

THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE

During the early 19th century the Bengali intellect learned to raise questions about issues & beliefs under the impact of British rule in the Indian subcontinent. In a unique manner, Bengal had witnessed an intellectual awakening that deserves to be called a Renaissance in European style. The new intellectual avalanche of European knowledge, especially philosophy, history, science & literature through the medium of education in English may be said to have affected contemporary mind & life very radically. Renaissance minds included Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833), Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) & his radical disciples, Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) & his followers, Akshay Kumar Datta (1820-1826), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), and Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902).

The major vehicle & expressions of the Bengal Renaissance were:

- a) the appearance of a large number of newspapers & periodicals
- b) the growth of numerous societies & associations
- c) a number of reform movements, both religious & social

These served as so many forums for different dialogues & exchanges that the Renaissance produced.

The major achievements of the Renaissance were:

- a) a secular struggle for rational freethinking
- b) growth of modern Bengali literature
- c) spread of Western education & ideas
- d) fervent & diverse intellectual inquiry
- e) rise of nationalistic ideas
- f) rise of nationalism challenged the foreign subjugation of country

In *British Orientalism & the Bengal Renaissance* (1969), David Kopf considers the idea of R(r)enaissance (with a lower case r) as synonymous with modernization or revitalization. He underlines that the notion of Renaissance is used to signify a set of cultural patterns associated with Italy during the 15th & 16th centuries by European scholars. To him Renaissance signifies for him a particular kind of socio-cultural process associated with the ideas of revitalization & modernization. The basic shift in ideology occurs at that instant when the idea of Renaissance as a process is accepted in a new context and liberated from specific historical periods or cultures or cultural patterns.

The Indian Renaissance which may be said to have started in Bengal is in some respects different from the European. First of all, its historical location is well marked. The beginnings may be traced to the victory of Clive at Plassey in 1757. The major exponent of the Bengal Renaissance, Raja Rammohan Roy was born in 1772.

Secondly, the great exponents of Bengal Renaissance discovered the sources of humanism in the new learning which they inculcated from the west & not in ancient Literature of the country. Thus when the Government was on its way to establish the Sanskrit College, it encountered opposition from Rammohan, who opposed the idea on the ground that Sanskrit learning was

dry & lacked relevance to modern practice. The Bengal Renaissance may be said to be a movement of discovery rather than re-discovery, 'it was a nascence rather than a re-nascence'. Again, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the greatest product of Sanskrit College was oriental in his scholarship & dress but radically Western in his social reformist thought & educational ideas. Even the great Puranic stories went a considerable transformation in the light of Western thought in the writings of Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

Henry Derozio was a Calcutta Eurasian of Portuguese-Indian ancestry & was much taken up with by the ideology of the French Revolution & English Radicalism. Under his tutelage students were encouraged to debate freely & question authority. He upheld the motto: "He who will not reason is a bigot; he who cannot is a fool, & he who does not is a slave". He was the sole inspiration behind the inauguration of the Parthenon (the Atheneum, according to Sibnath Sastri) on February 15, 1830. Orthodox society was deeply shocked when they knew that some Hindu College boys were reciting the Iliad instead of holy slokas & mantras. It was rumoured that one of the students greeted the goddess Kali with a "good morning, Madam". Bacon, Locke, Hume, Smith, Paine & Bentham were deeply debated. The Derozians not only dismantled traditional customs & Hindu beliefs but they equally criticized the practices of colonialism. In the words of Derozio himself,

*My country! In thy days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,
And worshipped as a deity thou wast,
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?*

Along with Derozio, David Hare devoted his life to reform as well as the furtherance of modern education in his adopted country, Bengal. He was the virtual founder of the Hindu College of 1817 & militated against Press Regulations (1835) & the export of coolies to Mauritius (1838). He also pressed for the extension of the jury system (1835). Disciples of Derozio were known as the followers of Young Bengal & one of their objectives were to summon Hinduism to the bar of reason. Indeed, one of its positive aspect was a fearless rationalism & a candid appreciation of regenerating new ideas from the West.