

INDIAN ESSAY – 19th Century

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Overview

Essay writing flourished in the hothouse of ideas that was 19th century India. Muslim, Hindu and Christian movements all vied for public attention using the new medium of printed newspapers, magazines and journals. Many of these polemicists used the new language of English, and many of their writings were first serialised in periodicals. Argumentative prose-writing of this kind was produced in every major language, although Calcutta, as befits the capital of the British Raj, was the starting point.

Urdu

Syed Ahmad Khan The case for Islam in a modern India was most forcefully articulated by Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). Islam, he argued in a series of , was compatible with science, English education and British Rule. Equally, after the Revolt of 1857-1858, he had to persuade the colonialists that Muslims were loyal subjects of the crown. His two-sided strategy is illustrated by the two books he wrote in the aftermath of the revolt. In *Asbab-i-baghavati-Hind* ('Causes of the Indian Revolt', 1859), he attempted to explain to the British that their mistakes in governance had caused the rebellion. And in *Sarkashi-yi zila Bijnor* ('A History of the Bijnor Rebellion,') he chastised the people of Bijnor for joining the mutiny. He also found time to write, in English, 'The Mohomedan commentary on the Holy Bible' (1862).

Hindi

Dayananda Saraswati The voice of Hindu reform in Hindi was Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), the leader of the Arya Samaj movement in north India. Scholar and orator, he was a fiery opponent of Islam and Christianity who wrote more than 60 books on every aspect of religion and society. In 1875, he published his most influential, and most controversial. *Satyarth Prakash* ('The Light of Truth') attempts to be study in comparative religion, but misrepresents Islam so badly that it was banned in areas under Muslim rule.

Bharatendu Harishchandra An essayist with a more secular and literary reform agenda was Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-1885). He is considered the 'father of modern Hindi literature,' for his poetry, drama and prose, and especially for his journalism. In 1867, at the age of 17, he established the first literary magazine in Hindi, the *Kavi-vachana-sudha* in 1868, followed in 1873 by *Harishchandra Magazine* (later called *Harishchandra Chandrika*) and *Bala Bodhini* in 1873. Under his editorship, he gathered around him a number of like-minded Hindi writers, who collectively set the modern standard for prose-writing.

Bala Bodhini Harishchandra's journalism can be illustrated by looking at *Balabodhini*, on the several literary journals under his editorship. Though it lasted little more than three years, and though its agenda appeared to be Victorian (for example, in advocating separate spheres for men and women), he used it as a pulpit to argue for various reforms, from the elevation of Hindi to the eradication of child-marriage. Indeed, he was a clever champion of women's causes, using the shield of his traditional journal to advocate change. In the very first issue, for example, he wrote a rousing essay about the fact that equality between the sexes had once existed in India.

Tamil

C.W. Damodaram Pillai One strand of Tamil essay-writing during this century was the traditional commentary on old texts. The master of this art in the 19th century was C.W. Damodaram Pillai (1832-1901), who used the discursive prefaces to his editions of Tamil classical poetry to establish the now accepted canon of Tamil literature.

Arumuka Navalar Another traditional Tamil scholar who contributed to the essay was Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879). Though educated as a Christian, Navalar led a Saivite revival movement to stop mass conversion

to Protestantism that threatened southern Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. In 1851 he published a 250-page prose version of a 12th-century Tamil hagiographical text. As part of his anti-Christian crusade, he used his knowledge of the Bible to publish a tract, *Bibiliya Kutsita* ('Disgusting Things in the Bible'), in 1852.

G. Subramaniya Iyer The essay in Tamil received an enormous boost from the leading journalist in Madras, G. Subramaniya Iyer (1855-1916). As a leading member of the nationalist movement, in 1878 he created *The Hindu*, an English-language weekly (and later daily) newspaper, for the express purpose of campaigning for the appointment of an Indian to the High Court in Madras. He was the paper's owner and editor for twenty years. In 1882, he set up the first Tamil daily, *Swadesamitran*, in order to communicate with the majority of people who did not speak or read English. In 1898, he left the English paper and became editor of the Tamil paper, which he ran until his death in 1916. During his editorship of both these newspapers, he promoted the cause of Indian nationalism through his editorials and editorial policy. As one contemporary put it, his pen was 'dipped in fiery chilli sauce.'

Rajam Aiyar Another strand of Tamil essay-writing was dedicated more to literature (although, as we have seen, politics and literature were tightly intertwined in this period). Rajam Aiyar (1872-1898), an outstanding novelist whose bright flame burned briefly, first made his mark on Tamil literature through a series of critical essays published in the 1890s in a Tamil journal (*Vivekacintamani*) in Madras. His criticism of a famous play ('Manomaniyam') and an essay on humanism ('Man, his Greatness and his Littleness') are regarded as the first stirrings of literary criticism in Tamil.

English

Raj Mohun Roy Raj Mohun Roy (1774-1833) is deservedly called the 'father' of modern India. A Bengali Brahman, and founder of the Brahmo Samaj movement, he wrote crusading essays in Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali and English. In 1803 he published an essay in Persian, *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin*, arguing the truth of monotheism. From 1823, he edited a Bengali-language newspaper (*Sambad Kaumudi*). In 1829, he published a Sanskrit tract condemning idolatry. In 1823, when the British government passed regulations restricting the press in India, he used his fluent English to write a 'letter' to King George IV in protest.

Dadabhai Naoroji If Roy was the 'father' of modern India, its architect was Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917). A Parsi businessman, Naoroji spent fifty years living in England, during which time he delivered speeches, wrote essays and submitted petitions, all with one purpose: to persuade the British government and people that Indians should be granted the same rights as other British subjects. A good example of his argumentative prose is found in *Admission of educated natives into the Indian Civil Service* (London, 1868). In 1892 he himself was the first Indian to be elected to serve in the Parliament at Westminster.

Keshub Chunder Sen The stormy times of the 19th century are illustrated in the life and writing of the Bengali reformer Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884). Born a Hindu, he followed Raj Mohan Roy in the Brahmo Samaj movement, later broke with it and later still left the organisation shattered into three separate parts. In his journalism (and indefatigable speechmaking), he resolutely championed the merger of Christianity and Hinduism, arguing that Christ was Asian and that all Indian religions should unite in one 'church.'

Swami Vivekananda Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was the last in the line of 19th-century Bengali reformers, who wrote in many languages, but reached the world through English. He became an internationally recognised spokesperson for Hinduism after his barnstorming address to a conference of religions in Chicago in 1892. In his long, Bengali essay *Bartaman Bharat* ('Modern India,' 1987), he surveyed the history of India, arguing that castes rise and fall, and that the real purpose of life is to 'love your brothers and sisters.' An English-language collection of essays, taken from his lectures (*Lectures from Colombo to Almora* (1897)), is still widely read.

Questions/Discussion

1. Benedict Anderson coined the term 'imagined community' in 1983 to explain how 'print capitalism' became a decisive factor in the emergence of nationalist movement in Asia. While Anderson focused

primarily on Indonesia, he did consider India, as well. Now, however, there is a great deal more published scholarship on the growth of the media and of nationalist politics in India. A new study focusing on India is overdue.

2. Evaluate the role of English in creating this 'imagined community' in 19th-century India. Only a small percentage of the population could read the language, but were they sufficiently influential to bring about change?
3. What about Urdu, the language of the fading Muslim aristocracy? Was it even more unsuited to fulfil the role of promoting change? What alternatives were available to reformers such as Syed Ahmad Khan?

Reading

Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras* (Oxford, 1997)

Sasha Ebeling, *Colonizing the Realm of Words: The Transformation of Tamil Literature in Nineteenth-Century South India* (SUNY, 2010)

Stephen Hay (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition: Modern India and Pakistan, vol. II* (Columbia, 1988)

Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910. Western Impact, Indian Response* (Sahitya Akademi, 1991)

Texts

1. From Raj Mohan Roy's letter to King George III, protesting against press regulation, 1823

After this Rule and Ordinance shall have been carried into execution, your Memorialists [the signatories] are therefore extremely sorry to observe that a complete stop will be put to the diffusion of knowledge and the consequent mental improvement now going on, either by translations into the popular dialect of this country from the learned languages of the East, or by the circulation of literary intelligence drawn from foreign publications. And the same cause will prevent those Natives who are better versed in the laws and customs of the British Nation from communicating to their fellow-subjects a knowledge of the admirable system of Government established by the British.

2. From *Satyarth Prakash* by Dayananda Saraswati, 1875

They should also counsel then against all things that lead to superstition, and are opposed to true religion and science, so that they may never give credence to such imaginary things as ghosts (Bhuts) and spirits (Preta).

All alchemists, magicians, sorcerers, wizards, spiritists, etc. are cheats and all their practices should be looked upon as nothing but downright fraud.

Young people should be well counseled against all these frauds, in their very childhood, so that they may not suffer through being duped by any unprincipled person.

3. From *Bartaman Bharat* by Swami Vivekananda, 1899

O India, this is your terrible danger. The spell of imitating the West is getting such a strong hold upon you that what is good or what is bad is no longer decided by reason, judgment, discrimination, or reference to the Shastras [sacred laws]. Whatever ideas, whatever manners the white men praise or like are good; whatever things they dislike or censure are bad. Alas! what can be a more tangible proof of foolishness than this?