

Keynote II

Tim Allender

Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932

This lecture concerns a new academic approach to better understand knowledge transfer modalities across national and colonial boundaries. Its focus is constructions of femininity and feminism in colonial India over a relatively long time period of approximately 112 years. The paper looks at the variable and changing receptivity in a colonial setting to mostly Western fabricated mentalities and identity stereotypes. The method explored in this paper is applicable to non-British colonial domains as well.

'Learning femininity' in colonial India is one of the simplest and least aggressive phrases that might be used to describe any part of the imperial project. What 'female education' evoked via the official rhetorical repertoire was intentionally externalised by the raj to the metropole as a soft and consistent moral purpose that could only improve the 'condition' of women in India. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, the reality was something very different in terms of a fierce race and class deployment where official gender articulation also became a complex but strong conduit for attempted enculturation from the West. This complexity makes sense of a much more interesting story of how women educators and learners in India came to their classrooms and hospitals in different ways during this 112-year period, and the official mentalities that beckoned them there. In the early nineteenth century colonial female education concerned mostly only a few mission schools seeking to assert Judeo-Christian hegemony in surrounding communities. However, by the early twentieth century, female education had become more of a polemic, culminating in an unsuccessful attempt to shore up official legitimacy using the uncertain relevance to India of Western feminist modernity.

Seeking to understand the vista in these terms requires a longitudinal study, of the kind offered by this paper, of the changing interactional features between the state and different female networks in play. What is apparent is that colonial state mentalities concerning females in India changed over time and were more restrictive, reactive and cognisant than is often supposed. As well, feminine receptivity, whilst orchestrated by the colonial state, could also create new learning spaces of female interaction and collaboration that were outside the gender, race and class agendas of empire. In this sense Western feminine accommodation, and more fragmented Western feminist activism, located in India, was not always internal to broader colonial agendas. Although collegial awareness by most of these colonial-aligned women educators was never strong, nor were they prescient as to how their daily work might be shaping the colonial domain.

During the British colonial interregnum, the raj variously deployed Indian, Eurasian and even European females in the artificially constructed Western settings of female professionalism, where Western gender codes of femininity and medical care mediated the state's own race and Western class agendas. 'Eurasian ladies' were the official outcome preference by the later nineteenth century, where British colonial learning settings aimed to produce a feminine prototype in India. This educated feminine prototype was to be brown, but not too brown; that is, mostly a Western oriented Eurasian beneficiary; and a 'lady' not a 'woman'; that is, an accomplished female of English middle class feminine sensibility and bearing. These strong race constructions also had implications for eugenic theorisation at the metropole. Additionally, the role of white women, at home, in Britain, when looking to 'help' colonial brown women 'abroad' was usually a self-absorbing philanthropy rarely reaching Indian women in India.¹ However, for those white women actually living in India, their engagement terrain with Eurasian and Indian women in the classroom, and in the medical dispensary, was not of Western feminist making. Rather, it was negotiated through the paradigm of femininity and the preservation of the female body according to prevailing Western moral norms that were mostly amplified by state rhetoric.

Theorising about these interactive phenomena and placing them in an overarching schema of periodization and change accentuates the products of empire. It would be nearly impossible to systematise in some way the highly variable, and culturally different, receptivity and resistance of Indian females over this long colonial time period, using the paradigm of femininity. These Indian female communities mostly did not contest the pedagogic and knowledge constituencies of female education as they occurred in the colonial classroom, but saw their broader socio-cultural purpose, instead, in strongly antagonistic terms. However, on the other side of the colonial divide, the paper demonstrates that the colonial project was more cogent and unified, capable of evolving and producing outcomes that both accentuated and reconfigured colonial race, class and gender boundaries.

Discerning the colonial project in this way to understand what drove these variable outcomes at different times in the colonial phase is still difficult. Centre-periphery approaches, which identify just one imperial centre, and peripheries only in colonial domains, have been largely unsuccessful in tracing complex relationships of the kind explored in this paper. This is particularly so if the colonial period is perceived, erroneously, as one relatively even enterprise of imposition upon settler societies and 'native' communities; and where the metropole, itself, has not been identified as a cultural space worthy of similar problematisation. However, network and circuit conceptions of empire are more compelling for the purposes of this paper.² Tony Ballantyne's organising metaphor of an agglomeration of overlapping webs helps to

¹ A. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1994).

² K. Darian-Smith, P. Grimshaw and S. Macintyre, *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

explain the multi-sited history of empire.³ The paper is also responsive to the comparative education approaches of Jürgen Schriewer and Carlos Martinez, which excavate the variable dimensions of the internationalisation of education knowledge in other nation states.⁴ As well, the general method of Kimberley Ochs and David Phillips is taken into this colonial setting. Overlapping connections, responding to Western-identified social and cultural ‘deficits’ in India were established and were then deemed to require Western remedy, yet these ‘deficits’ strongly objectified Indian women and their emotional and moral bodies.⁵ Reconfigured subaltern approaches concerning females and new gender scholarship are also engaged in the analysis of the paper.

This paper is based on my forthcoming book: T. Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015)

Tim Allender teaches at the University of Sydney and his postgraduate research was conducted mostly in London, UK and in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Since that time his research interests have included postcolonial scholarship particularly regarding India, a field he has been active in researching for the past two decades. He has written three books, edited or co-edited four special editions of international journals and has published approximately 30 international journal articles or book chapters. He was recently invited as a Visiting Professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, India where he led the community there of Indian professorial academics and research fellows for six weeks. He held one of fourteen international history fellowships in 2012 at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India’s leading postgraduate university in the humanities and the social sciences. He has also conducted other research collaborations at Delhi University, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai and at Kolkata University.

Tim is currently involved in a cross-disciplinary project concerning the social inclusion of destitute Indian females in Kolkata, where education is the only escape from modern day slavery and sex trafficking. This builds on his involvement in AUSAid social inclusion and human rights programmes based in Australia.

At a national level in Australia, Tim has been the NSW University Academic Board nominee for the development of the new National Curriculum (History) for primary and secondary schoolchildren up to university entry level. He has recently held a large national grant researching the disciplinarity of history pedagogy in the school classroom and he maintains a strong research interest concerning the use of textbooks and online resources in these classrooms.

³ T. Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002).

⁴ J. Schriewer and C. Martinez, ‘Constructions of Internationality in Education’ in G. Steiner-Khamsi, (ed.) *The Global Politics of Educational Borrowing and Lending* (New York: Teachers’ College Press, 2004).

⁵ D. Phillips and K. Ochs, ‘Processes of Policy Borrowing in Education; Some Explanatory and Analytical Devices’ in *Comparative Education* 39:4 (November, 2003), 451-461.