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Transforming Men: The Anglicisation of Bengali Masculinity in the Colonial Era

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Abstract

During the colonial era, when the British were in control of the administration of Bengal, they launched discourses meant to convince one and all about the drawbacks of Bengali men. In such discourses, the body of Bengali men became a countertype to the emerging ideals of masculinity prevailing in Europe in the nineteenth century. With ardent belief in the narratives popularised by the Colonisers, many Bengalis sought to reconstruct their manliness in order to fit into the normative model of masculinity. The paper, therefore, is an exploration of the ways in which Bengali masculinity went through processes of radical masculinisation during the 19th century till the independence; and how proximity to English language and culture shaped up the imagination of Bengali men.

Key-Words: Masculinity, Orient, Sexuality, hyper-masculinity, heteronormativity

I. Jobe Charnock and the Rise of Calcutta

It was during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I — also known as the age of discovery—that the British started to vie for more prudent economic circumstances concomitantly tinkering with the idea of broadening their dominion all around the world. The British started their sojourn in India, especially in Bengal, with the hope of substantial economic proliferation. The obsession with the ‘exotic’ native lands of Asia and Africa is very much prevalent in British culture if we carefully read literary texts and other historical documents of the period. For instance, Andrew Marvell (1681) wrote in ‘To His Coy Mistress’:

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love’s day.

Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain

The reference to the rubies found on the banks of the Ganges clearly reveals that the West was unambiguously aware of the healthy economy that prevailed in the east; and the seed of the desire to usurp these lands was probably planted during the late 16th and the early 17th century. The dream was starting to take shape as a realistic scenario after Jobe Charnock came to the village of Sutanuti¹ on 24th August, 1690² (p.23). Calcutta³, back then,

¹ Calcutta, or today’s Kolkata, was predated by three villages—Sutanuti, Gobindapur and Kolkata.

² I am indebted to Sripantha’s wonderful study on the history of the city.

was a 'barbaric'⁴ village, and Charnock, against all odds, dreamt of setting up his business there. Perhaps, deep in his mind, he also envisioned making Calcutta a city of note. Though Charnock did not live long (in fact, he died in 1692) to realize his dream, the British had found a strong footing, from which they would rule this country for more than two centuries.

II. Educating the 'Brutes'

For a century or so the British were happy doing business in this country. However, the victory at the battle of Plassey gave them an immense boost as they started fostering the dream of ruling India unanimously. In the year 1813, the East India Company was dissolved and the British Empire started a large-scale expansion of their territory. The Christian missionaries were already coming in, as the British were looking for a cultural overhaul of the native land which they considered primitive and unsophisticated. The intention was undoubtedly to reduce the 'uncouthness' of the natives by proselytising them. For the purpose of this paper, I would be focusing on some of the projects taken up by the British (along with Christian missionaries), especially by T.B Macaulay, that played a major role in transforming Indian cultural spectrum. In 1835, Macaulay published his notorious *Minute on Indian Education* where he proposed to refurbish the education system by introducing advanced and more scientific studies through the English language. However, Macaulay's project was never as benevolent as he tried to make it look. It was laced with colonial prejudice; an attitude which, in Edward Said's words, can be called 'Orientalism'. Macaulay was so prejudiced against the Indian/Oriental

culture that he literally ignored the presence of the treasures that Indian literature contained back then. He [Macaulay (1835)] famously quipped in his *Minute*:

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education. (para 10)

With his belief in the superiority of the Western literature and culture, Macaulay planned to circulate their cultural values amongst Bengalis. His main purpose, however, was to create a class of Bengali men who would perpetuate the ideology of the Colonisers amongst the native folks by rendering themselves as weak and ineffable. These men were later known as the *babu*⁵ class who, Macaulay imagined, would be brown in colour but white in taste. In short, he wanted to create slaves out of those Bengali men by training them in Eurocentric knowledge.

Macaulay was not content merely by advocating such an overtly prejudiced and arbitrary academic system; he went on to define Bengali men in his own inimitable style. Sudipta Sen (2004), in his essay "Colonial

³ By Calcutta, I mean the conglomeration of three villages mentioned in the previous footnote.

⁴ Any non-European place was deemed barbaric back then. However, Calcutta was indeed in dearth of civilisation during that period.

⁵ *Babu* class refers to the class of middle class Bengali men who miserably failed while trying to mimic the Colons. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay offered a satirical picture of this class in an essay with the same title.

Aversions and Domestic Desire”, quotes Macaulay:

“...the physical organisation of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour-bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable. His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance.”⁶ (Sen: 49).

If we fuse these two prejudices of Macaulay—regarding education and Bengali men—his intentions become obvious. He wanted to project Bengali men as weak and effeminate; a bunch of brutes who would never be able to become their own masters and who are in need of divine benevolence to take them out of their misery. In order to perpetuate his belief, he had a system in place—a system of education—that methodically convinced Bengali men of their alleged inferiority. The Anglicisation of the Educational spectrum was indeed a garb of benevolence underneath which the British were planning to fulfil their political imperative. Therefore, it is obvious that Macaulay’s projects were Orientalist in assumptions, as they posited the natives as uncivilised creatures and promised to bring them out of their slumber through an arbitrarily imposed education system.

III. The polarisation of Cultural (masculine) Spectrums

The question that beckons me at this point of time is how and why Macaulay could form such a hypothesis. The answer perhaps lies in

⁶ Sudipta Sen has taken this passage from *Critical, Historical and Miscellaneous Essays and Poems*, Vol.2 by T.B. Macaulay (Boston, Estes and Lauriet, 1880), pp. 566-67

Bengali culture itself. Bengal has never been a land of hyper-masculine prerogatives. For instance, the effeminate postures in the images of Sri Chaintya⁷, the medieval mystic, reveal an alternative spectrum of male body. On the other hand, the Victorian era (19th century) saw a Renaissance of hyper-masculinity in the West. With the aspiration of gaining success in Professional life—in a competitive Industrial and post-Darwinian world—men tried to attain physical strength. Certain stereotypes started to emerge during this time as George L. Moose (1998) identifies in his book *The Image of Man*:

Modern masculinity helped to determine, and was in turn influenced, by what were considered normative patterns of morality and behavior, that is to say, typical and acceptable ways of behaving and acting within the social setting of the past centuries. Though, as we shall see presently, the middle classes were instrumental in the formation of that society, its standards spread to both the aristocracy and working class as well. Indeed, the manly ideal was so well established from the start of the nineteenth century onwards, that every western European movement had to face it and accept it, emphasizing at times one or another of its attributes or even trying a change in direction. (Moose: 4)

However, not only the economic need, but also emerging discourses on sexuality expected men to be straight⁸ (pun intended) and strong. Any form of bodily and sexual deviation was generally looked down upon. Macaulay and other British administrators were able to smuggle in these discursively

⁷ Sri Chaitanya or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was a Hindu monk and social reformer of the 16th century West Bengal. He was a major figure in popularising the Vaishnava school of faith based on the teachings on ancient Indian scriptural text *Gita*.

⁸ The terms straight and gay perhaps came into existence in the 20th century. However, the meanings they refer to—heterosexual and homosexual respectively—came into existence in the 19th century.

constructed ideals of Manliness, based on patriarchal hypotheses, into the native lands. The idea of hyper-masculinity was gradually holding its own to become the 'hegemonic masculinity' in the Victorian England. R.W. Connell's (1995) explication about this critical concept must be taken into consideration:

The concept of 'hegemony', deriving from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations, refers to the cultural dynamics by which a group claims and sustains leading positions in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than other is culturally exalted...which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Connell: 77).

Connell's analysis, that cultures produce 'hegemonic masculinity', becomes very handy in analysing the cultural spectrum of Bengal during the 19th century. The idea of masculinity that slipped into the Bengali culture through English discourses was enough not only to subordinate women, but also to subordinate those men who did not fit into the hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Bengali men, obviously, did not fit into these budding ideals of manliness that dominated in the West. Thus, they became the feminine antithesis of the hyper-masculine British. The physical organization of the Bengalis, undoubtedly, made it easier for Macaulay to polarise the 'manly Englishman and the effeminate Bengali'⁹.

If hyper-masculine bodily feature was one aspect of British Masculinity, then self-discipline and strong moral conduct became another prerequisite to Manliness. Having control over one's sexual desire was also a very important factor of the Victorian world order. Such strict code of moral conduct was perhaps inspired by the popular religious beliefs of the age—namely Evangelicalism. Evangelicals were extremely suspicious of pleasure. In the

introduction of his book *A History of Victorian Literature*, James Eli Adams (2009) reports that Lesley Stephens (Virginia Woolf's father) talked about his father who had never smoked a cigar but once as he found it highly pleasurable after smoking it for the first time. Such an attitude to life gave rise to an austerity that influenced both public and the private life, creating a moral dictum that relied on resisting temptation and mastering desire. I am of the opinion that this growing discourse on body and desire had a huge impact on how masculine behaviours were being shaped up. Both discourses, however, had one thing in common—they wanted men to be strong and resilient. Through cultural osmosis the fluids of the British culture got mixed with the Bengali culture and the stronger fluid of the British culture emerged as triumphant as Bengali men were gradually convinced about their inferiority.

IV: Colonisation of Sexualities

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1998) talks about how the frank discussion on Sexuality—which prevailed even at the beginning of the seventeenth century—was derided in the Victorian era. As 'the monotonous nights of Victorian bourgeoisie' (Foucault, 1998, p.3) fell upon the discourse on sexuality, it became confined within the domestic sphere. The heterosexual, monogamous and reproductive sexuality became the accepted models of Sexual behaviour. In short, a 'repressive hypothesis' was constructed about sexuality; as sexuality was started to be defined within the parlance of medico-juridical discourse. In order to describe this situation, Foucault uses a term- *Scientia Sexualis*¹⁰- which is in direct contrast to *ars erotica*¹¹. Foucault and various other scholars found out that several pagan

⁹ The phrase is borrowed from Mrinalini Sinha's book of the same title.

¹⁰ Science of sexuality! Perhaps talking about the reproductive domain.

¹¹ Art of Lovemaking. Such arts are to encountered in many pagan cultures including Greek and Roman.

societies, such as those that prevailed in China, Japan, Rome, Greece, treated sexuality with an air of frankness. India was no exception as proved by the presence of texts such as Vatsyan's *Kama Sutra*, which is a classic example of *Ars erotica*. The presence of *ars erotica* can also be found in the sculptural brilliance on the walls of ancient temples of Konarak¹² and Khajuraho¹³. However, with the emergence of the modern scientific views on sexuality, this acceptance and frankness gave away to a rather prudish outlook toward sexuality and gender. Hence the world of men and the world of women were clearly demarcated within the heteronormative¹⁴ society. However, when the West encountered the East, they saw that men and women of the Oriental world do not always fit into this normative world order. The bodily features of Bengali men, that Macaulay blatantly critiqued, were deemed as a symbol of inferiority. Interestingly, like Sri Chaitanya's, bodies of many iconic Bengali men showed signs of alterity. Take for instance, Sri Ramakrishna's bodily construction! Ramakrishna, a mystic and the priest of Dakhineswar temple¹⁵, often debunked (perhaps unconsciously) the Western views regarding manliness. Through his uninhibited preaching in colloquial Bengali, this untutored representative of a Bengali village, called Kamarpukur, would talk the world over to his unorthodox viewpoints. When most Bengali men—especially the elite ones (known as *bhadralok*¹⁶)—were starting to imitate the fervour of British masculinity, Ramakrishna remained independent of all Western trappings. A lot of questions have been raised

over Ramakrishna's sexuality; while some Western scholars do not shy away from calling him a homosexual as well¹⁷. Be it as it may, his non-materialist outlook to life; unique sartorial appearance; homoerotic undertones that run throughout his preaching¹⁸; and the denial of reproductive heterosexuality make him a man who can easily be posited as an antithesis to the dominant European ideals of masculinity. Though the British had to recognise the enigma in Ramakrishna, that was not sufficient to reconcile them to his alterity and as the century went along, the puritanical ideas on sexuality were emboldened even further.

V. Inspiring Men

Though Ramakrishna was able to stand out as a unique individual—especially because of the immense popularity that he enjoyed amongst the elite Bengali class—many privileged English-educated Bengali men¹⁹ sought a paradigmatic shift in their bodily features. These Bengali men were indeed convinced about their inferiority and sought to reconstruct their masculine appearance. The British were not merely content with writing about the difference between a Bengali man's body and the body of a Briton; as they incorporated and circulated various images all across Bengali culture to inject the sense of inferiority more convincingly. If we go back to Macaulay's notorious passage on Bengali men, we would identify a certain desire prevailing on him to homogenise the native culture for

¹² A 13th century sun-temple situated in the state of Odisha, India.

¹³ A group of Hindu and Jain temple situated in Madhya Pradesh, India.

¹⁴ A term surfaced by Gayle Rubin and popularised by Michael Warner, heteronormativity refers to the belief that considers heterosexuality to be only natural form of sexuality. In the poststructuralist era, Queer Theory emerged as a critique of heteronormativity.

¹⁵ Situated in West Bengal, India.

¹⁶ Elite, intellectual, city-bred Bengali men.

¹⁷ Many western scholars of eminence have written biographies on Ramakrishna. Romain Rolland, Max Mueller, Christopher Isherwood are some of them. However, the most controversial book on Sri Ramakrishna has been written by Jeffrey Kripal, titled *Kali's Child*, where he has raised questions over Ramakrishna's sexuality.

¹⁸ This view is especially proliferated by Jeffrey Kripal. Though some of Kripal's conclusions seem rash at times, they cannot be blatantly overlooked.

¹⁹ Many Bengali men converted to Christianity as well. Michael Madhusudhan Dutt's conversion is perhaps the most famous of them.

their own benefit. The situation gave the colonisers a privilege of becoming the 'signifier'; while the colonised natives became the 'signified'. Homogenisation of the male body, however, had bigger consequences as it became a site of political discourses. When compared with the various images of Western men—that started to come in through several means—Bengali men indeed appeared to be weak. Judith Ohikuare (2013) quotes David L. Chapman and Douglas Brown, who, in *Hunks*, write that the “male body factored prominently in the construction of modern national identities,’ and as the imperial powers of the day disseminated their own religious and socio-political standards, they also strove to shape the actual bodies of the people they encountered” (para, 2). In the same wonderful review of the book, Judith Ohikuare (2013) further writes:

In India, Sandow's gospel of personal strength became interwoven with Indian nationalism and independence. In Senegal, where wrestling has its own tradition that predates European photographers. And in the United States and beyond, models posing in men's magazines celebrated physical health and wellness, but also doubled as pin-ups for consumers of gay subculture. All of these photos generate a syncretic view of buffness that reveals the ways in which muscled men are more than stereotypical gym rats; they can also be cultural ambassadors (para 3).

It is evident from the quoted passages that the physical appearance of people like Sandow became a yardstick of masculinity that 'effeminate' natives would perhaps try to emulate. There was indeed a sustained effort to construct a universal aesthetic of masculinity based on the bodily features of the 'hunks' like Sandow. The formulation of such aesthetics indeed seems to be more political than philosophical (in the Kantian sense, of course).

As mentioned earlier, through the images of the muscular male body, the British were able to construct an aesthetic of masculinity based on hegemonic ideals. Umberto Eco (2004) writes, “The Victorian world (and especially that of the bourgeoisie) was a world underpinned by a simplification of life and of experience in a bluntly practical sense: things were right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, with no useless self-indulgence in mixed characteristics or ambiguity” (pp.361-2). Religious prudery also played a major role in defining the gendered roles. Victor Seidler (2006) explores the way the project of masculinisation was intricately linked with the act of Christian proselytisation. The British did not consider any form of alterity. The new aesthetics of hyper-masculinity based on the Eurocentric principle of male beauty had no space for the unorganised, 'effeminate' Bengali men and hence, I believe, it became almost imminent for Bengali men to reconstruct their emotional and physical features to be recognised. With the help of Bhabah-ite discourse, we might say that the desire of the colonised to be like the colonial master was an act of 'mimicry'. This desire stems from the fact that the colonised is always deemed to be inferior. Therefore, it was not astonishing for Bengali men to mimic the manly gestures of the British; as they tried to erase the tag of effeminacy that was inevitably earmarked as the essential cause of their alleged weakness and ennui.

VI. Reframing Bengali Masculinity

Many Indian/Bengali men, especially those who were at the helm of the political supremacy, started to believe in this Western prejudice regarding native masculinity at large; and Bengali masculinity in general. The real impetus, as far as the reconstruction of Bengali men's bodies is concerned, came from the spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda. Though known for his spiritual teachings, Vivekananda's rhetoric was steeped in a strong

political imperative as he wanted to oversee the resurgence of Bengali men who would be strong and fearless in countering all the obstacles of the world. Though a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who showed signs of masculine authority himself, Vivekananda perhaps believed that effeminacy and lack of strength would be nothing but detrimental to the progress of the state. The same view is constantly expressed by Gora—the titular hero of Rabindranath Tagore's novel—who is often thought to be a literary reincarnation of Vivekananda. If we compare the physical features of both Gora and Vivekananda they appear starkly similar. Here's how Tagore (2010) describes Gora at the initial stages of the novel:

He seemed to have surpassed everyone else, to a disproportionate content. His college professor had named him the silver mountain. His complexion was rather blatantly fair, not softened by the slightest hint of yellow. Almost six feet tall, he was heavy boned, with fists like tiger paws. His voice was startlingly deep and resonant, enough to give one a fright if heard suddenly. His facial contours were also unduly large and excessively firm, the chin and jawbone resembling strong bolts on a fortress gate...The eyes were small but strong, their arrowlike gaze seemingly fixed on a remote, invisible target, yet capable of turning instantaneously, like lightning, to strike an object close at hand. Though not exactly handsome, Gour was impossible to ignore. He would stand out in a crowd. (p. 8).

Romain Rolland and other western and Indian scholars have also eulogised Vivekananda in the same manner. Vivekananda's masculine oeuvre was indeed essential in stirring up a new aesthetic of Bengali masculinity. Ironic though it may seem, Vivekananda's masculinity follows the Victorian ideals of manliness. It is perhaps because of his quasi-European physical features that he fascinated the West. Swami Tathagatananda (2014)

quotes from Vivekananda's *Complete Works* to show how he was repeatedly emphasising upon strength and fearlessness:

...in spite of our greatness of the Upanishads...we are weak, very weak. First of all our physical weakness. That physical weakness is the cause of at least one third of our miseries. We are lazy, we cannot work; we cannot combine...this sort of weak brain is not able to do anything; we must strengthen it...Be strong...you will be nearer to heaven through football than through the study of *Gita*²⁰...you will understand the *Gita* better with your biceps, your muscles...(p.12-13)

There is a startling similarity between what Macaulay said and what Vivekananda proposed about Bengali men. Through his repeated emphasis on the resurgence of strong Bengali masculinity, he transcended all the negativity that surrounded Bengali men. His rise to fame, even in the Western canon, created euphoria around him; and inevitably many Bengali men went on to replicate his ideology. However masculinist and proselytised²¹ his discourses may seem, through his call for stronger men, this spiritual leader indeed gave a new dimension to the nationalist struggle. It would not be wrong to suggest that Vivekananda's spirit anticipated the violent backlash that was impending due to the overtly repressive and sedentary views on native men and the country expressed by the Britons.

At this juncture we must stop and take a closer look at the way Vivekananda's body functioned in comparison to the body of Ramakrishna and others, whose bodies were ambiguous to say the least. Being a rustic, Ramakrishna had very little or no access to the English language. Hence, he probably did not come across the Victorian and bourgeois

²⁰ Ancient Indian scriptural text.

²¹ I use this word to show how the thought Vivekananda and the British about men were in sync with each other and to trivialise his motives.

ideals of gender or sexuality that ran riot in nineteenth century Calcutta. Sartorial and physical appearance made Ramakrishna an emblem of effeminacy²². Vivekananda, on the other hand, was English educated and was also aware of the Colonial rhetoric on Bengali men. The discourse must have forced him to believe that physical reconstruction of Bengali men was essential for them to have a significant position in the world. In short, the English-ness of Swami Vivekananda might have contributed to his overt masculine agency²³. Will it be grossly inappropriate, then, to suggest that Vivekananda was blatantly mimicking the Western values? A one word answer to this rather complicated question is almost impossible. Vivekananda came at a time when India was struggling as a nation and— as the British had shown— the cause was the lack of strength, discipline and resolve. What Vivekananda wanted was a synthesis of values of both the East and the West. Hence, he wanted the *Gita* to be understood with muscles and biceps. Though Vivekananda's message was full of passionate intensity to see his country come out of insomnia, the fact cannot be ignored that the western education must have had an impact on him. We must remember how images of the bodybuilders like Sandow were used to stir up Bengali men's imagination. Vivekananda, who was very much a part of the age where such discourses took place, might have felt that the country could come out of slumber only if there was resurgence of manliness.

Vivekananda's rhetoric indeed gave birth to a brand of masculinity in Bengal as many young boys tried to emulate his formula. One of the boys, of course, went on to become one of the leading patriots of the nation. He is none other than Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The resurgence of masculinity took a whole

new turn under the influence of Bose, who wanted aggression from his comrades. Young Subhas Bose was deeply influenced by Vivekananda and he revealed this debt time and again. Netaji felt that the British, who won over the world with their strength and courage, and of course through their spirit of militant aggression, could be defeated only with the help of militant nationalism which would be based on a force of physically strong men. Even when Gandhi started to gain prominence all across the country by spreading his message of non-violence, Netaji stuck to his idea of virile resistance to the British. Even today, theories and counter-theories are produced on the importance of their respective philosophies. However, reaching a mandate on who played a more important role is impossible. I am of the opinion that any straightforward answer to this issue will merely be showing one's naivety. Neither does the scope of this paper allow indulging in the debate.

VI. Conclusion

Sixty-eight years of independence has not been enough to eradicate all our colonial tutelage. Some of the beliefs still remain the same. We are still obsessed with the English language; and in some spheres of life knowledge of English is considered to be prestigious. On the other hand, the multi-billion dollar fairness industry reveals how we still fantasize about the European aesthetics of male beauty. In short, the minds of the natives have not been completely decolonised. However, the situation is not completely gloomy. In films and popular media, there are growing discourses that are projecting alternative versions of gender and sexuality rather conveniently. One cannot but imagine that there would be a day when the country will be able to defy the values of gender, sexuality and manliness hegemonically imposed upon the natives.

²² There are several moments in *Kathamrita* (translated as *The Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna*) that bear proof to Ramakrishna's effeminate gestures.

²³ Niladri R. Chatterjee's essay gives a more comprehensive perspective. (see References)

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