

## The Renaissance of Bengal: A Convergence between Secular and Sacred Traditions of Indian Thought \*

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### **Abstract:**

*Modern Indian is intrinsically connected with the eighteenth-century Renaissance in Bengal. To understand the legacy of Bengal Renaissance, we need to understand its pioneers like Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Swami Dyananda Swaraswati, Swami Vivekananda and others. This paper aims to explore the ideological foundation and inspiration behind Renaissance. Classical Indian Philosophy was the inspiration before the protagonist of the Neo-Vedanta/Practical Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda. On the contrary, the famous humanist reformer of nineteenth-century Bengal, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar preferred to act to resolve humanitarian problems and remained silent on philosophical/spiritual issues. Thus, there was a convergence between spiritual/religious traditions and secular humanitarian outlook in the Renaissance of Bengal.*

**Key-words:** *Secularism, Indian Philosophy, Renaissance, Neo-Vedanta, Social Reform, Modern India.*

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India has been a civilizational nation since the pre-historic period. Unlike the other contemporary civilizations like the China, the Egypt etc., the spirit of ancient Indian civilization is still surviving. It is the philosophical speculations and zealous attempts to realize them in this life. The Indian thought tolerated the torture of time, overcame the fierceness of barbaric attacks, reactionary faiths, stereotypes, belief patterns etc. India was repeatedly invaded by alien forces. But none of them was successful to destroy the knowledge-tradition created by the saint and seers in the caves of the Himalayas and maintained in the royal courts as well as the *chatuspatis* of the poor pundits. Whenever the Turkish, Persian, Mongol, the British or the Portuguese invaders rushed into the *janapadas* of India, a Shankara or Chaitinya or a Vivekananda appeared to bring necessary changes in the *lokachara* or *deshacharas* to make them fit for the survival of the glorious tradition of creating and sustaining knowledge. This knowledge tradition was not necessarily confined within philosophical speculations and spiritual pursuit, it was secular also.

This paper shows how the Renaissance of Bengal confronted the mediaeval obscurantist society by invoking a secular tradition in the form of Bengali *bhadraluk* culture on the one hand and on the other, how the Renaissance was culminated in the form of the Neo Vedantic attitude propounded by Sri Ramakrishna and popularized by his famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda in India and across the world. The Neo Vedantic attitude was a synthesis of eternal Vedantic values and modern positivistic/scientific way of life. The main argument in this paper is how the Neo Vedantic Movement of Swami Vivekananda was preceded by the renaissance activism of the luminaries like Rammohan, the other leaders of the Brahma-Samaj and particularly Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar laid the foundation of a new assimilationist cultural atmosphere that would synthesize Western positivism and eternal Indic virtues. The paper has two sections. Section I analyzes the renaissance activism with special reference to that of Vidyasagar as the preparatory works for the outbreak of the Neo-Vedantic Movement. And section II would point out how Swami Vivekananda propounded the manifesto of new India in the form of the Neo Vedantic Movement.

### **Section I**

British colonial administration brought new political regime which had to be legitimized by introducing western ideas, institutions and practices in the fields of religion, society and culture. A section of middle-class elites received maximum benefits of the colonial regime and initiated modernization efforts of its society, religion and culture. Raja Rammohan Roy, 'the Indian Renaissance man' launched the Brahma Samaj Movement to fight against polytheism, movement against the practice of widow immolation called the Sati system and other social evils. He also took initiatives to popularize modern English education, promoted vernacular literature and introduced journalism among the natives. The colonial administration anticipated such reform initiatives for its own legitimation and sustenance. Thus, the modern public life began to grow in the early

nineteenth century colonial Bengal. Voluntary associations started to grow there. The earliest of them was Atmiya Sabha (1815) formed by Rammohan Roy. A number of such associations like the Indian Agricultural and Horticultural Society (1920), the Gaudiya Samaj (1823), the Dharma Sabha (1830), the Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge (SAGK, 1838), the Landholders Society (1838), the Hindu Theo-philanthropic Society (1843) etc. were formed during the subsequent decades. These organizations did not have a uniform objective. Rather they had contradictory goals. As for example, the Atmiya Sabha launched by Rammohan Roy wanted to promote monotheism, but the conservative organization called Dharma Sabhawas the defender of status quo and champion of reactionary thoughts. On the contrary, the organization called the Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge (SAGK) was led by Henry Derozio and his followers became famous for its agenda of Anglican modernity and iconoclastic attitudes. Thus, they were not uniform in nature. Rather, they worked as the 'elective fraternities' of the emerging middle-class urban public. These organizations were the 'mediating institutions between civil society and state' and they had a 'pedagogical mission' of the colonial masters. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar as a contemporary, never identified himself with any of them. Nor did he contest any of these organizations or personalities on their preferred ideological motivations. Nonetheless, the contributions of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in the nineteenth century awakening of Bengal were not insignificant in compare to the other prominent prodigies or the organizations launched by them. It is not possible to understand Vidyasagar unless we understand his time.

Decay and degeneration of Hinduism in Bengal and its adjacent parts were mainly due to the degeneration of the glorious Bhakti-cult created by *Sri Chaitanya* (1486-1533 AD) and the disaffectionate administrative policies followed by the Muslim rulers during the pre-British era. Humanistic Bhakti-cult created by *Chaitanya* and his followers was replaced by ritualistic religious traditions mainly dominated by the *tantras*. The basic principles of Hindu scriptures were grossly misinterpreted and misrepresented by the half-educated and ill-educated priests. On the other hand, the administrative policies of the Muslim rulers threatened the very existence of Hindu social and cultural traditions. Hinduism was relegated into the status of a number of regressive social customs and traditions. Religious practices in the mediaeval period were mostly based on *Smritishastras* and *Dharmasashtras*. So, they were detached from spiritual pursuits and became the reference point of superstitious beliefs and practices like caste-based sectarianism, polytheism, widow immolation, child marriage, polygamy etc. Stagnant feudal economy along with superstitious religious customs and fragmented social and cultural life reduced the pre-British mediaeval period in India as the real 'dark age'.

Bengal was the first province in colonial India to come out of the stagnant mediaeval attitude and mindset. The British colonizers gained control over Bengal and adjacent areas in 1765. Since then, Bengal province in general and Calcutta in particular became the centre of the British colonial

government. As the main centre of the British Indian colonial administration, Calcutta attracted the aspiring youths who were seeking a better lifestyle. The elite compradors of the colonial government and the aspiring common youths were the main targets of the legitimation processes initiated covertly or overtly by the colonizers. Components of modern way of life like education, communication and transport etc. were introduced. Colonial bureaucratic structure was expanded where the urban youths were recruited in various positions. Thus, the middle class as the chief actor of the urban colonial society was being developed in nineteenth century Calcutta. The newly evolved 'colonial public' engaged itself with the rulers in a complex process of interactions. Its ingredients like imitation, reaction, absorption and recreation which transformed the native social background of Bengal and further consolidated the colonial society. Gradually the colonial state made its inroad into the Bengali social life and the 'self-activity' of the newly emerged middle class anticipated such legitimation processes of the colonial state. These self-activities of the Bengali intelligentsia led ideological and intellectual formations of the social, religious and moral life of nineteenth century Bengal and ultimately created a 'break' with the feudal past to give birth to the Renaissance of Bengal/Awakening of nineteenth century Bengal.

Renaissance created new standards of 'being and doing' sometime in consonance with western rationality/Enlightenment while in other occasions, in pursuit of 'reviving' the glories of Indian culture and civilization in the context of modern age. In nineteenth-century Bengal the Derozian 'Young Bengals' emerged as the stereotype of anglicized youths as the crusaders of western rationality/Enlightenment. On the other hand, the followers of *Brahmo Samaj* attempted to redefine the Hindu spiritual life as per the Upanishadic principles as well as that of the utilitarian standards and in the long run created a prodigious '*bhadraluk* intelligentsia' in nineteenth century Bengal. A section of intellectual elites learnt English, French, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Sanskrit and Persian languages not as a part of curriculum but as a pursuit of enlightenment. These intellectual prodigies of nineteenth century Bengal were anglicized but most of them produced literary works and analytical treatises in vernacular i.e. the Bengali language. Thus, new knowledge penetrated into the Bengali society to re-build it with new standards of 'being and doing'. Similarly, the 'Young Bengals' being the champions of westernization/ Europeanisation were criticized for their heedless flight into British culture and rootlessness. But their role in transforming the mediaeval inertia of Bengali society is not less than that of the *Brahmo Samaj*. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was born in early colonial Bengal on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1820 and inherited the legacy left by both the Derozians and the *Brahmo Samaj* without being a part or follower of any of them. Thus, Vidyasagar was truly a unique character in nineteenth century Bengal. According to an opinion, the predecessors of Vidyasagar were very rare except the Buddhist ascetics of 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Therefore, to develop an

understanding on the uniqueness of Vidyasagar we have to know how this unique renaissance man interacted with his contemporaries by following a firm philosophy of life.

Although Vidyasagar himself was a descendent of the pundits belonging to the famous Khanakul-Krishnanagar school of scholasticism and a prolific professor of Sanskrit language and literature, yet he always remained more inquisitive about the latest developments in the positivistic branches of knowledge like physical sciences, geography etc. than the metaphysical pursuit on the *Brahma*, the transcendental only truth held by the conventional Hindu scripture. He wrote brief biographies of famous western scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton etc. in his Bengali book *Jibancharit* based on the famous biographical work of William Chambers entitled *Biography, exemplary and instructive*. In another book *Bududhaya* (in Bengali), Vidyasagar analyzed various core issues of mathematics, physics, chemistry, botany etc. to popularize them among the young learners. His interests in positivistic branches of knowledge and its favourable atmosphere might be influenced by observing the blunt nature of the contemporary scholars in Sanskrit, a large section of whom held an unverified view that the traditional Hindu scriptures like the Vedas, *Upanishadas* and *Puranas* had the rudiments of all the modern scientific discoveries and technological innovations. It was this observation of Vidyasagar which might have inspired him even to condemn the Vedanta and *Sankhya*, the two most venerable theistic schools of Indian philosophy as “false systems of philosophy”. Vidyasagar had to work with the traditional pundits of Sanskrit language and literature. He might have observed how these pundits directly and indirectly obstructed the atmosphere of free learning by mis-quoting the scriptures of the Vedanta and *Sankhya* systems of philosophy. Vidyasagar’s view about the Vedanta and *Sankhya* systems of philosophy does not prove his blind admiration for the west. He made this statement mentioned above to nullify the recommendation of J.R. Ballantyne, the principal of Benaras Govt. Sanskrit College for introducing Bishop Berkeley’s *Inquiry*, a treatise on idealistic western philosophy closer to the Vedanta and *Sankhya* systems of philosophy as a part of curriculum for Sanskrit college in place of J.S. Mill’s *Logic*. So, when Vidyasagar condemned the Vedanta and *Sankhya* systems of philosophy as “false systems of philosophy”, he equally condemned Berkeley’s idealism.

Extreme idealistic standpoint or uncritical pretention of belief in the non-duality resulted hypocritic and dry scholasticism, which was mainly responsible for the decay and degeneration of Indian society, culture and knowledge-tradition. Vidyasagar held that the so-called learned persons were a ‘body of men whose longstanding prejudices are unshakeable’ and thereby this section of people became the basis of the then Indian obscurantist society. That is why Vidyasagar carefully avoided philosophical debates and discussion. It is evident in the account of his meeting with Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa on 5<sup>th</sup> August, 1882 as narrated by Mahendranath Gupta, the compiler of

*Sri RamakrishnaKathamrita*. Ramakrishna was a dominant speaker in the entire conversation. During the whole course of dialogue between these two great figure of nineteenth century Bengal, Ramakrishna addressed Vidyasagar twenty one (21) times, eight (8) of which were containing more than 100 words, a number of fables, devotional couplets, references of (Indian) philosophical figures and terms, mythological characters etc. while the later responded only eleven (11) times in total and ten (10) times towards Ramakrishna with as brief as the sentences of the length of three (3) to eight (8) words without any reference of religion, philosophy or mythology. Only one of the replies of Vidyasagar was a counter-question enquiring whether the Almighty had given “more *shakti* (power) to some and less to others”.

The image of Vidyasagar as evident from this dialogue is not that of a mere passive listener. Rather he retorted the great ascetic of nineteenth century Bengal with the question he asked as mentioned above and asserted implicitly that inequality was not a natural/*a priori* phenomenon. It was the product of the social and the political and therefore it was ‘open to human action’ for remedial purpose. His reluctance in philosophical arguments also indicates that he was not ready to accept any transcendental destiny of life by ignoring his surroundings from where the voice echoing to get rid of structural miseries. This is perhaps Vidyasagar’s philosophy of praxis which inspired him to engage in social reforms and discouraged him to engage in philosophical dialogue/discussion or deliberation.

Although Vidyasagar hardly engaged in any philosophical dialogue/discussion or deliberation personally, yet for the success of his social reform agenda he did so publicly. Vidyasagar is regarded as the forerunner of various pro-women social reform agenda like prohibition of child-marriage, introduction of widow re-marriage, prohibition of *kulin*-polygamy etc. These social evils were deep rooted since the pre-colonial period and an over-powerful patriarchal hegemony was the defender of them. Vidyasagar fought them by invoking a counter-hegemony against the medieval patriarchy. To develop a successful counter-hegemony, he published a number of pamphlets like *Sarvasubhakari*, *Balyabibaher Dosh*, *Bidhaba-bibaha* etc. to convince the emerging ‘public’ of the city of Calcutta, the pundits like Brajanath Vidyaratna and their patriarchal patrons like Raja Radhakanta Deb. Although he could not convince the defenders of patriarchy, yet a common consensus was established in favour of his arguments among the common educated ‘public’ of Calcutta. Vidyasagar, who explicitly showed reluctance in philosophical dialogue/discussion with Ramakrishna by replying the query of the later regarding his philosophical/ecclesiastical position passionately engaged in *shastric* exegesis in the assemblies of the Pundits at the premises of the landlords to tame the mediaeval Indian patriarchy appeared in the form of the Raja-Pundit nexus before him.

Another aspect of Vidyasagar's social action agenda was consolidation of the modern school education in Bengal by following very strict administrative measures and also by producing socially relevant contents in the curriculum. Vidyasagar opened a large number of Anglo-vernacular schools by utilizing the sanctions of the Wood's Dispatch of 1854. These new schools created opportunity of education among the common people and thus they helped to promote and sustain the culture of Bengali *Bhadralok* in Bengal.

Thus, we can find plenty of incidents in Vidyasagar's life where he preferred his praxis of social action over religious or philosophical debates, discussion etc. be it in his social reform initiatives or in his own career as an educational administrator. Hence, we can say that Vidyasagar's philosophy of life was very closer to that of a pragmatic social reformer with a liberal-individualistic conviction. Such a liberal-individualistic conviction was the harbinger of man-making mission launched by Vivekananda to ameliorate the decay and degeneration of the pre-colonial and early colonial India.

## Section II

Vivekananda was an embodiment of the Renaissance spirit. In him, the five thousand years old India emerged anew in nineteenth century. According to a recent observation, 'in Swami Vivekananda, the nineteenth century Indian renaissance found culmination'. His master, Sri Ramakrishna was 'the consummation of two thousand years of spiritual life of three hundred million people'. For Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna as 'the fulfillment of Indian sages....and ..the sage for the time whose teaching was the most beneficial' was the main source of inspiration and guide for propounding the message of practical Vedanta.

The Vedanta philosophy as expounded by Shankara and others intended to realize the Brahman, the ultimate reality of the microcosm and macrocosm by hearing the *shrutis*, contemplating on the principle of the *shrutis*, and dwelling upon the Reality called the Brahman. Realizing the Brahman in this life is the ultimate goal of life for everyone. For that the exponents of Vedanta held that renouncing this worldly life is the main precondition. Shankara created the *Dashanami Sampradaya*, the ten sects of the ascetics which would maintain the purity of Vedantic principles by renouncing this worldly life and also by taking refuge to a life ascetic and realize the ultimate truth. Vivekananda, on the other hand, expounded the goal of human life is "self-realization by doing welfare to all". Such an altruistic design of Vedantic philosophy aroused out of the Vedic literature and the realizations of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. In the *Atharva Veda*, we find the verse that announces the sovereignty of man as "Mighty am I, superior by name upon the earth, all-conquering am I, completely conquering every region". The anecdotes in the biography of Sri Ramakrishna are the testimonies of realization of this grand truth. Observations made by Will

Durant, the famous philosopher would be appropriate in this regard: “He (Sri Ramakrishna) tolerated sympathetically the polytheism of the people, and accepted humbly the monotheism of the philosophers, but in his own living faith God was a spirit incarnated in all men and the only true worship of God was the loving service of mankind.”

Such a great spiritual inspiration motivated Vivekananda to understand India, its people and society by travelling from the north to south and east to west of the subcontinent. He found the miserable situation of the country. Then he went to the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 and delivered the eternal message of the Vedanta and came back to India and founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 with goal of “The attainment of realization and doing good for the world”. His concept of religion is unique in the sense that it announces the divinity of each soul, harmonizes the contradictory doctrines and sect and above all opens the space for social actions in the form of service to mankind. He says, “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest that divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship or psychic control, or philosophy – by all or more or all of these and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms are but secondary details.”

Thus, we can conclude that the Renaissance of Bengal was a successful blending of the eternal values of classical Indian philosophy with the new ideas and observations developed in the field of physical sciences, geography etc. to make the Indian mind free from narrow parochialism and interpreted the basic ideas of Vedanta to make them fit for self-realization through social actions and services. Hence, the ideology of the Renaissance of Bengal was both secular and sacred.

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