

Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860 - 1920 Review

By Emma Root

During the age of imperialism Britain had colonies all over the world. While creating scholarship about this empire, many historians have looked at how each nation related back to Great Britain. In the book *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860 – 1920*, Thomas R. Metcalf aimed to not only create a different center of the empire, in his case India, but also show how each colony was connected to each other. His book looked at the British Empire from 1860 – 1920 as India as the center of the British Empire in the Indian Ocean arena. The author, Thomas R. Metcalf, is a professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, specializing in South Asia and the British Empire. In this book he looked at India in relation to places like South and East Africa like Natal, Zanzibar, and Uganda and British holdings in Southeast Asia like Malaya. Beyond creating a Indian-centric view, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860- 1920* added to the history of the world in 1900 by investigating how Indian identity was formed throughout the British Empire that surrounded the Indian Ocean.

Imperial Connections took a thematic approach to telling the story of how India was the center of the British Empire in the Indian Ocean. Each chapter had its own topic, such as discussing the government, the army, identities, and locations. It talked about identities in a variety of different ways, such as concerning stereotypes the British assigned certain peoples, race, castes, religions, and class. In the second chapter, *Constructing Identities*, Metcalf looked at how the British classified certain peoples. He gave an example from a 1905 book by Frank Swettenham, British Malaya, where Swettenham said, “While the Malay has no stomach for

really hard and continuous work, either of the brain or of the hands, if you can only give him an interest in the job he will perform prodigies; he will strive, and endure, and be cheerful and courageous with the best.”¹ This quote from Swettenham was racist because it gave an entire people a demeaning personality. However, it was important Metcalf used direct quotes from literature because it gave a better sense of the language used at the time. The language was used to classify peoples for what jobs they were good for and what roles they should have in the government. This made sense given the context of this era, because this was a time period when racism was supported by “science.” Throughout the book, Metcalf explains identity in a similar way, like the chapter about how Sikhs were chosen for the army because they have “a very remarkable aptitude for acquiring knowledge of Military exercises.”² Metcalf does a strong job of using primary sources in explaining how the British stereotyped peoples in order to learn how to control them.

A large part of this book involved looking at what Indians did overseas, and how that led to creating other national identities. Of the reasons Indians left India, 1.3 million Indians left their homeland under indentured servitude from 1830-1920.³ They went all over the Indian ocean, and in one of the chapters Metcalf specifically talks about East Africa. Many of the people who went to East Africa were ordinary Indian citizens, but some came from all over the British empire, such as Scotland.⁴ This is one of the many examples that Metcalf used to show diversity within nations during this time, creating a more complex story. Indians had their own agency in choosing where to go, often choosing to go to South Africa because there was a larger Indian

¹ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena 1860 – 1920*, (Los Angeles: University of California, 2007), 48.

² Metcalf, 111.

³ Metcalf, 136.

⁴ Metcalf, 123

community and it had a fast growing economy.⁵ Metcalf argued that these Indians overseas a national identity was because they faced racial discrimination.⁶ This was in part because inside India, people were labeled by caste or region, but since racial identity dictated roles inside colonies, Indians were put into the same category.⁷ For example, the Commissioner of British Central Africa and also Uganda, H.H. Johnston, said Indians would be great in East Africa to help “civilize” the African people and share the “white man’s burden.”⁸ He continually praised Indians for their intellect, seeing them as superior to East Africans, and in turn solidified Indians as having a singular identity.

Metcalf was very clear about situating his own work in several historiographies. He begins by referencing the eurocentricity of many scholars, even saying archives are organized by colony, and thus everything is relating back to Great Britain.⁹ He continues to say that the scholars wrote works about how the empire existed “out there” but also “at home,” meaning the overall empire had a lasting impact inside Great Britain itself. He then shifts to framework of history closer to his study: the study of oceans.¹⁰ He mentions the work of Fernand Braudel, who looked at the Mediterranean sea as a connector between Europe and Africa, Christendom and Islam.¹¹ He discusses K.N. Chaudhuri as the Indian oceanic scholar, however his books were of the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus, Metcalf filled in gaps in the historiography by looking at a different center of the British Empire and by studying the Indian Ocean at a later time period.

⁵ Metcalf, 175

⁶ Metcalf, 3.

⁷ Metcalf, 110.

⁸ Metcalf, 174.

⁹ Metcalf, 7.

¹⁰ Metcalf, 8.

¹¹ Metcalf, 8.

It is significant that Metcalf fit his book in relation to the historiography clearly because it helped show what this book had to offer. It is similar to how Charles Emmerson set up his book *1913*, because he wrote it as a complement to other books in the historiography leading up to World War I.¹² Metcalf also writes his book in direct opposition to many of the narratives during this time period. Metcalf continues discussing the historiography on a particular subject at the start of each chapter. In chapter five, “*Hard Hands and Sound Healthy Bodies: Recruiting “Coolies” for Natal*,” he stated that the indentured labor system had often been studied from two different perspectives, the administrative structures and the treatment of Indian laborers. However, he intended to focus on the collection and dispatch of laborers.¹³ This is a fitting way to lay out his own research, by being clear about how it fits into the scholarship. He also laid out the specific questions he would ask in this chapter, like, in reference to the case of Natal, “How were colonial recruiters selected, remunerated, and disciplined? What criteria did they in turn use to decide whom to recruit for indentured labor in the colony? What castes and regions of India were favored, which disfavored, and why?”¹⁴ The rest of the chapter he organized chronologically, including context on the demographics and geography of Natal before 1860. His organization and purpose is very clear, so he is able to accomplish discussing Indian identity in a variety of different ways.

What could have made this book stronger would be to include narratives perspectives from Indian people. Although the book does a good job of taking the center of the empire away from Britain itself, it still uses many sources from English perspectives. Although this book is organized thematically, using more personal narratives would create a stronger story and add

¹² Charles Emmerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

¹³ Metcalf, 137

¹⁴ Metcalf, 138.

more to the historiography. In discussing identity, it would be useful to see what Indians or Sikhs or Malaysians thought of themselves, beyond simply describing the class structure and their roles in society. Otherwise, the structure of this book would help students organize a paper, especially students working on complex and interconnected ideas. Because *Imperial Connections* is thematic and focuses on a large geographical area, it adds to the historiography through directing the politics of identity. As we are looking towards writing a picture of the world in 1900, this book can be used as a guide to help write about the world that centers around a non-Europeans perspective and in how to write thematically.

Bibliography

Emmerson, Charles. *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2014.

Metcalf, Thomas R. *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena 1860 – 1920*. Los Angeles: University of California, 2007.