BOOK REVIEW


This volume is a labour of pure love. It is the author’s tribute to his college and to one of its most prominent teachers, Father Eugene Lafont. It is no hagiography. Professor Biswas has tried to situate the narrative in a context. The account begins with the advent of modern and scientific education in India from a Jesuit perspective. The author claims, ‘St. Francis Xavier brought Christ, selfless service and education to the suffering people of India’, (p.6). A unique feature of this ‘new’ education was love for nature, both animate as well as inanimate. The spirit was no doubt evangelical but not colonial, the author argues. In fact all the early Jesuit scientists in India were non-British. I wish the author had examined the evangelical – colonial relationship a little more closely.

The story quickly moves to the British period. There are some polemical references to Gandhi, Nehru and neo-Gandhians. But the author refuses to engage with them. He is very clear. ‘How can we hold Macaulay responsible for the age – old lapses of the Indian youth and society?’ Full credit to the missionaries who ‘silently forged ahead in the field of education and generated a scientific temperament in the country’ (p.11). William Carey, John Mack and David Hare appear as pioneers. This is followed by a brief survey of the contributions of some individuals and institutions till the establishment of the St. Xavier’s College by the Belgian Jesuits in 1860.

The colonial education system that had emerged by the middle of the nineteenth century had very little scientific component. Macaulayan education was geared to produce clerks and imitators, not creative or original thinkers. Thanks to the science teachers like Father Ignatius Carbonelle, Father Lafont and Father Francotte that education could get a scientific orientation. Father Lafont was a science communicator par excellence. He started a series of popular scientific demonstration lectures for the public. His reputation soon transcended the class-room. In the cyclone of November 1867, he made meteorological observations on an Aneroid Barometer for thirty hours. Later he built a meteorological observatory. The transit of Venus in December 1874 led to the establishment of an astronomical observatory.
The author had earlier made a separate study of Mahendralal Sircar and the science movement that he started. Father Lafont was Sircar’s most enthusiastic collaborator. Together they established the Indian Association for Cultivation of Science. The author has given a graphic account of this collaboration. Both were keen observers of science, religion and society. As a scientist Father Lafont would put more emphasis on data than on hypothesis. Religion to him was not contrary to science. One truth can not disprove another, he argued. The author has rightly juxtaposed these views with those of contemporary religious leaders like the Paramhans and his disciples.

Chapter VII is the best chapter and gives a comprehensive picture of the scientific work done at St. Xavier’s College. It brings out little known details and shows what higher education ought to be. The last fifteen years (1894-1908) of Father Lafont saw the fruition of his work. He and Sircar had heralded a new dawn of which J.C.Bose, P. N. Bose, P. C. Ray were the first rays. These were his students who made fundamental contributions to both knowledge and society. Sircar, though never pessimistic, remained little unhappy over poor response to his call, but Lafont was essentially a teacher; he collapsed while treating his students to a gramophone entertainment.

This volume is virtually divided into two: one constitutes 151 pages of text and the other has even more as appendices. The text has ten small chapters with a short list of mostly secondary references. Unfortunately the text is often repetitive. The scholar hints at certain controversial issues but refuses to delve deeper, probably for fear of losing focus.

He has dwelt upon the relationship between science and religion, the pioneering educational works of the Jesuits, etc. but is silent on their role in mass conversions, for example, the conversion of the tribals of Chota Nagpur. Father Lafont chose Calcutta as the center of his activities, yet when the honours came, he claimed ‘all this is for Chota Nagpur’ (p. 310). The Jesuit Archives (recently shifted to Luvain from Brussels) may have some material on Father Lafont and his Jesuit colleagues. Anyway, the appendices have interesting historical materials. Professor Biswas deserves our gratitude for a useful selection.

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