



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Raja Ram Mohan Roy To Tagore Remembering The True Spirit Of The *Bengali Renaissance*

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Abstract

This research article reviews the phenomenon more philosophically than historically known as The Bengali Renaissance and shows how the first-ever Asian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore imbibed the spirit of Renaissance in its true sense. The early 19th century Bengal saw a steep rise in the intellectuality of the Bengalis, who learned to question the prevalent societal ills and evils, beliefs, and faiths of the people of British India. Uniquely, Bengal experienced an intellectual upheaval that came to be called a Renaissance that marked the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. It started and spread in the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe, marked by an effort to revitalize and transcend ideas and achievements of classical antiquity. After the Late Middle Ages Crisis, it emerged in Europe and was associated with meaningful social change. The exponents hailed the "long Renaissance" beginning in the 14th century and its end in the 17th century. Through English education, it spread like a rockslide avalanche of European knowledge, especially philosophy, history, science & literature. It spread throughout the European colonies and radically affected contemporary minds & life. Renaissance minds and spirits included Raja Rammohan Roy, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio & his radical disciples Debendranath Tagore & his followers, Akshay Kumar Datta, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore & Swami Vivekananda.

Introduction

The Bengali Renaissance was a cultural, social, intellectual, and artistic movement in Bengal of the British Raj. It started in the late 18th century and continued till the early 20th century—the movement began with the victory of the British East India Company at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Raja Rammohan Roy, the major proponent of the Bengal Renaissance, was born in 1772, and he steered Bengal to a new awakening. Roy is rightly regarded as the "Father the Bengali Renaissance".

The Bengal Renaissance witnessed a significant number of newspapers & periodicals. It influenced the growth of numerous societies & associations, both literary and non-literary. Several reform movements, both religious & social, took place, and all of these made way for forums for heterogenous dialogues & exchanges that the spirit of the Renaissance ensured. The momentous attainments of the Renaissance included free-thinking, growth of modern Bengali literature, and widespread and appreciation of Western education & ideas. It offered passionate & myriad intellectual inquiry, the rise of nationalistic sentiments, and the rise of nationalism that eventually contested the foreign domination of India.

We understand that the stage for the Bengal Renaissance was the colonial metropolis of Calcutta. To understand the philosophy, convictions, and artistry of Rabindranath Tagore's works, an appraisal of the social, political, and cultural milieu becomes necessary. The contemporary world always leaves an undeniable imprint upon its people. Societies, art, religion, and faith influence the age and manifest in the literature of the period.

An extract from Tagore's essay '*A Vision of History*' gives us a glimpse of the colonial past of Bengal: "The history of India has been the history of struggle between the mechanical spirit of conformity in social organization and creative spirit of man which seeks freedom and love in self-expression."

A few memorable and historical dates may prove helpful here in the study of this transition age from the old to the new India.

The Battle of Plassey fought in 1757, was of great import to the East India Company and revealed the utterly unethical political life in Bengal. The Hindus were frustrated with the Muslim rule in the province, and still, it cannot prove with certainty that the Battle of Plassey firmly established the British power in India or Bengal. The British still had to fight for another fifty years or more to secure the position of a ruler.

Mir Jafar stayed as the Nawab of Bengal after Siraj-ud-Daulah, and in 1765 after his death, the Calcutta Council named his son Najam-ud-Daulah as ruler of Bengal. Nevertheless, it decreed all the powers into the hands of the English Company. The socio-political condition of Bengal was cluttered. There was anarchy, disorder, bribery, lawlessness, and fleecing everywhere. The state of affairs remained the same when Clive came to India in 1765 as the Governor of Bengal for the second time.

Clive arrived in India for a second time, especially to improve and reshuffle the entire government of the company. Finally, it was Clive who became the founder of the British Empire in India and was also the principal architect of the ruin of Bengal. Warren Hastings was appointed the Governor of Bengal in 1772. Lord Cornwallis succeeded Clive, and for seven years, he remained the Governor-General. The first Partition of Bengal of 1905, known as '*Bango Bhango*', was a territorial separation of the Bengal Presidency by the British Raj. This settlement limited the proprietary right of the *zamindars*. It took the magisterial powers away from the *zamindars*. The ancestors of Tagore, called the Pathuriaghat Tagores, were also affected by this settlement. An excerpt from Tagore's '*The Religion of Man*', where he says, "I was born in what was once the metropolis of British India." Later, Gurudev told an audience at Oxford University in 1930. When he was almost 70 years old:

"My ancestors came floating to Calcutta upon the earliest tide of the fluctuating fortune of the East India Company. The unconventional code of life for our family has been a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British. My grandfather belonged to that period when amplitude of dress and courtesy and generous leisure were gradually being clipped and curtailed into Victorian manners.... I came to a world in which the modern city-bred spirit of progress had just triumphed over the lush green life of our ancient village community. Though the trampling process was almost complete..., something of the past lingered over the wreckage".

The East India Company changed its Governor Generals from time to time. Lord Wellesley became the Governor-General of Bengal, succeeded by Lord Hastings, who completed his work. Lord Amherst took the reigns from Lord Hastings. The dawn of a new era started with Lord William Bentinck. He was a man of resolve, capacity, and the renaissance spirit. He is remembered not for his conquests but also his reforms in various fields. His social reforms and the financial, judicial, administrative, and educational reforms were noteworthy. He abolished Sati and Thuggee. Both these customs led to the deaths of the victims. The death in the case of Sati took place voluntarily by the upper caste widowed women. In this custom, the widowed woman chose or was forced to burn herself on her deceased husband's pyre. One can trace the source of the tradition of Sati back to the Hindu mythologies, and undoubtedly, it was an age-old practice that prevailed among the higher castes. Widowed women saw it as a privilege and honour, and it accompanied the recitation of sacred hymns. The custom continued despite protests, and even Mughal Emperor Akbar tried to suppress the custom of Sati, but without any result. William Bentinck made Sati a penal offence. He was helped in the task by Raja Rammohan Roy, and with this new awakening, Bengal Renaissance started. Bentinck declared the practice of Sati illegal by issuing a regulation in 1829 and made it punishable as "culpable homicide".

In culture and spiritual awakening, the Renaissance in modern Indian literature began with Raja Rammohan Roy. He was the first of the Indian masters of English prose, but he was so great in so many other fields that he belongs to Indian history more than Indo-Anglian literary history.

Roy was a great linguist who drew upon sources written in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Greek, English, French, and Bengali. He is among the most remarkable Indian intellectuals of nineteenth-century India, and Tagore placed him amongst the greatest Indians. Roy is recognized today mainly for his stand against Sati and widow remarriage. We fail to acknowledge him for his endeavour to alleviate the contemporary Hinduism of phony traditions and meaningless rituals. After the death of Raja Rammohan Roy, this Society became the most influential and crucial movement of religious and social reforms in nineteenth-century India, and one of its presiders was Prince Dwarkanath's son, Debendranath Tagore.

Raja Rammohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828. He set up a stringent monolatrous worship of the Supreme-Being, and the Brahmo Samaj endorsed the worship of one God and the universal brotherhood. The early demise of Raja Rammohan Roy left the Brahmo Samaj without any community, body, membership, covenant, or commitment. His pursuit of religious reforms also guided him to assume social reforms. His wakeful mind discerned that Indians could not participate in the medieval to modern social transition without scientific knowledge of modern sciences. He understood that awakening and freedom could not come in isolation and independent strivings, and it could be attained by a universal brotherhood of individuals and nations. He was a social reformer who valued the Renaissance spirit to have its unpretentious dwelling in the minds of Indians and thought he would achieve it by discarding the ills and evils of society.

At a later date, Tagore portrayed a similar thought when he advocated freedom of thought and knowledge in *Gitanjali*:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free ...
... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

Rabindranath Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath, put a new life into Roy's organization and introduced a standard church service, including thanksgiving, praise, and prayer. Debendranath did not officially become a Brahmo until 21 December 1843. Raja Rammohan Roy had influenced him profoundly. He, according to Tagore, was "the best friend of my grandfather."

Rabindranath Tagore, born on 7 May 1861 at number 6, Dwarkanath Tagore's Lane, Jorasanko in Calcutta, was the fourteenth child of Maharshi Debendranath and Sarada Devi. Hailed as Maharshi, Debendranath was accepted as a great saint for his profound holiness, strict adherence to moral principles in conduct, deep piety, and deep advocacy of the worship of the Invisible God.

He suggested a rejection of the idolatry practices prevalent amongst the Hindus. The Maharshi was a proponent of the One Invisible God he found in the *Upanishads*. Still, he differed from the monistic rendition of the scriptures made by the *Advaita* School of Philosophy. The *Advaitin* considers the whole and exclusive uniqueness of the individual self (*Jiva*) and God. The Maharshi strongly opposed the philosophy in which the individual submerges in the Absolute. His religion had eclecticism and had experienced an incremental transition. This attitude to the world and God had a tinge on *Vaishnavas'* introspection and faith, and the early Tagores were devout and religious *Vaishnavites*. This profoundly influenced Tagore's philosophy of life

At an address in China, Tagore talked of the importance of the age in which he was born. He stressed the critical role assumed by his family members in the three revolutionary movements which stirred the country in those days. The first movement was religious, and its founder was Rammohan Roy, who carried the constant and endless war on superstitions and proclaimed the oneness of God. One of the pioneers of this movement for this spiritual renewal was Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. The second movement was in literature, where Bankimchandra rescued the Bangla language from the clutter of dead forms, brought a new crucial perspective, and made Bangla a vehicle for expressing lively invention that

would tolerate no discipline imposed from the outside. The third movement was the national movement; it was political and cultural.

Tagore said, "It was a voice of indignation at the humiliation constantly heaped upon us by people who were not Oriental." While not opposed to the force and energy of Western thought, it discouraged indiscriminate rejection of traditional Indian culture and habits.

A clerical group amongst the Bengal literati took its birth during the rule of the British East India Company. The British taught them the basics of English to run their enterprise effectively. Thus, the Bengali middle-class was born— the Babu, who could communicate in English and imitate Victorian mannerisms. Thus the cradle that nurtured the Bengali intelligentsia in the years to come was born, and that would give birth to the Bengali national spirit later. Soon, a group of prolific people in the English language and European ways and thinking emerged from this middle class. Bengal has always been rich in its cultural and literary heritage, and now, with the inrush of fresh ideas, new intellectualism ushered in the Bengal Renaissance. The scene in the other provinces of the country was not different either.

The Bengali Renaissance started with Raja Rammohan Roy, and it ended with Rabindranath Tagore. Many stalwarts displayed particular aspects of this great intellectual and creative output all over the country. Nineteenth-century Bengal had a matchless variety of religious and social reformers, scholars, literary giants, journalists, patriotic orators, and scientists. All united to form the vision of a new awakening that marked the transition from the 'medieval' to the 'modern', i.e., the great Indian Renaissance.

After the Indian First War of Independence in 1857, the Bengali Renaissance saw a classic outburst of great Bengali literary efforts. Raja Rammohan Roy and Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were the trendsetters. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and others followed suit and built upon this solid foundation. Later, along with the expansion and increase of the national spirit, social problems began to be dealt with, and the language became more colloquial and acceptable to the masses. The foremost amongst these greats was Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Regarding the Bengal Renaissance, Historian Romesh Chander Dutt said:

"The conquest of Bengal by the English was not only a political revolution, but ushered in a greater revolution in thoughts and ideas, in religion and society... Nowhere in the annals of Bengali literature are so many and so bright names found crowded together in the limited space of one century as (these).... Within the three quarters of the present century, prose, blank verse, historical fiction and drama have been introduced for the first time in the Bengali literature...."

Rammohan Roy co-founded the Hindu College in Calcutta (1817) and several other schools and colleges as an educationist. He supported the Western teaching style and advocated education in English, science, Western medicine, and technology. He published many journals and magazines in different languages, notable amongst which were Brahminical Magazine in English (published in 1821), Sambad Kaumadi in Bengali (1821), and Mirat-ul-Akbar in Persian (1822).

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820 –1891) was a philosopher, academic, educator, writer, translator, printer, publisher, entrepreneur, reformer, and philanthropist par excellence. Though best known for his social reforms in proposing and propelling through the Widow Remarriage Act XV, 1856, and his support for the education of the girl children, he was instrumental in reconstructing the Bengali alphabet, reforming Bengali typography into an alphabet of 12 vowels and 40 consonants. His endeavours to facilitate and contemporize Bengali prose were highly significant. He also rationalized and simplified the Bengali alphabet and type, which had remained unchanged since Charles Wilkins and Panchanan Karmakar had cut the first wooden Bangla type fonts in 1780.

Nirad Chaudhuri, born in 1897, was not a Brahmo but absorbed Brahmo values as a child and acknowledged the spirit of the Renaissance. He wrote:

"In this period, under Brahmo and related reforming influences, the Hindu middle-class showed 'greater probity in public and private affairs, attained greater fulfillment of cultural aspirations, and put forth greater creativeness' than at any time in recent centuries."

A Bengali of the next generation Satyajit Roy, whose family were eminent Brahmos, though he was not, also valued the period. "Brahmos of that time," said Ray, "were very powerful figures, very demanding figures with lots of social fervour in them: the willingness, the ability and the eagerness to do good to society, to change society for the better."

At its best, the Bengali Renaissance produced the masters of the movement and seminal minds like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and later Rabindranath Tagore. Both Dutt and Tagore imbibed and merged Western ideology and Eastern traditions to create a unique mutualism that laid the foundation for the twentieth century. It justifies Dutt's commentary of colonial thought in the climax of *Ravana and Meghnad* as against Rama and his proletariat. His embracing of Christianity exposed him to the dichotomies of Western imperialism and led him to turn back and write in Bengali. In true spirit and essence, Dutt imbibed Renaissance awakening.

The philosophical and intellectual awakening during the Bengal Renaissance resulted from the 16th-century European Renaissance. However, we must remember that Europeans did not face the challenges of colonialism as Bengal had to under British rule. In the case of the Bengal Renaissance, there was an inquiry into practices such as the oppressive dowry system, the unfair caste system, and the restrictions of some religious faiths. The Young Bengals, under the guidance of Derozio, encouraged atheism and rationalism to fight the caste system.

If Rammohan Roy trailblazed the first phase of the Bengal Renaissance, Bankimchandra Chatterji was of the second. The religion and culture addressed by Bankimchandra are a synthesis of his learning of world literature and from the Gita. His deep humanism was the source of his propensity to suggest the inclusion of ancient Indian culture in Indian life, manifested in his revolutionary novel, *Anandamath*. His rendition of Renaissance humanism took its form in his image of the Mother in his patriotic hymn, *Vande Mataram*.

Tagore formulated national ideologies by juxtaposing Indian cultural identity and Western ideologies. At a later date, Tagore got disillusioned and took an extremely anti-Western shape. Indeed, Tagore's apprehension of Western culture clashed with his disapproval of the militant nationalism in this phase. He probably tried to address his inner conflict in his powerful novel, *Gora*. In the book, through the protagonist Gora, Tagore juggled both in favour and rejection of Hindu nationalism and Brahmoism. Finally, he realized his dream by creating Visva-Bharati University, where he probably found the answer to the problems of unity and diversity, universalism, and nationalism. And what we have now is a culture called Visva-Bharati, a tangible result of the Bengali Renaissance of the yesteryears.

The Bengal Renaissance gave way to modernism in a different sense but never died. Tagore probably had the same thought when he wrote in *Gitanjali*:

"Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill."

Conclusion

Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar ushered in a new era; the Bengal Renaissance produced a wealth of Bengali literature. Central literary figures were Bengali poet, writer, and journalist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) and later Saratchandra Chatterjee (1876-1938). The Tagore family was compelling and dynamic in the Bengal Renaissance, intending to bring in educational reforms. RN Tagore was the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded to him in 1913 for his book of poems entitled the *Gitanjali*.

More significantly, scientific research and experiments and pioneering works in many fields by Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, a Bengali physicist, biologist, archeologist, botanist, and science fiction writer. Other prominent Bengali and Indian scientists from this period are Satyendra Nath Bose, Meghnad Saha, and Upendranath Brahmachari.

The Bengal Renaissance was an exciting time in Bengali history, with contributions by ingenious individuals that benefited the ensuing eras.

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