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English Writings in Bengal during Bengal Renaissance: An Overview

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Abstract

Nineteenth century life and literature in Bengal ushered in a major change and a new beginning. The Evangelical revival in England, the social and educational reforms of the 1830s, the advent of communication by steamships, the acquisition of a common language, that is, English, etc. led to the birth of a “New integrated all-India class with varied background but a common foreground of knowledge, ideas and values. It had a sense of unity, of purpose, and of hope. It was the new born soul of modern India. In time it was to infuse the whole of India with its spirit.” The literature was also mostly dominated by feudal and religious ideas. In terms of technique and style, it followed certain conventions of Vaishnava lyric verses and Mangal Kavyas. The contention of this paper is to study how the west influenced the religious, social and political aspects of the life of the common people and also how western literature influenced the literature during the Bengal Renaissance.

Keywords: Renaissance, Bengal, English, Society, Western.

The influence of the west on Bengal is quite striking. The west has not only influenced individual writers of Bengal but has also influenced various facets of the life of the people of Bengal. The nineteenth century intellectual life in Bengal saw a process of changes which expressed itself in the various creative endeavour as well as socio-cultural movements, and this collectively is described as the Bengal Renaissance. Bengal renaissance was not initiated by the indigenous forces but was mostly the result of the invasion by non-native people who brought with them new values and institutions. As Sri Aurobindo said of the Indian renaissance that it was less like the European renaissance and more like the Celtic movement in Ireland, “the attempt of a reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse of self-expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and rebuilding” (Sri Aurobindo P. 397), so also can be said of Bengal renaissance. The awakening of Bengal was twofold: she looked to the west and also at her own past. In re-discovering the past, even the English officials deployed in India played an important role. They studied the ancient Indian texts passionately. While the Englishmen were re-discovering the past of India, the gradual spread of English education and western

ideas made some Indians also take interest in the European learning. This led to the amalgamation of ideas.

The spread of English education also played an important role and it found its ablest Indian champion in Raja Rammohon Roy. Rammohon Roy, together with David Hume established an Association to promote European learning and science in 1816. The Government resolution of 7th March, 1835 also stated that ‘the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone’ (qtd in Naik, 13). This policy however was corrected in 1852-53. Sir Charles wood, a member of the Select Committee of the British Parliament, while pointing the necessity of extending European knowledge among all classes of the people also observed that “this object must be effected by means of the English Language in the higher branches of instruction, and by that of the vernacular languages of India to the great mass of the people” (qtd in Naik P. 13). The outcome of this policy was the establishment of the three Indian Universities in 1857 – Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. These universities became the home of the resurgent Indian genius, which brought in a renaissance in the political, social, cultural and literary spheres.

The Evangelical revival in England, the educational and social reforms of the 1830s, the advent of the new means of transport and communication, the conducting of competitive examinations for the company service brought about a change. This affected the social life in India too. A new race of civil servants came to India breaking the tradition of hereditary service of certain families. These officials loved India and in loving it, they served it better and were also loved in return by the people of India. The impact of the Evangelical revival and its aftermath often generated a feeling of contempt for Hindu religion and culture in the Englishman’s mind, and the stance of the white man’s superiority came naturally to self-made men, the products of the new social and educational reforms.

The attitude of the Indians towards the Britishers and vice-versa went through a change. When the first products of higher education in India started coming out of the portals of the earliest Indian Universities, the seeds of the ideas sown by Rammohon Roy began to sport vigorously. The gradual spread of the vast railway network, the growth of the press and the acquisition of a common language, that is, English brought the new intelligentsia come close together. While the old Indian aristocracy lay supine, dreaming of its past glories while shutting the eyes from the realities of the present, there “was born from the middle stratum of society a new integrated all-India class with varied background but a common foreground of knowledge, ideas and values. It was a dynamic minority. It had a sense of unity, of purpose and of hope. It was the newborn soul of modern India. In time it was to infuse the whole of India with its spirits” (Spear. 291).

This spirit also expressed itself through movements of religious, social and political reform Raja Rammohon Roy founded the Brahma Samaj in 1828 to reorganize Hinduism along the lines of monotheism and repudiation of idol-worship and superstition. This

movement influenced the intellectual class of Bengal. A similar movement, Arya Samaj was established in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. This movement tried to revive Hinduism in its pristine purity of the Vedic age. Repudiation of Puranism and polytheism, rejection of the hereditary caste system and revival of proselytization were its chief motives. The Arya Samaj also started with a number of educational institutions which imparted both oriental and occidental knowledge. Along with the Arya Samaj, Theosophical society was founded in New York in 1875 but the society shifted to Adyar in India in 1878. With its blends of the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Pythagoras and Plato, ancient Egyptian thought and early Christianity, Theosophy was an eclectic creed, but like the Arya Samaj it also helped the prevailing climate of the Indian resurgence.

This led to a new religious resurgence. Earlier, under the first impact of western education, the Indian, swept off his feet by European culture and thought, had often been a prey to an inferiority feeling, as he contemplated in comparison, the state of his own tradition-bound religion and culture. In Bengal especially, the younger generation had for a time taken pride in rebelling against what it considered to be crass obscurantism; and men like M.M. Dutta had even abjured Hinduism to embrace Christianity. As Surendranath Banarjee observed, "Our fathers, the first fruits of English Education, were violently Pro-British. They saw no flaw in the civilization and the culture of the west. They were charmed by its novelty and its strangeness. The enfranchisement of the individual, the substitution of the right of private judgment in place of traditional authority, the exaltation of duty over custom—all came with the force and suddenness of a revelation to oriental people who knew no more binding obligation than the mandate of immemorial usage and of venerable tradition" (Banarjee P. 285-286). The new reform movements proved a strong corrective and restored the balance. The new reformistic zeal in religion was inevitably accompanied by a political awakening as well. The first organized effort in this direction was the founding of the British India Association in 1839, followed by the British India Association of Calcutta in 1851.

The influence of English on Bengali literature is most striking. Apart from the obligation that individual Bengali writers have for the West, there have been influences of a variety of things on the general development of Bengali literature. These influences have appeared in a number of ways: similarity of characters, of themes, style and technique. An expected culmination of a slow process of cultural exchange which had begun in 1857 with the establishment of Calcutta University, converting Calcutta as the centre of Indian Renaissance, it introduced steps to make the Indians learn English and at the same time discover the richness of Western literature. With the development of literary doctrines and ideals the critical spirit also grew up. Criticism, as a rule, was uncommon in older Bengali literature. The few works that existed were only based on the Sanskrit texts on poetics. Madhusudan Datta revolted against the stringencies of Sanskrit codes and used rather reproachful language about writers like the author of the *Sahitya Darpana*. The rigours placed upon dramatic construction annoyed Datta and he wrote dramas based on the critical canons of the West. Modern criticism does not just mean the annotation of texts, or bringing

out the hidden meanings which the writers themselves perhaps have never anticipated, nor is it concerned primarily with rules of grammar, style, rhetoric or prosody. The actual function of criticism is to value and appreciate all that is good and beautiful in literature. Modern criticism thus devotes itself more to the inner aspect of literature than just to the superficial or external form.

The feeling for Nature was almost lacking in older Bengali literature. Nature, was described only in a formal and typecast way. The external world hardly had any appeal in literature as it was more engrossed with the inner aspect of the life of men. If at times a few imageries were used in poetry from the world of Nature, they were of a fairly ordinary type. Bengali poets were only fond of speaking about the common Kadamba tree, the river Jamuna, and the like but outside this little was brought up. This does not mean that the poets were blind to the beauties of Nature, but it was their failure to comprehend that Nature had any spirit. Nature was not comprehended in the sense in which Shelley or Wordsworth understood and felt for Nature. The transcendental meaning was entirely unknown in Bengali literature before the nineteenth century. Nature is now not only merely described but its beauties are romanticized. Nature now appeals to men and women both in their joys and sorrows, and retorts to their feelings.

The feeling of patriotism and nationalism in Bengali literature is also one of the effects of Western influence. With the exception of a few there is hardly any trace of the feeling of patriotism or love for one's own country. The British period saw the expression of these sentiments. One reason for the silence of older Bengali writers on the subject of patriotism is the people of Bengal did not consider their rulers as aliens. Hence they were unaffected by anything like patriotism or nationalism. Political consciousness started to grow with the march of time.

Western influence has broadened the subject-matter of modern Bengali literature. Bengali literature in the past was concerned generally with some religious groups or other which promoted the worship of deities. The subject matter of literary works was mostly the worship of gods or goddess and intertwined with it was the story of devotees who received blessings and favours. In Kavi Kankan's *Chandi*, the fate of Srimanta is affected by the favours or the curses of the goddess. In *Manasamangal* all the misfortunes of the merchant Chand ebb away when he starts the worship of the goddess Manasa. Similarly Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal* has a religious background where the goddess has her own favourites. The religious aspect plays an important part in these poems where the human interest and the human characters are completely subordinated to the divine beings. The lives and actions of the human beings are regulated by the divine. The characters were similarly drawn and this imitateness resulted in monotony. But the English influence resulted in the vastness of the subject-matter of literature which has introduced exuberance of fancy, convolution of emotions, and heightened imaginativeness. The technique has also become simplified and the language lucid. The personality of the writer for which there was hardly any place in older Bengali literature, began to find an adequate expression and space.

This note of subjectivity which is an important feature of the literature of the West resulted in the replacement of the classic aspects of older Indian literature by personal lyrics.

Various types of literary compositions were introduced under the influence of the West like the novel, the short story, the sonnet, the ode, the elegy, the essay, the satire, etc. The foundation of a prose literature became the most important. The Bengali prose that subsisted before the period of Western influence was an accumulation of Sanskrit, Persian, and Urdu words which had no proper style. The Bengali prose is chiefly the work of writers fostered and reared in the school of Western thought. Western influence has done much to take the prose towards simplicity of style. There is also a spirit of progress and advancement. Bengali writers in earlier ages did not have the nerve to rise above certain rules and conventions and certain trite situations. It would have been inappropriate, had a writer of the Vaishnava period thought of Radha in the same light as Bankimchandra or Rabindranath could think of his heroines, because Radha was the symbol of something divine. Vaishnava writers could not think of love as anything more than the yearning of the human soul for the divine.

Madhusudan Dutta refused to accept his own root openly so as to be included in the Western Literary canon. However his “Captive Lady” which was in imitation of Milton’s “Paradise Lost” proved to be a failure which made him realize that his fancy of becoming ‘another Milton’ would remain only a dream and finally he gave the static Bengali literature a classy look. In “Paradise Lost” Milton, to some degree, challenges the Biblical tradition by making Satan the hero. Dutta’s epic “Meghnad Badh Kavya” was inspired by Milton’s Paradise Lost and depicted Meghnad (Ravana’s son) as the hero and depicted Ramchandra as a dishonest figure full of deception. In following the steps of his Occidental Masters he introduced ‘Amitrakshar Chhanda’ (Blank Verse), Chaturdash Podi Kobita (Sonnet). His “Sharmistha” was infact the first attempt at blank verse in Bengali literature. Bankim Chandra’s “Kamalakanter Daptar” and the dream world of the vagabond are encouraged by De Quincey’s “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater”. The historical novels of Bankim Chandra remind us of Walter Scott. His “Kapal Kundala” is based on Miranda of Shakespeare’s ‘The Tempest’. Rabindranath Tagore himself acknowledged how the “spirit of Europe” had awakened and overwhelmed him when he was an adolescent, and that the passion of a romantic poet like Byron in particular had moved his heart. Even his intense hatred for the Colonizers could not avert him away from his attraction to British poetry. His ‘Shishu’ is inspired by Blake’s “Songs of Innocence” while his “Ekakini” by Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” and “Sandhysangeet” is motivated by Baudelaire’s “Evening Twilight”.

Western influence has broadened the subject-matter of modern Bengali literature. Bengali literature has been to some extent denationalized in the course of its contact with the West but such a situation was inevitable. The westernisation of Bengali life and literature could not be avoided during times when influences were so strongly working and impressions were so vivid but at the same time it was for the better. Occidentalism in thought led to an *Occidentalism* in life and literature. With the amazing spirit of malleability

that is a distinctive feature of the people of Bengal, they have assimilated Western influence in a manner which has led to the steady development of Bengali life and literature.

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