

INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE AND DEPENDENCE

Bankimchandra Chatterjee

Translation from the original essay in Bangla: '*Bharater Swadhinta o Paradhinta*' in *Bankim Rachana Samgraha, Prabandha Khanda, Part I* (1973), pp. 303-309.

Sutapa Dutta

Preface by the Translator

This is a translation of an essay by Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94), originally titled '*Bharater Swadhinta o Paradhinta*' in Bangla. Known primarily for his revolutionary work *Ananda Math*, and the evocation of the patriotic mantra 'Vande Mataram', Bankim's talent and vision has yet eluded readers at home and abroad. The end of the nineteenth century was a particularly seminal phase in Indian history in determining ideologies of repression and representation, aggression and appropriation, commerce and colonization. The political and cultural contact with the outside world gave rise to the need to define the self. This required a serious rethinking and refiguring of the inclusion and exclusion of people, and ideology within the ambit of the nation hitherto familiar with categories of cohesiveness such as religion, caste, locality, region or occupation. Nation formation and nationalism influenced by western concepts and discourses had to be incorporated to indigenous ideas of cohesiveness. At the same time the emergence of narratives with its intrinsic wide spectrum of representation became the ideal medium to depict cultural and national identities. Nationalistic feelings in this period were increasingly being expressed by a class of English educated intelligentsia like Bankimchandra Chatterjee, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt in Bengal, who turned from Western literature and manners towards the more familiar and acceptable Bengali language and idiom instead.

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Bankimchandra Chatterjee's writings, his essays and novels, demonstrate the emerging perspective of a nascent nation grappling to understand the differences and plurality of culture. The achievement of the foremost visionary and literary figure of nineteenth century India is best summed up by Sri Aurobindo when he asserts that Bankim created 'a language, a literature and a nation.' Bankim can be credited for popularising the spoken Bengali language, for arousing feelings of nationalism and patriotism by his literary works, and for creating consciousness among the masses for liberation from foreign rule. His writings laid stress on the need to chronicle one's own history, of creating a mass consciousness. Bankim realized the immense potentialities of the past; the past was by no means a finished story of dead people. The past became a potent formative factor to stir up, discover, and shape the present. His works attempt to create an 'Indian' identity by relating to the heroic past and the heroic characters of India through mythological legends, genealogical records or ancient Sanskrit literature. The construction of a particular past and glorifying this imagination could be seen as a resistance – a subjugated people's way of retrieving their self-respect, though in their attempt to assert their identity vis-à-vis the British, the intellectual Bengalis were compelled to adopt the terms of discourse settled by the colonial rulers.

The essay, *Bharater Swadhinta o Paradhinta*, was written in 1887 – the 50th year of Queen Victoria's rule in India, wherein Bankim redefines terms like 'independence', 'liberty' and 'subjugation'. It also reflects on, and questions some very pertinent and contradictory reactions of Indians towards colonial rule. The translation of this essay is an acknowledgement of Bankim's invaluable contribution in shaping significant aspects of Indian thought and culture, and his constant striving to synthesise the best of the East and the West.

Translation of the Essay

Man can never be in such a deplorable situation in which he cannot discern something favourable. In the midst of the greatest misfortune it is possible to find blessings. He is truly wise who seeks the positive in the midst of the greatest calamities and sorrow. It gladdens our heart in these distressing times to think that sadness is not all that sad after all!

India was independent in the past, but now for many years it is under foreign rule. Today's Indians consider this to be the ultimate misfortune. Let us compare our independent past with the present bondage. Let us distinguish joy and sorrow.

Independence and Dependence – we need to contemplate on the meaning of these words. We have begun by comparing ancient India with the modern times. What are we trying to establish by pointing out that India in the past was independent but not so now? The purpose of comparing is to bring out the differences, to ascertain whether the people of ancient India were happier or are they more content in modern India.

By this time, I am sure; many would be ready to attack me. Who can doubt that only a state of independence can bring true bliss; any one who questions this is stone hearted, a beast, etc. I acknowledge its truth. But if we were to ask how independence is better than subjugation? – The answer is difficult to find.

Western Education has taught the Bengalis two words – ‘Liberty’, and ‘Independence’. Many think that the two mean the same. The general conception is that independence means to be governed by one’s own people, but if the king is from a foreign country, then the people are under foreign rule and that nation is subjugated. As per this, present India under the British rule is considered to be dependent and suppressed. India under the Mughals, or Bengal ruled by Siraj-ud-daullah was, similarly, deemed as oppressed. Let us analyse the logic behind such reasoning.

Queen Victoria is British, but her ancestors George I and George II were not British – they were Germans. William III was Dutch, Bonaparte was Italian, the ancient race of the Spanish Bourbon kings was French, and many an emperor to ascend the throne of the mighty Roman Empire have belonged to barbarian races. Hundreds of similar examples can be given. All these kings were foreigners. But do we consider these nations to be subjugated? No one would think so. If England under King George, or Rome under the Trojans is not regarded as subjugated, then why do we say that India was under foreign rule when Shah Jahan was the king, or when Bengal was ruled by Alivardi Khan.?

It can be seen that a nation does not come under foreign rule just because its king belongs to another land. Again, having a native ruler need not necessarily mean a country is independent. Before the war fought by Washington, America was governed by its own people. All colonies are at first managed by the inhabitants, but in that situation colonies cannot be regarded as autonomous.

Then, what is subjugation?

It is true that today India under the British is not free. From Rome, to Britain to Syria, countries have been under foreign bondage. Algeria and Jamaica are dominated. What makes these countries

subjects? These are not sovereign nations, but a part of a larger foreign kingdom. The Empress of India does not live here – she dwells in another country. A country whose king's allegiance is towards a distant throne and people – that country is not independent.

If two nations have one ruler, then one of them is dependent and the other is independent. The country in which the king lives is free; the other where he does not reside is subjected.

Such definitions can give rise to certain objections. England's James I, the supreme head of Scotland and England, left Scotland and lived and ruled from England. Did then Scotland come under England? Emperor Babar having conquered India and having established his rule from the throne of Delhi began to administer his homeland from here. Did then his kingdom come under the rule of India? George I after ascending the throne of England continued to rule his fatherland Hanover. Did that bring Hanover under the yoke of England?

We can venture to say that the former kingdoms of James I, or George I, or the Mughals, had at the most been dependent, but they were not subjugated. They may have lost their independence but not their liberty. What then is the difference between Dependence and Subjugation, or between Independence and Liberty?

The word 'liberty' has a special connotation in England's politics. Without going deep into their interpretation, we shall focus on what we Indians understand by this word.

To have a ruler from another country is by itself an injustice. Those who belong to the king's country will enjoy greater prerogatives as compared to the locals. The subjects of such a king would be oppressed. Where there is a marked difference in the treatment of his own vis-à-vis the others, such a country is suppressed. That nation which is liberated from foreign oppression is truly free.

Still, a dependent kingdom can be called free – like Hanover during George I, Kabul during the Mughals. Sometimes a free nation can be dependent – like England during the Normans, India during Aurangzeb. We consider Northern India under Qutub-uddin to be subjugated, but India under Akbar's rule to have been free and independent.

When the king lives in another country it has two detrimental effects: First, it hampers good governance. Second, the king's loyalty is more towards his own place and people, often at the expense of harming the interests of the colonial subjects. India has faced these two problems. Had Queen Victoria been enthroned in Delhi or Calcutta, India would have, no doubt been ruled better because

matters at hand get obviously more priority than what is distant and far away. The second problem has also manifested in the form of taxes and 'home charges' that England has levied on the Indians in its war with Abyssinia mainly for its own honour and glory.

Since the king lives far away, no doubt our country suffers, but at the same time the eventuality of a self-centred king living right here would have meant more harm than good. Some kings seek to gratify their senses, spending most of their time in the harems, some are cruel and some are avaricious. India in the past has suffered from all these. In present India, we shall at least not directly suffer the shortcomings of the king or the queen as they live in a distant land.

Second, as present India's welfare is often sidelined to accommodate the interests of England, similarly, our kings in the past have often ignored the good of our people. Prithviraj abducted Jaichandra's daughter to fulfil his egotistic interests, but this only stoked the fire in both their hearts and led to bitter wars and mortification. As a result both lost to the Muslims. Thankfully the chances of being affected by the whimsical natures of kings are very less in India today, as our present rulers live far away.

But this just goes to elucidate a state of dependence, but our purpose is to distinguish the difference between dependence and subjugation. Nobody in our country would deny that in India the English are the rulers, we are the subjects, and for the good of the English our interests are often sacrificed. Even though such instances of one race dominating another race were never there in ancient India, but comparable caste oppression did exist. No one would disagree that in India the majority has always been the *Shudras*. The upper castes were lesser in number as compared to the *Shudras*. According to the caste hierarchy the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas* have been the rulers. But we need to elaborate on this further.

People think that in ancient India only the *Kshatriyas* were the kings. In reality it was not so, the management of the kingdom was divided into two parts. The *Kshatriyas* were responsible for warfare; the executive, legislature and the judiciary were in the hands of the Brahmins. Like we have the civil and the military to look after the administration of the country today, it was the same then. The *Brahmins* were the civil servants, the *Kshatriyas* were the military. As in the present the civil servants are superior to the military, it was so too then. The kings were selected from among the *Kshatriyas*, but practically the *Brahmins* were more important. It was not always that the *Kshatriya* was the king. Perhaps they were in the distant past, but during the Buddhist and the Maurya period we do see kings

of mixed castes. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang had mentioned the presence of *Brahmin* kings beyond the *Sindhu*. In other places too, *Brahmins* became kings. In the medieval period most kings were *Kshatriyas*. The *Rajputs* are mainly *Kshatriyas* but could also be of mixed castes. The *Kshatriyas* did not always occupy a vital position in ancient India, but the *Brahmins* have never lost their glory even for a day. Even during the times of the Buddhists who disapproved of the *Vedas*, the administration of the kingdom never passed from the hands of the *Brahmins* – because, the *Brahmins* were wise, well educated, and competent. Hence, it can be said that in ancient India, the *Brahmins* were actually the rulers. The eminent writer Taraprasad Chattopadhyaya, in an essay for *Bengal Magazine* justly wrote that the *Brahmins* were the Englishmen of ancient India.

The question now to be posed is, whether the disparity between the natives and the foreigners today is any greater than the inequity between the *Brahmins* and the *Shudras* in ancient India?

The racial discrimination that prevails when the king is a foreigner can happen in two ways: First, when the law makes two prejudiced sets of rules, one for the king's own people, and another for the outsiders. Second, when the king favours his own people and appoints them to the high posts of the government. Let us examine the presence of these two faults during the English rule and in ancient India.

1) Under the English rule, the court of law is different for the local inhabitants and the foreigners. The natives can be punished under the English law, but the Englishmen cannot be judged by the Indian court. This is an enormous disparity. But even though the English have different courts, at least the law is the same when it comes to punishing a native who has murdered a white man or an Englishman who has killed a native. Compared to this we notice a greater discrimination during the *Brahmin* rule - what a disparity exists between the punishments meted out to a Brahmin who murdered a *Shudra* and a *Shudra* who killed a *Brahmin*! Who can then dare say that modern India is worse than ancient India? As today the Englishmen cannot be tried by Indians, similarly in ancient India the *Brahmins* could not be judged by the *Shudras*.

2) The English do have their own people in the government, but there are many Indians who also occupy high positions. It is doubtful whether during the *Brahmin* rule the *Shudras* were ever allowed to do so. We know very little about the system of administration in the past, but from early books we can gather that the administration, military and judiciary have been traditionally in the hands of the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas*.

Many would say that the comparison between the hegemony of the English and the supremacy of the *Brahmins* is not apt; because, the *Shudras*, even though afflicted, were dominated by their own race, whereas the English are a different race altogether. I would like to reply that for all who are subjugated, to be tyrannized by one's own people or by others, means the same to them. I do not think oppression by one's own race is any sweeter. But if somebody thinks contrary to that, we have no objection. What has to be emphasised is that today we have racial discrimination; in ancient India we had caste bigotry. For most people both are the same.

But we do have to concede that in dominated India, people who are bright, well educated, highborn and meritorious are not getting their worth. If intellect and learning are not recognized then this would be a grave injustice to such people. This is evident in modern India. Now, the governance is in the hands of the English; we do not get much opportunity to learn how to defend and administer our country. This impedes national progress. We have to accept that subjugation fetters advancement. At the same time European education and scientific learning has enabled and empowered us. European domination has on the one hand been detrimental, but on the other hand it has also benefited us.

Thus it can be said that compared to the present, the upper classes in ancient India did enjoy more privileges, but for the majority of the people it is the same; rather, one would say, modern India is better.