A discovery of India

BOOK REVIEW

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Jairam Ramesh has been unusually prolific these past several months, delving into archives and other sources to write a book on P N Haksar and then on V K Krishna Menon, bringing to light lesser-known facts about their lives and work, enriching our understanding of the early years of the Indian republic and its leading figures. The book under review is unusual in that it is a three-in-one biography—one of the book of poems entitled Light of Asia, one of its author, Edwin Arnold and not the least, one about Lord Buddha himself.

Mr Ramesh displays in full measure the immense scope of his research, drawing from what may have been obscure sources and, like a good detective story, the reader is led from one interesting clue to another. The book is a dense collection of anecdotes, some surprising, some illuminating and others amusing. One may get lost in the detail, so much is packed into 400 pages spread over 25 chapters. But they do offer a fresh perspective on a period of political and cultural awakening in colonial India, straddling the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This was also a period when great advances in science, such as Darwin’s theory of evolution, challenged deeply held Christian beliefs. Edwin Arnold’s Light of Asia, which is a long poem on the life and teachings of Lord Buddha, was published in 1879, but became a celebrated and popular literary sensation across the world. In India, it resurrected the embedded memories of the Buddha and the tenets of Buddhism. It is through the Light of Asia that Mahatma Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore became familiar with an ancient Indian sage and his humanistic and egalitarian ideas. The revival of Buddhism became an instrument of instilling pride in ancient Indian civilisation as part of the nationalist movement. The Light of Asia played a similar role in countries where Buddhism was the dominant faith, including Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Japan. These Buddhist links played an important part in the pan-Asian movement of this period. In Europe and America, The Light of Asia resonated with elites looking for philosophical ideas and values more appropriate to an age of questioning, placing reason above faith and suggestive of a deeper, more universal spirituality.

Mr Ramesh has explored these different facets in considerable detail and with sharp insight. Edwin Arnold belonged to a band of British colonialists who were at once champions of empire and yet nurtured deep interest in the cultures of the East. It is their explorations of India’s past, whether through archaeology or through deciphering of ancient scripts, or, in Arnold’s case, investing passionate scholarship in studying and translating Indian classical works, that civilisational India became alive for Indians. In addition to The Light of Asia, Arnold translated the Hitopadesha and the Bhagavad Gita (as the Song Celestial). Before this translation, the Bhagavad Gita was an obscure and little known part of the Mahabharata. Its current elevated status is of recent origin.

The author narrates how Arnold became more deeply committed to Buddhism though he never embraced it formally. The controversy over the management of the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya, which had, for all practical purposes been turned into a Hindu temple, is recounted in all its twists and turns. Arnold became a passionate and insistent advocate of the temple being brought under the Buddhist control. The Sri Lankan monk, Anagarika Dharmapala, who set up the Mahabodhi Society to mobilise support for this, carried the struggle forward. Arnold was influential in making this an international issue, writing letters to British authorities in India, penning articles in the British press and eliciting support from Japan, which was then allied to the British. Interestingly, China does not figure in Arnold’s activities, despite being a major Buddhist country.

Chapters 23 and 24 appear to be later add-ons, incorporating new material that Mr Ramesh came across as he researched Edwin Arnold’s Life. Chapter 23 is about the discovery of the Lali-Vakti translations, being verses penned by the 14th century Kashmiri saint, Lalleshwari. These were attributed to Arnold though the latter never referred to these translations himself. The author examines the evidence but remains sceptical.

Chapter 24 is about Arnold’s progeny. It is while poring through the National Archives that Mr Ramesh was able to put together stray references to piece together a fascinating family narrative, beginning with Arnold’s son Chancellor, who was in the employ of the Bhopal princely family. Several of Arnold’s great grandchildren still live in Bhopal.

This is a fascinating book because it has covered so many dimensions—historical, cultural, political and just plain human stories. The author has obviously enjoyed this foray into history, leading the reader from one path to another until one is ensnared in an intricate web. But Mr Ramesh’s delight in this historical detective work, like a latter-day Arthur Conan Doyle, is infectious. For the patient reader this is a good read.