VIVEKANANDA AND THE RENAISSANCE OF BENGAL

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Introduction

Vivekananda (1863-1902), a major personality of 19th century Bengal, regarded as a cyclonic monk and pioneer reformer who went up to USA to preach universal humanism in the parliament of Religion took place in 1893 at Chicago. (General Report, 2012, p. 11) He was a chief disciple of Ramakrishna[1] (1836-1886), contributing in various ways to the enrichment of the world culture. His contributions covered almost all aspects of life. His idea of spirituality and universal humanism was not limited to any particular region, but it embraced the people of all over the earth without any distinction of caste, creed, gender, religion and nationality.

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[1] Sri Ramakrishna, the Great 19th century Saint of Bengal, is regarded as the Master of Modern Age.

In H.G. Well's book *The Outline of History*, there is a chapter titled, "The Intellectual Revival of Europeans." The chapter shows how the collective mind of the Europeans underwent a renaissance in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries, as a consequence of which love for knowledge and efforts to achieve knowledge began to spread among the common people. (Vivekananda, 1995, p. 28) So, educational institutions were founded in Oxford, Paris, Bologna and several other towns. People moved to different parts of Europe in quest of knowledge. Books were in great demand and, since press was not known in Europe, books had to be handwritten and copied by hand. It was this awakening that in succeeding centuries led to the Renaissance — which assisted the Europeans to acquire enormous wealth, power and to dominate people in Asia, Africa and South America. (*Ibid*, p. 34)

It is an irony of history that, when the European mind woke up, the Bengal mind went to sleep. And it took nearly seven hundred years to arise. It is known that up to the 12th century, Bengal was the wealthiest nation in the world. But after the consolidation of British power in Bengal, this region became one of the poorest nations in the world. Besides caste system in Bengal society became rigid, and a major part of people were treated as untouchables. Education was denied to women, and a large part of the population remained illiterate. (Dev & Samad, 2014, pp. 2-19) The religious life used to retain superstitions, dogmatism, priest craft and intolerance. In addition, at the beginning of the 19th century, European culture, with its glorification of science and technology posed a great challenge to Bengal culture, while their secular values, such as individual freedom, social equity, and justice attracted the educated of this land. In this circumstance, Vivekananda arose and met the challenge by reviving Vedanta and incorporating

best elements of the western culture into it. So, it was Vivekananda who first spoke of this Renaissance of Bengal.

If we study our day-to-day life, we can observe that when a highly developed society endowed with a very rich culture en-counters challenges, it sets in notion auto-corrective responses. The response of Bengal society to the challenges of Western culture proceeded along three lines. The three lines of national response have been referred to as three involvements by Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet of Bengal. In a lecture on "My Life" he stated : "... Just about the time I was born, the waves of three movements had met in the life of my country, namely the religious movement started by Raja Rammohan Roy, the literary movement pioneered by Bankimchandra and a national movement that was not fully political." (Quoted in Mukherji, 1971, pp. 2-3) The religious movement that Tagore mentions was actually a socio-religious movements. Here it may be noted that these movements were confined mostly to Bengal and two or three other regions and lacked an all-India character. And we must recall that the intellectual burden of humanist literature in nineteenth century Bengal beginning with Madhusudan down to Nabin Chandra, had been to prove the man in God; in the hands of Vivekananda, this was inverted to the search for God in man. (Rollaind, 1929, p. 11)

The preceding points were intended to give an idea of the socio cultural –cum political situation that prevailed in Bengal. A proper attention of the situation is necessary to understand the great work that Vivekananda did in the renaissance of Bengal in the 19th century. The contributions made by Vivekananda are as follows:

Creation of National Awakening

The reform associations and the activities of social leaders (such as Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Devendranath Tagore

(1824-1883 etc) represented only regional movements and did not create a national awakening. Even Bankimchandra, whose writings such as *Anandamath*, did not identify himself with the whole of country. (Ghosh, p. 937) By contrast, Vivekananda had from the very beginning a national consciousness which itself was only a part of his universal outlook.

Several scholars have viewed Vivekananda as the first proponent of Bengal nationalism. In the *Encyclopedia of Social Science,* Florence Mishnun States: "Vivekananda was in a sense the unconscious prophet of new Indian Nationalism, whose ideology shows the impress of his doctrines." (Quoted in Mukherji, 1971, p. 197) Besides, noted historian R. C. Mazumdar who quotes another scholar R. G. Pradhan, remarks: "Vivekananda might well be called the father of Indian nationalism; he largely created it, and also embodied it in his life its highest and noblest elements." (Majumdar, 1962, p.361) Though Vivekananda has been regarded as the father of Bengal nationalism, it was not nationalism in a political sense. What he endeavored to create was national awakening, Bengal as a cultural entity, not only for the educated upper classes, but also for the downtrodden of the society.

The idea of renaissance, the awakening of the whole Bengal, had its origin in the teaching of Vivekananda. By "renaissance" Vivekananda meant two processes: a) awakening of the masses and involving them in development; b) Spiritual awakening of the Soul of Bengal.

a) Awakening of the Masses: The Cultural renaissance and reform movements started by Rammohon, Rana Dey and others were upper-class and middle class movements. The lower classes were not involved in them. By contrast, Vivekananda strongly believed that the real strength of a nation lay in the awakening of the

masses. He said: "Your duty at present is to go from one part of the country to another, from village to village. Make them understand their real condition and say, 'O ye brothers, arise! Awake! How much longer would you remain asleep!" (Complete Works, v. 5, 1990, pp. 145-146)

Owing to British colonial rule in India, Vivekananda could not carry out his plan of mass awakening, and in a letter written to sister Nivedita later he stated that he had given up the project. (Complete Works, v. 5, p. 67) Needless to state, had the mass awakening programme been carried out Bengal's fate would have been different.

b) Spiritual Awakening: Vivekananda was not merely a preacher and teacher, but an awakener of souls, the awakener of the soul of Bengal. In this regard he served as the chief associate of the mission of his Master Ramakrishna. In his short life of 39 years, Vivekananda undertook what was in effect a re-statement of spirituality in the light of the new situation that has developed during the 19th century. He travelled extensively in Bengal and abroad, lecturing on the Practical Vedanta. (Singh, 1983, pp. 58-60)

It is this spiritual perspective, this spiritual orientation of all services that distinguishes Vivekananda's Socio-political views from all other modern thinkers and thus he can be considered as an illumined seer who could see far into the future of humanity. We can sum up this discussion on the spiritual awakening of the Soul of Bengal by citing Vivekananda's advice to his own monastic brothers and disciples in 1897: "Arise! Awake! Wake up yourselves, and awaken others. Achieve the consummation of human life before you pass off.

Arise, Awake, and stop not till the Goal is reacherd." (Complete Works, v. 6, p. 112)

Uplifting the Marginalised People

Another significant contribution Vivekananda made to the awakening of the people in the nineteenth century was to highlight the attention of distressed people in Bengal. Vivekananda used the word "downtrodden" to refer to them. He was the first person in Bengal to point out that the main reason behind Bengal's downfall was the neglect of the deprived masses. Pointing this issue, he said: "I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses. No amount of policies would be of any avail until the masses in Bengal are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for. We must work for them." (Complete Works, v. 5, p. 222)

Vivekananda visioned to uplift marginalised people and social transformation through education. He did not merely focus the importance of education but also instructed how education is to be imparted. The problem in Bengal is that the most of the poor children, especially in rural areas, have to go to work in field. Pointing this difficulty, Vivekananda said: "If the poor cannot come to education, education must reach them at the plough, in the factory, everywhere." (Complete Works, v. 5, pp. 307-308)

It is obvious that Vivekananda is speaking about what is nowadays called "non-formal education", which is also known as "distance-education," "online-education" or "virtual-learning". He wanted that poor children be given training in some trade or skill so that they may earn their livelihood. He was very much in favour of introducing science and technology in educational curricula in Bengal. Besides, he pleaded for equality between man and woman. He urged parents to educate their daughters in the same way as their sons. (Joshi, 1997, p. 350)

Services as a way of life

Another most important contribution of Vivekananda to the renaissance of Bengal in the nineteenth century was introducing the ideal of service as a way of life. It is well known that "renunciation and service" have always been two dominant characteristics of Bengal culture. But Vivekananda's ideal of service has certain distinct features: For Vivekananda Service means not only some actions of charity take place once in a while, but one's general attitude towards society, a way of life. As he stated, "They alone live who live for others; the rest are more dead than alive." (Complete Works, v. 4, p. 363) One significant lesson he claimed to receive from Ramakrishna was that "*Jiva is shiva*" (each individual is divinity itself). This became his motto, and he coined the concept of *daridra narayan seva* - the service of God in and through (poor) human beings. Thus, Vivekananda significantly transformed the idea of man in God to God in man, which helped to regenerate the idea of humanity, a vital component of the nineteenth century renaissance of Bengal.

Harmony of Religions

It is a well-known fact that hatred leads to violence in its extreme form becomes terrorism. Hatred is the opposite of love, and hence love is the antidote for curing this deadly disease called hatred. As an inhabitant of Bengal, Vivekananda know only too well that the presence of Islam as an essential part of Bengal nation is a historical fact which has to be accepted. He saw that the integrated power of Islam and Hinduism was necessary for the unity of Bengal. In a letter to a Muslim admirer, Vivekananda wrote: "For our motherland, a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam – Vedanta brain and Islam body – is the only hope. I see in my mind's eye the future perfect Bengal rising out of this chaos and strife." (Complete Works, v. 6, p. 416)

From the beginning, Bengal is a multi-religious country, which has been plagued by religious conflicts. Therefore, the political leaders in Bengal should have given primary importance to the doctrine of harmony of religions taught by Vivekananda. Instead, they followed the soulless, sterile policy of politics as an alternative to religious harmony. It was this neglect that ultimately led to the partition of Bengal, in 1947, into two parts. However, it is notable to mention that Vivekananda is against conversion. (Vedanta Kesari, 1963, p. 17) He believes each must assimilate the spirit of the other and yet preserve one's individuality and grow accordingly to one's own religion. (Husain, 2012) This is how, Vivekananda served for a harmonious Bengal and for a unity in diversity.

Conclusion

We may sum up the discussion by saying that Vivekananda had already become the pioneer of Bengal renaissance. His ideal is a living ideal and his contributions are also living. At the end of the nineteenth century, he founded Ramakrishna Math (RKM) and Ramakrishna Mission, twin organizations which form the core of the worldwide movement known as Vedanta movement, which aims at the harmony of religions, harmony of the West and the East, and all-round progress of human faculties without any distinction of caste, religion, race or nationality. RKM has now 187 centres in Asia and beyond serving for the cause of humanity. The profuse publications on Vivekananda and his activities, not only by his admirers and devotees but also by his critics and opponents, are an indication of the tremendously powerful influence that he has left on the nineteenth century renaissance of Bengal.

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