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**Panel 9:  
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**The Bengal Renaissance : a critique**

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Preamble

This paper welcomes listeners to a fresh review of the phenomenon known as The Bengal Renaissance. It is a fact that during the early 19<sup>th</sup> 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), & Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902).

The major vehicle & expressions of the Bengal Renaissance were:

- the appearance of a large number of newspapers & periodicals
- the growth of numerous societies & associations
- 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 secular struggle for rational freethinking
- growth of modern Bengali literature
- spread of Western education & ideas
- fervent & diverse intellectual inquiry
- rise of nationalistic ideas
- 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 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> 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. It can then be applied to any culture at any period of history (Kopf 280-289).***

#### Critique of Bengal vis-a vis the European Renaissance

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' (Gupta 68). 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 (Gupta 68).

The first phase of the Renaissance coincided with the rapid transition from medievalism to modernism in early 19<sup>th</sup> century India. The most prominent exponent & inaugurator of this transition may be said to be Raja Rammohan Roy. In his letter written to James Silk-Buckingham on January 18, 1818 he stated how the "present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interests." This is because of

***the distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions & subdivisions among them, has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling and the multitude of religious rites & ceremonies & the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprises. - It is necessary that some change should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage & social comfort (Gupta 9).***

His program of religious reform also led him to embrace social reforms. His alert mind perceived that without knowledge of the fundamentals of modern sciences Indians cannot participate in the social transition from the medieval to the modern. To achieve modernization, therefore, grounding in Western systems of thought was Absolutely essential. To Victor Jacquemont he confessed that India requires many more years of English domination so that she might not have many things to lose while she is reclaiming her political independence (Gupta 1958. 14). He realized that the progress of Indians did not lie in isolation of their

independent strivings but in the brotherhood & interdependence of individuals as well as nations. He was the truly social reformer who could realize the incarnation of the Renaissance spirit in the minds of his countrymen. Tagore had emphatically chanted in his Gitanjali:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;*

*Where knowledge is free;*

*Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic wars;*

*Where words come out from the depth of truth;*

*Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;*

*Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;*

*Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action –*

*Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.*

*(holisticonline.com)*

Ram Mohan's task was carried further in a revolutionary but iconoclastic manner by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, who, along with David Hare (1775-1841) was responsible for dissemination of European learning & science among Bengalis. However, unlike other leaders around them, they were godless secularists with little faith in denominations or religious instruction & yet staunch idealists.

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?  
(Gupta 17)*

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.

In this context it must be remarked that the Bengal Renaissance was flawed from the outset not merely because it failed to involve a regeneration of ancient literature & institutions but also because the educated community of India hyped only the immediate benefits of British rule in India & not its exploiting character. The protagonists of our “Renaissance” failed to comprehend the needs of the toiling masses who lived in a nether world; with their obsessive Hindu traditions & rituals as well as the handicaps of their fellow Muslim citizens. In other words their intellectualism did not make common cause with the masses. ***It was not a mass movement.***

However, *the real critique of the Bengal renaissance lies elsewhere.*

It must be understood that the expansion of British imperialism in India unleashed the forces of bourgeois revolution. The consolidation of the British empire under a centralized governance as well as the introduction & implementation of machinery in industrial production led to the historical inevitability of the bourgeois revolution , without which India could not emerge into the Twentieth century. But such an intellectual & financial nascence or awakening led to the

birth of the Indian middle class & the germination of Indian nationalism. On the one hand the desired objective of the British Empire was the domination of India but paradoxically the forces of colonization produced its inevitable contradiction in the modernization of India.

Western ideology directly & indirectly contributed to the rise of Indian nationalism. Both Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) & Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) possessed the historical sense to comprehend the true significance of the economic & political forces let loose in India by British imperialistic forces. They were aware of the economic exploitation but they understood that it was not expedient to resist the economic revolution in India which would be later beneficial in the transition of India from medievalism to modern. So an understanding of the Bengal Renaissance should follow a broader study of the critical thought accompanying the ideology & practice of social reformers like Rammohan & Dwarkanath among others, who accepted the influx of Western ideas but simultaneously they argued against the economic & political deprivation of the masses.

However, it is to be remarked that their revolutionary efforts lacked support from the rising middle class as well as the general body of Hindus. On April 20, 1843 Tarachand Chakravarty, a follower of Derozio & a disciple of Rammohan established the Bengal British Indian society under the chairmanship of George Thompson with the objective of securing the welfare & extending the rights of fellow Indians.

In 1867 the Hindu mela/fair was started to foster Swadeshi & to encourage the development of indigenous language, culture as well as the manufacture of Indian goods under the inspiration of Debendranath Tagore. This forum continued its task of supporting the growth of national language & literature. However, the political consciousness of the middle class was not mature enough to realize the full implications of such ventures & members of the intelligentsia were largely ignorant of such developments. As yet the political consciousness of the middle class was in a teething stage & still not confident of its own power & role in the struggle for national emancipation. Again, Swami Vivekananda's tirade against caste restrictions did not bear fruit because he failed to ally himself with those who worked for its abolition. Thus Swamiji's protest remained a verbal condemnation & was not geared into a substantial agenda. On the other hand, he upheld Hinduism, root & branch with his messiac magnetism. Thus the

acceptance of traditions after critical appraisal spelt the submergence of the rationalism of the Renaissance under the emotional tide of revivalism. In a different sense, the Swami was a fervent nationalist & all his efforts was directed towards the strengthening of the freedom movement. In this way the trajectory of the Bengal Renaissance was diverted from a revival or Renaissance of ancient ,literature, art & culture to a nationalistic struggle inspired by Western ideology & political thought. In a supreme paradox the Bengal Renaissance attained the character of a hybrid movement & culture since it imbibed Western influences not merely to return to roots but also engaged in its debunking.

In its best, the Bengal Renaissance was not a step backwards but a step forward in the reckoning of the masters of the movement & seminal minds like Michael Madhusudan Dutt & later Rabindranath Tagore, who used the contents of Western Ideology & Eastern traditions to create a remarkable symbiosis between rationalism & passion to forge British India's march to the Twentieth century.

In this sense we can understand Madhusudan's critique of colonial thought in the apotheosis of Ravana & Meghnad as against Rama & his rabble. His embracing of Christianity exposed him to the contradictions of Western imperialism and led him to write in Bengali. There is no other instance of Renaissance in Bengal than his example. His desire for Western culture inspired him to write:

*Where man in all his truest glory lives,  
And nature's face is exquisitely sweet;  
For those fair climes I heave impatient sigh,  
There let me live and there let me die.*  
([Wikipedia.html](#))

Madhusudan embraced Christianity at the church of [Fort William](#) in spite of the objections of his parents and relatives on [February 9, 1843](#). Later, he escaped to [Madras](#) to escape persecution.

He describes the day as:

*Long sunk in superstition's night  
By Sin and Satan driven,  
I saw not, cared not for the light  
That leads the blind to Heaven  
But now, at length thy grace, O Lord!  
Birds all around me shine;  
I drink thy sweet, thy precious word,  
I kneel before thy shrine!*  
([Wikipedia.html](#))

On the eve of his departure to England he wrote :

*Forget me not, O Mother,  
Should I fail to return  
To thy hallowed bosom.  
Make not the lotus of thy memory  
Void of its nectar Madhu*  
([Wikipedia.html](#))

Madhusudan's life was a mixture of joy and sorrow. Although it could be argued that the loss of self-control was largely responsible for his pitiable fate, his over-flowing poetic originality for joy was to become forever immortalized in his oeuvre.

Vidyasagar's lofty praise runs:

*Meghnad Badh is a supreme poem*  
([Wikipedia.html](#))

[Rabindranath Tagore](#) would later declare:

*It was a momentous day for Bengali literature to proclaim the message of the universal muse and not exclusively its own parochial note. The genius of Bengal secured a place in the wide world overpassing the length and breadth of Bengal. And Bengali poetry reached the highest status*  
([Wikipedia.html](#))

In Byron's dramatic poem Manfred what the Abbot of St. Maurice spoke of Manfred can equally be applied to the life of Madhu

*This should have been a noble creature: he  
Hath all the energy which should have made  
A goodly frame of glorious elements,  
Had they been wisely mingled, as it is,  
It is an awful chaos light and darkness  
And mind and dust and passion and pure thoughts  
Mixed and contending without end or order,  
All dormant or destructive*  
([Wikipedia.html](#))

His triumph & tragedy is an apt instance of the achievements & demerits of the Bengal Renaissance.

If Rammohan Roy was the greatest figure of the first phase of the Bengal Renaissance, Bankimchandra Chatterji was of the second, albeit in a different sense, that is, if one considers the Bengal Renaissance as a loose term, including the connotations not merely of a revival of ancient learning & arts but as a nascence of a new spirit spurred by the influx of Western ideas, emphasising the conflict in this difficult marriage of cultures .

The early novels of Bankimchandra reflect the Renaissance sense of wonder at the central paradox of man- his greatness as well as his insignificance. At best his early novels showcase

the power of passion in Nurjahan ( *Durgeshnandini*), Mrinalini (*Kapalkundala*) who spell out the richness of human emotions.

In *Krishnakanter Will*, on the other hand, Man's reason becomes supreme in the achievements of Bhramar. She is a woman with remarkable strength of character and may be said to be the Indian version of the apotheosis of man/woman. Suryamukhi in *Bisha-Briksha* is also an embodiment of the same idea.

The religion & culture preached by Bankimchandra is a synthesis of his learning imbibed from the Gita as well as from Auguste Comte & the author of *Ecce Homo*. His sturdy humanism is reflected in *Sitaram & Devi-Chaudhurani*. His profound humanism becomes the source of his penchant & recommendation of ancient Indian culture & finds its apt embodiment in his revolutionary novel, *Anandamath*.

*Renaissance humanism is incarnated in his conception of the Mother in his patriotic song, Bandemataram.*

Any study of the Orientalist legacy and the problem of Brahmo identity leads to Rabindranath Tagore's reinterpretation of the Adi Brahmo idea of Hindu modernism and which forms his ideological contribution to Bengal studies. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal the problem of modernity became ever so acute with the proliferation of British imperialism and the consequent rise of militant nationalism.

Tagore played a key role in this historical juncture by formulating ideas about cultural identity, nationalism in view of his eclectic grasp of both Western and Eastern ideologies. For example, Tagore's pro-Western proclivities during 1886-1898 has been noted by scholars like S.C. Sarkar and Rachel Baumer among others. And yet during 1898 and 1906 Tagore's position was extremely anti-Western (Sarkar 168). Indeed, Tagore's suspicion of Western culture coincided with his flirtations with militant nationalism in **this phase**.

**This question has found its artistic exposition in his powerful novel, *Gora***

*Gora* hovers between both a defense as well as a repudiation of Hindu nationalism and Brahmoism. Like Dwijendranath Tagore, *Gora* declares that:

*A child gradually grows up to be a man but man does not suddenly become a cat or dog. I want the changes in India to be along the path of India's development for if you suddenly begin to follow the path of England's history- then everything from first to last will be a useless failure. I am sacrificing my life to show you that the power and greatness of our country have been preserved in our country itself  
(Gora 330).*

Finally, it must be noted that Tagore's eclecticism found its embodiment in his desire to create an institution where the wealth of past culture might find its symbiosis in its encounter with modern influences. Indeed, his dream was realized in his establishment of Visva-Bharati University, where the the problems of unity and diversity, universalism and nationalism was finally resolved after fourteen years of intense struggle.

Tagore's utopia, which was formulated in the backdrop of the conflict between British imperialism and Indian nationalism honoured the Orientalist legacy as well as the modern. Thus, the Bengal Renaissance did not die but was reincarnated in a different sense. Here lies its cardinal difference from the European Renaissance.

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