

Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. *The Uncollected English Writings of Sudhindranath Datta*. With an Introduction by Amiya Dev. Delhi: Chroniclebooks, 2008. 326pp. ISBN: 81-8028-033-0.

Bengali readers passionately assert that the most hauntingly memorable modern poems in their language came out of the tormented soul of Jibanananda Das. But they are also unlikely to deny that the most magisterial presence on the Calcutta poetry scene in the heyday of modernism, that is, from the thirties to the fifties, was the cosmopolitan and debonair Sudhindranath Datta (1901-60).

Born into an illustrious Bengali family – father Hirendranath Datta was a highly successful lawyer and much admired Vedic scholar – he was educated at Annie Besant’s Theosophical school in Benares and Scottish Church College, Calcutta, but abandoned plans to follow in his father’s footsteps after five years as an articled clerk, and while dedicating himself wholeheartedly to literature also ran through a bewildering assortment of jobs: secretary to the literarily named Light of Asia Insurance Company, officer in the Air Raids Protection Service, assistant editor of *The Statesman*, PR man for the Damodar Valley Corporation, and director of the Calcutta branch of the Institute of Public Opinion. Perhaps the most congenial employment he ever had was teaching part-time for two years in the comparative literature department at Jadavpur University. Towards the end of his life he made an abortive attempt to launch “an English quarterly of Asian writing” – *The Asian Review*, as he proposed to call it. I hope our readers will appreciate that the *Asiatic* may be regarded as a realisation of Datta’s unfulfilled dream.

Even as an aspiring poet Sudhindranath attracted the attention of Rabindranath Tagore, with whom he travelled to America in 1929; this was the first of a number of sojourns in the West. Back home in Calcutta, in 1931 he launched *Parichay*, a journal modelled on Eliot’s *Criterion*, which during his twelve-year association with it exerted a seminal influence on modern Bengali letters. Datta’s reputation in Bengali literature rests securely on the five volumes of his mature verse and two collections of critical essays, though the forbiddingly erudite diction of both restrict his readership to highbrow circles. There is also an Anglophone Datta that should always appeal to discerning readers. An earlier volume, *The World at Twilight* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1970), with a prefatory puff by Malcolm Muggeridge and an informative introduction by Edward Shils, Datta’s friends both, included his own English translations of ten of his poems, a lone poem written in English, plus several essays on art, literature and his native city; the title piece, a 100-page autobiographical fragment; and several critical essays translated from Bengali by others. It now transpires that the original English writings were only a fraction of the total output. Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri has rendered yeoman service to Indian

English letters by presenting the remaining pieces – or almost all of them – along with a useful introduction by Professor Amiya Dev. Missing is “Tagore: The Unbeaten Pioneer,” first published in *The Statesman Sunday Magazine* on 15 October 1939 and later reprinted in the paper’s Tagore Centenary issue; perhaps it isn’t preserved in Professor Chaudhuri’s main source of material, the Datta Archives at Jadavpur University.

Together with the earlier book, the present volume should firmly place Datta among the finest prose stylists in English from this subcontinent. The title is well chosen, finely balancing the two poles of Datta’s sensibility. Datta was equally a poet and an intellectual, and while his balanced periodic sentences resonate with the authoritativeness of a Dr. Johnson, they also reflect a philosophical cast of mind that may seem more Teutonic than Asian, or anything else for that matter: certainly not Anglo-Saxon, and not even Gallic, though Datta’s aesthetic is derived chiefly from Mallarme and the Symbolists. Yet, the ideational ballast is exquisitely leavened by an effervescent wit, so that in scattered aphoristic flashes he sounds like a cross between Thomas Mann and Oscar Wilde:

... with the passage of years, the gorgeous ideologies have grown threadbare, revealing underneath the same old lust for power as was hidden within the folds of Richelieu’s red robe; and being exactly as old as the present century, I must, alas, be partial to the past and hostile to the future. (57)

... the second law of Thermodynamics does not rule the world of spirit. (57)

... post-war Europe was fantastically sophisticated, and a suicidal skepticism was the only recognized vocation for an intelligent man. (300)

... vigilance must be exercised to prevent science from taking the place of religion; and having in course of a century performed miracles, encouraged mysteries and evolved a priestly hierarchy, science, since the advent of Einstein, has become abstruse enough to sound oracular. (120-21)

... should logic desert us in our hour of need, there is invective always ready at hand. (123)

... it is easy to confuse between the categorical imperative and self-interest. (162)

... progress, that changeless eddy round a hungry vacuum. (233)

The book’s 80 odd items, which include published and/or finished essays alongside *disjecta membra*, are usefully divided into five sections, the most substantial one being devoted, rather surprisingly, to “Politics and Society.” Though many of the topics may be of merely historical interest today, these will survive as literature, as, needless to add, will the essays, reviews and radio talks on art,

literature and culture. “The Necessity of Poetry” is an Eliotesque gem, less than four pages long, eminently suitable for Critical Theory courses. Three hitherto unpublished essays on culture, “The Evolution of Durga,” “Sartorial Habits of the Hindus,” and “Holi: The Feast of Spring,” are quite delightful, packed with information and leavened with critical good sense. My favourite is the last-named, with its celebratory evocation of the robust paganism of *Madanotsava*, of which Holi seems to be a rather degenerate descendant.

Contrary to the popular image of Datta as a highbrow elitist, he emerges in these pieces as a liberal thinker with broad sympathies and complex responses. He acknowledges that “much of what is really worthwhile in India today can be derived, even if in a roundabout way, from the days of British rule” (231), but without Nirad Chaudhuri’s brassy assertiveness; there is indeed a mood of world-weariness in his examination of “The Legacy of the Raj,” for, “history,” after all, “has no room for regrets” (232). In youth he was rather enamoured of the Russian Revolution, and though in later years he could condemn Communism as “this noxious weed” (219), on the whole his mature intellectual deliberations evince a fruitful engagement with Marxism. Datta ghosted a proposal for *The Marxian Way* for its editor, M.N. Roy, and contributed several memorable essays to it. Most readers of “The Liberal Retrospect,” certainly this reviewer, will go along with him when he meets Marxism halfway: “certain though I am that economic interpretation of an entire civilization is impossible, I am convinced that no culture trait is wholly understandable except in relation to its material preconditions” (144).

As for Datta’s positive philosophy, “Freedom of Expression,” gives a cautious endorsement to “the scientific attitude, which consists in recognizing that facts and their interrelations constitute the whole of reality,” before registering a somewhat Emersonian caveat: “this the child should be encouraged to discover for himself, and not to accept on the authority of his teachers” (120) – for there is a danger that science may turn into an authoritarian institution.

In an extraordinary essay, “Whiggism, Radicalism and Treason in Bengal,” first delivered as a lecture at the Progressive Writers’ Conference held in Calcutta in 1938, Datta delineates a critical conspectus of Bengali culture down the ages and confidently asserts the primacy of the region’s folk heritage over the modern trends spawned by colonialism. Datta’s own modernism is downplayed by implication – an admirable instance of robust self-criticism. Datta forcefully presents a number of perspicacious observations that deserve to be highlighted.

Bengali society was “naturally egalitarian” and irreverent towards authority, including religious authority, whether Hindu or Muslim. Consequently “no religious literature, in the narrow sense of the phrase, ever developed in Bengal” (17). When Hindu myths were used, the gods were often caricatured.

The “interaction of Hinduism and Islam, throughout the Middle Ages and later was so instinctive and extensive” that the communalism rife in pre-Partition Bengal could only be explained as “the demonic irony of history.” Not only was “Bengali

literature... ushered into existence by the imaginative sympathy of a Mohammedan king” (20), but “Hindus and Muslims participated in the immemorial fairs and collective festivals where, in rude verse, man sang of his community with man” (17).

It is inaccurate to attribute mysticism in the strict sense to traditional Bengali literature, for it is rooted in a “life-religion” that emphasises “immanence rather than transcendence, tolerance rather than orthodoxy.” Thanks to the influence of “pragmatic Buddhism,” Chandidas “our first considerable poet,” is humanistic and “eminently rationalistic.” Similarly “the term ‘mystic,’ meaning non-logical” (18), is inapplicable to the “Bauls, who, whether they were Vaishnavas or Shaktas, Hindus or Mussalmans, all alike went about the towns and villages of Bengal, announcing that, even in spiritual matters, independence and integrity were safer guides than authority and conformism” (19). We might call them Gnostics.

Given these aspects of native Bengali culture, “Radicalism, with its superficial emphasis on the individual, contained nothing that was intrinsically foreign to the Bengali genius” (19). Hence the spectacle of Bengal as “the first oriental playground of the eighteenth-century Whigs and their nineteenth-century successors, the Philosophical Radicals” (16).

Intellectuals like Ram Mohan Roy hailed this cultural intervention as a progressive phenomenon, and initially it did release tremendous creative energy. Thus we find Michael Madhusudan Dutt, “the first progressive in British India,” “recreating the Bengali epic on what at first seemed like exotic examples, but which reflection has proved to be essentially indigenous.” Unlike most of his contemporaries and successors, Michael Madhusudan Dutt was fully aware that the idea of progress “is always teleological, implying thereby that the past is no less important than the future and the present is of no moment whatever, except insofar as it is the halting point for determination of our temporary position.” This “enabled him to borrow without committing plagiarism” (20).

Similarly, the followers of Chandidas had “imported the emotionalism of the Sufis to counteract the prevailing objectivity of the current Bengali verse” (20). And Tagore famously imbibed Wordsworthian nature-mysticism. Unfortunately, his admirers mistakenly attributed this aspect of Tagore to the native Bengali tradition.

Datta sketches a resolutely populist view of tradition, declaring that to “the progressive... tradition becomes more important than experiment.... It is a growing thing, like the climbing house of a self-made man who, with increasing prosperity, goes on adding storey to storey; and while the soaring superstructure constantly alters the appearance of the developing building, it is the original foundation – which all, except the humble denizens of the basement, forget – that determines every fresh alteration. In other words, not the introspecting intellectuals but the enduring masses are the guardians of tradition and directors of progress; and whatever be the calibre of the experimenter, unless he passes the pragmatic test of his people, the facts he would fondly establish are febrile dreams, and the truths he would loudly proclaim are a maniac’s fancies” (22). In his view of tradition and individual creativity, as also

in his reservations regarding science, Datta seems to anticipate the powerful contemporary critique of modernity, spearheaded in India by Ashis Nandy.

Ram Mohan Roy made the error of “thinking that the British were anything but accidental in releasing the indigenous forces of progress which... reside in the masses.” Datta thinks that “the common people, throughout the long years of Moghul feudalism, had been weighted down at certain unshifting points.” The impact of British rule disturbed these points without “altering the substance of the burden; and the readjustment of the weight was enough to cause resurgence of vitality into the decrepit social body. That source of perennial energy has choked up again, not with decayed leaves as on the last occasion, but with weeds of foreign extraction – the Bengali middle class” (23).

Writers after Michael Dutt have been increasingly neglectful of the duty of maintaining a vital connection with the native tradition, with the result that the reader has become alienated from “the advanced writers of today... because we have forgotten that progressive mutation is possible only with the same genus, and disregard for this unexceptionable rule leads to sterile hybridisation” (21).

If the cultural energy of the masses is tapped, “this narrowly national channel will end by bursting its particular bond – in much the same way as Jamini Roy’s intensely Bengali technique, which will remind you of Giotto and Holbein, of Van Gogh and Picasso, of the unknown sculptors of India, Africa and Mexico... he alone among his contemporaries understands that the traditional artist, being more natural than the experimental one, has, paradoxically, the greatest affinity with the Universal Man who, whether in fact he exists or not, must at least be imaginatively rediscovered in every living art.” Datta admits that “the crisis in our culture is of class origin,” and places his “forlorn hope of regeneration in the people, who are permanently beyond class and thus eternally outside crisis” (24).

Given the differences between the painter’s medium and the poet’s, a “Jamini Roy of Bengali poetry” may well be an impossibility, but making allowances for these differences one might venture to suggest the name of Jibanananda Das. Of all the Bengali modernists he was the only one with a vital connection with our rural world and its timeless folk culture. Yet Sudhindranath Datta remained largely indifferent to his work, a blind spot in an otherwise astute critical vision.

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