

Perhaps the most significant side effect of the ongoing reconfiguration of the discipline of French studies in countries outside France has been the thoroughgoing internationalisation of that field of study. As a consequence, scholars of French in European countries with 18th and 20th century empires which competed with those of the French are researching colonialism and its afterlives in a comparative way. This approach is particularly promising in the study of the cultural contact between India and Europe.

# French-language representations of India

## Globalised research across national disciplinary boundaries.

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Prompted by the award of a four-year Arts and Humanities Research Council grant to a project on 'Peripheral Voices in European Colonialism' at the University of Liverpool, this essay surveys research into French-language representations of India 1754-1954. That is from Duplex's departure from India, to the cession to India of Pondicherry, the territory he once governed with the other French *comptoirs* of Yanam, Mahé, Karaikal and Chandernagore.<sup>1</sup> This essay will also place that research in the context of the discipline of French studies which has shifted its focus from the national literature of France, to include the study of francophone cultures in their global contexts.<sup>2</sup> The vitality of English-language work on India from a postcolonial studies perspective, means that the study of French-language representations of a non-francophone nation such as India, must take account of anglophone work in producing research which is historically anchored and yet multilingual and comparative.

### A French corrective to 'India as an anglophone space'?

Early in the investigation, however, two anomalies appear. First, although there are studies in English which address the French presence in India, they tend to examine it in isolation.<sup>3</sup> Far more serious, however, is the way that the vast majority of research on colonial India in English treats it as an anglophone space. Indian languages surface, but the comparative study of two or more European colonisers (the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Danes and the Swedes) is a comparatively recent phenomenon (even taking into account the massive differences in scale between the colonial enterprises of the other countries and that of the British).<sup>4</sup> The anglophone bias also applies to Indian historians of India writing in English in the Subaltern Studies school, although they aim to renew their discipline by what they consider as an anti-bourgeois and anti-nationalist analysis of Indian history.

As Harish Trivedi has suggested, post-colonial studies has 'ears only for English'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, despite the major theoretical contributions in studies published from 1983 to 1997, it is striking that none of them mention the French presence.<sup>6</sup> In both anglophone colonial history and postcolonial studies, therefore, India still appears to hold the bejewelled place that the Raj occupied in the former empire.

If one looks to studies written in French to offer a corrective, by elaborating a French dimension, one sees that they too are dominated by a national discourse. With Jackie Assayag (1999) as one of the very few exceptions, the 'Anglo-Indian' bilateralism of the English-language sources is repeated in 'Franco-Indian' forms.<sup>7</sup> Herein lies the second anomaly: while a compara-

tive analysis of the impact of the British colonising other is nearly absent from academic research published in France, French-language primary sources, frequently contain both references to English (viz. the title of Marguerite Duras's *India Song*) and to the 'Britishers' in India (such as Phileas Fogg).

Evidence of this is provided in *India Scripta*, the Liverpool project's bibliography, written by Corinne François-Denève.<sup>8</sup> It will survey all the fiction and non-fiction books on India published in French from 1754 to the present day. Its scope goes further



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whole subcontinent disappear between the Indo-China and the Indian Ocean sectors. Despite French investment in Pondicherry attested to by the *École française d'extrême orient*, the *Institut français*, *Alliance française* and the popular *Lycée français*, and despite the Marxist-inflected proto-postcolonial writing of Bernard Mouralis in the 1970s, Jean-Marc Moura's 1999 work informed by anglophone theory and studies exploring the Indian dimensions of Mauritian and Réunionnais writing, there has been little shift in the Francophone studies doxa.<sup>12</sup> Non-metropolitan francophone texts, and, bizarrely, only non-metropolitan texts can

debate to include, not only direct footfalls on Indian soil, but also military activity in Egypt, part of the British Indian empire's supply lines. Since Napoleon's expedition of 1798, and in common with much of 'Franco-Indian' bilateral writing, 'the French considered that they had not merely interests but an affinity with Egypt'.<sup>16</sup> This is confirmed by the expedition's publication, the 21 volume *Description de l'Égypte* (1809-13), which rivalled the work of British Orientalists in India such as William Jones. After his failure in Egypt, Napoleon planned a joint expedition to India with Czar Paul under the leadership of Masséna, but this was abandoned after Paul's murder in 1801.

The project's book-length contributions to postcolonial theory elaborate one element in the history of the French presence in India. The few French people in the *Établissements français en Inde* [the French possessions in India] between 1815 and 1947 were colonisers who were themselves under the hegemony of another European power. France was thus a '*colonisatrice colonisée*' (a colonised coloniser), or, better, a 'subaltern coloniser'.<sup>17</sup>

The status of the French as subaltern colonisers in India brings an understanding of simultaneity to French-language representations of India. French writers can be seen doing several partially contradictory things at once. They criticise British colonialism, from a supposedly disinterested viewpoint, while frequently sympathising with French colonialism. Their criticism co-existed both with a selective solidarity with the European colonial brother (a perspective that is so often masculinist) in the face of threatening Indians, and with an imaginative occupation of the Indian space for nostalgic, fantasist and utopian ends. Their writing is free to explore other Indias, and it is particularly interesting to study French representations at times of change in the colonial status quo, such as in 1857-59.

It is also possible to apply the notion of the subaltern coloniser to other contexts where a double stratification of power prevailed, such as in the relationship, after 1763, between the French and both indigenous peoples in Quebec, and colonised groups in the Caribbean. Indeed, more generally, the notion helps to theorise the role of proxy agents in colonial power relations, such as the Ashanti collaborators in the Atlantic slave trade and that of groups linked to former colonisers living in serially colonised regions under a new status quo (such as the descendants of French settlers in British-ruled Mauritius (1810-1968)).

'Subaltern coloniser' is an oxymoron which breaks the coloniser/colonised binary in complementary, but different ways from the Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler's 'bottom up' focus on the individual 'agents of colonialism'.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the geographically disparate situation of these

trading posts whose military defence was expressly forbidden in the two treaties of Paris of 1763 and 1815, adds an inter-coloniser dimension to Mary Louise Pratt's understanding of the 'copresence [and] interaction' between coloniser and colonised in 'contact zones'.<sup>19</sup>

The ongoing, open-ended loss in what could be called France's two-hundred-year-long decolonisation in India (1754-1954), means that subaltern coloniser status can contribute to the study of France's colonial policy. This builds on the work of Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire in the *Association Connaissance de l'histoire de l'Afrique contemporaine* (ACHAC).<sup>20</sup> From the start of the French conquest of Algeria in 1830, and intensifying after 1880, the loss of the Indian trading posts to the British and the concomitant loss of national prestige functions as an example to avoid.<sup>21</sup> More generally, Jean-Marc Largeaud has provocatively equated this focus on loss after Waterloo with a French national culture of glorious defeat.<sup>22</sup> It must be said, however, that these comparisons with India were intended to spur on French colonialists rather than to inhibit them.

### Globalised research practice

While attuned to national contexts such as those above, a practice of globalised research should exhibit two qualities at the same time. The first is to be linguistically inclusive. Ideally, this manifests itself concretely, such as in the bi-lingual annotations of *India Scripta*. Alternatively, it can be a cumulative phenomenon, such as conferences and volumes of collected essays which admit more than one language, authors who publish in more than one language, or, at the very least, use source texts in French and English.<sup>23</sup>

The second quality is integrated multiple foci. One of the main domains in which these can function is in a suspicion of nation states, while at the same time acknowledging their importance in the period from 1754-1954. Cross-national comparativism of this sort is standard practice in studies on the pre-history of colonialism in the 17th century and earlier.<sup>24</sup> It is also found in studies of mercantilist colonialism.<sup>25</sup> This is because the shareholders in a company were not necessarily nationals of the country where it was based. Hence the capital flows into and out of trading companies were international. This recalls the occupation of more than one role, associated with the 'subaltern coloniser'. It also recognises the ability of certain individuals to make multinational connections between the different European colonialisms of India.<sup>26</sup>

The project monograph *Passeurs* is a study of three 'French' careers in the 19th and 20th century British Indian empire. These are three lives which go between nationalities, cultures and identities, breaking down

than existing publications because it will be annotated in both English and French and be available via open access.<sup>9</sup>

In France, the institutional embedding of a comparative research practice is hampered by both scepticism about the place of interdisciplinarity and the academic pedigree and state support accorded to the neighbouring disciplines of Indology and Francophone studies.

French Indology was consecrated in 1814 at the Collège de France with the founding of the first chair of Sanskrit in Europe for Antoine-Léonard de Chézy (1773-1832).<sup>10</sup> This was the precise time at which France was being reduced to a second order power in India. From that time onwards, Indology has either focused mainly on the languages and cultural products of the period before European colonialism, or bracketed out its effects.

Since its coining, the expression 'francophone' has been an uneasy combination of a prefix and a suffix, failing to reconcile language, ethnicity and colonial domination.<sup>11</sup> The sectorisation used by contemporary institutions such as the OIF (*L'Organisation internationale de la francophonie*) has led to the complete marginalisation of India: official francophone cartographies make the

'francophone' in the official sense, are still reduced to serving in a reductive exoticist mode as 'an elsewhere for the French language'.<sup>13</sup>

### France as subaltern coloniser in India

These restrictions imposed by national disciplines encourage the project team to establish a new practice of comparative colonial studies. Using a strategy of triangulation between France, India and Britain in the context of competing colonialisms, this research both applies and simultaneously modifies postcolonial criticism in English, helping to correct its anglocentric and Anglo-Indian-centric bias and joins other projects which seek to bring in a comparative European dimension into postcolonial studies.<sup>14</sup>

Given, the 'second hundred years war' (1689-1815) between them, Franco-British rivalry is an important aspect in European involvement in India.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding this, however, triangular relations should be further multiplied by additional colonial competitors. That in turn necessitates a global perspective, including into debates about the colonisation of India and other theatres of rivalry, such as Egypt, and other powers, such as Russia. This opens out the

the monolithic nature of 'French', 'British' and 'Indian' in the process: Frans Balthazar Solvyns (1760-1824), a Paris-trained Flemish painter who lived and worked in Kolkata with his English wife; Edouard de Warren (1811-98), a Pondicherry-born soldier of mixed race who wrote an account of the events of the Indian Mutiny and Suzanne Brière who married into the Tata family at the turn of the 20th century. The focus on such individuals who were French in a multicultural way, adds a global dimension to the understanding of colonialisms in India. This dimension provides an alternative to the parochialism built on nationality, be it French or British.

Taken together, all the project outputs aim for a practice of research which is acutely aware of the continuing role of nationalisms in theories of knowledge, while demonstrating that French and British nationalisms in colonialism were not as hermetic as they once might have seemed.

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Notes and suggestions for further reading

#### Notes

- 1 Since 2006 'Puducherry' is the official Indian name of Pondicherry (Pondichéry in French). Joseph François Dupleix (1697-1763).
- 2 Forsdick, Charles. 2005. 'Between "French" and "Francophone": French Studies and the Postcolonial Turn'. *French Studies* 59-4.
- 3 Mathew, K.S. and S. Jeyaseela Stephen. 1999. *Indo-French Relations*. Delhi: Pragati Publications.
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- 6 Nandy, Ashis. 1988 [1983]. *The Intimate Enemy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press and Cooper, Frederick and Ann Laura Stoler. 1997. *Tensions of Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 7 *L'Inde fabuleuse*. Paris: Kimé. More typical is: Weber, Jacques. 2002. *Les Relations entre la France et l'Inde de 1673 à nos jours*. Paris: Les Indes savantes.
- 8 The project bibliography *India Scripta* records nineteen books which mention Britain and English in the period from 1754-99 alone.
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- 11 Reclus, Onésime. 1886. *France, Algérie et les*

- colonies*. Paris: Hachette. p. 422.
- 12 1975. *Contre-littératures*. Paris: PUF; 1999. *Littératures francophones et théorie post-coloniale*. Paris: PUF and Pousse, Michel and Tilaga Pitchaya. 1993. *L'Inde, études et images*. Paris: L'Harmattan and l'Université de La Réunion.
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- 17 Magedera, Ian H. and Dhana Underwood. 2001. 'Déesse sexualisée et/ou victime? La femme hindoue entre les colonialismes anglais et français en Inde'. *International Journal of Francophone Studies*. 4-1 and Marsh, Kate. 2007. *Fictions of 1947: Representations of Indian Decolonization 1919-1962*. Oxford: Peter Lang; p. 13.
- 18 Cooper, Frederick and Ann Laura Stoler. 1997: p. vii.
- 19 1992. *Imperial Eyes*. London: Routledge; pp. 6-7. The 1763 treaty can be consulted here in English: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/paris763.htm> (accessed 19/11/07).
- 20 2002. *Zoos humains*. Paris: La Découverte.
- 21 Prévost-Paradol, Lucien-Anatole. 1868. *La France Nouvelle*. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères; p. 417.
- 22 2006. *Napoléon et Waterloo: la défaite glorieuse de 1815 à nos jours*. Paris: BH, la boutique de l'histoire; p. 357.
- 23 *L'Héritage des Compagnies des Indes dans les musées et collections publiques d'Europe/The Heritage of the East India Companies in European Museums and Public Collections* (Port-Louis: Musée de la Compagnie des Indes and la Société des amis du musée, 2000).
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- 26 Jasanoff, Maya. 2005. *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.