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THE RENAISSANCE AS THE REINCARNATION OF INDIA: THE INFLUENCE OF THE WEST ON THE EAST: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the 19th century India in the social, historical, religious, political and cultural contexts. The pre-renaissance period can be marked as the background to welcome the Renaissance in India with a special reference to the advent of the British in India as an external influence on the internal, as the influence of the West on the East. India as an identity rests not only on the history of discrete people but also on cultures given its socio-political, socio-religious and socio-cultural scenarios. The emergence of India today as a very strong and solid nation with a deep root in democracy owes to the long experience of imperial government, its cultures and civilization. Therefore, the omission of the mention of the British in the history of India will render it incomplete. The introduction of the British army, institutions, hospitals, schools, colleges, economic structures, architecture, technologies, administration, education, Christianity and above all the use of English language—the full panoply of the British presence in India altering the physical, economic, social and even the domestic landscape of rural and urban people across the subcontinent rendered India very lame. The Indians also witnessed the ideologies and the practices of a British-mediated colonial modernity in India.

Key Words: Renaissance, Reformation, religion, freedom, culture, education

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and socio-cultural scenarios. The emergence of India today as a very strong and solid nation with a deep root in democracy owes to the long experience of imperial government, its cultures and civilization. Therefore, the omission of the mention of the British in the history of India will render it incomplete. The introduction of the British army, institutions, hospitals, schools, colleges, economic structures, architecture, technologies, administration, education, Christianity and above all the use of English language—the full panoply of the British presence in India altering the physical, economic, social and even the domestic landscape of rural and urban people across the subcontinent

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The writing of such a history, with reference to time, can be divided inexactly. The history of the modern India roughly begins with the end of the Mughal Empire established by "Babur in 1526 and formally brought to an end by the British in 1857" (Mansingh 2006: 17). The 18th century, largely a period of darkness and decline, was without any remarkable political or cultural developments. The death of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) in 1707 disintegrated India into a number of small kingdoms fighting among themselves to have a control of their territories. The abundant resources in India, internal crises and quarrels attracted the Europeans, especially the British who gained foothold after the battle of Plassey in 1757 by establishing the East India Company with Calcutta as their headquarters with a disguised objective to drain away the resources of India. The weak Mughal Empire allowed this Company to be very strong with the seeds of supremacy in Bengāl extending later on throughout India. With the granted rights to rule in the name of the government, the Company gradually moved inland from Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, the major coastal cities of India.

The full-fledged establishment of the British in India brought a series of changes in the social and religious context in the subcontinent. The expansion of conservative British Rāj instrumented the political, economic and social transition in India. With the passage of time, the British not only acquired the political power but also secured their place in the administrative affairs of India. The 18th century that preceded the juggernaut of colonial march was not devoid of the reform movements and intellectual advances. However, Hinduism was beset with the evils like idolatry, polytheism and superstitions that were inherited even by the following century. People got restless by the mid of the 19th century and revolted against the British for the first time due to the diverse reasons which generated the fumes of discontent among them in various parts in India. These agitations burning into flames in the mutiny of 1857 invited an end to the

Company in 1858 making the Indians aware of their unity against the British. Though this revolt was crushed, it made an important impact on the minds of the Indians.

The post-mutiny period of India was marked with the development of some new forces in India like the cultural Renaissance and the Reformation movements. In spite of having the strong impact of the Christian Missionary, the Hindus and the Muslims were free to follow their cultures and religions. Employability rendered many Indians loyalty to the British Rāj. Having acquired the power in India, the British exploited the natural resources and the man-power mercilessly. The growth of the British imperialism provided a platform for the establishment of a political party known as the Indian National Congress in 1885 aiming to work with the British for the benefits of the Indians. This party, presided over by W. C. Bonerjee (1844-1906), turned against the British due to the less significance given to the Congress. Later on, this political body transformed itself into a national vehicle for social reform and human upliftment. The British allowed certain benefits to Indians when they introduced the concept of time in the government offices. Everything was done according to rules and timetables on its fixed time. The pocket watch became an emblem of the British colonial modernity for the Westernized Indians. Printed books and newspapers available in English were equally omnipresent signs of the modern colonial life. The first vernacular newspaper, "The Bengālī Gazette", began to be published in 1816. Bombay had its first Indian press in 1861; Madras had its first Indian-owned newspaper, "the Madras Mail" in 1868. Printing became Calcutta's second largest industry by 1911.

When the Indians protested, a wall of racial distrust between the White and the non-White subjects resulting in the physical separation of the European residences and the social life was created. In order to divide and rule, the British appointed only those Indians in the Army who assisted the British during the Mutiny of 1857. Further, in the name of modernization, they not only reshaped Indian cities but also villages. The unfair distribution of the land by the British to the Hindu high caste

communities compelled many landless people to go below poverty line to be the labourers. Such people sailing in the same boat due to their worst condition got united to revolt against the British. As a result of this unity, especially, after 1850, the violent protests came from “the Santhals in northeastern India (1855), from Nāikdā tribes in Gujarāt (1868), and from several different communities in Madras Presidency” (Walsh 2006: 146). Due to this unfair distribution of the land, the Muslims known as the *Moplahs* or *Mappilās* had conflicts with their landlords. The imposition of higher land revenues made the peasants of Bengāl, Āssam and Bombay to protest. In 1873, Jyotirāo Phule (1827–1890), an untouchable from the *Māli* (gardener) caste in Pune founded the *Satyashodhak Samāj* (Truth Rectification Society), an organization whose purpose was to unify the lower castes and make them free from upper-caste oppression.

Walsh comments that after 1857, the surviving princes and landlords “became staunch supporters of the Rāj” (Walsh 2006: 145). As a result, the agriculture of India, especially after 1860, was commercialized to the British benefits. Therefore, the peasants were forced to grow the raw materials to be exported to the global markets. Judith Walsh opines that “the commercialization” of Indian agriculture had “reduced supplies of locally consumed food crops” along with the expansion of the railroads and roads (Walsh 2006: 144). Moreover, the years following 1869 had registered “a new pattern of famine” which had emerged in the British India due to heavy or no rain. The crops moving out of India for sale indifferent to the local conditions created further shortage of food and hence famine. During 1866-67, Orissa famine “caused 800,000” deaths, during 1868-70, “a second famine caused 400,000 deaths in the western Ganges, Rajasthan, central India, and the northern Deccan; 1873–74 saw severe famine in Bengāl and eastern India; 1875–76 in the Deccan; 1876–78 in the Ganges region and in the cities of Madras, Hyderabad, Mysore, and Bombay” (Walsh 2006: 145).

Moreover, the British took away the liberty of the Indian press by passing the Vernacular Press Act in 1878. Having provoked angry objections, this

Act was denounced for infringing the “freedom of thought and speech” (Wolpert: 1962: 12). By 1878, politics was a major interest of urban Indian elites who began forming regional political as well as social reform associations in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The social reform associations looked after religious practices, women’s social conditions and caste interactions whereas the political association like the *Pune’s Sārvaajanik Sabhā* founded in 1870 regularly organized the public meetings, debates, protests, collected dues, subscriptions, kept minutes of their activities and publicized their issues providing the background for the political development of M. G. Ranade (1842-1901), Bāl Gagādhar Tilak (1856-1920) and Gopāl Krishna Gokhle (1866-1915).

The enquiry into the history of the status of women reveals that the patriarchal society has always offered women a subordinate freedom-less position. Tied to a number of oppressive customs, the Indian women were reduced to mere beasts of burden irrespective of any religion, class, community and region. The lives, except of a few women of the upper class, of general women were “not worth living” because even the religion ascribed to women as subordinate. Such women were never supposed to have “the opportunity of education and refinement” as the access to social justice and equality were denied to them (Stanley and Kumari 2010: 109). The married woman was “under male control” and was only treated as “the bearer of children” and a property for sexual pleasure (Doranne and Susan 1992: 122). As individuals, these women were unaware of their basic rights due to illiteracy, ignorance and economic subordination. Even the Muslim women suffered from the evil of *pardāh* i.e. seclusion and polygamy of their husbands.

Such wicked and wretched condition of women demonstrated a poor mentality declaring India backward and decadent. Moreover, all castes carried the common evil of child marriages. Innocent children were forced to marry whereas widows were never allowed to remarry. The Hindu widow was supposed to be a *Sati*- the custom of self-immolation of a woman in the funeral pyre of her husband. Luckily, the practice of becoming *Sati* was

banned by Lord William Henry Bentinck (1774-1839) in 1829, the then Governor General. The collective attempts of Rāmmohan Rāy and Vidyāsāgar to pass the Widow Remarriage Act for “Hindu widows” were successful in 1856 when the Act was passed with an attempt to stop even polygamy (Kumar 2003: 71). Further, the Female Infanticide Act was passed in 1870 and inter-caste and inter-communal marriage was permitted by the law in 1872. The young English-educated men founded numerous societies for women’s social reform and education.

Through the attempts of Macaulay (1860-1942), the British introduced the new educational and cultural systems that “made itself mainly responsible for the modern Renaissance in the Indian life and society” (Naik and Nurullah 1974: 203). This new educational system with many positive and valuable changes in social and religious spheres influenced the Hindu society. The culmination of the educational forces gave a rise to nationalism. As a revolutionary force, “Indian Nationality” according to Annie Besant, “is not a plant of mushroom growth but a giant of the forest with millennia behind it” (Besant 1975: 1). People, due to the rise in the momentum of the national struggle, began to be more conscious of the defects and weakness of the educational system sponsored and controlled by the foreign rulers.

These English schools rendered the high-caste and rich children of Hindus more Westernized than modernized. The Muslims also, after the initial refusal due to their pride and conservative culture, started sending their children to English schools. Later on, English was also introduced in the university centres at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The latter half of the 19th century witnessed that the English-language education became a required credential for elite employment throughout British India. In 1854, India had only “180 English-language schools” which were expanded into “140 arts colleges” in 1918 with the enrollment of 27,000 students (Walsh 2006: 131). The Muslim reformer Sir Sayed Ahmad Khān (1817-1898) established the Anglo-Oriental College which became the first Muslim English-language college in India founded in 1875. Regardless of castes and creeds, students were offered all subjects in these institutions. No

doubt, the acculturation in English schools earned the educated youth “a large share in the administration” however it taught them that the British were superior (Thompson 1908: 393). After graduation, employment in British institutions or under British superiors introduced the educated elite to racial prejudices in more personal circumstances. Thus, the received English education rather than eradicating the prevailing evils worsened the social predicament of people in those days.

The received education through the English schools could not free the Muslim community from the evils like seclusion of women, polygamy, child marriage, superstitions and others. The educated Muslims elites with the desire to free their community from such evils were impressed by the reform movements like the *Brahmo Samāj*, the *Prārthnā Samāj* and the *Ārya Samāj*. Even certain movements among the Muslims played an important role to reform them. Towards the close of the 18th century, the *Wahābi* Movement, begun in Arabia, was brought to India in 1820 by Sayed Ahmed Shaheed of Rae Bareli (1786-1831) which initiated the movements by the Muslims along with the awareness about the British discrimination with them. It failed in asserting the British disfavour to this community because the Muslims were suspected by the British for their role in the Mutiny of 1857.

Sir Sayed Ahmed Khān’s role as the nationalist and the lover of Hindu-Muslim unity cannot be underestimated. To him, these two communities are the “two eyes of the beautiful bride that was India” (Pruthi 2004: 132). During the Mutiny, he helped the British and in return he won their trust. Gradually, he was successful in building up the Muslim loyalty towards the British. His purpose behind opening the educational institutions was to provide good Muslim citizens to the British Crown. He persuaded the Muslims to oppose the activities of the Indian National Congress. He pleaded for the interaction between the Europeans and the Muslims. Certain other minor Muslim movements were also launched during this period. The *Deoband* Movement established at Deoband in 1866 by Rashid Ahmad Gangolāi and Mohammad Qasim Namtari did not support the Western

education and culture. The *Ahmadiyā* Movement founded by Mirzā Gulām Ahmad in 1889 was based on “more or less the liberal principles” of “universal religion of all humanity” with an objective to “inculcate the feeling of fraternity” among the Hindu and the Muslim (Jayapalan 2000: 137). The *Aligarh* Movement also played the crucial role in the upliftment of the Muslims during the British India. Thus, Muslims even though minor played the major contribution during the time of British India.

The imperialist spirit of the West affected many saints, scholars, educators, teachers, historians and reformers who by playing the massive role brought the spirit of re-awakening, revival and recreation known as Renaissance in India and represented India totally anew and afresh which was able to fight back. Therefore, initially begun as the anti-evil movement, the Renaissance Movement turned to be the anti-British Movement of Reformation to free India from the Western imperialism by regaining the lost Indian culture. It is difficult to date the rise of the Renaissance in India. However, the Renaissance Movement different in nature from the European, is initially believed to have begun in Bengāl in some respect.

Rāmmohan Rāy (1772-1883), the great leader of the modern India has been considered the first and the most exponent of the Renaissance. This Renaissance Movement led to the general awakening that introduced the emergence of a number of movements in India during those days. Of all these movements, the *Ātmiya Sabhā* originally established in 1814, later known as the *Brahmo Samāj* in 1828, has been considered the pioneer national movement founded by Rāy. The *Brahmo Samāj* wedded to the basic principles of universalism and idealism appealed all aspects of social life attempting successfully to restrain the conversion of the Hindus to Christianity. The modernization of India, according to Rāy, lies in the study of the modern Indian languages and in the acceptance of the fact that “the East and the West must no longer remain apart from one another” but rather these diverse cultures must be synthesized in “a new culture” (Cited by Kumar 2003: 75). Therefore, Rāy promoted the Western education not only to men but also to women irrespective of

prejudices through the study of the English language. The founding of the first private English school known as the Hindu College in 1817 was possible due to the initiatives of Rāy. Over the next decade, the newspaper was started with the goal to achieve the “eradication of Hindu idolatry” (Bhattacharjee 1986: 139). This Movement is known as the “Hindu Renaissance” to see Hinduism “reborn” as free from idolatry and superstitions. Thus, due to his great attempts towards Reformation, Rāmmohan Rāy is considered not merely “a great educational reformer” but also “a nation builder” (Hampton 1947: 39).

The half-left task of Rāmmohan Rāy was carried further in a revolutionary manner by certain contemporaries as well as the following reformers like Debendranāth Tagore (1817-1890) who managed the affairs of the *Brahmo Samāj* after Rāy's death, Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884) who became the missionary of the *Brahmo Samāj* in 1857, Iswar Chandra Vidyāsāgar (1820-1891), Madhusudhan Dutt (1824-1873), Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894), Swāmī Vivekānanda (1862-1906) and many more in one or the other way. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), the follower of Rāmmohan's ideology, disseminated the European learning among the Indians as he believed in giving full freedom to all.

The *Prārthnā Samāj*, following the ideas of the *Brahmo Samāj*, was established “in 1867 in Bombay by Dr. Ātmārām Pāndurang under the influence of Keshab Chandra Sen” with an objective to establish the reform movement within the fold of Hinduism, particularly with reference to women (Jayapalan 2000: 115). The most important acculturative Renaissance Movement, next to the *Prārthnā Samāj*, was the *Ārya Samāj* Movement founded by Swāmī Dayānand Saraswati (1824-1883) in 1875 at Bombay. Swāmī Dayānand Saraswati, the Gujarātī *sanyāsi* (holy man) with little interest in English education, opposed all social and religious evils including the customary restrictions on women. The aim of the *Ārya Samāj* Movement was twofold: to protect Hinduism from the attacks of Islām and Christianity, and, to reform the perverted Hinduism by reviving the original force of Hinduism as propounded in the *Vedās*.

The Theosophical Movement originally founded in New York in 1875 by a Russian, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and an American, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1831-1907) aimed to reform the society. Later on, one of its branches was also established in 1882 at Madras in India after Madame Blavatsky's meeting with Swāmī Dāyānanda Sarasvati. Within a few years the society based its religious ideas on Hindu and Buddhist concepts of *karma* and reincarnation. Later on, Annie Besant (1847-1933) became the President of the Theosophical Society in 1907 and rendered her service in India. This Theosophical Movement very actively appealed and influenced the educational, social and religious spheres of India.

Another notable reform Movement begun in Bengāl was the Rāma Krishna Mission established by Swāmī Vivekānanda (1863-1902) on "5th of May in 1897" after accepting the priest Gadādhara Chatterjee or Swāmī Rāmakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886) as his *guru* in 1885 (Jayapalan 2000: 128). This Movement soon very successfully spread to other parts of India. According to Swāmī Vivekānanda, education is the only remedy to improve the wretched condition of people. He believed that the whole education of the country must be "in our own hands" and must be "on national lines" so as it can train Indians into various aspects of Indian customs and manners, culture and philosophy (Vivekānanda 1947: 302). Like Vīra Narmad (1833-1886), the poet cum social reformist of the 19th century Gujarāt, he also recommended daughters to be brought up and educated just like sons because "Ignorance" as he believes, "is the mother of all evils and all the misery" one happens to come across (Cited by Madan 1991: 21). Thus, the Rāma Krishna Mission brought about a spiritual Renaissance in the realm of Hindu religion and philosophy resulting into a widespread national patriotic awakening in the great traditions of the country.

The contributions of all these movements were significant for all communities as a whole. These socio-religious movements of the 19th century fostered among the Indians a great self-respect, self-confidence and a sense of national pride. The reformers, by interpreting their religious

past in modern national terms, enabled their followers to meet the official taunt that their religions and society were decadent and inferior. These movements also, to some extent, ended the Indian cultural and intellectual isolation from the rest of the world.

Apart from the social reformers, the Renaissance as a movement of "nascence rather than a re-nascence" also includes the writers functioning as reformers adopting the medium of literature for the said purpose (Gupta 1958: 68). This Renaissance developed all over India more or less the same time along with its influence on different regions, regional writers and religions. However, the Renaissance in the modern literature begins in Bengāl as a kind of seed-bed of creative geniuses under the leadership of those exponents who expressed the Renaissance "European in spirit, in outlook, in literary devices, in the choice and treatment of subjects" retaining the close connection with "the best in the literature and life of ancient India" without having "wholesale borrowing" in "every Indian vernacular" (Kumar 2003: 69). Thus, this Renaissance introduced to us the literatures of the great Europe to bring in the variety in our reading and enjoyment encouraging along with it the activity of translation rapidly.

Many Indian poets and writers have retained the spirit of nationalism through their poems and works. Hem Chandra Banerjee (1838-1902) of Bengāl expressed the poor social condition of India in "Bhārat Sangeet" (1870) ("Song of India") stating that China, Burma and even "uncivilized Japan" are "independent" and therefore are considered "superior". He further adds that it is a tragedy that India alone "knoweth no waking" (Cited by Pruthi 2004: 70). Govind Chandra Roy (1882-1962), another poet of Bengāl asked: "How long will it take thee, Oh Bhārat, to swim across this ocean of misery?" He further adds that once very beautiful face of India has become very gloomy today as "Day and night tears flow" from her eyes (Cited by Pruthi 2004: 71). Bankim Chandra Chatterjī (1838-1894), through his national anthem *Bande Mātram*, recorded in his classic novel *Ānanda Math* (1882), depicts the inward spirit of Indian life and thought. The conception of the Mother in this patriotic song

incarnates the Renaissance humanism depicting “the dominant political trends” of the Renaissance time (Das 2008: 214). He was not only a poet of the Indian cultural Renaissance but according to Aurobindo “a seer and the nation-builder” and one of the “Makers of the Modern India” (Ghose 1947: 9).

Rabindranāth Tagore (1861-1941) played a key role in this historical juncture by formulating ideas about cultural identity and nationalism in view of his hold on both the Western and the Eastern ideologies. The patriotic song *Jana-gana-mana adhināyaka jaya* he originally composed by Tagore in Bengālī and later on translated into Hindi has been accepted by the Constituent Assembly as the National Anthem of India on January 24, 1950. *Gītānjali* (1912), a collection of patriotic poems, won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Through the novel *Gorā* (1924), Tagore declares that “A child gradually grows up to be a man” but it cannot suddenly “become a cat or dog”. He wants “changes” but does not want “to follow the path of England” suddenly and blindly (Tagore 1924: 330). His dream was realized to provide higher education to Indians when he established Visva-Bhārati University in 1921 which is also known as Shāntiniketan Mahāvidyālaya.

Apart from a few more Bengālī writers like Krishnā Mohan Banerji (1813-1885), Peary Chand Mitrā (1815-1883), Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyāsāgar (1820-1891), Rajendra Lāl Mitrā (1821-1892), Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-1873), Dinabandhu Mitrā, (1830-1874) and Nabin Chandra Sen (1847-1908), there are many writers of various Indian languages who played significant roles in creating the Renaissance spirit through literature. They include Chandrakumār Agrawāla (1858-1938), Lashmināth Bezbaruā (1867-1938) Hem Chandra Goswāmy (1872-1928) (Āssamese); Dalpatrām (1820-1898), Narmad (1833-1886), Navalrām Pandyā (1836-1888), Kavi Nhānāl Dalpatram (1877-1946), Govardhanrām Tripāthi (1855-1907), K. M. Munshi (1887-1971) (Gujarātī); Bhārtendu Harishchandra (1850-1885), Munshi Premchand (1880-1936), Maithili Saran Gupt (1886-1964), Jaishankar Prasād (1889-1937) and Niralā (1899-1961) (Hindi); Dharmavaram Krishnāmāchārya

(1853-1913), D. R. Bendre (1896-1981) (Kannada); Chandu Menon (1847-1899), Raman Pillāi (1856-1922), Kumāran Asan (1873-1924) (Malayālam); Dādābhāi Naoroji (1825-1917), Hari Nārāyan Āpte (1864-1919), Kesavasut (1866-1905) (Marāthi); Fakir Mohan Senāpathi (1843-1918) (Oriyā); Bhāi Vir Singh (1872-1957) (Punjābi); Vedhanayagam Pillāi (1826-1889), Subramanya Bhārti (1882-1921) (Tamil); Vīrsālingam Pantulu (1848-1919), Gopāl Krishnamā Chetty (1849-1921) (Telugu) and Mirzā Ghālib (1797-1869) (Urdu). Most of these voices were, on the one hand, against colonial rule, and on the other hand, for the glorification of India.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Renaissance turned India to be reborn, to be reincarnated, as a new and fresh India that got to be prepared to move towards her independence as the background towards her fights with the British for the long awaited freedom. The Renaissance, really speaking, serves as a background for the solid India that emerged in the twentieth century as reincarnated. The spirit of the Renaissance developed the spirit of nationalism for the Indians and this spirit led the creative writers as well to recreate India on the literary platform as a new, free and afresh nation.

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