Bengali Women.

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function, stating that “the crisis of the Congress, however, is too deeply rooted in its structure and composition to be blamed upon any single individual” (p. 299). And again: “But it would be facile to attribute this decline [of Indian democracy] to the machinations of any individual, however powerful” (p. 300). As a way out of this predicament, Masani finally sees India as either moving toward a military-supported authoritarian pattern after Nkrumah and Sukarno, or more likely—and for Masani preferably—toward Indira leading a breakaway progressive segment out of the Congress party and into a joint front with the leftist forces in the country. In discussing the latter possibility—which has been, of course, for years the dream of the Communist Party of India—Masani underestimates the hold of the Congress mystique and overestimates the structural support base for such an alliance. He also succumbs to some typical pandering to Western prejudice by his frequent references to Lutyen’s Delhi, gadi and durbar. At times he also adopts a simplistic leftist formula, as in the case of the de-nationalization of the wholesale wheat trade. But all in all this excellent study deserves to be read by all those concerned with South Asia and to be in any library of any significance.

Baldev Raj Nayar


This is an extremely interesting book, conveying a vivid impression of the life of upper-class Bengali women. The Bengali author has interviewed acquaintances, women of different ages, concerning their socialization and particularly their expectations of marriage. Arguing that she was to a large extent a detached outside observer, since she grew up outside of Bengal, Dr. Roy uses concepts from anthropology and psychology to construct an analytical model; but the book is most successful at the personal level.

Her thesis is that the psychological needs and expectations of a Bengali woman are frustrated when she marries and becomes part of her husband’s joint family. She sees several “compensatory” relationships for the disappointed wife, ranging from those with her husband’s younger brother and her own children to one with a guru in later years. One might attribute this expectation of conjugal love to Western influences, but Dr. Roy grounds it in traditional Sanskrit and Bengali literature. Her examples do show that Bengali women are socialized to hope for love in marriage, and also to expect disappointment in that hope. Perhaps the relationships here termed “compensatory” might better be termed “alternatives.” In any case, her
material well illustrates the balance of roles within a joint family, and the tensions between individuals in those roles.

There are some problems with the way the material is presented. The basic one is organizational, for she has presented the data without regard for the differing ages and educational attainments of her fifty informants. Dr. Roy regrets in the preface that the picture is somewhat static, but states that she noted no significant generational differences (xv). But her informants do fall into three groups, according to the ages and marital status of their children (guidelines implicit in her analysis of changing patterns within a household), and they did differ significantly in age at marriage and years of education. The differences would affect some of the author’s generalizations, most obviously those about the father-daughter relationship, where the model assumes a college-going daughter. Related to this is Dr. Roy’s use of sources and references. The reader should be able to link the case-studies in the text with the informants and specific information about them given in an appendix. This was not possible in most cases, and three case-studies were clearly not derived from the listed informants (cases 1, 33, and 34). Thus the reader cannot assess the case-studies properly and the appendix has no apparent utility.

One might differ at times with the author’s interpretation of her data. She follows a hypothetical woman through the life-cycle, showing how the woman’s relationships with others, and the possibilities for frustration or satisfaction, change over time. Dr. Roy firmly emphasizes the frustrations at every stage, a contrast at times to statements in the case-studies (137, 123 and 133). Her view of Bengali men as husbands is unalleviately pessimistic, and she includes three interviews with men to substantiate it. One might, however, look at the same Indian and Western literary and cultural influences which led young Bengali woman to expect romance in marriage and ask why they did not have the same effect upon young Bengali men. It also seems unfair to cite Nirad Chaudhuri, a man in his seventies, for contemporary ideas of conjugal love (128-9). Despite such quibbles, Dr. Roy’s negative portrayal of Indian husbands receives substantial support from Rama Mehta’s recently-published Divorced Hindu Woman, and a study of men’s socialization and life cycle changes is very much needed now.

This provocative book has certain similarities to Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, though they have been partially disguised by the academic nature of this presentation. Were this thesis presented even more strongly as a personal statement in a “movement” rather than “academic” framework, it is worth thinking about the impact it would have and the controversy it would generate in India.

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