

Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire

Review Number:

635

Publish date:

Friday, 30 November, 2007

Author:

Durba Ghosh

ISBN:

9780521857048

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£48.00

Pages:

290pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521857048>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Karuna Sharma

The interaction between western men's and native women's sexuality makes the human body central to the articulation of colonial/imperial ideologies. Setting her study in eighteenth-century British India, Ghosh emphasises a pan-imperial understanding of body, and the role of race, gender and sexuality in empire-building in the early modern period. In my view, by seeing the body as a place where imperial power was imagined and exercised, Ghosh's study marks a fundamental re-conception of the nature and working of empires. While high politics and commerce dominate accounts of the British Empire, this book demonstrates the constitutive role of women/the colonised and explains how their bodily interaction with the English males/colonisers added to larger socio-political discourses.

At first, British abhorrence of Oriental practices was informed by specific moral virtues and a conviction of social superiority. In the British psyche, the Oriental aristocratic practices that were copied by East India Company servants were disgraceful; all the more so, perhaps, because at heart the English aristocracy felt threatened by the influx of new wealth from the East. A practical sense of cultural contact, imagined in the form of domestic-sexual arrangements, was conveyed through visual and narrative mediums, thus ensuring that colonial society was not threatened. The interracial sexual liaisons that actually took place, however, are a part of the past that has been selectively forgotten. Ghosh examines this past to reveal how men approached intimate relationships when they had an undercurrent of racial and class anxiety.

Those Englishmen who engaged in such relationships were particularly concerned about the future of their mixed-race children, and this led them - and colonial society at large - to confront complicated and delusive

questions, such as who should be classed as a British subject and what rights these indigenous companions and their offspring should enjoy. In the present book, we see that these anxieties were very much part of the eighteenth century - although they were to expand further in the nineteenth. In the Company state's struggle to limit the number of people to whom it granted the status of British subjects, thereby protecting the whiteness of its citizens, the native companions' incorporation into its system of rule was achieved by force majeure. On the other hand, as these companions grappled with social ostracisation they too harboured many anxieties and were often able to negotiate with the colonial institutions of governance. This negotiation ipso facto solidified racial and gender hierarchies. An ambitious narration of various case studies, both civil and criminal, in the book exposes the materiality of colonial sexual-domestic arrangements and reveals that the social structure within the Company state reflected an unequal access to equality.

Companionship with native women held an anomalous position in the scheme of the colonial establishment - an establishment in which men sought to be powerful. For some it could be politically rewarding, as illustrated in the narrative of the rise of two important families, those of James Achilles Kirkpatrick and William Palmer. A strong foothold could be gained in local court politics under the auspices of noble women. Through the study of various wills, Ghosh focuses on the organisation of household relations, the anxieties shared by different classes of men, and the extent to which the Company state shared them. Men in the higher echelons of the Company state, as well as those aspiring to such a position, were aware of the prejudice that any children they sired would face in India if they did not choose for them English social opportunities and class status. Such fathers were good patriarchs who replicated the English order by acknowledging their paternal obligations towards their offspring. However, while these men bequeathed social standing and estates to their children, they provided little for their companions. The re-socialisation and Anglicisation of the child overrode its mother's economic rights. In contrast, the less-moneyed, lower- and lower-middle-class men, who were minor bureaucrats, recognized both sets of relationship.

Nevertheless, the social consequences of miscegenation for these men, as well as for their progenies, were constitutive of their identity. Under all circumstances, as fathers and husbands, they upheld norms of masculinity and stood for the cause of paternal obligations. This was facilitated by the Company state, which had to confront the status of these relationships which had been neither religiously nor legally recognised? The easy solution, albeit one with great ramifications, was to give the female companions the same legal status as their men. This was certainly one way to organise household relationships. Thus, in pursuit of a respectable Empire, these traders, merchants, civil servants and soldiers were mindful of social/moral and racial distinctions. In Ghosh's study the dynamics of colonial inequities within interracial families reflect how gender and race hierarchies paralleled social order in the colonial settlements of the East India Company. Long before such relationships became taboo within the larger British Empire, the colonial mind was infested with such distinctions. The unequal material provisions made in wills for companions, the priority given to mixed-race children over their widowed mothers, enacted and reinforced broader conceptions of racial cultural and gendered inequalities.

Against this background, the legal status that had been accorded to interracial families, as noted by Ghosh, brought native women into the system of colonial governance. The women's demands forced the Company state to review who were British subjects and who could legitimately ask for its legal and social protection. Looking at things from the women's perspective also allows for a better understanding of their role. For instance, the appearance of a mother's pet name - or even its complete absence - in baptismal registers signalled the presence of native women rather than the suppression of their identity. The women, too, had certain anxieties, and these can highlight the various ways in which they became part of colonial society. Through the study of their wills and of their everyday life, Ghosh shows how these women maintained their community and familial ties and their linguistic and religious practices. The stories of Begum Samru and Begum Bennett, both native companions, reveal the consequences of interracial conjugality for native women. They made changes in their own customary practices, refashioning themselves in order to negotiate greater advantages. While Samru's story shows how women might rise from obscure origins, Bennett's reveals the significant constraints that native women faced. Their personalities were representative of neither typical English nor native women, as they occupied several cultural spaces. They were strategic and resistant

when they recorded their subjectivities, their final testaments, letters or political negotiations, and in this way they could register themselves in the colonial archives.

Later, Ghosh demonstrates how the pursuit of justice, in civil and criminal cases, was one arena in which the new subjects (those on whom the colonial judicial structure bestowed a legal status) by coincidence created a normative gendered and racial order within their own domestic units, thus buttressing the political authority of the Company state. The rule of law was responsible for enforcing the gendered distinctions that marred the early colonial order, while ambivalence prevailed in the handing down of judicial decisions. Whereas this ambivalence tied women's legal identity to their male counterparts, it also protected their rights for as long as the position of the patriarch went unchallenged and the legitimacy and order of the Company went uncompromised. Each and every decision, legal or otherwise, unremittingly supported a man's right to enjoy the body and estates of his companion. But the law also gave a woman the same legal identity as her partner - in some cases at least. In short, a sexual and social regulation pertaining to English morality was enforced by asserting a man's absolute control over his companion. When cases were reported to the courts, both the parties crafted stories which made sense to the judges and could help them secure acquittals. Domestic violence came to be justified, as it was the arena where the male ruled. The fact that women's agency was contingent upon the patriarchal authority of the immediate lord did make them subservient, but it also served to keep them alive to colonial bureaucracy.

For its own moral and political imperatives, while the colonial state in different ways was securing men's sexual access to the bodies of native women, its courts, to all intents and purposes, also legitimated the presence of these women around military cantonments and colonial settlements. They were to be ready domestic and sexual partners. Ghosh engages with crime, violence and the ensuing legal issues in which women were always suspected, as the rule of law seemed to justify any crime against women who lived near to military areas. Under all circumstances their quest for justice underpinned the male position and secured the influence of the rule of law over domestic arrangements. In the trajectory of hierarchies, Ghosh sees these domestic-sexual arrangements as paradigmatic of service relationships within the setting of the cantonment area. Whereas men got easy service from women and the Company secured a structural arrangement to enforce appropriate definitions of household hierarchies, native women acquired a financial basis for the domestic relationships that they entered.

Ghosh further complicates this picture of economic and social-sexual interdependence by addressing women's interaction with the Company's bureaucracies and institutions. The East India Company's military administration, under a façade of responsiveness, moved forward with the practical and ideological work of socially engineering colonial settlements, and announced formal support funds - the Lord Clive's Pension Fund and the Military Orphan Society - for native companions and their children who lived close to military cantonments. Needless to say, the anxiety that these mixed-race orphans aroused was at least partly responsible for such moves, which, Ghosh argues, were intended to educate the children and so make them loyal and productive subjects. Military officials laid claim to paternal authority over a large number of subjects in order to bring them under the jurisdiction of the nascent colonial government, thereby furthering their political authority. But officials in England did not share their views and instituted various exclusions that limited their financial responsibilities.

Financial constraints were often cited to explain the marked differences in approach, but the anxieties over the erosion of a racially pure white society had been central to the colonial authorities. When military officials in India championed the cause of the companions and children of their brothers in arms, they prioritised the patriarchal contract, with its notion of women as possessions, over racial distinctions. Ghosh emphasizes that it was only after 1770 that the racial status of the recipient became a central subject of debate, and that paternal benevolence became contingent upon a hierarchy based on gender and class. For the companions it was a chance to plead for legal and material support on the ground of being British subjects, which further burdened those disbursing funds with anxieties over claimants' eligibility for such material provision. In the minds of the former, this provision was compensation for the women's unpaid domestic and sexual labour. As a result they supported such claims and wanted the military officials to be specific about their policies. That Ghosh can show inconsistency on the part of officials reveals how these

women's claims forced them to contemplate such issues as the nature of Company policy on eligibility.

The women articulated their rights as subjects of the Company state. In particular, their interaction with the Orphan Society is seen by Ghosh as a negotiation with the system. The women stayed close to cantonment areas because of their children, who were forcibly taken away from them to mitigate the effects of an indigenous upbringing. These children were cared for by officials until they were old enough to go to a school for orphans. Further, even when they were clearly entangled in the mesh of the politics of material provision, the women gained from the tension between military officials in India and the higher authorities in England. While the former visualised the political authority of the Company through the household authority of the soldier, the women relied on their rights as members of military families, and unwittingly consolidated the paternal structures from which these institutions had been formed.

The expansion and colonialism of the English posed a formidable challenge to their identity, which emerged particularly troubled when its male sexuality produced racial anxieties in the colonial landscape. The colonial archive might have deliberately avoided recording racial conjugality, but the number of wills left by colonial companions does suggest that these relationships existed; and this seems to have caused much anxiety. The sexual economy of the colonial period became liable to government intervention, and the debate around mixed-race intimacy became centred on issues of race, gender and class. A degree of ambivalence existed in the governance of various institutions and in the policies that were developed, as the native women were readily available sexual partners on whose bodies the paternal authority of their partners could be established - which aligned with legitimising and ensuring colonial control.

In this rigorously researched book, the author shows that the making of empire relied on paternalism. A parallel can also be drawn in indigenous practices, where the Mughal - the political power before the British - showered paternalism on their women. The women had an amount of agency and at the same time they inadvertently came to underpin the gender hierarchies of the harem. Undeniably the specific socio-economic and cultural environment produced typical gendered relations, but a mention of the role of local influences in the organisation of household relationships, where this can be ascertained, would have been interesting. The author points out towards the end of the book that interracial intimacy met with little resistance from the native elites. The reason for this is that these women belonged to the lower caste orders, and were thus open to, if one can put it like this, the sexual assaults of higher caste orders. This is reminiscent of prescriptive texts like *Manusmriti*, which advises that the sexuality of those who would endanger caste purity and ritual status should be guarded. But women of the lower orders were easily accessible to all and had no one to complain to. Ghosh has been able to convey that racial transgression and the negotiations for women worked in tandem with global understanding of a woman's body as a site where those in power tended to inscribe their authority. In every way, this study of imperial anxieties has historicised the household and a hitherto marginalised section of society. The analysis of some (un)expected aspects of the English colonialism addresses the sexualised gendered context of the Empire and vouches for relations between bodies, empires and the worlds of past. This book will attract a cross-disciplinary audience.

Other reviews:

oxford journals

<http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/113/4/1110.extract> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/635>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4155>

[2] <http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/113/4/1110.extract>