

Tapan Raychaudhuri

The Year at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin



Tapan Raychaudhuri was born in eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh, and grew up in the district of Barisal, the only district in the subcontinent not connected by railways with the rest of the country. Growing up in this remote area, he became aware of resonances of very distant cultures in the life of his rural and small town homes: orthodox Hinduism, Sufi Islam, British literary and philosophical traditions, the doctrines of Auguste Comte and revolutionary as well as Gandhian nationalism coexisted in an uncertain equilibrium. Educated at Presidency College, Calcutta and Balliol College, Oxford, his historical investigations are informed by his curiosity regarding the way South Asian societies have interacted with distant influences, especially Western culture. His publications, on Bengal under the Mughals, Dutch trade on the southeastern coast of India, chapters in the volume of the Cambridge Economic History of India that he edited and his monograph on Bengali perceptions of Europe are all addressed to this central question. Raychaudhuri has held chairs in Delhi and Oxford, was awarded the D.Litt. degree by the University of Oxford and has been a visiting professor at many universities, including Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley. He is now an Emeritus Fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford. – Address: March to October: 1 Hawkswell Gardens, GB–Oxford OX2 7EX; November to February: 463 Keyatala Road, Calcutta 700029, India

In his address of welcome to the new Fellows for the year 1997–98, Professor Lepenies suggested two alternative scenarios as the basic framework for their year's programme: to write the great book or decide not to write it at all. In his farewell assessment, illuminated by judiciously selected stills from the great film classics of those two men of genius, Laurel and Hardy, he acknowledged that the Fellows had enjoyed themselves.

These two statements define the parameters of my academic and social experience at the Kolleg.

I came with the object of finishing a book on which I have researched for more than a dozen years and which I started writing last year. The subject was the mental world of a social group, the Bengali educated middle class, in the last century. It is a social group to which I belong and one I have studied at various levels over the decades.

What did I expect to gain from a year at a German institute of higher studies for a work in which there was no manifest interest in Germany? A number of things. The list of Fellows and their areas of interest suggested that there would be several colleagues here with whom I could interact fruitfully. The Rektor's own work on dimensions of Europe's cultural and intellectual history interested me. The colonial subjects of Britain in Bengal were indeed a melancholy people and their self-perception underlined their predicament. I expected to gain a better understanding of the middle-class experience from the great historian of the German middle class. Then the list mentioned two economic historians who, I knew, had daringly introduced social psychology into the interpretation of economic history, especially market behaviour. I hoped that I could extend further my limited knowledge of social psychology and explore in some depth its relevance to my work. The presence of a neo-Freudian psychologist was an additional bonus. So was that of a former colleague whose work on the Muslims of India touched on my second line of interest, the threat of Hindu chauvinism in contemporary India, a matter which goes beyond the limits of academic concerns, for it affects the very survival of all that the liberal Indian values and of the Indian polity as we know it today.

Most of my expectations as listed above were more than fulfilled and there were unexpected gains as well. To wit, a young philosopher drew my attention to Mill's formulations on "the chemical process", which helped me define precisely the central concept in my current work, the notion of contact with the West as a catalytic agent in the development of modern Indian culture.

The neo-Freudian psychologist helped me choose the precise title for my projected book. She also read parts of my chapter on religion and offered explanations of the mystical phenomenon I described which startled me: now I shall have to rethink and rewrite that chapter.

Let me get down to brass tracks. What did I do or "achieve" in these ten months? In terms of the alternative scenarios sketched by Professor Lepenies, I discarded one ambition. I had long wished to present the material I had gathered in a more or less literary form, underplaying the analysis and the insights from social sciences, and focus instead on reconstructing the human experience emulating novelists and descriptive

historians. After several goes at it, I realised that this was not what I could best do. Thus the great project of writing a history of perceptions and sensibilities that would read like a novel was abandoned. I have fallen back on my original project of writing a history of mentality without frills.

This uncertainty delayed my work to some extent and I had to rethink the project, especially after I received very useful comments on the paper I presented at the colloquium – on the mental world of a colonial middle class. I could, as a result, actually write up only about half of what I had planned. But I do believe that the discussions I have had with my colleagues have influenced very positively the quality of my work and I have felt encouraged to rewrite parts of the chapters I had already written.

If I am not mistaken, most academics feel the need to see their name on a hard cover from time to time. Since it has been some years since I have had that pleasure, the delay in finishing my book led to an initiative I had not planned before. Since 1992, I have produced some twenty-five papers and chapters in various volumes. These are addressed to a variety of audiences and I wondered if it would be worthwhile to bring together and publish a selection of these articles as a volume of essays. Again I sought advice from my colleagues. One friend, a former Fellow of the Kolleg, actually went through the material and helped me select the papers which she found publishable. But for this help and approval, I doubt if the project would have got off the ground. Now the volume is in press, to be published by the Oxford University Press, and will see the light of the day in foreseeable future under the title “Sentiments, Perceptions, Sensibilities: Essays on India’s Colonial and Post-colonial Experiences”.

As for my main work, I have now decided to present the results of my research in two volumes – one covering the themes of identity, interpersonal relations and faith, the other focussed on world-view, morality and the relation between the individual and society. I hope to send the first volume to the press early next year, the second in the year 2000. Famous last words? I also have decided on the title for this work: “An Unlikely People: The Mental World of the Bengali *Bhadralok*, 1817–1905”.

A couple of years ago, an American colleague had discovered a Bengali manuscript written by a lady, born around 1866 and widowed at the age of nine, who had managed to educate herself and have a career as a medical practitioner. I found the manuscript to be of unusual interest and translated it into English. It was annotated by Professor Geraldine Forbes, who had found the manuscript. She also wrote the introduction. This product of a joint effort has found a publisher, again with the help of a fellow Fellow, and will soon be in print.

The election of a Hindu chauvinist party as the leading partner in India’s coalition central government revived my anxieties about the

advent of extreme reaction in the forefront of politics in our country. I had written on it before and I am grateful for the opportunity the Kolleg gave me to present my analysis of the Indian political reality at an afternoon colloquium. The talk is now to be printed in the Kolleg yearbook. It will also appear in the volume of essays I have sent to press.

Thus in terms of publication, these ten months have been a productive period. In terms of fresh output, somewhat less so. But perhaps the loss in terms of quantity has been balanced by a corresponding improvement in quality – or so one hopes.

But there have been quantitative gains elsewhere – in body weight, inevitably. Professor Lepenies had warned about this at the very beginning of the term. But whoever has ever listened to good counsel? Indian philosophy speaks in terms of two categories in the context of human experience, *sreya*, that which is for the good of one's soul and *preya*, that which gives pleasure, with some cautionary words as to the possible consequences of preferring the latter. Those who are weak in spirit pay no heed to ancient wisdom. In the Kolleg dining hall, I fell for the *preya*. But somehow I feel sure this has done my soul a world of good, even though the fact is less obvious than what it has done to my middle.

I must record here another failure. I decided to try to take advantage of the German language lessons offered by the Kolleg. After a while I gave up my attempt to learn conversational German, though, as Frau Sanders will bear witness, I have learned to say “Guten Tag” with great self-assurance. Then I decided to acquire some skill in reading German – to build a base from which I could aspire to read someday Mann and Kafka, my two favourites, an impossible ambition. One day Eva Hund brought a few pages from Kafka and, inevitably, I failed to make any sense of his beautiful prose. But if I failed with Kafka, with Kocka I had a measure of success. I have dislocated my arm in my effort to pat myself on the back.

As a wandering academic, I have sojourned in many parts of the world. The year in Berlin will stand apart from all other similar experiences in my memory. I would not be able to explain why without indulging in sentimentality: so let me stop here – with thanks to all who have helped to make this year so memorable.