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Debjani Das. *Houses of Madness: Insanity and Asylums of Bengal in Nineteenth-Century India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 304 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-945887-5.

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Madness in Bengal

In this solidly researched monograph, Debjani Das looks at the institution of the asylum in the history of colonial Bengal. In tandem, she also considers the history of efforts to define and refine the concept of insanity that guided (primarily) British decision makers in their interactions with those subject to treatment and confinement. For readers less than expert in the history of mental illness and psychiatry, what knowledge they may still be likely to have of Michel Foucault's landmark *Madness and Civilization: A Hist*ory of *Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961) will serve them well in understanding the intentions of Das's book. For although mentioned only in the introduction, Foucault's study remains a touchstone.

Houses of Madness is thus framed as a departure from the view associated with the great French historian of "asylums" as being "only places to 'discipline and punish.'" Instead, Das seeks to show that they were first and foremost places to "understand insanity as a disease and implement various treatments for its remedy" (p. 5). In a similar vein, *Houses of Madness* moves away from the view of asylums as "total institutions" (p. 10). Without denying that practices in Bengal's asylums could be "undoubtedly harsh," the book thus takes a considerably softened view of "the history of 'colonial psychiatry'" (p. 5).

Accordingly, it does not, in the main, focus on recapitulating a critique of the medicalization of mental illness. Rather, Das draws momentum from the general drift in recent years toward bringing colonialism's forms of knowledge down to earth from the determining heights of metropolitan theory/discourse-as-abstraction. As Das puts it, for example, a main goal of *Houses of Madness* is to show how medical practitioners fashioned, in something of an ad hoc way, a "correlation between definitions of insanity and its treatment with the construction of new asylum buildings and the spatial distribution within it" (p. 11). While these strands of the argument are laid out in the introduction, they inform the subsequent four main chapters of the book in a way that often retreats far into the background. Instead, the body of *Houses of Madness* comprises a methodical description of the book's archive, which consists primarily of official reports from the Government of India and Government of Bengal compiled from the National Archives of India, the West Bengal State Archives, and the British Library.

Chapter 1, titled "Madness and Madhouses of the Lower Provinces of Bengal," opens with a con-

sideration of European doctors working in Bengal and their efforts to stay abreast of (and invariably adapt) the latest definitions and understandings of insanity as a condition in the medical literature of Europe and Britain. Focusing primarily on the late nineteenth century, the chapter acquaints the reader with figures like the Dacca-based Surgeon James Wise, who proffered explanations for "the prevalence and causes of insanity" among different communities in eastern Bengal (p. 23). Assorted others, like A. Payne, the superintendent of the Dullunda Asylum, also appear. Chapter 1 closes with a description of the European Insane Hospital in Calcutta, founded in the 1780s as the city's first asylum facility. Here Das also discusses the "diverse definitions of madness" that were formulated both at the European Insane Hospital and in the various "native" facilities that popped up elsewhere in Bengal (p. 14). In addition to the Dullunda Asylum in the 24 Parganas, these also included the Patna Lunatic Asylum and facilities where Bengalis were treated/confined that were located at Dacca, Murshidabad, Baharampur, and Hazaribagh. For several of these institutions Das is able to reconstruct details about the architectural features of the facility in service of her larger concern with "spatial distribution." Whether these parts of the discussion fully carry through on the introduction's ambition to illuminate a correlation between definitions of insanity and spatial design/layout is less clear.

In chapter 2, "Treatment of the Insane: Conflict between Theory and Practice," Das introduces the reader to the movement from so-called mechanical restraint to moral therapy (and beyond) that informed practice in both Europe and Bengal. The chapter thus touches on a series of therapeutic interventions that came and went between the eighteenth and late nineteenth century, including padded rooms, handcuffs, the use of baths, occupational versus recreational therapy, exposure to educational materials, and the use of games and other forms of amusement. Here again the empirical focus remains consistent with the author's desire to move away from any strict formula equating treatment of the insane with a program of disciplining and punishing. At the same time, the chapter mostly confines its analytic to its last several paragraphs. As a result, the chapter's argument/thesis does not provide a sustained basis of reflection that consistently illuminates its descriptive contents so much as it does a mere, sometimes tantalizing, addendum. Accordingly, I would have enjoyed seeing the spirit of the last few paragraphs more consistently intertwined with the chapter's otherwise often dry recital of fact. The author's closing comments on "therapeutic rationales" being constructed to reach short-term objectives or on how "medical" treatments were just as embittering as "moral" ones, for example, are provocative but also frustrating given how little attention they are given (pp. 128-129).

Chapter 3 doubles down on the book's preferred method of exposition, providing an overview of women in asylums, "Women in the Lunatic Asylums of Bengal." Taking up the author's concern with the gendered dimension of colonial psychiatry and the communities of the insane who were its objects, it is propelled by furnishing to the reader a series of highly informative tables reproducing various demographic data about female inmates in various of Bengal's asylums. The data includes information about age, caste, religious affiliation, the nature of their afflictions, and various other metrics. The chapter ends with several case studies of female consignees in different "native" asylum facilities.

Chapter 4, the last, closes the monograph (although there is a short conclusion) with a discussion of asylum staff, "The Role of Asylum Staff in the Treatment of Insanity." Reaching back in time to the early nineteenth century, the chapter provides an overview of its titular concern, recounting some of the main duties of ordinary asylum personnel and "native" doctors, as well as their "native" and mostly European overseers. It also provides a detail-rich discussion of how asylum es-

tablishments were managed and data on what various personnel were paid.

For those interested in the history of colonial psychiatry in India, ***Houses of Madness*** will surely prove an important source of information and a useful point of departure for further inquiry. Tracking a move away from Foucault in particular and the older tendency, in general, of looking at colonialism's forms of knowledge more in theory than in practice, the book's main argument will also carry an inherent appeal for many readers.

Beyond the qualifications I have already registered above—about the book's analytic often feeling too much like an afterthought that is less than fully intertwined with the description of the archival materials being surveyed—two other critical points are worth noting. Both of these points, moreover, are more likely than the first set of qualifications to resonate with the limitations that attentive readers will most likely attribute to ***Houses of Madness*** in light of current scholarship on the history of colonial medicine. First, even notwithstanding its move away from excessively theoretical discussions of colonial knowledge, the book will likely be said to draw on too limited a range of official (and English-language) sources. Second, and related, the book wholly leaves aside any discussion of the encounter between colonial psychiatry—whether as a set of abstract theoretical discourses or even as a more immanent set of asylum practices—and its vernacular incarnations. As a result, ***Houses of Madness*** may feel limited in its ability to portray the true complexity of the terrain it purports to survey.

Projit Mukharji's more recent ***Doctoring Traditions: Ayurveda, Small Technologies, and Braided Sciences*** (2016)—which also focuses on colonial Bengal—is a useful point of contrast. Of course, this is not to say that every monograph need be all things to all readers (or even, just to those interested in the history of science); and certainly, there must be room for studies that concentrate on the medical sciences as practiced within the fours walls of the Raj's own institutions. Nonetheless, Mukharji's titular allusion to the "braidedness" of science in colonial Bengal is telling. It proves suggestive of the very direction in which ***Houses of Madness***, itself, seems to be striving. If Das's book may not always do so as successfully as one would hope, it is not simply because it stays within the confines of the colonial state's own medical institutions. Rather, it is because its portrait of the doctors, medical staff, and inmates whose mutual interactions made asylum psychiatry in Bengal could have been much more vivid.

That said, there is no doubt that ***Houses of Madness*** is an important contribution to its field. Not only will it open many new questions for the attentive reader, but it also works through the archival material it surveys in a straightforward and always informative manner.

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