



# COLONIAL MASCULINITY

The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century



MRINALINI SINHA

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# *Colonial masculinity*

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and the 'Effeminate Bengali'  
in the Late Nineteenth Century**

Mrinalini Sinha

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A distinguished British historian remarked at the 1994 Anglo-American conference in London that it was 'time to play the imperial card'. Many of the papers at that conference indicated that, at last, British historians are indeed beginning to recognise the significance of imperial history for the full understanding of social and cultural developments in the United Kingdom between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, not least in the formation of the complex of national characteristics that brought English, Scots, Welsh and Irish together. The contributors to this series have of course been aware of these important interactive dimensions of the study of the British Empire for ten years and more. With this book by Mrinalini Sinha we have an excellent example of the genre.

She uses images of masculinity in Bengal in the late nineteenth century to illuminate much wider issues of gender, imperial rule, and British domestic social and cultural history. In that period, British and Bengali were delineated by sharp stereotypical distinctions – on the one hand, a supposed masculine ideal identified by a love of sports, particularly hunting, a disdain for the 'bookworm', a celebration of general competence ('trained for nothing, ready for anything'), a vigorous pursuit of play and 'japes' as well as work in its proper place, a chivalric (and therefore distancing) approach to women, all contributing to the 'manly character' which was seen as the well-nigh unique mark of the Briton.

The Bengali *babu* was viewed as the almost complete foil to this: effeminate, bookish, over-serious, languorous, lustful and lacking in self-discipline. As Dr Sinha so convincingly demonstrates, these stereotypes underpinned many of the legislative and administrative controversies of British India in the 1880s and 1890s: those connected with the Ilbert Bill, the native volunteer movement, the Public Service Commission and the revision of the age of consent. But issues of masculinity never operate within a vacuum: these crises were equally infused with feminine stereotypes, with broader issues of both imperial rule and domestic self-image, and also the interleaving of nationalist and traditionalist/patriarchal policies. Thus, although the focus is on Bengal, this book deals with significant areas of gender, culture and politics of much wider significance. Moreover, it is a major contribution to the notion that aspects of metropolitan culture and of class and gender relations were formed at the so-called imperial periphery. As such, it represents an important illustration of the necessarily interactive character of the study of the British Empire and its capacity to illuminate British social and cultural history.

It is hard to resist a footnote which illustrates the manner in which these interactions can take a deeply personal form. When travelling in India a few years ago, I found myself searching for my name on the platform notice-board which allocated sleeping accommodation on the night train for Delhi. Thinking that I had been missed off the list, I was relieved to find it rendered as John M. Mukherji. Somebody's handwriting had led to a perfectly natural Indianisation – or indeed Bengalisation – of my Scottish surname. Now, symmetrically, I learn



## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

from Mrinalini Sinha's book (p. 86) that in the 1920s a station master on the Bengal Assam Railway had changed his name from Satish Chandra Mukherji to Sydney Kenneth Mackenzie in order to join the volunteer force and secure a rifle so that he could hunt the tigers which infested his area.

These reversals of identity have very different resonances in the twentieth century. The assimilation of my name struck me as agreeable, flattering almost, and I resolved to think of Mukherji as my South Asian surrogate. Satish Chandra, however, sought a practical outcome, a Eurasian route to acceptability in the Volunteer Force and the opportunity to take on the European hunting mantle. He was of course found out and rejected, for in the period which Mrinalini Sinha studies, such shadings of identity were scarcely possible.

John M. MacKenzie

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I have received financial assistance from the following institutions for this project: American Institute of Indian Studies; Taraknath Das Foundation Grant, Columbia University; Altrusa International Women's Grant; and SUNY Stony Brook. A Faculty Fellowship from Boston College allowed me the time off from teaching to complete the book. This book would not have been possible without the support and co-operation of the staff of the India Office Library and Records, the British Museum and Library, the National Archives of India, the National Library in Calcutta, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi, and the libraries at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Chicago, Harvard University, SUNY at Stony Brook, Boston College, and Southern Illinois University. An early version of Chapter 1 has appeared in Nupur Chaudhuri and M. Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism* (Indiana University Press, 1991); and an early version of Chapter 4 has appeared both in M. Kimmel, *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity* (Sage, 1987) and in T. Stewart (ed.), *Shaping Bengali Worlds: Public and Private* (University of Michigan, 1989). Certain portions of Chapter 4 have also been incorporated in an article forthcoming in *Genders*.

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*For my parents*



## INTRODUCTION

This book is about the processes and practices through which two differently positioned elites, among the colonisers and the colonised, were constituted respectively as the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in nineteenth-century India. In *Colonial Masculinity: The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century*, I argue that the emerging dynamics between colonial and nationalist politics in the 1880s and 1890s in India is best captured in the logic of colonial masculinity. For colonial masculinity points towards the multiple axes along which power was exercised in colonial India: among or within the colonisers and the colonised as well as between colonisers and colonised. Neither the colonisers nor the colonised represented homogenous groups; there were not only important internal hierarchies of class, gender, and status within each group, but also alliances across various axes that in fact helped fashion the opposition between colonial and nationalist politics. Indeed, *Colonial Masculinity* reframes, from the perspective of the uneven and contradictory intersection of various axes of power, the dynamics between colonialism and nationalism, on the one hand, and between colonial Indian and metropolitan British society, on the other. It thus recontextualises some of the major colonial controversies of the late nineteenth century in India. The book traces the impact of colonial masculinity in four specific controversies: the 'white mutiny' against the Ilbert Bill in 1883, the official government response to the Native Volunteer movement in 1885, the recommendations of the Public Service Commission of 1886, and the Indian opposition to the Age of Consent Bill in 1891.

The argument of the book proceeds from two basic assumptions. The first is that the categories of the coloniser and colonised are not fixed or self-evident categories.<sup>1</sup> Although these categories may appear to have represented 'natural' differences of race or national origin, there was nothing natural or fixed about them. There was a constant need, therefore, to define and redefine the coloniser and the colonised. Moreover, since the coloniser and colonised were themselves historically constructed categories, the relations between the two were neither fixed nor given for all time. Indeed, the relations between the coloniser and colonised were constantly rearticulated in accordance with the continually changing political and economic imperatives of colonial rule. It follows, then, that the figures of the 'manly Englishman' and the

'effeminate Bengali' must be examined in relation to 'specific practices of ruling', rather than as products of a universalised or generalised colonial condition.<sup>2</sup> The second assumption of the book is that the contours of colonial masculinity were shaped in the context of an imperial social formation that included both Britain and India.<sup>3</sup> The figures of the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' were thus constituted in relation to colonial Indian society as well as to some of the following aspects of late nineteenth-century British society: the emergence of the 'New Woman'; the 'remaking of the working class'; the legacy of 'internal colonialism'; and the anti-feminist backlash of the 1880s and 1890s. This focus on the imperial social formation points not only to the intersection of the imperial with the categories of nation, race, class, gender, and sexuality, but also to the essentially uneven and contradictory nature of that intersection. *Colonial Masculinity* thus examines the politics of masculinity in the late nineteenth century from what Rosemary Hennessy has called a 'global social analytic'. Such an analytic is global in two senses: first, it focuses on a world-system fashioned by imperialism; and, second, it understands the 'social' as the intersection of the political, economic, and ideological, none of which can be reduced to any of the others.<sup>4</sup>

The following contemporary account of the 'effeminate Bengali *babu*' in *The Times* in London demonstrates a surprising perspicacity about historicising colonial constructs: 'the old East India Company did not develop the Bengali babu – the old East India Company left the Bengali as it found him – a cringing subservient eye servant, to be made use of as circumstances or occasion required. The Crown took the Babu in hand and developed the babu into his present state of loquacity and disloyalty.'<sup>5</sup> The author's definition of the 'Bengali *babu*' alludes to a quite specific historical ordering of colonial masculinity. By the late nineteenth century, the politics of colonial masculinity was organised along a descending scale: senior British officials associated with the administrative and military establishment, and elite non-officials, those not directly related to the colonial administration, occupied positions at the top of the scale. Other groups and classes that made up colonial society supposedly shared some, though not all, of the attributes associated with the figure of the 'manly Englishman'. In this colonial ordering of masculinity, the politically self-conscious Indian intellectuals occupied a unique place: they represented an 'unnatural' or 'perverted' form of masculinity. Hence this group of Indians, the most typical representatives of which at the time were middle-class Bengali Hindus, became the quintessential referents for that odious category designated as 'effeminate *babus*'. The major emphasis of this book is to examine how colonial masculinity, in the context of the changes in the

imperial social formation in the late nineteenth century, produced and exploited such categories.

The figures of the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali *babu*' were produced by, and helped to shape, the shifts in the political economy of colonialism in the late nineteenth century: the changing imperatives in the strategies of colonial rule as well as the altered conditions for the indigenous elite's collaboration with colonial rule. The colonial cliché of the 'effeminate Bengali *babu*' was thus tied to the entire ensemble of political, economic, and administrative imperatives that underpinned the strategies of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. The sheer lucrateness of colonial domination over India was perhaps never more evident than in the closing decades of the last century. India, for long regarded as the 'Jewel in the Crown', was the linchpin of Britain's economic and political pre-eminence in the world. India served as a source of raw materials for British manufactures, as a captive market for British industrial products, and as a field for British overseas investments in agriculture, extractive industries, and in public works like the railways that had a guaranteed rate of profit. Moreover, Britain's unfavourable balance of trade with the rest of the world – a result of the 'protectionist' policies of many of Britain's trading partners in the second half of the century – was financed through India's export surplus with other countries. The transfer of surplus from India to Britain was managed through the complex system of 'Home Charges' for civil and military expenditures, guaranteed interest on railways, interest on the India Debt accumulating in England, and charges for such 'invisible services' as shipping, insurance, and so on; early Indian nationalists aptly termed this process the 'drain of wealth'.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, imperial banks in India handled British overseas trade, '*coolie*' labour from India was used as cheap labour on British economic concerns in different parts of the British Empire, and Indian troops, paid for by the Indians, were used to secure and extend British control overseas.<sup>7</sup> The province of Bengal was in many ways the key to this entire structure of British economic and political domination in India.

If the 'high imperialism' of the late nineteenth century was a reminder of the enormous political and economic stakes in the colonial domination of India, it was also an era in which colonial administrators faced a crisis of confidence in existing forms and practices of colonial rule. The 'illusion of permanence' that historians have identified in the colonial attitudes of the last quarter of the century was secured only after a shift in the practices of colonial rule in India.<sup>8</sup> In the early nineteenth century the colonial administration, drawing upon British Evangelical and Utilitarian thought, had embarked on a conscious programme of restructuring the existing colonial administration. This



development was marked by the victory of the Anglicist over the Orientalist school of colonial administration; the latter favoured rule through supposedly indigenous or traditional means.<sup>9</sup> But the Great Revolt of 1857 eroded much of the early nineteenth-century confidence in the Anglicist programme. The expression of Indian discontent in 1857 was seen as a warning against the radical restructuring of 'traditional' Indian society. The suppression of the rebellion and the transfer of India from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858 ushered in a new era of caution: the colonial administrators henceforth sought allies in the traditional landholding classes and orthodox religious leaders who were seen as the main forces behind the rebellion of 1857.<sup>10</sup> The problem of 'educated Indians', though far less dramatic, was an equally important factor in the rethinking of colonial policies in the second half of the century. The colonial administration was faced with the daunting task of accommodating a growing number of Western-educated Indians within the existing colonial administrative and political structures without threatening the exclusive rights and privileges to which generations of colonial officials and non-officials in India had grown accustomed.<sup>11</sup>

Both of these factors led to a shift in the dominant administrative perspective from the second half of the century onwards. The midcentury Anglicist perspective began to be tempered by a revival of the Orientalist perspective. There was a growing acceptance of the view that India could be best governed only through a judicious use of its supposedly indigenous traditions. These so-called indigenous traditions of rule, as various scholars have pointed out, were themselves a product of an earlier phase of colonial administration: in the late eighteenth century colonial administrators-cum-scholars, also known as Orientalists or Indologists, had through such practices as the codification of indigenous laws contributed to the construction of a specifically colonial understanding of indigenous tradition.<sup>12</sup> This colonial construction of indigenous traditions had enabled a trading company, recently entrusted with the task of rule, to exercise what was in essence a new and 'alien' form of authority in the name of continuity with Indian traditions.<sup>13</sup> The return to these supposedly traditional Indian forms of rule in the second half of the nineteenth century and the courting of more orthodox or traditional Indian groups signalled a marked shift from the Anglicist goal of creating a 'class of persons Indian in colour and blood, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'.<sup>14</sup> The earlier policy of relying on Western-educated Indians as the most trusted allies of the government began to falter as these groups began demanding a share in the exclusive privileges of the British colonial elite. The new attitude towards this group of Indians was

reflected in the colonial 'discourse' that characterised them as an 'artificial' and 'unnatural' class of persons: in short, 'effeminate *babus*'.<sup>15</sup> It was these changes in colonial rule that came to a head in the 'white mutiny' against the Ilbert Bill in 1883. In my discussion of the Ilbert Bill controversy, I argue that the British or Anglo-Indian opposition to the Ilbert Bill rearticulated the broader shifts in colonial economic, political, and administrative imperatives in the politics of colonial masculinity: it substituted for a straightforward defence of racial exclusivity a supposedly more 'natural' gender hierarchy between 'manly' and 'unmanly' men.

The indigenous elite's own investment in colonial masculinity, moreover, was also shaped by, and shaped, the realignment of the colonial political economy. The changes of the late nineteenth century had an impact not only on the transfer of surplus from India to Britain, but also on the modification and intensification of class hierarchies within India. The transformation in the economic prospects of the Bengali middle class, for example, fostered the self-perception of Bengali effeminacy. For, as Tanika Sarkar reminds us, 'manhood' in colonial society was based on a particular relationship to property; it was this relationship to property that was gradually eroded for the Bengali middle class in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> From the heyday of the early decades of the century, there was a decline of Indian economic competitiveness in the modern economic sector in Bengal. The Bengali elites found themselves squeezed out of the dynamic economic sector as the new economic arrangements of the second half of the century came to be dominated almost entirely by the European managing agency system; there was little compensation for Bengali elites in the less prestigious local trade and business activities either, for these were already in the hands of Marwaris, an immigrant native group from western India.<sup>17</sup> Added to this was the declining fortune of the significant *rentier* class of Bengali elites. In 1793 the British, under the terms of the Permanent Settlement, had fixed the revenue obligations of landlords in Bengal; this had allowed the growth of a *rentier* class who made a considerable fortune from rural and urban ground rent.<sup>18</sup> From the 1870s onwards, however, the Bengali *rentier* class witnessed a decrease in revenue from landholdings as a result of a combination of factors: increase in population, land fragmentation, and lack of agricultural improvements. Furthermore, new tenancy regulations as well as the peasant resistance of the last quarter of the nineteenth century made dents in the untrammelled power that landlords had exercised over the countryside under the terms of the Permanent Settlement.<sup>19</sup> The Bengali elites were being defined more and more through administrative and professional employment. Indeed, the

majority of the Bengali middle class found their horizons severely contracted by 'chakri', or petty clerical work.<sup>20</sup> This ignominious experience of 'chakri', according to Sarkar, underpinned the self-perception of effeminacy among the Bengali elites.

Furthermore, the Bengali elite's simultaneous investment in, and contestation of, colonial masculinity also reflected the new contradictions in elite politics: the changes in the conditions of elite collaboration with colonial rule. As many historians have recognised, there was a shift in elite politics in Bengal from collaboration to criticism of specific colonial policies in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet the constraints of the colonial political economy in Bengal also limited any substantial modification in the role of Bengali elites as mediators between a colonial import-export sector and a largely subsistence peasant economy.<sup>21</sup> It was this contradiction that haunted the change that historians have noted in elite Bengali politics in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: the rise of two distinct groups within the Bengali *bhadralok*, or 'respectable' society, from the erosion of the hierarchical ties between an older aristocratic elite and newer social groups within *bhadralok* society. In discussing elite politics in Bengal in the post-1870 period, therefore, the historian Rajat Kanta Ray identifies a 'triangular' pattern of interaction between senior European officials and non-officials, an Indian aristocratic or gentry class, and a new western-educated Indian middle class.<sup>22</sup> There exists a long controversy in the historiography of colonial India, however, over identifying the newly visible group in *bhadralok* society in the late nineteenth century as a distinct social class; for, as Michelguglielmo Torri has argued, the changes suggest instead a transformation or mutation in the role of intellectuals – both the western-educated and the vernacular literati – as spokespersons for the powerful landed magnates and notables who together made up the indigenous elites.<sup>23</sup>

The various anomalies in elite politics in late nineteenth-century Bengal are nicely captured in the politics of colonial masculinity. For, despite important economic and cultural ties to the older landholding or *rentier* Indian elite, the newly visible group of intellectuals did define themselves as a distinct *sikhita madhyabitto*, or educated middle class. Their world was defined against both the more traditional or orthodox Indian elites and the vast majority of Indians, the peasants and the urban poor. By the 1870s they had set up their own political organisations, like the Indian League and the Indian Association, distinct from the British Indian Association and other such organisations of an older landed and titled Indian elite; they also had their own newspapers and journals like the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the *Bengalee*, distinct from older newspapers like the *Hindoo Patriot*, which represented the views of an

older elite.<sup>24</sup> It is the anomaly in their struggle for legitimacy – which Partha Chatterjee has called the paradox of the ‘subalternity’ of an elite – that provides the background for the Bengali elite’s investment in colonial masculinity in the late nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> On the one hand, as Sarkar has suggested, the self-perception of effeminacy was itself an expression of the hegemonic aspirations of the Bengali elite: for the degeneration of the body of the elite Hindu male became the symbol of the negative impact of colonial rule on indigenous society as a whole.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the self-perception of effeminacy also facilitated a challenge, however limited and contradictory, to the dominance of the colonising elites: for the emasculation of Indians was also the basis for challenging specific colonial policies. I demonstrate the tension in the Bengali elite’s investment in colonial masculinity in the native volunteer movement of 1885. For though the demand for native volunteering by the elites also provided a more radical critique of the impact of expensive colonial financial and military policies on the majority of Indians, this challenge was recuperated in the obsessive concern over the ‘demilitarisation’ of the elite Indian male. The Bengali elites thus both accepted and resisted the colonial politics of masculinity that cast them in the unenviable position of ‘effeminate *babus*’.

Studying colonial masculinity from a densely historicised context does indeed open up new ways of situating not only colonial and nationalist politics but also metropolitan British and colonial Indian developments. One contribution of *Colonial Masculinity* is thus to demonstrate that late nineteenth-century notions of English/British masculinity or Bengali/Indian effeminacy cannot be understood simply from the framework of discrete ‘national’ cultures; instead, they must be understood in relation to one another, and as constitutive of each other. Hence the point of my discussion of colonial masculinity is not to stage an encounter between discrete British and Indian conceptions of masculinity. Rather, it is to understand the prior significance of imperialism in the construction of both ‘national’ British and ‘colonial’ Indian politics of masculinity in the late nineteenth century. My emphasis on the imperial constitution of the politics of masculinity, therefore, marks a point of departure from such pioneering works on masculinity and the psychology of colonialism as Ashis Nandy’s *The Intimate Enemy*. Nandy connects the development of a post Enlightenment notion of modern ‘Western’ masculinity and colonial domination.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Nandy, however, my focus is much more on the material, historical specificity of colonial masculinity in the late nineteenth century rather than on broad historical generalisations. Nandy’s discussion of the politics of masculinity, moreover, emphasises the impact of modern Western notions of masculinity on the reordering

of more traditional conceptions of masculinity in India; the historical approach of my book, however, is meant precisely to complicate either notions of modern Western masculinity or of traditional Indian conceptions of masculinity as discrete or mutually exclusive categories by a recognition of their mutual implication in imperial politics. To offer one example: the colonial government, in rejecting the Indian demands for a native volunteer force, claimed to be perpetuating an Indian tradition that distinguished between so-called 'martial' and 'non-martial' Indian castes. But as various scholars of colonial India have demonstrated, the popular understanding of the Indian caste system and the colonial invention of the criterion of 'martial' and 'non-martial' Indian races for recruitment in the post-1857 colonial army were both products of a peculiarly colonial understanding of an indigenous Indian institution.<sup>28</sup> The distinction between supposedly distinct 'martial' and 'non-martial' Indian races that was at stake in the colonial response to the native volunteer movement did not reflect a 'traditional Indian organization of masculinity' but a colonial understanding of the ways in which certain attributes of masculinity were supposedly distributed in traditional Indian society. Equally important for my purposes is to note that the colonial preference for 'martial' over 'non-martial' Indians did not simply reflect the priorities of a discrete British/Western masculinity, but that nineteenth-century British masculinity was itself implicated in the history of British imperialism.

A sustained focus on the imperial constitution of colonial masculinity, therefore, serves also to refine the standard historical scholarship on nineteenth-century British masculinity. For though recent studies of the politics of masculinity in Britain have gone beyond the narrow institutional focus on the 'great English public schools' and 'Oxbridge' to explain the changing ideals of 'manliness', their broader sociological explanations still remain limited because of the predominantly metropolitan British frame of reference. A reticence in engaging the imperial social formation has limited even such important contributions to the understanding of nineteenth-century British masculinity as George Mosse's study of masculinity, middle-class respectability and nationalism in nineteenth-century Britain and Germany; Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff's examination of the 'separate spheres ideology' of masculinity and femininity in British middle-class formation; Keith McClelland's essay on masculinity and the politics of work in British artisanal culture; Jeffrey Weeks's account of the historical construction of gender and the regulation of sexuality in late nineteenth-century Britain; and Brian Harrison's examination of male bonding in the politics of the opponents of female suffrage in Britain.<sup>29</sup> For a historical and materialist understanding of 'British'