from each other in important respects, colonial regimes in turn came to preside over widely differing information orders. Simple difficulties of language made the Europeans initially dependent on the skills of 'linguists', 'translators' and 'men of two tongues' or, as the Hindustani has it, *dubashs*. These informants were inevitably drawn from the very communities which the western powers sought to dominate. Even if they served their alien masters loyally, they moved in realms of life and thought which they wished to keep hidden from the rulers. The basic fear of the colonial official or settler was, consequently, his lack of indigenous knowledge and ignorance of the 'wiles of the natives'. He feared their secret letters, their drumming and 'bush telegraphy' and the nightly passage of seditious agents masquerading as priests and holy men.

Some contemporary social theorists have gone further and concluded

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *Cambridge History of South East Asia*, I, (Cambridge, 1992), 537–42.



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that Europeans never knew anything significant about indigenous societies, and indeed can never know anything about them because of European conceptual biases. What passed, or passes, for European knowledge of the Other is, in fact, a mere web of rhetorical devices designed to give legitimacy to conquest.<sup>15</sup> This position is too extreme. European rule over Asians and Africans could not have been sustained without a degree of understanding of the conquered societies. In India, colonial knowledge was derived to a considerable extent from indigenous knowledge, albeit torn out of context and distorted by fear and prejudice. People from different races and cultures, possessing different degrees of power, could and did achieve a broad agreement over claims to truth about the phenomena they observed. This study, therefore, broadly accepts Stuart Schwartz's view that 'despite the haze of linguistic and cultural assumptions that limit observation ... other cultures existed outside the mind of the observer' and they could be observed and understood 'in an admittedly imperfect approximation of a reality'.<sup>16</sup>

In our view, the problems the British faced in understanding and controlling events in south Asia derived as much from the shape of India's information order and the superficiality of colonial rule as from any particular cultural bias or prejudice resulting from the assimilation of knowledge to power. The British never controlled the bulk of capital, the means of production or the means of persuasion and communication<sup>17</sup> in the subcontinent. Because they were not, in general, concerned to spread their faith or mingle their genes with the Indian population, the British could not count on an inflow of 'affective knowledge', that is knowledge which derived from the creation of moral communities within the colonial society by means of conversion, acculturation or interbreeding. Indian Christians and Armenians were, of course, important informants; Eurasians played a big role, especially in the generation of military knowledge for the British conquerors in the later eighteenth century. But the situation was quite different from that obtaining, for example, in early southern Africa where large mixed-race communities and acculturated or converted Africans ('Hottentots';

<sup>15</sup> This position has sometimes been associated with Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), but it is much more typical of his radical disciples, see John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism. History, theory and the arts* (Manchester, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Stuart B. Schwartz, 'Introduction' in Schwartz (ed.) *Implicit Understandings. Observing, reporting and reflecting on the encounters between Europeans and other peoples in the early modern era* (New York, 1994), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> This term is taken from Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of a theory of structuration* (Cambridge, 1984), and conveys part of what I mean by information order.

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Khoikhoi) provided guides, mediators and informants.<sup>18</sup> Again, the British in India could not rely on that 'patrimonial knowledge' on which independent states and some colonial governments could draw. This was the knowledge of the expatriate or mixed-race landowner or commercial man who acted, albeit in his own interest, as the eyes and ears of the colonial government. In India, as opposed to French Algeria or British southern Africa, white or mixed-raced farmers, or sub-imperialist commercial men, such as the Indians in East Africa, were not widely available to create and transmit information to the rulers.

In India, then, the British were forced to master and manipulate the information systems of their Hindu and Mughal predecessors; this was especially true before 1830. Later, there was indeed change in these systems, though this was limited in its geographical range and impact. Indigenous agencies were modified, given new tasks and set to collecting different types of information from their predecessors. Public instruction created a new type of native informant. The statistical movement, which gathered pace after 1830, had a powerful impact. It raised the status of the expatriate expert, the 'old India hand' in the Indian Medical Service or the Posts and Intelligence Department of the Army and gave the colonial authorities a superficial knowledge of conditions in the major stations and among subordinate Indian servants. Away from the purview of the district offices, however, the British were still ignorant of much that was transpiring, as the events of 1857 brutally revealed. Their chain of surveillance was at its most vulnerable where the body of elite, literate officers stretching down from the district town linked up with the hereditary servants and information collectors of the village. This link snapped in 1857, was partly welded together in the later nineteenth century but was rapidly corroded again during the twentieth century. In short, the surveillance agencies of both pre-colonial and colonial government in India were flexible and at times penetrating, but they also seem labile and thinly spread when compared, for instance, to the density of state institutions at village level in Japan. In parallel with political power through long periods of Indian history, information and knowledge was decentralised. From the heyday of Mughal rule to the present this has confronted the emerging state with serious obstacles in its dealings with regional and village elites.

When we move on to consider the broader impact of British rule on the information order of north India, similar patterns will emerge. On the face of it, the simultaneous introduction of public instruction, the

<sup>18</sup> Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson, *The Oxford History of South Africa*, I (Oxford, 1969), 69–70; Robert Ross, *Adam Kok's Griquas. A study in the development of stratification in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1976).



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printing press, public debate in newspapers, the English language, libraries and dense archives transformed Indian society in the nineteenth century more thoroughly than colonial capitalism transformed its economy. This study does not, however, go as far as postulating a revolution in mentalities consequent on the rise of 'print capitalism' as Benedict Anderson does for Indonesia and other colonial territories.<sup>19</sup> It argues that north India's response to these modern forms of information diffusion and retrieval was determined to a considerable extent by existing communities of knowledge, styles of reasoned debate and patterns of social communication. Even in realms of scientific knowledge such as the disciplines of astronomy, geography and medicine, where western theories and techniques were to achieve dominance in the long term, the imprint of earlier indigenous sciences and the virtue of indigenous practitioners remained significant for most Indians. The information order of colonial India retained distinctly Indian features, even while it was absorbing and responding to the profound influences set in motion by the European rulers. The first chapter examines this indigenous inheritance.

<sup>19</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (revised edn, London, 1994).

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## 1 Prologue: surveillance and communication in early modern India

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Without good political and military intelligence the British could never have established their rule in India or consolidated the dominant international position of the United Kingdom. During the years of conquest, British knowledge of the country was drawn largely from Indian sources and supplied by Indian agents. This introductory chapter analyses the indigenous systems of political surveillance which the British sought to capture and manipulate in the years after 1760.

Indian statesmen had long been concerned with good intelligence gathering, regarding surveillance as a vital dimension of the science of kingship. Their aim was not to create a police state which monitored the political attitudes of subjects, so much as to detect moral transgressions among their officers and the oppression of the weak by the powerful. Their systems were flexible and adaptable, but in Indian kingdoms the agencies of the state were generally not as densely clustered in the localities as they were in most European and some other Asian societies. For this reason royal intelligence was heavily dependent on informal networks of knowledgeable people. The chapter goes on, therefore, to consider the context of popular communication and literacy in which the royal agents worked, enabling us to conceive of the evolution of the pre-colonial information order in broad terms. It ends by describing the slow and piecemeal process by which the East India Company began to 'know' the country which it ultimately conquered.

### **Royal wisdom and intelligence: the tradition**

In theory, Indian statesmen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw kingdoms as treasure-houses of knowledge as well as accumulations of wealth and power. For example, the Maratha 'Royal Edict', a Hindu political text of the early eighteenth century, remarked that forts were 'the essence of the whole kingdom'.<sup>1</sup> These forts were not only strong-

<sup>1</sup> S.V. Puntambekar, 'The Ajnapatra or Royal Edict, relating to the principles of Maratha State Policy', *Journal of Indian History*, 8, 1929, p. 219.