

“Whirling Dervish of Indian Science”

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“The Scientific Sufi- The Life & Times of Jagadish Chandra Bose”, by Meher Wan, Penguin-Viking, 2023. Rs. 499/-.

Sir J.C.Bose was the preeminent experimental scientist of his time. His pioneering work on radio transmission and the properties of millimeter radio waves preceded that of Marconi and others who not only got the credit for it but also managed to make money out of it. Later in his career he worked on the response of plants to various stimuli for which he developed several ingenious pieces of equipment.

Born in 1858, Bose had a relatively privileged upbringing since his father was a civil servant in Bengal. After obtaining his undergraduate degree at St. Xavier’s college, he went to England to study medicine but could not do so because of ill health. He went on to study natural science at Cambridge under some of the most well-known scientists of that time.

He returned and joined Presidency College in Calcutta where he taught till his retirement. Despite a hostile administration, he managed to do his path breaking research while at Presidency College, using his own funds and those from friends and benefactors. Later, when his work got recognition abroad, the government started funding his research as well as his lecture tours to Europe. After his retirement, he continued his research in plant behavior and biophysics and also founded the Bose Institute where he remained till his death in 1937.

Meher Wan’s biography of J.C. Bose is an attempt not just to describe the life and work of this extraordinary scientist but also place it in the context of the colonial environment which played an important part. His earlier years, which were decisive in shaping his personality, are described in great, if somewhat excruciating detail as is the important role played by his father. Bose’s work on the radio as well as on plant physiology is explained reasonably clearly, though with some repetition which could have been avoided with better editorial control.

The style of writing however is somewhat jarring. It reminds one of the way in which biographies of great men are written for what are nowadays called “young adult” readers. On almost every page, one encounters “pearls of wisdom”. Thus, describing Bose’s relationship as a child with an ex-dacoit, we have, “They have the stagnation of a deep ocean due to their experiences and waves of their desires bounce on the shores of their memories”. Describing the fear felt by Bose as a child, we have “ In his stubbornness, a person feels all the creepy caves of fear in the palace”. Mildly amusing at first, these soon get annoying and also detract from the flow of the book.

And then there are errors- some minor ones like the famous scientist Gabriel Stokes is mentioned as Strokes. But there are also some real bloopers. “In 1913, J.C. Bose retired after completing fifty-five years at Presidency College.” This could only have been possible if he had been appointed a Professor as soon as he was born! That Kala Azar is caused by a parasitic bacterium – it is caused by a parasitic protozoa. Or that 0.005th of a second is 2000th of a second- it is 200th of a second.

The book is advertised as “the definitive English biography of the father of modern science in India, Sir J.C. Bose”. Well, this book definitely is not.

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