

## Book Review

# ***Rule by Numbers Governmentality in Colonial India*** **by U. Kalpagam**

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**Reviewed by**  
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**T**he book is a timely intervention for academicians interested in understanding the Foucauldian approach to modern State formation. Research on colonial state-society relations from Marxist, liberal, post-colonial and feminist perspectives have thrown light on various aspects of colonial State. Resolutely Foucauldian in approach the book provides valuable introduction to the subject of governmentality and biopolitics in colonial state formation in India. The main focus of the book is on the production of statistical knowledge as a part of colonial governance in India using Foucault's idea of governmentality.

The traditional understanding of State formation in Western political thought is based on the sovereignty-model that argues power is concentrated in the hands of sovereign ruler. Foucault challenged this model by calling for 'cutting off the king's head' and replacing it with new way of looking at the modern State. Modern State is the effect of power relations diffused in the society. Governmentality or political rationalities are complex strategies of power used

for directing the 'conduct' of individuals, groups, communities etc. towards certain goals.

The book focuses on the 'enumerative rationalities' and strategies 'used in the State building activity'. The author highlights how colonial conquest in India and elsewhere was based on 'epistemological conquest', i.e., a power-knowledge system that displaced, replaced or juxtaposed the existing system. Kalpagam documents this epistemological conquest in the domains of history, economy, society (castes, tribes, religion and race), public health, and the public sphere. The colonial State building became possible in India due to the introduction of Western categories of time, space, reason and causality. None of the regimes in the pre-British era used quantificatory system. However, the West was already using Baconian inductive and experimental knowledge to study social processes in their own society. It merely sought to export it to the colonies. Statistical knowledge became new mode of intervention in the Indian subcontinent. Yet, the method introduced in India

differed considerably from the Victorian administrative State. The book examines how enumerative technologies of rule led to the proliferation of measurements and classifications of things that earlier were unquantified.

Kalpagam gives an overview of how the abstract concept of modern State sovereignty was deciphered during British colonial rule. Sovereignty in theory is coherent but in practice it is fragmented and discontinuous. This was seen in case of East India Company that was a political monster of dual nature; it was subject of the British state and political master of India. As company rule consolidated by 1830s there were fierce debates in Britain regarding governmental practices suitable to the Indian society. The civilizing mission using liberal governmentality was always a mix of coercive, disciplinary and violent strategies. This necessitated total control of people. Therefore, the institutions set-up in India used bureaucratic surveillance to create massive imperial archives about the population of India so as to bring various aspects of social life under the colonial gaze. Yet, the scientific rationality of archival practices was subjective as it involved selecting some slices of social facts and ignoring the rest. The practices of annual reports of parliament, royal commissions, and experts' opinions prevalent in England were exported to India to extract knowledge of the colony. For instance, the colonial office in London demanded all colonies to produce annual statistical reports known as Blue book.

Production of modern spaces was an important component of political rationalities. The colonial State made use of surveys, maps, diagrams, etc. for demarcation of spaces. Carto-

graphical techniques were used to map physical borders and population of India. Earlier cartographic exercises of James Rennell (*Bengal Atlas (1781)* and *Map of Hindoostan (1788)*) helped in setting functional sites like barracks, factories, prisons, schools, etc. Land was an important source of revenue for the company. As early as 1792, the Company appointed Alexander Read as a revenue officer of Baramahal and Salem to conduct detailed 'political survey' of every district. The survey was comprehensive and covered subjects like inhabitants, occupation, calendar and division of time, weights and measure, coinage and exchange rates, production and crop cycles with appropriate diagrams, agricultural prices, land rents, tenures and rates and modes of taxation, histories of the districts and their institutions, settlement records, mode of revenue management etc.. In the latter half of the nineteenth century cartographic archives were used for medical policing as health became an element of colonial governmentality.

Alongside spatial practices the colonial government also introduced new temporalities in the subcontinent. When company rule was established in the Indian subcontinent British power had to reckon with thirteen types of calendrical system. Post-Enlightenment brought new understanding of time. Time became linear and progressive and advancement of civilisation was henceforth to be measured on the new time scale. The British considered indigenous understanding of time as static and cyclical. Hence, they wanted to replace it with secular idea of time and used it to map the history and progress

of Indian civilisation. Consequently, the British government began to impose uniform time scale to run the administration. Practices like allocation of work in factories, prisoners in jails, running of railways were premised on secular progressive time scale. However, the homogeneous time scale introduced by the colonial government often clashed with the heterogeneous time practices of the governed. This was especially witnessed in the writings of colonial history. While some colonial historians considered the then existing social system of Hindu society as decayed and sunken that had to be civilised by the British rule, certain sections of the Indian intelligentsia challenged such moves by invoking glorious Vedic past. Another argument put forth was that though India might have remained 'backward' in matters of material achievements it remained par excellence in the realm of spiritual greatness. This resistance to the 'secular progressive' time scale resulted in some taking refuge in the timeless, eternal and spiritual past. If the early Hindu nationalist criticised the empty homogeneous time of modernity by counterposing the spiritual realm, the anti-caste movement that arose in the mid-nineteenth century used the secular progressive temporality to attack the hegemony of the Brahmins by seeking emancipatory potential in the secular progressive time.

Classificatory techniques that originated in Europe in the 17th century helped in conceiving society at a macro level. Population became subject of study only after the development of statistical knowledge. Census tools were deployed to capture, what appeared to the colonial authorities as, chaotic social realities of

Indian society. Caste was an important social marker that needed enumeration. The fuzzy caste relations had to be transformed into measurable entities by capturing its features like endogamy, commensability, occupation, ritual practices etc. Kalpagam argues that classificatory techniques were not unique to India as it was the result of statistical practices that became embedded in the governmental rationality of Western states. These techniques helped in assessing the capacities of individuals, groups, communities and state resources. This was necessary to integrate people into political economy and administrative rationalities of the state. Often postcolonial writers criticised census techniques for freezing caste system that, they claimed, was fluid before the arrival of the British. However, it must be understood governmental rationalities didn't exist in vacuum; they always partake the social realities of the society. Even in Europe disciplinary techniques and surveillance practices were used against working class, vagabonds and criminals. The discourse of race and crime got mixed with evolutionary science and this led to the emergence of governmentality that began to understand caste system as based on racism.

The colonial State could not penetrate the depths of the society unless it was able to manage the conduct of the population in the direction of colonial liberal practices like participation in the new economy, accepting new social identities, developing respect for colonial value-system. Newspapers were yet another important mode of public sphere that developed in colonial India. Colonial State had to keep the Indian public informed about government policies and stimulate

favourable responses. The English newspapers published for the resident British and English educated Indians created public sphere for deliberations and debate though its spread was limited. The vernacular newspapers broadened the horizons of public sphere in India as the non-English educated masses (limited in numbers) could participate in the public deliberations. The colonial State also raised, especially after the 1857 mutiny, legal barrier to prevent the production of hostile public opinion. The nascent nationalism emerging in India made use of vernacular press to raise national consciousness of the masses. Similarly, some social reformers used newspaper to create favourable opinion about the benign role of the colonial power in catalyzing social change in the society.

The liberal freedom that was introduced by the colonial governmentality was always fortified by the security requirement of the colonial state. Yet this liberal governmentality germinated the ideas of equality and justice although in

fragmented manners that got reflected in a more coherent manner in the framing of the Indian constitution. The postcolonial implications of colonial governmentality are also examined in the book with respect to both planning techniques for attainment of justice and the role of information in the constitution of neoliberal subjects.

*Rule by Numbers* offers original perspectives on the construction of the colonial State and colonial power within the framework of governmentality. It does a commendable work in drawing implications for the postcolonial nation-State in the contemporary period. It provides a wealth of information for students of surveillance studies. However, the main drawback of the book is that it is very dense. Readers not familiar with Foucault's theory of power will find it difficult to understand the book. Another major limitation of the book is the lack of references to political and social resistance coming from various segments of the society to the practices of colonial governmentality.