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Battala and the *Babu*: English Literature in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

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Abstract: The study of English literature in nineteenth-century Bengal facilitated the emergence of a discursive terrain which was crucial for Bengalis not only for coming to terms with the colonial encounter but also for the reconstitution of a new Bengali subjectivity. This complex cultural negotiation has sometimes been reduced to a colonial project of ideological indoctrination, as in the work of Gauri Viswanathan. Others, while emphasizing the agency of Bengali readers and their cultural predilections in the process, have largely overlooked the internal contradictions and dilemmas that dogged this discursive terrain. I shall argue in this paper that this discursive terrain was not simply the locus of an anti-colonial struggle because here the colonized was at war not only with the colonizer but with contesting versions of himself, and the emergent subjectivity was fraught with contradictions. I shall try to focus on the zones of contestation and collaboration between the nationalist elite and the readers and writers of Battala in terms of their engagement with English literature by counterposing Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's censure of Battala with an obscure Battala writer Parameshwar Datta's pamphlet which satirizes the supposedly high cultural pretensions of the nationalist intelligentsia.

Key-words: Battala, Nineteenth-century Bengal, English literature, *babu*, Colonial Bengal, Print culture.

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1. Introduction: *The Battle of the Books*

The inception of the academic study of English literature in nineteenth-century Bengal has been viewed by some critics like Gauri Viswanathan as a ploy to bolster colonial rule by means of ideological indoctrination. It has been widely shown, however, that the impetus for the institutional study of English literature came not primarily from the colonizers but from upper-caste Hindu families eager to secure for their children a foothold in a rapidly changing world. The crucial question here is whether Bengali readers of English literature had agency over their reading habits and preferences. In order to answer that question, we need to take into consideration not only the institutional study of English literature but other spaces