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Recensão a *The Calling of History:
Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His
Empire of Truth*
de Dipesh Chakrabarty

Girija Joshi

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***The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath
Sarkar and His Empire of Truth***

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Girija Joshi*

The Calling of History is, in the first place, a work inspired by very rich material. It revolves around the story of one of India's most prominent and later, much-criticised historians, Sir Jadunath Sarkar. In the mid-1990s, Chakrabarty stumbled upon excerpts of letters exchanged between Sarkar and his close friend and intellectual ally, Bahadur Rao Govindrao Sakharam Sardesai, and was quick to recognize their significance. The letters, exchanged over the course of nearly half a century, reveal how closely the private and public lives of the two prominent historians were intertwined. Sarkar's story is especially a poignant one, for reasons that are not solely of biographical interest but of broader relevance to anyone interested in the history of academic history in the Indian subcontinent.

Sarkar's career as an historian was shaped by the contests between different cultures of history that characterized the early life of the discipline in India. At one level, these contests can be read as the jostling of mutually hostile interpretations of what loyalty to the infant Indian 'nation' meant. Sarkar, who was easily (and not inaccurately) pegged as a sympathiser of the British Empire, was nonetheless deeply

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patriotic. Yet unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not believe that cultural pride ought to be allowed to intercede between the historian and the truth, in the objectivity of the latter he firmly believed. His wish for the emergence of a politically independent Indian nation, his commitment to objectivity and fairness, his belief in the decisive role that character played in shaping destiny and his correspondingly harsh judgment upon historical actors who deterred rather than facilitated the nation's development made him unpopular amongst his contemporaries. Using modern, and thereby intellectually European standards to measure historical figures, he often found the latter wanting and thus appeared, in an age of growing nationalism, to be a spokesperson for what Chakrabarty calls "imperial liberalism" (p. 49).

While Sarkar and his scholarly detractors broadly agreed that collecting original testimonies constituted the core of the historical discipline, their specific understanding of what a reliable source was and what constituted a good historian appeared to be shaped, at least partly, by their respective cultural sympathies. For Sarkar, just as history turned on the actions of individuals, so was a scientific history dependent upon the historian's character. From his point of view, only a hard-working, scrupulous, fair and non-partisan scholar could be relied upon to tell a good source from a worthless one. For Sarkar's intellectual rivals (many of whom were Maharashtran historians of the *Bharat Itihas Samshodhak Mandal*), on the other hand, it was not so much technical skill, but an ability to understand 'the spirit' of the source that was of value; and this latter ability was not something that could be learnt like grammar, but that had to be empathised with. This argument automatically shielded nationalistic histories from 'objective' criticism, while positing cultural identity and intuition (rather than fairness, hard-work and skill) as the preeminent criteria for identifying a good historian.

The fault-line that divided Sarkar and his detractors was thus the question of how to reconcile the modern European provenance of their scholarly occupations with their identities as patriotic but colonized Indians. For Sarkar, admirer of the Raj, the answer lay in beating the

West at its own game; in cultivating all the skills of the historian as recognized in Europe more scrupulously than European scholars themselves. Yet this also led him to reproach his Indian peers for their laziness in source-criticism, their careerism and their lack of objectivity, all of which rendered their work sloppy and unreliable. Such patrician dismissiveness was all the more stinging for the cultural inferiority it implied – Sarkar’s critique echoed the popular British conviction in the unscientific temperament Indians (and ‘Orientals’ in general). One misfortune of Sarkar’s life as an historian was thus its timing: his resolutely non-partisan histories and his admiration for Europe’s progress in scientific research were doomed to be poorly received in a climate of growing mass discontent with British and more broadly ‘Western’ dominance.

The criticism of Sarkar’s work by other Indian historians continued much after his death in 1958. The scant attention he paid structural and institutional factors in his narratives, his equation of ‘historical change’ with the action of politically influential men and his use of European standards of ‘civilization’ to assess the pre-modern past rendered his works ‘dated’ as historiographical trends shifted in favour of a more representative social history. Yet to call Sarkar pro-British and to dismiss him for anachronism is, as Chakrabarty demonstrates, not only to do injustice to his competence and diligence as a scholar (this was a man who knew eight languages). It is also to miss the larger theoretical question that Sarkar’s life as an historian poses, viz., what are the circumstances under which a society values the ‘objectivity’ (aspired to, if not achieved) of historical research? When, if ever, does the public life of history pay at least token deference to its “cloistered life” (p. 6), and when do the scales tip and the balance alter? And what impact does that equation have upon the skills and virtues that the historian is encouraged to cultivate?

Sarkar’s answer to these questions was clear: only a modern society, which espoused the ‘civilized’ ideals of the Enlightenment was one that could appreciate critical, scientific research. In his attempts to foster a public culture that appreciated history, he wrote both in

Bengali and in English while also using the Indian Historical Records Commission to disseminate a general awareness of the importance of archiving documents. Whatever one may think of his “imperial liberalism”, at a moment when the public appreciation of historical research in India is perhaps at an all-time low, Sarkar’s attempts to bridge the gap between society and academy can only be admired.

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