

‘The Moral Sentiments of Hindoos’:

Reading Adam Smith in Colonial India

In September 1840, C.H. Cameron, a member of the Council of Education in India,¹ outlined his plans for establishing an Adam Smith essay contest for Indian students. “I propose,” he wrote, “to give a Prize to be contended for by the first class at Hindoo College, for proficiency in the study of Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments.”² Cameron’s proposal was driven by his view that the teaching of moral lessons was absent from Indian education, and the lack could be addressed by “teaching Morality in the form of Moral Philosophy.” Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was, he believed, the perfect text to accomplish this goal. Although he disagreed strongly with parts of Smith’s argument, he explained he had chosen the work because “it gives a learned, critical, and perspicacious account of the most celebrated systems of moral philosophy, ancient and modern. It is full of ingenious illustrations, [and] is written in an excellent style.”³ The winning essay, he proposed, should not only display command of the text, but should also raise new criticisms and examples that challenge Smith’s argument. The winner would receive a gold medal worth fifty rupees.⁴

In this paper, I hope to examine this essay contest as a way to re-think the intellectual history of Smith and the British Empire. To write about Smith and empire, however, is to risk going down a path too well-trodden. For, along with Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill, Smith

¹ The Council of Education was one of the two main bodies of the colonial government responsible for regulating education in India (the other being the General Committee of Public Instruction). In 1842, the General Committee was abolished, and a number of schools and colleges were brought under direct control of the government’s Education Department. The Council of Education remained as an advisory body, along with direct supervision of a small number of schools and colleges, including Hindu College in Calcutta. C.H. Cameron later became the president of the Council of Education.

² British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, IOR/V/24/948, ‘General Report of the Late General Committee of Public Instruction for 1840-1 and 1841-2’, appendix IX, p. lxx (henceforth BL, OIOC).

³ IOR/V/24/948, p lxx.

⁴ IOR/V/24/948, p lxxi.

is the thinker most often studied in relation to the British Empire. This is partly because Smith's own work was concerned with the topic of Britain's colonies (a significant portion of *The Wealth of Nations* deals directly with the question of colonies and overseas commerce). But, it is also because, as Emma Rothschild has beautifully argued, Smith himself was deeply entangled in the imperial networks of the eighteenth century.⁵ He was actively involved in political debates about overseas trade and colonies; many of his close friends and family acquaintances had colonial careers; and, his work was frequently invoked in debates about the future of the British Empire. As voluminous as the scholarship on Smith and empire is, it has tended to fall into two categories. On the one hand, intellectual historians have focused on the ways in which Smith's ideas influenced British imperial policy.⁶ On the other hand, political theorists have been concerned with explaining what Smith himself thought of empire.⁷ While both these historiographies are immensely useful, and have transformed the field of political thought and empire, they implicitly endorse a reading in which India is merely an object of inquiry for Smithian analysis rather than a site in which Smith was read and critiqued. My paper aims to invert this line of investigation: rather than asking what Smith thought of India or how Smith influenced Indian policy, I ask instead how Smith was read in India.

To answer this question, I turn to the early-nineteenth century when Smith's work began to be taught in newly-established Indian schools and colleges. Engaging with an under-explored

⁵ Emma Rothschild, "Adam Smith in the British Empire," in *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, edited by Sankar Muthu (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶ See for instance, Donald Winch, *Classical Political Economy and Colonies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy, the Empire of Free Trade, and Imperialism, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁷ Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

archive of Indian education in the era of early colonial liberalism, I consider how educational and curricular material can shed light on the ways in which Smith's work was read and disseminated in India. The paper is divided into two parts: in the first part, I describe the colonial-pedagogical complex of institutions, curricula, and teaching practices in which the Adam Smith essay contest was rooted, focusing in particular on the teaching of history. The second part then turns to the essays of two Indian students – Anand Kishen Bose and Rajnarayan Bose – who won the gold and silver prizes respectively in the first Adam Smith essay contest at Hindu College in 1843. The ways in which these students critiqued the role of sympathy and the limits of moral sentiments, I believe, raises important questions about nineteenth century liberalism and empire, which I will take up briefly in the conclusion.

The Lessons of History and the Making of a Colonial Liberal Education

The beginnings of colonial education in India are often traced to the 1813 Charter Act, which among other reforms, assumed a British role in promoting native education.⁸ In its wake, a number of colonial and native educational institutions sprang up. Among these was Hindu College, founded in 1816 in Calcutta for the purpose of providing English education specifically to children of the city's Hindu community.⁹ It was funded mainly by donations provided by the community, as well as by student fees. In its initial years, the college enjoyed considerable autonomy over its administrative and curricular decisions. However, by 1823, the college had run into financial difficulties, which required it to approach the colonial government for assistance. In return for bailing out the institution, the government brought it under the oversight

⁸ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

⁹ BL, OIOC, IOR/V/24/946, "Report of the Colleges and Schools for Native Education Under the Superintendence of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1831", p.10.

of its Committee of Public Instruction (which, by now, was administering a number of other schools and colleges as well). As a result, several government officials were installed in the governance structure of the college, which gave them significant authority over shaping the courses of study.

From its inception, the college was divided into a Junior school and a Senior school. The Junior school admitted boys between the ages of 8 and 12, while the senior school admitted boys no older than 14, who had completed the requirements of the Junior school. The purpose of the Junior school was to help students acquire a “tolerable grasp of the English language”.¹⁰ Thus, the curriculum focused mainly on English grammar, reading, and composition, with some arithmetic and geography as supplementary subjects. The senior school continued those subjects, but gradually added the study of history, poetry, natural philosophy, chemistry, algebra, and translation from Bengali to English and vice versa. In addition to this prescribed course of study, students were encouraged (often with prizes) to read, in their own time, “the best Classical Writers in the English language,” many of which could be found in the well-stocked college library.¹¹

By 1835, the Hindu College was a “flourishing institution” with nearly 400 students of which almost 350 were fee-paying, while the remainder were supported by government scholarships and stipends.¹² 1835 was also a significant year for colonial Indian education because it saw the passage of the English Education Act, which further reinforced the colonial

¹⁰ BL, OIOC, IOR/V/24/946, “Report of the Colleges and Schools for Native Education Under the Superintendence of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1831”, p.12.

¹¹ BL, OIOC, IOR/V/24/946, “Report of the Colleges and Schools for Native Education Under the Superintendence of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1831”, p.14.

¹² BL, OIOC, P/V/150, “Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1835”, p. 14-5.

government's commitment to promoting English-language education in India. The 1835 Act has frequently been seen by historians as part of the decisive shift towards an 'Anglicist' educational policy, which privileged English-language teaching and texts over the previous 'Orientalist' policy of translating and recuperating ancient texts from Indian languages.¹³ The Act is also seen as the quintessential representative of nineteenth-century liberal imperialism, in part due to the influence of Whig historian and politician T.B. Macaulay. In what is surely one of the most quoted passages in all of British imperial history, Macaulay wrote in his "Minute on Education" (1835) that the objective of the legislation was to create subjects who would be "Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."¹⁴

However, for Macaulay, English-language education alone was not sufficient to create the hybrid Indian-English subjects he had envisioned; it was also crucial for students to have thorough knowledge of English and European history and, more broadly, for them to think in historicist terms. He believed that it was only through the study of history that Indian students could understand their place in the British empire, and see themselves as part of a universal narrative of progress and ever-increasing liberty. Macaulay later explored this interpretation of history in his celebrated five-volume *History of England*, in which he traced the development of the English state as a story of gradual progress. As Catherine Hall has described it, Macaulay's narrative was intended to be "a universal history," showing the progress of a nation from "barbarism to civilization."¹⁵ Macaulay, in fact, conceived the idea for writing such a work during his time in India, and hoped that it would ultimately be used both in Britain and India as a

¹³ Bruce McCully, *English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism* (Gloucester: P. Smith, 1966); Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ T.B. Macaulay, "Minute on Education," 2 February 1835.

¹⁵ Catherine Hall, "Writing Macaulay," in *Women: A Cultural Review* 24, no. 2-3 (2013): 124-28.

way to narrate to generations of students the history of the “limitless, progressive Empire” that he believed the British Empire to be.¹⁶ For Macaulay, then, to have a liberal historical imagination was to understand the gradual enlargement of liberty and progress, which he best saw embodied in the history of the English state.

In 1836, Macaulay reviewed the curriculum and student reports at Hindu College, and determined that history teaching was sorely lacking. Writing to C.H. Cameron, he expressed his dissatisfaction that students at Hindu College were learning too much literature and not enough history. “I should be inclined to say that a disproportionate degree of attention has been bestowed on this branch of study (poetry) by almost all students,” he wrote. “They all had by heart the name of all the dramatists of the time of Elizabeth and James the First, dramatists of whose works they, in all probability, will never see a copy; Marlowe, Ford, Massinger, Decker, and so on. But few of them know that James the Second was deposed.”¹⁷ Macaulay worried that this lack of historical knowledge threatened to put at risk the entire purpose of English education in India, which was to create enlightened, liberal subjects. He wrote to Cameron, “If all that is effected by such unprecedented means is a showy insubstantial acquaintance with English literature and an ignorance of the most basic facts of English history...what can be expected but the diffusion of ignorance?”¹⁸

Macaulay’s criticisms led to a substantial overhauling of history teaching at Hindu College. By the next year, Captain D.L. Richardson, the principal of the College, announced that “Lectures should take a wider scope, embracing an unbroken series of English history, from the

¹⁶ Theodore Koditschek, *Liberalism, Imperialism, and the Historical Imagination: Nineteenth century visions of Greater Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/947, “Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1838-9,” p. 31.

¹⁸ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/947, “Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1838-9,” p. 32.

accession of Henry VII to the revolution.”¹⁹ New books were introduced for the Senior school including David Hume’s *History of England* (1754-61), various works by Oliver Goldsmith on the history of Greece and Rome, and a new “Introduction to Universal History” compiled by the Public Instruction Committee.²⁰ The College Library also ordered multiple copies of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and James Mill’s *History of India*. By the early 1840s, some improvement could be seen in the students’ knowledge of history. According to the examiner’s report of student performance in 1840, “Some of the senior boys acquitted themselves pretty well in replies to questions on Ancient Roman History, and almost all very creditably (generally speaking) in English history of an elementary character.”²¹ There was further improvement next year, with the examiner reporting that “their answers on the history of England were very correct and ready.”²²

It was in the context of these efforts to revamp the teaching of history, and to realize the Macaulayite vision of liberal Indian subjects who would be “English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” that the idea for an Adam Smith essay contest was raised, and to which the paper now turns.

Smith, History, and the Limits of Sympathy

As mentioned at the beginning, the Smith prize contest was devised by C.H. Cameron, a member of the Council of Education and later its president, who believed that the teaching of moral philosophy had thus far been absent from the Hindu College curriculum. Cameron was informed

¹⁹ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/947, “Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1837,” p. 7.

²⁰ It is unclear who wrote the “Introduction to Universal History,” but given Macaulay’s interests in this area, it is highly plausible that he compiled the reader.

²¹ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, “Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1839-40,” p. 16.

²² BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, “Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1840-41 and 1841-2,” p. 60.

that Principal Richardson had, in fact, tried to incorporate the teaching of Smith's work into the history lessons, but "in consequence of the scarcity of copies in Calcutta of [Smith's] work...he has been obliged to wait a further prosecution of his course."²³ Cameron eagerly took up the project of setting up the contest, ordering copies of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* from London, soliciting advice from other colleges in India, and designing possible questions for the contest. He hoped that, if the exercise were successful at Hindu College, it could be introduced to other institutions as well. His communication with the board of the English college at Madras suggested that there was significant demand for such an exercise. The board not only endorsed the idea, but also suggested adding Dugald Stewart's moral philosophy and Aristotle's ethics as part of the teaching on moral philosophy.²⁴

The contest finally came together on 11 March 1843, and Senior students at Hindu College assembled into the College Hall. The students had not seen the questions before, and the answers were written in Cameron's presence "without any reference to books or other assistance."²⁵ Unfortunately, the colonial archive has only preserved the essays of the gold and silver medal winning students, and so it is not possible to see the full range of views of Smith that were held by Indian students. Moreover, since Cameron himself devised the questions and determined the winners, it is possible that he chose the ones that most closely reflected his own reading of Smith. As such, this paper does not purport to recover some authentic Indian interpretation of Smith; instead, the purpose here is to study the educational institutions and practices of early colonial liberalism that led to the particular reading of Smith contained in these

²³ BL, OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, "General Report of the Late General Committee of Public Instruction for 1840-1 and 1841-2," 72.

²⁴ BL, OIOC, IOR/F/4/2067/94987, "Proceedings on Native Education, 1841," p. 282.

²⁵ BL, OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, "Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1842-43," Appendix D, lviii.

essays. The students' reading of Smith was not only shaped by their own experiences as elite, English-speaking colonial subjects, but as the previous section suggested, it was also shaped by the pedagogical and curricular agendas of Hindu College where they were educated.

The contest itself consisted of a series of questions in two parts. The questions in the first part were designed by Cameron to test proficiency of the text and its main arguments, while the questions in the second part invited critiques and challenges to Smith's theory. The questions in the first part asked students to reflect on whether moral judgements were founded in reason or sentiment; where according to Smith our sense of propriety and impropriety came from; and, where the origins of the generally-accepted maxims of morality were located.²⁶ Both medal winners, Anand Kishen Bose and Rajnarayan Bose, began by explaining that moral judgements were located neither purely in reason nor purely in sentiment, but in what Rajnarayan described as, "the compounded principle of what is called by Smith sympathy."²⁷ Rajnarayan argued that Smith's notion of sympathy was a compounded principle because "every time it is exercised, it is compounded of imaginative, ratiocinative, and emotive processes." In this way, according to the two students, Smith's idea of sympathy combined the rational and the sentimental theories of moral reasoning.

Both students spent a considerable part of their answers explaining how Smith saw the exercise and operation of sympathy. Anand Kishen, who won the gold medal perhaps because his essay contained more concrete illustrations as the contest had required, described the operation of sympathy, and how moral judgments are formed, in the following way:

²⁶ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, "Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1842-43," Appendix D, lviii.

²⁷ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, "Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1842-43," Appendix D, lxiv.

When I see a person commanding himself in the agony of disease, I approve of his conduct. My approbation cannot arise before I perceive his feelings; the perception is caused by my imagining myself to be transported into his situation, and by observing the state of my feelings under similar circumstances. Thus by *my* feelings, I judge of *his*; and, if subsequently, I find that I would have acted similarly as he acts, I approve of his conduct.²⁸

Both Anand Kishen and Rajnarayan agreed that people cannot have an immediate perception of someone else's feelings, but the operation of sympathy allows them to imagine themselves in a similar situation to ascertain how they would feel if put in that situation. In this way, sympathy which Rajnarayan called, "the fact upon which Smith has ingeniously and ably erected his entire theory," forms the basis of moral conduct and forms people's sense of propriety and impropriety.²⁹

At the same time, both students argued that sympathy, as a standard of judging moral conduct, had many limitations. In the second part of their essays, in which they were asked to critique Smith's ideas, both students drew upon the notion of historical development and progress to argue that sympathy could not be a universal guide for judging moral conduct. Anand Kishen began by arguing that sympathy was a "vacillating and capricious principle" that could not yield universal moral truths, since it could change over time and appear different in different societies. He used the example of judging works of art by explaining that we would deem only those works of art as genius which have "throughout the revolutions of time, the mutations of custom and religions, have continued to please the generality of civilized nations." In other words, he argued, we cannot just rely on our own judgements which might be shaped by "the heat of party spirit and popular phrenzy" or "some passion or prejudice."³⁰ In this way, the

²⁸ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, "Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1842-43," Appendix D, lxi.

²⁹ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, "Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1842-43," Appendix D, lxxvii.

³⁰ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, "Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1842-43," Appendix D, lxxiii.

judgment of time and our understanding of what prevails “in almost all civilized countries”

might help to correct our immediate and personal moral judgements.

Rajnarayan’s answer was even more explicit in using the idea of historical development and civilizational superiority to criticize Smith’s notion of sympathy. He wrote:

Some nations follow customs which, judged according to the pure and elevated standard of European morality, are morally culpable, but which the nations themselves consider as innocent... The rite of infant-sacrifice and Suttee prevailed until very lately in Hindostan. In the island of Formosa, promiscuous sexual intercourse is considered no crime; and in some parts of Africa the people throw their parents from trees. All these have originated in mistaken, misguided, and rude sympathy; yet we can venture that when these nations will gain the same stock of information and civilization, as the Europeans possess, their elevated reason will correct these products of misguided sympathy.³¹

The answer appears to echo the Macaulayite vision of historical and civilizational development, according to which societies improve over time, gradually attaining ever-increasing liberty and refinement. Rajnarayan’s use of this historicist mode of reasoning to challenge the concept of sympathy reflects the ways in which his reading of Smith was shaped by the curriculum of Hindu College.

The use of the “Suttee” (*Sati*) example is particularly interesting. *Sati* (or the rite of widow-burning) was abolished in India by the colonial government in 1829, a mere fourteen years before this essay contest was held. The ban, which proved to be very controversial, was debated extensively by Indians. On the one hand, orthodox Hindus opposed the ban and petitioned the colonial government to complain against what they deemed to be an infringement on religious liberty. On the other hand, reformist figures (including the early liberal thinker Rammohun Roy)³² supported the government’s position. These debates continued throughout the

³¹ BL,OIOC, IOR/V/24/948, “Report of the General Committee of Public Instruction, 1842-43,” Appendix D, lxvii.

³² For more on Roy as an early Indian liberal, see C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011).

1830s, particularly in Calcutta, and would have been fresh in the minds of Cameron and other teachers reading these essays.³³ As such, Rajnarayan's use of this example places this essay squarely within the sphere of colonial politics. However, his use of Macaulay's civilizational argument to denounce *Sati* aligns him with the liberal reformist position in an ambiguous way. On the one hand, Rajnarayan's essay could be read as a classic statement of the reformist position that *Sati* was an outdated practice. However, on the other hand, it could also be read as a critique of the ban itself, as it implies that once India has progressed to a certain civilizational status, the practice will disappear on its own and no ban will be necessary. As he put it, "elevated reason will correct these products of misguided sympathy." If we take Rajnarayan's essay to be part of liberal reformist discourse, then his engagement with Smith highlights the ambiguities of this discourse.

Conclusion: Sympathy and Liberal Imperialism

In her influential and important book, *A Turn to Empire* (2005), Jennifer Pitts argued that there was a "liberal turn to empire" in the early nineteenth century, marking a sharp departure from late-eighteenth century acceptance of civilizational difference. As she put it, "the liberal turn to empire was accompanied by the eclipse of nuanced and pluralist theories of progress as they gave way to more contemptuous notions of 'backwardness' and cruder dichotomy between barbarism and civilization."³⁴ In particular, Pitts sees this turn as reflected in the shift from the views of Smith and Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century to those of James and John Stuart

³³ For a broader discussion of the *Sati* debate, and the similarities between the different positions, see Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For more on Roy as an early Indian liberal, see C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁴ Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

Mill in the nineteenth century. Smith, like the Mills (and like Macaulay, for that matter) was a proponent of stadial history i.e. the notion that different societies are at different stages of historical development. However, Pitts argues that Smith's view of societal development held "a respectful posture toward non-European societies he regarded as being in earlier stages of development."³⁵ In contrast, the works of James Mill and Macaulay adopted a cruder version of the civilizational hierarchy, in which societies were not varied according to circumstance and contingency, but were rather divided between 'civilized' and 'barbaric'. This denigration of non-European societies, Pitts argues, provided justification for imperial interventions.

The argument I have presented here is broadly aligned with Pitts's narrative about the early nineteenth century. I agree, for instance, that Macaulay's emphasis on English education in India is part of the interventionist liberal impulse that Pitts describes. However, I modify this story in two ways. First, the gap between Smith's stadial history and Mill or Macaulay's stadial history is often not explained. What made Smith's stadial history inclusive and Mill's stadial history exclusionary? If the argument I have presented here is correct, then the difference lies in Smith's notion of sympathy. In other words, it is Smith's theory of moral sentiments that tempers his theory of societal development. A similarly well-developed account of sentiments is not to be found in the works of the nineteenth century liberal thinkers, which possibly explains the differences in their view of civilizational development.

The second way in which I modify this story is by examining Indian writing, including non-canonical sources like student essays, as a way to suggest that early-nineteenth century liberal reformism was co-authored by the colonial state and elite English-speaking Indians alike,

³⁵ Pitts, 25.

often within the context of colonial pedagogy. In other words, imperial liberal thought was not simply developed in Europe and then transported to Indian society via colonialism. Instead, I argue that it was forged within the colonial setting itself, and was reflected in mundane documents like exam essays and student writing. In this way, the Adam Smith essay contest, while a minor event in the history of colonial pedagogy, reveals important insights about the trajectory of colonial liberalism.