

Posthuman Renaissance(s) – Becoming Self, Becoming World

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We have titled the second world colloquium on existential posthumanism, posthuman renaissance(s), making self, making world. It is apposite in its location here at the Presidency University, Kolkata, which, as the inscription of names of its alumni exemplifies, may be considered the intellectual and existential hub of what has been called the Bengal Renaissance, a rather obscure term in global discourse, which rises like a ghost from the anticolonial periphery of modern history and makes its shadowy claim in its archives. Though its historicity, its personalities and its material traces may be enumerated, so that it can be named and dismissed as an early chapter in cultural nationalism and in the making of the national bourgeois subject as the imagined normative Indian human, its phenomenology and ideational topography remain hazy.

The European Renaissance itself, adulated as the inception of modernity, of world history, and may we dare say, of the birth of the human as a universal category, is less easy to grasp than what it is seen as from our vantage, in its morphing through several phases of modernity. This rebirth, often thought of as the displacement of authority from transcendent sources of Church dogma to immanent sources of universal rationality, and sometimes equated as a shift from God to the human, hides a variety of historical debates, further complexified and refracted in its entry into non-Western worlds through colonialism. The rebirth of Hellenism, for example, often characterized in terms of the Sophist Protagoras' statement, "Man is the measure of all things," identified simplistically with Aristotle's definition of man as an animal with logos and brought forward in Leonardo da Vinci's image of the Vitruvian Man, fails to note that Protagoras referred to a pluralistic human, which was anathema to Socrates, who spent his whole life debating the Sophists and whose foundation of universal reason was what Aristotle rehearsed in his definition of the human. Again, it is easier to reduce Leonardo to a worshipper of such universal reason in his Vitruvian Man without taking into account the intangible presence of the transcendental in the phenomenological in his notion of sfumato that accounts for the inscrutable quality of his paintings.

The heliocentric order of the Copernican Revolution so repeatedly memorialized as a cornerstone of Truth in the modern age was in fact not unknown in the premodern world, whether in some models of medieval Europe or in India of the Vedic period. For some in the premodern world, it constituted one of two viewpoints on the cosmos, a theocentric and an anthropocentric perspective, both valid as relative frames of reference, but not reduced

to a single Truth. The displacement of God to Reason became fully epistemological in the 18th c., technological in the 19th and political in the 20th centuries, the age of ideologies, yet its character as displacement, not replacement is seldom recognized, the monotheism of a theocratic conception of Abrahamic Religion pursuing it through its changes.

It pursued it through its chapter of colonialism, in the guise of the white man's burden of civilizing the natives. Here the equation of the human with the monotheism of universal reason was assumed but the question was left open as to the relative humanity of natives – a variation that ranged from degree to kind – i.e. from human but in need of civilizing to not quite/not white in Homi Bhabha's formulation and further, to irredeemably inhuman and hence usable, dispensable and disposable.

Kolkata (or Calcutta), the first capital of British economic, epistemological and cultural colonization, apart from those already on the land attracted new natives to its growing precincts. These included those who saw new employment opportunities, but also a breed of adventurers in search not only for new fortunes but drawn to the lure of new lifestyles and new understandings. Many of these came from the lower castes or from families ostracized or of otherwise questionable status in Hindu society. Of course, there were also those who clung to their traditions and social positions while straddling new relational lines for financial prestige. These new settlers learned the conventions of a new form of cultural capital that allowed them to become effective middlemen, indispensable to the British and vying with them for power and prestige. Several of these amassed fortunes and traveled to Europe or sent their sons to England for education. From the 19th c., this class of middlemen, later to be known as bhadralok (or urban gentry) began participating in civic and cultural projects of cultural and educational advantage to the natives. The Presidency University, started in 1817 as Hindu College, is one such project. The cultural life of the Bengali bhadralok found itself negotiating not only between two economies but two systems of existential becoming, ethics and taste, stemming from the dislodgement of doxa and the bifurcation of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. This generated a culture of critique and creativity which is the foundation of the Bengal Renaissance.

To some the Bengal Renaissance is a movement of cultural nationalism which prepares the ground for the political nationalism of the swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905. It prepares the imagined community of the national subject and launches a Bengali modernity. Some see this as equivalent to the formation of the modern subject in the West, an assimilation of native culture to the epistemological ontology and capitalistic teleology of colonial modernity. Epistemological ontology implies the clear division of subject and object, the ontology of property ownership mediated by the social contract. Capitalist teleology implies the progressive marketization of the lifeworld. It is supposed

that this is the inevitable ontology of modernity in different nationalistic flavors. But a closer look at the Bengal Renaissance challenges this view. Like the sfumato of Leonardo's paintings, there is a haziness to hybridity which cannot be reduced to known languages and conceptual forms. New nascent directions are spawned which may or may not propagate through known history and may remain virtual potentia. To detect such potentia we need new conceptual tools. It is my contention that this seminal creative moment in Indian historiography has much to teach us still as we grope our way to the future through the new rising monotheism of the religious nationalism of our times.

I will consider two lines of deeper conceptual attention that have opened up the fertility of the Bengal Renaissance beyond its reduction to a moment in Indian nationalism. One such line comes from the subaltern studies historians, several of whom were products of this university. Though these historians have steered closer to more culturally and economically marginalized voices, several of them have searched out intractable expressions or moments from lives of Bengal Renaissance figures to make their case about alternative histories and epistemologies that challenge inclusion in the archive of world history or enlightenment epistemology. Partha Chatterjee in his consideration of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's comic gestures on classification is among the early subaltern historians to provide an insight in this direction, but more substantial theoretical analyses in this vein come from the watershed work *Provincializing Europe* by Dipesh Chakrabarty and the last major work of Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World History*. These works take subalternity beyond native cultural or economic marginality to ontological intractability to the teleology of ideological historicism, whether of capital, politics or religion and find many of their examples in the cultural practices of the Bengal Renaissance. Guha in his last work draws on Rabindranath Tagore and the Mahabharata to sketch a praxis of existential becoming that stands against the compulsive drive of historicism through a creative and interpretive rebirth of historicity open to one's ongoing locatedness in time and space (i.e. one's historicity). The ontological rebirth of the Bengal Renaissance lay in many cases in just such a creative reinterpretation of the past so as to be reborn into the future; and such a rebirth could not be a proxy national stereotype, a given image of the human but an existential art of co-individuating with one's locatedness, the art of becoming what one could not predict, the art of becoming posthuman.

My other line of consideration comes to us from the philosophy of religion, from the seminal work of Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*. The engagement with religion was a major aspect of the Bengal Renaissance. From a certain viewpoint, secular modernity threatened the pervasive doxa of religiosity in Indian culture and pushed it to a crisis point of discursive emergence in terms set up by modernity. Halbfass, in analyzing this phenomenon, draws on a couple of terms popularized by one of his teachers, Paul Hacker,

the terms Neo-Vedanta and its corollary, inclusivism. If the transcendent monotheism of Abrahamic Religion controlled by the Church displaced itself to the immanence of universal reason as the essence of the human in Enlightenment modernity, the response of the Bengal Renaissance was the sublation of universal reason in the experienceable transcendent of monist nondualism, Advaita Vedanta. This modern use of Advaita Vedanta was given the name Neo-Vedanta by Hacker. In this light it can be seen as an Indian flavor of Abrahamic monotheism; instead of the exclusivism of the Abrahamic variety it rose to its absolute status through inclusivism. Inclusivism pre-empted all difference through sublation or subsumption. One of the founding figures of the Bengal Renaissance (as of the earliest incarnation of the Presidency University, the Hindu College), Raja Rammohun Roy was also among the founders of universalist Neo-Vedanta in the form of the Brahma religion. Halbfass also points to another major religious figure of the Bengal Renaissance (and another alumnus of Presidency College), Swami Vivekananda, as continuing this direction through the Ramakrishna Mission. In reinterpreting the past to be reborn into the present, these figures put to service an oft-repeated line from the Rig Veda, *ekam sat vipra bahudha badanti*, the truth is one, the wise ones speak of it variously.

Halbfass points to the ideological danger of such a metaphysical standpoint. It claims and appropriates in the name of unity. In the Vedic statement, the one becomes privileged, the many voices of the plural wise are erased in its absolution. This indeed is the monotheism of the prevailing Hindu nationalism of India, whose ideological wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad endorses transcendent Advaita Vedanta as the essence of Hinduism and the soul of the nation. However, the Bengal Renaissance's preoccupation with Neo-Vedanta cannot be reduced to this strand, a closer look discloses a wide variety of inflections in the relation of the One and the Many in its engagement with the displaced monotheism of Enlightenment modernity. Rabindranath Tagore, son of one of the successors of Rammohun Roy and a Brahma by birth, lived, practiced and taught a universalism that embraced the One in varied manifestations of nature through an intense power of poetic empathy. He did not sublimate the many in the One, but found the infinite moods of the One in the many, the praxis of a participatory phenomenology. We have already seen the attention Ranajit Guha paid to Tagore in his consideration of the existential praxis of historicity.

Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta, too, may not be as transcendent and negating a nondualism as it seems on the face of it. A contemporary scholar-monk of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Medhananda, has written a book challenging the reduction of Vivekananda to a simplistic Advaita teacher and practitioner. Vivekananda's teacher Ramakrishna practiced and embraced a variety of spiritual paths and came to an ecstatic realization of their spiritual goal without privileging any over another. He stated his own version of the Vedic

tenet in Bengali in the words *Jato mot toto poth*, or there are as many paths as opinions. But are these paths to the One? Is this another statement of the oft-repeated perennial tenet -all rivers flow to the ocean or all paths rise to the mountaintop. In such statements, we return to the inclusivism of Advaita Vedanta – the many rivers are erased once they enter the ocean, the many paths are subsumed in the absoluteness of the mountaintop. However, Swami Medhananda (known earlier as Ayon Maharaj), in his book on Ramakrishna, locates the context of Ramakrishna's statement in his concept of *vijnana*. *Vijnana*, according to Ramakrishna, is the paradoxical self-knowledge of the infinite potential of the One, the state where the One possesses its infinite multiplicity. Ramakrishna offered a variety of parables to explain this state. For our purposes I will describe one of these parables. A man saw a chameleon while returning home. He returned home and told a friend who was visiting I saw a blue lizard on the tree at the bend of the road. The friend said I have seen that lizard, it is brown. The two almost came to blows. They then decided to go together to the tree and beheld a green lizard. They began to wonder whether there were several lizards on the tree or they were both mistaken. At that point, a man came and sat down under the tree. He saw the two and said I live under this tree, I have seen that lizard. It can change its color by will. The two individuals in this parable represent the relative human subject. Each sees the world as its own representation. They can't agree on these representations. The person under the tree represents ideological reason. It arrives at generalities without the full knowledge of the lizard, the infinity of the colors it can take on or how it can become these. The lizard represents *vijnana*, the infinite one which knows its infinity and can deploy the right potential under the right conditions.

Another prominent philosopher and spiritual personality of the Bengal Renaissance, Sri Aurobindo, made this term and its concept his spiritual goal in responding to the problematic of our time. What the Bengal Renaissance encountered was its own version of this problematic – that of radically plural peoples making a single world. In looking for some universal version of this world, we only endorse a fascism, someone's idea of the One, or noone's idea of the One. It is only when we can find the meeting point of the many and the one, where each is known and enjoyed as a radically different horizon of the One without limits, that we participate in the constitution of the infinite One. This brings us to the praxis of posthuman becoming. The art of posthuman becoming is not a narcissism of self-discovery, self-knowledge or becoming self, it is the art of becoming-other. It is the faith in our infinite potential and its ability to be reborn in a new form in every encounter, a form of deep relationality and identity, being co-constituted by the encounter and co-constituting the world in each encounter.