

# HINDU REVIVALISM IN BENGAL

RAMMOHUN TO  
RAMAKRISHNA

KAMAL KUMAR GHATAK

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# **HINDU REVIVALISM IN BENGAL: RAMMOHAN TO RAMAKRISHNA**

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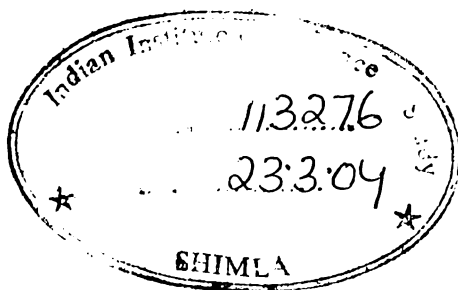
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To  
My Mother,  
—Now a Memory



## PREFACE

I have studied for some years different aspects of Hindu revivalism in the 19th Century. My respected teacher, Professor Anil Chandra Banerjee first suggested that I should take up this work but cautioned that the subject would be difficult. My close friend, Professor Amitabha Mukherjee prepared a detailed plan of the work and constantly helped me to proceed with the subject. No good word is enough to express my gratitude to them.

So much has been written on the subject that it is difficult to discover new facts. While I have studied original sources I have also used materials from secondary works. My standpoint is basically different from those who call it New Hindu Movement or Neo Hinduism.

So I would like to state clearly my views on the subject. First, there was nothing substantially new in the New Hinduism. What Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda preached was orthodox Hinduism. This has been clearly stated by Sister Nivedita in her book *The Master as I saw Him* (Calcutta 1977, Page2, first published in 1910) Secondly, the revivalist leaders were communal and to be more specific, anti-Muslim. Some scholars have seen too much in one essay of Bankim Chandra, *Bangadesher Krishak*. It will be an over-simplification to say that their Hinduism was broadbased and their leaders were *progressive*. Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were different from the earlier leaders. But even Sri Ramakrishna maintained that only *Sanatan Dharma* would survive (*Kathamrita* Part 2 Cal B.S. 1358 P.249). Prof. Sumit Sarkar has pointed out that Vivekananda had no specific program for the uplift of the down-trodden (*Modern India*, Macmillan, 1985 P. 73). Thirdly, there was no organised movement in any sense of the term. Many people flocked to the Dharmasabha or to the saint of Dakshineswar. But the mass of the people clung to their old beliefs and rituals. Even at the close of the 20th Century we have a fairly rigid caste system, untouchability and bride burning. This is a sad commentary on the so-called New Hindu Movement.

In the first half of the 19th Century Hinduism was completely on the defensive, it had to face the challenge of the Christian missionaries, the Brahmos and the Derozians. Derozian radicalism did not last long. The first split in the Brahmo Samaj (1866) strengthened the revivalist leaders. Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and Rajnarain Basu, unlike Keshab Chandra Sen refused to break away from Hinduism. Rajnarain's lecture on the Superiority of Hindu religion (1872) was a turning point in the religious history of 19th Century Bengal. The Adi Brahmo Samaj joined the Hindu leaders in resisting the Christian Missionaries. The second split in the Brahmo Samaj (1878) and the appearance of Sri Ramakrishna changed the whole

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picture. An aggressive Hinduism stormed the citadel of the Brahmo Movement. In the process it also cried a halt to progressive social reform.

I have tried to discuss this changing scenario. The ideas of the principal Hindu leaders have been discussed in some detail. I strongly hold the view that there was no such thing as *The New Hindu Movement*.

I have received immense help from Sri Sushil Mukherjea, Director of Minerva Associates and his colleagues. My pupil, Prof. Ananda Gopal Gupta of Navadwip Vidyasagar College helped me in many ways. For all of them I put on record my special note of thanks and gratitude.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## HINDUISM ON THE DEFENSIVE

### PATTERN OF HINDU RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN BENGAL IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY.

THE EARLY years of the 19th century witnessed significant developments in the religious and social life of Bengal. These changes were connected primarily with the spread of English education. But English education alone does not explain the changes that occurred—the attitudes of the different social classes to these changes. The Bengal Renaissance was a complex phenomena and our effort will be to analyse the position of Hinduism in the 19th century, and show how this position affected the different social classes in Bengal. This analysis, in our view, cannot be simplistic. We do not propose to enter into the recent controversies regarding the nature and limitations of the Bengal Renaissance. This is not to say that we are not conscious of the economic structure in which the changes occurred. While any analysis of the 19th-century social changes in Bengal should be multidimensional, our effort will be to discuss Religion as the major theme. Other features which will crop up in the course of our discussion will be peripheral to this central theme.

A distinguished historian has thus summed up the position of Hinduism at the end of the 19th century: “An aggressive Hinduism replaced the shy passive creed that used formerly to be ashamed of itself and stand ever on the defensive against growing foes and a diminishing number of adherents”.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that at the beginning of the 19th century the situation was completely different. At that time Hinduism was completely on the defensive. Its pattern, ideals and values were subjected to serious challenges from different quarters. The challenges and criticisms which Hinduism faced were mainly due to its temporary impotence, lack of leadership, and the overzealous attitude of its dissidents and antagonists. We shall try to identify these factors in the course of our discussion. But it will be well to remember that the crisis was temporary. The critics for a time carried everything before them, as there was none who could give an able leadership to the Hindus and explain, as Vivekananda did later on, the true meaning of Hinduism.

We get a very dismal picture of Hinduism at the beginning of the 19th century from contemporary and near contemporary writers. "The whole country, specially the province of Bengal, was steeped up in the most debasing form of idolatry. The moral and spiritual aspects of religion and its elevating influence on character had long been lost sight of and in their place the grossest superstitions had taken hold of the national mind. Men were clinging to dead forms and trying to draw spiritual sustenance therefrom as children cling to the corpses of their dead mothers".<sup>2</sup>

The priests had developed a vested interest in the system. The Kathakas made their living by giving popular expositions of Hindu mythology, often working upon the imagination of the people. Revolting practices like the Sati, the throwing of children into the Ganges by their mothers in fulfilment of certain vows, and even the suicide of devotees beneath the wheels of the car of Jagannath at Puri were looked upon as pious acts of great merit. Numerous minor deities had come to be included in the Hindu pantheon of Bengal, and their worship was associated with the slaughter of buffaloes, and drinking orgies. Tantricism which Sivnath Sastri considers as 'a legacy of later day Buddhism' had many thousands of adherents in different parts of Bengal. It encouraged open indulgence in sensuality and many secret and demoralising practices. Vaishnavism had flourished in Bengal in the 16th century, thanks to the efforts of Sri Chaitanya and his disciples, the seven fathers of the Vaishnava Church (Saptagoswami). Vaishnavism with its message of universal love the devotion to God, was an antithesis of Tantricism. But its followers gradually lost sight of the fundamental principles of their faith. They were now more concerned with the forms rather than the principles of their religion. Obsessed with sectarian fights, the Vaishnavas were immersed in vice and sensuality as much as the Tantrics. The Brahmin priests were the greatest beneficiary of this state of affairs. They formed a parasitic class which thrived on the ignorance and superstition of the masses. In general, the priests were not acquainted with the original scriptures of the Hindus. There were seminaries of Sanskrit learning at Nadia and other places. But the scholars there did not care much for Vedic literature, and were engaged mainly in the study of grammar, rhetoric, belles-letters, law and logic. Even if some of

the priests were conscious of the degenerate state of religion, they did not want to strike at the popular prejudices, because they had developed a vested interest in the system which provided them with their means of livelihood. Image-worship, rituals, ceremonies, and observance of the rules of caste were encouraged by the priests with meticulous care and high enthusiasm.

In spite of all these limitations, religion remained a source of inspiration to the common Hindus for benevolent activities. It promoted their Spiritual growth and charitable disposition.<sup>3</sup> It has also been pointed out by a modern historian that the majority of the Hindu population in Bengal accepted the whole systems of Hindu mythology, and preference for any particular deity did not mean to them the complete repudiation of others.<sup>4</sup> Then again, there was no major difference between the religious practices of the educated classes and those of the ordinary Hindu masses. The more enlightened among the former were acquainted with the idea of the unity of Godhead and the symbolical nature of idol-worship. Ramram Basu, a writer of Bengali prose in the early nineteenth century, offered prayers to the Supreme Being in the preface to his book *Lipimala* (1802). H. H. Wilson has pointed out that the Brahmins who compiled a code of Hindu law by the command of Warren Hastings prefaced their performance by affirming the equal merit of every form of religious worship.<sup>5</sup>

In his preface to the *Translation of the Ishopanishad* (Calcutta, 1816) Rammohan observed, "Many learned Brahmanas are perfectly aware of the absurdity of Idolatry and were informed of the nature of the purer mode of Divine Worship. But as in the worship, rituals, ceremonies, and festivals of Idolatry, they find the source of their comforts and fortune, they not only never fail to protect Idol worship from all attacks, but even advance and encourage it".

A number of non-conformist groups appeared in the Hindu society in the 18th century. Members of these groups were worshippers of *gurus* or religious preceptors. They denounced caste, idol-worship, and polytheism. In the early 18th century an ascetic named Aulchand founded the sect of Kartabhajas. He preached in various parts of Nadiya till his death in 1769 A.D. One of his principal disciples was Ramsaran Pal of Ghoshpara, near Naihati. The heterodox sect of 'Spastadayakas' was founded by Rupram Kaviraj,

a disciple of Krishna Chandra Chakravarty of Saidabad (in Murshidabad). The followers of this sect denied the Divine character and despotic authority of the *guru*. The Balarami Sect was founded by one Balaram Hari of Meherpur, Nadiya (1786-1851). His followers ignored caste rules and worshipped him as an *avatara* or incarnation of God. The Sahebhdhanis and the Khusi Biswas of Krishnanagar and the Ramvallabhis of Bansabati were similar heterodox sects. They believed in the one-ness of God and renounced caste and idolatry. In 1802, Joshua Marshman of the Serampore Mission reached the village of Chundooreah where he had an animated discussion with one Sibaram Das who had rejected idolatry, established a new sect and collected nearly 20,000 followers. Early in the 19th century the Reverend Claudius Buchanan mentioned a class of Hindu sceptics, who were found at Jessore and led by one Niloo at this time. "The existence of so many heterodox religious groups and sects in Bengal in the 18th century proved that the people were not completely satisfied with the superstitions of their forefathers and some among them were inclined to enquire, and think and determine for themselves".<sup>6</sup>

These organisations are important for what they thought rather than for what they achieved. They were conscious of the basic tenets of Hinduism and the evils of caste and idolatry. But they could not bring about any major change in the Hindu society. This was due to lack of proper leadership and co-ordination among the organisations, and the absence of missionary zeal among their followers. Moreover, in most cases, their founders were low-caste people whose leadership the upper castes were not prepared to accept.

The prevalence of superstitions and the undue emphasis on ceremonies and rituals in place of true religion are explained by one major fact of contemporary history—want of proper education. The majority of the population were living in the darkness of ignorance. "The little education, that was imparted to those who carried on the ordinary business of the nation was of the most rudimentary kind. It was accounted no shame even by a Brahmin to be unlettered. There was no literature of the people, so to say, and its absence was supplied by a number of poetical works many of which, however, were highly demoralising in their teachings".<sup>7</sup>



The political turmoil of the eighteenth century had its demoralising influence on social life. Many centuries of contact with Islam had resulted in a slackening of rigid caste rules. But the conservative Brahmins still dominated the Hindu society. In spite of their colossal ignorance, the priests had a position of honour in the Hindu society. Sivanath Sastri mentions the story of a spice-seller who had collected the dirt from the feet of a hundred thousand Brahmins to wear it as a remedy for an attack of leprosy. This is an extreme case, but it reflects the spirit of the age, so far as the common people were concerned. Poverty and political servitude had stultified the growth of the human mind. People lived and behaved like immature children, devoid of proper judgement and rationality.

Society was caste-ridden. Caste divisions gave rise to numerous complexities in the Hindu social structure. The system of Kulinism, a mark of social aristocracy and hereditary in character, is said to have been introduced in Bengal in the 11th century by Ballala Sena, a ruler of the Sena dynasty. Kulinism gave rise, in course of time, to extensive polygamy among the higher castes, particularly the Brahmins. A marriage alliance with a Kulin was looked upon as a privilege for the family. Kulin was obliged to give his daughters in marriage to other Kulins, and non-Kulins also tried to secure Kulin husbands for their daughters in order to enhance their social status. Hence, a large number of girls were often married to a single Kulin gentleman. The position was both ridiculous and horrible. A young girl had the satisfaction of having a Kulin but absentee husband, whom she might meet once or twice in a lifetime. She was therefore compelled to live in enforced celibacy even during her husband's lifetime. When the husband died, she had two alternatives, both equally severe. She could burn herself along with the dead body of her husband and become a Sati or, she could enter a life of darkness and despair which was the lot of the average Hindu widow from which the only escape was through death. Hundreds of these women lived a life of drudgery and despair without any decent means of support, and neglected by relatives and friends.

Pandit Sivanath Sastri in his *History of the Brahmo Samaj* (1974 Edn. pp 4-8) gives a graphic picture of the social degeneration of the period. "Those that were well-to-do wasted their time and substance in the flying Kites, in witnessing fights between rams and

between bulbuls (a kind of bird well-known in India), in getting up dances of professional nautch girls and operas called *jatras*, which often included scenes highly immoral in their tendencies. Many again squandered away their fortunes in still more frivolous pursuits. Iswar Chandra, the Raja of Nadiya, had spent in 1790 Rs. 1,00,000/- on the marriage of two monkeys and those days were not entirely over in 1830. Whilst the rich wasted their substances in such vanities, the poor regaled themselves with impromptu retaliatory songs, often couched with most vulgar and indecent language”.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHALLENGE TO HINDU RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL TRADITION

#### THE MISSIONARY CHALLENGE

THE CHRISTIAN Missionaries were the first and perhaps, the most bitter critics of the Hindu religion and society in the 19th century. It will not be fair to condemn the East India Company for the hostile attitude of the missionaries towards the Hindus. The Company believed in a policy of *laissez faire* in matters of religion and social tradition. When, in the middle of the 18th century, the Company assumed administrative power in Bengal it did nothing to disturb the religious beliefs and social practices of the people. The new government considered itself an heir to the legacies of the past rulers of this country. The Directors of the Company believed that for the sake of stability of their own position, they should not only recognise the religions of the people but should also support and patronise them as fully as the Indian rulers had done before them. Hence they took under their management and patronage the temples and mosques, paid money for rebuilding and repair of important shrines and the salaries of the officials. While the East India Company's primary concern was trade, it adopted a cautious, almost hostile attitude towards the missionaries. The Company refused to allow the latter to settle down or preach in their territories. With such surroundings, where the Europeans in general had abandoned the Christian morality and in an atmosphere where the European government showed definite hostility "it was difficult for missionary work to gain any foothold at all"<sup>2</sup>

The earliest Christian missionaries to work in Bengal had, however, arrived in the sixteenth century. These Jesuit missionaries came to Bengal with the Portuguese captains and pirates. It has been rightly said that "the sword allied itself with the cross".<sup>3</sup> The Portuguese power gradually declined in Bengal in the 17th century. The Jesuits left Bengal. But a number of Roman Catholics continued to live there. Their impact on the subsequent history of Bengal was practically nil.

The first Protestant missionary to arrive in Bengal was the Reverend John Zachariah Kiernander from the Royal Danish Mission which had been sent to South India. His mission in south India was broken up by the French. At Clive's invitation Kiernander came to Bengal in 1758 and started work among the Roman Catholics. But he soon became bankrupt, retired to Chinsurah and died in 1799.

John Thomas, a Baptist Doctor with zeal for missionary work arrived in Bengal as a surgeon of a Company's ship. "He met four persons only who were reputed to be religious people and favourable towards the missionary project. They were Charles Grant, William Chambers, David Brown and George Udny".<sup>4</sup>

Charles Grant with his great sympathy for missionary work thought seriously of making an appeal to the Government for their support in forwarding a mission for Bengal and Bihar. A paper was drawn up, 'a proposal for establishing a Protestant Mission in Bengal and Bihar' (1786). The Governor-General, Lord Cornwallis, however, declined to support it. The East India Company's Government thus set its face against any official involvement in the missionary cause. The position becomes clear when we find that William Carey and the Baptist Missionaries had to set up their headquarters outside Calcutta in the Danish settlement of Serampore. (1799)

This attitude of the Company's Government did not change till 1813 when the Charter Act was passed by the British Parliament. This Act removed all restrictions on missionary activities in India.

The missionaries now started to come in greater numbers to India. The first Bishop of Calcutta, J. F. Middleton, arrived in 1814. Lord Hastings continued the Government's cautious policy towards the missionaries. Hastings as well as Amherst followed a policy of non-interference with the religious prejudices of the people. Lord William Bentinck was more cautious about the missionaries. His recall from the Governorship of Madras on account of the Vellore Mutiny might have influenced his subsequent attitude towards the missionaries.

The missionaries did not criticise the Government in Bengal. Joshua Marshman of the Serampore Mission observed in 1807, "Resistance to government never made any part of our plan".<sup>5</sup>

When the Charter Act of 1813 removed all restrictions, a great impetus was given to missionary activities in India. The London

Missionary Society had sent their first agent Nathaniel Forsyth to Calcutta in 1798. But the latter retired to Chinsurah, then a Dutch settlement. In 1816 the L. M. S. shifted their headquarters back to Calcutta. The Church Missionary Society opened their first mission centre at Garden Reach, Calcutta in 1816. Another centre was opened at Burdwan by Lt. Stewart of this mission. The Calcutta Diocesan Committee of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge was set up by Bishop Middleton in 1815. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in foreign parts also set up its Diocesan Committee in Calcutta in 1818. The Baptist Mission of Serampore expanded its activities further. Before 1823 they established ten stations in different parts of Bengal.

“The missionaries constituted an overt challenge to Hinduism. Never before was the Hindu ideal of life, its whole apparatus of social organisation, subjected to such ruthless criticism as was done by the missionaries. The civilisation and religion of the West were assailing every phase of Heathenism, its idolatry, its mythology, its castes and other absurdities and everything relating to Hinduism was subjected to a scathing criticism and merciless exposure”.<sup>6</sup>

The attitude of the missionaries was moulded largely by Charles Grant’s “Observations”. Grant’s long residence in Bengal made his “Observations” an authority from which the missionaries drew arguments freely in many of their subsequent writings. Grant painted a dark picture of the Bengali Hindus. “They want truth, honesty and good faith in an extreme of which European society furnishes no example. In Bengal, a man of real veracity and integrity is a great phenomenon... frauds, deceptions, and procrastinations... discord, hatred, abuse, slanders, injuries, complaints and litigations, all the effects of selfishness unrestrained by principle prevail to a surprising degree”.<sup>14</sup>

“The character of the whole multitude of Hindu deities, male and female is another source of immorality. The legends and histories of their actions are innumerable and in the highest degree extravagant, obscure, ridiculous and incredible”.<sup>15</sup> Grant argued that the introduction of English education would shortly and silently subvert and undermine the fabric of error and then ultimately “idolatry with its false principles and corrupt practices... its ridiculous ceremonies and degrading superstitions, its lying legends

and fraudulent impositions would fall. The reasonable service of the only and infinitely perfect God would be established".<sup>16</sup> Rev. W. Ward was one of the Baptist missionaries who remained in Serampore from 1799 to 1818 and again from 1821 to 1823. In his book entitled. *A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindus (1815)* Ward collected numerous information about the Hindus in the early 19th century, but he had no understanding of the basic tenets of Hinduism. His work was naturally reduced to a scathing commentary on the rites and practices of the Hindus in this period. The missionaries, however, accepted Ward's Book as an authoritative exposition of the Hindu way of life. Ward's views are so prejudiced and his understanding so imperfect, that only extensive quotations from his book can help us to look at his standpoint. "The heathen deities owe their origin to the common darkness and depravity of men; who rejecting the doctrine of the divine unity and considering God as too great or too spiritual to be the object of human worship chose such images as their darkness or passions suggested".<sup>17</sup> The author believes that the disclosure of real facts respecting the mythology of the Hindus would tend to elucidate the origin of idolatry of all the Eastern Nations and he offers a few conjectures, the fruit of his own enquiries. "The Veda declares that He is that which has never been seen or known. In other words, he is the Athenian 'unknown God'. The one God is never worshipped by the Hindus as a mere spiritual being, but always as United to matter and before some Image".<sup>18</sup>

Ward raises the question: What is the object of worship among the Hindus? He gives the answer himself. "It is not the one God, but this compound being, the soul of the world enclosed in the matter, the Primeval energy, the prolific and vivifying principle dwelling in all animated existences or in other words, the personification of whatever the disordered imagination of the Hindus have attributed to this God encompassing himself with delusion".<sup>19</sup>

"The worship of the primary elements possibly originated in the doctrine of the Vedas, respecting the eternity of matter, for we find in these writings the elements deified and called by appropriate names as in the modern mythology of the Hindus. The worship of the heavenly bodies may probably be attributed to the astronomical notions of the Hindus; and as the worship of the heathens has always

been dictated by their fears and hopes, rather than by their reason, it is not a matter of surprise that they should have worshipped the hosts of heaven while they believed the stars to have been a mighty and immediate influence on their destiny here and hereafter.<sup>20</sup>

Ward's work is devoted to a denunciation of the Hindu religion, and he is determined to reject everything associated with that religion as irrational. But, at places, he has inadvertently made observations which disprove his central theme. He writes, "Images have been chosen to fix the mind of the worshipper and attributes of power and splendour and various fables having been added in the forms of devotion and the addresses to the Gods, all these attributes are recognized and the contents of these fables rehearsed to raise in the mind of the worshipper the highest thoughts of the power of the idol".<sup>21</sup> This statement indicates that the Hindu did not consider image worship as an end in itself. Rather the image was a sort of symbol which helped the worshipper to fix his mind on the deity. It is well-known that the Hindu never regards image worship as the ideal form of religion. It is not necessary for those who are spiritually advanced. The Hindu ideal of 'adhikanaveda' (different modes of worship for people having different tastes and inclinations) is well-known. Image worship is an inferior kind of worship, not an irrational one.

Ward has no good word for anything connected with Hinduism. "They are a people who have never created a charity school, an almshouse nor an hospital ; who suffer their fellow creatures to perish for wants while living or to inter their bodies, to prevent their being devoured by vultures and jackals, when dead ;..."<sup>22</sup>

"The Hindu will utter falsehoods that would knock down an ox and will commit perjuries so atrocious and disgusting as to feel with horror those who visited the courts of justice ; but he will not violate his Shastra by swearing on the waters of the Ganges".<sup>23</sup>

Ward's view of the Hindu religion and social tradition is vitiated by his own religious bias. He can find no merit in the numerous practices of the Hindus, and is contented to relegate the Hindus to a place among the most uncivilised nations of the world. He thinks that "Keeping Gods is a trade among the Hindus", and that "the temples answer none of the ends of a lecture room nor of a Christian temple". Indeed one would like to ignore the irrationality of a writer



who observes : "Multitudes of Brahmins are likewise employed as priests to prostitutes and actually performs the offices of religion in houses of ill fame, so completely absent is the moral principle from the religion of the Hindus".<sup>24</sup>

Ward mentions in detail the atrocities committed in the name of *Sati*, and in his estimate, 5,000 unfortunate women were immolated every year according to this practice. Infanticide in various forms was practised in various parts of Hindusthan. In Bengal childless parents would often take a vow to offer their first-born to the Ganges, if they were blessed with more than one child, and this vow was sometimes redeemed. Ward calculated that 10,500 persons perished annually due to Brahminical superstitions.<sup>25</sup>

Ward never attempted to understand the significance of the Hindu mythology. On the other hand, he rejected the whole system as absurd and ridiculous. His comments are sometimes amusing. But they definitely shocked his contemporaries in the Hindu society. "Krishna's thefts, wars and adulteries are so numerous that his whole history seems to be one uninterrupted series of crimes. In the images of Kalee she is represented as treading on the breast of her husband. Lukshmee and Swaraswatee, the wives of Vishnu were continually quarrelling. It is worthy of enquiry how the world is governed by these Gods more wicked than men that we may be able to judge how they can be the objects of faith, hope and affection".<sup>26</sup>

In the 'introductory remarks on the Hindu Religion' Ward has given his assessment of the Hindu character. This assessment may be regarded as the typical Christian attitude towards the Hindus in the early 19th century. "It is a common sentiment among this people that in secular transactions lying is absolutely necessary, and perjury is so common that it is impossible to rely upon the testimony of Hindu witnesses. The natives ridicule the idea of administering justice by oral testimony.

In short, the character of the Gods and the licentiousness which prevails at their festivals and abounds in their popular works with the enervating nature of the climate have made the Hindus the most effeminate and corrupt people on earth. Suffice it to say, that fidelity to marriage vows is almost unknown among the Hindus, the intercourse between the sexes approaches very near to that of the irrational animals. The husband almost invariably lives in criminal

intercourse during the pupilage of his infant wife ; and if she becomes a widow cannot marry and in consequence, being destitute of a protector and of every moral principle becomes a willing prey to the lascivious''.<sup>27</sup>

Other Christian writers did not basically differ from the views of Ward. Alexander Duff's book, *India and India Missions* is a scathing attack on Hindu religion. The missionary attack was not confined to preaching. They also attempted conversion and it was at their instance that the Lex Loci Act of 1850 was passed. This was an even more serious challenge to the Hindu society.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE RADICAL CHALLENGE : YOUNG BENGAL

HINDUISM IN the early 19th century faced a serious challenge from the great radical thinker Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and his followers, known as the Young Bengal. In November, 1826, Derozio was appointed fourth teacher of the Hindu (now Presidency) College on a salary of Rs.150/- per month.<sup>1</sup> This appointment marked the beginning of an important movement in the intellectual and social history of this land. "Neither before nor since his day has any teacher within the walls of any native educational establishment in India, ever exercised such an influence over his pupils".<sup>2</sup> Derozio's liberal ideas, his wide reading, his patience and courtesy won the hearts and the high reverence of his pupils. In addition to the work of the class Derozio gave readings in English literature to many students of the Hindu College who were interested in broadening their knowledge. Derozio and his pupils started in 1828 the Academic Association which discussed topics like free-will and fate, virtue and vice, patriotism, arguments for or against the existence of God, the shares of idolatry and priest craft. The Hindu College students started a journal entitled the *Parthenon* (1830) wherein were mooted subjects like women's education, necessity of cheap justice and the cures of superstition. "In this atmosphere there was surging up a wave of radical sentiment. Orthodox society was deeply alarmed".<sup>3</sup>

The effect produced by Derozio on his pupils and on the educated Hindu society of his day is well recorded in a short manuscript history of the Hindu College by Baboo Hurra Mohan Chatterjee, a clerk of the College at Derozio's time. The extract which follows has reference to the position of affairs in the Hindu College during 1828, a year after Derozio's appointment. "The students of the first, second and the third classes had the advantage of attending a *Conversazione* established in the School by Derozio, where readings in poetry, literature and moral philosophy were carried on. The meetings were held almost daily before or after college hours. Though they were without the knowledge or sanction of the authorities, yet Derozio's disinterested zeal and devotion in bringing up the students in these subjects was unbounded and characterised by a love and philanthropy, which up to this day has not been

equalled by any teacher in or out of service..... He fostered their taste in literature, taught the evil effects of idolatry and superstition ; and so far formed their moral conceptions and feelings as to make them completely above the antiquated ideas and aspirations of the age. Such was the force of his instructions that the conduct of the students of the College was most exemplary and gained them the applause of the outside world, not only in a literary and scientific point of view, but what was of still greater importance, they were all considered men of "Truth". Indeed, the College boy was a synonym for truth...."<sup>4</sup>

The Derozian penchant for truth and free criticism posed a challenge to Hindu religion and social tradition. The admirers of Derozio hold that the Derozian criticism was not confined to Hinduism. They attacked all established religions and recognised no infallibles. That was a poor consolation for the leaders of the orthodox Hindu society, who were completely bewildered by the severity of the Derozian attack. The nature of the attack can be guessed from contemporary evidence. "The principles and practices of the Hindu religion were openly ridiculed and condemned and angry disputes were held on moral subjects ; the sentiments of Hume had been widely diffused and warmly patronised. The most glowing harangues were made at debating clubs, then very numerous. The Hindu religion was denounced as vile and corrupt and unworthy of the regard of rational beings. The degraded state of the Hindus formed the topic of many debates ; their ignorance and superstition were declared to be causes of such a state and it was then resolved that nothing but a liberal education could enfranchise the minds of the people".<sup>5</sup> Pyarichand Mitra, biographer of David Hare and a Derozian himself, has related how the Hindu pandit and the Hindu customs were openly ridiculed by the Derozians.

The Managers of the Hindu College were rightly alarmed that the students of the Hindu College were likely to lose all religious principles. A typical example of Derozio's disciples was Madhab Chandra Mullik. He frankly said that he hated Hinduism from the core of his heart. D. Anselm, the Headmaster, was requested "to communicate with the teachers and check as far as possible all disquisitions tending to unsettle the belief of the boys in the great principles of natural religion".<sup>6</sup> Subsequent events prove that the

headmaster's efforts proved abortive. The teachers were asked (February, 1830) to refrain from any communication with their pupils on religious subjects and especially the religion of the Hindus ; and "that practices, inconsistent with Hindu ideas of propriety, such as eating or drinking in the class rooms were to be visited with dismissal".<sup>7</sup>

This order too failed to have any impact on Derozio and his followers. In April, 1831, decisive steps were taken to remove "Derozio and the more advanced of his pupils who had publicly avowed their hostility to Hinduism".<sup>7</sup>

The dismissal of Derozio has been a subject of controversy since his day. The Managers of the Hindu college have been condemned as reactionaries who had no understanding of Derozio's liberalism. Sivnath Sastri has recorded that the orders of the Managers, imposing restrictions on the students, roused the anger of the contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> "Hindu society was scandalised beyond measure, understandably though, without any real understanding", comments a Marxist historian.<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to see how the College authorities could accommodate Derozio whose ideal was the very antithesis of the values and traditions of the founders of the Hindu College. No Christian missionary society would permit a Hindu or Muslim teacher to denigrate Christianity regularly through his lectures in a college sponsored by it even today. Nor would a non-Marxist teacher be allowed to criticize freely the doctrines of Marx and Engels in any educational institution in Soviet Russia or China. It is clear from the writing of Thomas Edwardes that the meetings of the *Conversazione* were held almost daily before or after college hours. They were organised *without the knowledge and sanction of the college authorities*. The College authorities had initially prohibited such practices as eating or drinking in the class rooms which were inconsistent with Hindu ideas of propriety. Edwardes admits that "the management were wise enough to conclude that they had neither the power nor the right to enforce the prohibition of the boys attending private lectures or meetings".<sup>11</sup> It is only fair to say that, with all his merits, Derozio presented an embarrassing problem for the Managers of the Hindu College, whose values of life were totally different from those of Derozio. They could find no better solution

of this problem than removing him from office.

Derozio was removed from the Hindu College in April, 1831. He died a few months later (December, 1831). Before his death he established a daily, *The East Indian*. Krishna Mohan Bandopadhyaya, a senior Derozian, brought out the *Inquirer* and wrote "The Persecuted" to expose the practical heterodoxy of the orthodox Hindus. Rsaik Krishna Mallik, another eminent Derozian, brought out the *Jnananveshan*. "Worldly occupations and private interests inevitably scattered in course of time the individual members of the Derozian group, for Young Bengal could never develop into a movement compared to the various trends in Europe to which the same adjective has been attached. Yet, for a dozen years after Derozio's death his impact continued to be manifested in a collective way".<sup>12</sup>

The Young Bengal group rejected all traditional behaviour, resorted to hard drinking as a protest against the orthodox society and ridiculed and slandered Hindu religious practices. A modern historian is very near the truth when he states, "Their excuses produced such a condition that Westernism came to be equated with wild living, dissolute habits and intemperance".<sup>13</sup>

Rajnarain Basu, a prominent member of the Adi Brahmo Samaj was not at all impressed by the progressivism of the Derozians. He recorded his opinion frankly and said that western education had turned the heads of the disciples of Derozio.<sup>14</sup> It is significant that Derozio's dismissal has not been unequivocally condemned by a progressive Brahmo leader like Rajnarain Basu. A modern American historian also does not basically differ from the position taken by Rajnarain. "Derozio's untimely death in December, 1831, accounts for the rapidity with which he came to be portrayed as a sacrificial victim of the revulsion against modernism of India".<sup>15</sup> "The historical over-emphasis on Young Bengal's adolescent fervour in the early 1830's which coincided with the Bentinck period and the Sati controversy has distorted that group's impact on Indian cultural history".<sup>16</sup> Derozio's biographer, Thomas Edwardes, has no hesitation in admitting that the splendid success of Alexander Duff in later years was primarily due to the work of Derozio.<sup>17</sup> If that was so, the Hindu College authorities perhaps tried to save the institution from the flood of Christianity by dismissing Derozio.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE BRAHMO CHALLENGE

THE BRAHMO movement posed the biggest challenge to traditional Hinduism in the early nineteenth century. The movement started with Rammohun Roy's activities in Calcutta. Much has been written on the early career of Rammohun Roy and the formulation of his religious ideas. These details are not very relevant to our purpose. We may start with a general comment on Rammohun's religious achievement by a Brahmo historian: "The Brahmo Samaj long remained a meeting place of a number of educated and influential persons who intellectually sympathised with the doctrine of monotheism, but practically adhered to all the idolatrous rites in private life. There was not that fervid enthusiasm, seeking to mould individual life and reconstruct society which was introduced into the movement at a later period. There was more of the spirit of a cautious philosopher than of the consuming fire of a prophet in him."<sup>1</sup>

Rammohun's approach to religion was basically intellectual. He had a strong social consciousness. Kisorichand Mitra described him as a "Religious Benthamite". It is difficult to agree with Miss Collet that "he was above all and beneath all a religious personality".<sup>2</sup> Rammohun wanted to utilise religion for social change. Sivanath Sastri also pointed out that Rammohun lacked the religious fervour of a prophet.

Rammohun Roy settled in Calcutta at the end of the year 1815. Immediately before this, he was the Dewan of John Digby at Rungpur. Rammohun stuck to the religion of his forefathers in his early life and performed his father's *Sradh* ceremony according to Hindu rites though not of the traditional type. Rammohun had mastered Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian quite early in his life. He also thoroughly studied the Hindu religious scriptures, the Vedānta, the Smṛiti, the Tantra and the Puranas. According to Sir Brojendranath Seal, the doctrines of the Sufis and the Islamic free-thinkers, the Mutazilas, greatly influenced his mind. For his profound Islamic scholarship Rammohun came to be known as the 'Zabardast Maulavi'.

Rammohun began to study the English language rather late in his life. The study of European philosophy and scientific thought from



Bacon to Locke and Newton as well as the propaganda of free thinkers like Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Tom Paine and others gradually confirmed Rammohun in his rejection of miracle, dogma and ritual. In his first philosophical work, the *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin* (written mainly in Persian) Rammohun began to doubt the claims of all *shastras* and all historical religions. "But the first effects of the heady wine gradually passed away. Deeper draughts of the Vedanta brought him back to a theistic view of the world and world history".<sup>3</sup> Rammohun's religious views had taken their final shape when he settled permanently in Calcutta, established the Atmiya Sabha and started translating the *Upanishads* into English and Bengali. "Rammohun emerged as the greatest Indian authority of his time on the religions of the East and the West, and to use the words of Monier Williams as the first earnest-minded investigator of the science of comparative religion that the world has produced".<sup>4</sup>

The foundation of the Atmiya Sabha was the first important work of Raja Rammohun Roy in Calcutta. It was "an association for the dissemination of religious truth and the promotion of free discussion of theological subjects". The Atmiya Sabha changed its venue successively from Rammohun's Simla house at Amherst Street, to the house of Beharilal Chowbey at Barabazar. In 1819 took place the celebrated debate between Rammohun Roy and Pandit Subrahmanya Shastri of Madras on the subject of Idol Worship. Raja Radhakanta Deb, a leader of the orthodox Hindus at this time was present at this debate. After 1819 the meetings of the Atmiya Sabha seem to have been discontinued for some years. Rammohun was assisted in his work by Pandit Sivaprasad Misra, Hariharananda Tirthaswami and Ramchandra Vidyabagish, later first minister of the Brahmo Samaj. In the weekly meetings of the Atmiya Sabha Hindu scriptures were read and expounded. Govinda Mala, a well-known musician of the town, used to sing hymns composed by Rammohun Roy.

One point deserves notice in this connection. The popularity of the Atmiya Sabha was primarily due to Rammohun's link with the most affluent and influential families of Calcutta. The same could be said also about the Brahmo Samaj which was founded later. Among those who attended the meetings of the Atmiya Sabha were Dwarkanath Tagore of Jorasanko, Prasanna Kumar Tagore of Pathuriaghata, Kalinath and Baikunthanath Munsif of Taki, Brindaban

Mitra, grandfather of Dr. Rajendralal Mitra, Kashinath Mullik of Calcutta, Raja Kalishankar Ghosal of Bhukailas, Annadaprasad Banerjee of Telinipara, Baidyanath Mukherjee, the grandfather of Justice Anukul Mukherjee, Brojomohan Mozumdar, Haladhar Bose and Nandakishore Bose, the father of Rajnarain Bose.<sup>5</sup> It will be seen later that Rammohun's principal opponent, the Dharma Sabha, was a more broad-based organisation, even though it included a large number of affluent people of Calcutta.

As we have already pointed out, the *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin* (or a Gift to Monotheists) a treatise in Persian with an Arabic preface was the first important philosophical writing of Raja Rammohun Roy (1803-1804). This was a bold protest against idolatrous elements in all religions. The treatise wanted to make out a number of points. (1) All religions were based on one common foundation, the belief in the one Supreme Being who has created and sustains the whole universe. (2) They all differ in the details of the super-structure created thereupon, these super-structures being all equally unjustified by any basis of fact and arising solely from the imagination of men working in vacuo. The treatise was written in an abstruse style and abounded with Arabic logical and philosophical terms. Miss Collet observes, "The treatise is important as the earliest available expression of his mind and as showing his eagerness to bear witness against established error but it is too immature to be worth reproducing as a whole".<sup>6</sup>

This was followed by the publication of a series of tracts such as the translation of the Vedanta (1815), *Abridgement of the Vedanta* (in Bengali, Hindusthani and English), *Translation of the Kena and Isha Upanishads* into English and Bengali, *Translation of the Katha and Mundaka Upanishads* into Bengali and English and *Translation of the Mandukya Upanishad* into Bengali; *A Defence of Hindu Theism* (Parts I and II) in Bengali, a Bengali tract against the custom of Sati, the substance of a discussion with a Vaishanava Goswami, and a tract explaining the meaning of the "Gayatri," English translation of the Sati Tract (1818), and the English version of his second Bengali tract on Sati (1820).<sup>7</sup>

The publication of these tracts was considered to be the most effective means of rousing his countrymen to a sense of superiority of the monotheistic creed. Rammohun also entered upon a bitter theological controversy with the Serampore missionaries. In 1820

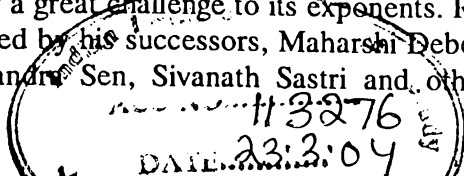
he published *The Precepts of Jesus, A guide to Peace and Happiness*, and in 1823 the *Three Appeals to the Christian Public*. By a rare display of polemical skill and profound Biblical learning Rammohun tried to uphold in these works his favourite doctrine of the Unity of Godhead, and to reject the Christian doctrine of trinity which he regarded as bordering on polytheistic worship

Finally, on 20 August, 1828, Rammohun established the Brahmo Samaj of India. The object of the Brahmo Samaj was "the worship and adoration of the eternal, unsearchable and immutable Being who is the author and preserver of the Universe but not under or by any name, designation or title used for and applied to any Being or Beings by any man or set of men whatsoever. It was also a place of public meeting of all sorts and descriptions of people without distinction, as shall behave and conduct themselves in an orderly, sober, religious and devout manner. No graven image, statue or sculpture, carving, painting, picture, portrait or the likeness of anything shall be admitted within the said message, building, land, tenements, hereditaments, and premises and that no sacrifice, offering or ablation of any kind or of anything shall ever be permitted there and no animal or living creature shall within or on the said message and be deprived of life either for religious purposes or for food".<sup>8</sup>

The house in which the Samaj was first opened is known in Brahmo History as Feringhee Kamal Basu's house. The services of the Brahmo Samaj began to attract increasing numbers and it secured new sympathisers. Rammohun was able to raise sufficient funds for the purchase of a house on the Chitpore Road which would be the permanent place of worship for the members of the society (1830). The Church was opened on 23rd January, 1830, but Rammohun left for England a few months later.

In the meanwhile Rammohun had established the Vedanta College in 1825 for the teaching of the monotheistic doctrines of the Vedanta. "Rammohun saw in the Vedanta rightly handled and '*rightly divided*' a means for leading his countrymen out of their prevailing superstition and idolatry into a pure and elevated Theist".<sup>9</sup>

Rammohun's criticism of the traditional Hindu religion was undoubtedly a great challenge to its exponents. Rammohun's work was continued by his successors, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Sivanath Sastri and others. The Brahmo



movement continued to provide the most sustained challenge to traditional Hinduism for nearly four decades, though Rammohun stoutly denied to the last day of his life that he was founding a new sect outside the pale of Hinduism. In the seventies of the last century however the Brahmo movement was very much weakened due to internal dissensions. Rammohun's dream of a Universal theistic religion remained unrealised. "Brahmoism rose to arrest the conversion of educated Hindus to Christianity. But Brahmoism proved only a halting place for the struggling Hindus of the new school".<sup>10</sup>

Rammohun's object was made clear in his preface to the *Translation of the Vedanta*. "My constant reflections on the inconvenient or rather injurious rites, introduced by the peculiar practice of Hindu Idolatry which more than any other Pagan worship destroys the texture of society, together with compassion for my countrymen, have compelled me to use every possible effort to awaken them from their dream of error".

Rammohun rightly felt that the masses of his countrymen had fallen into a state of abject mental and spiritual slavery. He fell back upon the monotheistical writings of the Vedanta which were of unquestionable authority in matters of Hindu theology. He undertook the arduous task of translating these difficult books into a vernacular which was till then crude and undeveloped, and publishing them at a tremendous cost to himself. He wanted to communicate his ideas to the masses of people. His approach in this respect may be compared with that of Martin Luther. But Rammohun, unfortunately, had none of the religious fervour of the latter in his appeal to the common people.

His adversaries were puzzled, though not completely overpowered by his arguments in favour of monotheism and the complete repudiation of idolatry. A group of intelligent defenders of the system of idol-worship appeared, who tried to meet him on his own ground. The new religious culture which Rammohun wanted to start was regarded by his adversaries as a caricature of Hinduism. Rammohun could draw around him a limited number of enlightened men who were sceptical about traditional Hinduism. "The common people were roused and agitated but were not drawn into the movement".<sup>10</sup> Even Rammohun had to concede to his critics that the scriptures tolerated idolatrous practices as an inferior kind of culture necessary

for the ignorant. This admission neutralised, to some extent, the effects of his earnest protest against idolatry, because the masses of his countrymen were very largely ignorant and uneducated.<sup>12</sup>

What was significant was that Rammohun checked the sentiment in favour of idolatry and superstition. The Hindu critics of Rammohun were constrained to prove that idolatry was symbolical and was useful as a means of attaining the true knowledge of God. "In fact, the mission of Rammohun was a simple one, namely to call his countrymen to discard idolatry and come to the worship of one true God. His work was that of a sturdy pioneer, working single-handed to clear away a mass of popular prejudices and prepare the way for those who were coming after him. His work was mainly negative and reformatory and not positive and constructive".<sup>13</sup>

With the departure of Rammohun Roy for England and his subsequent death there (1833) the Brahmo Samaj fell into a moribund condition. The monetary help rendered by Rammohun's close friend and associate Dwarka Nath Tagore somehow managed to keep it alive. Very few people were attracted to the Samaj during this period and the Samaj lost all popularity. "The rich people that had gathered round the Raja's banner in his lifetime dispersed directly the news of his death got to Calcutta. A few middle class men attended the Samaj whose weekly congregation would mostly be made up of straggling wayfarers, some of whom would peep in with their bazar baskets and others with their pet parrots".<sup>14</sup> Ramchandra Vidyabagish, the Acharya of the Brahmo Samaj somehow kept the Samaj alive. It was from this condition that Devendranath resuscitated the Samaj and converted it into a new Church with a well-knit organisation, and with its own scripture, rites and ceremonies.

In 1839 along with his first followers Debendranath established the Tatwaranjini Sabha which subsequently took the name of Tatvabodhini Sabha, a name suggested by Pandit Ramchandra Vidyavagish. Its objects were the dissemination of the knowledge of the Upanishads and the promotion of religious enquiry. The Tatvabodhini Sabha became popular among the Bengali elite very quickly and by 1841 its membership rose to 500. Among its members and sympathisers were many rich and influential men like Maharajadhiraj Mahatab Chandra Bahadur of Burdwan, Raja Sris Chandra Roy of Nadia, Raja Satya Sharan Ghoshal of Bhukailas,

Babu Joykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara, all well-known land-holders of Bengal of those days. Intellectuals like Akshay Kumar Datta and reformers like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar also became its members.

Devendranath proceeded to frame a covenant for the adoption of the Brahmo Samaj and to introduce a regular form of church service, including thanks-giving, praise and prayer in place of the old practice of mere exposition of passages from the Upanishads, attended with sermon and hymn. The covenant had three important features. The devotee had to declare that he would conform to the rules of religious life laid down by the Vedanta. It also bound all who accepted it to worship God by the *Gayatri Mantra*. In framing the new covenant Devendranath kept close to the lines laid down by Rammohun. Debendranath influenced twenty of his youthful associates to join him in undergoing a formal ceremony of initiation at the hands of Pandit Ramchandra Vidyavagish, and to sign this new covenant. The 7th of Paush (B.E.) 1765 Saka (1843 A.D.) was the memorable day on which the first step was taken towards converting the Brahmo Samaj into a close spiritual fraternity.

The Samaj was soon thrown into an intense controversy by two major developments. The Hindu community was shocked at the forcible conversion of Umesh Chandra Sarkar and his wife (1845). The Hindu citizens of Calcutta met at the initiative of Devendranath Tagore and a school, the Hindu Hitarthi Vidyalaya, was started with the pecuniary assistance of Ashotosh Dev, a millionaire of Calcutta. The *Tattvabodhini Patrika* bitterly criticised Alexander Duff's work, *India and India Missions*, which appeared at this time. The *Patrika* also defended the principles of the Brahmo Samaj which were attacked by Duff. "We will not deny that the reviewer is correct in remarking that we consider the Vedas and the Vedas alone as the authorised rule of Hindu theology. They are the sole foundation of all our belief, and the truths of all other shastras must be judged according to their agreement with them. What we consider as revelation is contained in the Vedas alone; and the last part of our Holy scriptures treating of the final dispensation of Hinduism forms what is called Vedanta". The Brahmo position was defined as above in the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*. Rajnarain Basu, a close friend of Devendranath, was the principal exponent of these principles. His articles were published in a tract, the *Vedantic Doctrines*

In 1845 the Vedas were proclaimed as the basis of the religion of the Brahmo Samaj and the religion of the Samaj was held up as Vedantism. Akshay Kumar Datta, the editor of the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, was not happy with this new position taken by the Brahmo Samaj. He was a rationalist out and out, and could not accept without question the doctrine of infallibility of the Vedas.

Devendranath was by nature conservative. But he gave due consideration to the views of Akshay Kumar Datta and his followers. Four Brahmins were sent to Benaras to study the Vedas carefully. Devendranath personally visited Benaras in 1847 and made searching enquiries into the matter. He was finally convinced that the doctrine of Vedic infallibility could not be maintained unequivocally. So he accepted the new position and published the new principles of Brahmoism in a book, the *Brahmo Dharma* (1850). The old Vedantic covenant was replaced by a new one, consistent with the principles of Natural and Universal Theism. The credit for this change has generally been given to Akshay Kumar Datta. He was the first to raise doubts. But, it is fair to record that the change in the doctrinal position could not be brought about without the concurrence of Devendranath. It is also more creditable that the Maharshi accepted the new position in spite of his deep attachment to the Hindu scriptures.<sup>16</sup> "But from the time he became conscious of the untenable character of the doctrine of Vedic infallibility he also became anxious to keep the movement as much as possible on the old lines of reverence for the ancient Hindu scriptures".<sup>17</sup> The controversy over Vedic infallibility was the first symptom of a division in the ranks of the Brahmos. The leaders of traditional Hinduism did not fail to take advantage of the incipient disharmony in the Brahmo Samaj. It will be seen that Brahmoism lost much of its challenging vigour in the sixties of the last century. Those who speak of the rapid progress of the Brahmo movement should bear in mind the constraint which this disharmony placed on the Samaj.

Akshoy Kumar Datta was determined to broaden the basis of Brahmoism in two ways. The dry light of reason was applied to social ideals as well as to the fundamental articles of religious belief. The *Tattvabodhini Patrika* published articles, advocating women's education and widow marriage, denouncing polygamy and intemperance, and seeking to conduct the affairs of the Brahmo Samaj on strictly constitutional principles. The Brahmo Samaj established branches at Behala, Kidderpore, Bhowanipore, Burdwan, Krishnagar



and many other places in and around Calcutta. The party of Akshoy Kumar Datta started a society of friends, the Atmiya Sabha, for the discussion of social questions. But the enthusiasm of its members shocked Devendranath. They went to the extent of settling their belief in the attributes of God by voting. Devendranath retired to the Simla hills to devote himself to study, meditation, prayer, and to a close examination of the doctrinal position of the Brahmo religion. In 1855 Akshoy Kumar Datta was struck down by a terrible malady which incapacitated him permanently. The retirement of Akshoy Kumar was a great loss to the radical elements in the Brahmo Samaj.

The coming of Keshab Chandra Sen to the Brahmo Samaj (1859) started a new phase in the history of the Brahmo movement. Maharshi Devendranath was impressed by the earnestness and ability of Keshab. The latter was instrumental in establishing the Brahmo Vidyalaya where Devendranath and Keshab Chandra delivered lectures on religious subjects in English and Bengali. In 1862 Keshab Chandra was installed as an Acharya of the Samaj with the title of 'Brahmananda'.

"But this harmony was not to last. The temperament of the two men differed too widely to allow of any permanent co-operation. My father, though an uncompromising enemy of idolatrous worship, was essentially conservative in his instincts. While endeavouring to revive the lofty theism of the Upanishads, he was not prepared for measures, calculated, as it seemed, to subvert the social fabric of modern Hinduism. He cherished an ideal differing greatly from that of the bulk of the educated men of his day. To him ancient India was the cradle of all that was pure in morals and religion.... His religion was Indian in origin and expression, it was Indian in ideas and spirit".<sup>18</sup> As regards social reformation, Debendranath Tagore was for adopting a slow and cautious policy, a policy of conciliation; he was in favour of leaving reforms to the influence of time and to the effect of the teachings of pure religion. Keshab was a reformer of pronounced type. Inter-caste marriage, remarriage of widows, abolition of caste distinctions, all these questions engaged his attention. Debendranath was alarmed when he found that Keshab and his disciples were going too far. Keshab's ideal was cosmopolitan. His whole character was formed by western culture and Christian influence. In a lecture entitled 'Jesus Christ, Europe and Asia' Keshab observed, "In Christ Europe and Asia, the East and West, may learn to find harmony and unity".<sup>19</sup> Thus Keshab Sen's attitude towards Christianity was basically different

from that of Debendranath. The issues which precipitated a breach in the Brahmo Church were the use of the sacred thread by the Brahmo Acharyas, and intercaste marriages solemnised by Keshab Chandra Sen (1863). In 1865 Keshab withdrew from the parent church and in the following year he founded the Brahmo Samaj of India.

The first schism in the Brahmo Samaj was undoubtedly a significant event in the social history of Bengal. This was followed by a second one in 1878. The Brahmo Samaj was considerably weakened after 1866. It has been argued that Keshab's revolt was a challenge to authoritarianism in the Church. The same could be said about the dissidents of 1878 who formed the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. The break-up was inevitable. "He (Keshab) was in a position of one, who by his own utterances and acts, had unchained a mighty spirit, which walked abroad, defying all efforts for moderating its course. The clouds were gathering in the horizon, unheeded by the more enthusiastic members, but visible to the keen eye of Keshab Chandra Sen, who strove for sometime, as the events of the next two years will show, to ward off the impending storm, but failed and finally yielded to the inevitable".<sup>20</sup>

The successive splits in the Brahmo Samaj indirectly helped the leaders of traditional Hindu religion. The Brahmo movement was a movement of protest. Like the Protestants of the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe the different groups in the Samaj differed as to their aims and objectives. Like the Protestants, they too found to their dismay that Authority could not be completely disregarded in the Church organisation. Luther's 'Justification by faith' could not be fully reconciled with the authority of the Protestant Church. The Brahmo cry for a democratic church ended in Keshab's ultimate alienation from the Samaj. The second and perhaps, more significant fact was that the Hindu leaders as well as the Brahmos of all groups came from the same social milieu. The tradition of modernity which they championed was confined to a small section of the educated, urban middle class. Neither the Brahmo leaders nor their opponents thought in terms of regeneration of the vast masses of uneducated people who lived outside the cities. The religious ferment of the nineteenth century had no perceptible impact on the majority of the population, Hindu as well as Muslim. In a way the work 'movement' can be applied to Brahmoism in a severely limited sense. The same is also true of the so-called Neo-Hindu Movement in Bengal in the late 19th century.<sup>21</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE

### REACTION OF THE HINDU SOCIETY TO THE CHALLENGERS OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

It is a measure of the inner strength of the Hindu religion that it survived this tremendous challenge. "Hinduism again asserted its marvellous assimilative power and changed its colour like the chameleon".<sup>1</sup> The significance of this challenge was realised quite early by the Hindu leaders. Gaurikanta Bhattacharyya, Dewan of the Civil Court of Rungpur, wrote a Bengali book *Janananjan*, refuting Rammohun. Gouri Kanta was well-versed in Persian and Sanskrit, but he failed to rouse the people against Rammohun.<sup>2</sup> The foundation of the Atmiya Sabha (1815) was the first important work of Rammohun in Calcutta. Religious and social reform were the main subjects discussed at the meetings of this Sabha. The conservative Hindu leaders were agitated over these issues and tried to counteract Rammohun's arguments. The principal conservative leaders of Calcutta at this time were Mrityunjay Vidyalkar, Bhabani Charan Bandopadhyay, Radhakanta Deb and Ramkamal Sen. Rammohun as well as his Hindu critics believed in an authentic Indian tradition. But Rammohun differed with his critics regarding the methods of its regeneration and the place of post-vedantic Hinduism in a revived Indian tradition. Rammohun and his principal Hindu critics were all modernisers of their own tradition rather than westernisers. Modern research appears to controvert the view that Rammohun "was the earliest liberal David locked in mortal combat with the conservative Brahmin Goliaths bent on preserving a diseased social system against the inroads of Humanitarianism and common decency".<sup>3</sup>

Mrityunjay Vidyalkar (1762-1819), pandit of the Fort William College and later of the Supreme court, was the earliest Hindu leader who defended the cause of traditional Hinduism. Mrityunjay was a scholar of great distinction. He was well-versed in Sanskrit language and literature, and had a complete mastery over Hindu philosophy. J.C. Marshman was no friend of Mrityunjay. But he paid handsome tributes to the ability and scholarship of the latter. "At the head of the establishment of Pandits (at the College of Fort William) stood Mrityunjay who, although a native of Orissa was usually regarded as the Boetia of the country and was a colossus of literature. He bore

a strong resemblance to our great lexicographer (Dr Johnson) not only by his stupendous acquirements and the soundness of his critical judgement, but also in his rough features and unwieldy figure".<sup>4</sup>

Mrityunjay Vidyalankar wrote an elaborate defence of traditional Hinduism, *An Apology for the present system of Hindu worship (or Vendanta Chandrika)* in 1817. Mrityunjay was perhaps unacquainted with the English language, and it has been presumed that the work of translation was done by his son for Sir Franck Macnaughton, Judge of the Supreme Court.<sup>5</sup>

A close study of the *Vedanta Chandrika* reveals some significant facts. In the first place, Mrityunjay was convinced that idol-worship was a useful religious practice, though not the best one, for attaining salvation. In this he was anticipating Sri Ramakrishna's teachings by nearly fifty years. Secondly, the Pandit asserted that self-realization or realization of God came only to those who lived a life of religious discipline and practised renunciation. This implied that a man of the world like Rammohun could never hope to grasp the essence of true religion. Thirdly, he boldly disagreed with Rammohun's interpretation of the Hindu Sastras and did not hesitate to launch a violent attack on the latter's methods. Fourthly, Mrityunjay Vidyalankar was not apologetic at all about the position he took in his arguments, although he calls his book, *An Apology for the present system of Hindu worship*. Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay (1787-1848) was another important critic of Rammohun. Marshman described him as "a Brahmin of great intelligence and considerable learning, though no Pandit but remarkable for his tact and energy which give him great ascendancy among his fellow countrymen".<sup>6</sup> Bhabanicharan was for sometime connected with Rammohun's *Sambad Kaumadi* but broke off due to his religious differences with Rammohun. The *Samachar Chandrika* that he edited was equally opposed to the Christians and the Vedantists in religious matters. But the *Chandrika* consistently supported every educational reform while conveying to its readers the need for a well-informed public of natives. Bhabanicharan was not opposed to western education and enlightenment, but he was hostile to the Anglophile Baboo. His satirical works *Nabababuvilas* (1825) and *Nababibivilas* (1831) were meant to check the growing trend towards anglicism in social life. Bhabanicharan was determined to rouse in the young people a regard for their own religion and way of life. His *Kalikata Kamalalaya* (1823) has been described as "the first attempt

by a member of the intelligentsia to hold a literary looking-glass before his peers so that they might better perceive their own social image".<sup>7</sup>

Bhabanicharan's most significant achievement was, however, the organisation of the Dharma Sabha in 1830. The ostensible object of the Dharma Sabha was to oppose the Sati legislation of Bentinck (1829), to prevent Government interference in religion and to protect the *Sanatan Dharma* (traditional Hinduism). The principal members of this organisation were Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay (Secretary), Ramkamal Sen, Radhakanta Deb, Gopimohan Deb, Kalikrishna Deb, Jaynarain Tarkapanchanan and some of the pandits of the Sanskrit College. The minutes of the first meeting show that its primary object was to organise public opinion against the Sati legislation. The meeting was fairly well-attended and the members decided to ostracise all those who deviated from the traditional religious and social practices. The subscription varied from rupees 2500 to Rupee 1.<sup>8</sup>

The foundation of the Dharma Sabha and the Sati controversy have been responsible for many popular misconceptions. Bhabanicharan and Radhakanta have been depicted as the 'Tory' opponents of Rammohun's 'whig' liberalism. The facts available from contemporary newspapers lead us to believe that Bhabanicharan played a modernising role in educational matters. The Dharma Sabha certainly rallied the Hindus to maintain their traditional way of life and protect it against governmental interference. This does not necessarily imply that they were out and out reactionaries in every sphere of life.

Another notable figure in the Hindu society at this time was Dewan Ramkamal Sen (1783-1844). Ramkamal's talents were discovered by the reputed orientalist, H. H. Wilson. He did many odd jobs, as clerk and native secretary to the Asiatic Society, and head of the native establishment of the Mint where Dr Wilson was the Assay Master, before obtaining the responsible position of the Dewan to the Bank of Bengal.

Ramkamal Sen was a member of the Hindu College managing committee, Secretary and Superintendent of the Sanskrit College, a member of the managing committee of the School Book Society as well as of the Parental Academy. He was made a member of the General Committee of Public Instruction in 1839. His biggest contribution to education in Bengal was his *English-Bengali Dictionary* which he compiled in collaboration with Felix Carey. His contributions to the journals of the Asiatic Society, and the Agri-Horticultural

Society together with the spadework he did as member of the Fever Hospital Committee for the establishment of the Calcutta Medical College (1835) testify to his liberal attitude towards western education.

Ramkamal Sen was also quite conscious of the need of spreading education through the Bengali language. As Secretary to the Gaudiya Samaj (founded in 1823) he sponsored the move for the promotion of knowledge in the Bengali language. He helped the School Book Society also in the task of spreading education in the vernacular. In 1839 he came forward as one of the sponsors of the Hindu College Pathshala. The object of the Pathshala was to impart education to the boys in Bengali. Special importance came to be attached to the cultivation of the Bengali language with the growing demand of the leaders of the society for the replacement of Persian by Bengali in all court proceedings.

In spite of his zeal for the spread of education Ramkamal Sen could not stand the irreligious and sceptical attitude of the English-educated students of the Hindu College. The growth of this attitude among students was ascribed by the Hindu members of the College Managing Committee to the influence of Derozio. Ramkamal Sen therefore took a leading part in removing Derozio from the College teaching staff in 1831.

The career of Radhakanta Deb (1784-1867) throws a flood of light on the cultural position of the so-called 'conservative critics' of Rammohun. Radhakanta was the leading spirit behind the Sati petition (14 January, 1829) and the formation of the Dharma Sabha (1830). He was opposed in principle to governmental interference in social and religious matters and he believed that the traditional religion alone could maintain social stability. He was a zealous member of the Gaudiya Samaj (1823). Ramkamal Sen was the President of this Samaj which included men of such diverse opinions as Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay, Ramjay Tarkalankar, Kashinath Tarkapanchanan, Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore and Tarachand Chakravarti. The Gaudiya Samaj had accepted the sanctity of the Hindu scriptures and social customs. But its main work was the promotion of learning among the Bengalis.<sup>9</sup>

The Sati controversy has obscured the brighter aspects of Radhakanta's character, and he has been painted as the main architect of reaction. His differences with Rammohun have really helped

building the latter's charismatic image. It has been claimed that "the conservative critics missed, as their modern apologists do even today, the epoch-making significance of the life-work of Rammohun".<sup>10</sup> The truth seems to be that Radhakanta Deb and his followers were no less enthusiastic than Rammohun for educational and cultural progress. But Deb's concept of the Indian culture differed from Rammohun's in that he would not sacrifice Sanskrit learning for modernisation. In religion he was a supporter of traditional Hinduism. Image worship was a part of Hindu religion and Deb found no necessity for its abolition. It is difficult to believe that Radha Kanta Deb, a liberal intellectual in many ways, failed to see the inhuman nature of the Sati custom. The probability is that he was opposed to the manner of its abolition.<sup>11</sup> Even Rammohun did not initially approve of government legislation on Sati, though he later supported it.

Radhakanta Deb was an enthusiastic supporter of English education and was connected from the outset with the School Book Society, the School Society and the Hindu College. But he was certainly no moderniser in the Derozian sense. The early followers of Derozio in their zeal for truth and freedom despised all social norms. Hindu religion was the butt of their ridicule. The Hindu College Committee did not take kindly to the activities of Derozio and decided to dismiss him (1831). Radhakanta Deb supported this decision which was considered necessary "in the present state of public feeling amongst the Hindu community". He was also opposed to the appointment of Rammohun's friend, William Adam as a teacher in the Hindu College (1832). In both cases he seems to have been prompted by a genuine concern for the good of the Hindu College students. If he had failed to appreciate Derozio, the failure was not his alone. His whole generation was far behind Derozian radicalism.

Radhakanta Deb was an ardent champion of women's education and actively supported missionary efforts in this direction. He had established a girl's school in his Sovabazar house and encouraged Bethune to establish the Bethune School in 1849. *The Stri-Sikhsa-Vidhyayaka* (which he prepared along with Gourmohan Vidyalkar in 1822) advocated women's education in domestic skills. Radhakanta Deb's love for Sanskrit led him to compile a Sanskrit encyclopaedia, entitled the *Sabdakalpadrumah*. It has remained to this day a monument of his scholarship and industry.

From 1830 Radhakanta Deb was closely connected with the Dharma Sabha which remained after the Sati petition as a rival organisation of Rammohun's Brahmo Samaj (1828). The Dharma Sabha-Brahmo Samaj controversy seems to have mellowed down after Rammohun's death (1833). As a matter of fact, the Brahmo Samaj was on the decline for some time after Rammohun's departure for England. Ramchandra Vidyabagish somehow maintained it till Debendranath Tagore took over the organisation in 1843. Two factors seem to account for this tendency to rapprochement. The first was the aggressive zeal of the Scottish Missionary Alexander Duff. The missionary school, General Assembly's Institution (1830) was used by Duff conveniently for proselytization. Within a few years some bright students of the Hindu College like Krishnamohan Bandopadhyaya, Mahesh Chandra Ghosh, Madhusudan Datta and Jnanendra Mohan Tagore embraced Christianity. Hindus of all shades of opinion sensed danger at the activities of Duff.

The second factor which softened the critics of Rammohun was Debendranath Tagore's attitude of compromise. Debendranath sincerely believed that the Brahmo Samaj would ultimately unite with the Hindu Society. He was always anxious to introduce the superior kind of Brahmo worship among the Hindus. Debendranath bitterly criticised Duff's activities in the *Tattvabodhini Patrika* and urged the need for a native school (1845). He found good response from the Debs and a Hindu Charitable Institution was established (1846). The foundation of this Institution had two immediate consequences. "This did away with the rivalry between the Dharma Sabha and Brahmo Sabha and all their disagreement with each other. All were ranged on the same side and tried their best to prevent children going to Christian schools and Missionaries making Christian converts. Thenceforward the tide of Christian conversion was stemmed and the cause of missionaries received a serious blow"<sup>12</sup> The Missionary challenge of the thirties was a blessing in disguise. The Vedantists and the idolators joined hands to resist Christianity. Alexander Duff had at least succeeded in putting Brahmoism on the defensive along with Hinduism.



## CHAPTER SIX

### BEGINNING OF HINDU REVIVALISM AND NATIONALISM IN BENGAL

#### I. THE HINDU MELA

THE SEVENTIES of the 19th Century witnessed two major developments in the religious life of Bengal. The first was the gradual decline of the influence of the Brahmo Samaj on the educated Bengalees. This decline was mainly due to the two schisms in the Brahmo Samaj and the ultimate withdrawal of Keshab Chandra Sen from the main body of the Samaj. The second major development was a movement for return to Hinduism and a growing desire for political rights, the two things being inter-linked to some extent. Many factors contributed to this second development. A very important one among them was the new consciousness regarding the past heritage of the Hindus. The history of the Hindu Kings written by Mrityunjay Vidyalankar in 1808 shows that even the educated Indians in the early 19th century possessed little knowledge of their past. Oriental scholars like Sir William Jones and H. T. Prinsep greatly added to their knowledge in this respect, and the excavations of Alexander Cunningham, and the writings of Max Muller, Wilson, Fergusson, Rajendralal Mitra and others made the educated Indians conscious of the glory and greatness of ancient India.<sup>1</sup>

They found that the Indian heritage was no less glorious than that of Greece or Rome. European scholars pointed out that the forefathers of the Hindus belonged to the same race as the European nations, that the Vedas were the oldest literary works existing in the world and that the Upanishads contained the most profound philosophical speculations of the human race. The educated Indians learnt for the first time that the Maurya Emperor Asoka united nearly the whole of India and Afghanistan under one rule. "The revelation of India's past was one of the strongest foundations on which Indian nationalism was built, and gave it that stamp of Hindu character which made its influence felt in many ways at different stages of political evolution in India".<sup>2</sup> The educated Indians were also greatly inspired by the political developments in Europe, particularly the struggle for independence in Greece, Italy and Ireland. Visits to European countries increased their knowledge of the political institutions of Europe. Indeed, the Hindu College students who flourished in the second half of the 19th century took pride in their own heritage. A

representative figure of this generation was Rajnarain Basu (1826-1899) who has been hailed as 'the father of Indian nationalism'. Ranjarain disapproved of the anglicized views of the followers of Derozio. He made the significant remark that "Western education had turned the heads of these disciples of Derozio".<sup>3</sup>

Rajnarain Basu may also be regarded as the first exponent of the idea of Hindu revivalism. Rajnarain was a prominent member of the Adi Brahmo Samaj and a close associate of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. He did not believe in traditional Hinduism with its superstitious rites and practices and numerous restraints on personal freedom regarding eating and drinking. But he was deeply devoted to his country and to the lofty ideas of ancient Hindu culture in particular. Keshab Chandra Sen and his followers derived their ideals mainly from Christian ethics and culture, while Rajnarain's main source of inspiration was the ancient Hindu religion and culture. In the controversy between Keshab Chandra and Debendranath, Rajnarain unequivocally sided with the latter. He stood up boldly to proclaim the superiority of the Hindu religion and culture to Christian theology and European civilisation. "His lecture in Bengali on *Hindu Dharma* *Sresthata* (or, the superiority of Hinduism) was really the first challenge of the ancient spirit of India to the aggressive thought and civilisation of Europe".<sup>4</sup>

Nabagopal Mitra (1840-1894) was another close associate of Maharshi Debendranath who solidly stood behind the Adi Brahmo Samaj in the period of the first schism in the Samaj. Like Rajnarain he was an ardent champion of Hinduism, and the two were closely associated with the Hindu Mela. Rajnarain records in his autobiography that his friend Nabagopal Mitra got the idea of the Hindu Mela from his 'Prospectus of a society for the promotion of national feeling among the educated natives of Bengal'.<sup>5</sup>

This prospectus may in fact be regarded as the first great landmark in the history of Hindu revivalism. It envisaged a bright future for the Hindu culture and civilization and suggested positive steps for its revival. The prospectus was at once a challenge to the critics of Hinduism and a programme for its revitalization. Its author was afraid that a catastrophe might overtake the unreformed Hindu society and that the tide of revolution might sweep away all that was good in the Hindu heritage. "To prevent this catastrophe and to give a national shape to reforms, it is proposed that a society be established by the influential members of native society for the promotion of national feeling among the educated natives of Bengal".<sup>6</sup>

Rajnarain Basu set out specifically the programme and objectives of this national society. It would endeavour to revive the national gymnastic exercises and publish tracts on the prevalence of gymnastics in ancient India. The Nationality Promotion Society should establish a model school for instruction in Hindu music. The Society should also establish a school of Hindu medicine where the Hindu materia medica and practice of physic would be taught, freed from the errors and absurdities that disfigured them. The Nationality Promotion Society should publish in Bengali the results of the researches of the Sanskrit scholars of Europe in the department of Indian Antiquities, giving special prominence to their descriptions of the prosperity and glory of ancient India, physical, intellectual, moral, social, political, literary and scientific. The Society was to afford every encouragement to the cultivation of the Sanskrit language and literature and to patronise the publication of important Sanskrit works.

The prospectus of the Nationality Promotion Society shows that Rajnarain Basu was not an obscurantist and that he was fully conscious of the current problems of the Bengali Hindu community. The proposed society was to make it binding upon its members to ground the knowledge of their sons in the mother tongue before giving them an English education. "Education both in English and Bengali carried on simultaneously does greater injury to the Bengali education of a student as he pays greater attention to the English than to the Bengali language".<sup>7</sup> An educated Bengalee should speak either pure Bengali or pure English. The Nationality Promotion Society was to make it binding on its members to correspond with each other in Bengali. "The members of no nation correspond with one another in a foreign language", Rajnarain observed.<sup>8</sup>

Rajnarain strongly opposed Keshab Chandra Sen in the controversy over the civil marriage bill. But he was not a reactionary in social matters. This is quite evident from the prospectus referred to above. "The Nationality Promotion Society will not initiate or take an active part in social reformation, as such reformation is not its principal end or aim, but will aid it by rousing national feelings in its favour. The Nationality Promotion Society shall publish tracts in Bengali containing proofs of the existence of liberal and enlightened customs in ancient India, such as female education, personal liberty of females, marriage by election of the bride, marriage at adult age, widow marriage, intercaste marriage and voyage to distant countries. The Nationality Promotion Society shall, in a few words, try in the first

place to prevent the introduction of evil foreign customs into educated native community ; secondly, to introduce such native customs, as have a tendency to infuse national feeling into the minds of its members ; thirdly, to give, if possible, to foreign customs, already introduced, a national shape ; fourthly to aid social reformation by citing old precedents in its favour ; and fifthly, to prevent the abolition of such old customs of the country, as are beneficial in their nature".<sup>9</sup>

The prospectus was the basis of the Jatiya Mela organised by Nabagopal Mitra in 1867. The first Mela was held on the last day of the Bengali era 1273 at the Belgachia Garden of Ashutosh Deb. It was a small gathering of friends and neighbours.<sup>10</sup> The Second Mela was held in the same place in the Bengali era 1274. In the proceedings of the third meeting of the society held in 1275 the Mela was described as the Hindu Mela. But the name Hindu Mela was definitely adopted only from the fourth year, 1870 A.D. (or B.S. 1276). Dwijendranath Tagore, the eldest son of Debendranath, made the position clear in his report as Secretary. "The Mela was so long known as the Jatiya Mela or Chaitra Mela. Its character was indistinct. But, now it assumes explicitly the name Hindu Mela, and by this its real character is revealed".<sup>11</sup>

The Hindu Mela has been regarded by some historians as the first expression of our national sentiment. The proceedings of its meetings revealed that the object of the Mela was to rouse a consciousness about our past heritage. Manomohan Basu said in the first meeting (1867) that the sacred object of the assembly was to establish national independence, national unity and self-help.<sup>12</sup> This object of the Mela was also emphasised by Ganendranath Tagore in the second year.

In his prospectus referred to above Rajnarain Basu had made it clear that the society should abstain from the agitation over religious and political issues. But the word 'Freedom' seems to have been used first by Monomohan Basu in the second year of the Chaitra Mela. "We do not venture now to mention the name of that fruit. People of other countries call it *Freedom* and taste its heavenly flavour. We have not seen that fruit. In hearsay alone we have heard about its infinite qualities".<sup>13</sup>

From the proceedings of the meetings and the speeches of some of the leaders we can form a fair idea about the aims and objectives of the Mela. The Mela's primary objective was the revival of the past glory of Hinduism. Its leaders talked of patriotism, freedom and Hinduism in the same breath. In fact, they found no contradiction in

this. Neither Rajnarain Bose nor Nabagopal Mitra thought of a common national sentiment which could enthuse the Hindus, Muslims and Christians of India in a feeling of brotherhood and unity. Nationalism and Hinduism were almost identical in their eyes. This fact has to be accepted in any assessment of the contribution of the Hindu Mela. Secondly, the change of the name from Jatiya Mela to Hindu Mela was not without significance. Dwijendranath Tagore made it clear in the fourth meeting of the Hindu Mela that the real character and ideal of the Mela were evident in the name itself. The Hindu Mela has often been regarded as the beginning of our nationalism. This is true in a severely limited sense. The nationalism that manifested itself in the Hindu Mela was distinctly Hindu in character. The Mela may more appropriately be regarded as the starting point of Hindu revivalism.

The detailed description of the Mela and its activities leaves no room for doubt about its real character. Ganendranath Tagore and Nabagopal Mitra made the following proposals in the Mela of 1868 :-

- 1) Hindus of all classes should be organised in a common organisation and work for a common purpose.
- 2) The progress of the Hindu society should be studied and a report prepared at the end of each year.
- 3) There will be an exhibition each year of goods prepared by indigenous labour and enterprise.
- 4) Every encouragement would be given to those who excelled in national music and national gymnastic.<sup>14</sup>

In the same meeting Monomohan Basu maintained that the revival of Hinduism and the recovery of the lost glory of the Hindus would be achieved by the Mela. He mentioned *inter alia*, that the *Yavanas* (i.e. Muhammadans) by their iron rule had stifled Hindu thinking and Hindu independence.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time we should not be oblivious of the fact that national songs composed by Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Satyendranath Tagore, Dwijendranath Tagore, Monomohan Basu and Rabindranath Tagore were sung at the various sessions of the Mela. "These patriotic songs together with the stirring speeches delivered by Ganendranath, Monomohan Basu, Rajnarain Basu and Rajanikanta Gupta, created an abiding feeling of love for the country in the hearts of those who thronged the Mela every year as if it was a place of pilgrimage"<sup>16</sup>

With the growth of political consciousness two secular associations, namely, the India League and the Indian Association were established

in 1875 and 1876 respectively. The Mela gradually lost its importance and was finally closed in 1881.

In the meanwhile Nabagopal Mitra established the National School in 1872 in the premises of the Calcutta Training Academy at 13, Cornwallis Street. This institution imparted to its students instructions in morality, Indian music, chemistry, geometry, drawing, carpentry, bricklaying, smithery and physical training. The school laid great emphasis on physical education, and Nabagopal felt that with proper training the Bengalees could prove their mettle on the battlefield. Bipin Chandra Pal thus records his impression of the enthusiasm of Nabagopal Mitra : "When I first made his acquaintance, he was living as an independent gentleman, devoting not only his time and energy, but also practically the whole of his financial resources to the promotion of the cause of physical education of his people and the revival of national arts and industries. He seems to have come very soon to the end of his personal resources and was compelled to take service in the Calcutta Corporation as license officer. But he continued to run his hobby and finally organised the first Bengali circus in which he lost his all and passed away in the 80's of the last century almost a penniless man".<sup>17</sup>

## II. RAJNARAIN BASU AND HINDU REVIVALISM

A systematic effort to revive pure Hinduism as envisaged in the Upanishads was made by Rajnarain Basu in his long career. Rajnarain was a close associate of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and shared his ideas. Keshabchandra and Debendranath were drifting apart in the 60's of the last century. Keshab finally separated himself from the Adi Brahmo Samaj and established the Bharatvarsiya Brahmo Samaj in 1866. His attitude towards Hinduism was primarily responsible for the first schism in the Brahmo Samaj. Debendranath and Rajnarain were opposed to polytheism and idolatry, but they wanted to reform Hinduism from within by removing the superstitious rites and customs which had debased its true character. The nature of their differences with Keshab is evident from a speech which the Maharshi delivered in 1867 A.D. (1789 Saka, Kartik 11). The speech clarifies the stand of the Adi Brahmo Samaj regarding the Hindu revival. It may be said that the members of the Adi Brahmo Samaj were the first exponents of the idea of reviving the purest form of Hinduism which in their opinion, was really Brahmoism.

Debendranath's speech mentioned above deserves close examination as an important landmark in the religious thought of 19th century Bengal. The Maharshi's main arguments may be summarised as follows.<sup>18</sup>

(1) The worship of Brahma had been inculcated in all Hindu scriptures as the highest form of worship and the means of salvation. Idolatry was meant only for the weaker intellect, and Brahma-worship was essential for salvation. So the worship of Brahma can unite all Brahmos. (2) While the idolaters believed that God appears as *Avatar* in this world from time to time for the preparation of true religion, Brahmoism specifically forbade the worship of any intermediary between the human soul and the absolute. The significant feature of the Brahma faith was the worship of the Infinite, discarding all other forms of worship of any finite object. (3) The object of the Brahmos should be to reform and purify the Hindu society from within, and thus elevate it to a higher plane. (4) It was quite easy to improve one's own self. But the primary object of the Brahma should be to improve the whole society.

The speech quoted above makes it abundantly clear that there could be no lasting rapprochement between the westernised Keshabchandra and the conservative Debendranath. In a way Debendranath and his followers in the Adi Brahma Samaj were the first group of leaders who gave the call "Back to Hinduism".

Debendranath retired from active work in the Samaj after the first schism. He had trained up ministers to conduct the service of the Adi Samaj, and now he appointed a committee for the management of its affairs. He continued, however, to keep a close supervision over the affairs of the Samaj, and everything was done with his knowledge and under his advice and guidance till his death. Keshab and his followers also showed him great personal respect, though not following in his footsteps. "Henceforth he became the common patriarch of all the Samajees and a Maharshi for all Hindus".<sup>19</sup>

Rajnarain Basu was the principal associate of Debendranath Tagore in the Adi Brahma Samaj. He solidly stood by the Maharshi in his days of crisis and anguish. Rajnarain believed as did the Maharshi, that the Brahma Samaj could prosper only by maintaining a close connection with the Hindu society. This was the antithesis of Keshab's idea of an independent Brahma church, free from Hindu traditions. But Rajnarain was no less progressive than Keshabchandra Sen in social

and educational matters. We shall examine in detail the two aspects of Rajnarain's work.

From 1851 to 1866 Rajnarain was the headmaster of the Midnapore Zilla School. He was closely connected there with the educational and religious activities of the Brahmo Samaj. In 1866 he came to Calcutta. Here he co-operated with Nabagopal Mitra in organising the Hindu Mela, whose activities have been discussed above. From this time again Rajnarain firmly stood against certain developments in the Brahmo Samaj, which he considered 'unhealthy'.

He wrote a book, *Brahmic Advice, Caution and Help*, denouncing Man-worship and *Avatarvada* (doctrine of Incarnation) among the Brahmos. Keshabchandra Sen was closely connected with these developments. The latter was at Allahabad in 1868. There his followers declared him as an *Avatar* of God and began to take the dust of his feet. This habit of touching the feet of the *Acharya* (Spiritual Preceptor) became contagious. "The desire to take the dust of his feet was so intense among the Brahmo that it was difficult to save one's feet."<sup>20</sup> Rajnarain regarded this as an antithesis of the true spirit of Brahmoism. The Brahmo recognises no intermediary between God and man. But when Keshab's followers proclaimed him an *Avatar* (incarnation of God) and vied with one another in taking the dust of his feet, Keshab indirectly encouraged this practice by saying that "he could not check the flood of Bhakti".<sup>21</sup> Rajnarain's strong views on what he regarded as an unhealthy practice were clearly stated in his books, *Brahmic Advice, Caution and Help* and *Brahmic Questions of the day*. The followers of Keshabchandra did not take kindly to this criticism and abused Rajnarain in their journal, *The Indian Mirror*.

Rajnarain was not to be subdued by the vituperations of *The Indian Mirror*. In 1872 he went a step forward and delivered his famous lecture on the Superiority of Hinduism to all other religions, *Hindu Dharmer Sresthata*. The lecture was delivered at 13, Cornwallis Street, Calcutta, in the Training Academy Hall. It was organised by the National Society of Nabagopal Mitra and presided over by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore himself. The lecture was a great set-back for the followers of Keshabchandra. Sivnath Sastri, a close follower of Keshab, replied to Rajnarain. But his effort proved unsuccessful. "Nobody listened to our lectures" Sivnath himself conceded later. "On the other hand, Keshab's followers were branded non-Hindus and earned the contempt of the Hindu-Society".<sup>22</sup>



Though no friend of Rajnarain, Sivnath admitted that the former's lecture was so sound and so full of national sentiment, that he earned instant reputation. People were literally enamoured of his speech. Kali Krishna Deb, President of the Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha of Calcutta hailed him as the 'Hindu-Kula-Shiromoni' (Chief of the tribe of Hindus). Rajnarain's lecture also earned him the admiration of the foreign press. *The London Times* published the gist of this lecture with very favourable comments.

The main contention of Rajnarain Basu in his lecture on Hinduism was that "the Brahmo Dharma is the highest developed form of Hinduism and as such is not distinct from it, though it is at the same time entirely catholic in its character. ...The Hindu religion contains like the ocean that washes the shores of India gems without number and will never perish as long as that country exists".<sup>23</sup>

Rajnarain defined Hinduism as the worship of Brahma. All the Hindu *Shastras* he pointed out, agree that the worship and knowledge of Brahma are the sole cause of salvation and the rites and ceremonies are preliminary means of ascending to that knowledge and worship. The grosser aspects of Hinduism, namely idolatry, pantheism, asceticism, austere mortification, and the system of caste were not sanctioned by the Vedic scriptures. Rajnarain in his lecture also refuted as baseless, the charges against Hinduism which its critics brought, namely that (1) Hinduism did not inculcate the necessity of repentance as other scriptures do; (2) that it did not worship God as father and mother of the universe; (3) that it did not treat of divine love, the highest point of development of every religion; (4) and that it did not inculcate forgiveness towards enemies as the Christian scriptures did.

Rajnarain had his own arguments to prove that Hinduism was superior to other religions. The Catholic character of Hinduism was shown by the fact that the name 'Hindu' was not derived from that of any man as Christianity, Buddhism and Mohammedanism. Hinduism did not acknowledge a mediator between the object of devotion and the worshipper. Unlike the Semitic religions, Hinduism did not recognise the idea of a Prophet. The Hindu worshipped God as nearer and dearer to him than he is to himself, as the soul of the soul. The idea of having intimate communion with God even at the time of wordly business was a special feature of the Hindu religion. "Hinduism maintains that we should worship God for sake of God alone and practise virtue for the sake of virtue".<sup>24</sup>

Christianity and Mohammedanism maintained the theory of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell. But the Hindu religion allowed an expiatory process to sinners by means of transmigration. The catholicity of the Hindu religion was established by the fact that it believed that each man could obtain salvation by following his own religion. Rajnarain disarmed the critics of Hinduism with the following observation. "Hinduism maintains inferior stages of religious belief in its own bosom in harmony with the nature of man who cannot but pass through several stages of religious development before being able to grasp the Supreme Being".<sup>25</sup>

Religion was the basis of life in Hinduism. It was often said that the Hindu ate, drank and slept religiously. Two other aspects of the Hindu religion made it basically different from other religions. This religion was of a very comprehensive nature, embracing as it did, all human knowledge, all civil polity, all domestic economy. The Hindu religion was the oldest of all surviving religions, and existed from pre-historic times. Rajnarain maintained that there was much in it which could secure a permanent hold over the mind of man.

The principal target of attack of the critics of Hinduism was idolatry. Rajnarain's lecture effectively rebutted the critics by pointing out that the worship of the absolute was the highest form of worship among the Hindus. For this there was no need of performing any rites or ceremonies. But those who could not worship the formless God or the Absolute were not disowned by Hinduism. They formed an inferior group of worshippers, worshipping images. Ultimately they would realise the necessity of the worship of the Brahma and reach a higher stage. "Idolatry of the idol-worshippers is not a sin, it is only a mistake".<sup>26</sup> This observation of Rajnarain was merely a corroboration of what Rammohun had said long ago. Like Rammohan, Rajnarain also maintained that those who worshipped images should be taught to realise gradually the efficacy of Brahmaworship. As Rajnarain put it, "Do not remain on the staircase for ever. Reach the terrace".<sup>27</sup>

Rajnarain also made it clear that his slogan 'back to Hinduism' was a call to revive the highest form of Hinduism, preached by the Upanishads. The Upanishads contained valuable sermons which could not be found elsewhere in the world. The Bible and the Quoran inculcated the idea that God resided in a particular place or in heaven. The Hindu did not believe in this theory. God was omnipresent and he was not different from the world. "The principal object of worship is the attainment of the Absolute. Worship and repentance for sin are only means to achieve this object."<sup>28</sup>

The current form of Hinduism with its superstitions was to be reformed and transformed into Brahmoism, which was a universal religion. The purest form of Hinduism was non-sectarian and universal. Therefore, Brahmoism could not be regarded as a separate religion beyond the pale of Hinduism.

In concluding his speech Rajnarain predicted a bright future for Hinduism. "The Hindus will rise from slumber and again march heroically to prosperity... The deeds of the Hindus and their glory will gradually spread throughout the world".<sup>29</sup>

The Muslims, in Rajnarain's opinion, had tried their best to destroy Hinduism. The Christian missionaries also bitterly attacked Hinduism, and tried to convert the Hindus. But the Reverend Alexander Duff had ultimately conceded defeat and retired to England. The missionary attack on Hinduism had failed. Rajnarain firmly believed that Hinduism would never be wiped out. On the other hand, it would remain as a unifying factor among different peoples like the Bengalees, Punjabis, Hindusthanis, Rajputs, Marathas, and Madrasis. The name 'Hindu' had a magical charm. This name as well as the religion called Hinduism would remain forever.

Rajnarain Basu retired to Deoghar for reasons of health in 1879 A.D. There he began to write a book, entitled *The Old Hindu's Hope*. The book was first published in Bengali in 1886 in the journal *Nabajiban* as "Vridhha Hindur Asha." The scheme envisaged by 'the old Hindu' has been regarded by some contemporaries as the precursor of the National Congress or the Mahadharma-mandal.<sup>30</sup> *The Indian Mirror* of 4 August, 1889, made a very favourable review of the book, and recommended its wide circulation. Some of its comments deserve notice. "The old Hindu who has broached the idea, though physically old, is mentally, morally and religiously more energetic and enthusiastic than most of the younger members of the Hindu community. The proposal gives rough details of how the Samity is to be formed and worked, but these are subject to modifications. Patriotism of the highest type pervades every syllable of the old man's thoughts and utterances, and all who have the nation's good at heart would do well to consider the practicability of the proposal which, if successfully carried out is calculated to work out a revolution in the temporal and spiritual economy of the Aryan nation."<sup>31</sup>

*The Vridhha Hindur Asha* may be regarded as the last great work of Rajnarain. Here Rajnarain summed up his idea of Hindu revivalism. Two main points in this programme need special mention. The author made it clear that the Muslims could have no place in this Mahasamiti. They were free to form a Maha-Mussalman-Samity and co-operate

with the Hindus in political matters. Secondly, the flag of the Samiti should bear the inscriptions, "*God and Motherland: Triumph of Sanatan Dharma.*"

These points are highlighted to refute the views of some writers that the Revivalist Movement was not communal and the word 'Hindu' was used in a broad sense.<sup>32</sup> The leaders of Revivalism were not apologetic when they talked of Hindu glory and Hindu nationalism. They were patriotic in their own way and played their parts effectively. The detailed programme of Rajnarain Basu is examined here to establish our contention. His first contention was that the Hindus alone could be members of the Maha Hindu-Samiti. The latter were divided into two principal groups, the idolaters and the Vedantists or Brahmos. Secondly, he contended that since religion was the most important thing in the life of a Hindu, the object of the Mahasamiti would be to protect the religious rights of the Hindus, to rouse their consciousness and to seek a general improvement of the Hindus. Thirdly, Brahma was the object of worship of all Hindus. The different gods and goddesses were but the manifestations of the different aspects of the Supreme Being or Brahma. The Mahasamiti should, therefore, try to form a united Hindu nation on the basis of the Hindu religion, Hindu customs and the past glory of the Hindus. There could be no such unity with the Muslims, as their religion, customs and traditions were different from those of the Hindus. But there could be a Mussalman Mahasamiti, and 'the old Hindu' felt that this Samiti can co-operate with the Maha-Hindu-Samiti in political matters. This was actually being done in mass meetings and in the Indian National Congress. The Hindus and the Muslims worked together at the time of the imprisonment of Surendranath Banerjee and the farewell of Lord Ripon. In the fourth place, the Maha Hindu Samiti would have a national flag on which were to be inscribed the words '*God and Motherland: Triumph of Sanatan Dharma*'. Each member was to put on a ring bearing his inscription. Fifthly, in the sessions of the Samiti controversial questions of social reform should not be discussed. These might be left to social reform organisations. The purpose of the lectures in the Samiti should be to make the members conscious of the past glory and present degeneration of India. Proposals for the physical, moral, political and economical improvement of the Hindus, i.e. a general regeneration of the Hindu community should be discussed.<sup>33</sup>

It was evident from the above discussion that Rajnarain's programme was to unite all Hindus on the basis of the Upanishadic Hindu religion and the past glory of the Hindus. He wanted to reform the Hindu society in a very limited way. He had none of the exuberance of Keshab Chandra Sen for quick social progress or the bitter hostility of Rammohan towards idolatry. The old Hindu's outlook was essentially conservative. But he had a greater appeal to the Hindus in general than either Keshab Chandra or Rammohun. The old Hindu harped on the old glory of the Hindus and drew up an elaborate plan for its revival.

The branches of the Maha-Hindu Samiti were to be established in every town and village of India. A Sanskrit pandit, if available, should be nominated President of the local Samiti. The President was to be assisted by a Secretary and an Assistant Secretary. The session of the assembly should be held in a solemn manner with elaborate Hindu rites, viz. the burning of incense, putting on garlands and chandan-tilak and the chanting of hymns from the Gita and the Upanishad.

The old Hindu laid down an elaborate procedure for the meetings of the Samiti. The welfare of the Hindus should be discussed and proposals for this invited. National songs like 'Bandemataram' should be sung and lectures delivered on national glory. The Samiti should be open to Hindus of all sects, Vaishnavas, Kabirpanthis, Dadupanthis, Sikhs, Jains, Brahmos, and persons converted to Hinduism from Islam or Christianity.

Young men should be encouraged to take interest in physical culture and manly sports. The Indians had become weak due to lack of military training. So the Arms Act should be abolished, and the Indians trained in the use of arms. The members of the Maha Hindu Samity should learn the Hindi language in the Devnagari script for communication with people of different provinces of India. English might be used temporarily by the South Indians and the Bengalis. But, ultimately, Hindi should be the common language of all Hindus of this sub-continent. The Maha-Hindu Samiti should establish Sanskrit schools in different parts of the country. A Sanskrit University also should be established for the whole country and Sanskrit learning encouraged. The members of the Samiti should try to develop indigenous trade and industry, and with this object in view, should refrain from using goods made outside the country. Special attention should be devoted to agriculture. Since the preservation of the cow was necessary for agriculture, the Maha Hindu Samiti should organise a movement against cow slaughter. The author felt that this would be a great unifying factor among the Hindus. The cow was held in great reverence by all Hindus, and it could serve the purpose of achieving Hindu unity better than anything else.

*The Old Hindu's Hope* is a valuable document for the study of the Hindu revivalist movement in its early phase. It shows clearly the aspirations of its leaders as well as their limitations. Rajanarain Basu and Nabagopal Mitra initiated the movement for reviving the past glory of Hinduism. This alone, they felt, could unite the different sects of Hindus and keep Brahmoism within the Hindu fold. They were opposed to foreign goods, foreign language and blind imitation of European manners and customs. The Hindu Mela contained an incipient nationalism which later developed into a desire for freedom. The early leaders of Hindu Revivalism thus prepared the ground for the Swadeshi movement and the work of the National Congress.

But one should not be too enthusiastic about their nationalism. The nationalism which they preached had a definitely Hindu bias, and Rajnarain made it clear that the Sikhs might be admitted into the Maha Hindu Samiti, but not the Muslims. The Muslims, naturally, could not be attracted to this kind of nationalism. The leaders made no attempt to bring the Hindus, Muslims and Christians living in India under the banner of a common organisation. On the other hand, their excessive attachment to Hindu rites and ceremonies alienated the non-Hindus. The reverence for the cow and the suggestion for an anti-cow-slaughter movement were not likely to endear Rajnarain and his supporters to the Muslims and the Christians. Historians who try to play down the communal overtones in the writings and ideas of these leaders may go through the book *Vriddha Hindu Asha* to have a proper perspective of the movement at least in this early phase. An intense form of this Hindu nationalism may be found in some of the novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee like *Anandamath* and *Sitaram*. There was no place for the Muslims in Sitaram's Hindu empire, as in Rajnarain's Maha Hindu Samiti. The position has been clearly summed up by a Marxist writer: "The political awakening was rousing intense pride and self-confidence and in view of the backwardness of the Muslim people it naturally tended to take on a Hindu garb more decisively than before.

"Patriotic writers invariably glorified not merely the ancient Indian culture with its predominantly Hindu structure, they also began to dwell upon the struggles of the Rajputs, the Marathas, the Sikhs as instances of the freedom urge. As it happened, all these peoples had as their adversaries—the Muslims, and the Hindu trend in the national sentiment was intensified with a not very happy consequence"<sup>34</sup>

In spite of these limitations, the work of Nabagopal Mitra and Rajnarain Basu was of considerable significance in the history of Bengal in the late nineteenth century. They halted the campaign of villification of Hinduism started by the Christian missionaries, the Derozians and some of the Brahmos themselves. They disarmed the aggressive Brahmo critics led by Keshab Chandra Sen, by maintaining the position that Brahmoism and true Hinduism—the Hinduism of the Upnishads—were identical. The real need of the time was a reformation of Hinduism, not its denigration. They attempted to unite the Hindus on a common platform, leaving out social problems to social reform organisations. They were conscious of the need of social reform, but felt, like their preceptor Debendranath Tagore, that religious unity should have priority over social reform. If the first could be achieved the second would be a natural sequel. In this respect, they differed basically from Keshab Chandra Sen and the more radical Brahmos. They also differed sharply from Keshab Chandra Sen in refusing to admit Brahmoism as a separate religion outside the pale of Hinduism. The leaders of the Adi Brahmo Samaj thus actually strengthened the cause of Hinduism. While this was a distinct gain for the Hindus, the Brahmo position was immensely weakened. The first schism in the Brahmo Samaj (1866) was followed by a second one (1878), and Keshab Chandra Sen was ultimately alienated from the main body of the Brahmos. Sivnath Shastri, who was a close associate of Keshab Chandra has painfully recorded the plight of the Brahmo Samaj in the period of the second schism. “Religion cannot grow in an atmosphere of groupism... The Brahmo Samaj has been held cheap in the public eye as a result of this and has not yet been able to overcome this plight. The decline of the Brahmo Samaj is a punishment for our sin”.<sup>35</sup>

In spite of their basic conservatism in respect of religion, Debendranath and Rajnarain were not opposed to social changes. When Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar started the agitation for widow-marriage in the 1850's he was actively supported by both. Rajnarain's cousin Durganarain and brother Madan Mohan Basu were among the earliest to marry widows. Rajnarain had to incur the displeasure of his mother and other close relatives for taking the initiative in these marriages, but Devendranath blessed him.<sup>36</sup> Regarding women's education also Rajnarain was extremely enthusiastic. In his “*Sekal O Ekal*”, a lecture delivered in 1874,

Rajnarain lamented the fact that not much had been done for the education of women. Raja Radhakanta Deb and Drinkwater Bethune were the pioneers of women's education in Bengal. But their work had not been effectively followed up. Women in those days learnt little and were attracted to vulgar novels and dramas. They should have proper instruction in morals, domestic chores and fine arts. It was better to have no education than to acquire an imperfect or faulty education.

Rajnarain Basu wanted gradual reform of the Hindu society by rousing the consciousness of the people about social abuses, and not by imposing changes from above all on a sudden. His views on the caste system were explained in an article in the *Tatvabodhini Patrika* (Asharh 1796 Saka). Rajnarain analysed the controversy regarding the caste system. There were broadly three kinds of opinions on this subject. The conservative group maintained that any change in the caste system would lead to chaos in the Hindu society. Therefore, the system which had been established by our ancestors should not be disturbed. The opponents of this view pointed out that all men were equal in the eyes of God, and caste created an artificial barrier between men. It was a hindrance to the development of people belonging to the lower castes. The restrictions imposed by the system on sea voyage, inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage were doing immense harm to the Hindu society. The abolition of caste was, therefore, essential for India's progress. There was a third group of people who wanted to maintain the caste-system in a modified form. They agreed that all men were not equal and that the caste system in some form or other would remain in society. In Europe the rich and the poor formed different classes which did not intermix socially. Since society could not dispense altogether with the caste system, the best course would be to maintain the ancient caste system on the basis of religion and education. In ancient India there was no bar for a Sudra rising to the status of a Brahmin by virtue of character and education. An irreligious, immoral and uneducated brahmin was reduced to the position of a Sudra. There was no doubt that people of the higher castes were superior in intelligence. The caste system in its ancient form was good in two ways. It would maintain a stream of intelligent people among the higher castes.

Rajnarain Basu favoured the third view regarding caste. He felt that the abolition of caste was neither feasible nor desirable. Actually he



wanted to revive the caste system in its ancient form. He made it clear that respect for ancestors and tradition was good as long as it was not an impediment to social progress. "Caste should remain, but we cannot agree with the view that the present caste system needs no change". This conclusion of Rajnarain leaves no room for doubt that the revivalist thinkers were opposed to the social idealism of the Brahmo movement of which Rammohun was the originator and Keshabchandra, an ardent supporter.

Rajnarain Basu's attitude to social reform is clearly explained in an article published in the *Tatvabodhini Patrika* (Asvin 1797 Saka). The Hindus, according to Rajnarain, were the more conservative among all peoples. So social reform and religious change could be made only by maintaining old customs. The ancient Aryans were not an unwise people; what they did was not all wrong and unreasonable. Rajnarain felt that social reform could not succeed if it was not connected with religion. Religion could change our life in a more fundamental way than anything else. The reformer who wanted to reform society and religion by breaking down the entire traditional system, had little chance of success in his task. On the other hand, the reformer who put greater emphasis on preservation than destruction would have a fair chance of achieving his objective. In India the most successful reformer was Sankaracharya who propagated the true message of Hinduism with vigour but did not attempt to break down the Hindu social system. Others like the Buddha who wanted a violent break with the past did not ultimately succeed. Kabir, Nanak and Chaitanya struck at the root of Hindu conservatism. But the latter proved too strong for them. Instead of reforming the Hindu society the followers of Kabir, Nanak and Chaitanya became small sects within the vast Hindu community. Those who had revolted against sectarian religion ended by forming sects themselves. Rajnarain, therefore, stressed the point that social reform should be gradual and not violent. Rajnarain struck a note of caution for the Brahmo progressives and other radical reformers.

### III. THE NATIVE MARRIAGE ACT OF 1872

The Years 1871-1972 witnessed a social agitation over the passing of Act 3 of 1872. Brahmo marriages, according to a reformed ritual from which the idolatrous portions of the orthodox Hindu ritual were expunged, began to be celebrated from July 1861 onward. The Adi Brahmo Samaj used to celebrate marriages in this manner every year.

In 1866 two Brahmos, Prasanna Kumar Sen and Srimati Rajlaksmi Maitra, were married in a new manner. Many features of the ceremony which the progressives considered unnecessary were abandoned. *Sampradan* (giving away of the bride to the bridegroom) was replaced by the taking of vows. The ceremony thus became more western than eastern.

The Brahmo Samaj of India raised the question of the legal validity of such marriages in 1868. Keshab Chandra Sen persuaded Henry Maine to introduce a bill in the Viceroy's Council, called the Native Marriage Bill, in order to legalise Brahmo marriages. The Bill provided a civil form of marriage for all non-Christians. It was vehemently opposed by the Hindu members of the Council, the landholders of Bengal, the Pundits of Benaras and the Hindus and Parsees of Bombay.

Fitzjames Stephen who succeeded Maine as the Law Member received the Select Committee's Report (1871) and modified the Bill as the Brahmo Marriage Bill. It was vehemently opposed by the leaders of the Adi Brahmo Samaj. They argued that the marriages celebrated under the ritual of the Adi Brahmo Samaj were quite as valid as the marriages of other reformed Hindus and that the proposed law contemplated a civil form of marriage, which was revolting to Hindu ideas. The passing of the Act would inevitably tend to separate the Brahmos from the Hindu community, but they were totally opposed to this separation.<sup>37</sup>

The members of the Adi Brahmo Samaj and the progressive Brahmos were locked in a bitter controversy over the proposed Native Marriage Bill. Keshab Chandra Sen addressed a letter to the leading Pundits of Bengal, asking for their opinion on the validity of the rituals adopted in Brahmo marriages. "Thus the marriage controversy developed itself in side issues and there was an interminable discussion".<sup>38</sup>

The Native Marriage Act was passed in 1872 as Act 3 of 1872. The Act abolished early marriage, made polygamy penal, and sanctioned widow marriage and intercaste marriage. The followers of Keshab Chandra Sen welcomed the passage of the Act. But Rajnarain Basu wrote a pamphlet opposing the Bill, and distributed this among the Brahmos. In his autobiography he wrote: "How can a Brahmo say before the Registrar that he takes a women as his wedded wife when he has already done so in the solemn presence of God and the minister of religion? Will not this be a plain lie? .... Never before in the history

of India did any such instance occur of a body of religious men surrendering their religious rights into the hands of the Government of their own accord in the way we are doing".<sup>39</sup> He wrote further, "The day Keshab Babu said 'I am not a Hindu' was a sorrowful day. On that day the two brothers were separated, one brother left the house".<sup>40</sup>

Sivnath Sastri makes a similar observation, although he was one of the ardent supporters of Keshab Chandra Sen on this question. "It (the Act) was hailed with a shout of joy by the progressives; but ever since it has been one of the principal causes that have alienated the Brahmos from the sympathies of their orthodox countrymen. Its negative declaration, consequent upon the act being intended for parties not coming under any of the existing marriage laws and not professing any of the current faiths, has given great offence to our Hindu countrymen, from amongst whom the present members of the Brahmo Samaj are largely recruited".<sup>41</sup>

The year 1872 may be regarded as a turning point in the religious history of Bengal. Rajnarain Basu's lecture on "Hindu Dharmer Sresthata" and the opposition to the passing of the Native Marriage Act were manifestations of a new feeling, among the Hindus as well as the conservative Brahmos that Hinduism must assert itself, and no longer remain on the defensive. Henceforward Hinduism heroically faced the challenge of its critics, whether they were Derozian radicals, Brahmo progressives or Christian missionaries. The Cooch Behar marriage controversy and the second split in the Brahmo Samaj (1878) further strengthened the Hindu position. Whether this new strength of conservatism was beneficial to the Hindu society in the long run is another matter.

The Hindu protest mentioned above was a challenge against unfounded and uninformed criticism. Rajnarain was a product of the Hindu College, who had studied English like the Derozians. He was also well versed in the Bengali language and had thoroughly studied the Hindu scriptures. Moreover, he held progressive ideas on female education, widow marriage, and English education and was fully conscious of the need for changes in current Hinduism. His justification of Hinduism could not naturally be dismissed by his critics in a cavalier manner.

European education had been quickly destroying the faith of the educated Bengalees in the religion of their forefathers. The disciples

of Derozio used to take pride in the denigration of Hinduism and openly indulged in prohibited food and drink. Beef and wine became symbols of progress, so to say, and the orthodox Sanskrit scholar was held in contempt. But Rajnarain now pointed out that Hindu religion was not devoid of reason and rationalism. One should not be too enthusiastic about European rationalism. In fact, the Upanishdas represented the first manifestation of the rational faculty of the Hindus. The Upanishads proclaimed the unity of godhead, inculcated faith in the absolute or the supreme being, and protested against the ritualistic religion of the early Vedas. Revival of this pure form of Hinduism was, according to Rajnarain, the greatest need of the hour. His position has been succinctly summed up by Bipin Chandra Pal: "Not only have we the most perfect system of theism or monotheism in our ancient theology and religion, but side by side with these religious and spiritual ideal Hinduism presented also a much higher social idealism, all its outer distinctions of caste notwithstanding than has as yet been reached by Christendom".<sup>42</sup> Rajnarain Basu made a bold protest on behalf of the Hindus against the threatened domination of our life and thought by the aggressive and colour proud civilisation of Europe.

His intense patriotism was hurt when Keshab Chandra Sen sought the help of the foreign Government in passing the Native Marriage Act. He consistently maintained the position that the alien Government should not interfere in our religious matters. Once this was allowed it would not be stopped. This would ultimately result in moral and intellectual domination of the west in addition to their political domination. This was also Tilak's argument against social legislation. Himself a product of the Hindu College, Rajnarain initiated a movement for the preservation of the national vernacular. He organised a small society, Jatiya Gourav Sampadani Sabha, which was a precursor of Nabagopal Mitra's Jatiya Sabha. The members of the society used only Bengali language as the medium of conversation; one who violated this rule was fined one paisa.<sup>43</sup> He was also the first to organise a movement against intemperance. At Midnapore he organised a society for the prevention of drinking- *Surapan Nivaran Sabha*. Kumar Brajendranaryan Deb, son of Radhakanta Deb, became a member of this association. Previously, he had been much addicted to drinking. His conversion to the cause of temperance naturally irritated his former friends, and Rajnarain became a target of their slander.

The opposition to the Native Marriage Act served as a rallying point for all forces defending the cause of Hinduism. Nabagopal Mitra and his National Association strongly opposed the Bill. The Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha had been established a few years earlier by the Rajas of Sobhabazar, Kamal Krishna Deb and Kali Krishna Deb. The Sabha organised lectures and discussions on the Hindu religion and Hindu customs with a view to establishing their superiority. The sessions of the Sabha were held in the house of Khelat Chandra Ghosh, one of the richest men in Calcutta. Hitherto it had been busy with the interpretation and evaluation of the Shastras and the revival of Hindu feeling. "But from this time it became a powerful force... The Brahmos do not want to call themselves Hindus. As soon as this rumour spread the effort of this Sabha for the revival of Hinduism was strengthened".<sup>44</sup>

#### IV. THE COOCHBEHAR MARRIAGE CONTROVERSY

Keshab Chandra Sen was not much disturbed by the controversy over the Native Marriage Act (1872). He was vigorously pursuing the work of the Brahmo Samaj. The Bharat Ashram (The Indian Hermitage) or a joint family house of the Brahmos was opened in February, 1871. The old Brahmo School was revived in July, 1871. Keshab delivered regular lectures in this school, and his young followers had to read Tulloch's *Theism*, Morell's *Philosophy of Religion*, MacCosh's *Institutions*, Butler's *Analogy* and also the *New Testament*.

The Sangat Sabha which had fallen into a moribund condition was revived. Its discussions began to be regularly published in the form of a journal, the *Dharma-Sadhan*, under the editorial charge of Umes Chandra Datta, the then Principal of the City College. Many young men joined the Sangat Sabha which remained in existence till 1875.

Keshab organised the missionaries into a body called the Brahmo Missionary Conference of which he was the President. The old Brahmo institution, called the Society of Theistic Friends was revived. The Brahmo Niketan, a student's lodging, was started in 1873 and lasted for a few years.

"All these plainly showed the great ardour with which Mr. Sen threw himself into his new work from 1871. But side by side with the signs of renewed activity there were other signs less visible on the surface that indicated that the seeds of discontent and discord had already been

sown and were silently growing.”<sup>45</sup>

The discord culminated in the Cooch Behar Marriage controversy and the second split in the Brahmo Samaj (1878). Only a brief survey of the events is given here to indicate that the Hindu revivalist cause was strengthened by the dissensions in the Brahmo Samaj. The first difference in Keshab's Samaj had arisen on the question of women's education and emancipation. Keshab was opposed to the University education of women. But the dissident group started the Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya which ultimately merged in the Bethune College. With this scheme were connected Brahmo leaders like Anandamohan Bose, Durgamohan Das and Dwarkanath Ganguly.

The second point of discord was the authoritarian attitude of Keshab in respect of Church Government and Brahmo theology. The dissidents were opposed to hero-worship, and wanted democratisation of Church Government. They formed a group, the Samadarshi Dal and started a journal, the *Samadarshi or the Liberal* (1875) for discussing matters relating to Church Government and theology. The Samadarshi group wanted to organise the Brahma Mandir on the principle of self-government. Secondly, they wanted to place the affairs of the Church in the hands of a number of trustees. These attempts proved abortive. The Samadarshi Dal then pressed for a general assembly of the Church. In 1877 a Representative Assembly was formed. The Assembly elected Keshab Chandra Sen as its President and Ananda Mohan Bose as Secretary. Sivanath Sastri, an important member of the group, was selected as the Assistant Secretary. Keshab had at last conceded the formation of a Representative Assembly, but before the Assembly could do anything fruitful, the whole Samaj was overtaken by the Cooch Behar Marriage controversy.

In the fall of 1877 a rumour spread in the Brahmo circles of Calcutta that there was a proposal of marriage between Keshab's minor daughter and the non-Brahmo Prince of Cooch Behar, who was also a minor. It was also heard that the marriage would be solemnised according to non-Brahmites. In January, 1878, definite information reached the Brahmos that the marriage had been settled and certain conditions had been agreed to. These conditions were: (1) the marriage was to take place immediately i.e. before the young Prince's departure for England; (2) it was to be celebrated according to the Cooch Behar ritual with the idolatrous portions expunged;

(3) Keshab Sen's brother, Krishna Behari, was to give away the bride instead of Keshab himself because the latter had lost caste in the Hindu society; (4) the Cooch Behar priests would preside at the marriage and no Brahmo service or Brahmo minister would have anything to do with the ceremony.<sup>46</sup>

The Brahmos of Calcutta were deeply disturbed by these rumours. Some of them wanted to elicit information from Keshab, but the latter maintained complete reticence in this regard and the Brahmins were kept guessing. When the news of the marriage was published in the *Indian Mirror* on 9 February, 1878, there was a sense of shock and puzzlement. Twenty-three leading Brahmos—all ardent followers of Keshab—drew a formal letter of protest and presented it to him on the same day, but Keshab did not reply.

The marriage took place on 6th March, 1878. There was a long drawn controversy regarding the ritual. But it appears in retrospect that Keshab was completely helpless and had to give in to the wishes of the Raj family. "The rites observed were Hindu in all essential features, though in deference to the religious principles of the bride's father, idolatrous *mantras* were omitted and the presence of an idol was dispensed with. Care was, however, taken to retain whatever the Brahmins considered essential to the validity of the marriage".<sup>47</sup>

In an extra-ordinary issue of Keshab Chandra's Bengali journal, the *Dharmattattva* dated 29 March, 1878, an elaborate defence of his action was published. The main contention was that Keshab had never thought of the proposal; it came from the Government without his seeking. He accepted this as providential and as such, binding upon him. The theory of Divine command or 'Adesha' was a new phenomenon in Keshab's life which had far-reaching consequences.

On 15th May, 1878, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj was organised. Ananda Mohan Basu was appointed its President, while Shib Chandra Deb and Umes Chandra Dutta were appointed Secretary and Assistant Secretary respectively.

This second schism in the Brahmo Samaj was a painful event. It was a definite setback for the progressive ideal for which the Brahmo Samaj and Keshab Sen, in particular, stood. It gave an impetus to the conservative forces which were opposed to that ideal. The valuable services of Keshab Chandra to the cause of social progress were largely forgotten on account of the unfortunate controversy over the Cooch Behar marriage. Sivanath Sastri rightly observes. "The impression left

by that incident on the minds of outsiders and impartial observers was a melancholy one—namely, that the faith was no doubt lofty and the gospel was no doubt great, but the ‘leaders were morally inadequate’—an expression used by an English writer in an English quarterly review at the time when the Cooch Behar controversy was raging. The moral inadequacy of the leaders lay in the fact that those very men who had struggled at one time to build up some high principles, had yet a leading hand in breaking them down afterwards, who can say we are not open to that charge?

That conviction has certainly lowered the Brahmo Samaj in public estimation. The Brahmo Samaj rose with Keshab Chander sen : with him perhaps it has gone down in public regard”.<sup>48</sup>



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAYA (1836-1894) AND THE REVIVAL OF HINDUISM IN BENGAL.**

BANKIM HAS been regarded by some authors as the chief exponent of Neo-Hinduism in the late nineteenth century; one writer had described the Hastie controversy as the beginning of the New-Hindu Movement in Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The present writer has used the term Revivalism and he does not regard the Hastie controversy as the beginning of a movement. These reservations regarding Neo-Hinduism will be explained later.

Bankim was a litterateur and his explanation of Hinduism was an important development in the field of Bengali literature. It is well to remember that he was not a religious man like Ramakrishna Paramhansa. The difference in their attitudes was fundamental. No one will deny that Ramakrishna Paramhansa had a more pronounced influence in the Revival of Hinduism than Bankim. Bankim's principal contribution to the religious revival of the late 19th century was "the study and interpretation of Hinduism as an intellectual discipline".<sup>2</sup>

Bankim was engaged in a controversy with the clergyman William Hastie in 1882. The occasion which gave rise to this controversy was the performance on 17 September, 1882 of the Dansagar Sradha ceremony of an old lady of the Sovabazar Raj family, the grandmother of Maharaja Harendra Krishna Deb Bahadur. Bankim Chandra made an elaborate defence of Hinduism in a series of letters published in the *Statesman*. The Hastie controversy was an important step in the propagation of Hinduism. But it was *not the first step* taken by Bankim. Anandamath was published earlier. Bankim's trilogy, *Anandamath*, *Debi Chowdhurani* and *Sitaram* were conscious efforts at the propagation of Hinduism. Bankim wrote a series of letters to Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, a positivist thinker. These were his *Letters on Hinduism*. He devoted himself to a study of Hinduism and its interpretation in the last ten years of his life (1884-1894). Bankim's journal *Prachar* and Akshay Chandra Sarkar's journal *Navajiban* were published from 1884. Bankim's works *Krishnacharitra*, *Dharmatattva*, *Devatatva O Hindudharma* and *Srimadbhagvatgita* were published in the last ten years of his life. His concept of Hinduism, as it should be, can be found in all these writings. Three main points

may be mentioned about Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's writings on Hinduism.

Bankim did not regard Hinduism as a religion. Rather it was a way of life, a system of values, a culture in itself. "The substance of religion is culture, the fruit of it the higher life". This view of Bankimchandra has been explained in the novel *Devi Chowdhurani*, in his *Letters on Hinduism* and *the Dharmatattva*. Bankim believed that it was possible to attain the higher life by a proper cultivation of the faculties (*Vritti*) of man. The faculties, according to Bankim, were four devoted to the development of *Jnana*, *Karma*, *Chitta* and *Sharira* (i.e. knowledge, work, mind and physique). He emphasised that true religion was the assimilation of all the faculties and their full development (*Vrittinichayer Samavyaya*).

A second element in Bankimchandra's religious thinking was that an ideal was necessary for the development of full man. In Bankim's opinion this ideal could be found in Sri Krishna. Thus Bankimchandra believed in *Avatara* or incarnation. The *Avatara* can be regarded as an ideal among human beings. The ideal human being was Jesus Christ among the Christians and Sakyasingha among the Buddhists. But the Hindu ideal was Sri Krishna of the Mahabharata. Bankim reconstructed the life of Sri Krishna and attempted to establish him as a historical figure. Sri Krishna, according to Bankimchandra was the *avatara par excellence*.

"He was the synthesis of the impersonal and the personal, the divine and the human, at once individual and universal".<sup>3</sup> Bankim's ideal was not the impersonal God of the Vedantist or 'the Inscrutable power in nature' of Herbert Spencer. He made it clear that the worship of the impersonal God was fruitless, that of the personal God was fruitful.<sup>4</sup>

A third element in Bankim's religious thinking was the concept of Bhakti. Bankim's concept of Bhakti was basically different from the concept of Bhakti propounded by the medieval Saints, these saints having defined Bhakti as total surrender to the will of God (*Prapatti*) and attainment of the grace of God (*prasada*). It is evident that there is no place of any rational explanation or argument in this concept of Bhakti. Only a loving devotion to a personal god could lead to one's salvation. When Bankimchandra speaks of Bhakti as the highest form of religion, he has a definite outlook. This outlook is clearly defined in the *Brahmatattva*. "A condition in which all the faculties of man are turned towards God is Bhakti. A development of all faculties is

needed for the perfection of man. But perfection also consists in the progress of all faculties towards Bhakti".<sup>5</sup> This is a basic element in Bankimchandra's explanation of religion. And he had reached the conclusion after years of search. "From very early life I have faced the question: What is to be done with this life? What shall I do with my life? I have searched for an answer throughout my life. Practically my life has been spent in finding an answer.... I have read many books, written much, conversed with many people and come into contact with many people in course of my service career. I have read literature, science, history, philosophy, native and foreign scriptures. I have laboured hard for the fulfilment of life. After hard labour and suffering I have found an answer to my query: what shall I do with life? I have learnt that Bhakti is attained when all human faculties are turned towards God. There can be no perfection in man without Bhakti."<sup>6</sup>

Any argument of Bankimchandra's religious ideal has to take into account these basic elements in his thinking. He has written much and on many subjects. Naturally his writings can be and have been used to suit particular viewpoints. Often his contribution to neo-Hinduism has been exaggerated beyond measure. We have to remember that Bankim's medium was literature. Literary work on Hinduism can have a limited influence, confined as it is among the educated classes. Secondly, Bankim was a writer-cum-civil servant. There was no religious fervour in him. His analysis was cold, intellectual and rationalistic. Thirdly, his *Anushilan dharma* was something abstract. Bipinchandra Pal has compared it with Brahmoism and found the two alike.<sup>7</sup> This position has been accepted by later writers as well.<sup>8</sup> From this one can conclude that Bankim's Anushilan dharma could not be here, like Brahmoism, a major influence in shaping the Hindu outlook on religion.

These reservations should not be construed as attempts to denigrate Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Rather they are intended to have a study of Bankim's religious outlook in proper perspective. Bankim devoted the last 12 years of his life (1882-1894) to an elaborate defence of Hinduism and attempted to give Pauranic Hinduism a national basis. This was not something new as to merit the nomenclature neo-Hinduism. Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda also preached the revival of Hinduism, not a new Hinduism. Bankimchandra and Vivekananda had wide differences in their approach. But they were all revivalists, not innovators. On this point

sister Nivedita was very clear when she wrote on Swami Vivekananda. "In his case as in that of the Buddhist missionaries the impelling force that drove him out to foreign lands was the great personality of one at whose feet he had sat and whose life he had shared for many years. Yet in the west he spoke of no personal teacher, he gave the message of no limited sect. 'The religious ideas of the Hindus' were his theme at Chicago, and similarly thereafter, it was those elements which were common to and characteristic of orthodox Hinduism in all its parts that formed the burden of his teaching. Thus for the first time in history, Hinduism itself formed the subject of the generalisation of a Hindu mind of the highest order."<sup>9</sup>

I have quoted Nivedita at some length to establish my contention that there was not much which could be regarded as substantially *New* in the so-called Neo-Hinduism. Both Bankimchandra and Vivekananda wanted to protect the citadel of *Pauranik* Hinduism, not to pull it down. While they should not be ranked with other orthodox thinkers of the Century like Sasadhar Tarkachuramani, they wanted a Hindu revival to combat the challenge of Christianity and Brahmoism. Bankim attempted to refute the arguments of Hastie, an English clergyman. The Hastie controversy (1882) was followed by the *Letters on Hinduism* written to Jogendrachandra Ghosh, a positivist thinker. Here we find the principal ideas of Bankimchandra on Hindu religion. The Hastie controversy was long-drawn and marked by polemics on both sides. From our point of view, the detailed arguments are not useful. The principal points of Bankimchandra may be summarised first. (1) The fundamental doctrines of Hinduism are what no European scholar understands and what no European scholar is competent to teach. The native scholar is decidedly a better teacher than the European. (2) Knowledge in India come to be in part recorded in a written language and in part handed down as unwritten and traditional. ...Now all this traditional and unwritten knowledge which is flesh and blood to the dry bones of the written literature is wholly unavailable to the European scholar. ... "The breathing form of the old learning and old civilisation is visible to the native eyes only."<sup>10</sup> (3) Bankimchandra did not think that Hinduism was placed on the defence by an attack of Christianity. Rather Christianity was to maintain a hard struggle for its existence at home. (4) He makes a few observations from the Hindu's point of view. Hinduism consists of a doctrinal basis of the *creed*, a worship or rites and lastly a code of morals, more or

less dependent upon the doctrinal basis. The doctrinal basis will be found to consist in dogmas formulated, explained and illustrated in a number of philosophical literature and legends, which form the legitimate subject of the *puranas*. (5) Bankim is not apologetic about the prevailing form of Hinduism and does not contend that something new should take its place. Often he would suggest reforms and rejection of accretions. But his Hinduism was basically a revival of old values and ideals of traditional Hinduism. This is evident from what he writes to Hastie in the *Statesman* (22 October 1882). "Pantheism and polytheism, philosophy and mysticism, all lent a hind; and out of this bold eclecticism rose the beautiful religion, which do not believe of divine origin, but which I accept as the perfection of human wisdom."<sup>11</sup> (6) Bankim admits that idolatry is a part, but not an essential part of Hinduism. But he has no word of condemnation for idolatry. "The existence of ideals is as justifiable as that of the tragedy of Hamlet or that of Prometheus. The religious worship of idols is as justifiable as the intellectual worship of Hamlet or Prometheus. The homage we owe to the ideal of the human realised in art is admiration. The homage we owe to the ideal of the divine realised in idolatry worship".<sup>12</sup> The image, according to Bankim is simply the Visible and the accessible medium through which the worshipper can send his homage to the throne of the Invisible and the Inaccessible. (7) Caste, idolatry and ritual can be dispensed with. But the principal doctrines of Hinduism are unchangeable and have continued to remain for ages. Bankimchandra wants a proper understanding and revival of the pure doctrines of Hinduism.

The *Letters of Hinduism* indicate what Bankimchandra wanted in a revived Hinduism, the so-called Neo-Hinduism. 1) The term Hinduism has to be restricted to the articles of religious belief accepted by Hindus generally at the present day in exclusion of the Vedic and Brahmanic faith out of which Hinduism evolved itself, ...The noxious parasitic growth must be exterminated before Hinduism can hope further to carry on the education of the human race. 2) Reformed and purified Hinduism may stand forth in the world as the noblest system of individual and social culture available to the Hindu even in this age of progress. Bankim says very frankly, "I have certainly no serious hope of progress in India except in Hinduism, in Hinduism reformed, regenerated and purified. ...Let us revere the past, but we must in justice to our new life, adopt new methods of interpretation and adopt

the old, eternal and undying truths to the necessities of new life.”<sup>13</sup> 3) The worship of the personal God is, in Bankim’s opinion the highest form of religion. “A personal God alone realises the highest and most perfect ideal of the Good, the Beautiful and the True. ... If religion is culture, worship of such a perfect ideal is by far the most important means of culture.”<sup>14</sup> 4) It is again true that Bankimchandra did not envisage any basic change in puranic Hinduism. He suggested reform of certain customs or rituals, which were not central to his idea of Hinduism. This position is categorically stated in *the letters on Hinduism*. “If the ultimate principles of Hinduism be found true and sound and the practical applications of these principles erroneous, the wise course is not to subvert and annihilate Hinduism—which is the cry of the educated India, but to discard the erroneous applications and to remodel life in accordance with its true principles. That is the direction in which religious reform is most desirable and in which alone, I trust, is its success possible.”<sup>15</sup> The legends of Hinduism are not to be rejected out of hand. They should be carefully studied, so that the true Hinduism latent in them may be discovered. “The spurious Hinduism is in their literal interpretation ; the true Hinduism is in their historic interpretation.”<sup>16</sup>

The *Letters on Hinduism* written to Jogendra Chandra Ghosh by Bankimchandra constitute an important landmark in Bankim’s enunciation of Hinduism. It will be seen that Bankim does not reject any vital part of Hinduism and the new Hinduism is substantially the old puranic Hinduism. Professor N. R. Roy rightly comments that Neo-Hinduism is “a more convenient than correct nomenclature for the nineteenth Century religious reaction in India.”<sup>17</sup>

Bankim maintains that polytheism is one of the distinguishing features of Hinduism. He is not apologetic about it. “A pure monotheism is not to be found among the most cultured nations of the earth. ... If it is found at all, it will be found in spheres of lower culture, among Mahammedans, for instance.”<sup>18</sup> The passage quoted above indicates also Bankim’s attitude to Muslim Culture.

Hinduism does not accept more than one God in spite of its polytheism. It does not suppose the existence of a number of deities subordinate to or co-ordinate with the great author and ruler of the Universe. Hinduism in its days of corruption lost sight of this important truth. It is the duty of the modern cultivated Hindu to restore it to its primitive purity. So Bankim wants a restoration of primitive Hinduism,

not a revolutionary change in its definition or content. Pantheism is also a feature of Hindu religion. Sankaracharya developed it and preached it with an amount of learning and eloquence unrivalled in India. *The Bhagvat Purana* and the *Bhagvat Gita* are pantheistic literature, which derived their philosophy from the Vedanta. But the God of Pantheism is an impersonal God, who has no moral attribute which can be worshipped. "Pantheism therefore fails as a religion. Moral attributes imply personality, we must worship a personal God in order that we may worship the highest form of excellence, that our worship may not be a barren and crushing worship of pitilessness and power, but one of love and hope and an exalting influence leading man to the highest ideal of life."<sup>19</sup>

The belief in a personal God is of the very essence of the creed of Hinduism. Iswara, Parameswara, Jagadisvara, these are words commonly used to denote a personal God. Bankim believes that in the great storehouses of the traditional religion of the Hindus, the Itihasas and Puranas, the belief in a personal god co-exists with that in an impersonal god co-extensive with the universe on the one side and theism and polytheism on the other.

Much has been written on Bankimchandra's Anusilan Dharma. Bipinchandra Pal found it similar to Brahmo Dharma. Other writers have regarded this as a major aspect of neo-Hinduism. But Bankimchandra did not regard Anushilan as anything new or basically different from Puranic Hinduism. This is evident from a passage in the *Dharmatattva*.

"Disciple: The Europeans and Pandit Dayananda Saraswati regard the Vedic religion as the best and the Puranic or modern Hinduism as an inferior religion. But now I see that this is extremely incorrect. The religion which is devoid of Bhakti is an incomplete or inferior religion. So the Vedic religion is inferior as the Vedas have no place for Bhakti. Puranic or modern Hinduism is the best religion. Those who try to revive Vedic religion and abolish modern Hinduism are mistaken."

"Preceptor: Your view is entirely correct. But it cannot be said that there is no place for Bhakti anywhere in the Vedas."<sup>20</sup>

Bankim has repeatedly emphasised in the *Dharmatattva* his contention that Puranic Hinduism is the best and complete form of religion. This is the reason why it could not be defeated or replaced by any foreign religion.<sup>21</sup>

I have started with the proposition that Bankim Chandra was a champion of Hindu revivalism and not an exponent of neo-Hinduism. He suggested changes here and there, but these were peripheral. His central theme was the defence of Puranic Hinduism. I shall discuss his Anushilan Dharma to establish my contention. Some of the items of his Anushilan Dharma have been already discussed and will be avoided as repetition. Our primary source is *Dharmatattva* where the discussion is between the preceptor and the disciple. Bankim is the preceptor and his views are fully explained in the *Dharmatattva*. Bankimchandra's main contention is that the religion of the *Bhagavatgita* is based on the Anushilan Dharma. The Hindu believes in a personal loving God and his religion is based on devotion or bhakti. The object of bhakti is happiness in this world and in the other world. And this happiness has three elements : (1) the culture of physical and mental faculties, (2) harmony between the different faculties, (3) the satisfaction of all the faculties in such condition. Here we find his explanation of religion and happiness..

“Disciple : Anushilan is religion...

Preceptor : If you do not understand what is Anushilan you cannot understand its relation with religion.

Disciple : Anushilan is religion. It is a new thing.

Preceptor : It not new. It is only a reformation of the old.”<sup>22</sup>

In the course of this discussion Bankimchandra writes that the substance of religion is culture. This culture consists in a development of the various faculties in man—physical, mental and aesthetic. Perfection can be reached by man in this life. As a matter of fact perfection has been reached by the superior men, the Avatars. Sri Krishna is the greatest Avatara, according to the avatar of the *Dharmatattva*.

The Avatara represents the ideal of the devotee, The purpose of worship is to imbibe the qualities of the personal God. The Aryansaints believed that by imbibing the virtues of a personal God one can attain salvation. “Salvation is nothing but the attainment of God through the cultivation of godly qualities. It is then possible to get relief from sorrow and attain happiness. No nation other than the Hindus understood better the meaning of worship (*Upasana*).”<sup>23</sup>

Human facilities (*Vritti*) relate to knowledge, work, physique and aesthetics. The cultivation of these faculties results in the growth of a full man. Sri Krishna, according to Bankim, is the ideal or full man.



Bankimchandra's idea of Hindu religion was nothing new. He has made it clear that he has no new principle to preach, no new religion to uphold. The *Dharmatattva* shows his faith in the old religious tradition. "Religion is old, not new. Where shall I get a new religion? ... I am following the footsteps of the ancient Rishis in my understanding of religion... The central part of Hinduism is immortal; it will continue for all time.... But certain customs or rites should change with the times or even abandoned in some cases. This is the main thing in the regeneration of Hinduism."<sup>24</sup>

The source of Anushilan Dharma is the Hindu scripture. Bankim's ideas in places resembled those of Comte, Spenser and Spinoza. But Bankim emphatically maintains that such ideas are sanctioned in the Hindu scriptures and they should not be abandoned simply because they resembled European ideas. Comte thought that education was part of religion. That is no reason why this idea should be abandoned by the Hindus. Similarly the idea of worship cannot be abandoned simply because the Christians also cherish the idea of worship. If there is some similarity between Vedanta and the ideas of Spencer and Spinoza Vedanta cannot be abandoned. Hinduism is an all embracing religion. "To the Hindu there is nothing which is outside his religion. Religion is a part of his life. God, man, the temporal world, the spiritual world—these are all parts of the Hindu religion. So Hinduism is a complete religion; other religion are incomplete and imperfect."<sup>25</sup>

From the above discussion it is clear that Bankimchandra was convinced of the superiority of Hinduism. On this point he had full agreement with Rajnarain Basu, who in 1872 delivered a lecture on "the superiority of Hindu religion." Rajnarain and Bankimchandra sharply differed as regards the nature of Hinduism which they intended to revive. But both of them strengthened the movement for the revival of Hinduism. This naturally leads to another question: Bankim's attitude to other religions, like Islam and Christianity. Bankim's criticism of the Muslims has been extremely harsh. This may be established by numerous references to his writings, particularly *Anandamath*, *Debi Chowdhurani* and *Sitaram*. Some writers have tried to play down this criticism by pointing out that 'Bankim's target was not the upright Muslim but the decadent tyrant.'<sup>26</sup> One writer has mentioned that Bankimchandra was primarily a novelist and wherever he has attacked the Muslims he has done so in the interest of his novels.<sup>27</sup>

If we read the works of Bankimchandra closely we are generally inclined to accept him as a zealous Hindu who championed the cause of a revived Hinduism. In one of his letters on Hinduism he mentions that monotheism could be found in spheres of lower culture, among Mohammedans for instance.<sup>28</sup> The novel *Anandamath*, which is closely connected with the rise of national sentiment makes disparaging references to Muslim rule and the general character of the Muslims. In "Bandematarm" one can find a very fine symbol of patriotic literature. But the Mother conceived by the hero Satyananda smacks of idolatry. Satyananda is a bitter critic of Muslim rule, and is determined to destroy the Muslims. Ultimately Satyananda is assured that Muslim rule has been destroyed and Hindus can prosper only under British rule. The English are well-versed in practical knowledge. The spread of English education would remove the ignorance of the people. "There will be no hindrance to the spread of Sanatan Dharma. The true religion will be revived on its own."<sup>29</sup>

The revival of religion is also the theme of *Devi Chowdhurani*. Bankim has mentioned two principal mottos of the Novel. 1) The substance of religion is culture. The fruit of it the higher life (*Natural Religion* by the author of *Ecce Homo*, Sceley), 2) The general law of man's progress whatever the point of view chosen, consists in this that Man becomes more and more religious. (August Comte, *Catechism of Positive Religion*, English translation of *Congreve* 1st edn. p.374)

A close study of the novel shows that Bankimchandra has consistently tried to propagate his views on Anushilan Dharma through this novel. In the end Prafulla has been regarded as an Avatara who appears from age to age for the establishment of religion, for the protection of the saints and for the destruction of the evil doers. It does not appear from the novel that Prafulla actually represents these ideals. Moreover, the emphasis on religious propaganda has considerably marred the qualities of the novel.

Sri Krishna is the ideal man in *Debichowdhurani* possessing as he does infinite beauty, infinite wealth and infinite youth. The author suggests that Sri Krishna is the personal God of Hindus, a God who can be imagined and worshipped. The Hindus are conscious of the fact that God is infinite, but they prefer to worship a personal God, who is limited. This is the way of approach to the infinite. The central figure of the novel Prafulla is taught the principal ideas of Anushilan Dharma. Bhabani Pathack teaches Prafulla to do work without any attachment

(or *Asakti*). Non-attachment means control of the senses, abandonment of pride, surrender of all results to God. Ultimately it would be possible to realise God in one's mind. It appears that Prafulla has realised the substance of religion i.e. culture. The result was higher life. Bankim has described this as the motto of the novel, *Debichowdharani*.

Sitaram, the last novel in Bankim's trilogy, is devoted to the propagation of the cry of superiority of the Hindu religion. In the success and failure of Sitaram Bankimchandra has delineated the strong and weak points of contemporary Hinduism. Sitaram was a Bengali chief; he was able to establish an independent kingdom by force of arms. But ultimately he failed to maintain his kingdom as he sought for his own pleasure. The Hindu ideal of non-attachment, of doing good to others was abandoned by Sitaram. The reasons are stated in the novel: "Sitaram who had staked everything for the protection of Hinduism now abandoned his administration and sought for Sree,... one who was devoted to the good of the people now became devoted to self."<sup>30</sup>

Bankim's passion for Hindu glory can be seen in the pages of Sitaram. This intense love for Hinduism has not been liked by some critics. But Bankimchandra was firm in his ideal. He reminded the Hindus of their past glory and denounced their decay and moral weakness. Sitaram's story illustrates the strong and weak points of Hinduism. He had an intense pride in the Hindu tradition. "Then I was reminded of the Hindus. The Upanishad, Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Kumarasambhab, Shakuntala, Panini, Katyayana, Sankhya, Patanjali, Vedanta, Vaishesika, all these are works of the Hindus. This idol is nothing in comparison."<sup>31</sup>

Bankim regarded the revival of Hinduism as a great task. A statement of Chandrachudra to Sitaram deserves notice. "If you are pleased towards the Muslims, who will protect the Hindus from the Muslims? Where will Hinduism stand? It is your good fortune, as one who revives Hinduism is worthy and fortunate among men."<sup>32</sup>

A brief discussion of three novels of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay shows that he was keen on reviving Hindu glory and often denigrated the Muslim. I have already mentioned that some authors try to play down the communal overtones in Bankim's novels. References have been made to his article "Bangadeshar Krishak" and the conclusion in the novel *Rajsimha*. In *Rajsimha* Bankim writes at the end of the novel: "No reader should think that the object of the

book is to find a difference between Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu is not necessarily good and the Muslim is not necessarily bad,... Good and bad elements can be found among both.”<sup>33</sup> This explanation was necessary as the principal object of the novel was to establish the superiority of Hindu might. *Rajsingha* is an example of Hindu power and Aurangzeb, of Muslim degeneration. This part has been overplayed in *Rajsingha*, which Bankim claims to be a historical novel. Aurangzeb has been depicted as a prisoner in the hands of women in the harem, which he was not in fact. In *Rajsingha* Bankim has exaggerated the virtues of Rajsingha and the power of the Hindus. Aurangzeb has been completely denigrated in an unhistorical manner. This explains why Bankim had to add an explanation at the end.

Prof Amales Tripathy in *The Extremist Challenge* maintains that Bankim was a critic of the decadent tyrant, not of the upright Muslim. In *Bangadesher Krishak* Bankim speaks of the misery of the peasants in general. The Ramchands and Shyamchands had the same kind of life under the Muslims as well as under Sitaram. These, however, do not lead us to think that Bankim was not communal, on the other hand, his works generally leave the impression that he was a zealous Hindu revivalist and he was generally contemptuous of the Muslim rule. In *Anandamath* he welcomes the British rule. In Sitaram's Hindu Rajya there is no place for the Muslim. There is no need to play down Bankim's communalism. This was a general attitude of the leading men of the 19th century. Their nationalism was Hindu nationalism and they preferred British rule of law to Muslim tyranny. If we keep this in mind, we can easily show how the author of *Bandermataram* could be a strong Hindu revivalist. The following observation of a Marxist writer deserves our attention :

“Bankim was the prophet of nationalism in literature and yet Hindu revivalism with an excessive stress on the Hindu character and tradition seemed to speak out through him.”<sup>34</sup>

*Bandermataram* later found acceptance by Indians of other provinces as a model of a patriotic poem. But initially Bankim thought of Bengali nationalism and Hindu revivalism. “Bankim Chandra understood that essential to nationalism was the close identification of the individual with a particular community and the differentiation of the interests of the particular community from other communities. He realised that the basic problem of Indian politics was the lack of social solidarity.”<sup>35</sup>

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### NABIN CHANDRA SEN (1847-1909)

NABIN CHANDRA Sen was one of principal champions of Hindu revivalism in the late 19th century. Originally he was a Brahmo of the school of Keshab Chandra Sen. Nabin Chandra regularly visited the Colootola Samaj of Keshab for prayer and meditation. Gradually he became convinced that it was not possible for him to conceive of a formless God. Nabin Chandra gives a description in his autobiography how he gave up Brahmo faith. One day he was engaged in prayer from the morning till 1 p.m. It was no longer possible for him to concentrate on a formless God. So he left the place. From that day he left the Brahmo Samaj and entered the world like a ship without a helm.<sup>1</sup>

After leaving the Brahmo Samaj Nabin Chandra Sen became devoted to Puranic Hinduism and a champion of Hindu revivalism. Bankim's attitude was rationalistic. But Nabin Chandra's writings were full of devotion. Devotion often get the better of his judgement and reasoning. In his autobiography as well as in works we find that an excess of devotion has often marred the literary qualities of his writing. The following observation seems to be justified. "Bankim based his ideas on pure reason, but the main traits of Nabin Chandra Sen were devotion and emotion. Bankim Chandra rejected many things in the Puranas and accepted only those, which he believed, stood the test of reason. But Nabin Chandra accepted them all and tried to work out an explanation on the lines of modern reasoning."<sup>2</sup>

A review of his works was published in the *Calcutta Review* and Nabin Chandra Sen quotes the opinion with pride and satisfaction in his autobiography. "Babu Nabin Chandra Sen is undoubtedly the poet of the Hindu revival. He is now writing on Jesus Christ, now translating the Geeta, now making Bengali version of *Markandeya Chandi*, and one absorbing purpose runs through all the works, namely that of reviving in the minds of his countrymen a respect for Hinduism. He interprets the story of Mahabharata and that of the great war at Kurukshetra as signifying a successful attempt at fusing the contending nations in India into one great nationality on the basis of a Catholic religion and a liberal social organisation".<sup>3</sup>

In the light of this observation it is possible to find out the import of the literary works of Nabin Chandra Sen. The element of devotion

in Nabin Chandra Sen developed when he was posted at Puri around the year 1877. The poet relates in his Autobiography how a young widow came to him frantically seeking his help for seeing Jagannath. Here Nabin Chandra found evidence of pure bhakti and realised how the Brajagopis became mad for Srikrishna. "A new heaven opened in my heart and the germs of *Kurukshetra*, *Prabhas* and *Raibatak* were laid".<sup>4</sup>

In 1881 Nabin Chandra was at Rajgir. He read the Mahabharata and came to the conclusion that the Mahabharata was a historical work. There were two great figures in ancient India, Srikrishna and Sri Buddha. Sri Krishna established a great kingdom, removing all internal dissensions among the Indians. This great Indian Empire was the Dharmarajya and Sri Krishna was the founder to this great Kingdom of religion. In his Autobiography Nabin Chandra relates that Buddha was no other than Krishna and the Buddhist religion was Vaishnavism. "In the ultimate stages of Buddhism the Buddhists created three mandals. Jaganath, Balabhadra and Subhadra were the three figures representing the three mandals. Sri Krishna used Balabhadra, Arjun as the main instrument for the establishment of Dharmarajya. The Hindu Pandits regarded Buddha as Vishnu, Sreekshestra as Vishnukshetra and the three mandals as the three figures. In Indian scriptures there are many Avataras, but Krishna is God himself"<sup>5</sup> Nabin Chandra mentioned that *Raibatak*, *Kurukshetra*, *Pravash* and *Amitabha* emerged from this thinking.

*Raibatak* (1887), *Kurukshetra* (1893) and *Prabhas* (1896) are the principal works of Nabin Chandra which were devoted to the revival of Hinduism. Nabin Chandra's emotion and bhakti often marred his sense of history. He tried to establish an idea through these books, the idea of a Dharmarajya. The literature that was produced was not of high quality, but contemporaries were struck by the religious element in these writings. They served well the cause of Hindu revivalism. *Raibatak* was the first book in the trilogy of Nabin Chandra Sen. Nabin Chandra read the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata before writing *Raibatak*. But he did not closely follow the epics and the Puranas in portraying the story of the *Raibatak*. Moreover, *Raibatak*, *Kurukshetra* and *Prabhas* are parts of the same story, the story of Sri Krishna founding a Kingdom of righteousness or a Dharmarajya. Arjun went to Prabhasstirtha on the West Coast of India for a 12 year sojourn (*Banabasa*). He met Krishna and wandered in the hills of

Raibatak. Here Arjun found Subhadra; who was the daughter of Vasudeva and step sister of Krishna. Arjun was emotionally disturbed after seeing Subhadra. Krishna permitted him to elope with Subhadra. Subhadra was forcibly taken away by Arjun from the Raibatak hill. The Bhojas, the Vrishnis and the Andhakas complained to Krishna against this act of Arjun. Krishna advised them to remain quiet and bring back Arjun to Dwaraka. This was done. Arjun and Subhadra lived happily for one year at Dwaraka.

This is the story of Subhadraharan, which forms the central fact of Raibatak. But Kashiram Das has modified the story of the Mahabharata and given prominence to Subhadra's love for Arjun. "Nabin Chandra took the main story from the Mahabharata, but he was more influenced by the Bengali Mahabharata of Kashiram Das. The principal object of the poem was to depict the love sequence of Arjuna and Subhadra ..... apparently there is prominence of Arjuna, but the story is principally guided by Sri Krishna. The marriage of Subhadra and Arjuna was desired by Sri Krishna for the good of the world".<sup>6</sup> Kurukshetra and Prabhas were parts of a single story woven round the theme of Sri Krishna's Dharmarajya. The Subhadra-Arjuna marriage was followed by the destruction of Abhimanyu, the extinction of Yadubansa and end of Krishna's worldly existence. Nabin Chandra's principal objective was to explain the life history of Sri Krishna. He has allowed free play to his fancy in compiling the story of Subhadraharan. This story has been used to explain some problems of Indian history and Indian social order. In the Raibataka the poet has put greater emphasis on the story of his imagination than on actual history and explained some of his own ideas through the Kavya. The Brahmin-Kshatriya conflict has been depicted as a social history of the age of the Mahabharata.

A study of Raibatak-Kurukshetra-Prabhas indicates that Nabin Chandra Sen was deeply influenced by the ideas of Hindu revivalism of the late 19th century. Like Bankim Chandra he also tried to give a new interpretation to the life of Sri Krishna. But he lacked the analytical power and rationalism of Bankim Chandra. Therefore, the Krishna in Nabin Chandra's interpretation has not been moulded into any coherent figure. From Raibatak to Prabhas Krishna appears as a figure of Vaishnava God of Bhagavata. In Prabhas in particular he has been depicted as the personal God (or *Bhagaban*) of the devotee. So the poet's effort to establish Krishna as a historical figure has not

quite succeeded. His intense devotion and emotion have marred the poetic qualities of his writings.

The poet has tried to attribute some statesmanlike qualities to Sri Krishna. According to the poet political unity in India was destroyed in the age of Mahabharata due to the conflict between Aryans and non-Aryans, between Brahmins and Kshatriyas, between feudal chiefs and the ideological difference between Vedic rites and the cult of Bhakti. Sri Krishna appeared in this crisis and established unity in India removing the various conflicts between men and ideology. Nabin Chandra has tried to combine two elements in Krishna, the humanism of the nineteenth century and the Bhakti religion of ancient India. He has not been quite successful. The Krishna of Nabin Chandra has emerged as a new feature in his new Mahabharata, which Bankim Chandra regarded as the Mahabharata of the 19th century.

The character of Subhadra represents in some ways the 19th century Bengali woman who was seeking liberation from traditional bondage. There is the image of a woman who took part in social activities or service with her husband, who transcended the image of woman as wife or mother. The amelioration of the condition of women was principally attempted by the Brahmos for whom Nabin Chandra had no good word. But his portrayal of Subhadra represents the nineteenth century ideal of a liberated woman.

The character of Abhimanyu is, according to one critic, a blind imitation of the English story of Sir Philip Sidney.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Balaram is advised to preach the Krishna cult in the north-east coast of the Salt Sea. This will be regarded as somewhat absurd and a figment of the poet's imagination. The poet was so emotionally involved with his portrayal of Krishna that he did not care if his portrayal violated known history and tradition. Nabin Chandra's works represent one trend in the revivalist tradition. It is significant that his works were admired by Brojendra Nath Seal, the eminent scholar.

"The grandeur of the situation fails description. A dim prehistoric vista, a hundred surging people and mighty kingdoms, in the dim light clashing and warring with one another like emblematic dragons and crocodiles and griffins on some Africa shore, the astute Brahmin priest fomenting eternal disunion by planting distinction of caste or creed, of political government on the basis of Vedic revelation.... In the foreground the figure of the half divine legislator Krishna, whom Bishnu, the lord of the Universe guides through mysterious visions and



phantasoms. Unfurling in the fulness of his destiny the flag of the universal religion of Vaishnavism to hurl down the Brahminic priesthood and their cruel Vedic ritualism and to establish in their place the Kingdom of God in Mahabharata, one east Indian empire, a realised universal human brotherhood, embracing Aryan and non-Aryan in bonds of religious, social and political unity, a grand design, scenic pomp, an antique as well as modern significance like this what national epic can show?" (B. N. Seal's *New Essays in Criticism*).<sup>8</sup>

We shall examine the principal ideas of Nabin Chandra Sen from three sections of *Raibataka*, Sections 3, 12, 17. Nabin discusses the doctrine of pre-destination in Section 3. Arjun was anxiously searching for an eight-year old daughter of Nagaraja Chandrachuda, whom he had killed in an encounter. Vyasadeva advises him not to search for the girl as she may not be happy if Arjun found her. "Man's happiness and sorrow are not fully controlled by man ..... Man is like a small particle of sand in the vast Sea of Creation subjected to the current of circumstances."<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of *Karmafala* and predestination is explained in the course of a long conversation between Sri Krishna and Vyasadeva. The latter explains that man's will is not fettered by any outside agency and he works according to his will. But his success or the ultimate result is not controlled by his knowledge or will. Arjun did not know of the Nagaraja. He intends to bring up the girl as his own daughter. But, Vyasadeva advises him to give up the search as it may be ultimately harmful for the girl. Arjun's duty is to behave as a Kshatriya and rule as a king.

In Section 3 of the *Raibatak* Vyasa and Sri Krishna discusses various problems of life and fate and the possibility of founding a dharmarajya. Vyasa contends that fate or predestination cannot be lightly dismissed. What man sees is small, the unseen is infinite. When Arjun speaks of the intrigues and jealousy of the Kauravas Krishna points out that "the misery of Indis is due to differences of Kingdoms, of castes, of families. And any strong race from the west could destroy the Aryans like grass".<sup>10</sup> Krishna finds the solution in the founding of "one religion, one nation, one throne".

In Section 12 of the *Raibatak* Sri Krishna reveals himself as God who appears from time to time for the protection of religion, for saving the Sadhus and destroying the wicked. Krishna's emissaries come from different parts of India and relate how opposition against him

is growing in different places like Magadha, Chedi and numerous other kingdoms. Krishna is convinced that India will be destroyed if this strife between Kings and races continue. Vyasa points out that the Brahmins and Rishis will oppose the revolution which Krishna contemplated.

Krishna then reveals his real identity. He says. "I am He, I am Narayana, I am not alone, I am one with Him. I am one with the Universe. Look at my Visvarupa, ... Men who are not guided properly are to take shelter in me, giving up all religions".<sup>11</sup> Arjun and Vyasdeva were then convinced of the powers of Krishna and promised to support his Dharmarajya, and also help to bring it into existence.

In Section 17 of the *Raibatak* Sri Krishna explains to Arjun the misery of India and asks him to establish Dharmarajya through a religious war. Then he explains the idea of happiness and the meaning of "I am He" (*So Aham*). Sri Krishna asks Arjuna to look at the picture of mother India. "On one side She is endowed with numerous gifts of the creator. On the other side can be seen the signs of pettiness of man".<sup>12</sup> Krishna maintains that the present condition of India is one of misery and only a religious war can bring about a change. When Arjun is reluctant to go to war Krishna advises him not to be sentimental. A war is necessary for establishing Mahabharata. "The constant war among families, castes, kingdoms, religions, the meanness of petty beings will destroy the Aryan race. My intention is peace, not war, Religion, not physical power is strength. ... The Kingdom which is based on religion, the administration which is based on work without attachment, is likely to last in the course of time".<sup>13</sup> Krishna then explains that the happiness of the individual consists in the happiness of the world. If all are devoted to the good of the world then the world will become a heaven.

At the end of Section 17 of the *Raibatak* Sri Krishna sets out clearly the kind of Mahabharata which he wants to establish. "The Mahabharata will be a Kingdom based on religion. It will have one religion, one Nation, and the good of all will be the basis of the Kingdom. Unattached Karma will be the aim of his work and the ultimate subject is to reach the absolute (or *Parambrahmo*)".<sup>14</sup>

The story of the Mahabharata is continued in *Kurukshetra*. We shall discuss the principal ideas of the Kavya from Sections 9, 12, 17. In Section 9 there is a long conversation between Krishna, Vyasa and Bhishma on Dharmatattva or true religion. In Section 9 Krishna explains how the idea of a Mahabharat cropped up in his mind when he was

a boy at Brindaban. "The suffering of the diseased, the tears of the suffering men seemed unnumberable for me. I decided that I shall jump into the fire and spray the waters of religion. I shall save the Sadhus, destroy the wicked and establish religion by founding a big religious empire".<sup>15</sup> There Krishna relates how Kansa was killed and peace was established in western India. But again he was confronted with the greed and selfishness of the Kauravas. He advised Arjun to go to war against the Kauravas. Arjun was reluctant to go to war against his relatives. Sri Krishna then advised him to give up his lethargy and fight a religious war. This advice was contained in the *Bhagvatgita*. In the conversation between Bhishma and Sri Krishna the latter relates the story of the Kurukshetra war and how Arjun was led to war by his advice. Bhishma now realises who Krishna is and expresses his deep reverence for this Vasudeva.

In Section 12 of the Kurukshetra Vyasadeva and Sri Krishna discuss fate, *Karmafala*, happiness, the conflict between the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Sri Krishna was disturbed from his boyhood about the plight of India divided in strife between pious chiefs and between Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Once he thought of renouncing the world altogether. But he soon realised that "If one cannot love the country how could one love the world?"<sup>16</sup> He also realised that "real Sannyasa consisted in the good of the world as the real Sadhana".<sup>17</sup> So he became determined that with the help of Arjuna he should embark on the great war at Kurukshetra with a view to establishing a Dharmarajya in India.

The 17th chapter of *Kurukshetra* found the destruction of Abhimanyu and the intense sorrow of Uttara, Subhadra and Arjun. Krishna is disturbed that his Dharmarajya had not yet been established. Ultimately he found that the image of mother India was emerging from the funeral pyre of Abhimanyu.

The third work in Nabin Chandra's trilogy is *Prabhas* (1896). It is a continuation of the principal theme of Mahabharata, but it shows the ultimate end of Krishna Lila. Sections 8 and 9 of *Prabhas* show the end of the worldly life of Sri Krishna. The end of Yadubansa was due to the indiscipline among the Yadavas. The Yadavas were addicted to excessive drinking and they destroyed themselves in mutual fighting. The non-Aryan followers of Vasuki quickly performed this massacre. Sri Krishna advised Balaram to preach Krishna cult outside India. Balaram sailed in a ship from Saurashtra, which Krishna called *Hercules*. Vasuki understood that Durbasha under the disguised name of Jarat Karu has caused the mischief. In Section 9 Jarat Karu hit

Krishna and Krishna was struck with an arrow. This was the end of Krishna's worldly life. Krishna said before final departure, "I assume worldly life from age to age with my friends and foes. I establish the Dharmarajya for the protection of the Sadhus and the destruction of the evil doers".<sup>18</sup>

The last chapter of *Prabhas* indicates that Krishnalila will not end in India Christ will be born among the Jews, Mohammad among the Arabs and Gourhari on the banks of the Bhagirathi and they will continue to complete the work of Krishnalila. Thus through various stages of *Raibatak*, *Kurukshetra* and *Prabhas* the poet has established that Krishna was God and he appears in the world to establish Dharmarajya. This is the message of the Gita. The trilogy of Nabin Chandra Sen tried to establish this message, and in this they had succeeded.

Like his contemporaries Nabin Chandra Sen found no contradiction between Hindu revivalism and national sentiment. He came into contact with Shisir Kumar Ghosh and was inspired to write *Palashir Yuddha*. This famous historical poem was published in 1875. This great poem bewitched his country men by the vigour and exalting influence of its national sentiments. "The inspiring speech of Mohanlal, the patriotic general of Sirajaddaula, asking his soldiers not to run away from the battle field because defeat would lead to the forging of the same fetters of slavery round the feet of both Hindus and Muslims, struck a deeper chord in the hearts of his countrymen. He wanted his soldiers to realise that a freeman in hell was immensely happier than a prosperous but enslaved ruler in heaven".<sup>19</sup>

The central textbook committee considered the book objectionable in parts (1899). These stanzas were to be expunged from all future editions of the poem. Nabin Chandra Sen was further humiliated by being superseded in the first grade of the subordinate executive service. Mr Anderson, who was a former official of Bengal advised him not to take his rebuff seriously. He made a prophesy which may be regarded as a real tribute to the contribution of Nabin Chandra Sen. Anderson remarked that he would be long remembered not as a Deputy Collector, but as the author of *Palashir Yuddha*. "Bankimbabu will be remembered long after the civil list of his time has been eaten by white ants. I often wish that you would quit official work and give yourself up to literature, literature without any collection in it—literature like your *Palashir Yuddha*".<sup>20</sup>

## CHAPTER NINE

### BHUDEV MUKHOPADHYAYA (1827-1898)

THE SPIRIT of Hindu revivalism was expressed vigorously in the writings of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, another famous writer of the late 19th century. Bhudev was connected with the education department, working first as a teacher of the Hindu Charitable Institution, later as Headmaster of Howrah School and finally as acting Inspector of Schools in 1877. He realised the necessity of writing textbooks. In addition he wrote a number of essays and novels which established his reputation as a litterateur of 19th century Bengal. These writings can be divided into three classes : 1) writings for school, 2) writings for Hindu society, 3) books for the general readers. We shall discuss some of the works of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay to illustrate his views regarding the revival of Hindu religion and society in the 19th century.

*Samajik Prabandha* published in 1892 is an important work of Bhudev. Here Bhudev explains his ideas on Hindu society and rationalism and indicates the nature of the new leadership required for the revival of Hindu society. We get a clear idea of what Bhudev thought about the problems of contemporary Hindu society. Hindu society was very suitable for the growth of national consciousness. India is like a continent where extremes of climate and opposites of geographical features can be seen. So the people inhabiting the vast territory of India have developed a broadmindedness which is not generally found in other parts of the world. "The Indian scriptures prohibit antipathy to other religions and the theory of Adhikar-Bhed has destroyed the roots of religious strife".<sup>1</sup>

There are other bonds of union among the Indians. The customs of one broad province are closely similar to the customs of another broad province, although dissimilarities in a particular locality are too many. There are many languages among the Indians, but all of them are descended from Sanskrit.

In Bhudev's opinion India has now been united under the rule of the Queen of England. Now our happiness and sorrow, hope and despair are woven in one thread. But even before this a greater part of India has been brought under one rule. Mention may be made among others, of Ashoka, Vikramaditya and Akbar. Under their rule too, a large part of India was brought under one rule and a sense of unity grew up.

In *Samajik Prabandha* Bhudev maintains that the Muslims will gradually come closer to the Hindus. Most of the Muslims in India have links with the Hindus ; they are either converted Hindus of the lower castes or descended from the Hindu wives of the Muslims. Many Hindu customs have been adopted in Muslim society ; Hindu astrologers and Brahmins are respected by the Muslims. In Bengal and the Deccan many Muslims take part in Rathajatra and Durgapuja festivals. The Muslim rule was responsible for the emergence of the Hindi language and the development of a distinct style of architecture. In general, the Muslim Kings were just and if some of them were unjust their tyranny could not affect the whole country. Only a few wealthy and privileged men were affected by their tyranny.

The English try to foment discord between the Hindus and Muslims. "It must be stated that if the British distrusts anybody among the Indians it is the Muslims. The English have taken the empire from the Muslims and among the Muslims the tendency to unite is great. During the Mutiny the Hindu sepoy revolted but a Muslim was seated on the throne".<sup>2</sup>

There are about 22 lakhs of Christians among the Indians, whose number is 29 crores. The number of Christian is small, but they cannot be ignored in the formation of an Indian nationality. The Christians, who are generally converted Hindus did not get any benefit from the rulers, whose religion they embraced. Naturally they did not give up their old habit of considering themselves as Indians.

Among other people there are about 92 lacs of tribal people. They are scattered in the hilly areas of the Himalayas in the north and other hilly regions in south and central India. But the primitive people are generally being accepted in the Hindu society. "The Hindu society has accepted ceremonies, caste and Adhikarbhed. As such Hindu society is best suited for the improvement and civilising of the primitive people".<sup>3</sup> Bhudev feels that national feeling among the tribal people could only come through Hindu society.

Bhudev makes certain conclusions regarding the growth of national sentiment among the Hindus. The Hindu society will have to realise its own nature. Indian unity is possible only under the rule of the British. So we have to be respectful towards the British and develop an attitude of friendship. We should not consider ourselves part of the English society. We should give up the habit of mutual strife and develop a

sense of unity. The sympathy of the own community is to be regarded as an asset among the Hindus.

In *Samajik Prabandha* Bhudev emphasises the fact that the sense of national unity can grow under British rule. British rule has been beneficial to India in many ways. India was divided into many parts. But from very early times there was an attempt to unify India. The Maurya kings, the Afghans and the Moguls tried to conquer the Deccan and establish a unified empire. The English has fulfilled the desire for unity. Moreover, peace and order have been thoroughly established under the English rule. There is no quarrel among the native rulers of India.

The unifications of the country and the establishment of order have resulted in all other advantages among the Indians. Trade was expanded and it has been possible for the people of different provinces to come together. The frontiers of India were exposed to foreign attacks from very early times. The Sakas in the northwest and the Ahoms in the northeast have been a source of trouble to the Indians. The English now quickly suppress all troubles in the northwest and northeast. The English navy is constantly ready to guard the coastline of India. So the English have fulfilled the general tendencies which prevailed among the people before English rule was established. Moreover, the English are businessmen and as such they are very cautious in their attitude, whenever a new province was conquered the English made it clear that they would not interfere with the religion of the people or local customs. This was not always done by the Portuguese or the French. Moreover, the English have preserved the laws of the Hindus and the laws of the Muslims.

The writer of *Samajik Prabandha* Bhudev Mukhopadhyay concludes that the English have taken India to the destined path and this work could not be done by any one also. For this the English have earned the respect and gratitude of the Indians.<sup>4</sup>

Bhudev extols the virtues of English rule. But he is not oblivious of the defects of this rule. In *Samajik Prabandha* Bhudev Mukhopadhyay mentions the strong and weak points of English rule. The English are immensely powerful and their rule is well-disciplined. There is practically no sign of partisanship, injustice or indiscretion on their activities. In the English administration there is no foreign invasion, no internal warfare, no theft or robbery and the country is calm. "Foreign trade is expanding, internal trade has become prosperous.

there is fairness in justice, there is freedom of the press. Due to the spread of European education the native people have become conscious. On the whole English rule is an unprecedented event".<sup>5</sup>

While extolling the virtues of English rule Bhudev Mukhopadhyay is conscious of the defects of English administration. In chapter 4 of *Samajik Prabandha* Bhudev writes that the English maintains an alien attitude, which has caused some shortcomings of their rule in India. English rule is not conducted for the good of India, but for the good of the English. It is, however, maintained that which is good for the English is also good for the Indians. The equality before the law is generally maintained, but the white men have some advantages in the law courts. The laws and customs of the land are generally maintained, but English law is being introduced whenever there is a loophole. In the matter of taxation and trade everything is done to suit the interests of the ruling class. The English have taken the charge of education, but education is in a very bad shape.

These shortcomings of the English rule are due to the fact that the rulers are not sympathetic to the natives. Whenever there is any necessity of reform or change the English think that an appointment of Englishman would solve the problem. The writer of *Samajik Prabandha* thinks that these defects can be removed by the rulers if they give up the alien attitude and control themselves by their keen insight.

*Samajik Prabandha* is the last book published in Bhudev's lifetime. In 1893, one year after the publication of the book Sir Charles Eliot told a meeting of the Asiatic Society: "No single volume in India contains so much wisdom and none shows such extensive reading. It is the result of the life-long study of a Brahmin of the old class in the formation of whose mind eastern and western philosophy have made an equal share".<sup>6</sup>

The most important point in the book is a complete definition of national sentiment. Nationalism has been defined by every important man of the 19th century, Rajnarain Basu, Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda. But Bhudev's definition of nationalism is comprehensive. According to Bhudev nationalism is a good idea, but it cannot be said that it is the noblest idea in human society. It is a combination of good and evil, of broadness and narrowness. The ancient Pandits of India have not condemned nationalism as a minor religion and has not extolled it as the highest religion. "About national



sentiment our Vedas, Puranas and other scriptures hold that it is a good idea, but there are better ideas. It is a high place in the elevation of the human mind, but it is not the highest or the ultimate stage''<sup>7</sup> The highest idea among the Aryans was to love all animate and inanimate objects of the world and to realise the absolute who makes this world.

Indians were possessed of this highest ideal and as such they were oblivious of the sentiment of nationalism. But now this attitude is being gradually changed. The Indians are now thinking of their countrymen and developing the sense of national unity. There is a possibility that Indians would now devote themselves to the growth of their financial power, knowledge and life. The author of the *Samajik Prabandha* thinks that Indians would never forget the ideal of Universal good (*Jagathitaya Krishnaya*). They will develop loves for their motherland, develop a national sentiment, but they will never develop any hatred or animosity towards other people. Thus there will be a happy reconciliation of national sentiment and Universal love.

## CHAPTER TEN

### SRI RAMAKRISHNA PARAMHANSA (1836-1886)

THE DECLINE of the Brahmo Samaj coincided with the rise of a new force in Hinduism, represented by Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. Ramakrishna made a tremendous impact on all classes of Hindus as well as Brahmos who came in contact with him. The saint of Dakshineswar had indeed a charismatic personality. Pratap Chandra Mazumder, an ardent follower of Keshab Chandra Sen wrote to the German scholar, Max Muller in September, 1895. "What is there common between him and me? I, a Europeanised, civilised, self-centred, semi-sceptical so called educated reasoner, and he a poor, illiterate, shrunken, unpolished, diseased, half-dressed, half-idolatrous Hindu devotee? Why should I sit long hours to him, I who have listened to Disraeli and Fawcett, Stanley and Max Muller and a whole host of European scholars and divines? ..... and it is not only I but dozens like me who do the same"<sup>1</sup>

Ramakrishna's life was very different from the lives of other reformers of the 19th century such as, Rammohun, Debendranath and Keshab Chandra. He had little formal education and had not read the Vedas or Upanishads. In 1855 he had been appointed priest at the Dakshineswar Kali temple near Calcutta established by a zamindar of the Kaibarta caste, Rani Rashmoni. The terms of appointment have been stated in the Deed of Endowment executed by Rani Rashmoni on 18 February, 1861: "Monthly pay, three pairs of cloths, half seer of rice, half poah of Dal, two banana leaves, tobacco one chhatak, and wood two and half seers."<sup>2</sup> Ramakrishna's conversations as well as the style of his life were rustic even by the standards of the 19th century Bengal. He formed his views through his contact with traditional scholars and saints and also his personal experience. He did not place any high premium on rationalism or book-learning in matters of religion. True religion was in his opinion based on realization. He was not like a successor to Rammohun as some historians have suggested.<sup>3</sup> Ramakrishna's defence of Hinduism was total and yet he was so different from the contemporary champions of Hinduism. He did not consider any part of Hinduism redundant. Idolatry was very much a part of Hindu religion. Ramakrishna never denounced idolatry though he regarded realization of the Absolute

(*Brahma*) or realization of one's self as the highest form of religious experience. Rammohun's special concern was social regeneration. Religion was only a means to an end. Sri Ramakrishna was on the other hand a man of religion who breathed spirituality and constantly harped on renunciation. He was not much concerned with social reforms, though he was easily moved by the common people. He was a Hindu to the core of his heart though by 'Hinduism' he did not mean a string of religious rites or moribund social practices. His emphasis was entirely on spirituality and self-realization which again, in his opinion, might be achieved by following sincerely any religion. His religion was not that of Raja Radhakanta Deb. Unlike Rajnarain Basu he never thought of forming a National Association to preach the glory of Hinduism. He was pro-Hindu, but not anti-Muslim, anti-Christian or even anti-Brahmo. Romain Rolland has succinctly summed up Ramakrishna's religion: "And it is because Ramakrishna, more fully than any other man not only conceived but realized in himself the total unity of this river of God, open to all rivers and all streams that I have given him my love; and I have drawn a little of his sacred water to slake the great thirst of the world".<sup>4</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna was practically unknown to the world outside Dakshineswar till 1875. It was Keshab Chandra Sen, who brought him to limelight. The first meeting between Sri Ramakrishna and Brahmananda Keshab Chandra Sen took place in a garden house at Belgharia near Calcutta on 15 March, 1875. Keshab's biographer thus sums up the meeting: "Sometime in the year 1875 a singular incident took place. There came one morning in a rickety eccagari, a disorderly looking young man, insufficiently clad and with manners less than insufficient. He was introduced as Ramakrishna, the Paramhansa (great devotee) of Dakshineswar. His appearance was so unpretending and simple, and he spoke so little at his introduction that we did not take much notice of him at first. But soon he began to discourse in a sort of half-delirious state, becoming now and then quite unconscious. What he said however, was so profound and beautiful that we soon perceived that he was no ordinary man. A good many of our readers have seen him and heard him. The acquaintance of this devotee, which soon matured into intimate friendship, had a powerful effect upon Keshab's Catholic mind".<sup>5</sup>

There has been a good deal of controversy regarding the influence in Keshab Chandra Sen's new Dispensation of Ramakrishna's ideas.

Some followers of Keshab feel that Sri Ramakrishna has been unnecessarily glorified in this context.<sup>6</sup> The worship of the Divine Mother was a definite contribution of Ramakrishna, although Keshab might have thought of this in his own way. Keshab's biographer P. C. Mozoomdar had summed up this position in an unprejudiced manner: "The adoration of Shakti was according to Ramakrishna, a childlike rapturous, self-consecration to the motherhood of God as represented by the power and influence of woman...The purity of his thoughts and relations towards women was most unique and instructive. It was an attitude essentially, traditionally, gloriously national. Keshab's own trials and sorrows about the time of the Cooch Behar marriage had spontaneously suggested to him the necessity of regarding God as Mother. And now the sympathy, friendship and example of the Paramhansa converted the motherhood of God into a subject of special culture with him".<sup>7</sup> This is corroborated by the *Dharmatattva*, dated 16.9.1886,

“পরমহংসের জীবন হইতেই ঈশ্বরের মনোভাব ব্রাহ্মসমাজে সঞ্চারিত হয়। পূর্বে ব্রাহ্মধর্ম শুদ্ধ তর্ক ও জ্ঞানের ধর্ম ছিল। পরমহংসের জীবনের ছায়া পড়িয়া ব্রাহ্মধর্মকে সরস করিয়া তোলে।”

It is clear from the study of contemporary journals, the *Dharmatattva*, the *Indian Mirror* and the *Sunday Mirror* that Keshab Chandra was coming closer to the Hindus by enunciating his New Dispensation. P. C. Mozoomdar also writes that “Keshab's religion perceptibly gained in popularity with Hindu society by this means”. How Keshab Chandra had changed over the years could be seen by one of his writings in the *Sunday Mirror*. “Hindu idolatry is not to be altogether rejected or overlooked”, Keshab writes, “As we explained sometime ago, it represents millions of broken fragments of God. Collect them together and you get the Invisible Divinity. When Hindus lost sight of their great God they contented themselves with retaining particular aspects of Him and representing them in human shapes on images. Their attribute is nothing but the worship of a divine attribute materialised. If the material shape is given up, what remains is a beautiful allegory or picture of Heaven's dispensations. The theist rejects the image, but he cannot dispense with the spirit of which that image is the form. The revival of the spirit, the destruction of the form is the work of the New Dispensation”.<sup>8</sup>

This change in Keshab's attitude was historically significant. The Brahmo cause was ruined beyond repair. Keshab was the most celebrated Brahmo leader in the second half of the 19th century. He

was a strong rationalist, imbued with a spirit of European liberal thought. He had earlier condemned Hindu idolatry in no uncertain terms. As a matter of fact, his breach with Debendranath Tagore was primarily due to his aversion of traditional Hinduism. While the latter was anxious to retain the link between Hinduism and Brahmoism, Keshab would have none of it. In the Native Marriage Bill Controversy (1872) Keshab frankly admitted that he was prepared to call himself a non-Hindu. Debendranath was branded a conservative and the Brahmo Samaj split into two, the Adi Brahmo Samaj and the Bharat Varsiya Brahmo Samaj. So when Keshab Chandra began to talk with respect about Hindu idolatry, he certainly weakened the Brahmo Samaj, perhaps unconsciously. Further, when Keshab introduced symbols, celebrations and ceremonies he came very near to the Hindu concept of a personal God and the religion of love.<sup>9</sup> His close association with Sri Ramakrishna, the great Hindu Saint of the age and the sincere love and respect in which they held each other constituted a significant development in the religious life of Bengali in the nineteenth century. Such great tributes have been paid to Sri Ramakrishna by numerous scholars and writers, intellectuals and philosophers in recent times that one unconsciously becomes a partisan while reading or writing about him. The present writer cannot arrogate himself to the position of a completely detached writer. But an honest attempt will be made here to sift the contemporary evidence and assess his role in reviving the true spirit of Hinduism.

Sri Ramakrishna's life has been aptly described as the 'story of a phenomenon'.<sup>10</sup> Ramakrishna was a phenomenon, an object of experience, but extra-ordinary and mysterious. It is difficult to understand him and even more difficult to present him in true historical perspective. We can start with an assessment of Sri Ramakrishna by a Brahmo writer, who was generally supposed to be a critic of Hinduism. "...though a Hindu of the Hindus, Ramakrishna was not a Hindu of the ordinary type. He was not a Shaivite, not a Shakta, a Vedantist; yet he was the totality of all of these. He worshipped Shiva, he worshipped Kali, Rama; he was a confirmed advocate of Vedantic doctrines. He was a believer in idolatry and yet a faithful and most devoted mediator of the perfections of Great formless one, whom he called *Akhandā Satchidananda* (the undivided truth, wisdom and joy)".<sup>11</sup> Ramakrishna offered to his compatriots a new way of thinking and living. The Indian civilisation was infused with a new energy. "To

those who represented Hinduism for Hinduism for creating a block to India's economic development he replied that the block resulted rather from faulty understanding of Hinduism and he exerted every effort to make the religion known and extended in its highest form by freeing it of the excess of ritual that occasionally stifled it".<sup>12</sup>

Ramakrishna's idea of God was realization. He has been absorbed in an intense *Sadhana* for more than 12 years and had tried to realize God by following different paths presented by different religions including Islam and Christianity. Ultimately he came to the conclusion that the end of all religious pursuits was realization of God or realization of one's true self. It was not possible to grasp the true nature of Godhead by reading books on religion and philosophy. One has to dive deep into realization. Then alone can one be convinced of the existence of God.<sup>13</sup> Sri Ramakrishna maintained that it was not proper to be dogmatic about one's conception of God. God may be with form or without form or something beyond form and formlessness. What one can do is to stick to one's faith with a conviction. Then it will be evident that God not merely exists but comes and has communion with his devotee.<sup>14</sup>

Ramakrishna had accepted the three different Hindu interpretations of the Vedanta *Dvaita* (Dualism) *Visistadvaita* (qualified dualism) and *Advaita* (monism) as successive approaches to truth, or views of the ultimate reality for three different planes of experience. The controversy between Brahmoism and Puranic Hinduism was also considered irrelevant by Sri Ramakrishna. He found no real contradiction between *Bhakti-yoga*, *Rajayoga*, *Jnanayoga* and *Karmayoga*, which were only different ways leading to the same goal. God can be realised in any of the four ways. But Sri Ramakrishna thought that the concept of a personal God and the pursuit of Bhakti (intense love of God) were easier and more suitable for the average run of people in this age.<sup>15</sup> Different religions are different paths to reach the Almighty. "As from the same gold various ornaments are made having different forms and names, so our God is worshipped in different countries and ages and has different forms and names. Though he may be worshipped variously, some loving to call him Father, others Mother, yet it is one God that is being worshipped in all these various relations and modes".<sup>16</sup> Ramakrishna basically differed from the Brahmos in his attitude towards the mode of worship. He maintained that it was not essential for the development

of one's spiritual life to worship God without attributes. The Brahmos worshipped God without a form but with attributes. That itself was inconsistent according to Sri Ramakrishna. Religion consists in loving a personal God. That alone is sufficient to give us a taste of Heavenly Bliss. What necessity is there for an ordinary worshipper to enquire into the real nature of Godhead? What mortal can fathom the Divine? If one can get drunk with one bottle of wine, what is the use of enquiring into the stock of the cellar?<sup>17</sup>

The highest goal of Vedantist is to take back his human self to the Godhead. The Vedantist does not want to put on a new nature, but to recover his real or true nature. But most people cannot soar so high. This is why Hinduism recognises *Adhikarbheda*. Different people will, according to their individual tastes and inclinations, worship God in different ways. Some will worship the Absolute, some will worship a personal God, some will revere saints or spirits and some may even worship rivers, trees and stones, regarding them as symbols of the divine creator. A personal God may again be conceived in different forms. Sri Ramakrishna found nothing wrong in it. Polytheism did not mean multiplicity of Gods to true Hindu, it meant simply the multiformity of one true God as Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan put it much later. Idol worship is only a means, not necessarily the best one for the attainment of the Absolute. But it is a very helpful religious exercise for the ordinary worshipper who cannot concentrate his attention on a formless creator. Max Muller has a word of praise for this kind of worship. "The purely human devotion and love which he (Ramakrishna) expresses for his Divine Mother for instance, is certainly sometimes startling, but one feels all the time that if he could press it, he is groping for that Godhead which he must find in himself or in his self before he can find it in the self of the whole world, in the self even of the old idols".<sup>18</sup> It is clear therefore that Sri Ramakrishna made no attempt to abandon idolatry which was so much denounced by the Brahmo religious leaders. For that matter he did not give up any essential part of Hinduism. He defended puranic Hinduism almost in the same way as Pandit Mrityunjay Vidyalkar had done in the course of his religious dispute with Rammohun. Some other thinkers of the 19th century like Sasadhar Tarkachuramoni and Bankim Chandra also tried to defend Hinduism in their own ways. But none of them had the realization or the religious fervour which Sri Ramakrishna possessed. They created controversies but did not often

carry conviction. Sri Ramakrishna was widely respected as a man of God. His teachings gave a total and integrated picture of Hinduism. Even some of the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj had to abandon their previous attitude of contempt towards Puranic Hinduism. Vijay Krishna Goswami once a stalwart of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj later came to the fold of Traditional Hinduism. Sri Ramakrishna was quite confident about the future of Hinduism. He maintained that Hinduism which was the *Sanatan Dharma* (eternal religion) would last for ever ; its new variants would come and go by the will of God. <sup>19</sup>

What was Sri Ramakrishna's influence on the revival of Hinduism ? There is no doubt that there was a perceptible decline of the influence of the Brahmo Samaj after the emergence of Sri Ramakrishna though this was also due to some other causes. The Saint of Dakshineswar tried to understand the attitude of the young and educated followers of the Brahmo Samaj when he visited Keshab Chandra Sen. Later many of them turned to Sri Ramakrishna. Many of the intimate followers of Sri Ramakrishna who later became monks like Swami Vivekananda, Brahmananda, Sivananda, Saradananda, Ramakrishnananda, had been members of the Brahmo Samaj in their early youth. Many others came to know of Sri Ramakrishna from the lectures of Keshab Chandra Sen or his journals. Among them may be mentioned Mohendranath Gupta, Balaram Basu, Girish Chandra Ghosh and Ramchandra Datta. <sup>20</sup> Ramakrishna was able to convince these young men that Hinduism was not barren, and that idolatry was not to be condemned outright. Ramakrishna's liberal interpretation of all aspects of Hinduism revitalised it. He urged his disciples not to create a Ramakrishna-ism after his death, and not to launch a new religious sect. He firmly believed that there should be no barriers between men of different faiths. Religion must not be dogmatic or sectarian. "A river ought to flow freely. If it is stopped it turns stagnant and becomes poisoned." This was an important message of Sri Ramakrishna ; perhaps it sums up his whole message.

Outside the country Sri Ramakrishna's message was spread by Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda has been compared to St. Paul in this respect. <sup>21</sup> But the religion that he preached to the West was not any new or modified form of Hinduism. "In his case as in that of the Buddhist missionaries the impelling force that drove him out to foreign lands was the great personality of one at whose feet he had sat and whose life he had shared for many years. Yet, in the West he spoke



of no personal teacher, he gave the message of no limited sect. 'The religious ideas of the Hindus' were his theme at Chicago ; and similarly thereafter, it was those elements, which were common to and characteristic of orthodox Hinduism in all its parts, that formed the burden of his teaching. Thus for the first time in history, Hinduism itself formed the subject of the generalisation of a Hindu mind of the highest order".<sup>22</sup>

The Hinduism which Vivekananda upheld was the traditional Hinduism, hitherto the butt of ridicule of the Derozians, the Christian missionaries and the Brahmos. Vivekananda unequivocally acknowledged his debt to his Great Teacher. He was the greatest and noblest contribution of Sri Ramakrishna to the revival of the Hindu tradition.

## NOTES

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6. A. Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
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10. S. C. Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
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14. Rajnarain Basu, *Sekal O' Ekal* (Calcutta 1909)
15. David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta 1969), p. 259.
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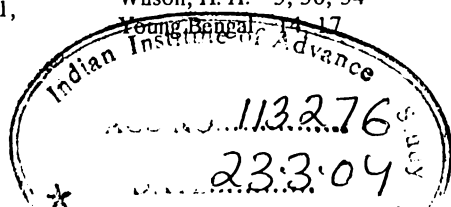
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