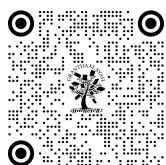


SPLENDID ENCOUNTERS: INTER-RACIAL INTIMACY AND EAST INDIA COMPANY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to offer insights on the efflorescence of East India Company along coastal areas of the Indian Ocean and its consequent flourishing into a British empire with base in, what later transformed into urban mercantile centers and port cities of Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. It further examines the emergence of the phenomenon of going native that was prevalent until late eighteenth century in India; a picture that was gradually replaced by the polarized versions of east-west relationship.

Keywords: Coastal, Domesticity, Inter-Racial, Going Native, Port Cities

1. INTRODUCTION

To write the story of an ocean, then, is to write the story of those who have traversed it, who have inhabited its shores, and who, through the power of the imagination, have conveyed its many meanings.

- Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives

Trade and commerce are known to flourish in an environment of mutual cooperation and collaboration with resultant proliferation of cultures and ideas of those who come into contact with other. In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese and

later the Dutch dominated the Indian Ocean and as a consequence had established their colonies on India's coastal areas. Goa being one such important site also witnessed cross cultural interactions and interracial intimacies as ports are not simply thresholds for entry and exit. Rather they function as receptacles for peoples and goods from diverse foreign lands. One could extend Ashley Jackson's labelling of "ocean as a connector" to ports as well since the two mutually constitute each other. Within these larger networks also flourish systems of patronage and friendships apart from circulation of material goods in which they seemingly interact. The Portuguese were the precursor to the later Anglo-Indian connections and intimacies that these connectors helped materialize. Afonso de Albuquerque and Vasco de Gama are known to have encouraged miscegenation that resulted in 'intangible Portuguese legacies in Asia' apart from long lasting control on trade on Indian Ocean route (Jayasuriya, 2008). Intending to capitalize on the profitable spice trade in the present-day Indonesia, a bunch of Englishmen too set out on a voyage to East Indies which laid the foundation for the East India Company.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Bombay on the Malabar coast belonging to the East India Company of England, 1754 (oil on canvas), by Jan van Ryne.

2. THE ORIGINS OF EAST INDIA COMPANY

Having contracted a charter in 1600 a group of Englishmen set sail on the first fleet of ships from England in 1601. Having failed to make a breakthrough in the spice trade in East Indies, they settled for India. In 1608, William Hawkins, on behalf of the East India Company, led the first English mission to the Mughal court to establish a factory. Though he did not succeed in this, his fluency in Turkish impressed Jahangir who rewarded Hawkins with an administrative position and an Indian wife. It was however not until 1612 when Sir Thomas Roe, the English ambassador of James I, succeeded in negotiating treaties with Jahangir which would allow the English to trade at any port in the Mughal Empire. This gradually resulted in the cropping up of "a small cluster of factories on the Indian coasts- on the west coast factories were established in Surat and Bombay... On the east coast Fort St.

George at Madras emerged as the main British settlements. Further north, in Bengal, Fort William was established at Calcutta in 1696 (Anthony J. Farrington)."

The importance of the Indian Ocean in this wide spanning network of connections of people and cultures can be gauged from the fact that there were many contending rivals that sought to wrest control into their hands which would lead to unimaginable fabled riches of the East. "To control the Indian Ocean" writes Moorthy and Jamal, historians of maritime studies, "was to control its trade and riches, and was a guarantee, historically, to its global ascendancy" (p. 2). Consequently, while the British habitats were limited mostly to these coastal settlements in the initial decades of their arrival, they gradually managed to elbow out their rivals in French, Danes, Dutch and Portuguese by allying with and providing military support to the contending Indian parties. As a result of the burgeoning commercial enterprise of the Europeans, the port cities of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta emerged as independent British presidencies. They were European creations in the manners in which these spaces were specifically crafted for the use and consumption of the Europeans.

The history of the establishment of the coastal cities of Madras and Calcutta is also peppered with interesting anecdotes that point to the easy relations between the Europeans and the natives; an infatuation of sorts as it were. About the founding of Madras, the story goes that its founder, Francis Day chose the site, a small fishing village, even though inhospitable just because he was besotted by a local lady at San Thome. Similarly, about Job Charnock who founded Calcutta, it is said that he was so taken in by a young Indian girl who was about to be immolated on the pyre of her deceased husband that he swiftly rushed to rescue her and ended marrying her and living with her like a local. A growing number of studies into the early history of colonial India and urban studies of the port cities in particular point to a larger historical phenomenon of mixed-race desire and domesticity that was made possible because of the trade and commercial routes; a history of interracial intimacy and the phenomenon of going native that prevalent in the early days of the British presence in India.

3. CROSSING OVER: INTER-RACIAL DESIRE & DOMESTICITY

In what became a common phenomenon of localizing - adapting and appropriating Indian modes of living- the British occupied different points in this spectrum of 'going native'. The phenomenon entailed different things for different people depending on where one came from; while for some it entailed smoking hookah, eating betel leaves and watching nautch girls, for others it simply implied cohabitation and an enjoyment of domestic and conjugal intimacies with Indian *bibis*. For some like William Jones, a professed Indophile, it meant a total immersion of the self in indigenous ways both personal and intellectual such that he came to be variously known as 'Stuart Hindoo' and 'General Pundit'. In doing so they frequently crossed borders- social, cultural and political- as observed in Britain though not without its own share of suspicion and scandal that did startle people back home in England, if not in the trading lands (Dalrymple, 2005).

Figure 2



Figure 2 A European in Delhi Watching a Nautch and Smoking a Hookah - Anon, c.1820.

The Anglo-Indian hybridity whether out of fondness for things native or for practical reasons, be what it may, manifested itself in other forms as well. The affectations of indigenous culture expressed itself in the materiality of everyday quotidian existence as well as in arts and aesthetics of miniature paintings, prints and architecture - all of which reflected this mutating English self in flux and the hybrid nature of it. In his book, *Colonial Self-Fashioning in British India*, (2018), Prasannajit de Silva explores the questions of hybridity and Europeans going native through the visual optic of paintings and prints of mixed-race families and portraits of well-known Englishmen, native mistress and *bibis* as well as visual renditions of British households in India.

In what offers an interesting counterpoint to the phenomenon of crossing over, are the physical arrangements of the houses and bungalows which also denoted the patterns and degrees of intimacy. While it is undeniable that the eighteenth century saw many mixed-race households, it is also a fact that the British forts and factories at Calcutta and Madras though were developed specially as English spaces marking themselves as distinct from the local. With particular English structures and customs in place it sought to contain the excess that marked the spaces outside of Forts and factories, and regulate the everyday rhythms of its English factors (Pettigrew & Gopalan, 2017, p. 10). These regulating mechanisms, notwithstanding, the factors did not remain unaffected by the local. Eugenia W. Herbert in her interesting study of British gardens in India titled *Flora's Empire* (2012), examines the British gardens as markers of difference that were intended to, among other things, put a stamp of civilization on the newly occupied spaces beyond Britain. Reading gardening and imperialism as coterminous process, she suggests that "hybridity was common in British gardens during much of Company period: "a pleasing hybridity", mingling "Eastern exoticism with European familiarity"" (Herbert, 2012, p. 36). The "wealthy Europeans though sought to segregate

themselves in garden houses and governors outdid themselves in the magnificence of their residencies” (Herbert, 2012, p. 34). Notwithstanding the deliberate attempts to re-create English homes and gardens, even if out of a sense of nostalgia, “gardens came to reflect both the altered character of the British population” (p. 37). And as with the gardens so with the architecture a sense of fusion marked the English residencies in the eighteenth century. Commenting on the Hyderabad Residency which was occupied by James Kirkpatrick, an icon of Anglo-Indian fusion, romance and hybridity, a visitor in 1801 wrote “Major Kirkpatrick’s grounds are laid out, partly in the taste of Islington & partly in that of Hindostan” (Dalrymple, 2005, p. 116; Herbert, 2012, p. 34).

It would be pertinent here to remember that the English came to India neither as conquerors nor as settlers but as traders looking to expand their business ventures as is evident. Home was back in Britain, as the cultural exchange and material traffic between India and England suggest. That the Englishmen set up settlements, took Indian mistresses, and donned Indian ways of living was an unexpected result of living in India for a considerable period of time and a point in history when neither travel was easy nor the economic prospect for a large number of people in Britain much better.

4. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the expansion and transformation of the East India Company, which pivoted on the transoceanic networks of trade and commerce across the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, has been the subject of many historical analyses of colonial India and imperial Britain. However, in the process of establishing grand narratives of trade and empire, and how an English trading company metamorphosed into a political entity ruling over the Indian subcontinent for about two hundred years, there is something crucial that economic historians lost sight of; the social and the sexual lives of the Company men who arrived young and spent a major part of their lives in India building career and fortunes before retiring to England in plenitude. That gap, however, is now increasingly being addressed owing to the various recent methodological approaches, materialist studies and the feminist interventions in the South Asian history. The result is a corpus of revisionist histories which are more recuperative of forgotten pasts, emotions, objects and silenced bodies than a mere reinforcement of colonial paradigms in their re-reading of the colonial archives. Such an engagement with the lived experience of the people who navigated the great seas and oceans and who inhabited the littoral and the hinterlands of the places they travelled to, here India, allows one to understand the ‘Indian Ocean poetics’ (Moorthy and Jamal, 2010) in its full complexity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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