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Book Review

Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India

Indira Sengupta and Daud Ali, editors
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Reviewed by: Nasir M. Baba
Usmanu Danfodiyo University

Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India, edited by Sengupta and Ali, belongs to a body of literature that attempts to provide scholarly understandings of colonial societies and imperial history through the lens of colonial knowledge. Colonial knowledge is conceived as the form and content of knowledge that was produced out of and facilitated the process of colonisation. The idea that colonialism could be understood by focusing on the production and dissemination of knowledge that accompanied it owes much to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, which foregrounded representation as a key aspect of imperialism. The idea of representation made possible the understanding that colonial authorities exercised power over colonised people not only through military conquest or economic dominance but also through the command of knowledge that they had over the colonised people. Therefore, scholarly work inspired by Said (1978) views colonialism as much a cultural project as a military or an economic one.

Whereas Sengupta and Ali rely on colonial knowledge as an analytic category in the study of imperial power, they dispel the notion held by earlier researchers of a static, coherent, and hegemonic colonial knowledge that ruled, marginalised, and stood in direct opposition to colonial subjects and their agency. On the contrary, the book aligns itself with the view advanced by newer studies, which argue that the relationship between knowledge and the state was neither predictable nor straightforward. Sengupta and Ali go on to argue that "knowledge production, like the state project itself, was often more considerably fragmented, even while it operated within the framework of blatant and sustained asymmetrical power relations" (p. 4). This thinking, according to the authors, required a change in approach from an exclusive focus on state power and its control over knowledge and discourse to a pragmatic study of local processes of knowledge production and the roles local actors play in them. The research focus within this new paradigm requires a localised and archive-based approach that interrogates "specific interactions on the ground between agents of colonial rule and indigenous social groups and individuals who were involved, with varying degrees of power and agency, in the production and dissemination of what is now called colonial knowledge" (p. 6).

In line with the thought pattern described above, the book addresses two major concerns. The first is to facilitate an understanding of the process of knowledge production through examining its localised and historically specific social and intellectual contexts. In particular, Sengupta and Ali ask how important Indian elites and their agency were in the knowledge production process. The second, which the editors consider innovative, is to go beyond

knowledge production that much of the existing literature focuses on and begin to account for its implementation, transmission, and reception on and by colonial subjects and people of the metropole. To address these concerns, the book contains 10 chapters organised into three parts. Part I of the book is titled *Producing Colonial Knowledge* and the four chapters in it address two questions: What were the intentions and policies of administrators, missionaries, and scholars associated with major knowledge production projects in colonial India? and How internally coherent and dynamic was this knowledge, and what was its relationship with specific issues of policy and power in both the metropole and the colony? In part II, *Historical Places, Historical Pasts*, there are three chapters that devote attention to determining the role of local actors in the production and reproduction of knowledge. In particular, these three chapters seek to show how local actors were involved not only as sources of knowledge but also as active participants in the emergence of a local sense of place and time. The last part of the book, *Pedagogy and Transformation*, engages with the contradictions of colonial pedagogy and its implementation and seeks to reconstruct how colonial pedagogy was engaged with Indigenous forms of knowledge, ethics, and improvements. Three chapters in the last part of the book are devoted to these tasks.

The significance of the book and its contributions to the fields of colonial studies, imperial history, and knowledge production can be assessed along these three lines of enquiry outlined by the editors. The book is successful in representing colonial knowledge in India as an avenue of competing interpretations. The different actors in the colonial enterprise were selective in the sources of knowledge that they used and the purposes to which they deployed them. In Part I, Chapters 3 and 4 deal with representations of religious life in India by missionary museums and preservations of Indian monuments by the colonial state respectively. These chapters were particularly illustrative of the contradictions and partisanships that accompanied different projects of knowledge production by missionaries, scholars, and the colonial state. Geoffrey Oddie's work on missionary museums, in Chapter 3, underscores the roles that museums played as propaganda tools for galvanising British public opinion in support of Christian missions in the Indian territories. Oddie demonstrates that throughout the first half of the 19th century, and even later, accounts of religious lives of Indians given by missionaries were influential in developing the ideas and feelings of the British about Hindus and Hindu religion. The dominant narrative etched on the British imagination by the missionary bodies was the appalling spiritual conditions of the heathen Indians that required resurrecting through publicly supported missionary interventions.

However, the missionaries were not a monolithic group because they sub-divide into different orientations and each made pronouncements on idol worship among Indians for different motives. For instance, early- and mid-19th century missionaries such as William Ward and Alexander Duff began to recognise that the undifferentiated labelling of Indian modes of worship as *heathenism* or *idolatry* was unhelpful given the wide diversity of these religious beliefs and practices and the unique characteristics of the Hindu religion. But authorities at the missionary museums were intent on categorising all non-Christian religions as undifferentiated idolatry. To build and sustain this narrative, the missionaries built their representations of Hinduism on popular religious beliefs and practices of the middle- and lower-class sections of society with which they were most conversant. Accordingly, it was the artefacts of this kind of religiosity, such as village deities, serpent worship, and processions of the juggernaut that appeared in missionary museums effectively reinforcing the image of idolatry as the dominant religious thought and practice among Indians. Whereas Oddie did an impressive work of

describing missionary museums as desperate attempts to make other formal religions invisible to the British public, he nonetheless drew attention to how significant the museum's portrayals of Hindu popular religious practices were in bringing the unique life and spiritual plight of ordinary Hindus to public attention in Britain.

The roles of local actors in knowledge production processes is a common theme that cuts across the three chapters in Part II. On reading these three chapters, one detects an attempt by the authors to transcend the two opposing views on the role played by *Indigenous* informants in the construction of colonial knowledge in British India. The tension is between the view of local actors as mere collaborators who never actually contributed to the shaping of colonial knowledge and their perception as active participants in the creation of colonial knowledge and the shaping of its outcomes. In Chapter 5, the reader encounters Chitralekha Zutshi's contribution, which examines the processes leading to the preparation of a critical edition of *Rajatarangini*, by Marc Aurel Stein, well-renowned for his archaeological surveys of central Asia and Iran. *Rajatarangini* was a 12th-century Sanskrit narrative discovered in the late-18th century in the Kashmir region of India. It was judged to be the only Sanskrit text from the pre-colonial period that could be accorded the status of *history* in view of what the British consider to be its potential contribution to the construction of an authentic historical narrative of early India. In preparing his edition of *Rajatarangini*, Stein relied upon several local teachers and scholars in Kashmir (referred to as Kashmiri Pandits) who served as the project's cultural mediators and gave Stein access to their private libraries, helped him interpret texts, and introduced him to Kashmiri folk tradition, sense of geography, and space. Zutshi argues that in performing these roles, these Kashmiri Pandits were neither marginal to nor marginalised in this process of knowledge production. Instead, they "were in fact central to the articulation of historical knowledge about Kashmir and, more importantly, were able to define their own role in Kasmiri society through their participation" in Stein's project (p. 114).

Zutshi also reports that Stein had repeatedly underplayed the possible influence of Kashmiri Pandits in the overall outcome of the project because they had been trained in and followed standard western procedures of collating and copying manuscripts. It has been shown elsewhere in the book, particularly in Chapter 10 by Margrit Pernau, that translation means much more than simply transporting or *carrying over* of meaning from one language to another, and it is difficult to discount local agency in the projects in which there were some levels of Indigenous involvement. For translation, according to Pernau, is a social practice and a creative process that "transforms not only the target language but also has repercussions on the connotations the concepts carry in their original language" (p. 233).

Although Pernau's comments are relevant to the elucidation of the theme of local agency taken up in Part II, they are actually made in relation to the transmission and reception of colonial knowledge that form the theme of Part III. Pernau's contribution specifically examines the encounter between Victorian values and Indo-Persian notions of civility, called *tahzib ul akhlaq* (the polishing of manners), within the context of moral education and the responsibilities of schools to mould individual character in 19th-century Delhi. A common approach adopted by British and local Indian scholars was to treat the two concepts, civility and *tahzib*, as if they were the same and would ultimately lead to similar outcomes. The analysis provided in the book shows that although the British colonisers and local Indian elites were in agreement on the need for schools to train students in individual comportment and civic behaviour, not all the elements of the British discourse could be transplanted among local populations in the same manner. On the contrary, British civilising missions were shown to be

successful only to the extent that they could be translated into Indigenous concepts in ways that permitted their adaptation and incorporation. Meaning, this process was not a British project alone; local Indian elites, often acting outside the boundaries of the colonial state, played active roles in adapting British ideas of civility and education through the lenses of *tahzib ul akhlaq*. What emerged through the process, therefore, was not a moral regime of the British that was accepted or rejected by the Indians. Rather, it was an emotional and moral regime that was appropriated by a colonised middle class.

On the whole, whether looked at from the perspective of the motives for knowledge production, the role of local actors in the process, or the pedagogy of its transmission, *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India* makes for a compelling reading for imperial historians, anthropologists, literary scholars, scholars of gender, and other scholars and students for whom the Saidian analytical framework has a special appeal. Of special note is how the editors paid attention to roles of

local agency and power in knowledge production, as well as the previously neglected processes of knowledge transmission and reception. Overall, Sengupta and Ali bring fresh perspectives that foreground colonial knowledge as a dynamic, fractured, and historically contingent process that defies any attempt to characterise colonial India using a single theory.

References

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Nasir M. Baba is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria.