
The Creative Zeal of the Rays

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In *The Rays before Satyajit*, Chandak Sengoopta tries to situate the ancestors of Satyajit Ray in their historical context. The book, in many senses, tries to search for the historical roots of the maestro's modernity. However, it does much more than simply trace the historical and familial origins of Ray's genius. In fact, Sengoopta is more interested in narrating the story of Ray's predecessors and less in writing a biography of Ray in this book. He picks up the case of the Rays to narrate the bigger story of modernity in India. So far, scholars who have written about the history of the Ray family have either tried to make a connection between the early Rays and Satyajit Ray or have focused on the literary contributions of writers like Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri and Sukumar Ray. But Sengoopta argues that in order to comprehend the negotiations that the early Rays made with colonial modernity, one needs to look at their contribution to other fields such as art, social reform, and last but not the least, nationalism. Sengoopta states succinctly that he has chosen to narrate the history of this particular family because this biography "can tell us about the character and ambiguities of colonial modernity" (p 9).

Sengoopta begins by tracing the genealogy of the Rays, for which he turns to Mymensingh, their native place. While most of the middle-class men in Mymensingh chose to pursue government jobs, the Rays traversed a different path altogether. They did not just steer clear from administrative jobs (except Pramadaranjan Ray), they also never showed any interest in pursuing careers in law, engineering, or medicine. While Saradaranjan Ray, Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's elder brother, always remained a staunch Hindu, his brothers opted to follow the Brahmo religion. Sengoopta owes much of Upendrakishore's interest in conversion to his father-in-law,

BOOK REVIEWS

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Dwarakanath Ganguli. In fact, Sengoopta further states that the story of the Ray family is integrally connected to the reformism of Dwarakanath Ganguli. It is a well-known fact that Ganguli was a steadfast advocate of women's education. His passion for designing a proper curriculum for women needs to be situated in the larger context of female education.

At first, a few Bengali Hindu men objected to female education on the grounds that many of the early schools had been started by missionaries. But by the 1850s, Indian men themselves started organising institutions for female education. The middle-class advocated female education, believing that education would make women better mothers and better wives and equip them better for housework. Undoubtedly, Dwarakanath Ganguli, like many of his contemporary Hindu middle-class men, endorsed the kind of education for women that would include learning needlework and cooking along with English and mathematics; nevertheless, Sengoopta reminds us that Ganguli championed women's education so that they could earn "an independent livelihood" (p 111). Kadambini Ganguli, his wife, went on to become one of the first Indian medical practitioners. In his discussion of Dwarakanath Ganguli's championing of women's education, Sengoopta critiques scholars who have merely looked at women as objects of male reform. While Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty have made us aware of the complexities that have emerged because of the peculiar character of the modernity found in India as a result of colonialism, Sengoopta posits a different argument. His discourse is akin

to arguments made by scholars like Judith Walsh, who believe that the focus on domesticity found in educational reforms for women was tied to transnational constructs of a global domesticity. Modernity, as many scholars now argue, has never been an ideal construct. Sengoopta belongs to that genre of historians who problematise any idealised reading of European modernity.

When Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri "discovered how to split each half-tone dot into four, which led to great improvements in the quality of the printed image" (p 210), his role becomes that of an innovator and not merely an imitator. His innovations won recognition, albeit on a small scale from the metropolitan perspective. This recognition signified universal acknowledgement for people like Upendrakishore, which for them was not touched by colonialism. In fact, these universalist aspirations were linked to the nationalistic tendencies of many from Upendrakishore's generation. Recognition won from institutions in the West had the potential to add to the nation's pride. But this nationalism of Upendrakishore and others like him was also complex. He did not simply turn to an idealised depiction of "tradition." He rather tried to remove the shortcomings of those by studying European art. The synthesis of what was good in Europe with what was good in India was important for him.

Chandak Sengoopta's work is certainly appreciative of the reformist zeal as well as the entrepreneurial skills of the Ray family. He tries to link their experimentation and innovations to their nationalist ardour, without simplifying the connotations of nationalism. Sengoopta tries to establish that "derivative" and "original" or "universal" and "national" were "dialectically related" and not necessarily exclusive categories. It is also very refreshing to read a work that problematises modernity itself rather than swaying between what is "original" and what is "derivative." Of course, Sengoopta's is not the sole voice in this endeavour to problematise modernity. The story of the Rays definitely complicates this

story of modernity, but it often remains unclear throughout the book. In fact, some of the instances that Sengoopta provides endorse the notion of derivative modernity. Suprabha Ray, Satyajit Ray's mother, who traversed the paths of tradition "without losing her moorings in the modern universe" is a case in point. Nevertheless, the book is a refreshing

read, especially for those who do not have access to vernacular sources on this fascinating family. The greatest strength of *The Rays before Satyajit* lies in its ability to appreciate the efforts made by the Rays and their associates to negotiate with colonialism and nationalism. Sengoopta brings out their limitations and shortcomings in the book while never

losing sight of the creative zeal of the Rays. The addition of a few images and a bibliography would have enriched the book, but then the author hardly has a say in these matters.

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