

Book Review and Discussion

TRACING PEDAGOGIC SHIFTS IN SUTAPA DUTTA'S DISCIPLINED SUBJECTS

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Recent debates surrounding the draft NEP regulations 2019 and the NEP 2020 once again bring issues of education, language and social justice to the fore. Independent India has been grappling with these issues for a long time with a clear policy divide, visible in the ways that both the states and the center have tackled child education and the medium of instruction.¹ Generations of students have been products of an education system mired in problems of handling classroom teaching in regional language, mother tongue or English. Language and early childhood learning activists have consistently argued that primary school teaching should be in the mother tongue. However, that too, has its own problems in a diverse country like India that has internal regional migrations and arbitrary constructions of state borders.² This gives rise to complex questions where there are no easy answers. At the outset, we must remind ourselves of a very long history behind building our pedagogic structure which is inextricably linked to our country's colonial past. As Gauri Vishwanathan's classic post-colonial work, *Masks of Conquest*, shows, English studies in India was introduced in India as a subtle measure intended for political control.³ Vishwanathan's central thesis is that English studies masqueraded as a benevolent gesture from the colonial masters as part of the 'White Man's Burden' syndrome, but in effect served as an instrument of power and what Michel Foucault would see as the organized practice of 'governmentality'.⁴ Such education was designed to train an intermediary class of natives who could be the point of contact between the foreign rulers and the local population.

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The result is the birth of a Bengali *bhadralok* elite well versed in Western literary texts.⁵ This aspect is further extended in Sutapa Dutta's *Disciplined Subjects: Schooling in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2021). Dutta gives a detailed analysis of the evolution of the system of schooling as it originated in colonial Calcutta by tracing debates and analogies in metropolitan England. In this way, Dutta's book draws out the dual facets of the British imperial power structure through her examination of discourses on education, and specifically, their expression in the printed primers used in language learning and primary education, both in the metropolis as well as in the colony in the long eighteenth century.

Dutta sets out to examine interactions between Britain and India in an analytic framework of production and circulation of knowledge in the eighteenth century. The book brings under scrutiny the practices of the missionaries and the colonial government partnering and propelling the foundation of the Western educational system in colonial Bengal. This book then, brings to the fore an array of issues ranging from traditions of thinking about epistemology and knowledge in both Western and Indic traditions, notions of functional knowledge as foundational in modern schooling, the idea of modern schooling as a disciplinary practice, interlinkages of religiosity, morality and primary education, English language learning, translation, and the shaping of vernaculars inside the rubric of a quintessentially Western education system, construction of gender through education, early childhood learning, school curriculum and skill acquisition, the evolution of a native geo-consciousness through the introduction of Western discipline of geography, movements of self-assertion and the making of nationalist thought as a byproduct and resistance to Western hegemonic education, making of the elite *Bhadralok* gentry, the *Babus* and the ideas of self-fashioning resulting, in what Homi Bhabha would call mimicry and hybridity.⁶ While the Western discourses gear towards a social construction of the native child, they, in turn construct the native as childlike. In the process they have devised a number of pedagogical tools to correct the indolent native and tame the chaotic nature by disciplining the minds and bodies. Interestingly, these measures trigger the formation of a sense of the self and resulted in the making of the geographical identity of India, and a consciousness about its past and the history. The structure of the book follows this trajectory as it traces Western pedagogical practices in schools right from Renaissance England to Enlightenment Great Britain, consequent upon which, the education system in the colony is formulated. Taking patterns of practices in

both the metropolis and the colony within a single unified system of analysis, it indeed proves to be beneficial as it traces how the later configurations are resultant of this initial encounter. The intellectual encounter through school learning, which sparked off feelings of nationalism, also bears lineage to this same system. In the words of Hannoum:

Knowledge was not only the means by and through which colonialism governed. Knowledge is also regulated by the power of the mental structure that produces it. Its function went beyond knowing the natives. Colonial knowledge has shaped postcolonial identities; it introduced colonial categories and institutions that outlived colonialism. Indeed, colonialism produced the knowledge by and through which it governed. It also transformed the product of imagination and, in fact more importantly, the domain, of imagination [and] assured colonial domination even long after the collapse of colonial enterprise.⁷

In this review, I will try to identify four main themes which are tracked through the course of the book.

Language and Ethnicity

Incidentally and most importantly, language became a crucial instrument and conveyance through which Western ideas were disseminated in imperial Bengal. A number of scholars have variously spoken about the growth, role and function of languages in South Asia as an important contributor to identity formation.⁸ The first schools set up during this time, both missionary as well as through the East India Company initiative, made extensive use of primers for language training and learning. This way, missionary systems became embroiled with morally codifying school education and pedantic learning. These primers functioned as an ideological medium to ensure control of the minds of the colonial subjects: that the children grew up to become easily controllable disciplined subjects. The Foucauldian idea of the school as a disciplinary institution is extended to identify and interrogate a diverse range of teaching materials, such as the primers, in order to study how notions, contexts of race and morality ideologically shaped the readings. Missionary ethnographic practices simultaneously constructed a moral topography identifying the characteristics of the land with its indolent inhabitants. The spatial othering of the region on lines with religious dogma becomes the reversible counterpart and reflection of the colonial preconceived impression

of the morally inept inhabitants of the colony. Western schools and classroom formats are introduced in various regions and especially in the capital of the Bengal Presidency in Calcutta, supplanting local methods of imparting knowledge that are strategically designed to purge the natives of their supposed fallen moral standards.⁹ Dutta describes in detail Thomas Babington Macaulay's (the scribe of the infamous minutes on education of 1835) political move to revamp Indian education by curbing funds to institutes which were engaged in studies of Indic texts and by stopping the print of Oriental texts. Instead, he promoted induction of English literary canon and English language learning. His approach is a drastic shift from former practices by the Orientalist scholars like William Jones who invested attention to the learning of ancient Indic texts. (Dutta, p. 30, 151)

On the other hand, evangelist literature seeking to understand and interact with the natives went on to frame codified textual material and grammar books in local languages, in this case Bangla. These texts flourished as aids to not only interpret, translate and communicate local language but also standardized the language and led to erasures of dialects or variations in written scripts. In Bengal, not only was a form of Sanskritised Bangla (*Sadhu Bhasha*) codified and formalized, the script was lent to several other oral languages from adjacent regions like Assam and Manipur. The first monolingual dictionary or Madan Mohan Tarkalankar's *Shishushiksha*, an introduction to Bangla Varnmala (alphabet), or Vidyasagar's *Barnaparichay*, were created under the circumstances of this cultural exchange. The newly structured language spawned ideas of a nation based on this fresh discovery of linguistic unity which formed the basis for an assertive thinking and writing in Bangla. Thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance urged people to learn Bangla bhasha as opposed to the Rajbhasha English, which was identified as the cause for decimating the native tongue. Also, there was a growing anxiety about the Christian proselytizing objective behind English education. An alternative ethnic literary and cultural self-fashioning germinated from this fresh understanding, countering circulation of English literary and historical texts which sought to establish Great Britain as a great nation. A unique class of Pundits and Munshis was born following the footsteps of William Carey and his establishment of the press. Scholars such as Ramram Basu and Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, were architects of a novel ethnic historiography as they translated Sanskrit texts like *Hitopodesh*, *BatrishSinghasan* and *Rajaboli* to Bangla. Language thus, plays a critical role in the making of a

collective history, imagination and memory of a community which, in the present scenario, kindled and augmented the nationalist sentiment.

Morality and Ethics

Just like in the imperial metropolis, primers insinuated notions of purity and morality, such primers too, carrying on the Christian missionary ideology, perpetuated ideas of cleanliness, religiosity and subservience to Christian values.¹⁰ The Bible was translated in Bangla too. Although a spirit of the triumphalist scientism soon catches up, it is not entirely successful to transform the Christian core of imperial education or to eradicate the element of Christian morality that continued to remain an abiding principle in the early childhood learning. The introduction and promotion of Western education in colonial Calcutta is rooted in the White supremacist belief that native parenting is altogether inefficient and incapable of raising a morally upright generation. The British felt that the sons of this land needed to be released from ignorant, superstitious and cruel parents (specially the mothers). Therefore, discussions relating to methods of admonishment and corrective measures centered on the efficacy of punishments as disciplinary measures, triggering debates on physical pain, humiliation, and corporal punishments. However, Western form of education embraced a subtler way to inculcate propriety. Modern schooling adopted the text heavy method and introduced pictorial primers to drill in customary behavioral expectations from native pupils so that they grew into obedient controllable subjects. Dutta's study uncovers the interpellation of moral platitudes in study materials both in English and Bangla. This kind of disciplinary tactics were felt to be far more efficient and ethical than cruel forms of corporal punishments.

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay's telling and his critical work titled *Rakhal Gopal Dwanda Shamas* (1991) in Bangla, translated as *Rakhal Gopal Dialectics* in English, has unfolded how Bengal inherited a legacy of morality via the colonial pedagogical structures instituted in Calcutta through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bandyopadhyay reads Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Bengali primer, *Barnaparichay*, (first published in 1855 and still accepted as the leading foundational text for learning Bangla), as bearing imprints of a disciplinary credo which has had a crucial impact on the socio-cultural fabric of Bengal.¹¹ Bandyopadhyay talks about the two fictional children in the primer named Rakhal and Gopal who are counterfoils to each

other. Gopal is an ideal good boy, a role model for other children to follow; whereas Rakhai is his exact opposite, the counterfoil. In both parts of Vidyasagar's *Barnaparichay*, these two names figure in short rudimentary statements and sentences, as the archetypes of good and the bad. Bandyopadhyay argues that these notional ideals of good and bad have ruled children's literature written in Bangla ever since. The two exist as binaries and are limited to their own worlds, never allowed to cross over to the others'. However, this goodness is judged by a power structure: the authoritarian rules of the adults according to whose directives, children need to shape their behaviour: as though there exists an unspelt social contract between the adults and the children, which the helpless children are fated to abide by for their own survival and acceptance. Under such circumstances, children are trapped in a helpless world where they are fated to exhibit unquestioning servile loyalty to the masters, their elders, the parents, and the teachers. The school and education structure, of which a primer is a synecdochic representation, exists within this world maintained by this all-pervasive unspoken pact. The consensual arrangement of this world order is of course managed socio-culturally and manifests in literary fictions that groom and fashion the child's consciousness.

Conversely, in a colonial setup, the child is reversible with the childlike native who needs to be trained in order to remain subjugated to the power structure. Dutta points out several English language and Bengali primers such as *Bodhoday*, which use Biblical maxims within its contents like God's creation, living and non-living things, mingled with moral axiomatic principles interspersed and commingled with ideas of '*vidya*' with '*niti*'. Dutta argues that primers such as *Barnaparichay*, function like a veritable "vernacularized Ten Commandments" from the authorial voice of the guru mahashay or schoolmaster who is invariably also a Hindu. (p. 151) The Gopal – Rakhai binary was germinal to the foundation of an underlying logic of the socio-cultural formulation of the Bengal public sphere, which was the concept of *bhadra* and *abhadra*. This gentrification led to the rise of an alternative consciousness igniting a spirit of nationalism.

Gender and Class

Linked with the idea of morality, are the ideas of moral improvement and virtue. Women and the working class were the target groups for an education system that was meant to deliver social upbringing for moral uprightness. The category of 'children' therefore was neither

homogeneous nor universal. Study materials differed, based on their target group. Dutta provides many interesting case studies to elaborate how gendering was routinely promoted and inculcated through the means of textbooks and primers. Such materials treaded precariously with caution and negotiated with aspects mentioned in such books so as to remain within the permissible limits of the socially instituted framework of gender roles. However, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women writers such as Ann Fisher, Anna Barbauld, Sarah Trimmer, Mary Cavendish, and Maria Edgeworth began writing about the need for education for girls and women, and the need to go beyond traditional feminine skills. The books they wrote were meant specifically for children but the stories were replete with the predominance of little girls. Many of these stories had pictographic contents which suggested idyllic and harmonious living, highlighting cleanliness and tidiness as virtues. (Dutta, pp. 90-2) However, in the nineteenth century, with the demands of an expanding industrial society, gender roles became more pronounced as men go out to work in factories and women are homebound, taking care of their homes. Dutta shows how social roles of men and women became clearly defined and resulted in differentiated and segregated training for boys and girls, as boys especially from the lower classes, were expected to meet the gap in the required workforce by becoming young apprentices. Accordingly, skills such as carpentry became integral to boys' education whereas activities such as needlework and mending were essential skills for girls that are sought to be learned from their childhood. Such skills were encouraged in girls also because they were thought to promote tenderness and instill a spirit of service towards others even while keeping them preoccupied during their free time. The book has several interesting illustrations of prescriptive needle work manuals meant to teach girls.

As the activism surrounding women's education reached the colonial periphery from the imperial center, the debates were modified and tempered to suit the concerns in the subcontinent. School education for girls remained a controversial subject in colonial India. In Bengal, upper classes and respectable families preferred home tutoring of their girls to classroom teaching. Missionary schools were instituted for the education of girls through initiatives of the likes of the Baptist Female Society. However, many early Indian educationists such as Radhakant Deb and Gaurmohan Vidyalankar also took the cue from the British and wrote profusely about how education was prevalent among Hindu women in the

earlier times. Dutta recounts how the first couple of schools for girls were established in colonial Kolkata which were attended by the wards of respectable families. Interestingly, the Brahmo Samaj led the movement for women's education and emancipation, and left the Hindu Brahminical elite far behind. In fact, the forward thinking of the Brahmos were seen with suspicion by the Hindu community. Dutta cites the establishment of the famous Mahakali Pathshala in 1893 to counter the radical approach of the Brahmo community, arguing for and going back to traditional virtues and learning in women, advocating the honing/mastering of wifely skills and qualities in its curriculum. (Dutta, p. 159) The result of this polarity complicated the situation/lives of women in the later nationalist frame of thought pertaining to their position in nation building. Whether their education was important in view of their contribution to making of the public sphere or for better management of the household and children, especially of sons, the situation have attracted many scholarly arguments from the likes of Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar.¹²

Geography and Nation

The Victorian ideas of useful knowledge and improvement were not only meant for the upliftment of a race but extended to geographic regions too . There was a general feeling that education provided a cementing impetus to the otherwise disparate groups of people across regions or classes. Initially, school education was formalised among the working class in the hope for their moral upliftment. Cleanliness and hygiene were introduced as abiding principles through textbooks, enhanced with pictorial associations to neat and tidy living and the advantages thereof. Dutta curated a whole range of English language primers and readings for children that were circulated in Great Britain, for the purpose to instill a spirit of allegiance and pride about their homeland. Just as encyclopedic digests and taxonomies included various regionalities within an overarching frame of the national, the surveys and maps brought diverse regions within a unifying cartographic frame. Through school curriculum and readings in the British Isles, an image of a powerful Great Britain gained its currency. With the introduction of English teaching, "Scotland has been improving", English education was thought to be the harbinger of a modern reason. Primer after primer, it elided class and regional differences in order to project a sense of strong and a unified nation. (Dutta, p. 108-10)

Primers which portrayed an imaginary interaction with the animal kingdom, such as Rev. William Bingley's *Animal Biography* (1802), were, in effect, an offspring of the predominance of scientific rationality that generated interest in natural sciences and the animal kingdom. This was supposed to have been the first step of initiation into the world of natural phenomena and natural philosophy drawing on the works of Linnaeus. Bangla versions such as *Pashwabali* (Animal Biography), was an instructive text book based on moral fables, which was inspired by Bingley's work delineating authentic anecdotes about the economy, habits and habitat of specific indigenous animals. These ideas of useful knowledge and foundational science were introduced to schools in the colonial setting with the intent of coaching Hindus. Elite Hindus were then introduced into the world of modern scientific knowledge. According to Dutta, the introduction of geographical knowledge too began, with the intention to acquaint the native minds about the greatness of Great Britain, anapotheosis of human development. Thus, such writings were based on the idea of creating a civilisational hierarchy. However, categories of the 'useful' and 'practical' led to the configuration of Bangla empirical textbooks based on the criteria of colonial intellectual development. Many of these transpired from travels of colonial travelers across the Indian subcontinent who recorded detailed spatial descriptions. The first geography text books in India were published from the Serampore Press as were dialogues and copy-book compendia on the geography and astronomy of India. Together with what Mary Louise Pratt calls the 'planetary consciousness'¹³ these works sparked a British styled awareness in the native mind about their own location and identity. The Bangla word as well as the discipline of *Bhugol* was a product of this consciousness. As Subho Basuhas elaborated, the colonial geographic information system impacted the mentality of the emerging educated elite, which later became a prolegomena, aiding them to articulate ideas about their ethnicity, nation and space.¹⁴ This geo-consciousness materialized a discursive terrain which also provided impetus to a nativist historiography.

Conclusion

Disciplined Subjects charts a path for future discussions on the history of establishment of educational institutions in colonial India. Although the main thesis in the book is the journey of imperial debates on education and their global reception in the colonial periphery, Dutta leaves many indications to this transfer not being

a solely unilateral one. There are complexities which appear from translations, disgruntlements, and the eventual re-figuration and configurations of a number of debates that contribute to the constitution of the public sphere and a selective adoption and adaptation of scientific temper in the colony. Based on the dialectics of inclusion and rejection of select European knowledge systems, the Bengal literati constructed an ethno-cultural identity which was unforeseen and unique. Rather than a desired fashioning of the native mind, gently coaxing them to accepting their subject status, Western education sparked off identitarian debates and heterodox movements about freedom, liberty, sovereignty and ultimately, the right to self-governance.

Notes

1. See for example, Sengupta, Papia. 'NEP 2020 and the Language-in-Education Policy in India: A Critical Assessment'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56:43, October, 2021, pp. 45.
2. Sengupta, Papia. *Language as Identity in Colonial India: Policies and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. xii.
3. Vishwanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989). Columbia University Press, 2014.
4. Foucault, Michel. 'Governmentality'. Tr. Rosi Braidotti. In Graham Burchell eds. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991, pp. 87-104.
5. Chatterjee, Partha. 'Bengal: The Rise and Growth of a Nationality'. *The Social Scientist*, 4: 1, 1975, pp. 67-82.
6. Bhabha, Homi. 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse'. *October*, 28, MIT Press. 1984, pp. 125-33; Bhabha, Homi. *Location of Culture* (1994). London: Routledge, 2012.
7. Hannoum, Abdelmajid. 'Translation and the Colonial Imaginary'. *History and Theory*, 42, 2008, pp. 61-81, p. 63.
8. See Ramaswami, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue*. California: University of California Press, 1997; Mitchell, Lisa. *Language, Emotions and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
9. Also see Marshal, P.J. *The New Cambridge History of India: Bengal: The British Bridgehead*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
10. Chatterjee, Partha. 'Claims on the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography in Bengal'. David Arnold eds. *Subaltern Studies*, 8, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 1-49.
11. Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji. *Gopal RakhalDwandoShomash: Upanibeshbaad o banglarshishushahitya*. Kolkata: Papyrus, 1991.
12. Chatterjee, Partha. 'Claims on the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography in Bengal'. David Arnold eds. *Subaltern Studies*, 8, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 1-49. Chatterjee, Partha. 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question'. In Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid eds. *Recasting*

- Women*. Delhi: Kali for Women. 1989. pp. 238-68; Sarkar, Tanika. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.
13. Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). London: Routledge, 2007.
 14. Basu, Subho. 'The Dialectics of Resistance: Colonial Geography, Bengali Literati and the Racial Mapping of Indian Identity. *Modern Asian Studies*, 44:1, 2010, pp. 53-79.