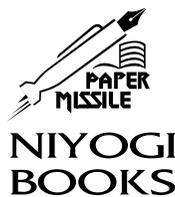


LOSING THE PLOT

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POLITICAL ISOLATION
OF WEST BENGAL

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BIRTH OF NATIONALISM

Ananda Math had defined nationalism for Indians in its formative stages, said historian S. Irfan Habib.¹ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay published the novel in 1882, about 40 years after the political upheavals known as Spring of Nations that broke out across Europe. The movements seen in Europe in 1848 were aimed at removing monarchies and creating nation states. This flame of nationalism reached the shores of Bengal since it had the closest connection with western thoughts due to the presence of the British rulers.

Bankim Chandra was the first Indian graduate from the newly established Calcutta University, a product of the British effort to educate its Indian subjects. In fact, even before writing the novel *Ananda Math*, Bankim had composed 'Vande Mataram', the national song which became the rallying cry for the Indian freedom movement. Judged by the overwhelming popular acceptance it may be safely said that the relatively nascent concept of nationalism, in the Indian context, had its birth on the soils of Bengal.

Swami Vivekananda, wrote historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar,² had told a group of young men at Dacca some time in 1901, 'Read Bankim Chandra and emulate his *deshbhakti* (patriotism) and *Sanatan Dharma* (principles of the heroic band of Sannyasins as depicted in the *Ananda Math*). Your duty should be service to motherland.'

The nascent sense of nationalism was not confined to Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore set the poem 'Vande Mataram' to music and

sang it during the 1896 session of the Congress in Calcutta. It was sung in 1901 five years later at another session of the Congress in Calcutta. Poet Sarala Devi Chaudurani sang the song in the Benares Congress session in 1905.

R.C. Majumdar wrote,

During the long and arduous struggle for freedom from 1905 to 1947 'Bande Mataram' was the rallying cry of the patriotic sons of India, and thousands of them succumbed to the lathi blow of the British police or mounted the scaffold with 'Bande Mataram' on their lips. The main theme of the novel inspired the Bengali youths to supreme self-sacrifice during the hectic days of the Swadeshi movement.³

Bengal was the first to witness the great transformation since British rule was established here first. Historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar noted,

If Periclean Athens was the school of Hellas, the eye of Greece, mother of arts and eloquence that was Bengal to the rest of India under British rule, but with a borrowed light which it had made its own with marvellous cunning. In this new Bengal originated every good and great thing of the modern world that passed on to the other provinces of India ... New literary types, reform of the language, social reconstruction, political aspirations, religious movements and even changes in manners that originated in Bengal, passed like ripples from a central eddy, across provincial barriers, to the farthest corners of India.⁴

Bankim Chandra, whose 'Vande Mataram' became a battle mantra and *Ananda Math* the inspiration, was a product of a wave of changes

that swept Bengal. It all started with the spread of western education pursued relentlessly by personalities like Raja Rammohun Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar to name just a few. The Hindu College was established on 20 January 1817 with active support from Sir Hyde East, then chief justice of the Supreme Court of Calcutta. It was an initiative undertaken by prominent Bengali families who met at Sir Hyde's residence and contributed money to set up an institution where their children could receive liberal education like the Europeans. According to R.C. Majumdar it was one Baidyanath Mukherjee, a prominent resident of Calcutta at that time, who had been the main force behind pursuing Sir Hyde East.⁵

The setting up of the Hindu College gave wings to the desire of Bengal to receive the best liberal education that was available in Europe. The Bengali Hindus in Calcutta were eager to learn English primarily to facilitate their discussions with English merchants in order to carry out their trading activities smoothly. In the beginning Bengalis did not have much fascination for the Englishmen as can be seen from what Raja Rammohun Roy wrote. Finding the Europeans 'generally more intelligent, more steady and moderate in their conduct' he gave up his prejudice against them.⁶ In fact Roy started learning English only after this realisation. Bengalis took the initiative to learn English, with the majority acquiring a working knowledge in order to earn a living. The likes of Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore and Nilmoni Datta earned huge wealth through their association with the British. Some were employed in British establishments, some opted for trade and commerce, while others built up a fortune in law. The establishment of the Supreme Court in Calcutta opened up a new career opportunity for Bengalis. The economic prospect enticed the new generation of Bengal to seek English education which made

them approach Sir Hyde East. That in due course this exposure to European education attracted them to the European concept of nationalism was a natural transition.

There was an interesting change in the attitude of Hindus in Bengal towards British rule. According to R.C. Majumdar the British victory at Plassey was viewed as yet another change of guard by the Hindus accustomed as they were to frequent changes in the then capital Murshidabad. 'The people of Bengal ... looked upon the accession of Mir Jafar as one usurper and traitor succeeding another and it was beyond their wildest dreams to see in this event the beginning of British rule in Bengal, far less in India,' wrote Majumdar.⁷ Essentially to the Hindus, who were the majority in Bengal, British rule was yet another foreign rule replacing the earlier one. To them the nawabs of Murshidabad were aliens. When Robert Clive entered Murshidabad triumphantly with a few hundred Europeans and sepoys, the people who gathered to witness his entry amounted to thousands. According to Clive had they cared they could have beaten back the Europeans even with sticks and stones.

The point to note is that when the British rule started there was no sense of nation state among the Bengali Hindus. They observed the change of guard and discerned certain benefits as was noted by Raja Rammohun. Hindus and Muslims used to live in proximity with two different beliefs and cultures. The feeling of distinct identities was deep rooted despite the fact, as was mentioned by Raja Rammohun in his 'Appeal to the King in Council', that under the Muslim rule, 'the natives of this country enjoyed every political privilege in common with Musaalman.' However under the British rule, despite loss of political consequence, the natives 'were consoled by the more secure enjoyment of those civil and religious rights which had been so often violated by the rapacity and intolerance of the Mussulmans ...'⁸

When Bengalis were exposed to the idea of nationalism that was sweeping through Europe the thought that was uppermost in their minds was the violation of civil and religious rights during the 700 years of Muslim rule. *Ananda Math*, the hugely popular novel by Bankim Chandra, that served as the trigger for the nascent sense of nationalism in Bengal, was based on a central theme that was anti-Muslim, according to A.G. Noorani.⁹ In the last chapter, Noorani wrote, there is a supernatural figure persuading the leader of the sanyasis, Satyananda, to stop fighting, ‘The Muslim power is destroyed, there is nothing else for you to do ... Hindu dominion will not be established now ... The English will rule.’¹⁰ Bengali nationalism started out as an anti-Muslim sentiment.

There are good reasons for this. ‘When the British rule was firmly established in Bengal, the anti-Muslim and pro-British sentiments of the Hindus went on increasing,’ wrote Majumdar.¹¹ He cited the views of Rammohun Roy who was arguably the most liberal man of his times and had accepted the superiority of Muslims in many respects. Yet according to Roy the British rule in India was a benign act of Providence. He referred to the despotic power of the Mogul princes who ruled over India in his ‘Appeal to the King in Council’. He also referred to the religious bigotry and proselytisation of the Muslims that Indians suffered for nine centuries. Majumdar concluded that, ‘The view of Muslims as alien rulers persisted throughout the nineteenth century among the Hindus ...’¹² This explains the popularity of *Ananda Math* and ready acceptance of ‘Vande Mataram’ as the battle cry.

Curiously despite nearly 700 years of living under the Muslim rulers Bengalis disliked their rulers to the extent that they readily accepted the rule by people alien to their culture who came from faraway lands with the intention of exploiting the resources of their native land. One reason could be that the Moguls established

their hold over Bengal after much struggle, and to maintain their control always appointed representatives from within their family or members from Upper India as governors of the state and other high-ranking officials. All these appointees looked forward to the day of retiring back to their homes. Bengal was thus a much-neglected province. The frequent changes of rulers immediately before the East India Company defeated Nawab Siraj-ud-daula had also alienated high-ranked Hindus from the rulers. Thus none of them from Siraj-ud-daula to Mir Jafar or even Mir Qasim could ensure loyalty from the Bengali Hindus. Instead Bengali Hindus won wealth by siding with the British traders. When they and their offspring opted for European education they nursed a soft corner for British rule. Thus the supernatural figure in *Ananda Math* told Satyananda, 'Who is the foe? There are no foes now. The English are friends as well as rulers.' This was the dominant sentiment among the Bengalis then and was not fabricated by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay just to please his English employers.¹³

Bengal's honeymoon with the British was evident during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 which was later considered as the first struggle for freedom from the British. Interestingly it was the soldiers at Berhampore (Murshidabad) who refused to use the cartridges made using beef and pig tallow. This was followed by the sepoys at Barrackpore where a sepoy Mangal Pandey had attacked a British officer. This apart there had been instances of sepoys revolting at Chittagong, Dacca and Jalpaiguri. Yet the vocal Bengali newspapers of the day and commentators did not support the mutiny. A meeting was held in Calcutta attended by prominent personages like Raja Radhakanta Deb, Kaliprasanna Sinha and Harendra Ghose where a resolution was adopted condemning the sepoys. *Sambad Prabhakar* a prominent newspaper wrote in its editorial, 'Some bands of irreligious, indisciplined ungrateful reckless sepoys having risen in

revolt against the Government, the peaceful people are praying to God for establishment of immediate peace in the country by getting rid of the danger posed by the Mutiny.¹⁴ As early as in the 1850s Bengal held a view different from the rest of India, the upper provinces in particular where the Sepoy Mutiny had taken a serious form.

English education started at the behest of natives looking for opportunities to earn their living but was not confined to this narrow objective. The establishment of the Hindu College and the influence of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio ensured that the liberal ideas of the west along with patriotism and nationalism took roots in Bengal. Derozio was instrumental in setting up the Academic Association at the Hindu College where students used to freely discuss state, society, religion, patriotism, politics, etc., based on common logic which often enough militated against the then prevailing rigid rituals. Orthodox Bengalis who were behind the setting up of the Hindu College were agitated and saw to the ouster of Derozio from the college. Interestingly Derozio considered himself an Indian and wrote poems in English on nationalism. This was 'the earliest instance of a lyrical expression of an emotion of patriotism towards India as the country of one's birth.'¹⁵ Much before Bankim Chandra's sanskritised poem 'Vande Mataram' it was Derozio who had expressed his love for India as his motherland.

Derozio's students became rebels and indulged in drinking and consuming forbidden meat. Rajnarain Bose, father of Indian nationalism according to historian R.C. Majumdar, wrote in his autobiography how they used to assemble near College Square to eat and drink. Some like Madhusudan Dutta even converted to Christianity. But more importantly these elite students despite their rebellion against orthodoxy were instrumental in the development of Bengali literature and also a sense of nationalism. The students of the Hindu College had set up the 'Sarbatatva Dipika Sabha' for the

cultivation of chaste Bengali. Debendranath Tagore was its secretary. Clearly it was Derozio's disciples who lit the lamp of renaissance in Bengal even before Macaulay wrote his treatise. Bengalis did not learn English to become clerks but in order to enrich themselves with modern knowledge which included developing Bengali language and literature as well.

Interestingly Hindu College did not produce students who indulged in blind imitation of the Europeans. In an article read out at the Hindu Literary Society the author commented sarcastically,

The Europeans on coming to this country were so much pained at the misery of the people that they at once set about to remove the same. They imported various kinds of alcoholic drinks – Rum, Gin, Brandy – and other accessories of modern civilization and within a surprisingly short time, managed to civilize this barbarous nation.¹⁶

The students of the college did not hesitate to criticise the British rulers for their lapses. In February 1843, Majumdar noted in his two-volume *History of Modern Bengal*, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee read out an article on the police administration and justice system under the British East India Company in the presence of the principal of the Hindu College D.L. Richardson.¹⁷ The principal objected to the article and called it seditious but he was overruled by the chairman Tarachand Dutta, a student of the college. English education did not create mere pen-pushing clerks in Bengal but free thinkers who excelled both in the liberal arts of Europe and traditional knowledge of India. Clearly the rebels of the Hindu College, such as Madhusudan Dutta, Rajnarain Bose and their other classmates like Iswar Chandra Ghosal, Prasanna Kumar Sen had taken up drinking as a mark of civilisation. They had later become major exponents of

Indian culture. Madhusudan Dutta was the first to use Bengali as a medium for expressing literary flavour. His first drama *Sharmistha* was written in verse and was based on the story of Yayati from the *Mahabharata*. The rebel who even converted to Christianity excelled in writing in his mother tongue based on themes taken from India's glorious past. Bengal thus served as the link between India's past and the most modern European philosophy.

Not that the intelligentsia that emerged from this environment of modern thinking did not have conflicts. An interesting discord was over banning polygamy where Bankim Chandra opposed Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's effort to stop the heinous practice. In fact, even the government was reluctant to enact a law banning such practices fearing that this would impact its control over the natives. When Vidyasagar along with the Maharaja of Burdwan petitioned the government to enact a law banning polygamy, Raja Radhakanta Deb opposed the same. In 1866 when the Bengal government appointed a committee of Europeans and Bengalis to examine the ban on polygamy, all Bengali members barring Vidyasagar opposed it and the issue was buried.

The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was seen by Bengal, busy as it was then with matters pertaining to larger human civilisation, as a threat. Rajnarain Bose had sent his family to Calcutta for their safety. Many Bengali families used to keep boats and other means of transport ready to flee in case sepoys reached their area. For the enlightened in Bengal the mutiny was merely a rebellion of a few thousands of sepoys against the crores who viewed the British rule as beneficial.¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo in a speech delivered on 19 January 1907 at the Bombay National Union said,

Bengal once was drunk with the wine of European civilization and with the purely intellectual teaching that it