

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO INDIA'S
STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

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Decolonization and the Struggle for National Liberation in India (1909-1971). Historical, Political, Economic and Architectural Aspects/ edited by Thierry Di Costanzo and Guillaume Ducœur. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2014. 256 pp. (ISBN 978-3-631-65466-8 hb).

The book collects eleven papers, covering a wide range of topics, some of which offer really original readings and interpretations of unusual aspects related to India's colonial phase and its struggle for independence. The first of such original interpretations is the dating of the period, from 1909 to 1971. The former date is that of the first significant Indian institutional reforms implemented by the British; the latter is that of Bangladesh's foundation, considered by the book's editors as the last outcome of India's partition and, therefore, of India's freedom struggle.

The strong point in the Di Costanzo-Ducœur's book is its multidisciplinary approach. In fact, it combines history, politics, economics and sociology with culture, religion and architecture. Of course, all this implies the risk of heterogeneity, both in the topics put under the lens of the analysis and as far as the scientific level of the single contributions is concerned.

As Di Costanzo points out in his introductory essay – one of the best in the book – it is time for an appraisal of the main historiographical and interpretive schools dealing with India's freedom struggle and partition: the nationalist school, the Cambridge school, the Subaltern Studies school. Di Costanzo examines briefly but competently their strength and limits and goes on to critically and skillfully compare the *Transfer of Powers* and *Towards Freedom* historiographical projects.

Guillaume Ducœur's essay, *Histoire comparée des religions et construction identitaire nationaliste dans le processus d'indépendance de l'Inde*, reconstructs the late 19th century historiographical trends represented, as far as India is concerned, by in-depth and highly learned studies focused on some hitherto unexplored aspects of Indian ancient history. The birth, in the same period, of Compared History of the Religions as new scientific discipline allowed to combine history and religion in the study of ancient

India. Those were also the years of the rise of Indian nationalism; accordingly Ducoer dwells on Indian nationalism's usage of history as a political tool. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was the main representative of this stream. Unfortunately, Ducoer's essay, which is nevertheless very well documented and constructed, does not delve much in the political implications of Tilak's approach to India's ancient history. Ducoer devotes a remarkable space to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and to the creation of a chronology of Indian history which, on the basis of a dating often without much scientific foundation strived to demonstrate the antiquity of India's civilization, comparing it to other ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptian, the Greek and the Roman. This discourse, which heavily borrowed from the European Orientalists, claimed India's influence over those civilizations. That was a thesis which, up to now, has been based less on historical evidence than on theoretical arguments.

The different approaches of the *Transfer of Powers* and *Towards Freedom* projects, already examined in Di Costanzo's essay, are further and competently examined in Sucheta Mahajan's *Towards Freedom: the Making of a History*.

The two papers concerning architectural subjects are challenging, as the political use and multiple meanings of colonial architecture would have deserved wider and more in-depth analyses. Nevertheless, some details in Julia A. B. Hegewald's *Images of Empire: Re-Use in the Architecture and City Planning of British India* are intriguing. This is especially the case of her description of the strategy used by the colonial city planners to increase the citizens' feeling of integration into the empire. The political implications of the redistribution of religious places within the capital city of New Delhi is an absolutely original interpretation of the political use of colonial architecture in India.

How not to talk about Chandigarh, when speaking of architecture in India? This is done by Marc Cluet in his *Punjab's New Capital City Chandigarh: Aims and Reality*. The comparison between colonial Delhi and the new city of Chandigarh, conceived by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, makes the architectural discourse coherent with the other essays of the book.

Some papers offer really original interpretations; this is the case of Ingrid C. Sankey's *Les princes et Le Raj britannique ou les aléas du système d'administration indirecte dans l'Empire des Indes*, which examines the connection between the Raj and the rajas at the dusk of the British empire.

Aditya Mukherjee's *Decolonization or Last Phase of Colonialism?*, one of the core chapters in the book, argues that the period between World War I and 1947 did not witness decolonization, but «the continuation of colonial exploitation (though in an altered form)». Professor Mukherjee convincingly grounds his thesis on economic statistical data and concludes his analysis by pointing out that India's remarkable economic growth, which

began in the 1950s, is due to «a *structural break*» (author's italics), rather than to continuity between the colonial and post-colonial economic policies. For a more in depth knowledge of Mukherjee's approach, it might be worth reading his books, mentioned in his essay.

Salil Mishra's *Emotions in Politics and Politics of Emotions: the Making of Pakistan and the Decolonization of British India, 1937-46*, another of the core essays in the book, explains Pakistan's creation within an intriguing theoretical frame. According to Mishra, «the making of a Muslim nation spanned through three different stages: one, the transformation of Indian Muslims, scattered throughout the country, into a pan-Indian religio-political community; two, the transformation of this religio-political community into a potential national community; and three, the popularization and dissemination of this nation». The transformations induced by the structural development triggered by colonization - urbanization, migrations and displacement - strengthened religious identities and favored the «the creation of large religious communities». This theory reminds the one contained in the famous book *Khaki Shorts Saffron Flags* (by Tapan Basu et al, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993) regarding the rise of Hindu political identity. Mishra speaks correctly of syncretic Hindu and Muslim communities, but does not take into consideration the colonizers' role in the making of communalism and in shaping religious (or pseudo religious) political identities.

The rise of Bangladesh as the concluding aspect of the freedom struggle is elegantly treated by Sonia Cordera, *The Long-Term Effects of Decolonization of the British Empire in South Asia: the 1971 Secession of Bangladesh and its International Consequences*. However, the author, in the light of recent studies on this topic, appropriately widens the significance of the rise of independent Bangladesh, examining it not only as a domestic or, to the utmost, as a regional problem, but as an event which involved the two superpowers of the time, the US and USSR, as well as India's giant neighbor in the north: China.

The book closes with a general bibliography which – fulfilling one of Di Costanzo's objectives, as stated in his introduction – has the potentiality to be remarkably useful for scholars.