

REINVIGORATING THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE: TAKING THE ROUTE OF CONFLICTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

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Abstract

The Bengal Renaissance was a cultural and intellectual movement that emerged in Bengal during the 19th century under British Rule. This article looks at the said conflicting period as a resurgence of interest in Bengali language, literature, and music, as well as a growing consciousness of political and social issues. One of the prominent figures of this period was Rammohun Roy, who instrumented a momentous role in advocating for societal restructurings, such as the abolition of sati and the promotion of education for women. During this time, the British Empire was expanding its economic power through free-trade policies, leading to increased conflict with local communities. This conflict was reflected in the ideas of Karl Marx, who critiqued the capitalist exploitation of labour in colonies. Despite the tensions, the Bengal Renaissance contributed to the rise of a modern Indian cultural discourse and paved the way for the Indian independence movement.

Keywords: *Bengal Renaissance, Rammohun Roy, British Rule, Marx, Free-trade and Conflict.*

The Bengal Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual movement that emerged in Bengal during the 19th century under British Rule, is a pivotal as well as a conflicting period in the history of India. This paper explores the resurgence of interest in Bengali language, literature, and music, as well as the growing consciousness of political and social issues during this conflicting period. The Bengal Renaissance is marked by the presence of prominent figures such as Rammohun Roy, who played a significant role in advocating for societal restructurings, including the abolition of sati and the promotion of education for women. However, it is important to critically examine this period as a conflicting one, shaped by the colonial power dynamics of the British Empire and local communities against the backdrop of the Empire's expanding economic power through free-trade policies. The economic policies of free-trade adopted by the British Empire led to increased conflict, which was reflected in the ideas of Karl

Marx, who critiqued the capitalist exploitation of labour in colonies. It is crucial to acknowledge the tensions and power imbalances that existed during the Bengal Renaissance, and how they shaped the movement's impact on the socio-political landscape of India. Despite its contributions to the rise of a modern Indian cultural discourse and paving the way for the Indian independence movement, the Bengal Renaissance should be analysed within its historical context and its relationship with colonialism.

Theorising the Colonial Rule

Karl Marx in 'The British Rule in India' (1975) observes

All the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines, strangely complex, rapid, and destructive as the successive action in Hindostan may appear, did not go deeper than its [India's] surface.

England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoo, and separates Hindostan ruled by Britain from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history. The British colonisation of India, therefore, historically marked the beginning of an Era when the debacle of the pre-existing social, political and economic order of the sub-continent furthered the industrial potency of England. Among the three fundamental departments of the traditional governmental system, the colonisers of the East India Company came to control the military and the finance to ensure absolute domination without any accountability to the public works. They neglected the agriculture, destroyed the hand looms and spinning wheels—turning one of the largest importing countries of fabrics into an extremely profitable market for the Lancashire textile. The economic basis of the native communities crumbled as, Marx rightly comments, “[the]British steam and science uprooted, over the whole surface of Hindostan, the union between the agriculture and manufacturing industry” (Marx, 1975).

India, as a British colony, was converted into a rich repository of raw material and Cheap labour and, at the same time, the market, offering the basic prerogatives for optimising, what is historically called the Industrial revolution in England. This, according to Marx was only one aspect of the British rule in India. The other and more curious aspect of British colonisation lies in the fact that the very undermining of the pre-existing economic basis shatters the solid

foundations of ‘Oriental despotism’ in the shape of an unchanging social system.

In ‘The Future Results of the British Rule in India’ Marx further advances, “England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (Marx, 1975). With his stress on the ‘double mission’ Marx envisages England as ‘the unconscious tool of history’(Marx, 1975) to revolutionise not only the backward production system of the Indian sub-continent but also her thinking minds liberating them from the restrictions of a stagnant social structure.

To study the material basis and the ideological impact of the Renaissance in Bengal, as well as to scrutinise the compelling conflicts and contradictions in the discourse of Renaissance, it is crucial to try and understand critically this inherent dichotomy of British colonisation as it is illustrated in young Marx’s ideation of the ‘double mission’ of the British rule in India. Robert Clive’s conspiracy with Mir Jafar and Jagat Seth resulted in the decisive Victory of the British East India Company over Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 established the political authority of the British colonisers on Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It is a little more than a decade after the establishment of the colonial authority in eastern India that the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 broke out.

Among the worst affected areas of this famine were Birbhum and Murshidabad in Bengal and Tirhut, Champaran and Bettiah in Bihar. The failed monsoon and the consequent drought in 1769 may have been a natural catalyst, but the exploitative tax revenue policies of the British East India Company after 1765 had already plundered the economic resources of the rural population of this region (Ghose) which finally resulted in in in in one of the earliest and the greatest man-made famines which would

devastate the rural mass of the eastern part of British India, particularly Bengal, during the 18th, 19th and the first half of the 20th century. In 1772 Warren Hastings estimated in his report that one-third of the total population in the famine-affected region had starved to death.

Interestingly, Raja Rammohun Roy, who would later be considered the first modern man in India and along with his friend and comrade Prince Dwarkanath Tagore would share the glory of being the forerunners of the Renaissance in Bengal, was born in the same period and remained unaffected, unperturbed and entirely non-committal in his realm of thought throughout his life regarding this terrible historical event that for quite a long period changed both the demography and topography of rural Bengal. The history of British domination during the hundred years after the Battle of Plassey up till the Great rebellion in 1857 can be viewed as an account of the conflict between the East India Company's monopolisation of the sub-continental market on the one hand and free trade on the other. This contention finally caused the historic transition of British colonialism to British imperialism as India was taken directly under the rule of the Crown in 1858.

The monopolistic nature of the trading initiatives of the East India Company in India and China was evidently at odds with the interest of the advocates and practitioners of competitive capitalism. Moreover, once the initial hazards of the colonial establishment in the appendage country were dealt with, in the more advanced stage of the colonial rule the monopoly of the East India Company ceased to serve the economic interest of the metropolitan country in its entirety. For instance, the East India Company had a monopoly on tea exporting from China and trading it across the length and breadth of the British Empire, minting large sums of money from the English home market which in comparison to the prices offered by various tea exporters of other capitalist-

imperialist countries was so exorbitantly high that it was even affecting the revenue system of Great Britain (Tagore, 1990).

Developing the Industrial Renaissance of Bengal

Rammohun and Dwarkanath, the two pioneers of the Bengal Renaissance, actively participated in the debate against the monopolistic operations of the company siding with the idea of free trade. Dwarkanath Tagore and Prasanna Kumar Tagore wrote quite a few letters in *Samvad Koumudi* and *The Reformer*, respectively, in favour of the trickle-down effect of free trade. They even advocated for the positive impacts of the indigo plantations on the local economy.

Raja Rammohun Roy was another expounder of free trade and he voiced for the unrestricted settlement of 'Europeans of character and capital' (Soumendra, 35) in India as he, along with his comrades and followers, believed that British India's break with its age-old socio-economic frame work was a historic exigency and India would finally emerge as a modern nation via industrial development with the aid of European capital, technology, efficiency and enthusiasm. This optimistic and progressive notion regarding the possibility of industrial development of India determining here evolution as a modern capitalist country was majorly flawed in the sense that it did not take into account the real nature of colonialism. The industrial growth of the appendage country could not be and was not the concern of the metropolitan country.

The conflict between monopoly and free trade was the conflict between the contending interests of foreign monopoly and free capital both of which essentially was meant to exploit the rich raw material and cheap labour of the backward storehouse and then further turn it into a profitable market. Hence the promise of industrial development of India and the consequent development in the realm of thought of her

progressive minds as it was hoped by the leading men of Bengal during this period was destined to be frustrated. Owing to that reason, those chosen few enterprising budding industrialists who could have, through their entrepreneurial endeavours, set in motion the vehicle of an industrial revolution, culminating in the decolonisation of the base as well as the superstructure of the sub-continent, sank into them or as of petty feudal pigmy-hood; for, the imperial rulers, on each step, barred their independent development by imposing different trade regulations and bills. They could not cope with the designs of the big British capital armed with political authority thereby not being able to reinvest the surplus appropriated. The young enthusiastic Dwarakanath, therefore, ironically emerged as just another zamindar and fortified the feudal mode and motif—under the garb of Junker capitalism.

The early figures of the so-called Bengal Renaissance in their limited understanding of colonialism along with their zealous impression of the European enlightened thoughts and practices, due to their socio-economic class position, became the native collaborators, consciously or unconsciously, in the making of a colonialist discourse where the deliverance of the colonised appears to be dependent on the colonial benefactors. This notion was further ideologically entrenched by the initiation of Macauley's educational programme, essentially designed to reproduce native elitism which, nonetheless, containing certain progressive components, would be fissured from the vast majority of the toiling mass.

PCI leader and theoretician, Antonio Gramsci, decodes the symbiotic relationship between intellectuals and the economic production of a social group as its homogeneity and functional awareness in the socio-economic and political fields is given, organically, by one or more strata of intellectuals. He has classified the intellectuals into two categories, namely, organic and

traditional. Gramsci argues, ...the 'organic' intellectuals which every new class creates alongside itself and elaborates in the course of its development, are for the most parts 'specialisations' of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type which the new class has brought into prominence (Gramsci,1996).

The pro-colonial, pro-British stance of the emerging organic intellectuals of the Calcuttan Bengali 'babudom' was evident in the matter and manner of their response and reaction to a number of very crucial peasant and tribal revolts, rebellions led by different ethnic groups and champions of diverse socio-religious creeds and particularly to the Great Rebellion of 1857. The urban Bengali intelligentsia vehemently opposed the Great Rebellion which is now considered by many as the most severe historic onslaught on British colonialism in 19th-century India. Despite being underestimated as a mere sepoy mutiny for a long, it hooked the foundation of British colonialism in almost every corner of the subcontinent, except Bengal and the provinces of the Deccan.

Kali Prasanna Singha in *Hutum Pyanchar Naksha* (1863) tears apart the social fabric of the Bengali urban upper class and being both an active participant and a distant observer of that group, *Hutum* with his characteristic humour Remarks: The madness over the [Sepoy] Mutiny has come to a close. The Bengali people, thus, could save their lives just as that convict who accidentally gets a new life due to certain technical problems with the noose while being hanged...As men realise the importance of a chaste, nurturing wife in times of sickness, pain and danger, the government too, on the occasion of the Mutiny could recognise the mettle of the Bengalis. (Singha,2008). It is also important to note what Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar wrote about the Great Rebellion. In the preface of one of his books on Indian history, Vidyasagar characterised the Great Rebellion as sheer misfortune fallen on an

unfortunate land. Even the vernacular press bore eloquent testimony to the nature of the educated gentry. On June 4, 1857, in the article 'The Sepoy Mutiny and its Action on the People of Bengal' the Hindu Patriot commented or noted,

The Bengalees never aspired to the glory of leading armies to battle...Their pursuits and their triumphs are entirely civil. A strong and versatile intellect enables them to think deeply and think far-sighted...They are in the hopes that by lawful and constitutional appeal to the good sense and justice of the English people...when the fitting moment arrives, will rise yet further in the scale of equality with their foreign rulers and divide with them the honour and there's a possibility of administering the affairs of the large stand the most well-established empire in Asia. (Ghosh,2007).

As Alfred Von Martin observes, '...the typological importance of the Renaissance is that it marks the first cultural and social breach between the Middle Ages and modern times: it is a typical early stage of modern age' (Von Martin, 1963). Now, this socio-cultural breach of one age from the other is facilitated by the breach in the production system, as in Europe the split ensued with the collapse of feudalism and the emergence of the capitalist system. But in the context of Bengal, this did not happen. As it has already been argued that because of the distorted and disruptive growth of the native capital, the elite could not cut the umbilical cord of fits feudal matrix and its interests always remained tied to the land. The basic feudal structure and ethos, though at times modified, more or less remained unchanged and the sub-continent really did not emerge as a modern nation in the true sense of the term and it even retained the ancient structure of the caste system.

The social and religious reformist movements of 19th century Bengal which tried to fight the social evils could not radicalise their questioning of the

age-old oppressive structures. Rammohun Roy tried to reform the religious sector by imbibing all the unceremonious and philanthropic aspects of different religious credos but since the institutional power structures remained intact, his Brahmoism could not eradicate the solid foundation of Brahminism; on the contrary, as Binoy Ghosh aptly puts it:

The principal sources of strength and stability of any society are its institutions, institutions on which rests our feudal social power structure some of which are the joint family, the caste system, matrimonial, customs, religion and so on. Although the reformist movements of the 19th century could initially set as tiring the society, ultimately, they could not change the basic framework of these institutions. This became all the more evident in the terminal phase of the century when Hindu revivalist troops, raising much hue and cry, hijacked the platform of the Bengal Renaissance, substantiating the fact that the firm foundations of these institutions have in effect remained untouched. (Ghosh,1984)

The legal abolition of Sati took place in 1829 following a vehement struggle of Rammohun with Lord Bentinck on his side. Spivak equates Sati as 'barbaric representation', directly to the justification of imperialism as a 'civilising mission' (Morton,63). 'It was undoubtedly a brilliant feat, but, at the same time, it shifted the attention to enforced celibacy of upper-caste Hindu widows, for, as Vidyasagar himself comments, while the legal ban of 1829 saved widows from a 'compulsive death, it did not grant them the right to a fruitful entrance into life'(Vidyasagar,1976) and for Vidyasagar, widow remarriage was the only possible means to ensure that 'fruitful entrance into life'. Vidyasagar put forward arguments to support his case for scriptural approval for widow remarriage. Interestingly, Rammohun Roy quite early in his tract on satire cognised the Relationship between the miseries of widowhood and the absence of

property rights of the widows. But after the abolition, this fundamental point was more or less ignored and the male discourse on enforced widowhood became limited within the purview of repressed sexuality and its disastrous and immoral effects upon society. It was hardly concerned with the material dimensions of widowhood among the high castes. The discourse was majorly ambivalent regarding the questions of gender and caste also in the sense that the approval for remarriage was sought only for virgin child widows. To quote Uma Chakravarty:

The Brahman and upper-caste reformers...could not stand outside the coercive power of the community and were not willing to break with their kin and caste fellows. Their location within their caste, their larger social position and their attempt to reinterpret tradition and remain within it provided the parameters within which they struggled to manoeuvre, somewhat ineffectively. It is not surprising that Vidyasagar himself died as a disillusioned man. Before his death, he shared his disappointment with a visitor from Maharashtra to whom he said that he was now finally convinced that the Hindus, as Hindus, would never accept social reform. (Chakravarty,1998)

Reshaping the Religious and Cultural Discourse

Old Marx, however, revisited his idea of a double mission, though not in the context of India but in the case of Ireland. Earlier he had argued that colonialism's Doomsday could appear from both sides, that is, from the end of the people colonised, endowed with new scientific endeavours and industry, and within the metropolitan country itself through working-class ascendancy. He categorically said:

The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the

now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether. (Marx,1975)

But later on, after delving deep into the Irish question, Marx realised the liver should be applied not in the metropolitan country but in the appendage country. Here, it must be noted that, even though Marx dubbed India as the Italy of Asiatic dimension, he ultimately categorised her as the Ireland of the East. Despite this, however, it would be grossly unjust not to recognise the changes that took place under British rule. True, Bengal was not a direct recipient of the lessons of the European Renaissance, but a new outlook was emerging fast among the privileged classes.

Let us, for instance, take Rammohun Roy. Despite the critical observations made above; it cannot be denied that he was the person who first took the initiative to make the people of his class aware of their blinkered religious mindset. Almost two hundred years back in August 1827, a local Andhrite leader of Brahmapuram in the Ganjam district of Madras presidency, reached Calcutta by sea to meet Raja Rammohun Roy. After meeting Roy, here turned to his native land and reported to his Governor in Madras that Roy's religion 'is no religion and his laws are no laws, but a conglomeration of all stitched into singular one...He is neither a Christian, a Mahammedan or a Hindu, but a free-thinking man, abandoned by all religions' (cited in Mukhopadhyay,1972).

Not only against religious fundamentalism and repression of women, but Rammohun was also critical of the forced pauperisation of the peasants and riots at the hands of the zamindars of the Permanent Settlement. In 1832, before the Parliamentary Committee, he gave the following declaration, which effectively put forward his realisation of the plight of the peasantry and the deeds of the British-backed feudal elements: The condition of the cultivators is very miserable, they

are placed at the mercy of the zamindar's avarice and ambition...the landlords have met with indulgence from the government in the assessment of their revenue while no part of it is extended towards the poor cultivators. (Cited in Tagore,1990)

Rammohun was much influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution but could not advance the cause of national liberation owing to his faith, albeit not in the uncritical sense, in the Company's rule. All the representatives of the Bengal Renaissance, from its pioneer to its concluser, bestowed importance on the backward thought process that emerged because of the backward productive force prevailing in India. Ram Mohan started the *Tuhfat al-muwahhidin* by scrutinizing the precise historical assertions of Hinduism. Once he had debunked the dogmatic convictions, Roy contended that all faiths were grounded on a mutual conviction in the singular Supreme Being who formed and maintained the entire cosmos. He put forth the argument that the natural unity that was created as submissive to one everlasting entity has been inaccurately partitioned into numerous and contradictory factions. In reshaping the society's thought process in the light of occidental philosophy and production they collaborated with the company and later on with the Crown, thus, not being able to identify the principal contradiction between colonialism and imperialism on the one hand and the native people of India on the other.

But rules could seldom sustain without exceptions; and history has proven that Derozio, the stormy petrel and a key figure of 19th century Bengal, amidst an environment of collusion and compromise, embodied the true spirit of Enlightenment that stem from the classical delineation of the Renaissance. Derozio was a true Indian, probably, the first patriot who could identify in black and white the principal contradiction prevailing. When the other Bengal Renaissance figures felt reluctant in opposing British colonialism and imperialism, Derozio

entered the battlefield with a double-edged sword, ripping apart the philosophical foundations of British colonial imperialism and Indian feudal backwardness. Against British rule, he unequivocally spoke out for a resurrection of the classical glory of India as well as opposed tooth and nail with his students the sectarian and backward religious customs of Hinduist orthodoxy. His breed of patriotism knew no bounds. A fine poet, Derozio, at his emotional peak, composed 'The Harp of India', a small piece of poetry, rich with patriotic fervour, invoking, just as a Renaissance man, the reincarnation of India's glorious spirit of foregone days.

Bengal did not encounter the Renaissance with all its classical symptoms—she did experience the trickle-down effect of English education and industry which the post-industrial revolution British rulers installed here with the vilest interest of appropriation. This very fact manifested in the political awakening of Bengal with the radicalisation of the Congress under extremist revolutionaries as opposed to the moderate functioning of Gokhale and those of his like. Born in 1885 to give respite to the colonial rulers, the Congress, under the aegis of the extremists, gave a radical jolt to its conventional policies, and subsequently during the Bengal Partition of 1905 facilitated the formation of anarchist revolutionary groups such as the Anushilan Samity and Yugantar Dal. British colonialism had compelled the new elite to inculcate parliamentary civil policies instead of revolutionary activism making the Bengali intelligentsia turn a deaf ear to the battle cry of the sepoies who were peasants in uniform. But this very civil and parliamentary outlook, if we introspect in totality, had a far-reaching effect quite understandable through the radical decisions of 'land to the tillers' and the proposal of the abolition of the Permanent Settlement of the Fazlul Haque Ministry during the 1930s. As pronounced earlier, the Bengal Renaissance was no Renaissance either. But scrutiny of its impacts reveals that it did sow the

seeds of socio-political awakening which finally took shape in the form of our national parliamentary system based on universal adult franchisee without any discrimination of gender, caste, class, ethnicity and race. This very system, notwithstanding its direct colonial lineage or semi-feudal bearing, has emerged for the past seven decades as a multi-dimensional safety valve, which has reinforced the Indian state by bypassing the shock waves of popular resistance and movement.

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