

“dispersal”, “articulation”, “disarticulation” in a cluster on pp. 151–152, for instance). But such instances do not recur as the book progresses. In any case, these only reflect an articulation strategy rather than anything else, and do not take away anything from the merit of the monograph.

The book fulfils a major need for a social history of roads, canals, and railways in colonial India. It represents first-rate scholarship on the colonial history of transportation networks based on a rigorous use of colonial state archives. It will be useful to historians of South Asia as well as to those broadly interested in South Asian Studies. It is slated to make an impact in the field.

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CHOUDHURY, DEEP KANTA LAHIRI. *Telegraphic Imperialism. Crisis and Panic in the Indian Empire, c.1830*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke [etc.] 2010. xii, 277 pp. Ill. Maps. £55.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859011000307

Something must have gone wrong with the title of the book. First of all: in 1830 the telegraph did not yet exist though, admittedly, preliminary experiments had taken place in Europe, North America, and British India. Experiments with an electric system of transmission, however, had been going on at least for fifty years. Second: “Telegraphic Imperialism” sounds like a period covering the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. The “c” – *circa* – thus does not make any sense at all. In fact, as the author points out in his introduction (p. 1), the book covers the period just mentioned.

Yet something further is confusing. In his “Acknowledgements” (p. xi) Choudhury mentions that his thesis won a prize for the best thesis submitted at Cambridge University in 2000. Scanning the bibliography one wonders why a certain Lahiri Choudhury, D.K., submitted a thesis at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, dated 1997, entitled: “Communication and Empire: The Telegraph in North India, c.1830–1856” (p. 270). As there is no bibliographic difference indicated between Choudhury’s thesis and, for example, the dissertation of Saroj Ghose, which is a Ph.D. thesis submitted at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, in 1974, it leads one to assume (probably falsely) that the said thesis of Lahiri Choudhury is also a Ph.D. thesis. However, most likely Choudhury’s unpublished dissertation is his M.A. thesis. That should have been made clear. In any case, a more thorough editing would have helped to avoid such confusion and inconsistencies.

Having said this, the contents of the book are much more interesting than the cover, the first, and the last pages. Some of the chapters have been published earlier in various journals and edited volumes which have established the author’s reputation as a telegraphic insider, especially with respect to the telegraph’s social implications in a British Indian context. The topic of the Indian employees’ telegraph strike of 1908 is, without doubt, the most lucid example, and has been reprinted in a reworked version as chapter 7 (pp. 157–178).

The first chapter deals with the independent invention of a telegraphic system by William O’Shaughnessy during the 1830s and 1840s. Within a decade O’Shaughnessy established a telegraph network which covered the main routes of the British Empire in India. However, the network lacked completeness as the Great Rebellion of 1857–1859 would demonstrate. Instead of covering the whole subcontinent, major arterial lines such as that between Madras and Calcutta were not built. This story is told in the second chapter which illustrates that, at that time, the telegraph was by no means a highly

advanced technology suppressing and controlling rebellious Indians. On the contrary, defects and mistakes within that system hampered communication on the subcontinent, which is why the British had to rely on conventional modes of communication like postal services on camels', horses', and runners' backs.

The said mistake was corrected during the rebellion and after it the whole system was rapidly expanded in relation to imperial needs and designs. Reconstructing and expanding the telegraph lines took place according to a certain rationale. From now on, as Chapter 3 shows, telegraph lines had to serve two ends, namely the commercial and the strategic. Up to that point, and that was the major cause for the collapse of the telegraph system in 1857, they had only served military concerns. Signallers were now carefully selected and better trained, which also meant that Indians were increasingly refused access to the telegraph office. Of the telegraph staff, 75 per cent consisted of Europeans and Anglo-Indians, the rest being Indians in lower positions like peons (messengers etc.). Yet, at the same time a heated debate went on about the perfect signaller, the perfect telegram, the ideal form of communication. It seems, as Choudhury emphasizes (pp. 75–76), that the period after 1860 lasting well into the 1880s was a time when the government tried to establish what it regarded as an ideal telegraphic (communication) system. However, disciplining employees, language, technology, time and space did not work at all, at least not in the sense that the Post and Telegraph officials imagined. The very nature of the system required a far greater number of personnel, of bureaucracy, and administration than was thought appropriate for an empire which was to be run on the cheap.

Chapter 4 deals with the telegraph's international and global aspects. However, what Choudhury calls "New Imperialism" (p. 79) seems to be retelling an old and fairly well established narrative – though adding new aspects. It seems strange that the author's point of reference and, therefore, point of departure is David Fieldhouse's *Economics and Empire 1830–1914*, dating from 1973. After 1870, the telegraph "constituted the hegemonic determinant of the relations of production and power [...]. The telegraph system provided both the means and an primary locus for the financial and imperial expansion of Britain after 1850. [...]. Imperialism in the late nineteenth century was nothing new but fundamentally different from all previous forms" (p. 81). It was not trade which the flag followed or the other way round, but an empire that followed the lines of the telegraph. To demonstrate this rather old story Choudhury retells the history of cable construction through the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf in 1863–1864. It is told as an undertaking to "taming, naming, and transforming an alien landscape and its people into something familiar" (p. 91). The very same can be said of the botanists, geologists, geographers, and cartographers of the nineteenth century. Yet this is the old positivistic narrative of a progressive imperial power subduing countries and people by means of science and technology.

The conclusion that "India became the launching pad for British influence in the Indian Ocean, western Asia, south East Asia, and east Africa" (p. 101) is not supported by the evidence given in the chapter. Apart from this, the argument of cable cartels controlling transnational connections should have been elaborated on. The recent study of Pike and Winseck would certainly have been very helpful as their book was published in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Both authors demonstrate that it was not national and empire politics that dominated cable strategies, but that transnationally operating cartels influenced the laying and

1. Dwayne R. Winseck, and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860–1930* (Durham, NC [etc.], 2007).

working of cables and tariffs much more than hitherto admitted. The argument of the book would have been very supportive of Choudhury's argument of global actors which he emphasizes at the beginning of his book. The same is true for the transnationally operating press agencies like Reuters London, Havas Paris, and Wolff Telegraphenbureau Berlin, which agreed on 17 January 1870 to establish a worldwide news exchange by dividing the globe into zones of collecting and distributing news. The cartel was revised and joined by Associated Press New York in 1893. Choudhury does not mention this transnationally operating news cartel at all. In contrast, cable and news politics are covered within the limiting confines of the British Empire and British India.

Likewise, Choudhury misses the point when telling the story of the "All-Red-Line" planned from the 1870s onwards and realized in 1902 (chapter 5, pp. 116–118). Referring only to the contemporary literature,<sup>2</sup> he does not mention the stark opposition that the project met from various British politicians and economists which has been highlighted by a more recent study.<sup>3</sup> Also the consequences, feared by the said opposition, are not duly highlighted, namely the dramatic decrease of tariffs all over the globe after 1894 when cable construction in the Pacific began. This becomes of particular importance when dealing with the telegraph strike of 1908 (chapter 7, pp. 157–178). According to Choudhury, the telegraph strike of the Indian and Anglo-Indian personnel is seen in a rather national Indian context. Yet, this strike is also an example of transnational connectivity in a period of globalization. Though Choudhury mentions the strike of the signallers of the US-American telegraph monopolist Western Union (p. 178), he does not draw the relevant conclusions. Given the fact that the Western Union was operating a state monopoly, and also given the fact that in British India the telegraph was actually run by a state monopoly, the strike in both countries occurred after the decline of tariffs, and the monopolists tried to counterbalance the development by an increase of working hours, wage reductions, and automatization.

Of course, Indian signallers did not communicate with their American colleagues but transnational cartel politics forced nationally operating monopolists to pursue the same politics. This symmetry of monopolistic policies in the then most advanced democracy and one of the most strictly run colonies of the world is what makes a comparison worthwhile and, without doubt, highly interesting. Seen against this background, Choudhury's book seems rather unbalanced. On the one hand, the readership is told a highly reactionary story of imperialistic advance and progress due to technological and scientific superiority whilst, on the other hand, that very same technology did not work as it was envisaged by the British Indian government. The idea of an information panic, again stressing the limits of modern communication means, is not supported by the history of the telegraph, neither in British India nor in the British Empire let alone beyond it. The readership is left with this rather dissatisfying result and has to draw its own conclusions. The book has great potential and a more thorough elaboration of the argument and a sound theoretical framework could have turned it into a seminal piece of academic work.

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2. George Johnson (ed.), *The All Red Line: The Annals and Aims of the Pacific Cable Project* (London [etc.], 1903).

3. Neil Brenner, "Beyond State-Centrism? Space, Territoriality, and Geographical Scale in Globalization Studies", *Theory and Society*, 28 (1999), pp. 39–78.