

## Book Review

***Understanding of Other and Dialogue in Philosophy of the Bengal Renaissance*, Tatiana Skorokhodova, 2022, St. Petersburg: Centre for Oriental Studies Publishers. (In Russian)**

The history of Bengali studies in Russia goes back almost 240 years – from Gerasim Lebedev’s voyage to Calcutta in 1787. Nevertheless, the results of these studies are comparatively poorly known outside Russia, despite the existence of an entire school with rich traditions. The bibliographical index *Bengali Literature in Russian Translations*, the first part of which, devoted to fiction, was published in 2022, counts 745 translations of novels, dramas, and poems by Bengali authors, including several collections of Rabindranath Tagore’s works, works by Bankim, Kazi Nazrul, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and other authors.

The field of research is no less vast, covering various aspects of Bengal history and culture. Among them are works on the history of philosophical thought of the Bengal Renaissance, from Ram Mohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore, of which Tatiana Skorokhodova’s *Understanding of Other and Dialogue in Philosophy of the Bengal Renaissance*, published in 2022 by the St. Petersburg Centre for Oriental Studies Publishers, is an excellent example.

This seminal work (over 1,800,000 characters with spaces) consists of an introduction, two parts with seven chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The introduction outlines the methodology of the study. The author proceeds from the paradigm that the processes of understanding the Other during the colonial period of India’s history are an integral part of the Indian Renaissance and its regional variants, particularly the Bengal Renaissance. The Indian Renaissance begins with the emergence of the Other, i.e., the West, and continues through interaction, understanding, and dialogue with it. The result is the discovery and realisation of the Other – its history, philosophy, culture, etc. Thus, the author faces the need to answer the question – how does the problem of understanding the Other arise in traditional society, how is understanding carried out, and what are the most important results of dialogue?

The author’s analysis shows that the problem of understanding the Other in traditional society arises when event-meeting occurs, the experience of which leads to several variants of attitudes of different sections of Bengali society towards the Other. Part of society perceives the Other as a stranger or enemy, another part looks upon it as an acceptable stranger to whom one can interact in certain socio-cultural spheres but not in terms of equality, and finally, part of society accepts the Other as it is. The last option arises in the minds of people who find themselves at the intersection of the traditional and modernized worlds – people like Ram Mohan Roy.

On the one hand, this methodological approach allows the author to consider 19th-century Bengal society as a holistic phenomenon, since society as a whole faces the Other and the need to form an attitude towards it. On the other hand, society is markedly differentiated depending on the chosen option of interaction / refusal to interact with the Other. The author describes the understanding of the Other by the part of society that tries to accept it as a consequence of three conditions, i.e., overcoming the experience of limitation, leading dialogue participants to an alliance that does not cancel their beliefs; openness to the perception of ideas; and the possibility of dissent.

The author calls the method of understanding the Other as understanding-in-dialogue. This method presupposes the freedom of the parties-subjects – even under conditions of colonial dependence, Bengal Renaissance thinkers assert their freedom in dialogue, their intellectual action in it is voluntary, originating from an inner need to understand the Other, irrespective of the nature of external conditions. Texts of the Bengali Renaissance are predominantly dialogic in form and content, and they often reveal the successive steps of dialogue, from questioning the Other about essential values and themes through comparison to appreciation of similarities and differences. However, understanding-in-dialogue is not unilinear, and there are liberal and conservative variations, which manifest themselves as a consequence of different interpretations of the general dialogical scheme.

In the process of dialogue in spiritual, social and cultural dimensions, the process of comprehension of one's own country, the Discovery of India, also develops. Thus, the understanding of the Other becomes the beginning and theoretical justification of social reform and political practice, bringing the process of understanding to its logical conclusion.

Based on this methodological model, in the first part, *Genesis and development of hermeneutic situation in Nineteenth century Bengal*, Skorokhodova describes the beginning of interaction with the Other during the period of rule of the British East India Company and the hermeneutic problem arising with its emergence in Bengali social life. The author describes the peculiarities of different social groups of Bengal society that influence the attitude to the Other (i. e., West) and concludes that at the early stage the challenge of European sociality and culture is realised primarily at the individual-personal level, rather than at the socio-group level, since groups that have adapted or partially accepted the Other tend to perceive only certain aspects of it (which, for example, finds expression in external imitation of the Other). Individual personal awareness, on the other hand, allows one to penetrate into the spiritual side of the Other behind the external attributes. The second chapter of the book, *Problematic thinkers of Bengal*, therefore, offers the reader a brief excursion into the history of the development of philosophical thought in Bengal in the context of questioning the traditional model of thought from Ram Mohan Roy to the revolutionaries of the early 20th century (including Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Surendranath Banerjea, B. C. Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh and others). Problematic thinkers are the main actors in the discovery and understanding of the Other. They

constitute the creative minority that creates the epoch. In understanding-in-dialogue, the Bengali subject acts as an autonomous Western-type individual socialized in the Indian socio-cultural milieu, and thus he is able to engage in dialogue with both the West and traditional elites. The creative minority has ample scope for dialogue because of their ability to communicate in the language of the West and in their mother tongues. In dialogue, the Bengali thinker simultaneously comes to know his own country and himself; hence the urge to reverse and discover personal and national dignity, which finds expression in the realm of reformist and cultural creativity. As a consequence, dialogue with the West for Bengali thinkers continues in dialogue with India, and this dialogue allows them to understand and comprehend India as an objective social, cultural, civilizational and historical reality.

The author points out that the discovery of India by Bengali thinkers is a complex process of understanding the Self against the background of the Other and meaningfully represents the creation of India's image. This image is an intellectual construct, an imaginary country which attracts by its humanity, tolerance, and aspiration for peace. At the same time, Bengali thinkers did not idealize the reality of India's social life, objectively highlighting social, spiritual, economic problems as part of the truth about the country.

The second part of the book *Hermeneutics and dialogue in the Bengali philosophy* is devoted to the reconstruction of understanding in several vectors – not only in relation to the West, but also to the East, in the interreligious triologue between Christianity-Islam-Hinduism and consideration of Buddhism as Own-Other and its role in the formation of the Indian spiritual tradition. Finally, the author reveals the processes of understanding the Other through the lens of interaction under colonial Empire. Hence, a crucial issue arises – the question of nation and nationalism. The author concludes that among all the aspects of intellectual dialogue with the Other under colonial conditions, the perception of the concept of nation and the justification of nationalism proved to be the most controversial in content and consequences, but it was of serious importance because it formed a projective idea of a possible and desirable state as a national-political union of all India's inhabitants.

In conclusion, the author summarizes the results of the study. Understanding and dialogue with the Other has resulted in an understanding of the self and one's own, which has been a creative process of creating and recreating the Self in the realm of thought; the new images of the Self have contributed to the self-understanding of society and the search for ways of self-acquisition in the present and future. Bengali social thought created a theoretical template for the path to modernity – to learn from the Other without renouncing the Self, and fostered intellectual and social conditions for any Other-fellow to have the opportunity to engage in dialogue as well. As a large pluralistic society, India is made up of many other groups, and it was the merit of Bengali thinkers to discover, comprehend and recognize the significance of these groups in Bengali society.

Tatiana Skorokhodova's book is of great importance not only for future philosophical studies but also for works on the history of Bengal and India in general. It is gratifying that outside the broad English-speaking space, serious studies are emerging that reveal the complex processes of Modern Indian history, thereby contributing to a larger audience interested in the multifaceted culture of this country. English-speaking audiences, in turn, can read the Summary in English, which outlines the main findings of the study.

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