

*The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal.* By INDIRA CHOWDHURY. SOAS Studies on South Asia. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. xiii, 193 pp. \$22.95 (cloth).

Indira Chowdhury's excavation of the re-signifying practices of an anxious *bhadralok* masculinity of late nineteenth-century colonial Bengal begins with an arresting and savagely satirical poem from 1886. This poem juxtaposes the image of a martial, lion-riding goddess Durga with that of her enfeebled, servile, and comical Bengali male devotee, who is defined entirely by the abject banalities of his existence under colonial rule. The kind of gendered colonial theater that such a poem stages has a certain familiar cast to it; scholars as varied as Ashis Nandy, Mrinalini Sinha, Tanika Sarkar, Sara Suleri, John Rosselli, and Sudipta Kaviraj have drawn our attention to the potency and the wide circulation among the Bengali *bhadralok* of this image of abasement and effeminacy. Chowdhury seeks to understand what might have constituted the seductiveness or the counterintuitive strategic utility of such representations to its ostensible object, the *bhadralok* male. What kinds of ideological work might such masochistic representations of effeminization and ineffectuality be made to perform, and what forms of satire and raillery might end up in the service of a constituency eager to establish its own hegemony over a colonized cultural domain? What, furthermore, might be the political serviceability or the affective charge of the ample quotient of heroic female icons that marked the discourse of the *bhadralok* male anxious to wrench at least a historical past, if not the historical present of colonial rule, from the ascendancy of racist traditions of colonial Indian historiography? These are not inconsequential questions to ask, and Chowdhury seeks to approach them through a range of texts, tropes, and historical figures, some familiar and some relatively obscure. Thus the familiar figures of Vivekananda, Bankim, and the icon of Bharat Mata are situated cheek by jowl with more unexpected ones such as Manomohan Basu (one of the chief organizers and ideologues of the National Mela), the writer and diarist Hemendra Prasad Ghose, and iconic images of a "Hindu" "Mother Victoria." Chowdhury scrutinizes these in order to elaborate, interpret, and contextualize the variety of ways in which the *bhadralok* male responded to the gendered script of colonial subjection. She thus details the role of an institution like the National Mela in identifying, recasting, and making visible a range of products, ritual practices, and corporeal images designed to counter amputations of *bhadralok* unworthiness. The production of a repertoire of countercolonial cultural representations was also assumed by Bengali historians who sought, not so much to anticipate the end of colonial government (which was largely inconceivable at this historical moment) as to establish a new and visionary understanding of the past as an archive of heroic Hindu images replete with pedagogical potential for a debased and postheroic present. This invocation of a once and future virility was directed not simply at British norms of heterosexual masculinity; it sought to incorporate, even as it was competitive with, the heroic histories of the subcontinental "martial races" identified by the taxonomies of colonial rule. Such yearnings for a muscular Hinduism were mobilized and popularized by Vivekananda's showcasing of the robust asceticism of the *sannyasi*, and by the practices of a *swadeshi* movement that followed logically in his wake.

This arsenal of virile images was complemented by a set of heroically chaste and maternal feminine figures. Occasionally, however, more unusual feminine icons emerged and circulated; that of "Mother Victoria" was one of them. In what is perhaps

the best discussion in the book, Chowdhury demonstrates that the appeal of such a figure was not easily reducible to loyalism or to masculine self-assertion. On the whole, though, this text is often more at ease in rehearsing rather than extending the received wisdom on the gendered struggles of *bhadralok* masculinity. It is not always fully inattentive to questions of genre and form, their modes of address, and their often discrepant and incalculable implications. Thus the author is content to read a variety of forms—journalism, satire and mock-epic, historical narrative, and religio-national icons—as documents of an anticolonial impetus that dared not speak its name. Such an assertion does little to illuminate the powerfully affective and even erotic investment of the *bhadralok* in the self-image of abjection or unworthiness. Nor does it tell us much about the convergent, conflicting, or interlocking sex-gender systems of Victorian Britain and colonial Bengal that were surely debated and recast in this project. And in the absence of any consideration of the ways in which women, lower castes, and even Anglo-Indian subjects were solicited by this discourse or responded to it, it is none too easy to speculate on its aspirations towards hegemony. Nonetheless, Chowdhury's text does inaugurate in some of its detail some of the more difficult questions about the gendering of colonial Bengal; it is not entirely surprising that many of the questions it broaches demand further investigation.

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*Temple Architecture and Sculpture of the Nolambas: Ninth–Tenth Centuries.* By ANDREW L. COHEN. Delhi: Manohar, 1998. 151 pp. \$26.00 (cloth).

This monograph is a detailed and trustworthy investigation of twenty-one Hindu temples built of stone and brick in the central highlands of southern India. That region, where the modern states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu now converge, was the homeland of the Nolamba dynasty whose authority was circumscribed by their more powerful neighbors, the Cholas, Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Rashtrakutas. Previous scholarship has framed art of the Nolamba region as a weak provincial echo of art sponsored by the mightier dynasties around them, and by the Cholas in particular. Embedded in this view, of which C. Sivaramamurti and K. V. Soundara Rajan have been vocal proponents, are the groundless assumptions that kings were the only significant patrons of temple architecture; that royal patrons, especially those who were good warriors, were directly involved in decisions about temple design; and that artistic influence accompanied political subjugation.

Andrew Cohen wisely rejects this view and devotes his introductory chapter to exposing the theoretical flaws behind it. He weakens the case for Chola influence on Nolamba art by citing Burton Stein's evidence against a centralized Chola state. Cohen builds on Nicholas Dirks's observation that peripheral regions can be influential. He notes Ronald Inden's remarks about the complexity of human agency involved in temple patronage, and Pramod Chandra's case for the irrelevance of dynastic labels to most Indic art. In his willingness to apply to the study of Indic art these revisions of Indic history paradigms, Cohen makes a worthy contribution. These revisions should reshape our thinking about the production of art throughout the subcontinent, helping us beyond still prevalent assumptions that kings patronized all major works of art and that shifting patterns of political dominance were the primary cause of changes in art styles.