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LIMITS OF THE METROPOLE: DECOLONISING THE LOGIC OF THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to question the nineteenth-century Bengal renaissance, which has been canonised as the cradle of colonial modernity in India and probes it as a hegemonizing epistemic project. The historical configuration of power, knowledge and subjectivity suggests that the 'bhadralok' internalised the classificatory logic of colonialism and this is where the root of the distinction between the traditional and the modern rests. The metropolitan rationality devalued the hinterland as backward and dismissed context-specific knowledge. The paper argues for a conceptual shift to de-centre Calcutta and advocates for a plural conception of modernity to fructify the unfinished journey of decoloniality of Bengal.

Keywords: *Metropole, Bengal Rennaissance, Historiography*

Introduction

The nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance has long been canonised as the moment of Indian modernity. Conventional historiography – nationalist, liberal and even Marxist- described this as a moment of rupture from a stagnant, tradition-bound past into a moment of animation fuelled by reason, reform and rational inquiry led by an English-educated intelligentsia (Kopf, 1969; Sarkar, 1983). Western education, Enlightenment rationality, scientific inquiry and liberal political ideals converged in colonial Bengal, which was thus conceptualised as the cradle where modern India was articulated and debated. This space produced a new class of reformers who sought to shun the superstitions and dogmas to remake the Indian society.

This resilient narrative, kept in full display within textbook histories and public commentaries, finds its examples in revered figures like Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidysagar, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, among many others. These figures are invoked as the normative standards of progressive consciousness that negotiated between indigenous life-worlds and Western modernity (Raychaudhuri, 1988). This modernity, however, did not arrive evenly across Bengal – colonial Calcutta, due to its political and economic heft under the Raj, was the first to experience this upheaval and henceforward acted as the site of this modernity, which painted the rest of Bengal as traditional and backward – somewhat lacking (Chakraborty, 2000).

The intended paper attempts to intervene in these debates and re-examines the Bengal Renaissance as an epistemic project consolidating elite rationality. It attempts to understand colonial rationality as a result of the historical configuration of power, knowledge and subjectivity produced within colonial governance. It recognises the contestation and negotiation in and around this project of modernity and argues that the privileging of this modernity has been the reason behind the historical and social Kolkata-centredness of Bengal. It questions the authority of metropolitan rationality and seeks to pluralise the meaning of the modern and the metropolis.

Colonial Calcutta: Authority of the Metropolis

As the seat of the British imperial authority in India until the early twentieth century, Calcutta hosted the institutions of courts, colleges, bureaucratic offices, missionary societies and publishing houses – the institutions that helped to stabilise and reproduce the norms of the colonial rule (Bayly, 1996). The function of these territories went beyond mere governance –it involved buttressing the ambitions of the colonial power, aided by the emerging *bhadralok* middle class.

It can be argued after Foucault (1977) that Calcutta functioned as an epistemic regime – a particular site that authorised and disseminated particular forms of truth. The governmental practices of the colonial regime, like ethnographic surveys, land

revenue settlements and legal codification, made Bengal comprehensible to the foreign dispensation (Cohn, 1996). However, such practices ended up hardening fluid social relations into fixed categories of languages and communities. Identities around caste, religion, occupation, region, etc., were stabilised for the convenience of the colonial government. Such classificatory logics were not imposed solely from above. The logic of the regime was internalised, mediated and translated by the indigenous elite – the English-educated middle class, who held the position of privilege due to their proximity with exercise of colonial power within the colonial society. Through education and bureaucratic employment, the urban and upper caste *bhadralok* accumulated cultural and symbolic capital and became the primary interlocutors of colonial modernity (Bose, 1998).

English was imposed as the language of power – Persian sidelined into obscurity and Bengali, particularly its dialectical and oral forms, into marked irreverence. Certain contemporary accounts describe early graduates of Hindoo College refusing to speak Bengali in public. Bengali was seen as a sign of backwardness (Ray, 1988). This civilizational alignment with the colonial order transformed the metropolis into the normative centre from which the rest of Bengal was measured and found deficient as per the imposed standards of civility, taste, rationality and progress. Defined in Calcutta and projected outwards, these standards painted rural hinterland Bengal not as a coeval space, but as lagging – out of touch with history.

The Moral Economy of Reform and Epistemic Hierarchies

Reason constituted the ideological and ethical centre of the Bengal Renaissance. The practices of Sati, oppression of the widows, absence of education among women, entrenched caste hierarchies and superstition were attempted to be overcome by the agenda of social reform. However, these derogatory practices were not framed only as moral obstacles to progress – they were positioned as hindrances to civilizational uplift (Sarkar, 1997). As a result, this agenda of reform carried the onus of self-fashioning of society, and the *bhadralok* positioned themselves as the harbinger of a modern, rational and superior ideal.

This made the public sphere – the sphere of the colonial government, educational and judicial institutions, and emerging print culture, etc.- markedly different from the private spheres of domesticity, which were guarded and preserved as sites of cultural authenticity. This division between the private and the public spheres indicated the limitations of its claims of being a universally inclusive project (Chatterjee, 1993). The *bhadralok* elite got the opportunity to selectively appropriate the notion of modernity while retaining control over the domestic and social spheres. A few examples of this ambivalence are in order. While Rammohan Roy's espousal of monotheism and vehement opposition against *Sati* critiqued both Hindu superstitions and colonial misrecognition of religions in India, his reliance on scriptural credibility and textual authority over popular and lived practices marginalised popular devotion to a position of flaw (Chatterjee, 1993). The legitimacy of religion became increasingly defined by its concord with Enlightenment reason. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar garnered Sanskritic textual evidence and legal justifications to garner support for his brand of reform. Although this succeeded among upper-caste urban Hindus, it had very little penetration in rural Bengal, i.e. a sphere with distinct caste dynamics, kinship dynamics and labour relations. This made Vidyasagar's efforts spatially limited. The absence of rural widows outside the reformist horizon is a testament to the selective visibility through which the rationality of the Renaissance operated.

This reform naturalised the norms of the elite as the universal values. By drawing on the interventions by Antonio Gramsci (1971), it can be surmised that by framing the reformist interventions as moral necessities, the underlying power relations of the reformist projects were obscured. This rationality, enmeshed with colonial forms of knowledge, was ensconced not just as an ideal but as a disciplinary standard to judge the governed population. Reason and rationality were identified as markers of progress, often in contrast to the categories of irrational superstition and indigenous belief (Cohn, 1996). Such oppositions were instrumental in the production of epistemic hierarchies.

James Scott's (1998) concept of *metis* – experiential and context-specific knowledge- aptly describes what the Renaissance rationality failed to recognise. The privileging of the abstract, the textual and the universal came at the cost of devaluing and denigrating the practical wisdom of quotidian life. Several ethnographies and discourses of reform met at the common ground of condescension towards folk religion and practices such as the worship of *Shitala*, *Manasa* and *Dharmathakur*. These practices were dismissed as identifiers of primitive survival (Chakraborty, 2014). Such a stance failed to recognise the explanatory frameworks these rituals offered to understand the uncertainties embedded in the agrarian life-worlds laced with economic precarity, diseases and ecological vulnerabilities. Such epistemic violences of misrecognition and misrepresentation had obvious material afterlives. Local practices were disrupted by policies manufactured by metropolitan rationality. Such disruptions in education, legal structures or agriculture often were not accompanied by viable alternatives. Yet, the failures of these policies were often attributed to the resistance or backwardness of the rural population – the hinterland, thus, came to be identified as a space of lack with deficits in reason, progress in its march towards the future.

Alternative Temporalities and Everyday Ethics

Mainstream historiography preferred to portray rural Bengal – the spaces of villages, towns, markets, forests and riverine deltas- as spaces of inertia standing in contrast to the dynamism of the metropolis. This differentiation was not just limited to spatial segregation. Following Chakrabarty's (2000) identification of the logic of historicism, it can be argued that the hinterland was conceptualised stuck in an earlier historical stage – awaiting the arrival of modernity from the metropole. Similar to the non-European societies that were given a place in 'the waiting room of history' w.r.t. to the progress in the European civilizations, rural populations were positioned within a similar waiting room – rendered perpetually incomplete and not-yet-modern.

But scrutiny suggests the limitations of such a theorization – rural Bengal was not static. Colonial rule brought in profound changes in land tenure and revenue systems, shifted labour relations and commercialised agriculture, reconfigured village life and generated newer forms of political consciousness and social conflict (Breman, 1996). These newer forms did not always mirror the metropolitan model; however, they were not pre-modern either.

The numerous peasant movements in colonial Bengal and the interplay of power through the capillaries of colonial bureaucracy, landlords and moneylenders fundamentally altered this understanding (Guha, 1983). The peasant rebellions, structured by shared norms, moral expectations and symbolic practices were not merely spontaneous, irrational and pre-political eruptions but acted as collective decisions that attempted to redefine legitimate authority and just conduct. The forced indigo cultivation, imposed through coercive contracts and violence, brought in disruptions to subsistence patterns and deepened peasant indebtedness. Petitions, refusal to sow indigo, collective boycotts, sanctions against planters, withdrawal of services by barbers, washermen and priests were planned steps that constituted the Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 (Banerjee, 1992). Songs, rituals and rumours, bypassing print culture and formal institutions, played instrumental roles in forging solidarity by utilizing oral traditions and everyday interactions. These steps of vernacular modernity were markedly different from pre-modern categories.

Modern systems of governance often tends to standardize abstractions at the expense of local, experience-based understanding. Such attempts at state-simplification blurs the hinterland life-worlds (Scott, 1998). The logic of the Renaissance aligned with this rationality, treating vernacular cosmologies as obstacles to integration. Folk religious practices, rituals surrounding the goddesses encoded with the meanings of ecological vulnerability and communal obligation were often reduced to superstition, denying their pragmatic and ethical relevance (Chakraborty, 2014).

Print culture has often been identified as the infrastructural backbone of a critical public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Anderson, 1983). Beyond the print cultures in the metropolis of Calcutta, cheap presses, lithographs, almanacs were widely circulated in other parts of Bengal and beyond Bengal (Ghosh, 2006; Orsini, 2009). These texts deal with issues like agricultural cycles, health remedies, moral guidance, devotional instructions etc., largely outside the purview of the metropolitan discourse. The acts of often reading them aloud in spaces like markets, homes and religious gatherings blurred the boundaries between orality and textual sanctity. However, the standardization of Bengali prose marginalised dialects and pushed performative forms such as *jatra* and *kirtan* to the peripheries (Pollock, 2006). Such coexistence and persistence of multiple temporalities without collapsing into a single developmental sequence indicates the persistence of the non-modern life-worlds that operated within the heterogeneous time of the nineteenth century (Skaria, 1999).

Conclusion: Decolonising the Renaissance

Postcolonial theory has long argued to examine how colonial power not only shaped political institutions but produced new categories through which history has been produced and reproduced (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). By drawing attention towards popular practice rather than elite consciousness, it has attempted to challenge the traditional conformity of the Renaissance with the liberal, secular and textual norms (Guha, 1983). Often beyond metropolitan intelligibility, the symbols, rituals and moral claims that constitute subalternity are keys to experience-near histories.

Modernity, to be identified solely with the colonial metropolis, runs the risk of historical misrepresentation. The uneven encounters between elite rationality and vernacular knowledge, between rural resilience and metropolitan domination and between the colonial power and the indigenous society undermine the neatness of the single and linear narrative of colonial modernity. Enlightenment rationality and the scientific discourse, far from being value-neutral instruments of progress, were instrumental in creating hierarchies between the metropole and the hinterland. As a result, the Bengal renaissance, despite being enabling in bringing in waves of scientism and reason, succeeded in subordinating the hinterland, culturally and temporally.

Reimagining the future of Bengal requires overcoming the binary of modern/traditional and elite/subaltern. It requires foregrounding vernacular rationalities, plural temporalities and struggles for epistemic sovereignty as tools to arrive at an egalitarian theorisation. By attempting to excavate the hinterland, this paper argues for a plural conception of modernity, which itself is situated within the relations of power, negotiation and resistance. The need to de-center Calcutta does not warrant denying its influence; rather, it involves a methodological shift and theoretical reflexivity. By drawing on postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies, this paper neither denies the metamorphic impact of the Renaissance nor reduces it to mere colonial mimicry. It calls for further excavation of the hinterland alongside the metropolis to enable a more inclusive historiography, which recognises Bengal's modernity as an unfinished project.

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