

Acharya Brajendra Nath Seal : His Intellectual Insight and Ideas of Universal Humanism

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Abstract: The present paper is intended to highlight Acharya Brajendranath Seal and his philosophy of life with reference to his intellectual insight and ideas of universal humanism. Fact remains that Acharya Seal was a man of great mind and he not only came in touch with various branches of knowledge but also tried to analyze human mind as well as the universe as a whole. He wrote a few books and good number of articles and whatever may be the theme of his works, he proved his worth and was really a typical representative of an Indian mother. At a moment whenever we are concerned with intellectual crises and moral degradation all around, the thoughts of A.B.N. Seal may open a new dimension as to the mental relief we may seek for at this moment. He developed his '*Jivan Darshan*' which propounded '*Manavsamghati*' (Unity of Mankind), and above all professed humanism and spirituality from his scientific insight. A.B.N. Seal was attracted to the philosophical ideas of Raja Rammohun Roy, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Keshav Chandra Sen and so on. At the long last he talked about 'Universal Religion' and the qualities of a Universal Man. For such a scientific temper he has rightly been called the 'Child of Bengal Renaissance' and this is justified when he stood not only for human solidarity but also could declare "I am a man (hence) nothing human is alien to me. I lived in the spirit of these sayings." The entire paper is based on some original documents and contemporary writings available to us related to this man and very likely, it may strike the mind of some people who are not supposed to be alien to the ideas of spiritualism and humanity.

Keywords: Philosophical mind, value and dignity of man, intuitive power, unity of mankind, universal humanism, eternity or salvation, religio-spirituality, intellectual attainments, largeness of heart.

To speak or to write in detail about Acharya Brajendranath Seal is really difficult and particularly in the presence of such an academic gathering of the philosophers, researchers and experts on the field of ideas and thought I do not belong to. Incidentally, we are here in this gathering to pay our homage and respect to Acharya Sir Brajendranath Seal who was born on 3rd September, 1864 and breathed his last on 3rd December, 1938. Obviously this is the year to be treated as the year of 150th birth anniversary of this great man and from different

corners of our country many academics are paying tributes in a befitting manner. Examples of such tributes are not less and how was he counted among the brightest sons of Bengal can be understood in a good number of obituary notes published in many contemporary newspapers and medias immediately after his death. One of them was in the Sunday Statesman dated 4th Decernber,1938 which brought to the notice of the readers in a way that “the death of Sir Brajendranath Seal removes from the Indian philosophy a bright star of imperishable luster. “A typically representative Indian, an outstanding personality in the intellectual world, a man of international reputation, he was closely associated with all aspects of our educational and cultural works. At a time when India is almost at a face of intellectual anarchy, the best of paying our tributes to the memory of the great scholar and a great man would be for the youth of his country to follow his inspiration and to contribute their quota to the intellectual regeneration of this country.”¹ Frankly speaking, some extraordinary terms in this statement may draw our attention and these are ‘A typically representative Indian’, ‘an outstanding personality in the intellectual world, and also the appeal of the writer to the youths of our country to follow his inspiration ‘at a phase of intellectual anarchy’.

It is a fact that at this stage we may not be able to survey and asses the academic achievements of Acharya Seal because it is not only long and diversified but also difficult to bring them in one point. His viewpoints not only speak about a great brain but also give us inspiration of intellectual insight. It may be noted that Acharya Brajendranath Seal seems to have been impressed by a few great personalities of Bengal namely Raja Rammohun Roy, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. He referred to these personalities in various occasions and through his writings he scanned their lives and achievements and particularly the ideologies which attracted him very much. In his views these personalities were to him as not products of the age rather the age was created by them. Acharya Seal was also attracted to them because of their contributions in the intellectual field and above all the idea of universal humanism, propagation of fraternity of men and very significantly the value of humanity above divinity. Incidentally, we may recall here, for example, a lecture he delivered in Mysore on 27th September 1924 on Rammohrm Roy on the occasion of his death anniversary and the caption was Ram Mohun: The Universal Man² and likewise wrote an article on Vivekananda published in the *Prabuddha Bharati* in April, 1907. In those writings Acharya Seal tried to locate the philosophic mind of Rammohun and Swamiji who could develop a powerful ideological force which virtually shapes the

destiny of man. This particular aspect is no doubt interesting but here the focus of the present article would be to highlight his *Jibanbodh* (Perception of life) vis-à-vis life-philosophy (*Jiban Darshan*) of Acharya Seal who was not only a great colourful personality but an event, a phenomenon in the history of awakening in Bengal.

In one of the interviews taken sometime in 1933-34 by Nandagopal Sengupta, a contemporary and close associate of Acharya Seal and in an article Mr Sengupta has given some highlights about the life philosophy of Acharya Seal. It may be noted that bin that sitting Nandagopal Sengupta had quite efficiently provoked Acharya Seal to express his *Jibanbodh* and very clearly noted in the words like “....দর্শন, বিজ্ঞান, সাহিত্য, ও কলাকৃষ্টির মধ্যে গভীর একটি আত্মিক ঐক্যও গড়ে তুলতে হবে। তা না হলে, প্রকৃতির ওপর অসামান্য প্রভুত্ব হাতে পেয়ে প্রেমহীন, বিবেকহীন, সৌন্দর্যবোধহীন মানুষ ত শেষ পর্যন্ত ভয়াবহ দানব হয়ে দাঁড়াবে। অর্থাৎ সবকিছুর সমন্বয়ে গড়ে তুলতে হবে নূতন এক জীবন দর্শন “ (...*darshan, bijñān, sāhitya o kalākristir madhye gobhir ekti atmik aikyao gore tulte hobe. Ta na hale prakritir upon asamanya probhutva hate peye premhin bibekhin saundaryabodhchin manush ta sesh parchanta bhayabaha danab hoye darabe. Arthat sab kichhur samanvaye gare tulte habe notun ek jiban darshan*)³ What Acharya Seal inclined to clarify is perhaps clear to us .It shows that he was deeply concerned about the demonic tendency of a human being and how a man devoid of feeling and conscience turns into a devil. He aspired for a *Manab Sanhati* i.e Unity of all human beings and in that interview with Mr. Sengupta he expressed the definition of his life philosophy and in the version of Mr Sengupta “ ভৌগলিক ও ধর্মীয় পার্থক্য বিমুক্ত বলিষ্ঠ একটি সার্বিক মানব সংহতি চাই, সে জন্যে চাই এক বিশ্ব রাজধানী, আর চাই সর্বধর্ম, সমস্ত সভ্যতা ও সংস্কৃতির নিষ্কর্ষ মন্থিত এক সার্বজনীন মনন ও চিন্তনের প্রেরণা। “ (*bftattgatik o dharmiya parthakya bimukata bolistha ekti sarbik manab sanghati chai se Janye chai ek visva rajdhani, ar chai sab dharma, samasta sabhyata o sanskritir niskarsa manthita ek sarbajanin manan o chintaner prerana.*)^{3a}

From such a realization Acharya Seal seems to have developed his concern about the tendency of the genius of Asia the theme of which he delivered a lecture at the request of Rabindranath Tagore in the opening ceremony of Visva-Bharati held on 23rd December, 1923. In this respect what he exactly presented was “এশিয়ার গেনিউস যুনিভার্সাল হিউম্যানিজমের দিকে, অতএব ভারতের এবং এশিয়ার interest -এ এরূপ একটি যুনিভার্সিটির প্রয়োজন আছে।* (Ashiyar genius universal humanism dike, atae bharater ebong ashiyar interest e erup ekti university prayojan ache)⁴ This background of Acharya Seal may bring us to look into the philosophy that has been reflected in his book of poems titled *The Quest Eternal* or *Shaswata Sandhan* published in 1936. It is said that he has presented the evolution of cultural history of the human society

and this can be clear from the introduction of the book. In the beginning of the book he talks about ancient hymn in which, he believes, Gnosticism and Neo Platonism grew up; According to Acharya Seal this hymn is supposed to be uttered by Greek priest returned from Bactria to his island home and thenceforward he had familiarized himself with Indian mythology, its art and speculation. In this way Indian elements in the Gnostic and Neo-platonic Cosmogonies came into existence. Similarly we come across how he presents the medieval ideal. He could trace the rationalistic movement of the *Motazilas* of the 8th and 9th centuries which in the long run, he argued, developed the concept of *Ikhwanus-Safa* or ‘sincere Brethren’. In the modern ideal he wants to emphasize how humanity can be sought in its simple universality.⁵ Thus *The Quest Eternal* is not only a book of poems but a reflection of an extraordinary quest of a scholar to reflect on his philosophic mind. This may be clear from another part of his conversation with *Nandagopal Sengupta* when the latter asked him as to the philosophic background if any, of the *Quest Eternal*. At this point he (Acharya Seal) could only say that “আমার আমিকে ওর মধ্যে বোধহয় অনেকটাই ব্যক্ত করেছি” (Amar ami ke or madhye bodhhay onektai byakta karechhi)^{5a}. In course of the conversation *Nandagopal Sengupta* also drew his attention about the sole objective of the quest for divine spirit and whether it is for pure Knowledge or God or Eternity or Salvation and that Mr. Sengupta had to ask him that all these matters were beyond his cognizance.^{5b} But he did not give any straight answer to this enquiry but instantly reacted and said “অনুভূতিগুলি এতই সূক্ষ্ম, এতই আনির্বচনীয় যে, তা বুক দিয়েই উপলব্ধি করা যায়, মুখ দিয়ে বলা যায় না।” (“*Anubhatiguli etoi suskha, etoi anirbachaniya je ta buk diyeyi upoalabdhi kora jay, muk diya bole jay na.*)⁶

In this respect his book *Quest Eternal* or *Saswata Sandhan* Essential sticks to a particular theme and it is sabots the existence of God and side by side all the mysteries of this universe which can be realized through intuitive power and there is no place of expression in words. So one can realize the depth of his life philosophy and how he had expressed in many occasions. His splendid aristocracy of thinking, descent taste, and his profound power of reasoning made him really a unique thinker who could identify truth and humanity through prudent analysis.

His own life philosophy has, perhaps, nowhere been reflected other than to attempt to analyze the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna Pramhansa. Incidentally we may refer here to his Presidential address delivered on the accession of the birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna held in Calcutta in March, 1937. This lecture may be considered not only the brilliant analysis

and exposition of Ramakrishna's thought but also the ideology that Acharya Seal ever professed and followed throughout his life. Because whatever significance Acharya Seal could see in the philosophy of Ramakrishna was nothing but feeling of Universal Humanism which bears its relevance all the time and in all circumstances. In the lecture he defined the temperament of Ramakrishna as a marl of composite personality like Raja Rammohun Roy. His studies to search out the ideas and personality of Ramakrishna perhaps prompted him to analyze how Ramakrishna found out the mechanism to contemplate truth from the absolute (i.e. *Nirupadhi*) and negitivated all conditions (i.e. *upadhis*) but from the relative or conditional (i.e. *sopadhi*) point of view he had from mother goddess kali as well as other modes of the deity.⁷ In the opinion of Acharya Seal, Ramakrishna "worshipped the one in all, and the all in one," and Ramakrishna did not see in any contradiction rather a reality of this perception. According to Acharya Seal Ramakrishna had the quality and capability to reconcile *Sakara* and *Nirakara* worship (upasana) and this was due to his realization that one should consider the form of a deity as the manifestation of God himself.

Acharya Seal had also brought the point of *Samadhi* that Ramakrishna developed in the form of 'ecstasies' in the purest form and the meaning of religion vis-à-vis spiritual truths which according to Acharya Seal may be understandable even to a child. Here it is noteworthy to bring to our notice how Brajendranath Seal talked about the ideas of Universal Religion propounded once by Rammohun Roy and followed by Brahmananda Keshab Chandra Sen, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Rabindranath and so on. As a strong believer in Universal Humanism, Acharya Seal has also focused in this lecture many points with reference to Raja Rammohun Roy and specially his thought called Neo-theo-philanthropy i.e. 'a new love of God and man' and here Acharya Seal has found many positive and constructive ideas that Rammohun and his Brahma movement took up to awaken the Indians . In this light it may be striking how Acharya Seal did also present Keshab Chandra Sen and explained the style Keshab Chandra Sen had given the message that, 'it is not that every religion contains truth, but every religion is true.'⁸ Acharya Seal could see here a unique significance in the statement and he clarified "as there are different religions it follows that they convey different aspects of truth. They transcribed not a part but whole of truth each from one fundamental stand point. In this way before going to the details of the thought process of Ramakrishna, Acharya seal had tried to clarify what Keshab Chandra meant for 'Unity of all Religions'. According to Acharya Seal this unity of all religions was to Keshab Chandra 'not the collection of truths

but the unification of truths in one ideal'. This was again what may be called as Rammohun's idea of universalism.¹⁰

Very interestingly Acharya Seal found Ramakrishna's idea something different and he sought this difference in Ramakrishna on two grounds- (a) "he maintained that the practices of each religion with its rituals and discipline give it essence more really and vitally than its theoretical dogmas and creeds; and (b) it is not by selective eclecticism but by syncretism and whole, hearted acceptance of a religion that its full value and worth could be realized and experienced"¹¹

Since A.B.N Seal could realize the ultimate objective of Ramakrishna's philosophic mind and he discovered a truth why Ramakrishna did not support 'Selective extracts' which according to Ramakrishna would spoil the vital element in each religion and its objective. With a support to such an idea of Ramakrishna Acharya Seal explained the notion that Ramakrishna ever propounded "he would be Hindu with the Hindu, a Moslem with the Moslem, a Christian with the Christian in order to experience the whole truth and efficacy of each of these three religions." In this light nobody is entitled to practice different religious disciplines or hold different creeds at one and the same time. Because according to Acharya Seal what Ramakrishna wanted to propagate was that the observances rituals or practices of each religion are organic to it. In this sense a Hindu might accept tentatively the whole creed and ritual of the Christian or a Muslim in order to experience the truth lying in it. In doing that there may be temptation or a biased stand but he must think or do just like an innocent child. Acharya Seal remarks that it was in this process that the Paramhansa passed successfully Pro-Christian and Muslim experiences. If one is to understand the significance of syncretistic idea of Sri Ramakrishna, one should try to realize the logic behind it and this sounds nothing but the message of Sri Ramakrishna-*Jata mat tata path* (As there are faiths and there are paths).

Acharya Seal then came to the point about 'Parliament of Religions' for which the convention was arranged on the occasion of Sri Ramakrishna birth centenary. On this particular point his appeal to the audience through the speech was to form a parliament for man or a federation of world cultures.¹³ In this opportunity his address was also directed for a parliament of religions and the necessity, he stated, because in his words "articles of faiths, creeds and dogmas divide man from man. But we seek in religion a meeting ground of

humanity. What we want is not merely universal religion in its quintessence” but “as Ramakrishna taught the Ultimate Realization of God-in – Man and Man-in-God. Furthermore it appears that what Acharya Seal wanted to convince the meaning of religion and in this respect referring Sri Ramakrishna he pointed out religion is a force that organizes life and activities. In this sense the meaning of parliament of religions he meant was to reinvigorate the approach of a new order. In his words “the personal life which has hitherto been the centre of development, must make room for larger personalities, such as the masses, the community and the age and all this must consciously regulate humanity.”¹⁴ In fact by the conception of parliament of man or federation of world cultures he visualized a progressive evolution of humanity where one can find man in the universe and universe in man.¹⁵

This particular life philosophy of Acharya Seal seems to have inspired him to search for ‘the life universal in the personal life’ In order to pursue this life he prescribed four cherished goals namely (A) *Dana* (gift), (B) *Priyabachan* (pleasant words), (C) *Lokahita* (public welfare) and (D) *Samanatharta* (cooperation towards a common end). He laid emphasis on these cooperation towards a common end and in this respect he wrote “কেবল মৈত্রী, করুণা, মুদিতা বা উপেক্ষায় চলিবে না, তাহাও স্বতন্ত্র কর্তৃত্ববোধ ছাড়িয়া উঠে নাই, বিশ্বাত্মার বিশ্বজীবনের (Life Universal) সতি একীভূত হইতে পারে নাই। তাই সমানার্থতা চাই; সকলে একার্থ হইয়া একাসনে বসিয়া একপ্রাণে এক ধ্যাণে বিশ্বমানবের মুক্তি সাধন করাই একমাত্র সাধনা।” (*kebal maitreyi, karuna, mudita ba upekshaya choliba na, tahao swatantra kartritva bodh chharaiya uthe nai, vishvatmar visva jibaner (life universal) sahit ekibhuta haite pare nai. Tai samanarthata chai: sakale ekartha haiya ekasane basiya ekprane ekadhyane visva manabe mukti sadhan karai ekmatro sadhan.*)¹⁶

In this way Acharya Seal wanted to explore a *tatva* that is ‘Fundamental Truth’ for the solution of various problems surrounding the life of man. According to him here lies the conception of ‘infinite knowledge’ (*paramtatva*) which is no doubt significant to understand the life philosophy of Acharya Seal.¹⁷ He believed that the subject matter of this world has no end and our sense organs namely eyes, ears, nose do not work in one point. They bring to our knowledge all the mundane objects in different forms according to its attributes. All these things, Seal believed come to us in parts but in actual sense these are all inseparable. In course of writing a short article titled *Brahmatatva Purnatatva* he referred the *brihadaranyaka Sruti* and wrote “আপাতত যাহা বহুরূপে প্রতীত হইতেছে, মূলে তাহা বহু নহে। যাহা খণ্ড খণ্ড বলিয়া দেখা যাইতেছে, মূলে তাহা অখণ্ড। যাহা অপূর্ণ বোধ হইতেছে তাহা পূর্ণ। ব্রহ্মই সেই এক, সেই অখণ্ড, সেই পূর্ণ বস্তু বা পূর্ণ তত্ত্ব। চক্ষুকর্ণাদি জ্ঞানেন্দ্রিয় সকল সেই পূর্ণবস্তুরই বিবিধ ও বহুমুখি প্রকাশ মাত্র। এই জন্য ইহারা ব্রহ্মেরই নিদর্শন। সেই ব্রহ্মকে, সেই পূর্ণতত্ত্বকেই ইহারা প্রকাশ ও

প্রতিষ্ঠিত করে, কেবল মাত্র আংশিক বা খণ্ডবস্তুকে প্রকাশ করে না।” (*apatata jaya bahurupe pratita hoytiche, mule taha bahu noye. Jaya Khanda Khanda boliye kekha jaiteche, mule taha purna. Brahma sei ek, sei akhanda, sei purna bastu ba purna tatva, chakhukarnadi gyananendriya sakal sei purnabasturai bibidha o bahumakhi prakash matra. Ei janya ehara brahmarai nidarshan, sei brahmake, sei purnatatva kei eihara prakash o pratistita kare, kebal matra angshik ba khanda ke prakash kare na.*)^{17a} Acharya Seal by this realization perhaps wanted to establish a logic that the cardinal substance behind each existence is the existence of Brahma and that Brahma or the soul exists among each human being and every creation. In another occasions¹⁸ he pointed out the defective side of emotion and in order to become more realistic he laid emphasize on a ‘strong critical faculty’ which will virtually create ‘searching enquiry to realize the motion of the age, truth of the universe and a self introspection to find out the means of solution of the problems of all men of this world.

From the above, Brajendranath Seal has rightly been called a ‘Child of the Bengal Renaissance’.¹⁹ The Bengal Renaissance was a search for a new image of India which also proved to be a social force to reassess our Indian heritage afresh despite the prevailing *Shastric* insanitation were obstacles to progress, and, therefore, it emphasized on rational reinterpretations. Being fully aware of the situation of Bengal as well as the socio-cultural crisis of contemporary India, Acharya Seal with his uncommon ability to see his time, place and people in their unfolding perspective, he started popularizing a value-based social order not like a technical philosopher but as a social reformer. It is likely that he was much more influenced by the science of his time and naturally emphasized reason and objectivity. This rationalist attitude brought him nearer to the life philosophy of Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. He thus talked about ‘human solidarity’ and also investigated the issues that threatened this solidarity. His efforts were also to explore the deep spiritual foundation of Indian culture. Such religio-spirituality he believed, may give Indian culture a distinct transcendental term exceeding all material or earthly life values. In this circumstances Acharya Brajendranath Sal could write in his unpublished autobiography that “I have taken all knowledge for my province..... I am a man nothing human is alien to me. I lived in the spirit of these saying”.²⁰

Notes and References

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3. Nandagopal Sengupta, *Smaraniyader Sânnidhya*, (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1391 (BS), p.19. 3a. loc. Cit.
4. Sunil Bandyopadhyay, *Bajendra Nath Seal Ebong Annanya* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1984, p.85.
5. Brajendranath Seal, *Quest Eternal*, London, 1936, pp. VII-VIII. 5a. Nandagopal Sengupta, op cit, p.21. 5b. Loc. Cit. In original Bengali version it has been written as “আমি প্রশ্ন করলাম, মানবাত্মার অনুসন্ধান কি লক্ষ্যে পৌঁছানোর জন্যে, তা কি শুদ্ধ জ্ঞান, না ঈশ্বর, না আত্মতত্ত্ব, না নির্বাণ, ঠিক বুঝিনি বইটি পড়ে।”
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17. *Bangla Rachana* , p.94.
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19. Sunil Bandyopadhyay, Op. cit, p.76.
20. Sunil Bandyopadhyay, Op. cit, p.77.