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**DISCIPLINED SUBJECTS**

SCHOOLING IN COLONIAL BENGAL

Sutapa Dutta



Whenever we speak about the beginning of English education in India, we usually mention T.B. Macaulay and his infamous Minutes on Education (1835) that aimed to create an intermediary class of Indians who would help in speaking English and act as a link between the rulers and the ruled. But the interface between Britain and India resulting in the production and circulation of knowledge began much earlier in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As one of the first detailed studies of its kind, the present book under review focuses on the imperial school curriculum, the textbooks used for the purpose both in schools in Britain and colonial Bengal. It also discusses how, along with the colonial government, the missionaries and the native stake holders ultimately shaped and influenced Indian society. Drawing on a host of primary sources in the UK and India, Sutapa Dutta launches a detailed enquiry of the historicity of modern education with the aim

to thus show why a particular educational method was adopted predominantly for the schools in the colonies. The objective is to analyze the paradoxical nature of knowledge formation, the rigid imposition of colonial knowledge on the one hand and the complexities of their resolution in a multicultural context on the other, where the difference between the disseminator and the receiver of knowledge often overlapped and became indeterminate.

The study has been undertaken through a detailed introductory chapter and three separate sections. In the Introduction the author emphasises how modern education in India has been primarily regarded as a concept adapted from the West, a legacy of colonial rule in India. Colonial education was used as the key tool for justifying the rhetoric of reform and inculcating values among the natives whose intellect was considered 'juvenile' and 'immature.' India was still following the ancient *gurukul* system of education to a great extent till knowledge formation in colonial India, based on the broad Christian developmental framework, became one of the foremost agendas of the colonial civilising mission in India. The thrust area of this book is that the 'thinking and intentions of the colonizer' needs to be studied in order to come to a clearer understanding of how it was received. Lots of work has been done on missionary education in India and the growth of the Empire along with English literature as an imperial tool for educating and civilising colonial subjects. But not much work has been done on the role of imperial elementary curriculum, especially school textbooks, in the creation and perpetuation of imagining and labelling colonial subjects. Thus the basic focus is on how school textbooks shaped imperial images of 'native subjects.' In addition, it "considers the formation of subjectivity not just by the colonizer, but also how the colonized constructed its own terrain of knowledge that resisted, overlapped or complemented colonial knowledge formations." (12). It takes into account the questioning of colonial indoctrination, and reformulation of an alternate 'image' by the Bengalis, as was evident in the textbooks written by them. The work also explores the formative role of colonial education in the emergence of a 'modern' nationalist India.

The first and second chapters, comprising Part I of this study, analyze historical insights of education in colonial Bengal from 1757 to 1911 and schooling the mind in the metropole and the colony. The author draws our attention to the formative institutions like the Fort William College in Calcutta and how it changed the face of formal education in India. Mention is made of the role played by William Jones and the Asiatic Society, the contribution of the Serampore Missionaries trio namely William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, the existence of vernacular education through *maktabs* and *pathshalas*, the establishment of the Sanskrit College in 1824, the beginning of girls' education by Bethune Institution in 1849, and the post-1857 new education policy. We are informed how schooling in the colonies was an extension of the system followed back home, albeit in a different packaging. In the colonies the

purpose was to construct the subjects that were required and the details of the elementary school method are also discussed.

Part II, comprising two more chapters, discusses the content and context of textbooks in Britain and Bengal respectively. Here Dutta draws our attention to the fact that from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, primers and spelling books in Britain had become more secular and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Britain saw a phenomenal increase in books of instructions for children. Most of the early primers were addressed to “the children” but expected mostly ‘the good boys’ to read them. Gradually, women activists advocated girls’ education as well, but it was a segregated gender oriented one – namely needlework for girls and carpentry for boys. As social class divisions actually became more rigid in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, England was successful to a large extent in controlling dissent by making the working class conform to their subordinate position. Textbooks were composed keeping in mind the growing need for education materials that would emphasise the unity and the sameness of the people, rather than highlight the separateness. Thus books began to commonly have lessons on shared geography, history, and social unity. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, textbooks for shaping the cultural consciousness of its readers, especially in the colonies, were seen more pronouncedly. Thus depicting the stereotypic images of the Other strengthened firmly held preconceived notions and these textbooks were adapted in schools in Bengal before Peary Churn Sircar adapted them to a more suitable localised context for Bengali students. For example, the series of *Royal Readers* promoted British colonial power by constantly contrasting and appraising one set of society and civilisation with another.

The next chapter analyzes the inevitable complexities of such a system that had already been introduced in India. Different kinds of books made their appearance – books for improvement of the Company officials primarily with Christian values, and how the Fort William College sought to mould the young English trading community in Bengal; Nathaniel Brassey Halhed’s *A Grammar of the Bengali Language* (1778) tried to train the East India Company officials; whereas much before Macaulay’s appearance, people like Ram Ram Basu and Mrityunjay Vidyalankar sought to standardise vernacular languages and translation of the scriptures. The lack of suitable schoolbooks, especially for the vernacular schools, was a matter of anxiety for the educators till Akshay Kumar Dutta’s *Charupath* and *Sishu Siksha* filled in the lacunae. Also from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century books written for schools in Bengal began to concentrate on scientifically accurate and informative study. At the end of this section, the author points out how after 1857 there was a movement towards a *swadeshi* pedagogy, especially one that would suit the needs of the times. This phase therefore saw a more comfortable balance and synthesis with books like Rabindranath Tagore’s *Sahaj Path* (1930) where the poet had realised that an English primer had also to be written especially with the proliferation of English education. Thus the English

educated *babus* of Bengal were ready to form the workforce necessary to maintain the British Raj in India.

Part III or Chapter Five of the book focuses on “Popular Representations of the Educated Bengali Babu” and as the title suggests, it gives us details, including several illustrations that add to its appeal. It begins with how the rise of the Bengali *babus* in the nineteenth century reflected the unmistakable changes in native identity due to the colonial experience in Bengal. Their rise as a social class can be attributed to colonial trade and enterprise. Dutta discusses the *zamindar babus* and their ‘Babu Culture’, the *bhadralok* educated *babus*, and the transformation in the *babu* households when they came to be associated with this new class of literate English educated Bengalis who formed the greater part of the white collar workers required in the cosmopolitan enclave of Calcutta. The chapter also includes imperial impression of the *babu*, packing punch at them when after 1857, those who tried very hard to assimilate English manners and habits became the recurring subject of mockery in the writings of the British. Also discussed are various magazines like *The Indian Charivari* which made the native’s ‘Babu English’ a frequent butt of fun. The folk depiction of *babus* in Battala prints and Kalighat paintings and the nationalistic Hindu *babu*, a la Krishna are also included in the discussion.

In the concluding section Dutta opines that colonial education no doubt changed the intellectual environment in India, but at the same time it opened up a vista of western ideas which changed the very fabric of social life and thinking. Gradually, there was a growing consciousness of the role of primary textbooks in shaping the subjectivities of the learners. With time, primers became increasingly child-friendly, aesthetically pleasing with pictorial and poetic embellishments. The emphasis was now on the joyous nature of education. The earlier authoritarian tone of the textbooks with its insistence on religious morality was softened to a more secular and scientific education. The ‘civilising’ mission of the colonial ideology had been apparently eroded, with changes dictated by market pressures and changing demographics of the learners. In a nutshell, this dense book should arouse interest in scholars of history, cultural studies, education and interdisciplinary subjects, and anybody who is simply interested in knowing the development of English education in India.

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