

BEYOND BENGAL: GENDER, EDUCATION, AND THE WRITING OF COLONIAL INDIAN HISTORY

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FEW TOPICS CONNECTED TO THE STUDY of colonial India have produced quite as much scholarship in recent years as the issue of colonial Indian education reform. The past decade alone has witnessed the publication of no fewer than eight English-language books on the subject, as well as a steady stream of journal articles. Part of the appeal of such research is no doubt a result of India's privileged place in the British Empire during the nineteenth century. In 1881, India's first complete census documented the existence of 253,891,821 Indian subjects living under the British Raj – or, to put it another way, a population nearly ten times the size of England and Wales's own population during the same period.¹ For scholars, education offers a particularly fruitful site for understanding British colonial ideology. In addition, it provides an important glimpse into the lives of Indian subjects. An extensive print archive, manifest in sources as diverse as political speeches, bureaucratic files, periodicals, and memoirs, has greatly aided research into the development of colonial education. At the same time, the tendency for research to privilege particular regional focuses has left troublesome gaps in the historical record.

For scholars in the British tradition, who have often read imperial history from the top-down with an eye for the prominence of the Empire's "men on the spot," the preeminence of Bengal in the Indian historiography is understandable.² Yet on the subject of education, in particular, a Bengal-centered literature has generated a partial impression of colonialism's purpose, scope, and effect. As an extension of wider shifts in the study of Indian history, the push to upset Bengal's centrality on the subject of education has stemmed from an inescapable sense that a narrow focus on Bengal distorts impressions of education reforms by ignoring the decentralized nature of the colonial education system, the persistence of vernacular education, and the gradual expansion of access to education for women, Muslims, and lower-caste Hindus in the years after the Sepoy Rebellion. In keeping with these recent efforts to broaden Indian history, the purpose of this paper is to examine how a historical literature centered in Bengal came to convey high-caste reform ideals about education, as well as how and why such an approach forms an inadequate response to a topic as complex as Indian education in the nineteenth century.

I take as my starting point the observation that Bengal's prominence in work on Indian educational history is closely aligned with the story of the Bengal Renaissance, a cultural revolution that altered popular notions of history, religion, science, and art amongst the educated classes throughout the nineteenth century. As a historical narrative, the Bengal Renaissance is, at its core, a national tale. In its basic form, the narrative describes a process of transculturation in which native custom encounters European ideals to shape the development of modern nationalist consciousness.³ The appeal of this narrative to popular conceptions of Indian history – which, it should be noted, is alive and well in the twenty-first century – is, in part, a testament to the omnipresence of European ideals of “political modernity” in the postcolonial world that render it “impossible,” as Dipesh Charkabarty contends, “to *think* of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe” (4). That is to say that by demonstrating the cultural sophistication of India on European terms, the renaissance narrative has traditionally been deployed in an uncritical fashion to legitimate Indian national identity through the liberal, Enlightenment values embodied in the “great men” of the upper-middle caste *bhadralok* in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, the prominence of Bengal in research on education is also in part a matter of critique, for as with Chakrabarty's own work on the region, most scholarly engagements with Bengal to emerge in recent decades have done so with an eye for complicating the renaissance narrative's teleology, typically by reading it alongside concepts of gender, class, and caste.⁴ While such work has been a boon to historical research on India, the centripetal pull of Bengal as both a site of myth and criticism speaks to a deeper issue concerning how scholars frame discussions of imperial history. On the one hand, there can be no denying that the contributions of men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Satyendra Nath Bose, and Upendranath Brahmachari were crucial to improving India's intellectual standing on the world stage. In the 1890s, for example, Swami Vivekananda, an English educated Hindu monk, attracted widespread acclaim in the United States and England during an extended lecture tour on Indian religion.⁵ Yet on the other hand, fascinating as such stories may be, the exemplary nature of the men involved in these narratives provides an image of history that is out of step with both the demographic and political realities of colonial Indian education reform on a national level.

When we step back from Bengal to connect its experience with that of colonial India, we find the evolution of three interrelated projects on education that gained prominence in the nineteenth century. In the first project, education – particularly, higher education – functioned as a source of privilege, agency, and representation for a select group of Indian men that included, but was not limited to, the *bhadralok* class of Bengal. As an extension of similar reform movements during the nineteenth century, the education of this group played a particularly important role in the development of a sense of both national identity and colonial citizenship as members reacted to and participated in a larger set of debates within the British Empire. In the second project, the aspirations of the British Raj to craft a more general liberalizing mission for the Indian subcontinent after the Sepoy Rebellion led it to take a more active role in India's economic and social development. One such area of reform was education, where the expansion of basic instruction to groups that were often marginalized in the colonial system spoke to the Empire's shifting responsibilities in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as well as the tenuous state of older Brahminical forms

of caste exclusivity that had traditionally been constituted by limiting access to certain kinds of knowledge and schooling.⁶

Caught in between these developments was a third project: the education of upper-caste women. This project has often assumed secondary status in historical analysis owing to the relative rarity of education for women until the final decades of the nineteenth century, but as a site of contention between native voices, the education of upper-caste women illustrates the function of nineteenth-century reforms in crafting a vision of the nation that cannot be contained within a historical narrative of renaissance. In contrast to the idea that English education was automatically and universally valued as a source of social improvement, the processes of negotiation that underpin women's educational history highlight English's importance as a platform for the justification of social hierarchies. As an illustration of this point, in her research on western India, Shefali Chandra has recently observed that the first generation of English educated men in India presented a challenge to the Indian caste system by occasionally conjuring associations with femininity for the way they mimicked English manners. Chandra notes that debates on women's education allowed such men to recode the gendered associations of Englishness "by reinscribing the phallogocentric power of English" within the context of "the correct socialization of native women" (*Sexual* 58). Consequently, more than a modern form of liberation from the trappings of a recent medieval past, she contends that upper-caste Hindu and Parsi women's access to an English education had a palpable function in domestic caste politics. In the second half of the nineteenth century, educated elites deployed their familiarity with the English language to reposition themselves at the forefront of a reconstituted normative gender hierarchy, effectively extending older forms of caste-based exclusivity into the modern era.⁷

On a historiographic level, Chandra's findings in her studies of Bombay and Poona can help to address the privileged notion of the Bengal Renaissance by moving beyond the problem of exemplarity and taking the domestication of English within Indian culture on its own terms as an empty signifier that could be redeployed as a screen for the reinforcement of caste boundaries. If we go beyond her geographically-oriented empirical research to speculate on its implications for colonial educational history, Chandra's contention that "the native mimic man clearly did not mark the end point of colonial cultural engineering" would appear to underscore a larger theme of Indian education reform – namely, that on top of any abstract notion of colonial education's success or failure as a site of cultural imperialism and individual empowerment, colonial education was also about producing and maintaining difference within India (*Sexual* 80). In an attempt to bring these tensions to the foreground, the next section presents a concise model of what a revised history of Indian education might look like, so that readers can better understand the insufficiency of the renaissance narrative and the need for frameworks that resist the "bracketing" of particular educational histories. From there, I turn to the question of gender more specifically, looking to the impact English education had on native men. Finally, in the last section, I return to Chandra's work to comment further on the options available to scholars for amending their disposition towards a Bengal-centered history.

A Brief History of the Colonial Education System

IN REFRAMING THE BOUNDARIES of colonial Indian education reform beyond Bengal, it is important to clarify what I mean by India, since the growth of the British Empire's occupied

territory in the south Asian subcontinent to 1,372,588 square miles at the time of the 1881 census includes a collection of ethnic, religious, and linguistic traits that defy typical notions of national identity (Plowden 1). In short, nineteenth-century India was a space of uneven development and regional difference, with the majority of colonial activity concentrated in cities such as Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, and Madras. The presence of princely states that were not annexed under the British Empire, such as Nizam and Rajputana, further complicates matters, for they reveal great expanses of land – by some estimates, one-third of India’s total area – that were, at least nominally, outside the control of colonial administrators.⁸ For the sake of clarity, then, British India was a patchwork, with colonial influence at its strongest in cultural centers such as Bengal in the east, as well as regional hubs along the Indian Ocean and in the northwestern provinces. Although a communication gap between urban and rural areas posed an additional check on authority, casting India’s position to that of a “distant dependency” up until and, to some extent, following the revolt of 1857, British command had established a strong colonial presence over great swathes of the region in the time since the incorporation of the East India Company in 1600 (Green and Deasy 6).

Within this framework, Indian education emerged as a responsibility for the East Indian Company with the Charter Act of 1813, but it wasn’t until the English Education Act of 1835 that the subject earned serious consideration from Parliament and Company officials.⁹ In the march leading up to the Act, Thomas Babington Macaulay, one of the fieriest voices in the debate, called for Parliament “to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (20). Lofty as Macaulay’s aspirations were, the development of the colonial education system would become less notable for its function in the transmission of culture and more notable for what it revealed about the difference between the Empire’s aspirations and its abilities. Throughout the nineteenth century, government officials continually revised Macaulay’s demands for western education in the English language as part of their attempt to respond to emerging responsibilities for the wellbeing of the Indian people and to stabilize colonial rule. From their efforts, the tenor of colonial education policy became more inclusive in the years surrounding the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, incorporating, among other things, much-needed provisions for education in the vernacular languages. Even with these changes, the presence of colonial profiteering, gender inequality, and caste prejudice limited access to schools for most Indians throughout the nineteenth century, underscoring uncertainties about the depth of reform.

First and foremost amongst the groups left out of British colonial reforms were Indian women, whose access to education was restricted to missionary and indigenous efforts for most of the nineteenth century. Women’s education first appeared as an issue for the East India Company with the conversion efforts of evangelical missionaries in the 1830s.¹⁰ At the time, the Company had no formal policy on the education of women, but the relaxation of barriers on missionary work created a context for religious groups to seek out female pupils from marginalized communities. Initially, these efforts were geared towards providing women with basic literacy skills to facilitate their apprehension of the Bible; however, missionaries soon came to recognize the central place of women in the home and intensified efforts to introduce female pupils to British middle-class domestic values in the hope that it would effect a broader cultural transformation.¹¹ As a conversion effort, missionary outreach failed, since Indian women could easily ignore the religious component of their teachings (Savage 210). At the same time, it set an important precedent for viewing women’s education as a

site of cultural significance. The rise of Indian nationalism following the Sepoy Rebellion placed additional emphasis on women's roles in the "spiritual realm" within Indian culture, leading to indigenous efforts at homeschooling in upper and middle class households in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹² From the late 1840s onward, the model of western women's education would also have a presence in the public sphere as the construction of several schools – such as the Bethune School (1849), the Alexandra Native Girls' English Institution (1863), and the Poona Native Girl's High School (1884) – provided an English education to Indian girls.¹³

If and when colonial authorities became directly involved in women's education, it was generally in the case of those few students who negotiated their way to the highest levels of the system. Women were admitted to the University of Calcutta, a government-funded institution of higher learning, in 1877, with other colleges and universities following suit in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Sen 180). But as in the case of other educational reforms, changes in the realm of women's education were statistically insignificant in the context of India's geographic and ethnic diversity. To fully appreciate the gravity of the situation, it is helpful to consult the Empire's own empirical data. It was not until 1883 – nearly fifty years after the Education Act of 1835 – that the Hunter Education Commission Report pointed out the need for collecting educational data and statistics. That report led to the institution of the Quinquennial Report on the Progress of Education in India in 1886–87, which published findings on the development of education every five years up until 1947. The first Quinquennial Report of 1891–92 showed startlingly low enrollment rates for British India.¹⁴ Of the school-age population, just 9.6% of potential pupils were enrolled in school – with 8.1% enrolled in primary school, 1.4% in secondary school, and a statistically insignificant 0.1% enrolled at art and professional colleges. Literacy rates were not collected until 1911; however, the results were equally dismal: for men, just 9.5% of the population in British India was literate and – of that group – just 9.9% were literate in English. Amongst men and women combined, 5.2% of the population was literate, with 10.1% of that group literate in English.

These numbers stand in stark contrast to the English system, which first saw public funding allocated for the construction of schools in August 1833 and the enforcement of compulsory education for children age five to ten in 1880.¹⁵ In the Victorian context, expanded access to education coincided with a long series of Factory Acts, which gradually restricted the hours, tasks, and conditions child-laborers were allowed to endure in the workplace. The absence of such regulations in India, where child labor supported industrial, agricultural, and service work, perpetuated the assumption that education had minimum value in a colonial economy. Upon closer inspection, the Empire's *laissez-faire* attitude toward child labor also underscored an important discrepancy between imperial ideology and its manifestation in the colonial sphere. Scholars have frequently noted that British support for empire depended on widely promoted assumptions about English cultural supremacy that confirmed the Empire's civilizing mission.¹⁶ Yet the incapacity of reformers to fully democratize education reveals clear choices that consolidated British power without acknowledging those principles. When officials sat down to confirm their commitment to the idea that the Indian government should assume responsibility for the education of the Indian people, they understood that there was neither funding nor support from local elites for the development of a primary education system on par with the English model.¹⁷ This was especially true given the systemic "drainage" of Indian funds through taxation, which was estimated to stand at

£17 million per annum at the end of the nineteenth century and of which one-third was spent on maintaining India's robust military for the Empire's service (Bandyopadhyay, *Plassey* 123). In light of these circumstances, authorities made strategic decisions to channel funds towards communities that would best ensure stability.

Not surprisingly, such funding was felt most keenly at the level of higher education, where the institution of government-affiliated colleges in every province in British India allowed the Empire to surpass the aspirations of other imperial nations and introduce a framework for the production of skilled native administrators and intellectuals.¹⁸ Farther down the system, at the primary and secondary levels, public education's gains remained modest. Although there was overlap and collaboration between their respective realms of influence, by allowing missionaries to head education efforts in Madras while privately run Hindu schools continued to operate in the intellectual center of Bengal, the Empire was able to focus the bulk of its attention on urban areas in and around Bombay and to the west.¹⁹ At the same time, the move toward decentralization afforded the Empire little oversight – even in its own districts, where the decision to supply funds for the establishment of independent schools through local grants-in-aid delayed the foundation of a central education system until the institution of the Indian Education Service in 1896.²⁰ Practically speaking, the absence of colonial oversight in Hindu and missionary schools generated the conditions for the production of new religious sensibilities that ran counter to the secular vision of the state. Even though such compromise more or less followed the principles of religious non-interference outlined at the Parliamentary level, it had the unintended effect of “standardizing” religious identity through educational institutions (Sengupta 21).²¹ The cumulative effect of religious schooling would eventually result in the heightened perception of ethnic and religious identities that stood outside of the Empire, thereby creating new challenges for authorities through the rise of religion as a politicized entity.

As one might perhaps expect, the small faction of Indians who received an English education rarely blamed British authorities for the status of India's schools and was likely to view the matter as a work in progress. Within this group, the primary source of disagreement was over the best strategy for the future. Dadabhai Naoroji, a cosmopolitan Parsi leader who would eventually become the first Asian person to serve as a British MP, offered his countrymen an optimistic take on the situation in his first speech as president of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1886 when he said that “we know as a fact that each community is now doing its best according to its lights, and the progress that it has made in education, I need not I think particularise” (193). Despite these gains, Naoroji went on to claim that raising the “social, moral, and religious status” of the Indian masses was ultimately “too delicate for a stranger's handling” and should be left to the native population that best understands the needs of its people (194). In contrast to Naoroji's enthusiasm for native control of education, cultural minorities saw an important flaw to this line of reasoning. Syed Ameer Ali, the founder of the National Mahomedan Association, a religiously affiliated political organization, suggested that the lack of education for India's Muslim population was not the result of the British, who he felt presented the best course to India's “well-being and progress,” but rather a Hindu community in Bengal that is “enabled, by wealth and education of its representative members, to ignore to some extent this liability to disfavour” the region's Muslims (186, 188). As indigenous and colonial reformers confronted the challenges of crafting and instituting effective education policies in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the absence of agreement on the source of the problem left colonial

education in a state of flux, caught between competing visions of its scale and purpose. Within this environment, education would become as much a sign of the problem as a solution to India's social divisions, as traditional forms of caste exclusivity were reconstituted in the modern colonial state.

Gendering Indian Men at Home and Abroad

THE PRECEDING DISCUSSION HAS APPROACHED the history of Indian education at a distance, with an eye focused on imperial experiments in *realpolitik* that exceed the historical circumstances of colonial Bengal. Yet as we can see from the details of this discussion already, in addition to cementing the authority of colonial powers, Indian education presented the opportunity for the small number of Indians proficient in English to reinforce their status within the system. The aims of empire were, in other words, just one of many factors involved in the development of colonial education. We know, of course, that scholars of the British Empire have long understood that India's provinces were constructed from established cultures with preexisting power relations. Recognizing that earlier scholarship often skewed discussions towards the privileged classes of men who enjoyed the most educational opportunities, distorting the colonial landscape to create what Partha Chatterjee has called the "subalternity of an elite," contemporary studies have frequently adopted a more critical stance towards their subject matter, revising the boundary between colonial authority and imperial subjects to acknowledge difference amongst the Indian population (*Nation* 37). To speak of colonial India today is thus to understand that the structural inequalities of the British Empire provided the container for Indians themselves to jockey for position during the gradual inversion of power dynamics between India's Hindu and Muslim populations in the years following the collapse of the Mughal Empire. What is only beginning to become clear, however, is the particular role that gender has played in naturalizing and legitimating religious and caste authority.

In one of the best reconsiderations of Bengal's intellectual history to emerge over the past decade, Tithi Bhattacharya has effectively critiqued the place of the Hindu upper-caste *bhadralok* culture within the colonial system by demonstrating the centrality of social and economic privilege in ensuring academic and professional success for Indian men. Although educated high-caste Indians represented a small portion of the total population, and were ultimately subservient to colonial administrators, they nevertheless had an important status within the colonial system and were capable of acting as cultural producers. In her analysis, Bhattacharya is quick to note the informal avenues of education that perpetuated difference – institutions such as professional associations, literary circles, libraries, clubs, and political organizations.²² By identifying the institutions where difference was produced and maintained, Bhattacharya reminds her readers that the outcomes of educational policy are often very different from the language of the reforms themselves. Education, in her interpretation, thus serves an important social function in constructing and maintaining distinctions between groups. To the extent that it is possible to assess its influence, it is less significant for *what it does* to individual students and more significant for *what it allows them to do* in the world.

In spite of regional differences, we know that the phenomenon Bhattacharya associates with the *bhadralok* had corollaries elsewhere. In centers of power throughout India, colonial education functioned for a select group of Indian men as a kind of "portable property" – to

borrow from John Plotz's appropriation of Dickens – in that it allowed them, through the metonymic function of their degrees, to make a claim for the otherwise elusive powers of Englishness.²³ Naoroji's experience as an English politician from Bombay, for instance, provides an exceptional case study for tracing the opportunity and status education afforded Indian subjects for participation in the political process. In 1888, scandal broke out in England when Lord Salisbury referred to Naoroji as "a black man" in his explanation of Naoroji's failed bid for Parliament in 1886. Significantly, Salisbury's detractors pointed not only to Naoroji's lighter complexion, which was described using a wide spectrum of hues, but also his decades of experience living, working, and studying in London's academic and political communities. As a commentator from the *Leader* noted: "Many an English man is not so fair. He has lived 30 years in England. In speech, costume, and manners *he is indistinguishable from a refined, educated, and courteous English gentleman*; and it requires a quick eye to tell from his colour that he is not English" (qtd. in Burton 637, italics mine.). When read alongside Naoroji's success as an MP from Finsbury for the Liberal party from 1892 to 1895, the view represented in this passage does more than reveal his success at "passing" as a Victorian man of means: it suggests that Naoroji, through a process of assimilation – of which his education and training as a professor of mathematics, natural philosophy, and Gujarati played a prominent part – was able to "become" an English gentleman befitting a seat as a MP. However Naoroji would choose to classify his skin color or ethnicity, his acquisition of the basic tenets of English cultural identity and subsequent integration into England's elite social and professional circles afforded him privileges that were commonly coded in racial terms.

As extraordinary as the details of Naoroji's story are within the context of imperial history, the acquisition of enhanced political rights through education was neither unique nor limited to the small cadre of Indian men who traveled to England for educational and professional opportunities. Instead, Naoroji's experience is indicative of a reconceptualization of imperial identity amongst the select group of men who benefited from colonial education. More than the class of "interpreters" that Macaulay had hoped to create in his "Minute on Education in India," a half-century of colonial education had been integral to the development of colonial citizenship (20).²⁴ In the nineteenth century, India's educated classes acquired heightened status as members of an interconnected global community. Although stereotypical depictions of India were not uncommon in Victorian England, appearing in sensational novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890) as well as other forms of contemporary discourse, upper-caste members of Indian society were frequently granted special consideration by virtue of India's central position within the Empire – treatment that was often denied to the populations of other colonies.

Even so, the final decades of the nineteenth century bore witness to a broad degree of frustration with the state of progress in the colonial education project. British officials lamented the credentialism of the university system, which did not, from their perspective, produce a modern, liberal subject so much as a culture of "cramming" (26).²⁵ The perceived differences between English and Indian students perpetuated the view amongst many officials that most students were destined for the middling clerkdom of government offices. Indian nationalists and educated elites, meanwhile, became increasingly critical of the systemic lack of funds for education. Nationalists, in particular, took issue with the presumed "Englishness" of the system, which they saw as producing a class that was, if not quite English, nevertheless

thoroughly differentiated from the Indian populace at large (Seth 162). When the Partition of Bengal intensified nationalist concerns in 1905, the push to envision alternatives to colonial education would expand in the founding of the National Council of Education in Calcutta in 1906 and subsequent calls for national control of education in the decades leading up to independence.²⁶ But while the goals of nationalist projects would take on many forms, their primary objective was never a return to Indian intellectual traditions. Instead, their main desire was expanded access to western education with an infusion of nationalist content.²⁷

This development was not terribly surprising, as the attempt to negotiate an appropriate relationship with western education had already formed a significant component of nineteenth century debates amongst Indian elites during discussions about the content and purpose of women's education in native-administered schools for upper-caste girls. The persistence of English in both scenarios was not only a result of colonial administrators' influence but also a reflection of the cultural authority that English had come to signify within the Indian caste system. Prior to the nineteenth century, Indian women typically received limited instruction within the context of the *zenana*. Muslim women, for example, would learn to recite verses of the Quran by heart from a very early age under the guidance of an *ustad* (tutor) or *ustani* (woman teacher) (Minault, "Educated" 114). Beyond that, most would spend the majority of their time assisting in domestic duties, although a few would receive additional instruction in Persian, Urdu, and canonical Islamic literature like Sa'di's moral tales.²⁸ Education for Hindu girls typically followed a similar path in its emphasis on a minimal set of practical, moral, and religious lessons (Gupta 17–18). After the emergence of missionary schools for lower-caste women in the 1830s, early interest in English education was initially limited to the undertakings of high-caste Indians.²⁹ However, with the gradual appearance of primary and secondary schools for upper-caste girls in the middle of the nineteenth century, women's education soon came into contact with the political exigencies of the modern imperial state and its emerging class of representatives.

Surveying Alternatives to the Renaissance

IT IS WITH THIS CONTEXT IN MIND that I would like to return to Chandra's work on the symbolic function of English in Bombay and Poona, presenting it as an example of the way in which historical research has successfully moved beyond the male-centered renaissance narrative to show the continuities between men's and women's education in regions outside of Bengal. In her recently published book, *The Sexual Life of English: Languages of Caste and Desire in Colonial India*, Chandra breaks from British and transnational conceptions of English language reform to argue that the cultural processes behind the acceptance of Indian education can be understood most directly through India's sexual politics. For Chandra, the gendering of English education in Indian public discourse was closely tied to the dissemination of the English language from educated men to their wives and daughters as a means to shore up anxieties about the security of their status in the colonial system (*Sexual* 5). In her previous work on this topic, some of which appears in *The Sexual Life of English* in a revised version, Chandra has noted that the asymmetrical nature of reform set English as a prize for the emerging class of western educated men, generating various degrees of pushback within Indian society. Such opposition came not only from those whose power had been displaced or deferred but also from English educated elites concerned with policing traditional caste boundaries. As an extension of the contempt for Indian men who affected English modes

of dress by adopting accessories that carried feminine associations in an Indian context, such as glasses, gloves, and socks, Chandra suggests that anticolonial voices reacted to and influenced shifting power structures by linking the English language with effeminacy.³⁰

In her expanded assessment of these tensions in *The Sexual Life of English*, Chandra maintains her earlier conviction that the English education of upper-caste women provided an opportunity for an exercise of male authority in the reconstitution of a new family unit on Indian terms. As she herself puts it: “By attributing new, gendered meanings and forms of power to ‘English,’ a range of British Indian men and women shaped the reach and location of English in modern India, limiting the language through the caste-specific logic of Indian conjugal modernities” (*Sexual* 190). In placing the bulk of her attention on the function of what Indians did when they gained control of an English education for themselves, her analysis rests on the conviction, widespread in postcolonial studies in the aftermath of Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, that “colonial discourses on masculinity and female sexuality, while irrefutably powerful, were never translated seamlessly” in their transmission from the colonizers to the colonized (*Sexual* 80). To make visible the appropriation and redeployment of English language and culture by Indians, Chandra draws heavily from novels, plays, newspaper articles, and public debates amongst native elites. Although these documents vary in content, tone, and opinion, the common thread between them is their symbolic function as a form of “discipline” in carving out an acceptable role for English in the structure of the modern home (*Sexual* 7).

Thus, unlike the innate value English language and culture assume in the normative history of the Bengal Renaissance, Chandra suggests that English provided the location for the articulation of gendered discourses of power concentrated among the respectable Hindu and Parsi classes in Bombay and Poona. In unraveling the cultural ramifications of educating women in a heavily gendered patriarchal environment, her primary concern is not the material realities of women’s education – although much of what she says will be of interest to scholars attracted to those issues. Instead, Chandra’s focus is the transformation of caste-based logic to the project of rationalizing English education for certain men and women through a series of heavily gendered tropes that linked the relationship between the English language and the vernacular to a sexual idiom. Like other scholars who have noted that colonialism led to the “secularization” of caste, Chandra is interested in the repercussions of the colonial state’s mediation in Indian culture (Rao 43; Chandra, *Sexual* 134). The emphasis on the symbolic connections among gender, language, and caste in her work leads to a fertile analysis, as her desire to think beyond the “empirical ‘fact’ of woman” as a demographic category allows her to show how a string of connected terms – motherhood, the mother tongue, reproductive sexuality, and domesticity – were deployed to render upper-caste boundaries “invisible” as an ideological force in colonial modernity (*Sexual* 81).

Taken as a whole, Chandra’s sensitivity to the evolution of the gendered associations attached to language presents a challenge for succinctly summarizing the ninety-year span she covers from 1850–1940. Her post-structuralist paradigm yields no “smoking gun” – a point that may initially be irksome to some readers. Be that as it may, a careful exploration of her findings provides access to the dynamics of withholding that reinforce her larger claims about the symbolic role of gendered discourse in naturalizing English’s effect for upper-caste groups. To take a case in point, expanding on the observations of earlier historians who asserted that the cultural and economic success of Parsis and Brahmins came at the expense of a broader push for mass education in western India, Chandra notes that members of the newly

anglicized groups such as Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, a Marathi writer from the Chitpavan Brahmin sub-caste, could occasionally cast aspersions on the threat that English posed to the vitality of Marathi. Given that the adoption of English amongst the Marathi population was, as in the rest of India, minimal, Chandra connects the proliferation of “the mother tongue” discourse from Chiplunkar and others with a traditional pattern of withholding associated with Brahminical traditions.³¹ In the case of Chiplunkar, specifically, she observes that his emphasis on the “selective appropriation of culture” in a series of essays published in the *Nibandhmala* literary magazine in the 1880s was carefully coded to justify restricted access to English through a privileging of Marathi cultural autonomy (*Sexual* 62). Instead of planting an oppositional relationship between English and Indian vernaculars, Chiplunkar’s writing sought to translate their relationship through a gendered analogy of the masculine incorporation of the feminine. Whereas he compared “English knowledge” to tiger’s milk for its ability to prevent those who imbibe it from becoming “irresolute,” he suggested that “eastern languages” were like “cow’s milk: sweet and pure” (qtd. in Chandra, *Sexual* 62). Or, to put the analogy in more stark material terms: English was a potent influence best taken in moderation by a select group of people. It was not a staple of the Marathi diet.

Chandra notes that by avoiding the censure of colonial officials, who had occasionally intervened in native publications that cast English as anathema to Indian culture, Chiplunkar was able to maintain the support of officials while staging a call for the importance of Marathi’s cultural identity.³² Coupling the structural inequalities of Brahminical opposition to things like free scholarships for Muslims and lower-caste Hindu students at institutions of higher learning, she contends that the classist assumptions underpinning his writing testifies to “the bilingual prowess of the new colonial Brahmins” in their ability “to speak for the masses while actually arguing for the maintenance of anglicized, Brahman leadership over native society” (*Sexual* 59).³³ In connecting the importance of religion and caste in determining access to the tools of cultural production, Chandra’s work links up nicely with recent studies of colonial Bengal, where scholars such as Mahua Sarkar, for example, have shown that the emergence of middle- and upper-caste notions of Indian national identity organized around Hindu *bhadralok* values were “mutually constitutive” with the late nineteenth century production of a stereotypical masculine Muslim identity associated with violence and backwardness (48). What is different here, of course, is a shift in geography and methodology. Whereas Sarkar’s study imparts a trenchant critique of the Bengal Renaissance as a discourse that defines its own progress against the presumed backwardness of others – and thus provides evidence to support Walter Benjamin’s thesis that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” – Chandra’s analysis yields a more diffuse exegesis on the relationship between social context and language in the historical circumstances of western India (256).

Understanding the value that both projects bring to scholarship on colonial India as a check on the allure of culture associated with the Bengal Renaissance, one wishes that Chandra had spent more time contextualizing the importance of this transition for her readers. To the extent that she addresses Bengal’s position in the Indian historiography, it is not through the reevaluation of the region that has characterized most scholarship to emerge in recent years. Instead, it is primarily by drawing attention to the way that a general preoccupation with policing boundaries at the top of society presents a definitive check on older assumptions about the unity of nationalist thought over issues of gender. This focus necessarily leads her to Chatterjee’s influential essay, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,”

which Chandra notes has often been subject to criticism for its regional focus on Bengal and its stake in a Hindu nationalist response to imperialism rooted in patriarchy.³⁴ Yet in limiting her engagement with Bengal to a critique of an essay that was published a generation ago under very different disciplinary conditions, she unnecessarily shortchanges the more urgent question about the ways scholars have moved beyond “hard distinctions between the colonial and the native” in the writing of colonial history (*Sexual* 24). There can be little question that the presentation of her research would have been better served with an extended discussion of western India’s relationship to the writing of Indian history and a more detailed explanation of the benefits underpinning her approach to colonial India in light of other more recent historical work. As the latest installment of a productive strand of research into the “margins” of the colonial education system to emerge over the past fifteen years, the value of her contribution goes beyond its immediate focus on education as a step towards imagining a more geographically inclusive account of Indian history.³⁵

In spite of its reluctance to engage the historiographic question, *The Sexual Life of English* nevertheless effectively demonstrates that, far from a symbol of unity, cultural understandings about Indian women provide a site of conflict between members of different caste groups. Divorced from preconceived notions of its content or influence, “English,” Chandra suggests, “was not the adversary of any inner, spiritual, feminine essence” but rather the “semantic glue” that helped to naturalize a new form of caste authority within the changing colonial state (*Sexual* 27). For its own merits, then, *The Sexual Life of English* forms a theoretically innovative, empirically insightful, and persuasively written account of the indigenizing of the English language. By simultaneously countering *geographic* and *gender* biases in the writing of colonial history, Chandra is able to view Indian education reforms with fresh eyes as a topic closely aligned with cultural ideas of respectability, marriage, and desire that were relatively insulated from the Empire’s direct influence. But more importantly, her western Indian focus tilts the axis of representation away from Bengal towards much-needed empirical research into the Maharashtra region. Whereas my own discussion of Indian education has attempted to think through the problem of Bengal as a representative site in colonial historiography by zooming out from the region and attempting to reposition it in a broader narrative of Indian educational history, Chandra’s focus on Bombay and Poona has provided English readers with valuable access to Marathi texts that reveal dynamics quite different from that of the renaissance narrative and its critique. In counteracting the influence of Bengal on the Indian historiography, scholars focusing on nineteenth-century India can benefit from both approaches as alternatives to the normative history of Indian education.

Conclusion

THE PRECEDING PARAGRAPHS are not meant to provide a comprehensive narrative of colonial Indian education reform; rather, they speculate on some of the options available to scholars in attempting to counter the limitations of a Bengal-centered historical literature. With the end of the nineteenth century, colonial officials in British India found themselves in charge of two populations: a small, native-born Indian elite whose education produced a sense of imperial identity with nationalist aspirations and a great mass of the population that remained impoverished, illiterate, and socially marginalized. From these material circumstances, the central development in Indian education was not the birth of the “Indo-Western mind” – which was ultimately negligible given gross illiteracy and the systemic lack of educational

opportunities for Indians in the nineteenth century – but rather the patterns of exclusion that maximized difference amongst the colonial population within an ever-expanding imperial sphere (Dasgupta 352).

As I have suggested, a conceptual resizing of India is essential for moving beyond the exceptional, transnational, and predominately masculine histories that typically frame accounts of colonial India, particularly as it relates to education. When we talk of “Victorian India,” we must be careful not to allow the sense of parity implied in the term to envelop and erase tensions in the production of an isolated exchange between two homogenous cultures. If left unchecked, such generalizations produce a startlingly different impression of India than we might otherwise find, smoothing over seismic differences in favor of an artificial creation of common ground. Adjusting the boundaries and perspectives from which we think about India can reveal a more productive matrix of imperial relations than one finds in familiar centers of power. If the ideal state of historical analysis involves approaching the past without preconceptions, those preconceptions must not only be limited to the content and tone of historical narratives but also the frames and methodologies by which the past is analyzed. De-centering Bengal in Indian history marks an important step towards a truly comparative imperial history in that it can help historians to identify and evaluate the processes and negotiations that have produced the impression of the past they work with today. The history of Bengal, fascinating as it may be, is a poor substitute for these debates.

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NOTES

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1. See Plowden 1 for population data from the Indian census. For English census data, see *Census*. English Census data is also quoted in Martin 82.
2. The reasons underlying Bengal's prominence in the Indian historiography are, of course, wide-ranging and complex; however, a few points can be readily agreed upon. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bengal oversaw as much as sixty percent of British investment in India and provided a launching point for imperial endeavors that stretched from Eastern Africa to Indonesia (Darwin 9–10, 194). After the Battle of Buxar in 1764, in which the East India Company supplanted the Muslim rule of the Mughal Empire, Bengal gave birth to the upper-middle class Hindu *bhadralok*, or gentlemanly, culture consisting primarily of the Brahmin, Baidya, and Kayastha intellectual castes. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the *bhadralok* routinely took advantage of opportunities from the colonial government for education and employment. But by the 1880s, the political aspirations of the *bhadralok* for equal rights with British subjects and greater political representation in the colonial government saw the group look beyond Bengal in an attempt to establish itself as “a vanguard class” in the nation's future (Darwin 194). This power-struggle between the *bhadralok* elite and the British Raj eventuated in a series of political maneuvers that yielded the Raj's consolidation of power via the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the relocation of the Indian capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911, and the move towards provincial government as a means to hold regional interests in check (Darwin 203, 311–12). Thus, in the twentieth century, Bengal, the epicenter of India in the nineteenth century, would frequently serve as a symbol for the challenges of colonial government.

3. Dasgupta, for example, defines the Bengal Renaissance as “an awakening of the Indian mind in the nineteenth century to new possibilities and new kinds of consciousness,” primarily as a result of “a constellation of encounters of all sorts between Bengal and the West” (352).
4. See, for example, Bandyopadhyay *Caste*, Bhattacharya, Sarkar, Sartori, and Sengupta.
5. See Dasgupta 314–20.
6. For explorations of Brahminical caste exclusivity in a nineteenth century context, see Bhattacharhya 157; Chandra, *Sexual* 20–21; and Rao 40–50.
7. See Chandra, *Sexual* 22–23.
8. See Nurullah and Naik 432 for an estimate of the size and diversity found in the over 700 princely states. In practice, the Empire claimed responsibility for these territories’ external affairs through suzerainty, which was supported with subsidies in the form of military personnel, tribute payment, and market restrictions that favored the sale of British commodities. See M. A. Chaudhary and G. Chaudhary 184 for an explanation of suzerainty in colonial India.
9. For a brief history of colonial education policy prior to the Sepoy Rebellion, see Viswanathan 23–41.
10. See Savage 201. For more on the relationship between Christian missionaries and Indian women, see Roy.
11. See Savage 203 and 214.
12. See Chatterjee, “Nationalist” 238–39 and Sen 177.
13. See Chandra, *Sexual* 35 and 57. See also “History.”
14. Data from the first Quinquennial Report of 1891–92 is reprinted in L. Chaudhary 183–85.
15. As a point of reference for comparing the educational system in colonial India with that of Victorian England, see Rose 148 and 151.
16. See, for example, Mann.
17. See Whitehead, “Historiography” 320 for further exploration of this point.
18. The first Indian universities on a western model were opened in 1857 (Dasgupta 268). Whitehead notes the accomplishment of the British colonial education system in comparison to other colonial powers. See Whitehead, *Colonial* 6.
19. See Whitehead, *Colonial* 6.
20. See Whitehead, “Historiography” 320 and Whitehead, *Colonial* 5.
21. Specifically, Sengupta argues that “the purpose of modern schooling was as much about the production of new religious sensibilities as it was about the production of colonial subjects. This historical dynamic resulted in the increased politicizing of religion within schools” (21). See Sengupta 1–23.
22. See, for example, Bhattacharya 6.
23. Plotz argues that, in the Victorian period, portable property became instilled with value at precisely the point at which the foundations of cultural and national identity becomes debatable. In regards to Empire, specifically, he suggests that “the flow of objects outward from England played a crucial role in exporting a restrictive, distinctive sort of Englishness through a world that stayed distinctively non-English” (20).
24. For more on this point, see Banerjee.
25. See Seth 26–28, 161.
26. See Seth 163–65.
27. See Seth 163–67, esp. 167.
28. See Minault, “Educated” 114–17.
29. In Bengal, for example, women’s education often took the form of *antahpur* schools located in the home, marking an extension of traditional practices. See Sen 177.
30. See Chandra, “Mimicry” 204 and *Sexual* 58–61.
31. Chandra notes, for example, “the role of education in consolidating the power of the Brahman caste cannot be separated from the systematic efforts made by some upper-caste men to negate attempts made by members of the Muslim community and the lower castes to gain access to the same facilities” (*Sexual* 15).

32. Elsewhere, Chandra notes the intervention of colonial authorities against more overt forms of native protest. See, for example, *Sexual* 68–77.
33. Chandra notes the opposition of “prominent Marathi nationalists” to free scholarships at the Deccan and Fergusson Colleges. See *Sexual* 15.
34. First published in 1989, Chatterjee’s essay suggests that while the Indian nationalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is often assumed to be a patriarchal ideological framework, it nevertheless provided the means for the resolution of the woman question as part of its effort to counteract colonial influence. Chatterjee begins with the observation that colonial influence can be divided into two realms: the material and the spiritual. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British colonial activity in India dominated the material realm. In an attempt to stake out an independent sphere, he contends that the nationalist movement looked towards the spiritual realm for the basis of a reformed national identity. For Chatterjee, one of the consequences of this development was that the place of women became increasingly associated with spiritual qualities, which were cultivated within an Indian-controlled women’s education system starting in the 1850s. Within the “new patriarchy” the nationalists constructed, the modern nationalist woman was defined in opposition to both the coarse woman of the lower-castes as well as the westernized women of the upper-castes. According to Chatterjee, “attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman’s newly acquired freedom” (245). From his perspective, the purpose of women’s educational reform in the nineteenth century is best viewed as an attempt to remove the subject of women’s rights from the contest of power between nationalist and colonialist forces.
35. For other examples of research on educational contexts outside of Bengal, see Pernau, Minault “Educated,” and Minault *Secluded*.

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