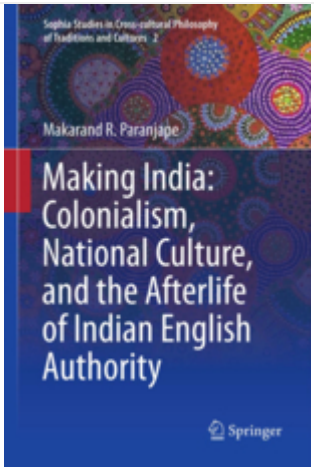
{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

# Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English Authority




Volume 47 (2014)

## Reviewed Work(s)

*Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English Authority*. By Makarand Paranjape (Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York/ Springer, 2012). Pp. 265. Print, $129.00. Ebook, $99.00.

Modernism, or 'adhunikata' in the Indian context, found its first utterances through the Bengal Renaissance and came to be understood with an element of permanence (explained by the word 'Sanatana' meaning 'Nitya nutana,'or forever new). The book focuses on the time period beginning with Rammohun's emergence as Bengal, and India's, preeminent modern-day polymath and reformer, Gandhi. It is primarily a reappraisal of many of the figures of Indian modernity with frequent comments on their legacy in postcolonial India. It traces the efforts of a nascent emerging nation to espouse the ideals of these luminaries. Paranjape classifies them as 'Indian English Authority' writing as they did both in English and in the vernaculars, thereby shaping the burgeoning liberal and later national consciousness of the middle classes. This was also a time of great churning wherein disparate and amorphous sects came to be identified, unfortunately, through the transformation of a geographical marker used in Achaemenid Inscriptions of Persia and by later dat Arabic writers, into the hegemonic idea of a unified 'Hindu' community.

The author begins by tracing this trend of questioning the age-old Brahmanical ideals, beginning with Rammohun, and the subsequent attempts at revitalizing the tradition by infusing new life into it by later day moderns such as Vivekananda. In the midst of it all the question which remains forgotten is that how much of this worked within the similar Judaeo-Christian tropes of investigation already laid down by the Orientalists or the Semitic religious way of theorizing, which appeared convenient to the colonizers. Rammohan's middle-path was the greatest achievement of the encounter between the east and the west before it would be bowdlerized by the hegemonic view of the English-educated middle class. By questioning native religious traditions to and resisting a blind, wholehearted embrace of Christianity and Western culture, a trait which many like Madhusudan would exhibit, Rammohun set the dominant cultural tropes of the time.

Derozio and young Bengal's radicalism and disdain for traditionalism, which was seen at the time as regressive, is taken up for discussion in Chapter 2. There are many new insights on Derozio's *Fakeer of Jungheera* which elucidate how he was neither a "proto-nationalist" nor a pioneer of modernity. Whether superimposing tracts of the *Pagolpanthi Bidroho* or repositioning himself in an aesthetic space far removed from

colonial abstractions, the poem cements its place in the annals of Indian English Poetry. Even with its Oriental influences, it successfully creates an exemplar of what Indian-English Poetry till Sarojini would seek to be —essentially an amalgam. Paranjape uses the poem to reemphasize what he calls the 'East-Indian cosmopolitanism' of Derozio which contributed more artistically, than ideologically or politically (58).

Michael Madhusudan Dutt's tragedy of a life is taken up for study in the next chapter, and quite poignantly so, reminding the readers of how even with his moorings he was forever destined to remain an outsider at Albion's shore. It was only his native Bengal, which he had deserted in his youth, which embraces him and his literary masterpiece *Meghnad Badh Kavya*. Even with its influence of Western epics, the text relied heavily on Sanskrit poetics especially *alamkara shastra*. However, it must be noted here that even though Madhusudan critically evaluates and scorns many of the elements of the mythopoeic society of Ramayana, and as it may appear overturns the pre-existing structuring of the epic, it is almost in continuity of Kittivasa's Ramayana and not an entirely "Western twist" as the author suggests (80).[1]

With Bankim in the next chapter we come to the decisive phase of modernity, when a new strand or ideological idiom developed, borrowing from the Orientalists the proclivity to valorize a supposed Golden rule. This initially led to the erasure and then the demonization of the supposed dark ages—periods of Muslim rule—thereby internalizing the colonial paradigm. Bankim was in many ways a literary innovator. His *Rajmohun's Wife* being the first attempt, possibly in all of Asia as the author points out, to write a novel in English or *Durgesnandini* (1865). The novel had the nucleus of the plot borrowed from Bhudev's *Anguriyavinimay*, modelled somewhat after Scott's Ivanhoe, and having the high style of Vidyasagar, becoming the first novel in Bengali based on Western conventions. However, after his debate with Hastie, the Bankim of Samya would be reborn in a new garb and issues of 'Hindu Rashtra' would become dear to him. The term Hindu was an alien term in the sense that it was never used to identify the adherents to different sects prior to the interaction with Islamic trends and it also never constituted a single, institutionalized religion as historians like Romila Thapar have shown. Thus the revivalist trend in a sense problematized the project of modern liberalism that it was

ushering into all walks of life. Even as the colonial constructions of Indian history were repudiated by many of the individuals studied here, they fell into the same trap of investing authority to Brahmanical texts—more than what they could have ever claimed throughout history—and internalizing many other colonial interpretations.

The strongest literary critique of this exists in Tagore's Gora, which Paranjape also takes up for discussion. Gora's initial aggressive posturing as a Hindu is what many of the intellectuals of resurgent Hinduism would exhibit, though Gora's transformation and sublime acceptance of a Universalist humanism would not find widespread semblance in the real world. The "new society that is yet to emerge fully as the novel ends" perhaps never finds fruition, and is never realized on the plane of reality more than a hundred years since Gora was being published in a serialized manner in the pages of *Prabasi,*between 1907 – 1909.

The chapter on "the women's question" and their agency as evident in their own creations is perhaps the highpoint of the text. Replete with many lesser known facts it sheds light on the women who claimed their rightful place in India's modernist project. Bringing back figures from our history who strived to find their own footing in the emerging liberal idea of a nation, Paranjape studies the life of many women such as Pandita Ramabai, whose erudition earned her the title Pandita, along with Ramabai Ranade, Anandabai, Shevantibai, Tarabai and others. While the shift from Bengal is a conscious effort, lost is the example of one of the earliest exemplars who showed the yearning to learn amidst her socially constricting role and had the tenacity to record it all in her memoir – Rassundari Devi. The women studied here not only broaden the spectrum of Indian modernity but also posit instances of women traversing the unfamiliar and articulating their yearning to learn at a time when women's literacy was dismal compared to that of the men.

Lack of available evidence as Paranjape himself notes makes his sketch of Vivekananda's life and times incomplete, as do much of the work on saintly figures even from colonial India.. He goes on take up the question of "truth" claims about a saintly figure which may often be the only primary sources available. In this section he lays threadbare the fallacies of blindly believing such secondary sources (which are the only available ones) and questions their veracity such as the proposition that Vivekananda swam across shark infested waters to answer the mothers

calling and upon reaching the shrine prostrated before her, staying put for three whole days. He cites Chattopadhyaya to elucidate on the legitimization of an oft repeated fabrication over time. However, his attempts at balancing historical truth and what he claims to be the poetic truth again strays into the familiar territory of narrativization which the book is replete with and may not be palatable to many other than the true "sadhak." And even at the cost of repetition one has to ask, can a good "Bhakta" ever be a sincere historian, with the very distancing and rigours of scientific scrutiny, and criticism where necessary, absent from their tools? From another point of view one could have questioned how the bourgeoning nationalist movement came to be laced with religious channels, which at the time seen to reinvigorating, displaced India's persistent heterodoxy. It can today be safely read as a project which led to secular libertarian principles being constricted to the superstructure, a plane of big ideas, while sectarian strife and religion held greater sway as one moved closer to the ground. Vivekananda's approximation and celebration by fundamentalists in India, having become an icon for Hindutvavadis today, can also be seen in this light. What was flexible and universalistic in the colonial times was never free from the threats of rupturing a multi-religious polity like India's, nurtured over centuries, where religion has always been amorphous (at least what has since then been labelled as 'Hindu' religion); and the monotheistic zeal of many like Bankim and Vivekananda may have knowingly or unknowingly led in many ways to the same.

The chapter on Sarojini Naidu is again a revelation as the author links it up with much of his own research, having himself brought out many of her previously unpublished letters and poetry in edited anthologies elsewhere. His study of Sarojini's tryst as an orator never really extending to her poetry which in post-Independent India would almost suffer from having no readership at all due to the constant criticism that it received. Yet Sarojini's attempt to seek a commingling of Indian aesthetics and English Romanticism, after being advised by Edmund Gosse to try and be a "genuine Indian poet of the Deccan," even while failing to capture the zeitgeist of the times, would forever remain as her legacy to the cultural and literary factors that shaped India (178).

The most cogent argument of the text comes when Paranjape questions the very idea of a Renaissance, linking it up with Kapoor's argument on

inherent potential for renewal, and perhaps that of Rabindranath's, who had rejected the artificial imposition of Eurocentric modernism and proposed the principles of universalism and permanence . Tagore while envisioning a free India, free from the yoke of British domination, never supported hegemonic ideas of nationalism which rendered the individual voices ineffective and his idea of nations was always tied to the universal and more clearly internationalism wherein borders were but man-made constructs. Perhaps a true torchbearer of this tradition was not Gandhi, who though in many ways widely read and universal in approach was too firmly entrenched in his religio-cultural vision to ever envision a world free of nationalities and thereby distinct religio-cultural identities. Nehru's idea of Panchsheel and the glorious days of Non-Aligned Movement may have reminded many of the continuance of Tagore's ideas, something the author even with many comments regarding the reception of these figures in Independent India, fails to highlight.

Sri Aurobindo Ghose represents the best of both traditions of Western modernity and Indian spirituality. It is a life which perhaps best sums up Paranjape's efforts in writing this "version of the story of the making of modern India". (260) Aurobindo's essay on the Renaissance, perhaps the first recorded utterance of the word in colonial India, has also been studied in the same light.

The chapter on the Persistent Mahatma and Sanatani Dharma posits Gandhi's pioneering efforts in ushering in a balanced understanding of Modernity in India and questions his ultimate failure to live in the minds of his countrymen till posterity. It cites the desertion of Gandhian ideals, citing how not only have the Hindutvavadis twisted his logic but also how the Congress too has deserted its legacy. But perhaps stray comments such as the one about Gandhi pronouncements on untouchability or Hindu-Muslim relations for that matter having upturned the static practices of his era, would be unverifiable, and it might lead the Western reader into the meandering paths of believability.. Perhaps Gandhi with his chosen path between Nehruvian Secularism and fervent religiosity had always known that someday his views would become obscure because the very foundations on which he had based his ideas of *sarva dharma sambhava* would never have worked in the religio-identitarian schema that he both practiced and preached. Even though they had the

potential to generate mass appeal working with popular markers, they would only unleash far unhealthy an upsurge. Countries around the world are today practising the Gandhian policy of tolerance (and not irreligiousness and complete separation of the state from religion as Nehruvian secularism initially stood for) and yet as a domestic policy, it has failed almost everywhere. The author laments this but possibly without understanding its root cause.

However, throughout the text one sees a constant struggle to reassert it in its own right as a historic-cultural treatise while working in between the not so seamless space of history and culture. One does lament the unusual harangue from Paranjape on the Marxist or Subaltern positions and his proposition of what he postulates as their failure to fully comprehend the multifacetedness of Rammohun. Making India is as much about the authorial figures studied here, who not only formed Indian-English authority in their times but also left a mark to guide the country for posterity, yet it is also about the familiar tropes of colonialism and the relationships formed under its guise such as the one between Sarojini Naidu and Gosse.

Reading litterateurs and their works in isolation is often a mistake and nothing proves this more than the book in question. Many a times one finds it glossing over issues of the market, dominant reading strategies, the equivocal process of canonization or for that matter the crucial question of why these people and not others could find a place in Makarand Paranjape's book (or in the books by many such literary historians?). Even though the author had made it amply clear in the introduction that his main interests were with literary and cultural aspects, rather than political or economic, the avoidance of tricky political aspects in a book of such magnitude could have very well been avoided. One wonders, couldn't Bankim's choice of language while leaving *Rajmohun's Wife* unfinished, been guided as much by the "wrong turn" of his predecessors as well as the growing market for reception of Bangla texts especially one envisioned and fashioned in an English mould?

On a special note the author's way of repaying his "ancestral debts" by publishing poetry and letters of Sarojini Naidu previously unavailable to readers, is something, one hopes, that would inspire many scholars to revive those lost parts of their literary heritage which are almost

forgotten. (165) This book will be indispensable for scholars of Indian English Literature for years to come.

**Rohit Dutta Roy**

*University of Delhi*

1 A detailed study of Madhusudan's *Meghnad Badh Kavya* working in the tradition of Krittivasa, even with the obvious influences of Milton, can be found in Clinton B. Seely, "Ravana and Rama in Michael's Hands," in *Barisal and Beyond: Essays on Bangla Literature,* edited by Clinton B. Seely (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008) 65 – 91.

Published by

View all posts by

Book Reviews

Culture, Empire, England, India, Intellectual History

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

FIND US ON:

» Facebook

» Twitter

---

ADMIN:

» Log in

» WordPress.org



UP ↑