

Trans-colonial Modernities in South Asia. Michael S. Dodson and Brian A. Hatcher, eds. London/New York: Routledge, 2012. ISBN: 9780415780629

In recent decades, “modernity” has become one of the most ubiquitous words in the lexicon of scholars of South Asia. It is an essential aspect of the conceptual apparatus on which we draw in our attempts to make sense of the disruptive effects of colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. This collection of essays, the result of a conference organized in 2008 at Indiana University Bloomington, aims to show that modernity continues to be a “useful conceptual tool” for historians of South Asia, especially when understood “as an interweaved set of processes encompassing living, enacting, embodying, authorizing, and analyzing, which unite local colonial contexts, the imperial metropolis, and the contemporary academy” (4). In its aim and method, the book can be located within a substantial body of scholarship which, since the 1980s in particular, has challenged Eurocentric accounts about the trajectory of modernity in non-European contexts by calling attention to the multiplicity of ways in which modernity was understood (and practiced) in those locations. One of the strengths of the volume is the impressive array of vernacular materials on which the authors draw in their attempt to challenge entrenched binaries such as tradition vs. modernity, European vs. Asian, and resistance vs. accommodation. This enables the authors to throw new light on the meaning of social change and agency in colonial South Asia.

The book is divided thematically into three even parts, framed by an “Introduction” and an “Afterword”. The first part, entitled “Local agents, local modernities”, comprises two papers on the educational projects of Serfoji II, ruler of the princely state of Tanjore, and of Raja Shivaprasad, a “hybrid intellectual” from Benares, as well as a contribution on the activities of Bengali Sanskrit pandits and their crafting of what Brian A. Hatcher calls the “modern shastric imaginary.” The second part, “Strategies of translation”, acknowledges the significance of translation both as a practice of and metaphor for modernity. This section features papers on Persian/Urdu lexicography and its relationship to the highly problematic modernity of the English language and the Roman script, the role of Iranian Bible translators who worked and lived at the intersection of the Russian and British Empires, and the transformative encounter between Jain historical writing and “authoritative” Indological knowledge. Finally, the third part is a conceptual analysis of “History and Modernity”, with papers which trace the genealogy of concepts like “society” and “social” in the works of nineteenth-century Bengali intellectuals but also explore, from more literary angles, the meanings of modernity and history in the poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Antony Firingi and Ishwar Gupta, as well as the historical fiction of Romesh Chunder Dutt.

Far from being a patchwork of idiosyncratic texts, the book is successful in constructing a cohesive narrative of colonial modernity as emerging out of dynamic processes of cultural

and linguistic translation. Indira Viswanathan Peterson's chapter on Serfoji II's educational project in Tanjore is significant not only because it is the only contribution which discusses an example from south India (and a "provincial" example at that), but also because it demonstrates that Serfoji's peculiar understanding and practice of "moral improvement" by means of education predated the era of "progressive princely rule" advocated in later official discourse and policy (16). That modernity was regarded "largely as a pedagogical project" (76) is also evident in Ulrike Stark's chapter on Raja Shivaprasad, which discusses the tensions inherent in his project to introduce modern science to rural India and urges us to pay attention to the "mundane domains of work, lived practice, and everyday experience in shaping visions of modernity" (69). Equally interesting is John E. Cort's contribution, which traces the refashioning of Jain historical writing into a new form of "scientific history" in colonial India. Following the debates over icon worship between Acharya Vijay Anandsuri, a Murtipujak Jain mendicant, and Swami Dayananda Sarasvati, the Arya Samaj leader, Cort demonstrates how the encounter with the work of German and British Indologists led to the gradual incorporation of new principles of evidence in Jain history books, such as references to inscriptions, archaeological findings and Indological texts. The same search for (the meaning of) history is also discussed in Rosinka Chaudhuri's paper on the work of three Bengali poets, Henry Derozio, Antony Firingi and Ishwar Gupta. Most notable in her analysis is the attempt, which echoes Ulrike Stark's earlier argument, to recuperate for the history of modernity in South Asia "the everyday" and "the banal", so vividly captured in some of the poems discussed. Her observation that the colonized self was a "divided" self, "a self-division [which was] based on the conflicted loyalties and contradictory impulses that were so much an insignia of the age" (201), encapsulates perfectly the essence of many of the individual lives discussed in this book and points to yet another common thread which binds the chapters together.

Ironically, however, and despite the best efforts of the editors, the book is less successful in overcoming one of the most pervasive legacies of colonial rule in South Asia, namely the identification of Bengal as the main locus where debates about modernity took place. The geographical and cultural bias present in much research on colonial South Asia, which tends to focus on Bengal and the northern part of India at the expense of other regions such as the South, is visible here as well. Almost half of the contributions (four out of nine) focus on the former region, with the remaining five distributed unevenly among the Hindu-Urdu belt of north India, the princely state of Tanjore, and Bombay. Nile Green's chapter on Iranian Bible translators is the only contribution which examines the trans-imperial dimensions of knowledge production and exchange. Furthermore, the majority of papers in this volume frame modernity predominantly in cultural and religious terms. In his "Afterword", C. A. Bayly anticipates these points of criticism and attempts to restore the balance by discussing some of the projects of modernity which emerged in the cosmopolitan city of Bombay. His contribution brings to the fore the problems involved in interpreting Bombay's experiments

with modernity “in starkly economic terms” (245), as well as the need to examine the “culture(s) of modernity” in conjunction with the “political economy of capitalism”, as Arif Dirlik, another theorist of modernity, has also emphasized in his work. Undoubtedly, these are aspects of the history of modernity in South Asia which deserve more attention in the future, especially if we are to engage seriously with the point, emphasized by the editors themselves, that modernity was, essentially, an “undemocratic and inegalitarian” enterprise (3). Recent scholarship demonstrates that there is scope to expand the range of materials examined beyond the domain of the religious and the literary to include commercial, financial, medical, and technical texts which have the potential to illuminate new sites where modernity was debated, negotiated, and created.

Apart from these minor points of criticism and the occasional typographic errors, the book remains a valuable contribution to the study of South Asian history and culture. The many references to South Asian languages such as Sanskrit, Bengali, Hindi/Urdu might occasionally prove difficult reading for the non-specialist. I hope that this is a challenge many readers will accept, and I cannot but repeat, in slightly modified form, the old yet pertinent observation of Serfoji II that “there are many countries on the globe, and many kinds of people live in them,” and if we are to learn from them we need to “study and accept” other languages as well (36). This book offers a unique and insightful glimpse into the history of one of those countries and is therefore a must read for anyone who wishes to understand how modernity was (also) articulated through other media than that of the English language.

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