

Introducing Colonial Regionalism: The Case of the Madras Presidency

Colonial India is often conceived of as those areas under direct British rule ("pink India" on many maps) and those areas under the nominal control of the princes ("yellow India"). However, this simple binary overlooks the complex and nuanced differences between the different regions of British India. Rather than viewing British India as a homogenous colonial power, this paper argues for the variegated nature of colonial rule, suggesting that within British India were distinct colonial regions. Typically India's national history is viewed from 1885 with the founding of the Indian National Congress, thus marking the beginning of Indian nationalism. I argue that prior to this period, in the decades between 1850 and 1890, a form of colonial regionalism took shape centered around the presidencies of British India. This regionalism was artificially constructed from the amalgamation of polities cobbled together over two centuries by the East India Company, yet, I argue, such regionalism was a critical step in the formation of Indian nationalism. Colonial regionalism - a concept I am introducing here - has transnational application as we can usefully look at other regions of greater Asia to see the ways in which artificial regions are created and come to have a powerful life of their own. When these regions are merged with yet larger national frameworks, they often come back - sometimes decades later - as powerful separatist movements. Thus, colonial regionalism has both important historical and contemporary resonances.