



***Sir R.N. Mookerjee* by Gautam Kumar Bysak and Pronoy Roy Chowdhury, Poets Foundation, Kolkata, 2022, 140 pp., ISBN 978-81-957547-0-0, Price: Rs. 999.00, US \$ 20.00**

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Sir Rajendra Nath Mookerjee (1854–1936) was an exceptional Indian having great technical acumen at a time when engineering and technology in India were dominated by colonizers. This biography of Sir R.N. Mookerjee is a valuable addition to remind us of our scientific and technical heritage.

Rajendra Nath Mookerjee was born in a Brahmin family on 23rd June 1854 in a small village near Basirhat in the present-day North 24 Parganas of West Bengal. His father, who practiced law at Barasat court died at an early age when Rajen, as he was fondly called, was only six years of age. After his initial schooling at Agara at his maternal uncle's place, he completed his matriculation from the London Missionary Society's Institution at Bhowanipur. He got himself admitted for civil engineering courses in 1964 at the Presidency College campus of Calcutta Civil Engineering College, established in 1857. He was one of the first students of the college. His studies were discontinued due to ill health, but the flair for technology has arisen in him.

This book by Gautam Kumar Bysack and Pronoy Roy Chowdhury has fifteen chapters dealing with Sir Rajendra Nath Mookerjee's life and achievements.

The first chapter focuses on his birth and early education, while the second chapter provides a brief description of the development of technical education in India and Rajen's days at Calcutta Civil Engineering College. The second chapter lists the establishment of major educational institutions and developmental works in Bengal, however not very systematically. Neither the reference sources for the documents nor the historical records or archival sources are given.

The third chapter describes Sir Mookerjee's initial pursuit as an entrepreneur in the form of he obtaining a civil

engineering contract from Sir Bradford Leslie for the construction of Palta Waterworks. He obtained this contract on a borrowed capital of Rs 1000/, but earned a profit of Rs. 20,000/ which was a handsome amount in those days. But, he worked day and night to complete this work. The chapter also mentions briefly his second marriage with Jadumati Debi, which proved to be a very successful one.

The fourth chapter focuses on the greater business pursuits of Rajendra. He commenced his new ventures under the name T.C. Mookerjee and Co. This new enterprise of Sir Mookerjee completed the pipe laying works for Calcutta and Allahabad Municipal Corporation in collaboration with European firms like Walsh Lovett and Co. and Martin and Co. and the construction of an annex building for the Indian Museum, Calcutta for organizing the Calcutta International Exhibition in 1883–84. The new partnership of Martin and Rajendra shall go a long way to create a huge civil engineering infrastructure such as water supply projects, palatial buildings, iron and steel industry, light and railways to mention a few. However, the content organization in the chapter is not very methodical.

Chapters six and seven deal with the collaborative ventures of Rajendra Nath with Martin and Co and the development of Martin Light Railways in 1897–98 and other building activities. There were three routes run by Martin and Co. namely Howrah Maidan–Atma and Saikhala line, Bukthiarpur Bihar Light Railway, and Barasat Basirhat Railways. These narrow gauge railway lines continued much after Sir Rajen's death when his son Sir Birendranath was responsible for running Martin and Burn Co. and were ultimately replaced by Indian railways in the 1970s. The building activities of the joint venture resulted in the construction of buildings like the palace of Maharaja of Tripura, Mysore Memorial at Kalighat, the Council House (Legislative Assembly of Bengal), the Calcutta Club, and the famous Howrah Bridge across river Hooghly among others. Many new things have been unearthed in these chapters.

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Chapter eight deals with the appointment of Sir Rajendra Mookerjee as the Sherrif of Calcutta for the year 1911. In the year 1911, when the Imperial Darbar, popularly known as the Coronation Darbar of King George V was held at Delhi, R.N. Mookerjee was granted the insignia of K.C.I.E. (Knight Companion of the Order of Indian Emire). Most importantly it was in 1908, that Rajen became ‘Sir’. The extracts from London and Edinburgh Gazette add special value to this chapter and the book.

Chapter nine mentions Sir Rajen’s efforts toward establishing steel plants in India. Bengal Iron and Steel Company at Kulti, Asansol was established with the efforts of Sir Mookerjee and Sir Acquin Martin. The Indian Iron and Steel Co. was started in 1918 by G.H. Fairhurst. The other important organization taken over by Martin and Co. after its merger with Burn and Co. was the Burn Standard Co. of Howrah, which was involved in the manufacture of railway wagons for the East India Railway and later Indian railways after independence.

Sir Mookerjee’s association with various committees and commissions like the Calcutta Improvement Trust, Bengal Retrenchment Committee, and The Indian Industrial Commission, 1916 has been described in chapter ten. He had a long association with the Asiatic Society of Bengal and became its President for the term 1924–25. How many of us know that Sir R. N. Mookerjee was the first President of the Indian Statistical Institute, established by Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis? The authors have dug out primary sources to write about these facts.

Chapter eleven focuses on the construction of Victoria Memorial which brought crowning glory to Sir R.N. Mookerjee’s carrier. The foundation stone of the Memorial was laid in 1906 by King George V and even before the building superstructure was constructed, cracks developed in the plinth level. Rajendra suggested a novel solution for strengthening the foundation by inserting steel joists in the building walls for uniform load distribution on the foundation to assure uniform settlement. His idea was not only

accepted by the colonial government but also the tender for constructing the entire building was granted to Sir Rajendra’s firm Martin and Co. He received the honour of KCVO (Knight Commander of Victorian Order) from the British Crown for his firm’s role in the construction of the Victoria Memorial.

Chapters twelve and thirteen deal with Sir Rajendranath’s association with the then Shibpur Engineering College (Now known as IEST, Shibpore) and the Calcutta University (established in 1857). As a member of the board of Bengal Engineering College, he took reforms to reorganize various departments of the college. There are many scanned archival materials and pictures in these chapters but the sources of these archival documents are not cited and the authors must rectify this in the future edition.

Chapter fourteen, the penultimate chapter of the book throws light on the construction of Ramakrishna Temple at Belurmth which was designed by noted European architect William Banks Gythur of Calcutta. Approved by Swami Vivekananda himself, before his death, the temple has the unifying features from all major religions, church, mosque, and temple. This chapter is important from the historical point of view not only for Bengal but for the whole of India. The chapter on the construction of Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta, Ramakrishna Temple, and Belurmth Howrah are worth reading.

Sir Rajen passed away on 15th May 1936, leaving a legacy of dedicated pioneering work in India, which was still a long way from Independence. However, his contributions are path-breaking, and this book is a very important contribution in that direction. The cumbersome language and lack of citing of sources are some of the drawbacks of the book that need to be corrected. Even then, it is a must-read for historians and people interested in the development of technology in India. The authors must be thanked for writing about someone who is almost forgotten.

