



***Let There Be Light: Engineering, Entrepreneurship and Electricity in Colonial Bengal 1880–1945* by Suvobrata Sarkar, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, xliii + 266 pp**

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Received: 7 April 2022 / Accepted: 11 April 2022 / Published online: 31 May 2022
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Almost two months back inhabitants of Chandigarh learnt a valuable lesson that electrical engineers and technicians provide a life-line to homes, offices, engineering and other educational institutions as well as industrial establishments. Their two-day strike disrupted normal life and communication networks. The office of my N.G.O. where in solar system takes over whenever transmission network collapses, came to my rescue. It enabled me to charge my mobile phone and get through scheduled online meetings. In this context, Sarkar's book *Let There Be Light...* seems to be the most relevant publication. It has revealed that for a deep understanding and evaluation of the theory and practice of science and technology, it is mandatory to construct a dialogue between its past, present and future. It is a social enterprise. Besides, scientific institutes serve as sites for knowledge-production. Their students and teachers facilitate migration of knowledge and its practical application in big and small industrial enterprises as well as thermal and hydro projects.

Sarkar's book has focussed upon Bengali responses to the transfer and policy of implementation of technology of electrification in colonial Bengal. Besides a rich introduction and conclusion, it comprises of five chapters. In Chap. 1, he has offered a novel historical perspective through the narration of the national history of modern technical knowledge and the institutional history of the Bengal Engineering College, Sibpur and the College of Engineering and Technology, Jadavpur. Herein, the Bengali intellectuals experimented with the idea of constructing an alternative educational system and conceptualizing modern technology for fulfilling national goals and needs. Their broad agenda was 'nation-building' and modernization through scientific and technological projects such as industrialization of India. In

Chap. 2, the author has discussed the regional elites' efforts namely, Rajendra Nath Mookerjee for facilitating collaboration between academic institutions, industry and state. Sir Rajendra Nath Mookerjee had made solid contribution by opening East India Railway's Kanchanpara Workshop for Indian apprentices. He was also instrumental in pioneering the generation and distribution of domestic and industrial power in India during his stewardship of Martin & Company. Sarkar has also highlighted Prafulla Chandra Ray made sterling contribution as the founder of the tradition of modern Chemistry in India. He had boosted the Indian Chemical and Pharmaceutical Industry. The fascinating story of the electrification of civic spaces in Calcutta amidst controversy between the colonial state and the Swadeshi ideologues becomes alive in Chap. 3 'Electrification: Shaping of a Technology'. It captures intellectual, socio-cultural and economic history of light through a deft analysis of various sources including vernacular. He brushes aside the 'tool of empire' hypothesis while discussing electrification of streets, offices and homes in Calcutta. However, it may be pointed out that the colonial administrators' major concern was to strengthen economy, consolidate their social control and revitalize their political muscularity as done in the case of railways, irrigation projects and telegraph networks.

In Chap. 4 'Domesticating Electricity', Sarkar has discussed Indian responses to new technology of electrification, which brought about a wide range of transformations in the lives of Bengalis. It was shaped by both individual, regional and nationalist concerns and priorities. Chapter 5 explores the contribution of Bengali *bhadralok's* collective imagination to technological, industrial and thermo and hydro projects for nation-building in independent India. No less important was the search for the alternative models for the Indian nationalist leaders whose vision was a combination of theory and practice of science and technology.

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It may be said that Sarkar's monograph is supported by rich documentation including archival material, vernacular literature and private papers. A number of illustrations add to the lucidity of analysis and narration. However, a few questions must be raised. The author should have defined and elaborated the often-used concepts such as modernity and culture. Absence of statistics in the discussion of two institutions leaves the story of the changing material culture and mind-set of the Bengalis an 'unfinished history'. Last but not the least is the elision of women's struggle to get

engineering education and carving a professional identity. There are fascinating and insightful books about the pangs of European and Indian women for acquiring medical education and employment. But a scholar has limitations of time and resources while writing a book.

I recommend this unusual and well-researched monograph for those working in the social history of science and technology in India. Its slick production enhances the readability of Sarkar's book.

