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Clare Anderson, *Legible bodies. Race, criminality and colonialism in South Asia*

Oxford/NY, Berg, 2004, 245 pp., ISBN 1 85973 860 5

Satadru Sen



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- 1 *Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia* is Clare Anderson's most recent foray into the history of punishment in colonial South Asia. In this compact but informative book, she takes up the relationship between discourses of race and criminality on the one hand, and embodied practices on the other. Her particular concern is with colonial inscriptions, descriptions and readings of the bodies of convicts, through tattooing, dress, haircuts, measurements, photography, and fingerprinting. Anderson ties these 'writings' and readings of the incarcerated body to the colonial project of ordering Indian society, arguing that the body-as-text provided administrators and penologists with ways of interpreting criminal behavior and constructing racialized and gendered 'communities' within the larger society of natives.
- 2 There is much to admire in this study, which is encyclopedic in its ambitions, well-grounded in the post-Foucauldian scholarship on discipline, and eager to utilize colonial as well as recent anthropologies of India. It is well-written, not burdened by jargon, well-researched (in spite of a tendency to reproduce anecdotes that have already been produced by other scholars) and a more than useful addition to the historiography of punishment. While focused on the agents of the state, it does not assume an omnipotent state: Anderson is well aware that the inscription of prisoners' bodies did not necessarily reflect the power and the standardizing drive of the regime. She points out the diversity,

unevenness, and sometimes the sheer illegibility of embodied texts, as well as the resistance of the prisoners to the textualization of their bodies. Anderson is also able to draw attention to the internal contradictions of punishment in colonial India, noting, for instance, that even as practices such as photography and tattooing were aimed at stabilizing (and reifying) a link between the convicted criminal and the society of his or her crime, the colonial prison often sought to sever those links, partly as punishment and partly as rehabilitation. Similarly, she demonstrates convincingly that the individualization of the criminal through marking/reading the body coincided with a paradoxical process of categorization, because the legible individual was relocated within a normative social category of race-caste.

- 3 Anderson is also reasonably successful at establishing a relationship between metropolitan and colonial penology in the nineteenth century. Asking whether the colony was in fact a laboratory, she concludes that there were so many parallels between European and British-Indian experiments that the boundary between metropole and colony was «substantially blurred». At the same time, she acknowledges the peculiarities of colonial penology, such as the obsession with caste and racial hierarchy. To her credit, she highlights how metropolitan and colonial discourses, bodies and experiments served as points of reference for each other.
- 4 The section on tattooing is the most engaging and originally-researched part of the book. Anderson narrates the translation of this 'cultural' practice into an identifying strategy that assumes a stability of the body across time and space, and to the production of legible subjects for a centralizing state. Her observations would, however, have benefited from a reading of Partha Chatterjee's theorization of identity, marked bodies and the colonial state in *A Princely Imposter?*, and especially from Chatterjee's observation that identity can be disproved but not conclusively proved. Anderson misses an opportunity build upon that insight, and as a result, her study suffers from an insufficient polemical distance from work that has been done by Chatterjee and Nicholas Dirks. Unlike Chatterjee, Dirks is cited extensively by Anderson, and she is clearly in agreement with his broad thesis about the 'ethnographic state,' or the descriptive, recording, authoritative colonialism of the second half of the nineteenth century. While she extends that state into the prison, however, it is not clear what she adds to, or takes away from, a point that Dirks has already made quite convincingly.
- 5 A reluctance to 'follow through' on promising ideas is evident at some other points in the book. Anderson notes – quite correctly – that hereditary criminality in India was seen by colonial administrators as primarily a social phenomenon, whereas metropolitan penologists gave greater weight to biology. She does not, however, adequately theorize the idea of delinquency, or the 'habit' that marked the 'habitual criminal' in the colony and that was frequently manifest in his body. What exactly was the relationship between body, habit, and nurturing? To some extent, the anthropological approach of the study – especially the narrow focus on the prison and colonial ethnography – works to Anderson's disadvantage. She is able to show how incompletely and hesitantly modern the colonial state was, but that in itself is not a new revelation. She presents a wealth of expository information on what convicts wore, and about localized contests over dress, but does not provide a satisfying answer to the 'so what?' question other than to reaffirm that clothing ordered British constructions of caste. It remains unclear whether this was a pedagogical ordering, an elaborate game of colonial dress-up, a process of negotiation

with the convicts, or the consequences of negotiation with other interested factions in Indian society.

- 6 The reluctance to pursue these opportunities fully is also a consequence of Anderson's disinterest in the wider political context of punishment, observation and description. While she is cognizant of the micro-politics of the prison, the lack of a macro-political frame weakens the analysis of penal agendas. 'Race' – which is explicitly the subject of the book – was not, after all, a concern of the colonizer alone; nor was the colonial state stable in its racial authority. The body-politics of the prison took place within, and reflected, a wider set of political contests, including the gradual infiltration of the colonial penal bureaucracy by middle-class Indians from the 1890s onwards. By the interwar period, certainly, the British-Indian state was not unambiguously colonial; various sites within it, including the prisons and the provincial legislatures, had been partially decolonized. This decolonization was enormously disruptive of older agendas of punishment and description: by the 1920s, Indian professionals in jails and reformatories had created models of deviance, relocated deviance from the body into a medicalized psyche, and produced delinquents who might be 'cured' rather than located within criminalized social groups. Because Anderson does not take note of this process, her study is curiously ahistorical: there is little change over the hundred-odd years that she examines, and an uncomfortable gap between the actual end of her study early in the twentieth century and the rather facile conclusion that present-day Indian ethnography is unproblematically colonial.

AUTHORS

SATADRU SEN

(History Department, Washington University, St. Louis), ssen@artsci.wustl.edu