

EMPERICISM AND THE STAGING OF SCIENCE AND POWER BY THE BRITISH IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract:

The rise of Positivism and the burgeoning faith in Empiricism as the new epistemology of codification started in Europe in the Nineteenth Century. Europe's new found confidence of an encyclopedic urge to collect and collate numbers, figures and data was employed across the board as the new epistemology. Bernard Cohn's contention that colony and metropolis have to be viewed in a 'unitary field of analysis' is useful here because empiricism was being used both at home and abroad as the antidote to all ills. There was a sanguine belief in solutions emerging out of quantification of information related to all aspects of the human condition. One can, however, discern the various uses to which information collated through these new procedures was put. The Reform Bill of 1830 which was a result of consistent criticism of the damages of Industrial Revolution was perhaps one of the earliest pieces of legislation to have been drafted keeping numerical data in mind. It is considered one of the earlier instances of statistics aiding social reform.

Key Words: *Positivism, burgeoning, colony, human condition.*

A number was, for the British, a particular form of certainty to be held on to in a strange world - Bernard Cohn - Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge.

As Marika Vicziany states, by the Nineteenth Century it had become standard practice to give a 'full report' while reporting on the affairs of a country. These reports included information on wide ranging aspects like topography, natural history, taxation, local customs, diet and general living conditions. Reports such as these were called 'statistical accounts': statistics connoting a very different meaning from the contemporary usage. It included a comprehensive report regarding all aspects of the subjects being studied. However, upon entering the colonies these means of codification was used by the British to codify all aspects of native life in unsparing detail with the view to aid governance. Francis Buchanan's detailed survey of Bengal in the year 1807 was inspired by Sinclair's detailed report on Scotland. Statistical Account of Scotland published between 1791 and 1798. Buchanan's survey was perhaps the first such detailed survey of any part of India. Cohn considers Buchanan as having established the tradition of Survey in Indian society (Vicziany 653). However, Vicziany is quick to see the difference between underlying motivation for the same: While Sinclair's survey was motivated by a desire to improve the quality of ordinary people's lives, and resulted in creating a climate which facilitated the abolition of the Government Tax on coal, which was demonstrated in the survey as causing excessive hardships for the Scottish poor. Buchanan's survey on the other hand only facilitated the interest of his employers, The East India Company. As an example, Vicziany quotes the case of the Salt monopoly held by the company, which pushed up the prices of salt to such an extent that the poor in Bengal had to make do with cooking with ashes. Buchanan not only brushed this bitter truth under the carpet but also made the point that the abolition of salt duty was no guarantee of an increase in salt consumption. 'The poor, he suggested may prefer to squander the relative increase in real income by buying more tobacco or working less' (quoted by Vicziany 651). The East India Company was in the process of tightening its control over India and it is to this end surveys like these were used. This is yet another instance of empiricism, which is considered 'objective'

was used by West in the colonies to misrepresent reality according to their own interests. According to Cohn, the British entered India which they tried to comprehend using their own ways of knowing and thinking. There was an optimistic belief that society could be known and represented as a series of facts. 'The forms of these facts was taken as self evident and they believed wholeheartedly that 'administrative power stemmed from the efficient use of these facts' (4). He further adds that "To the Nineteenth century English the world was knowable through the senses, which could record the experience of natural world. This world was generally believed to be divinely created, knowable in an empirical fashion and constitutive of the sciences through which would be revealed the laws of nature that governed the world and all that was there in it' (4). He iterates that by reaching the underlying theories of classification of this data and its implication in the governance of India combined with the processes used to transform this data into 'textual forms' like encyclopedias and archives that were extensively used in fixing, bounding and settling India' (8). This new found scientific-empirical approach helped the English map out India as the domain over which they would erect their empire. This was in addition to the use of new technology and weaponry, which James Headrick referred to as the 'tools of empire.' The growing navigational skills of the Europeans along with sophisticated new machinery helped them achieve success in the colonies more tangibly, however, what Foucault calls 'Governmentality' was achieved by their use of facts and figures.

Museums and the Staging of Science

In entering the colonies, science was used as a discourse of power. In the preceding chapter the growth of western science as a discipline has been exhaustively undertaken. The one dominant feature that science adopted at this time was the way in which it was used for eliciting profitability in the growth of empire. In relation to the colonies, we also see the use of science as a discourse of power. The projection of science as a discipline originating and expanding in the West as a linear progression of spontaneous discovery after discovery had entitled the Western powers in their own eyes to subjugate the colonies. Science could be seen as a 'benevolent' reason for the British to rightfully continue to occupy India. In India science was 'staged' too for the benefit of the natives. Cohn talks of a museological modality as a 'form of knowledge' of Colonialism

In this regard he spells out the various ways in which the natural resources of the new lands were exhibited in curated museum spaces of the west and on the other hand, the new exciting possibilities of the science that West was exploring at this point were staged for the 'benefit' of the natives. He avers 'for many Europeans India was a vast museum, its countryside filled with ruins, its people representing past ages ... it was a source of collectibles and curiosities to fill European museums, botanical gardens, zoos and country houses. He further discusses the career of James Fergusson who came to India as an indigo planter and extensively travelled the country from 1837-42. He wrote a series of accounts of Indian art and architecture which established a 'hegemonic history and evaluation of Indian Art and Architecture.' (Cohn 9) He later became instrumental in organizing the planning of the famous Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851 and became the official connoisseur of India's artistic achievements. Ghosh, in his travel essay 'Dancing in Cambodia' too talks about the expedition of Cambodian King Sisowith to another such mega exhibition 'Exposition Coloniale' in Marseille, France in May 1906. He describes the exhibition as 'an immense fairytale of an exhibition, centred on the theme of France's colonial possessions; there was little by way of exotic and opulent fantasy that the exhibition did not offer, from Tunisian Palaces to timber-studded West African mosques and Indo- Chinese pavilions.' This constituted of the 'museological modality' as a form of colonial knowledge whereby the colonial powers used the space of a museum/exhibition both at home and in the colonies to highlight the extent of their penetration abroad. Unlike the earlier 'Cabinet of Curiosities' of the Renaissance period, museums organized objects to make them speak a language and reveal an order' (21). In an age of increasing Nationalism in England, these displays of exotic goods, artifacts, flora, fauna, archeological and architectural specimens became a source of pride. It was at this time that the collection of exotic plants at Kew became a symbol of the imperialistic

spirit of the Age which had become successful in cataloguing and collecting such a vast collection of fauna from around the world. It was a symbol of their navigational skills and scientific ardour that had made this and exploitation of exotic plants and other resources. As Gyan Prakash says: 'they classified, named, mapped and ordered non-western people and things to realise their desire for domination. In this project, no less important than establishing standards of art, aesthetics, history and identity was the staging of Western science as universal knowledge' (Prakash 19).

However within the space of the colonies, these exhibitions and museums became the instruments of the civilizing mission for, 'these not only defined what constituted art, culture and history but also showcased scientific knowledge and instruments as technologies of governance and improvement ...collecting, cataloging, classifying and displaying objects, these institutions sought to establish the universality of their classificatory enterprise and to position science as a sign of modernity and means of colonial rule' (19). Gyan Prakash sees this 'staging of science' as playing a crucial role in the spread of colonialism. Prakash sees the use of staging of science as a means of fashioning Western Knowledge's self identity, initially in the foreign and exotic material accumulated in the cabinets of curiosities and later in the burgeoning colonial spoils displayed by metropolitan museums and exhibitions' (47).

The power of the superiority of Western science is to be seen in conjunction with the justification of the idea of Empire. Conrad, another very powerful author to show the various layers of the colonial encounter talks about this idea behind the enterprise of Colonialism where he says that what will redeem colonialism is nothing but an idea. That idea was the conviction the white man had of his own superiority. Science too was a part of this cluster that justified the idea of one man taking on another's dominion. The febrile excitement towards scientific research as a hallmark of Europe's metropolitan cities at this time is indicative of the importance research wielded for the ordinary Europeans. Science was increasingly seen as a panacea to all human ills and people had begun to posit a sanguine belief in the ability of science to take humans on the road to unlimited progress. Progress was indeed a very powerful idea and no time in history had ordinary people actually experienced such a comfortable existence as a result of the numerous inventions big and small that changed the tempo and tenor of these times. Gyan Prakash talks about science as a bearer of cultural authority, as the sign of rationality and progress:

As such science means not only what the scientists did but also what science stood for: the dazzling range of meanings and functions it represented. The rich and pervasive influence of science was rooted in its ambiguity as a sign-its ability to spill over its definition as a body of methods, practices and experimental knowledge produced in the laboratory and confined only to the understanding of nature. As a multivalent sign science traversed a vast arena, encompassing fields from literature to religion, economy to philosophy, and categories from elite to popular (Prakash, another *Reason* 7).

It is this authority of science that went much beyond the strict contribution it was making in terms of discoveries and inventions but the idea of progress and bringing the same to the colonies that redeemed the enterprise of colonialism. One can go to the extent of suggesting that since the idea of progress is embedded in the very heart of the narrative of science, it is seen as steering human society towards betterment in all spheres. This is also precisely the reason why the logic of amelioration of the natives by the West is particularly hard to refute when it comes to the introduction of science and technology. However the claims of science to such altruism on the one hand and its use as a means of the expansion of an empire that was built on injustices and repression makes the enterprise of science in the colonies janus-faced.

Technology is a more concrete proof of the strides made by pure sciences. Lay people respond more readily to technology as a manifestation of science as it touches them on a day-to-day basis. When advances in theoretical aspects of science filter down into usable form which one can see and feel, one

realises the impact it has made on lived lives. The introduction of this technology by the British further added a layer of meaning to the phenomenon. The British staged technology as 'wonder' or 'magic': Gyan Prakash builds up this argument around the contention that the British considered Indians to be superstitious and therefore could be lured into accepting the power of western science if it was presented as wonder. In this regard he says:

The project of colonial pedagogy required the “unlearned” Indian whose education could be accomplished only by repeated visual confrontations with scientific knowledge embodied in objects. But addressing and reforming the eyes of such viewers demanded that science express itself as magic, that it dazzle superstition into understanding (p 31).

However, if one really looks at the display of scientific phenomenon in the public sphere, it is the display of the efficiency that the use of technology can achieve for its users which evokes the response of wonder from the audience. As discussed earlier, Prakash emphasizes the coloniser's need to exhibit and display science for the native through exhibitions, museums and science fairs. Agricultural exhibitions became a regular feature of colonial India in the mid-nineteenth century. Many a times these were grafted on to local fairs and their popularity rose to such an extent that an industrial Exhibition was made to coincide with the session of Indian National Congress in the year 1901.

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