

Sanskritisation of Bengali, Plight of the Margin and the Forgotten Role of Tagore

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It is well known that, after the victory of Lord Clive against Sirajuddaula at the battle of Plassey in 1757, there was an unprecedented reign of loot in Bengal, as the British presided over a drainage of wealth from Bengal. According to one estimate, apart from the “official compensation” to the British army and navy, the members of the Council of the British East India Company received an amount of £ 50,000 to £ 80,000 each, and Clive alone took away £ 234,000 over and above a *jaigir* worth £ 30,000 a year (Smith 473). This apart, most British men carried out a grand loot at individual levels, the extent of which is difficult to imagine. The magnitude of the loot can be estimated from the fact that Govind Chand, the descendant of Mahatab Chand - the Jagat Seth during the battle of Plassey who had a staggering annual income of Rs 26,800,000 in 1765 - was reduced to penury as a result of the loot, and the British rulers granted him a monthly dole of Rs 1200 (Sikdar 986). Needless to say, this grand loot completely destroyed the economic structure of Bengal, which was a prosperous and wealthy kingdom.

However, it often eludes our attention that the arrival of the British not only destroyed the economy of Bengal, but also the language of Bengal, i.e. the Bengali language. It was during the reign of the Muslim Sultans in Bengal that Bengali started to flourish as a vibrant language of the common people in which a number of literary

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works were written. As Dinesh Chandra Sen writes, the ascendance to power of the Muslim rulers in Bengal was the “chief reason” for “such a good fortune” of the Bengali language (Sen 129). Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay also informs us that the Muslim rulers of Bengal showed a keen interest in the development of the Bengali language since the fifteenth century CE, which was a direct result of their love of Bengali (Chattopadhyay 124). This resulted in the birth of the native Bengali culture and literature, liberated from the shackles of Sanskritic school so long in vogue, which in turn gave birth to a popular indigenous culture. Not only were the two epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* translated into Bengali during this time, several original poems were also composed in colloquial Bengali in different parts of Bengal - like *Ram Katha* by Nityananda Acharya in North Bengal, *Chandimangal* by Mukunda Chakrabarty in Medinipur, *Manasamangal* by Narayan Dev in Mymansingh-Kachhar, or *Madhumalati Kavya* by Syed Hamja in central Bengal. Needless to say, each of these works served as major milestones in the growth of popular Bengali literature where the Sanskrit scholars did not dictate and which was enriched by the contributions of those not necessarily trained in Sanskrit scholarship.

But the growth of this popular culture was a threat for the Sanskritic scholars who tried to do everything possible to retard the growth of this popular literature and culture. It is well known, for example that the Sanskritic scholars had cursed that anyone listening to religious texts in Bengali would be condemned to the hell (Bandyopadhyay 56), and Raja Krishnachandra of Krishnanagar, the patron of the Sanskritic scholars, had also issued a dictate prohibiting the reading of the Bengali *Ramayana* written by Krittibas Ojha (Bandyopadhyay 57). Although the journey of the popular Bengali literature and culture flourished for sometime in spite of such threats, the Sanskritic scholars found an ally in the British rulers in the post-Plassey scenario and they quickly grabbed the opportunity. Following the victory at Plassey in 1757, and especially after obtaining the right to raise revenues in 1765, the British government felt the need to impart the knowledge of Bengali to British officers to facilitate their rule. As Ranajit Guha has pointed out, after the independence of the United States of America in 1776 it became necessary for Great Britain to look for other colonies, and hence British economists, including Adam Smith, emphasised the need to curtail the monopoly of the Company in a bid to establish the rule of the British government in India (Guha 34-36). This also compelled the British officers to learn the language of Bengal. With this end in view, the British established the Fort William

College in 1800. It may be recalled that after the foundation of this college, William Carey appointed only the Sanskrit scholars as teachers of Bengali - like Mrityunjoy Tarkalankar, Ramnath Bachaspati or Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay (Roy 6) - who were only too willing to discourage the growth of the popular Bengali literature and culture spread across Bengal, and tried their best to restore the Sanskritic rule over Bengali. It may be worthwhile to mention that - prior to the rule of the British of Bengal - the Bengali language, as spoken by the general people, liberally used Arabic and Persian words, which is evident in the poetry of Bharat Chandra Roy, who proudly defended his use of such words in Bengali.¹ However, following the establishment of the Fort William College, the Sanskritic scholars took great efforts to change the Bengali language into a Sanskritic Bengali, by imparting Sanskritic elements into the language. Sumanta Bandyopadhyay has rightly said that - by doing this - the Sanskritic scholars effectively made the language inaccessible for the common people and thus established the empire of the high-born Hindus in Bengali culture from where everyone else was expelled (Bandyopadhyay 59). Sibnath Sastri has gone on record saying that though such Bengali was dear to the heart of “some people”, it remained incomprehensible to most Bengalis (Sastri *six*). Rabindranath Tagore also observes that the Bengali language that was re-created as per the Sanskrit model at the orders of the foreign rulers was “uneasy” (Tagore Rabindranath *Bangla Shabdatattva* 762). This marked the beginning of the grand schism between formal education and ordinary people of Bengal. It may be recalled that even Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar had advocated in favour of Sanskritisation of Bengali when he wrote in the Draft Reforms of Education of Sanskrit College on 12 April 1852 that those “not well-trained in Sanskrit” would not be able to write “proper Bengali” (Umar 44). Needless to say, it appears a little surprising, because a number of Bengali poems were written in non-Sanskritic and rustic Bengali much before Vidyasagar. This brings to our mind the famous criticism of Vidyasagar made by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay that Vidyasagar has “done harm to Bengali language by using difficult Sanskrit words” (Umar 33).

With this, large sections of Bengali population were left outside the world of formal education, which came to be dominated by aristocrat and upper-caste *bhadroloks*. Not only was the growth of popular Bengali literature stunted, but the Bengali language – reshaped and reoriented towards Sanskrit as it was under the *bhadralok* tutelage – soon lost touch with the ordinary people of the society, especially those who were socially weaker. This was carried out to a further extent when Hindu

College was established in 1817. Pradip Narayan Ghosh, formerly the Vice-Chancellor of Jadavpur University, has brought to our notice the first regulations of Hindu College where it was clearly stated that its aim was to impart education to the high-born Hindu male students (Ghosh 434). With this, the breach between formal education and the common people was complete in Bengal. The breach was further widened with the introduction of abnormally high fees for college education in Bengal. It may be recalled that, as early as 1828, monthly tuition fee at Hindu College was as high as Rs 5, exactly the same as the monthly stipend given to Ramakrishna Paramahansa by Rani Rashmoni more than three decades later (Sarkar 218n).

Needless to say, all these three deterrents - i.e. Sanskritization of Bengali language, opening up of higher education only to the high caste Hindu male students, and exorbitant college fees - made it impossible for the weaker and marginal sections of the Bengali society to enter the arena of higher education in the British-ruled Bengal. It may be argued that the Sanskrit-loving *pundits* and upper caste Hindus of Bengal willy-nilly contributed to the British plan not to educate the common people of Bengal. Narahari Kabiraj has brought to our notice the fact that a section of the British rulers had opined against imparting education to the Indians as that might give birth to a passion for independence (Kabiraj 185). This impelled the British to give education only to those sections of the society which would serve the cause of their empire.

It is true that no less a person than Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had tried to liberate Bengali from the shackles of Sanskrit. He, however, faced some serious roadblocks. It is on record that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar awarded less marks to Bankim Chandra in Senior Division Examination of 1852 at Hooghly College as he did not like Bankim's simple and easy language (Datta 67). We also know that the great Sanskrit scholar Dwarakanath Vidyabhushan had described Bankim's easy and simple Bengali as "impure" and derided it as "শবপোড়া-মড়াদাহের" ভাষা (Bhattacharya 44-45). Later, the cause of the simple and ordinary Bengali was taken over by the greatest of all Bengali writers, Rabindranath Tagore. Not only did he express the hope in his essay *Bangla Bhasha Parichay* in 1938 that a time would come when the ordinary Bengali would dethrone the artificially decked Sanskritised Bengali (Tagore Rabindranath *Bangla Bhasha Parichay* 1032), but he also wrote a letter to Rajsekhar Basu on 11 February 1931 voicing his anguish over the "illogical rule" of Sanskrit grammar over the Bengali language, including the meaningless insistence on যত্নত-

rule in Bengali (Tagore Rabindranath *Bangla Shabdatattva* 782).

Both Bankim and Rabindranath had good reasons to oppose Sanskritisation of Bengali. As we have seen, the chastening of Bengali language with Sanskritic elements had removed the language from the ordinary people of Bengal. Indeed, as Tagore himself reminisces, the Bengali that he learnt in his school was so shockingly artificial that his father deemed it fit to discontinue his Bengali lessons (Tagore Rabindranath *My Reminiscences* 55). One may also recall that in 1897, peeved at Tagore's attempts to introduce Bengali at the Bengal Provincial Conference at Natore, W.C. Bonerjee asked him, "... do you think that your *chasas* and *bhusas* understood your mellifluous Bengali better than our English?" (Tagore Rabindranath *Pitrismriti* 21). The bitter truth therefore remains that the so-called chaste Bengali was out of bounds for the ordinary people of Bengal, confining the so-called mainstream culture of Bengal only to the limits of the *bhadralok* categories.

However, like Bankim, Rabindranath too had to face the tirades of the Sanskritic *pundits* of Bengal for his attempts to liberate Bengali from the Sanskritic rule. In the Falgun 1291 (Bengali era) issue of the Bengali journal *Prabaha*, Mahendranath Roy criticised Tagore for sullyng and corrupting the Bengali language by using colloquial and rustic words (Pal 232). Even as Bankim's Bengali was deemed to be impure, similarly Tagore's non-Sanskritic Bengali was also deemed to be impure by certain Sanskrit-loving people of Bengal. We may recall, for instance, that Kaliprasanna Kavyabisharad had strongly disapproved of Tagore's simple Bengali in his satirical poetic piece *Mithekara*, by deriding his language as শকটচড়া গাড্যারোহণ (Tagore Rabindranath Vol 16 55-56). One also needs to remember that so angry were the Bengali *pundits* with Tagore that in 1914 - barely a year after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature - examinees of the Bengali paper in the Matriculation Examination of the University of Calcutta were asked to rewrite a passage of Rabindranath in "chaste" Bengali, which proves that according to the university teachers Rabindranath's Bengali was not chaste (Kripalani *A Life* 115).

The story of the Tower of Babel in *The Bible* tells us that a group of men attempted to construct a tower tall enough to reach the heaven. Then God became worried over the prospect of mankind challenging his position and hit upon an idea to frustrate the design of the builders: He confused them by scattering their tongues (The Book of Genesis, 11: 6-9). This story is illuminating; if we put aside its religious

overtone, the story tells us that the big and the powerful try to confuse the language of their subjects in order to consolidate their own position. This, undoubtedly, was the ploy adopted by the British in Bengal when they tried to divide the Bengali language into two parts - first, the chaste one for the privileged few who would support the cause of the Raj, and second, the ordinary and the rustic one to be used by the underprivileged masses. It was again Tagore who could see through the game of the British and warned in his address in the Anti Seditious Bill rally at Town Hall in Calcutta in 1898 that the British feared the united force of the Bengalis, for which they had been trying to destroy the unity of the language (Tagore Rabindranath *Raja Praja* 216). We may also argue that, as Frantz Fanon says that “the first step for colonised people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past” (Barry 192), Tagore too sought to bring about a unity among the Bengali-speaking people by trying to rediscover the glorious past of non-Sanskritic Bengali through his attempts at bringing to light folk culture and folk literature of Bengal in his wonderful book *Lok Sahitya*, which was published in 1907, when he broke away from the narrow-minded *Swadeshi* movement of Bengal and instead concentrated upon developing the inner strength of the Bengali people - which he rightly described as *atmasakti*. He rightly understood that if the lower and the weaker sections of the society were left out of the paradigm of education in Bengal, there would be no hope for our meaningful victory over the colonial force.

This brings us to observe that Robert Redfield, in his dissertation paper titled *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*, says that “the great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities” (Burke 50). Rabindranath Tagore, following in the footsteps of his predecessor Bankim, wanted to achieve a union between these two traditions. However, we cannot yet say whether his attempts have succeeded.

Although the Sanskritisation of the Bengali language left large numbers of the so-called weaker and lower sections of people outside the ambit of higher education, it is surprising that not enough critical discourse has taken place on this issue. This, despite the fact that no less a person than Rabindranath himself had taken up the job of reviving the Bengali folk literature, lost under the pressure of Sanskritisation. It is also surprising that we have not paid enough attention to the fact that Rabindranath had launched intense attacks on this process of Sanskritisation. On the other hand, the

literary discourse of the socially weaker and marginal sections of the Bengali population found its voice in the so-called *Battala* literature, which was beyond the control of the Sanskrit-educated high-caste *bhadralok* Bengalis.

Notes

1. মানসিংহ পাতশায় হৈল যে বাণী।
উচিত যে আরবি পারসী হিন্দুস্থানী।
পড়িয়াছি যেই মত বর্ণিবারে পারি।
কিন্তু সে সকল লোকে বুঝিবারী ভারী।
না রবে প্রসাদগুণ না হবে রসাল।
অতএব কহি ভাষা যাবনী মিশাল।

(Goswami 87)

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