

## Book Review

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Subrata Mukherjee: *The Political Ideas of Rabindranath Tagore. Reflections of a Public Intellectual*. Delhi. Rupa. 2020. pp.252+Acknowledgements, Reference, Bibliography and Index. INR 295/-

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The attractive quality about this book is the unassuming lucidity with which it approaches its task of outlining Tagore's political thought. It is free of jargons, fashionable turns of phrase and complex arguments. Thankfully, it is also a text that is organized and structured in a reader-friendly manner. I take it, therefore, that the readership that the author was targeting comprised not the highbrow and fiercely argumentative scholars but the interested student and lay public. The book has much to recommend itself for the persuasive way it guides the reader through a fairly long and eventful historical period beginning from about the 1870s and ending with the poet's death in 1941, which also coincides with his last major essay, titled the "Crisis of Civilization". Priced at a modest INR 295, the book is also quite affordable.

The book has 11 chapters in all. Of these, the first attempts a rapid survey of the political environment in India preceding Tagore's emergence as an active political thinker and the last offers some thoughtful concluding remarks. The arrangement of chapters though is a trifle odd since this is neither plainly thematic nor chronological but a random mix of the two. This accounts for a discernable weakness in narrative continuity. At places, the arrangement also turns episodic as for instance in Chapter 9 wherein some sub-headings read: 'Visit of Quakers', 'Kipling's death' or 'Radhakrishnan's visit to Santiniketan'. On first reading, it would appear as though these did not deserve to be so highlighted. Tagore's political inheritance is rather weakly dealt with. In as much as this required a rigorous and detailed

analysis of burgeoning Indian nationalism in post mutiny India, particularly in Bengal, the book leaves much to be desired. There is little discussion on the formative political associations and of their activities, the nature of the early Congress, the culturally reactionary moods or the birth of economic nationalism.

For a political scientist, Mukherjee is surprisingly inaccurate with his facts or at least with the manner in which he presents them. Thus, contrary to his claims (p. 50), William Carey was not the Principal of Fort William College and indeed, it would be a stretch to label Dwarkanath Tagore as a 'Brahmo reformer' (p. 2). I also felt that the author put the cart before the horse with his assertion that the contributions of Dwarkanath Tagore, Bankimchandra and Hindu nationalism served as a catalyst for the Bengal Renaissance (p. 1). The renaissance was firmly entrenched by the time Bankim or Hindu nationalism emerged. When 16 or 17 years of age, the author further tells us, Tagore "revolted against the subservience of princes and princely states which unquestioningly accepted British rule". Now Tagore turned 16 in 1857 and surely, the open rebellion of several ruling houses in north and central India could not have escaped his attention. I also wish the author had avoided sweeping generalizations. One of these claims that Vivekananda showed 'considerable intolerance towards other faiths' (p. 51, fn. 58), another calls Tagore the first Indian to protest the plight of the Indian peasantry (p. 14). On occasions, the ineptness of language is likely to mislead the reader. For instance, it would have been more apt to call Sandip in the novel *Ghare Baire* the leader of a militant and not 'terrorist' organization. But there are also other expressions that may prove baffling. On page 50, we hear that "Rammohun's greatest success was that Hindu sects who believed only in rituals could not

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tolerate him". I tried hard but could not identify such a sect. Then, there is the following: "Colonial modernity arose in the 1990s, mainly as a critique of modernization theory" (p. 209). It certainly would have been more accurate to say that the concept of colonial modernity and not the very experience of it arose in the 1990s. Such instances led me to believe that Mukherjee might have suffered an indifferent copy editor; on the other hand no copy editor without sufficient knowledge of the period would have been able to point out how the author himself unwittingly erred on facts. On page 230, Mukherjee writes, "When Tagore was a young man of 22, referring to an essay by Bankim in the *Bharati*, he remarked...". The essay in question was one in a series exchanged between Bankimchandra and spokespersons of the Adi Brahma Samaj, led by Debendranth Tagore and appeared in the journal *Prochar* edited by Bankim himself. It was Tagore who wrote for the *Bharati*, a journal run by members of the Tagore family.

As I have earlier indicated, the appeal of this book would have to lie in its unconventional way of juxtaposing issues or facts. Particularly in chapters 7 and 9, it goes into an engaging discussion related to the political life of Rabindranath and his contemporaries, notably the Bengali

novelist, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. Mukherjee is right in drawing our attention to the fact that Tagore never wrote on Prophet Mohammed whereas he did write on the Buddha and Christ. It is also noteworthy that while Santiniketan continues to honour Christ and Christmas each year, it does not celebrate any Islamic festival such as Id or Moharrum. In relation to their grounding in Upanishadic metaphysics, I am inclined to think that Gandhi and Tagore focused on two different aspects of the same body of literature; Truth (*Satya*) and Bliss (*Ananda*) respectively. Gandhi inverted 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God', if only to indicate the larger domain of ethical consciousness; Tagore, on the other hand, found love and joyousness to pervade the very essence of this universe. In their own ways, apparently, they both found God to move in human history and to direct it.

Mukherjee might have profitably consulted some of the works to appear in recent times and which have now attained enduring value. Three of the important references I found missing were Nandy's *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, Rustam Bahrucha's *Another Asia* and Gangeya Mukherjee's *An Alternative Idea of India*. However, it stands to reason that the work under review remains a useful addition to the literature on the subject.