

## Brajendra Nath Seal – a sesquicentenary birth anniversary tribute

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*Rajatantrapravina Acharya Brajendra Nath Seal was the greatest savant and polymath of the 20th century. As the whole body of human knowledge was known to him, he could approach a subject matter from the standpoint of totality and examine its relation to other subjects to get a fuller understanding of its place in the world's widest canvas. He was a seeker of truth and believer in universal humanism. This essay embraces a brief account of this forgotten genius – a scholar who elevated and exposed brilliantly the cultural heritage of India, its philosophy, science, history, religion and civilization. His magnum opus 'Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus', epic 'The Quest Eternal', and other works remain yet to be critically analysed and studied, and so is the man.*

Brajendra Nath Seal contributed articles related to the mechanical, physical and chemical theories of the ancient Hindus and other topics in Prafulla Chandra Ray's book *History of Hindu Chemistry* (1911). Ray wrote in his autobiography: 'I was also fortunate in securing co-operation of Dr Brajendranath Seal whose encyclopaedic knowledge was equal to the task of contributing the section devoted to the atomic theory of the ancient Hindus.' This portion was subsequently recast and enlarged by the learned author into a volume entitled *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus*. Brajendranath also gifted his unpublished manuscripts on 'Physical sciences and scientific notions of the Hindus', to Benoy Kumar Sarkar to get the matter included in Sarkar's book *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology* (1914).

Brajendranath later included both the above matters in his book *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* (1915). In its preface he wrote:

'My direct aim in the present work is to furnish the historians of the special sciences with the new material which will serve to widen the scope of their survey. The Hindus no less than the Greeks have shared in the work of constructing scientific concepts and methods in the investigation of physical phenomena as well as of building up a body of positive knowledge which has been applied to industrial technique; and Hindu scientific ideas and methodology (e.g. the inductive method or methods of algebraic analysis) have deeply influenced the course of the natural philosophy in Asia – in the East as well as the West – in China and Japan, as well as in the Saracen Empire. A comparative estimate of Greek and

Hindu science may now be undertaken with some measure of success – and finality.'

This publication gives a brilliant analytical-synoptic account of history and philosophy of science developed in ancient India.

Brajendra Nath Seal was born on 3 September 1864 in Kolkata. His father Mahendranath was a learned person and eminent lawyer of the Calcutta High Court. The untimely death of Brajendranath's father was a severe blow to the family because his mother Radharani Devi had died earlier. He along with elder brother Rajendranath and two sisters took shelter in their maternal uncle's house. Their suffering further aggravated due to the death of their maternal grandfather. In order to get rid of the worst woe, Rajendranath sacrificed his studies and took to service to support the family. And this decision helped Brajendranath to continue his studies!

After completing 'Pathshala' course, Brajendranath joined the infant department of the General Assembly's Institution, Calcutta. His expertise in mathematics was well known in his school days. It was here that he learned the English alphabets. He passed Entrance Examination of the University of Calcutta in 1878 securing First Division. Then he was admitted into the College Department of the same Institution (now Scottish Church College).

Brajendranath's quest for knowledge was eternal, his memory astonishing, intelligence glittering, having superfine analytical and synthetic mind. One day as a first-year student, he approached Principal William Hastie to seek his permission to lend a book of high standard meant for postgraduate students and

research scholars. The Principal was initially hesitant to comply, but on Brajendranath's repeated request had to yield. He returned the book after four days. The curious Principal wanted to test the knowledge of his pupil. He asked some pertinent questions and Brajendranath's answers were amazingly accurate. He embraced his pupil and said: 'one day you will shine as a great genius in the world'.

It was a coincidence that Narendranath Dutta (later known as Swami Vivekananda) was a fellow student of that college. At the request of Sister Nivedita, Brajendranath wrote an article on Vivekananda, which was published in *Prabuddha Bharat* in 1907. This article reveals the depth of knowledge, independent thinking and intellectual flair of both Brajendranath and Narendranath during their college days.

After giving enchanting description of Vivekananda, Brajendranath described his restless mental arena: 'I gave him a course of readings in Shelley. Shelley's Hymn to the spirit of Intellectual Beauty, his pantheism of impersonal love and his vision of a glorified millennial humanity moved him as the arguments of the philosophers had failed to move him... I spoke to him now of higher unity than Shelley had conceived, the unity of Para Brahman as the Universal Reason. My own position at that time sought to fuse into one, three essential elements, the pure monoism of the Vedanta, the dialectics of the Absolute idea of Hegel and the gospel of Equality, Liberty and Fraternity of the French Revolution. The principle of individuation was with me the principle of Evil. The Universal Reason was all in all, Nature, life, history being the progressive unfolding of the Absolute idea. All ethical, social and political creeds and principles were to be tested

by their conformity to Pure Reason. The element of feeling appeared to me merely pathological, a disturbance of sanity and order. How to overcome the resistance of matter, of individuality and of unreason, to the manifestation of the Pure Reason was the great problem of life and society, of education and legislation. I also held with the ardor of a young inexperienced visionary that the deliverance of the race from the bondage of unreason would come about through a new revolutionary polity of which the watchwords were Equality, Liberty and Fraternity.’ This writing manifests glimpses of superior mental faculty of Brajendranath in those youthful days.

Brajendranath obtained First Division in FA examination in 1880 and graduated with First Class Honours in 1883. He was then appointed as a Professor in the same college, a unique event in the academic life of our country. An interesting incident happened during his study. His mathematics professor wanted Brajendranath to appear at the M.A. examination in mathematics and the Principal wanted him to appear in philosophy. During this subject-jugglery between his two teachers, Brajendranath was busy on the studies of biology and anthropology in the museum. Ultimately, he chose philosophy and obtained First Class in 1884, being the only successful candidate.

In 1884, Brajendranath married Indumati, the eldest daughter of Joygopal Rakshit of Assam. She was conversant with the poems of Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and others. She used to discuss the sense and essence of their poems with her husband. A great tragedy struck the family when she died at the age of only 28, leaving behind three sons and one daughter, the youngest son having died at infancy.

### Service life

Brajendranath joined the City College in Kolkata as a professor of English at the age of 20. The next year he moved to Nagpur as a professor in Morris Memorial College and later becoming its Principal, the youngest in the country. In 1887, he came to Berhampur (West Bengal) as the Principal of the Krishnanath College. In 1897, Maharaja of Coochbehar offered him the post of Principal of the Victoria College, which Brajendranath accepted. He served here till 1912 (this college is now named Acharya Brojendra

Nath Seal College). Here he made all-round developments in teaching, administration, organization and education as a whole. During his fruitful 15 years here, Brajendranath attended many national and international conferences.

Brajendranath attended the International Congress of Orientalists at Rome in 1899, where he presented four papers. He emphasized on many new ideas on universal culture which were hitherto unknown to the Western scholars. The other three papers presented were: The taste of truth, Hindu as a founder of social and jurisprudence, and Evolution of religions in India (ancient, medieval and modern). He quoted extensively passages from Sanskrit texts. This conference brought great glory to India through Brajendranath’s scholarly presentation of the truth of Indian philosophy. Thus his name and fame spread throughout Europe.

Brajendranath inaugurated the first Universal Race Congress held in London in 1911. He expressed his views on the relative importance of physical and chemical anthropology. Emphasis was laid on the need for harmonizing the claims of physical anthropology with its geographical zones of ethnic culture. Towards the end he said:

‘Nationalism is only a halting stage in the onward march of Humanity. Nationalism, Imperialism, Federationism are world-building forces, working often unconsciously, and in apparent strife towards “the one far-off divine event” a realised Universal Humanity with an organic and organised constitution, superintending as a *primum mobile* the movements of subordinate members of the World-system, each within its own sphere and orbit. Respecting each National Personality, and each scheme of National values and ideals, Universal Humanity will regulate the conflict of Nations and National Ideals and Values on the immutable foundation of Justice, which is but the conscious formulation of the fundamental bio-sociological law: that every National Personality (like every individual personality in the Nation) has a right to the realisation of its own ideal ends, satisfaction and values within the limits imposed by the similar rights of others (individualistic Justice), and also a right to co-partnership and co-operation for the common good

and common advantage (socialistic Justice), within the limits imposed....’

In 1911, a new Chair named King George V, Professor of Mental and Moral Science was established in the University of Calcutta, and Brajendranath became its first occupant. He remained here from 1913 to 1920. He was involved deeply in various aspects of activities related to the academic regulation and reformation of the University since his Coochbehar period. In 1906 the University formed a committee for framing the regulations of which Brajendranath was one of the members. He was also involved in the review of arrangements for postgraduate teaching in the University. A committee was constituted in 1917 to investigate the problems associated with the University and formulation of the recommendations, the President of which was Michael E. Sadler, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds, UK. The members of the committee toured throughout India, visited most of the educational centres, colleges, schools and presented a monumental report in 1919. Several volumes of this report contain writings from the pen of Brajendranath Seal which are of permanent value.

In 1921, Brajendranath accepted the Vice-Chancellor post of Mysore University and remained there till 1930, when ill-health forced him to retire. It may be mentioned that the post was first offered to Michael Sadler, who recommended the name of Brajendranath stating: ‘I know of no one in respect of the range and depth of scholarship and originality of mind who can be equal to Dr B. N. Seal either in the East or in the West.’

Brajendranath during his tenure not only nurtured, developed and elevated the academic standard of the University but was also instrumental in shaping the administrative, constitutional and economic set-up of the State of Mysore. Maharaja Sri Jaya Chamaraja Wadiar Bahadur of Mysore, in his presidential address at the Birth Centenary Celebration of Brajendranath Seal, summarized his activities:

‘From the moment he set foot on the soil of Mysore Dr. Seal wholeheartedly associated himself with the administration of the University in particular and Mysore in general ... Dr Seal’s stay in Mysore enabled him to

make a study of the land and its people and the more he studied its people the more affectionate did he become towards them. Its villages fascinated him, its towns and cities occupied his attention and its arts and architecture fascinated him. This love and admiration of Mysore made him say once to a learned Society: "In its language and literature, its arts and tradition, its ethnic types and historical dynasties, Mysore has solved or tried to solve the problem of the fusion of North and South, of West and East, always the central problem for the history of the Indian people and cultures".

In spite of ill health Brajendranath worked hard on the activities of the University and the State of Mysore. And in effect he suffered paralytic stroke. He had to retire and settle in Calcutta.

Brajendranath was awarded Knighthood in 1926, and Mysore's Rajatantrapravina in 1930 for his outstanding contributions. Earlier, the University of Calcutta awarded him PhD in 1910 for his thesis 'Mechanical, physical and chemical theories of ancient India', and honorary D Sc degree in 1921. Brajendranath studied extensively many languages like Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian and other European languages along with their cultures. He also had a deep study in many Indian languages.

### His works

Brajendranath published his magnum opus *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* in 1915. He was the first 'scholar to furnish evidence about the positive method followed by the ancient Indian philosophers in their formulation of concepts relating to the investigation of physical phenomenon'. He also provided the contributions of the Jain and the Buddhist philosophers. Togetherness of science and philosophy is well known. In the words of Brajendranath, 'Philosophy in its rise and development is necessarily governed by the body of positive (scientific) knowledge preceding or accompanying it'.

The pioneering work of Brajendranath and Prafulla Chandra Ray influenced Indian scholars to form a Board on the study of history of science in India under the umbrella of the Indian National Science Academy in 1950. Subsequently, a

scholarly book *A Concise History of Science in India* was published in 1971. The Academy also publishes monographs along with a periodical *Indian Journal of History of Science*. It may be mentioned that Brajendranath's *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* still needs to be critically analysed and comprehensively investigated in the light of the contemporary findings and knowledge.

Brajendranath's epic *The Quest Eternal* is a pure poetry which seeks to transcribe basic philosophical ideas embracing the events and time of human civilization in lyrical form. According to the author, 'the first two poems were complete in their present form in 1893'. Some say that part of the composition dates as early as 1882. The work aims at being a varsical summary of philosophical outlooks, ancient, medieval and modern. He succeeded in creating a number of artistic situations and clear-cut characters, and these are well-calculated to furnish poetic delights to the readers such as care to ignore or forget the history of philosophical ideas.

The content of Brajendranath's book *Comparative Studies in Vaishnavism and Christianity* (1899) was based on his lectures delivered at the Orientalist Conference at Rome in 1899. His research and discussion related to philosophy of historic and historic-comparative method was comprehensive and concise. He 'catered many new ideas to the European as much as Asiatic scholars for their rethinking on Universal Culture and to re-estimate the values of culture which they use to hold in view of their old, begot theories'.

In the preface of the book *New Essays in Criticism* (1903), Brajendranath expressed his objective as 'to exhibit genetic method as applied to literary criticism from the philosophic-historical, the comparative and the psychological points of view'. Among others, the essays 'The neo-romantic movement in literature: a paper on the philosophy and history of art', and 'The neo-romantic movement in Bengali literature', which were originally published in *The Calcutta Review* in 1890-91, have been included in the publication. The writings manifest the author's encyclopaedic knowledge and his intellectual flair, analytical acumen and synthetic brilliance. Brajendranath was a great exponent of comparative literature, and may be regarded as a pioneer in comparative study to that effect.

Brajendranath's publication *Race Origins: Fundamental Considerations Touching the Physical Basis of Race* (1911) is based on an essay which he presented in the first Universal Race Congress. *Syllabus of Indian Philosophy* (1924) reflects a total picture of ancient Indian philosophy. Those who want to study philosophy-literature may find a variety in this syllabus. Other publications of Brajendranath include *Memoir on the Coefficient of Numbers* (1891), *The Equation of Digits: Being an Elementary Application of a Principle of Numerical Grouping to the Solution of the Numerical Equations*, and *The Gita: A Synthetic Interpretation*.

Brajendranath studied animal psychology, child psychology and abnormal psychology. He researched in experimental psychology, then a newly developed subject. He was the founder of the science of statistics in India. He was involved in finding out the age of the Earth with the help of geology and archeology. To him science and philosophy include a synthetic and correlated whole.

Brajendranath was very much influenced by Rammohun Roy and Devendranath Tagore and made several studies on their life and works. He was also greatly influenced by Rabindranath Tagore, and in 1891, for the first time, he exposed the works of Tagore and other Bengali authors to the Western scholars. Rabindranath invited Brajendranath to preside over the foundation ceremony of Vishva Bharati in 1921.

Once Brajendranath wrote: 'A Scaliger once exclaimed, - "I have taken all knowledge for my province", Another and a finer, the first of humanist declared, - "I am a man, nothing human is alien to me". I lived in the spirit of these sayings'. Such a daring declaration could be stated by the one and only Brajendranath.

This great sage of modern India breathed his last on 3 December 1938.

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