Reviews


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1 Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” (1835) set out a conditional invitation to the colonized: learn English to become British in taste and culture while remaining Indian by blood and color. The transfer of rule from the East India Company to the Crown in 1858, and then the declaration of Victoria as the Empress of India, *Kaiser-e-Hind*, in 1877, extended similarly conditional prospects of assimilation to the colonized. Each of these invitations constituted an impossible transcendental Subjectivity that was to be desired by the racialized subjects of the Crown but never achieved. Sukanya Banerjee’s *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (2010) illustrates how the promise of imperial citizenry for the Indian was always an unrealizable dream: the prospect of gaining equal status as citizens of the empire was always deferred, as the colonized were found inadequate for that purpose. Unlike their counterparts in Canada and Australia, Indians were simply *subjects* of the British Empire. Yet, as Banerjee demonstrates here, this did not stop some Indians from eking out an (imperial) identity in relation to the imperial promise and its infinite deferral. Banerjee’s monograph is a riveting study of a handful of such individuals and the “narrative strategies” they adopted to “re-present themselves” against claims denying their participation in the imperial stage of citizenry (13).

2 It would be misleading, however, to characterize Banerjee’s book as a simple account of colonial subjectivity in the throes of a limiting social order. In fact, instead of rehearsing established facts about how the colonized were systematically excised from the promise of imperial citizenship, she reads this excision as constituting “an important site in the study of citizenship precisely because it was remarkably prolific in generating claims to citizenship that was otherwise withheld” (7). Focusing on the interstitial space that opens up between the Universalist promise of imperial citizenry and the reality of a racialized, gendered imperium actively restricting native desires for that identity, Banerjee concentrates on delineating the “idioms of liminality [and] failure” that undergird late-nineteenth-century articulations of citizenship by Indians such as Dadabhai Naoroji, M. K. Gandhi, Cornelia Sorabji, and Surendranath Banerjea (16).

3 Banerjee’s first chapter examines Dadabhai Naoroji’s self-fashioning as an imperial citizen during his campaigns for a Parliamentary seat in the British House of Commons in conjunction with his treatise on colonial economy, *Poverty and UnBritish Rule in India* (1901). When these sources are read together it becomes amply evident that Naoroji believed in the possibility of a harmonious coexistence between Indians and the English as citizens of the empire if, and only if, the colonial administration halted its economic exploitation of India. In *Poverty* he argues that the unrestrained economic bleeding of India by the colonial
administration is detrimental to the moral and spiritual well-being of the Empire as a whole. And this economic hemorrhaging of the subcontinent, Naoroji contends, is in turn responsible for “the failure of the English to fulfill their pledge of granting citizenship to Indians” (42). Drawing upon the narrative conventions of the fin-de-siècle Gothic, the “Grand Old Man of India,” as he was commonly known, describes the torturous putrefaction of the South Asian body politic under British rule to urge an immediate end to the draining of wealth from India, and propose the rebuilding of a healthy relationship between all the citizens of the empire (43). His narrative mapping of gothic imagery onto the political, Banerjee notes, allows Naoroji to constitute Poverty not only as “a forum of representation and appeal for those” most commonly demonized in the Gothic—i.e., the colonized other—but it also helps him present the English and the Indians as suffering equally from the lack of free circulation of capital (40; 46-7). Yet what finally worked in favor of Naoroji in the British elections was his racially liminal status as a Parsi—he was Indian yet not quite black (66-67). According to Banerjee, it was Naoroji’s liminal racial status that enabled him to win the election by nullifying metropolitan anxieties over his “blackness” (69).

However not every Indian was as adept in negotiating the liminal space that opened up between the imperial promise of citizenship and the sequestering fact of their blackness. In fact, as Banerjee’s second chapter aptly demonstrates, much depended on which natives had access to the political tools necessary for reinscribing themselves into the hallowed annals of imperial citizenship. Mohandas K. Gandhi’s movement demanding equal rights for Indians in South Africa, for instance, while accentuating the value of indentured labor as integral to the economic health of the empire, excised the indentured laborer from the imaginary of imperial citizenship. These indentured laborers, or coolies, Banerjee explains, were written out of Gandhi’s map of citizenry even though their contributions to the economic growth of the empire proved indispensable for Gandhi’s argument that Indians of the trading class should be named free and equal citizens of the Crown.

The third chapter of Banerjee’s book shifts attention to the life and times of Cornelia Sorabji, the first Indian woman lawyer and the first woman to study law at Oxford, reading her autobiographical memoir India Calling (1934) as a “rewrit[ing] of her self as an imperial citizen” (149). For Sorabji, articulating citizenship through professionalism and the work ethic was an alternative to the overlapping ideas of female subjectivity that were being articulated by imperial, nationalist, and feminist discourses of her day. As Banerjee contends, Sorabji’s narrative in India Calling describing her experiences of working with women in the zenana functions to “carve out a liminal space from which to present herself both as a professional and a citizen” (119). Most interesting however is the author’s almost passing claim that this liminality was also an anomaly disrupting the “official framework” and, as is evident from Sorabji’s harassment at the Canadian border in 1931, the extended networks of the empire (131). Yet this argument is not fully developed in the chapter. This reader at least was hoping to read more about how the anomalous professional character of Sorabji, a product of the colonial state which forbade female lawyers from practicing, might have not simply unsettled but resisted the gendered and racial logic of imperial citizenship.

In any case, the fourth chapter of the book continues the discussion of how the Indian discourses of work and professional ethics fold into an imaginary of virile masculinity in the writings of Surendranath Banerjea, especially his autobiography A Nation in Making (1925). This chapter places Surendramath’s work in the context of metropolitan anxieties over emasculation resulting from the 1854 changes in the administration of the Indian Civil Services and the centrality of the ICS debate in Indian nationalist thought. Surendranath’s response was a rhetoric of moderate nationalism that constructed “nation and citizenry in ways that preceded and exceeded what was eventually constellated by the Indian nationalist discourse” (152). Central to Surendranath’s discourse, Banerjee argues, was a re-envisioning of the national public sphere as one that was to be built through the merit, labor, industriousness, and masculinity of the Indian male. Yet Surendranath’s fashioning of the national citizen along the axes of health, body, labor, and bureaucratic work was written out of later nationalist thought, especially with the emergence of the Extremists movement in Indian nationalism, for its apparent collusion with the imperial state. What Banerjee’s work effectively notes in the course of the four chapters then is not so much how the notion of Indian citizenship emerged in opposition to the empire through successfully detaching itself from the idioms of imperial citizenship. Rather she shows how the rhetoric of early citizenship proves foundational for later conceptions of national citizenry even though it is frequently constructed around a self-contradictory and limited view of subcontinental identity and thus fails to completely
Indeed Banerjee’s book inaugurates a long overdue conversation between postcolonial studies and nationalist historiography around the issue of citizenship. But then it also leaves us with a few unanswered questions: what about other, alternative idioms of citizenship that might be opposed to both imperial and nationalist discourses of nation and nationality? What about expressions of sovereign identity that might not have been national in scope or secular in their dispensations (say for instance those articulated in the rebel pamphlets of the 1857 uprising or during later subaltern rebellions)? Undoubtedly, these questions were outside the purview of Banerjee’s book, but it would be interesting if she or her readers were to take these up in relation to Becoming Imperial Citizens in the near future.

Biographical Notice

Gautam Basu Thakur (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is assistant professor of English at Boise State University where he teaches courses in British literature of the empire, Critical theory, and postcolonial studies. His articles have been published or are forthcoming in Slavic Review, Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society; and New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film; and in the anthologies Figurations in Indian Film (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); The Literary Lacan: From Literature to ‘Liturarre’ and Beyond (Seagull, 2013); and Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora (Anthem, 2010). Basu Thakur is currently working on a book-length project titled: The Nonhuman Empire: British India 1857-1947.