

Lahiri-Choudhury, Deep Kanta: *Telegraphic Imperialism. Crisis and Panic in the Indian Empire, c.1830-1920*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010. ISBN: 9780230205062; 277 S.

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This is an ambitious book, and as with all ambitious works it both fascinates and frustrates. Its ambitions cause the author to sometimes take on too much, and the focus of the work slips. Choudhury's work is about Empire, science and the technology it enables, and India. It is situated at the intersection of science and Empire through the emergence in the second half of the Nineteenth Century of electric telegraphy, the impact of the „New Imperialism“ on Britain's Indian Empire, and the centrality of India to the imperial project. Choudhury claims that, contrary to the received wisdom that the communications hub of the Empire, and thus the command and control center, was securely located in London, India acted as a communications hub for the formal and informal Empire that developed from Egypt to Australasia in the second half of the Nineteenth Century. Choudhury also claims that the increasing velocity and volume of information flow caused a series of global „information panics“ that became particularly problematic as the 1800s turned to the 1900s.

Although the term „New Imperialism“ came into popular usage in Britain after 1880 historians have not generally accepted that there was any real break in the process of imperialism during the 1800s. Choudhury argues „there was something new about imperialism after 1850 and that British popular perception was shaped through the experience of the first global electronic network“ (p. 5). One interpretation is that Britain kept acquiring territories to ensure its geopolitical security, especially in the light of the „Great Game“ against Russia. Choudhury argues that the defense of Imperial lines of telegraphic communication was a far greater imperative (p. 99) and that „the newness of „New Imperialism“ lay not in its ideology but its technology“ (p. 122). Britain came to represent itself as a morally superior form of Empire based on rational science and the technology it made

possible, the cornerstone of which was the telegraph. This is a useful corrective to our evolving understanding of the British Empire.

Choudhury makes an interesting and convincing argument that the particular application of science that allowed, in particular, submarine telegraphy, was highly conservative, inasmuch as the central figure of that science, William Thomson, conceived of the flow of electrons as akin to a hydraulic flow, a fundamentally mechanistic analogy. Regrettably, Choudhury's account of the competing technologies ultimately frustrates. Thomson's embrace of the mechanistic analogy led him to ignore James Clerk Maxwell's field theory. This put telegraphy under increasing threat from two directions, only one of which Choudhury analyzes. Understanding Maxwell's equations would eventually allow Heinrich Hertz, Oliver Lodge, and Guilielmo Marconi to apply Maxwellian field theory to wireless telegraphy, which in the hands of a Marconi Company armed with Lodge's patents and using vacuum tube technology developed by Bell Labs would prove to be a much cheaper technology than the submarine cables for imperial communications by the 1920s. The consequences of this are ably summarized on pages 127-128. Frustratingly, despite the excellent comparison of Thomson and Maxwell on pages 125-127, Maxwell's name is not in the index. Missing entirely is the attack upon terrestrial telegraphy mounted by the telephone. The first American to fully understand and apply Maxwellian field theory in telecommunications was the marvelously named John Stone Stone at Bell Labs, who provided the scientific basis to fulfill Bell Telephone's push after 1900 to expand to true long distance telephony using first line loading then, by 1915, vacuum tube amplifiers to achieve transcontinental service.

So where, and how, did India fit into the „New Empire,“ especially in the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny, which forced the ouster of the East India Company and the imposition of direct rule. Here is one of the strengths of Choudhury's book, drawing as it does on Indian as well as British sources. At the same time the author's assumption that the reader will have a deep knowledge of Indian history and politics is challenging to all but

Indianists. Choudhury gives us a fascinating account of the development of Indian terrestrial telegraphy before the Mutiny, and debunks the popular historical understanding that the British were able to use that network to mount an effective resistance to the Mutiny. The technology developed in India was unique and ultimately seriously flawed. The pre-Mutiny network was also unique in that it was entirely unrelated to railroad construction. In Europe and, especially, the United States of America the telegraph emerged as first the handmaiden of the railroads and then the conveyor of financial information, allowing the emergence of national and global futures markets, initially for agricultural products, the first based on Chicago, the second on London. In India the telegraph was truly a tool of the imperial state rather than of commerce, and once that pattern was established it tended to persist through such policies as requiring transmissions only in English. Choudhury makes clear, however, that Indian merchants, especially those in the financially important opium trade, were often able to subvert such policies. Certainly one cannot argue against his (re)positioning of India as central to the British imperial structures of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries rather than merely a puppet. The Direct Rule imposed after the Mutiny tended to be a concept very much lost in translation, however hard British proconsuls may have tried. India continued to have one of the world's largest armies, and even though that army often came to Britain's aid, such as in various colonial wars of the late 1800s and in the Middle East during World War One, it was scarcely under full British control.

The peculiar contribution of this book for this reviewer lies in the understanding that „the Empire followed the telegraph as much as the telegraph followed the British flag“ (p. 91). In a Nineteenth Century economy still heavily dependent on the output of the organic world Britain's logical concerns were food, agricultural raw materials for industry, such as cotton, and markets for its industrial products and financial services. But the world economy was turning by 1900 to one more focused on other flows: as Choudhury notes „the telegraph provided a field and context

in which newer strategic imperatives such as control over petroleum emerged toward the close of the nineteenth century“ (p. 82). The telegraph was important to the „New Imperialism“ of the late 1800s but it is also an important model for the management of the unstated imperial projects of the late 1900s and early 2000s.

Two sections seemed poorly related to the book, if fascinating: Chapter 7 on the Telegraph General Strike of 1908; and the material on information panics. Clearly the Strike is of great interest and Choudhury's claim that the telegraphists formed an early „virtual community“ is provocative. Given the claims made by Choudhury with regard to the role of information panics in accelerating geopolitical instability in the late 1800s they deserve to be the subject of a book by themselves.

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