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## **Shinron – The Literary Foundation of Japanese Nationalism**

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Aizawa Seishisai

Our divine land is where the sun rises and where the primordial energy originates. The heirs of the great Sun (The Emperors) have occupied the Imperial Throne from generation to generation without change from time immemorial. Japan's position is at the vertex of the earth makes it the standard for the nations of the world. Indeed, it casts its light over the world, and the distance which the resplendent imperial influence reaches knows no limit. (Aizawa Seishisai, *Shinron*)

***Shinron* (New Thesis):** *Shinron* is a specific literary document that attempts to emphasize and express the need to establish the national essence of Japan in the face of the probable influx of external cultural influences. It captured the imagination of the people of the time but most importantly, it influenced scores of thoughtful people for generations and proved to be a clarion call for preserving the spirit of Japan amid all

the changes. It has earned the status and import of a national classic and its influence is still pervasive on Japanese psyche. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the text in question has Catholic context, rooted in the larger discourse of cultural preservation with Japan as a setting. The success of *Shinron* is to bring all the traditional perceptions about the Yamato nation and its specificity in a coherent form and present it to the nation.

It is written by Aizawa Seishisai, a Japanese nationalist thinker and visionary of Mito school, in 1825 as a result of observation of the wave of cultural invasion crashing on the shores of the Yamato country that is Japan. Aizawa Seishisai was primarily a Confucian scholar who strongly believed in the system of the emperor and considered the emperor as 'divine sovereign'. He endorses the mythological validation of the Emperor as the rightful ruler of Japan who is a direct descendent of the sun goddess Amaterasu. Japan is the only country, believed Seishisai, where the chain of divinity that springs from the sun goddess continues without a break which makes it a truly distinguished nation. This logic was further stretched to bring the whole nation and the populace in the firmament of divinity. This idea was appropriated by the Meiji oligarchs and military enthusiasts to justify the building of Japanese empire and Japan's specific privilege to rule over the Asian realm.

Aizawa's fame as one of the leading exponents of the later Mitogaku came from his work *Shinron* (New Arguments), which he wrote in 1825. It was read widely by the politically-conscious and active samurai of the Bakumatsu days (i.e., last days of Bakufu) because it dealt with the question of meeting foreign threats, which was then foremost in the minds of the Japanese. It became, so to speak, the political manifesto of the Shishi (patriotic samurai), and it provoked inspiration to a great many samurai who were looking for a proper answer to the challenge facing the country. (Murthy 62-63)

It is a collection of essays which deals with the threat perception of Japan by Western ships which were trying to reach Japan during a time when it followed the policy of isolation. Aizawa Seishisai acknowledged the scientific advance made by the West and felt that unless Japan was going to modernize its army and strengthen the nation by uniting people it cannot stand the powerful hostile waves reaching its shore.

Aizawa found in his observation that the people of Western nations are unified by Christianity and the devotion towards the religion has made them a purpose-driven potent entity. It is not possible for any nation to grow powerful without the unity of the people and galvanizing them for the national purpose. The West, empowered by a unifying religious fervour, was reaching out to nations and bringing them in its commanding sphere of influence. Seishisai concluded that religion can also be used in Japan for unifying its people and be used as a fulcrum for instilling morality to serve the nation. According to Seishisai, external influences have diluted the spirit of Japan and only Shinto, the indigenous faith of Japan can provide the basis for such unity and moral compass. It is primarily because the imperial system and divinity of the Emperor finds its legitimacy from Shinto beliefs. Hence, in order to foster loyalty amongst people towards the Emperor it is imperative to have Shinto and its praxis as the predominant impetus guiding the conduct of people.

The pivotal contribution of *Shinron* is its formulation of the idea of Kokutai which can be translated as the National Polity or 'National Essence' or 'National Entity.' Kokutai established the importance of nation beyond the interests of the individuals and placed the Emperor on the highest pedestal, who embodies the essence of the national

sovereignty. The emperor is sacred and divine and hence inviolable. It attempts to delineate the idea of the notion of an individual when one tries to conceive the nation and his/her place in it. It also emphasises loyalty of an individual towards the national cause and submerge one's individuality in the national collective consciousness. Kokutai laid the idea of 'Yamato Damashi', that is, the spirit of Japan, which inspired the nationalist samurai, particularly *shishi*, during the end of Tokugawa period, the imperial army during the building and expanding the empire of Japan.

The idea of Kokutai was developed by Aizawa Seishisai through the work of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and later scholars of Kokugaku school, who tried to purge the Japanese culture from overwhelming Chinese influence, by re-establishing the supremacy of Japanese ancient texts Kojiki and Nihonshoki. Norinaga considered the narrative presented in these books as truth. He presented his ideas in his famous text Kojikiden which is an interpretative commentary on Kojiki. The Shinto beliefs are interpreted as the truth which claims that the Emperor is the descendent of the sun goddess Amaterasu. Hirata Atsutane further developed and propagated the ideas of Kokugaku. P.A.N. Murthy has highlighted the work of Hirata Atsutane as one of the inspirations of Kokutai:

His views on Kokutai (national polity) were in the nature of an amplification of what Hirata Atsutane had stated in Koda tai'I, namely that the Japanese nation was a vast family with the Emperor as its lord and master. (Murthy 63)

However, the literary embodiment of all the previous thoughts was created by Aizawa Seishisai in Shinron. In order to protect the culture and religion and, therefore, the national essence, Seishisai developed the idea of Kokutai for his time which became a classic for nationalists in Japan. Shinron's central idea of Kokutai was further interpreted with passage of time to suit the socio-cultural milieu but its central core remained the defining feature in all the future literary works and called for the preservation of national identity and characteristic cultural aspects.

The ideas enshrined in Shinron had wide-ranging influence on socio-cultural and political milieu of Japan. However, its influence on the development of a series of literature with Kokutai as their integral part is of prime importance. The idea of Kokutai advocated in Shinron was critiqued by Fukuzawa Yukichi, considered as the father of the movement 'Enlightenment and Civilization'. Yukichi agreed that Japan has powerful national entity but he contended that it is not only a specific characteristic of Japan. Fukuzawa Yukichi further elaborated the idea of Kokutai and argued that other nations also have their distinguished national sovereignty. However, Yukichi also agreed on preserving the cultural capital of Japan for its distinguished identity.

The idea of Kokutai influenced the ideas of several scholars of Japan even during the Meiji period who believed that uncritical and indiscriminate imitation of Western culture, ideas and institutions would not augur well for Japanese identity and nationalism. Sakuma Zozan's idea of including the scientific advance of the West for strengthening Japan. However, he also emphasised that the Japanese culture and its essence must be preserved in times of assimilation of ideas coming from other cultures. His central assumption is reflected by his celebrated slogan of 'Eastern Moral and Western Science'. Other scholar Motoda Eifu (1818-1891) also incorporated the idea of Kokutai but also advocated the adoption of Western knowledge and expertise. The works of these scholars collectively produced the idea which came to be referred as enlightened

nationalism. Enlightened nationalism maintained that it is important to preserve the spirit and essence of the nation while assimilating the important ideas coming from other nations.

This movement was led by men like Shiga Shigetaka (1863-1927), Miyake Setsurei (1860-1945), and Kuga Katsunan (1857-1907), who were not fundamentally anti-Western. Essentially, they wanted to establish a firm cultural or national identity that would enable them to adopt the best from the West while preserving the best, or the "essence" of Japan (Hane 134).

The scholars of enlightened nationalism resorted to the literary media for awakening the national pride in its culture; many newspapers were also published by adherents of enlightened nationalism. *Nippon* (Japan) was a newspaper started by Kuga Katsunan (1857-1907) in 1889 in which he advocated the idealistic nationalism in the light of liberalism. He expressed that it is important for a nation to foster nationalism in order to stand in the ranks of great powers and preserve its national independence. It was also stressed that the culture of a nation should not be overshadowed by foreign culture to an extent as to lose its own specific cultural characteristics. *Nihonjin* (Japanese) was yet another magazine edited by Shiga Shigetaka (1863-1927) in which he tried to attract the people's attention towards indiscriminate adoption of Western values which were inherently detrimental to the cultural fabric of Japan. *Shinzenbi Nihonjin* (*Goodness, Truth and Beauty of Japanese People*) was a work of Miyake Setsurei (1860-1945), a member of enlightened nationalists, which highlighted the outstanding features of Japanese people. Miyake's nationalism maintained that to work for the good of a nation is to work for the good of the world. It was also advocated that cultivating one's race was tantamount to the elevation of the human race. However, Miyake opposed the idea of militarisation and advocated only nationalism with liberal values.

The idea of Kokutai was also used as a guiding principle of the Meiji Constitution (1889) to ensure the preservation of fundamental values of Japan especially when Western elements were incorporated for the modernization of Japan. The principles aligning with Kokutai were to be kept in mind as the directive principles for the statesmen, bureaucrats and government officials while discharging their duties.

Known as Kokutai, it supplied a working philosophy to bureaucrats and party politicians alike, and was deliberately propagated by educators and sections of the intelligentsia, by the press, and by the armed forces (Mason and Caiger 294).

The nationalist spirit of Japanese people is also expressed through the poems written by many people. In these poems, people have expressed their penchant for the nation and loyalty for the Emperor. The literature produced by independent poets, including the Emperor has also supported the ideals of Kokutai.

Barry Richards has mentioned a poem written by the Emperor Meiji reflecting the idea of Kokutai in 1910:

*'Should we not preserve in dignity  
This land of peace  
Handed down from the Age of the Gods?'* (Richards 78)

In 1945, the Japanese Commander left a poem before committing suicide (Harakiri), Barry Richards cites another poem reflecting the extent of loyalty for the nation:

*'Though with the last arrow gone,  
My body dyes Heaven and Earth,  
My spirit shall return, shall return,  
To defend the motherland.'* (Richards 110)

Various interpretations of the Kokutai shrouded the basic idea of the term in confusion and it became difficult to have a clear meaning of the term. In order to dispel the vagueness created by the interpretation, the government constituted a group of leading scholars of Japan in 1937 to present definitive exposition of the meaning of the term. This produced an important text *Kokutai no Hongi* which dealt with the meaning of the Kokutai. The Kokutai was explicated in a religious or metaphysical sense based on faith at the expense of reason. The Emperor remained the embodiment of the Kokutai and the loyalty towards the Emperor remained the highest virtue for people. Nearly two million copies of the *Kokutai No Hongi* was sold in six years despite it being a small but complex book to comprehend. It was also included as a part of the textbook for instilling a sense of nationalism and teaching the importance of the cultural essence of Japan.

The impact of Shinron is distinctly visible on the literature of Nihonjinron. It is the collective term dedicated to a genre of literature produced after the Second World War which have the cultural uniqueness, identity and specificity of Japan, its people and polity –

(against) the background of so-called Nihonjinron literature, which seeks to establish Japan as a unique, exclusive, and homogenous polity... (Goto-Jones 142).

The idea of the Kokutai enshrined in *Shinron* inspired and continues to inspire and influence the theme and content of the prominent literary figures as well as the popular media. Great literary figures such as Yukio Mishima and Ōe Kenjuro (awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994), though they differed in their vision, also included the idea of Kokutai as the inspiration for patriotic protagonists of their literature. With the defeat of Japan in the Pacific War, the influence of the Kokutai also diminished. Kokutai no Hongi was banned by Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers during the occupation period of Japan from 1945 to 1952.

The pivot of the Kokutai was the symbol of the Emperor which came to a crushing collapse with the renunciation of divinity by the Emperor in 1946. The Emperor, who was considered a divine figure, has now condescended to a common human being with limitations, frailty and fallibility. However, in the present context with the rising nationalism and identity debates in Japan the idea of Kokutai has begun to resurface and capture the literary space again in Japan. The voice to amend the constitution and reclaim the divinity of the Emperor is growing loud. The ideas introduced in Shinron are once again becoming increasingly relevant in present Japan.

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