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Florence D'Souza's latest book explores the work of James Tod, a military officer of the East India Company in India from 1800 to 1822, a period when the future Raj was still in its swaddling clothes, and the task of Empire building had just begun. Tod, as the British Political Resident for the Western Rajput states, travelled extensively and on his return to England, he published several accounts of his experiences, including the *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1832). In *Knowledge, Mediation and Empire: James Tod’s Journeys among the Rajputs*, D'Souza presents Tod as “a self-elected spokesman trying to defend and illustrate the cause of the Rajputs through his publications”, and attempts to analyse “some of the complexities and contradictions that such a position presented.” The fundamental question the book addresses is: can an ‘empire builder,’ as Tod undoubtedly was, ‘step across the line’ of divided loyalties? For D'Souza, there can be no doubt: “Tod was undeniably a steppe across lines and frontiers.” (4-5)

While her book is well supported by careful close readings of Tod’s published writings, unpublished correspondence and personal documents, her reluctance to refute, or even mention criticism of Tod’s work places her work perilously close to a hagiography. Statements like “So Tod shows himself to be an assiduous historian and an astute observer concerning the capitals and local histories of the different princely families of Gujarat” (54) require more substantiation considering that Tod’s work has frequently been accused of historical inaccuracies, requiring careful sifting to be taken seriously.

British historian C.A. Bayly, for example, dismisses *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* as “James Tod’s neo-Gothic extravaganza” when discussing “the process of ranking and grading the Indian social order in an attempt to understand and control it” by early Company officials.¹

D’Souza differentiates her work from other writings on Tod by explaining that it is “limited exclusively to the background and reception of Tod’s texts during Tod’s time”(6) and is inclusive of new sources not easily available. She has chosen to focus on the “literary and aesthetical aspects” of Tod’s work (7), consciously avoiding the political dimension: “Whether this was part of the ‘epistemological violence’ of colonialism and whether Tod’s dreams of material ‘improvement’ in the territories he helped to supervise for the British Governor-General in Calcutta boiled down simply to exploitative colonial impositions are questions best left to others”. (77) However, can politics be evacuated when discussing empire-builders? The result is sometimes an oxymoron: “the need for gentle British intervention in Rajasthan” (105).

The book comprises seven chapters, an introduction, a conclusion and four appendices. Chapters one to three present Tod's two major publications as travelogues embellished with historical and mythological stories, “with the express aim of making available to readers in Britain and Europe what he found to be the unique characteristics of the land and the society of the Rajputs and Gujaratis he had encountered.” (33) There is no doubt that the charm of Tod’s depiction of the landscapes of Rajasthan and Gujarat is frequently overlooked in the many historiographic debates which dominate discussions of Tod’s work. D’Souza compares Tod’s narrative with other contemporary British

travelogues, for example, Francis Buchanan Hamilton, whose statistical surveys, published in the 1830’s, lack Tod’s sensitivity to the beauty of the land (34), or Bishop Reginald Heber, who like Tod, “devotes attention to the picturesque and sublime aspects” of the Indian landscape, but who had less empathy for Indians, as his major concern was to improve Indian society through Christianity (35).

D’Souza quotes several descriptions of the Indian landscape in Tod’s work, using the word ‘sublime’ as explained by Edmund Burke. She notes how Tod seems to “give priority to the contemporary picturesque aesthetic designed to provoke astonishment and delight in the viewer, rather than to any overt colonialist agenda of proving the inferiority of the colonized or the superiority of the colonizer”(38). Similarly, she notes the parallels Tod draws between Scotland and Rajasthan/Gujarat through the use of words like crags, glens, cairns; and the comparisons between the Indian and European archaeological sites/mythology, thus placing the East on a par with the West. Interestingly, she points out the 18th-century humanism latent in Tod’s work: he is not feminizing the Orient, as the ‘sublime’ is masculine according to Burke’s theories, as contrasted with the ‘beautiful’, which is feminine. D’Souza refutes Ronald Inden’s claim that Tod consciously ‘constructed’ an imaginary Orient (feminist and irrational), as per Edward Said’s analysis in Orientalism, for imperial purposes. (43)

Tod did not speak Sanskrit, but he learned the locally spoken Urdu language, and had regular recourse to indigenous interpreters, which enabled him to enrich his narrative with historical and bardic accounts. D’Souza lays stress on both the wealth of historical narratives collected by him and the warmth of his relationships with several Rajput royal families. There are some delightful anecdotes which allow the reader a glimpse of the man behind the official “cultivating English lettuces and celery in his Udaipur garden, to the joy of his Rajput friends”; she quotes Tod: “the Dewanjii (Rana) has monopolized the celery, which he pronounces the prince of vegetables.” (77)

Chapters four and five situate Todd among the different ideological currents of his time. She places Tod among the Indian Romantics; that is to say men inspired both by the cosmopolitan ideals of the eighteenth century and by European Romanticism. They shared a great admiration for Ancient India, and believed that England should help Indians rediscover the lost roots of their own civilisations. They generally identified India with Hinduism, regarding Muslims as invaders.2 D’Souza writes that Tod voices “his admiration for the age-old Rajput customs which had outlived 800 years of Muslim domination in India. (…) He believed in a] flexible British colonial regime that would ultimately recognize the right to the restoration of the independence of its colonized subjects” (110). She adds that Tod’s extensive quotations from British Romantic writers were probably an attempt to “distance himself from the other strong current of thought and writing on India, embodied by James Mill” (81), i.e., Utilitarianism.

D’Souza describes at length Tod’s tales of the Rajput royal families, especially the marriages of Rajput princesses to Muslim sovereigns – but regrettably there is no contextualizing of these marriages, and the Emperors Akbar, Aurengzebe, Jahangir and Shah Jahan are all juxtaposed without notice of the radical shift in Mughal policy over the period discussed (86-89). The whole remains picturesque, but requires careful historical sifting, to have any value other than local colour. Myth and historical veracity mingle in the narrative, raising the inevitable question: is Tod creating a romantic vision of the Rajputs at the expense of Muslims? And was this a way to justify British intervention?

The title of chapter six, “Tod’s knowledge exchanges with his contemporaries in India” is misleading, as knowledge exchanges are only mentioned briefly on pages 141-42. On the other hand, D’Souza depicts various facets of Tod’s personality and life, beginning with his birth certificate. She paints a lively picture of Tod’s activities in India, his relationship with both British and Rajput officials, including the tension between Tod and General David Ochterlony, which eventually led to Tod’s resignation in 1823. This chapter is a detailed account of British activities in Rajasthan, reconstructing the role of ‘kingmaker’ played by the British (145-47). It also discusses thirteen letters written by Tod to Rana Bheem Singh of Mewar from March 1820 – 1822, translated from the Devanagri script into English by D’Souza. The letters not only show Tod’s ease in the local language, but show how involved Tod was with the personal affairs of the Rana (150-51).

Chapter seven discusses Tod’s publications and conferences on his return to England, followed by detailed descriptions of reviews of Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan published in six learned contemporary journals, which were, on the whole, favourable. One can regret that D’Souza does not adopt a more synthetic approach. She concludes by noting “his gradual acceptance and recognition as an erudite authority on his beloved Rajputs” by European literati. (188)

In her conclusion, D’Souza compares Tod’s stated goals with his achievements. She explains that Tod wished to “arouse a sympathetic interest in the Rajputs in Britain and Europe, and also to inspire further investigation among British and European scholars into the history and customs of the Rajputs” (194). For D’Souza Tod has succeeded, but in support she quotes only Douglas Sladen’s preface to the 1914 reprint. After describing Tod’s bequest of documents and objects connected with Rajasthan to the Royal Asiatic Society in London, she finishes by comparing Tod to other early British colonialists. Four appendixes complete the study, the thirteen letters from Tod to Bheem Singh of Mewar, two memorandums by Tod and a copy of his will.

D’Souza’s book is the result of in-depth research work; she has consulted an impressive number of published and non-published sources on her subject. The result is a book which redefines and expands our understanding of the enigmatic early builders of the Raj. She has been at pains to point out how studies of colonialism cannot be reduced to simplified binaries; for example, Tod hopes that “Britain would grant the Rajputs ‘the restoration of their former independence’, paradoxical as this might seem from the pen of an official of the British Empire” (101). Tod himself was aware of the “vanity of all his undertakings in India”; D’Souza shows him quoting from the book of Ecclesiastes at the time of his departure for Britain: “I looked upon all the works that my hands had wrought and on the labour I had labored to do; and behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit.”(106-07) Forsaking her reluctance to allow politics to enter her book, D’Souza comments: “The insertion of this biblical verse adds a zest of venerable trustworthiness to Tod’s text, while also showing his own actions in India in a tragic light of futility.” (108) In concluding her book by situating Tod in the company of other early British colonialists caught up in the same paradox, she reminds us that James Tod’s story is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a complex historical process.