

# BRAJENDRA NATH SEAL CENTENNIAL ADDRESS

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BY

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ACHARYA BRAJENDRA NATH SEAL  
BIRTH CENTENARY COMMITTEE : CALCUTTA

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## Seal the Polymath

In the entire annals of university education in India there has been no greater savant, no more genuine polymath than Brajendra Nath Seal. No nobler scholar taught in the post-graduate classes and debated at the Senate House of the Calcutta University than this distinguished professor. None has won such reverence for two or three generations among a thousand disciples scattered throughout India for the wisdom blended with humility and childlike simplicity.

Michael Sadler of the Calcutta University Commission compared Seal with Aristotle and called himself a pupil of the new *Stoa poecile* in the Darjeeling hills where they were closeted together for hours discussing a hundred topics. It is impossible to do justice to the wide range of Seal's encyclopaedic learning. As a polymath he is comparable only with Aristotle of Greece, Nagarjuna of India and Thomas Aquinas of Medieval Europe. He could speak with accuracy and acumen on an incredible variety of subjects, ranging from philosophy and religion to social science, from literature and philology to mathematics and statistics, from the ancient Sanskrit lore to modern biology and geology. But certainly more significant than his learning and wisdom were the sweetness of his disposition, love and tenderness and his unparalleled graciousness and generosity in giving away all what he knew to all who came to learn.

No wonder that his *baiṭhakkhāna* was swarming with peoples, great and small, for over fifty years, all eager to dip in this fountain-head of wisdom. In India, more than learning spirituality counts. And Seal was both the intellectual and spiritual patriarch of educated Bengal for two successive generations.

### **Pioneer of the Comparative Study of Civilizations**

What were Seal's enduring contributions to modern thought ? There were many. I would focus attention only to a few that have the greatest significance in the present age of troubles. Seal, as a true disciple of Ram Mohan Roy, the father of comparative studies of institutions in the world, amplified and extended the comparative and historical methods of study of civilization and their combination so as to anticipate the UNESCO anthropological and historical principles underlying the recent programme of compilation of a world history of civilization. With a most remarkable foresight he pleaded in a paper on *Race Origins* (1911), more than half a century back, the need of harmonizing the claims of physical anthropology with its permanent anatomical types, cultural anthropology with its geographical zones of ethnic culture and the philosophy of history with its law of three or more stages for a synthetic view of the development of mankind and civilization. A study of genetic conditions and causes of the biological, psychological and sociological forces at work which have shaped and governed the rise, growth and decadance of peoples and civilizations, can alone enable us to guide and control the future evolution of mankind. Such a synoptic view has not yet emerged, due to the lop-sided specialization in the various branches of social and historical discipline and the absence of an integrated outlook that can emanate only from a masterly synthetic mind like Seal's. Meanwhile, new branches of knowledge, such as social biology, social psychology, social anthropology and linguistics have developed since Seal's time with their impact on the general

history of human culture and progress, showing the unfolding of a common world pattern.

### **The Law of Mankind**

Just as Seal envisaged a new anthropology, a new sociology and a new history of culture on a dynamic basis in accord with the demands of modern conscience and modern spirit, he laid down the principles of the law of the nations that the UNO has yet to define and implement. Every national personality, like every individual personality in the nation, he stresses, has "a right to the realisation of its own ideal ends, satisfactions and values, within the limits imposed by the similar rights of others (individualistic justice), and also a right to co-partnership and co-operation for the common good and common advantage (socialistic justice), within the limits imposed by the preceding clause". The above fundamental principle of international jurisprudence conforms to the legal conscience of the growing age of mankind.

### **The Invisible Mankind of the Ages**

Behind the efforts of the organization of world peace that began faintly and tentatively in the first decade of this century, Seal, the philosopher, envisioned the silent background, an invisible humanity of the ages: there are the unutterable instincts of reverence, awe and adoration for what is above us, the mysterious longings of reverence, love and sympathy for what is below us, without which international diplomacy and commerce and science would be but inciters to world fury and destruction. To this silent background Seal invoked India to play her legitimate role in world history for peace and goodwill building up the life spiritual on the foundations of *ahimsā*. How magnificently and sagaciously did he anticipate the world dreams and aspirations of Gandhi and Nehru!

### **Pioneer of the Comparative Sociology of Religion**

The second lasting contribution of Seal's thought was his

development of a methodology for the comparative sociology of religion. His historico-comparative study of Vaishnavism and Christianity is a most original work that goes far beyond the European science of religion, whether the schools of Spencer, Tylor and Lang or the German schools. Seal advocates a comparative historical study of the speculative conception of the God-head and the socio-ethical or practical attitude of religion blended together in the context of the world view of the culture and of the relations of man, society and cosmos. Comparative history of religion in the West more or less overlooks the practical socio-ethical aspect of religion which is organically, if not also logically, related to the speculative element.

But with Seal, the study of comparative religion was not of mere theoretical interest, even though the historical method received an extended scope and meaning in his hands, allied with a philosophical conception of the development of universal culture and of the Absolute Idea. For in his approach to religion Seal was an ardent disciple of Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the first among the moderns of the world not only to realize that the universal truth of religion was stressed in different ways, at different accents, in different historic utterances, but also to marvellously combine in his personal spiritual growth the fundamental Hindu, Christian and Islamic experiences. For Brajendra Nath Seal there was only one religion for the coming world civilization—a deep mystical religion that fuses historical cults and cultures in one discipline of humanity in the soul of the universal individual.

### **The Polycentric Personality**

History has many centres and the future man, an epitome of world history and civilization, must have a polycentric personality; but the centre of centres in him is beyond them all. That centre, Seal explains, is his experience of communion with the whole or the Absolute in *samādhi* wherein he can unify and synthesize all particular religious values and

experiences. In all his writings Seal stresses how universal humanity in future may realize in individual synthesis of life (and *sādhana*) the disciplines of the great historic religions. "It is as certain as anything in man's future history can be," Seal asserts, "that the future will see a rapprochement of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Vedantism—not a melange, not one concrete universal religion, but world redactions of each of these religions under mutual contact and assimilation." In this respect Seal, like his master Ram Mohan Roy and the modern seer Ramakrishna Paramahansa, is a prophet and precursor of the coming world faith, the humanist pure and simple, watching from his conning tower the procession of universal humanity in universal history. To him all mysteries of the cult and creed were unveiled, and all idols of the cave and temple broken.

### **Seal's Stress of Unity and Wholeness of Indian History**

A third enduring contribution in Seal's thought which has a profound significance for India's political and social evolution of the future is his emphasis on the unity and wholeness of Indian civilization. The evolution of a composite man and composite civilization, according to Seal, is the central and abiding fact of Indian history. The epic of Indian history, he stresses, must tell the story of a great co-operation between North and South, between East and West, between Aryan and Dravidian, between civilized and jungle man, for a great consummation, and this story will point the way to the greater epic of humanity. To-day after more than a decade and half of independence India is experiencing divisive forces of North and South, East and West and of language, caste, community and race that threaten the unity and solidarity of the new-born Republic. How far-sighted and pregnant was his warning: "To turn back now on the entire course of Indian history, to take a stand on that separation and segregation, which are the rejected by-products, the unsuccessful experiments of Nature, in this vast continental laboratory and museum which is India,

is to be untrue to the past and the future of India and of humanity alike.”

### **Prevision of the Issue of Dark Serfs and Slaves**

Two most important social corollaries follow from Seal's comprehensive sociological analysis of Indian peoples and cultures—examples partly of stratification, partly of mosaic cementing and partly of blend and fusion and of social distance and segregation. Seal discerned that India in the big blooming world of the 21st century will be represented by those autochthonous Harijan groups who now form three-tenths and will then form nine-tenths of the Indian population. With isolation and segregation of the multiplying congeries of depressed, poverty-stricken, ignorant, semi-serf peoples multiplying faster than the rest of the population, Indian civilization will perish and India may be another African continent of the future, the unhappy mother of a new race of dark serfs and slaves. India's social issues of caste conflict and segregation far eclipse her economic and political issues urgent as these are. An impenetrable darkness envelops India's future if she cannot before the end of this century abolish all caste inequalities and antagonisms and wipe out dirt, disease and destitution among the Harijan groups that will constitute the predominant majority of the Indian population in the near future.

### **A Vigorous Peasant Democracy**

With an unerring insight into the energy, virility and primitive constructive instincts of the thorough-breds of the Indian soil, Seal recommended to the Mysore Darbar the assimilation of the indigenous village panchayats and communities into the constitution of new democratic government. We have realized in our present political set-up that a sound democracy must be built up from the bottom upwards and that the State or Central Government of the parliamentary mould results in interference, class rule and bureaucratic corruption and oppression from above. Seal was no theoretician

but envisaged the efficacy of the Panchayat Raj in practical politics so that the common people could understand the full meaning of democracy and reap its fruits best. The Western parliamentary bias is still dominant in Indian political thinking today. It will be necessary to go back to Seal's correctives and modifications of the prevalent political set-up, if India has to evolve a real, vigorous peasant democracy, achieving not a camouflaged decentralization as conceded by the Central Government but real decentralization which reveals the growth of real federalism rising layer upon layer on village institutions.

### **The Concept of a Regional University for Bengal**

A fourth major contribution relates to the nature and purpose of the university. His ringing, passionate voice for reform still rings in the ears of many of the audience. Seal carefully went into the various types of universities developed in India and elsewhere and thought much ahead of his times in respect of the true nature and function of a modern Indian university. A university may be of the encyclopaedic or Napoleonic type, devoted to the cultivation of all branches of human learning, such as the Calcutta University which latterly under the guidance of Sir Asutosh Mookerjee fostered and promoted a national ideal in its cultural history courses and its organization of various Indian languages and literatures, helping towards the cause of national integration. Seal commended the principle of a regional university, not merely cultivating the inherited culture and historic traditions of the people but also definitely addressing itself to the tasks of opening up and promoting economic resources and possibilities of the region. The appalling and increasing unemployment of the educated youths in Western Bengal and the associated grave and chronic economic and social unrest and unsettlement show the inadequacy and failure of the universities of Bengal that do not firmly plant themselves on the soil and its economic resources and potentialities. Not merely the agriculture of the level plain, as is the concern of the new Kalyani University,

but also the methods of land reclamation and farming and inland and marine fisheries of the Bengal Delta, the coal and iron of the tableland, the jute and the metallurgical industries of Calcutta and its hinterland, and, above all, the establishment of a much-needed balance between village and city, Calcutta and suburb, agriculture and industry, large industry and auxiliary industry, humanistic and literary and vocational and technical bias in the setting of the vast swelling refugee population, ought to be now the serious academic concerns of a regional university or rather a few regional universities in Western Bengal. It was Seal's timely educational warning which has not been heeded at all.

### **The Prophet of World Humanism**

The regional university should also grow into a truly national and to an international university. Seal is the precursor and prophet of the twentieth century world humanism on the same footing as Erasmus and More were prophets of the fifteenth and sixteenth century European Renaissance. No modern thinker in Europe or America is imbued with such universalism in his social thought. This is both humanly and cosmically universal and is rooted in the orchestration of all the physical and social sciences, in the synthesis of the philosophy of science and the philosophy of values. Universal humanity as the keyword is Seal's system of thought. The individual rises to his full status as the universal or cosmic person. The nation realizes itself in the unlimited community of mankind. Mankind or *Nārāyaṇa* is the goal of each individual, each community, each nation. Universal humanity is the world body and mind of the Lord, his *viśvarūpa*. Each individual, each nation, each community is the Lord's limb, mind and heart. Each in all, and all in each. For it is the Great Being, Universal Humanity, or as others would have it, the Great God, who is being accomplished and fulfilled in every man, woman and child, individually as well as collectively. Doing or suffering, enjoying or enjoyed, we are His hands and

His feet, His eyes and His mouths. Seal quotes the Sanskrit text, "Victory is mine, saith the Lord; defeat is mine, saith His consort of the Infinite Compassion."

India's holiest word is neither *jñāna* nor *karma*, nor *bhakti* but *Dharma*. *Karuṇā* or compassion is the road to universal freedom, *sarvamukti* based on *sarvabhūtātmabhāvanā*. Sitting at his feet for days, months and years as a novice in the formative decade of my intellectual life, I used to hear from the lips of this great sage of modern world humanism soul-stirring words of infinite and eternal compassion of the Lord for all His creatures. "The Lord," he would often quote from Ramanuja, his most favourite philosopher, "beholds creatures crossing the sea of *samsāra* in the frail boat of the flesh, and says to Himself, 'and I, even I, will be tossed about and buffeted by the waves of the seas'." Mankind is one superorganism, one supermind. Like poverty and well-being, like science and knowledge, freedom, justice and goodness belong to all or to none of mankind, here or nowhere. In the march of world history these come as the individuals and nations live in mankind and mankind lives in them, the many in the one, and the one in the many.

### **India's Contribution towards Universal Humanism**

The philosophical concept of universal humanity as a superorganism, a collective being or reality has now faded away in the West. The fixed and intolerant ideologies of Capitalism, Communism and thinly-veiled Racialism stemming from Europe divide mankind today and lead peoples and continents to violence and possible mutual extermination. There is no more in the West that daring quest after universality, that vision of the whole, that eudaemonic inspiration of the Absolute after the sunset splendours of German and British idealism vanished from the Western sky in the first quarter of the 19th century. Modern science in the West breaks up the organic unity of life and consciousness into fragmentary and unreal abstractions. Western thought derived from

Cartesian and Kantian rationalism abstracts the subject from the object and both from the Absolute. It abstracts knowledge from practice, thinking from acting, intelligence from emotion, reason from will. It abstracts the moral order from the cosmic order and the idea of the beautiful from the world of sense and sensibility. With so many abstractions mankind fails to realize the unity, wholeness and harmony of life, mind and cosmos. Subjectivism, relativism and "value-purging" in the social and cultural sciences sharpen in the West the cleavages between different phases and dimensions of human nature, values and social experience that are treated autonomously without regard to the whole, whether the whole may be conceived as the complete human person, the integrated community, mankind as a whole or the metaphysical order of the cosmos.

Only the generalizing, synthetic, unifying imagination and intuition of India can inject a new spirit into philosophical world-building that can never be accomplished without a grasp of the Absolute, an enthusiasm and delight in the One and the Universal. In India the mutually interwoven conceptions of the Universal Man (*Nārāyaṇa*, *Viśvātman*), cosmic values and the Community of the Cosmos (*Viśvam bhavatyekaniḍam*) comprise the transcendent principle of the knowledge of civilization, grasped only as suprahistorical reality. This constitutes the classical philosophical foundation of cosmic humanism in Indian thought.

### **The Philosophical Crisis of the Age**

The present crisis of mankind's wars and revolutions is fundamentally rooted in a philosophical crisis. The philosophical problem alters its shape and import for mankind from age to age. The modern world has been groping decade by decade after a new system of mankind, after a universal religion, after inviolable human rights, after the law and commonwealth of mankind. World organization, agencies and institutions are being shaped, and laws, covenants and agreements, fashioned. But the warm breath is wanting that

can bring the dry bones together and stir them into life. In Indian mind and civilization the key-note is the quest of the Whole and Real and Mankind-and-Cosmos-total, beyond all dogmas, doctrines and symbols—the focus of absolute and transcendent values. Of this is born the sense of cosmic unity which enables one to see the whole in the part, the universal in the particular, and the transcendent in the concrete. The specifying, differentiating, individualizing intelligence of the West has done its work. The unity of mankind in this century can truly be built up on the synthetic speculative ardour and the metaphysical genius of India, on her knowledge of the truths and values of the Absolute, the Universal and the Transcendent. There can be no deliverance for mankind from within or without except such as comes from the consciousness of a common humanism and a common cosmism, a sense of the universal procession of mankind as an everliving symbol of that mysterious Life (*cetanā*) which is at once immanent and transcendent in every man, community and nation. It is the Universal Self of man and humanity, the Truth of all truths, the Being of all that lives and moves that alone can redeem the feverish and ignorant individual and the distracted and fallen humanity. Such is Seal's message of universal humanism for this century.