

Introduction

The colonial era is roughly coterminous with the rise of a knowledge that I will be calling “modern, western knowledge” – “modern” to denote its relatively recent emergence, “western” to indicate the cultural specificity of these historical origins. Along with guns and goods, this knowledge traveled to the colonies, and it was in part through this knowledge that the non-western world came to be conquered, represented, and ruled. But although it arrived from the outside, often at the point of a bayonet, this knowledge ceased to be merely the colonizer’s knowledge. It found a home in its new locales. A number of agencies served to disseminate it, among them armies, railroads, trade, and the institutions and practices of colonial government.

In India the most direct and one of the most important of these agencies was western education. The 1830s witnessed a bitter dispute in the ranks of colonial officialdom over whether the British Indian government should patronize “Oriental” knowledges, or whether it should direct its attentions solely to promoting western knowledge, initially through the medium of English. Victory went to the “Anglicists,” led by Thomas Babington Macaulay, and from 1835 India’s colonial rulers became the agency for promoting “western education,” that is, education which sought to disseminate modern, western knowledge through modern institutions and pedagogic processes. It was anticipated and desired by the victorious party that this would gradually supplant indigenous knowledges, which were condemned as (variously) “superstitious,” “mythic,” “primitive,” and, more generally, untrue; or, as Macaulay characterized them, “medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, astronomy which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school, history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and geography made of seas of treacle and seas of butter.”¹

After 1835 India’s colonial rulers spent the bulk of the state money allocated for educating their subjects on modern, western education. When in

1854 the authorities in Britain gave instructions for extending the provision of education beyond the élite classes of native society for which it had initially been intended, they made it clear that “the education which we desire to see extended in India is that which has for its object the diffusion of the improved arts, science, philosophy and literature of Europe; in short, European knowledge.”² Schools were established to teach this knowledge, and in 1857 the universities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras were established, soon to be followed by universities in other parts of India.³ The British thus undertook a task that lent its name to the title of a work by Charles Trevelyan, one of the architects of the decision of 1835: *The Education of the People of India*. While this effort was being made, from the early decades of the nineteenth century colonialism itself came to be seen as an essentially pedagogic enterprise. Those aspects of British rule which had long been hailed as the justification for foreign rule of another peoples – the Pax Britannica which created peace where once there had been disorder and brigandage, the “rule of law,” the provision of public works, and so on – were now seen not only as goods in themselves but also as having an educative value. A textbook of 1897 told its audience of Indian schoolboys that the Penal Code, public works, railways, irrigation and civil works, schools, the post office and telegraph, and a free press were all forces working to educate India.⁴ The ascription of pedagogic effects and benefits to almost all the practices and institutions of colonial rule became pervasive, so much so that sometimes it assumed burlesque forms: in 1913 a government enquiry declared, “The Committee regards the provision of proper latrine and urinal accommodation as not only necessary in the interests of . . . health . . . [and] sanitation . . . but also as having a distinctly educative value.”⁵ It became common to describe formal instruction or schooling as but an aspect or subset of this wider pedagogic mission.⁶ Partly because it came to be seen in this way, western education was endowed with great significance, even though the sums expended upon it were minuscule, and the numbers directly affected by it a small proportion of the total population.⁷

There was also, for a long period, a keen awareness of the “exoticism” of western knowledge. The architects of the decision of 1835 were in no doubt as to the momentousness of the decision they had made. Charles Trevelyan wrote, “The decision which was come to is worthy of everlasting record. Although homely in its words, it will be mighty in its effects long after we are mouldering in the dust.”⁸ The *Pioneer*, an English-owned newspaper published from Allahabad, wrote that “the experiment [of Western education]

going on in India is one which, in the immensity of its scope, the gravity of the issues depending on it, and the conditions under which it has to be carried on, has had no parallel in the world's history."⁹ Schooling, not on the face of it the setting for high drama, was frequently treated in highly dramatic terms, and described in flowery language. Nor was this by any means confined to the British. Syed Mahmood wrote: "The origin, rise and progress of English education in India . . . constitute one of the most significant episodes, not only in the annals of India, but in the history of the civilised world."¹⁰ Not to be outdone, a contributor to the nationalist *Modern Review* scaled new rhetorical heights: "The English education of India! It is one of the most momentous events the world has ever seen and most difficult problems the human brain has ever faced. How to transport the learning, method, and spirit of Western Europe to Middle Eastern Asia, among a subject race . . . and make it grow as native of the soil . . . It is a more difficult achievement than the annihilation of time and space by modern science."¹¹

That sense of exoticism has long since faded. Today almost all serious, "respectable," and officially disseminated knowledge about the non-western world shares the presumptions and guiding categories of modern western knowledge. This is so whether the sites for the production of knowledge are located in the western world, or in the non-western world. And usually, this fact occasions little comment, let alone sustained reflection, because western knowledge is no longer seen as only one mode of knowing but as knowledge itself, compared to which all other traditions of reasoning are only Unreason, or earlier stages in the march toward Reason.

This book is a study of how western knowledge came to be disseminated in India, such that it came to assume its current status as the obvious, and almost the only, mode of knowing about India. The book is principally concerned not with the thinking and intentions of the colonizer but with how western education was received and consumed by the colonized. It is also, and simultaneously, an argument that the status of modern western knowledge—the assumption that it is not merely one mode of knowledge but is knowledge "as such," that it must be adequate to its Indian object because it is adequate to all objects—is questionable, and needs to be rethought. What follows thus has certain affinities with recent studies, some of them undertaken under the sign of postcolonial theory, that seek not to "apply" our modern western knowledge to the non-western world, but rather to make that knowledge itself a matter for investigation and problematizing.¹²

Subject to Pedagogy

New knowledges do not simply stuff the heads of existing people with new ideas; they serve to create new people, which is why “the history of knowledge constitutes a privileged point of view for the genealogy of the subject.”¹³ Knowledges position and construct knowers in different ways, and this was especially true of modern, western knowledge. Why “especially” so? Because modern knowledge helps initiate, and is a defining feature of, a deep transformation which creates a knowing subject who is set apart from, even set up against, the objects to be known.

This transformation has been characterized in a variety of ways, one of the more famous of which is Max Weber’s notion of “disenchantment.” According to Weber, modern western man’s increasing capacity to “master” the world is attributable to a type of knowledge that approaches the world looking for laws and regularities rather than purposes and meanings. The efficacy of what might initially be a more-or-less methodological or technical postulate – that we act as if the world were rationally calculable – results in turning it into a natural stance. The world is disenchanted in the sense that no magic and no mysteries pervade the world nor yield up knowledge of it; and in that the world is external to us, it does not resonate with our longings and aspirations. We can find no support or vindication for our choices, values, and beliefs, for a disenchanted world does not provide us with our own reflection – it is blank, and cold. Our knowledge of it does not reveal its meaning; the only meanings we find “out there” are those which we have put there.¹⁴

This knowledge is fundamentally different from the premodern knowledge(s) of Europe, which were displaced by this new knowledge, and which, Charles Taylor writes, required “understanding the world in categories of meaning, as existing to embody or express an order of Ideas or archetypes, as manifesting the rhythm of divine life, or the foundational acts of the gods, or the will of God,” and “seeing the world as a text, or the universe as a book.”¹⁵ Such knowledges presumed a very different relation between the knower and the known, between humans and their world; for one thing, they did not draw the line between the two so sharply. To simplify, they presumed that humans found meaning and purpose in the world; and as modern knowledge emerged and was defined through a critique of scholastic and other medieval knowledges, this was seen as the source and root of the errors of premodern knowledges. To find an order in the universe and seek to harmonize with it, or to find the correspondences so loved by the Renaissance, or to subscribe

to theories of knowledge which attribute to man an “innate” disposition to assent to the good and the true – all these appeared, from an emergent, modern, and scientific perspective, as a confusing of man with his world, most clearly manifested in attributing to the world a meaning and purpose which in fact belongs to us, and which we have projected onto it. A conception of knowledge that posits a knowing subject and an object external to it is also one that makes policing this distinction the very basis of any valid knowledge. Any confusion between the knowing subject and the object must be guarded against; solipsism on the one hand, and “projecting” one’s desires and purposes onto the world on the other, become the two cardinal sins to be avoided.

This was once a novel conception of knowledge, and the subject it presumed was not found ready-to-hand but rather had to be forged, had to be created through new pedagogic practices, and through the transformations and disciplines enforced by industrialization and capitalism, modern armies, and the modern novel – a process that was complex and difficult, and one that met with resistance. All the more so in the Indian subcontinent, where the knowledges in question were not autochthonous, and where the instruments for forging the new subject had not been slowly working away through the centuries of industrialization and the emergence of new disciplinary matrixes of family, prison, school, and factory, but were heavily dependent upon the violent and coercive agency of colonial rule.

As a study of western knowledge in colonial India, this is also a work about subjectivities. It is about how Western education in India posited and served to create – and sometimes failed to fully create – certain sorts of subjects.

Subject of History

This is in part a work of history, and it is also a work about writing history, and the possibility thereof. Why it should be about writing history is readily discernible, for this book is in a very precise sense a product of the history which it retells. It is a history of the western, rational type, approved of – and practised by – Macaulay, rather than, say, a Puranic history (Macaulay’s “history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long”). As a history of western knowledge in India written from within that knowledge, a work such as this needs a reflexive moment; it needs to ask whether the ensuing circularity is an enabling hermeneutical circle or a disabling, self-referential one.

But what could it mean to ask about the “possibility” of history writing? Here I will try to explicate this question by returning to my brief description of Weber’s account of “disenchantment,” this time to complicate it by juxtaposing it with another account.

Part of the appeal of Weber’s account is that in arguing that there are no meanings and purposes and values “in” the world, he does not conclude that meanings and values are superfluous. Weber’s well-known insistence that the scientist seek to keep fact and values distinct is not born of a positivist denigration of the latter; indeed, in part Weber argues, in Kantian fashion, for a realm of objectivity in order to make room for values—as distinctly human products.¹⁶ This yields, or can be made to yield, a historicism which is possibly more appealing now than it was in its own day. Just as individuals assign meaning and choose values, so different peoples at different times have shaped collective values and ways of being in the world. Scholars of the human sciences can, from texts, monuments, artworks and the like, reconstruct their world-picture or *Weltanschauung*—a favorite word of Weber’s, as of a number of his contemporaries. Medieval men and women attributed their own actions and conceptions to transcendent beings; this was a part of their *Weltanschauung*, something the historian can reconstruct or piece together from their art, their philosophy, and so on. We moderns know better, although—the source of Weber’s melancholy—the price of our superior (self-) knowledge may be that we are less at home in the world. In all cases, man is a meaning-endowing and culture-secreting being, and from the material and textual traces and remnants he leaves behind, we can piece together what sort of man he was.

In “The Age of the World Picture” Martin Heidegger seems at first glance to be offering an account similar to this one. Like Weber, he sees the more obvious manifestations of modernity—individualism, technology, and so on—as based upon something which is, however, more fundamental. This something “more fundamental” reads not entirely unlike Weber’s distinction between a subject who has become central and a world of objects which is disenchanting, and Heidegger too talks of a world picture. But his account is in fact very different.

Heidegger also states that at the heart of modernity is the rise of an absolute subjectivity, such that the world appears to man as if it were “for” him. But this is not a new *Weltanschauung*, replacing the older one: the modern age is not distinguished from other ages by its peculiarly “modern” picture of

the world, but rather by the very fact that it can conceive and grasp the world as picture.¹⁷ Nor can the difference between the modern and the medieval and ancient worlds be understood in terms of different “cultural values” or “spiritual values,” for there was nothing, writes Heidegger, like “culture” in the Middle Ages or “spiritual values” in the ancient world: “Only in the modern era have spirit and culture been deliberately experienced as fundamental modes of human comportment, and only in most recent times have ‘values’ been paraded as standards for such comportment.”¹⁸ The difference between our age and other ages (and other peoples, then and now) cannot be rendered in terms of different “outlooks,” “views,” “values,” and “experiences,” because such ways of thinking are already modern, are already products of a historical and intellectual transformation which places Man at the centre of things, which now exist for him and only exist inasmuch as they are pictured, valued or experienced.¹⁹

Unlike Weber and many others, who rightly urge that we recognize “our” way of understanding and engaging with our world as possibly specific to us rather than part of a “human condition,” Heidegger goes further, questioning the very idea that man has always been a culture-secreting being, and that different men in different epochs “secreted” different values and meanings. To recognize, as Weber did, that others may have viewed the world differently is an advance over an ahistorical ascription of similarity, but under the seeming defamiliarization of this sort is still an unwarranted assumption, namely that always, everywhere, there is “Man,” whose way of being in the world is to “view” it. One way of approaching Heidegger is thus to see him as radicalizing and going beyond such historicizing, and in so doing “explaining” its limitations. Historicizing approaches take a feature of the modern, Occidental world – namely that we are subjects whose values and world-picture become embodied in socially produced meaning – and read it into the world as such.

Pressing into service this aspect of Heidegger’s thought, I will ask: Where Man has not become subject and the world has not become picture, is it still possible to write history? History writing is always the “history of” – that is, it has a subject whose past it recapitulates. For modern historiography, which is deeply imbued with humanist and anthropological premises, this subject is Man, conceived as a being who produces culture and meaning, and whose meanings can be deciphered from his texts and his monuments and other “traces” of his subjectivity. But if, as this book shall show, modern knowl-

edge failed fully to produce a subject and to produce “the world as picture” in India, then how do we write history, and what is the status of the knowledge we produce when we do write it?

The Plan of This Book

These are questions of general, theoretical import. But how do these theoretical ambitions connect with a historical study of the diffusion of western education, and of the debates to which it gave rise? Moreover, what I am calling modern, western knowledge is internally highly differentiated – there are liberals and Marxists, Kantians and Hegelians, empiricists and idealists, and so on. Is it even possible to write about the dissemination of an object called “western knowledge”? And – a final question – if this book is a critique of aspects of modern western knowledge, do I write from a position outside this knowledge?

What makes it possible to speak of “modern western knowledge,” notwithstanding the numerous camps within it, is that for all their differences, they share some “core presumptions,” “categories,” and “background assumptions” – terms that I will be using interchangeably. These are usually unstated, because they are (or have become) naturalized, and have assumed the status of axioms. Some prefer to call these core presumptions an “episteme” or “social imaginary,” but whatever the nomenclature, in all cases what is being referred to is not any specific intellectual position, representation, or practice but the “foundational assumptions about what counts as an adequate representation or practice in the first place.”²⁰ I seek to explicate these assumptions in the chapters that follow, and also to subject modern western knowledge to critical scrutiny, by showing that the presumptions that it takes to be axiomatic and universal are not in fact so, and were not so in India.

The character of this critical enterprise needs to be carefully specified. I do not argue that the presumptions characterizing western knowledge were falsified by the “reality” of India. Arguments of this sort – an example is the “nativist” contention that western knowledge is an “alien” imposition, and therefore an inadequate instrument by which to know India – suffer from a number of crippling defects. Critiques of this sort assume that knowledge is “of” an object external to it, and thus that acquiring knowledge is a matter of “mirroring” the “real”;²¹ in this view, if western knowledge is to be criticized, that is because it fails to provide an adequate account of its Indian object. In arguing so, this adherents of this view partake of a representational episte-

mology which, ironically, is that of the modern knowledge which they seek to call into question. And in judging western knowledge to be inadequate, they presuppose a correct or adequate understanding of the “reality” of India without being able to account for where such knowledge itself comes from, and what warrant we have for treating it as the standard by which to measure modern knowledge.

Here I do not seek to step “outside” western knowledge, measure it against the “reality” of India, and show it to be wanting. I seek instead to show that in the course of the dissemination of western knowledge in India, the debates and discourses to which it gave rise can be read as registering the fact (often experienced as a disquiet) that its “foundational assumptions” could not really be assumed. It is through an attentiveness to these disturbances on the surface of western knowledge in the course of its dissemination, rather than from a vantage point outside it, that one can locate and demonstrate how western knowledge was rendered problematic in India. Since knowledges do not merely cognize a world external to them but serve to constitute that world, I also remain attentive to the ways in which, in colonial India, western knowledge reshaped what it was thought to be merely describing.

This means that I write with and from within western knowledge. It also means that the enquiry into how this knowledge was disseminated, and the argument that its presumptions and axioms cannot always be taken as axiomatic, are not two separate exercises. It is not that I first provide a historical narrative of the arrival of western knowledge in India, and then seek to evaluate its truth claims, and its adequacy to its Indian object; it is precisely through the study of how the knowledge was disseminated that I show how its enabling epistemic presumptions were rendered problematic – or else served to remake its Indian object.

Chapters 1 and 2 follow a common intellectual strategy. Each documents a controversy and the discourse that it generated, and delves into the implicit (and sometimes explicit) presumptions which are shown to underlie and animate the debates. Chapter 1 surveys the century-long complaint that Indian students treated western education as a mere means to an end, and that they learned by rote, thereby defeating the purpose of an education predicated upon the idea that knowledge is only truly such when it has been “understood” rather than simply memorized. I interpret this complaint as articulating the anxiety that modern knowledge was not producing the modern subject which it presupposed, and ask whether we should conclude that this was because another subjectivity, corresponding to indigenous modes of re-

lating to knowledge, was diverting and frustrating the impact of western education. This question turns upon whether the desire to read historical evidence in a fashion which does not naturalize the modern, western mode of being a subject (thereby treating it as the norm) is best served by reading “difference” into “subjectivity,” or whether doing so only renders all forms of being human into different ways of being a subject, thereby dissolving the very difference to which this strategy seeks to remain sensitive.

Chapter 2 documents the widely expressed belief that western education, expected not only to transform Indian students’ knowledge but also their character and morality, had indeed done so – but not for the better. Western-educated Indians were thought to have been plunged into the throes of a “moral crisis” as a result of their exposure to western knowledge, evidenced in their moral and intellectual “inconsistency.” According to this view, the “inconsistent” beliefs and practices of educated Indians arose out of their immersion in two incommensurable worlds, each informed by different beliefs and its own moral code: the modern world of western knowledge and the institutions and practices of colonial civil society, and the world of traditional beliefs and institutions. I show that this diagnosis was enabled by a number of presuppositions that were and are modern presuppositions, encoded in modern, western knowledge; thus here the knowledge being disseminated in schools and universities was simultaneously put to use to characterize and explain an unexpected effect of this knowledge. How adequate was this knowledge to explaining its own effects? Could it comprehend and account for its own failures? What was the relation between western knowledge as a means for comprehending social change in India and western knowledge as one of the agents of that change?

We who live in an age gifted, or cursed, with the “historical sense” often think that everything has a history – that history simply “is,” even if not all peoples developed a sense of historicity and the means by which to record and write it. In chapter 3 I argue the contrary: it is not that there is the fact of history, which among some peoples at certain times leads to history writing, but rather that the code and representational form which constitutes the modern practice of writing history gives us the history we think we had. If this argument, baldly summarized here, is valid – if history is not something which is always there, and which can be reconstructed well (as through modern protocols of history writing) or badly (as through myths and epics and legends), but something which is constituted and constructed through the codes which purport to simply re-present it – then we need to inquire

more closely into the enabling presumptions of modern practices of history writing. We should not be surprised to discover that these presumptions are part and parcel of modern, western knowledge; history writing is itself, after all, a modern knowledge. However these presumptions include those which are discussed and shown to be problematic in the preceding chapters. Thus here I formulate and address a paradox: modern western knowledge provides many of the enabling assumptions of history writing, yet history writing finds these presumptions rendered problematic when it seeks to narrativize the emergence and dissemination of modern, western knowledge in India.

Whereas part I of this book seeks to interrogate the discourses to which the spread of education gave rise for their hidden presumptions, part II seeks to discern what place education acquired in the imagination of nationalists, and others, who both sought this education and criticized it. Western education was not only where the question of subjectivity came to be posed; it was also the site where collective identities were produced. Indeed, the impact of western education derived less from the transformations that it effected upon the relatively small numbers who were subject to pedagogy, and more from its having become the object of desire and contestation; less, for instance, because many nationalists were western-educated, and more because nationalism made western education an important part of its vision of what was required to bring into being an independent and modern nation. The role that western education came to play in the production of collective identities, and in particular the role that it played in the nationalist project to found a nation at once modern and yet different, provides the subject matter for part II of this book.

In the nineteenth century alarm was expressed over Muslim “backwardness,” this backwardness being measured in terms of the failure of Muslims, by comparison with Hindus, to avail themselves of western education. Chapter 4 enquires into the epistemic conditions enabling this discourse, this time locating them not in unstated ontological and epistemological presumptions that characterize western knowledge but more specifically in the practices of colonial governmentality, and in intellectual disciplines closely associated with them. It was only when “population” became an object of knowledge and governance that “backwardness” could become a subject for investigation and concern. But measuring the backwardness of the Muslim entailed conceiving what it meant to be Muslim in a novel way, and thus a debate centering on western education and Muslims also created new ways of thinking – and being – Muslim.

Partha Chatterjee and others have shown that in the nineteenth century an emergent nationalism made the Indian woman the emblem and custodian of Indianness, at the same time as nationalists sought to imitate and acquire those “material” advantages of the West which were necessary to found an independent nation.²² But if woman were to become the repository of an essential cultural identity which needed to be preserved, this did not mean that she was not herself to be subjected to change. At the same time that woman was made into an icon of Indian identity and culture, there began a concerted project to transform and “modernize” the middle-class woman and the Indian home. Female education was an important part of this project, and chapter 5 examines this and the tension which marked it. Because of the symbolic load which woman was required to bear, any signs that this project was failing not only testified to the continued backwardness of the Indian home, and thus of the would-be nation, but also, and more fundamentally, seemingly disqualified the educated nationalist élites’ claims to being the modern vanguard of an ancient nation. Incapable of transforming their homes, how could they transform the nation they wished to lead?

Most books dealing with India’s recent past find that the opposition between colonizer and nationalist was a decisive one, and many structure their investigations around it. For the most part that is not so of this book, and chapter 6 explains why. There were of course some important lines of division between nationalists and rulers over the subject of education. Many important nationalist figures, including Gandhi and Tagore, not only were trenchant critics of western education in India but sought to elaborate alternative visions of what education in India should be, and to give institutional expression to these visions, as did many lesser-known figures. This chapter seeks to remain attentive to the variety and richness of the nationalist imagination, while drawing attention to what is of central importance and yet nonetheless frequently overlooked: few nationalists doubted that what India needed was modern, western education, and hardly any advocated a return to “indigenous” knowledge practices, even as they urged that modern knowledge be disseminated through Indian languages rather than through the medium of English. That modern Western knowledge has come to be normalized, such that it is identified with knowledge as such, is as much the “gift” of nationalism as it is of colonialism.

Almost all the personages who figure in this book viewed western knowledge just as we tend to view it: as being in some sense intimately linked to modernity. The burden of my argument, however, is that while India was

transformed, and western knowledge was an important agent in this transformation, this transformation did not principally occur because education “modernized” those Indians who were subject to it. Even as they engaged with modern institutions, engaged in modern practices, and acquired western knowledge, Indians often seemed to do so in ways that did not render them modern, and that did not accord with the core presumptions of this knowledge. The Epilogue of this book thus inquires into the relation between modern knowledge and modernity, and suggests that the homology we usually assume between the two needs to be rethought.