

Reading Mohini Mohun Majumder's *Muk-Shiksha*:

Special Education in Colonial India

Tirtha Pratim Deb

English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India

Abstract

The paper studies a 1903 text titled *Muk-Shiksha* to make three arguments. It examines the colonized deaf subject as shaped by discourses of oralism, the role of hearing advocates in consolidating oralism, and the ways in which deafness is mediated in local contexts of educational reform.

Keywords: Oralism, Reform, Pedagogy, Colonial Bengal

Reading Mohini Mohun Majumder's *Muk-Shiksha*:**Special Education in Colonial India**

In the 1904 issue of *The American Annals of the Deaf*, Jamini Nath Banerji wrote a review of a book titled *Muk-Shiksha*¹. Described as a “copiously illustrated book on the education of the deaf” as well as the “first publication of its kind in any Indian dialect” (Banerji, 1904, p.390), *Muk-Shiksha* was written in Bangla by Mohini Mohun Majumder and printed by a press in College Square, Calcutta, India in 1903. Alongside Jamini Nath Banerji, Srinath Sinha, and Girindranath Bhowse, Majumder was one of the earliest proponents of teaching methods for deaf students in colonial Bengal. They were all involved with the founding and the workings of the Calcutta Deaf School. In his review, Banerji measures *Muk-Shiksha*'s importance through the “contribution” that it makes where the public discourse on deafness was limited (Banerji, 1904, p.390). *Muk-Shiksha* was among few textbooks to supplement a state-approved curriculum, which had been designed for hearing students, and which was required to be followed even in deaf schools (Vasishta, 2021). However, by describing some of the concepts, approaches, and methods in use at the Calcutta School, most of which discussed certain practical ways in which the Deaf² student could be taught to ‘speak,’ *Muk-Shiksha* was also produced with a larger readership in mind. This readership included students, instructors, as well as parents, presumably both deaf and hearing, who could learn about oralist methods in Bangla. Thus, the intent was to bring within the colonial public and print sphere what was ostensibly ‘specialised knowledge’ about teaching deaf students. By the time of the book’s writing, oralist methods had not only made their way into

the colony, but also been in use at schools such as at the Bombay Institute for the Deaf (Miles, 2001, p. 310). Even though other methods of communication had been used with deaf students outside the formal confines of schools, the preference for oralism signifies two important things. One, in their use of oralist methods, Indian educators perpetrated what was an essentially colonizing perspective of deafness as difference. And secondly, its deployment was also emblematic of a modernizing imperative in educational reform, with the colonized Deaf subject at its helm.

The problem with this figuration is that, in the absence of any consolidated political consciousness of disabled persons, it was not so much modernity as was the case with other social groups. During this period, there was no substantial literary or cultural output by disabled persons themselves, except for some isolated instances such as Subodh Chandra Roy's *The Blind in India and Abroad*; nor were there any significant inroads made as far as a disabled identity goes. Disabled people were not at the forefront of any sustained claims to a political constituency. This sense of 'becoming' modern through educational reform was steered by nondisabled advocates rather than disabled persons themselves. Thus, the instrumentality of education was a more pressing concern and its consequences on persons deemed 'infirm' and 'defective' more immediate, rather than any subjective questions of what disability had meant to the students.

This leads us to ask what was it about deafness in the colony that these educators had thought to make 'modern'? What role did education have in such imaginations, and was this idea of a modern, socially capacitated Deaf subject influenced by developments in the metropole? Was there any space given to sign language within the predominately oralist

methods used in schools? If oralist principles were mostly followed, how do we conceptualize Deafness within the socio-cultural context of the colony? Majumder has been described as “a brilliant exponent of the sign language” (S.N. Banerji, quoted in Miles, 2001, p.310) and yet for its entire length, *Muk-Shiksha* relies on oralism as guiding its pedagogical content. Could the formative moments of Deaf identity be located and historicized in life histories of students at the Calcutta School, a textual trope which closes Majumder’s text? We do not know if cultural identities had formed around signing in the colony. Existing literature documents the prevalence of signing communities (Miles, 2012), while isolated moments of signing as pedagogical practice emerge in the colonial archive. But where any cultural consciousness had not emerged around signing as linguistic practice, what were other ways to conceptualize Deafness? I pose these questions to point the major thematic turns this paper will take in its discussion of *Mik-Shiksha*. This is a text which was produced, I argue, with the purpose of familiarizing its readership with deaf education in general, and with the oralist pedagogy of the Calcutta School in particular. It elaborates on the forms that oralism takes in the immediate context of Bangla, all the while underscoring education as social intervention.

For all its adherence to oralist methods then, *Muk-Shiksha* can also be understood as an instance of early advocacy by teachers at the Calcutta School. Threading through it is an awareness of pedagogical as well as cultural practices of Deaf communities in the metropole and the implementation of oralist education in the context of the colony. Its attunement towards ‘becoming’ modern, when read against the social reformist landscape of late colonial Bengal, thus positions deafness as the site upon which such imaginations are inscribed. Yet,

such interventions come at the cost of integrating deafness within a normative, hearing world. How then, does reading *Muk-Shiksha* provide decolonial possibilities of understanding deafness in the colony? I argue that these emerge in how Indian educators negotiate with colonial structures and imperial knowledges to rewrite the cultural terms of deafness.

This is a complicated position, a glimpse of which is present in the final section of the book which documents, through brief personal histories, the lives of former students at the Calcutta School. Such was the kind of advocacy which included the formation of groups such as the Convention of the Teachers of the Deaf in India (Vasishta 2021) and concerted lobbying on the part of educators and relief workers for aid, acknowledgement, and resources from the colonial state (Majumder, 1940, p. 233). Thus, *Muk-Shiksha* encapsulates some of the prevalent notions on deafness in the context of colonial education and reform. Through moments of narrating the past and present of deaf pedagogy, and by imagining Deaf subjectivity in the histories of students, *Muk-Shiksha* intervenes into a public space where information about deaf education was scarce, and where deafness was equated with the colonial logic of ‘infirmity.’ This does not mean that noncolonial configurations of deafness subscribed to the same, as native forms of signing had persisted in the colony, outside of governmental and reformist intervention (Nair, 2020, p. 86). Even though *Muk-Shiksha* had relied on oralism, it had displayed an awareness of impairing regimes of colonial production. It had worked around the reluctant stance of the colonial state regarding disability reform. In the context of its socio-cultural location, therein lies its decolonial imagination.

In my reading of *Muk-Shiksha* then, I proceed in three primary sections. The first briefly discusses oralism’s imperative to assimilate the variability of deaf experience within a

colonizing and culturally disqualifying discourse. Oralism was premised upon the “disenfranchisements of deaf people” (Esmail, 2013, p. 10), and in the process of gaining ideological ground over forms of pedagogy in the west, had aligned signing with social and political exclusion. In the second section, I think through historical moments where oralism was consolidated in the context of the colony, primarily by hearing advocates and educators. I look at certain scattered instances of signing, and trace how it had been gradually replaced by oralist pedagogy within formalized settings such as deaf schools. The final section critically reads *Muk-Shiksha* as embracing oralism in its contents, and yet not decrying signing as inferior. Rather, it presents certain possibilities for Deaf subjectivity and records Deaf history, contained as they may be in the context of educational reform in the colony.

Advocates and Instructors: The Figure of the Teacher in Colonial Deaf Schools

It is important to note that the colonial state had pushed the matter of education for disabled persons outside its immediate purview. Passive in its welfarist engagements with disability, it had constructed disabled persons as a class whose educational interests were beyond the state’s immediate concerns. This had led to interventions from other stakeholders in the matter of social reform and education, such as missionaries, landed and merchant classes, and native educators. What was common in their responses to an emerging trend of reformist intervention, was a “curative imaginary” of disability, that is, the understanding that disability “not only expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention” (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). Such intervention was differently located for colonial actors, localized in their intent and agendas based on what they had

imagined the role of disability to be. Missionary engagement with disability, for example, may have had “a strong religious motivation,” but it was “far from being a monolithic or coherent force” (Miles, 2001, p. 292). The conditions of charity by merchant classes may have been influenced by “filial piety and obligation, driven by family and religious motivations” (Kaul, Sandhu and Alam, 2021, p. 12), but it had also brought under its fold those who required economic and social aid, such as the old, sick, and disabled, across community lines. But most prominently, where the state’s approach to disability was careful and selective, present on paper but rarely actualized, there had come up schools for disabled (primarily blind and deaf) students, mostly but not always helmed by Indian educators. Requiring resources, financial support, and social patronage had caused educators to correspond with one another, leading to the formation of associations and groups which had, in turn, lobbied with the colonial state.

This becomes an important point of contention in the discourse on education of deaf persons. Much like how Jennifer Esmail describes oralism as being consolidated by “hearing parents, hearing educators, and hearing governmental representatives,” the role of hearing individuals in the context of the colony also belies a conflation of difference and the scale of its reform. Some historical accounts note that the initial efforts at teaching disabled children started out of personal concerns, and then took the form of schools. Such was also the case at the Calcutta School. Girindranath Bhose and Srinath Sinha, two of the founders, had deaf family members (Banerji, 1949, p.5). A 1906 editorial in *The Association Review* mentions P.L. Desai and his “noble efforts ... to educate his own deaf son” had led to the “one or two other deaf children” being “brought to him for instruction” (“An Interesting Letter,” 1906, p.

199). Desai, who had started a school at Kadia near Ahmedabad, Gujarat, was also a proponent of the oral system, a point we will return to in this paper. However, leaning towards oralist methods may have been more than simply ideological. It may have also been influenced by the difficulty of using sign language in classroom settings, or the designing of course materials using the same. For instance, an 1897 review of Jamini Nath Banerji's *Visit to the Institutions for the Deaf and Dumb [sic] (and the Blind) in England, Ireland, and America* describes this mediated approach in the early years of the Calcutta School:

Where success by the oral method is not possible, he favors the manual alphabet, but finds it difficult if not impracticable to adapt a manual alphabet to the native language of India. Signs he would use freely with all pupils, but only "such signs as can be understood and are used by hearing people. ("Notices of Publication", 1897, p.339)

During his time at the 'Normal Department' in Gallaudet College between 1895 and 1896, where hearing persons were trained in methods of deaf education, Banerji had been exposed to manual signing. The idea of combined methods may have appealed to him, as he had also encountered oralism during his visit to England, specifically the work of Van Praagh, an oralist advocate (Cleall, 2022, p. 176). Yet, Banerji's approach to both was mediated at first, as its oralist pedagogy had not entailed the complete removal of signing at the Calcutta School. However, Banerji had eventually moved towards oralist methods. This was very likely a consequence of the colonial logic of reformism, compounded by the formalization of oralist methods in the colony and thus, the ease in disseminating information on them. While signing has been documented in some instances (Miles, 2012), it was eventually sidelined due to the absence of any significant cultural presence of Deafness in the

colony, unlike how it was in the metropole. This was, once again, an issue with early instances of advocacy in the colony, where its paternalistic proponents were persons who were nondisabled and hearing. Any political constituency that disability had accrued, was not because of a changing critical consciousness, but rather, because of a tendency among nondisabled advocates to conflate reformist modernity with the difference upon which it was premised. Thus, while *Muk-Shiksha*, for the most part, works as a treatise on oralist methods reiterated in Bangla, it also discusses signing and fingerspelling, however briefly, as concurrent forms of expression for Deaf persons. Which leads to the question of what factors and conditions had pushed oralism into the mainstream of deaf pedagogical methods in the colony. However, before that, I will briefly discuss how the political construction of deafness was contingent upon oralist discourses in the metropole.

Between Oralism and Manual Signing in the Metropole

Oralism and manual signing had occupied inequivalent positions within narratives of deaf subjecthood from the nineteenth century onwards. Manualism advocates for signing as a form of linguistic, cultural, pedagogical, and thus, political expression for Deaf persons. Oralism, on the other hand, premises itself on speech and hearing as capacitating features of a rational, autonomous self. Douglas Baynton argues that manualist methods were focused on individual moral reform, while oralism emphasized the “creation of national unity and social order through homogeneity of language and culture” (Baynton, 1992, p. 218). Oralism understands deafness as inherently negative and signing as a ‘primitive’ form of expression, meanings which were also conflated onto ideas of nationhood and language, resulting in

political exclusion. Amid debates on the use of both within educational spaces, the “oralist victories of the 1880s and 90s” (Esmail, 2013, p. 16) were significant moments. This was not only because the decision-making bodies they were a part of had consolidated oralism in pedagogic spaces. But conversely, such moments also saw strategic attempts at establishing and publicizing the variability of Deafness and signing as lived experience through forms of cultural production such as art and literature by Deaf and signing persons, what Esmail calls “counternarratives to oralist denigrations of signed languages and signers” (Esmail, 2013, p. 46). Thus, despite the segregationist consequences of the “ascendancy” of oralism (Fleischer and Zames, 2011, p. 17), such as the banning of sign language as a medium of instruction, at The Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf at Milan in 1880, it had persisted within “a countervailing ethos vigorously supporting the teaching of sign language” (17).

Despite its “political attempt to erase an ethnic group” (Davis, 1995) and its fixation with eradicating the cultural variability of Deafness, oralism’s discursive expansion was not without responses from Deaf communities who had contested it. Thus, while oralism may have attained a certain significance, both within and beyond pedagogical spaces, manualism, signing, and fingerspelling were not without its advocates. Signing was understood to be an inherent, naturally realized element in the formation of Deaf identity and community relationships. The work of Deaf Scottish artist William Agnew is important in this regard. Agnew has been described as a “strong opponent of the oral system” (Stiles, 2011), whose stance on signing is evident in a series of paintings he had made between 1883 and 1900 “which recorded a conversation between a hearing person and a deaf person that took place in

signs” (Esmail, 2013, p. 1). The subject of these paintings was a deaf woman, Elizabeth Tuffield, who is depicted lying in her bed and conversing with Queen Victoria in signs. Curiously, it was Agnew from whom Majumder had procured printing blocks for the illustrations in *Muk-Shiksha*. Further, a brief biographical sketch of Agnew also appears in the final section of the book, as does an account of Victoria visiting Tuffield.

Mainstreaming Oralism in the Colony

By the late nineteenth century, some of the early schools for deaf persons had been established in the colony of India. The Calcutta school was one of the earliest, alongside others at Bombay, Mysore, and Palamcottai. While oralism was more pronounced in these places, other methods of teaching deaf students were also prevalent. Take for instance, the school at Palamcottai in the Madras Presidency, which was started by Florence Swainson, a missionary-worker for the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society. The complex nature of teaching methods used here is observed by Lilian E. Bishop: she writes teachers engaged with their students “by the use of charts, maps, pictures, black-boards and other means, together with sign language and wonderfully expressive faces,” the results of which were “as successful” as the means “were ingenious” (Bishop 1904, p. 294). The adoption and use of complex methods is also documented in records produced by the colonial state. H. P. Jacob, the Educational Inspector of Sind, a province in the western part of the colony, observes in 1890 that a fourteen-year-old boy at “an indigenous school” in Hyderabad (Jacob 1890, p. 8) was taught using “gestures both of lip and hand occasionally.” This boy, who was taught by the “worthy Bawa and his wife” (‘Bawa’ refers to the teacher) at the school, had

eventually learned to write in the Gurmukhi³ script. Jacob also mentions another person named Chellaram who was taught to write in Sindhi alphabet by a “Mohammedan Akhund” (‘akhund’ is a Persian title for an Islamic scholar) using “manual and other signs” (Jacob 1890, p.8). It is important here to establish the terms which had distinguished such forms of teaching from those adopted at the Calcutta, Bombay, and later, Palamcottai schools. Surely, the two teachers mentioned above had not subscribed to any oralist principles, at least not in the ways its use had been mandated in the metropole at the end of the nineteenth century. They may have used a mixture of pedagogical methods, even though the knowledge of the alphabet and writing was an important step. In Jacob’s observations, the question of speech appears secondary to the ability to read and write, such as when he notes that Chellaram would communicate with hearing persons using signs and written words (Jacob 1890, p. 8). It is also pertinent to note that both persons whom Jacob mentions had been left to the care of their respective teachers, suggesting a more complex, longstanding, and sustained relationship between the deaf student and the hearing teacher. Such forms of pedagogy, isolated as they are in historical records, foreground deafness as contingent upon specific contexts, where the terms of responding to it had varied from the oralist inclinations of the metropole. There was no formal political imperative guiding such moments of deaf pedagogy, but only attempts at fashioning a subject who could be capacitated through education. With “the growing professionalization” (Miles, 2001, p. 310) of formal teaching methods in newly established schools in the colony, especially with such methods already in use in the metropole, a discernable direction had emerged. This was not so much a turn, simply because there was no prior formal system of teaching deaf students from which to turn

away. Rather, the increasing adoption of oralist principles in these schools signified an outlook towards deafness where speech seemed to be the only way to ‘recover’ what was deemed to be lacking in nonspeaking and deaf persons.

Writing how “the tide was strongly contrary” in debates about the use of signing (Miles, 2001, p. 311), Miles locates signing methods as gradually giving way to an oralist hegemony in pedagogical methods. What could have one of the ways to work through the scarcity of funds, or to bring schools into circuits of social relevance, was the adoption of what was formalized in the form of existing resources, methods, and, simultaneously, trained teachers to deploy them. Indian educators, in their attempts to draw from such ideas, had corresponded with oralist institutions and organizations to seek resources and teaching materials for their deaf students. The eighth volume of *The Association Review*⁴ had printed an excerpt from a letter by Pranshankar Lallubhai Desai in 1906 (“An Interesting Letter,” 1906, p. 199), describing his attempts at teaching his son in “the art of speaking” using the Gujarati alphabet. Desai had created a book “containing small sentences involving names of articles of daily use” (“An Interesting Letter”, 1906, p. 199), which his son would read daily, while the latter’s method of “lip-reading” would include writing “to dictation detached and connected small sentences containing verbs representing ordinary actions done by him” (“An Interesting Letter,” 1906, p. 199). A. H. Date, who had established a school at Thakurdwar in Bombay in 1907, designed what he describes in a 1935 newspaper article as a “vernacular system of teaching” (Date, 1935, p. 15). Date used “vernacular” to distinguish from what he called the “English System,” which he claims to have been used at the schools in Calcutta, Madgaon (Bombay) and Palamcottai. Date then goes on to mention a book in Marathi he had

published called *Mukam Karoti Wachalam*⁵, before noting that a “complete course of books” was needed to design a curriculum “specifically” for deaf students (Date, 1935, p. 15). Incidentally, *Mukam Karoti Wachalam* roughly translates to “making the mute speak,” and much like the title of Majumder’s book, centers speech as the subject of its instruction. And much like Desai and Majumder, Date also produced instructive texts in a native linguistic context. However, unlike Majumder, Date never uses the term ‘oralist’ in his article to denote his approach to teaching. It may very well be that by 1935, he was aware of the methods in use at the three schools he mentions, the ‘English system’ in his words. By this time, the use of oralist methods in the colony was common knowledge, bolstered by the justification that oralist resources and oralist training was easier to come by and implement in the form of curricular materials, rather than the specificities of signing as pedagogy. The Calcutta School had a teacher training program which was started in 1897. In what was a “paradoxical” (Vasishta 2021) move, Jamini Nath’s adoption of oral methods has been attributed to reasons such as the difficulty of using fingerspelling in the Bangla alphabetical context, as well as a broader consolidation of oralist teaching in the metropole (Vasishta, 2021). Thus, oralism had persisted and its principles and methods normalized as teaching practice. In the Bengal Presidency itself, there were eleven deaf schools by 1940 and most of these had a single teacher in charge of its activities, most of whom were either graduates of the teacher training center, or of the school itself (Majumder, 1940, p. 233). By 1935, The Convention of Teachers of the Deaf was formed in India, and among its agendas was the integration of deaf education into the mainstream of primary education in the colony (Majumder, 1940, p. 234).

Such lobbying was backed in strong measure by the convenient adoption and normalization of oralist methods, knowledges, and resources.

Muk-Shiksha: Oralism in the Bengali Alphabet

Muk-Shiksha (translated as ‘Education of the Mute’), was published in 1903 by Majumder himself, and is divided into three primary sections. The first historicizes education for deaf persons by locating some key moments and figures who had fostered it, both within and outside colonial India. The second section is entirely instructive in its contents. It adapts oralist methods in the context of the Bangla alphabet, working through grammatical principles of word and sentence formation using phonetics, pictures, and repetition of vowels and consonants. The third and final section uses biography as a narrative trope to talk about the lives and careers of some former and existing students at the Calcutta Deaf School, among other prominent figures such as William Agnew and Helen Keller.

Muk-Shiksha begins with a note by the publisher/author acknowledging the role of certain individuals in the production of the book. Among them, Majumder mentions the formative role of William Agnew, who had parted with his printing blocks for the Majumder’s use in the book. The teachers at the Calcutta School were aware of developments happening in the metropole in the sphere of education, which had by then shifted to an oralist ideology, as well as of Deaf artists iterating their political stance on sign language through cultural production. Thus, Majumder’s adoption of oralist methods in *Muk-Shiksha* was not so much supplemented by the socio-cultural disqualification of signing, but much more

nuanced in its approach and choice. This becomes evident in the first section of the book, in which he historicizes the emergence of signing as pedagogical practice by narrating accounts of educators, authors, and their books which predated the late nineteenth century turn towards oralism. This is not to say that Majumder does not narrate instances where speech is the preferred modality of teaching, but that his primary concern is with the social integration of deafness, and the ways in which deafness is engaged with in western historical-cultural texts. In Majumder's historical narrative then, texts discussing fingerspelling and signing such as Giovanni Bonifacio's 1616 treatise "The Art of Signing" is mentioned alongside accounts of oralists such as Alexander Graham Bell.

Muk-Shiksha's second section is titled "শিক্ষা প্রণালী", or "teaching methods." Here Majumder expands on his understanding of oralism before mentioning four existing methods: "the manual or sign method," "combined system," "the manual spelling method," and finally, "the auricular method" (Majumder 1903, p. 41). Even though he acknowledges that the 'combined system' may be used where oral methods are too laborious, he does not hesitate to assert oralism as being "the most excellent one," which "is presently used to teach in most schools of the world" (Majumder 1903, p. 40). Before centering oralism, Majumder addresses what he perceives as a pronounced social response to deafness, where it is equated with an inability to speak. He then locates the intervention that oralist methods, and by extension, his book would provide in such cases where a nonspeaking, deaf person can be taught to speak through careful instructions, sustained care, and the use of 'specialized' methods. Thus, in Majumder's construction of deafness, while it may lead to the absence of speech, such a state can be eventually 'recovered.' Using a situation where he describes that a Bangla-speaking

and hearing infant understands the language because she heard it being spoken by her family members since childhood, yet the same infant would not understand English because she had never heard it before, Majumder substantiates his claim that it is lack of hearing that causes the inability to speak. Thus, he declares that “the deaf don’t have to be mute forever” (“বধিরগণ আজন্ম মূক নহে”) (35). In this regard, Majumder also explains—perhaps to remind his readers that speech is not out of bounds for deaf students—the biological processes involved in the act of verbal communication and the use of specific methods such as lipreading, or tactile communication by touching the throat (which he describes as an instance of teaching blind and deaf students). He expands on the latter point to bring up the question of homophones, with examples such as “আত – আদা” and “আঠা – আটা” (both sets of words are similar sounding) (40), which may not ordinarily be distinguished by the deaf student through any oral method. The solution, Majumder contends, is in contextualizing similar sounding words through their use in sentences, writing that “একটি পদ দ্বারা আমরা ভাষা বুঝি না, আমরা বাক্য দ্বারা তাহার অর্থ চিন্তা করি ও বুঝি” (we do not understand language through figures of speech but rather it is through sentences that we understand and think about its meaning) (40).

This section then leads to several pages of pictorial-phonetic exercises where Majumder describes grammatical schemes, rules of pronunciation and word formation using the Bangla alphabet. Further, Majumder includes extensive footnotes which guide the reader/instructor towards properly using the lesson, as well as clarifies certain basic concerns which may develop over its course. Among the teaching methods he uses are sound repetition, and word-picture and word-sound association, where the complexity of words are

compounded with increasing number of syllables. Interspersed with pictures of the objects, around which such exercises are written in most cases, there are thirty-two lessons (“পাঠ”) in this section. Not only do such lessons include instructions on grammar, word and sentence formation, they also detail how to read, write, and pronounce numbers, directions, names of objects, and in the later lessons, even short passages. For example, the twenty seventh lesson is titled ‘rose’ (“গোলাপ ফুল”) and has a picture of a rose above it. The passage in the lesson goes thus:

অমি গোলাপ ফুল দেখেছি। গোলাপ ফুলের গন্ধ ভাল। গোলাপ ফুলের রং অনেক রকম। অল্প লাল, হল্‌দে ও সাদা। আমি হল্‌দে ও সাদা গোলাপ ফুল দেখি নাই। গোলাপ ফুলের গাছে অনেক কাঁটা আছে। জবা ফুলের গাছে কাঁটা নাই। জবা ফুলের রং খুব লাল। জবা ফুলের গন্ধ ভাল নয়।

Translated into English:

I have seen roses. Roses smell good. Roses have different colours. Some are red, some are yellow, and some white. I have not seen yellow and white roses. Rose plants have many thorns. Hibiscus plants do not have thorns. Hibiscus flowers are very red. Hibiscus flowers do not smell nice. (Majumder, 1903, p. 56)

With its emphasis on repetition of words, continuous adherence to sentence structuring and syntax, as well as the use of abstract descriptions and context, the lessons in *Muk-Shiksha* position oralist principles as central to the kind of pedagogy that it presents. It must be recalled that this was a book addressed to not only teachers or instructors in formal schools,

but also to a readership who may not have known about such developments. Their dissemination through print, in the local context of Bangla, was thus a focal point of the intervention that Majumder and Banerji had sought to make. This imperative threads through the way in which *Muk-Shiksha* is structured, appended at the beginning and at the end with historical narratives of education, and few biographical sketches of deaf persons, respectively.

Among brief biographies of deaf educators, artists, and authors outside the colony, Majumder also includes some students at the Calcutta School. His recourse to speech as a central tenet of the book becomes most prominent in these biographies of students. For example, he writes about Satyendra Basu, one such student, that “তাঁহার স্বর অতিশয় কোমল এবং স্বাভাবিক, তাঁহার সহিত আলাপ করিয়া হঠাৎ কেহ তাঁহাকে বধির বলিয়া মনে করিতে পারেন না।” (His voice is extremely soft and normal, no one can understand that he is deaf upon conversing with him) (88). Deafness and speech occupy equivalent positions in this instance, where one comes to be used in place of the other. Thus, in his use of biographies, Majumder relies on a thematic trope where the lives of students are qualified by bringing in the role of oralist education and the Calcutta School. Satyendra Basu later joins the Government Art College, Calcutta, after having apprenticed with a photographer in the city for two years, while simultaneously receiving lessons from a teacher at home. Rakhhal Chandra Palit, another student, is described as having humble origins, moving to the city at sixteen and studying at the Calcutta School for six years, also learning art and woodwork alongside the usual curriculum. His artistry had drawn accolades from prominent individuals, as did his work at the office of the Surveyor General of India, who also gave a testimony about Palit’s

work, which Majumder quotes at the beginning of the biography (90). Employer testimonials were a common feature of the biographies Majumder writes, such as in the case of Nalinikanta Basu, who had joined the school at the age of fourteen in 1898; Basu was adept in mathematics and could solve problems in his mind and was presently working at a jewelry shop in the city (94). However, in every biography, Majumder makes it a point to note the extent of verbal speech training on these students, recording the progress each made in the ability to pronounce words. This is most prominently displayed in the account of Mouli Bhushan Mukherjee, in which Majumder quotes an entire public the student gave (93).

Throughout *Muk-Shiksha*, Majumder uses variations of the Bangla word “বধিরগন” (deaf people) rather than allude to any distinction between deafness and ‘Deafness.’ This brings back a question posed at the beginning of this paper: is there a way to think of Deaf cultural identity in the absence of any significant political consolidation of the same? Signing is mentioned in passing, relegated in favor of the practicality that oralism brings to the project. Are discursive parameters around Deafness then complicated in the specific context of the colony, where oralist methods were predominant, at least in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century? It cannot be denied that the work of educators and advocates such as Majumder, Desai, Date, or Banerji, brought the matter of deafness into the colonial print and public spheres, even though their terms were rooted in a fundamental understanding of deafness as difference, where deafness could eventually be ‘reformed.’ The histories of colonized Deaf students archived in *Muk-Shiksha* and plotted alongside moments, texts, and biographies from the metropole, thus underscore what social integration means to Majumder, resonating in many ways with the reformist politics of the Calcutta School. I use

‘Deaf’ here to suggest a certain imagination to which *Muk-Shiksha* subscribes. This was an imagination premised on oral education as entailing social emancipation by its integration into a nondisabled space of difference. Graduates from the Calcutta School went on to establish deaf schools in other parts of colonial Bengal, such as Chittagong in 1923 and Rajshahi in 1931, both in present day Bangladesh (Bhattacharya, 2012, p. 14). It was through such mediations by Indian educators that early forms of advocacy were possible. In the absence of any organized mobilization around deafness or any attempts at contesting what was nondisabled, hearing, and normative, the question of a Deaf identity was contingent upon narratives produced by such advocates and educators. Yet, by recording and circulating life histories of Deaf students, by forming and tapping into regional as well as transnational networks, and by lobbying against the colonial state about resources and aid, there was an attempt to bring it into public circulation and thus fashion a political constituency populated by Deaf as well as hearing advocates.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the incidence of oralism in the colony was distinct from how it had come about in the metropole. Where the colonial state was unconcerned with educational reform for its disabled subjects, it was through the work of missionaries, landed classes, and most influentially, Indian educators and social reformers, that disability had come to be written about, discussed, and spoken for. Since there was no consolidated mobilization around signing, and because it was deemed difficult to incorporate within classroom settings, the adoption of oralist pedagogy had occurred without much resistance. However, this had entailed the formation of networks among advocates and educators both

within the colony and outside it, through which they had engaged with resources, concepts, and methods used in educational practices in the metropole. *Muk-Shiksha* was one of the earliest texts on the instruction of deaf students in the colony, where it had sought to address the absence of any such material for a localized reading public. By adapting methods and principles drawn from the metropole in the specific linguistic-cultural context of colonial Bengal, *Muk-Shiksha* had aligned deafness with processes of educational reform, although such intervention was premised upon the centrality of verbal speech and to bring into its fold deaf students. Building upon the pedagogy of the Calcutta Deaf School, this text had thus, imagined a colonized deaf subject who could be made ‘modern’ using oralist training, and who could be integrated into a normative, hearing and speaking social sphere. Conversely, it was through such processes that the formative aspects of political representation for Deaf persons were possible in the specific context of the colony, however limited they may have been.

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Footnotes


¹ All translations from Bangla to English have been done by the author of this paper, unless specified otherwise.

² In the final section of this paper, I mention my reasons for using ‘Deaf’ in some places. While ‘Deafness’ is premised around sign language as the center of its political and cultural identity, I argue in this paper that the conditions for any such mobilization were not available in the specific context of colonial India. Thus, I use ‘Deafness’ to refer to moments where Deaf lives are capacitated and written into history by mostly hearing advocates and educators. Their construction of Deafness, even though it comes through as a result of oralist education, is a primary focus in this paper. I go on to argue that such constructions were complicated by the political imaginations of hearing advocates, and simultaneously, by their upholding of deafness as difference.

³ ‘Gurmukhi’ is a script which continues to be used in western parts of the Indian subcontinent, mostly in the Punjab region of undivided India.

⁴ *The Association Review* was brought out by the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf. This organization was instrumental in oralism gaining significant ideological traction around deaf pedagogy, and subsequently the cultural marginalization of manual signing.

⁵ This phrase is taken from a Sanskrit verse in the Hindu religious text the *Bhagavat Gita*.

 Reading Mohini Mohun Majumder's *Muk-Shiksha: Special Education in Colonial India* by Tirtha Pratim Deb
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