

THE MAKING OF A PENMAN

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Abstract

The family is not only the foundation, but also the determining element of all social organizations. Family history has become a distinct and acknowledged field of historical inquiry. French historical demographers such as Louis Henry and the *Annales* group and on the other hand Cambridge historian Peter Laslett point out that a family reconstitution technique would provide an enduring basis for family history. An intelligent member of the concerned family can elevate oneself through relationships with one's individual family members of a larger family cycle. U.S. historian Tamara Hareven identifies the family as an active agent to change the motives of the member. Families use their familial and kin resources to deal with their own needs and objectives. The role of family in the development and shaping of the life-course of an individual cannot be denied. These kinds of trends had been seen in Bengal from mid-nineteenth to twentieth century. During this time Bengal had been symbolized by her remarkable political integration, intellectual activity which influenced intellectual, religious, social and political life. Most of the families along with societies of Bengal had been charmed through indigenous atmosphere and also western phenomenon. The young English educated people of Bengal were emphasizing on western culture overmuch. During this period, the well-known Dutt family of Rambagan in Calcutta had played an important role in the society. R.C. Dutt was born in this family, who appeared for the I.C.S. examination and is known as Economic nationalist historian, novelist and author of our ancient past. Here I am going to seek how much the family and society played a crucial role in making R. C. Dutt a historian.

Keywords : Rambagan, Jogesh Chandra, R.C. Dutt, *Dutt Family Album*, Toru Dutt, Aru Dutt.

Role of family :

The family has always taken crucial role in creating an iconic or remarkable figure in the society. The Dutt family of Rambagan, for

example, was one of the well-known aristocratic family in Calcutta. The members of this family were the product of the colonial era. They were known for their wealth and literary achievements. Maximum members of this family were talented and devoted themselves largely to literary pursuits. Many of the members held high security jobs under the British rule. This family produced two generations of writers of English verse. The first generation consisting of Nilmoni Dutt (the founder of Dutt family, born 3rd January 1757), Rasomoy Dutt, Govin Chandra (1828-84), Hur Chandra (1831-1901), Greece Chandra (1833-92), Shoshee Chandra (1824-86); and the second generation consisting of Romesh Chandra Dutt (1848-1909) and his cousin Toru Dutta (1856-77), Aru Dutt. Both generations were highly popular, intellectual and well-to-do middle class of contemporary society in Calcutta.

During the time of R. C. Dutt, English education had already been dispersed and imbibed in the various family of the society of Bengal. The family, which Nilmoni Dutt founded, produced some remarkable men and women, well-known in contemporary society for their culture and learning, who were among the first and most distinguished persons to absorb in themselves the impact of English education. One such was Rasamoy Dutt, son of Nilmoni Dutt. Writing about him, R.C. Dutt has mentioned, 'He had a splendid collection of English books in his day...Rasamoy Dutt's life marks a transition in Hindu society, under English influence.' (Dutt *Builder* 5)

Rasamoy Dutt's son Govin Chandra and his nephew Soshee Chandra carried these traits. R.C. Dutt had witnessed these moral activities of his family members. In 1870 the *Dutt Family Album* was published from London. It is a collection of poems written by the members of the family, chiefly imitative in style and form of the British Romantics. Toru's father Govin Chandra and a cousin Omesh C. Dutt contributed the largest number of verses to the *Album* and received the well-deserved compliment of a favourable review in the *Blackwoods Magazine* in England.

During the time of publication of the *Album*, R.C. Dutt was present in England to prepare for the I.C.S examination. Dutt was influenced by this work. He was also inspired by the writing of cousin Aru and Toru Dutt, daughter of Govin Chandra. Toru's main works, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876), was rendering in English of the French lyrics of the romantic school, regarding which the well-known critic, Edmund Gosse mentioned, 'If modern French literature were

entirely lost, it might not be found impossible to reconstruct a great number of poems from the Indian version.’(Dutt, *Builder* 6) The *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindusthan* (published posthumously in 1882) and other poems earned equal praise from Edmund Gosse. It was precise that Dutt, in his earlier life, wanted to get some response from the western world. Later on, he started writing for representing the native and nation towards the west. In history writing, he criticized the colonial empire basically on drain of wealth, economic decline, railways, irrigation system etc.

After the death of his father Isan Chandra, R.C. Dutt was placed under the guardianship of Soshee Chandra. R.C. Dutt observed very closely the achievements of his uncles. According to the *Indian Echo*, ‘the success of Soshee Chandra Dutt as a writer lay in the extreme ease and felicity of his style, directness of narrative, brilliant anecdote, quiet humour, and chaste sentiment.’ These kinds of remarks invigorate R.C. Dutt.

The path of R.C. Dutt to make himself a civil servant (1871-1897), writer, author, novelist and of course a historian would not be so easy if he had not got support from his elder brother, Jogesh Chandra (born 1847). He was deeply attached to Jogesh Chandra. Two were brought up together and remained life-long friends. Correspondence between the two brothers was maintained throughout their lives, so much so that this correspondence went beyond their personal relationship, thus helping Dutt develop his views on several important matters and indeed on his outlook on life. Dutt’s first publication *Three Years in Europe* (1871) had not only showed his acute power of observation and vast knowledge, but also depicts his deep concern for the poor and the lowly, and also his patriotic yearning to transplant the best of Europe in his home soil. The ways of thinking of R.C. Dutt was transmuted from his eldest brother Jogesh Chandra.

So, the family had taken major step to enrich R.C. Dutt in various fields. The first generation of the students of *Hindu College* (founded in 1817) produced their intellectual views and wove it into the pattern of Indian life. Soshee Chandra, Govin Chandra was the product of this College. Most of them tried to show that our country possessed potential to be compared with the West and besides, they also criticized our conservative attitude and so-called unreasoning social and religious practice. Dutt acquired these ideas from his family.

Role of society :

Society is crucial medium for making the character of the masses. The mid-nineteenth century was remarkable, as political integration and intellectual activity penetrated India, through Bengal, and then spread throughout the century thus influencing its intellectual, religious, social and ultimately its political life. There had been European colonization in earlier centuries. The event called the Battle of Plassey in 1757 helped the British colonizers to establish their power first in Bengal and then all over India. Through it, this country came into direct and intensive contact with the West. Around the port of Hooghly was the present city Kolkata that grew up as the main centre of the English East India Company in the mid eighteenth century. Therefore the first impact of western education and culture spread over those areas in early nineteenth century.

R.C. Dutt was the product of mid-nineteenth century Bengal when English education through British colonization tried to break the unreasoning conservativeness and orthodoxy of Indian society. In 19th century, Bengal was recognized for its intellectual endeavour and spirit of rationalism. The situation resembled 18th and early phase of 19th century Europe, which generated the ideas of decolonization through the *War of Independence in America of 1783*, shattered the old ideas through the *French Revolution of 1789*, spread the ideas of republicanism through *July Revolution of 1830* etc. Those ideas were brought to Bengal and subsequently India by the British Indian administrators. Then the change followed in society and politics as happened in Europe. In college life (*Hindu College*) Dutt learned about these and think differently.

It is true that there emerged respectively traditional intellectual figures (like Raja Rammohun Ray) and religious groups (like kortavojas, Baloramie etc.) in 19th century Bengal. (Dey 2) Hence they launched their war against some of the obnoxious Hindu customs and practices prevalent in Bengal, a splendid intellectual movement that turned the tide of Indian history to a new direction. (Mukhopadhyay 1) Vidyasagar's extensive programme of social reform covered many fields, the most important among which were the foundation of Bengali prose, advancement of education especially for female, and widow re-marriage. By the help of them, the mid nineteenth century's middle class culture had undergone growth of catholicity, secularism and rationalism; and some of them like Aksayakumar Datta were well-versed in mathematics, astronomy, physical science and German language. Dutt was inspired by them and he used the social troubles in his writing and novels and introduced the path of solutions. Dutt was

too close to Bankim Chandra, Iswar Chandra, Sivanath Sastri and other distinguished figures, and proximity with these personalities inspired R.C. Dutt to think like them. Translation of *Rig Veda* into Bengali by R.C. Dutt was the inspiration of Sivanath Sastri.

English educated native peoples of 19th Century desired to write in English language, but later on some of them changed their mind and sweep on writings in vernacular language. Initially, Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) decided to write in English language and he says,

I acknowledge to you, and I need not blush to do so—that I love the language of the Anglo-Saxon. Yes—I love the language—the glorious language of the Anglo-Saxon. My imagination visions forth before me the language of the Anglo-Saxon in all its radical beauty; and I feel silenced and abashed.
(Mehrotra 53)

After the book entitled *Dutt Family Album* (1870) was published which was written by members of Dutt family, Bankimchandra, in the introductory article of the first issue of his magazine *Bangadarshan* (1872), had remarked that there was one outstanding barrier to the writing of Bengali by educated Bengalis. Educated people did not want or wish to read, write Bengali. Bankimchandra himself had written his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), in English, but later on he realized there had been a short of gap for Bengali writings and he stated his wish to write in vernacular language. Often R.C. Dutt met with Bankimchandra who came to the press in Bhabanipur for *Bangadarshan*. One day Bankimchandra said to Mr. Dutt about his interest in Bengali language and suggested the latter to write in Bengali language. The conversation between them was as follows,

‘Write in Bengali! But I hardly know the Bengali style.’ ‘Style!’ rejoined Bankimchandra, ‘whatever a culture man like you will write will be style. If you have the gift in you, style will come of itself.’ (Mehrotra, *An Illustrated* 54)

This was a memorable episode in the life of Mr. Dutt, and from that day he turned to Bengali literature. Dutt wanted to enrich the Bengali language. Jogesh Chandra was his inspiration and Dutt had always taken suggestions from his elder brother to stick to his path. Conversation between them through letters on the aspects of service and personal life was carried on. In a letter in 1877, Mr. Dutt says, ‘My own mother tongue must be my line, and before I die I hope to leave

what will enrich the language and will continue to please my countrymen after I die.' (Gupta 68)

The subsequent historic shift which Madhusudan made from English to Bengali was symbolic of the changes that took place in Bengal. The later half of the century witnessed the birth of nationalism--so much so that nationalism signified a pride in and awareness of indigenous culture and tradition. The intellectual and well-to-do middle class in Calcutta, which had spoken English in preference to Bengali, and had found its cultural standards and modes of behaviour in the literature and manners of the West, now turned, with Bankim Chandra and Ishwarchandra, towards the Bengali language and a Bengali identity instead.

On these perspectives, R.C. Dutt started to write various articles and novels in Bengali, some of which are *Bangabijete* (1874), *Madhabi kankon* (1877), *Maharashtra Jibon Provat* (1878), *Rajput Jibon Sandha* (1879), *Samaj* (1886), and *Sansar* (1894). Mr. Dutt not only acquired an honour as successful administrator or civil servant but was also noted for demonstrating his love for his mother tongue. After appearing in ICS Examination, Mr. Dutt returned to India and joined as Assistant Magistrate in Alipur on 28th September 1871. Then he was posted in different rural places (like Meherpur) all over Bengal and saw the basic social trouble, serious-shocking conditions of people. After few years he wrote the *The Peasantry of Bengal* (1874) on aforesaid matters. One of the remarkable features of this book was not merely his detailed knowledge of the problems of the poor peasants, but his active interest in their welfare which led him to develop a perspective which was not only against the current policy of the then Government, but was also regarded as contrary to the interests of the most influential section namely the Zamindars.

Sometimes he had been motivated by some important books written by contemporary historians like Sir Walter Scott. In student life, Dutt had desired to read the English historical novels of Sir W. Scott and others and their works had influenced him to write the novels. *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* of Tod inspired Mr. Dutt to write the historical novels. Mr. Dutt himself mentioned in *Wednesday Review*, 23rd August 1905:

Sir Walter Scott was my favourite author forty years ago. I spent days and nights over his novels...I do not know if Sir Walter Scott gave me a taste for history, or if my taste for

history made me an admirer of Scott... (Gupta, *Life and Works* 383)

Not only in R. C. Dutt but also in Bankimchandra's historical novels, we notice the predominating influence of Scott in his historical novels. The *Bengalee*, on the 15th of March 1879, published a long article, in which it compared the relative merits of Bankimchandra and Romesh Chandar. The article mentioned, both were 'as the only two writers of fiction who have risen to distinction and fame in Bengal.' (Gupta, *Life and Works* 74) Mr. Dutt had been trying to find and pick up the characters of national heroes in his novel *Maharashtra Jibon Provat*, where he eulogises the unquestionable military genius Sivaji. He points out that although this Marathi leader belonged to a small state and also did not have sufficient army force and power at his disposal, he fought against the powerful emperor of great Mughal Empire and had shattered the healthy Mughal Empire. *Rajput Jibon Sandha* is woven around the story of the heroic struggle of Rana Pratap for the freedom of his beloved principality of Mewar against the overwhelming might of Mughal Empire. Two social novels *Samaj* and *Sansar*, together present an admirable picture of the everyday life of present-day Bengal. The chief interests of these stories were first of all to present widow re-marriage as a legal act and secondly to find those people who would be defenders of Hindu orthodoxy. So, contemporary social conditions of colonial empire along with supernatural and orthodox customs were knocking the way of thought of Mr. Dutt. These issues were brought forward in his writings.

Mr. Dutt translated the oldest Sanskrit texts into Bengali such as *Rig Veda Samhita* between 1885-87, and *Hindu Sastra* (1893-97), *Rig Veder Debgon* (Srabon 1292) etc. Mr. Dutt wanted to get an access to our ancient past and for that he resorted to translate the classical texts. But it was not so easy; the orthodox Hindus didn't support it. On this perspective Mr. Dutt had acquired the support and help of Bankimchandra and Vidyasagar for it. Bankimchandra wrote appreciative review in Bengali in the columns of *Prachar* that it was impossible to praise too highly the work of Babu Romesh Chandra. It was not an easy task to translate the *Rig Veda Sanhita*. But the thoroughness, accuracy, and rapidity with which R.C. Dutt was completing the work would have evoked universal praise in Europe. But the public feeling in these matters was different in this country, and it was to be hoped that he won't be discouraged for that reason. Bankimchandra also said:

Whatever others might say, we feel certain that this work of Romesh Babu will bring him enduring fame. When the Bible was translated into the modern languages of Europe, the Roman Catholic Priests and other scholiasts showed bitter hostility to the work. It is not unlikely that Romesh Babu will meet with similar opposition. But as in Europe the translation of the Bible paved the way for reforms in religion and a general advance in civilization, it is certain similar results will follow the translation of the Rig Veda in this country. The Bengalis will never be able to fully repay the deep debt of gratitude under which Mr. Dutt has placed them. (Gupta, *Life and Works* 118-19)

So, Bankimchandra, Romesh Chandra and his contemporary writers were trying to revive the glories of our ancient past, because they were representing that our country had potentialities and had the power to compare herself with any one like England. The sole object of him was to narrate the glories of our past and the greatness of our national heroes. Due to the revival of the colonial society it was essential for Mr. Dutt to create and establish it. Dutt didn't limit himself within the confines of Bengali writing but also wrote English texts and translated the epics in English.

After return from England in 1887, Mr. Dutt's first posting was in Pabna where the internal feuds of the rich resident landlords (as different from absentee landlords in many other districts) generated another kind of tension in the district. However he was also appointed in this place before, in the early phase of his service and he had the same experience as now. However, during his relatively long posting here (1887-90), Dutt was able to restore some stability, oldest peace and communal harmony. These experiences and upshots were captivated in *Rambles in India* (1897) written by Mr. Dutt.

These two-and-a-half-years were a particularly busy time in Mr. Dutt's career, restoring peace, repressing crime, starting several educational institutions. *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, a book Mr. Dutt, conceived of as the major work of his life, was written while he was in Mymensingh and was published from Calcutta in three volumes, in 1889-90. It was not so easy for Dutt, because of the place where he was posted was so remote, and it was unimaginable that the reference books or materials should be available there. For that he carried necessary documents with him when he left Calcutta. About this book, his earliest biographer G. A. Natesan wrote:

Huge packages of books of reference arrived from Calcutta, as there was no suitable local library; and when the District Officer went on his river tours in the rains, his boat was stocked and loaded with manuscripts, books and proof sheets. (Natesan 18)

So, the place, society, atmosphere are so important to develop or carry forward something. However, in this difficult situation Mr. Dutt completed the manuscripts of the aforesaid book. In 1911 Sir Aurobindo said about this book, 'His history of Ancient Indian civilization is a masterly compilation, void of original research which is rapidly growing antiquated.'(Ghosh 66) Although, Dutt was not a researcher or a professional historian,(Chandra 84) this book should be considered as the history of the peoples, not as the history of princes. In reality, Mr. Dutt wished to reanimate the ancient glorious past of India and wanted to mention that the Aryan civilization was superior to the civilization that existed in the India that is inhabited by educated people. In this book he pointed out that Vedic civilization had all the qualities –manliness, simplicity, absence of caste system and the relative freedom of women. The book was translated to mother language for the common people. In fact, Dutt desired to compare between the society of Vedic and modern age for making non-barrier society in Bengal and that's why he wrote the texts on Indian ancient past.

Dutt had selected important sections from original two epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and he had translated these from Sanskrit to English. He completed these translations while he was in England between 1898 and 1900. He desired to make Europe aware of our superiority, for example, 'the good and royal' Yudhistir, the 'tiger-waisted' Bhima, and the 'helmet-wearing' Arjun of Indian epic were the respectively Agamemnon, the Ajax and the Achilles of Greek. *Ramayana* gave us a true picture of the Hindu faith and righteous life as Dante's *Divine Comedy* gave us a picture of the faith and belief of middle ages in Europe. He ended with a general comparison of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, pointing out how the distinctive values embedded in these two sets of texts have shaped the cultures of Europe and India respectively. (Mukherjee 222)

R.C. Dutt's other important works were *The Economic History of India: Under Early British Rule 1757-1837 vol. I* (1902) and *The Economic History of India: In the Victorian Age 1837-1900 Vol. II* (1904) where he focused on the trading function, poverty, famine,

drain etc. and he mentioned and criticized the British colonization which was responsible for it, though he himself was the product of colonized institution and had supported the British culture, education and atmosphere. These books helped him to become popular and known as economic nationalist historian.

So, the family and society always assist the very person to take a novel attitude or to develop new ideas in a different way. R.C. Dutt had received the ideas from various persons who might belong to his own family or outsiders. Social conditions sometimes insist someone to capture those things in a frame. This frame might be a book, letter, autobiography, biography etc. Mr. Dutt was encouraged by the events in his society to engage himself in building this platform. Although he was the product of the colonial era, but in his writing he had counter sounds or perspectives against the colonization.

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