

Title—Rhetoric and Reality: Gender and the Colonial Experience in South Asia
Authors—Avril A. Powell and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley
Year—2006

Categories: Gender, Colonialism, Politics, Modernity

Place: South Asia

Time: 1860-1947

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection seeks to engage in the rhetoric and reality of discourse and policy making on issues directly affecting women during the colonial period. Powell and Lambert-Hurley situate this collection within the recent scholarship that has looked into the relationship between the changing nature of economic and political power and the change encountered by men and women of colonized territories. The essays aim to focus on the interconnections between the ideal and the real with regards to gender and the colonial experience in South Asia. This book is organized around three main themes: domesticity, central to reformist agendas in colonial India; the body, as metaphor and reality; and modernity, or the spectrum of modernities in the plural that emerged within the colonial milieu. All of the essays study the agency of the colonizing powers and those who are colonized. Powell and Lambert-Hurley argues that the domestic sphere became a sight and symbol of modernity. While the contributors sought to extend discussion to as much of the subcontinent as possible, the emphasis in reality tends to be on Northern and Central India with a tendency towards developments among Bengalis.

The essays in the collection discuss the following topics: motherhood, purdah education, female infanticide, notions of gender identity and the body, missionary activity, meanings of sisterhood, and the challenges faced by individual men and women as they grappled with the demands of modernity. In terms of child care, there was a clear hierarchy of senior women in the household, especially the mother in law. Interestingly, the importance of maids and servants in socializing and educating Bengali middle-class children went against the manuals that advised women to participate fully in the raising of their children. One essay argues that the practice of female infanticide was rooted in causes other than cultural—to consider it a cultural practice, the colonial intervention to eradicate the practice was misplaced and ineffective. There is a need to disentangle the economic, social, and political causes from the cultural aspects which underlie the need for larger numbers of men in the communities where female infanticide was practiced. Lambert-Hurley's contribution is focused on the work of Quaker missionaries in Bhopal. She argues that these missionaries were different compared to the missionary work happening in the rest of the colony. She claims that Quaker missionaries tended to avoid gender and racial hierarchies and were more tolerant of local religious and cultural practices. Overall, the collection underscores the extent to which gender, especially in regard to female experience, had become an established element within historical explorations of South Asia's colonial past.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Domesticity deals with colonial intervention in the domestic sphere by reformulating and redefining practices like child marriage, child care, female education, and dowry murder
- Theme of modernity in the colonial period juxtaposes various ideas to which Indian women were exposed in the domestic and public sphere
- Colonial policies of land ownership and revenue collection might have actually pushed selective female infanticide to occur more frequently