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Textualizing social activism: Reading the life narratives of Raja Rammohun Roy and Bipin Chandra Pal

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Abstract

The number of autobiographies by social activists is surprisingly less. This number is further less when it comes to Indian autobiographies in English. A cursory look at the history of autobiographies by an Indian social activist gets us back at a very small piece of an autobiographical sketch of his life by Raja Rammohun Roy that can be fairly regarded as the first of its kind. In fact, the self portraiture is said to be the first of its kind among the Indian autobiographies in English in general. Though later many have written their full fledged autobiographies, yet this brief sketch of Roy's life as narrated by himself at the behest of one of his English friends is significant for reasons more than one. He was the principal social reformer of his times. His revolutionary efforts at curbing the menace of the Sati system and supporting women education in the orthodox Indian society are but few of his glorious achievements as a social activist. About half a century later another prominent social activist and a remarkable freedom fighter by the name Bipin Chandra Pal wrote his full fledged autobiography that tells the story of his struggle in pursuing his passion to bring about a change to the lives of illiterate and poverty stricken multitude of his country.

Keywords: Autobiography, social reformer, Brahma Samaj, idolatry, orthodoxy

Introduction

Raja Ram Mohun Roy was born in a respectable Brahmin family of Murshidabad district in the colonial Bengal. His great grandfather Krishna Chandra Banerjee was honoured with the title "Roy" as a result of his some good services to the local government. Soon Krishna Chandra became the collector of the districts of Hughly and Burdwan. Thus he moved to Hughly district with his family and built a house at Radhanagar at the banks of Kana Darkeswar. His son, Braja Binode, like him, occupied a prestigious position serving under Siraj-ud-dowla. During his time British Empire established itself in India.

Among his seven sons, Ramakanta was the fifth one. However, he was the dearest to him. Braja Binode got this son married to Tarini Devi, better known as "Phool Thakurani". Ramakanta was a small Zemindar who had earned great respect in his region. Ramakanta's son Raja Ram Mohun was born at the Radhanagar house in 1774. This was the year when both the Supreme Council, the highest Executive and the Supreme Court, the highest Judiciary were established by the British in India.

Raja Ram Mohun was educated in Arabic and Parsi soon after his elementary learning of Bengali language was over in the village Pathshala. His learning of Arabic in Patna which was then considered the highest seat of Arabic study in India took place when he was nine years old. It was a tradition in those days to learn Arabic as it was the language of the Court. Raja Ram Mohun is said to have developed a keen interest in reading many philosophical and literary pieces in it and grasping their essence even at the tender age. When he turned fourteen, his maternal side seeing his prodigious attributes, took initiatives to introduce him to Sanskrit. Thus he was sent to Kashi, the highest seat of learning of the language. In Benares he spent two years to acquire a substantial knowledge of the classical language and get an understanding of the monotheistic tenets of the Vedanta and the Upanishads. Subsequently this learning was to foster in him an anti idolatry stand, something that was to upset the traditions of his family in the coming days. Raja Ram Mohun writes in his epistolary self-portraiture, In conformity with the usage of my paternal race, and the wish of

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my father, I studied the Persian and the Arabic languages,- these being indispensable to those who attached themselves to the courts of the Mahomedan princes; and agreeably to the usage of my maternal relations, I devoted myself to the study of the Sanskrit, and the theological works written in it, which contain the body of Hindu literature, law and religion (Roy: 273).

Bipin Chandra Pal was born in the village Poil, in the district of Sylhet which was then a part of Bengal and is presently in Assam. On November 7, 1858 he was born in a prestigious Bengali Kayastha family of Batsya *Gotra* to Ram Chandra Pal and his second wife, Narayanee of Shatiajuri village in Assam. His father was, like Raja Ram Mohun, reputed to be a good Persian scholar, and worked as an honest Peshkar (bench-clerk) in the court of the Sadar-Ala (Sub-ordinate Judge) of Dacca.

Bipin Chandra was greatly influenced by his father. He did not step into a school until he was ten years old. His father tutored him at home the elements of Bengali language from *Sishu Bodha* and introduced him to the first lessons of arithmetic. There is this anecdote Bipin recalls from his early childhood that had a great impact on his character. When he was about the age of seven, it so happened that his father was temporarily out of his job at the "Chowki". He went back to his village Poil for sometimes. There he learnt that a poor Brahmin family was put out of caste by some of the influential people in the village spitefully. He took no time to understand the great injustice done to the helpless Brahmin. He immediately sent for the head of the family and employed him as the family priest for the upcoming Durga festival. As result he was put out of communion by the Bhadrals of the village for as long as sixteen years (Pal: 19-20).

Bipin Chandra was sent to a Moulavi to learn Persian. But he could not find the procedure of learning the language by rote learning suiting his individual style of learning by understanding the meaning first. He recounts how he left the Persian classes in few days of his attending them and was soon put into an English medium school in Sylhet. However at a later phase of his school life, he realized how he was at a loss not being able to pursue his interest in comparatively studying the Bengali Vaishnavic poets and great Persian poets (Pal: 26-27).

Raja Ram Mohun wrote a book in Persian with an Arabic preface with the title, *Tuhfatul Muwahhiddin*, meaning Gift to Monotheism, in which he condemned the practice of worshipping many gods and for the worship of a single God by Hindus. Further he expressed his opposition to Idolatry much prevalent in the religion. As a result Ramakanta, his father, who was an orthodox Hindu was severely hurt. The relation between the father and the son became sour. Raja Ram Mohun decided to leave his house and undertake a tour of the country to satiate his inquisitive spirit. Later when he turned twenty his father recalled him and accepted him back into his home. Thus, he writes,

When about the age of sixteen, I composed a manuscript calling in question the validity of idolatrous system of the Hindus. This, together with my known sentiments on that subject, having produced a coolness between me and

my immediate kindred, I processed on my travels, and passed through different countries, chiefly within, but some beyond the bounds of Hindustan, with a feeling of great aversion to the establishment of the power in India. When I reached the age of twenty, my father recalled me, and restored me to his favour; (Roy: 273)

Wherever he went, he observed the manners, customs and religions of various peoples. Thus he reached the distant land of Tibet where he got an opportunity to meet Buddhists and get a firsthand experience of their religious practices. Here Raja Ram Mohun objected to their form of worship in the same manner as he had done with the Hindus sometimes back. But some of the Lamas took it as an offence and became violent in dealing with him. Raja Ram Mohun had a tough time trying to safeguard himself from the aggression. However, it was here that he experienced for the first time the help coming from unexpectedly from some of the women belonging to the same faith. Certainly the occasion was later to become the founding event for his rigorous efforts at emancipating women bound by then prevalent social customs. (Raja Ram: 1-6)

For Bipin Chandra the earliest instance of a secular attitude in him could be traced from this important incident from his childhood. For the first time a soda-water machine was set up in Sylhet. There used to be a Muslim who would bring soda-water and lemonade to the school where Bipin Chandra studied to sell them to the boys. It took no time to be popular among the school children. One day Bipin Chandra did not have money with him to pay for the lemonade he drank which he thought of paying the next time he would drink it. However, the vendor reached his house one morning as Bipin's father was about to go out for some important work, and asked him to pay for the lemonade Bipin had drunk. It disturbed the father. He gave Bipin a severe hiding that day apparently for two reasons; first because the lemonade was drunk without being paid the price of it, and second because the vendor was a Muslim to receive water from whose hand was believed to outrage the rules of cast. He writes,

I was guilty of a double offence, first, of enjoying something which I had not paid for, and second, which was far more serious from my father's point of view, outraging the rules of caste by drinking water touched by Mahomedans. All this came through my reading English, he said, and at once took me away from school. For full six months I did not go back to school after this incident (Pal: 34).

A couple of years later Bipin Chandra found an occasion to settle the score with his father on this lemonade episode. It so happened that Bipin Chandra became seriously ill of choleraic diarrhoea. His father became very anxious and sat by his bed the whole day. As Bipin felt severely thirsty during the illness, the doctor in attendance suggested that he was served with lemonade to maintain the water level in his body. Soon the lemonade from the same vendor was brought. But Bipin purposefully refused to accept it calling it 'unholy' as it was prepared by a Muslim. The father who himself was pouring out the lemonade in the glass pleaded him to drink it as it meant "medicine" then, and the medicine is God himself, irrespective of from whose hand it has come (Pal: 35).

Social Reformation

There was never a dearth for such thinkers in India. The subcontinent is famous for producing many great thinkers and philosophers on the planet. However, the need for a thinker –actor always precedes any substantial transformation in the society. The works of practical and perceptual difference to the lives of neglected and down trodden sections of the society are the ones that bear the true sign of an emancipator. Discussing the topic of social and cultural awakening in the nineteenth century India, an eminent historian on modern Indian history, Bipin Chandra writes the following about Raja Ram Mohun Roy,

Rammohun Roy was a great thinker. He was also a man of action. There was hardly any aspect of nation building which he left untouched. In fact, just as he began the reform of Hindu religion from within, he also laid the foundations for the reform of Indian society. The best example of his lifelong crusade against social evils was the historic agitation he organized against the inhuman custom of women becoming *sati* (Chandra: 131).

In order to pursue his mission of abolishing the custom of Sati, Ram Mohun toiled hard collecting the public opinion beginning in 1818. He even visited the burning ghats at Calcutta to try to persuade the relatives of widows to give up their plan of self immolation. He monitored the cases with the like-minded people where sati was forced upon widows and took great care to prevent it. For him “human dignity”, according to Chandra, was important. When some of the orthodox Hindus petitioned Parliament to withhold its approval of Bentinck’s action of banning the rite of *sati*, he counter petitioned against it standing firmly by Bentinck’s action (Chandra: 131). In the short account of his life, Ram Mohun recounts this episode of his life in the following way.

My expectations having been at length realized, in November 1830, I embarked for England, as the discussion of the East India Company’s charter was expected to come on, by which the treatments of the natives of India, and its future Government, would be determined for many years to come, and an appeal to the King in Council, against the abolition of the practice of burning widows, was to be heard before the Privy Council; and his Majesty the Emperor of Delhi had likewise commissioned me to bring before the authorities in England certain encroachments on his rights by the East India Company. I accordingly arrived in England in April, 1831 (Roy: 275).

Ram Mohun was not entirely given to his sentiments only on the matter of *Sati*, he was also well informed of the ancient Hindu scriptures in Sanskrit which he frequently quoted in course of his arguments against the custom. As he studied various Hindu scriptures extensively and had a great command over Sanskrit, he could very easily decipher that in the scriptures there were hardly any such provisions as to burn alive a woman who became widow. Thus Chandra states, “On the one hand he showed by citing the authority of the oldest sacred books that the Hindu religion at its best was opposed to the practice; on the other hand, he appealed to the reason, humanity and compassion of the people” (Chandra: 131).

Bipin Chandra was a prominent social reformer of his time. He was mainly concerned with the social problems of his time such as caste system, child marriage, widow remarriage, etc. was immense. His association with the Brahmo Samaj not only brought about new sensibilities in him regarding religious conduct but also opened him to the glaring problems dwelling in the society. He was a part of the group that acted against Keshub Chunder Sen’s decisions to marry his daughter off with the Prince of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar when she was barely thirteen years old and the prince himself was only sixteen years old (Pal: 332-9). He belonged to Shivanath Shastry’s Brahmoism that included not only social reformation but also national emancipation as their propaganda.

Shivanath dreamt of consecrated lives, vowed like the Catholic priesthood not to celibacy but to poverty. Those who joined this group were expected to earn nothing for themselves or their family but to put whatever wages their consecrated work might bring into a common purse from which the wants of themselves and their families would be met. The idea was to form a communist group more or less like the early Christian communists. The idea, however, failed to materialize itself (Pal: 315-16).

Be it his association with the Brahmo Samaj, or joining the Sadharana Brahmo Samaj or becoming a member of the Sylhet Union, social service had always been the prime motive of Bipin Chandra. In course of his varied degree of affiliation with these organizations in different phases of his life he worked hard to establish an egalitarian society by supporting education for girls, abolishing minor age marriages, removing discriminations based on caste and religion etc. His autobiography exhaustively documents the growth of his personal life into the religious, social and political spheres with remarkable clarity.

Conclusion

Reading together the life narratives of the two prominent Bengalis makes one aware of the presence of the strong social activism in the pre-independent India. A comparative study of the two autobiographical accounts reveals a lot about the transition that took place in the colonial Bengal of the times that in its turn fostered a spirit of revolution in the hearts and minds of many a courageous men. The claim of the colonial masters that the orient is not particularly open to reformation can be substantially countered with the works done by Roy and Pal. The fact that there was native promptness to address many social evils of those times can be asserted from a close study of these life narratives.

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