

# Book Reviews

*Gora*, by Rabindranath Tagore  
(trans. Sujit Mukherjee, Delhi:  
Sahitya Akademi, 1997, paperback  
2003, pp. 497 + xxiv.)

—reviewed by H. L. Richard



**G**ora is short for Gourmohan, the central figure in this striking novel by Rabindranath Tagore. Gora is a powerful

leader in Hindu society who represents what is today called “Hindu nationalism” or Hindutva or Hindu fundamentalism. As the novel is set in the 1880’s, it is only a nascent form of this ideology whose emotional and intellectual appeal is impressively presented in many of the dialogs in this novel.

Yet Tagore is powerfully opposing the Hindutva position. “Gora” in fact means white man, and the reader is early let in on the secret that Gourmohan is not a pure Brahmin, but rather an unclean European who was adopted as an orphaned infant. Gora’s mother is treated as unclean by Hindu society as she violates all caste taboos so as to live consistently with the violations involved in loving her adopted son. Gora’s Brahmin father stays away from him, and Gora himself only learns the truth in the next-to-last of seventy-six brief chapters.

Tagore is promoting a romantic humanistic ideology in this novel, but does so by contrasting the nascent Hindutva ideology with the Brahma

Samaj of Keshab Chandra Sen. The Brahma Samaj was the great reform movement of 19th-century India, and under Sen it became remarkably Christ-centered. (Keshab is mentioned a few times in the novel, but is a true historic figure. He joined the Brahma Samaj as a young man and later split the Samaj due to his Christ-centeredness and some personality issues.)

The hero of the novel is a Brahma Samaji, Poresb Babu. Nothing is said about what made this man the compassionate, wise, spiritually-minded man that he is, but nothing needs to be said; he clearly learned it from the Keshab Brahma Samaj, and so from Christ, interpreted according to insights from Hindu spirituality. Poresb Babu’s rejection by society suggests that he is something of a Christ-figure in the novel, but it is better to view him as a picture of a contextual disciple of Christ.

This novel is all about *community*, and *community* is the essential fact to grasp in Hindu contexts. Thus this is a brilliant introduction to contextualization in the Hindu world. The importance of community for contextualization, despite being often overlooked, is easily defined, but in Tagore’s novel it is deeply felt rather than merely defined.

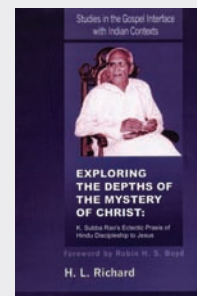
The Brahma Samaj, with an impressive ideology and a heroic figure in Poresb Babu (not to mention Keshab), is yet completely marginalized in Hindu society by its insistence on communal separation from the Hindu body. At a number of points Christianity makes a marginal appearance in the novel as a still worse example of the disease of Pharisaical separation that mars the Brahma Samaj. Of course one could argue that Tagore is not being fair to Christianity, but he is fair indeed to Hindu perceptions of Christianity.

One will not find in this novel solutions to the many problems and tensions involved in contextual discipleship to Jesus within Hindu families and com-

munities. But the problems of non-contextual Christianity are clearly displayed for all who wish to learn why the gospel has made so little impact on the Hindu world. Today Hindu society is being impacted by modernization and urbanization, yet this new translation of a novel from the 1920’s was made just because the issues Tagore saw then are still such vital issues in India today. *Community* remains at the center of Hindu lives and Hindu contexts. Feel it for yourself in this novel, and then see how it rings true as you get heart to heart with Hindu friends.

*Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ: K. Subba Rao’s Eclectic Praxis of Hindu Discipleship to Jesus*, by H. L. Richard (Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2005)

—reviewed by Aaron Glenn



**T**o follow Christ is to truly enter into the greatest of all mysteries. Emmanuel, God with us, is a comforting yet baffling notion. How

better could humanity know God than to experience him as a man? God is inherently contextual in his pursuit of his creatures, but his creatures have a hard time seeing things from any other perspective than their own. Our tendency to prioritize our own perspective is often detrimental, especially with regards to the propagation of the Gospel Message. At the heart of the matter is the unavoidable tension created when we attempt to distinguish what we believe to be God’s universal message of salvation from a culturally specific context.

*Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ* by H.L. Richard is a rare find for many reasons. In the book, Richard not only highlights the primary issues surrounding the contextualization of the Gospel in India, but he does so by telling the story of a unique individual. K. Subba Rao is among those rare pioneers who challenged the accepted definitions of doctrine and dogma as defined by the established Christian church on his personal journey into the mystery of Christ. It is indeed unique to hear the story of an individual who followed Christ, but remained unashamedly anti-Christian. Although not without controversy, the telling of Subba Rao's story helps the reader draw a distinction between Christianity as a religion and one Hindu's attempt to follow Christ as a true devotee.

Included in Richard's research, and central to understanding Subba Rao, are thirty-four songs written by the Hindu disciple, which survive as the only written legacy by this man of peculiar faith. These songs are very Psalm-like in devotional quality, and true to Subba Rao's worldview, their lines are full of Hindu imagery and concepts while being expressly Christocentric. Hindu philosophical and theological words are included within the text in a transliterated form for those who have or are interested in acquiring a basic vocabulary of common Hindu terminology.

Another nugget found in the book is the appendix, which goes into much needed detail regarding Orientalism and Post-orientalism as it pertains to India and its effects on the life of K. Subba Rao. The appendix alone could be the subject of a discussion group and is an enlightening addition that greatly contributes to an overall understanding of the historical relationship between the Eastern and Western hemispheres.

Overall, *Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ* calls for the reader to put on a new pair of cultural glasses and ask how Christ would look if he had been Indian. Subba Rao was not a theologian, but his focus on an experiential and contextual relationship with Christ sheds light into the Hindu worldview. This should be required reading for anyone interested in India and the related topics of contextualization among Hindus.

*The Serampore Mission Enterprise*, by A. Christopher Smith (*Studies in the Gospel Interface with Indian Contexts, Centre for Contemporary Christianity, Bangalore, 2006*)

—reviewed by H. L. Richard



This volume contains six previously published and now re-edited papers along with a new contribution focused on the evangelistic work of the Serampore Trio.

There is also an eighth brief closing chapter and eight appendixes. There are broad introductory papers and also papers focused on specific details; this is not a comprehensive study on William Carey and the contributions of Serampore to world missions.

Smith writes with great esteem for William Carey and his cohort in Bengal. He is careful to give due credit to all of Carey's illustrious co-workers, and also traces out the rather notorious aspects of the conflict between the senior and junior missionaries that developed in the second decade of the mission. Smith at points is rather severely critical of "the Carey tradition" and the way mission promoters have romanticized the Serampore story; readers will need to judge for

themselves whether Smith's evidence supports this criticism.

The romantic missionary hero William Carey was a great linguist who translated the Bible into multiple languages. Smith only reaffirms what is a commonplace among serious students, that in fact Carey was a poor linguist whose translation principles were foundationally skewed. This must not detract from the incredible impetus given to translation work by Carey's remarkable effort and output.

The romantic missionary hero William Carey was a great pioneer of cross-cultural ministry. Smith shows that Carey was really only deeply related to the Bengali people during his first six exceedingly difficult years. From the time of his move to Serampore in 1800, and particularly after accepting employment from the British government in 1801, Carey was confined to the mission compound and the teaching institute in Calcutta (particularly the latter, far more than even being in Serampore). But those six years of immersion in local life gave Carey an insight into Bengali life far deeper than was ever attained by the vast majority of Protestant missionaries who followed him to Bengal in the succeeding decades.

The relation of mission and colonial government is a theme running throughout this book, and is a topic that makes it a book that needs to be read. The ministry of Serampore was clearly compromised by colonial associations, even though they set up shop in the Danish territory of Serampore because it was illegal to exist as a mission in British India! (The book title contains a double meaning, as local perception could only have been of the mission as a business enterprise related to the overall colonial effort; it certainly did not look spiritual.) This topic is far from exhaustively covered, as if that could even be considered possible.

Smith mines archival sources to refine a picture of evangelism and church planting. Carey is famous for his translations, for his social concerns, and for his personal piety and sacrifices; but he longed for effective evangelism and church planting, and there was precious little success in this area. Smith struggles with this failure, as did Carey and his cohort. The colonial connection is part of the problem, but so is a terrible failure to properly deal with Indian sociological realities. Of course, sociology as a science did not even exist in that time. But the decisions made by Carey and his cohort, particularly the cynical perspective they adopted on caste, left a negative legacy that exists to the present time in Indian church and mission.

Smith shows that the birthing of Serampore College was related to aspects of the evangelistic struggle of the mission. It had laudable goals, and Carey and cohort were certainly entirely accurate in their assessment that national workers would have to be the effective evangelists. But romantic missiology refers to Serampore College in glowing terms which hardly match reality; Smith's perspective needs to be carefully studied and taken into account.

Smith suggests that a divergence of myth and reality began already during Carey's lifetime, and sorting out the difference is a task that needs more than one book. Yet however much disagreement there may be in various details, Carey is a truly heroic figure and one cannot but be challenged and encouraged (as well as warned and advised) by studying his history.

It is perhaps in the nature of a volume mostly of previously published papers that there is an element of repetition at times. But this volume presents some new angles on the study of Carey and Serampore, and as the issues that Carey grappled with are far from adequately resolved, much light is still shed on current situations from a care-

ful study of the father of the modern missionary movement.

*The Road to Delhi: Bishop Pickett Remembered 1890-1981*, by Arthur G. McPhee (SAIACS Press, PO Box 7747, Kothanur, Bangalore, 2005, pp. 394)

—reviewed by Jamie Bean, Executive Secretary, Rethinking Forum

**T**he *Road to Delhi: Bishop Pickett Remembered 1890-1981* is the fruit of Arthur McPhee's doctoral dissertation. The book chronicles the life of Jarrell Waskom Pickett, a pioneer in developing missionary strategy from social science research with a focus on group conversion. In his 46 years of service with the Methodists in India Pickett served as a pastor, evangelist, researcher and administrator. Pickett left his mark through research that stimulated a greater concern for people group thinking, initiatives in service to the poor and needy, relationships that ranged from the homeless to presidents, perseverance in poor health and occupational hazards, fundraising endeavors and speaking engagements, and his writings. This thorough study can be commended to those with an interest in the history of mission in south Asia, mass movements for Christ and the mark of the Methodist church in India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The book is broken down into sections marked by time and placement: *The Early Years* (1890-1909), *The Settling Down Years* (1910-1915), *The Arrah Years* (1916-1924), *The Lucknow Years* (1925-1935), *The Bombay Years* (1936-1944), and *The Delhi Years* (1945-1956).

In *The Early Years* readers learn about Pickett's family history, with significant attention paid to his parents, who both had missionary aspirations, but never made it to the foreign mission field. Waskom's three jobs as a college professor before the age of nineteen as well as his friendship with E. Stanley Jones are

noted. Pickett's application for missionary service and how he responded to various questions are addressed. Noteworthy is his calling which was rooted in the Student Volunteer Movement. His growing impatience with the application process, an interview with the Candidate Committee and his first assignment details with the mission are all chronicled. A historical focus on American Methodists in India including ministry locations rounds out the section.

*The Settling Down Years* include Pickett's passage to India, his first placement at the Lal Bagh Church in Lucknow, several challenges he would face, his ordination and a historical and cultural overview of Lucknow. Meeting and interacting with British aristocrats, the story of a Muslim convert turned evangelist, Pickett in love and health challenges resulting in a medical furlough are detailed. Pickett's experience with tuberculosis caused him to have a growing concern for health care to be modernized in India. Also discussed are mass conversion movements, fundraising in the USA, the marriage of Waskom and Ruth and the initial stages of the voyage to Arrah, India, the Picketts' first home as a married couple.

A history of the work in Arrah and details of the Picketts' new home begins the section on *the Arrah Years*. Conferences and colleagues, health and geographic challenges and Waskom's oversight of a boy's school are mentioned. World War I and other challenges Pickett faced as he began his second assignment are acknowledged. Some of the difficulties Pickett encountered are as follows: an increased pastoral load due to the closing of a German Mission, inflation caused by the import and export market with Germany coming to a halt, mission



support from the West decreasing, the logistics of getting around and slow transportation methods. This section references the typical village excursion experience with a specific focus on the “untouchable” Chamar people including early lessons in evangelism and culture. The author gives attention to keys to successfully fostering mass movements, couples with whom the Picketts worked at this time, schooling, discipleship models, opposition to the work and five reasons why the Arrah District work expanded. Pickett’s involvement and leadership of the temperance movement in India and a brief meeting with Gandhi are cited. Chapter twelve gives a glimpse of a major flood Pickett and his associates endured. Within the chapter is also a comment on the handicap of competitive denominationalism.

In *The Lucknow Years* Pickett the fundraiser shows his face once again, yet the main theme early on is his role as editor of the Methodist-Episcopal journal, *The Indian Witness*. Pickett’s missiology is prominent in the initial chapter of this stage and attention is given to general themes and specific content of the journal under his leadership. Notable is Pickett’s interest in “Indianizing the church” and “Naturalizing Christianity,” a holistic approach to mission service, Indian religions and cultures, creative methods of expressing the gospel, ethnocentrism, tolerance, open-air preaching, what he called “Golden Rule Evangelism” and book reviews.

A chapter entitled *Mott’s Proposal* opens with several pages of history on the relationship between Woodstock School, the Methodists and the Pickett family’s Landour experiences. Space is given to the politics of India in the face of growing nationalism and British

foreign rule. McPhee also reports on a meeting between John R. Mott and Pickett to discuss the possibility of a scientific mass movement study that would clear up misconceptions about mass movements or invalidate them altogether. *The Mass Movement Study* is then prominent in several chapters with topics including: funding, technical advisorship, study goals, survey methods and questionnaires. The book resulting from the study, authored by Pickett, was *Christian Mass Movements in India* which led many mission boards to rethink mission priorities and strategies. Another study done at the same time chaired by a Harvard professor resulted in the liberally angled book *Rethinking Missions* which was skeptical of missionary methods. In the chapter, *Lessons from the Survey*, three areas are highlighted: Pickett’s observations on how group conversion movements begin, survey respondent motives for coming to Christ, lists of generalized observations on the mass movement approach and some recommendations for missionaries and church leaders.

A chapter on Sudra movements describes the relationship between Pickett and his protégé Donald McGavran (church growth missiologist), Pickett’s “Trickle-Up” theory of church growth and problems with a largely outcaste church welcoming and overseeing their socially superior Sudra brothers and sisters. The social activist Ambedkar then enters the picture with a focus on the unjust treatment of untouchables, Ambedkar’s motives in a possible mass conversion of depressed class people as social versus spiritual, and the friendship formed between Pickett and Ambedkar. The author then tells of a typical mass movement research day on the field and the impact of Pickett on McGavran. McPhee then describes the situation as, “without Pickett’s ideas, we might never

have known McGavran, but without McGavran, Pickett’s ideas might never have met their potential.”

The chapter *Politics and Conversion* marks the beginning of a season of life and service in Bombay. Readers learn that Ambedkar’s focus is on leaving Hinduism versus embracing Christ. McPhee also discusses Gandhi’s views on mass movements, missionaries, and a particular speech made by Pickett as having “extravagant statements” with “unbelievable elements.” The line is clearly drawn to show that the Mass Movements and Gandhi’s Reform Movement were not in alignment, and the displeasure of those in the Ambedkar camp towards Gandhi was manifest. The drama is then shifted back to the politics of missions in *The McGavran Controversy* as an article McGavran wrote for a British journal (that was never meant to see the light of day) kept him from a desired post in the mission. Another issue from the chapter worth noting is the idea that Gandhi was able to hijack mail from Pickett and those with whom he was in correspondence with a case in point leading to such an assessment. Other topics addressed from the Bombay years: requests from Ambedkar for Christian baptism and the training of untouchables to be pastors under the supervision of Ambedkar (both requests denied by Pickett), Pickett’s encouragement of local church leaders to incorporate mass movement study findings in their work, preference for single mission workers, the successor of Pickett as leader to the mass movement research (not McGavran), a depleted missionary force due to World War II, church growth in Bombay, indigenization of the gospel and differences that Pickett and Jones had on India’s Independence and Gandhi’s initiatives. McPhee states, “As for Jones, his views were as colored by Gandhi’s influence as Pickett’s were by Ambedkar’s.”

*The Delhi Years* round out the book with India's Independence and partition as important themes. Here, one encounters a Pickett who has not lost his compassion for the poor. The chapter *Orphans of the Storm* recounts a month-long period of civil unrest when Pickett and other well-wishers assisted and aided displaced Muslims in Delhi. Another chapter in the section focuses on a new initiative to recruit post-college aged young people for short-term placements to help meet existing personnel needs. A separate issue addressed in the chapter is the "Dearness Allowance" which funded village pastors and teachers. Also mentioned is a conference where Pickett's sessions focused on what he called "confirming the gospel" or acts of service that meet practical needs.

Because of relationships with government personnel Pickett's potential contributions to the India Constitution article on religious freedom are taken up in the chapter *Birth of a Republic*. Although he has himself suggested the wording of the article is his, this fact cannot be adequately corroborated. Pickett as an Ambassador-at-Large is evidenced in meetings with members of the U.S. Congress and President.

The last chapters of the book are no less significant than the first as readers see the impact of Pickett in the founding of the United Mission to Nepal and his many retirement years which were spent as an educator at Boston University, a fundraiser for different mission projects, with family in different parts of the country and active in overseas travel. **IJFM**

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