

Education and Culture in the 20th Century Bengal in the Light of Nationalism

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Abstract

Bengal happened to be the forerunner in dissemination of knowledge, learning, art and culture since the day of Raja Rammohan Roy. A number of erudite scholars took the leading role in the occurrence of Indian Renaissance in the 19th century. In every field, right from spread of education, spirituality nationalism and cultures Bengal witnessed its glorious days under the able leadership of Vidyasagar, Rabindranath, Sri Aurovindo, Vivekananda, Chittaranjan, Subhas Chandra Bose and other. In response to various political decisions which were aimed at dismantling the unity of Indian mass our thinkers contributed a lot for the upliftment of education through National Education Movement, Swadeshi Movement, Dawn Society etc. Eminent scientists like J.C. Bose, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy, Satyendranath Bose, etc. left an indelible mark in their respective fields. Poets, lyricists, singers, artists, also continued their creativity that led to the reverberation of nationalism. Indigenous tradition of Bengali folk tales, folk music was restored. Artists like Abanindrath Tagore broke the domination of Victorian naturalism over Indian art and sought inspiration from the Mughal, Rajputs and Ajanta Paintings.

The full paper seeks to explore these issues in detail to delineate how education and culture in 20th century Bengal helped in outpouring nationalism.

KEYWORDS:- Education, art, culture, Renaissance, National Education Movement, Swadeshi Movement, Folk tales, Folk music, Indigenous art, Nationalism.

Introduction:-

Bengal has always been the pioneer in the effusion of Indian Nationalism. The great Gokhale once observed: "What Bengal thinks today India thinks it tomorrow." In the second half of 19th century Indian politics was turbulent enough. After the sepoy munity in 1857 the British Government was more cautious and Indian freedom struggle also took a condensed shape culminating in the establishment of Indian National Congress in 1885 by the patronage of an English civilian Alan Octavian Hume nominating W.C. Banerjee (a Hindu Brahmin converted to be a Christian as its President). People used to say it was but a safety valve for the British to run their administration smoothly. A host of bright leaders from Bengal led the freedom movement at various stages. Obviously Bengal happened to be one of the most favourite haunts of political and socio-cultural activities of the then India. Great scholars like Surendra Nath Banerjee, Sri Aurobindo, Rashbihari Bose, Netaji Subhash Chandra, Surya Sen took up the baton of the leadership from time to time. The revolutionary nationalism also had its epicentre in Bengal apart from Maharashtra and Punjab. Henry Hutton observed: "Surendranath Bandyopadhyay created great turmoil throughout a vast tract – right from distant Multan to Dacca"¹. To strengthen the freedom movement the support of literate mass was a must. The consciousness regarding education set off with the introduction of National Fair or

Hindu Fair in 1867. Through the Arya Society (1875) our leaders campaigned for ancient Indian culture and ideology. The people who were educated through prevalent education system also wanted the revival of values. This helped in formation of National Education Movement. Rabindranath established Santiniketan' with a view to bringing reformation in education. With the similar end in view Satish Chandra Mukhopadhyay set up a school namely 'Bhagawat Chatuspathi' in Bhawanipur, Calcutta. The leaders demanded education through mother tongue and expansion of practical need-based education. In 1902 Down Society was established for expansion of technical education among the youths. "The education system that was tried to be built up for providing inspiration in nationalistic thinking removing the defects in higher education, the Don society may be termed to be its first steps."² There was discontent among the Indians for non-inclusion of any Indian representative by Lord Curzon in the university commission. Fuel was added to this at Curzon's proposal of division of Bengal, obviously to weaken the strength of united Bengal. As a reaction, the Swadeshi Movement started and "the Indian national movement took a major leap forward. The richness of the movement was not confined to politics alone. The period saw a breakthrough in Indian art, literature, music, science and industry. Indian society, as a whole was experimenting and the creativity of the people expanded in every direction."³ Thus, National Education Movement in the backdrop of political movement took its acute form.

To protest against oppressive policies of the government, the national leaders called for rejection of everything that was English, no matter whether it was a product or a system. Students boycotted schools and colleges. To restrain the students Carlyle circular was enforced and many students had to leave school or college. In 1906 a National School was opened in Rongpur (now in Bangladesh) for the drop-out students. National Council for Education was founded with donations from solvents on 11th March, 1906. In a meeting held in the town hall, Calcutta on 14th August, 1906, its president Rashbehari Bose announced the establishment of National College and School. In a rented house of Boubazar Street the occasional functioning of educational institutions from school stage to the university level started. Aurobindo Ghosh was its Principal. Provision was there for Science, Vocational and Technical Education. Various Indian languages were also taught there. Tarak Nath Palit and Nilratan Sarkar, owing to dissent, established Bengal Technical Institute under the banner of separate council. Worshipping of Indianness took the prime position in nation education system. In the words of Bipin Chandra Pal: "So far we have acquired knowledge about trees like oak, elm, beech during the study of botany, but neglected mango grove. To collect information about the Nile, the Gangetic valley has remained unknown to our students."⁴

National Education Movement roused consciousness among the people of our country. The influence of this consciousness could be observed in the minds of the thinkers and leaders and as a result the wave of Non-cooperation Movement hit the political shore of India. Along with this Gandhiji's proposal for Basic Education came into effect.

Swami Vivekananda observed: "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in Man". He was concerned about the 'body' in his educational ideas. To rein the sense organs and to instill ethical values, he laid importance on the exercise of

mind. By 'Brahmacharya' one could acquire even unfailing memory. His thought on education is reflected through extracts like 'The Education that speaks of educating the child like the adult is to be rejected. The condition of life is freedom. To pack the brain with information is no education. That education is necessary which will build up character, mental strength, intellectual illumination and strength of selfhood.' He asserted, 'Attention, concentration and meditation would constitute the mind.' He upheld the ancient Brahminic education system in which students were taught at the houses of their 'Gurus'. This idea finally got the shape in formation of Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda stood for mass education through the medium of mother tongue with History, Geography, Literature, Science, General Knowledge and other curricular subjects. He favoured Women's monasteries with Girls' schools and advocated a curriculum consisting of language, literature, grammar a bit of English together with cooking, needlework, mother craft etc. He observed, "As a bird can't fly with one wing, similarly a society can't develop ignoring the role of women". Swami Vivekananda stated: "Everyone is the owner of nectar. Feeling is the foundation of Hindu religion, the religion is boundless, its path is eternal. Illusion is created out of plurality. From it comes sorrow, fear and death, equilibrium is God. He exists internally as well as externally."⁵ He realized the utility of technical education. He says "We need technical and all else which may develop the industries, so that men, instead of seeking for service, may earn enough to provide for themselves and save something against a rainy day". "Following Swami Vivekananda's ideology the revolutionaries were given the lesson of physical exercise, wrestling and stick playing".⁶

Rishi (Saint) Bankim Chandra upheld manhood. To him, Manhood is determined by proportionate development of instincts and happiness which comes through 'Dharma' Education is a part of 'Dharmo'. Human powers are divided into physical and mental aspects of life. Bankim Chandra wanted to put equal emphasis into all three aspects of development – 'Jnan', 'Korma' and 'emotional feelings'. Considering his saintly qualities Bipin Chandra Pal comments: "In fact Bankimchandra was greatly important architect at the threshold of strong bridge through which Vivekananda made expedition to the life centre of western power, America."⁷ The great revolutionary cum intellectual philosopher Sri Aurobindo resigned from the service of Baroda Estate and accepted the job of the Principal of the National College in 1906. He was interested in the activities of Satish Chandra Mukherjee and Dawn Society. According to him the aim of education is to help the fruition of the human spirit, and therefore, he stressed on strengthening those powers which would help spiritual progress. He says, '– nothing can be taught, the teacher is not an instructor or task master, he is a helper or guide, he does not impart knowledge to him (pupil), he shows him how to acquire knowledge for himself.' He wanted a well-formed and graceful body attainable through free exercise and games which would also impart a spirit of co-operation and sportsmanship and guard against undesirable emotions and sexual perversion.

In 'A System of National Education' Sri Aurobindo observed, "You can impose a certain discipline on children, dress them into certain mould, lash them into a desired path but unless you can get their heart and nature on your side the conformity becomes a cowardly compliance." He was dead against inviting vast machines. He was cautious about saving weavers, small artisans, blacksmiths, farmers etc. He wrote, "If we compete in the matter

of industrial production, it would be tantamount to committing suicide. The message of real economic emancipation would be spread all over the world from India only. And for this our financial carrier should be based on a greater foundation. We have to set example of suppressing all desires of enjoyment before our soul.”⁸

Simultaneously with Satish Chandra Mukherjee, Rabindranath Tagore contributed effectively towards the growth of ideas and also particularly in the National Education Movement. In "Shikshar Herfer"(1892) he pointed out the dichotomy between life and education caused by English education. To him, instead of creative and progressive adjustment with life the then education imparted bookish knowledge and that too in a foreign language. It failed to assimilate the truth and beauty. In an address to the students in 1905, Rabindranath said that a total education was possible by a combination of modern western knowledge and the freedom of pupils in the national context. He always dreamt of that country "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high/where knowledge is free – " He never encouraged the mechanical memorization and laments: "We punished those who hide book under the wrapper and rewards those who hide knowledge in the mind." Mechanical knowledge is starkly criticized in his story 'Tota Kahani'(Parrot's Tale). He unhesitatingly declared "In education mother tongue is mother's milk." He stressed on development of agriculture of the nation and hence established Sriniketan as a centre for agricultural studies and research. He did not hesitate to appoint teachers from Europe. He fully authorized the teacher to control the un discipline student there. By encouraging fairs and festivals he nurtured the spirits of corporate life among the students and common people alike. Patriotism, in his opinion, did not mean agitation and oratory, it meant knowing and loving the country and serving the fellow countrymen. These views of Rabindranath paved the way for a movement of Education Reform. To Rabindranath serving country does not mean possessing the congress, rather utilizing the energy for the development of education and health to devote the energy towards removal of scarcity of food. In his essay "Jgnabhanga" Rabindranath observed: "If both the moderates and extremists did not think of occupying congress as the sole aim of service towards the nation, if they would have established themselves in real work field, had they used their own energy always for alleviating the problems of education, health and food scarcity, had they got the taste of real worship and real attainment and realized the life and force of the country directly by joining the people of the country with body, soul and speech then they would not become crazy to possess the stage of the Congress."⁹ Mahatma Gandhi was also deeply influenced by Tagore's philosophy of Education and Gandhi's concept of Basic Education had a lot of similarity with that of Tagore's. When the mind of the people was thus gradually prepared, the question of partition of Bengal and its aftermath supplied the flint for ignition.

By the time, Lord Curzon published his education policy viz. Resolution of Government of India on Education Policy, 1904. So many positive aspects on primary education, teacher training, preservation of Indian art and culture, female education etc. were there but Curzon's role was not properly evaluated due to excessive turmoil in political sphere particularly in partition of Bengal, An eminent thinker, A.N.Jharemarks, "Now that the ashes of numerous strife are cold, all Indians are grateful to the wise statesmanship of the great viceroy who did so much to preserve our ancient

monuments and raise our educational standard." Lord Curzon is criticized too much for his imperialistic attitude and his modern thinking about educational reforms is not considered favourably by the Indians. That is why it is often said, "He is more sinned against than being a sinner"

Sir Asutosh Mukherjee became the vice chancellor of Calcutta University in 1906 to work out the much condemned University Act of 1904. He is noted for various reformations like expansion of secondary and higher education, introduction of the study of Vernacular at higher stage in education, studies in science and technology, introduction in varied disciplines offering facilities in the researches under the auspices of the university, maintenance of university autonomy and freedom etc. The Science College was founded in 1914. It was the genuine credit of Sir Asutosh to have secured the services of stalwarts like Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy, P.C.Mitra, C.V.Raman, Debendra Mohan Ghosh, Gonesh Prosad, Prof. Agarkar etc. Sir Asutosh Mukherjee believed that National integration through mental unity and integration might be achieved by education only. As a first step towards integration he adopted the policy of studying different languages of India. Asutosh's motto was, "culture the mother tongue; reach the people through mother tongue." Sir Asutosh held that Calcutta University had become a 'Swadeshi' university. In fact, our debt to sir Asutosh particularly in expansion of secondary and higher education is beyond measure.

One of the aims of education system propounded by twentieth century thinkers and educationists was to impart the lesson of nationalism and patriotism. The literary giants could not ignore the demand of the society, Rather they took up the responsibility of influencing people to get the knowledge of nationalism through their writings. In their novels, dramas, poems, songs they highlighted nationalistic thoughts. 'Anandamoth' by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was the source of energy for the revolutionaries, Swami Satyananda seemed to serve as his mouthpiece, his 'Bandemataram' was the chanting inspiration for the patriots. Many persons became martyrs uttering these charming words. The lessons of 'Jnanyog', 'Karmayog' by Swami Vivekananda moved the freedom fighters as well as the common people. One of the important aspects of Vivekananda's teaching was to sing the glory of Physical labour. He called upon the boys to play football rather than to read the Gita. 'Taruner Swapno' by Netaji serves as a handbook for the youth of the British ruled India. Rabindranath was not only a prolific writer who wrote for the sake of literature, but an important aspect of his thinking contains patriotism though he never liked or encouraged jingoism. He openly criticized the burning of clothes by the revolutionaries in 'Ghare Baire'. In 'Gora' he placed Gora as a human being, above Gora as a fanatic. Anandamoyee, who brought up Gora like her own child knowing well about his Irish origin, has been branded as universal embodiment of motherhood. To protest against the atrocities of the British he did not think twice to give up the title knighthood, nor is he hesitant to exchange opinion and teaching with the European scholars in his Santiniketan. His protest against division of Bengal is really noteworthy. He composed the song 'Banglar Mati Banglar Jol' which is still remembered by people in the occasion of any nationalistic or patriotic program, He started observing 'Raksha Bandhan' and thus led the demonstration against the division of Bengal. In innumerable songs on nationalism Rabindranath made up the minds of people for a better motherland. Saratchandra in his novel 'Pather Dabi' openly appreciated the activities of the

revolutionists. The British banned his book but that could not discourage Sarat Chandra, Kaji Nazrul Islam, a revolutionary himself, jailed for some time, wrote a number of songs, essays and poems in order to generate the idea of patriotism and nationalism among the people. His poem 'Kandari Husiar' and essay 'Raj Bandir Jaban Bandi' (Deposition of Prisoner) deserve special mention.

In the twentieth century Bengal a number of world famous scientists showed the world the paths of cultivation of Science. Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy emphasized on self reliance of the Bengalees. He always encouraged the youths to set up their own business establishments. His Bengal Pharmaceuticals is an example of his visionary attitude towards entrepreneurship. Sir J.C.Bose, an eminent Physicist as well as Botanist proved his excellence through experiments Satyendranath Bose with whom Einstein's name is uttered in the same breath always encouraged learning of science in Bengali. He used to say 'Those who say Science can't be learnt through Bengali either do not know science or do not know 'Bengali'. All these scientists through their activities encouraged nationalism.

In the backdrop of 'Swadeshi' movement a large number of lyricists composed songs and verses which still reverberate the spirit of nationalism. The most renowned among them were Dwijendralal Roy, Atul Prasad Sen, Sajani Kanta Das, Mukunda Das, Rejanikanta Sen etc. Songs like 'Sakal Desher Sera' by D.L. Roy, 'Bolo Bolo Bolo Sabe', 'Utho Go Bharata Laxmi' by Atul Prasad, 'Fele Dau Reshmi Churi' by Mukundo Das and 'Mayer Deoa Mota Kapor' by Rajani Kanta were almost part and parcel of Bengali culture. Eminent historian, Bipan Chandra co related Swadeshi Movement with folk tales, and indigenous art: "The Swadeshi influence could be seen in Bengali folk music popular among Hindu and Muslim villages(Palligeet and Jari Gaan)and it evoked collections of Indian fairy tale such as , Thakur Mar Jhuli (Grand mother's Tales) written by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Mazumder which delights Bengal children to this day.In arts this was the period when Abanindranath Tagore broke the domination of Victorian naturalism over Indian Art and sought inspiration from the rich indigenous tradition of Mughal, Rajput and Ajanta Paintings"¹⁰ Thus in the twentieth century Bengal showed its excellence in education, literature, liberty of women, spiritual thinking, leadership of social and cultural movements and in many respects. The way shown by Ram Mohan, Derozio, Vidyasagar, Modhusudhan was followed by the next generation leaders and in the light of knowledge and culture, politics was kept ablaze and this tradition is still on its journey towards better learning and upliftment of culture.

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