

ISSN: 2349-2147



Modern Research Studies

Editor-in-Chief
Gyanabati Khuraijam

**An International
Journal of
Humanities and Social
Sciences**

An Indexed & Refereed e-Journal

www.modernresearch.in

**Title: The Bengal Renaissance: The Idea, Term and
System of Symbolical Description**

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**Volume 2, Issue 4
December 2015**

pp. 738–768.

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The Bengal Renaissance: The Idea, Term and System of Symbolical Description

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Abstract: Based on philosophical approach, the author proposes to evaluate the methodological value of the term ‘the Bengal Renaissance’ for designation, the process both of awakening in culture and society and of transformations in minds and thought of Bengal educated elites, which had been interacted with Western civilization and culture. The term can be used as a ‘system of symbolical description’ (P. A. Florensky) of national-cultural renaissance in Bengal as important period in history of social thought, which is the process of self-determination by Bengal intellectual elites in context of society’s modernization. Taking into account of the term’s origin in inner experience of Bengal intellectuals from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore and the idea of renaissance as re-birth/regeneration of India and her society, the author offers epistemological model of symbolical description of the epoch. The model includes (1) the interpretation of the phenomenon in a context of philosophy of history, (2) representation of the groundings and conception of the project created in social thought by Bengal ‘creative minority’ and (3) a brief description of the aspects of the Bengal Renaissance in religious, social, political and cultural spheres.

Keywords: Bengal Renaissance, socio-cultural synthesis, East–West Dialogue, creative minority, Bengal intellectual elite, Humanism, renaissance project.

Introduction:

Among a broad body of Indian modernization studies, research of social-cultural processes in British India during XIX–early XX centuries has a special place. Much research examines intellectual, spiritual, social, political and cultural movements in Indian elites, which searched for the ways to Modernity for their own country. The most famous and discussed term used in the research is ‘the Bengal Renaissance’. It marks a complex of social-cultural processes in XIX–early XX c. Bengal – the most developed province of colonial India. These processes include religious, philosophical, educational, social, political, literary, and art movements and achievements by Bengal *bhadralok* representatives who had created the Modern Indian culture along with intellectuals of other regions.

As a historian of philosophy and culture, researching the development of social thought in Bengal of the period, the present researcher experienced the difficulties, which every supporter of the term finds in using of one in his research. The problem of the Bengal Renaissance lies in methodological field: researchers either accept the term to describe a phenomenon and historical period of social development according to some approach, or reject it. Moreover, both positions often demonstrate the tendency to give an ontological status of the term, in spite of its epistemological meaning. Evidently, three different aspects exist in the research field.

Firstly, there is an idea of a renaissance in Bengal – and, generally, in India (‘the Indian Renaissance’). The idea of the Bengal Renaissance means some second birth, or exactly, re-birth, awakening or revitalization of society and culture after ‘decline’ or ‘stagnation’ in pre-colonial period of XVII–XVIII centuries.

Secondly, there was a genesis of the term ‘the Bengal Renaissance’. It is widely believed that its genesis is connected with the works by English (Andrews 1912; Cousins 1918; Lovett 1920; Zacharias 1933) and Indian (Sarkar 1944; Sen 1946) scholars. But an origin of the term is in the works of main figures of the Bengal Renaissance; consequently, this fact compels attention of the supporters of the term.

Thirdly, there are controversies of supporters and opponents of the idea and the term. They discuss the essence and content of the historical period and the possibility of application of the term to it. Cognitive scientist Subrata Dasgupta writes:

The controversies have dwelt almost entirely in the economic, social and cultural realms: whether there was anything like a renaissance at all, its comparison with the Italian Renaissance, its significance (or otherwise) from social, political and cultural perspectives. (2012, 1)

Neither supporters nor opponents of ‘the Bengal Renaissance’ attempt to analyze the epistemological value of the term. It is necessary to appreciate the methodological possibilities of the term without stereotypes, clichés and prejudices, because ‘the Bengal Renaissance’ can be used as a ‘system of symbolical description’, following the conception of Russian philosopher Pavel A. Florensky (1922). This article defends the methodological value of the term and proves the possibilities of different ‘symbolical descriptions’ of the period called ‘the Bengal Renaissance’. But it is impossible to reach the purpose without turning to the idea, the term and the content of controversy.

Origin of the Idea and Term:

The appearance of the term ‘renaissance’ was connected with the beginning of Indian modernization, when Calcutta and other cities became the centers of economic, social and cultural activity of new native elites in colonial Bengal. The idea of renaissance had appeared in conversations and works by first reformers from early 19th century. Known as ‘father of Modern India’ and ‘father of the Bengal Renaissance’, philosopher and reformer Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) had earlier realized the role of Bengal in advancement of cultural and social development of Indians. In a letter on February 2, 1824, he marked that in Calcutta “the natives are more conversant in English, and frequently associated with European gentlemen”, and “the native inhabitants of Bengal, in a great degree follow the example of the opulent natives of Calcutta” (Roy 1982, IV, 885). In a conversation with Scottish Presbyterian missionary Rev. Alexander Duff,

Rammohun said: “I began to think, that some similar to European renaissance might have taken place here in India” (Quoted in Smith 1879, I, 118). Rammohun’s spiritual inheritors from Krishnamohun Banerjea and Devendranath Tagore to Aurobindo Ghose and Rabindranath Tagore called their time ‘renaissance’ and ‘regeneration’.

Phenomenologically, both the idea and the term are derived from inner experience of the epoch-makers, from their consciousness, reflections and mentality. Many were, indeed, truly ‘renaissance’ figures owing to multitude of their talents, possibilities and creative approach to socio-cultural life of their country.

The whole conception of renaissance in India was created by philosopher Aurobindo Ghose. He said about ‘salvation’ and ‘reawakening’ in the 19th century:

India will certainly keep her essential spirit, will keep her characteristic soul, but there is likely to be a great change of the body. The shaping for itself of a new body, of new philosophical, artistic, literary, cultural, political, social forms by the same soul rejuvenescent will, I should think, be type of the Indian Renaissance, – forms not contradictory of the truths of life which the old expressed, but rather expressive of those truths restated, cured of defect, completed. (Ghose 2003, 5)

In the work on Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who called his own time ‘renaissance’ also, Aurobindo began ‘the epoch of our Renaissance’ from Rammohun Roy, reckoned to outstanding figures of ones like Devendranath Tagore, Rajnarayan Bose, Aksaykumar Dutta, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Rajendralal Mitra, Dinabandhu Mitra, Keshubchandra Sen and others – to Rabindranath Tagore. Aurobindo wrote:

Our Renaissance was marked like its European prototype, though not to starting an extent, by a thawing of old moral custom. The calm, docile, pious, dutiful Hindu ideal was pushed aside with impatient energy, and the

Bengali, released from the iron restraint which had line like a frost on his warm blood and sensuous feeling, escaped joyously into the open air of an almost Pagan Freedom. ...This is usually the moral note of a renaissance, a burning desire for life. (Ghose 1997, 95)

Many of the key persons in social-cultural processes said on renaissance ('*nabagaran*', or '*udbodhan*' in Bengali) as an aim of reformist activities of educated elite (Krishnamohun Banerjea, Surendranath Banerjea), as a literary renaissance (Bepin Chandra Pal, Rabindranath Tagore), as religious and spiritual activity (especially connected with the Brahma Samaj), as social reformation (Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Kesub Chandra Sen, Sivanath Sastri) etc. Consequently, David Kopf says: "The notion of the Bengal Renaissance was not the invention of twentieth century Indian historians, evaluation of their nineteenth century heritage" (Kopf & Joarder 1977, 4).

Thus, the idea and the term 'the Bengal Renaissance' had been rooted in the attitude of main persons of the period towards their own time and in their thinking and feelings about changing Indian reality. The present study proposes to consider the matter of controversies between supporters and opponents of the term's applicability.

Controversy on the term:

The idea and the term were perceived and selected by researchers to mark the process both of awakening in culture and society and of transformations in minds and thought of Indian/Bengal educated elites, which had been interacted with Western civilization and culture. Taking into account an origin of the term, the comparison with the European – especially Italian – Renaissance was inevitable. The main cause of discussions and controversies, as well as appearance of opponents for the term is in application of European historical scheme to history of Indian civilization. In 20th century there appeared two groups of researchers: convinced supporters and strong opponents of the term 'the Bengal Renaissance'. The difference between them was determined by their methodological approaches and positions.

All opponents look at Indian history from the point of view of European scheme of history and determine in India the antiquity, Middle Age and Modern Age. They reject the possibility to mark Modern processes in India as ‘renaissance’, associating the term with the rebirth of antiquity – as in European 14-16 centuries – and defend renaissance character of Indian Middle Age’s culture. These authors apply the term ‘Enlightenment’ to XIX century India to represent the tenor of cultural processes (Chelyshev 1969; 1974; Konrad 1970, 417).

Later in 1990–2000 the tendency to repudiate the term is connected with the estimates of meaning and consequences of the Bengal Renaissance. The scientists argued the epoch had no effects on society, politics, economy and culture of Modern India (See the historiographical review: Raychaudhuri 2002). Besides, it is only an estimation of the Renaissance results in its influence on society. All supporters of the term – such as, for example, Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1967), Arabinda Poddar (1970, 21), Susobhan Sarkar (1970, 150), K. S. Bhattacharjee (1986) – clearly focus on elitist and, therefore, incomplete character of the Bengal Renaissance. Moreover, K. N. Panikkar says about the unfinished agenda of the Indian Renaissance at all, because contemporary problems of India are one of the results of this unfinishness (2007; 2011).

Among the supporters of the term ‘the Bengal Renaissance’, according to methodological approaches there are two main conventional groups. First group can be termed as ‘compromise’ in applying European scheme to India. In the group are predominantly united philologists and literary historians. They critically estimate an application of European scheme of cultural history to India and take into account peculiarity of Indian history. They are of opinion that Indian culture had renaissance character both in XIV–XVI and XIX centuries (Chatterji 1966, 162–170; Ghosh 1948, 19, 35). This group points out a new renaissance, originated from the historical events of XVIII–XIX centuries, viz. establishment of the British colonial rule, interactions between Indian and Western cultures and rising and growing new educated elites, etc. But they describe only literary processes and scarcely take into account religious, social and political development in XIX century Bengal, and other Indian regions.

The second group is independent from European historical scheme. The methodological approach to the epoch by the group's authors is general and broad-minded. They consider all historical, national, socio-cultural peculiarities of many-sided intellectual, spiritual, social, political and cultural processes and events in colonial India. The term 'renaissance' is used in direct sense to mean awakening and development in traditional society which had stood to the path of modernization.

The term 'The Indian Renaissance' intends to determine all-Indian character of socio-cultural processes, as constituted from regional movements in social, scientific, literary, political and cultural spheres (Nagendra 1959; Majumdar 1963–1965; Datta 1959; Datta 1965; Ghose 1969; Ayyappa Panicker 1983; Kumar, 2003). Indian authors connect the beginnings and grounds of the Renaissance with reformist activities by Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) and his Brahmo Samaj ('Society of Believers to Brahman' 1828) in Bengal. Consequently, the Bengal Renaissance is the source and core of the Indian Renaissance as a whole. Other regional renaissances had begun in mid or second half of XIX century (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamilnadu, Kerala, etc.).

Some Russian researchers had put forward fruitful ideas of compression in the epoch of Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment in thought and culture of colonial India (Kostyuchenko 1983, 157; Polonskaya 1970). Natalia Vishnevskaya had underlined that an impetuous development of society in XIX century India did not permit to fix different stages, but ideas of European Renaissance and Enlightenment are unified in India (1970, 282–283). Similar position defends Irina Sheptunova (1978, 9–10).

As concerns to the Bengal Renaissance, an extensive body of the research used various systems of symbolical description without accenting their epistemological character. There are many researches on the Bengal Renaissance by Indian scholars who describe the epoch as a new enlightenment, revolutionary awakening in a broad context of economic, social and political processes.

Susobhan Sarkar had described the awakening on Bengal as the response to “the impact of British Rule, bourgeois economy and modern Western culture”. There were complex interaction of Westernism and traditionalism, liberalism and conservatism, reformism and radicalism, religious and secular components in search of an adequate path to modernity by Bengal intellectuals from ‘the epoch-making’ lifework of Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore (Sarkar 1970, 3). The main intention of the epoch was the synthesis of Indian and Western society. The authors of the monograph *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance* had created many-sided picture of the phenomenon of Bengal-European contact born of Christianity and European rational and free inquiry. Religious and rationalist aspects in the epoch had stimulated an awakening of mind and roused its creative activities (Gupta 1958, xiii).

Ramesh Chandra Majumdar (1960) analysed the Bengal Renaissance in the broad context of Indian Renaissance as a movement of powerful secular content which created new national consciousness, patriotism, social reforms and new political ideas unknown in India before the nineteenth century. Development of English education, rising of social and political ideas, reforms and organizations are the main trends of the epoch; religious aspects are its concomitant elements.

Based on Marxist approach, Aurobindo Poddar suggests that the Bengal Renaissance is not rediscovering of India’s past in the present but awakening of social mind, overcoming of conformism, social stagnation and closed, introvert character of society in India. According to Poddar, the key Renaissance figure is Bengal intellectual, who had been oriented to rationalism and free-thinking values owing to English education, and had been confronted with old traditional values and surroundings (1970, 7-8). The first period is depicted as prevalence of anglophilism in intellectual’s mood; the second one (after 1857) represented as searching for identity and discovery of united India – religious and cultural – based on Hindu mythology and puranic literature and opposed to secular civil identity (Poddar 1977, 250).

K. S. Bhattacharjee sees in the Bengal Renaissance history of both thought and social practice which develop in a context of awakening.

The feature of Modern Bengal thought is “...a desire to repattern Indian thought and practice after the Western ideas so that dynamism and progress that lately marked out Western society could also be encouraged here (1986, 19). This desire had produced the idea of revival of old glories and inspired to search for pure Indian tradition.

It stands to reason that the body of these research of 1940–1980 represents a number of various systems of symbolical description based on acceptance – both the idea and the term ‘the Bengal Renaissance’. These researches successfully describe the content and meaning of the period as a holistic phenomenon in social history of Modern India. The differences and similarities between various researches help to deepen our notions on this epoch. Therefore, the acknowledgement of the term’s conventional character opens the broad possibilities of symbolical descriptions of the Bengal Renaissance based on certain approaches to the phenomenon.

The brilliant example of a contemporary research of the Bengal Renaissance is the book by Subrata Dasgupta that suggests that the phenomenon is a genuine cognitive revolution, created by ‘a small, but remarkable community of individuals’. He writes:

...The emergence of the creative mentality of the Bengal Renaissance marked such a cognitive revolution – that it represented a sharp transformation in the cognitive identity of a certain group of people, primarily in Bengal ... A cognitive revolution need not entail a socio-economic-political transformation, for a cognitive revolution may be confined to a select few – those at the intellectual and creative vanguard in some historical time of culture. (2012, 2-7)

Based on his own methodological model – or, system of symbolical description – S. Dasgupta empirically researches the epoch in terms of cognitive revolution in the mind of ‘creative beings’ – writers, poets, dramatists, scientists, social thinkers, educators, and religious reformers, etc. They are creators of creative and cross-cultural mentality of the Bengal Renaissance and humanism of the epoch. The book by S.

Dasgupta is an important path to a philosophical consideration of the theme.

A considerable amount of research demonstrates that the epoch is sufficiently depicted from factual and sapid points of view. But the Bengal Renaissance must be comprehended as a historical-cultural phenomenon. The present study is a system of symbolical description of it, based on phenomenological approach to it as national-cultural renaissance. This approach is chosen because it permits to describe the epoch as an important period in the history of social thought, which is the process of self-determination by Bengal intellectual elites in context of the society's modernization. Phenomenological method helps to understand the processes in the minds of Bengal 'creative minority' (Bergson 1935). This epistemological model had been applied in philosophical research, represented in the monograph (Skorokhodova 2008).

Firstly, this study offers the interpretation of the phenomenon in a context of philosophy of history based on notions by A. J. Toynbee (1934–1961) and K. Jaspers (2010). Then, the groundings and conception of the project created in social thought is represented. Finally, the aspects of the Bengal Renaissance will be briefly described in the religious, social, political and cultural spheres.

The Bengal Renaissance phenomenon in the context of philosophy of history:

Keeping in mind a historical appearance of national-cultural renaissances in some of the Western and Eastern modernizing countries of the Nineteenth century (There are Italian Risorgimento, Czech and Bulgarian Renaissances, Russian religious-philosophical renaissance in Europe, Meiji Restoration period, etc.), these ones can be understood as the phenomenon in history of modernizing West periphery and non-Western societies. Therefore, the term 'renaissance' can be used in a broad historical and philosophical treatment. A. J. Toynbee had treated 'renaissance' as "a recurrent historical phenomenon, one of forms of civilization's contacts in time, from which can begin new awakening" (1934–1961, IX, 4–5). A renaissance takes place in all spheres of

cultural life from politics, law and philosophy to language, literature, arts and religion. Based on Toynbee's idea, the present study uses a 'renaissance' as conventional term for denotation of some historical period, – for example, to Modern period in India. According to Toynbee, it is encounters between living culture, and dead culture – “a generic phenomenon which presents itself in different specific form in encounter in which both parties are alive at the time when they collide with one another” (1934–1961, IX, 4). A similar point of view is presented by David Kopf (1969, 280–289) and R. K. Dasgupta (quoted in Dasgupta 2012, 2)

The national-cultural renaissance arises and develops in the field of interaction-and-resistance between a traditional civilization and the West, and its effects on all spheres of life in society. In the East, the modernization's imperative is a requirement of a synthesis of the country's cultural-civilizational heritage with Western economic, social, scientific, spiritual and cultural achievements and heritage.

Consistent with Toynbee's categories 'Challenge and Response', genesis and development of national-cultural renaissance can be described as an attempt to make a response to Western challenge and a positive answer to an imperative of synthesis. It begins from an attempt to ground necessity of this synthesis and to create its 'ideal model'. It goes on as an attempt to embody – partly or fully – the model in social life. The history of such national renaissance is a history of continuous search for ideal variant of Eastern-Western synthesis.

Realizing the polysemantic and complex content of the term, the present study defines a national-cultural renaissance as a special socio-cultural epoch in the historical life of a people, connected with reconsideration of traditional heritage in the light of European rationalism and Western novations for an adequate integration to modernity, but without losing national heritage and historical memory.

Chronologically, the Bengal Renaissance was the first regional variant of Indian Renaissance because Bengal had been colonized early by British East India Company as well as had responded to British Raj challenge. The external challenge of British rule had created the crisis

which consisted in a complex collision between traditional society and imported elements of modern economy, administration, culture and ways of life.

The British challenge consisted of economic, political, social and cultural components. Economically, modernizing metropolis was at the Industrial Revolution, and India had become the source of raw materials and a market for British goods. Politically, Britain had a parliamentary system and a number of democracy institution, unknown in Indian traditional states. Socially, British had presented a model of civil society with guaranteed individual freedom and formal equality of rights, as well as possibility of individual social mobility. These were different from caste hierarchy of Hinduism, rigidly defined an individual's place in society from a birth. Culturally, British challenge has brought India the European rationalist philosophy, achievements of science and ideological expansion of Christian missionaries.

External challenges had functions to convert inner creative impulse in continuous stimulus for growth of society, because the response is the decision of social tasks, which leads either to development or to stoppage. But different strata and communities perceived the external challenge by their own ways, and had formed their own experience. In multiethnic and multi-religious India the experience was differentiated both socially and religiously. Based on Toynbee's terms, three variants of the response to Western challenge are marked in colonial Bengal.

Firstly, 'zealot' responses of common people (independently from religious belonging) and Muslim aristocracy. The later had lost its political rule and economic status. 'Zealot' response is an attempt of self-preservation and self-isolation from environment. It was an impasse because it is impossible to ignore the challenge without damage. Secondly, 'Herodian' response was the position of Hindu orthodoxy. The response was depicted as 'brahminical renaissance' (Bayly 1988, 158; Washbrook 1997, 425). It presented the attempt to adapt to situations – to new rule – without changing their situation. Both aforesaid variants were inadequate to Western challenge situation because they were one-sided, traditionalist and opposed to novations.

The third variant was the adequate, successful and creative response by representatives of new Western-educated stratum (*bhadralok*). They were inclined to non-dogmatic and heterodox thinking and free from communal dogmas. The feature of the response was their wish to imbibe the new and simultaneously save and regenerate positive characteristics of national tradition in all spheres of society. The phenomenon of national-cultural renaissance in Bengal is creative response to Western challenge.

Thus, the synthesis of national-cultural renaissance originates from creative response to external Western challenge, but the growth of civilization goes on through the transfer of challenge into inner space of society or, by Toynbee's term, "etherification" (1934–1961, III, 174). The external challenge must turn into inner moral challenge. This transfer of challenge in Bengal circumstances was realized by Rammohun Roy, who described the moral decline of society as main cause of its crisis:

...I (although born a Brahmin, and instructed in my youth in all the principles of that sect), being thoroughly convinced of the lamentable errors of my countrymen, have been stimulated to employ every means in my power to improve their minds, and lead them to the knowledge of a purer system of morality. Living constantly amongst Hindoos of different sects and professions, I have had ample opportunity of observing the superstitious puerilities into which they have been thrown by their self-interested guides, who, in defiance of the law as well as of common sense, have succeeded but too well in conducting them to the temple of idolatry; and while they hid from their view the true substance of morality, have infused into their simple hearts a weak attachment for its mere shadow. (1982, I, 73)

Rammohun Roy had connected the contemporary condition of society with Hindu idolatry and inhuman practices – sati, superstitions, infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, etc. – because these are "the

violation of every human and social feeling.” He saw in idolatrous practices

...the moral debasement of a race who, [he] cannot help thinking, are capable of better things; whose susceptibility, patience, and mildness of character, render them worthy of a better destiny. (Roy 1982, I, 74)

The growth began from many-sided activities of Rammohun Roy in religious, social, political and cultural spheres. He was disturber of tranquility for Bengal society, and he tried to search for means to overcome the society’s condition. Rammohun’s thought and activity had created a new social group formed by his adherent and younger contemporaries – including the Young Bengal, or Derozians – to his spiritual inheritors, Brahmoists and neo-Hindu thinkers. The group is described by H. Bergson (1935 78-79 & 178) and A. J. Toynbee’s term as “creative minority” (1934-1961, III, 174-191). Predominantly, creative minority of Bengal intellectuals generated new ideas and tried to put them into social practice for regeneration of society.

Toynbee indicates the creative character of minority on their orientation to highest moral and social values. The later ones reflect the general good of people and civilization. The orientation characterized the thought and practice of Bengal creative minority, who tried to resolve essential problems of people and to create new perspectives of Indian culture. Axioillogical approach by Toynbee permits to represent the creative character of Bengal Renaissance processes. Based on indigenous values and creative borrowings from the West, Bengal creative minority constructs a project of new modernizing society. Besides, an attention for peculiarities of Indian civilization helps to represent the epoch’s synthesis as an inter-cultural and inter-civilization dialogue which is the inter-exchange of values between India and the West.

For the content of Indian-Western synthesis in thought and culture of the Bengal Renaissance the present study proposes to use categories by Karl Jaspers’ philosophy of history. The possibility and necessity of the synthesis could be explained by ‘Axial period’ (Axenzeit)

conception (2010, 17–27). Challenge was presented by ‘Axial’ Western people to another ‘Axial’ people, who gave the response. Jaspers had decided the ‘East–West problem’ as distinction of cultures developed from one root – ‘Axial period’, but differently come true in history. The deep mutual understanding and inter-relationship and interaction between them are possible. According to Jaspers renaissance is inspired by ideas of ‘Axial period’. Consequently, the Bengal Renaissance can be interpreted as the epoch of special inspiration of Indians by their ‘Axial period’. Axial values were discovered in Upanishads by intellectuals from Rammohun Roy to Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. Generally, the epoch’s synthesis is based on ‘Axial’ Vedanta philosophy which treats the unity of the universe and human being as the *Brahman-atman* identity. Another Axial *darsana* was Samkhya – for Bankimchandra (Sen 2011, 23–25, 85–103) and partially Vivekananda. The reconsideration of Vedanta according to modern social-cultural needs of India had created neo-Vedantism – a result of Indian-Western cultural dialogue.

Encounter of European and Indian cultures in colonial period had determined the features of turning to ‘Axial’ heritage. On the one hand, there was interaction-and-resistance of two Axial cultural traditions – of Ancient Greece and Ancient India. On the other hand, according to K. Jaspers, the West/Europe had passed through ‘second Axial period’ – consequently, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment. These ones had become the foundation of modern development in the West. British colonial rule brought in India the achievements of European ‘second Axis’, such as political liberty, consistent rationalism, inwardness of selfhood, un-dogmatism, claim to exclusive truth, decisiveness in resolving logical problems and personalities in history (Jaspers 2010, 67–74).

If we combine Toynbee’s and Jaspers’ approaches, the purport of the Bengal Renaissance is double socio-cultural synthesis. The first is a synthesis of Indian and Western socio-cultural paradigms. The second is a synthesis of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment ideas and achievements in Bengal thought, social practice and culture.

The first synthesis of Indian and Western connected with decision of problem of tradition–novation proportion. Generally, there were three variants of the decision in Bengal thought.

1) *A prevalence of Western novation, which claims rejection from the traditional values and institutions as unsuitable for rationalist approach to reality.* For example, under influence of Christian conception of marriage, Derozian Maheshchandra Deb called to ameliorate the Hindu women and to base a marriage on human dignity and conjugal love:

Women, who allotted to man as his inseparable companion during his journey through life to participate his dangers and sorrows, to alleviate his distresses, and share his joys and happiness, leads indeed a wretched life in this country. Pinned up in her eternal prison house she is doomed to pass her days in misery and confinement. (Chattopadhyaya 1965, 92).

Maheshchandra Deb criticized Hindu *sastras* for rendering women in slaves, proposed to destroy traditional institutions such as seclusion, custom of parent’s privilege to provide matches for their sons and daughters and early marriage, polygamy (especially *kulinism*), ‘most detestable crime adultery’, eternal widowhood, etc.

2) *The prevalence of traditional values plus removal of some norms and institutions unfitted modernity.* The best examples of the position were the works by Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay. He positively estimated economic, political and educational and science achievements of British rule, but was of the opinion that traditional Hindu values such as caste social differentiation, other-worldly orientation, working in accordance with *dharma*, joint family and joint-ownership of property and even child-marriage are important to societal harmony and self-development. As A. Mitra writes, “...For Bhudeb indigenous values and institutions were not only good for traditional India, but also for India of his time. He would therefore ask for their revival rather than welcome changes in them. The Hindus were now in a miserable condition. ... But their

society would survive all the same only if they remained true to their *dharma*” (1979, 99).

3) *The optimum combination of positive achievements of Western novation with all positive ones of Indian tradition.* The dialectical position of Swami Vivekananda illustrates the variant of synthesis:

But piercing through the mass of whatever good or evil there may be is seen rising the sure emblem of India’s future prosperity — that as the result of the action and reaction between her own old national ideals on the one hand, and the newly-introduced strange ideals of foreign nations on the other, she is slowly and gently awakening from her long deep sleep. (1998–2002, IV, 473)

And further:

Have we not then to learn anything from the West? Must we not needs try and exert ourselves for better things? Are we perfect? Is our society entirely spotless, without any flaw. There are many things to learn, he must struggle for new and higher things till we die — struggle is the end of human life. (1998–2002, IV, 475)

...

Of course new things have to be learnt, have to be introduced and worked out; but is that to be done by sweeping away all that is old, just because it is old? What new things have you learnt? Not any — save and except a jumble of words! What really useful science or art have you acquired? (1998–2002, V, 475)

Thus, Vivekananda’s position is continuation of Rammohun Roy’s ideas of Indian-Western synthesis in society.

The first synthesis had determined the reconsideration and critical imbibing of ideas and achievements of European epochs: the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. This is second

synthesis in the first one. *Renaissance complex* can be seen as foundation of second synthesis owing to humanistic thought in one. Conventionally, Bengal humanism answers to the questions on human's place and role in the universe, on possibility of knowledge of transcendental, natural and social worlds, on person's freedom and dignity, on happiness and suffering, personal–communal–societal collision and morality. Bengal humanists opened the self-value of human as person and independent subject living for activity in social world. But if the idea of compassion and mercy for human is archetype in the West, in India – from the works by Rammohun Roy against *sati* and in defense of monotheism – humanism is founded on idea of compassion for victims of social order, religious customs and prejudices, economical system and political constraints. The perception of human sufferings as social evil had generated the social reform movements in Bengal. Unlike European humanists, sought for human right for happiness, Bengal thinkers and reformers Rammohun Roy, Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshubchandra Sen, Sivanath Sastri and others saw in the relief of suffering the main condition for achievement of happiness. As Rammohun Roy wrote on *sati* rite,

... These are facts, occurring every day, and not to be denied. What I lament is that, seeing the women this dependent and exposed to every misery, you feel for them no compassion, that might exempt them from being tied down (to funeral pile of husbands. – T.S.) and burnt to death. (1982, II, 363)

Rammohun Roy was greatly motivated for his practical reform activity by confronting with human suffering in traditional society as well as other reformers.

In the *Reformation sphere*, Bengal intellectuals answered to another round of questions: on true essence of Hindu religion, on proper correlation between its spirit and form, on relations of human and God, on the role of priesthood and mode of worship, on social meaning of religion (including ethics). The answers constitute religious philosophy and new practices of worship generated by inter-religious dialogue between Hinduism, Christianity and Islam in consciousness of thinkers.

Two spiritual movements of the epoch – the Brahma Samaj and Neo-Hinduism are two endeavours to accent high values of Hinduism and highlight its spirit without connections with rituals and traditional practices. The Brahma Samaj was founded by Rammohun Roy in 1828

... as and for a place of public meeting of all sorts and descriptions of people without distinction as shall behave and conduct themselves in an orderly sober religious and devout manner for the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe... (1982, I, 216)

The Neo-Hindu thought and movement claimed by Swami Vivekananda's words, that Hinduism is "the mother of religions," which "does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realizing — not in believing, but in being and becoming." The Hindu religion has "come down to us from time prehistoric," based on the Vedas' revelation (Vivekananda 1998–2002, I, 3, 13).

From the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists, and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu's religion. (1998–2002, I, 6)

The essence of Hinduism is represented by Vivekananda as monotheistic faith:

He is everywhere, the pure and formless One, the Almighty and the All-merciful. "Thou art our father, Thou art our mother, Thou art our beloved friend, Thou art the source of all strength; give us strength. Thou art He that beareth the burdens of the universe; help me bear the little burden of this life". Thus sang the Rishis of the Vedas. And how to worship Him? Through love. (1998–2002, I, 11)

The complex of Enlightenment had united conventional questions of more secular character. It embraced answers about rights and dignity of people in society, rational social order (civil society), moral and social role of education and science, on progress in history, possibilities for resolving social problems, role of foreign rule in Indian history, on democracy and legal state, on development of language and culture, and so on. A significant idea of the complex was clearly expressed by Vivekananda:

...a nation is advanced in proportion as education and intelligence spread among the masses. The chief cause of India's ruin has been the monopolizing of the whole education and intelligence of the land, by dint of pride and royal authority, among a handful of men. If we are to rise again, we shall have to do it in the same way, i.e. by spreading education among the masses. (1998–2002, IV, 482)

People's ignorance along with diseases and famines are main causes of Indian decline, and the idea was general for each of Bengal intellectuals.

Summing up the ideas of the second synthesis, we see the following complex:

- 1) *Renaissance*: ideas of value of human personality, his right both to deliverance from suffering and right for happiness and freedom; of comprehensive and free development of human person, awakening the national consciousness by the development of vernacular languages and literature and a study of history.
- 2) *Reformation*: grounding of monotheism and moral values as essence of Hinduism and development of social service for oppressed by caste system;
- 3) *Enlightenment*: freedom of thought and priority of reason in human and social life; idea of moral and social role of knowledge, education, science and scientific thinking; the idea of progress in Indian history.

From this originated the idea of renaissance as re-birth/second birth of society in India.

Obviously, this double synthesis of the Bengal Renaissance is many-sided and non-trivial, because its thinkers and reformers attempted to combine harmonically universal and national, religious and secular, traditional and novation components.

The Bengal Renaissance as philosophical project:

The meaning of creative activity of Bengal intellectuals as well as the Bengal Renaissance at whole is predominantly in philosophical sphere. In colonial situation, Bengal creative minority was the only social force that could resolve the problem of future development of India, the population of which was turned to traditionalism. New intellectuals inherited an Indian tradition of philosophical thinking, and simultaneously had admittance to new ideas and to its perceptions and thinking. The intellectuals were representatives of their own civilization before British and other world and tried to synthesize the Indian heritage with Western novation. Before all, the synthesis was created in the mind of intellectuals and embodied in philosophy. Thereupon, intellectuals turned into reformer and tried to inculcate synthetic ideas into social practice. The latter was not only difficult, but even insurmountable task in inert and traditional society. Notwithstanding, Bengal creative minority began to move both consciousness of countrymen and real life of society. And this movement was the result of the Bengal Renaissance philosophy and culture.

The philosophy of the epoch can be described as a project, or a program of spiritual, social, political and cultural activity of person – as well as groups and all society. The project had been formed by all thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance and opened for reconstruction based on their works. They tried to embody their projective ideas into reality and thus had created the phenomena of the Bengal Renaissance in various spheres.

Based on Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach, this study turns away the attention from a number of interpretations of the epoch,

and analyzes the experiences and positions of key persons. If they realized their time as ‘renaissance’, the last was recognized as their own purpose. Consequently, the subject of renaissance, or its issue-area, consist of ideas, values and principles of spiritual and social activity, which has a perspective meaning for life and development of both person and society. This issue-area opens the purpose, subject, means and spheres of embodiment of renaissance idea. After Rammohun Roy, the idea of renaissance was advanced by Derozian Krishnamohun Banerjea:

...We are by no means satisfied with the state of things around us. We wish we were not surrounded with wretched and degraded fellowmen and that ourselves could boast of wiser and more perfect heads and were inspired by a stronger public spirit. (Chattopadhyaya 1965, 22)

Just forty years later Surendranath Banerjea said, that “upon the moral regeneration of your country depend its intellectual, its social and its political regeneration” (1970, 241) and called on as follows:

... If you seriously wish to regenerate your country, wish to see her great and prosperous, then you must have a thorough knowledge of the evils that beset her, the miseries that afflict her. First learn the disease, before you minister to the patient. But the miseries that afflict of India, the disease she is suffering from, are not the work of a day. Their roots stretch back into remote past. The past must be studied, before the work of Indian regeneration could be accomplished. (1970, 230)

‘Regeneration’ and ‘renaissance’ is the purpose of creative minority as well as their project.

United in general purpose, Bengal intellectuals saw differently on subject of the renaissance. Nirad C. Chaudhuri describes inside them liberal and conservative trends of thought and activities:

The new thinking... soon showed the differences of outlook and emphasis, which finally grouped themselves into the great nineteenth century antithesis of Liberalism and Conservatism. (1967, 16–17)

Both liberalism and conservatism sought for assimilation of the European experience critically and tried to synthesize it with the original Indian tradition, but made two conceptions of renaissance of India. Liberal variant proposed synthesis, in which Western ideas and achievements of science, technologies and culture are the means of renaissance and the main method is social reform. Liberalism emphasized the priority of universal ideas and values in the synthesis and paid attention to universal values founded in Indian national-cultural heritage. Tradition is rational grounding for novation. Western scientific and technical experience, political institutions and cultural heritage and achievements offered to adopt for renovation of Indian society. In broad sense of term, social renaissance have priority in liberal conception and includes social reform, education of people, development of justice sense, civil society, legal state and national economy, development of science and culture. The main protagonists of liberalism were Rammohan Roy, Derozians, Isvarchandra Vidyasagar, Aksaykumar Dutta, Kesubchandra Sen, Sivanath Sastri, Surendranath Banerjea, Rameshchundra Dutta, Rabindranath Tagore.

Conservative variant of renaissance was also founded on ideas of Indian-Western synthesis, but ‘Indian’ often identified with ‘Hindu’. The core mean of renaissance is tradition with its rational and accordant to modern aspects. Western ideas and achievements could selectively serve the renaissance affair – for equating India with the West, but not for spiritual and cultural renaissance. In the synthesis *national* have the priority before universal. Conservative project paid attention to national ideas, values and institutions because its creators believed in the greatness of national spirit in religious and moral spheres and India’s message for modern world. Conservatives recognize the necessity of social reforms, development of education, science, culture, and national economy in India – based on national tradition. That’s why, spiritual and cultural renaissance of society have priority in conservative conception, and social one appears at secondary purpose. The main

representatives of this variant after 1880 were Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, and Aurobindo Ghose (in his early periods).

Both conceptions are complementary because they are integrated in one purpose of renaissance. Both are united in aspiration to adopt Western achievements critically in social and political spheres along with the development of their own spiritual and cultural tradition. Liberal and conservative variants are integrated in their humanist characters; therefore, each of them is counterbalance for Hindu orthodoxy and ‘brahminical renaissance’.

The spheres of operation of ideas of renaissance were philosophy and religion, social relations and reforms, education and science, politics and culture. From the spheres we can mark four conventional aspects of the Bengal Renaissance: religious renaissance, social renaissance, political renaissance, and cultural renaissance.

1. *Religious renaissance* represented a search for true faith and humanity in opposition to orthodoxy and dehumanization of socio-religious life. It was a non-trivial attempt to make a religious synthesis of Hindu, Islamic and Christian ideas and values, based on human’s universal connection with God, personal freedom and dignity. The epoch’s liberal thinkers – predominantly brahmoists (members of the Brahma Samaj) – sought to reform Hinduism and reinterpret it as monotheistic and ethical faith. Conservative thinkers proposed the renovated version of *dharma*, based on idea of ‘unity in diversity’ (Swami Vivekananda). As a result, they created a humanistic image of Hinduism which was presented as religion of love, charity, happiness and struggle against social evils.

2. *Social renaissance* based on idea of existence of social problems originated from collision between ethical norms and human behavior. Bengal reformers fought against different forms of social alienation – legal (discrimination), economical (poverty), social (caste and gender inequality) and others – for a worthy life of the populace. Besides, based on the idea of civil society as ideal, analysis of actual society’s condition and practice of social reformist activity, Bengal thinkers from

Rammohun Roy and Derozians to Rabindranath Tagore formed the project of social development which had an all-Indian content and value, because it was concerned about all strata independently from religion, caste and gender. The main ground of that project was a civil society with equal rights and freedoms of citizens and the possibilities of its defense, public control over the state power, self-rule in society and prevalence of the law and co-operation of citizens. The changes of the society must be based on removing of traditional dogmas and rules, saving the high values of Indian culture, the creative social novation and sense of justice. The integral part of social project was moving to gender equality: Bengal thinkers maintain the rightful place of women in society both in social life and family.

3. *Political renaissance* was embodied in political and legal activity of a new social group and strata. Bengal intellectuals had created new political philosophy, being impressed by Western political values and institutes and simultaneously were the strict critics of British colonial rule in India. From Rammohun Roy, who saw in British Raj the cause of poverty, alienation and oppression of Indian population and foresaw Indian independence in future, to Surendranath Banerjea, who proposed British to implement their values and principles in governing of India for benefit of its people – all of them created the project of independent and democratic India. But the condition of Modern democratic state in India is the overcoming of the inertia of a people and development of political consciousness. Besides, in Bengal political project had formed the notion of a nation-state in which an all-Indian identity combined with diversity of religious, regional and ethno-cultural identities.

4. *Cultural renaissance* is the process of creation of modern Bengal culture based on a synthesis of national and universal, regional and all-Indian, indigenous and ancient traditions with new ideas of modern epoch. The humanistic culture originated from a deep India–West intercultural dialogue, which had drafted main vectors of culture in independent India. These vectors are: the development of education and enlightenment of people; the integration of Western scientific knowledge and development of social and natural sciences in India; creation of Modern Bengali literature from Michael Madhusudan Dutta and Pearychand Mitra to Rabindranath Tagore and Saratchandra

Chattopadhyay; creation of original Bengal school in painting; inventing new theatre and music arts.

Conclusion:

Obviously, the proposed system of symbolical description under the term ‘Bengal Renaissance’ could have some epistemological value because it opens the following research possibilities. Firstly, the system permits to research the epoch as the historical phenomenon, based on approaches of philosophy of history, and to overcome one-sided interpretations of the Bengal Renaissance as exclusively ‘Westernist’ movement, or ‘traditionalist’ movement turned to the past. Secondly, the system helps to demarcate the renaissance processes from revivalist and fundamentalist trends in XIX–early XX century India, and to demonstrate impossibility to reduce the whole process to Hindu religious movements only. Thirdly, this system demonstrates the elitist character of the Bengal Renaissance as its forte, because ‘creative minority’ of the epoch had given to contemporaries and latter generations the necessary high ideal of truth in opposite to minute claims of crowd majority. Fourthly, the system provides the opportunity of a complex analysis of the epoch’s processes – intellectual, religious, social, political, cultural etc. Finally, the represented system allows the possibility to describe the synthetic, many-sided, religious and secular character of the Bengal Renaissance thought and culture, its problems, achievements and heritage, and also to estimate its meaning for contemporary India and actually, importance of social development of the country. Consequently, the heritage of the Bengal Renaissance, as well as Indian, could be seen as ethical and cultural experience for resolving contemporary problems.

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