

## Colonial Modernity

**Lessons from Schools** by Nita Kumar;  
*Sage, New Delhi, 2000;*  
pp 232, Rs 200.

**Constructing Post-Colonial India**  
by Sanjay Srivastava;  
*Routledge, London, 1998;*  
pp 257.

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The decline of indigenous traditions in education and the growth of colonial education have remained sparsely researched, and that may be one reason why the role of education in shaping wider social processes is not adequately appreciated in the social sciences. An instrumentalist view of change and modernisation continues to allure even the more sophisticated among economists and sociologists. Historical inquiry can help promote a more sober view of how education works and what it can do, but the history of education has yet to qualify as a favoured area of sustained research. The two books under review should be seen, therefore, as fruits in the wilderness rather than as examples of a trend or emerging focus. One is a social history of Banaras with special interest in community responses to colonial education; the other is a social anthropologist's account of the Doon School since its inception in the 1930s. Both are preoccupied with the 'modern' that colonial education is assumed to have inaugurated. Without trivialising or debunking modernity, the two authors engage with the challenge of sketching its social contours in a colonised society. They help us recognise its historical logic and limitations, making a highly contemporary point.

Nita Kumar uses four orbits to organise her study of the indigenous-colonial negotiations that took place in Banaras from mid-19th century onwards. The pundits, the merchants, and the silk weavers constitute the first three orbits; a fourth one accommodates women. A number of valuable insights lurk in the descriptions Nita

Kumar offers of indigenous pedagogies, especially in the first two orbits. We also get an opportunity to recognise resistant moves and processes of accommodation. Details of the identity-building role of post-1857 administrative steps taken by colonial rulers allow us to develop a nuanced view of Muslims as a community. The discussion moves at different levels and covers different kinds of data, forcing an impression that the educational activity of each community calls for rather different points of recognition. For instance, the description of pundit pedagogy tells us a lot more about teacher-pupil relationship than we learn about it in the context of other communities or in the context of girls. One gets the impression that the researcher's question differs for each orbit although the overarching issues are constant.

Nita Kumar is an unusual historian of education to recognise the inner world of education, but this advantage nudges her a little too far in a normative direction. Her research makes it clear that there were important ideas and a strong motivation among educational entrepreneurs of Banaras who wanted to find meaningful alternatives to the constricting and alienating approach that the colonial administration had devised. Nita Kumar explains the poor success of these ideas by referring to the absence of what she calls an appropriate 'educational technology' – a term she uses in a highly personalised way to cover factors directly effecting pedagogic practice, e.g. teachers, their training, classroom space, texts and processes for evaluation. Nita Kumar does recognise that pedagogic practices are rooted in models of childhood which are reflective of larger socio-cultural ideas and economic circumstances, but this recognition does not discourage her from insisting that an imaginative synthesis between colonial syllabi and community educators could have occurred. 'The unequivocal conclusion of this study', she says, 'is that there evolved no great 'Indian' model of schooling in the past two centuries, but that *there could have*' (emphasis as in the original).

For the reader, this conclusion does not come across as being quite so unequivocal.

The term 'Indian model' can be applied to the school Sanjay Srivastava studies in an attempt to provide 'an ethnography of modernity'. It is a fascinating attempt, made with the help of a wide variety of data, including architecture and space, biographies, school routines, rituals and publications. Sanjay Srivastava uses individual life-histories to vivify terms like 'class', 'elites', and 'ethnicity'. He locates the inception of the Doon School in a traceable alliance between professional and bureaucratic elites, nurtured in the values of British raj and inspired by the vision of national independence, on one hand, and elements of the feudal order, on the other. How this alchemy resulted in the creation of a pedagogic space deemed to produce leaders for free India is hardly portrayable within the hackneyed design of 'post-coloniality', but Sanjay Srivastava tries to do just that. One suspects that if this book had been written a decade or so earlier, it would have carried a smaller burden of stylistic correctness. Its debunking of the historic grand, its analysis of masculinity and secularism in the context of a proto-public school are brilliant and unnecessarily so heavy-going.

Together, these two books about Banaras and Dehra Dun arouse our curiosity about north Indian educational entrepreneurship which ignored mass illiteracy in the attempt to institutionalise a national vision of modernity. Both authors engage with the flawed modernity that India imbibed in the course of its colonisation. Nita Kumar acknowledges the inevitability of the modernisation process and asks us to construct 'the solemn narrative of change' so we can sort out the 'sub-plots of calculation and miscalculation' in the annals of leadership and participation. Sanjay Srivastava's gaze is more sweeping and ominously more convinced that the plot is far more substantial than the sub-plots, and it promises to offer no break in the impending future. His inquiry into a 'dispensary of metropolitan cultural capital' reveals the depth at which ideas about teaching and learning, operating in the matrix of class relations, shape historical processes like dominance and underdevelopment. **EW**