

Mann, Michael: *South Asia's Modern History. Thematic Perspectives*. London: Routledge 2014. ISBN: 978-0-41562-866-2; 426 S.

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Teachers of South Asian History today are spoiled for choice when it comes to selecting textbooks for their undergraduate courses: There are the usual suspects, especially Jalal & Bose and Metcalf & Metcalf, in addition to a host of other offerings, old and new; more are on the horizon. It is to this crowded field that Michael Mann's „South Asia's Modern History: Thematic Perspectives“ must now be added. Mann makes a deliberate point of carving out a space for himself in the introduction, acknowledging and critiquing the rest by turn. He might have been a bit more generous in this cursory historiography – and the opportunity for an extremely useful historiographical overview, one that went beyond the rote references to the Cambridge School and Subaltern Studies etc. usually found in works of this type, is missed. Crispin Bates' „Subalterns and the Raj“¹, by contrast, reads as an extended annotated bibliography, which students seem to appreciate.

Where some of the other textbooks might conceivably be read by non-academics, this is unlikely to happen with Mann's stringently thematic approach. The subjects usually occupying most of conventional narratives, namely politics and state formation, colonial rule and nationalism, are here covered in the first three chapters. By page 136 we have already reached the twenty-first century, and covered the entire region, from the Mughals to Modi. What might at first appear to be a somewhat counterintuitive prioritization actually works surprisingly well and leaves Mann free to pursue in the remainder of the book what is arguably its real focus – and where, one suspects, his real interest lies. Mann's first book was a typically Germanic (i.e. thorough to the point of pedantic) examination of the manner in which early British rule in India radically transformed its landscape, and it is this emphasis on the social and environmental, broadly conceived, that really makes the present book stand out. In

the last five chapters, and what amounts to two-thirds of the book, we are thus presented with, respectively, discussions of agriculture and agro-economy; silviculture and scientific forestry; migration, circulation and diaspora; urbanisation and industrialisation, and knowledge, science, technology and power.

There is, in other words, little to speak of in terms of cultural history, but there is almost everything else. One might perhaps have wished that the introductory sections, just like the historiography, had been a bit more expansive – a page and a half, for instance, is not nearly enough to allow undergraduates to navigate the complexity of 'Knowledge' covered in the final chapter. There is nevertheless a very tangible benefit in having distinct themes covered in relatively short chapters, going over the same couple of hundred years again and again, but from varying perspectives and with varying emphases: It provides the reader with an analytical overview not achieved through conventional chronological accounts. The structuring of the book, in and of itself, thus encourages the very kind of cross-periodical comparisons that we work so hard to get our students to make. That is no mean feat for a text-book.

The book has been translated from the original German edition and though substantially rewritten, future editions would benefit from a closer attention to the English prose; students are notoriously sensitive to anything remotely 'stilted' and it would be a real shame if that should stand in the way of its reception. „South Asia's Modern History“ serves as a welcome counterpoint to the strictly chronological narratives of the competitors and for those who balk at the notion of relying on a single text-book to underpin a series of lectures, the chapters are easily adapted for different approaches. Not everyone will agree with Mann's choice of themes; the concept and format, however, is very compelling and for that reason alone should be seriously considered as required reading on any course in the subject-area.

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¹ Crispin Bates, *Subalterns and the Raj*. South Asia Since 1600, London 2007.

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