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An Indian Experience of Colonial and Indian Exhibition: T.N. Mukherji's *A Visit to Europe*

Abstract

*By contesting the Saidian perspective, this paper suggests that the Indians, who were part of the colonial British setup in India, were not passive agents of the empire. In fact, they were active participants of the events and were critical of the British policies and discourses. By employing the concept of Homi Bhabha's hybridity, the article identifies the hybrid features in the textual analysis of a travelogue, *A Visit to Europe*, by T.N. Mukherji, a western-educated Indian, who assisted the British with organizing the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886 in London.*

Keywords: T. N. Mukherji; Travelogues; Colonial and Indian Exhibitions; Hybridity; Indian exhibits.

Introduction:

Colonial exhibitions are an important site to study the perceptions of the imperial powers about the world, about their own place in it and about the people whom they had colonized. Administrative officials and entrepreneurs viewed an exhibition as an educational opportunity that could convey messages of power to the visitors of the exhibitions. There has been substantial scholarship that details the cultural technologies of rule at colonial exhibitions. A number of scholars employ Edward Said's approach to study the displays of African and Asian colonies in the exhibitions and suggests that the displays "formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the message of power" in the public arena.¹ However, Dennis Porter argues that Said's "work simplifies Western discourse about the 'other' over time and place, and exaggerates the hegemony of the West over the East".² Therefore, when colonial exhibitions are analyzed through the Saidian framework, two important aspects are missed out: first, the meaning of the exhibitions for the colonized people. Exhibits at colonial exhibitions were at times, even critiqued by the colonized people who were aware of them. It was not always the case that the exhibits betrayed a sense of superiority that was accepted by the visitors from the colonized lands; second, the "subtleties and complexities of imperial projects within specific temporal and geographical contexts".³

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We can understand the Indian history outside the “supposed certainties of Western historicism” and deny the “exclusivity of modernity to the West”.⁴ What is generally classified as Indian “difference” can be seen as something which “enabled subversions to Western power”. Homi Bhabha, in *Location of Culture*, discusses “the ambivalence of colonial discourse and its vulnerability to being problematized by the colonized”. Bhabha argues that the colonized people “responded to the colonialist presence with an imitation or mimicry that distorted the initial colonial discourse rather than producing an exact copy”.⁵ This produced an “Otherwise to modernity”, which, in turn, defied Western boundaries and trajectories. As a result, it destabilized the Western, knowledge-based categories.

Pramod K. Nayar presents a similar argument, in *Indian Travel Writing in the Age of Empire 1830 – 1940*, while discussing the encounters of Indian travelers in Europe.⁶ He argues “that the traveler even when paying attention to European history, art or places, reconstructs England as a space of the cultural Other.”⁷ He extends this to posit that Indian travelers deterritorialized Europe and its history by pointing to a ‘non-European Other’ in it, overturning European ethnocentrism. However, it must be acknowledged that a ‘travelogue’, in the late nineteenth century, itself is closely linked to colonial exposure. Avishek Ray illustrates that the practice of travel writing, in colonial India, was aimed at achieving cultural proximity with the colonizer.⁸ Similarly, many other scholars have studied travelogues written by Indians living in colonial India, about Europe and the world. Patricia Johnson notes that travelogues as cultural texts “recount an engagement in, and with, cosmopolitanism.”⁹ Jayati Gupta discovers an intense self-awareness in Indian travel narratives as the cosmopolitanization of Indian and colonial subjects problematized awareness of the self for Indian travelers as they were exposed to a ‘plurality of selves.’¹⁰

These cosmopolitan travelers were ‘hybrids’ according to Julie Codell.¹¹ Hybrids mean that “they negotiated conventions of travel literature at times in resistance to and other times in compliance with generic expectations”.¹² The resulting literature was a hybrid that relied on guidebooks, ethnography, autobiographies, and local histories. Unlike European travelers who traveled on a quest for self-discovery, Indian travelers were interested in experiencing Britain firsthand, judging their previous knowledge about it and discovering what their colonial education had not told them about Britain. Also, European travelers explored the ‘unexplored’ and tried to dominate it terming it as an exotic, picturesque and inferior ‘other’, while these Indian travelers explored the over-explored metropole, reversing the hierarchy of center and periphery.¹³

This paper aims to look at “The Colonial and Indian Exhibition” from the perspective of an elite Indian who had received western education and recorded his experience of the exhibition in his travelogue: Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay or T.N.Mukherjee. T. N. Mukherjee’s travelogue, who was an elite class Indian responsible for the administration of the exhibition, *A Visit to Europe* will be analyzed to see how an elite Indian critiqued the exhibits and contributed to complicate the British understanding of India and as a result, producing an “otherwise to modernity”.¹⁴ This paper will look at the instabilities of colonial

power and its discourses by analyzing the Indian agency, by taking into account the voices of the Indians who helped administer and critique the exhibitions.

Nineteenth Century: An Age of Exhibitions

The nineteenth century holds paramount significance in the history of exhibitions. The *Illustrated Weekly News* published in London, used the words 'age of exhibitions' to describe that time.¹⁵ The editors wrote: "We have exhibitions of nearly all possible and impossible things under the sun - exhibitions of pigs, of paintings, of performing fleas, of parrots... of steam engines, and of babies. We have national and international gatherings, local, vocal, and rural shows. The list seems all but complete, yet, as there is nothing more fertile than the imagination of exhibiting mankind, fresh addenda continue to drop in every day".¹⁶

The first exhibition, also known as 'The Great Exhibition', held in 1851, was widely successful and started the trend to organize exhibitions of all kinds. Peter Hoffenberg notes that an "international exhibition movement" was caused by the Great Exhibition.¹⁷ Not only were these exhibitions "magnets for local, intercolonial, and overseas visitors" but they also contributed to "[popularize], and [give] explicit, accessible meanings to" colonialism itself.¹⁸ Describing the sight of London at the time of the Great Exhibition, Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote: "the sight among the green boughs was delightful... the boats; the flags; the music; the guns; - everything was exhilarating."¹⁹ In fact, the Great Exhibition was in public memory as such an exceptional event that almost all commentators could not help but compare each subsequent exhibition to the Great Exhibition. Evaluating the International Exhibition 1862, one commentator expressed dismay because the exhibition was, according to him, "paled beside the glow of the novel and mythical Crystal Palace."²⁰

This series of post-1851 colonial exhibitions helped create a "tripartite imperial world" of England, Australia, and India.²¹ Australia was the dominant image of 'settler colonies' and India was the dominant image of 'subject colonies'. Australia would usually feature in these exhibitions as a "progressive" place, which was flourishing under white settlers. Australian exhibits would include manufactured goods and photographs of tall buildings. Indian exhibits, on the other hand, would be "artisans weaving tapestries" and "dramatic models of India's ancient monuments."²² The exhibitors were interested in celebrating India and generally all settler colonies as places with a restored past. Additionally, Indian exhibits were selected by the British and some Anglo-Indian officials whereas the Australians were allowed to choose how they would represent themselves at the exhibitions.²³ Moreover, apart from representing the restored past in India, exhibitors were also hopeful about the economic implications of these exhibitions. An Indian government official suggested, about an Indian exhibition, that the displays would educate people in colonies about the potential wealth among their "picturesque" settings.²⁴ Also, the *Calcutta Review* boasted after the Madras Industrial Exhibition 1855 that distant provinces in India have been made aware of each other's products and each had the opportunity to be aware of their own dependencies.²⁵

Colonial and Indian Exhibition

The Colonial and Indian Exhibition held from 4 May to 10 November in 1886. It was visited by approximately six million people. It was held in the district of South Kensington (London) which occupies an important place in the history of colonial art education and exhibitions. It hosted the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition and the 1862 International Exhibition. Additionally, it was the host to a series of international exhibitions organized between 1871 and 1874.²⁶ These exhibitions initiated critical discussions about the expectations, scale, and purpose of exhibitions. In the light of these discussions, Sir Henry Cole and his colleagues reformed their scheme for future exhibitions. The Colonial and Indian Exhibition took place in South Kensington almost 12 years later in 1886. It was organized by the Royal Commission for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition.²⁷ India occupied the largest space of around a hundred thousand square feet.²⁸

The aims of organizing the exhibition were shaped by the organisers' political ideals. One obvious aim was to showcase supposed intellectual control over the culture and economy of colonies. The Colonial and Indian Exhibition had two political events in its backdrop. First, it took place shortly after the last major acquisition of Indian territory by the British in 1885, of Upper Burma.²⁹ Also, not much time had passed after the defeat of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the regime change in 1858. Power had been appropriated from the East India Company in 1858 and India had come under the Queen. The new government desired to establish its legitimacy in the eyes of both, the British and the Indians, given that it had gained power after crushing a massive local revolt. Therefore, the displays of the exhibitions were intended to show imperial confidence in the ability to "know" and classify India.³⁰ The intention behind exhibiting such a claim to knowledge might be to give the colonial project a missionary connotation and to move its image away from being a tyrant set-up based on violence.

The exhibits showcased India as a pre-modern and pre-industrial subcontinent of villages, bazaars and princely states. These exhibits "included a simulated Indian palace and durbar, reconstructed agricultural and artisanal scenes, and models of villages encompassing local societies".³¹ The Indian section "enclosed an architectural schematic that rendered India as a feudal land, dominated by princely and local politics".³² Upon entering the Indian Palace at the exhibition, a visitor would see a Durbar Hall which was supposed to reproduce a royal residence in India. It had on exhibition "portraits of Indian princes, as well as articles of bamboo, carved wood screens, and handmade objects."³³ Moreover, Indian artisans demonstrated the making of local crafts within the Indian Palace Forecourt.³⁴ For this, artisans were called in from India to be on display at the exhibition for around six months. This was also a display of the racial "difference" of the Indian artisans for the imperial visitors, as much as it was a display of craft. Furthermore, three sections were dedicated to British India: Artware Courts, Administrative Courts, and Imperial Economic Courts. The Administrative Courts housed the British accomplishments in India. This was segregated from the Artware and Economic Courts which were dedicated to the ethnography and economy of India.³⁵ The Artware Courts were dedicated to handmade crafts and artisan works. On the other hand, the Economic Courts showcased models of Indian villages and bazaars with life-size models of Indian 'natives.'³⁶ Also, the

Economic Courts had samples of agricultural products.³⁷ As far as other colonial governments were concerned, their financial guarantees to the Guarantee Fund established by the Royal Commission were small, and hence their participation was limited.³⁸ This included South Australia, New Zealand, Queensland, Mauritius, New South Wales, and Canada.³⁹

A Visit to Europe by T.N. Mukherji

T.N. Mukharji was an upper-caste Indian who worked with the British officials for organizing the Colonial and Indian Exhibition. His travelogue, *A Visit to Europe*, shows his concerns about the exhibition. Although he was one of the people assisting in the administration of the exhibition, he was aware of his own status as a “living” spectacle. He came from the Indian elite who did not supposedly carry their contestation of imperial ideology down to the subalterns. Moreover, since he was a collaborator of the British so he is expected to re-iterate the imperialist ideology, but nevertheless we can read his voice as the voice of Indian agency at the British exhibition.

T.N. Mukherji's travelogue reveals an ambivalent tension in the elite Indians like him. They supported the empire and their status as western-educated reforming Indians but at the same time, they also challenged assertions of Indian difference.⁴⁰ For example, Mukherji comments in his travelogue: “We were never natives before” but “We are all natives now—We poor Indians”.⁴¹ This line explains how Mukherji notices the setting apart of Indians as ‘natives’ in the colonial exhibition. We can also see that despite being among the people who were organizing the conference, he still identifies with the Indians to some extent by using the word “we”. He is aware that Indians have been made part of a certain racial category at a point in time by the British, and that category was up for being viewed at the exhibition. He is aware of this category unlike the artisans and is criticizing it by appreciating that there was a time when this category did not exist. Unlike the British who saw racial differences as natural, Mukherjee saw this category as a colonial construct. He does not accept this category as one would accept a British officer to believe in it. Instead, he recalls a time when it did not exist, to make the reader appreciate that this category of “native” is not timeless, and hence constructed.

Mukherjee tries to establish that Indians were not “novel” or “exotic” beings after all. Many scholars have explained the link between imperialism and exoticism. Exoticizing the Indian people was instrumental in othering them as racially, ethnically and geopolitically different.⁴² Bernard Smith articulates: “[Exoticism] was a category of accommodation by means of which the European perceived and interpreted the Other according to the limits and constraints of European understanding.”⁴³ The category “exotic” ended up giving the Europeans a dehumanizing lens to look at Indians through Eurocentrism. Mukherjee summarizes the reaction of the British audience to the exhibits of the Indian bazaar and artisans: “We were very interesting beings no doubt, so were the Zulus before us, and so is the Sioux chief at present time”.⁴⁴ Immediately after writing this, he delves into a discussion of how “human nature everywhere thirsts for novelty and measures out its favors in proportion to the rarity or oddity”.⁴⁵

Why does Mukherji feel the need to comment on the thirst for novelty in human nature while he is giving an account of all the exhibits in the exhibition? The obvious answer is that he observed that the British audience was looking at the Indian people as some “exotic” or “novel” beings. This is in itself an odd or even ‘challenging’ site for any Indian to experience. Mukherji brings in his understanding of human nature to provide it the blame for the way Indians were being looked at in the exhibition and this is his implicit argument that Indians are not “actually” exotic, it is just the human nature that is making the British people treat them that way! Also, Mukherji repeatedly in the travelogue discusses how he found the comments made by the British audience about the Indians utterly amusing.⁴⁶ This gives the reader a sense that Mukherji is also looking at the British as somehow “novel” human beings who are proud of ruling India yet are so ignorant about India. We can see that Mukherji is somehow trying to provide a sense of knowing the imperialist. It is an attempt by Mukherji to present his own understanding as knowledge. Mukherji is able to do this because of his training as a Western-educated Indian but at the same time we can see that his Western-education is not making him an exact copy of the British. In fact, his Western education enables him to produce an “otherwise to modernity”, as argued by Homi Bhabha. Mukherji attempts to explain away that Indians are not actually “exotic” and simultaneously implicitly suggests that in fact, British are, to an extent, “exotic”.

Mukherji reinforces the colonial racial categories. However, he complexifies them as the following lines of his travelogue reflect: “The power to relish destruction of life is developed in the Nagas in as high degree as it is in the European”.⁴⁷ “Naga” here, refers to a Mongolian tribe. Mukherji made this comment while discussing the statue of a Naga at the exhibition. Mukherji informs his readers that Nagas wear a necklace that comprises the hair of all the people they have killed. This means that each person in the Nagas is wearing each strand of hair around his neck as a medal to flaunt the headcount he has killed. Mukherji categorizes the Naga as a ‘savage’ and also remarks that Nagas killed not for ‘distinction’ or ‘privilege’ but for the “pleasure which the act of killing affords.”⁴⁸ This comparison of the Nagas and the British is very different from anything one would expect a collaborator of the British to articulate. From the Saidian perspective, Mukherji being a collaborator of the British should have compared the Nagas and the British but focused only on the differences in the Nagas and equated the differences as the “weaknesses” of the Nagas. However, we witness Mukherji articulating something completely different. He locates a similarity between the British and the Naga, provided that he terms Nagas savages, and notes that the British also have a similar tendency to relish destruction or killing to as high a degree as the Nagas. Right after the above-mentioned discussion, Mukherji writes that it is only the Hindus who feel sorrow upon bloodshed. This further clarifies that Mukherji, rather than imitating the British, is attempting to present his own understanding of the various races.

Mukherji also critiques the exhibits for not displaying Indian technology. He notes that the exhibition does have economic exhibits which portray the influence that industrialization and European technology is having on the Indian economic production. However, the display of Indian technological innovations such as the

technology to cultivate potatoes was missing. Mukherji finds this absence surprising since the British Empire had “encouraging circumstances” for technology at the exhibition.

Mukherji, at another point, informs about the public reaction to the Artware Court. He mentions that the Artware Court was the centre of attraction for many commoners at the exhibition. According to him, the most popular exhibits were the “glittering cases” which “displayed costly jewelry of ancient patterns and rare workmanship.”⁴⁹ Then he moves on to mention the reaction of the public to these exhibits. He specifically mentions all the different women in the audience with some interesting choice of words like “sweet little cherubim with yellow hair flowing in profusion on their backs” and “pretty maidens just out from school”.⁵⁰ He later compares the standards of beauty between English and Indian women. This brings us back to the point that, for Mukherji, the British people were far more interested in the artisans than the exhibits. Nevertheless, he narrates the “wistful eyes” which were looking at the necklaces, lockets, bangles, etc. All of a sudden, Mukherji breaks into another discussion with the words: “Poor little Swamy.”⁵¹ By “Swamy” he means the artisan who made the jewelry that was on display. He then describes how the artisan might have made the jewelry: “in his humble cottage...bending before his... anvil which his fathers and forefathers used... little did he know what those playful strokes of his subsequently produced in the far West.”⁵² Later he makes a brief comment that the playful strokes of the “Swamy” let loose “a force under which beat many a heart.”⁵³

This narration informs us of a scene, in which Mukherji is telling us that a product from his homeland which was produced and consumed in a different context back home was placed in a completely different context and almost stood appropriated by the audience as one of their own. Seeing that the audience was attaching an emotional value to the jewelry, the first thing that came to Mukherji's mind was the artisan who made that product. This is because Mukherji most probably found this entire scene amusing. One artisan makes a product that his/her family is producing generation after generation in India and it comes to England and takes on a completely new ‘enhanced’ significance in the public eye. By narrating this scene, Mukherji is sort of leveling a critique on the exhibits that although they were Indian products, they were telling the local people nothing about their actual context of origin. He suggests that the real purpose of colonial exhibitions was not to give new social meanings to the exhibits but to educate the public about those exhibits and their origin. However, at the exhibition, the display of working artisans decontextualized Indian craft practices instead of accurately representing them. The model there was far removed from how the craft was actually practiced. An artisan who worked on a loom specially designed for barocade had to do spinning for the exhibition.⁵⁴ Also, there is a possibility that many models on display were not practicing artisans. This broaches the subject that an Indian who was responsible for organizing the exhibition was aware of its shortcomings. The Indians who assisted the British with the organizing of the exhibition were not mere ‘subjects’; rather they were intelligent critics of the event.

Conclusion

Our analysis of T. N. Mukherji's travelogue lends support to the claim that the Saidian scholarship overestimates the influence of the imperialist. We observe that Mukherji expresses concerns and ideas which we cannot expect a collaborator of the British to voice. Moreover, we observe that he employs British system of knowledge to critique the British in defense of Indian traditions. These are the very encounters in which the concept of "tradition" was constructed by the British and ones who opposed them.⁵⁵ We see that Mukherji makes an attempt to grapple with the imperialist racial categories but turns them around and ends up comparing the Nagas with the British, the result of which argues for Hindus being more peaceful people in the world. This kind of shift is usually expected from an anti-imperialist scholar or revolutionary, and not a collaborator of the British. We also observe that Mukherji criticizes the exhibition for not including the Indian innovations and technology. He mentions the reactions of the British people to Indian human exhibits to be novel and humorous experiences in themselves.

Therefore, we may conclude that the colonial exhibition mentioned and the ones following it were not seamlessly successful in developing an overwhelming image of the empire. Rather, such events received their fair share of critique and resistance even among the elite Indians responsible for the administration.

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