Lives beyond language

THE MAN WHO MADE PLANTS WRITE: ESSAYS BY JAGADISH CHANDRA BOSE
By Sumana Roy,
HarperCollins, ₹599

What would it mean to listen to a life that cannot speak? This question runs vividly through *The Man Who Made Plants Write*, a collection of essays by Jagadish Chandra Bose, translated from his 1922 Bengali collection, *Abyakta*, by Sumana Roy. Written more than a century ago, these essays move among plants, physics, sensation, scientific experiment and literature, unsettling the familiar boundaries between the living and the inert, the visible and the invisible, and science and imagination. Roy's Introduction situates Bose's scientific and literary imagination within the life and the intellectual world from which these essays emerged, while her translation preserves the lyrical and often playful quality of his prose.

Bose is fascinated by the possibility that what appears silent may nevertheless be communicating through forms of response that human beings have yet to learn how to recognise. His plants are not merely objects of scientific observation but living beings whose growth, injury and reactions demand new ways of seeing and knowing. Yet the book's deeper fascination lies not simply in asking whether plants can feel or communicate. It asks what happens to our understanding of life when we stop treating human language as the measure of communication itself.

Bose's answer begins by questioning the very idea of a "speechless" life. In essays such as "The Plants' Story and The Speechless Life", he asks whether the inability of plants to communicate through human language should be mistaken for an absence of communication altogether. Plants respond to changes in their surroundings, to injury and stimuli, and undergo processes that remain largely inaccessible to ordinary human perception. For Bose, the task of science is therefore to not simply observe what is already visible but to find ways of apprehending these otherwise hidden forms of response. His attention repeatedly returns to the movement between stimulus and response, suggesting that life may reveal itself not through speech but through the capacity to register, react and change. In making this argument, Bose shifts the question from whether plants possess language to a more fundamental one — whether language should be the measure by which we recognise life at all.

This question of hidden response leads Bose towards one of the collection's most distinctive preoccupations: the attempt to make the invisible perceptible. His scientific experiments seek to register changes in plants that cannot be apprehended by the naked eye, turning growth, movement and responses to external stimuli into measurable traces. In "The Speechless Life", Bose imagines machines recording these minute changes, allowing the history of a plant to emerge through the marks produced by its responses. What is otherwise imperceptible can therefore acquire a visible form, not by making the plant speak in a human voice but by attending closely to the signs through which it responds. The impulse behind these experiments is consequently as much epistemological as scientific, asking how knowledge might be produced when the object of inquiry cannot communicate on human terms.



A painting of Jagadish Chandra Bose by Gaganendranath Tagore, 1921

What makes *The Man Who Made Plants Write* so compelling is the persistence with which Bose asks us to look beyond the limits of ordinary perception. His essays move seamlessly between experiment and imagination, measurement and metaphor, until the boundaries between scientific inquiry and literary thought begin to loosen. Plants emerge from these pages as subjects whose lives demand attention to forms of response that human beings have been accustomed to overlook. Roy's translation is especially valuable in allowing these shifts in Bose's thought and prose to remain intact, bringing his scientific curiosity and literary sensibility into an English that retains their strangeness and vitality.

The collection ultimately leaves us with a productive uncertainty about the lives we think we know and the forms of communication we have learnt to recognise. Perhaps its most enduring invitation is to become better observers, attentive to the possibility that the world is speaking in ways we have simply not yet learnt to hear.

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