

*Beyond Representation: Colonial and Postcolonial Constructions of Indian Identity*,  
ed. Crispin Bates (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2006; pp. 370. Rs. 675).

The ramping up of British colonial rule in India during the course of the nineteenth century occurred in tandem—and was in no small way connected—

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with a dramatic expansion of the means available to colonial administrators, travellers, religious functionaries and a professionalising academic community in seeking out, organising and disseminating information about the world around them. Since the late 1970s, scholars of South Asia, and India in particular, have been coming to terms with the implications of this conjuncture in ever more sophisticated ways, searching out epistemic dimensions of social and political control and revealing their longevity on the subcontinent—still burrowed deep into everyday life and politics more than sixty years after the formal collapse of European colonialism. The complexity of Indian society and of its ties with Europe in the modern era offers fertile scholarly ground for this ‘postcolonial’ approach to writing history. A particular focus has been the role of the colonial administration—from social categorisation to policy-making and public pronouncements—in the emergence of new accounts of Indian religion and history, caste and race, sexuality and rural life, and physical and psychological make-up. The insights of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ranajit Guha and others here have become the well-entrenched mainstream in South Asian studies, with the occasional shortcomings of the larger genre—mangled or self-righteous prose, inadequate appreciation of contextual complexity, the fetish made of technicality at the expense of the essence and drama of human life—outweighed by the sophistication and awareness bequeathed to scholars and students.

The thirteen short essays which make up *Beyond Representation* set out to offer a ‘benchmark’ in this area of scholarship and to continue the pursuit of an important recent corrective: the replacement of an over-emphasis upon colonial agency with attention to the workings of a dialectical process involving a variety of Europeans and Indians. The originality and attraction of the volume lies in the sheer breadth of the case-studies on offer, gathered around the theme of identity. Crispin Bates focuses on the tribal region of Bastar in central India, investigating the interplay of fearful and ambitious colonial officials, conflicting local opinion, missionaries in search of a pretext, and popular insurrection in the emergence of a web of rumour and speculation about the practice of human sacrifice in the area. In keeping with the aims of the collection, Bates seeks to pick apart elements of standard ‘colonial discourse’ in his sources—the accumulated received wisdom of the colonial British, widely influential despite its precarious basis in truth—from indications of contextually specific agency on the part of key individuals. In the process, Bates delineates the ‘political economy and instrumentality’ that helped to drive events.

Sanjay Seth explores the notion of the ‘backward Muslim’ in late nineteenth-century India, slow to access the benefits of western education in comparison with urban Hindus. Seth works through a trail of Indian and British publications and committee meetings to show how this idea managed to gain currency through a contemporary love-affair with statistics, the take-up of the issue by socially diverse organisations with dissimilar political agendas, and the British colonial tendency in this period to view as ‘backward’ any implied rejection of the modern state—including lack of interest shown in education run along government lines. Seth shows how this debate over education was just one dimension of an increasing separation of ‘Muslim’ from ‘Hindu’ in official and public discourse, thereby feeding into the serious communal alienation which developed in the early twentieth century.

The interplay of gender, language, religion and representation in the late colonial and early postcolonial period is the focus of contributions by Charu Gupta and Sumathi Ramaswamy. Gupta shows how the metaphor of 'mother' was deployed by Hindu nationalists in northern India in order to evoke in people a sense of nostalgic intimacy with a political cause. A Bharat Mata (Mother India) Temple constructed at Banaras featured a detailed map of India carved in marble, emphasising the embeddedness of the nationalist cause in Hindu religion and culture. No less explicit was the gendered terminology employed by the pro-Hindi camp in its publicity material during disputes over whether Hindi or Urdu—associated with Hindus and Muslims, respectively—ought to be adopted as the official administrative language of the region. Hindi was represented as mother, respectable daughter or Hindu wife, while Urdu was denigrated as icy aristocrat or prostitute. Ramaswamy looks at how, in a slightly later period (1937–68), an anti-Hindi campaign by advocates of the south Indian Tamil language included the use of poems, cartoons and rally speeches in which Hindi appeared as a demoness and a 'wily whore' and Tamil as an endangered mother-figure.

Six more contributions to the volume deal with the evolution of regional and middle-class identities: Riho Isaka on Gujarat, Markus Daechsel on Lahore, and Swapna M. Banerjee, Tithi Bhattacharya, Anindita Ghosh and Benjamin Zachariah on Bengal. Three further chapters deal with race sciences (Harald Fischer-Tiné), technology (Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury), and psychiatry (James H. Mills). Many of the essays in the book have appeared elsewhere in one form or another, but brought together here they offer, if not an introduction to colonialism's impact upon the construction of identities (Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* [1998] is an excellent place to start), then certainly a welcome opportunity for South Asian specialists, students and those with a more general interest in processes of identity-formation, to compare a rich range of case-studies from across the subcontinent. *Beyond Representation* ought also to be food for thought for anyone interested in why present-day South Asia's most pressing social and political debates take the form that they do, and where they may be headed in the twenty-first century.

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