

The *Babus* and the Social Body in Conceptual Proposition in Early Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: *Edward Said maintains: “Knowledge of the Orient because generated out of strength, in a sense, creates the Orient, the Oriental and his world” (Said 1978: 40). The emergence of the Babus brought new changes in the social atmosphere of early colonial Bengal. The elite, wealthy, western educated Bengalis began imitating western culture and were very much eager to forge a new social class, which would align them with the Britishers. This research paper tries to revisit existing literature in conjunction with historical texts to understand the formation of the Babu identity and how this was mirrored in the new social body that had come into existence.*

Keywords: *Body, Babu, culture, language, English*

Introduction:

The Bengali *Babu* (or *Baboo*) had emerged as a social class because of the establishment of colonial trade and commerce and also due to the introduction of English education in Bengal. The English East India Company operated primarily as a trading agency in India till the mid-eighteenth century. The Battle of Plassey and the Battle of Buxar ensured a colossal strengthening of the Company’s position in the region leading to the grant of ‘*Diwani*’ for the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by the Mughal emperor, Shah Alam. Bengal represented a region in which there were continuous attempts – both by the British colonists and the local population – to forge a hybrid identity at multiple paradigms. The establishment of the British Empire had a profound impact on the emergence of new Bengal. The new ambiance in Bengal was a reflection of archetype European society, and the emanation of *Babu* Culture was an example of this new prototype urbanism, and this had a huge impact on domesticity which inadvertently paved the way for new social body enigma in Bengal.

Conceptual Representation of the Body:

The ‘body’ of the human emerged as a subject of historical analysis in the latter 1970s. The genesis for the rise of this subject-specificity can be related to the interdisciplinarity of the ‘new social history’ of the 1960s and 1970s (Tilly 1884: 364). The scholarship developed in parallel to the growth of the histories of women and sexuality. Since then, it has developed in tandem with the new cultural history and gender history, both of which owed very much to the disciplines having general engagement with the linguistic turn. Body history does ‘exemplify general reorientations’ in historical study (Cartrine 2005).

The textual analysis of the body was not at all absent from the historical writings before the 1970s. Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, historians regarded the human body as a source of weakness to be overcome while they privileged the mind as a source of rationality, consciousness, and identity. This dualism of mind and

body was the most important feature of classical Christian and Enlightenment traditions that dominated the western intellectual thought. Thus, in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels the human body was weak and passive (Horkheimer & Adorno 1973: 231). Marc Bloch's (1973) examination of royal healing in England and France could be termed a prototype of body history, and Lucien Febvre's calls for 'quantitative histories' of family life, sexuality and death also encouraged historians to 'historicize aspects of the body' (Febvre 1970)

The most influential sociologist for the history of the body is Norbert Elias. Elias published works between the 1930s and the 1980s, but the key work for use for the present paper is "The Civilizing Process," first published in German in 1939, and translated into two volumes in 1978 and 1982. It had a major impact in the late 1970s, during which it became available in English translation. Elias examined changes in forms of 'acceptable social conduct' and 'treatment' of the body, particularly in relation to bodily functions, from the medieval to the modern period. He distinguished between two historical bodies. "Echoing classic modernization theory, the medieval body was childlike, uncivilized, irrational, and uninhibited in expressing emotions and bodily functions. In order for a more mature stage of individualization to develop, repression and education were needed. During the early modern period, the medieval body gave way to the modern, bourgeois body, which was restrained, mannered and decorous" (Carthine 2005: 2220. The medieval body's uncontrolled impulses were replaced by the modern body's emotional self-control.

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) study of the culture of folk humor in the context of the French writer François Rabelais has become enormously influential in body history. Bakhtin identified two distinct bodies, the 'grotesque', which he discussed at length, and the 'classical'. These bodies were associated, respectively, with low and high cultures. The classical body of elite culture was easily described and recognized, but the grotesque body was difficult to categorize and appraise. It was defined primarily in opposition to the classical body. Where the classical body was individual, the grotesque was collective. While the classical body emphasized the head, traditionally associated with honor, the grotesque body accentuated the belly and genitals and embraced organic bodily functions: defecation, lactation, menstruation, and conception. The complete and immaculate classical body's interactions with the world were clearly defined. In contrast, the grotesque body, the boundaries between inside and outside, between self and the other, the body and the world were blurred (Clark 1984).

Michel Foucault was one of the key post-structuralist philosophers of the twentieth century. Within the poststructuralist tradition, bodies are viewed not as constant biological entities, but - like books, films, and language itself - as texts. Bodies can be read by interpreting bodily signs and symbols. This semiotic conceptualization has led to a focus on social construction - how the meanings given to the supposedly natural or biological body are not fixed but constructed socially and culturally. Hence the body is understood differently in different historical periods. Foucault's approach is a social constructionist one. For

Foucault, bodies were constructed to legitimate dominant forms of power. The power relationships between rulers and their subjects are enacted on the bodies of the dominated. As modern forms of power relationships developed, so there was a change from an older to a new, modern body. The old fluid body of humours and astrological correspondences gave way to a new body, the former was denied by observation, intervention, and scientific rigour (Foucault 1979:112,113). The establishment of the British Empire had a profound impact on the emergence of new Bengal.

The English *Babus* and the Social Body:

Tapan Raychaudhuri writes that the *Babus* were the “first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West.” He points out that the British brought about a “close contact between two entirely different cultures of which one was perceived to be dominant,” and this supremacy proved the catalyst that prompted a segment of young Bengali men to mimic their colonizers which, in turn, contributed to the rise of the *Babus*. But the “colonial mimicry [of the *Babus* was, in essence,] the desire for a reformed, recognizable other as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite” (Raychaudhuri 1988: 9)

The advent of the East India Company allowed Bengalis many opportunities to amass large fortunes within a lifetime that would have been impossible if positions such as those of the *banians* and *dewans* had not been occasioned by British needs. In her essay, “The ‘Great Houses’ of Old Calcutta,” Chitra Deb (1990:6) rightly says of Bengalis, who filled such positions: “Unusually too, their wealth came not from hereditary trade or landed wealth but from new sources allied with nascent British colonialism.” Bengal was a simple case where both imperialism and colonialism were supported and perhaps impelled by impressive ideological formulations, and it reminded that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination (Deb 1990:60).

When the British first came to conduct business in Calcutta, the Setts and Basaks were existing businessmen of the time, but no one in Calcutta knew English. The use of sign language was prevalent when communicating with the British regarding business matters. Gradually, with the aid of sign language, some English words were learned. Later, because of the establishment of the Supreme Court, learning of English was necessitated for smoothly conducting legal matters (Bandopadhyaya & Das ed. 2004: 17).

The *Babus* realized they could only receive acceptance if the British perceived them as being socially and culturally evolved, that they could use their money as a means to display their refinement and social status proving the negative opinions of the British to be unfounded. They were quite aware that the British considered “European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures,” (Said 1978: 7). The study of English literature, in particular, helped to form a sense of connection between rulers and ruled, and yet it also served to perpetuate the *Babu* stereotype. It accomplished this by presenting a vision of idealized Englishmen and Westerners as the

universal standard which all enlightened persons should strive to attain, and by attempting to point out the failings of Bengali character through rationalistic discourse (Vrudhula 1999:89).

Decoration for the body has always been a way of representing status and the wealthier a society is, the more it puts emphasis on fashionable clothes as a means of creating superior social demarcation. The wealthy Bengali *Babus* too adopted clothing and fashion of the west. The wealth gave them the ability to buy and wear western clothes to decorate their bodies. They believed that decorating the body like *gora sahebs* would earn them passports into British society. The Babu's haircut was called the "Albert-cut" because it resembled the hairstyle of Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert (Sinha 1997:9).

To them the existing Bengali society was old fashioned and orthodox. Joining the west would make them progressive and modern since they "believed that Western civilization was superior to anything the Indian had to offer" (Greenberger 1969: 73).

The *Babus* were criticized due to their bohemian lifestyle by the older generations of the then society. They believed that mimicry of the Britishers was indirectly helping them to set solid footings on Indian soils. Motilal's father in *Alaler Ghorer Dulal* (1893) completely lost faith in Motilal when he became a *Babu*. Nobo's father's frustration with Nobo makes Nobo's father in *Ekei Ki Bole Sobhota?* ask Nobo's mother why she had not killed Nobo when she had conceived him. Both Motilal's and Nobo's fathers are shocked by their sons' activities, and both are quick to realize that their sons' ways of life threatened ago-old Hindu traditions that forbade the eating of beef, drinking of alcohol, and upholding the caste system. Most Bengali authors such as Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay, Tekchand Thakur, Kaliprasanna Sinha, Bankimchandra Chatterji, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt who wrote about *Babu*-culture were decidedly against it and disparage those who embarked on a *Babu* lifestyle. Dipesh Chakrabarty observes that English education often brought in its trail a sense of crisis in Bengali families—a certain degree of waywardness in young men that led to their neglecting their duties towards their families and the elders was a most commonly voiced complaint against the Bengali *Babus* of the early nineteenth century (Chakrabarty 1997: 373). In fact, the *Babu*, as he appeared in the farces and the sketches, was the pampered son of a British agent who has inherited his father's wealth dissipates it on drinking, whoring and other amusements with a host of sycophants (Banerjee 1998:180). Conservative mainstream society recoiled from the *Babu* lifestyle and, in response, entrenched themselves further in tradition and mocked the *Babus* in popular folk songs: *Brandi, ganja, guli, yaar jutey katokguli Mukhetey sarboda buli, hoot boley dey ganjaya tan* (They are immersed in brandy, hemp, and opium along with their cronies. Gabbling all the time and pulling away at hemp) (Banerjee 1998: 109).

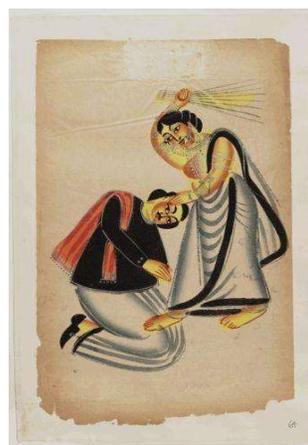
The *Babus* also tried to counterfeit the 'manly Englishmen' and projected a masculine body. The *Samachar Darpan* of 9th June 1821 (Bandyopadhyay 1950:78) writes that when a European quarrels with anyone, he virtually makes war. He attacks him with his fist, pistols, and so forth. By way of imitating that, *Babu* punched his dependent relatives and

also threatened to shoot them whenever his anger was aroused. *Babu* considered this as a mark of virility. Babu Dataram Ghosh, as mentioned in *Samachar Darpan*, determined to live like the European *sahebs* projected his bodily attitude in every particular way. For instance, the *sahebs* generally go for a ride in the mornings and evenings, either in a carriage or horseback. *Babu* Dataram Ghosh gave instructions to his servant to wake him so that he can go for a ride on horseback early in the morning. Unfortunately, he spent most of the night in a brothel, and arriving home early hours went off to bed. Soon the- servant came and woke him. He was still feeling sleepy when he got up and by the time he was mounted on the horse and ready to go, it was well past sunrise (Bandyopadhyay 1950: 78).

Conclusion:

Despite heavy criticism and censure from the orthodox society, the *Babus* began the trend of wearing western clothing, decorated their body mimicking the western *sahebs* and led a lavish lifestyle. No doubt the new social body of the *Babus* was despised by others; they did have a measure of achievement, and they led India into the Western world in terms of ideas. It is in the *Babus*' imitation, that is, in their taking on Enlightenment forms of thought, Western manners and habits, and forms of literary and artistic expression, that their construction of a colonial modernity lies Modern Calcutta owes a large measure of its modernity to the progressiveness of the *Babus*. The *Babus* began the trend of wearing Western clothing, and men in Calcutta today are most often seen in the clothing of the West rather than in traditional Bengali clothing.

The British also encouraged Westernization of the *Babus* because it served as a means of control by creating a group of people Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. (David 1995: 129). Promoting western education, clothing, and making new social bodies became a device of acculturation that the British used effectively as part of their “divide and rule” policy.



Source: <https://dreameroftheocean.wordpress.com/2017/09/21/kalighat-paintings-and-their-status-in-the-present-urban-ambiance/>

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