

BOOK REVIEWS

Shinjini Das, *Vernacular Medicine in Colonial India: Family, Market and Homeopathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 304, £75, hardback, ISBN: 9781108420624.

For historians of medicine in India, Shinjini Das's book is at once an invitation and a provocation to explore the 'careers' of specific forms of medical practice that seem intuitively familiar but not quite.

For who in Bengal would not be 'familiar' with homeopathy as a first line therapeutics that many experience within the confines of their home? It is now almost commonplace that children in Bengal cutting across class divides would get their first taste of medicine not from bitter pills but from globules of sweetness and light. Yet there is little in academic literature that tells us why this might have been possible. What made homeopathy, a heterodox western medical practice enter the intimate spaces of parenting and family in colonial Bengal? What sustains its benign hegemony in the realms of child-care, geriatric care and palliative care at large? What sustains the widespread trust in its therapeutic claims even when western biomedical orthodoxies continue to regard its practices with suspicion? Das's book is a deeply researched and theoretically nuanced story of the career of homeopathy in colonial Bengal. Das takes us through the vicissitudes of homeopathy in Bengal exploring at each stage its nurturance in Calcutta-based family firms, its slow and gradual spread among suburban and rural practitioners, its brush with the colonial state and emergent nationalist governments and more importantly its cultural production as a vernacular science between 1866 and 1941.

In a brilliantly evocative introductory paragraph, Das gives us a vivid snapshot of homeopathy's entanglements with Calcutta's commercial/entrepreneurial histories on the one hand, and the sinuous trajectories of the colonial encounters that mediated the translation, vernacularisation, and legitimation of a heterodox western medical practice in the public and private spaces of Bengali life on the other.

She writes,

"Tucked away in a corner of one of the busiest roads of north Calcutta and distinguished by its colonial architecture, stands a rather grand old porticoed building. The area the erstwhile Baithakhkhana bazar is now part of the rechristened Bepin Behari Ganguly street near Sealdah station. This is a traditional commercial hub of the city. Amid jostling crowds of banks, mercantile offices, and rows of jewellery shops we find the HQ of the Hahnemann Publishing Company... HAPCO is one of the biggest dealers, manufacturers and publishers of homeopathic medicine in India since the early 20thc. Its location would not seem strikingly unusual if one recognizes the building next door as the premises of *Basumati Sahitya Mandir* publishers of Basumati since 1881. Established in 1881 Basumati shifted its base to Bowbazar in the early 20thc – carried regular ads of homeopathic medicine. Inside HAPCO is a busy world of medics, booksellers, compounders, clerks working together in a massive pillared hall decorated with an impressive number large greying portraits of European physicians... Once permitted into the inner quarters of the building one cannot but note its original design as a typically opulent residence of Old Calcutta, with rooms arranged along long verandas across three stories and around a quadrangular, cobbled courtyard at the centre... The interior of the building begins to generate a sense of the ways in which cultivation of a vernacular scientific ethos is tied to practices of Bengali commerce... The top floor houses the office of the current proprietor Dr Durga Shankar Bhar grandson of HAPCO's founder Prafulla Chandra Bhar and custodian among other things of a substantial private collection of early 20thc publications by the firm. Arranged systematically but with restricted access, the collection for Mr Bhar is a precious documentation at once of his own family and the history of modern science in Bengal".

This might seem odd as a point of entry for a history of medicine but it is one of the peculiarities of the early history of homeopathy in India that it has no institutional archive or memory to build its story on. Homeopathic colleges were established years after homeopathy was institutionalized as medical practice through a network of family businesses. Das's book focuses on the 'peculiarities' of the professionalization, pedagogy and practice of homeopathy and in the process redefines some theoretical orthodoxies dominating histories of medicine in colonial India – particularly on the notion of vernacularisation.

Das structures her narrative through a collective biography of five homeopathic practitioners who doubled up as entrepreneurs to manufacture and sell homeopathic drugs through their own retail outlets. They were also publishers connected deeply with the city's print market. They were able to leverage this market to create and consolidate the market for homeopathic medicine. It was within this print market that the discursive terrain of homeopathy was shaped.

Das offers a meticulous analysis of this print archive of homeopathy. She identifies several intersecting genres of writing, from short treatises on the history and efficacy of homeopathic medicine, to biography, autobiography, from didactic literature on family, health, nation and enterprise to trade literature. She also looks into print advertisements that gave homeopathic drugs a new life in the market. It is through these creative interventions in print that homeopathy entered the familial spaces of affect and trust.

There are many ways to read this book but Das draws us to read it through its central analytical tropes – the family and the market. Das engages with the historical literature on both family and the market in Bengal to come to her own nuanced takes on both. Her in-depth study of the Bengali family-firms of homeopathy offers us an insight into the fluid structures of this institution in a colonial context as it precariously balanced itself within the normative strictures of the joint-family system together with the demands of patriliney, descent and ownership in the interests of an individual firm. On the peculiarities of the medical market in colonial Bengal, Das agrees with studies that look at the distinctiveness of medical markets around particular medical products and also regards the 'market' not as an autonomous, pluralist or egalitarian space but as one ridden with hierarchies and power and deeply enmeshed with the political and cultural pulls of state, family, religion and nation.

Finally, it is Das's reflections on the 'vernacular' that take her book into new analytical ground from where she argues correctly that the processes of the 'vernacularisation' of homeopathy through the institutions of the family and market in colonial Bengal pushes us to rethink the category of the 'vernacular' in more tentative terms. The 'vernacular' does not connote a primordial or spatially bounded terrain but rather one that is constituted and reconstituted over time through myriad cultural encounters. The 'vernacular', in other words, embodies complex processes of linguistic, epistemological, political and cultural translations that elude any categorical certitudes.

Das's book drives home this argument as it traverses the sites and spaces of the family, market and state, through which homeopathy was able to transcend its liminal identity and become a trusted science in colonial Bengal. The book breaks new ground in theoretical insight, archival depth and narrative elegance. It stands out as a truly remarkable achievement.

Madhumita Mazumdar
Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information Communication Technology
Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India
doi:10.1017/mdh.2020.52

Paulo Drinot, *The Sexual Question: A History of Prostitution in Peru, 1850s–1950s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. xv + 328, \$31.99, paperback, ISBN: 9781108717281.

The rise of nationalist movements in many Latin American countries throughout the twentieth century linked public health with notions of moral hygiene in collective efforts to foster the right kind of citizen for the nation. Paulo Drinot examines the 'sexual question' in the context of nineteenth and twentieth-