

L'Inde des Lumières; Entre orientalisme et sciences sociales (XVI-XIXe s.)/ Indian Enlightenment : Between Orientalism and Social Sciences (16th-19th century)
(en hommage à Sylvia Murr)

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The goal of the collection of essays - *L'Inde des Lumières; Entre l'orientalisme et les sciences sociales (XVI-XIXe s.)/ Indian Enlightenment : Between Orientalism and Social Sciences (16th-19th century)*- is to situate South Asia in the Enlightenment as historical moment and as the site of a set of evolving epistemological practices. The role of South Asia as a topography mapped by Europe in an attempt to know itself will be explored by revisiting archives, resurrecting the itineraries of various actors, and interlinking chronologies, geographies and knowledge-making practices of the period. The ambivalent nature of the Enlightenment, wielding “reason” as a double-edged weapon to advocate freedom and tolerance while legitimizing colonialism, hegemony and racism has been studied by postcolonial and cultural-critique historiographies. However, against the backdrop of colonial expansion and global commercial competition between European powers, the question of exactly what modalities various Enlightenment actors employed to both empower and disenfranchise, as well as the cumulative and mutually reinforcing effects of multiple efforts during a trajectory that began with the “discoveries” and ended with empire remains little examined.

At the peak of the Enlightenment, the French *encyclopedistes/philosophes* claimed intellectual dominion over the world. Our central question is: What role was South Asia assigned in the construction of supreme enlightened European authority? How did South Asia’s past and present, including its own knowledge-making and knowledge-transmitting practices, inspire European *studiosi* to theorize about the nature of the state, society and knowledge? What role did new *fora* – academies, salons, the circulation of books and letters both officially sanctioned and condemned – play in providing a public space for dialogue that propelled European discourse on South Asia ?

More than two decades ago, Sylvia Murr proposed some answers to these questions in her pioneering “Les conditions d’émergence du discours sur l’Inde au Siècle des Lumières” by triangulating texts produced by three different groups: Jesuit missionaries, members of the Académie Royale de Paris and the *philosophes* (Voltaire, Jaucourt, Diderot et l’abbé Raynal). In the present volume, we will try to widen the scope of the inquiry opened by Murr in terms of both chronology and cultural and social geography. However, unlike Sylvia Murr who was interested primarily in production of texts within the framework of history of ideas, we are interested in the production, circulation and dissemination of useful knowledges about India, some of which are textual, but can also be embodied in images and objects. The quest for useful knowledges did not start with the French, but with the Portuguese trade and missionary networks, followed by those of the Dutch, the English and the Danes. These earlier actors opened new possibilities for knowledge-making and for the constitution of professional expertise - linguistic, botanical, agricultural, mathematical as well as theological and esoteric – and created a global and increasingly public space of exchange. This space was hardly accessed equally by all. Colonial configurations and institutional filters helped create a complex puzzle of “centers of calculation” (Latour) that cut across conventional

colonial/imperial geographical divisions such as the local versus the metropolitan, Asia versus Europe.

This brings us to our next set of questions, how did the “useful” knowledges of and in South Asia that was prefabricated or co-produced (Raj) in such diverse locations as Pondicherry, Edinburgh, Colombo, Ile de France and Goa (to name but a few) transform the very epistemological structures that held them together? For example, how did travel or missionary accounts turn into ethnography? Or did they? How (and at what point) does linguistic expertise become Orientalist science? What does what we think we know as the Enlightenment has to do with this? Is the Enlightenment a cause or a consequence of these “gigantic authority shifts” (Trautmann)? Was there such a shift at all, or are we witnessing a mere re-structuring of the elites in charge of knowledge-making and the widening of public consumption of their derivative textual products (novels, almanacs, histories, journals)? The passage from religious organization to an economic and political ethics (de Certeau) brought change to knowledge production and its use, but where exactly was this located and how was it set in motion? If the Enlightenment’s illustrious achievement was the separation of religion and morality (the disenchantment of the world), how was South Asia framed in this universalizing narrative? Who were South Asia’s chosen actors? What were the forces of resistance both within and outside South Asia to this process? How can we establish a chronology of nodal events?

When we look at South Asia within this process of reframing, whose and what kind of Enlightenment do we see? Is there an Indian Enlightenment, just as there are claims for a radical, a botanical, an Orientalist, a Scottish, a French and a Catholic Enlightenment? Or, when South Asia enters the picture, does Enlightenment become Renaissance, as Raymond Schwab has proposed in his work on the reception of Orientalist knowledge in Europe during roughly the same period? A late eighteenth-century Catholic missionary in India, Paulinus a S. Bartholomaeo, shared Voltaire’s view that India was the cradle of all “sciences” (in other words, knowledge), but that it was Europe that perfected these. By the later 19th century, British imperialism demanded a rewriting that sought to erase this “enlightened” idea. It became buried under the routines of social sciences and Indian studies that continue to inform scholarship today. However, multiple traces and spaces of uncertainty remain of a European notion of South Asia as the site of epistemology’s origin, the origin, therefore of Europe’s own authority, and of its undoing. By revisiting and re-digging the archives, our goal is to look for knowledge-making practices in and about South Asia (16th-19th c.) that inaugurated the “scientific” procedures from the early 19th century “science of man” to a very broad category of social sciences and Indian studies.

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