

BOOK REVIEW

DEBATING CULTURE

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Review by Priyadarshi Dutta

Subhas Chandra Bose spent a day in Egypt on January 17, 1935 while voyaging to Europe. His musings in the land of Pyramids is captured in an eminently readable essay, *The Majesty of Man*, published in *The Modern Review*. Therein, Bose observes, 'As compared with Egypt, India also can boast of very ancient culture and civilization, but one must admit that we have not been able to preserve what we constructed, owing to our comparative inefficiency in the art of preservation....Our emphasis was not on civilization but on culture; not on material side of life but on the intellectual and spiritual. Therein we had our advantages, as well as disadvantages. Owing to our superior thought power, we could hold our own against invaders from outside even when we were vanquished physically for the time being- and in course of time we could also absorb the outsider while the ancient Egyptians went down before the Arab invaders and disappeared altogether'.

Subhas Chandra Bose almost seizes upon the crux of Indian experience. The towering civilizations that erected Pyramids, Ziggurats and the Great Wall of Gorgan disappeared for the want of an intangible cultural heritage to sustain it. India contrarily could preserve its identity despite monumental destruction because of its intangible heritage. Viewed in millennial perspective, India has not preserved its political continuity. Modern political institutions in India, unlike in the Europe, did not evolve from ancient or medieval institutions. They are an outcome of British intervention and inspiration in the nineteenth century. But political disruption notwithstanding, India maintained the integrity of its consciousness due to its intangible cultural traditions. Or was its something subtler than the UNESCO-definition of intangible cultural heritage (ICH)?

India was viewed as a political construct by the earliest national leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Banerjea or Pherozeshah Mehta. They thought India's salvation lay in the political reforms. But thought-leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Annie Besant etc contended that India is not merely a political entity. India is a sacred land whose art & culture bear the imprint of its spiritual attainments. The emergent national life, they advocated, should be founded upon that profound heritage not merely the transient political pursuits. Educated in modern sense of the term, they expressed themselves in consummate English. Thus they could converse to a modern audience on the uniqueness of Indian culture. That was really the game changer.

Anirban Ganguly's book '*Debating Culture*' culls the views of some savants on the Indian culture. His list includes Swami Vivekananda, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sri Aurobindo, Sister Nivedita and Indologist Sir John Woodroffe aka Arthur Avalon. In another section he studies K.M. Munshi, Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Jawaharlal Nehru, the men who contemplated on culture, despite being in active politics. Vivekananda, though a monk, was a passionate enthusiast on Indian art, architecture and culture. He saw the best part of the world, West and the East to make his judgments. Coomaraswamy, a Lankan Tamil, advocated that India's impulse for Swaraj or independence must be true to its cultural heritage. Seer Sri Aurobindo understood that some amount of borrowing from western culture was unavoidable. It was

not undesirable either if the eternal spirit of India were to manifest in modern times. Sister Nivedita was of the view that Indians must be imbued with stories of heroism and greatness that their history has to offer.

With the achievement of independence, the ideal and the rigour gave way to lust for political power. India became 'a union of states' in place of 'Mother India' guided by a Constitution not rooted in its past. The Leftist academicians, who appropriated the academic space, kept the views of the aforesaid savants outside discourse formation. Yet the intangible spirit of Indian culture dodged marginalization like it had dodged death in earlier eras. But now the revival of such ideas is no longer a pipe dream. Even the India political scenario looks ripe for successful advent of cultural nationalism rooted in territory, history and imaginations. .

The author in the latter half of the book included K.M. Munshi, Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Jawaharlal Nehru in his study. These post-independent leaders gave India institutions, public or private, that its cultural heritage might be preserved. His political fiascos notwithstanding Nehru had a rare sensitivity to Indian culture. He institutionalized it through various institutions like ICCR, Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi etc. K M Munshi founded the Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan for research into Indian heritage from an Indian perspective. His magnum project '*History and Culture of the Indian People*' edited by renowned historian R.C. Majumdar is a lasting legacy in scholarship. The author also highlights how the Ministry of Culture has badly mishandled the Indian culture. The bureaucratization of culture is that last thing the Culturists will desire.

The book, however, is found wanting on several counts. First, it is a personality-oriented rather than idea-centric book. It does not distinguish properly between art & culture. It also does not identify the distinguishing features of the Indian culture vis-a-vis other cultures. While art is a creative expression whether rendered on material (rock, stone, wood, metal) or sound (vocal and instrumental music) or performance (dance or drama) the culture includes lifestyle, community behaviour and religious convictions etc. While they are related, the two are not exactly the same thing. Second, given it is personality centric book, it would have been desirable if the author would have dealt with actual practitioners of culture like Nandalal Bose, Uday Shankar, M S Subbulakshmi and Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar etc. But that would have taken the book into a very different turf. But Tagore- the poet, painter, lyricist, and music-composer- who philosophized so much on culture has not been dealt separately. He is given a place only in the Introduction. It might be that the author had wanted to restrict himself to cultural views of the nation builders. But what it lacks is a framework – a deliberation on the nature of Indian culture itself. The historical development in the 19th century that made Indian Culture a talking point needed to be dilated upon. The cover of the book shows a banyan tree with overhanging roots forming a web. The Indian Culture is truly a subject that demands such profound treatment. But, at present, the book resembles a nice and well-maintained park.