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PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE OF ACHARYA BRAJENDRANATH SEAL: EXPOSITION AND BEYOND

Dr. I. Sarkar*

Introduction

To write in detail about Acharya Brajendranath Seal is really difficult. I write this article to pay our homage and respect to Acharya Sir Brajendranath Seal who was born on 3rd September, 1864 and breathed his last on 3rd December, 1938. People held him in profound respect examples of this is not less and how he was counted among the brightest sons of Bengal can be understood in a good number of obituary notes published in many contemporary newspapers and medias immediately after his death. One of them was in the *Sunday Statesman* dated 4th December, 1938 which brought to the notice of the readers in this way:

... the death of Sir Brajendranath Seal removes from the Indian philosophy a bright star of imperishable luster. A typically representative Indian, an outstanding personality in the intellectual world, a man of international reputation, he

* Professor of History, University of North Bengal, India,
E-mail : isarkar_nbu@yahoo.com

was closely associated with all aspects of our educational and cultural works. At a time when India is almost at a face of intellectual anarchy, the best of paying our tributes to the memory of the great scholar and a great man would be for the youth of his country to follow his inspiration and to contribute their quota to the intellectual regeneration of this country.¹

Frankly speaking, some extraordinary terms in this statement may draw our attention and these are 'A typically representative Indian', 'an outstanding personality in the intellectual world' and also the appeal of the writer to the youths of our country to follow his inspiration 'at a phase of intellectual anarchy'.

A. B. N. Seal - A Great Mind

It is a fact that at this stage we may not be able to survey and assess the academic achievements of Acharya Seal because it is not only long and diversified but also difficult to bring them under one head. His viewpoints not only speak about a great mind but also give us inspiration of intellectual insight. It may be noted that Acharya Brajendranath Seal seems to have been impressed by a few great personalities of Bengal namely Raja Rammohun Roy, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda and so on. He referred to these personalities on various occasions and through his writings he scanned their lives and achievements and particularly the ideologies which attracted him very much. In his views these personalities were to him not just the products of the age rather the age was created by them. Acharya Seal was also attracted to them because of their contributions in the intellectual field and above all the idea of universal humanism and propagation of fraternity of men. Incidentally, we may recall here, for example, a lecture he delivered in Mysore on

27th September 1924 on Rammohun Roy on the occasion of his death anniversary and the caption was Rammohun: 'The Universal Man'.² Likewise he wrote an article on Vivekananda published in the *Prabuddha Bharati* in April, 1907. In these writings Acharya Seal tried to locate the philosophic mind of Rammohun and Swamiji who could develop a powerful ideological force which virtually shapes the destiny of man. This particular aspect is no doubt interesting but here the focus of the present article would be to highlight his *Jibanbodh* (*perception* of life) vis-a-vis his philosophy of life (*Jiban Darshan*) who was not only a great and colourful personality but also an event, a phenomenon in the history of awakening in Bengal.

Philosophy of Life (Jeebon Darshan) of A. B. N. Seal

In one of the interviews taken sometime in 1933-34 by Nandagopal Sengupta, a contemporary and close associate of Acharya Seal and published in an article, Mr Sengupta has given some highlights about the philosophy of life of Acharya Seal. It may be noted that sitting beside Seal Sengupta was able to efficiently provoke Acharya Seal to express his *Jibanbodh* and very clearly noted this in the words :

... দর্শন, বিজ্ঞান, সাহিত্য, ও কলাকৃষ্টির মধ্যে গভীর একটি আত্মিক ঐক্যও গড়ে তুলতে হবে। তা না হলে, প্রকৃতির ওপর অসামান্য প্রভুক্ত হাতে পেয়ে প্রেমহীন, বিবেকহীন, সৌন্দর্যবোধহীন মানুষ ত শেষ পর্যন্ত ভয়াবহ দানব হয়ে দাঁড়াবে। অর্থাৎ সবকিছুর সমন্বয়ে গড়ে তুলতে হবে নুতন এক জীবন দর্শন (... *darshan, bijnan, sahitya o kalakristir madhye gabhir ekti atmik aikyao gore tulte hobe. Ta na hole prakritir upor asamanya probhutva hate peye premhin, bibekhin, saundaryabodhchin manush to sesh parjunta bhayabaha danab hoye darabe. Arthat sab kichhur samanvaye gare tulte habe notun ek jiban darshan*)³

What Acharya Seal was inclined to clarify is perhaps clear to us as well. This shows that he was deeply concerned about the demonic tendency of a human being and how a man devoid of feeling and conscience turns into a devil. He aspired for *Manab Sanhati* i.e. unity of all human beings and in that interview with Mr. Sengupta he expressed the definition of his philosophy of life and in the version of Mr Sengupta it appears as:

ভৌগোলিক ও ধর্মীয় পার্থক্য বিমুক্ত বলিষ্ঠ একটি সার্বিক মানব সংহতি চাই, সে জন্যে চাই এক বিশ্ব রাজধানী, আর চাই সবধর্ম, সমস্ত সভ্যতা ও সংস্কৃতির নিষ্কর্ম মন্থিত এক সার্বজনীন মনন ও চিন্তনের প্রেরণা। (*bhaugalik o dharmiya parthakya bimukata bolistha ekti sarbik manab sanghati chai, se janye chai ek visva rajdhani, ar chai sab dharma, samasta sabhyata o sanskritir niskarma manthita ek sarbajanin manan o chintaner prerana.*)⁴

Concept of Unity of Human Beings (manav sanghati)

From such a realization Acharya Seal seems to have developed his concern about the tendency of the genius of Asia a theme on which he delivered a lecture at the request of Rabindranath Tagore in the opening ceremony of the Visva-Bharati held on 23rd December, 1923. In this respect what he exactly presented was :

এশিয়ার genius যুনিভার্সাল হিউম্যানিজমের দিকে, অতএব ভারতের এবং এশিয়ার interest-এ এরূপ একটি যুনিভার্সিটির প্রয়োজন আছে। (*Ashiyar genius universal humanismer dike, ataeb Bharater ebong Ashiyar interest e erup ekti universityr prayojan achhe*)⁵

This background of Acharya Seal may bring us to look into the philosophy that has been reflected in his book of poems titled 'Quest Eternal' or *Shaswata Sandhan* published in 1936. It is said that he has presented the evolution of cultural history of the human society and this can be clear from the introduction

of the book. In the beginning of the book he talks about ancient hymn in which, he believes, Gnosticism and Neo Platonism grew up. According to Acharya Seal this hymn is supposed to be uttered by Greek priests returned from India to his island home and thenceforward he had familiarized himself with Indian mythology, its art and speculation. In this way Indian elements in the Gnostic and Neo-Platonic Cosmogonies came into existence. Similarly we come across how he presents the medieval ideal. He could trace the rationalistic movement of the *Mutazilas* of the 8th and 9th centuries which in the long run, he argued, developed the concept of *Ikhwanus-Safa* or 'Sincere Brethren'. He wants to emphasize how humanity can be sought in its simple universality. Thus the 'Quest Eternal' is not only a book of poems but a reflection of an extraordinary quest of a scholar to reflect on his philosophic mind. This may be clear from another part of his conversation with Nandagopal Sengupta when the later asked him about the philosophical background, if any, of the 'Quest Eternal'. At this point he (Acharya Seal) could only say that "আমার আমিকে ওর মধ্যে বোধহয় অনেকটাই ব্যক্ত করেছি" (*Amar amike or madhye bodhhay onektai byakta karechhii.*)⁶ In course of the conversation Nandagopal Sengupta also drew his attention to the sole objective of the quest for divine spirit and also asked him whether this is for Pure Knowledge or God or Eternity or Salvation. Mr. Sengupta had him to confess that all these matters were beyond his cognizance.⁷ Hence he did not give any clear answer to this enquiry, instead he instantly reacted to this question and said: "অনুভূতিগুলি এতই সুক্ষ্ম, এতই অনির্বচনীয় যে, তা বুক দিয়েই উপলব্ধি করা যায়, মুখ দিয়ে বলা যায় না।" (*Anubhatiguli etoi suskha, etoi anirbachaniya je ta buk diyei upolabdhi kora jay, muk diye bolajay na.*)⁸

Truth and Humanity through Analysis

In this respect his book the 'Quest Eternal' or *Saswata Sandhan* essentially sticks to a particular view as to the existence of God and it seems that Acharya Seal believed that all the mysteries of this universe can be realized through intuitive power but this cannot be expressed in words. Thus understood, one can realize the depth of his philosophy of life and why he divulged in diverse subjects on many occasions. Hence his splendid aristocracy of thinking, descent taste and his profound power of reasoning made him really a unique thinker who could identify truth and humanity through prudent analysis.

A. B. N. Seal's Idea of Universal Humanism through the Lens of Ramkrishna Paramhamsha

His own philosophy of life has, perhaps, nowhere been reflected other than in his attempt to analyze the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna Pramhamsa. Incidentally we may refer here to his Presidential address delivered on the occasion of the birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna held in Calcutta in March, 1937. This lecture may be considered not only as the brilliant analysis and exposition of Ramakrishna's thought but also as the ideology that Acharya Seal always professed and followed throughout his life. This is because whatever significance Acharya Seal could see in the philosophy of Ramakrishna was nothing but a feeling of the kind of Universal Humanism which bears its relevance for all the time and in all circumstances. In the lecture he defined the temperament of Ramakrishna as a man of composite personality like Raja Rammohun Roy. His studies to search out the ideas and personality of Ramakrishna perhaps prompted him to analyze how Ramakrishna found out the mechanism to contemplate truth from the Absolute (i.e.

(*Nirupadhi*) and negitivated through all the conditions (i.e. *upadhis*) but from the relative or conditional (i.e. *sopadhi*) point of view he had the mother goddess Kali as well as other modes of the deity.⁹ In the opinion of Acharya Seal, Ramakrishna “worshipped the one in all, and the all in one” and Ramakrishna did not see any contradiction rather he found a reality of this perception. According to Acharya Seal Ramakrishna had the quality and capability to reconcile *Sakara* and *Nirakara* worship (*upasana*) and this was due to his realization that one should consider the form of a deity as the manifestation of God himself.

Universal Humanism to Universal Religion

Acharya Seal had also brought the point of *Samadhi* that Ramakrishna developed in the form of ‘ecstasies’ in the purest form and the meaning of religion *vis-a-vis* spiritual truths which according to Acharya Seal may be understandable even to a child. Here it is necessary to bring to our notice how Brajendranath Seal talked about the idea of Universal Religion propounded once by Rammohun Roy and followed by Brahmananda Keshab Chandra Sen, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. As a strong believer in Universal Humanism, Acharya Seal has also focused in this lecture on many points with reference to Raja Rammohun Roy and specially on his thought-pattern called ‘Neo-theo-philanthropy’ i.e. a new love of God and man and here Acharya Seal found many positive and constructive ideas that Rammohun and his Brahma movement had taken up to awaken the Indians. In this light it may be striking to note how Acharya Seal also presented Keshab Chandra Sen and explained the style Keshab Chandra Sen had followed in giving the message that, ‘it is not that every religion contains truth, but every religion is true.’¹⁰ Acharya Seal could see here a unique

significance in the statement and he clarified it thus: “... as there are different religions it follows that they convey different aspects of truth. They transcribed not a part but whole of truth each from one fundamental stand point.”¹¹ In this way before going to the details of the thought process of Ramakrishna, Acharya Seal had tried to clarify what Keshab Chandra meant by ‘Unity of all Religions’. According to Acharya Seal this unity of all religions was to Keshab Chandra ‘not the collection of truths but the unification of truths in one ideal’. This was again what may be called as Rammohun’s idea of universalism.¹² Very interestingly Acharya Seal found Ramakrishna’s idea somewhat different and he sought this difference in Ramakrishna on two grounds:

- (a) ... he maintained that the practices of each religion with its rituals and discipline give it essence more really and vitally than its theoretical dogmas and creeds; and (b) it is not by selective eclecticism but by syncretism and whole hearted acceptance of a religion that its full value and worth could be realized and experienced.¹³

The Concept of Universal Religion- Analysis of A. B. N. Seal

Since A.B.N. Seal could realize the ultimate objective of Ramakrishna’s philosophic mind and was as to discover the truth why Ramakrishna did not support ‘Selective extracts’ which according to Ramakrishna would spoil the vital element in each religion and its objective. To support such an idea of Ramakrishna Acharya Seal explained the notion that Ramakrishna propounded, that is, “... he would be Hindu with the Hindu, a Moslem with the Moslem, a Christian with the Christian in order to experience the whole truth and efficacy of each of these three religions.”¹⁴ In this light nobody is entitled to practice different religious disciplines or hold different

creeds at one and the same time. Because according to Acharya Seal what Ramakrishna wanted to propagate was that the observances of rituals or practices of each religion are organic to it. In this sense a Hindu might accept tentatively the whole creed and ritual of the Christian or a Muslim in order to experience the truth lying in it. In doing that there may be temptation or a biased stand but he must think or do just like an innocent child. Acharya Seal remarks that it was in this process that the Paramhansa passed successfully the Pro-Christian and Muslim experiences. If one is to understand the significance of syncristic idea of Sri Ramakrishna one should try to realize the logic behind it and this sounds nothing strange but echoes the message of Sri Ramakrishna-*Jata mat tata path* (As there are faiths, so are there paths).

Parliament of Religions

Acharya Seal then came to the point about Parliament of Religions for which the gathering was called on the occasion of Sri Ramakrishna's birth centenary. On this particular point his appeal to the audience through his speech was to form a parliament for all men or a federation of world cultures.¹⁵ His address was also directed for a parliament of religions and the necessity, in his words, was, because "... articles of faiths, creeds and dogmas divide man from man. But we seek in religion a meeting ground of humanity. What we want is not merely universal religion in its quintessence" but "as Ramakrishna taught ... the Ultimate Realization of God in Man and Man in God." Furthermore, it appears that what Acharya Seal wanted to convey was the meaning of religion and in this respect referring to Sri Ramakrishna he pointed out that religion is a force that organizes human life and his activities. In this sense the meaning of parliament of religions is to herald the approach of a new order. In his words "... the personal life

which has hitherto been the centre of development, must make room for larger personalities, such as the masses, the community and the age and all this must consciously regulate humanity."¹⁶ In fact through the concept of parliament of man or federation of world cultures he visualized a progressive evolution of humanity where one can find man in the universe and universe in man.¹⁷

His Concept of Life Universal in the Personal Life

This particular aspect of the philosophy of life of Acharya Seal seems to have inspired him to search for 'the life universal in the personal life.' In order to pursue this life he prescribed four cherished goals namely (A). *Dana* (gift), (B). *Priyabachan* (pleasant words), (C). *Lokahita* (public welfare) and (D). *Samanatharta* (cooperation towards a common end). He laid emphasis on cooperation towards a common end and in this respect he wrote :

কেবল মৈত্রী, করুণা, মুদিতা বা উপেক্ষায় চলিবে না, তাহাও স্বতন্ত্র কর্তৃত্ববোধ ছাড়াইয়া উঠে নাই, বিশ্বাত্মার বিশ্বজীবনের (Life Universal) সহিত একীভূত হইতে পারে নাই। তাই সমানার্থতা চাই; সকলে একার্থ হইয়া একাসনে বসিয়া একপ্রাণে একধ্যানে বিশ্বমানবের মুক্তি সাধন করাই একমাত্র সাধন। (*kebal maitreyi.karuna,mudita ba upekshaya cholibe na,tahao swatantra kartritva bodh chharaiye uthe nai, vishvatmar visva jibaner (life universal) sahit ekibhuta haite pare nai. Tai samanartharta chai: sakole ekartha hoiya ekasane basiya ekprane ekadhyane visva manaber mukti sadhan karai ekmatro sadhan*)¹⁸

A. B. N. Seal's Search for Fundamental Truth-Infinite Knowledge

In this way Acharya Seal wanted to explore a *tatva* that is 'Fundamental Truth' for the solution of various problems surrounding the life of man. According to him here lies the

conception of 'infinite knowledge' (*paramtatva*) which is no doubt significant to understand the philosophy of life of Acharya Seal.¹⁹ He believed that the subject matter of this world has no end and our sense organs namely eyes, ears, nose do not work in one point. They bring to our knowledge all the mundane objects in different forms according to its attributes. All these things, Seal believed, come to us in parts but in actual sense these are all inseparable. In course of writing a short article titled *Brahmatatva Purnatatva* he referred to the *brihadaranyaka Sruti* and wrote:

আপাতত যাহা বহুরূপে প্রতীত হইতেছে, মূলে তাহা বহু নহে। যাহা অখণ্ড বস্তু দেখা যাইতেছে, মূলে তাহা অখণ্ড। যাহা অপূর্ণ বোধ হইতেছে তাহা পূর্ণ। ব্রহ্মই সেই এক, সেই অখণ্ড, সেই পূর্ণ বস্তু বা পূর্ণ তত্ত্ব। চক্ষুর্কর্ণাদি জ্ঞানেন্দ্রিয় সকল সেই পূর্ণবস্তুরই বিবিধ ও বহুমুখি প্রকাশ মাত্র। এই জন্য ইহারা ব্রহ্মেরই নিদর্শন। সেই ব্রহ্মকে, সেই পূর্ণতত্ত্বকেই ইহারা প্রকাশ ও প্রতিষ্ঠিত করে, কেবলমাত্র আংশিক বা অখণ্ডকে প্রকাশ করে না। (*apatata jaha bahurupe pratita hoytichhe, mule taha bahu nohe. Jaya khonda khanda boliya dekha jaitechhe, mule taha akhanda. jaha apurna bodh hoytichhe taha purna. Brahma sei ek, sei akhanda, sei purna bastu ba purna tatva. Chakhukarnadi gyananendriya sakal sei purnabasturai bibidha o bahumukhi prakash matra. Ei janya ehara Brahmarei nidarshan. sei Brahmake, sei purnatatva kei eihara prakash o prathistita kare, kebalmatra angshik ba khandake prakash kare na.*)²⁰

Acharya Seal by this realization perhaps wanted to establish a truth that the cardinal substance behind each existence is the existence of Brahma and that the Brahma or the Soul exists in each human being and every creation. On another occasion²¹ he pointed out the defective side of emotion and in order to become more realistic he laid emphasis on a 'strong critical faculty' which will virtually create an urge to realize the motion of the age, truth of the universe and a self introspection to find out the means of solution of the problems of all men of this world.

A.B.N. Seal- the Child of Bengal Renaissance

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that Brajendranath Seal has rightly been called a child of the Bengal Renaissance.²² Being fully aware of the situation of Bengal as well as the socio-cultural crisis of contemporary India, Acharya Seal with his unusual ability to see his time, place and people in their unfolding perspectives, he started popularizing a value based social order not like a technical philosopher but as a social reformer. It is likely that he was more influenced by the science of his time, hence he naturally emphasized reason and objectivity. This rationalist attitude brought him nearer to the philosophy of life of Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. He thus talked about human solidarity and also explored the issues that threatened this solidarity. His efforts were to bring to the fore the deep spiritual foundation of Indian culture. Such religio-spirituality he believed, may give Indian culture a distinct transcendental form exceeding all material or earthly life-values. This is why Acharya Brajendranath Seal could write in his unpublished autobiography: "I have taken all knowledge for my purpose I am a man, [hence] nothing human is alien to me. I lived in the spirit of these sayings"²³

Notes and References

1. *The Sunday Statesman*, 4.12.1938, p. 6. (Written by Khan Bahadur Muhammad Azizul Haque, Speaker of the then Bengal Legislative Assembly and Vice-chancellor of Calcutta University).
2. Brajendranath Seal, *Rammohun: The Universal Man*, Calcutta, 1993, also published in the Commemoration Volume of Rammohun Roy Centenary Celebrations, 1933, part-II, Calcutta, 1935.

3. Nandagopal Sengupta, *Smaraniyeder Sannidhya* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1391 (BS), p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sunil Bandyopadhyay, *Brajendra Nath Seal Ebong Annanya* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1984, p. 85.
6. Brajendranath Seal, *Quest Eternal*, London, 1936, pp. VII-VIII.
7. Nandagopal Sengupta, *Op Cit*, p. 21. In its original Bengali version it has been written as: “আমি প্রশ্ন করলাম, মানবাত্মার অনুসন্ধান কি লক্ষ্যে পৌছানোর জন্যে, তা কি শুদ্ধ জ্ঞান, না ঈশ্বর, না অমৃততত্ত্ব, না নির্বাণ, ঠিক বুঝিনি বইটি পড়ে।”
8. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
9. *The Religions Of The World*, Proceedings of the Sri Ramakrishna Centenary Parliament of Religions-1st march-8, 1937, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta, 1938 (3rd reprint: 1992, p. 109).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p.112.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
16. *Ibid.*, p.115.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Brajendranath Seal, *Bangla Rachana*, (Edited by Tapan Kr. Ghosh) Kolkata, 2013, p. 52.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
20. *Loc Cit.*

21. *Ibid.*, p.100
22. Sunil Bandyopadhyay, *Op. Cit*, p. 76.
23. Sunil Bandyopadhyay, *Op. Cit*, p. 77.