

Bengal Renaissance and Western Philosophy: Rammohun to Rabindranath

Amitava Khastgir
Kolkata, Rabindra Bharati Society, 2019, pp. 56, Rs. 150

Amiya P. Sen*

This little booklet carries a surprisingly acute intellectual content given its length. It combines brevity with insights and, quite uniquely, employs a philosophical gloss on the study of a subject that has hitherto been dominated by sociologists and historians.

In this work Khastgir's agenda is to examine how Western educated Hindus in 19th century Bengal negotiated certain key ideas or values emanating in the contemporary West. It is now commonplace that the Bengal Renaissance was a creative response to the mental and moral challenges thrown by the West before the new intelligentsia that was the product of modern educational institutions; Khastgir takes the story further, however briefly, by examining the manner in which such challenges were met with or resolved, making this work an important contribution to our modern intellectual history. To my mind the important point that the book makes, though not very self consciously, is about how ideas carried a certain autonomy of movement: in 19th century India, bourgeois ideas and values were indeed accepted and internalized under material conditions which would not permit their growth.

From what I have been able to make of this monograph it would appear as though educated Hindus related to the new philosophical and scientific knowledge from the West in some distinctive ways.

First, there were those enthused by the new and socially radical ideas coming from the West but could not creatively integrate this with what they had imbibed

from their own tradition. The educationist and reformer, Vidyasagar, had a vast collection of books imported from the West but fell short of producing an original treatise based on Western ideas or values. This can be justly contrasted to the work of the novelist Bankimchandra who was, perhaps, the best read in the philosophical discourse of the West without possessing an impressive personal library. His *Dharmatattwa* (1888) is the first full-length moral and philosophical treatise produced in modern Bengal that cites a good number of Western thinkers ranging from Fichte to Marx.

Second, there were those whose reading of Western philosophy looks somewhat shallow and contrived. Vidyasagar, for example, confused the subjective idealism of Berkeley with the monistic idealism of non-dualist Vedanta. He also believed that training in Western languages and knowledge systems would suitably expose the 'fallacies' in indigenous philosophical schools like Vedanta and Samkhya. Indeed, this was the substance of his two successive notes on education, dated 12th April 1852 and 7 September 1853 respectively. This critique is surprising if only because two completely opposed philosophical schools, idealistic Vedanta and materialistic Samkhya, could not have been both false. His agnosticism and arguments against the idea of a benevolent God too appear to have been derived from the writings of Mill, Hume and Spencer. Vidyasagar used Bacon to critique certain other philosophical schools like Nyaya which quite uncharitably he called a 'cobweb of learning'.

Third, we can also think of individuals who were willing to accept the Western philosophical traditions rather selectively. Reportedly, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore's gifted away a good collection of books on

* Amiya P. Sen is retired professor of modern Indian history, Jamia Millia Islamia.

Western thinkers to the library at Santiniketan presumably because he had no use for them. Both the Maharshi and the prominent Brahmo theologian, Keshabchandra Sen, preferred to borrow Western theism, not philosophy: focusing on the unity and personality of God and on the value of prayer and repentance. It is no coincidence that they both also contributed towards marginalizing indigenous philosophical systems: the Maharshi by refusing to accept the authority of Vedanta-*shastra* and Keshab, by profusely borrowing from the eclecticism of Victor Cousin and the New Testament.

In his incisive survey of Indian reception of Western thought, Khastgir makes three other points of substance and which, in my knowledge, have not been made earlier with comparable clarity. For one, he points to the tendency among educated Hindus of the 19th century of adulating relatively minor philosophical thinkers like Bacon to the relative neglect of Kant and Hegel. They were also in error in combining people as removed from one another as Bacon and Comte. Bacon, unlike Descartes, had no ideas about the applicability of mathematics to the study of nature and was more a naturalist than a philosopher (p. 11). And Bacon perceptibly differed from Comte inasmuch as he did not accept the worship of Humanity as religion (p. 19). My own thoughts on the matter are that Bacon's popularity arose primarily from two factors: his aversion to idealism and his preference for the inductive method of reasoning over the deductive,

which, arguably, better promoted a scientific and rational temperament. This was a point Bankimchandra makes too in his "The Study of Hindu Philosophy". We are also alerted about the tardy pace at which Western ideas entered Bengal. It is true that Paine's *Age of Reason* were sold at many times its price by unscrupulous book sellers but even so, communication links between England and India were not as rapid or effective in the first half of the century as they were in the second. Khastgir is quick to notice Rammohun's confusing monism with monotheism or his addressing the metaphysical Absolute, Brahman, as 'God', the latter because the term Absolute was popularized only by Fichte and his followers and clearly, Rammohun was not familiar with it in the 1820s (p.12).

I disagree with the author's claim that Akshay Kumar Dutt was a Brahmo (p. 18) or that Debendranath renounced faith in both the Upanishads and Vedanta *darshana*. It is a pity also that the work does not seriously take up the contribution of Bipinchandra Pal, the militant nationalist turned Vaishnava theoretician. I distinctly recall his persistent use of neo-Hegelianism in explaining key concepts in Vaishnava religion and aesthetics.

What tarnishes the value of Khastgir's otherwise very useful book is the inexcusably large number of typos and one wonders if the publisher arranged for proof-reading at all. All the same, to those interested in the history of thought during one of the key periods in modern Indian history, I heartily recommend the book under review.