

Out of Office

Required Reading: The Life of Everyday Texts in the British Empire

Priyasha Mukhopadhyay

232 pages, 2024, £35 (paperback)

Princeton University Press

Reviewed by Cedric Van Dijck, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

In early October 1921 the cold weather returned to the plains of central India. To mark the occasion, E. M. Forster, who was then employed as a local Maharajah's secretary, joined a torchlight procession to the outskirts of the princely state of Dewas. At a Tree of Victory, planted for the Dessera Festival, a document was read out, listing the state's unlikely revenues and possessions, including an army of battle elephants and lands stretching across the subcontinent from Lahore to Pune. For Forster, this "faery budget" appeared straight out of a comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan (*Abinger* 320). Exaggeration was the point: historically, this annual recitation was meant to convey the princely state's readiness for warfare once the harvest was in.

As part of the festival's proceedings, Forster was asked to officiate as priest and to worship the everyday objects around him, from an inkpot to a wastepaper basket. Easy enough, as it turned out: "Just wave incense and sprinkle water," he wrote to a friend in England, "and dab with red powder anything you like" (*Devi* 139). If today such actions might cause some discomfort, then it is good to be reminded that the gathering crowd likewise "smile[d] at the absurdities" (Forster, *Abinger* 321). To be sure, Dewas was a curious place. Leafing through an old imperial gazetteer, Forster had learned that the territory was in fact made up of twin states, Dewas Junior and Dewas Senior, whose boundaries were inextricably entangled and whose central district, Sarangpur, was administered jointly. (It reminds me of Belgium, from where I write). Years later, an old India hand told Forster that such a place could not have existed, leaving him with the puzzling intuition that he had never been there.

But Forster *had been* there. The forms of everyday writing he encountered—the fictional budget, the waste paper, the imperial gazetteer—governed his life abroad. In fact, they were central to the cultural imagination of British India at large. The rise of empire and bureaucracy were concomitant phenomena, both aided by the arrival of new and cheaper printing technologies. Orchestrated from London, the expanding British empire in the nineteenth century had presented such a logistical problem that even minor actions and decisions on the ground left lengthy paper trails. This had been, in part, the doing of Virginia Woolf's grandfather, James Stephen, who during his tenure as undersecretary of the colonies introduced modern bureaucracy at the colonial office and increased its clerking staff five-fold. Once put in place, such colonial bureaucracies, from London to Lahore, spawned

any number of print objects: almanacs, licenses, permits, military manuals, petitions, magazines. Priyasha Mukhopadhyay puts these files and folders—"the functional archive"—center stage in her new literary history of South Asia around the turn of the twentieth century, *Required Reading: The Life of Everyday Texts in the British Empire*. The book is a *tour de force*.

While ubiquitous, the functional archive remains largely unseen, given the prominence accorded to other forms, such as the novel, in our scholarly accounts of empire. And yet, for the colonizer and colonized alike (though in different ways and with different stakes), navigating life in the British Raj meant engaging with everyday forms of writing and with the affective experiences that such engagements entailed, from the absurdity and confusion Forster recorded to boredom and outright violence. In turning to these everyday print artefacts, Mukhopadhyay follows a shift in the field, veering sharply away from the adventurous and exotic towards the commonplace and boring as guiding principles for a novel affective history of empire. This is reflected in the commodities newly under consideration. We are now drawn as much to Forster's imperial gazetteer as, say, to the Goa stone in a gold filigree case which, passed down in the author's family, sat on his desk at Cambridge before it was donated to the British Museum.

By and large, functional documents did *not* make it into the British Museum. Ephemeral in nature, such papers were thrown away after they had served their purpose, making the lives and experiences that coalesced around them, including scenes of violence, historically illegible. Annotations in the margins, stains and thumbed papers give an indication of the uses and misuses of the writings that have survived, and the historical picture can be filled in further by imaginative scenes described in fiction. Part of Mukhopadhyay's point in doing so is to gesture beyond the notion of the functional archive as merely 'informational' and instead to appreciate its "rich aesthetic life" (18) (Forster once called it "a literature outside literature" ("Flood" 717)). In Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), for instance, administrative paperwork and procedures occupy a surprisingly key position in a novel populated by *illiterate* villagers in British Ceylon. They prove to be the undoing of its protagonists, Silindu, making good on Aimé Césaire's notion that colonialism implies a form of *thingification*.

By unearthing Silindu's engagements with the functional archive, Mukhopadhyay persuasively revises our understanding of reading in the colonial world—perhaps her book's most exciting intervention. "What counts as a response to a text?" she asks early on (29). The following scenes may help us answer such a question: a crowd of Indian festival goers *listening* to the recitation of a fictional budget covering enormous wealth and smiling at the absurdity; British troops bound for India packing Garnet Wolseley's *Soldier's Pocket-book for Field Service* (1869), yet leaving it *unread*; Indian farmers *burning* account books in the 1875 Deccan Riots so as to erase all trace of their debts; Forster *leafing* through an imperial gazetteer; a hurried

commuter, in a parallel gesture, *looking up* train times in a *panjika*, an almanac. The history of reading, especially in the colonial world, benefits from dismantling what Mukhopadhyay terms “a hierarchization of readerly engagement” and from considering instead the inability or refusal to read, as well as discontinuous, interrupted or repeated practices of reading (180). Reading (or not reading) functional documents, we know intuitively, is nothing like reading a novel, and the way this was done in South Asia around the turn of the twentieth century says much about an individual’s relationship to empire. The result of such an approach is a more inclusive, more capacious understanding of reading that propels us to revisit our own protagonists (E.M. Forster, for instance, does not feature in *Required Reading* but its insights sent me back to the novelist’s Indian writings with fresh eyes).

To open up the history of reading in South Asia, finally, presupposes the survival of the functional archive—not in itself an insignificant feat. Travelling between Oxford, London, Kolkata, New Haven and Colombo, Mukhopadhyay notes that those forms of everyday writing that remain to be found were paradoxically the least consulted, given the transient nature of cheap paper. The hot, humid weather, Forster promptly learned in Dewas, left his books “warped” (“the fate of ink,” he added, “is desperate”) (*Devi* 72). It must have been hard to keep equally destructive forces at bay over the years: neglect, fire, flooding, the absence of a perceived need to safekeep all those piles of papers. Who in the future would read them anyway?

More radically, the British Government evacuated and destroyed much of India’s functional archive in the weeks leading up to the country’s independence in 1947. The underlying idea had been to shape the histories of the past that historians would write in the future. The British Government may only as recently as 2011 have admitted to what at the time it called *Operation Legacy*, but the practice has long been something of a public secret. I am reminded of Virginia Woolf’s ironic quip, in *Orlando* (1928), at the “gentlemen of the British Embassy” in early modern Istanbul, who “preferred to die in defence of their red boxes or, in extreme cases, to swallow bunches of keys rather than let them fall into the hands of the Infidel.” Such moments now find their place in the history of readerly engagements with everyday forms of writing.

Works Cited

Forster, E.M. “A Flood in the Office.” *The Athenaeum* 8 Aug. 1919, p. 717.

---. *Abinger Harvest*. Edward Arnold, 1946.

---. *The Hill of Devi*. Edward Arnold, 1953.

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando: A Biography*. Penguin, 1963.