

Aparajita Basu, **Chemical Science in Colonial India: The Science in Social History**, K P Bagchi & Company, Kolkata, 2006, pages XIV + 268, Price Rs. 400

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Chemical Science in Colonial India by Aparajita Basu is a welcome addition to the meager corpus of literature on the history of chemical sciences in India. In this book, the author has tried to situate the evolution of chemical sciences in the broader perspective of history of modern India. But for that he takes a very wider view both of the subject and of the history. Introducing the subject, he presents a synoptic view of the related developments from the ancient times to the coming of the Europeans in the country. From alchemy to *Rasāyana* and tantricism, ayurveda, metrology and dyeing, everything is examined to trace the roots of modern chemistry, looking into the history of the west along with the history of ancient and medieval India. Chapter 2 deals with the initial introduction of western chemistry and its products in India; and the Chapters 3 to 6 discuss the progress and consolidation of modern chemistry in the country. Chapter 7 reflects on the interaction between science and society with focus on the chemical sciences; and the book ends with an 'Epilogue'.

The book is packed with information presented on a very wide canvas full of details of contemporary developments in the fields of polity, economy and society of the country. In that it is as much of interest to a lay reader as to a prospective researcher. For the latter, it is handy reference to begin with, as the author has presented a very wide picture of the subject referring along a whole range of the sources. This provides the beginners the possible directions of research without having had botheration of examining the varieties of literature. The author's vision and information are deep and wide which admirably present an integrated history of science and society. They demonstrate his interest in the subject and its understanding in the social context. Surely all this adds to the quality and readability of the book.

Although focused on chemical science in colonial India, the book has scanned virtually the whole course of history from the ancient to the modern

times and has probed all aspects and areas of science. However, while this offers volume and variety on the reader's platter, it also makes it difficult to manage them into a slender narrative. No wonder, often details and deviations obscure the main focus inquiry. But somehow this helps the reader relax with interesting detours and variegated vistas. The narrative is not well crafted, slips and flaws of language and style are there; yet in its rawness, the book takes you to engaging sights with significant goings-on that reveal important facts which could be of interest also to the popular audience. The author has scanned the subject from different angles and various perspectives. While tracing the evolution of chemistry, he pauses to look at the places where the related developments took place and to know who were the main participants and what was the overall scenario of life at the time. He discusses the details of what happened in and around Calcutta and Bengal where the British contact was felt first and the most, but he also takes note of what happened in the rest of the Presidencies and in the other territories under the control of other Europeans such as Goa. Within British India, he takes note also of the remote and far-flung places like Dacca, Lahore, Banaras, Allahabad and Patna. In the process, he takes into account the activities of almost all types of organizations involved: the universities, government institutes and departments, and the non-governmental and professional organizations like the Indian Science Congress. Generally, it is not difficult to know about the major developments in the subject, but this monograph rises above others in taking note of the important activities taking place at smaller places or those lesser known for science like Patna, Cuttuck, Hyderabad, Dharwad and Trivendram. The 7<sup>th</sup> chapter is important because it deals with the scientists and their interaction with the society in the last phase of the colonial rule and just on the eve of Independence. Looking at the nationalist response, he discusses the initiative of the Indian National Congress and formation of the National Planning Committee constituted to formulate a plan for national reconstruction. He also briefly takes note of the official measures taken up to meet the exigencies of the Second World and follows the Allied scientific cooperation during the war.

However, this reviewer is disappointed by the haphazard planning of the book and poor performance of the copy-editors of a prestigious publishing

house like Bagchi and Co. They should have taken care to eliminate the flaws of language and style and spruced up the story into a far better book this monograph deserves to be. The narrative is repetitive and the 'Epilogue' is superfluous. A bibliography without the publication details is indeed a bad introduction to any book. The author on this part, however, deserves commendation for taking trouble to share with us the huge treasure of his knowledge and insights which he must have acquired through hard labour over decades.

