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Harish Chandra Mukherjee and the *Hindu Patriot*: the Diffusion of Liberal Democratic Ideas in Bengal in the Mid-nineteenth Century
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Abstract

The nineteenth century Bengal during the period between 1850s and 1880s witnessed rapid growth of political consciousness, the diffusion of national sentiment and the epoch of constitutional agitation. The hitherto political movements of the Indians did not go beyond the demands for social, civic and administrative reforms in favour of securing more rights for the Indians, but gradually demands for more space and power in the governance in terms of democratic representation in the offices and councils were raised with distinct liberal and democratic outlook. The significant factors responsible for such remarkable awakening were: the establishment of some renowned political associations including British India Association (1852), Indian League (1875), Indian Association (1876); the Revolt of 1857, revolts against Indigo Planters (1859-60), transfer of power from East India Company to British Crown (1858), birth of some fear-less newspapers and journals like Hindu Patriot (1853), Somprakash (1858), Amrita Bazar Patrika (1868), Aryadarshan (1878), Kalpadrum etc., Ilbert Bill controversy (1883), National Conference (1883-1885), and the birth of Indian National Congress (1885). As a result of these three decades of unrest though under the big banner of nationalism a vivid and sustained ambience for the growth of constitutional and liberal democracy was developed through the illustrious thoughts and activities of some liberal thinkers like Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan, Harish Chandra Mukherjee, Lalmohan Ghose, Manmohan Ghose, Surendranath Banerjee, Woomesh Chandra Banerjee, Jogendranath Vidyabhusan and Sisir Kumar Ghosh. But unfortunately, most of these liberal activists, especially Harish Chandra Mukherjee, suffered an undeserved neglect in the contemporary literature of the Bengal Renaissance and modernity. This article tents to examine the role of Harish Chandra Mukherjee and his Hindu Patriot in the making of political consciousness and the advent of liberal democratic school in Bengal in the latter half of nineteenth century.

Key Words: *Hindu Patriot, Liberal Democracy, Nineteenth Century, National democratic school, Political consciousness.*

In the conceptual genealogy of liberalism in the second half of nineteenth century, perhaps the most significant contribution was made by Harish Chandra Mukherjee (1824-1861), the turbulent editor of *Hindu Patriot*. His fiery pen, especially during the rebellious days of the Revolt of 1857 and Indigo Revolt of late 1850s earned him the title of “a terror to the bureaucracy as well as to white colonialists and planters in Bengal” (Moitra, 1993: 126). It was Girish Chandra Ghosh who started an English weekly ‘*Bengal Recorder*’ in 1849 and renamed it as ‘*Hindu Pattiot*’ in 1853. Harish Chandra took the charge of *Hindu Patriot* during 1856-57 and soon Harish Chandra through his remarkable journalism imbibed with a keen sense of national sentiment, not only made *Hindu Patriot* as the mouthpiece of the oppressed peasants but also made it as the first national newspaper of India.

The existing writings on Harish Chandra have condemned him from some points. For example Chittabrata Palit (1980: 137) criticized his *Hindu Patriot* as “a mouth piece of the landlords” and also dubbed him the “errand boy recruited by them from inferior ranks for their purpose”. Mohit Moitra in his *A History of Indian Journalism* (1993: 116), condemned him for bearing a keen ‘soft corner’ for the alien rulers. Dr. Biman Behari Majumdar’s *History of Indian social and Political Ideas* (1967: 94), has also criticized Harish Chandra’s stand on the Permanent Settlement which had been regarded by him as “the most powerful bond which will unite Hindustan to Britain”.

Nonetheless, the remarkable role of Harish Chandra can hardly be undermined in the history of the rise and growth of nationalistic patriotic consciousness as well as liberal democratic conditions in the early second half of nineteenth century Bengal. The basic problem connected to the existing literatures is that most of the scholars have projected Harish Chandra from some certain pre-disposition which have hardly explored him properly. Despite the book *Selections from the Writings of Harish Chandra Mukherjee* by N. C. Sengupta, which has tended to recall Harish Chandra through his newspaper, it is really unfortunate enough that he had not been explored to the extent he deserved in the contemporary works on nineteenth century. Even scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Binoy Ghosh, Sibnath Shastri, Sushobhan Sarkar and Subrata Dasgupta who have worked in detail on nineteenth century Bengal renaissance, have surprisingly overlooked¹ Harish Chandra and his *Hindu Patriot* in their books.

A staunch journalist as well as liberal modernist Harish Chandra bore almost all the indispensable features of modern liberal democracy such as, raising questions and criticizing freely against a despotic authority, arguing for the defense of equality and most of all acknowledging and ascribing most importance on public opinion in governance. He fearlessly raised questions against various arbitrary policies of Lord Dalhousie. Harish Chandra opposed Dalhousie’s policy of annexation and confiscation of different provinces of India like Nagpur and Jhansi. Considering the policy as ‘foolish’ he attributed it as “the source of discontent in the country”, which prepared the ground for the Great Revolt of 1857 (Moitra, 1993: 129). Under the Caption “the Confiscation of Jhansi” he wrote—

“Lord Dalhousie is determined to shame the devil and beat even Nicholas hollow in the matter of forcible appropriation of neighboring states without the shadow of a pretext to colour his grasping policy An Indian Governor General is chartered to destroy dynasties with a scratch of his quill and the cry of the injured is smothered in the din of the roaring waters that separate him from the land of Liberty.” (Hindu Patriot, May 18, 1854: 2).

Such an anti-colonial roar against a despotic ruler is one of the many he penned through the columns of his paper, which not only created a sharp liberal public opinion but also created an incisive popular national aspiration in contemporary society. It gave the most incisive impetus in kindling up the lit of political consciousness through the constitutional battle against authority. Being an active member of the British Indian Association² he assisted Digambar Mitra in drafting the petition it sent to the British Parliament on the occasion of the renewal of Charter Act in 1853, complaining against the misrule of East India Company and demanded to make arrangements for the inclusion of eligible Indians into the higher posts and constitutional rights of the natives (Majumdar R.C., 1971: 283). The petition was emphatic against the perilous act of the Union of executive power with the Legislative and urged for establishment of a legislature not only composed of distinct persons but also of those who possess a popular character representing the sentiments of the people. When the new Legislative Council was opened under the caption “The New Legislature Council” Harish Chandra wrote:

“The new Council differs little in constitution from the one which hitherto exercised the functions of Legislation in this country... The British Indian Association, as our readers are already aware, have moved the Governor General to take into consideration, amongst other matters connected with the formation of the new Council, the propriety of its debates being carried on with open doors and allowing parties considering themselves likely to be injured by the proposed law... The Chief defect in a Legislature constituted like the one which is now to give laws to the people of India is its total exclusion of popular element.”(Hindu Patriot, May 25, 1854: 2-3).

On the demand of inclusion of Indians in the legislative Council to represent popular sentiment he, on June 29, 1854, which suggested that Prasanna Kumar Tagore should be appointed to the post of clerk Assistant to the Council which would help the members in understanding native aspirations and sentiments in a better way. Such a sound advocacy for the establishment of public opinion especially in cases connected to public interest reveals his liberal democratic mind which, it may be argued, even made him stand against any form of codification of the penal laws (Civil and Criminal)³ (Majumdar, 1967: 94). In an article entitled as “on the Penal Code” Harish Chandra argued, “Codification can only succeed under despotism, and codified law is always inimical to public liberty” (*Hindu Patriot*, January 29, 1857: 1-2). Again, his zeal for public opinion, political liberty and constitutional liberalism made him argue for the recognition of right to self-determination and when, after the ruthless suppression of the Revolt of 1857 the British Parliament was

making arrangements for the transfer of India from East India Company to the British Crown he vigorously argued for the restoration of public opinion through the following argument:

“Can a revolution in the Indian Government be authorized by parliament without consulting the wishes of the vast millions of men for whose benefit it is proposed to be made? The reply must be in the negative.....The time has nearly come when all Indian questions must be solved by Indian. The mutinies have made patent to the English public what must be the effects of politics in which the native is allowed no voice. (Hindu Patriot, April 22, 1858: 4)

Besides ascribing most importance on the public opinion of the governed Harish Chandra, unlike contemporary newspapers, both the vernaculars and the English as well as contemporary political modernizers who even attributed the Queen’s Proclamation (1858) as “the Magna Carta of India”, magniloquently raised question, “where is the guarantee that the promises, though coming out of the Queen, will be honored?” (Quoted in Moitra, 1993: 132). Being a pure liberal he ascribed most importance on the ideal relation between government and the governed. Therefore, he condemned the British Government for breaching repeatedly the promises, which, to him was the primary cause of discontent among the Indians.

During the unrest days of the Revolt of 1857 and Indigo-revolt the *Hindu Patriot* became the month-piece of million oppressed Indians. Simultaneously, it took the most crucial role in bridging the rival stances of rebellions and the British authority as a mediator (Sanyal, 1976, 68) The Revolt of 1857 which broke out on 10th May of the year as an inevitable reaction of ruthless torture and wide discriminations, eventually from the very beginning drew the sympathy of the country and after ten days on 21st May Harish Chandra, in his paper for the first time among the oriental print media raised question, “How slight the hold the British Government has acquired upon the affection of its Indian subjects events of the past few weeks have shown. It is no longer a mutiny but a rebellion.”(*Hindu Patriot*, 21 May, 1857: 3)

Harish Chandra, in an era when the existence of a newspaper entirely depended on the allegiance and support it gave to the alien ruler maintained autonomous, impartial and liberal role as a journalist. Even when some Anglo-Indians, some English newspapers and some conservative vernacular papers deliberately advised the Government to dispossess all the land holding classes in India of their lands and made them over to Europeans and the proposal of making extensive English colonization was sedately put forth, Harish Chandra fearlessly and impartially maintained an exemplary balance by criticizing the atrocities of the British as well as, by trying to open the eyes of the enlightened British public to the reality of discriminations and ruthless oppressions in the name of civilized and liberal governance. Acknowledging this liberal and democratic Ramgopal Sanyal (1976: 69) has rightly observed:

“The Mutiny may have inflicted upon this country a thousand losses but it has done some good to it as well. The Proclamation of 1858 which stands as an

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imperishable monument of the large heartedness of a conquering nation towards the conquered would not have been promulgated so soon but for this execrable rising and responsible journalism."

Moreover, one of the most indispensable features of modern liberal democracy is to uphold the ideal of secularism or religious tolerance and in this respect Harish Chandra's attempt must be acknowledged. During the trial of Bahadur Shah, the last of the Mughal kings, the Advocate General of the Government accused⁴ the Mahamedden press and tried to describe this 'national' upsurge with a communal colour. But Harish Chandra vehemently criticized the role of the British Advocate General as well as the contemporary English Press. Instead of addressing it a 'religious war' Harish Chandra wrote, "the nation had been roused and thoroughly prepared for revolution" (*Hindu Patriot*, August 25, 1857: 3). It is noteworthy that he anticipated the British trick of pouring estrangement into the hearts of Indians through a religious communal sentiment and, by using such terms like 'nation' and 'revolution' he tried to integrate a national public opinion as well as tended to diffuse the ideal of liberal democracy, i. e. secularism in an extra-ordinary way.

Like Rammohun Roy he was a staunch supporter of the freedom of press. When a host of contemporary papers continuously expressed sympathy to the rebellions, Lord Canning⁵ who was succeeding Lord Dalhousie accused them of provoking the people to rise in revolt by pouring into their hearts a sense of sedition through misrepresenting the fact in a sedulous, clever and artful way. On this 'The Public Press in India', Home Department in its resolution published:

"The Governor General in Council has read extracts from certain native newspapers published in Calcutta, in which falsehoods are uttered and facts grossly perverted for seditious purposes, the objects and intentions of the Government are misrepresented, the Government itself is vituperated, and endeavours are made to excite discontent and hatred towards the minds of its native subjects" (The Parliamentary Papers, 12 June, 1857) (Bhattacharyya, 2012: 232-33).

Arguing this Canning enacted a legislation known as the 'Gagging Act of 1857' which prohibited the keeping and using printing presses without a license from the Government, the violation of which empowered the Government to seize and confiscate the press (Mahfadullah, 1984: 138). Harish Chandra radically opposed such despotic legislation but all went in vain. Needless to say, the main object of the Gagging Act was to put impediments to the free traffic of ideas. As a consequence soon a good number of newspapers such as *Bengal Harukuru*, *Doorbin*, *Sultan-ul-Akbar*, *Samsad Sudhabarshan*, and *Hindu Intelligencer* were seized to publish (Moitra, 1993: 117-120).

When the 'Sepoy Mutiny' (the Revolt of 1857) was suppressed huge atrocities and mass murder were committed in the name of trial under Martial Law and some of the English owned papers took horribly malicious role by encouraging the butchery in the name of retribution. The Rev. James Long in his report of Calcutta press criticized those English

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Papers as “The English newspapers in too many cases cherish the spirit of antagonism of race” (Quoted in Moitra, 1993: 119). When the British army ruthlessly burnt the villages Harish Chandra (*Hindu Patriot*, September 17, 1857:1-2) wrote, “It would be paltry justice to set fire to entire villages and massacre innocent men, women and children.... The Martial Law is a mockery of law and is justifiable only under peculiar circumstances.”

Such an anti-British absolutist stance of Harish Chandra, it may be argued, reveals that he intended to expose the hypocrisy of the so-called British rulers who claimed themselves liberal but suppressed the free ideas arbitrarily. Moreover, through his vigorous journalism he took remarkable role in diffusing a liberal democratic ambience as well as a patriotic and nationalistic consciousness. On June 14, 1861 at an age of mere thirty seven he suffered a premature demise but left a remarkable legacy of activists imbibed with liberal democratic spirit, which had been rightly acknowledged by Girish Chandra Ghosh in his memory through the column of *Mookherjee’s Magazine* (June 16, 1861: 16) where he wrote, “We had only recently learnt the value of political liberty....Harish Chandra Mukherjee was the soul of this movement.”

Notes:

1. In his *Black Hole of Empire*, Partha Chatterjee and in his *Awakening: the story of Bengal Renaissance* and *The Bengal Renaissance: From Rammohun to Rabindranath* Subrata Dasgupta though presented detailed account of Nineteenth Century Bengal have neglected Harish Chandra and his *Hindu Patriot*. (See, Chatterjee, 2013, Dasgupta, 2011 and Dasgupta 2007.)
2. For details on British Indian Association see Majumdar, 1965.
3. It is important to note that Raja Rammohun Roy had pleaded for the codification of civil and criminal laws but Harish Chandra opposed it.
4. Addressing it as a religious war the Advocate General of the government accused: “If we now take a retrospective view of the various circumstances which we have been able to elicit during our extended inquiries, we shall perceive how exclusively the *Mohameddans* are attached to it.” (for further details see Moitra, 1993: 117)
5. Lord Canning said, “I doubt whether it is fully understood or known to what audacious extent sedition has been poured into the hearts of the native population of India within the last few weeks under the guise of intelligence supplied to them by the native newspapers. It has been done sedulously, cleverly, artfully. Facts have been grossly misrepresented—so grossly that, with educated and informed minds, the very extravagance of the misrepresentation must compel discredit.... (Quoted in Mahfadullah, 1984: 138-39)

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- 3.Hindu Patriot, May 18, 1854, Calcutta.
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- 7.Mookherjee Magazine, June 16, 1861, Calcutta.
- 8.The Parliamentary Papers, Public Press in India, Fort William, Home Department, June 12, 1857 in Bhattacharyya A., *The Revolt of 1857 and Bengal: Selections From Contemporary Newspapers*, Papyrus, Calcutta.