

Revisiting the Bengal Renaissance: A Critique

Presented by Mahmudul Hasan Turjoy (ID: 24116002)
Based on a paper by Samanta [Samanta, 2008].

BRAC University

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Main Argument

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The so-called *Bengal Renaissance* was **not a revival** of ancient Indian ideas. Rather it was a **new birth** — a **modernizing**, Western-influenced movement, **paradoxical** in nature and **confined** to the elite and privileged classes.

A Nascence, Not a Renaissance

- Looked outward to the West rather than recovering ancient Indian thought.
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Examples

- **Rammohun Roy** opposed establishment of Sanskrit college; calling it dry and irrelevant.
- **Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar**, though a Sanskrit scholar, was radically Western in his reform ideas.

An Elite Movement, Not a Mass Movement

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Examples

- "Brahmoism is not for the masses." - **Tapan Raychaudhuri**.
- **Young Bengal Movement**, led by Henri Louis Vivian Derozio, stayed within college students, called Derozians.
- The movement did not significantly penetrate rural or working-class life.

The Real Critique: A Colonial Paradox

- The Bengal Renaissance was a byproduct of British imperialism — the colonizer's education, economy, and administration created the very class that later questioned it.
- Thus, modernization and domination grew together — the empire's exploitation gave rise to India's awakening.
- This contradiction made the movement inherently paradoxical: born within subjugation, yet striving for intellectual freedom.

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Examples

- **Raja Rammohun Roy** welcomed English education as essential for progress, even under British rule.
- **Dwarkanath Tagore** cooperated with colonial industry, yet his ventures strengthened the new Indian middle class.
- **Young Bengal** used Western rationalism to denounce both Hindu orthodoxy and British hypocrisy.

Conclusion: The Hybrid Legacy

- The Bengal Renaissance was **not a pure revival** but a **hybrid birth** — Western in method, Indian in aspiration.
 - Its achievements lay in creating the **modern Indian consciousness**, though it never resolved its internal contradictions.
 - The same Western ideals that enlightened Bengal also deepened its dependence — producing both nationalism and cultural ambivalence.

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