



The Rays Before Satyajit: Creativity and Modernity in Colonial India

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BOOK REVIEW

The Rays Before Satyajit: Creativity and Modernity in Colonial India, by Chandak Sengoopta, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016, 426 pp., Rs. 995 (hardcover), ISBN 9780199464753

The Rays Before Satyajit: Creativity and Modernity in Colonial India by Chandak Sengoopta undertakes an exciting project of analysing nineteenth and early-twentieth-century India through the prism of family history. Reflecting on the importance of the Ray family, Sengoopta declares that 'the Rays were at the leading edge of a whole range of key reforms, debates, and cultural adventures, a surprising number of which remain unaddressed in the ever-growing scholarly literature on Indian modernity' (p. 1) and that he delved into 'the Rays and their work to extend, complicate, and revise some of the contentions of that literature' (p. 1). Divided into six chapters with an introduction and an epilogue, the monograph surveys the multidimensional histories of the Ray Family in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Calcutta, while also locating the family history within the socio-economic and political matrix of the period and thereby within the broader debates on colonial modernity. Sengoopta argues against the scholars who analysed modernity in India as primarily a western import, and makes a case for the heterogeneous and the hybrid character of colonial modernity. At the same time he asserts that the historiography of modernity in India, especially with those espousing postcolonial theory, always separated the spheres of cultural refinements, social reforms, and questions of nationalism from the spheres of small-scale technology, scientific innovation, and entrepreneurship (p. 22). Sengoopta proposes that the Rays' cultural entrepreneurship exemplifies the ways in which these two spheres were intertwined in shaping modernity.

Indeed the Rays' techno-cultural 'adventures' including photography, printing, book design, phonography, and product advertising are yet to receive sustained attention, while their leading role in religious reform, female education, nationalist politics, and literature were widely studied as scholars reflected on histories of colonial Bengal. Further, Sengoopta argues for a cosmopolitan character of colonial modernity through studying the Rays not as a conglomerate of creative individuals but as representatives of a socio-religious class – the Brahma-*bhadraloks* – invested deeply in universalism and cosmopolitanism. Unlike most commentators, Sengoopta characterizes *bhadraloks* not merely as a social group, but as a powerful economic class. He asserts that studying specific individuals might not be productive for a comprehensive understanding of the middle class in colonial Bengal because these individuals were shaped by 'the vulnerabilities of their entire class, the fundamental cause of which was economic' (p. 14). Thus, he employs a classical Marxist paradigm in locating an economic base for modernity that according to him had flourished in India in the context of an unindustrialized semi-capitalist economy where Karl Marx's 'small masters' like many of the Rays played a central role.

The Rays Before Satyajit is ambitious in scope and elaborate in execution. It reflects on the immediate and the extended family of the Indian auteur Satyajit Ray (1921–1992). It discusses the life and times of Satyajit's father Sukumar Ray (1887–1923), paternal grandfather Upendrakishore Raychowdhury (1863 – 1915; previously known as Kamadaranjan Ray), paternal aunt Sukhalata Rao (1886–1969; nee Ray), paternal granduncles Saradaranjan Ray (1858–1925), Muktidaranjan Ray (1867–1934), Kuladaranjan Ray (1873–1950), and Pramadaranjan Ray (1875–1947), as well as Sukumar's maternal grandfather Dwarakanath Ganguli (1844–1898), maternal grand-step-mother

Kadambini Ganguli (1861–1923; nee Basu), and Upendrakishore's brother-in-law Hemendramohan Bose (1864–1916). In the passing, Sengoopta mentioned the works of Hemendranatha Bose's two sons Nitindramohan Bose (1897–1986) and Manindramohan Bose and also Satyajit's mother Suprova Ray (1892–1960; nee Das). Sengoopta is not equally attentive to all these individuals and Dwarakanath, Upendrakishore, Sukumar, and Hemendramohan emerge as most important characters in his narrative.

The monograph is divided, both chronologically and thematically, in two overlapping sections. The first three chapters focus primarily on the Rays involvement in the nineteenth-century religious and social reform movements and their contribution to anti-colonial nationalism, while the last three chapters are devoted to their small-scale technological ventures and their literary excellence in the late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth century. Nationalism is a major analytical category in the first part, while 'rooted cosmopolitanism' is the preferred analytical lens in the second part of Sengoopta's narrative.

The opening chapter discusses Upendrakishore's ancestors' journey across Bengal over a period from the sixteenth though the eighteenth century till they finally settled in Masua (now in Bangladesh). It discusses the family's identity as a Persianized-Hindu pre-colonial scribal community fluent both in Persian and in Sanskrit and their later expertise in English that in the early nineteenth century became both the language of colonial command and the language of modernity in India. In Sengoopta's prose, Upendrakishore's elder brother Saradaranjan comes across as a transitional figure who had a niche in both the the pre-colonial world of Sanskrit language and the colonial game of cricket. Like many Indians, cricket for Saradaranjan was not simply a game introduced by the British, it was a nationalist aspirational passage through which to build a British-like moral character. The chapter also discusses the transition of a scribe's son Kamadaranjan Ray into an ex-scribe and landowning *zamindar's* adopted son Upendrakishore Raychowdhury. The chapter ends with Upendrakishore's travels from Masua to Calcutta, his transition from the scribal-*zamindari* ethos enshrined in orthodox Brahminical beliefs to his embracing of the radical reformist faith Brahmoism, and his self-fashioning as a modern-urban-progressive-professional-*bhadralok*. This new identity was most pronounced when he truncated his name to U.Ray, which was apparently less aristocratic sounding than his full name, for his printing firm and for his English language publications.

The following two chapters locate Upendrakishore's father-in-law Dwarakanath and step mother-in-law Kadambini in the history of the nineteenth-century reform movements, women's education, and anticolonial nationalist politics. The Brahmo-social reformer Dwarakantha's trajectory as a nationalist championing the causes of women and indentured labourers also provides an insight into Kadambini's career journey as the first female graduate of the University of Calcutta and the Medical College of Bengal and her travel to England to obtain a professional medical degree from the Royal College of Scotland. Kadambini's professional success illuminate the ways in which she and her mentor Dwarakanath redefined the limits of modern conjugality by accommodating professionally ambitious women.

The last three chapters are devoted primarily to Upendrakishore's, Hemendramohan's, and Sukumar's respective engagements with technology, literature, and their entrepreneurial ventures. Sengoopta positions Upendrakishore's polymathic talents, as a major photographer and halftone printer, as one of the foremost writers of Bangla children's literature, and as an acclaimed musician, within two apparently opposing investments in Swadeshi nationalism and rooted cosmopolitanism. These two aspects were most prominent in the ways in which Upendrakishore's halftone blocks helped disseminate the 'new Indian art' of the Bengal School, while he himself remained opposed the Bengal School's indigenist 'Indian' aesthetics. Rooted cosmopolitanism manifested in Upendrakishore's extensive writings on photography and printing in English and in Bangla that were targeted at two kinds of audiences; his English articles were for a specialist global audience, while his Bangla writings were for a non-specialist local clientele. This multidimensional pull of nationalism and cosmopolitanism was prominent

in Hemendramohan's pursuits in imported technologies and goods, as well as Sukumar's pursuits in printing technology and literature. However, Upendrakishore had improvised and improved the imported halftone printing technology and he along with Sukumar experimented with photography, while Hemendramohan did not innovate upon the imported technologies including phonograph, bicycles, and motorcars and remained primarily a distributor of western machines. Sengoopta criticizes a prior exclusive focus on the Rays' children's literature and discusses the same to reflect on the ways in which technology conditioned the Rays' pursuits of literary and pictorial aesthetics.

As Sengoopta follows events and their structures more than specific roles of individuals in those events, his narrative often drifts away from its focus on the Rays. For example, the his discussion of the campaign against the indentured labour system in the Assam tea plantations does not end with the death of Dwarakanath who began the campaign under the aegis of the Indian Association. Instead, Sengoopta moves into a detailed history of the anti-indenture campaign well beyond Dwarakanath's demise to think about the structure of capitalism ; Dwarakanath was important not only for his opposition to social injustices in tea plantation and for mobilizing support of his nationalist colleagues, but also was significant for his contribution to a campaign against the exploitation of labor by capital. Likewise, the author discusses at length the medical-education policies in India and abroad as well as the prejudices against medical education of women, as he focuses on Kadambini's struggle to obtain a medical degree and the hurdles, both social and institutional, she faced to practice professionally. Similarly, the discussions of Upendrakishore's and Sukumar's contributions to children's literature are set against the larger nationalist imperative to create ideal children who would be ideal citizens in the future.

While the Rays were important in their own right and well known among Calcuttans and Upendrakishore and Sukumar were acclaimed beyond India, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century histories of India evade many of them. Seen from a presentist perspective one would agree with Sengoopta that Upendrakishore and Sukumar remains important cultural figures among their Bangla reading public, while only Satyajit is known beyond the Bangla-language sphere. Indeed, the title and the epilogue of the book testify to the ways in which Satyajit needs to be foregrounded while discussing the achievements of his equally creative ancestors. The epilogue seems to indicate that Satyajit owed his multifarious talents in film-making, writing, graphic art, and music composition to his family; that he was the culmination of all the 'unconventional' and pioneering ventures of his ancestors, including Upendrakishore's and Sukumar's pioneering roles in photography, halftone printing, and children's literature, Upendrakishore's expertise in music and painting, Sukhalata Rao's talent in literature, Hemendranatha Bose's investments in sound recording and product advertising, and Nitin Bose's expertise in film direction and cinematography. One would wonder if Satyajit was the telos of the Rays' myriad ways of negotiating colonial modernity.

Not all individuals in the author's narrative carried the last name Ray and it appears that they were put under the category called the Rays irrespective of their last names because of two factors: first, the ways in which their identity has become Satyajit dependent, and second, their choice of unconventional practices in which they often were the pioneers. However, a dedicated discussion on the 'Ray brand' would have been helpful.

While the author's work is comprehensive in its coverage of the Ray family, this reader was reminded of at least two aspects that could have been richer. First, the monograph would have been enriched from reflections on Upendrakishore's and Sukumar's writings on photography and photo-printing in Bangla literary magazines, including *Prabashi* and *Pradip*, for they are valuable in appreciating the duo's commitment to public pedagogy and their engagements with modern vernacular publics. More importantly, these writings reflect on the ways in which photography and halftone printing were not mere technologies and were at the same time social and aesthetic practices. Second, readers' understanding of the modern children's magazine *Sandesh*, which embodied the skills of 'polymathis artisans' and 'small masters' like Upendrakishore and

Sukumar, would have been refined by a discussion on Pramadaranjan's daughter Leela Majumdar (1908–2007; nee Ray) and Sukumar's sister Punyalata Chakrabarty's (nee Ray) daughter Nalini Das (nee Chakrabarty) in the epilogue. Both Leela and Nalini played important roles along with Satyajit in the revival of *Sandesh* in the post-independence period.

Sengoopta's work is also notable in the ways in which it pays homage to the pioneering works of Siddhartha (Amitabha) Ghosh, who remains the only author, prior to Sengoopta, to write extensively about Upendrakishore, Sukumar, and Hemendramohan's techno-cultural ventures. It is to Sengoopta's credit that Ghosh is not only acknowledged but the latter's shadow looms large throughout the work, especially in the second half of the book. Thus Sengoopta urges us to remember the seminal works of Ghosh that is mostly forgotten like may of the Rays.

The Rays Before Satyajit makes for an intimate reading; it would appeal mostly to readers immersed in the nineteenth and the early-twentieth-century Bengali milieu, especially who grew up reading Upendrakishore and Sukumar's fictions and non-fictions. It might be overwhelming for people not acquainted with Bangla and/or the Rays, especially given the absence of a family tree. However, this reader thoroughly enjoyed reading the book for it vividly paints the picture of one of the most illustrious family in modern Bengal.

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