

Book Review:

Ishita Banerjee-Dube. 2014. *A History of Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. XXXii-478. ISBN 9781107588387.

doi: 10.1017/CBO781107588387.

Sakir Hossain Laskar*

Jadavpur University, West Bengal, India.

*Corresponding Author: sakirhossainlaskar@gmail.com

For a long time, Bipan Chandra's *India's Struggle for Independence*, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *From Plassy to Partition: A History of Modern India*, and Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India: 1885-1947* considered as suitable textbook for students of modern South Asian history. These books discussed various historical incidents of modern South Asian history and interpreted them via different methodologies based on the author's background. Ishita Banerjee-Dube's *A History of Modern India* is another addition to this collection. The aim of the author isn't just to make the student of modern South Asian history aware of various historical developments of modern South Asian history but also to inspire them to understand the notion that history as a subject isn't a static one rather history is a dynamic subject where various interpretation of one historical event is possible based on the historian's own perspective. Banerjee-Dube's interpretation of Modern South Asian history differs from other scholars significantly. The author saw the history of Modern South Asia not in a linear way but as a fluid concept.

The history of Modern South Asia is not just the tale of the rise and fall of mighty ruling power like the Marathas, the Nizam, Tipu Sultan, and other independent dynasties, it is also a history of the mighty East India Company (EIC), a commercial organization that became one of the first multinational company, which ruled the vast Indian subcontinent as a representative of the crown, and so on; the tale continues with the subjugation of various Indian monarchies to the taming of great 'Indian Despot', Tipu Sultan. History of Modern South Asia is also a history of the Bengal renaissance and the Indian mutiny of 1857, the establishment and growth of the Indian national congress to the multi-phased Indian national movement to free India from colonial power. Also, the history of modern South Asia isn't just the history of war and conquest of EIC and regulation acts, it is also about breaking the old system and establishing a new social system. Ishita Banerjee-Dube's *A History of Modern India* traced all of these phases of modern South Asian history to its core. This well-researched work portrays all the events of modern South Asian history with their effect on the prevailing socio-economic milieu. The author herself suggested that the major aim of this book is to — "reflect[s] particular inclinations towards socio-cultural history, including the perspective of gender as crucial to

understanding the past and the present” (p. xiii). Banerjee-Dube here not only just presented her own interpretation regarding various historical developments of modern South Asian history, but she also tried to highlight the difference among the historians regarding various historical developments, for instance, while describing the decline of the Mughal empire she cited and discussed theories of Jadunath Sarkar, C.A. Bayly, Satish Chandra, Muzaffar Alam, J.F. Richards, Irfan Habib, and many other historians while simultaneously inserting her own interpretation.

While one could see various developments of modern South Asian history as completely different from each other, Banerjee-Dube here tried to link them with each other. Thus, while on the one hand, she described the establishment of industries propelled by British capital, on the other hand, she described the colonization of the economy and misery caused by famine that destroyed Indian society. In the same way, she also described how the colonial state created two ever-warring communities based on their religions, i.e., Hindus and Muslims. The author also highlighted, in the same way, various issues related to castes and gender and colonial states’ role in it on one hand, and on the other hand, she highlighted various shades of Indian nationalism. Another interesting thing about this book is that the author often before the beginning of new chapters gave us hints regarding the content of the chapters, these given hints are ascribed in many forms like the picture of the surrendering Mughal emperor to the company troops, couplets of a song from a Bengali film, picture of Bharat Mata, couplets of Rabindranath Tagore regarding the partition of Bengal, Mahatma’s own words from Hind Swaraj, etc.

In this book the author starts describing various historical events and developments with a very interesting system—first by telling us about a minor historical event of the concerned period, and then she continues to expand the discussion bit by bit interwoven altogether and then concluding the chapter with the completion of the first incident, a very interesting system to keep the reader in suspense throughout the chapter. The author also emphasizes such historical events which were mostly ignored by other celebrated modern South Asian historians. This work doesn’t always condemn the colonial ruler altogether, and it also doesn’t praise the Indian national movement in a biased manner. The author tried to establish an equilibrium between different points of view.

Chapter one of the book started with Nawab Wajid Ali Shah’s mourning about his beloved Lucknow city on the eve of his departure — from this minor incident, the chapter starts to fold. In this chapter, the author lucidly showed us how the mighty Mughal dynasty which once ruled almost the entire Indian subcontinent confined itself within a ‘roughly rectangular wedge of territory about 250 miles from north to south and 100 miles broad’ (p. 4), How the jagirdari crisis destroyed Mughal central administration and its effects on the nobility, Mughal dilemma in ‘the land of kings’, i.e. The Rajputana, the rise of Marathas, the emergence of Mughal successor states and the rise of a new empire propelled by the mercantile policy of East India Company (EIC). In the end, the chapter was concluded by ending Nawab Wajid Ali Shah’s story of how EIC’s aggressive demand to native princes destroyed native princely states, in this narrative, the concerned state was Awadh.

From chapter two to chapter four the author traced EIC’s guiding principles, the administrative system of conquered territories and the inner operating system of the company, its way of governance, the law and order, and other dynamics of the state from 1757 to 1857. The idea of the establishment of the colonial state, the cross-culture of western society with the way of the orient find their place here. These notions result in the establishment of direct rule of the crown in the Indian subcontinent immediately after the great Indian mutiny of 1857. These chapters deal with the dual system of governance established by Robert Clive, Warren Hastings’s urge to return to the original Mughal constitution with the search and systematic codification of ‘Gentoo laws’ (p. 56), able governance of Lord Cornwallis with the establishment of permanent settlement, and finally with the hardcore imperialist policy of Lord

Wellesley. The establishment of Fort William College by Wellesley to train civil servants for better administration was also mentioned here. These chapters also describe the Englishmen's zeal to educate Indians on the western way of life. Many epoch-making acts were passed during this phase. Not only that, spreading the railway network, making a precious survey of conquered land, and the interaction between cultures happened during these phases. And then happened the revolt of 1857. The author vividly described various events of pre and post-revolt here, i.e., Imperial administrative reform, the inclusion of Indians in the viceroy's executive council, and greater emphasis given by the government to understand the structural problems of Indian society, i.e., the problems of low caste were portrayed very interestingly in these chapters.

The next five chapters deal very cautiously with the rise of Indian Nationalism. The drain theory put forward by Dadabhai Naoroji and RC Dutt, the deplorable condition of women in society, the establishment of the Indian National Congress, and the partition of Bengal was discussed in these chapters. From here the author took a detour to describe the problems of common people, here the author enlightened us with various facts and evidence regarding the drain theory, and how the people reacted to the swadeshi and boycott movement. A very interesting thing about this book is how the author in these chapters describes Gandhi's entry into politics. 'The Mahatma Phenomenon' isn't all about Gandhiji but also about his devoted followers, i.e. 'The Gandhian subcontractors' and their zeal to provide the nation with the strength of self-reliability, and cottage industry, and the spread of Khadi (p. 277). From the next chapters, the author started exploring various 'Pathways of a Nation', i.e., the rising of low caste people's movement under BR Ambedkar, change in the Congress leadership under the young socialist leaders like Nehru and Bose, the revival of the Muslim League under Jinnah etc. The passing of 'Tumultuous Forties' was also described here vividly. Also, the failure of the Cripps Mission, the Quit India Movement, India's struggle for independence during WW II, etc. all were critically studied here. In the end, the author concluded chapter 10 with the Independence and partition of India.

In the final chapter, the author discussed various events after the partition in detail; The making of the Indian constitution, the idea of democracy, and the minority question were all discussed here critically. The author also put equal emphasis on discussing the matter of centre-state relationship, the economic condition of independent India, the problem of Kashmir, the debate over secularism, the debate over uniform civil codes, the Dalit question, the controversy regarding 27 per cent reservation of OBC, the demolition of the Babri mosque, 2002 Gujrat riot, age of coalition government etc. This chapter also described the rise of regional parties and changing dynamics of Indian politics.

This book by Ishita Banerjee-Dube stands out for its analysis of various issues and events of modern South Asian history which were previously left out. The language of the book is also very simple and it can entertain readers from all backgrounds. But the author left some topics like the economic history of colonial India, especially from the phase between two world wars and the consequences great depression on Indian socio-political and economic history, the complicated relationship between modern South Asian states, especially the relationship between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the dominant role of 'Hindutva' elements inside the congress, the slow but gradual growth of Hindutva politics at the national level, the mysterious silence of the Judiciary in the matter of human rights violation by the state, and somehow a different approach of the various organs of the state towards its minority communities, the dilemma of the northeast, etc. unattended or partially unattended in this book. Even after these shortcomings, this book is *sui generis* among various works of modern South Asian history.

Published online: 30 April 2023