

Subrata Dasgupta, ***The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore***, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2007. Eight chapters, Prologue, Epilogue, Bibliography of 288 works, Index. Pages iii+280.

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The very idea that there had been a ‘Bengal Renaissance’ in the 19th century India has been widely debated. Sushobhan Sarkar has argued that there was an ‘awakening’ on the onset of the British rule in India which ‘fell short of the tremendous sweep and vital energy’ that characterized the Renaissance in Italy.

Professor Subrata Dasgupta had earlier earned fame through his work on *Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Indian Response to Western Science* (1999). In the present book under review, Dasgupta has approached the subject of Bengal Renaissance as a cognitive scientist — he is at present the Director of the Institute of Cognitive Science and also the Professor of History at the University of Louisiana, USA – ‘whose domain is the life and life history of the creative mind’. Dasgupta claims that this cognitive perspective has never been used in the extensive writings on the Bengal Renaissance, and that his research reveals that there was a ‘collective cognitive identity’ amidst a small but remarkable community of individuals in 19th century Bengal, which amounted to a ‘genuine cognitive revolution’.

By ‘cognitive revolution’ Dasgupta meant something specific: ‘the creation of a *new* (not existent in 18th century or earlier in India) and *historically significant* cognitive identity shared by a group’, transmitted across time, space and other knowledge systems in different parts of the sub-continent and the world. According to David Kopf, ‘renaissance’ implies a socio-cultural process of ‘awakening’, ‘revitalization’ and ‘modernization’ which goes beyond specific historical periods or cultures. Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta agrees with David Kopf that a genuine ‘renaissance’ should not remain confined to a specific movement in a specific part of the world in some specific time. Using this yardstick, R.K. Dasgupta concluded that the

18th century awakening in Bengal was a 'Renaissance phenomenon', even though it was 'an incomplete and deficient Renaissance'.

In order to prove his thesis as a cognitive scientist, Subrata Dasgupta considered the contributions of the British and other European Orientalists (Chapters I & II) and then 'the creativity and the concomitant development of cognitive identities' of twelve individuals in the remaining six chapters:

Rammohun Roy (Chapter III), Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Datta (IV), Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (V), Mahendralal Sircar, Eugene Lafont, Prafulla Chandra Ray and Jagadis Chandra Bose (VI), Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita (VII) and lastly Rabindranath Tagore (VIII).

Even this short list of Subrata Dasgupta includes the names of three non-Bengalees - he could have easily included David Hare and James Prinsep - and this goes to show that the renaissance movement was not restricted amongst the Bengalees.

Having provided a rough idea as to what the book under review is all about, I would naturally use a disproportionately large fraction of space, in this journal related to history of science, deliberating on chapter VI which the author has entitled 'Creating a Scientific Consciousness, Refuting a Western Belief' (pp. 127-169). Sircar, Lafont, Ray and Bose indeed refuted the erroneous Western belief that the Indians were incapable of creating a scientific consciousness in this sub-continent.

On Sircar and Lafont

Dr. Mahendralal Sircar (1833-1904) and Father Eugene Lafont (1837-1908) were that co-founders of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS, 1876), the first such association in the whole of Asia, and also the mentors of the next - generation science pioneers in India: Pramatha Nath Bose, Asutosh Mookerjee, Jagadis Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Ray etc. Dasgupta strangely ignored the contributions of Pramatha Nath and Asutosh. Deliberating on the pioneering roles of Sircar and Lafont in implanting the scientific consciousness in the minds of the Indian intellectuals (a very large number assisted them), Dasgupta made some poignant remarks in p. 149 which I would like to quote and comment upon:

“Inexplicably, some of the most widely referenced and significant historical accounts of modern Indian science have chosen to ignore Father Eugene Lafont entirely. It is as if, because Lafont was a Belgian, he does not merit mention in the context of the ‘Indian response’ to the Western science!”.

Dasgupta’s facts are right but incomplete, and the interpretation wrong. Mahendralal, an Indian, has been equally ignored. His handwritten diary notes of 1873 had remained unreported for 124 years! Many of the recent historical accounts related to Sircar and Lafont have not been ‘widely referenced’, as mentioned by Dasgupta. This point may be discussed with the aid of the accompanying list.

Some Key Chronologically Listed Literatures on Mahendralal Sircar and Eugene Lafont

1. St. Xavier’s College (SXC) Diaries since 1860, available in the Goethals Library, SXC, Kolkata
2. Mahendralal Sircar’s Diaries since 1873, microfilms in IACS, Kolkata.
3. Mahendralal Sircar, *The Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science*, printed in 1880, updated upto 1884, available in Asutosh Collection, National Library, Kolkata.
4. Amritalal Sircar, *Obituary Notice of Mahendralal Sircar*, 1905. Available in National Library and RKM Institute of Culture Library, Kolkata.
5. Obituary of Father Eugene Lafont, *Nature* (UK) no. 2011, Vol. 78, May 14, 1908, p.35
6. Articles written by Father Lafont in *Indo-European Correspondence*, volumes in St. Xavier’s College Library.
7. Articles written by Mahendralal Sircar in *Calcutta Journal of Medicine*, volumes available in National Library.
8. Sarat Chandra Ghosh, *Life of Dr. Mahendralal Sircar*, Hahnemann Publishing House, Calcutta, 1935.
9. Monoranjan Gupta, *Dr. Mahendralal Sircar* (in Bengali), Orient Book Company, 1959.
10. Arun Kumar Biswas, Rev. Father Lafont SJ. of St Xavier’s College, *Modern Review*, CVII (1), January, 1960, pp. 44-52 This was the first paper on the subject in half a century since the publication of several obituaries in 1908. Fortunately, several direct witnesses were still alive surviving the time gap of 52 years. They provided their reminiscences.
11. Arun Kumar Biswas, *Science in India*, Firma KLM Private Ltd. Calcutta 1969. One chapter on Mahendralal pp. 49-66, another on Lafont, pp. 67-84. Quoted in *Physics Today*, 39 (5), May 1986, pp. 36-44.

12. Anon, *A Century*, IACS, Calcutta, July 1976 celebrating the centenary.
13. Samarendranath Sen, *Vinayacarya Dr. Mahendralal Sircar* (in Bengali), IACS, Calcutta, 1985.
14. Chittabrata Palit, Mahendralal Sircar: The Quest for National Science, *The Indian Historical Review*, 12.1-2 (1989) p. 127.
15. Jaladhi Kumar Sircar, *Shri Ramakrishner Doktor Mahendralal Sircar* (in Bengali), Udbodhan, Kolkata, 1990.
16. Chittabrata Palit, 'Mahendralal Sircar, 1833-1904, The Quest for National Science' (same title as in ref. no-14) in Deepak Kumar edited, *Science and Empire: Essays in Indian Context*, Anamika Prakashan, Delhi, 1991.
17. Arun Kumar Biswas, Reverend Father Eugene Lafont and Scientific Activity of St. Xavier's College, *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 29.1 (1994) pp. 77-88. This paper had been earlier presented in 1989 during the tri-centenary celebration on the city of Kolkata.
18. Udayan Namboodiry, *St. Xavier's: The Making of a Calcutta Institution*, Viking, New Delhi, 1995
19. *Then the Trilogy*: Arun Kumar Biswas, *Gleanings of the Past and the Science Movement — in the Diaries of Drs. Mahendralal and Amritalal Sircar*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata; March, 2000. The Six chapters (I-VI) in the book had been earlier published in the pages of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 1997-1999. The seventh chapter which could not be included in this book was subsequently published in the said journal. VII. Additional Diary Notes of Dr. Amritalal Sircar (1880-1883 and 1904), *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 44.2 (2002) 1-58.
20. Arun Kumar Biswas, *Father Eugene Lafont of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata and the Contemporary Science Movement*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, March 2001. This is the first-ever biography of Father Lafont.
21. Arun Kumar Biswas (compiled and edited), *Collected Works of Mahendralal Sircar, Eugene Lafont and the Science Movement (1860-1910)*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, December 2003.

The Asiatic society has claimed the set of three references 19-21 to be a 'trilogy of source materials on the scientific renaissance in the 19th century'.

In the footnote of the cited page (149 fn), Dasgupta mentions some celebrated authors whose surveys did not mention Lafont:

B.V. Subbarayappa (1971); Priyadarajan Ray and S.N. Sen (1986), Rajesh K. Kochhar (1993), Deepak Kumar (1996, 1997).

The above footnote could be easily extended. Most of the aforementioned authors, as well as the better informed Palit (1989,1991) and

Namboodiry (1995)-vide references 14,16 & 18 in the table — refrained from citing the first eleven references in the table, particularly no. 10, the most crucial paper, published in 1960. The *Modern Review* paper (No. 10) on Father Lafont was the *first* in half a century since obituaries on the great savant were published in 1908, and for which the still-alive associates of Lafont such as Indira Devi Chaudhurani, niece of Poet Tagore, Prof. D.M. Bose, nephew of J.C. Bose, Father A. Briot, Sir C.V. Raman etc sent their reminiscences to the present reviewer. Even if this paper escaped somebody's attention, how could the following book (No. 11 in the list) of 1969 be ignored?

Dasgupta, who seems to be passionate and sympathetic towards Lafont (and also Sircar), had missed not only the first eleven references in the table but also the recent one, no.20, the first-ever biography of Lafont published in 2001. He has also missed the *Collected Works of Sircar and Lafont* (ref. no-21) published in 2003. The Asiatic Society has claimed that the set of the three publications: *Gleanings of the Past* (Diaries), *Lafont's biography and the Collected Works* constitute a trilogy of source materials on the scientific renaissance in the 19th century'.

The present reviewer is happy that Dasgupta quoted his *Gleanings of the Past* (No. 19) some 31 times, but still feels sad in noting that Dasgupta has treated this book as merely edited diaries, and overlooked the fact that it has six lengthy critically written articles analysing the socio-political contexts in which the science movement grew and the cognitive identities of the pioneers of the movement; has he read the seventh article (No. 19) not included in the book but published in 2002 in the journal?

If Dasgupta had read and utilized the trilogy materials more thoroughly, he would have enriched his thesis on several counts such as :

Cross-cultural contributions and scientific achievements of not only Lafont but also many other Xaverian Jesuits and students; sterling contributions of Pramatha Nath Bose, the first *practising scientist* in modern India (1880 onwards, even before Jagadis Chandra Bose) and the first Indian historian of science (even before P.C. Ray); controversy between Mahendralal and Rajendralal; cognitive interactions between Mahendralal and Sri Ramakrishna & his disciples, a unique dialogue between science and religion; Mahendralal's critically written articles reviewing J.C. Bose's research on

microwaves and P.C. Ray's *History of Hindu Chemistry*; the extensive discussion as to why the IACS movement did not apparently 'succeed' during Mahendralal's lifetime, etc.

It is true that the excellent contributions of Sircar and Lafont towards promoting scientific consciousness amongst the Indians have not been fully recognized, and this phenomenon can be explained at two levels. Firstly, our national standards of historical consciousness (a cognition factor) and historical research have been poor. Many scholars opt more for quick publications and fancy paradigms related to sociological, philosophical or psychological analysis, and less for digging towards fresh primary source materials or utilizing the primary source materials even if these are already available. Dasgupta himself is aware of many primary source materials but confesses (p.171 fn): 'for my present purposes, I have drawn upon a few secondary sources'. We have indicated the extent and consequence of this approach with regard to the studies on Sircar and Lafont. In his otherwise illuminating study: *Science and National Consciousness in Bengal (1870-1930)*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2004, J. Lourdasamy has failed to cite the *Collected Works of Sircar and Lafont* (No. 21) or acknowledge the source of many diary discoveries (No. 19) such as Ana Turkhud Pandurany being resurrected from oblivion. Lourdasamy has cited reference no 20 but not the numbers 10 & 17. Dasgupta ignored Lourdasamy's work even though the two scholar's theses are remarkably similar!

Secondly, at the higher and more significant level, the inadequate appreciation of Sircar and Lafont may be attributed to our cognitive defect, the imperfect scientific consciousness itself. The present reviewer while delivering the Foundation Day (of the IACS) Lecture on 29th July 1997 commented:

"The first apostle of modern scientific research in India, Dr. Mahendralal Sircar, is faintly remembered by our nation once a year on the Foundation Day of the Association that he established in 1876. If he is not adequately reckoned as one of the front-rankers in the echelon of nation-builders, it is only because India is yet to take a plunge into quality endeavour of scientific research and restructuring of society, yet to recognize that the scientific tradition is as important as the religious India is destined to revive its scientific tradition, in action and spirit, and then Dr. Mahendralal Sircar's

vision will shine in full glory". (Proceedings of the IACS, 1997; *Indian Journal of Physics*, Volume 71A, No.6, November 1997, pp. 1-5).

History, Science and Education

Dasgupta has been brilliant in his deliberations on the Julian Jaynes models of 'consciousness', 'scientific consciousness', 'nationalist consciousness' etc. (pp. 118-120), (p.131). But he missed out on 'historical consciousness' particularly with regard to historiography, and also 'educational consciousness' as separate themes. Very crucial to the phenomenon of Bengal Renaissance were the historical and archaeological studies conducted by the Asiatic Society intellectuals such as James Prinsep (decipherment of the Brahmi script) and later Rajendralala Mitra, Pramathanath Bose, Prafulla Chandra Ray (historians of science), Jadunath Sircar etc. In the sphere of 'educational consciousness', particularly amongst the women, the names of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Aukshoy Kumar Dutta (the unique science popularizer), Surendranath Banerjee (education and nationalism, the author of *A Nation in the Making*), Asutosh Mookerjee etc. stand out.

Why did Dasgupta ignore these great personalities and their contributions? Particularly the last-named, Sir Asutosh was not only a great mathematician, the first Indian contributor of an original scientific article in the pages of the Asiatic Society journal (even before J.C. Bose and P.C. Ray), but also the best transmitter of the IACS ideal of Sircar and Lafont, the founder of the Indian Science Congress Association (in 1914), the architect of the Post-graduate education in the Indian universities, the inspirer of C.V. Raman, Meghnad Saha, S.N. Bose (physics), S. Radhakrishnan (philosophy), Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (linguistics) etc. How could Sir Asutosh be ignored in Dasgupta's narrative?

In the humble opinion of the present reviewer, the story of Bengal Renaissance must cover the first two decades of the twentieth century and include the saga of independence struggle centering around partition of Bengal, National Council of Education and Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore's success as a Nobel Laureate, his later abandonment of the knighthood, the first two decades of success of the Ramakrishna Mission expanding in the whole world, Asutosh's success in building the first Indian infra-structure post graduate education and scientific research, and so on.

Necessary A Total View

Presumably, Dasgupta was interested in unravelling the mysteries of the individual consciousness of the creative intellectuals only, and not the total social consciousness of the Renaissance Movement which spilled over to the first two or three decades in the 20th century. Subrata Dasgupta's mentor Professor Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta has been strongly supportive of the socialist ethics of Swami Vivekananda (Vedantic socialism) and warmly eulogized the present reviewer's work *Swami Vivekananda and the Indian Quest for Socialism* (Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. , Kolkata, 1986). He wrote in his letter dated 11 September 1987: "No other work on the subject has been so thorough and so perceptive. I have no doubt that specialists in the field will value this book as an outstanding contribution to the understanding of the subject". Subrata Dasgupta and other scholars working on Bengal Renaissance may assess the value and utility of books such as this.

Professor Subrata Dasgupta has brilliantly illustrated, through the eyes of a cognitive scientist and a psychologist, the essential features of the 'renaissance minds' which were witnessed quite in abundance in the 19th century Bengal spilling 'over the 20th (vide pages 214-216, 231-232) . Cognitive identity of such 'minds' may be defined in terms of 'a belief / knowledge space, a need / goal space, an emotion space and the cognitive style'. Creativity of such renaissance minds has been 'a multi-levelled affair', at the lowest level being the individual acts of creation, at an intermediate level collective 'consciousness' of different kinds: 'nationalist', 'scientific', 'historical' etc and at the highest level there must be the *shared* cognitive identity of the most consequential entities such as 'cross-cultural mentality' and the 'outlook of universalism (pp. 238-243).

It is needless to emphasize, as the author himself has agreed, that at the highest level the supreme ideals must be 'shared', and what is of paramount importance is to investigate to what extent there were sharing of ideals, the interactions between the great minds. The present reviewer has extensively recorded the intellectual interactions between Mahendralal, Sri Ramakrishna and the Ramakrishnaites as 'a dialogue between Science and Religion' (Chapter Four, pages 189-261, *Gleanings of the Past*, Ref No... 19). In so far as this chapter has failed to draw Dasgupta's attention, it is presumable that the subject of binary and multi-personality interactions of the renaissance minds has remained outside the purview of Dasgupta's present study.

It is earnestly hoped that the author would utilize his impeccable scholastic abilities to improve the contents of the book in its second edition, specifically on the following lines: (a) discussions on the several other renaissance minds in Bengal, (b) their mutual interactions, (c) citation of primary source materials, many of them in Bengali, (d) extension of the deliberations beyond the artificial time barrier of 1900.

The author would do well to enter into the debate which he himself has raised in the beginning of his book. Was there such a thing as 'Bengal Renaissance'. His answer is affirmative, but he has not discussed, supported or refuted his mentor's comment (p.2) that the said phenomenon was 'an incomplete and deficient Renaissance'. No discussion on this topic is possible unless the author evaluates the impact of Bengal Renaissance in the whole world and well into the twentieth century. Lastly, he may muse over the apparently silly questions such as: can we replicate such renaissance eras, can we clone the renaissance minds!