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Sanskrit Learning in Bengal under Foreign Invasion and In British Rule

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Abstract

Sanskrit was undisputedly the official language of whole India until 1100AD and its dominance in indicated by a wealth of literature of widely diverse genres, with the foreign invasions from 1100AD, Sanskrit was being displaced and was further demoted by the early 15th century. However the Sanskrit schools of learning were scattered and over media and specially in towns of special importance. In west Bengal, the district of south 24 parganas which is adjacent to kolkata had received some enlightening touches of British rule in areas of education and culture. It has to be remembered that south 24 parganas has a rich cultural heritage as there were many renowned centers of Sanskrit learning, In medieval and late medieval period Majilpur was called the 'second Navadvipa' and Harinawi and Rajpur were also famous centre of learning Sanskrit. With foreign invasions the traditional Sanskrit based culture dispensed with their own language and culture. When the British took control of the country from the mughals, the caused significant downfall of Sanskrit education. Gradually the Importance of Varanasi as the seat of Sanskrit learning decline and the supremacy of the guru and many ideas behind Sanskrit education (e.gg none eligibility of women and lower classes for Sanskrit education). Hangs introduced by the British swept away dominant influence of Sanskrit school of education. It the renewal of the charter of east India company in 1813, Lakhs of rupees were ordered to be spent on inhabitants of the British territories for the Promotion of western Education, On January 1' 1824, the general committee of public Instructions opened Sanskrit college at Calcutta to redeem the pledge given in 1811,, for the establishment of oriental colleges at Nadiya and Tirhut. The college at Tirhut was finally abandoned in favour of Sanskrit college to be Established of Calcutta. William Adam a missionary came to India in 1818 and in 1829 requested Lord William Bentinck to institute an enquiry in to the system indigenous education, and at last many reports were submitted. Mr. Adam had proposed that if Sanskrit schools were neglected, the British government. Might invite the hostility of the learned in India. However certain Individuals showed genuine interest to Sanskrit literature and culture, for example sir William Jones, max Muller the great German scholar. Sir William jones not only mastered the language but also translated kalidasha's Sakuntala, in 1820 other institutions were established fot the encouragement of Sanskrit learning in India. Max Muller did more than anyone to introduce Sanskrit to the west. Even in translation the works of Sanskrit evoked the supreme admiration of western poet and philosopher like Whitman, Melville, schlegel. Poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1914) and his visva-Bharati. Aurobindo ghose (1872-1990) and his Ashrama at

pondiceri helped in cultural revival of the growth of interest in Sanskrit. Bankim Chandra chaterjee, Rajendralal mitra, Vidyasagar, Haraprasad Sastri brought in the world of the Indian intellectual an intelligent and critical appreciation of Sanskrit literature and its value for Indian studies.

Until 1100 A.D., Sanskrit was undisputedly by the official language of the whole of India. The dominance of Sanskrit is indicated by a wealth of literature of widely diverse genres including religious and Philosophical literature (Short-story, fable, novels and plays); scientific literature including Linguistics, Mathematics, Astronomy and Medicine; as well as Law and Politics.

With the foreign invasions from 1100 A.D. onwards, common languages patronized by the foreign kings as a tactic to suppress Indian cultural and religious tradition gradually started displacing Sanskrit. Though, Sanskrit education enjoyed a highly respectable status of being the only formal system of education in the Indian society for several thousand years, but it was demoted to a minor position by the early 15th century.

However, the Sanskrit system of education even during the Islamic period remained essentially Hindu in pattern and ideas. Sanskrit Schools of learning were scattered all over India and existed in towns of special sanctity or even of political importance. As the present district of West Bengal, South 24 Parganas is adjacent to Calcutta, the capital of early colonial rule in India; it had received some enlightening touches of the British rule, like the spread and extension of modern education and social and religious reform movements etc. However, it has to be remembered, the present South 24-Parganas has a rich cultural heritage. There were many renowned centres of Sanskrit learning in the medieval and the late medieval periods. Majilpur was called the 'second Navadvīpa' for its profound studies and culture of the Hindu sastras. Harinavi, Rajpur, all were famous centres of learning Sanskrit. 1 So, when in the nineteenth century the modern western education was beginning to penetrate in this region, a complex interaction was going on between the old and the new.

Foreign invasions imposed supremacy of their language and culture over the traditional Sanskrit-based culture that prevailed at that time of Bengal. The larger population did not easily yield to this cultural invasion and resisted against it. Then the British took over the regions of the country from Mughals. This marked the beginning of colonial culture in India. N. Kumar² considers colonial culture as a major force in the downfall of Sanskrit education because it dispensed with many ideas and practices underlying Sanskrit education. This is especially true with Varanasi that was known as the seat of Sanskrit learning with the larger social and economic changes introduced by the British in the country. The supremacy of the Guru and many of the cultural practices and ideas behind Sanskrit education (e.g. the non-eligibility of women and lower classes for Sanskrit education) were put to question.³ These changes forced even the practitioners of Sanskrit education (Paṇḍitas) to search for an alternative self definition. The wider system of education introduced by the British and formal schools established in different parts of the country swept away the dominant influence of Sanskrit

schools on education. As these examples indicate, during the last quarter of the 18th century, British orientalist thought out, studied under, and commissioned work from variety of Paṇḍitas from the areas around Calcutta, Navadvīpa and Benaras. Bengali Paṇḍitas did not respond immediately to British requests for instruction in Sanskrit and information about Indian culture, not to offers of employment with the courts.⁴

At the renewal of the charter of East India Company in 1813, lakh of rupees were ordered to be set apart every year for the revival and encouragement of learned natives of India for the introduction and promotion of knowledge of the sciences amongst inhabitants of the British territories of India. This was the next event of importance after Minto's Project, as a proof of the company's duty towards the people of India in the matter of their mental and moral reform. In 1823, Holt Mackenzie suggested, "It will probably be thought sufficient to have two Sanskrit Colleges for the encouragement of Hindu literature; and also for the instruction of Paṇḍitas of our Courts... improve those by the instruction of European sciences."⁵

Even earlier the Government had proceeded to revive the project of Lord Minto for the establishment of oriental colleges at Nadīyā and Tirhut. On January 1, 1824, the general committee of Public Instruction opened Sanskrit College at Calcutta to redeem the pledge given in 1811, for the establishment of colleges at Nadīyā and Tirhut. The event, however by itself is not of so much importance to the history of education as for two memorable protests, one from the court of directors and the other from Raja Ram Mohan Roy which it called forth. These protests can be presumed as fore-runners of the Anglo-orientalists' controversy.⁶

Raja Ram Mohan Roy in a Memorandum⁷ to Lord Amherst on December 11, 1823 opposed the plan of establishing a Sanskrit college at Calcutta. He considered The present effort as a duplicate one as there had been numerous professors of Sanskrit indifferent Parts of the country. He suggested holding out premiums and grant of certain allowances to the most eminent Paṇḍitas. The college at Tirhut was finally abandoned in favour of a Sanskrit college to be established at Calcutta from 1817-18 to 1822-23, estimates to the following amounts were made : 8

Nadīyā @	Rs. 12,876 p.a for 6 years	Rs. 77,256
Tirhut @	Rs. 12,742 p.a. for 6 years	Rs. 76,452
Total	Rs.1,53 ,708	

Alongwith there developments during the period under study we come across certain enquiries from Bengal. In Bengal, Adam's enquiry⁹ has been considered as a model applicable to the entire contemporary British India. William Adam came to India in the year 1818 as a missionary. He made a comprehensive study of Sanskrit and Bengali languages. In 1829, he requested Lord William Bentinck to institute an enquiry into the system of indigenous education. But seeing that nothing came out of it, he wrote again in 1834. In this way Adam himself undertook the enquiry at the request of Lord Bentinck and having worked for three

years from 1835 to 1838, he submitted three reports. His first report was not more than a mere digest of his first enquiry. The second report was, however, much more comprehensive and detailed containing a through survey of thānā Ntātore in the district of Rajshahi. Adam's third report presents statistics about education for the district of Moorshedabad, Burdwan, Birbhum, Tirhut and Southern Bihar.

For this enquiry he planned to survey some of the Principle towns of learning and also some secondary towns:

- a) Principle Towns: Calcutta, Nuddea, Dacca, Moorshedabad. b) Secondary Towns: Jessore, Midnapore and Puneah.

According to Adam's report there were three kinds of colleges in

Bengal.

1. Grammar, General literature and rhetoric and occasionally mythological Poem Study.
2. Law and mythological poem study.
3. Logic.

In all types of colleges selected works were read and their meanings explained; but lessons were not imparted in the form of lectures. The system of education available in these colleges was that the pupils repeated the assigned lessons from grammar and the teacher communicated the meaning of the lesson after they had been committed to memory.¹⁰

The study of grammar was pursued during two, three or six years and where the work of Pāṇini was studied not less than ten or sometimes twelve years were devoted to it. As soon as a student had obtained such knowledge of grammar as to be able to read on understand a poem, a law book, or a work on philosophy. He might commence the course of reading also and carry on at the same time the remainder of his grammar studies. Those who studied law or logic continued reading either at one college on another for six, eight or even ten years. When a person had obtained all the knowledge possessed by one teacher, he made some respectful excuse to his guide and availed himself of the instruction of another.

Mr. Adam¹¹ had proposed that if Sanskrit schools were neglected, the British Government might invite the hostility of the learned in India. Due to this he feared some serious obstacles to the spread of popular instruction that might arise. Therefore, Adam suggested that Sanskrit schools and teachers might be made to induce as effectually to the spread of sound and useful western knowledge as other agencies. Adam felt that through Sanskrit schools, the Government could gain access to a large and influential class and there was no class of persons that exercised a greater degree of influence in giving native society the tone, the form and the character which it actually possessed. In this concluding remarks Adam expected healthy effects by the implementation of his proposals.

However, certain individuals showed genuine interest to Sanskrit literature and culture. In the year 1783, Sir William Jones came to India as a judge of the Supreme Court. His interest to learn Sanskrit grew so strong that within six years. He not only mastered the language but also translated Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā. His Śakuntalā had a profound effect in India. Another English man who already knew Sanskrit was Charles Wilkins. The writings and translations of there too English – Sanskrit scholars attracted the attention of other European scholars to Sanskrit language and literature in the last two decades of the 18th century. This new enthusiasm for Sanskrit must have been one of the reasons that actuated Lord Cornwallis to start in 1791, the Benaras Pāthāśālā and later known as Sanskrit college. In the 1820s, other institutions were established by way of encouragement to the study of Sanskrit, like the Puna Sanskrit College (1821), the Sanskrit College at Calcutta (1824), The Oriental College in Delhi (1825) and Oriental College at Agra (1827).¹³

In the legacy of Sir William Jones are included the digest of Law, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Asiatic Researches and translation of some of the classics of Sanskrit literature. He appointed Radhakanta Sharma for the Eastern School of Jurisprudence. Radhakanta was a Brahmin of distinguished abilities and highly revered by the Hindus in Bengal for his erudition and virtue¹⁴.

The great German scholar max muller¹⁵ who did more than anyone to introduce Sanskrit to the West in the latter part of the 19th century, contended that without a knowledge of the language (Sanskrit), literature, art, religion and philosophy of India, a liberal education could hardly be complete – India being the intellectual and spiritual ancestor of the race, historically and through Sanskrit. Maxmullar also pointed out that Sanskrit provides perfect examples of the unity and foundation. It offers to the Celtic, Teutonic, Slavonic, Germanic and Anglo – Saxon languages, not to mention its influence on Asian languages. The transmission of Buddhism to Asia can be attributed largely to the appeal to Sanskrit. Even in translation the works of Sanskrit evoked the supreme admiration of western poets and philosophers like Emerson, Whitman, Thoreall, Melville, goethe, Schlegel and Schopenhauer.

The limited syllabus of English school and college had serious gaps, particularly on artistic, creative and spiritual sides. The medium of instruction, the new Western approach to the study of the Sanskrit language and literature totally divorced from the classical method, and the new institutions located in the heart of the society provided further base to private initiative, public workers, artists, poets, religion leaders and thinkers to work for Sanskrit education.

Some of these new movements had a direct or indirect connection with Sanskrit and Bengal, to revival of interest in literature and learning of which they gave a fresh impetus. Ramakrishna Pramahansa (1836-1886) and his great disciple Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and the Vedānta movement. He deleared¹⁶ that “In India Sanskrit and prestige is Synonymous. If you learn from Sanskrit language, nobody will gain courage to talk against you, this is the only

mystry, following this way. Poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and his Viśva-Bhāratī, Arobindo Ghose (1872-1950) and his Āśhrama at Poṇḍicerī -each contributed its share to the cultural revival of the country and the growth of interest in Sanskrit Classics with which such reawakening was intimately connected. During the second half of the 19th century, literarymen, educationists, scholars and students of Indian lore, like Radhākānta Deva, Baṅkim Chandra Chatterjee, Rajendralāl Mitra, Pandit Ísvaracandra Vidyāsāgar, Ramesh Chandra Dutt, Haraprasād Śāstrī and others, brought into the world of the Indian intellectual an intelligent and critical appreciation of Sanskrit literature and its value for Indian Studies.¹⁷

In this period, the introduction of Printing, Sanskrit Studies in Bengal, as we have seen it cannot be said to have been generally prevalent in all branches, there are some branches which are more popular than the others. Thus there were some subject e.g. Nyāya and Smṛti which were especially ‘Bengali’ in the sense that they were cultivated in Bengal more than anywhere else. But contemporaneously with the advent of the Europeans and the introduction of printing facilities of communication this state of things disappeared to a great extent. Though the subjects for which Bengal was reputed to have a special predilection still continued to be studied with as much assiduity as even, other subjects which are known to be more or less neglected began to attract the attention. The immense popularity which the study of vedānta¹⁸ has of late attained may be cited as an instance. This is one of the characteristic features of Sanskrit studies in Bengal of this period.

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