immediate strategic variables such as allies and resources, but also how they interface with historical memory rooted in long-term legacies of conflict.

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AHUJA, RAVI. Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit und das Problem der Arbeit. Eine Studie zur Sozialgeschichte der Stadt Madras und ihres Hinterlandes zwischen 1750 und 1800. [Beiträge zur Südostasienforschung, Band 183.] Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 1999. x, 389 pp. DM 130.00; S.fr. 130.00; S 949.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859001450164

This study is the doctoral thesis that Ahuja submitted to the University of Heidelberg in Germany in 1997. It addresses the question of colonial state formation from the point of view of the city of Madras, as present-day Chennai was known during the period studied. The dilemma the author takes as his point of departure is not one of conquest or commodity trade, but of manpower and employment. This proves a fruitful approach. Ahuja wonders how a few thousand Europeans managed to establish the English East India Company (EIC) as the dominant power in the Indian subcontinent, i.e. over the approximately 180 million people that could be called Indians at that time. It is, he argues, first and foremost a question of labour. He does not seem very keen, however, on the concept of a labour market, which perhaps he regards as too modern and undifferentiated a term. Instead, his study looks for a variety of forms of social organization that pre-existed the colonial state, informed and transformed it during decades of Indian–British interaction, and adapted themselves in the process to the new tasks required of them.

Ahuja assumes, with good reason, that centuries of commercialization, largely the result of increasing global trade, had exercised a dynamic impact on labour relations in the subcontinent long before 1750. Thanks to the nature of the historical sources available, one can trace the particular impact of these dynamics on, for instance, relations in the military labour market and on military matters in general. This is also the case with various categories of transport workers and construction workers. In other fields much information has been lost. The tools the East India Company used to impose its will on India (including peasant recruits, but also army bullocks – crucial to military logistics – a monetized economy, and a sophisticated system of espionage) were all available to any entrepreneur, whether Indian or otherwise, who was willing to adopt them. Ahuja endeavours to do justice not so much to groups of people neglected in earlier studies, like the peasant-soldier or weaver-soldier, but to trace all forms of labour relations involved in the rise of the colonial state. Yet, he states, the period he has studied was one of intense militarization, not only in the Madras area but also in practically all of India, and the demand for military (but also civilian) labour was much greater than in earlier centuries. I am not entirely convinced that the military dynamics Ahuja considers a new phenomenon were not actually a much older one. It is no doubt true, however, that regional powers like the EIC were compelled to employ large numbers of men, even unproductive men, to maintain their position in the highly competitive politics of the time. A large share of the county’s resources was sent – or diverted – to military channels. The demand for labour was often intense, and agricultural production suffered as a result.

Ahuja’s study is both wide-ranging and meticulous, and the thorough manner in which he has made use of the London and Chennai archives lends authority to his conclusions.
The problems of the recruitment, discipline, and payment of labour occupy a prominent place in these records. Before the middle of the eighteenth century, textile workers demanded most of the EIC’s attention. Subsequently, a much larger number of coolies, sepoys, boatmen, etc. had to be engaged and managed. By 1790, the administration turned to agriculture and to the peasant as the source of labour on which the state primarily depended. However, the military-administrative colonial state came into being in the period 1750 to 1790, and can only be understood by taking into account the patterns that emerged when Indians and Europeans worked together in finding out where their labour institutions and cultures were compatible. Ahuja finds that these institutions were compatible to a large extent, but at the same time emphasizes the violence that was a feature of this process of reshaping social relations in Madras and its hinterland. In itself, the participation of the EIC in these labour relations, military and otherwise, did not represent a fundamentally new departure from the patterns of social organization prevailing in India during the second half of the eighteenth century.

The forms of social organization that were at the basis of colonial state formation cannot, the author argues, be described in terms of the simple opposition of “free” urban to “unfree” rural labour. Already during the long-term process of commercialization that preceded the period of militarization – the nature and especially the origin of both, I believe, remain somewhat hypothetical; but that, of course, falls outside the scope of this study – collective ties between rural labourers and mirasidar communities had gradually loosened, without completely dissolving. These relations were characterized by ambivalence and flexibility, negotiation, and the attempt to keep open more than one employment option, which have always been features of Indian peasant survival strategies. Ahuja suggests that these rural labour relations require further research, and important research it would be too.

On the other hand, intensive warfare and the unbearable pressure on the countryside led to a crisis in late eighteenth-century Madras, culminating in the demographic catastrophe of the famine of the early 1780s. This, together with the novelty of a monopoly of arms such as the EIC succeeded in imposing on Madras and its hinterland, resulted in a clear break with the past. Typical for this period of crisis were paradoxical phenomena like the coincidence of low prices on the market for slaves and high prices for hired labour. After the crisis, a long period of peasantization confirmed dominant agricultural groups in their position of control, while the demand for labour and peasant mobility decreased. Ahuja does not for a moment deny that this meant radical change. The colonial state, however, continued to be informed by the knowledge it had imbibed of the forms of Indian labour organization. That state, in other words, did not come into its own in about 1830, when its agrarian fiscal procedures were canonized. For some of its most typical characteristics one must look to the second half of the eighteenth century. Ahuja has convincingly shown this, and one must therefore hope that his book will be translated into English. It certainly has something of considerable relevance to contribute to our rethinking the origins of the colonial state and, therefore, of the modern state in India.

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