

Book Reviews

Priyasha Mukhopadhyay. *Required Reading: The Life of Everyday Texts in the British Empire*. Princeton UP, 2024. Pp. v, 216. \$39.95/£35.00.

Priyasha Mukhopadhyay's *Required Reading: The Life of Everyday Texts in the British Empire* offers an innovative contribution to the intersecting fields of postcolonial studies, comparative empire studies, and book history. Mukhopadhyay lucidly examines the entanglement of textuality and power in colonial South Asia by uncovering a seemingly banal yet significant administrative colonial archive. By foregrounding “required readings” (Mukhopadhyay 4)—everyday texts such as reports, almanacs, manuals, magazines, and petitions—she both illuminates the practical and bureaucratic dimensions of colonial communication and highlights how these ostensibly mundane texts served as material “contact zones” (4). These zones were pivotal sites where imperial authority was negotiated, contested, and maintained and where colonial subjects engaged with the mechanisms of governance and institutional systems. Her use of the term “required reading,” in particular, challenges conventional narratives that primarily associate reading with intellectual freedom or personal enrichment. The book reframes reading as a disciplinary tool and illustrates how colonial subjects were often compelled to engage with texts that structured their legal existence, an engagement that often led to crucial forms of resistance.

Mukhopadhyay employs the term “functional archive” (4) to describe the textual infrastructure that was created to mediate the relationship between the British empire and its subjects. She identifies four key characteristics of this archive. First, it is generative; it continuously expands without reaching a definitive endpoint. Second, it is transactional; it reflects an exchange-based relationship between the parties involved. Third, it is scattered and dispersed; rather than being confined to a single physical location, it exists across the empire. Finally, it is characterised by ephemerality and fragmentation. This archive, as Mukhopadhyay demonstrates, is made up of poor-quality materials that were hastily produced, making it inherently precarious. Each chapter of her book examines specific aspects of this archive through collections situated around the world, including South Asia (Kolkata, Colombo), the United Kingdom (London, Brighton, Oxford), the United States (New Haven), and other digital repositories. The ephemerality of Mukhopadhyay's “functional archive” offers a significant commentary on the need to preserve

such colonial forms of documentation, but it also raises questions about the digital afterlives of these materials. Digitisation reshapes debates about access and preservation while perpetuating certain imperial exclusions. While the role of digital archives is acknowledged in the book, Mukhopadhyay's analysis of the "functional archive" is missing a more explicit engagement with the politics of digitisation itself—who controls access to these materials, what items are prioritised for preservation, and how do digital platforms reproduce colonial biases in metadata and searchability? In other words, Mukhopadhyay's deeply insightful "functional archive" proffers fruitful ground for further investigation into the exclusionary power structures that shape the digital world just as much as the textual one.

Chapter 1 of the book begins uncovering this archive by focusing on the refusal of British soldiers to read, specifically, their disregard for official instructional texts. Mukhopadhyay examines *The Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service* (1869), a manual intended to instil discipline and imperial values among British troops in colonial South Asia, and shows how the handbook's rigid prescriptions often clashed with the practical realities of colonial warfare, leading soldiers to ignore, resist, or selectively interpret its contents. Chapter 2 offers Mukhopadhyay's most original analysis in extending the theme of divergent literacies by delving into bureaucratic frustrations and the historical gaps created by illiteracy itself. Mukhopadhyay foregrounds the neglected role of illiterate readers and challenges conventional models of literacy by interrogating how petitions—appeals and complaints about abuses of power, dictated to scribes—were crafted with repetition and rhetorical emphasis in anticipation of an economical reading by local British colonial authorities (80). She also accentuates how petitions subverted dehumanising bureaucratic systems by prioritising the voices of colonial subjects over imperial agents.

Chapter 3 critically surveys Indian railways, schedules, and almanacs (*panjikas*) and in doing so makes an argument for how time was contested and negotiated at the intersection of Indigenous practices and colonial impositions in South Asia. Mukhopadhyay introduces the concept of the "corrective reader" (95), a figure emblematic of meticulous engagement with *panjikas*, juxtaposed with the "selective reader" (95) of petitions (from the previous chapter), to underscore the varying temporalities shaped by these texts. The chapter highlights how *panjikas* represent a fusion of local and imperial conceptions of time and reveals the tensions and accommodations inherent in this collision. Particularly noteworthy is the distinction between British almanacs, which largely disregarded South Asian readers, and Bengali Hindu almanacs, which catered to local temporal needs and incorporated advertisements that

reflected distinct cultural priorities. This analysis is pivotal for understanding how imperial time collided with and sought to reshape, yet could not entirely subsume, Indigenous temporal frameworks.

Chapter 4 offers the text's most conventional literary analysis by examining themes of gender and reading companionship among South Asian women readers of *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* (1901–38), the first English-language magazine in India edited by a woman. By analysing its publication records, subscription data, and contributor biographies, Mukhopadhyay highlights how English literature functioned as both an aspirational and anxiety-inducing space for these readers. While the inclusion of *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* marks a departure from the “required reading” framework established in earlier chapters—it lacks the urgency and direct ties to imperial governance that define the “functional archive”—the magazine nonetheless embodies a site of transcultural exchange that reflects colonial tastes and offers women readers a platform to navigate provinciality and engage with their sociopolitical realities. Even though the connection to imperial structures is less immediate, the chapter excels at linking reading practices to community formation and highlighting how such periodicals fostered shared intellectual and cultural spaces. Mukhopadhyay also acknowledges the magazine's limitations, noting its appeal to a small, elite readership and thereby underscoring its exclusivity.

Central to the argumentative drive of the book is Mukhopadhyay's suggestion that this “functional archive”—comprised of reports, manuals, and bureaucratic texts—only created the illusion of control for the British empire; the notion that the colonies were managed with efficiency was a fantasy. One particularly powerful means with which to challenge this fantasy is the way Mukhopadhyay unravels Chinua Achebe's assertion that the British were experts in colonial governance. In his memoir *There Was a Country* (2012), Achebe writes: “There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country. This was not something that the British achieved only in Nigeria; they were able to manage this on a bigger scale in India and Australia. The British had the experience of governing and doing it competently” (43). Mukhopadhyay's work directly disputes Achebe's contention that the British were administratively “competent.” The archive she explores exposes the unevenness of colonial administration, the messy contradictions within imperial claims of authority and governance, and the resistant textual tactics of Indigenous South Asian communities.

Mukhopadhyay's study is part of a burgeoning development in postcolonial archive studies advancing new anti-colonial methods of reading. In

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a South Asian context, Aakriti Mandhwani's *Everyday Reading: Middlebrow Magazines and Book Publishing in Post-Independence India* (2024) is an insightful case in point, showing how the overlooked archive of Hindi middlebrow magazines and paperback publishing shaped everyday reading practices and mediated the literary tastes of India's emerging middle classes in the two decades following independence. While Mukhopadhyay does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of reading in colonial South Asia (she acknowledges the region's linguistic and cultural diversity and attempts to offer "comparative snapshots" across colonial contexts [23]), the book nonetheless begs for a deeper engagement with regional and linguistic variations, such as the contrast between Bengali chapbooks and Hindi and Urdu texts in North India. However, the distinctive strength of Mukhopadhyay's study lies in its deliberate shift from reading established literary genres (such as the novel, poetry, or even magazines) toward everyday, institutional, and political forms of writing, including manuals and petitions. By centralising these overlooked archives and forms of textuality, Mukhopadhyay offers a genuinely fresh perspective on print culture, literary resistance, and the history of colonial reading practices. Her book sheds new light on how archival work and the examination of everyday texts can unravel tactics of imperial control.

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Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Penguin, 2012.
- Mandhwani, Aakriti. *Everyday Reading: Middlebrow Magazines and Book Publishing in Post-Independence India*. U of Massachusetts P, 2024.