## **BOOK REVIEW**

Ashish Lahiri: *Caught between two Cultures – Science in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, THEMA, 46, Satish Mukherjee Road, Kolkata 70026, pages vii+152, ISBN 978-93-81703-21-2, First published January 2013

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Sri Lahiri is one of several outstanding scholars working under the illustrious Professor Sushil Kumar Mukherjee the then professor in-charge of History of Science at the Asiatic Society in 1995. Since then Lahiri has earned sufficient fame as an erudite and articulate writer, both in Bengali and English, on topics related to History of Science.

The book under review has six chapters, not all of them of equal merit. Lahiri himself has been 'caught between two cultures' which he might have considered to be irreconcilable! Of course, there was some confusion in the nineteenth century thought-currents to which Lahiri added something of his own imagination. If C. P. Snow had 'ignored the role of organized religion in effecting the fissure', he later provided '*The Two Cultures and a Second Look*' (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

The very first article in the book, 'Radhanath Sikdar: The Atypical Derozian Scientist (1813-70)' is excellent and exhaustive. Sikdar was the first Derozian scientist in Modern India, and it has been well-established by Lahiri in his 37 pages article that Sikdar was the discoverer of the tallest mountain peak in the world.

The second article of Lahiri on Akshay Kumar Datta, Vidyasagar and Bengali Rationalism is also good but not so comprehensive. The readers may find it profitable to consult some recent writings of this reviewer in this context: 'The Era of Science Enthusiasts in Bengal (1841-1891): Akshayakumar, Vidyasagar and Rajendralala' *IJHS*, 47.3(2012) pp. 375-425.

Lahiri has surmised that Vivekananda's 'Strange Volte Face of Hindu Science' (his article no. 4) was related with Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's dilemma

between idea and substance (his article no. 3). Such a notion has little substance and may be dispelled when Lahiri undertakes a thorough research.

Lahiri has hardly enlightened us about his notion or 'Muslim Science' in the Indian sub-continent and its link to modernity and secularism. He has mentioned Father Lafont as the 'Guru' of Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937), but has not provided adequate references to this reviewer's painstaking TRIOLOGY publications brought out by The Asiatic Society! The readers deserve more details & realize the profound Science Spirituality Interaction during the era of Lafont-Mahendralal-Vivekananda-Jagadish Chandra era. Do not they?

Lahiri, captions has lengthy fifth chapter (on Jagadish Chandra Bose), as 'Caught Between Two Cultures', probably because he had a pre-conceived notion on this issue. It is quite interesting that Lahiri terms P.C. Ray as 'The lone Dissenter' in this context (pp.101-102). Quite sadly, Lahiri's research on P.C. Ray is also pathetically incomplete. Acharyya Prafulla Chandra gradually became a subscriber of Vivekananda's leadership in the areas of anti-Shankara secularism, pernicious influences of cast and class and the syncretistic notions of Vedantic Socialism. Very recently, this reviewer has deliberated on the Syncretistic Notion of Swami Vivekananda which may be consulted:

'Science in the Path of Syncretism', IJHS, 46.1(2011) pp. 109-130

'Syncretism in the Future of Humankind: Some Golden Thought of Swami Vivekananda', in *Vivekanda as the Turning Point*, 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary Volume, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, January 2013, pp. 257-286.

Lahiri wrote that 'Vivekananda was certainly within his rights to promote *advaitavād* as the philosophy of everything'. But J C Bose was not, without putting them through the crucial tests. 'Bose was duped by his own mind'. These were rather strong words! In 1896, Bose considered Vivekananda's proposition of 'thought-wave' as a reality, but could not imagine what experimental device could be harnessed to prove the reality objectively. Lahiri cites this as 'a typical instance in India getting caught between the two cultures'. This is how Lahiri concludes his lengthy Chapter 5 (pp.85-106), attempting to make Vivekananda 'sans myth', ridiculing his

'strange volte face', and fortunately stopping short of calling him 'a liar'! (the word not used by Lahiri).

Lahiri last (sixth) article is entitled "Tagore's creative Comradeship with Science" (pp.109-144). With the benefit of superb ideas of Albert Einstein, Satyendranath Bose, Werner Heisenberg, etc., Lahiri's presentation has been excellent. In the preface it has been written: "If the last article overlaps on to the twentieth century that is deliberate." Why has this 'deliberate' act been performed? Was it because Lahiri felt suffocated, caught within Nineteenth Century Bengal, finding little clue to the vexing questions he himself had raised? With his researches on Vivekananda, J C Bose etc. so incomplete, did he try to find some solace in Tagore's later day 'Creative Comradeship with (real) Science'? We wish him luck and success in his bold venture!