

# Narasingha P. Sil: *Problem Child of Renascent Bengal. The Babu of Colonial Calcutta.*

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This is a slim book, entertaining and instructive in its content and comprising three essays that were earlier produced as Working Papers in various institutions. The first essay is an analytical survey of the *Babu* himself and of *Babu* culture in colonial Calcutta. This is followed by two essays on Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore respectively, presumably based on the view that the two represented quintessentially *Babu* figures. Some may find this association problematic if only because Bankim himself lampooned the ways of the *Babu* and Rabindranath visibly lacked some qualities that came to be typically associated with *Babudom*.

Sil's researches into the etymological origins of the word *Babu* are fascinating though not always backed by supporting explanations. *Prima facie*, it might be difficult to understand just how the word, as it came to be understood in nineteenth century Calcutta, may have been founded in the Sanskrit *bapra* (wall or a rampart) or *bapta* (one who sowed or planted). Reportedly, the term was also earlier used among the Mughal aristocracy and in the Hindustani heartland of north India. In the early modern era, the term was first applied to the comprador merchants who settled in the vicinity of Calcutta. Sil also points to two important qualities that initially defined the *Babu* in social terms. Apparently, wealth by itself was not integral to the making of the *Babu* even though *Babudom* survived on conspicuous consumption and pompous displays of wealth. What mattered equally was the patronage of an emerging urban culture which included organizing musical soirees, whore mongering,

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alcoholism and allowing *dals* or factions to grow up around oneself: in short, the *Babu* typically revealed an appetite for 'fashion, feast and fun.' (pg.11) *Dalpatis* or faction-leaders were *Babus* by both choice and vocation. They promoted the arts, music and literature but also defeated attempts at progressive social reform, as evident in the case of Vidyasagar's widow marriage campaign. We are also rightly reminded of how even the *Bhadralok* (literally, the genteel people), a term that Sil finds generally interchangeable with the *Babu*, could also be called a *chotolok* (the menial) and the *itar* (or the vulgar), depending upon his behavior in the private domain and the public. Thus, an irate middle-class housewife could hurl those epithets on her infuriating husband or an offended tenant on his overbearing landlord. Sil's work considerably builds upon the complex social differential that characterized the internal world of the *Babu*. The reasonably affluent and fashionable (*shoukeen*) gentry of the town and the petty clerk who lived, to use Ramakrishna's acute observations, on a paltry monthly salary of 25 rupees and under perpetually leaking roofs, both qualified to be *Babus* though their worlds rarely met. Sil has a useful section devoted to '*babu bashing*' by several literary figures of nineteenth century Bengal; what he does not quite divulge though, is the disdain that the old-world elite developed for the upstart and prudish *Babu*. Mahasrhi Debendranath invited Ramakrishna to attend *Brahmo* prayer meetings but later insisted that he be properly dressed for the occasion. Ramakrishna indignantly turned down the invitation saying that he could not possibly pose as a *Babu* (*Ami Babu hote parbona*)! It would have been interesting to know too if the word was equally applied to the Muslim gentry of the town or if the qualifying attributes for the *Babu* were common to both Hindus and Muslims.

Sil persuasively argues that the taunts and teases directed at Babu culture by authors and editors originated, not in reformist intentions, but the more material concern for attracting a larger readership. However, a reformist agenda cannot be entirely ruled out; if nineteenth century Calcutta was characterized by a decided turn towards drinking spirits, partly, no doubt, with an eye on imitating English ways of life, there were also campaigners for the Temperance movement like Pearycharan Sarkar and Keschab Chandra Sen, who also belonged to the *Babu-Bhadralok* class. Arguably, this oversight stems from Sil's not engaging meaningfully with both the *Brahmo-puritanical* and the *Hindu-conservative* faces of the *Bhadralok*.

The two essays on Bankim and Rabindranath that follow are actually selective vignettes drawn from their life and work, as for instance the allegedly communal overtones in Bankim's writings and the mystical-humanist strains in that of Tagore. Though brief, their argumentative framework is both original and incisive. For instance, there is a revisionist attempt to demonstrate that at least later in life, Bankim paid attention to the importance of sustaining amicable relationships between Hindus and Muslims. Similarly, Sil finds fault with Tagore's world view for its accentuated reliance on Upanishadic idealism.

I found reason to disagree with Sil on certain ideas or arguments. For one, he tends to overlook the colonial context of the Renaissance and the emergence of the *Babu-bhadralok*. On p. 33 for instance, he somewhat simplistically suggests that the lack of a burgher class in colonial Calcutta may be attributed to the reluctance on the part of the 'educated and enterprising' Bengalis to take risks with commercial or industrial ventures, overlooking the relentlessly extractive mechanism that colonialism

employed and the hegemonic control of nearly all forms of enterprise. Sumit Sarkar has rightly argued that by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, only certain professions came to be typically identified with the *bhadralok*: teaching, legal practice, clerical or subordinate jobs under the government, printing, publishing and journalism. Similarly, while the emergence of the *Babu* does coincide with a 'modernist movement' (p.41) we cannot possibly overlook the colonialist nature of this modernity. Contrary also to Sil's claims, British liberalism and capitalism was not 'predicated on popular sovereignty, freedom of expression and industrialization.' On pg. 36, the author contends that the anglicized *Babu* was not so much a heretic as guilty of blasphemy. Surely, this excludes the ways of Young Bengal, some of whom openly declared their 'hatred' for Hinduism and willingly abandoned their ancestral religion. I was puzzled too by Sil's using the term 'Hindutva' (pg. 82, 83) in relation to Bankim whereas its real preceptor was the more conservative Chandranath Basu, his friend and fellow writer.

Some sources cited in the book are not listed in the Bibliography. There is, for instance, the essay "Daiba O Purushakar" (1884) reportedly published in the *Bangadarshan*, and a review of Meer Mosarrafa's "Godai Bridge" etc. In Sil's reckoning, both were authored by Bankim and yet, surprisingly enough, these are not included in the standard *Sahitya Samsad* edition of his Collected Works which he himself has consulted. I noticed three typos, on pg.8, line 1, on pg 22, FN 16 and on pg 81, FN 67.

The production quality of the book is otherwise fine and K.P. Bagchi must be complimented on presenting us with an affordable and accessible book dealing with a stellar chapter concerning our cultural history.