

## ACHARYA BRAJENDRA NATH SEAL: THE IDEA OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION

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### Abstract

This paper is intended to focus on the unique Philosophical thought of Acharya Brajendra Nath Seal. Here, in this paper, we would like to highlight on the idea of Universal Humanism as advocated by Acharya Seal. 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 was very much influenced by the Philosophical ideas of Raja Rammohun Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa Dev, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Keshav Ch.Sen, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and so on. 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. Acharya Seal, being a great humanist Philosopher, talked about 'Universal religion' and the qualities of a universal man. He tried to make a dividing line between 'human being' and 'being human'. Concept of Humanism generally emphasizes on the value and agency of human beings, individually as well as collectively. It actually refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress in every field like social, political, and moral and so on. Acharya Seal practiced this kind of humanistic thoughts throughout his life. For such a scientific temper, he, in true sense, has been called a "child of Bengal Renaissance". The entire paper is based on searching value and dignity of mankind from Seal's writings.

**Key Words:** Humanism, Philosophical mind, value and dignity of man, universal humanism, salvation, unity of mankind, largeness of heart.



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### SECTION -I

Acharya Brajendranath Seal was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1864 and breathed his last on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1938. He was a famous Bengali Indian philosopher who believed in humanism. Seal was a great thinker and as a philosopher, he used to believe in the right to differ, criticize and think afresh. Unfortunately Seal's works have not been given proper attention by Indian academicians. Seal was one of the believer and supporter of the Brahma samaj. He tried to regulate the humanistic approach of the Brahma philosophical thought. As a student of Philosophy at the General Assembly's Institution (now Scottish Church College,

Kolkata), he became attracted to Brahmo theology. And along with his class mate and friend Narendranath Dutta, the future Swami Vivekananda, he regularly attended meetings of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Later on they would part ways .While Dutta found his own religious movement, the Ramakrishna Mission, Seal staying on as an initiated member of Brahmo samaj. During this period, both Seal and Dutta came across by the writings on faith, progress and spiritual insight in the works of J.S.Mill, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Hegel. Acharya Seal also seems to have been impressed by a few great personalities of Bengal namely Raja Rammohun Roy, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. He tried to follow their lives and ideologies through his writings. Acharya Seal was also attracted to them because of their contributions in the intellectual field and above all the idea of universal humanism, universal religion, propagation of fraternity of men and very significantly the value of humanity above divinity.

Seal on several occasions speaks of Cosmic Humanism which is not at all antagonistic to science. As we told earlier that Seal was influenced by Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa , according to him , Ramakrishna represents a form of Cosmic Humanism, where spiritual discipline ( sadhana) is being seen as a stepping stone towards the final realization of ‘ God-in –Man and Man-in-God’. Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings, according to Seal, consist of “syncretic practice of religion by being a Hindu with the Hindu, a Muslim with the Muslim, Christian with the Christian and a Universalist with the Universalist”. (1938:9). About Sri Ramakrishna’s syncretism, Seal has said that “the Paramhansa would experience each cult and religion in its totality or as one whole experience. Ramakrishna was a cosmic humanist in religion and not a mere nationalist. He gave the impulse initiative to universal human and this must be completed in our age”. Seal considers religion in a broader sense as different from religions ‘in the concrete’. According to Seal, Humanism is greater idea than nationalism. It is, for Seal, a force that ‘organizes life and life’s activities’. ....All cultures and in fact, all concepts are dominated by the idea of religion’. (Presidential address of the birth centenary of Ramakrishna published in the Prabuddha Bharata,1937:170). . Seal considered his first meeting with Ramakrishna as a “thrilling experience of saintliness”. This lecture may be considered not only as the brilliant analysis and exposition of Ramakrishna’s thought but also as the ideology that Acharya Seal always professed and followed throughout his life. This is because whatever significance Acharya Seal could see in the philosophy of Ramakrishna was nothing but a feeling of the kind of Universal Humanism which bears its relevance for all the

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time and in all circumstances. In the opinion of Acharya Seal, Ramakrishna “worshipped the one in all, and the all in one” and Ramakrishna did not see any contradiction rather he found a reality of this perception. According to Acharya Seal what Ramakrishna wanted to propagate was that the observances of 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. Acharya Seal remarks that it was in this process that the Paramhansa passed successfully the Pro-Christian and Muslim experiences. If one is to understand the significance of syncretic idea of Sri Ramakrishna one should try to realize the logic behind it. The idea of Sri Ramakrishna echoes the message of *Jata mat tata path* (As there are faiths, so are there paths). This, perhaps, is the true essence or the true reflection of universal religion.

In another essay in the series of Cosmic Humanism is “An early stage of Vivekananda’s Mental Development.” This essay narrates the first hand understanding and an eye-witness account of Narendranath Dutta’s attitude as a young and keen student of Vedanta and Hegel, as well as the spiritual transformation of him due to the influence of his master, Sri Ramakrishna to emerge as Swami Vivekananda of later day. He considered Narendranath as a free, a creative thinker and a person of dominating intelligence. Here it is also necessary to bring to our notice how Brajendranath Seal talked about the idea of Universal Religion propounded once by Rammohun Roy and followed by Brahmananda Keshab Chandra Sen, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. As a believer in Universal Humanism, Acharya Seal has also focused in this lecture on many points with special reference to Raja Rammohun Roy and specially on his thought-pattern called ‘Neotheophilanthropy’ i.e. a new love of God and man. Here Acharya Seal found many positive and constructive ideas that Rammohun and his Brahma movement had taken up to awaken the Indians. In this light it may be striking to note how Acharya Seal also presented Keshab Chandra Sen and explained the style Keshab Chandra Sen had followed in giving the message that, ‘it is not that every religion contains truth, but every religion is true.’ Acharya Seal could see here a unique significance in the statement and he clarified it thus: “... 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 by ‘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

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in one ideal'. This was again what may be called as Rammohun's idea of universalism. Seal was an advocate of humanism based on science. And here Seal is on the same footing with Bertrand Russell, Eddington and A.N. Whitehead. Like them, Seal thought that this kind of Humanism will liberate man from the dominance of the old creeds and dogmas. Seal is fond of synthetic and universalistic point of view. He speaks of the Cosmic Humanism, and believes that it will be the future of humanity at large. Cosmic humanism or secular humanism rejects and denies all kind of religious dogma and superstition. It advocates that human beings are capable of being ethical, just and moral without believing in so-called religion devoid of reason. Though Seal himself, as a philosopher, seems to be a dedicated advocate of reason and science in life, Seal cautions us about the blindness of admitting science as a whole of life. According to him, the concept of new humanism will make us free from our total and blind obedience to scripture. It is undeniable that the greatest bondage is the slavery of thought, and therefore, for our betterment, we are to enjoy freedom in ideas. What is reasonable must be accepted and what is unreasonable must be rejected as an ideal, according to Seal. Naturally Seal's idea and line of thinking, we can see, is very much up to the mark and appropriate for modern generation. If one studies Seal's work thoroughly, may find some way out to the confusions of now a day.

The particular aspect of the philosophy of life 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 cooperation towards a common end. In this way Acharya Seal wanted to explore a 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 philosophy of life of Acharya Seal. He believed that the subject matter of this world has no end and our sense organs 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". Acharya Seal by this realization perhaps wanted to establish a truth that the cardinal substance behind each existence is the existence of Brahma and that the Brahma or the Soul exists in each human being and every creation. On another occasion, he pointed out the defective side of emotion and in order to become more realistic he laid emphasis on a 'strong critical faculty' which will virtually create an urge to realize the motion of the age,

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truth of the universe and a self introspection to find out the means of solution of the problems of all men of this world.

## SECTION –II

Now let us concentrate deeply on some of the writings of Acharya Seal to understand the philosophy of universal humanism of him. Interview taken by Nandogopal Sengupta , a contemporary and close associate of Acharya Seal, the life philosophy ( *Jiban Darshan*) comes out. Seal was deeply concerned about the demonic tendency of 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. He aspired for a non-religious, secular, universal thought for human beings irrespective of specific civilization and culture. From such a realization Acharya Seal seems to have developed his concern about the tendency of the genius of Asia. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1921, being invited by Rabindranath Tagore, Seal went to Shantiniketan and presided over the first meeting of Visva- Bharati Parishad. What he said there is a masterpiece of social Philosophy for a dignified world. Very often, we see, mere scholarship creates discrimination. But Acharya Seal was an exception. He was interested to see the inner rhythm of the kingdom of learning with his inner eye. As a visionary, Seal said: “ *each can realize himself only by helping others as a whole to realize themselves---others can realize themselves by helping each individual to realize himself.*”

In 1899, Seal was invited as the representative of India, in Oriental Conference held at Rome. In that International Conference the theme of Seal’s lecture was ‘Comparative Studies in Vaishnavism and Christianity with an Examination of the Mahabharata Legend about Narada’s Pilgrimage to Svetadvipa and an Introduction on the Historico-Comparative Method’. It is perhaps the first philosophical approach by any Indian in modern language what we call today inter-religious dialogue. He has stressed on the fundamental spiritual unity between two religions on the basis of love, in spite of the outward differences. For Seal, religion of love creates a bridge among human beings of different religions instead of creating difference, discord and unrest. It is one of the wonderful experiments to show how philosophy and sociology of religion can meet at a certain point. The question of superiority and inferiority among religions is irrelevant and are creations of priest-craft and politics in guise of spirituality. The goal of all religions is to establish the bond of love among human beings and welfare of the world. There is no conflict between pure spirituality and pure reason. Pure reason helps us to reconcile the conflicting views of religion and also helps us to get rid of superstitions in guise of religion. From this view point of Seal, we can also notice

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the mark of social value and the flavor of Humanism. We are, no doubt, very much sure that how far Seal's idea of universal humanism is applicable and wanted in today's disturbed socio-political situation. Seal's approach to inter-religious understanding through an examination of Christianity and Vaishnavism deserves our attention for protecting humanity from the danger of communalism, racism and bloodbath in the name of religion. Seal has taught us that religion teaches love and not hatred. This small treatise needs special attention of researchers in Philosophy and social sciences.

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. In the modern ideal he wants to emphasize how humanity can be sought in its simple universality. 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. Seal's only book of poems '*The Eternal Quest*' was published in 1936, two years before his death. According to Benoy Kumar Sarkar, it "bids fare to be appraised as such by students of poetry and philosophy. His book *Quest Eternal* or *Saswata Sandhan* 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. 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. Originality, depth, and richness of information-all three qualities simultaneously characterize Seal's writings. In today's academic activities-either in philosophy or in the history of science in India, Seal's contribution remains forgotten. We take this as a golden opportunity for us to pay homage to Acharya Seal here, on this prestigious platform. He has not explicated his philosophical ideas in any comprehensive written form. But we are to gather a rough idea of his philosophical thought from his lectures, poems and conversation with others.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that Brajendranath Seal has rightly been called a child of the Bengal Renaissance. Being fully aware of the situation of Bengal as well as the socio-cultural crisis of contemporary India, Acharya Seal with his unusual ability to see his time, place and people in their unfolding perspectives, he started popularizing a value based social order not like a technical philosopher but as a social reformer. It is likely that he was more influenced by the science of his time, hence he naturally emphasized reason and objectivity. This rationalist attitude brought him nearer to the philosophy of life of Raja

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Rammohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. He thus talked about human solidarity and also explored the issues that threatened this solidarity. His efforts were to bring to the fore the deep spiritual foundation of Indian culture. Such religio-spirituality he believed, may give Indian culture a distinct transcendental form exceeding all material or earthly life-values. This is why Acharya Brajendranath Seal could write in his unpublished autobiography: "I have taken all knowledge for my purpose .... I am a man; [hence] nothing human is alien to me. I lived in the spirit of these sayings.

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