

Historical Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Indian Renaissance

Dr. Saraswati Kumari

Assistant Professor, History Section, MMV, BHU, Varanasi

Abstract:

This paper is all about the historical interpretation of the phenomenon of Renaissance in context to India. It discusses about the various perceptions being thought about the renaissance in India. How it was historically being analyzed as mere imitation of the west and later on perceived as the impact of the intellectual enlightenment of the Indian mind and not the imitator of the west. This paper also throws light on how the British conquest and the consequent dissemination of colonial culture and ideology had led to an inevitable introspection about the strengths and weaknesses of indigenous culture and institutions. The response to it was varied but the need to reform social and religious life was a commonly shared conviction. This paper also discusses about how the European renaissance led to the accomplishment of the western culture that was not Indian but had a great influence on Indian mind. It also discusses a perceived thought about how depressed culture in a European context was a tragedy of Indian intellectualism also.

Keywords: Renaissance, Bengal, interpretation, phenomenon

The term renaissance often associated with the fifteenth and sixteenth century in Europe has been invented and taught in thematic dimensions outside of Europe and has been used to describe the changes that may have little connection to the historical period and canon usually associated with the particular temporal and geographical space. While it is impossible not to acknowledge the role of European cultural terms and epistemologies, the term renaissance nonetheless has been re-imagined to declare and designate historical developments in many areas of the world. The word Renaissance was first coined in the 16th century writings of the Italian artists and critic Giorgio Vasari [1511-1574]. In his long Introduction to the lives of the Great painters, sculptors and architects. By 18th century, the significance of the European Renaissance was further elaborated by French enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and many others.

The past is clearly in the present and the present is in the past. More to the point, however, the past is constituted of 'past present' such that any given phenomenon at any point in time is simply the contingent manifestation, the apex of an emerging pyramidal structure of meaning. The trick is not to undo the pyramid to discover the truth but to show the dynamic inter relationship of its constituent parts as emergent myths.

It is precisely such 'emergent myths' and how they came into being that I wish to uncover by exploring the dynamic interconnection between the developments of European renaissance and impact on India. History itself as Depesh Chakraborty contains in provincializing Europe was a part of the civilizing mission of the west consequent to imperialism and the enlightenment.

The attempt here is to not to break or contribute to history but to break out of it we may do show by examining the multiple base in which the past is present to us and how it discloses new ways of being in the world even changing it. By reading texts and textualizing, lives helps us to re-cupetrate multiple and usable understanding of our selves. This does not mean that the force of the texts is meant to launch and escape from reality, nor is its hidden agenda nearly to textualize the world, language does not merely create world, substitutes but rewords the world in such a way as also to re-world it.¹

Hence by recollecting facts this paper seeks to narrativize the contending episteme that went into the making of the nation. The European sea power in India brought with them western civilization and culture into the country and introduced many new elements into India's cultural heritage. In the closing years of the 18th century channels or Indian culture were getting dry. The creative had disappeared in fine arts, literature, science philosophy and religion. The intellectual life had become dull and sluggish. Society with all its evil customs remained stagnant. It was during the period that the west challenge all old values and beliefs of India. Consequently, old rites and rituals customs and traditions crumbled. Social, religious economic and political institution ceased. A change vision and revolutionizes those who came in contact with this process. Its immediate results were the indiscriminate imitation and adoption of western mode of life.

India was the home to one of the earliest civilization. The Indus valley civilization also called the Harappan civilization flourished between 3300 and 2000 BC in, What is now north western India and Pakistan. It was the contemporary of the ancient Chinese, Mesopotamia and Egyptian Civilization. Very little is known about the history of the civilization since few written records have been found and the script is yet to be deciphered. Most interestingly for our current purposes, there is strong evidence that the Indus valley had an active trade links with the outside world, particularly Mesopotamia. Archaeologists have uncovered a Sophisticated system of docks for sea going vessels in the part of Lothal in Gujarat.

India's Maritime links extended to the west as well as where it traded with the Persian and Roman Empires. There were two main routes one via the Red Sea and one through the Persian Gulf. The Indian trade surplus with the Roman Empire caused a constant one-way flow of gold coins. Roman writer [AD 23-79] wrote "that not a year passed in India did not take fifty million sesterp away from Rome".

Sushrut's invention and the numerical innovations of Aryabhata was able to work out that the earth is spherical and that it rotates on its axis. Throughout these centuries India also produced remarkable works in art, literature and philosophy. Hindu Buddhist kingdoms from south east Asia to central Asia looked to India for intellectual and cultural leadership. Pilgrims and students came by both sea and land routes to studying in Indian universities like Taxila, Nalanda and Ujjain and to visit the holy sites. Much of what we know about ancient India comes from the diaries of these foreign visitors.

Gradually India saw the decline phase of its civilization after 11th century AD. Western civilization too had gone through a similar cycle following the decline of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. In that case to the civilization decline had been the result of the changed attitudes. The European renaissance led to the accomplishment of the western cultural norms, western ways of seeing and western values and habits of mind, all ingested in a language that is not Indian. Such an immersion produces in the minds that engage with them with certainty, that those ideas, those ways of seeing, those practices are their own. This intellectual certainty is reinforced by the degree of felt comfort and familiarity²

The concern here is that enslavement by western civilization and condemnation to the status of a mere imitator, as opposed to an original thinker is inevitable in context to the India, once English language and culture becomes medium of thought.

The British created a new kind of Indian who was not merely cut off from his civilization but was educated in different way. The strangeness of the species that their terms of reference are the west. They put the problem of India through the eyes of Indian content. The deepest anguish of the Indian intellectual is that he is unrecognized in the west as an equal or as an intellectual at all³

The developments in a context of, cultural fusion was generated by the British colonial rule of India. The intellectuals were self –consciously writing both as Indian intellectuals for an Indian audience and as participants in a developing global community constructed in part by the Britishempire also. The British regarded Indians as inferior, their subsequent Indian colleagues look back [and down] on them as Britishimitators. As Rabindranath Tagore put the point with characteristic eloquence, in his 1924 lectures in China, languages are jealous sovereigns and passports are really allowed for travelers to cross their strictly guarded borders.⁴

Like European modernity this Indian modernity do arose from a renaissance moment and indeed a moment, thematized by its participants in that terms. Like the European renaissance centrally involved a back to the future trope. A past was to be reconstructed or resurrected and the imagined future was to be constructed on its foundation. The mixture of colonial consciousness and national awareness could not easily be reconciled. This already complex mixture was further complicated by the question of language, including tensions between English, Indian vernacular language and the traditional languages of Sanskrit and Persian. Moreover, the relationship between Hindu and Muslim philosophical traditions and the ways in which they informed civil society and academia could be highly combustible.⁵

Voltaire famously pronounced that history is nothing but a pack of tricks that we play upon the dead. In this essay I propose an historical interpretation. Many of the characteristics of 18th century Historiography became more persuasive when inspired by the renaissance of ideas and culture ambitions which modernity has come to call the enlightenment.

Marx, Lukacs, Durkheim, Mannheim, Fried, Pareto and many others have proposed the relativity of thinking, especially about economic, social and cultural development, could led to the conclusion that it is impossible to make a valid distinction between higher and lower cultures.

The term renaissance is applied in a narrower sense to the revival of classical art, learning and literature and in its wider sense to resurgence of the secular, individualistic and spirit of classical antiquity, involving the social, political and religious systems and institutions. In India, generally speaking the systematization of intellectual and religious tradition which was spawned by such men as Raja Ramohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekanand, Tilak,B.C.Pal and Mahatama Gandhi can be termed as renaissance because it involved a recrudence of interest in Hinduism and in its importance both for India as a nation.These founders of Indian renaissance were initially stimulated by the western educational system though in varying degrees.⁶

Indian Renaissance has been an important subject. Renowned Scholar like R.C. Majumdar, R.C.Dutt,J.N.Sarkar,N.R.Roy,K.N.Pannikar,S.Kadhirwal,Sudhir Chandra, C.F.Andrews, Rabindranath Tagore, M.G.Ranade and others have extensively written on the subjects of renaissance.

Annie Besant wrote about, 'We have resolved to revive the ancient ideals of Indian education and Indian culture, to teach our children in their mother tongue, to make Indian ideals the basis of Indian civilization ,renouncing the hybrid and sterile ideals of anglicized Indianism and to adapt them to a new

form instinct with the ancient life, and moulding it into a glorious new body for the ancient spirit. India would then lead a world into a new era of literature and beauty, Brotherhood and Peace.⁷

It was during the period from A.D. 1300 to 1550 that witnessed a remarkable revival of the Hindu mind an astonishing recovery from slough of despondency into which the people of India had fallen as a result of political conquest. It is the religion, philosophy and social thinking that were created during this revival, which enabled Hinduism to re-assert it in the period that followed and gradually regain its pre-eminent position in India. The medieval period thus acclaimed as the period of the Hindu renaissance, an era of great constructive thought and creative inspiration without which the re-emergence of the people among free nations of the world at a later period would not have been possible.⁸

Thomson and Garrat in the Rise and Fulfillment of British rule in India take a similar view and give to Raja Ramohan Roy the same place of unique importance as the originator of the remarkable rapprochement of two alien races, India and Britain, whereby the Eastern and Western cultures have become intermingled. Raja Ramohan Roy had performed a double task. He had to challenge Hindu orthodoxy and also turn in a new religious direction, the negative, skeptical spirit of the first generation of English educated Bengalis. Miss Collet quotes from an article in the Asiatic journal (1833): “The Raja often deplored the existence of a party which had sprung up in Calcutta, composed principally of imprudent young men, some of them possessing talent who had avowed themselves skeptics in the widest sense of the term. He described it as partly composed of East India and partly of Hindu youth, who from education and Learnt to reject their own faith without substituting any other. These he thought more bigoted Hindu and their principles the bane of all morality.”⁹

Because of his high courage and vast scholarship and comprehension of other religions, the Raja was best fitted to accomplish a union of the spiritual forces of the east and west which had met in India. The battle of Plassey 23 June sowed the seeds of British political supremacy in Bengal, which was extended throughout India, during the hundred years following it, naturally conducted India through manifold process of transition-political, social and economic. This for diverse reason, generated fumes of discontent among various sections of the people in different parts of India, which burst into flames in the movement of 1857-59, was no doubt suppressed by the government. But it produced significant consequences for India and its memory recalled in the subsequent years certainly worked against British Imperialism.¹⁰

The post 1859 period was marked by the development of some new forces in India destined of effect transformation in the various phases of her life. Cultural Renaissance and the Reformation movements in India during the second half of the 19th century, were then producing of a new awakening in Indian mind. The political developments of modern India have been an aspect of a general renaissance pervading different spheres of life –religion, society and culture and producing momentous consequences in each. The inevitable penetration of its spirit into the field of politics generated a connotation which gathered an irresistible momentum defying all the weapons of an aggressive Imperialism.¹¹

It is true that growing acquaintance, through the medium of western education, with the progressive political thought of the west and the stirring achievements of the revolution of modern Europe resulting in the triumphs of nationalism and democracy saturated the minds of some educated Indians with the ideas of liberalism, civic liberty and freedom. But this by itself could not have produced and forested a truly Indian national movement if there had not been at the same time a genuine urge from within, a spirit of renaissance aiming at the revival of what was noble and elevating in India's past

and also at the redemption of her people from the crushing load of unreason, social abuses and political servitude .¹²

Indeed, discovery of India's passed through the honest endeavors of scholars, poets and social and religious reformers proved to be a highly fertile source of inspiration generating in the minds of many a feeling of regard for the motherland. Indian nationalism has been, remarks, Ramsay Macdonald truly 'The revival of her historical tradition and the liberation of the soul of a people. 'Indian nationality is' in the words of Annie Besant, 'not a plant of mushroom growth but a giant of the forest with millennia behind it.'⁵

The establishment of the Asiatic Society in Bengal was a significant landmark in the history of cultural renaissance in modern India. The researches of many zealous antiquarians, Indian as well as European, revealed the majesty and glory of India's old civilization, which served to inspire generations of people in this land. No doubt the pioneer workers in this respect were a number of European scholars like Jones, Prinsep, Wilson, Colebrooke, Rosen, Burnouf, Schegel, Bopp, Max Muller and some others. But it is highly gratifying to note how far this supremely important task of rediscovering and reinterpreting India's past, we owe a heavy debt to our distinguished countrymen like Rammohan Roy, Radhakant Dev, Rajendra Lal Mitra, Vishwanath Narayan Mandlik, Mani Shankar Jataahankar, BhauDaji, Bhagwan LalIdraji, M.G.Ranade, B.g.Tilak, R.G.Bhandarkar, K.T.Telang, chaitanya, Jayadev, Tulsidas and Shankaracharya and destined in the future to shine clear as the first glowing sparks sent out been the fiery turmoil where old and new were fusing. Spiritual Idealism has been also a highly potent factor in promoting the progress of nationalism in modern india. The Indian social and religious reform movements have undoubtedly exercised much influence on the course of our national development. Referring to India's new awakening. Reg.C.V.Andrews wrote about 1912: 'But this awakening would have been wholly insufficient to usher in a new era if it had not been combined with a second and even greater change . 'A religious reformation has been advancing side by side with the new renaissance. Rammohan Roy DevendraNathTagore, Ishwar Chandra vidyasagarKeshab Chandra senDayanandSaraswati,M.G.Ranade ,Bal GangadharTilak,Ram Krishna Paramhansa and his great disciple Vivekanandaand Shri Aurobindo Impressed on the minds of our countrymenand profoundness and sublimity of our ancient thought and created their in indomitable urge for national regeneration on the basis of the best in Indian culture.¹³

Colonialism has been seen on the one hand as aviolent suppression of hererogency or on the other as the ingenious inventor of indigenous traditions. The year 1780-1850 witnessed the synchronous growth of Imperialism, Romantacism and Orientalism, together with the emergence of ideas of nationhood in both colony and metropolis.

By 1830 British domination extended across northern India and throughout the peninsula. This extended Indian empire had become by then the most important of Britain's Imperial assets, British manufactured exports to India were at last beginning to take off and with the decline of the west Indies,the volume of British trade with India's was outpacing with any other part of the empire. That there was a close connection between the rise and consolidation of empire and the trajectory of British cultural involvement with India is surely self-evident. Raymond Schwab offered a compelling interpretation of that connection. Their military success in the later 18th century, in his view gave the British both primary over other Europeans in India and a unique access to the sources of Indian culture.For some years,a handful of British people made exemplary use their opportunities in interpreting India to Europe.But the European oriental renaissance that Schwab invokes, 'had only an

ephemeral career in that same England to which it owed its originit was England great disgrace to be too self-seeking in Indi the conquerors felt obligated to defend their conquest, which meant exalting their own race and religion. The pressure of Empire stifled deep cultural engagement.’¹⁴

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