The history of Bengal has been the focus of a great deal of recent scholarly attention. It has benefitted from waves of topical and methodological interest, but there has long been a need for a comprehensive book on the late colonial period that encompasses revisionist historical perspectives and their conclusions. Since most of the early Congress leaders came from Bengal, in histories written in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to study the clash between British colonialism and Indian nationalism, Bengal featured prominently. As the field of Indian history began to encompass provincial history in addition to nation-centric narratives, Bengal came to assert itself more eloquently by the end of 1970s. What followed were specific focuses on the theme of partition, the history of the subaltern groups, historical experience of women, peasant and working class struggles, communalism, and Hindu and Muslim nationalism. This multipronged approach enriched the area of study overall. Lacunas that remained were quickly corrected. For instance, in partition studies, Bengal was relegated to a backseat because of an overwhelming interest in Punjab, though Bengal was also partitioned. But subaltern studies in the 1980s rescued Bengal from this neglect by encouraging studies on the Bengali peoples’ experience of partition, particularly women and scheduled castes and tribes. No oversight prevailed for long. Now Sabyasachi Bhattacharya’s The Defining Moments in Bengal 1920-1947 offers a welcome broad history within the framework of the ‘constitutive elements of the life and mind of Bengal’ (p. vii), his argument for starting the book with 1920 being that the decade saw a ‘redefinition’ of Bengal’s identity and the birth of a “new ‘Bengali Patriotism’” (p. vii).

The nine chapters in the book are divided into three sections. Chapters one to four deal with deep structures in Bengal’s life and culture. Chapters five to seven trace the constitutive elements that shaped Bengal’s
economy and polity. Last two chapters describe the process of attainment of independence along with partition. Bhattacharya asserts that together these chapters describe the key moments that shaped Bengal ‘as we know it today’ (p. vii). Barring the last two chapters, which are arranged chronologically, Bhattacharya explores, through interestingly titled chapters, groups such as women, Muslims, scheduled castes and tribes, themes such as community consciousness development, patriotism, nationalism, and spaces such as private spheres, literary societies and other cultural domains. While none of these points of discussion are novel, even for a study of Bengal or the period under discussion, Bhattacharya accords them a specific place and connects them to offer a reader some sense of the fundamental shifts that were taking place in Bengal between 1920 and 1947.

In the first chapter, ‘Reinventing Bengal’, Bhattacharya studies the new Bengali patriotism of public intellectuals like Pramathanath Chaudhury, Fazlul Huq and Chitta Ranjan Das and how it differed from 19th-century nationalism, which did not allow for the cultivation of any distinct regional identity. Chowdhury and Das, however, found no contradiction in the coexistence of Bengali patriotism and Indian nationalism. In fact, they were of the opinion that the former strengthened the latter. This belief found acceptance in the wider public mind as well; so much so that criticism of the much revered Tagore’s idea that ‘innate unity of mankind had no room for nationalism’ (p. 17) was commonplace. Other significant changes in the 1920s were vernacularization of politics, the growth of mofussil towns at a higher rate than cities like Calcutta and Howrah, the rise of the atraf class among Muslims and a new wave in literature pivoted around the publication of the literary magazine Kallol. Bhattacharya masterfully demonstrates the linkages between these developments. For instance, the use of the Bengali language in political discourse impacted, as it was impacted by rise of mofussil towns, and with that rise of political leadership from these towns. The atraf classes came from these suburban and rural areas and unlike the city-based ashraf class, which was well-versed in Urdu, they not only clung to Bengali but as they entered political or literary worlds, they consciously used Bangla as a political tool. The literary world in particular gained from contributors like Kazi Nazrul Islam, who infused the literary world in Bengal with new themes, ideas and characters like beggars, goons and burglars, who had had no place in the literature of the preceding classical Tagorean era.

Bengal continued to reinvent itself, Bhattacharya argues in his second chapter, through the figure of the new bhadramahila and a redefinition of the gender question. While Bhattacharya admits that men still dominated the public sphere (there were no women’s movements in the 1920s and women hardly had any property rights) his research takes us within the private sphere, where women were demanding ‘love’ in conjugal relationships, and Feroza Begum writing in a women’s magazine Saogar held the mullahs (Muslim clerics) culpable for female illiteracy. Progress was slow but significant. While Jyotirmoyee Ganguly asked if ‘companionship in marriage was possible in a male dominated society’, her contemporary Anurupa Devi wrote, ‘authors who write of sexual love … should have been eliminated at the moment of their birth’ (p. 63). By presenting voices from often-ignored women’s journals Jayashree and Mandira, Bhattacharya allows readers an insider’s view of discourse on feminism and women’s rights. So while one hand it might seem that the forces of conservative feminism of the late 19th century had outstayed its welcome in Bengal in the 1920s, the reader understands why from within the same world there were voices like those of Congress activist Bina Bhowmik’s, who questioned Gandhi’s pleas to Indians to support the British in the Second World War. As Bhattacharya put it, ‘By the 1920s it was no longer a question whether education should be offered to women: … the only question was how much’ (p. 53).

No comprehensive work on Bengal is complete without a discussion on caste and community identities, including the majority Muslim community. In the third and fourth chapters, aptly called ‘Affinity and its denial’ and ‘The logic of fission’, Bhattacharya explores Bengal’s deep structures by arguing the presence of both progressive tendencies that brought Bengalis together and the sadly logical regressive tendencies that pulled them apart along caste and religious lines. Following an excellent discussion on the 1931 Census and its befuddling conclusions for the British, Bhattacharya shows how orthodoxy finally won the game. So while the Bhagwania sect had recruits from both Hindus and Muslims, Chitrakars were Muslims who did not practice circumcision or bury their dead and painted Hindu gods and goddesses for a living; these were minorities and the Hindu bhadralok denied this affinity. As Bhattacharya puts it succinctly, ‘There were
Defining Moments is a good, comprehensive book on Bengal. It draws on excellent sources, many of them hitherto untapped, and is full of interesting trivia (like the fact that seven per cent of the Bengali classic Hutum Peychar Naksha is made up of Persian words). However, it must be said that while the curious first time reader of Bengal’s history will find this book to be fascinating and educative, more experienced readers might be left with some questions. In terms of structure, overarching focus and the main arguments, Bhattacharya’s rationale is not always convincing. He lays out his main organizing principle and argument...
in the preface and then in the first chapter again, which very briefly serves as an inadequate introduction. While the reinvention of Bengal is the focus of the entire book, the first chapter is called ‘Reinventing Bengal’ whereas in fact its principle focus is the new Bengali patriotism. In the absence of a clear introduction and conclusion, which would have allowed Bhattacharya to tease out more clearly the significance of his work, while the focus of each chapter is clear, their relation with each other, and with the overall argument that the 1920s witnessed a beginning towards a new redefined Bengali identity, remains a loose end throughout the book. How the various parts, such as ‘deep structures’ and ‘constitutive elements’, add up to ‘defining moments’ could be better explained. The move from a thematic approach to a chronological one in the last two chapters also left this reader wondering what the narration is arguing and where it fits with the previous chapters.

Bhattacharya’s prose and marshalling of evidence makes for convincing chapter arguments but the decision to start in the 1920s, the significance of which is discussed in the first three chapters, begs for a more thorough explanation. For one, Bhattacharya uses the 1910s and the 1920s as indistinguishable in parts of the book (p. 27). For many of his arguments he cites evidence from the decades preceding 1920s. While it is understandable that in cultural history, unlike political history, significant dates or a watershed years are infrequent, Defining Moments does not make a compelling case for the 1920s. Works by Wajed Ali and Akram Khan which explored the question of connecting Bengal to the Indian Muslim community via a national language were published in 1918. The focus on the literature of the Kallol group from 1923 to 1929 is praiseworthy and while it is clear that ‘conventional history of literature’ (p. 37) and even Nirad C. Chaudhuri considered Kallol to have been a trend, Bhattacharya’s acceptance of Kallol’s significance seems to lie in the fact that it marked significant contribution to post-Tagorean literature, not its political stance or anything else. That Bengal with its rich intellectual history would continue to produce literature is not surprising, which then raises questions about uniqueness of the 1920s as a decade. Bhattacharya’s discussion on women and the gender question evoke similar tensions. If indeed the 1920s had liberating potential for women because conservatives were losing ground, was this not true for the 19th century as well? Again, if indeed the small gains women achieved were ‘unintended consequences’, what does this say about the 1920s or the formation of Bengali identity that this decade paved the way for?

Barring some of these concerns, Defining Moments is a comprehensive book on the provincial history of one of colonial India’s most significant regions. Comprehensively incorporating new primary sources within the growing historical research and new methodologies to contextualize Bengal’s identity formation from 1920 to 1947, Bhattacharya narrates an eminently readable story that does not make the mistake of assuming the inevitability of partition. All those interested in Bengal and British India could read and enjoy this book, and it will be especially helpful for undergraduate students and researchers who want to understand the region before delving deeper into specific topics.

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