

The sense of touch

The Sixth Sense

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It was a pair of forceps that brought me into the world. The metallic tongs pulled me out of my mother's womb. I don't remember the touch. But every time my mother touches me, I feel the soft grip of Elopsmia. I feel the touch of her fingers. I feel the touch of her hair. I feel how close death was; how near life is! Touch has memory— wrote John Keats.

touch of hope—can bring together millions. In his second month of August, we recall how we were touched by a thundering voice that created a roaring crowd. Touches can herd people together.

Because touches can give you hope—I learned.

I guess an individual such as Professor Kaiser Haq would have been afraid of going to the war leaving his pen and poems. But once he was touched by an idea, he became part of a crowd that did not fear the touch of the bullets, the mortars or the shells.

Some touches are golden, I learned. Isn't it called the Midas touch? The touch that can turn everything into gold! But, a golden touch can be very tricky. King Midas learned it the hard way by turning his only daughter into a statue. What can the story imply? I see this obscenely rich gentleman offering tribute to his daughter through a newspaper ad—a daughter who slowly died due to the infectious touch of his filthy wealth. The mythical Midas touch—revived.

Touches are not so golden after all—I reckon.

Anyone who has had a golden handshake will tell you how a simple touch can make you fall.

Some touches are black and blue, I learned.

It was Neruda who said, "We the mortals touch the metals, [the wind, the ocean shores, the stones, knowing they will go on, ineret or burning, and I was discovering, naming all these things; it was my destiny to love and say goodbye." At the touch of love, everybody becomes a poet. Indeed, how can you love without touch? How can you say goodbye without touch?

Remember Carol Ann Duffy's "Warming her Pearls"? The maid in the poem makes sure that the pearls of her mistress are warm when they are put around her throat. "Next to my own skin, her pearls, / My mistress/bids me wear them, warm them..." The pearls hang on to the maid's neck like a collar of desire.

And all day I think of her, she confesses. And when the socialite mistress goes to the party, when the maid says awake thinking of the tall men with whom her mistress was dancing, and she confesses: "All night I feel their absence and I burn."

The pain of not being touched! What glory is there in being a 'cold postcard'? John Keats makes us reflect on the

Crecean Urm, the container of ashes, a museum object out-of-touch, and kindness of the still unvisited bride of quietest; think of the bold love stopped from being kissed. While it is easy to glorify the chastity of fair youth, the question remains: is it fair for the lovers—not being touched? As John Lennon would have it: "Love is wanting to be loved/Love is touch, touch is love..."

Did the maid in Duffy's poem touch herself while burning in desire? Is she allowed? Is it a sin? How can it be a sin when in a touchless oneself? One is not an object in a glasshouse where the sign says: do not touch. I am my own master. And the master shall abate his burning desire. Why do you think Doctor Faustus made his pact with the devil? To be his own master! A mortal becoming immortal, a moral becoming immoral, that too through a touch. "Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss... Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!" "Touches can produce fire—I learned.

The first fire came out of rubbing wood together. So did civilization. Touches can create civilization; destroy it too. Look no further than Helen. Was it the touch of fate? Was it her own doing—being touched by Paris? I guess that's what they call 'butterfly on a wheel' in chaos theory—a simple touch deviating the course of a story.

In a poem called "Touch", Meena Kardasamy says: "you may recollect how a gentle touch, a caress changed your life multifold, and you were never the person you should have been."

Meena, the Dalit poet from Chennai... Dalit, dammit, aren't they supposed to be untouchable? Why? Touch can make you unholly. Just like it can make you holy; you can be blessed with the touch of holy water. What if the unholly can make you unholly. Mukh Raj Anand's novel Untouchable is a case in point. The holy priest Pundit Kalnath can touch Sohini in order to make his manhood alive. Yet the same holy man cannot touch her husband. But as will be a shame! And how sad!

Touch is racial—I learned. This man with squinted eyes walked into the carriage of a Piccadilly Line train at King Cross Station. He had his hands stretched out, trying to find something to hold onto on a moving train. I reached

out to help! "Don't F--- touch me!" he yelled at me, shaking my hand off.

He wasn't blind after all. Maybe his heart was, but not his eyes. He sensed everything mobile and immobile on that train. Everyone was touched by his outbursts. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry — he mumbled." It was too late, the damage had been done. The touch of a momentary outburst! I got off from the train at the next station, even though I had two more stations to go. Back in my university I washed my hands—like Lady Macbeth did. But the bitter touch refused to go. The touch of a white man on my brown skin felt like acid in the streets of London.

Touch is cultural—I learned. My friend's professor came to Dhaka for a conference. He went back to the US, and told his class how everyone in Dhaka was gay. He saw guys holding hands and touching each other in public.

Touches can be a big job— I learned. The tact rules of who touches whom, when, why, where, and how, are complex and deeply ingrained social issues. A close analysis of touch can therefore yield much information about a society's most deeply held values. Do you touch the feet of the elders when you see them? Do you touch your own head to show respect to others? Do you shake hands? Do you hug to greet? Do you offer a fake kiss in the cheeks? One cheek-both cheeks?

Margaret Atwood tells us, "touch is the first language; and it always tells the truth." Touch comes before sight, before speech. No wonder the Creator has given touch the largest of organs—the skin. A skin that covers eyes, ears, a nose, or even tongue!

Therefore I am here to cast my vote for touch. Because touch can touch you. Touch from a hand can soothe you. Touch from nature can soothe you. A finger touches one, but a rainbow touches many. And it is Shakespeare, who said: "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

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1. Both Sigmund Freud and Jung studied the unconscious but did not strongly emphasize the 'Sixth Sense' or the Intuitive one, although there is sufficient evidence of the Intuitive in the works of Freud and Jung.

2. I personally feel the Intuitive or Extra Sensory Perception is quite common to both individuals and literature.

3. In Shakespeare's Hamlet I feel Prince Hamlet could not fully believe his senses while encountering his father's ghost. Therefore, he arranged the play within the play and saw for himself the buried exit of the usurper King. This was sufficient proof for Hamlet about what his father's ghost had told him.

4. The Prince of Denmark while haranguing his mother about her betrayal suddenly looks at the fluttering curtains, and without trusting his senses, intuitively slays Polonius. This is one example of how the 'Sixth Sense' may not be reliable at all times.

5. In Shakespeare's King Lear, the King is convinced by sycophancy and divides his Kingdom between the two older daughters: Regan and Goneril. He is unable to use his senses properly and becomes a victim of his intuition that could not inform his senses about the flattery of his two daughters.

6. In one of Humayun Ahmed's short stories, "Mittur Gondho", a man visits a doctor's office and complains about his olfactory organ. The doctor is a renowned specialist who thinks the man is psychologically unwell and asks him to go to a mental asylum. The man says he's convinced about his ability to smell death; for he did so when his wife went to visit her father. Later, he got the news that she jumped off the roof of her father's house and killed herself. The doctor was even more annoyed then and asked his assistant to return his consultancy fee to the man. As the doctor was hurriedly leaving his office the man quietly says, "I can smell death in your body!"

7. As I conclude I recall how a few weeks ago, late at night, I suddenly thought of one of my father's close friends who was still alive. I remembered many incidents involving him and our family, and I couldn't sleep that night. Early in the morning I received a phone call from my brother who informed me about the death of my father's friend who had passed away about at 3 am in the morning!

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The Politics of a Widespread Colonization

REVIEWED BY FARHAD BANI IDRIS

Jatiotbad, Sampradaitaka O Jonogor Mukti 1905-47, Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Samhati Prokashan, 2016.

Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury's Jatiotbad, Sampradaitaka O Jonogor Mukti: 1905-47 or Nationalism, Communalism and the politics of the administrative system and incisive analysis. In its more than 800 pages (of which the references alone number thirty-nine), the book treats the most turbulent years of South Asian history. The countries involved in the turmoil—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—are home to a billion and 700 million people. The region, often described as "the Indian Subcontinent" or "the Indo-Pak Subcontinent" or just "the Subcontinent," witnessed epoch-making events in the first half of the twentieth century. The Subcontinent at the time was the shiniest jewel in the crown of the British Empire. The glory, however, did not extend much beyond the few years following WWII. On the other hand, what to the British was a mere loss of colonial territory became an occasion for unimaginable horror to millions of South Asians.

The historical period is specific as the subtitle implies. The cutoff year, 1947, is self-explanatory because it was the year when both India and Pakistan became at least politically free from British rule—whether their peoples became truly free though is a highly charged question; Chowdhury leaves ample hints in his book to suggest otherwise. But why the starting point of "1905"? There lies the rub. The joy of independence in 1947 was no joy at all for the millions who fell victim to the administrative system of the two most populous and prosperous states. Presaging the 1947 partition, a mini partition occurred in Bengal in 1905. Imposed by the British, this was a bloodless event. The rationale given by the colonial administration was administrative efficiency. Bengal at that time comprised today's Bangladesh in its entirety and the Indian provinces of Bangla, Bihar, and Chota

Nagpur. Such a large administrative unit was not easy to govern; this was the basis for "Bongo-Bhongo" or the "Bengal-Break"

All subsequent political events, Chowdhury suggests, touch an ominous turn. Good administration was the stated goal in partitioning Bengal, but for greater Bengal and the rest of India, the splitting of Bengal created a deep divide between the Hindus and the Muslims. The colonial administration, led by Lord Curzon, promoted the many benefits of the dissection as aggressively as it could. Eastern Bengal, which became East Bengal—and then as a part of Pakistan-East Pakistan, in 1947, an sovereign Bangladesh since 1971—was a Muslim-majority state. While the divisive measure was popular among some Muslim leaders there, it was thoroughly unwelcome to the residents of the west Bengal, many of whom were Hindu and were prospering under British patronage.

The religious divide also had a strong element of class. In eastern Bengal, the economy and agriculture were based on land ownership. The owners of huge estates generating exorbitantly high revenues were primarily Hindu; the peasants who worked those lands were mostly Muslim. The landowners preferred to reside in Calcutta, where they owned expensive houses in posh neighborhoods. Located in what became West Bengal in 1905, Calcutta was the capital of British India. It was also the seat of British power in all of India, Burma, and Singapore until 1911, when the British moved the Indian capital to Delhi. Peopled by poor peasants, the landowners' estates in eastern Bengal, quite unsurprisingly, lacked the glamour and amenities of Calcutta.

"Bongo-Bhongo" was offensive to many for other reasons as well. An administration as colossal as the one in early twentieth-century Calcutta required the labor of many functionaries. The Bengali Hindus, early beneficiaries of the new education introduced by the British, gladly provided the administrative support the British needed. This emerged the "babus" or the

clerks, the low-level officials of the Raj, as beholden to their masters as were the zamindars or the landowners, for their continued residence in the British rule. The division of Bengal threatened both the economic interests of the zamindars and the prospects of the babus.

Both groups opposed the division. Undeterred, Curzon found a new ally among the British, the Muslims refused to join them and came up with their own version of nationalism. A huge irony exists in these developments. Chowdhury reminds his readers more than once in the book that just about half a century before, during India's First War of Independence in 1857, the table had been turned on the Muslims. Calcutta Hindus had staunchly supported the British in that conflict.

Nationalism in India never became true nationalism in that not all Indians could subscribe to the same idea of it. To illustrate this point, Chowdhury refers to the popular rallying cry of the time "Vande-Mataram." The word literally means "hommage to the mother" and appeared as the title of a well-known poem written by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the most accomplished litterateur of nineteenth-century Bengal. Chatterjee included "Vande-Mataram" in his fiery novel Anandamath which depicts a group of Hindu monks fighting the British but turning

against the Muslims. According to Chatterjee, it is highly probable that Chatterjee felt obliged to change the plotline to avoid offending the British too much. He held the job of a Deputy Collector in the colonial administration and had been denied promotion. Both the poem "Vande-Mataram" and the novel Anandamath, despite its anti-British fervor, could not inspire the Muslims. It was a part of the poem to music, he was unequivocal in his assertion that no Muslim could accept its conflation of Bengal or India and Durga.

Religion was not the only divisive factor in sculpting the nationalism that could unite India; class was another. Politicians in colonial India, Chowdhury reminds us, could never shake off their class orientation. Gandhi, who had an exceptionally modest lifestyle, was no friend to the poor. Nehru evinced a Fabian brand of socialism but professed his loyalty to both Gandhi and the bourgeois ideology of the Congress Party. Jinnah, the self-professed leader of the Muslims and the founder of Pakistan, was more comfortable with a feudal form of government than with democracy. All these national politicians of colonial India—except Gandhi—were enamored by power. They were too eager to fill in the vacuum that the imminent departure of the British would create to think of the people they were leading.

Though a Marxist thinker himself, Chowdhury does not spare the Indian communists either because in his opinion, limited by class attachment, they too failed to rise to the occasion. Comrade Muzaffar

Ahmed, the eminent activist, for example, was known as "kakababu" among his young and largely Hindu admirers. "Kaka" means uncle, commands respect, and implies an amity surpassing communal bigotry, but "babu," the equivalent of sahib in Bengali, suggests distance and imposes a class barrier. Indeed, the failure of communist leadership in pre-independence India can be attributed to the leaders' inability to connect with the peasants. Neither group saw the other as one of their own. The communist leaders were quite content to be the third political entity after Congress and Muslim League.

Ludicrously enough, they took a great deal of pride in playing merely a minor role in the large national political arena.

An important contribution of Nationalism, Communalism and People's Freedom is the many comparative analyses of key personalities, both political and cultural. Comparative studies of Gandhi and Jinnah or of Nehru and Jinnah are common enough, but that of Jinnah and Subash Chandra Bose is not, nor of Tagore and the Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal, whom many consider the ideological architect of Pakistan.

Here it is useful to note that not only does Chowdhury discuss the politicians of the time, he examines literary figures as well, of Bengal and beyond. The events leading to independence from the British, to the partition of the subcontinent, and to the horrendous communal violence that followed were complex and, in some instances, chaotic. Unraveling this convoluted history is not an easy task; Chowdhury, however, performs it dexterously. Two facts account for the success of his book: lucid prose and impeccable research. Obviously, Chowdhury's background as a literary scholar, and a highly productive author has given him the disciplinary tools needed in writing the ambitious Nationalism, Communalism and People's Freedom. Though the history it tells is painful, the telling is in refreshing Bengali prose combined with sound scholarship.

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