

Sen, Sudipta. *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 216 pp.

**Author:** Sudipta Sen earned a BA and an MA from Calcutta University and an MA and a PhD from the University of Chicago. He teaches at the University of California, Davis, specializing in Asian history.

**Subject:** Sen writes about India from the beginning of British ascendancy to the defeat of the Sepoy Mutiny, the time during which the British Empire developed from just one of many powers in India to being the sovereign power. His primary focus is on British sovereignty—how the British legitimated their rule both to India and to themselves. Though he deals with politics, economics, and military conquest in passing, he writes primarily about culture, gender, race, and identity.

**Characteristics:** Sen tries to integrate the history of India, of the British Empire in India, and of the British nation. He attempts to answer the question “What should the historian of India endeavor to know of Britain’s domestic past?” He is part of the “new imperial history,” meaning that he sees British domestic history affecting imperial history and vice versa.

**Thesis:** Using culture, gender, and race, the British legitimated and modified their sovereignty over India at the same time that their encounter with India solidified British identity.

**Themes:**

1. British sovereignty in India
  - a. Theories of sovereignty: king in Parliament; Moghul Empire; British East India Company, joint-stock company, Battle of Plassey, Battle of Dehli, Sepoy Mutiny.
  - b. Historiography: Mountstuart Elphinstone, *History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*; Hindus, or “Gentoos,” weak, effeminate, and depraved because of climate, religion, and morality; Muslims strong but despotic because of religion; timeless stereotypes of race as a justification for sovereignty.
  - c. Cartography: question of identity; Mughul vs. British maps; origins in military surveys by Engineering Corps; comparison to Scotland; James Rennell’s map (1767); William Lambton’s Great Trigonometrical Survey of India (1802–15); *Atlas of India* (1822); geography leads to ethnography.
  - d. Race and gender: British model of the household; “free, benevolent, improving, paternalist, consciously authoritative agency”; change from intimacy to separation based on blood; no *mestizo* class; rights to liberty and property; despotism; climate, marriage, and morality; Francis Buchanan Hamilton and systematic ethnography (1807).
2. The effects of India on British identity: “Britishness” not an ahistorical quality; not just colonizer and colonized; resisting Oriental corruption from wealth and miscegenation; parallels to Scotland and Ireland; “decline in intimacy”; expatriate communities.