CHAPTER 2:
IMPACT OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ON 19TH CENTURY INDIAN RENAISSANCE
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Renaissance was an intellectual movement that began in Italy in the fourteenth century. The word ‘Renaissance’ denotes a period of time and certain characteristics associated with the period. ‘The word Renaissance is French and relatively late in origin, the phenomenon is Italian and early.’¹ This movement’s impact was manifested in a series of cultural, economic, social and political changes. It was not confined within Italian peninsula. Its impact gradually spread to almost every country of Europe. ‘For Italy, the period is popularly accepted as running from the second generation of the 14c to the second or third generation of the 16c.’² Renaissance meant the revolt against the medieval view about supernatural authority and man’s uncertain future. Renaissance brought in changes in man’s thinking about himself from mediaeval period that envisaged man’s subordination to spiritual authority. It was the discovery of the world and of man himself. It signified the awakening of human power and his great capabilities. In other words, it considered the human being as a self-confident, optimistic and courageous creature for the attainment of liberty. This human being would depend on the power of his own for his success in the victory in the world. ‘It depicted man as a confident, self-aware and courageous creature who, for his success, would no longer depend on the uncontrollable will of God and fate, but rather on the power of his own arms with which, so was now thought, he could conquer the world and, indeed, do miracles. To brighten this image of man, the Renaissance naturally preached a secular and scientific view of life.’³

the hand of Turks in 1453 led to an exodus of classical scholars with their classical manuscripts to Europe which accelerated the process of awakening or Renaissance in Italy. Renaissance brought the middle ages to an end and ushered in a new era.

The word humanism emerged in nineteenth century as a part of the Italian Renaissance. It denoted the revival of the knowledge or classical learning. The humanists seemed to center their thought upon the dignity of man and his privileged position in the world. They stressed the rediscovery of ancient Latin and Greek classics. Humanism conditioned every aspect of the Renaissance. The renewed study of Aristotle may have created a new approach to the study of the Latin classics. In the middle of the fifteenth century, Roman antiquity had been the object of study for nearly a century. Greek antiquity began in latter. Italian Renaissance literature marked a renewed emphasis on classical antiquity. One of the achievements of humanism was the modernization of literature and thought. The most important consequences of Renaissance were the awakening of the past glorious memories and evoking nostalgic feelings of past greatness.

In one sense, Renaissance symbolized revival of classical learning. It denoted the transition from middle ages to the modern world. The Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth century appears as a recovery of what the ancient had known and the medievalists had forgotten, or the revival of knowledge and culture of ancient Greece and Rome which had been taking place over a number of past centuries, had appeared as study materials in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The humanists studied the literature and philosophy, art and antiquities of Greeks and Romans and also admired the human culture and the progress of human life. The achievements of humanism in art, literature and thought were original and distinctive. It was not the revival of antiquity alone but was a new birth as much as
rebirth. The three great Italian humanists were Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Dante was a pioneer of Italian Renaissance. His poem conceived in a modern spirit and written in a modern tongue, was the first sign that Italy, the leader of nations of the West, had shaken off her sleep.

Petrarch was a great humanist teacher. His father who had a taste of classical learning influenced him. Petrarch wrote many books in Latin. His greatest achievements in prose were the Ad Familiaries in 24 books and the semiles in eighteen. He first linked Plato with the thought of Italian humanism. He had the greatest collection of Latin classics. Boccaccio wrote both in Latin and Italian languages. He was famous for his vernacular works and particularly for his seminal work Decameron. After Petrarch and Boccaccio, Colucci Salutati started the study of Greek as humanist’s line. Poggio, Leonardo Bruni, Bindo were the greatest humanists in Italy. Bruni translated from Plato and Aristotle. Murshilio Ficino turned the whole of Plato into Latin. Humanism created the intellectual climate in Italy during the first half of fifteenth century, and Italian humanism reached its watershed in the second-half of this century. Italian language and Italian literature reached its climax under the period of the three great writers of verse and prose, like Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. During the end of sixteenth century New-Platonism held an important place in general culture. The neo-Platonists, filled with the sense of having liberated the human spirit from every hindrance to its free expansion, tended naturally to emphasize the greatness of his powers and the joy of their exercise.

As a part of the rediscovery of the ancient, the humanists had a renewed interest in Platonic doctrines. The study or the discovery of classical literature induced new activities of human spirit. Lorentius Valla possessed a close knowledge of classical Latin. He attempted a critical vision of New

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Testament. Humanism, beginning with Petrarch, was against the post-classical and mediaeval changes in Latin. The study of Latin humanists was a phase of human growth in Italy. This leads on to the expansion and expression of humanity in all faculties of study. Ficino and Pico Della Mirandola were the two great champions of man’s intellectual freedom.

It is wrong to describe the Renaissance as only revival of ancient learning. It was something more than the interest in classical learning. This movement was the great intellectual force which transformed medieval into modern world. This is to be seen in comparing the mediaeval scholars with the humanist scholars of the Renaissance. This movement awakened the man of medieval age to a new consciousness of life, seeking glory and fame. The humanists studied the literature, art and philosophy of Greek and Latin and thus admired the culture and progress of ancient life. ‘Renaissance was considered to be the period in Italian history in which the study of classical art and the discovery or rediscovery of classical literature led to new activities of human spirit.’

It influenced man to became a more important subject of study rather than God. Renaissance emphasized the enjoyment of life and concentrated on this world. This main and distinguishing feature of the Renaissance was the uncompromising assertion of man’s intellectual freedom and a revolt against ecclesiastical authority. The culture of antiquity was a display of human dignity and reason in an intellectual atmosphere. The revival of classicism brought back the great memories of ancient Rome and roused feeling against despotic rule of medieval period. It created the intellectual climate of modern world. ‘The resuscitation of antiquity showed a consciousness of its past and a wish to reproduce it.’ And thus Renaissance produced the feeling of national unity in Italy.

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In fact, we cannot encapsulate the whole phenomena of the Renaissance within the field of any one department of human knowledge. If we ask the student of art what they mean by Renaissance, they will answer that it was the revolutionary effect in architecture, painting by the rediscovery of antique learning. Student of literature and philosophy see in the Renaissance, the rediscovery of ancient manuscripts. The man of science is interested in the discovery of truly scientific method in Renaissance. On the other hand, the political scientist has his own answer to the question. The development of nationalism in Italy and Europe and the gradual emergence of that sense of freedom are the aspects, which engross his attention. It is the movement of the attainment of self-conscious freedom by human being. Nationalism is a modern idea. National identity was a new concept in the sixteenth century. A number of national histories were produced in the time of Renaissance. The freedom of conscience was established in this period which witnessed a remarkable growth of patriotic sentiment, which at times verged on nationalism. ‘The word Renaissance really means new birth to liberty - the spirit of mankind recovering consciousness, recognizing the beauty of the outer world, and of the body through art, liberating the reason in science and conscious in religion, restoring culture to the intelligence and establishing the principle of political freedom.’

Machiavelli was the most important political thinker during the period of Renaissance. ‘Nicolo Machiavelli was a child of Italian Renaissance, not only in point of time but more in respect of representing its intellectual influence.’ He was a modern thinker in the sense that he ceased to be a medieval thinker and ushered in certain new ideas which are symbolic of the modern age. He was born in Florence that was the center of Italian culture during Renaissance. He was greatly affected by this spiritual movement. He wrote three great books, namely, ‘The Art of War’, ‘The Discourses on Levy’ and ‘The

10 Ibid., p. 23.
11 Ibid., p. 86.
Prince’. The very spirit of Italian Renaissance permeates these. He could understand the dynamics of the modern state.

Machiavelli enquired about the causes of devastation of Italy, and considered the remedies of this disorder. He recommended that a prince should rule in a secular state. The main duties of the prince are to make the country strong and united. The prince will establish peace and order, and expel the foreign invader. For this noble cause, the prince would adopt any means. This is the essence of the doctrine of the end justifying the means. Machiavelli was the first who systematically exposed the power view of politics. According to him, the purpose of politics is acquisition, preservation and increase of political power. The idea of maximization of state power is the central theme of his political theory. He gave a fully secular character to politics. His political doctrine made him the first modern political thinker. He adopted the empirical or historical method of investigation. His method is of generalization from particular.

Machiavelli envisaged a deliberate and complete separation of politics from ethics. He intended to use religion as an instrument for creating national feelings, which would help the state in preserving peace and stability of the society. To Machiavelli, the unification of Italy required the secularization of politics. ‘According to Machiavelli, the church is not only, through its temporal power, the chief obstacle to the unity of Italy, the church is also responsible for the religious and moral corruption of Italy, and for the ensuing loss of political virtue.’

He sanctioned the use of immoral means by the ruler whenever it was necessary to do so to save the country and preserve its stability. He separated the private from the public sphere of morality. State had a morality of its own that is the morality of success. He granted politics the fullest autonomy. He subordinated moral principles to necessities of political existence and public welfare. He advised the rule to

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combine in himself, the power of lion and cunning of fox. He emphasized the importance of
religion but wanted to use it as an instrument for attainment of political objectives. To
secure the unification of Italy under a strong government, he studied the causes of the rise
and decline of ancient Rome. Thus he turned to the past classical antiquity. The influence of
the Renaissance is most visible here.

The title of the last chapter of ‘The Prince’ is ‘an exhortation to liberate Italy from
the Barbarians.’ He described a new prince as the liberator of Italy. He believed that the
new prince should introduce new laws and orders. The liberator of Italy must do for Italy
what Moses did for the people of Israel. Machiavelli stresses the need for a radical reform of
the Italian military system for the liberation of Italy from foreign domination. In fact, he
devotes half of the chapter to the military conditions for the freedom of Italy. In the Prince,
he says, ‘It is necessary before all things, as a true foundation for every enterprise, to be
provided with your own forces, because there can be no more faithful, truer or better
soldiers. And although single, they are good, altogether they will be much better when they
find themselves commanded by their Prince, honored by him, and maintained at his
expense. Therefore, it is necessary to be prepared with such arms, so that you can be
defended against foreigners by Italian valour.’

Machiavelli identified power as the key issue of politics. He was the first exponent
of the principle of power politics. It was not essential for the Prince to be always honest. If
the interests of the state so demand he should not mind resorting to fraud and other
dishonest means. For the sake of attaining the highest almost everything is permitted for the
ruler. ‘Indeed, to grow the nationalism in Italy what was primarily needed was nothing but a
strong and irresistible power and so he gives so much importance to a study of the problem

13 J. Dunn & I. Harris, *Machiavelli*. Vol. 1, (Great Political Thinkers 5, Edwar Elgar Publishing Ltd., UK,
of power.¹⁵ Machiavelli’s political realism allowed him to remain neutral towards the means that were to be employed for achieving the ends. His realism seemed justified as it aimed at the fulfillment of national aspirations.

In the nineteenth century, a large section of Indian educated classes wanted freedom from religious and social abuses. Religious and social reforms were very closely linked with political consciousness. Leaders of Indian religious and social reforms, such as Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, created in the Indian mind an urge for political freedom. The cultural Renaissance in India manifested in novels, poetry and essays of some outstanding literary figures like Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay etc strengthened the idea of Indian nationalism. We may have now a look at how Italian Renaissance influenced Indian Renaissance, and consequently the emergence of Indian nationalism.

Italian Renaissance took place in the fourteenth to sixteenth century whereas the Indian Renaissance movement started in the nineteenth century. There was a close link between Italian and Indian Renaissance. To provide a large number of English speaking Indians to assists in the administration, the British introduced western education in India. But the consequences of this were significant. The progress of western education had a decisive effect in transforming the Indian mind. The English language exposed the scientific ideas and the idea of nationalism and democracy to Indian intelligentsia. ‘The cultural Renaissance and reform movements beginning from the thirties of the nineteenth century paved the way for the emergence of the concept of Indian nationhood.’¹⁶ The impact of modern western culture was felt first in Bengal and this consequence was more advanced than all the other states. ‘The role played by Bengal in the modern awakening of India is

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¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 93-94.
thus comparable to the position occupied by Italy in the story of the European Renaissance.  

The nineteenth century was a very creative age in the history of Bengal as well as in the history of India. Rammohan Roy was the pioneer of the Indian cultural movement that is called Indian Renaissance. ‘He has been called the Pole star of Indian Awakening, the Prometheus of nineteenth century India, and the Erasmus of the Indian Reformation, inauguration of the New Age.’ It was he who first roused an independent spirit and humanistic urge in Bengal after a long time and gave that spirit a modern form. The chief characteristic of Rammohan’s life and thought was a synthesis of the best of the Eastern and Western culture. He inspired from western learning as well as Eastern culture. He had studied not only the traditional Sanskrit culture but also received the knowledge of other languages and different religions. His rational modern outlook refused to accept some Hindu rituals and ceremonies, and attacks of the Christian missionaries upon Hinduism. Most of the principal social, religious, political or educational movements of the nineteenth century originated from him. He was a steadfast fighter against social oppression. He started the first constitutional agitation in India. The influence of Western liberal thought is seen in Roy’s activity supporting freedom of the Press and protest against the Jury Act of 1827. He was the first Indian who dared to break the traditional prohibition of sea-voyages by taking a trip abroad. He wanted to purify the Indian tradition. Roy, like Italian humanists, produced the modern Indian spirit by return to Indian past greatness. ‘In order to bring the original Hindu scriptures to his countrymen, who did not know Sanskrit, Rammohan was the first to translate the classics of Hindu religion into Bengali and English.’ His desire was to unite, through this movement, the different groups into which society had split up; and thus

promote the growth of an all-India national outlook. He was a pioneer of educational
reform. He placed great faith in western educational reform. ‘He established a Vedant
college in 1825, where he tried to combine western and traditional Indian learning.’
In his Brahmanical Magazine, 1921-23, he displayed his deep love for the best tradition of India.
One of the most remarkable things about Rammohan was his keen interest in
international affairs and relation with nationalist movements all over the world. His sorrow
at the failure of the revolution in Naples in 1821 and delight at the revolution in Spain
indicates the cosmopolitan nature of his life and thought, ‘Dr R.C. Majumdar has conceded
that Rammohan was one of the greatest representatives of the New Age and he reflected in
himself many distinguished features that heralded, the Renaissance in Bengal.’

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, a top level government officer, spread the idea of
nationalism through his novels, prose works and essays. He brought out ‘Bangadarshan’, in
Bengali, which was the vehicle of a variety of ides than concern a modern mind. The center
of Bankim’s ideas was nationalism. In his article of ‘Bharat- Kalanka’ and ‘Bharatvarsher
Swadhinata-O-Paradhinata’, we have noticed the idea of political nationhood. He was
deeply attracted by the history of European Renaissance. He felt that Italian Renaissance
was success for their national language, so he stressed the progress of Bengali language.
Like Italian humanists and Rammohan, he made the people conscious of their past history.
Rammohan’s ‘Bangadarshan’ carried essays on ancient culture and contemporary social
problems. Its primary objective was to arouse the national feelings in its readers. ‘Bankim
Chandra undoubtedly was moved by the history of unification of Italy of Garibaldi and
Mazzini.’ In 1874, he composed the great nationalist song ‘Vande-Mataram’ which was
incorporated in his novel ‘Anandamath’ (1882). This song became a potent source of

21 Ibid., p. 16
22 Ibid. p. 60
patriotic and national inspiration to the political movement not only in Bengal, but in the whole of India. In his ‘Devi Choudhurani (1884), Bankim Chandra expressed the ideal of selfless work. This book showed the way of dedicating man’s life for the service of humanity. Bankim Chandra provided a positive concept of nationalism that was new in the history of Indian political thought. This was the first time that in his novel, the motherland was symbolized as Goddess Durga. ‘One class of readers believes that all the talk of Sanyasis of Anandamath about the uprooting of Moslem power really meant the liberation of the country from British power. In support of this view, the reading of the first edition of this book in generally quoted to show how the word ‘Ingrej’ was everywhere replaced by ‘Yavana’ later on.’

The concept of independence and Indian nationalism are revealed in some of his essays. In ‘Bharat-Kalanka’, he asks why India has been subjugated for so long. According to him, the real reason ‘lay in the Indian psyche lacking the desire for liberty, the Indian mind was indifferent to who governed or ruled. ’His mind was preoccupied with the thought of building up a high moral character for the success of our nationalism. ‘As much as one can not write on Indian nationalist thought without his ubiquitous presence.’ His novels and essays were regarded a source of powerful inspiration to the revolutionaries.

The poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta was also intensive reader of history. He took the Bengali readers to the classical world of Homer, Virgil, Dante and Petrarch. ‘He was also the inventor of Sonnet, form in Bengali poetry and for this his initial scheme derived from Italian poet Petrarch whom he read while living in Versailles in 1863-1865.’ Dutta started his ‘Chaturdospadi Kabitabali’ (in Bengali) with mention of Italy, motherland of Renaissance and his foremost personality Petrarch. He had studied Greek and Latin at

24 Ibid. p. 91.
26 Ibid., p.104.
27 Ibid., p. 12.
Bishop College and latter in Madras. Though he mastered western culture but believed that the new life in Bengal literature would be possible through the support of power and capability of Sanskrit language. He studied Sanskrit when he was abroad in Madras. Dutta took every theme and character in almost all his writings like ‘Sharmistha’, ‘Tilottomasambhab Kabya’, ‘Meghnabadh Kabya’, ‘Birangana Kabya’, from Sanskrit. In tune with the spirit of Renaissance, his cultural character was cosmopolitan.

Swami Vivekananda might be called the father of modern Indian nationalism. He believed that when a powerful Indian nation was formed, India would be free from British rule. He asked the people to say ‘the soil of India is my highest heaven; the God of India is my God.’ His triumphant travel abroad gave Indians a deep sense of national pride. His inspiring lectures strengthened the people’s awareness of India’s ancient glory. Vivekananda sent his message to all the people of India, arousing in them deep feelings of unity. He said that the masses were the source of power. Bhupendra Nath Dutta observes, ‘It is truism to say that there is a co-relation between Swamiji’s appeals to his young countrymen and the intensity of revolutionary urge in the mind of the young men of later generation.’ From the foundation of Bengal Revotntionary party, his writings along with the work of Mazzini and the life of Garibaldi were the sources of inspiration to the youth of India. ‘His prophetic far-sightedness helped him to visualize the coming events of the world. The inevitability of history, to use the expression of the great Italian patriot Joseph Mazzini, made British imperialism quit India, but at the same time created an anti-thesis in the form of partition of the peninsula into two parts.’

Vivekananda’s outlook was very much similar to the revolutionaries and also Machiavelli. He said to the famous revolutionary Hemchandra Ghosh at Dhaka in 1901,

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29 Ibid. p. 116.
‘Your sole object is to break the shackles of slavery that have bound your motherland and you must do so by any means whatsoever.’\textsuperscript{30} Vivekananda, according to Hem Chandra was the manifestation of the spirit of Krishna. He never advocated non-violence in the face of oppression and persecution.

Prof. Benoy Sarkar was a social and political thinker whose basic purpose was to secularize the Indian life and culture. Prof. Sarkar’s view of man was similar to that of Machiavelli. Like Machiavelli, he met the initial support for the new emerging bourgeoisie with the aid of his secular approach and the concept of man. There were some great obstacles behind the development of Indian industrial bourgeoisie. The greatest impediment was the fact of political subjugation and absence of capitalist frame of mind in India. He secularizes the Indian intellectual tradition. Prof. Sarkar tried to secularize the Indian approach to the problem of life by portraying the bourgeois man as a self-confident and contemptuous about the nobler virtue of life. Though he emphasized that the emerging bourgeoisie would struggle with ruthlessness, with external forces for its final victory, but would ensure the smooth development of the operation of bourgeois society. ‘As Machiavelli secularized European thinking, so does Prof. Sarkar with regard to Indian thinking. This, together with his Machiavellian notion of man enables him to infuse a spirit of self-confidence into the Indian ethos and makes him, indeed, the prophet of a new Indian Renaissance.’\textsuperscript{31} His secular approach to Indian life and culture was guided by his nationalist urge to give his motherland an equal dignity and honor with her foreign ruler.

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the foremost leaders of the Indian Renaissance. The primary characteristics of Indian Renaissance, in the 19th century, was shown in his art, 


music, songs and literature. In one sense, Renaissance is Revival of learning. In the age of Renaissance, Italy was primarily engaged in the studies of spirited ancient Greek and Latin culture. ‘His (Rabindranath) emotion to ancient Indian culture and life style was as same as or much more than the father of Renaissance humanism Petrarch.’\(^{32}\) Like Petrarch, Tagore wanted to return to past greatness. Italian humanist assembled the greatest collection of Latin and Greek Classics and translated many works in Italian language. And thus they created a new literary form. Rabindranath did this in the field of Bengali literature and culture. He had great respect for Sanskrit language. As Dante looked across the centuries and hailed Virgil as master, Tagore, turned back to Kalidasa. He was a great humanist. He brought unity to millions of people through his poetry, music, art, philosophy and religion. ‘For Indians, Tagore remains the greatest poet of the Indian Renaissance to inspire them to realize the glory of the Motherland and work for her uplift.’\(^{33}\) Tagore’s outlook is universal. Patriotism and cosmopolitanism was combined in his thought. He placed his faith in a variety of human relationship. ‘He used his great genius for half a century in fostering the spiritual and political revival of India and devoted and dedicated his life to the establishment and development of a cultural and educational center, the Visva Bharati, with international ideals.’\(^{34}\) He established this international university with the view of the spirit of the ancient ideal of the Tapovanas.

Two of India’s eminent historians, Jadunath Sarkar and Ramesh Chandra Majumder opined that there was a real renaissance in India in nineteenth century. Jadunath Sarkar, in his ‘History of Bengal’ (vol.2) has commented that the Indian Renaissance was wider, deeper and more revolutionary than that of Europe. But some historians like Sushobhan

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\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 175.
Sarkar have criticized the Indian Renaissance. Sushobhan Sarkar in his book ‘On the Bengal Renaissance’ has made the comment that the Renaissance in Bengal lacked the tremendous sweep and vital energy of the many sided Italian Renaissance that ‘it did more on the axis of the upper stratum alone the society, the bhadralocks.’ He thought that it could not draw the masses of the backward Hindus and Muslims.

But if we analyze this logically, we shall find that much of this criticism is pointless and irrelevant. Any discussion of the Bengal Renaissance must begin with a clarification of the concept of Renaissance. The Renaissance of the fifteenth century was an intellectual reawakening of Italy through the rediscovery of classical treasures, their re-interpretation in new rational light, admiration of humanity and acceptance of reason as a guide. And if Renaissance is assumed to be an intellectual movement, it is bound to be confined to the elites or bhadraloks. The Italian intellectual movement was also confined within aristocrats.

Finally, considering all aspect of the case, we shall have to conclude that Indian Renaissance was influenced by Italian ideas and models together with Indian’s search for her own identity like Italian movement. This intellectual movement was exhibited in art, painting, music, poetry, literature, education and in politics. Like in Italy, Indian nationalism was the consequence of Indian Renaissance. The idea of patriotism and the love for liberty emerged in India under the impact of western culture. Many educated Indians fostered the idea of nationalism by their writings. Vivekananda devoted his life to awakening the national awareness. Like Italian humanists, Vivekananda had great respect for India’s glorious past and its heritage. He was one of the early pioneers of the idea of humanism. It was during the period of Renaissance that the concept of nationalism gained

\[35\text{ Sarkar, Op.cit, p.69 .}\]
momentum in India by the writings, patriotic songs, lectures, messages of many educated Indians. Literatures in the native languages like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore aroused anti-British feelings. Like Italy, in India, this intellectual movement paved the way for the emergence of national feelings and awareness.