

BOOK REVIEW

S. Irfan Habib and Dhruv Raina, *Social History of Science in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007, Rs. 650/-

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The book under review is a new title in the series, Themes in Indian History. That OUP's grip on academic circles is further proved by this book. In the selection, senior Indian historians of science such as Subbrayappa, Arun Biswas and the reviewer have not been included. It is an east-west collaboration with a pro-western bias. The sole purpose is to demonstrate western efficiency and Indian deficiency in the progress of science. Though all the excerpts are engaged in exploring science in colonial India, the colonial framework is conveniently forgotten. The thrust of the book is evident in the following paragraph - "In short, the essays collected here highlight the inadequacy of percolation models in comprehending the relationship between modern science and culture in colonial India. The several perspectives emerging argue, despite differences, that the standard tale of the assimilation of modern science as a western cultural import was inadequate and missed out the multifarious nature of exchange between modern science and so-called traditional knowledge forms. The idea of modern science as an instrument of the civilizing mission has differentiated into a number of perspectives that suggest that the expansion of European sciences was catalyzed by the joint efforts of imperial bureaucrats, their scientific entourage and indigenous traditions. Indigenous elites visualized this encounter with science as a path to revitalization. This dynamic relationship itself constantly reshaped modern science. Consequently, the growth of modern science and European colonial expansion were inextricably linked. While there is an epistemological dimension to the process of reshaping modern science, the fact remains that the standard tale is oblivious of how the politics of knowledge could provide crucial insights into science in the former colonies. (Introduction, pp. xvi-xvii)

There is an obsession among this genre of editors who identify modernity with western science and pre modern traditional science with Indian science. The possibility of a parallel science in India is not even dreamt of. This has been the attitude of Indian scientists so far. Now the social scientist have also taken up the reins. Though the debate is taken care of, the swing to pro-western view is obvious. The plus and minus points of science as a tool of empire are discussed but the former appears to be preponderant. Baber is a revival of George Basalla in a subtle form. As Weberian model of linking science with capitalism privileges the west over the east in a transition from tendalism to capitalism, the west becomes the agency for transmission of science to the east. As Dionne and MacLeod suggest, India was the sounding board of perfecting western science for home consumption and re-exportation to the colony. Thus Inkster with a repertoire of science technology and imperialism, goes to the length of saying that the British rulers retrospectively appear to have been neutralised by enclavist colonial economy.

Less said the better of the domesticators of western science in India (Habib and Raina) or the structuralists who view the west as the hammer and India as the anvil (Deepak Kumar). But there is some relief in the submission by the editors that it made little sense to speak of the derivative character pursued in the colonies or former colonies or that knowledge germinated in the minds of exceptionally gifted individuals. But this levity in quickly give in to a glasnost of globalisation.

We conclude this review with following quotation from the introduction - "The first generation of Indian scientists have acquired an iconic place within this narrative of the institutionalisation of modern science. These scientists were embarking on an unenviable project of building bridges between the science they were pursuing and the knowledge forms that were part of the cultural life of the region before colonialism. This task often produced a variety of responses that appeared curious to the western eye. Thus J.C. Bose, the first of modern India's physicists, is one of the deified figures in the aforementioned pantheon. Amongst Indians, Bose's research has been seen as India's response to western science, while in the west he continues to be an enigma. But scientists in the west and in India have often marvelled at his acumen as an inventor of instruments." cf: Subrata Dasgupta. The question is — who is condescending to whom?