

Book review: Shukla Sanyal, *Revolutionary Pamphlets, Propaganda and Political Culture in Colonial Bengal*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2014

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We're the best judges of the public interests. Therefore, just out of ordinary morality, we have to make sure that they don't have an opportunity to act on the basis of their misjudgments. In what is nowadays called a totalitarian state, or a military state, it's easy. You just hold a bludgeon over their heads, and if they get out of line you smash them over the head. But as society has become more free and democratic, you lose that capacity. Therefore, you have to turn to the techniques of propaganda. The logic is clear. Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to totalitarian state. That's wise and good because, again, the common interests elude the bewildered herd. They can't figure them out.

-- Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: the Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda* (20-21)

In 1905, Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, tabled a proposal for dividing Bengal into two parts. While he maintained that this partition was necessary to ease administrative burden, it enraged the Bengali *bhadraloks* (middle and upper middle class gentlemen, educated bourgeois) who saw this as a body-blow to their political identity.¹ The ensuing protest, known as the Bangabhanga Andolon [A protest to (stop) the partition of Bengal. Bangabhanga, literally, means

“Partition of Bengal”] also provided the ground for the emergence of extremist politics in Bengal as well as other parts of India, superseding the dominance of moderate, diplomacy-based politics of the aging Congress leadership. The young political leaders advocated the employment of more violent measures against the ruling British, and their periodicals, newspapers and pamphlets became vehicles for these subversive ideas. The result was the outburst of an armed revolutionary movement (though the British officials referred to the revolutionaries as terrorists) which marked a decisive moment in India’s nationalist politics. For a brief period, the traditionally docile Bengali educated *bhadraloks* rattled the very foundations of the British Empire. In her new monograph, *Revolutionary Pamphlets, Propaganda and Political Culture in Colonial Bengal*, Shukla Sanyal provides a fairly comprehensive insight into this period of great political turmoil in Bengal. Sanyal uses hitherto unexplored material stored at the West Bengal State Archives, the Police Museum in Kolkata and, most importantly, the little known Smaraniya Bichar Sangrahashala (Museum of Memorable Cases), located on the premises of the Alipore Session’s Court in South-Western Kolkata. Sanyal’s book provides an extensive reading of the titular propaganda pamphlets as well as leaflets and other ephemeral print media written, printed and distributed by revolutionaries and revolutionary propagandists. She also delivers an insightful commentary on the political and social conditions which led to the emergence of this propaganda culture, its wider implications as well as how the British government responded to this new transformation of the largely obedient and cooperative Bengali middle class.

The history of censorship in colonial Bengal is a fairly complex domain. In nineteenth century the censoring machinery focused mostly on containing the perceived “obscene” elements within the low-brow vernacular literature and culture. In this pursuit, the colonizers were almost

continuously aided by a vast majority of native intellectuals. Otherwise, the middle and upper middle class Bengalis were generally allowed to enjoy a free circulation of ideas. Though there were occasional conflicts, they were too few and far between. The native literati saw themselves as readers and writers of periodicals, newspapers or scholarly literature of the more “respectable” variety. Hence, even after the proposal for Bangabanga shattered their faith in the moderate politics as well as the benevolence of the colonial regime, the extremist leaders initially conducted their propaganda campaigns through articles published in periodicals and newspapers. But this publication model had one handicap: the periodicals and newspapers had to come out regularly in order to hold onto their clientele, ensuring that they could be easily tracked by the intrusive colonial state. In her first chapter, Sanyal outlines how an underground culture of propaganda pamphlets grew out of the extremist newspapers and periodicals run by native intellectuals and political ideologues (Sanyal 35). Quoting extensively from *Jugantar*, *Bandemataram* (edited by the siblings Barindra Kumar and Aurobindo Ghose, respectively) *Sandhya* (edited by Brahmabandhab Upadhyay) and other such newspapers which regularly voiced a need to organize an armed insurrection, Sanyal describes how these papers soon buckled under the stringent censoring and oppressing machinery of the colonial administration. Once the newspapers and periodicals were shut down one after the other, the revolutionaries adopted ephemeral pamphlets and leaflets as the chosen vehicle for their propaganda.² In this chapter, she demonstrates in meticulous details how the earliest propaganda pamphlets were published, and what impact they had on the impressionable youth of Bengal who were fed up with the political gridlock into which the moderates had thrust them into (45).

Sanyal devotes the next two chapters to outline the growth of this new propaganda culture.³ She quotes in detail from the propaganda pamphlets to show how the purveyors of revolutionary propaganda constructed the image of a moribund, chained nation through their fiery rhetoric. The second chapter, titled “The Signs of the Times: constructing a nation”, explores the textual content of these pamphlets in greater detail. Sanyal uses reports and secret memos sent by members of the British police and their undercover agents and investigators, official reports such as the ones prepared by Sidney Rowlett and James Campbell Kerr and government records of intercepted letters and depositions gleaned from arrested revolutionaries and propagandists to construct a believable and at times highly readable account of the people behind this propaganda literature. Her translations of the Bengali propaganda pamphlets are lucid and manage to capture the vigorous energy that the originals were meant to convey. However, one could say that Sanyal gives too much attention to their fiery rhetoric to actually question the more problematic aspects of this propaganda culture. As she herself points out, the revolutionaries were largely a bunch of elite, educated, impressionable Hindu upper class (and mostly *upper caste*) young men who found a rejuvenating thrust from this new form of political machination (158). This was, again, a classic case of a small section of the educated bourgeois assuming the leadership for the entire population. This rather dicey aspect of revolutionary propaganda never enters Sanyal’s analysis.

Also, unlike Peter Heehs (1993), Sanyal does not question the intricacies of the strong undercurrents of militant Hinduism that was a key feature of this propaganda literature. Instead, Sanyal writes a more straightforward account of how the propagandists used religious imagery to inspire people into armed resistance against the British. She does not, for example, talk about the

memory of “white violence” that lurked as a very potent shadow beneath these evocative religious images. She gives more emphasis on how the pamphleteers equated their struggle with the epic battles between good and evil found in traditional Hindu epic literature. *Jugantar* and other revolutionary newspapers are shown as the harbinger of this martial rhetoric, while the pamphlets are depicted as a logical continuation of this programme. This rather linear analysis is the reason why in spite of its wealth of new material and focused presentation, the third chapter, titled “Legitimizing Violence”, falls short of expectations. A little more attention given to how these texts connected with the memory of actual colonial oppression, instead of merely focusing on propaganda as an ideological project, would have enhanced this chapter immensely. Those who are interested in this field may consult Sumit Sarkar’s classic work *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908* (1973), Peter Heeh’s *The Bomb in Bengal* (1993) or Elizabeth Kolsky’s *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (2010) and Jordana Bailkin’s excellent article “The Boot and the Spleen: when was murder possible in British India” (2006) for different perspectives.

“The Battle for Domination”, the fourth chapter of Sanyal’s book, takes into account the British response to this propaganda culture. As Robert Darnton (2001) has pointed out elsewhere, nineteenth century British administration concentrated mostly on the surveillance of native literature, while there was very little practical censorship. This chapter tells the story of how the surveillance machinery gradually transformed into a vast censoring apparatus that gave up the essential liberal basis of the empire in order to pursue a more stringent programme of repression and control. Sanyal provides an engaging narrative full of accounts of police persecution, undercover investigations and arrests that not only tell the story of this propaganda

campaign, but also how the British intelligence service evolved in order to tackle this challenge that threatened, albeit briefly, the stability of the empire (Sanyal 124-156). The factual details of the new laws and amendments passed in order to contain the spread of revolutionary propaganda is given due attention, too. Connecting the propaganda movements to the emergence of new tactics of censorship, Sanyal provides an illuminating insight into the transformation of the ideological principles by which the British government ruled its most precious colony. In comparison, the final chapter, “Summing Up”, feels almost needless as it does nothing new in way of advancing the essential arguments presented in the previous chapter. The author could have dispensed with this rather cumbersome section of her book, or assimilated it within other chapters.

Despite these glitches, Sanyal’s book remains a genuinely engaging and well researched account of the ephemeral literature of Bengal’s revolutionary movement. She throws new light on undiscovered or little explored material to show how the intellectual Bengali evolved from a group of erudite and eclectic men of letters to bomb-throwing, revolver-wielding anarchists who dared challenge the mighty British Empire. However, herein also rests the chief weakness of this book. Despite occasional references to cultural theorists such as Benedict Anderson or Jurgen Habermas or Jacques Ellul, Sanyal never really deviates from a rather linear narrative. Hence, we never learn how this new avatar of Bengali gentlemen fared once the age of armed resistance was over. Also, her understanding of the revolutionary propaganda never goes beyond the texts written by the revolutionaries themselves. A large number of publishing industry professionals who regularly collaborated with the revolutionary anarchists are never mentioned in the book.

And Sanyal's monograph does not adequately answer the question of why this propaganda campaign failed, and how it was overtaken by more popular movements led by pacifist leaders.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that Sanyal's work is, to a large extent, pioneering. While some questions remain unanswered (as they should, probably, at the end of any scholarly work) this book will, in years to come, be recognized as an important contribution to the scholarship on propaganda culture and state censorship.

Notes:

1. For majority of Bengalis, the partition was a betrayal of the worst kind: a decisive blow to their political identity and a sure sign that the government was engaged in a game of divide and rule. Bengali leadership accused that by creating a new state with Assam and Eastern Bengal, the British would get a pliant Muslim population in the East, while the Bengali gentlemen would lose its political voice thanks to the vast population of non-Bengali speakers in the West.

2. Sanyal here draws a parallel between the origins of the propaganda culture in revolutionary France and revolutionary Bengal. She quotes from Harvey Chisick's seminal work on the various aspects of revolutionary French propaganda pamphlets to show how pamphlets almost always antedate the revolutionary periodicals and newspapers. According to Sanyal, pamphlets are a more intimate form of propaganda literature.

3. Throughout the nineteenth century the *bhadralok* class had shunned the chapbooks and pamphlets and most kinds of street literature as low and base cultural commodities. Though *bhadralok* intellectuals *did* occasionally publish pamphlets, they were few and far between. However, extensive colonial repression and incarcerations of the editors, printers and publishers of native newspapers compelled the Bengali intellectuals to adopt these ephemeral commodities as the main vehicle for their propaganda. Pamphlets could be published randomly, and distributed

through clandestine means. These were not visible like the periodicals and newspapers. The *bhadralok* class's shift towards these more marginalized literary forms was indeed a new development.

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