Michael Dodson and Brian Hatcher (eds.)

This edited volume is a valuable contribution to the literature on conceptions of modernity, colonial South Asia, education, linguistics and historical imaginaries. Through an interrogation of each of these themes, the book uncovers the diversity with which modernisation, both as a theoretical construct, as well as a historical process, has unfolded in various sectors, as well as regions in South Asia. The nine chapters in the volume cover a range of subjects, from Bengali literature and Jainism, all the way to Persian and Urdu lexicography.

Rochona Majumdar’s chapter exploring the conceptual history of modernity in colonial Bengal provides a powerful example of the complexity of modernity in the Indian context through analysis of Bengali literature. An interesting point she makes is that several Bengali writers and thinkers, including Tagore, conceptualised modernity by not only drawing on European norms, but also transcending them. This reveals the nature of the interplay between two forms of modernity that would seem to be at odds with each other. Equally important is her critique of the conceptions of Bengali modernity that make up the subject of her study. She points out that they had been mainly conceived along religious lines, ascribing to a Hindu notion of Indian society that left out Muslim thought and philosophy, as a result failing to capture the full breadth of modernity as it unfolded at the time and therefore leaving scholars with a one-sided picture of the modernity story.

The placing of Brian A. Hatcher’s paper before Ulrike Stark’s allows for an interesting comparison between two very different conceptions of modernity within the South Asian context. Unlike Hatcher’s paper that presents modernity in terms of a shastric imaginary that eventually gave way to a resurfacing Hindu nationalism, Stark’s paper provides an entirely different picture of modernity—one that belonged to a Hindu nationalist vision of progress. The latter paper interestingly points out the need to see the modern in nationalist works, rather than view nationalism in this context as an opposite of modernity. The paper further reveals the complexity of modernity and the many forms in which it needs to be understood. What is especially valuable about Stark’s paper is his critical commentary on the category of “modernisation” itself. He cites how Shivaprasad’s work, which despite not explicitly referencing ideas of modernity (which in the Indian educational discourse was framed in terms of “improvement”), nevertheless requires scholars to understand how modernity
may itself emerge as a different form within such literature, and therefore needs to be understood on its own terms.

The entanglement of the new and the old, producing a new version of modernity, is a theme that runs throughout the chapters, and is especially evident in John E. Cort’s chapter on Jain debates over icons and history. The use of modern techniques brought about by colonialism in Jain scholarship, such as standards of procedure for producing texts, and the organisation and cataloguing of libraries, as Cort points out, were used for pursuing pre-modern disputes and pre-colonial forms of scholarship. What this conveys is the symbiotic relationship between modernity and history, with each playing a role in the production of the other, rather than two separate opposing concepts that conveniently allow for ideas and processes to be neatly slotted into the category of “old” or “new”.

Just as the papers have explored the importance of avoiding viewing modernity in opposition to concepts such as history and nationalism, papers such as Indira Viswanathan Peterson’s reveal the need to avoid associating modernity too closely with processes such as Europeanisation and instead see how modernity can emerge when the local and the global combine. Peterson argues how modernisation within the process of education in 19th century Tanjore, India, was not a story of complete Europeanisation, but rather involved an adaption of European tales into a native context and literary style. A similar theme emerges in Javed Majeed’s chapter, which details the important role that Indian practices and idioms played in the construction of colonial linguistic modernity in 19th century India.

C.A. Bayly’s concluding chapter highlights the paradoxical nature of modernity and the negotiations between different cultural constructions of modernity that eventually came to form broader conceptions of modernisation. Bayly notes that many Indians not only presented a sense of moral superiority to the “backwardness” of European moral thought, but at the same time, aspired for the physical, scientific and economic progress that came to signal modernisation in the West, especially in the case of the urban projects of New York and Paris, which the elites of Bombay aspired to for their own city’s development.

One of the most significant contributions of this book to scholarship on colonial South Asia is its very unpacking of the term “modernity” and its interrogation of the interplay between the various versions of modernity that it