

Psychology and the Bengal Renaissance: Education, Literature, and the Formation of an Indigenous Indian Psychology of Education

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of psychology in colonial Bengal represents a unique confluence of Western scientific rationality, Indian philosophical traditions, nationalist consciousness, and literary creativity. During the Bengal Renaissance, intellectuals did not merely adopt European psychological thought but critically reinterpreted it within indigenous epistemological and cultural frameworks. Figures such as Narendranath Sengupta and Girindrasekhar Bose laid the institutional and theoretical foundations of Indian psychology, while thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda infused psychological reflection into literature, spirituality, and education. This paper examines the historical, educational, and literary intersections that shaped early psychological discourse in Bengal and argues that colonial Bengal was not merely a recipient of Western psychology but an active site of epistemological reconstruction and cultural reinterpretation.

KEYWORDS: Bengal Renaissance, Indian psychology, psychoanalysis in India, cultural psychology, Narendranath Sengupta, Girindrasekhar Bose, Rabindranath Tagore.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed profound intellectual transformations in Bengal, often described as the Bengal Renaissance (Chatterjee, 1993). The introduction of English education in 1835 and the institutionalization of Western scientific rationality created the conditions for new forms of inquiry, including psychology. However, psychology in Bengal did not evolve as a mere colonial import; rather, it emerged through a dynamic negotiation between Western epistemology and Indian philosophical traditions (Dalal, 2010). In 1856, the Bengal Renaissance was at its peak. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was collecting signatures to legalize widow remarriage. At that very time, in Germany, Sigmund Freud—the pioneer of psychoanalysis—was born. It is indeed astonishing to think about this historical simultaneity. A few years later, when psychology began its journey in India, its principal center was Bengal. Narendranath Sengupta established a Department of Psychology, marking psychology's gradual separation from philosophy as an independent scientific discipline. Around the same period, Freud was corresponding with Girindrasekhar

Bose, who had already stirred significant discussions in the world of psychoanalysis. Bose offered a unique interpretation of repression and discussed the role of the ego in resolving unconscious conflicts within clinical psychology. He also critically examined Freud's theory of dreams. Conventional dream analysis often appeared unidirectional and somewhat monochromatic. In contrast, Bose proposed a reconstruction-oriented and diversity-sensitive interpretation, emphasizing layers and depth within dreams. Notably, he was the brother of the chemist and writer Rajshekhar Basu. Bose founded the Indian Psychoanalytic Society, one of the earliest psychoanalytic societies in the world. In this context, Freud sent Ernest Jones to India to invite Bose to join the International Psychoanalytic Association. As a student of education and educational psychology, one feels immense pride in the fact that the early foundations of psychology in India were laid in Bengal. The Bengali engagement with mind and introspection seemed almost perennial. Exploring the innermost layers of the psyche and understanding the unfolding of thought were central concerns of early

psychological discourse. Psychoanalysis initiated this engagement. Contemporary literature and culture were also deeply infused with psychological inquiry, especially in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. One may argue that the idea of the collective unconscious found profound resonance within Bengali intellectual life and Tagore's writings. In novels such as *Chokher Bali*, unconscious conflicts and their causes were portrayed with remarkable psychological depth, transforming narrative fiction into a comprehensive psychological exploration. Thus, during the Renaissance, psychology evolved through literature, culture, philosophy, and modern Western ideas. The analytical framework of science gradually replaced purely emotive interpretations. By focusing deeply on specific domains, scholars penetrated further into the complexities of human consciousness. From a positivist ontological perspective, early psychological discussions often emerged within medical science. Clinical methods, quantitative reasoning, deductive syllogism, and a quantitative mindset dominated the period. However, Swami Vivekananda challenged Herbert Spencer's agnosticism and initiated a philosophical direction that moved beyond strict positivism. Vivekananda's psychological ideas were not confined to religion or philosophy; they carried implications for modern psychology, particularly in matters of self-development and mental peace. The essential difference between Tagore and Freud lay in their perspectives on consciousness and the unconscious. While Freud emphasized the unconscious drives beneath awareness, Tagore leaned toward what later resembled humanistic and positive psychology. His thought reflected a phenomenological paradigm-prioritizing lived experience, the present moment, and situational contexts. Existential psychology and contemporary reflections were also intertwined in his works. Although psychoanalytic influences appeared indirectly in his romantic writings, his later novels demonstrated stronger phenomenological and behavioral orientations.

This paper situates the rise of psychology in Bengal within three interrelated domains:

1. Institutional formation in education
2. Psychoanalytic and theoretical innovation
3. Literary and cultural expressions of psychological thought

2. Institutional Foundations of Psychology in Bengal

Narendranath Sengupta and the Scientific Discipline

The formal institutionalization of psychology in India began in Bengal. Narendranath Sengupta established one of the earliest psychology departments in India at

the University of Calcutta in the early twentieth century (Sinha, 1986). Under his leadership, psychology gradually separated from philosophy and developed as an independent empirical science. Sengupta's *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1928) marked one of the first systematic attempts to conceptualize social psychology within the Indian cultural context. He emphasized that personality is not an isolated construct but emerges through interaction with social structures, traditions, and collective values. His perspective anticipated later developments in cultural psychology by arguing that Western psychological theories could not be universally applied without contextual reinterpretation (Paranjpe, 2016). Unlike strict positivists, Sengupta viewed psychology as both experimental and introspective. For him, understanding the mind required engagement with Indian philosophical traditions, including Vedanta and Yoga, alongside laboratory-based methods. Narendranath Sengupta's contributions were not limited to academia. He devoted his life to building Indian psychology with the dedication of a spiritual seeker. For him, psychology was not merely experimental science but a means of penetrating the inner world of human consciousness. His teaching resembled a guru-disciple relationship, emphasizing self-knowledge and existential fulfillment. His book *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1928) was one of the first systematic treatments of social psychology in the Indian context. He viewed individual and society as mutually constitutive. Personality, in his understanding, was shaped by social values, traditions, and collective life. He analyzed leadership, crowd behavior, group influence, and social relationships through Indian social realities. Sengupta recognized the limitations of Western psychology when applied to India's multi-layered, religiously and linguistically diverse society. Thus, he envisioned social psychology as a cultural science, integrating rituals, beliefs, family structures, and historical context. In colonial Bengal, psychological inquiry was a complex, multidimensional process-an intersection of Western epistemology, Indian philosophy, and nationalist consciousness. It became not merely an academic pursuit but also a cultural resistance and a means of reconstructing Bengali selfhood. With the introduction of English education in 1835 and Western scientific rationality, psychology gradually emerged as a field of study. European traditions such as associationism, rationalism, and empiricism entered Indian universities. Initially taught as part of philosophy at institutions like the University of Calcutta, psychology slowly evolved into an independent discipline under figures like

Sengupta and Bose. Simultaneously, Indian intellectuals brought indigenous traditions-Yoga, Vedanta, and Buddhist thought-into psychological discourse. Concepts like self (atman), consciousness, memory, and liberation were translated into modern psychological language. This resulted in a philosophical psychology that stood beyond colonial imitation. Thus, psychological inquiry in colonial Bengal became an act of self-discovery and intellectual emancipation. By challenging colonial epistemology, Bengali thinkers planted the seeds of psychological independence-where science, culture, philosophy, and literature converged into a uniquely Bengali intellectual awakening.

3. Psychoanalysis in Colonial Bengal Girindrasekhar Bose and Indigenous Psychoanalysis

Girindrasekhar Bose occupies a singular position in the global history of psychoanalysis. As founder of the Indian Psychoanalytic Society in 1922, he established one of the earliest psychoanalytic institutions outside Europe (Basu, 1990).

Bose maintained correspondence with Sigmund Freud, yet he did not remain a passive follower. He critically reinterpreted Freud's theory of repression and offered an alternative account of the ego's role in resolving unconscious conflicts. His theory of "opposite wishes" proposed a more dialectical understanding of intrapsychic conflict, diverging from Freud's drive-centered model (Bose, 1929/1999).

In dream analysis, Bose rejected the unidirectional symbolic reductionism often attributed to classical psychoanalysis. Instead, he emphasized layered meanings and cultural variability in dream interpretation. His work demonstrated that psychoanalysis could be meaningfully adapted within Indian philosophical frameworks.

4. Literature as Psychological Inquiry Rabindranath Tagore and the Phenomenology of Experience

Bengali literature during the Renaissance was deeply infused with psychological insight. Rabindranath Tagore's novels and short stories explored unconscious conflict, moral tension, and existential anxiety long before psychology became widely institutionalized in India. In works such as *Chokher Bali*, Tagore portrayed jealousy, repression, and emotional ambivalence with remarkable psychological depth. However, unlike Freud's emphasis on instinctual drives, Tagore's psychological vision leaned toward a phenomenological and humanistic orientation. He foregrounded lived experience, relational subjectivity, and moral self-awareness (Chakrabarti, 2006).

Tagore's educational philosophy also anticipated humanistic psychology. At Santiniketan, he emphasized creativity, self-expression, and harmony with nature-values later associated with existential and positive psychology.

5. Swami Vivekananda and Spiritual Psychology Swami Vivekananda and the Reinterpretation of Consciousness

Swami Vivekananda's engagement with Western thought, including Herbert Spencer's agnosticism, led him to articulate a spiritual psychology grounded in Vedanta. For Vivekananda, consciousness was not merely an epiphenomenon of matter but an ontological reality (Vivekananda, 1896/1994).

His psychological ideas transcended religious discourse and anticipated modern discussions of mindfulness, self-regulation, and self-transcendence. By challenging strict positivism, he offered an integrative framework that connected subjective experience with metaphysical insight.

6. Cultural Psychology and Epistemic Resistance

Colonial Bengal became a site of epistemological resistance. Western psychology, rooted in empiricism and associationism, was confronted by Indian philosophical traditions emphasizing introspection, self-realization, and collective identity (Dalal, 2010).

Psychology thus evolved as both scientific inquiry and cultural reconstruction. Bengali thinkers translated concepts such as atman (self), chitta (mind), and moksha (liberation) into psychological discourse. This process generated an early form of cultural psychology that recognized the role of language, religion, ritual, and history in shaping identity.

Rather than imitating Western models, Bengali scholars engaged in what may be termed "critical assimilation." They appropriated Western scientific methods while preserving indigenous epistemological autonomy.

7. Conclusion

The history of psychology in Bengal reveals a profound intellectual synthesis. Institutional pioneers like Narendranath Sengupta established psychology as an academic discipline; psychoanalysts like Girindrasekhar Bose reinterpreted Western theory; literary figures like Rabindranath Tagore embodied psychological insight in narrative form; and spiritual thinkers like Swami Vivekananda expanded psychological discourse into existential and metaphysical domains.

Thus, colonial Bengal was not merely a passive recipient of Western psychology but an active

producer of theoretical innovation and cultural reinterpretation. The Bengali contribution to psychology stands as a testament to epistemological plurality and intellectual self-determination. It reminds us that psychology, as a science of the mind, is always embedded within culture, history, and lived experience.

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