HEMCHANDRA RAYCHAUDHURI

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

When Hemchandra Raychaudhuri passed away in Calcutta in the evening of the 4th of May, 1957, very few Indians realised the nature of the loss caused by the sad demise of the great scholar. But, to those who were acquainted with him personally or with his invaluable works, the news came as a rude shock, even though they knew that he had been suffering from a protracted illness and that there was little hope of his recovery. Still it was a great loss to them, since, even from his sick-bed, Raychaudhuri was acting as a source of inspiration to the sincere students of history.

At the beginning of his magnum opus, Political History of Ancient India published by the University of Calcutta, Raychaudhuri observes, “No Thucydides or Tacitus has left for posterity a genuine history of ancient India”, and he took upon himself the task of reconstructing this lost history in greater details than what was offered in the earlier part of Smith’s celebrated Early History of India. Smith’s attempt practically relates to the period beginning with Alexander’s invasion of India in 327-324 B.C. even though he wrote a few pages on the earlier period from c. 600 B.C. But Raychaudhuri pushed back the commencement of the historical period to the 9th century B.C. when the great Kuru king Parikshit flourished according to the chronological scheme proposed by him.

In the first part of this magnificent work, Raychaudhuri dealt with the pre-Bimbisāra period of Indian history on the basis of a careful analysis of the early Indian literary traditions which, as he showed, are not devoid of genuine historical elements. It was no easy task. He had to go through the entire Vedic and Epico-Purānic literature and various other Sanskrit and Prakrit works as well as the Buddhist and Jain texts. But proper utilisation of the great mass of material thus collected is more difficult, since that requires special competence. However, Raychaudhuri was eminently suited to the work. The great popularity of his Political History of Ancient India (from the Accession of Parikshit to the Extinction of the Gupta Dynasty) is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it has run no less than six editions since its first appearance in 1923.

Hemchandra Raychaudhuri was born on the 8th April, 1892, in the village of Ponabalia in the Buckergunge District. Son of
Manoranjan Raychaudhuri, Zamindar of Ponabalia, and Tarangini Devi, Hemchandra received his early education at the Brajamohan Institution, one of the best schools of the time, founded by Aswinikumar Datta at Barisal. He passed the Entrance examination of Calcutta University in 1907 having stood first among the students of the then province of East Bengal and Assam. Thereafter he came to Calcutta and studied first at the General Assembly’s Institution (later Scottish Churches College) and then at the Presidency College from which he graduated in 1911. Having stood first among all the Honours Graduates of Calcutta University during that year, Hemchandra obtained the Eshan scholarship. In 1913 he stood first in the M.A. examination in History and subsequently became a Griffith Prizeman in 1919 and was also admitted to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) of Calcutta University in 1921.

Immediately after obtaining his M.A. degree, Raychaudhuri worked first as a Lecturer at the Bangabasi College, Calcutta, for a short time (1913-14) and then joined the Bengal Education Service and served at the Presidency College, Calcutta, for three years (1914-16). In 1916, he was transferred to the Government College, Chittagong. About this time, he was considerably distressed owing to the illness of his wife, whose untimely death soon afterwards acted heavily upon his nerves, and the transfer increased his troubles. Fortunately, Sir Asutosh Mookerjee was then in need of talented youngmen for the new course of Ancient Indian History and Culture introduced in the University of Calcutta. He offered a lectureship to Raychaudhuri who readily gave up his post in the Bengal Education Service and joined the University as a Lecturer in 1917. In 1936 when D. R. Bhandarkar retired, Raychaudhuri succeeded him as Carmichael Professor and Head of the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, a position that he held down to June, 1952. Before this appointment, for a year in 1928, he acted as Reader and Head of the Department of History at the University of Dacca.

As a man, Raychaudhuri had an extremely affectionate and sensitive nature. Whoever came into his contact was charmed by his amiable behaviour. He was an exceptionally successful and inspiring teacher. But he lived more or less a life of seclusion, though the urge for knowledge never allowed him any rest. He devoted all his time and energy in studies. Dr. R. C. Majumdar, while paying tribute to his memory, remarked that Hemchandra knew nothing but books.

Raychaudhuri’s scholarship was universally recognised. His treatment of historical topics was characterised by originality, sound
judgement and learning, and he never sacrificed critical caution to the passion for novel theories. Indeed, Raychaudhuri's name was a guarantee for dependable work. In 1946, he was made a Fellow of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and later, in 1951, was awarded the Society's B. C. Law gold medal for his contribution to the cause of Ancient Indian History and Culture. In 1941, he had presided over a section of the Indian History Congress held at Hyderabad, while he was elected General President of the Congress for its Nagpur Session held in 1950.

It is interesting to note that, as an author, Raychaudhuri was not exceptionally prolific, and this is because he insisted on quality rather than quantity. His second famous work, entitled *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect*, was published by Calcutta University and has run two editions (1920 and 1936). It is regarded as the most useful source book by all serious students of Vaishnavism. Raychaudhuri also contributed a number of articles to learned periodicals, all of which have been incorporated in his *Studies in Indian Antiquities* (1932 and 1958), the second edition of which, also published by the University of Calcutta, appeared a year after his death. The papers in this volume are characterised by clarity of thought and are suggestive of the vast range of Raychaudhuri's scholarship. He contributed chapters to such works as the Dacca University's *History of Bengal*, Vol. I (1942). Even when he was bed-ridden, he contributed an important chapter to the *Early History of the Deccan* edited by G. Yazdani. He wrote the *Advanced History of India* (for B.A. Students) in collaboration with R. C. Majumdar and K. K. Datta.*