

‘Semi-educated natives’ as a source of imperial anxiety: the politics of English education and bureaucratic recruitment in Bengal, ca.1830-1880

Satoshi Mizutani,
Associate Professor, Faculty of Global and Regional Studies,
Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan.
mizutanis0606@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In 1857, Bengal witnessed the establishment of Calcutta University, which was to reign as the ultimate embodiment of the ideal of ‘English education’—an higher education for Indians in the Western liberal-arts style with the English language as its medium of instruction¹. It did not take long, however, before the British—the very people who had introduced this education as an indispensable instrument for their colonial domination—found themselves dissatisfied with the quality of students enrolled at this cherished institution. Only fourteen years later, in 1871, a British observer, Samuel Lobb, lamented in his *Calcutta Review* article the current situation where many of the students whom the university attracted were of an undesirable sort. Lobb, a member of the Calcutta University Syndicate Committee, was alarmed that English education seemed to have become derailed from its initially assigned role. According to Lobb, it had ‘only one valid reason for its existence’. ‘[S]o long as we hold the country’, he declared, ‘it should provide an adequate number of intelligent native officers both able and willing to assist the ruling power in carrying on the work of Government’. Lobb’s remark mirrored Bengal’s historical condition in which, not least because of its sheer population density, no colonialism would have been conceivable without securing the supply of an intermediary class composed of local elites whose ideas were sufficiently Westernized and allegiances firmly tied to the empire. It was none other than to address this condition that the British Raj pursued the policy of English education. It was devised to groom a specific class of Bengali men into loyal and efficient servants of the colonial state.

The problem for Lobb was that most students whom Calcutta University attracted turned out to be ‘poor Bráhmans and Kayasthas’, who were, in his view, ‘quite out of place’. These Bengali men might have looked to constitute an elite because they were neither low-caste nor Muslim but were simultaneously high-caste and Hindu; they *were* in possession of the two identificatory attributes required for membership in the mainstream of nineteenth-century Bengali society under British

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rule. But, despite their caste and religion, in Lobb's judgment, their seeming elite-ness was fatally flawed, preventing them from commanding the respect of the masses. Unlike the class above them, these students did not originate from families with a secure economic base, and at best constituted something like a 'middling sort', struggling to find white-collar jobs. They sprang from what Lobb regarded as the wrong social strata in terms of economic class. They were lured to state education neither because of an elite sense of mission nor to pursue academic interests, but precisely because of their lack of a stable, respectable source of income. As Lobb put it, their objective of attending university was 'a purely self-regardant one'.

Ultimately for Lobb, English education was problematic because it had become a source of political instability for British rule. For most of those Bengali men mentioned above did not manage to get the kind of employment they so enthusiastically desired. They almost unanimously wanted 'professions already overstocked', namely positions in the civil service and the legal professions, and equally unanimously failed in their endeavours. Calcutta University seemed to be failing in its mission to produce 'intelligent native officers' because it popularized education beyond the prescribed limits. According to Lobb, by 'step[ping] beyond these limits', the British in Bengal were 'undertaking a fruitless task, and one which the State, for various reasons, ought not to assist in accomplishing' (Lobb 1871: 340).

What complicated the problem that Lobb identified was that it was deeply anchored in the realm of sentiment. English education was seen to induce the wrong desires in the wrong people. The British ruling order was forced to deal with a social terrain saturated with sentiments that were potentially explosive—the desires, despairs, and resentments of aspiring youth. As the work of Ann Laura Stoler has shown, European colonial states heavily invested themselves in the affective conditions of the various populations they governed, with the subject of desire emerging as a particularly critical political concern. On the one hand, European rulers were aware that imperial projects were impossible without tapping into the desires of local subjects. Of critical importance for any successful colonization was whether or not certain sections of the population could be cajoled into participating in empire building as intermediary agents. Key to this issue was how to entice their ambitions in ways that made them believe that their allegiance and commitment to the empire would also serve their own self-realization, whether as enlightened modern individuals or as traditional local leaders. On the other hand, it was feared that, when unfulfilled, positive sentiments like desire, passion, and ambition as entertained by the same people would turn into a sense of resentment, which was inevitably directed against the powers that be. It was imperative for colonial empires to remain alert to the affective states of local populations, checking the sorts of (re)sentiments that threatened to jeopardise the racial, gender, and class categories that constituted the order of things designed to maximize imperial interests. Lobb's warning against the government's education policy can be read as sharply articulating the inexorable

nexus between the colonial state and the sphere of sentiment as its object of intervention (Stoler 2009: 57-102).

This paper will seek to demonstrate that, by the late 1870s, the kind of imperial anxiety expressed by Lobb over the educational aspiration of Bengali youth was shared by the highest administrative authorities of the British in Bengal. It brings into focus why and how a number of British concerned with colonial rule in India started to see English education with disdain almost as soon as it became formally institutionalized as a state apparatus to locally procure intermediary agents of empire. One of the major reasons for this, this paper argues, was that an increasing majority of Bengali recipients of English education faced great difficulties in finding jobs that fulfilled their career ambitions and economic needs, and that, because of their rising sense of resentment, they were believed to become disloyal to the British empire, causing seditious sentiments to spread in Bengali society. In the face of this perceived threat to political stability, the British critics accused the government of recklessly increasing the number of those undesirables whom they variously called 'semi-educated', 'half-educated' or 'ill-educated', while failing to raise that of the 'educated', whose presence was, in contrast, seen as essential for British colonial domination.

Covering the period of about half a century beginning in the early 1830s, this essay strategically confines its analysis to the attitude of the colonizing British towards what they formulated as the question of 'semi-educated natives'. My hope is that this focus will deepen the historical study of the relationship between English education and bureaucratic recruitment, which has thus far tended to center around the following three themes: the influence of Western modernity on English-educated Bengal elites called the *bhadralok*—often referred to by the British at the time as 'educated natives' or 'Bengali Babus'—²; their anti-colonial politics from around the time of the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885; and the imperial counter-politics that occurred in reaction to them³. Common to all is a close attention to the eventual radicalization of the *bhadralok* as the English-educated elite of native society and their perceived threat to Britain's political security in India. By focusing on an earlier period, however, one of the aims of this paper is to show that, before the 1880s, imperial anxieties lurked not so much over *bhadralok* men as over those 'semi-educated' youth who had strong *bhadralok* aspirations, but were not always recognized as such due to their humble social origins and loss in academic competitions.

The history of the British imperial attitude towards the 'semi-educated' in Bengal, I believe, deserves special attention not least because of its world-historical significance, which went far beyond this particular region of British India. As I have shown elsewhere, by the turn of the century, 'English education' in colonial Bengal

² See, for example, Vishwanathan 1998.

³ See for example, McCully 1966; Seal 2007.

had become a topic frequently discussed in other empires, including the French and Japanese empires, precisely because the rulers of these empires worried that the problem of the 'semi-educated' would be reproduced in the colonies of their own—such as Indo-China or Taiwan—, unless they carefully avoided following the British experience in nineteenth-century Bengal. In and outside the British empire, many regarded English education as one of the most disastrous colonial policies ever practiced (Mizutani 2014).

2. The 'semi-educated' in the Anglo-Indian press

In the 1870s, British outlets of public opinion in Bengal—as represented by such journals and newspapers as *The Calcutta Review* and *The Friend of India*—published articles complaining about the quality of students attending Calcutta University. In a *Friend of India* article published on 2 June 1870, the anonymous author, under the pseudonym 'A Professor in a State College', lamented that most college students in Bengal came from 'bunyas [usurers] and lower classes'. 'The undergraduates', the article pointed out, 'are all poor, many of them entirely supported by their scholarships'. While suggesting that these students be excluded by abolishing the government scholarship scheme and by raising the fees, the article stressed the need to attract the sons of wealthier and more influential classes, including 'Rajahs and Mahajuns'. 'Then, and then only', the article went on, 'will the Calcutta University be really such a University to India as Oxford and Cambridge are to England' (*The Friend of India*, 2 Jun. 1870: 629). The supposed imperial aim of English education was to produce useful native agents who acted as intermediaries between ruler and ruled. Under the initial plan, the conditions of being such agents were, first, that they commanded the respect of the rest of the native people, and, second, that they fully understood British ways and were loyal to the empire. The British who criticized the current state of English education argued that the majority of the recipients of university education met neither of these conditions.

To start with, the fact that many of these students did not come from influential families seemed to indicate that they were not natural-born leaders of Bengali society. Unlike the men from higher social orders who did actually come from those families, they were not necessarily recognized as 'respectable'; by birth, they belonged to a struggling class, desperately looking for ways to rise above the rest. Because of his unexceptional standing, the typical university student was not seen as exerting any paternal influence over the masses. As *The Friend of India* declared in 1875, 'He does not take any position in his country, and exercises no influence upon his countrymen'. Book learning and cramming might have brought them to a position to receive some form of higher education, but their fitness as the intermediary agents of empire was often found to be dubious. Moreover, British critics also saw the majority of university students as being only insufficiently Anglicised, making the 'theory of downward infiltration' look like a pure chimera. They were seen as incapable of internalizing the values and norms of Western modernity, let alone embodying them in the eyes of their fellow Bengalis. According to the same

newspaper article, the alleged inability of the typical university student to genuinely Anglicize himself revealed itself in his helplessly superficial command of English. As the newspaper put it bluntly, he used ‘the English language in the same mechanical manner in which he uses an English knife, considering it purely as a means towards an end, and nothing more’ (*The Friend of India*, 11 Sep. 1875: 836). He had no genuine love for the language, knowledge, and literature of Britain, making English education mean nothing more than a practical way for earning a salary.

Ultimately, the numerous presence of these students from unprivileged families was problematic for these British critics because it was seen as a fertile source of seditious sentiments. Unlike their wealthier counterparts, whose families had regular sources of unearned income from the land, these poorer students desperately needed white-collar salaried jobs and to use their English education—however insufficient it may have been—as a means to obtain them. As the availability of after-graduation employment became a matter of ‘life and death’ for them, their eventual failure to find decent jobs—the event of which was far more common than exceptional—could lead to angry frustration being directed at English education, and by extension, at the colonial government, which had initiated the establishment of English education as an institutional device to attract and train the future servants of the state. As the aforementioned *Friend of India* article explained, the university student ‘takes an exaggerated view of his own abilities, and looks to Government for their due appreciation’. The problem ensues when he fails to find the kind of job he wants. As the article went on, ‘The State does not show an exceptional treatment of him, and he therefore begins to show his “patriotism” by spreading sedition against it’ (ibid.).

These Bengalis might be poorly Anglicized but it was feared that they would be able to use what little knowledge they acquired to challenge their colonial master. The British observers belittled them by pointing out their alleged lack of intelligence, but they also argued that the latter had been educated up to a point where they managed to criticise the government in their newspapers and journals. In an article entitled, ‘Popular Education and British Supremacy’, *The Friend of India* pointed out on 26 June 1877 that the majority of those educated in English did not make it so far as to pass the entrance standards of Calcutta University. The trouble was that their half-baked education was worse than not being educated at all. For, as the article argued, ‘the average intelligence attained by them will probably suffice to make them understand the general drift of newspaper criticism, and thus, acquire, though at second-hand, very decided opinions on our government and policy’. In short, English education was seen as responsible for an ‘awakening of the resentment and ill-will’ toward British rule (*The Friend of India*, 26 Jun. 1877: 702-3).

3. English education as an instrument of colonial government

The distinction between ‘educated’ and ‘semi-educated’

But, if the existence of poor students receiving English education was such a curse to their Raj, why in the first place did the British decide to establish as high an institution of higher education as a university for colonized subjects? Why was it that the provision of British-style higher education was to be supported directly by the government, and why was the language of instruction to be English? My aim in the following section is to establish that, since as early as the late eighteenth century, British rulers found themselves urgently in need of a secure and constant supply of local elites as the intermediary agents of Britain's imperial undertakings in the Bengal Presidency, which was by far the most densely populated overseas territory the empire had ever acquired. The British would disparage the overflow of 'semi-educated' Bengalis, but even those who condemned this growing presence would have agreed that the British Raj was impossible without a sufficient number of colonial subjects serving the administration of the region.

That a guaranteed supply of 'educated natives' was absolutely required can be seen by the fact that even those who severely decried the inclusion of the 'semi-educated' stressed the continued importance of Britain's educating and then utilizing capable Bengali youths in the public service. In the impressions of India recorded in his bestselling book, *Greater Britain*, published in 1869, the liberal imperialist Charles Dilke argued for a more extensive use of English-educated Bengalis in colonial administration. Of the question of the 'semi-educated' was Dilke sharply aware, but this did not stop him from advancing his claim. He opined that the British should distinguish the 'educated' from those whom he described as 'incompetent', 'half-educated', and 'grossly immoral'. What the empire needed, he maintained, was 'a proper system of selection of officers' under which the 'half-educated' would 'never come to be employed'. So long as such a more exclusive mechanism of selection was in place, university education would remain important for British imperial interests. In fact, Dilke even argued for the use of qualified Bengalis in the 'Covenanted Service', which had hitherto been almost entirely reserved for British elites educated in the metropole (Dilke 1869: 323-4). In a similar vein, Charles O'Donnell, a colonial servant from Ireland, insisted that the British Raj needed more English-educated Bengalis. In his *Calcutta Review* article published in 1887, he did admit that English education had produced what he describes as 'the well-known body of natives of high caste but little income, ill-educated, always striving after small profits or some petty employment'. Just as Dilke did, O'Donnell urged his readers not to mistake these 'ill-educated' men for their properly 'educated' counterparts. The British may well belittle the former but should not forget that they were dependent on the latter to uphold colonial rule. In principle, there was nothing wrong in educating Bengalis in English or in employing them in the public service. It was just that the two policies should target the right class of men. The duty of the British was to 'strain every nerve to increase their number and raise them in the estimation of Europeans and of their own countrymen' (O'Donnell 1887: 149).

These remarks above should be taken as reflecting a historical condition of colonialism in Bengal where the ruling power completely depended on the colonized population for the provision of administrative staff necessary for the running of the state. When the British started to colonize Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century, there were already twenty million inhabitants there, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the population would increase by more than another ten million. By the end of our period, there were about 37,000,000 inhabitants in Bengal proper (*The Census of India, 1891, vol.III*: 46-7). The British had no choice but to rely on Bengali officers since the number of their own men was miniscule, not exceeding two hundred. In the year 1886-87, for example, there were only 174 superior British officers sent from the metropole (*Report of the Public Service Commission 1886-87*: 10). British Collectors and Magistrates would never be able to collect a vast amount of revenue and settle countless land disputes without the help of approximately 770 native subordinate officers, including Deputy Collectors and Deputy Magistrates, who were locally recruited as well as that of a vast number of clerks of minor order who worked under them.

The imperial reliance on the bhadralok

Britain's reliance on Bengali public servants started well before the age of English education. In the late 1780s, Charles Cornwallis, the Governor-General between 1786-93, set out to modernize the administration of the East India Company by recruiting its servants directly from Britain. The British officers of the colonial state would henceforth be highly paid professional administrators, as opposed to those Company men in the former decades—called 'nabobs'—, who had been allowed to engage extensively in commercial activities with local merchants to complement their low salaries (Bayly 1988: 77-8). These merchants, as we shall see below, later managed to translate their profits into social prestige and political ascendancy, and as *bhadralok*, replaced the Mughal elites as the dominant group in Bengal. This modernization of administration that began with Cornwallis's reform would have been impossible without a greater inclusion of Bengali men whom the Company could employ much more cheaply than British men, whose salaries were set considerably higher under the new scheme. What emerged was a mechanism of differential inclusion where British and Bengali men were recruited within a strictly hierarchized division of labour. Those British officers recruited in the metropole would occupy the positions in the 'Covenanted Service' and be remunerated in sterling, while the Bengali ones would take a range of positions within the 'Uncovenanted Service', whose members were paid in rupees. Into the nineteenth century, this policy of increasing the number of native officers, which was to be called 'Indianization', was rigorously pursued, and it was in this context that the *bhadralok* emerged as a group of intermediary agents essential for British rule.

There was another policy of Charles Cornwallis's that was crucial for the rise of the *bhadralok*. Through his policy of Permanent Settlement (1793), the Company would collect revenue through those Bengali middlemen who would act as landlords or

‘zamindars’. As far as the colonized population was concerned, the beneficiary of this policy was an emerging group of wealthy high-caste Hindu Bengalis. Many of these men had already amassed a fortune through business deals with the nabobs of the previous era. With the advent of colonial capitalism, Indian industry declined, but under the Settlement, these Bengali men secured their wealth by reinvesting it in the land under the zamindari system. Importantly for our discussion, it was these very rich Hindus who enthusiastically wanted both English education and respectable positions in the colonial civil service, not just for themselves, but also for their offspring. It was the sons of their families who would dominate the Hindu College founded in 1816, by far the most prestigious college for English education in Bengal. Given these historical origins of the *bhadralok*’s rise as a privileged group, it was not surprising that they sought to cement their bonds with the British by sending their youth to schools that imparted English education and ultimately government jobs⁴. In their rise to prestige, the *bhadralok* families depended upon the colonial government as much as the latter did upon the former. It was at this juncture that the Indianization of the public service proceeded, with the *bhadralok* playing a key role as ‘Uncovenanted’ officers.

The education-recruitment nexus

While the educational enthusiasm among the *bhadralok* built up around the Hindu College since the mid-1810s onwards, the British started to look for ways to educate Bengali youth with a view to making future public servants out of them. English education as a key institution for this education-recruitment nexus officially commenced in 1835 with an unambiguously ‘Anglicist’ decision by William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of India (1828 to 1835). This decision established that all government funds reserved for the education of native subjects would be spent on an education in English. This decision had been made in opposition to the insistence of the British ‘Orientalists’ that natives should be educated in the traditions of their own cultures, with either Persian, Arabic, or Sanskrit—the classical languages used in the Mughal empire—as the medium of instruction. For our argument here, we take a special note of one historical factor—namely, the urge for cost-cutting as a pragmatic measure to safeguard economic profits. As will be shown below, this was the most significant ground for the decision in favor of English education. In fact, this was actually far more crucial than the oft-exaggerated impact of the famous ‘Minute Upon Indian Education’ by Thomas Babington Macaulay.

In the late 1820s, attempts had been made to give preferences to students educated at the Orientalist colleges run by the colonial state, but in the end, the government had come to claim that it would be impossible for it to employ native men in responsible positions without a body of native students educated in English. Behind this shift was the London authorities of the Company, or the Court of

⁴ For the historical origins of the *bhadralok* and their relationship to English education, see McGuire 1983: 6-56.

Directors. A correspondence from the Court of Directors to the Bengal government, dated 29 September 1830, made it clear that nothing was of greater interest and importance than the education of natives that was ‘calculated to raise up a class of persons qualified by their intelligence and morality for high employments in the civil administration of India’ (‘Court of directors to the Bengal government on the education of Indians, 29 September 1830’ in Philips 1977: 525-6), and that English should be made the sole medium of such instruction. As the same correspondence declared, the Hindu College ‘has had more decided success’ than any of the Orientalist colleges in Calcutta, proving that ‘the higher ranks of the natives’ under the Bengal government welcomed English education, rather than Orientalist education. Thus, the London authorities had no doubt that ‘the means should be afforded of cultivating the English language and literature and acquiring a knowledge of European science, and a familiarity with European ideas’ (ibid.: 520). Simultaneously, the correspondence also argued that, in place of Persian, the English language should be gradually made into the medium of communication between British and Bengali officers, both administrative and legal (ibid.: 526). It was in responding to this call from the Company’s headquarters in London that Bentinck chose English over Oriental education without hesitation. Well before the arrival of Macaulay as President of the General Committee on Public Instruction, the Governor-General had already reached his conclusion (Barrett 1954: 93-7). It was not so much the force of Macaulay’s liberalism in his well-known speech as the material reequipments of imperial exploitation that drove the British authorities in India into adopting this particular educational policy.

Having pointed out how the Company authorities influenced Bentinck’s decision in 1835, what needs to be explained here is the former’s position regarding the employment of native youth, into which the government’s educational policy was to be geared. Since the early 1810s, they continuously urged the colonial authorities in charge to use ‘Native Agency’ in order to reduce administrative costs. For example, in 1824, they opposed an addition of eighty British men as the Company’s ‘Writers’, advising a more extensive employment of native agency in the Judicial Department of the civil service, particularly in the settlement of civil disputes (ibid.: 164-5). By the late 1820s, almost all (95%) of original law suits brought to civil courts throughout India were being judged by native judicial officers; it was only natural that ordinary offenders—the majority of whom were native subjects—were tried by native judges (Boulger 1892: 64). The Directors found that the running of the colonial state was expensive, and to secure the profits of the Company, it all came down to ‘a question of how far the aid of native agency from the better classes might not be brought into operation, with advantage and economy’ (‘Peter Auber to Bentinck, 11 December 1828’, in Philips 1977: 64-5). In the face of the Company’s financial difficulties, recruiting a large number of British youth was out of the question. To retrench administrative spending, ‘nothing can more conduce than the employment of native agency in preference to the expensive services of Europeans’ (‘William Astell to Bentinck, 20 January 1829’, in Philips 1977: 143). Bentinck’s final decision had much

to do with the pressure coming from the Directors of the Company, who had urged the colonial government for decades to retrench the budget by reducing the number of British officers while increasing native ones. In fact, throughout his years as Governor-General, Bentinck distinguished himself by faithfully carrying out the wishes of the Company authorities in London and rigorously pursuing the policy of Indianization.

The decision in 1835 was a pivotal moment for the emergence of so-called 'educated natives' as a colonial category in Bengal. Over the subsequent two decades, the task left for the colonizing British was to systematically incorporate government support for English education into its ongoing effort to recruit more educated natives in the Uncovenanted branch of the colonial civil service. Thus in a Resolution of 1844, Henry Hardinge, the Governor-General of India during 1844-1848, ordered the educational authorities in Bengal to submit annual returns of those English-educated students 'who may be fitted, according to their several degrees of merit and other circumstances, [to positions which] they may be deemed qualified to fill' (*Second Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, appointed to inquire into the operation of the Act 3 & 4 Will 4, c. 85*, 1853: 415-16). In practice, however, the lists of candidates created by Hardinge's order was not found very useful. Then, as an alternative, it was soon suggested that the government should put together the different colleges offering English education—with the Hindu College being the most prestigious of all—into a single university as a degree offering institution. The government then would only have to look for degree holders as suitable candidates for public service. The first idea of creating such a university came as early as 1845 with a 15-page proposal, *Proposed Plan of the University of Calcutta*, written by Frederick J. Mouat, the Secretary of the General Council of Education in India. According to Mouat, the increase of English-educated natives after 1835 made it 'a matter of strict justice and necessity, to confer upon them some mark of distinction, by which they may be recognized' as capable of 'holding the higher offices under Government open to natives, after due official qualification' (Mouat, 1845: 1-2). Finally, it was in 1854 that the government proposed the creation of universities in India, including one in Calcutta. In the so-called 'Wood's Education Despatch' sent to Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India, Charles Wood, the President of the Board of Control (1852-55)⁵, argued that 'the spread of [English] education in India will produce a greater efficiency in all branches of administration, by enabling you [the colonial government] to obtain the services of intelligent and trustworthy persons in every department of Government' ('Copy of a despatch to the government of India, on the subject of general education in India', 1854: Paragraph 72). To identify suitable English-educated natives as the much needed candidates for official appointments, it would be necessary to establish universities in India. As Wood wrote, 'the acquisition of a degree, and still

⁵ The Board of Control was a government office in London that was responsible for supervising the activities of the East India Company in general and for securing the British government's interests in India in particular.

more the attainment of university distinctions, will bring highly educated young men under the notice of Government' (ibid: Paragraph 75). The emergence of 'educated natives' as a category was intimately linked with the imperial demand for a cheap but efficient white-collar labour force. For Bengalis to be recognized as 'educated' meant to be educated in English, and not in any other ways. Furthermore, 'educated' also implied that those designated as such were expected to be willing to contribute to Britain's empire building in India as its local agents.

Established in 1857, Calcutta University emerged as a colonial apparatus whereby the British could formalize their use of the *bhadralok* as a select group of intermediaries. Only one year after its establishment, 13 candidates appeared for the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science examinations, with two of them successfully obtaining a degree. These two first graduates were immediately appointed as Deputy Collectors, with one of them being Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya—arguably the most prominent *bhadralok* man at the time (Sharma and Sharma 2004: 113). By officially connecting higher education with public recruitment, the university system consolidated a relationship of mutual dependence between the colonial government and the *bhadralok*, allowing the latter to achieve almost complete dominance in positions in the public services and in the judiciary sphere, except for the few exceptional ones reserved for white British elites. And this extraordinary ascendancy of *bhadralok* men was accompanied by an all but total exclusion—in terms of religion, caste, and class—of any other Bengali social groups. First of all, Muslim elites, who used to be dominant particularly in the judicial section of the public service as judges, lost almost all the positions they formerly held to their Hindu counterparts. In the first few decades after Cornwallis' civil service reform in the late 1770s, Persian-speaking Muslim elites were still dominant in the civil service, particularly in the judicial branch. However, these Hindu men—now equipped with their officially sanctioned Western education in English—would later virtually monopolize both university places and public offices. Unlike the Hindus, the Muslims in Bengal continued to regard their traditional religious education as more relevant to their needs, not availing themselves of the state-funded secular education, including the one offered at the various colleges of Calcutta University. Moreover, their linguistic advantage was lost when Persian was abolished in 1837 as the language of administration, which eventually paved the way for English to replace it⁶. In terms of caste, an overwhelming majority of university students were either Brahman, Kayatha or Baidya—the three caste dominant groups that constituted the *bhadralok* class. In the year 1883-84, for example, 76% of all college students in Bengal (2887

⁶ By the late 1880s, the colonial civil service had become almost completely dominated by high-caste Hindus by virtue of their having adapted to the emerging nexus of English education and public employment. In Bengal, the percentage of Muslims in the judicial service had fallen to a mere 3.1%, while that of Hindus was 96.1% (*Report of the Public Service Commission, 1886-1887*: 31). Of this, F. H. Barrow observed in an article published in 1888: 'We found early the whole administrative work of the country carried on by Mahomedans, and [...] now they are almost obliterated from public employ except of a menial kind' (Barrow 1888: 26).

out of 3773) belonged to one of these Hindu castes (*General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for 1883-84* 9). Thus, in so far as the aim of English education was to create future native officers out of the sons of influential *bhadralok* families, Calcutta University did fulfill its assigned role. It was the high-caste Hindu men from this university who would occupy the highest ranks of the Uncovenanted Civil Service such as Deputy Collectors or Subordinate Judges. For the year 1886-87, for example, there were 214 Deputy Magistrates and Deputy Collectors (excluding those Britons appointed in the metropole). Of these, 128, or about 60%, were from the dominant castes (58 Brahmans and 70 Kayasths). Likewise, of 48 Subordinate Judges, 37, or about 77%, were from these castes (22 Brahmans and 15 Kayasths) (*Report of the Public Service Commission, 1886-87* 28, 32). With both their good English education and their respectable status as *bhadralok*, such men, whom the British would call 'Bengali Babus', or more generally 'educated natives', would not only work harmoniously with the British men in charge, but command the respect of Bengali society, contributing as intermediary agents to the political stabilization of British control.

4. The dilemma of English education

The question of class

Despite having the aforementioned merits for colonial rule, the institutionalization of bureaucratic recruitment through university education was increasingly seen by the British as defective because it magnified the class cleavage among high-caste Hindus in Bengal. In spite of its strict exclusivity in both caste and religious terms, the university admitted students of humble economic means, with the percentage of its students from rich *bhadralok* families remaining fairly small. The education report by the Bengal government for the year 1875-76 revealed that of 766 Hindu students who attended the government colleges, only 47, or about 6%, were classified as 'upper class' (*General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for 1875-76* 123). Even among the high-caste Hindus, the percentage of students from wealthy families was not at all high. According to the official education report for the year 1883-84, of those students studying at the various liberal arts colleges operating under the university system, only 13% were from 'rich' families, with incomes exceeding Rs. 416 a month. 78% came from families with incomes generally varying between Rs. 100 to Rs.300 a month. 9% came from impoverished families with incomes below Rs. 17-8 a month. The same report also pointed out that, as far as all schools in Bengal not confined to higher education were concerned, among the pupils from the dominant literary castes such as Brahmans and Kayasths, at least 32% belonged to the poorer classes (*General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for 1883-84* 11).

Despite their being high-caste, these Bengalis were seen by British critics as too poor to become sufficiently Anglicized to perform efficient administrative work or to become respectable enough in the eyes of their fellow colonized subjects. Ironically for these critics, these young men became probably the most enthusiastic aspirants after public employment, precisely because they saw it as the almost only means of

economic survival within the colonial economy. Unlike the *bhadralok* men from wealthy and influential families, who often had the advantage of cross-generational links with the British establishment—and the stakes in the zamindari system connected therewith—, these men possessed neither the economic security nor the social capital necessary to survive the years of competition before, during, and after university education. Many of those who received English education could not even enter the university as they could not pass the entrance examination, and the majority of those who did manage to enter left the university without obtaining a degree. And even when they did obtain a degree, the competition for respectable jobs in the government was tough. Throughout the 1870s, a cumulative number of about 25,000 students took the entrance examination for Calcutta University. The number of passers amounted to about 10,000, while as many as 15,000, or 60%, failed (Johnston 1883: 259). Of those who did matriculate, only about 1,700 graduated, and about 1,000 of them got what were regarded as respectable jobs (530 in the civil service and 470 in the legal profession) (*Report of the Public Service Commission, 1886-87*: 381). If we venture a crude calculation out of these figures, we find that, in this decade, only 4% of all students who aspiring to university education (1,000 out of 25,000) actually became what the British saw as ‘intelligent native officers’, the creation of which was the very aim of English education.

With the important positions in the public sector lost to their more successful competitors coming from the class above theirs—‘educated natives’ from richer *bhadralok* families—, what kinds of employment were these ‘semi-educated’ men going to obtain? And what would happen when they ended up without any jobs that satisfied their ambitions and needs, as was so often the case in reality? Would they not come to hold the government responsible for their own failings? By the 1870s, these concerns started to worry the British, both inside and outside of government circles. What Bengal witnessed was the acute awareness of a dilemma inherent in the colonial nexus of higher education and public recruitment. On the one hand, Calcutta University continued to be the key imperial apparatus with its mission to procure and nurture *bhadralok* men as the future native agents of the British Raj. On the other hand, however, the same university was seen to attract far more of those men who had keen aspirations to be recognized as members of the *bhadralok* community, but without the sufficient means or connections to realize them, often ending up underemployed after leaving higher education and left with a sense of resentment.

Orientalist critique

For some of those British who had opposed English education from the beginning, the danger of its manufacturing ‘semi-educated natives’ was only too predictable. Here, let us consider the Orientalist position represented by two leading scholars during the period under consideration. One of them was Horace Wilson, an eminent Orientalist scholar who was appointed in 1832 as the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit at University of Oxford. Before his appointment, Wilson served in British India for many years as Secretary of the General Committee of Public Instruction. During the

education debate over how the government's education fund should be used, he represented the Orientalist cause against the Anglicist one, arguing for the promotion of education in the classical languages of the East, namely, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. Naturally, in 1835, he was vehemently against the proposed idea of making English the sole medium of instruction. What interests us here is the fact that, in his attack on the Anglicist cause, Wilson cited the possible emergence of those Bengalis who were to be later called 'semi-educated natives' as one of the possible side-effects of English education. In an article he contributed in December 1835 to *The Asiatic Journal*, he attacked the idea of English education, saying, 'To extend a smattering of English throughout India, is to do little good'. He argued that the majority of students thus educated in English would not be truly interested in British ideas and values. They would only 'want the language and nothing more', and this, 'only as much as can be turned to profit'. There would be no need for the government to spend its entire education fund to help the typical 'Bengali sircar or kerani', who 'copies letters and keeps accounts', to 'earn a subsistence'. Because these men would merely advance their own self-interest, English education would not serve to anglicize Bengali society. As he put it, 'To spread a thin sheet of water over a vast tract, will generate only slime and weeds' (Wilson in Moir and Zastoupil: 218).

Two decades later, in a summoned interview in the Select Committee leading to the so-called Wood's Education Despatch of 1854, Wilson repeated his warning. Among high-caste Hindus, he distinguished between the *bhadralok* elites and those who were not. On the one hand, there was the 'Babu' (as the British called a *bhadralok* man) who 'is desirous of becoming familiar with English as an introduction to the acquaintance and notice of the leading members of European society'. On the other hand, there were those who are 'in an inferior station of life' willing to 'cultivate English in the hope of its leading to public employment'. Of the two, it was the latter Wilson saw as problematic. He said, 'It is not from any love of English literature that they cultivate the study; it is from worldly considerations' (*Second Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, appointed to inquire into the operation of the Act 3 & 4 Will. 4, c. 85*, 1853: 262).

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Wilson's Orientalist perspective found much resonance in the view of another influential British Orientalist, Monier Williams, who succeeded Wilson in 1860 as the Sanskrit Professor at Oxford. As with Wilson, Williams attacked English education from an Orientalist point of view for promoting the education of native subjects in their own traditions. In an article he contributed to *The Times* in 1877, he made his stance clear. For him, English education was a 'mistaken system', under which India became 'flooded with conceited and half-educated persons'. These persons would 'despise and neglect their own languages, and their own religious and political systems, without becoming good English scholars, good Christians, or good subjects of the Queen'. Those whom he labelled as 'half-educated' were allegedly 'wast[ing] their time in concocting, and even

printing and publishing wretched English verses which no Englishman can read without a smile' (*The Times*, 9 November 1877: 4).

Writing in the 1870s, Williams shared with his contemporaries the anxiety over the unemployment or underemployment among the 'half-educated'. As he put it, British rule was now confronted with 'the difficulty of providing suitable employment for the thousands of young men we have educated badly and unsuitably' (ibid.). This is not too say that he was saying all those educated in English had seditious tendencies. Rather, he argued that there were two types of native men among those looked to both English education and government jobs. In his book *Modern India and the Indians* (1878), he observed that there were those who were genuine elites of native society. These men, according to him, were 'generally satisfied' with British rule. He continued, however, that there were also those whose elite status was dubious at best, with their sense of dissatisfaction having become palpable to the extent that it was no longer possible for the British to ignore: 'It is useless to conceal from ourselves the existence of much discontent, chiefly among the men we have educated above their stations' (Monier-Williams 1878: 239-40).

5. The colonial state and the realm of affect

The psyche as an object of intervention

By the end of our period, the British authorities in Bengal had grown sharply aware that what for Horace Wilson had been merely a premonition four decades earlier had now become an imminent problem for the government. In his speech made on 10 March 1877 at the Convocation of Calcutta University, Lord Lytton, the Governor-General of India during 1876-1880, bitterly admitted that there were British people who charged his government for the noticeable presence of 'semi-educated' Bengalis and for 'increas[ing] their expectation of responsible official employment, without necessarily qualifying them for it'. The Governor-General had no choice but to agree with his critics that Bengali students generally saw English education almost exclusively as a passport to public service employment. And by this, he was deeply alarmed. As he put it, 'I can conceive no greater curse to any country than a state of things in which the whole educated class of the community is encouraged and accustomed to look exclusively to Government employment' (*The Friend of India and Statesman*, 16 March 1877: 312).

Nowhere was such official problematization of the 'semi-educated' more clearly articulated than in the view of Richard Temple, the highest administrative authority in Bengal in the late 1870s. Let us draw on Temple's accounts expressed in two Minutes he wrote as the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal (1874-77), as well as those found in his book, *India in 1880*. What he found problematic was that the majority of them—as many as about 80%—left higher education without a proper degree offered by Calcutta University. These students knew that they were neither necessarily keen on, nor capable of, obtaining a degree, but nonetheless entered the university. For they believed that English education would bring them the sorts of employment they

wanted to obtain even if their study at university was ‘superficial’ and ‘imperfect’, with their proficiency of English being ‘of a second-rate or a third-rate kind’ (‘Minute by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Dated 5th January 1877’: 57). Such a blind belief supposedly led to there being many tragic cases where university-educated men were frequently observed to be ‘applying for some lowly-paid appointment almost begging from office to office, from department to department’, only to no avail’ (ibid.: 59).

Temple deplored that they all pursued the same path partly because of a ‘banefully influential’ prejudice against manual labour: ‘they still dread and dislike the thought of manual work, even though it be accompanied with mental training’ (ibid.). But, clearly, this would have to change. Temple’s suggested remedies were, broadly speaking, two-fold. First, it would be necessary for the government to encourage Bengali youth to look to other avenues of employment—such as engineering or commerce—rather than the public service and the legal professions alone (‘Minute by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, 14th January 1876’: 87). Second, and no less important, they should be made to shake off their illusion that mere entry to the university would secure them a position in the public service or in the law. In the case of the law, the possession of a law degree, rather than mere entry to the university, had already been made the requirement for applying for a position. But if one wanted to become a public servant, such had not been the case, thus leading many to believe that they might have a chance. It would be therefore necessary to make the Uncovenanted Civil Service more exclusively for the elites by raising entry standards. In fact, shortly before his minute of 1876, Temple had already ordered that ‘no candidate for the superior grades of the Native Civil Service shall be accepted unless he be a graduate’ (ibid.: 85). Given the sheer difficulty of getting a Bachelor of Arts degree, as compared with just entering university, such an arrangement could be expected to work as a deterrent (‘Minute by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Dated 5th January 1877’: 57-8).

Problematizing disloyal sentiments

Temple felt it necessary to institute these reforms because he believed that the meagre job prospects of ‘semi-educated’ Bengalis served to create colonized subjects who were disloyal to the British empire. Temple’s thinking, however, should not lead us to assume that he repudiated altogether the idea of educating native elites in English. Nor did it mean that Temple regarded any Bengali men educated in English as potentially disloyal. In fact, Temple was not at all against the long-standing British patronage of the *bhadralok* through a system of higher education in English. For him, this class of Bengalis with a secure economic base in the countryside under the zamindari system remained the most valuable asset for British rule. They formed ‘a lettered and refined class’ and were to be credited with ‘exerting on the whole a salutary influence on Native opinion’ (Temple 1880: 115). As ‘the Native officials of the upper and middle grades’, high-caste Hindu men with an unambiguous *bhadralok* status made the best of officers, making themselves known ‘as gentlemen in the best sense of the term, that is as men of honour’ (ibid.: 122). Temple was obviously aware

of the recent rise of radical politics among certain *bhadralok* men. He denied, however, that English education itself was to blame for this because no foreign rule would be spared at least some 'disloyal individuals'. Generally, it produced men whose 'heartfelt allegiance' the British could rely on with confidence (ibid.: 136).

What is crucial for us to remember here is that, in Temple's mind, the question of political disloyalty concerned solely the poorer class of high-caste Hindu Bengalis, and not their wealthier counterparts. To explain why these men would become seditious, Temple offered a psychological argument. According to Temple, they were by 'nature diligent, anxious to work for themselves and for their families'. But diligence in this context was not considered a virtue but a source of trouble; it engendered 'the discontent and restlessness which are perceptible in the rising generation'. As Temple wrote, 'They look back on all the mental toil they have endured, and they are chagrined at discovering that in but too many instances it leads to nothing' ('Minute by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, 14th January 1876': 87). The most serious problem for British rule was that their sense of frustration and anger could be easily translated into, and expressed as, anti-British opinions. However 'superficial' or 'imperfect' their education might have been, it remained the case that these men were more educated than the most of the Bengali population. According to Temple, the 'semi-educated' state of these Bengali men meant that they were 'educated up to a point when the intelligence will become quickened, the ideas enlarged, and the ambition excited' (ibid).

6. Conclusion

By foregrounding the imperial colonial attitude towards those colonized youth whom they classified as the 'semi-educated', this paper has sought to explore some hitherto unexplored aspects of the histories of education and bureaucratic recruitment in Bengal. It has shown that, ever since English education started as part of a state policy to train future native agents of colonial administration, there was a constant sense of anxiety among the British that an increasing majority of those actually attracted to this education were not the sort of elites they wanted—that would internalize and embody British values while at the same time commanding respect from the native population at large. What implications does this have for our effort to offer a deeper understanding of the history of both English education and of public employment in colonial Bengal?

One major current in the historiography of English-educated Bengalis has been to emphasize the supposedly hegemonic influence of Western modernity on the formation of their collective identity. It is precisely because of the force of such influence, so the argument goes, that their culture would bear a 'deconstructive' potential—whether in the mode of 'hybridity' or that of 'alternative modernity'—, radically transforming modernity itself from within⁷. This perspective presupposes an irrevocable and hegemonic spread of European culture among those colonized people

⁷ See, for example, Chakrabarty 2000; see also, Bhabha, 1994.

who received Western education. This paper has shown, however, that, in practice, even among those who were actually educated in English, only a small proportion seemed to encounter the modern at close range; the rest of them remained largely untouched by the tenets of Western modernity. Because of their lack of means, the majority of those who embarked upon an English education did not manage to complete it, dropping out somewhere down the line while being thrown into the world with depressingly limited prospects. As Sumit Sarkar has demonstrated through an intimate reading of Bengali sources, disillusioned, frustrated, and resentful right at the heart of alien domination, the everyday lives of these men tended to be profoundly steeped in a new *vernacular* culture emerging in and around the city of Calcutta. Their lack of future prospects and humiliating poverty convinced many of them that they were living in the kind of dark age described in the *Kali Yuga* myth, while seeking solace in the religious teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a man who was himself from a poor Brahmin family in Bengal (Sarkar 1997: 282-357).

English education certainly played a historical role in shaping certain aspects of Bengali culture, as seen in the celebrated rise of the Bengal Renaissance, but the spread of its influence was *uneven* even among those who actually received it; it would therefore be a mistake to speak uncritically of its levelling role in the diffusion of modernity. Before we talk about the hegemony of Western culture, we need to ask, in precise historical terms, which different social groups of Bengali society desired to receive English education; not only in terms of their religion and caste, but also of their class position vis-à-vis the economic order imposed by colonial rule. What this paper has demonstrated is that an increasing number of British came to believe that their own promotion of English education had largely failed in its aim of influencing Bengali youth in Western lines because of the lower than expected class position occupied by the majority of its actual recipients.

By showing how the British identified the economic difficulties of these men as a critical source of anti-imperial sentiment, this paper has also suggested the existence of an arena of colonial politics which previous studies on bureaucratic recruitment have tended to overlook or ignore. The academic debate on the politics surrounding the colonial civil service has tended to revolve around notable English-educated Bengalis such as Surendranath Banerjeer. A small number of well-educated Bengali elites like Banerjeer passed the civil service examination only to endure the racially discriminatory treatment of being excluded by those British who saw their claim for equality as a threat to British imperial prestige. This focus on the claims of prominent *bhadralok* men remains important in understanding both the nationalist and imperialist politics over the public service question. As Mrinalini Sinha's discussion on the Ilbert Bill controversy (1883-84) has demonstrated, an analysis of such politics over the challenge of native elites helps us see the relevance of gender as well as race in the formation of the 'effeminate Babu' as a colonial stereotype of English-educated Bengalis (Sinha, 1995). But this attention to notable 'Babus' should not blind us to British political anxiety over those *nameless* Bengalis who were of high

caste, but were much less successful in the race for high office, thus constituting no threat as far as the jealously-guarded positions of British officers were concerned. In this context, I would like to emphasize, class mattered as much as race⁸.

Previous scholarly discussions of the politics of public recruitment, including the highly stimulating one by Sinha mentioned above, have tended to look only at particular aspects of colonial civil service, rather than the colonial civil service as a whole. Their focus has been far more oriented toward the question of the entry of Bengalis to what was in fact a numerically tiny section of the service, namely the Covenanted Civil Service, or the Indian Civil Service (ICS) as it has been more popularly known since 1858. My argument is that it is as important to foreground the perceived problems over their entry into the Uncovenanted Civil Service, a branch of colonial administration, much bigger in size than its Covenanted counterpart. It was precisely to the Uncovenanted Service that English education in India was directly connected; from the very beginning, the objective of this education was to turn Bengali youth into Uncovenanted officers, not Covenanted ones. It was mainly from the 1880s—particularly with the rise of the Indian National Congress—that the exclusion of Bengali servants from the highest positions in the Covenanted branch and their claim for parity with the British became an highly politicized affair. Before then, what bothered the British authorities in Bengal was not necessarily the growing number of ‘educated natives’, whose service as intermediary agents was regarded as absolutely indispensable for colonial administration. If anything, the perceived problem was that English education was not sufficiently attracting young men from respectable *bhadralok* families. To make matters worse, most of those whom it did attract instead self-claimed to be *bhadralok* but were not quite so in the judgement of those British concerned. Thus, during the period under consideration, imperial anxieties hovered particularly over ‘semi-educated natives’ and their near-total failure to enter the Uncovenanted Service. It was this group of men who were singled out as a source of anti-British feeling.

If we look at the history of anti-colonialism in Bengal that unfolded during the decades that followed, we see that the aforementioned imperial premonition was not in fact unfounded. In their vernacular press, the ‘semi-educated’ resentfully ridiculed the ‘Bengali Babus’ because, as they saw it, the latter were problematically aloof from the colonized due to their cultural Anglicization and their vested interests in the political status quo, thus making their supposedly nationalist stance far too lukewarm and gradualist. It did not take long before these dissatisfied Bengalis were attracted by a more confrontational sort of anti-colonial politics led by men like Aurobindo Ghosh, who represented the ‘extremist’ wing of Indian nationalism. While criticizing as ineffectual the nationalist politics in the hands of the ‘moderates’, consisting mainly of ‘educated natives’, extremists such as Ghosh—despite the fact that they themselves

⁸ In her book, the historian Tithi Bhattacharya usefully demonstrates that the influential *bhadralok* from rich families were highly conscious of their class position, and performed an exclusionist politics of class against those who were high-caste but were poorer than themselves. Bhattacharya 2005.

were highly ‘educated’ men—sought to mobilize the ‘semi-educated’ into their own anti-British movement, by exploiting the latter’s deep sense of resentment arising from their lower class position and the economic deprivation caused thereby (Bloomfield 1968).

Seen by the colonizing British as coming from the wrong class, those Bengali men categorized as ‘semi-educated’ did not match the British ideal of a respectable ‘Bengali Babu’. Misguided partly by their being high caste, so the argument went, they allegedly misunderstood their class position, vainly seeking to become what they should not even have dreamed of becoming. The problem of their seditious inclination was a particularly vexing one for the British authorities because it was irrevocably rooted in the unrewarded aspirations that had been induced by their own official policy of linking higher education directly to bureaucratic employment. With their desires and needs left unaddressed, these men directed their brooding anger at the very architect of this policy. The colonial government unwittingly found itself dragged into a politically charged realm of sentiment, where the mishandling of affective states was feared to undercut its own stability.

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