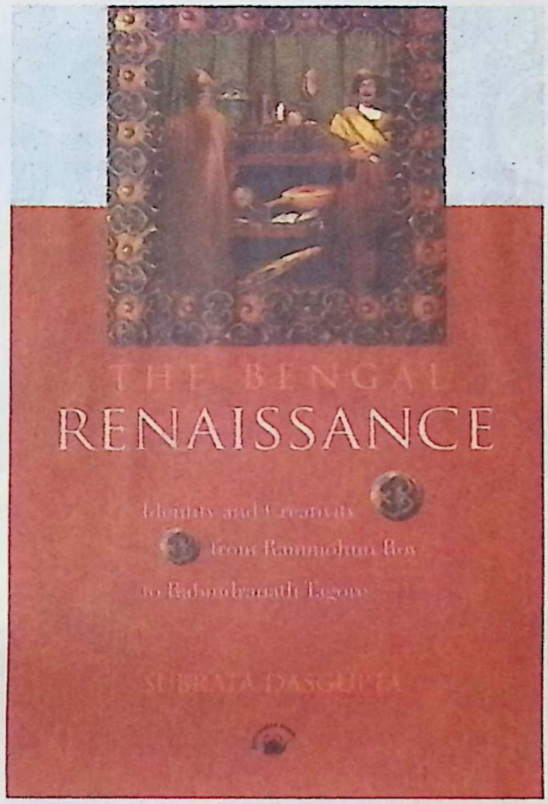
Colonial Encounters

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SIR William Jones, who translated the play Sakuntala into Latin, wrote to a friend about Kalidasa, calling him the Indian Shakespeare, saying, (it was written at a time) 'when Britons were as unlettered and unpolished as the army of Hanumat'. Jones was a product of Sir Warren Hasting's new India policy during the Raj, according to which, (all Britons in India) would have to 'think and act like an Asian'. He was India's first Governor General, before that he served as Governor of Bengal. It gave birth to a legion of thinkers now known as British Orientalists in India. The seeds of Bengal Renaissance were sown long ago. Bengal Renaissance, for its turn, has seen the rise of Raja Rammohun Roy and Brahmo Samaj, the idea of a monotheistic Hindu church that Rabindranath Tagore later believed in.

Subrata Dasgupta's new book tries to dissect the great minds behind Bengal Renaissance. He talks about a 'cognitive revolution'. By which he suggests, 'a radical transformation in the way one thinks, perceives, reasons, and conceptualizes'. Throughout the book, Dasgupta tries (and he does it successfully) to prove that the ninetieth century Bengal was 'a seed time rich in possibilities', unlike what his contemporary Tapan Raychaudhuri believes. Dasgupta portrays a vivid detail of time, from Michael Madhusudan Datta to Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, he meticulously anatomises the matrix of the time, vibrant and mettlesome that it has been. He has rightly tracked the way creative minds in general work: 'There are times when a new experience or situation is at odds with one's stock of schemata; or the creator may be quite dissatisfied with his existing repertoire of schemata. In either case, he may radically alter an existing schema or invent a new schemata are brought into existence is to gain insight into his creativity. Michael Madhusudan Datta took Miltonic blank verse as a model-- his initial schema; but in writing his great Bengali epic poem Meghanadbadh Kabya (The Slaying of Meghanada) he reshaped it for his particular Bengali needs and created the Bengali blank verse form (amritaksar).'



The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore
By Subrata Dasgupta
Permanent Black
pp 280; Rs 595

About Derozio, whose disciples (at Hindu College) 'were only a little younger than their teacher', Dasgupta says, 'Derozio's cross-culturalism was dominated by an "overidentification" with Western beliefs and knowledge systems, and yet in his poetry he drew upon Indian themes as sources of schemata for some of his poems, which he then elaborated and developed based on his English literary sources.' The book is, in fact, an authoritative guide on the Bengal Renaissance.

Another important aspect of the book is the scientific approach that its author takes to understand the period. He divides Mahendra Lal Sircar's 'Belief/Knowledge Space' into three distinctive categories and endeavours to find in it metaphysical aspects like 'Curiosity', and 'Pride'.

Students of Indian history, especially that of Bengal, should be delighted to find famous texts like 'Vande Mataram' discussed at length. 'The delicate, platonic relationship' that Tagore had had with Kadambari also comes under scrutiny. 'Over the years that followed Kadambari's death, Tagore would embed his memory of and feelings for her in poems and songs; and in fiction-- his novella Nastanir (The Broken Nest, 1901), which became Satyajit Ray's film Charulata (1964), was influenced by their relationship.'

The prose may feel a little pedantic for those who are not attuned to Dasgupta's style. Then again, it is no bedtime read, this is a serious book, a must-read for anyone interested in one of most glorious periods in the history of Bengal. ■