

Bengal Renaissance: Acharya Brajendranath Seal (1864-1938) and the Contemporary Intelligentsia

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Abstract:*In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the relation between Acharya Brajendranath Seal and other contemporary intellectuals. Indians were unconcerned about the rich culture and intellectual heritage of their own motherland. The thinkers of nineteenth and twentieth century have strove to preserve the soul of culture and heritage of India. Among them Acharya Brajendranath Seal, a humanist philosopher, played a pivotal role to put India in a glorious and acclaimed place in the world. The cultural rebirth, India experienced through the revival of learning and modern thinking was mainly founded by Raja Rammohan Roy. Brajendranath Seal was a wayfarer of the renaissance brought by Rammohan Roy. To name a few he was closely associated with Rabindra Nath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy, and so on. These eminent personalities bore a very intimate relation with Acharya Seal. Brajendranath seal desired the unification of all people across the world and abolishment of the people's orthodox frame of mind. He was an ardent admirer of humane qualities and thus became self-ladder for many personalities as well as Institutions.*

Keywords: *Acharya Brajendranath Seal, Brahma Samaj Intellectual, Renaissance etc.*

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Introduction

Indians are self-oblivious, and they have no interest in the rich cultural and intellectual heritage of their motherland. It should be a compulsory and spontaneous effort for any country to preserve and maintain its cultural and intellectual heritage for the progress of its country. The need to preserve this legacy has motivated us to relive the lives and thoughts and contributions

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of the nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers of India. Nineteenth Century Bengal was illuminated by some outstanding personalities who gradually spread their influence to the rest of India and contributed towards a social and cultural rejuvenation, which has come to be known as Bengal and Indian Renaissance. Surprisingly, Acharya Brajendranath Seal, who was one of the most eminent personalities of these luminaries, was one of the great thinkers who put India in a glorious and acclaimed place in the world.

Beginning of Renaissance

If the journey of renaissance of modern Bengali started with Raja Rammohan Roy, then another honorable wayfarer of that path was Acharya Seal. The Europe that Raja Rammohan Roy met in contact with was divided into small nations and states where the influence of Christianity was noticeable. Rammohan was inspired by the progressive educational system of the various nations, states of the European land, and the presence of free thought in the religious, philosophical and political spheres. On this basis, Raja Rammohan took the vow of social re-formation for his country. He studied theology and discovered Universal truth through which he founded his humanism. Despite the study of many religions, various ways, Rammohan's personal religious knowledge was dependent on his knowledge of Vedanta.

After Raja Rammohan, duties of reconstructing 'Brahmo Samaj' were bestowed upon Debendra Nath Tagore. Keeping immense faith in old traditions of his own homeland, Debendra Nath was enlightened by the Upanishads and reformed the main motto and purpose of 'Brahmo' Dharma. Moreover, he never accepted the mistakes of Vedas. He gathered the 'Theist believe' in 'Brahmo' Dharma from intense readings of scriptures of English and German philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the early years, Acharya Brajendranath Seal discussed about the life of Debendra Nath Tagore and Raja Ram Mohan Roy. He added a chapter on Ram Mohan Roy in a book on Rammohan's life edited by Nagendranath Chattopadhyay. In that specific chapter he discussed about the philosophic background of Ramohan Roy's 'Theist believe'.¹In the year of 1924 on the occasion of Ram Mohan Roy's death anniversary in Bangalore Acharya Seal apparently acknowledged Rammohan's influence on him.

Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore was another person who influenced Acharya Seal's life. His contribution to the renaissance of Bengal as well as India is also undeniable. Rammohan and Debendranath influenced Rabindranath Tagore. Upanishad and humanism nurtured Rabindranath's thought. After acclimatizing to western European culture and their intellects, he dreamt of building an institution, which could thread the world in one. Viswabharati was the product of that dream. Acharya Seal's speech on Viswabharati's Inauguration day reflects the same. Rabindranath Tagore was highly impressed and influenced by Acharya Seal's multifarious talent and genius of world cultural heritage.

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Acharya Seal said in his speech on the Inaugural day of visva-Bharati that, 'we have to keep in mind that which is the soul of India. That great soul is on the verge of almost extinct. If we do not exchange and correspond universally, then we will not be able to expose and establish our entity globally'.²What is the truth he had visited for a lifetime? What great soul of India did he discover with his keen wisdom? It can be expressed in one word, one simple sweet word- that is Unity. Of course, this is not a new thing for India because this is the most sacred word of the soul of India, the unique word of the heart. Acharya Seal presented the same old morals in a new way to the world with pride.³

Brajendranath and Rabindranath, they are contemporaries, like minded. Although the discovery of the perception of beauty is different in their lives and the journey is different but they ultimately reach the same realisation. While Rabindranath speaks of indescribable beauty from the earthly world, Brajendranath perceives the perfection of beauty based on daily experience with the visible world and mundane human life. Both are wonderful personalities and great assets of the Indian sagacity.

We do not get to know the right time and place of interaction with Rabindranath Tagore and Acharya Brajendranath Seal. However, it was gathered from writings of few authors that with the inspiration from few leaders of 'Nababidhan' Brahmo samaj (established by Keshab Chandra Sen), such as Pramatha Lal Sen, Binayendra Sen and Mohit Lal Sen set up a small group called Prarthana Sammelan. As said, both Rabindranath Tagore and Acharya Brajendranath Seal were introduced to each other in this group. From December 1902 to March 1903, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay went to England and gave a heartfelt and stormy speech on 'Theology of Hinduism' at Oxford and Cambridge. Under his influence, the leading professors there met to form a committee with a view to creating a permanent professorship to teach Hindu philosophy at Oxford. Brahmabandhab Upadhyay prayed to Rabindranath Tagore to create the post. Rabindranath Tagore recommended Acharya Brajendranath Seal's name. He made this plan more effective during Brajendranath Seal's visit to England. Details of his active efforts are found in a letter written to Bertrand Russell, as 'I do not know if you ever heard of Dr. Brajendranath Seal of Calcutta University. He is the most distinguished scholar and thinker we have in India at present. He just come to England...He is the only man I know who will be able to present the development of Eastern thoughts to European audience in an adequate manner'.⁴

There is much evidence of affinity between Brajendranath Seal and Rabindranath Tagore. The good news of the Nobel Prize winning poet arrived at Shantiniketan on 14th November, 1913. The followers and fans of Rabindranath organized a reception committee to facilitate him. Members of the committee included, Surendra Nath Bandopadhyay, Brajendranath seal, Nilratan Sarker and many more.

Brajendranath Seal's daughter Saraju Bala got married to Basanta Ranjan who was the brother of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das but he left for heavenly abode with 1-2 years after marriage. She wrote a praiseworthy book on sudden death of her husband. Brajendranath Seal requested Tagore to write the preface of her book and, eventually, Tagore accepted the request. It is known from the letter that Brajendranath sent to Rabindranath on 29 May 1914 from Cambridge.⁵

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In 1917 an event to facilitate Rabindranath, organized by 'Brahmo samaj', Acharya Seal gave a rousing speech entitled 'Pashime O Purbe Rabindranather adanprodan'. Where he said Rabindranath went to Europe as a pilgrim. He carried messages through 'Gitanjali'. He related the relation between the soul and God and its impact on life, nature and society. He carried the result and the pursuit of long meditation and exposure to the infinite world of India to the western world. Again he carried a big message to the western world. He carried a ray of hope and a message of peace for the torn out and unrest western people.⁶ Brajendranath thought that Rabindranath had brought that same message from abroad, how it is possible to infuse new life into the dilapidated ancient society. We find their spiritual relationship, respect for each other and affinity in their words and deeds; henceforth they become closely related to each other. In the background of world literature, Acharya Seal expressed and elaborated Rabindranath's poetry 'Bhanusinher Padabali', 'Prabhat Sangeet', 'Sandhya sangeet', 'Prakritir Parishod' etc. Acharya Seal critically discussed Tagore's lyric poetry in English, published till 1890 and placed him as a great poet among all the contemporary poet and writers. He also respected him as a lyric poet. Tagore was an honourable guest of his dear friend Brajendranath Seal at Bangalore in September 1928. At Acharya's place itself Tagore, composed 'Sesher Kobita' spending the entire night, though he was sick and recited the poem early next morning to Acharya Seal. Acharya was overwhelmed by the brilliant writing and praised him ecstatically in front of the poet himself. ⁷'Golden Book of Tagore', a compilation, edited by Ramananda Chattopadhyay was published in the year 1931, on the occasion of poet's 70th anniversary. To this Brajendranath wrote that 'Tagore's poetic achievement is characteristically complete. His early poems are an exercise in emotional exaltation. To this, he soon added the art of imaginative 'transfiguration' (as in Urvasi). In this mature achievement, he developed the criticism of life without sacrificing either exaltation or transfiguration. Finally, in his consummate later art, he has summed up all these elements and achieved a supreme mastery- the creation of a personality with an individual scheme of life, an individual outlook on the universe'.⁸

Sir Asutosh Mukherjee

There are some mentionable and contemporary characters of Brajendranath Seal; Ashutosh Mukherjee is one of them who was determined to make Calcutta University a prominent and one of the best learning centers in the country. Ashutosh recognized the talent of Brajendranath and they were able to create a teaching and research environment of Post-Graduation in Calcutta University. In the year 1913, at the request of the Vice- Chancellor Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, he was adorned the seat of the King George V Professorship in the newly established Department of Philosophy at Calcutta University and continued with repute till the year 1920. He was also a member of Board of studies in Economics and political philosophy, Mental and Moral Philosophy and experimental Psychology.⁹At the first level, he started with modification and amplification of the university's curriculum. He also gave emphasis on learning in mother tongue. But he made it point that science should be taught in English, as India will not be keep pace with the educational developments around the world.

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Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy

During his teaching days, Acharya Seal came across many talented students and professors and the direction of their research was influenced by Brajendranath's thinking. At this time Prafulla Chandra Roy was busy in research of Hindu chemistry. Acharya Seal was inspired by the research work of Prafulla Chandra Roy and started researching on the contributions of ancient Hindus in science, and added a chapter in one of Prafulla Chandra's books and the result of this research is Brajendranath's famous book 'Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus'.¹⁰ Acharya Seal has made immense contributions towards research of Mathematics, Science, Philosophy, Literature etc. He wrote the introduction of the Book 'Hindu Chemistry' as requested by Prafulla Chandra Roy. In that he wrote 'My direct aim in the present work is to furnish the historians of the special sciences with new material which will serve to widen the scope of their survey- I have not written one line which is not supported clearest texts.'¹¹

Swami Vivekananda

Meeting classmate and dear friend Narendra Nath Dutta was, of course a mentionable incident. Affinity grew up during their college days and both of them were frequent visitors to 'Brahmo Samaj' in those days. Vivekananda was Narendra Nath then, his thoughts and the world of emotions and life was restless, impetuous and full of punishment and conflict. At this point of time, Brajendranath seal was one of his closest friends who used to pacify him for his mental agony and impatience. Both of them used to commute to 'Sadharan Brahmo Samaj' at the same time. Subsequently, Vivekananda established the Ramakrishana Math and Mission and that time Brajendranath Seal articulates a sophisticated religious philosophy that leads him to a universal human religion where there is no place for dedicated service of God. Brajendranath talked about the evolution of religion throughout his life, which came back in his writings on Ramakrishna and Raja Rammohan Roy. Acharya Brajendranath and Swami Vivekananda together wanted to realize the works and development and the inner feelings of Mill, Kant, Herbart, Spencer, Hegel. At last, Vivekananda left the 'Brahma Samaj' and became a disciple of Ramakrishna, but Brajendranath did not take discipleship of Ramakrishna.

When Swami Vivekananda became familiar with the skepticism of Hume and Herbert Spencer's doctrine of the unknowable and the invincibility of his disbelief concentrated in philosophical skepticism, then he could find solace in music only. When Vivekananda was inexplicable state of mind, Brajendranath advised him to study Shelly's poems. Shelly's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' made a stirring impulse inside Vivekanada's mind, even wise thoughts of philosophers could not stir up his mind. The world then no longer appeared to him as a lifeless, loveless and mere machine any more. Then Brajendranath said to Vivekananda that what Shelly imagined, the truth of higher spirituality is more 'The unity of Para-Bramhan as the universal reason'.¹²

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Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa

Ramakrishna Paramahansa was among the personalities whose life and thought was attracted Brajendranath. Acharya Seal explained his first meeting with Ramakrishna Paramahansa as a memorable one and defined him as a 'cosmic humanist'. In an occasion of Sri Ramakrishna's Birth Centenary in May 1937, Acharya Seal gave presidential address. Through his speech, Acharya Seal not only explained the higher most level of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy but also discussed the ideology that Acharya Seal professed and followed throughout his life. As Acharya Seal found Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy none other than Universal Humanism which carried and followed in every sphere of life, irrespective of any circumstances. In his speech, he defined Sri Ramakrishna's nature and characteristics as a mixed and subtle personality of Raja Rammohan Roy. Exploring the details of Ramakrishna's thought and personality, he analysed how Ramakrishna attain the truth of life abstaining from realistic world. He navigated all conditions and modes (Upadhis) but he worshiped Mother Kali and other modes of deities through relative or conditional (Sopadhi) state of mind.¹³ According to Brajendranath Seal, 'Sri Ramakrishna worshipped one in all and all in one'. He also reconciled Sakara and Nirakara upasana (Iconic and aniconic worship). According to Brajendranath Seal, Sri Ramakrishna saw God in man as he saw man in God. This is the end of all perception. In this understanding, the universe is seen between humans and humans are seen in the universe. All living beings are embodiment of God to him. Following his philosophy and idealism made a great impact on Acharya Seal's life, specially his metaphor and allegory, which was never end. Acharya Seal honored and defined Sri Ramakrishna as torchbearer of universal unity who stood above any religion. 'He sought to experience each religion in its entire in 'Sadhana' or spiritual discipline. Now he would be a Moslem fakir with appropriate rituals, attitudes and garb and now a Christian neophyte, stricken with a sense of sin and crying for salvation'.¹⁴

Conclusion

Acharya Brajendranath Seal became an institutional name in his lifetime, a friend and a philosopher for many contemporary personalities in early 19th century whose contribution is mere a history in Bengal renaissance.

Notes & References

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