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Rowing as a Site of Cross-Cultural Encounters: South-Asian Students at Oxbridge, 1870s-1940s

By

LOÏC FOLTON

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the social and imperial history of South-Asian students competing in rowing at Oxford and Cambridge from the 1870s to the 1940s. I argue that rowing was a site of colonial encounters and student integration between white, British and racialised, South-Asian men through normative discourses based on such social criteria as race, gender and class. This inquiry aims to embed Oxbridge and their students further within the British Empire. I first suggest a historiographical account of rowing through the lens of social and Empire history since the 1980s. I then analyse Oxbridge visual and material culture on rowing as early as the 1870s. I finally study rowing-related, bodily encounters, focusing on students at Balliol College, Oxford between 1889 and 1949. By cross-referencing a diversity of sources, such as student periodicals, minutes books and photographs, I wish to comprehend rowing at the level of individuals in the very making of the British Empire.

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INTRODUCTION

*No Chinese has ever steered either the Oxford or Cambridge boats, although they have adorned both Universities as students. Japs are also known at our great English Universities, but I never remember any of them steering a boat on Cam or Isis. Indian coxswains and oarsmen are common enough.*¹

On 30 April 1904, a journalist for *The Evening News*, a daily Sydney-based newspaper, reported on the possibility for Cornell University's rowing team to compete in the Henley Royal Regatta in England that same year. Amongst the coxswains "anxious to steer the eight" from that university, he mentioned student Sas-ke-Sze, a name which reminded them that "Yale had a Chinese coxswain of a sort in the early 'eighties'."² Along the same lines, he underlined that some foreign nationalities were more represented than others as rowers and coxswains at Oxford and Cambridge. While taking a pro-Empire and state-centred stance, he sided with "our great English Universities," whose populations included students defined by non-English nationalities. He further stated that access to university rowing followed a regional dividing line: East-Asian students as opposed to South-Asian students, who were apparently known for rowing in and steering Oxbridge³ boats. What can the joint study of rowing and South-Asian students at Oxbridge reveal about cross-cultural encounters at the heart of Empire?

To answer the question, we must conflate two historical fields that have remained impervious to each other since the 1980s – the history of rowing and the history of South-Asian students in the metropole. The partition can be accounted for by the fact that these two fields have been invested by sociologically different groups of historians. On the one hand, memoirs and biographies of rowers, and historical accounts of rowing clubs have been gathered with little epistemological reflection since the 1930s.⁴ From the 1980s, however, rowing has also been studied by white, British historians who have abided by a materialist historiography with a focus on social class. In particular, the amateurism-versus-professionalism debates that took place in Great Britain in the 19th century have been extensively analysed.⁵ While Eric Dalladay and Neil Wigglesworth depicted a binary opposition between two homogeneous social groups – the elites *vis-à-vis* the bottom of the social ladder –,⁶ Win Hayes later showed that these debates were rather spaces where two distinct approaches of rowing were negotiated, which involved a diversity of actors and groups with their own agendas and strategies.⁷ This social, methodological-nationalist history of rowing has also included women,⁸ most recently through a prosopographical approach by Lisa Taylor.⁹ On the other hand, scholarship from the 1980s has sought to remedy what has been perceived as the deliberate exclusion of minorities from "British" history.¹⁰ As scholars began to draw narratives for specific ethnic groups, Kusoom Vadgama, Rozina Visram and Michael Fisher played a key role in opening up the field of study relating to South-Asian migrants in the metropole.¹¹ Following Michael Fisher who argued that "counterflows to colonialism"¹² were not consequences of British rule but existed alongside it, some historians have further challenged the binary tendencies of historiography by giving voice to those who had been denied one. Amongst them, Antoinette Burton, Shompa Lahiri

and Sumita Mukherjee have accounted for South-Asian students.¹³ In this subfield, only a few analyses have focused on sport.

The disconnect between these two fields of research has hindered the historicisation of rowing as a white, imperial and colonial regime in the metropole as from the late 19th century. In fact, “[issues] surrounding ‘race’, racism and ethnicity remain largely unexplored”¹⁴ in the scholarly literature on rowing, thus leaving aside what critical race theory could bring to the study of bodily interactions in an imperial context. And yet, South-Asian students “were intertwined closely in the fabric of British schools, universities, and society and politics at large.”¹⁵ As such, they took part in sports that worked as class-based and gendered social regimes within metropolitan, centuries-old institutions like public schools and Oxbridge. As colonial students that “were more often than not mobile—literally, on the move,”¹⁶ they were faced with anxieties, concerns and controls, at a time when student flows between Great Britain and South Asia were subjected to imperial framing.¹⁷

I argue that Oxbridge rowing was a site of colonial encounters and student integration between white and racialised men, through normative and performative discourses based on such social criteria as race, gender and class. In other words, it was an institution in and through which South-Asian individuals were racialised, that is, categorised and objectified as racially different, if not inferior, by white students.¹⁸ As such, rowing as an elite, masculine and white regime could re-enact and redefine the contours of colonial difference at the very heart of Empire. The article, however, does not include London, which has held most scholarly attention when it comes to the South-Asian student diaspora and their politicisation.¹⁹ Envisaging Oxbridge rowing as a colonial regime provides an opportunity to “focus on bodies as a means of accessing the colonial encounters in world history,”²⁰ while it answers Frederick Cooper’s call to go beyond the opposition between the coloniser and the colonised as socially effective categories.²¹

To support my argument, I wish to provide a comprehensive account of Oxbridge rowing as a site of cross-cultural encounters. Most of the examples I use throughout the article were gathered from a database I made of South-Asian students who were admitted to Balliol College, Oxford between 1877 and 1948. First, I show how available scholarly literature can be used to sketch a social and imperial history of Oxbridge rowing. I also tackle the issue of Oxbridge material and visual culture around rowing and South-Asian students as early as the 1870s. To do so, I study how British, white coaches and students orientalised and racialised their South-Asian counterparts, be it in clubs’ minutes books or student journals which acted as normative and performative discourses.²² Then, I illustrate how sport and crew photographs served to perform a college *esprit de corps* while also re-enacting a male-only, class-based *entre-soi*. These rituals were part of the habitus that students shared as male college members. The photographs I scrutinise relate to South-Asian students at Balliol College, Oxford.²³ Last, I address how colonial and metropolitan teenagerhood and early-adulthood conditioned South-Asian individuals’ access to Oxbridge rowing as members of the imperial elite.

HISTORIOGRAPHY: TOWARDS AN IMPERIAL HISTORY OF OXBRIDGE ROWING

Rather descriptive than analytical until the mid-1980s, publications related to rowing often were pro-colonial depictions of a so-called unifying, imperial modernity. In 1957 journalist and writer Hylton Cleaver said of the Empire Games that “the Government and peoples of these islands owe thanks” as they were, “without question, of untold value in cementing the friendship between the Mother Country, the Dominions and Colonies.”²⁴ In actual fact, however, colonial rowers were not invited to these events: the numerous lists and rankings he compiled indicate that crews represented only the predominantly British dominions and the metropole; and the Games were held exclusively in these territories between 1930 and 1958. Rowing at the level of Empire thus seems to have been a matter of white men, or even more so of Oxbridge-trained imperialists.

In fact, rowing proved to be a tool at the service of the so-called civilising mission. Charles Hose, a governor resident in Sarawak, Borneo who studied at Jesus College, Cambridge in the early 1880s, wanted to “bring *Pax Britannica* to Baram” valley through “an annual race between the war canoes of all the villages” to replicate “a sort of local Henley” royal regatta. Rowing, he thought, was a means of uplifting “tribes” in territories under British control.²⁵ Although it is hard to tell whether this civilising rhetoric was as sincere as it appears, historian James Mangan noted that Oxbridge-trained administrators used such sports as rowing to influence educational and recreational practices and habits at the level of Empire.²⁶ Oxbridge material culture explicitly linked rowing and Empire in India as well. In 1890, Somerville College bought a rowing boat “in commemoration of Indian students” then in residence, namely Cornelia Sorabji (1889-1894) and Princesses Bamba (1890-1895) and Catherine (1890-1894) Duleep Singh. It was accordingly named “the ‘Urmila,’ the Sanskrit name for the sacred Lotus Flower” which typically referred to India. The college may have intended to honour these students with a British-Indian boat to embody the intercultural character of the College: on each blade, the name was “inscribed...in English and in Gujarati characters.”²⁷ Using these students’ presence as a pretext, Oxbridge colleges could symbolically reassert India’s belonging to Empire at its very heart through rowing boats.

Some historians have shown the links between Empire and rowing in academic contexts, with an emphasis on how rowing contributed to the making of a national and imperial ethos from the 1850s – one of service to “God, country, and good.”²⁸ James Mangan studied the ideological transformations that British public schools underwent from the mid-19th century onward. In these fee-paying schools that were public as opposed to private tutoring in the domestic sphere, athleticism, he argued, served to inculcate “physical and moral courage, loyalty and co-operation, the capacity to act fairly and take defeat well, the ability to both command and obey.”²⁹ Pain and brutality were key in the process.³⁰ It differentiated boys on grounds of virtue, manliness and character – a trypic that aristocratic and upper-class families saw as essential for national and imperial leadership.³¹ James Mangan did not specify, however, what roles rowing in particular played

within this athleticism ideology. Paul Deslandes studied the place of rowing in the same period at Oxbridge in more depth.³² During this period, students mainly came from public schools.³³ As social rituals that provided entertainment and served to perform “the sexual, social, and cultural power of men,”³⁴ boat races were central to undergraduate culture in both universities. Oxbridge rowing, he argued, also had a racial and imperial dimension: “British prowess in rowing” could equate to “prowess in formulating imperial policy and administering colonial possessions,” and white rowers were “exemplars of British national and racial greatness.”³⁵ Beyond considerations of class, gender, sexuality and nationality, it seems that rowing served to inculcate racial hierarchies that were required for future Oxbridge-trained administrators. Having said this, I argue that the author failed to show how rowing partook in shaping racial identities. While he did analyse the making of South-Asian students as a social group within Oxbridge – one that accounted for up to three percent of the global student population between 1870 and 1920³⁶ –, he did not include these students in his study of rowing.

And yet, although colonial and South-Asian students in particular often were “merely names on the registers of their universities,”³⁷ they also have left traces of their rowing practices at Oxbridge. Their presence was signified in the rowing-related material culture. The latter included blade-shaped trophies that crews won during competitions, and which displayed the names of the rowers, the coxswain and the coach, as well as a list of the other boats’ colleges that were “bumped.” In 1933, such a trophy was awarded to Balliol College Boat Club’s best crew, the coxswain of whom was Devadaya Devakul, a student from Siam.³⁸ Furthermore, sports were considered as core components of higher education by college authorities at Oxbridge, and as such some colleges mentioned them in admissions registers. To do so, those in charge of updating the admissions registers over the years indicated the sports that students practiced. Balliol College’s admissions records, for instance, often updated and reissued, systematically listed the sports each student was involved in. Rowing, it appears, was the sport South-Asian students participated in the most between 1889 and 1949.³⁹ While about half of the ninety-seven South-Asian students practiced at least one sport during their studies at Balliol College, nine of them were rowers or coxswains over that period. Sports like rowing at Oxbridge colleges, insofar as they were recorded, sometimes systematically, were institutional priorities.

OXBRIDGE ROWING AND THE “ORIENTALISATION” OF SOUTH-ASIAN OTHERS

However, while Oxbridge material culture on rowing acknowledged the very presence of colonial students from South Asia, they were nowhere to be found in student periodicals related to rowing. The one exception I have found so far is a caricature and an article published in *The Moslem in Cambridge* in 1870. Prophesying over the arrival of non-white, non-Christian students “twenty short years”⁴⁰ ahead, this three-issue journal (1870-1871) was used to denounce national, racial, religious and gender diversity as a threat to the British character of Cambridge.⁴¹ The first issue portrayed a cosmopolitan Cambridge crew that would win a fictional interuniversity regatta against an Oxford team despite their

blatant incompetence.⁴² As international universities, the author anonymously argued, Oxbridge were supposedly to lose their vitality by 1890 owing to foreign and colonial students. However, the first Indian student to attend one of the two universities did so in Oxford in 1871, after the three issues were out. In other words, the journal does not so much tell us about bodily contacts as about the prejudice some British students had over their fantasised, South-Asian counterparts.



Figure 1. H.S., “The University Boat, 1890,” *The Moslem in Cambridge*, November 1870, 5, St John’s College Library, Cambridge. Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of St John’s College, Cambridge.

The depicted characters can barely row, if at all. No. 1 (from the right, i.e., the front of the boat), “Whiski-Toddi (The Great War Eagle) (Lake Hurron),” is holding a tomahawk and just standing; no. 3, “Nicolas Drinkoritch (Wallachia),” is canoeing, literally rowing backwards. The other racialised characters struggle to row too, like no. 7, “Brahmin Verrypoor (Delhi),”⁴³ whose name essentialised the character as an Indian miserable mystic. Likewise, the white characters, portrayed through national clichés, are not shown rowing: no. 5, “Jonathan Gawky (New York City),” long and thin as if to show his protestant faith, is smoking a cigar and is sitting cross-legged; no. 4, “Hans Beerymann (Heidelberg)” is said to have “absolutely refused to confine himself to four gallons of beer per diem.”⁴⁴ For these two characters, then, rowing is a leisure activity. The caricature thereby reasserted what Oxbridge rowing should be: a modern sport, that is, collective, competitive and serious, rather than individual, entertaining and disorganised – white and British rather than multiracial and plurinational.

To further the idea that rowing was an essentially modern and therefore British sport, the author depicted the crew and the boat itself to link foreignness and the “Orient” with the past and tradition. The British athlete is set in opposition to white and racialised foreigners, as none of them are wearing sportswear but stereotypical clothing on religious and national bases. In technical terms, too, the boat is quite unlike the boats that were typically used at that time: it is made of wood and looks very heavy, and boats made of planks nailed together may not have existed anymore by 1870,⁴⁵ especially not in the wealthy rowing clubs of Oxbridge. The exotic aesthetics of the boat, with animals depicted on the stern and bow, also contributes to its old-fashioned, or even archaic look.

Reasserting the white and British character of Oxbridge rowing thus relied on the dualism between modernity and tradition – practices and discourses that “orientalised” the “Orient”⁴⁶ through virtual students as a way of remedying some British students’ anxieties.

In contrast to other foreign students, what was specific about the “orientalisation” of South-Asian students through rowing was the lens through which they were perceived. In this perspective, the comments that the coaches recorded in the boat clubs’ minutes books tell us about an orientalist “episteme,”⁴⁷ the frameworks and patterns of thought that conditioned how they were perceived and categorised. One way to orientalise South-Asian students was to associate them with a so-called innate violence that interfered with rowing performance. On the occasion of the 1902 Torpids,⁴⁸ the coach of Balliol College Boat Club at Oxford commented on a crew that, he thought, had “proved a great disappointment this year.” He clearly attributed the boat’s defeat to Bhojrajji Bhagvatsinhjee Jareja, heir apparent to Gondal State and student at Balliol College from 1901 to 1903: “instead of imitating the good example” of “A. K. Graham at stroke and F. S. Kelly at 6,” the rest of the crew took Bhojrajji “as a model and became infected with his ‘oriental violence’.”⁴⁹ As he failed to restrain what the coach attributed to an inherent violence, he supposedly contaminated the whole crew, which in turn prevented them from following a distinctive rule of rowing – the synchronicity of rowers. His so-called “Oriental” descent was to blame for disrupting rowing as a team sport. The orientalisation that the coach subjected the student to is even more striking that Bojarjii attended Eton public school before Balliol College. It reveals that coaches could orientalise South-Asian students, and even those who had been involved in white imperial elites in the metropole early in their lives.

While rowing was a site of orientalisation of South-Asian students, even of those who were arguably more “anglicised” due to their previous education, it also served to define, if not essentialise them racially speaking. For instance, Abdul Ali Khan, a student from Peshawar who attended Balliol College from 1946 to 1949, was described by his coach in the words of warrior virility and homoeroticism. The coach emphasised his so-called perseverance, in a discourse akin to that of the military. About a race that took place on 3 December 1947, he wrote that “[Abdul] has [...] the ‘hooded and merciless’ eyes of a Pathan; considering which advantages he ought to have worked very much harder during training.”⁵⁰ This shows the prevalence of a colonial imaginary that clearly used such categories as “Pathans,” which was one of the “martial races,” a colonial classification based on ethnicity and caste that the British government established after the Sepoys rebellion (1857) to discriminate between peoples who were considered innately made for warfare and those who were not.⁵¹ By essentialising him through a colonial and imperial rhetoric that relied on gender, ethnic and racial clichés, the coach also reinforced hierarchies that he thought there should be between them – a mature coach *vis-à-vis* a younger rower, a white officer *vis-à-vis* a soldier of “martial race.” At the same time, the hierarchies he asserted had a homoerotic quality: Abdul, he wrote, had “a massive and beautifully muscled body.”⁵² The very racialisation that the coach subjected the student to thus proved to fuel his admiration or even exaltation for the male body.

While Oxbridge rowing as a white field of discourse could serve to re-enact colonial otherness, coaches' comments were not always limited to essentialising South-Asian students. Devadaya Devakul, who attended Balliol College, Oxford from 1932, was believed to have the capacities to progress as a coxswain: he was described as "a promising Siamese, with very good hands and boat sense. He must learn how to use his voice, and develop confidence. If he does this he may cox the 'varsity in time."⁵³ Nationality-based identification did not determine his actual skills as a coxswain once and for all. Usually, comments about self-confidence were made about crews in general and not about specific individuals. When commenting on the crew Ali Abdul Khan was a member of in 1947, the coach noted that "their lack of confidence in others turned out to be a lack of confidence in themselves."⁵⁴ Designating a particular student as lacking confidence meant that coaches could, as in Devadaya Devakul's case, envisage rowing as a means to overcome so-called limits that they attributed to a student of South-Asian national descent, and to develop individual abilities. In other words, I may argue, it actualised what Ronald Inden referred to as a "contradictory mixture of societalism...and individualism"⁵⁵ that surrounded individuals from India and South Asia at large. While Oxbridge rowing provided a frame in which South-Asian students were reduced to social groups as if they were not individuals, it also reasserted a liberal idea of individuals through the idea that only individual efforts could pay off. In this perspective, the coach may have claimed that rowing provided South-Asian students with a solution for becoming proper individuals, and thereby to set themselves free from the only form of identification they were supposedly capable of – so-called indigenous community belongings.

Through rowing, South-Asian students thus were specifically orientalised, that is, perceived and described as "hybrid imperial subjects":⁵⁶ while conveying a multi-faceted, colonial imaginary despite themselves, they were entwined in a metropolitan, homosocial university environment that essentialised them. In other words, Oxbridge rowing was a site of re-enactment of colonial discourses on South-Asian students. But beyond textual evidence, what can rowing-related photographs tell us of bodily encounters between British and South-Asian men?

CREW PHOTOGRAPHS: PERFORMING COLLEGE *ESPRIT DE CORPS*

Rowing as an Oxbridge sport was made up of a set of rituals, like crew photographs that would be taken after the main races of the academic year had taken place. Both Oxford and Cambridge have organised these rowing events as long-awaited milestones of the year. As early as 1827, Cambridge hosted a yearly rowing competition, which in 1887 turned into two separate regattas: Lent Bumps and May Bumps, held at the turn of March and mid-June respectively.⁵⁷ Their Oxford counterparts were (and remain to this day) the Torpids and Eights Week, around the same time of year.⁵⁸ These were bumping races where boats, starting one at a time, were supposed to catch up with those ahead. Paul Deslandes showed that these yearly races were one "arena" where "gender conflicts were enacted" at the turn of the 20th century.⁵⁹ South-Asian students, as members of colleges and rowing crews,

also took part in these events and were photographed accordingly. Therefore, I argue, crew photographs served to perform a college *esprit de corps* which included South-Asian students.

To start with, I wish to set aside the idea that crew photographs mirrored or re-enacted a racial hierarchy within Oxbridge colleges as imperial terrains. The main reason why this argument is unconvincing is because it would mean giving too much prominence to how we feel, and thus failing to go beyond what photographs as historical sources call for, that is, a more empirical approach. The 1934 Torpids crew, the coxswain of whom was Devadaya Devakul from Balliol College, provides a telling example of how the use of photographs can confuse historical thinking. As in typical crew photographs, the eight rowers are arranged following the shape of an upside pyramid while the coxswain is sitting cross-legged on the ground, between the legs of the stroke. Devadaya is sitting on a small piece of cardboard, folding his legs in his arms as would a child.



Figure 2. Crew photograph of the First Torpid, 1934, Archive Photograph Albums, Balliol College Archives, Oxford, ref. PHOT 36.56A. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders and the Master and Fellows of Balliol College.

At first sight, we may get the feeling that the photograph oozes domination due to Devadaya's posture. In this perspective, the fact that he is framed by a white student above him could give the broader impression that he is belittled by the cohort of older-looking, white rowers that he had just coxed. But then, it would be only a small step from asserting that crew photographs acted as embedded captures of South-Asian bodies. However, to

conclude the argument at this stage would be misleading, as it fails to consider that, in the coach's words, Devadaya "must...develop confidence."⁶⁰ His posture, in other words, seems more to reflect a personality trait and his subsequent physical attitude within the crew, than to uncover a racialising scenographic apparatus. Cross-referencing the first-hand materials thus allows for a more nuanced and incarnated picture of the student's rowing experience, rather than confining it to racial and bodily domination.

Other crew photographs including South-Asian coxswains further suggest that their positions within the scenography were determined by their roles within crews rather than by their racial identities. Batuk Prabhashanker Pattani, who attended Downing College, Cambridge from 1905, was photographed with the crew he coxed, sitting cross-legged on a carpet.⁶¹ Likewise, Fatehsing Sayajirao Gaekwar, Prince of Baroda and a Balliol student between 1901 and 1902, coxed a crew on the occasion of the 1902 Torpids and so sat on a carpet at the tip of the inverted pyramid, as most white coxswains would do.



Figure 3. Crew photograph of the First Torpid, 1902, Archive Photograph Albums, Balliol College Archives, Oxford, ref. PHOT 31.08A. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders and the Master and Fellows of Balliol College.

The crew he was part of, as the photograph shows, also included a South-Asian rower, Bhojrajji Jareja, the same student who was described in the words of "oriental violence" by their coach. Interestingly, with his hands held behind his back and his legs straight, his presence is akin to that of a stereotypical British gentleman. Bhojrajji seems to perform a British persona through a rowing-related ritual. While the coach orientalised him through the topos of an infectious disease which supposedly caused the crew to fail, the student performed class belonging through a tradition attached to a typically British sport.

As opposed to minutes books, crew photographs depicting South-Asian students as coxswains *and* rowers thus did not serve to exclude or inferiorise on grounds of racial hierarchies. Both students conversely appear to integrate into the crew as a community of male student rowers, and to abide by the habitus that is attached to it. At the same time, crew photographs acted as spaces where South-Asian students reasserted their social positions, and moments when they could capture and record their kinship with white, male Oxbridge elites.

While race as a social parameter is not sufficient to understand the significance of crew photographs, and sometimes misleading if considered alone, it becomes more revealing when considered within a more comprehensive range of normative criteria along with class, gender and age. To further historicise rowing and the photographic tradition that is attached to it, I wish to show that college sport photographs in general were class traditions and homosocial rituals that included South-Asian students. Cricket, I argue, served to perpetuate a college *entre-soi* through intergenerational sociabilities, as “Past and Present” photographs revealed. They displayed then current and former students who gathered for cricket sessions at Balliol College almost every year. Photographs including South-Asian students as past and present members of the college were taken in 1898, 1900 and 1913.⁶²



Figure 4. “Cricket, Past & Present,” photograph, 1900, Archive Photograph Albums, Balliol College Archives, Oxford, ref. PHOT 22.08A. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders and the Master and Fellows of Balliol College.

These photographs reveal more relaxed settings than those which prevailed in team photographs over the period studied in this article. For instance, the 1900 “Past and Present” meeting appears playful and slightly entertaining, as some players’ postures

suggest. In particular, the postures of Frederick John De Saram, a student from Ceylon who practiced rowing, rugby and cricket throughout his Balliol years from 1894 to 1902, and of a British student of the same generation (i.e., in the centre, front row), clearly show that the occasion consisted not only in playing cricket but also in spending time idly. The dress code also proves to be more indulgent than usual, with men who are not uniformly dressed, and some who are not dressed in sportswear at all. It means that not everyone had gathered to play but to enjoy being together as former and current members of the college. These elements reveal that leisurely days accounted for moments and spaces where young and older students re-enacted the college's *entre-soi* through sports. Sport photographs captured a "form of comradeship" between different generations of students "of equal class and professional status,"⁶³ thus perpetuating a college-based sense of belonging during and after their student years.

While sport photographs as college traditions served to foster intergenerational *esprit de corps*, they did not imply the erasure of difference for South-Asian students. Quite the contrary, on the 1913 "Past and Present" photograph, Hardit Singh Malik, from Punjab, signified his Hindu faith by wearing a turban.⁶⁴ Students could assert their religious beliefs in other sports, too. Santockh Singh, who came from Punjab to study at Balliol College, likewise expressed his Hindu faith by posing with a turban in hockey and tennis team photographs, in 1924 and 1925 respectively.⁶⁵ These examples illustrate the "ethos and cosmopolitan nature of the college,"⁶⁶ and reveal that photographs as social scenes within the college provided South-Asian students with spaces where they could express and assert their difference.

Insofar as photographs of sport club members mirrored ritualised apparatuses, they captured and so re-enacted social dynamics in a homosocial and intergenerational *entre-soi*. Precisely, rowing as a college activity and tradition was a core component of the masculine sport culture that British public schools fostered in the imperial elite, which raises the issue of rowing to legitimise or even whiten individuals from a sociological point of view.

METROPOLITAN TEENAGERHOOD: GRANTING ACCESS TO OXBRIDGE ROWING

Rowing was not only a university sport, but it was also often a sport that British and colonial pupils in metropolitan public schools practiced, along with other sports. As such, the experiences of South-Asian individuals at Oxbridge must be envisaged in a more comprehensive way, one that situates rowing within their trajectories as colonial pupils *and* students. I wish to show how metropolitan teenagerhood and/or early-adulthood conditioned access to Oxbridge rowing, and to imperial male culture in general.

The database I gathered on Balliol College, Oxford shows that out of the nine South-Asian students who rowed between 1889 and 1949, seven were pupils in metropolitan public schools beforehand. The secondary schools they attended ranged from Harrow and Rugby to Eton College and Rockville School in Edinburgh – four of the most renowned and expensive schools in the United Kingdom at the turn of the 20th century. Most of them, it

appears, did not discover rowing in Oxbridge but as part of their secondary education in the metropole. As for the two other students who did row at Balliol College but did not attend a metropolitan school, they were pupils in British-inspired schools and universities in South Asia. John Frederick De Saram, who was admitted to Balliol College in 1894, first attended the Royal College in Colombo, a secondary-education school that was founded on the model of Eton College; it may also have been the first so-called “royal” college outside the British Isles in 1881.⁶⁷ Abdul Ali Khan, at Balliol College between 1946 and 1949, started higher education at the Islamia College, Peshawar. This university was a result of the Aligarh Movement, which reformer Sir Syed Ahmed Khan initiated at the end of the 19th century to push for a cultural, social and intellectual regeneration of Islam through western-based education.⁶⁸ As in British public schools and universities, sports there were at the core of academic training.⁶⁹ Therefore, so-called British sports were an integral component of secondary and higher education at the level of Empire.

South-Asian pupils and students reused their sport experiences, be it in South Asia or in the metropole, to get access to Oxbridge. In the letters of character that were required for admissions to Oxbridge colleges, sports in general, and rowing in particular were mentioned as proof of academic excellence and versatility. In the letters that were written in favour of Avinash Chander Chopra to Downing College, Cambridge in the early 1930s, one by Naud Lal Puri from the Central Bank of India stated that “Mr. Chopra has had a brilliant career in his school and is a good all-round sportsman. He is a good oarsman and excellent tennis player for his age. He belongs to a very well-known and highly respectable family of the Punjab.”⁷⁰ A report card was also provided by the Rector of St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata, his former higher-education institution.⁷¹ Academic results, athletic commitments and family background thus were equally emphasised when it came to applications – taking part in so-called typically British sports was expected, if not required, for admission to Oxbridge. As such, South-Asian individuals could use rowing as an argument to try and be granted access to higher education in the metropole.

If most South-Asian students rowing at Oxbridge were educated in British-inspired schools and universities at the level of Empire, then it seems clear that their access to rowing depended on the networks and sociabilities they were entwined in as teenagers and young adults. In other words, teenagerhood and early-adulthood were moments when South-Asian individuals could secure access to rowing as a class-based, male-only regime. This statement could apply to British students as well. However, as I have showed, rowing remained a white regime, that is, one of the arenas where South-Asian students were racialised, despite their early entanglement in white imperial elites. The very re-enactment of colonial discourses about South-Asian students who learnt rowing in such academic contexts as metropolitan schools and universities and British-inspired ones in South Asia, shows the limits they were confronted with when it came to advancing in the world of Oxbridge rowing. While South-Asian pupils and students could fit into white gentleman milieus, and choose to adopt their habitus, they could not for all that become sociologically whitened through it.

CONCLUSION

Rowing as a site of cross-cultural encounters was one arena where colonial discourse around South-Asian students was re-enacted at Oxford and Cambridge. As early as the 1870s, rowing was one of the tools that white British individuals used to orientalise colonial and indeed South-Asian students. Rowing was in this manner at the service of discourses that white students and coaches used to signify their anxieties about Oxbridge as a white, masculine, Christian and British institution. With this study of students' and coaches' attitudes in such cross-cultural, academic contexts as Oxbridge from the late 19th century onward, I have also provided a nuanced picture of South-Asian students' integration through rowing. Oxbridge rowing was not only a site of racial reactions, essentialisations and discriminations, but also a place where South-Asian students could reassert their positions within Oxbridge as a social space.

The examples that I have drawn from the database on Balliol College, Oxford reveal that rowing remained a class-based regime above all, even when white and racialised students were in the same crews. Not so much race as class seemed to determine the very access to Oxbridge rowing. It was part of a class habitus, one that was not instituted in and through higher education but from secondary education onward. Oxbridge rowing thus was a space where British and South-Asian students could meet as a class-based social group. It did not mean, however, that the contours of colonial difference between them would weaken or even disappear. Quite the contrary, Oxbridge rowing proved to be a site of constant orientalisation and racialisation of South-Asian others in the heart of Empire, from the 1870s to the 1940s.

To suggest further research on the imperial history of Oxbridge rowing that I have undertaken in this article, I would like to sketch a prosopography of two "Cambridge-returned,"⁷² namely Jatindra Mohan Sengupta and Biren Mookerjee. In the mid-1920s, they both left Kolkata to attend Cambridge where they became friends. But rowing at Cambridge did not grant them access to urban rowing clubs in South Asia, as they were denied access to Calcutta Rowing Club which was "strictly racist, that is, for whites only."⁷³ This club was founded as early as the 1870s, and was displaced several times until the late 1920s, when it was established along the artificial Dhakuria lake, Kolkata along with three other clubs. One of them was the Lake Club, Jatindra and Biren's "own club for Indians" which they founded in 1932. Bengalis accounted for most of its members, and "ladies...began rowing [there] in 1934."⁷⁴ Rowing, it appears, was used as an activist, if not anti-imperialist, tool. To grasp the political character of rowing at the level of Empire, a prosopography of Oxbridge-returned may prove to be a fertile area for historical research. It paves the way for analysing how they proactively (re)shaped urban geography of "colonial clubbability"⁷⁵ in South Asia.

NOTES

- ¹ “Rowing,” *The Evening News*, April 30, 1904, 5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article113908954>.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Oxbridge as a portmanteau of Oxford and Cambridge is relevant insofar as it referred to a common form of higher education in the two universities. Moreover, the ways in which British undergraduates perceived nation and Empire proved rather consistent across the universities. See Robert D. Anderson, *Universities and Elites in Britain since 1800* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1992), 49.
- ⁴ Freddie Brittain, *Oar, Scull and Rudder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930); Robert F. Herrick, *Red Top, Reminiscences of Harvard Rowing* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1939).
- ⁵ Martin Johnes, “Great Britain,” in *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, eds. Donna Pope and John Nauright (London: Routledge, 2010), 451.
- ⁶ Eric Halladay, *Rowing in England: A Social History. The Amateur Debate* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Neil Wigglesworth, *The Social History of English Rowing* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- ⁷ Win Hayes, “The Victorian Paradox. Sport for the Wealthy to Sport for the Masses: A Conflict of Class and Ideals,” in *Paradoxe(s) victorien(s) / Victorian Paradox(es)*, ed. William Findlay (Tours: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, 2005), 141-156.
- ⁸ Christopher Dodd, ed., “Rowing,” in *Sport in Britain: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 276-307.
- ⁹ Lisa Taylor, “The Women’s Amateur Rowing Association 1923-1963: A Prosopographical Approach,” *Sport in History* 38, no. 3 (2018): 307-330, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2018.1488153>.
- ¹⁰ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), xi.
- ¹¹ Kusoom Vadgama, *India in Britain: The Indian Contribution to the British Way of Life* (London: Robert Royce, 1984); Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700-1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986); Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Michael Fischer, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).
- ¹² Fischer, *Counterflows to Colonialism*.
- ¹³ Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identities, 1880-1930* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Sumita Mukherjee, *Nationalism, Education, and Migrant Identities: The England-Returned* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- ¹⁴ Jayne Caudwell, “‘Easy, Oar!’: Rowing Reflections,” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 3, no. 2 (2011): 126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2011.572179>.
- ¹⁵ Sumita Mukherjee, “Mobility, Race and the Politicisation of Indian Students in Britain before the Second World War,” *History of Education* 51, no. 4 (February 2022): 565, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2021.2010815>.
- ¹⁶ Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *World Histories from Below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 5.

- ¹⁷ On the issue of higher education in regard to students from colonial Asia in the metropole at the turn of the 20th century, see Sara Legrandjacques, “Encadrer les ‘jeunes cerveaux’: Les pouvoirs publics face aux étudiants indiens et indochinois en métropole à l’aube du xxe siècle,” *Jahrbuch Für Universitätsgeschichte*, no. 22 (2019): 103-123, <https://doi.org/10.25162/9783515129046>.
- ¹⁸ Luis F. Mirón and Jonathan Xavier Inra, “Race as a Kind of Speech Act,” in *Cultural Studies: A Research Volume*, ed. N. K. Denzin (Bingley: Emerald, 2000), 85-107.
- ¹⁹ Alex Tickell, “Scholarship Terrorists: The India House Hostel and the ‘Student Problem’ in Edwardian London,” in *South Asian Resistances in Britain, 1858-1947*, eds. Rehana Ahmed and Sumita Mukherjee (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 29-43; Nicholas Owen, “The Soft Heart of the British Empire: Indian Radicals in Edwardian London,” *Past and Present*, no. 220 (August 2013): 143-184, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtt006>.
- ²⁰ Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.
- ²¹ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- ²² Joseph Kelly and Timothy Kelly, “Searching the Dark Alley: New Historicism and Social History,” *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 25 (Spring 1992): 688, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3789058>.
- ²³ These photographs were taken and have been approved for this publication by kind permission of Gillman & Soame.
- ²⁴ Hylton Cleaver, *A History of Rowing* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1957), 169.
- ²⁵ James Mangan, “‘Oars and the Man’: Pleasure and Purpose in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge,” *The British Journal of Sports History* 3, no. 1 (December 1984): 264, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02649378408713551>.
- ²⁶ Mangan, “Oars,” 265.
- ²⁷ *Somerville College Log Book 1879-1907*, Somerville College Library Archives, 54; quoted in Burton, *At the Heart*, 132; and in Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College, 1879-1993* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 141.
- ²⁸ Reba Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 3.
- ²⁹ James Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 9.
- ³⁰ Mangan, *Athleticism*, 187-191; Fabrice Bensimon, “Chapitre XIX - Société, culture et religion au XIX^e siècle,” in *Histoire des îles Britanniques*, ed. Stéphane Lebecq (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 674.
- ³¹ Mangan, *Athleticism*, 122-140.
- ³² Paul Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men. British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).
- ³³ Christophe Charle, “La seconde transformation : recherche ou ouverture sociale ? (1860-1940),” in *Histoire des universités: XI^e-XX^e siècle*, eds. Christophe Charle and Jacques Verger (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 156.

- ³⁴ Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 167.
- ³⁵ Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 166-167.
- ³⁶ Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 210.
- ³⁷ Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 86.
- ³⁸ Trophy for the 1st Torpid, 1933 Torpids, ref. BCA Blade 43, Balliol College Archives.
- ³⁹ *Balliol College Register, 1833-1914*, 1st edition; *Balliol College Register, 1833-1933*, 2nd edition; *Balliol College Register, 1900-1950*, 3rd edition, Balliol College Archives.
- ⁴⁰ *The Moslem in Cambridge: A Liberal and Advanced Journal of Universal Scope, Views and Tendencies, Adapted to the Tastes of All Nations. Conducted by Hadji Seivad and a Talented Heathen Staff, 1890*, no. 1 (November 1870): 1.
- ⁴¹ Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 212-215.
- ⁴² *Moslem in Cambridge*, 3-5.
- ⁴³ *Moslem in Cambridge*, 3.
- ⁴⁴ *Moslem in Cambridge*.
- ⁴⁵ Stefan Poser, "Speed for a Dated Technology: Rowing Boats and High-Tech in the 19th and 20th Centuries," *Icon*, no. 15 (2009): 122, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23787101>.
- ⁴⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).
- ⁴⁷ Michel Foucault defined "episteme" as the conditions of possibility of all knowledge in any given culture and at any given moment. See Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).
- ⁴⁸ On the definition and significance of the Torpids, see Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 154-183.
- ⁴⁹ *Balliol College Boat Club Records, 1902-1927*, Balliol College Archives, 52-56.
- ⁵⁰ *Balliol College Boat Club Records, October 1947-June 1958*, Balliol College Archives.
- ⁵¹ Gavin Rand, "'Martial Races' and 'Imperial Subjects': Violence and Governance in Colonial India, 1857-1914," *European Review of History* 13, no. 1 (March 2006): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480600586726>.
- ⁵² *Balliol College, 1947-1958*.
- ⁵³ *Balliol College Boat Club Records, 1927-1937*, Balliol College Archives.
- ⁵⁴ *Balliol College, 1947-1958*.
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- ⁵⁶ Mary Des Chene, "Language and Practice in the Colonial Indian Army," (paper presented at the Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power and History, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Fall 1993), 22-26.

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- ⁵⁹ Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 154-183.
- ⁶⁰ *Balliol College, 1927-1937*.
- ⁶¹ Downing College May Boat, 1909, ref. DCPH/2/3/2/53, Downing College Archives, <https://www.dow.cam.ac.uk/about/downing-college-archive/archives-college-history/downing-college-and-india>. In the section, the link to a more comprehensive study of "Downing College and India" by Teresa Segura-Garcia is provided. See also Teresa Segura-Garcia, "Downing College and India," *Dow@Cam: The Downing College Magazine* 26 (Winter 2014-15): 6-7, <https://www.downingcambridge.com/document.doc?id=52>.
- ⁶² Archive Photograph Albums, 1898, 1900, and 1913, ref. PHOT 21.30A, PHOT 22.08A, and PHOT 23.55A respectively, "Cricket, Past & Present" series, Balliol College Archives.
- ⁶³ Judith M. Brown, "Colleges, Cohorts, and Dynasties," in *Windows into the Past: Life Histories and the Historian of South Asia (Critical Problems in History)* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 27.
- ⁶⁴ Archive Photograph Albums, 1913, ref. PHOT 23.55A, "Cricket, Past & Present" series, Balliol College Archives.
- ⁶⁵ Archive Photograph Albums, 1924, and 1925, ref. PHOT 24.39A, and PHOT 24.42A respectively, Balliol College Archives.
- ⁶⁶ Brown, *Windows into the Past*.
- ⁶⁷ Charles Haviland, "Sri Lanka's 'Eton' celebrates its 175th birthday," *BBC News*, February 6, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8500520.stm>.
- ⁶⁸ Shahid Jaleel, "The Aligarh Movement: A Chapter in the History of Indian Education," (PhD diss., Aligarh Muslim University, 2004), 155.
- ⁶⁹ Jaleel, "The Aligarh Movement," 337-338.
- ⁷⁰ Letter to Downing College from Naud Lal Puri of the Central Bank of India, Kolkata, April 14, 1934, ref. DCAT/1/2/362, Downing College Archives.
- ⁷¹ Letter to Downing College from M. Vermeire, Rector of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, March 29, 1935, ref. DCAT/1/2/362, Downing College Archives.
- ⁷² Sumita Mukherjee referred to students who typically came from South Asia to study in the United Kingdom and then came back to South Asia as "England-returned." See Mukherjee, *Nationalism*.
- ⁷³ Christopher Dodd, ed., "Pacific Approaches," *The Story of World Rowing* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 345.
- ⁷⁴ Dodd, "Pacific Approaches."
- ⁷⁵ Mrinalini Sinha, "Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India," *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 489-521, <https://doi.org/10.1086/386265>.