

BOOK REVIEW

David Arnold, *Toxic Histories: Poison and Pollution in Modern India*, (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2017), Rs. 530, Pp. ix+241 Paperback, (ISBN 978-1-316-63496-7).

Bikash Sarma is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Salesian College Siliguri. He has completed his M. Phil from Sikkim Central University. He is currently pursuing his research on Politics of Narration Concerning the travelogues written during the Colonial period, Concerning Assam.

In *Toxic Histories*, Arnold embeds the social and cultural history of toxicity within the spatio-temporality of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India. The pre-colonial toxic culture gradually was politicized and polemicized in the later scientific discourse of the colonial state. Arnold in enacting historiography of toxicity, emphasize upon the 'constitutive ambivalence of *pharmakon* in India. In doing so Arnold enacts it from the minor footnotes of the historiography of health, medicine, and disease in British India. The book is about the history of medicine's, 'evil twin and toxic other'. The unrestrained circulatory networks of this evil twin in colonial India were simultaneously is also evidence of that marginality. The social history of poison remained elusive in misconceived etiology fin de siècle. And, before the bacteriological revelations, the history of poison was entangled with miasmatic exhalations and putrefactions caused by the tropical climate. Arnold positions the history of poisons into colonial climatic discourse and medical discourse of the long nineteenth century: in the changing understanding and role of poison in that emerging medical discourse. Thus, in *Toxic Histories*, Arnold recovers the history of poisons from the flawed colonial discourses: from merely being 'an epiphenomenon attributable to the medical uncertainties'.

However, the author subverts the reified orientalist discourse on poisons and poisoning by investigating the stereotyping that surrounds the mysterious figure of the orient and her appetite for poison. Arnold not only denaturalise such orientalist claims but also reveals the ideological biases of colonial science in the form of toxicology and production of categories of the natives attached with colonial poison history. The author very well cautions the readers about colonial archives 'epistemological quest and politicizing agenda' as poison and poisoning practices of the natives often provided the colonial ideology to surveillance and control.

Poison in pre-colonial India had material existence but because of its pervasiveness through statecraft, myth, and religiosity, it acquired a moral idiom of quotidian life in "dialectical opposition to the nectar of purity and virtue" (p. 20). Arnold elaborates on this pre-colonial materiality and imaginary of poisons in India not just in the realm of the 'exceptional' but in its manifestation of conspiracies and imperial punishments. He also hints at the discourse on 'misogyny and male anxiety' and forms of subaltern consciousness surrounding poisons. Pre-colonial chronicles, pharmacopeia like *Sushruta Samhita* are replete with these multiple imageries and stereotypes on the 'lives' and pervasiveness of poisons enacted through various circulatory networks of poison treatises and poison lore. The fecundity of the mythical discourse on poison as Arnold argues was later appropriated in social/nationalist and scientific applications.

In exploring "The Social Life of Poisons" in Chapter I, Arnold masterfully explicates with numerous events from pre-colonial India, the multifaceted lives of poisons as both source of pleasure, procreation in one context and in another as a source of death including suicides, infanticide, and murder. "In this topsy-turvy world, wives who murdered their spouses with arsenic or aconite could claim in their defense that they had intended the 'medicine' that killed their husband as a 'love philtre' to regain his waning passion or to ensure the birth of a much-needed child" (p. 32).

Chapter II “The Imperial *Pharmakon*”, details in colonial forms toxicology that sought to discipline the ambiguity surrounding the toxins and their social lives. The new colonial forms of knowledge in the nineteenth and twentieth century separated the complex intermingling of concepts and lives of toxins into a new ‘order of things’. The anxiety of the colonial administrators surrounding the ‘twilight zone’ of toxins as *pharamkon*: “as healing art...[and] destructive guile” (p. 42) were made intelligible into the ‘objective’ science of the colonial state by differentiating between the therapeutic drugs from dangerous poisons, as initial attempts at bioprospecting were made.

Throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century, poison occupied a quiet existence on the face of the onslaught of epidemics, famine and periodic revolts in India. However, the toxic fear and anxiety remained in the colonial minds that at time. In chapter III “Panics and Scares”, Arnold locates the emergence of colonial information order amidst the discourse on poison panics and anxieties. Rumours of circulation of toxins in both the public and the private spaces threatening the European and Indian corporality constituted these poison discourses. As Arnold suggests, contrary to the orientalist representations of poisonous deeds performed by the natives, the popular reports suggested the other way round. This chapter details the rumours and poison panics based on communal lines in colonial India that in turn were sought to be quelled by colonial science and by devising numerous categories deviants and habitual criminals.

Chapter IV “Toxic Evidence” underlines the process of capture and intelligibility of the poison panics and the native subjects through colonial toxicology and medical jurisprudence and in doing so it paints a critical portrait of the people associated with it. The chapter introduces the reader to the ideological biases of this colonial toxicology and medical jurisprudence. Chapter V “Intimate Histories” explores some of the poison tales of the nineteenth century and the investigation of these poison cases revealed the stereotypical representations of the ‘oriental poisoner’ or poisoning as an oriental menace that fed into the popular

imaginations of the European audience. In Chapter V “Embracing Toxicity”, Arnold provides a historiography of mysterious Arsenic of the nineteenth century India. Lacking in color, smell and taste it was one of the most popular poison agents in Europe and India. In the last chapter “Polluted places, poisoned lives”, Arnold after traveling the depth of poison lore and Toxicology, locates in the history of pollution in India, underlining the urban environment and industrialization. These issues were neglected for some time in Environmental histories of the continent as that mostly focussed on colonial forestry. Bourgeoisie environmentalism often overlooked the workplace poisonings of the workers.

Arnold’s masterful analysis of the social and political history of Poisons in colonial India covers a wide temporal and spatial frame. Although Arnold relies on colonial archives and reports rooted in oriental prejudices, he steers clear of reifying those stereotypes and racial prejudices. In *Toxic Histories* and as in *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century* (1993) and *The Tropics and the Travelling Gaze* (2005), he demonstrates critical history writing by subverting the colonial sources and their ingrained prejudices. By enacting this process of subversion he made the subaltern speak. Arnold’s mode of history writing through inversion and subversion of colonial sources paves the way for a new mode of historiography.