

Beyond Representation; Colonial and Postcolonial Constructions of Indian Identity
By Crispin Bates (ed). (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006 (£23.99/ 370 pages) Hardback (ISBN-13: 9780195674972).

Perceptions of the ‘self’, the ‘other,’ and the ‘nation’ in colonial and post-colonial India are discussed in this volume with particular focus on Bengal and gender. The editor, Crispin Bates, hopes that this book will break down some of the existing more rigid conceptions of identity and usher in a new “tolerance and irreverence for the markers of difference.”ⁱ The book is an edited volume of 13 contributions by South Asia scholars, broadly on the topic of identity. The book is meant to mark the beginning of the twenty-first century with contributions by younger scholars working in the field of South Asian History.

Particular attention is paid to gender, nationalism (and regional identity) and the middle-class as determinants of identity. In addition to these, myth, communication, the ‘Backward Muslim’, elites, race, space, education and writing are addressed. The book offers contributions to many areas of South Asian historical writing, especially debates in scholarly literature on the colonial and postcolonial periods. If there is a common thread in the way these writers discuss identity it is that there was no single ‘Indian’ identity before, during or after the colonial period. These authors see identities cutting across regions, genders, classes and individuals.

The chapter by Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury, “Treason of the Clerks: Sedition and Representation in the Telegraph General Strike of 1908” contains a long discourse on the nature of strikes. The author submits that the goals of the strikers are the defining characteristics of different types of strikes. As this applies to the ‘general strike’ of 1908, Choudhury asserts that the strike was actually several separate strikes which have been seen by historians as one general strike. By dissecting the goals of the different strikers (peons, clerks and signalers) Choudhury breaks new ground by showing continuity between this strike and later labour movements and submits that the prewar period is not the “pre-history of labour mobilization” but rather its early form.

Similarly substantially, the chapter by Crispin Bates, “Human Sacrifice in Colonial Central India; Myth, Agency, and Representation” sheds light on the practice, or rather, the perceptions of human sacrifice and cannibalism. Bates systematically deconstructs the arguments and stories told of human sacrifice during and before the colonial period. By doing so he raises questions and casts doubts on the stories of human sacrifice told by natives and administrators alike. Bates shows that reporters often lacked first-hand knowledge of the practice. He also shows that it was usually the ‘other’ (neighbouring tribes, etc.) who was reported to be the cannibal or participant in human sacrifice. By the end of his essay, Bates’ thesis becomes clear: if human sacrifices occurred they were extremely rare.

Two chapters on gender, “The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India; Bharat Mata, Matri Bhasha, and Gau Mata” by Charu Gupta and “Battling the Demoness Hindi in Tamil India” by Sumathi Ramaswami treat the discourse on gender very differently. The

difficulty which both writers confronted was that conceptions of the female, whether she is a mother, daughter or *wily whore*, were fluid. Little consistency was to be found in the use of gendered discourse other than its prevalence. The chapter by Gupta analyzes the use of the mother figure in all manner of representation. She focuses on its visual representation in the map of India, its use as the national language of India (Mother Hindi) and the protection of the cow as mother. The chapter by Ramaswami is more descriptive in nature. It quotes at length poems, verses and stories to show the gendered discourse applied to the battle for the Tamil language against Hindi as perceived by Tamil speakers. The author shows Hindi to be represented by the *False Mother, Wily Whore, Upstart Maid* and *Bloodthirsty Demoness*, while Tamil was the *Suffering Mother*. What is clear at the end of this chapter is that feminine and masculine imagery were mobilized in the language debates. What is less clear is why gendered discourse has been used at all, or further, why feminine and masculine images were used when they were, and for what purpose. Undoubtedly, these gender issues are important but exactly why and how gender issues are mobilized is less clear.

As in most collected volumes on India, several chapters are devoted to Bengal. In this case five of thirteen explore Bengali phenomena. Two chapters address the identification of the Bhadralok (socioeconomic group). “A World of Learning; The Material Culture of Education and Class in Nineteenth-century Bengal” by Tithi Bhattacharya and “The Chemistry of Bengali Life; Acharya/Sir Prafulla Chandra Ray in his Times and Spaces” by Benjamin Zachariah do this through two methods. The Bhattacharya chapter submits that the defining characteristic of the Bhadralok is its literate preoccupation, while class and wealth seem to play an auxiliary role. Bhattacharya examines the commonalities which seem to bind the group together (e.g. land ownership) but arrives at the aforementioned result. The chapter by Zachariah analyzes the life of one man who was considered a Bhadralok. His search for self respect is considered to be telling. The two authors approach the topic from different angles which adds nuance to our understanding of Bhadralok and general Bengali identity.

In the chapter by Markus Daechsel, “Between Suburb and World Politics; Middle-class Identities and the Refashioning of Space in Late Imperial Lahore, c. 1920-50” the author examines the spatial relationship between the suburban middle classes and city-dwellers. Daechsel finds that suburban residents became better connected to the world outside Lahore than the urban centre which bordered their enclave. Suburban influences were global struggles, socialism, communism and world leaders like Churchill and Stalin much more than their local urban leaders in Lahore.

The other authors and topics in this volume include: Sanjay Seth on the “Backward Muslim,” Swapna Banerjee on constructing middle class identity in Bengal, Riho Isaka on Gujarati elites and regional identity, Anindita Ghosh on identities of the literary Bengali and the other, Harold Fischer-Tine on discourses of science and Hindu traditions in early Indian nationalism, and finally James Mills on Para Brahma and Psychiatry and identity in post-colonial India.

The arguments made in this volume are generally revisionary analyses. Some shed light on previously dark spaces of history (e.g. strikes and social movements) while others merely stir the mud (e.g. gender) thus making the water murkier. They serve the purpose of clarifying issues and unsettling false conceptions such as the prevalence of cannibalism and role of the Bhadralok. These ‘new’ authors show great promise as part of the next generation of South Asia Social Historians.

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