



AND THERE WAS LIGHT: THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE AND THE PIONEERS IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century Bengal can be traced with jubilant culture, socio-religious and educational transitions most commonly termed as the Bengal Renaissance. The European culture produced its impact and caused an educational awakening. This gradually proceeded towards the development of modern Indian culture and thoughts. The historical background of the education in Bengal will not be complete without elaborating the roles of the pioneers of education. The then society had submerged itself into cultural rigidity which could only be eradicated through the spread of education. It is noteworthy to introspect into how these reformers wisely amalgamated the traditional studies with the western education. This paper is a humble attempt to introspect into the roles of these pioneers who fought relentlessly in establishing modern education at the same time honouring traditional studies. Today there is a threat of disintegration in many of the aspects of our lives, and thereafter it becomes crucial to hold on to the glorious past.

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INTRODUCTION

Bengal was engulfed into a disparate kind of rule, with the closure of the reign of Siraj-ud-daula, the last independent Nawab of Bengal. The new controllers were the writers and employees of the British East India Company, concentrating on to large fortunes and return back to England after retirement, who did not concentrate on the progress of the Indians, but tried to make the most out of the existing resources to benefit themselves. Bengal Renaissance was an awakening against the British rule, modern western culture and bourgeois economy. It was a socio-cultural movement involving all forms of art, literature and intellectualism. Bengal celebrated a sublime consciousness of the changing world and thereafter ran much ahead of the rest of India. Therefore, Bengal's role in the modern consciousness and awakening of India can be taken as tantamount to Italy's participation in the European Renaissance. At the same time, this late 18th century consciousness questioned the existing conservative customs engulfing the Indian society- for instance the caste system, sati, dowry system etc.

Important Establishments

The Bengal Renaissance specifically originated from Calcutta (Kolkata).

This period was marked with intellectualism. The opening of Fort William College in 1800 by Lord Wellesley was motivated to educate the company officers from England in the regional languages, especially Bengali. Doing this the Baptist Missionary, William Carey was appointed to teach the vernacular languages to the foreigners. This institution was responsible for giving birth to thousands of translations from Hindi, Urdu Arabic, Bengali, Persian and Sanskrit into English, making this the beginning of a period of historic importance. This completed the first phase of Calcutta's emergence into the phase of intellectualism after the establishment of The Calcutta Madrasa in 1781 and the Asiatic Society in 1784. Calcutta was the first colonial metropolis which used the British educational system. 1800 also marks the establishment of a center in Searampur by the Christian Missionaries. The colonial government supported them with grants and ran a network of schools teaching various subjects like English, physics, Geography etc. The Hindu School and College (1817) was co-founded by Raja Rammohan Roy, which came to be the only institute devoted to the European style. David Hare had already initiated the learning and education of English language in Bengal in collaboration with Radhakanta Deb. David Hare established *ArpuliPathshala*, later came to be known as Hare School in 1818. Sanskrit College was established in 1824 under the recommendation of Lord Babington Macaulay and James Princep. This institution rose to importance during the principalship of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar during the 1850's, when he began admitting non-Brahmin students to receive the

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Sanskrit education. Calcutta Medical College was established in 1835 being the second oldest college to impart western medicine studies in Asia.

Raja Rammohun Roy and Education

Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), a scholar and reformer is considered to be "*Father of the Bengal Renaissance*" by many historians. He was highly concerned about the corrupt state of affairs into which the Indian society had fallen and wanted "*his deep love for the people which sought their all-round regeneration, his critical appreciation of the value of modern western culture and the ancient wisdom of the East alike, and his untiring many sided efforts in fighting for improving the conditions around him.*" (Sarkar, S. p.14). Roy was a pioneer in educational reform, and the next advancement of social and educational causes were through his efficient hands. His role in establishing the Hindu College in 1817 is noteworthy. He was often criticised and objected for his inclusion in the committee because of his close association with Muslims. Yet, he stood as a pivot in the initial efforts ushered by the country in imparting western education.

During this process he also established an Anglo-Hindu School, where he included astronomy, mechanics, Euclid and Voltaire. Vedanta College was established in 1825 which was an attempt to amalgamate the oriental learning along with western learning. Rammohan Roy placed an appeal to the Church of Scotland Assembly in 1823, asking to send competent teachers. His letter to Lord Amherst (11th December 1823) projects his effort to advocate an educational policy, which came to be accepted by Macaulay and Bentinck late during the 1830's. His plea was to include western sciences in the curriculum instead of pressurizing students into the learning of dead languages and metaphysical speculations. This was then criticised because the state colleges were largely confined to traditional language learning like Sanskrit, Persian or Arabic. Rammohan Roy's commitment to English education and thought evoked sharp debate between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi, objecting to Roy's devotion to English education and thought, characterized him as a "pygmy". Tagore, on the other hand, rejected Gandhi's view, saying "[Roy] had the full inheritance of Indian wisdom. He was never a school boy of the West, and therefore had the dignity to be a friend of the West." Gandhi later contrasted his own cultural pluralism with the fault he saw in Rammohan: "*I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.*" However, his speculations did not confine his educational ideas into Oriental or Occidental, traditional or western languages, but made a path break for the new educational thoughts in our country, "*which was to shape the modern epoch of our history, and gave us a new orientation in life.*" (Sarkar, S. p.19)

David Hare and Women's Education

Rammohan Roy's pioneering role in the Bengal Renaissance also reminds us of his close associates and comrades who eventually graced and welcomed the changes towards the path of progress. The Rangpur circle, the Atmiya Sabha (1815), the Brahma Sabha (1828) and the agitations for the social and constitutional reforms attracted a number of enthusiasts to take part in the activities that would blow the wind of change. One such non-Indian figure was David Hare who visited India in

1800 to make his living as a watchmaker. He lived in India for around four decades until his death and continued to spread modern education. With the colonization, the demand for English language and western education came to be a growing need of the country, with few private institutions like Drummond and Sherburne trying pitifully to get accustomed to the demand. It is at this point where David Hare thought of drawing new lines from the Calcutta gentry.

His enthusiasm to promote some progressiveness to the education system made him to get in touch with Rammohan Roy and the chief justice, Sir Hyde East to establish the prestigious Hindu College in 1817. Hare also organised the School Book Society (1817) which would prepare and publish the text books needed to feed the western educational system. School Society was established in 1818 to provide scholarships to the economically backward boys. Hare retired from his watch trade soon to contribute as a whole timer in promoting education. Hare's School Society indulged into deep interest in promoting women's education and attracted the attention of the colonial government who in turn sent Miss Cooke in 1821. Miss Cooke successfully established ten girls' school with a prospective support from the Church Missionary Society. Adam's Report of 1834 shares a report of the functioning of 19 girls' school other than Calcutta, mostly under the inspiration of missionaries.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) was something of a wunderkind. He received his education at a private school run by Sir Drummond, who imprinted his qualities of being a poet, scholar and free thinker and bestowed to Derozio. Derozio was so intoxicated with the spirit of reason and liberty emanating from the spirit of French Revolution that he impatiently began traversing towards the path to a new world of liberation. He wanted to shed the weight of age old tradition which was posing threat to the society.

Derozio criticised Kantian philosophy in his youth and turned to be a rebel poet, who voiced for social cause and his love for freedom. His poem '*Fakir of Jhungeera*' strikes a note on patriotism. Derozio was appointed as a teacher of the Hindu College in 1826 and attracted numerous students, inspiring the notions of free thinking. Derozio's role in moulding the youth was commendable. He inspired them to question all authority and debate freely. He also found pace in starting an Academic Association. Derozio's followers were collectively known as *Young Bengal*. They defied the socio-religious rites and fought for women's education. Derozio took his last breath in the year 1831 falling prey to Cholera. But, his followers did not fail to keep a trace with the following years of political excitement. Peary Chand Mitra and Radhanath Sikdar, two of the Young Bengal founded *The Monthly Magazine* in Bengali in 1857, which turned to be a "*crusade for a simple style in Bengali writing, intelligible even to the average women in society. This was a protest against the prevalent passion for a chaste style in prose which tended to be heavily Sanskritised.*" (Sarkar, S.p.29)

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

The Educator

Vidyasagar fought his whole life for educational and social reforms. The basic objective as stated by the humanist-educationalist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar himself was, "*the*

acquisition of the largest store of sound Sanskrit and English learning combined, under the impression that such a training is likely to produce men who will be highly useful in the work of imbuing our vernacular dialects with the science and civilization of the western world.” (General Report on Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1846-1847) The synthesis of this traditional education with the Western turns out to be the most remarkable contribution of Vidyasagar. He advocated education to be in a language which was common to the mass. Vidyasagar’s letter to the Council of Education says, “what we require is to extend the benefit of education to the mass of the people. Let us establish a number of vernacular schools, let us prepare a series of vernacular class books on useful and instructive subjects, let us raise up a band of men qualified to undertake the responsible duty of teachers and the object is accomplished.” (Vidyasagar’s reply to Ballantyne’s report on Calcutta Sanskrit College; copies of correspondence between the Council of Education and the Principal of Sanskrit College, Benaras, 1853, pp. 13-29.) He graced being the Head Pandit of Fort William College, where his foremost duty was to make translations, penning down textbooks and at the same time moulding Bengali language.

Varnaparichaya (Part I and II) were published in 1855, became the most studied primers for Bengali children and is in vogue till date. *Bodhodaya* was penned in 1851 for the girl students of Bethune School. Vidyasagar’s attempt was to incorporate rationality in the young minds. He presented these stories for children with moral teachings and small narratives. Rabindranath Tagore paid his homage to the legend quoting, “Vidyasagar was the first creative artist of the modern Bengali prose. It is true that the Bengali prose set out on its literary character, but he was the first writer who showed us the way of using the Bengali language artistically. Before him, our language was like an undisciplined mob, beyond the writer’s control. He brought it under control and imposed a new direction on it by properly arranging the words, classifying them into different orders, relating sound with sense, making their movement easy flowing and enhancing considerably their usefulness. After the great pioneering work of Vidyasagar, many a commander of Bengali literature is now able to lead the disciplined army of words triumphantly into ever-new realms of knowledge. But the glory of these innovations should be first ascribed to him”. (Rabindranath Tagore, *Vidyasagar Charit*, Vol.2, p.331.)

Contribution to Sanskrit College and Education

Writing on Vidyasagar would be incomplete without praising his extraordinary attempt to reform the methods of teaching of Sanskrit. He himself was a scholar of the Sanskrit College and studied for 12 years with great distinctions. Sanskrit College was originally established to produce a proper cultivation to the Hindu literature. Vidyasagar as a scholar, imbibed strongly the western thoughts. He believed in the empiricist, agnostic and utilitarian philosophies of the west and proposed to mould Indian education “through modernization of the Sanskrit College and education.” The colonial officials wanted changes in Sanskrit College, but completely for colonial reasons. Vidyasagar, identifying the causes of poor results of the students, proposed few improvement measures. This time he was highly concerned about the grammar learning of the beginners. He specified text books to be read for each and

every stage of learning very constructively. Vidyasagar made English studies compulsory in the college.

Contribution to Women’s Education

Vidyasagar’s contribution in uplifting the causes of the women- be it for opposing child marriage, taking initiative for widow re-marriage or promoting women’s education, his role was commendable. The 18th and early 19th century Bengal presented a highly deplorable state of female education. There was no existence of female schools. Strong prejudices against female education and early marriages were a barrier to women education. Vidyasagar as the Secretary of Bethune School levelled up the cause of female education with enthusiasm. He was very sure of the fact that unless the Hindus were convinced about female education it was impossible to bring changes. He wrote an article in *Sarbasubhakari Patrika* (1850) on child marriage and female education. The vigorous campaigns by Vidyasagar for female education broke the ice. The hardcore of Hindu society began to melt in favour of the education of girls. This began the admission of the daughters of respectable Hindus to Bethune school. Vidyasagar also promoted female education in the rural Bengal.

CONCLUSION

Whatever might be the nature and limitation of the Bengal Renaissance, there can be no doubt that it ushered in an era of discovery, the discovery of the Indian self from a deep slumber that brought about numerous changes which can be credited in the gamut of both English and Bengali language. Despite inherent contradictions in both ideas and actions the Indian pioneers took deep interest and enthusiasm in speeding and providing a progressive approach to what was mostly entrapped into the mire of the *Madrasas* and *tols*, supported by the endowments. Moreover, these institutions were exclusively meant for the male and the girls did have very limited scope to receive education outside their homely premises. These pioneers not only fought for eradicating the evils and orthodoxy out of the society, but also to promote free learning and most importantly encouraging women’s education. The gradual moral decline of the society was also a grave concern of the reformers and they rightly felt that those could only be eradicated through proper education. There can be least doubt that they were laying the foundation of a new India with the spirit of modernity despite their oscillation between tradition and modernity.

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