

HISTORICAL NOTES

INDIAN RENAISSANCE: THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA

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Introduction

The history of the Indian renaissance in the 19th century and the European Renaissance in the 14th century offers us a pleasant contrast and also a curious scenario of creative synthesis of the best of the East and the West. With the adoption of English as the official language of British India in 1834, a phase of confrontation, co-operation and imitation started. But the main outcome was the resurrection of nationalist ideals and perceptions in the newly growing urban centers of India—a definite re-awakening; a new renaissance became noticeable. All other negative aspects silently slipped into oblivion and obscurity. The cultural and intellectual heritage of modern India derives largely from this phase of questioning and search. This was the beginning of the making of modern India. It generated an inner quality of earnest inquiry and search, of contemplation and action, of balance and equilibrium, in spite of conflict and contradiction. There was a poise in it and a unity in the midst of disparity and diversity, and its temper was one of supremacy over the changing environment, not by seeking escape from it, but fitting in with it, in order to move with the dynamic history of changing world.

Ram Mohan: The First of the Moderns

Politically, the period of ten decades between the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Sepoy Mutiny (1857) was the era of expansion of the British Empire in India and of its subsequent consolidation. It was also the time of Indian social

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progressive reform and of the eradication of feudal and obscurantist forces in Indian life. In spite of the vileness of British motives, there was a growing co-operation between the ruler and the ruled, ushering in the making of modern India. Dynamic and farsighted personalities among Indians were the demand of the day. It was at this critical juncture of modern Indian history when Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833) appeared on the scene. Himself a versatile Orientalist, he fought earnestly for the introduction of more liberal and enlightened system of education embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy with other useful branches of learning. Ram Mohan was our first internationalist and progressive modern thinker. He gave a public dinner in Calcutta when the Spanish people regained their Republican Constitution (of 1812) in 1820. When on his way to England in 1829, he saw in a port a French ship flying revolutionary flags, he insisted on visiting the ship to honour the people who preached the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789- “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity”. He must have noticed the contradiction in British policy in Colonial India-ruling tyrannically and yet opening before aspiring Indians avenues to the stream of European history, literature, art, science and culture. In a sense, it was the beginning of the Indian Renaissance. Renaissance means Re + “naissance” (birth) from the Latin word- *nascentia*-French word- *nasci* (be born) – resurrectio of learning. In Europe, after the demise of scholasticism, when the Christian Church was the repository of all knowledge and learning, the Renaissance (1500-1700) was the revival of art and literature (letters) under the influence of classical models which began in Florence (Italy) in the 14th century. However, in India, it was not a blind imitation of the European Renaissance; learning was always there in India- flamboyant, vibrant and dynamic; it was the meeting of minds of both Indian and European thinkers. Indian Renaissance, in nutshell, was a constructive interaction and a creative synthesis of the best of both worlds-East and West- within the enlightened canopy of classical Indian tradition and culture. Ram Mohan was the torch-bearer-followed by Iswar Chandra Bandopadhaya (Vidyasagar) (1820-1891), Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-1894), Rabindranath Thakur (1861-1941), Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya (1876-1938), Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) and many others from all walks of Indian life, culture, religion, literature and science.

Ram Mohan’s importance in modern Indian history rests upon the facts that he revived interest in the ethical principles of the Vedanta school as a counterpoise to the Western assault on the Indian culture and contributed to the

popularization of the Bengali language, while at the same time he was the first Indian to apply to the Indian environment the fundamental social and political ideas from the American war of Independence (1775-1783) and the French Revolution of 1789.

**Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831): The Storm-Petrel
on the Indian Horizon**

His is an amazing story of what a very young man, born in an Anglo-Indian family of Portuguese descent in Kolkata in 1809 (more than 200 years ago), could achieve for the posterity of India, especially Bengal, with his extraordinary precocious talent. Within a span of life of 22 years and 8 months he left a phenomenal legacy as a rare Anglo-Indian prodigy, a thinker, a fiery journalist, a spirited patriot, one of the harbingers of Bengal Renaissance and a pioneer of Indian Modernity.

He wrote several patriotic poems while declaring India as “My Native Land”. Indeed, he was the first person to exhort the words “freedom from British rule”. He and his firebrand student-disciples of “Young Bengal” fought against “*Satidaha*” (widow burning), idolatry, bigotry and for widow re-marriage, the spread of education and ideas of liberty and human rights.

Derozio made a profound impact on learning and the shaping of modern history in India. He lit a torch of knowledge which was carried forward by some of his pupils at Hindu College (Est. 1817- later named Presidency College in 1855). He taught his students to prize rationality and shun superstition during his brief teaching tenure (about six years) at his college. But by then he had ignited the spark which would light up the path of Bengal Renaissance and was instrumental in effecting the transition from tradition to relative ‘modernity’. Derozio’s emphasis on critical and free thinking, rational radicalism and his young Bengal movement features eloquently and significantly in the whole paradigm of Bengal Renaissance.

Vidyasagar: Leading Light of Indian Renaissance

The Indian Renaissance was not a replica of the European Renaissance. The Humanist ideology that once developed in Europe in the course of the Industrial Revolution (1780-1850) was essentially a thought or concept evolved in opposition to the socio-cultural outlook steeped in religious values. Later in Europe, humanism compromised with the tenor of Christianity, but in its early

phase, mechanical materialism and Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) agnosticism (Knowledge of the Supreme Being—God—the First Cause—lying beyond the reach of human intelligence), Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804-1872) materialism and Karl Heinrich Marx's (1818-1883) dialectical materialism remained its guiding principle. This humanism began opposing the Church and the concept of God. Its outlook was that "anything that is irrational and considered not verifiable ought to be discarded". It was secular and completely free from religious tutelage. And man was its focal point.

Vidyasagar, though born as Brāhmin and versatile Sanskrit scholar—rather a colossus in Sanskrit studies—once made the most radical statement that "Sāṅkhya" and "Vedānta" (one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy—forming the basis of most modern schools of Hinduism) were false systems of philosophy. He emphasized the study of Western philosophies, which according to him, evolved rationally as a result of interaction with the progress of science.

In our country, with the advent of Ram Mohan— the Father of Modern India— we felt the first impact of secular humanism of Europe. He stirred up the Renaissance movement in India through social reforms, combining European bourgeois humanist thoughts, ideals and concepts with the essence of religion.

But the tenor of Vidyasagar's thinking was absolutely secular. He defined a break— a very bold break at that —to give a new orientation to the current of Renaissance since Ram Mohan initiated religious reform. It was Vidyasagar who freed the humanist movement, as far as it was possible to do it, in the then social condition, from religious outlook and influence. His conduct, his entire life and works affirm this truth unequivocally.

Thus, the approach of these two stalwarts of the Indian Renaissance to socio-cultural reforms offers us a stimulating contrast. However, the aim of both approaches was one and the same —to free the Indian society from the icy clutches of obscurantism and religious orthodoxy.

Madhusudan : The Milton of India

The story of literary conversion of Madhusudan is instructive and is sound advice for all of us today. Like Madhusudan's English works [*Visions of the Past: The Captive Ladie* (1849); *The Anglo-Saxon and Hindu* (1854); *Ratnavali* (Translation- 1858); *Sermista* (Tr.) (1859); *Nil-Durpan* (Tr.) (1861) and Essays,

Poems, ‘Rizia: Empress of India’], Rabindranath wrote only one original poem in English- ‘The Child’ after seeing the Oberammergau Passion play in 1930; Bankim also wrote his very first novel ‘Rajmohan’s wife’ (1864) in English. None of them indulged any more in English in their creative works and literary expression. Jawaharfall Nehru (1889-1964)- first Prime Minister of independent India, educated in England (Harrow and Cambridge) also echoed the same limitation. Some of his works in English- ‘*The Discovery of India*’ (1946) and ‘*Glimpses of World History*’ (1934-1935) are considered to be a classic contribution to politico-historical literature. But he is not known to have written anything significant in his mother-tongue-Hindi. He also once said about himself, in despair, - ‘out of place everywhere, at home nowhere’. Madhusudan’s wisdom did trickle down to posterity quite successfully. Madhusudan repented. He specially wrote a sonnet on his timely repentance:

“O Bengal, your store is full of jewels of all sorts
 Unwise I am for neglecting all those
 Travelled abroad for greed of others’ wealth,
 Went on begging in foreign lands in dark days,
 Spent many days in dire unhappiness.”

Madhusudan became Christian Michael, not because he was ritually attracted to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He thought, rightly or wrongly, that if he was converted to Christianity, the religion of the then colonial rulers, he would be able to shed the limitations of his orthodox Hindu milieu. However, this religious disadventure did not stand in the way of his literary re-incarnation-the native ultimately returned to the ever-warm lap of his mother.

In literature, Michael Madhusudan Datta was a maverick, a person of independent and unorthodox views; he was an iconoclastic poet who attacked traditional concepts and principles in his own society. Madhusudan was Bengal’s greatest poet between Bharatchandra Roy (1712-1760) and Rabindranath Thakur (1861-1941). Madhusudan, in fact, was the first great poet of modern Bengali literature. He was known as ‘the Milton of Bengali literature’.

He was a dynamic, erratic person and an original genius of a very high order. He was academically baptized in the temple of Indian Renaissance- the Hindu College (Est. 1817) – later named Presidency College, Calcutta, in 1855. He was an Anglo-phile turned Christian in 1843 at the age of 19 against the will of his parents. He always dreamt dreams of ‘Albion’s distant shore’, where it was

his life's ambition to settle, wrote English poetry and nursed hopes of fame as an English poet. "Albion" (probably of Celtic origin) is the ancient name of Britain, mentioned by Pytheas of Massilia (4th century BC); but the Romans having in mind the white cliffs of Dover on the English Channel, assumed it to be derived from '*Albus*' (Latin-meaning 'white'). He began his career by writing in English; his long poem 'The Captive Ladie' (1849) shows the influence of George Gordon Byron (1788-1824) and Thomas Moore (1779-1852); other poems show the influence of John Keats (1795-1821)-the doctor-poet-trained in Guy's Hospital, London.

But his English writings were apparently unsuccessful in the then English circles of India. The prodigal returned to his mother's lap when he was thirty-four and did not write a syllable in his mother-tongue before that. His contribution to the development of Bengali was spectacular and significant; the new sap of Western thought and feeling helped Bengali literature to put forth new leaves on every branch. His turbulent life amply illustrated the then 19th century British Bengal's intellectual and spiritual ambivalence, and so with his "real, though somewhat erratic, genius", he remained "an alien star, a brief and brilliant wanderer into our literary firmament" [J.C. Ghosh, *Bengali Literature* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 118, 136-7 and 147]. It was he who introduced '*amitrākṣar*' (a form of blank verse with run-on lines and varied caesuras- both Petrarchan (1304-1374) and Shakespearean (1564-1616)- and many other original lyric stanzas. Francesco Petrarch was an Italian poet and scholar and is known as the Father of Sonnets. His personal life can be considered as a symbol of the entire history, not only of Bengali humanism, but of the whole of contemporary Bengali culture. If he had lived twenty years longer, he would have felt that the prayer in his last sonnet had been answered and that, although his hand had failed, others had lightened up Bengal and made her what he wished her to be- the jewel of India.

"From heaven wand'ring, exile now I seek,
One farewell favour beg with spirit meek-
Light up Bengal, India's jewel may she bide!

Bankim Chandra, Rabindranath, Saratchandra and Nazrul, along with other luminaries, crowned that jewel in the late 19th and 20th centuries in Bengali literature.

While abroad, Madhusudan realized the mistake of his youthful misfire in writing. In a letter written to one of his close friends, Gourdas Byasak, from Versailles, France, dated January 26, 1865, he was more eloquent. He wrote:

.... "I pray God that the noble ambition of Milton to do something for his mother-tongue and his native land may animate all men of talent among us. If there be anyone among us anxious to leave a name behind him, and not pass away in oblivion like a brute, let him devote himself to his mother-tongue. That is legitimate sphere- his proper element. European scholarship is good in as much as it renders us masters of the intellectual resources of the most civilized quarters of the globe; but when we speak to the world, let us speak in our own language. Let those who feel that they have spring of fresh thought in them, fly to their mother-tongue. Here is a bit of 'Lecture' for you and the gents who fancy that they are Swarthy Macaulays and Carlyles and Thackerays ! I assure you, they are nothing of the sort. I should scorn the pretensions of that man to be called 'educated' who is not master of his own language"

He is the torch bearer of modern Indian intellect. The bridge he built in Bengali literature between the East and the West more than a century ago is well established today in all its glare and glory.

On the death of Madhusudan in 1873, editor Bankim, 'the Emperor of Bengali Literature' wrote a long flamboyant obituary in his *Bangadarshan* (Bhadra, 1280, p. 209-210: A.D. 1873):

...."If a traditionalist proud European asks you: Who are the great Bengalis? We will say: Among the prophets –Sri Chaitanyadev; among the philosophers – Raghunath, and among the poets- Sri Joydev and Sri Madhusudan..... Fly the national flag- insert the name- 'Sri Madhusudan' on it..... Bengal is in mourning- in tears for the great poet of Bengal".

Notwithstanding his puritan, conservative and traditional background, this magnanimity of Bankim is spectacular and is an example to others in all walks of life. Gems can only appreciate gems.

Respect and gratitude one cannot demand; one needs to deserve them. Madhusudan deserves all our appreciation, respect and heart-felt gratitude. He is one of the intellectual icons of modern India. Michael Madhusudan will always murmur in our memory lane; his sonnets sing the song of Bengali soul; his lyrics echo the language of Bengali lips- rather rhymes of literary radicalism, and his plays paint the ethos of Bengali emotions, sentiments and humanism.

Bankimchandra: Emperor of Bengali Literature

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-1894) was not only the literary beacon of Bengal in the 19th century but the inspiring soul of the revolutionary

struggle for the liberation of India from the clutches of cultural, literal and political colonialism in British India. The lyrical song- '*Bandemataram*' (1882) (Hail to The Mother), originally written in 1874, later included in his novel – *Anandamath* (Abbey of Bliss) became the national anthem of Indian National Congress (Est. 1885). Many of our patriotic revolutionaries went to the gallows singing this '*mantra*' (hymn) during the independence movement. Nobel Laureate (1913) poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote the music for the epoch-making hymn and sang the song himself at the 1896 session of Indian National Congress held in Calcutta; Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) translated it into English. '*Bandemataram*' is "a comitist hymn, and anti-theocratic ode of rationalism, freed from the cult of gods". The Mother, to Bankim, is not an ordinary religious deity, but a new entity- the mother country: India, in which we, irrespective of race, religion and caste, live and move and have our being. Bankim simply epitomized the sacred and eternal religion of patriotism and nationalism in one single poem. Unfortunately, the real meaning of this poem was tragically misunderstood in certain communities in India. The result was the artificial mutilation of Mother India in August, 1947.

Bankim is not only the Father of *Bandemataram*; he is also the spiritual father of Indian nationalism. Since the beginning in the 10th century AD, Bengali literature has been secular, non-communal and liberal. Bankim maintained that great tradition. He wrote in "*Rajsingha*" (1882):

"No-one is good as only because he is a Hindu;
No-one is bad as only because he is a Muslim"

Of course, experts notice slight sectarian deviation in Bankim's '*Anandamath*' (1882) from secular ideals. This deviation is rather minor and insignificant when compared with his enormous positive contribution to the Indian Renaissance. Muslims of the day accepted Bankim's positive contribution to the nation and joined 'the *Bandemataram*' chours without any inhibition. As a slogan, it was raised from common Hindu-Muslim platforms during the movement against the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Khilafat movement in the early 1920's. The alleged sectarianism in '*Anandamath*' slipped into oblivion. Nothing in this world is a paragon of perfection or a den of fallibilities. Every man is a mean between virtue and vice, as Aristotle (384-322 BC) proclaims in his Virtue Theory of Logic. As such, Bankim, with his virtues and vices, is still the Emperor of Modern Indian Literature. He was great.

Spiritual Message of the Renaissance

Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath Dutta: 1863-1902)- charismatic disciple of the Hindu mystic Ram Krishna Paramhansadev (Gadadhar Chattopadhyay: 1836-1886) took the spiritual message of Indian Renaissance to the West. He attended the World Parliament of Religions, which was a part of the World fair on religion, science, art, law and human rights held during September 11-27, 1893, at the Hall of Columbus, Michigan Avenue, Chicago, USA, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) — so-called discoverer of the New World. It was a Congress, the first of its kind in recorded history, to be held anywhere in the world.

Representatives of fifty nations participated in the Parliament. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) addressed the assembly on September 19, 1893. He was introduced to the audience by Professor Wright, Professor of Greek of Harvard University. The Parliament was inaugurated by Cardinal Gibson. In the USA Vivekananda was called the ‘Cyclonic Hindu’. His speeches in the Parliament of Religions electrified the audience. His message of human oneness, his immortal words—sisters and brothers of America— caught the imagination of people and made people think about themselves and about their role in society.

His message to the American people stole their hearts; it spoke the language of their lips; it sang the song of their souls, and it played the music of their minds. He spent over a year in the USA and was invited by many learned bodies to deliver lectures on the Vedantic philosophy of India. People were charmed, not only by his presence, but by what he said and how he said it. That was his intrinsic strength to impress people. The ancient civilization of India appeared on the world stage with the new glare of Renaissance. But he was not impressed by the manifestation of religion which he witnessed during his extensive travel in the West and in the East (China and Japan), and his faith in the Indian philosophy and spiritual background became firmer. He believed that Monism, the Brahman of the *Advaita Vedānta* philosophy, could be the future religion of thinking humanity. Universalism and secularism were enshrined in the immortal words of Swami Vivekananda:

“I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship them all I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter into the Buddhistic temple where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his law; I shall go to the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of everyone.”

The Evolution of Modern India

The literate classes of Bengal depended heavily upon government employment. They had already seen the benefits of becoming proficient in the language of the new rulers, if only because so few of the latter achieved a real understanding of India and its languages. Education in English enabled many Indians to acquire a technical skill that would secure their employment. It was perfectly possible to attend an English school, even one run by missionaries, yet still be a good Bengali or Tamil literature to the writings of the West, and still live according to the accepted norms of your neighbours.

Nevertheless, some Indians were open to Western ideas. Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), a Bengali Brahmin, hailed as one of the founders of modern India, undertook serious study of Western theology and attempted to synthesize Christianity and European Deism with various strands of Hindu monotheism. In 1828 he founded the *Brahmo Samāj* (Society of God) to promote intellectual and religious exploration. Through it he propounded views that were critical of idol-worship, brahminism and some Indian customs, such as *satī*, and stressed the importance of learning about European scientific and mathematical discoveries. But the active membership of the *Brahmo Samāj* remained very small, and its real importance lay in the fact that it generated debate among the Bengali intelligentsia about a wide range of cultural matters. As the British became politically dominant, Indian society organized itself alongside and against the new foreign culture. Hardly any educated Indian became a Christian, but there was a great interest in the revival of Hinduism and quest for Indian and Hindu values among English-literate Bengalis. The presence of the British may have presented some sort of cultural challenge, but the more usual response on the part of the enlightened Indian was to recreate or rediscover an indigenous past.

The same period witnessed a new vigor within Islam. This took a bewildering variety of forms. The loss of political power was keenly felt by many Muslims, and served to stimulate movements for reform among them. Some saw the failure to keep up with modern scientific knowledge as a key element in their political weaknesses, and attempted to incorporate into Islamic doctrine the technical and scientific achievements of non-Muslims, at the same time stressing that this in no way undermined fundamentally the Muslim way of life. Across the whole spectrum of Indian Islam, a new determination to define and promote the true faith

manifested itself at all levels. Shah Waliullah (1703-62) and his son Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1824) promoted the puritanical and proselytizing *Muhammadiya* movement that aimed to purge Islam of the contamination of both Western and Hindu influences. Even fiercer were the frequent calls to arms issued by Sayyid Ahmad of Bareli (1781-1831), who seemed to conform to the stereotype of the strict and intolerant reformer and died waging *jihad* against the Sikhs. Among Bengali Muslims, the Faraizi movement, led from 1821 by Haji Shariatullah (1781-1840), took the form of a social and religious campaign to persuade villagers to follow the observance of Islam more closely and to give up social and cultural practices shared with their non-Muslim neighbours. At Firangi Mahal, the great Muslim college at Lucknow, impetus was given to the development of the rationalist syllabus within Islamic scholarly tradition, and later Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98), who founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental college at Aligarh in 1875 sought to introduce the study of mathematics, science and modern languages as they were taught at Oxford or Cambridge into a syllabus in which Islam remained in place.

The Indian Resistance

Despite its virtual monopoly of force from about 1820 onward, the Company's rule in India was never totally secure. There was hardly a year in which its armies were not at war. On its shifting frontiers campaigns were waged against the Burmese in the north-east and the Afghans in the north-west; Sind was annexed in 1843 and the Sikh state of Punjab in 1849. The British faced chronic unrest from their own recalcitrant subjects in the Indian countryside. In this context, the mutiny of part of the Indian army in May 1857 was the last, albeit perhaps the grandest, attempt at resistance to the new social and economic order that has been a century in the making. The rest of history of the sepoy Mutiny is well known. It was probably the first attempt, though violent in nature, to actively resist the colonial conspiracy to extinguish the instinct of Indian nationalism and thereby prevent the creation of 'Brown Englishmen' by the third-rate Western education system imposed by Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), a member (1834-1838) of the Supreme Council, who wanted to "form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions and in morals and intellect". Though the mutiny failed militarily, its legacy and philosophy remained at the core of Indian psyche.

From the Indian perspective, the tenor of the Renaissance was eloquently expressed in the immortal words of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948): “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet”. All great men think alike. Rabindranath, Saratchandra and Nazrul felt the same. No true poet should ever cut himself adrift from his own national tradition. Saratchandra and Nazrul never wrote in English. Saratchandra claimed to have read English literature well, but always maintained that he was not influenced by them. At a luncheon party given in honour of Rabindranath at the Trocadero Restaurant in London in July, 1912, by the literary elites of Irish-British society, like Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), Ralph Vaughan-Williams (1872-1958) “I have a speaking acquaintance with your glorious language; yet I can but feel in my own. My Bengali has been a jealous mistress, claiming all my homage and resenting rivals. Still I have put up with her exactions with cheerful submission; I could do no other”. This frank statement echoes what Madhusudan said on superiority of one’s mother-tongue in creative writing.

Secondly, most English-educated responsible Indians did maintain their own Indianness at the end of the day, in spite of slight aberration initially. British poet-author, Rudyard Kipling, (1865-1936), Nobel Laureate in Literature (1907), was objectively right when he wrote in his famous poem- ‘The Ballad of East and West’: “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Slavish and blind imitation of the West was not the order of the day in the turbulent corridors of Indian Renaissance. Age-old tradition, history, literature and culture always dominated the scenario of change, which was under constant strain under Western impact. Kipling also worked as a journalist in India during 1882-1889 and seemed to understand Indian reasonably well; in his poem, he gave the British perspective of Indian reaction to alien Western intrusion.

The Rise of Indian Nationalism

In the late 19th century in the main urban centers of British Colonial India, Bengal, Bombay and Madras, English-educated Indians began to form political associations to press for reform in government. Institutions like the Indian Association in Calcutta, the Bombay Presidency Association, the Pune Sārva-janīk Sabhā and the Madras Mahājana Sabhā heralded a new development

in Indian political life. They grouped people together according to shared interest in public affairs and drafted resolutions, petitions and memorials for submission to government. The societies exploited to the full the changing constitution of the government of India and thereby created new grounds for unity in Indian society. Since they were open groups, their members belonged to all castes and communities; since they commented on matters of concern to all, they genuinely claimed to stand for interests much wider than those of their members. In practice, it was unity in diversity as distinctly expressed by Rabindranath: “The concept of oneness amongst many, the advancement of unity in diversity — this has been the core religion of India”. Such broad-based associations, founded for particular ends and built out of compromise and alliance were indispensable for dealing with the government at provincial and national level and, within limits, were capable of maintaining continued cooperation among their members, irrespective of caste, community and religion. It was modern India in the making. They took their case to the center of the political establishment in London; they started lobbying the Members of British Parliament and secured support of influential interest groups within British metropolitan society. But, in order to influence English political establishment, it was essential to draw up a single all-India political programme.

On December 28, 1885, a group of about 100 well-known persons from nearly every corner of the sub-continent met in Bombay and established the Indian National Congress. The advertised object of the meeting was to make all the “most earnest labourers in the cause of national progress” personally known to each other. The history of Indian National Congress and of Indian independence movement is well-known.

Rabindranath and the Renaissance

A conversation which took place between H.G. Wells (1866-1946) and Rabindranath, the Nobel Laureate in Literature (1913), is an eloquent expression of the latter’s views on the intellectual interaction between the East and the West:

Tagore: Physical science of the nineteenth century probably has created this spirit of race superiority in the West. When the East assimilates this physical science, the tide may turn and take a normal course.

Wells: Modern science is not exactly European. A Series of accidents and peculiar circumstances prevented some of the eastern countries from applying the discoveries made by humanists in other parts of the world. They themselves had once originated and developed a great many of the sciences that were later on taken up by the west

and given greater perfection. Today, Japanese, Chinese and Indian names in the world of science are gaining due recognition.

Tagore: India has been in a bad situation.

Wells: When Macaulay imposed a third-rate literature and a poor system of education on India, Indians naturally resented it. No human being can live on Scott's poetry. I believe that things are now changing. But remain assured, we English were not better off. We were no less badly educated than the average Indian, probably even worse.

(Source: *A Tagore Reader*, Boston, Beacon Press, p. 108.)

India, a land of excellence in antiquity, always maintained her unique identity in the ocean of humanity as a living example to the dictum that "The test of every religious, political, or educational system is the man that it forms" (Henri Frederic Amiel: 1821-1881).

Western Education- The Beginning

Both James Andrew Broun Ramsay Dalhousie (1812-1860), Governor-General of India during 1847-1856 and Charles Wood, President of the Board of Control, devoted their thoughts to education. As mass education was impracticable because of its bigness, Wood thought of higher education. He wrote to Dalhousie, "I am inclined to think that these highly educated natives are likely to be a very discontented class unless they are employed and we cannot find employment for them all". Though he hesitatingly accepted the idea of founding universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, he was for leaving higher education "to be mainly supported by those who are anxious for it". He further wrote to Dalhousie, "If they choose to educate themselves, well and good, but I am against providing actors, opponents and grumblers". Thus took shape the idea of university taking charge of Western education, which had already taken deep root in Bengal. The Government proclaimed its duty of giving higher education to Indians through universities, but it tried to do so on the cheap. The universities were to be mere corporations of administrators. The University of Calcutta (Est. 1857) was the successor of the General Committee of Public instruction and the Council of Education.

When a definite proposal for the foundation of a university was adumbrated by the Council of Education in 1845, they suggested that degrees should be given not only in Arts and Science but also in Medicine, Law and Engineering. It is,

therefore, necessary to trace the genesis of medical education, legal education and engineering education in Bengal.

Modern Medical Education

The first institution of some importance for medical education established in Bengal was the School of Native Doctors. In May, 1822, the Medical Board communicated to Government a memorandum suggesting the establishment of such a school. The scheme met with Government approval. A general order was issued in June, 1822, establishing the school.

“The school to be established at the Presidency for the instruction of Natives in Medicine with a view to the civil and military service; to be under a medical officer as superintendent; to consist of 20 students generally to impart to them a practical acquaintance with the diseases of most frequent occurrence in India, the remedies best suited to their cure and the proper mode of applying those remedies”

The institution was later known as Dr. Tytler’s school, Dr. John Tytler being appointed Superintendent in 1828. In 1827, medical classes were also opened in the Calcutta Madrasa to teach the Unani (Greek) system and in the Sanskrit college to teach the Āyurvedic system. It was reported in 1828 that the progress of students in the medical classes of the Sanskrit College in the study of medicine and anatomy had been satisfactory and that “the students had learnt to handle human body without apparent repugnance and had assisted in the dissection of other animals”.

In 1833, William Cavendish Bentinck (1774-1839), First Governor-General of India, appointed a committee to report on the state of medical education in the Calcutta Native Medical Institution and in the Sanskrit College and the Calcutta Madrasa. The Committee was also to consider the question whether “it would be expedient to confine the medical instruction to English lectures and to adopt for class books solely English treatises, discarding Sanskrit medical books altogether”. The Committee in its report submitted on 20 October, 1834, said, “A knowledge of the English language we regard as a *sine qua non* ... We wish them to be able to drink out of the fountain head instead of depending to allay their mental thirst with driblets of translation”. The Committee recommended the establishment of a new medical institution on an extensive scale where “the various branches of medical service cultivated in Europe should be taught and as near as possible on the approved European system”. By the Government order of 28 January, 1835,

the Native Medical Institution as also medical classes in the Sanskrit College and the Calcutta Madrasa were abolished with effect from 1 February, 1835, and a new Medical College was founded on January 28, 1835, for imparting instruction in the various branches of medical science on the most approved European system.

Fifty students were to be admitted as foundation pupils. They were to receive a monthly stipend from the Government. In addition to the foundation pupils the benefits of the new college were opened to "all classes of native youths between the age of fourteen and twenty without exception to creed or castes". The students were to be respectably connected. Ability to read and write English and Bengali or English and Hindustani was considered essential. The first examination for grant of certificates of qualifications to practise surgery and medicine or for admission into the service was to be publicly made by the Committee of Education. Forty-nine students were selected in 1835 as foundation pupils. Most of them had their education in the Hindu College, Hare's School and the General Assembly's Institution. Some came from private institutions. Dr. Bramley was placed in charge of the institution with Dr. Goodeve and Dr. O'Shanghnusy as his colleagues. Trevelyan wrote, "of all the late measures for the promotion of education in India this alone was adopted in anticipation of the effectual demand". Stipends had therefore to be given to medical students until the advantages became more fully evident.

There is a tradition that Madhusudan Gupta was the first to begin dissection of the human body. He was formerly a student of the medical classes attached to the Sanskrit College. He rose to be a teacher there. On the establishment of the Medical College he was transferred to that institution. It has been said that "Madhusudan Gupta with a few courageous pupils rose superior to the prejudices of their early education and boldly flung open the gates of medical service to their countrymen by dissecting with their own hands a human body which had been performed for demonstration". But Principal Bramley's report about the first performance of dissection is different. He writes:

"On the 28th October four of the most intelligent and respectable pupils, at their own solicitation undertook the dissection of the human subject and in the presence of all the Professors of the College and of fourteen of their brother pupils demonstrated with accuracy and nicety several of the most interesting parts of the body. Thus was accomplished through the admirable example of these four mature youths the greatest step in the progress of true civilization which education has yet effected".

Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar later made enquiries as to who was the pioneer of dissection in Bengal. He got his information from two of the oldest medical practitioners and he wrote in 1872 that “Babu Raj-Krishna Dey was the individual who was the first to plunge the scalpel into the dead human body”.

David Hare was for four years Secretary to the Medical College Council (1837-1841). In the examination of 1838 eleven students of the Medical College came forward one year in advance as candidates for letters-testimonial for declaring them competent to begin the practice of medicine and surgery. The Examination Committee of the Medical College unanimously recommended that Umacharan Sett, Dwarkanath Gupta, Rajkristo Dey and Nabinchandra Mitter were competent enough to be given letters-testimonial for practicing medicine and surgery. They were the first batch of fully-fledged medical men in Bengal trained in the Western system. George Eden Auckland, Lord Auckland, (1784-1849), Governor-General of India during 1835-1841, presented a gold watch to Umacharan Sett who was adjudged the best among them.

In 1839, Dr. Wise, Secretary to the General Committee of Public Instruction, drew the attention of the Government to the suggestions of the Committee appointed in 1833, to send “eight of the elite of the pupils” to Europe to complete their education there. Dr. Wise told the Government that “the experiment would show to the people of England the powers and capabilities of the Hindu youth’s mind and thereby probably lead to the augmentation of education in India by exciting the attention of the English people on the subject ...the evidence of rich harvest which Indian education must return”. The Indian students could not at first be induced to go to Europe. But in 1844, Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), grandfather of Rabindranath, proceeding to Europe for the second time, made the munificent offer to take two pupils of the Medical College to England. It was calculated that each pupil would cost Rs. 7,000. Three students volunteered to go, Bholanath Bose, Suryakanta Chakrabarty and Dwarkanath Bose. Professor Goodeve proceeding to England offered to pay the expenses of the additional student. An additional sum was raised for the fourth student, the Nawab Nazim of Bengal, making a contribution of Rs. 4,000. Gopalchandra Seal was the fourth student who agreed to go. They proceeded to England in March 1844. They got the diploma of the College of Surgeons in 1846. Three of them also got the M.D. degree of London University, the highest professional degree which could then be procured in Europe. The course was extended from four to five years. In 1846, the course of instruction pursued in the Medical College was recognized by the

Royal College of Surgeons in England, the University of London and the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries.

A proposal was made for the establishment of a class of Bengali doctors in connection with the Medical College. In 1847, a two years 'apprentice course' was instituted for members of the subordinate medical service. Dr. Mouat and Diwan Ramkamal Sen drew up a scheme. Dr. Mouat said: "These new Doctors would be the only check on the common vendors of poison ...thus forming a special medical police". Ramkamal Sen proposed that instruction should be given in vernacular. It was argued that Indians studying through an English medium had neither time, nor disposition nor means to communicate to their countrymen the knowledge they possessed. The new Bengali class was opened on 15 June, 1852. The first set of pupils of the Bengali class, twenty-one in number, appeared at the examination in 1853. The Calcutta Courier of 6 September, 1844, records that Matilal Seal made a gift of valuable plot of land, beside the Medical College for a hospital for the sick people. The foundation stone of a large hospital was laid by Lord Dalhousie on 30 September, 1848.

Legal Education

At the advent of British rule the penal law in force in Bengal was the Mohammedan Law. But after December, 1790, began the systematic supersession of Muslim criminal law by British regulations. Muslim penal law was gradually "dis-stated" to such an extent that only certain original peculiarities, certain technical terms and nice distinctions- mere lumber of pedantry- remained as relics encumbering the dispensation of justice. Macaulay swept this rubbish aside in 1835. In view of the new set-up, a new system of legal education became necessary.

The General Committee was anxious to provide for systematic instruction in law. About the beginning of 1841, they succeeded in securing the services of a barrister of the Supreme court who was to deliver a course of lectures to students of the Hindu College on a fixed salary of Rs. 300 per month. The experiment was not of long duration. In 1843, the Advocate-General of the day, offered his services to deliver lectures gratuitously to Indian students. He delivered a course of lectures in November and December, 1843, and in the early months of 1844. His lectures were attended by senior students of the Hindu College and the Hooghly College. His untimely death prevented the lectures being delivered in

1845. In 1852, an eminent barrister was appointed in the law department of the Hindu College. In 1852-53 the law classes were attended by thirty students, of whom twenty-five belonged to the college and five were ex-students. Six students who went up for the examination passed creditably. The Professor of Law deplored the want of a good law library. But the teachers, one after another, were men of distinction. By Regulation XXVII of 1814 it was provided that pleaders were to be either of the Hindu or Muslim religion and preference would be given to those who were educated in the Hindu or Muslim colleges established or supported by government. This restriction was removed in 1846. Act I of that year laid down that "the office of pleader in the courts shall be open to all persons who could obtain a certificate as directed by the Sudder Court". There was an examination but no teaching arrangement. Hindu College was established in 1817 and later re-named Presidency College in 1855.

Engineering Education

A professorship in Civil Engineering was founded in the Hindu College in 1843-44. This professorship like the one in Experimental and Natural philosophy was created on condition that lectures should be open to all classes and religions. A civil Engineering College was established as a separate institution in 1856. The first Engineering College in India was founded in Roorkee in 1847.

Women's Education

In the early 19th century the Indian woman was wholly confined within the four walls of the house. Her self-expression took the form of cooking, sewing, minor crafts taken up as a hobby in the well-to-do families, mainly in urban and semi-urban areas. Men and women virtually belonged to two classes:

The Female Juvenile Society, an organization of European ladies, did some elementary school teaching among girls of poor families under the auspices of the Baptist Mission of Calcutta. In 1824, a Ladies' Society for Native Female Education made an organized effort for the promotion of women's education in Calcutta and its vicinity. The Calcutta Female School was started in May, 1849, by Drinkwater Bethune, a Law member of the Governor-General's Council. Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was the co-adjutor and fellow-worker of Bethune. Bethune made the Asoka tree the symbol of women's education. It is the 'Tree of Gladness'; in his words a new tree of liberty. Our first two lady

graduates of the University of Calcutta, Kadambini Ganguli and Chandramukhi Basu, graduated in 1883, and then Kadambini further graduated in Medicine (LMS) from the Medical College, Calcutta, in 1887, and later she completed her higher studies in England.

In the early part of this century, we had many women social workers. Gradually, the task of raising women's social status, their education and emancipation were devolving on women themselves. It resulted in greater social awareness and a deep yearning for more rights. Many women actively participated in the anarchist and independence movement. However, educated women were very few in number; they were merely the tip of the iceberg; the vast majority of women living in the village were in the darkness of ignorance. Muslim women in India at first remained outside the mainstream of the education movement. Begum Rokeya Hussain made a beginning in Bengal. She bequeathed her entire property to the founding of the Sakhawat Memorial School in Calcutta.

Ashutosh Mookerjee : “Father of Modern Education” in Science and Technology in India

The edifice of modern education in science and technology was built during the first two decades of this century in the University of Calcutta (First modern University in British India established in 1857). The main architect was Ashutosh Mookerjee (1864-1924).

The University Act of 1904- a modified version of the University Act of 1857 is a landmark in the development of higher education and academic programmes in Indian universities. It made provisions for teaching and appointment of professors and teachers for such work. The University officials at that time were mostly Europeans, and the actual control was in their hands. It was not conducive to the fulfillment of aspirations of Indians and to the development of modern science and technology in India. This act invited strong criticism from Indian intellectuals endowed with the spirit of nationalism and patriotism. Eminent educationalists like Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915) and Ashutosh Mookerjee (1864-1924) considered some of the provision as a retrograde step in the development of education in general and science and technology in particular in India. Indian intellectuals apprehended that the new act would dissociate the Indian elements from the active administration of the universities, leaving all the directive and administrative powers in the hands of European professors and bureaucrats.

The ghost of Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) was haunting the psyche of British educationists in India. As a member of the supreme Council of the Governor-General during 1834-38, Macaulay formulated the modern education system for India. Macaulay wrote in his ill-famed Minute of 1835 : “We must at present do our best to form a class, who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”. Macaulay’s offspring among the neo-educated middle class urban intelligentsia immediately started swamping the society like locusts as ‘Brown Englishmen’. As mentioned earlier, in a dialogue with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) said: “When Macaulay imposed a third-rate literature and a poor system of education in India, Indians naturally resented it”. This was what Indian intellectuals of the day under the leadership of Ashutosh and Gokhale were fighting against. In reply to H.G. Wells, Rabindranath said: “Physical science of the nineteenth century probably has created this spirit of race superiority in the West. When the East assimilates this physical science, the tide may turn and take a normal course”. This was exactly what Ashutosh was trying to do-to turn the tide and to initiate the normal course in India. He was a prophet in a sense. We are enjoying the fruits today; India is the fifth technological power in the world today. Ashutosh struggled to develop science and technology through the University system of education. At Ashutosh’s initiative, young scholars like Satyendranath Bose (1894-1974), Meghnath Saha (1893-1956) were appointed Lecturers in Physics in 1914 to teach post-graduate students. The first World War (1914-1918) had already begun ; books and journals from abroad were not available in India. Saha and Bose translated into English Albert Einstein’s (1879-1955) epoch-making paper- ‘Special Theory of Relativity’ published in *Annalen der Physik*, in Berlin, Vol. 17, p. 891-921, 1905, and also the second paper- ‘General Theory of Relativity’ published in 1915. All these translations were published by the University of Calcutta with due approval of Einstein, for post-graduate studies. This was how post-graduate teaching in modern physics started in India. On March 28, 1914, Ashutosh, in his convocational address mentioned his struggle for building a permanent edifice of educational system, which he rightly expected would gradually expand to other parts of India. He said:

“The sister Universities (in India) are eager to imitate and emulate what we have boldly initiated. I feel that a right spirit has been around, a spirit that will not be quenched and this conviction, indeed, is a deep comfort to me at the moment when I take leave from work dear to me for weighty reasons. The workers pass away; the solid results of their work remain and fructify”.

His Prophecy came true in the following decades. It was the beginning in Bengal. ‘Nothing so difficult as a beginning’ – so said the English poet- George Gordon Byron (1788-1824). It was Ashutosh who did the ‘difficult beginning’ Gokhale rightly said: “What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow”. Ashutosh proved it. Many others did as well in different spheres of life. Ashutosh also proposed teaching science in India through one’s mother-tongue. Man innovates originality only in the tongue of his mother.

The legacy left behind by Ashutosh continues to be the fountain of hope and inspiration for generations of scientists in India. Chandrasekhar Venkata Raman (1888-1970), First Noble Laureate in physics in Asia and Africa, Meghnath Saha and Satyendranath Bose are some of the products of the life-long struggle of Ashutosh. Humphry Davy (1778-1829) discovered Michael Faraday (1791-1867); Geoffrey Harold Hardy (1877-1947), Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887-1920) and similarly Ashutosh, discovered a galaxy of eminent Indian scientists who made immense contributions towards the development of a global profile of Indian science. The nation is always grateful to Ashutosh for laying the foundation of education in modern science and technology in India. Our national scientific organisation- Indian Science Congress Association-instituted an annual award of a gold medal to a leading Indian scientist from 1988 in the sacred memory of Ashutosh (also the first President of the Association in 1913) in order to pay homage to the great savant. Today, and for all time to come, Ashutosh will remain immortal in the annals of creation of modern India.

The dream that an Indian must learn science under Indian tutelage found the best expression in the development of post-graduate teaching in science and technology at Calcutta University. The first phase of the science movement in India initiated by Mahendra Lal Sarkar in 1876 was complete, due to the contribution of educationists, scientists and scientific workers in India. The establishment of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science in Calcutta in 1876, in the Tata Institute (1908), now known as the Institute of Sciences in Bangalore, and the Bose Institute (1917) in Calcutta are some of the landmarks, but none had so much far-reaching impact before independence as that of the developments initiated by Ashutosh at the University of Calcutta.

Its Limitations

The Italian Renaissance in the 15th century was the expression of the rising cultural enlightenment of mercantile capitalism. But the Indian Renaissance in the

19th century was truly a cultural Renaissance of the intellectual elite. It had its own limitations. It was urban in nature- rather centred in the emerging city of Calcutta- the then capital of British Colonial India. The ray of this Renaissance never reached the distant rural corners of Bengal or India. Hindus, were mainly attracted to it; Muslims remained totally indifferent. Towards the end of the 19th century, leading Muslim social leaders initiated the process of reawakening. It was confined within the heart of common people, workers and the peasants. The renaissance intellectuals never cared for their need, demands or aspirations. Though the problems of women were at the center of some social reforms (e.g. widow re-marriage, abolition of the *Sati* system, etc.), women themselves never took any active part in it. Probably the time was not right. It was not unique in India alone. Though hundreds of working women stormed the Fort of the Bastille on July 14, 1789 (French Revolution), they did not have voting power for the French National Assembly. British women first got limited voting rights only in 1918, and then got equal franchise as men in 1928 for everyone over 21, regardless of marital status. On the contrary, women in India and Pakistan got equal voting franchise from the very dawn of political independence in August, 1947. In 1897, male students at the University of Cambridge protested against the admission of women into degree course. They were successful, and degrees were not given to women at Cambridge until 1922.

There was no political dimension in the Indian Renaissance. Surprisingly, the Renaissance leaders were free from the agony of colonial subjugation. They rather helplessly accepted the foreign rule. They deviated from the path of reason and humanism and rather tilted towards antiquated old feudal and spiritual beliefs. The caste-system- the very foundation of feudal and unequal society in India- remained virtually unchanged. The success of the Renaissance was, in fact, very limited. Many are unwilling to consider it as a social reawakening in the real sense of the term. It lacked a definite philosophy. It had no central organization to achieve the objectives. It aimed at the flowering of the privileged individual and not of the society as a whole. It only created 'star figures' and encouraged personality cult. It compromised with the existing feudal system- never opposed it. It totally surrendered to old reactionary and conservative spiritual values. The reform movements were based on individual initiatives and not on any organized body : movement for *Sati* system by Ram Mohan, widow re-marriage by Vidyasagar and the Young Bengal movement by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831)- a Eurasian of Anglo-Portuguese descent. For both the 15th century

Renaissance in Italy and the 19th century one in India, 'Art' was only for 'Art's' sake and not for real human emancipation.

To sum up, Renaissance in Bengal or India was not cohesive in character; different actors moved in different directions. The Young Bengal Movement of Derozio had its own dynamics; the Brahma Samaj Movement of Ram Mohan had a different agenda. Bankim interpreted theology in his own way; religious resurrection by Rama Krishna took a different direction; Vidasagar and Vivekananda took different roads to reform society. All these hardly converged into a confluence of conciliation, co-operation and continuity; universal enlightenment or real re-awakening of society as a whole remained a distant echo. It remains so even today. The words of Rabindranath in his self-criticism reflects the same scenario:

“...I know the incompleteness of my tune,
My poetry, though went in diverse ways has not reached every heart and home”.
(“*Aikatan*” in *Janmadine*, Shantiniketan, January 18, 1941- Prose translation by this author.)

The Epilogue

The Renaissance triggered the process of rediscovering India's glorious past after a long period of hibernation, and initiated the symbiotic interaction between the best of both East and West, but always resisting her assimilation and absorption into ethos and culture of distant shores. The origin of many ideas of western philosophy could be traced to the maxims of ancient Indian philosophy, such as Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) duty-based theory, supremacy of the motive of an action over the action itself and its consequences, the categorical imperative, and the principle of universalizability. These are all reflections of the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* written about 2600 years ago.

What the American writer- Mark Twain- [pseudonym of Samuel Langhorne Clemens: (1835-1910)] wrote about India in 1897 still gives a genuine introduction of India to the world outside:

“India, 'land of dreams and romance- the country of hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition, the land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of all the rest of the globe combined”.