

Akshaykumar Dutta (1820 - 1886), the pioneer of modern Indian Rationalism, described all existing scriptures and revelations as imaginary, and declared this overt and visible world as the greatest and best book written by the supreme being Himself. In 'auspicious' days when millions rushed to take a holy dip in the Ganga, Akshaykumar set out on the opposite direction to bathe in the pond. He chose to set out on journey on days and hours marked 'inauspicious' by the astrologers. He broke all taboos regarding caste and encouraged young men of Bengal to study medicine defying their superstitious fathers. Akshaykumar's role in the development of modern Bengali language and culture is also significant. As the editor (1843 - 1855) of *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, he initiated dissemination of scientific knowledge and information. This ultimately led to the growth of modern Bengali prose with all its beauty and vigour.

Asit Kumar Bhattacharya, (1931 -1992), the author of this monograph, was Professor of Economics at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. His publications include a book of poems, a critical study on Bankimchandra and a number of articles on nineteenth century Bengal.



Library

IAS, Shimla

891.448 009 2 0 954 B



00116316

Price : Rs 15

ISBN 81-260-0081-3

Sketch : Kajal Kanjilal



Akshaykumar Dutta

Asit Kumar Bhattacharya



891.448
009 2 D 954 B

2

•

100

1

Akshaykumar Dutta

The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda. 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

Akshaykumar Dutta

Asit Kumar Bhattacharya



SAHITYA AKADEMI

SAHITYA AKADEMI

Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road New Delhi 110 001

Sales : Swati, Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110 001

Jeevantara, 23A/44X, Diamond Harbour Road, Calcutta 700 053

Guna Buildings, II Floor, 304-305 Anna Salai, Teynampet,
Madras 600 018

172 Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar,
Mumbai 400 014

ADA Rangamandira, 109 J. C. Road, Bangalore 560 002

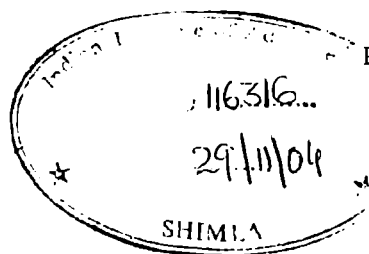
© Sahitya Akademi

ISBN 81-260-0081-3

891.448 009 2

D 954 8

First Published 1996



Price : Rs 15



Library

IAS, Shimla

891.448 009 2 D 954 8



00116316

Published by the Sahitya Akademi

Typesetting by Reprocan, 27 Mahatma Gandhi Road Calcutta 700 009

Printed at G. P. D. Box Co., Calcutta 700 014

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Historical Background and Formative Years | 1 |
| As an Editor | 10 |
| Social and Moral Philosophy | 28 |
| Analysis of Indian Religious Sects | 45 |
| Critique of Political and Social Milieu | 67 |
| Bibliography | 84 |

Historical Background and Formative Years

Akshaykumar Dutta was born on July 15, 1820 in Chupi, a village on the Ganga in central Bengal, about 50 miles to the north of Calcutta. The village has since been eroded away by the river. Central Bengal with its heartland Nadia has been the seat of Hindu learning and general culture in Bengal. Dutta left his village for Calcutta in 1850 and led an active life in the city till 1855 when he had to retire after a stroke. He continued to live for thirty more years, ostensibly as an invalid, but continued his intellectual labours according to his own choice. He had by that time achieved a welcome economic independence as an author. He died on May 28, 1886.

Akshaykumar Dutta was born sometime after the British had ceased to consider themselves as mere merchant adventurers in India. In 1799 Tipu Sultan was defeated by the British and most of South India came under their sway. In 1818 the third and last of the Mahratta wars had been fought and won by the British and no powers were left in India to challenge British supremacy any more¹. Circumstances thrust on the British authorities in India the necessity of building up a workable political system. They realised that it lay in their interests to introduce some form of western education in this country, if only to train men to assist them in administration. Prior to 1818, the East India Company had moved extremely slowly and was very wary about introducing European learning in India. Two institutions of higher education established by the Company were the Calcutta Madrassah (1780) under the initiative of Warren Hastings, the empire builder and the

1 The Sikhs who maintained some form of independence till 1849 were a marginal power confined to the north-west of the country.

Sanskrit College at Benares (1793) at the instance of Jonathan Duncan¹ and Jay Narain Ghoshal². The aim of these institutions was to turn out men competent to explain Islamic and Hindu laws to English judges who were usually ignorant of both Arabic and Sanskrit. Apart from these two institutions, nothing was done even to maintain the indigenous system of education³. Mass illiteracy was thus the direct outcome of the Company's rule in India.

The British Parliament put pressure in 1813 on the Company to do something about education in India when it renewed the Company's charter. As a result, the Court of Directors of the East India Company wrote in the same year to the Government of India, 'That a sum of a lac⁴ of rupees each year shall be set apart, and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India and for the introduction and promotion of the sciences among the British territories of India.'

Nothing however came out of this recommendation till July 1823, when a committee of public instructions was formed. The formation of this committee led to the famous controversy between orientalist and pro-westerns led by men like Rammohan Roy. The orientalist among whom were some genuine Sanskrit scholars of the west like H.H. Wilson (1786-1860) wanted to retain the traditional system of education based on Sanskrit grammar and poetics, logic or rather disputations and Hindu philosophical systems. Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) wanted western education, above all sciences, to be introduced in India. In 1823 he wrote a letter to Lord Amherst, the then Governor general of India, to this effect. Beatrice Webb mentions in her autobiography that at least one

1 Jonathan Duncan (1756-1811) came to India in the East India Company's service in 1772. In 1778 he became the Resident at Benares.

2 J.N. Ghoshal (1752-1820) also established the first English school in India in his own residence in Benares in 1814.

3 See Adam's Report on the State of Education in Bengal (1835-1838) reprinted by the University of Calcutta, edited by Anath Nath Basu (1941).

4 A lac equals one hundred thousand.

British official had recommended that the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction in Indian schools but he had no takers.

Rammohan Roy is rightly regarded as the father of the new age in India. It is regrettable that the British authorities in India ignored his letter of 1823 completely and continued to vacillate in the matter of Indian education. The western system of education finally came to be introduced in India in 1835 at the recommendation of Macaulay, then law member in the Governor General's Council in India. Macaulay unfortunately knew very little about the development of sciences in ancient India or the Islamic world and made sweeping condemnations of Indian learning even as he recommended the introduction of western education in this country. The courses he recommended had very different intentions from those of Rammohan Roy. Macaulay had wanted to train up native people who would be Indian in form but English in their tastes and preferences. Understandably the sciences, the importance of which had been stressed by Rammohan Roy, had a low priority in Macaulay's scheme. What emerged was a pale imitation of the system then in vogue in England which could not strike roots in the Indian soil. For more than a century Indians who went through the mill of Macaulay's system could not be free from a searing dichotomy of spirit. They had to accept that their country was intellectually retarded, a view they resented but found no way of refuting. It was only to be expected that their view of western culture and civilization was coloured by this resentment. A gulf kept on widening in later years between educated Indians and modernity perceived as imported from the West. This, however, is to anticipate later developments.

Meanwhile other forces had been released that challenged the old society in Bengal and its norms. In 1817 the Hindu College had been established in Calcutta offering an extensive curriculum in the arts and mathematics. By the end of 1820s the influence of its young students under their equally youthful Eurasian teacher Henry Louis Derozio (1809—1831) was making itself felt in the Hindu society of Bengal. Derozio

encouraged his students to think for themselves. With the help of his students he started a debating society (Academic Association). In their debates, according to the records left by Haramohan Chatterjee, their college clerk, 'The principles and practices of Hindu religion [meaning society] were openly ridiculed and condemned, and angry disputes were held on moral subjects; the sentiments of Hume had been widely diffused and warmly patronised...'.¹ Derozio was ultimately forced to resign in 1831 when the radical fervour of his students frightened the orthodox and the authorities alike. English education appeared to have done something more than turning out neat little Anglicans that Macaulay had looked for. It was in this milieu that Akshaykumar Dutta, a boy of ten at that time, was transplanted from his native village.

Early life

Akshaykumar's biographer Mahendranath Roy Vidyanidhi² records that he came to Calcutta at the age of ten years three months. We presume that he came to Calcutta in 1830 autumn with his elder cousin after the puja vacation. The establishment in Calcutta was nominally run by his father Pitambar Dutta, a cashier by a ferry ghat, not known to be distinguished for anything except his domestic virtues. His mother Dayāmayī (née Guha) also hailed from a village in central Bengal (near Krishnanagar in Nadia). Little is known about her. The family was undistinguished and indigent though not dismally so. Pitambar, his father, was by that time too old to take proper care of his son. Actually Akshaykumar had come to Calcutta at the instance of his elder cousin Haramohan who had been brought up, as was the custom in the joint families of the day, by Akshaykumar's father. Before he came to Calcutta, Akshaykumar was educated in his village school (*pāthsālā*).

1 Shibnath Shastri, *Rāmtanu Lāhiri O Tatkālin Bangasamāj*, 2nd ed. Calcutta 1909, p.107.

2 Mahendranath Roy Vidyanidhi, *Bābu Akshaykumār Dutta Jīvanbrittānta* (The Life of Babu Akshaykumar Dutta), Calcutta 1885, p.8 (subsequently referred to as MNR).

The curriculum of these schools was confined to Bengali and arithmetic. He was also taught Persian, as was the custom in those days for the sons of the gentry, for Persian was the language of the law courts till 1838. He had, however, come across a copy of Pearson's *Geography*¹ which opened his eyes to the hollowness of the mythological view about physical phenomena. He was troubled by vague questionings about the distance of the sun from the earth, how the earth was held in space or rather 'emptiness' and such like. He did not know the answers to these questions and he found out that men around him knew even less. He, however, knew enough to realise that to get to know the answers to the questions that troubled him he would have to learn English and must not go in for the education that turned out clerks for law courts or estate agents.

The Duttas lived in Kidderpore which was at some distance from central Calcutta where the educational institutions were to be found. For quite sometime his father and the elder cousin could not make proper arrangements for his education, especially English education in which the young Akshaykumar was particularly interested from the beginning. They also wanted him to go on learning Persian which was then the language of the law courts. Though a mere boy, Akshaykumar resolutely refused to do so. For years the struggle over his education continued. Meanwhile he got himself admitted to a missionary school where English was taught free of charge. His guardians were alarmed at their ward falling under the influence of missionaries. They agreed to his having an English education and got him admitted to a school called the Oriental Seminary established by one Gourmohan Addhya who had, in starting the school, taken full advantage of the scare raised in orthodox

1 In 1824 Pearson published *Bugol ebung Jyotish* (printed in English and Bengali) i. e. dialogues on *Geography and Astronomy* which gave a general description of the earth, the Zillas of Bengal, General History of Hindustan, description of other countries of Asia, General Geographies of Europe and America, the solar system, comets, eclipses, tides, lightnings, rainbows, compass, meteors etc. See *A Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Books* by Rev. J. Long. 1885. p. 17-18.

circles over the teachings of Derozio. He had held out promises to orthodox guardians in advertisements in rhymed couplets (which was the fashion in Bengal in those days) that he would keep his students free from 'irreligion' while giving them a modern education. The curriculum of this school had a definite bias for mathematics, and some teachers of the famous Hindu College were on its staff.

Akshaykumar was in the Oriental Seminary for a little more than two years. According to his own testimony his regular schooling had not started before the age of sixteen.¹ He was not, however, wasting his time. He read widely and reflectively. Pope's translation of the *Iliad* was a part of his curriculum and he read an English version of Virgil's *Aeneid* on his own.² Homer and Virgil opened for him the world of Greek mythology. He was struck by the remarkable similarity that popular Hinduism has with the pre-Christian religions of Mediterranean Europe. The conviction grew in him that Hinduism like the religions of Greece and Rome, had no basis other than in human imagination. His interest in geography and astronomy moved him further from prevalent world-view based largely on Hindu mythology. The various accounts of creation given in mythologies and accepted as the last word on such matters by the religious were in direct contradiction with scientific explanations of nature. He was convinced that the mythological accounts were imaginary. He argued to himself that something must be wrong with religion when it can allow such palpably false opinions about the real world to go about unchecked and uncontradicted, while it was so sure about the nature of what it called the 'ultimate reality'. He wanted to know how the scientists arrived at their conclusions. Hence arose his interest in scientific method. And for that he felt that he would have to master higher mathematics. His views had, therefore, started changing during his last year at school.

He was a born writer. At the age of fourteen he wrote and

1 Bhāratvarshiya Upāsak Sampradāya vol. II, second edition, Calcutta 1314 B. S. Preface, p. 319.

2 MNR, p. 19

got published a book of verse, *Anangamohan*. He did not continue his poetic activities further. He argued to himself that he could be of greater use to society by writing prose instead of verse.

He also attended many meetings where men discussed social and cultural questions. His interest and activities brought him in touch with Iswarchandra Gupta (1812–1859), the well-known poet in Bengali in the mid-nineteenth century. A self-taught man and a prolific poet, he was the editor of the then powerful paper, *Sambād Prabhākar*. Iswarchandra had become the editor of *Sambād Prabhākar* (hereafter referred to as *Prabhākar*) at the tender age of nineteen and turned it into a powerful paper in the language. Himself young, his paper provided a forum to young men aspiring for literary fame. Bankimchandra's first literary debut in Bengali had also been made in *Prabhākar*. Well-known for his irreverent and antisentimental verse that had cleared the air in Bengali poetry of the stereotyped pseudo-religious eroticism to which the once moving Vaishnava lyric tradition of Bengal had degenerated with the gradual decline of its original inspiration, Iswarchandra Gupta instantly recognised talent in young Akshaykumar. The two had struck a genuine friendship and Iswarchandra took him to various meetings and introduced him to intellectual circles in Calcutta which in those days included a large number of affluent landowners who patronised culture and the arts. This introduction from the elder poet, who was to refer to him in after years as 'once my pupil, now my teacher' was of great help to young Akshaykumar for it brought him in touch with men like Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905) and his *Tattvabodhinī Sabhā* (established October 1839). It also gave him access to the private libraries and collections of the rich.

Akshaykumar had continued in the Oriental Seminary for nearly three years. His father had retired soon after he came to Calcutta. When he was nineteen and still at school (in the second class in the Oriental Seminary) his father expired.¹ His

¹ Bandyopadhyay, Brajendranath *Sāhitya Sādak Charitmālā* Vol 1, No. 12 p.9 (Subsequently referred to as *S. S. Ch*)

expenses were expected to be borne by his elder cousin with whom he was staying. This man had too many commitments of his own to see a cousin through school. Akshaykumar's school fees ran into arrears and in the end he left the Oriental Seminary. His biographer records that the founder of the school Gourmohan Addhya had wanted him to continue and waived the fees. However, Akshaykumar was going hungry in the afternoons at the time and it was imperative for him to find some means to support himself.

Akshaykumar had left school because he had no money. Yet the years ahead did not see him pushing his way to pile up treasure. In fact, he persistently refused to accept any job that would tie him down to any fixed routine. He refused Iswar Gupta's warm invitation to join him in business and understandably did not heed the advice of his well-meaning relations to start as a broker or a shipper's clerk. He would have nothing to do with anything that was even remotely connected with the law courts or the police. He supported himself in a manner that has been followed by the intelligent youngmen in Bengal ever since. He gave lessons in English and mathematics to private students in his spare hours. In other hours he devoted himself to his studies. When he left school he knew English and some French which he had learnt on his own. He had also gone through the first four books of Euclid and had an introduction to elementary algebra. It was after he had come out of the school that he devoted himself fully to the study of mathematics and physics. He had come to know through his love of books some younger members of the family of Raja Radhakanta Dev (1784 – 1867), a rich landowner and a pillar of orthodoxy who had yet done a good deal for the spread of modern education in Bengal. Akshaykumar made good use of the magnificent private collection of Raja. He completed Euclid and beginning with trigonometry and conic sections, learned differential calculus within a year. The various branches of physics and astronomy were not neglected as was to be expected from the

first man who was to write a text on physics in the Bengali language. He also devoted a special attention to physical geography, a subject which occupied the first place in his list of publications. His geography book, now long out of print, had indeed been used as a text book in Bengali schools in the nineteenth century.

The reason for his approach to the sciences becomes clear if we remember that he wanted to understand the why and how of nature. He had to get a grip on the methods by which scientists came to the conclusions they did. Only then could he himself speak with confidence on these issues and do away with the arbitrary deities who were supposed to preside over every natural phenomenon and thus perpetuated fatalism and fear. Ignorance of natural laws as he was never tired of repeating in later years, was the greatest ally of social reaction and moral torpor.

By the time he was nineteen he also realised that his ignorance of Sanskrit stood in his way of making an assessment of the various schools of Hindu philosophy. He set himself to learn Sanskrit seriously. He learned it sufficiently well to make a critical appraisal of the entire range of Hindu philosophy and scriptural bases of various Hindu cults in his major work *Bhāratvars̥iya Upāsak Sampradāya* (*BhUS*, in short, Vol I, 1870; Vol II, 1883). No less important was his critical contribution to the Brahmo creed which we discuss later. From the reference given in *BhUS* (Vol. I) it is seen that he had learnt the language of the *Avesta*, or ancient Iranian. He made good use of this knowledge in his comments on the *Vedas*. When and how he learnt it is not known.

He had also attempted to learn German but apparently did not learn it sufficiently well to use the language in his research. References to German authors which are frequent in his texts always mention their English translations. This is in marked contrast to his use of French references which in the original abound in his writings, especially *BhUS*.

As an Editor

We have mentioned that Akshaykumar Dutta attended meetings of intellectual associations in Calcutta with Iswar Gupta. Of these one of his early biographers Nakur Chandra Biswas¹ in *Akshaycharit* (1887) mentioned two that deserve our attention. One was *Bānglābhāshānushilani Sabhā* (Association for the cultivation of Bengali language) and the other *Neetitarangini Sabhā* (Association for dissemination of morals) established by the Zamindar of Taki. Dutta actively participated in the meetings of these associations, read articles in their sessions and took part in the discussions. Gupta came to appreciate his writings and published his contributions regularly in his paper. These publications are also known to have drawn the attention of Debendranath Tagore (MNR). Akshaykumar's association with *Prabhākar* was recorded by Iswarchandra Gupta who on 14 April 1847 printed his name among the old established contributors to *Prabhākar*. His personal relationship with Gupta also continued till the latter's death.

Tattwabodhini Sabhā (Philosophical Association)

Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) was perhaps the most important figure in the cultural landscape of Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century. He gave a new turn to the new age in Bengal and infused new vigour in it when he established the *Tattwabodhini Sabhā* (*T. S.* in short) in 1839 (Oct 6). The basic aim of *T. S.* was to discuss theological and philosophical questions in general and propagate the Brahmo creed of

¹ Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay depends on *Akshaycharit* (1294 BS/1887) by Nakur Chandra Biswas for his facts given in his short biography of Akshay Dutta in S. S. Ch.

monotheism based on the teachings of *Upaniṣads* in particular. Debendranath Tagore who had been under the influence of Rammohan Roy from his very boyhood particularly resented the onslaughts of Christian missionaries on Hindu society and religion. He considered them with some justification perhaps, as cultural aggresison. The conviction grew in him that in order to survive, Hindu society would have to reform itself on the basis of Vedic monotheism enshrined especially in the *Upaniṣads* and that he claimed was true Hinduism. That is what led him to establish the *T. S.*

T. S. had a threefold programme. This was to start schools obviously to combat the influence of missionary schools; to start a journal in order to educate the rising generation of youngmen with western education, our ancient scripturers and the monotheism embedded in them so that they did not cease to honour India's religious and cultural heritage; and lastly to send scholars from Bengal to Benaras to learn the *Vedas* thoroughly and well for Vedic learning had disappeared from Bengal. The school *Tattwabodhinī Pāthsālā* was established in June 1840. The journal *Tattwabodhinī Patrika (T. P.)* came out in 1843 with Akshaykumar Dutta as the editor. We will discuss later at length Akshaykumar's role as a teacher in the *Pāthsālā* and of course in *T.P.* which he made and which on its turn made him the great writer he became.

Akshaykumar was admitted as a member of *T. S.* on December 25, 1839 at the proposal of Ishwarchandra Gupta. Ishwarchandra himself had been admitted to membership about a month earlier. As has been mentioned, Debendranath had earlier noticed Akshaykumar's publications in the *Prabhākar* and was evidently impressed by his intellectual prowess. We find that Akshaykumar was employed as a teacher in June 1840 (1 Āsarh, 1762 saka) in the *Pāthsālā* almost immediately as it started functioning. His salary was Rs.8/- per month to start with but was increased to Rs 10/- from the very next month. It was Rs 14/- per month when he resigned his post three years later in May 1843 when the school was transferred from

Calcutta to a district suburb (Bansberia). Akshaykumar taught geography and physics in the *Pāthsālā*. He published his text on geography, *Bhugol* in 75 pages in 1841 while teaching the subject in his school. This was the first authoritative text book on geography to be published in Bengali. It is still important because the scientific terms he coined or translated for geographical terms are still in use in the language. These include equator, latitude, longitude, Cape of Good Hope among others. (These terms are in use in some of the neighbouring languages also.) However, the sentence structure of the book shows that Akshaykumar Dutta had not yet arrived at his mature style. The sentences are often cumbrous and involved bearing marks of early 19th century journalistic prose. There are also liberal use of worn out metaphors not to be found in his writing in later years. His biographers, however, record that the book had been completed much earlier and was published only in 1841 because the *T. S.* had extended financial support for its publication, a fact acknowledged by Akshaykumar in the preface.

The editorial years

Akshaykumar's real career started when he was appointed the editor of *T. P.* (a philosophical journal) in August 1843. Debendranath started the journal as a mouthpiece of the association *T. S.* so that the metaphysical questions and theological doctrines discussed at its meetings could reach the growing number of educated Hindus who were increasingly getting dissatisfied with everything Hindu and Indian, considered synonymous in those days, under the impact of western learning on the one hand and missionary activities on the other. He held a public examination to recruit the right man to the post of the editor. He chose Akshaykumar Dutta as the editor of the journal for his excellent prose style. He believed that he could correct Akshaykumar's opinions whenever necessary.¹

¹ Years later in his Autobiography (1898) Debendranath records without any evidence that Dutta had praised the 'recluse (sannyasin) with matted hair' in his writing which apparently legitimized Debendranath's attempts to

Naturally this led to open differences of opinions and to parting of ways after some years. Debendranath could not change the opinions of Akshaykumar. Instead Akshaykumar persuaded him to bring about a profound change in the Brahmo creed that Debendranath expounded to which we turn later.

Rammohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore and Brahmoism

An assessment of the intellectual development of Akshaykumar demands our understanding of the intellectual and social reform movement initiated by Rammohan Roy. This was in a way systematized by Debendranath Tagore in Brahmo dharma or Brahmoism in the 1840s. Rammohan Roy deserves the attention of all serious students of modern India. He initiated the Modern Age in India and was also formed by it. His early education was based on Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian (languages which he mastered). He is also known to have studied Hebrew. He never ceased to study Sanskrit in his life. He came to learn English in his adult life when he came to work with Englishmen. He became wealthy in trade and from 1814 when he settled down permanently in Calcutta, he devoted his entire time to intellectual pursuits combined with social and religious activities. He carried on a powerful campaign against the obvious social evils of *suttee*, that is the burning of widows – a practice then dwindling in Bengal but still alive. He also campaigned for the freedom of the press. He is of course famous for his propagation of monotheism in India, especially among the Hindus. He derived his faith from the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*, which formed the final points of the Vedas, accepted as the most sacred texts by the Hindus but hardly studied at the time. These speak of one formless supreme being who encompasses the creation and to whom obeisance is due. In 1828 Rammohan Roy established the *Brahmosabha* later called *Brahmosamaj* where monotheists belonging to any

correct him. There is every reason to believe that Debendranath's memory had led him astray. Dutta who always argued from first premises stated clearly that knowledge is a social product and a recluse roaming about in the wide world is hardly better than an animal roaming in his forest habitat.

religion could join in prayer.

Rammohan's early education had given him a thorough grasp of Arabic and Persian. He is known to have studied Aristotle's logic in Arabic as evidence shows. He also studied Islamic theology. All this had a profound influence on him. His first publication *Tuhfat-Ul-Muwahhidin*¹ (A gift to the Monotheists) written in Persian with a preface in Arabic (1803-1804) shows him as a monotheist with an open mind. He stressed the need for independent judgment. The book shows him as a convinced monotheist trying to bring others of the faith to his line of thinking. It earned for him the sobriquet, *Zaberdust Moulvi* (powerful moulvi). At the same time he continued to make deep studies in Sanskrit scriptures and found in the venerated but then largely forgotten Vedic literature especially in the *Upanishads* clear pronouncement of one formless God, Brahma, the absolute spirit whose worship alone seemed right to him.

His espousal of monotheism was not motivated by religious belief only. He clearly enunciated the socio-political benefits to be derived by Hindus if they followed monotheism and adopted more enlightened views about men's duties. In a letter dated January 18, 1828 to one Dr. Tuckerman, he stated:

I regret to say that the present system adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interests. The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions and subdivisions among them has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise. It is I think necessary that *some change should take place in their religion at least for the sake of their practical advantage and social comfort.*

Rammohan set sail for England in November 1830 as the emissary of the nominal emperor of Delhi, Akbar II who conferred on him the title of Rajah and arrived there in April

¹ Obaidullah El Obeide, superintendent moulavi of Dacca Govt. Madrassa was the first to translate it into English as *A Gift to Deists* in 1884.

1831. He was never to return home for he died in Bristol in September 1833. His work for India in England remains a landmark to this day though his original mission in favour of the nominal emperor of Delhi met with limited success.

There is little reason to believe that Rammohan had wanted to create a new community with its own rites and rituals on the basis of a monotheistic creed. He had created a forum where monotheists of all religious faiths could come and join in prayer. It would seem that he wanted a party of men on the basis of monotheism for the regeneration of Hindu society and amity among all socio-religious groups. Rammohan had started the *Ātmiya Sabhā* (Association of Friends) which met each Wednesday evening in his home at Manicktala. In 1829/1830(?) winter (February) this body started functioning from Jorasanko house of the Tagores as Brahmo Samaj.

After the departure of Rammohan Roy for England, the Brahmo Samaj maintained its existence but gradually started to decline in the absence of inspiration and leadership. At this critical juncture Debendranath Tagore came forward to lead the body. He infused a new life into the movement and in the process changed its character as also its shape and form. From being an open forum it got transformed within a decade into a religious sect with growing features of a community.

Debendranath had known Rammohan Roy from his boyhood as the eldest son of Dwarakanath Tagore (1794 – 1846), the great entrepreneur who was also a close friend of Rammohan. History records how Dwarakanath had helped the reformist party with his munificence and encouraged them in every new venture be it the start of a new Bengali paper (*Bangadut* 1829) or the first anatomical dissection by a caste Hindu Madhusudan Gupta¹ in the Calcutta Medical College. This is why the Brahmo Samaj could function from his premises at Jorasanko.

Debendranath had been drawn to monotheism quite early in his youth. In his autobiography written much later in his life he mentioned the spiritual melancholy or deep sadness of soul

1 Dwarakanath awarded a prize to Madhusudan Gupta for this.

which weighed on his heart and mind as he lay awake by the death bed of his grandmother brought to the bank of the Ganga, as was the custom in those days, when doctors had given up all hopes for her life. He records how he came across a torn page of the *Īsopaniṣad* borne by the wind and how a look at its opening *śloka*s that mentioned the all pervasive one God Brahma, lifted the gloom from his heart and opened the doors of spiritual bliss to him. His biographers as also Shivanth Shastri in his *History of the Brahmo Samaj* (Calcutta 1911, H.B.S. in short) have seen in all this the hand of God as it were and held that Debendranath had spiritual illumination through divine revelation. Yet in 1867 Debendranath had himself testified about his spiritual development in the following words :

In my early years this infinite heavens studded with stars gave me a view of the infinite *Deus* (Anantadeva). In a blissful moment this infinite sky with its innumerable stars and galaxies spread out before my sight. My entire mind and spirit were drawn to it. Then *my intellect showed itself and came to the conclusion that all this could not have been created by any limited finite being*. In that very moment the very idea of the infinite being was reflected in my heart and that very moment my mind [literally eyes] was opened to knowledge ... The first message came from the infinite sky, later came the message of detachment from the burning ghat...¹

It is clear then that Debendranath Tagore's view of one infinite being came from reflection rather than divine revelation as is usually believed. He had been a lifelong student of astronomy and transmitted this love to his youngest son Rabindranath Tagore as has been recorded by the great poet in his memoirs. Debendranath had been a worthy student of the famous Hindu College for about three years.² He had started an association for the dissemination of knowledge from his early teens. At the age of fifteen in December 1832 he founded

1 Quoted in the biography of Debendranath by Bhabasindhu Dutta, 1321 B.S.pp. 328-330 (translation and italics mine)

2 Debendranath entered Hindu College shortly after the resignation of Derozio in 1831.

Sarbatattwadeepikā Sabhā, which functioned from the premises of the Anglo-Hindu school founded by Rammohan Roy. This association of which Debendranath was the secretary can be seen to have been the precursor of *Tattwabodhinī Sabhā* for its purpose was to discuss religious questions and spread the use of Bengali language.

Debendranath Tagore is a much misunderstood man. His contributions to social, intellectual and even political life of the country have been neglected and only his role as the founder of the Brahmo sect projected before the public. Both his autobiography and his biographers helped create this image from which it is not easy now to restore the figure of Debendranath Tagore as a historical person. Dwarkanath Tagore persuaded his son to leave the Hindu College after sometime and join him in business. Dwarakanath had started the Carr Tagore and Company in 1834. It can be assumed that Debendranath also entered business around this time. At first he did his apprenticeship in the Union Bank established in 1829 by Dwarakanath's youngest brother Ramanath Tagore. By 1838 we find that Debendranath had been promoted to the position of a deputy to Ramanath. Debendranath was also closely associated with the Carr Tagore & Company of his father in which he owned 1/16th (i.e. 6.25 percent) of share. In spite of his public controversies with the Christian missionaries to which he devoted valuable time that was not approved of by Dwarakanath, the father had full faith in the business acumen and abilities of his eldest son. He was given 50 percent share in it by Dwarakanath prior to his second and as it turned out last journey to England in March 1845. Dwarakanath, who has perhaps been the greatest of all entrepreneurs born in Bengal, would not have taken this step if he did not have sufficient faith in the practical sense and abilities and moral stature of his son.

One of the myths about Debendranath Tagore sedulously cultivated in the later half of the 19th century, relates to his inadequacy as a man of affairs. The failure of the Carr Tagore & Co. in 1847 is mentioned as a proof of this inadequacy. Yet

literary historians perhaps do not take account of the fact that in 1847 there had occurred a general crisis of international trade that originated in England and led to the failure of many concerns round the world. This general crisis, the precursor of subsequent great depressions of Capitalism had been discussed at length by Rostow in his well-known work *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century*¹ (1948). It was a great world-wide economic depression which originated in Britain and dislocated international trade. Debendranath as a person had nothing to do with it. His contemporaries in Calcutta understood the situation perfectly well. The annual report of the *Tathwabodhini Sabhā* (1769 saka era or 1847) published in *T. P.* (Second part No. 58. Jaishtha 1770 S. E. or May 1848), recorded the following :

It is known to all, how much evil has been wrought this year by the terrible upheavals in trade like a plague epidemic. A wave of the great disturbance that had forcefully struck far away England and rushing madly from it has been uprooting India, has also shaken this Association. The relation of this Association with Sri Debendranath Tagore is generally known and you are all especially aware what a great danger this disaster has posed for him...²
(p. 23)

The report then goes on to record how Debendranath had been forced to curtail his financial support to the Association (*T. S.*). They knew that the crisis in international trade had originated in Britain and had affected the Indian economy obviously because of our connection with that country. Debendranath was only a victim of adverse circumstances beyond his control.

Debendranath had also played an important role as the first secretary of the British Indian Association established on 29 October 1851 which was formed after the amalgamation of the Landholders Association and the British India Society originally established by Ramgopal Ghosh. He held his position till January 15, 1854. Jogeshchandra Bagal mentions in his biogra-

¹ See reprint edition 1968, p. 33 Table II & p. 48 footnote.

² Translation mine from the original Bengali.

phy of Debendranath (S. S. Ch no : 45) that soon after the Association was established, on December 11 Debendranath wrote to leading personalities in Bombay and Madras to work together on an all India basis. Debendranath wrote to them that the old Charter of the East India Company was about to terminate and a new Charter was to be issued soon (1853).¹ This was the time to work together to bring about national unity. If they employed one agent, i. e., spokesman for the entire country that would not only reduce expenditure but also help establish unity of Indian opinion on constitutional matters. B. B. Majumdar records in his *Indian Political Associations and Reform of Legislature 1818-1917*, the seminal influence of this memorandum submitted by Debendranath which had been acknowledged in a later speech of Dadabhai Naoraji.² Under the leadership of Debendranath the British Indian Association became a flourishing institution and started a branch association in Madras. Yet on his resignation from the secretary's post in January 1854 he turned his back on politics completely. His autobiography is silent on the subject and not helpful in elucidating his work for the Carr Tagore & Co. He was not being fair to himself when he blamed himself for its fall. If anything, his great good sense and practical ability are shown in the way he wound up its business in cooperation with his brother when disaster struck in 1847.

Debendranath and Akshaykumar

The T. S. as we have seen was established in 1839 and Akshay Dutta was nominated a member in the same year on December 25. For sometime he functioned as its assistant secretary. Debendranath joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1842 (1764 S.E) and embraced Brahmoism in 1765 S.E, December, 1843. The responsibility of directing the Brahmo Samaj and propagating the new faith was entrusted to the T. S. Understandably Debendranath felt the need to start a journal for the purpose. Thus was started the *Tattvabodhini Patrikā*

1 Company's Charter was renewed every twenty years from 1793.

2 B.B. Majumdar, above, Calcutta 1965, p. 38-39.

(*T. P.*) in 1843 (1765 S.E., 1 Bhadra). Debendranath held a public examination to select the right man for the post of an editor and Akshaykumar was selected to the post with a monthly salary of rupees thirty. This was a big rise from his last salary as school teacher which was rupees fourteen per month. Debendranath recorded the fact of this rise in Akshaykumar's salary in his *Autobiography* and there is just the trace of a suggestion that the stubborn Akshaykumar hardly returned the gratitude due to him or his views for the benefits he received.¹

Controversies on the foundation of the new faith

Immediately on his assuming the post of the editor of *T.P.*, Akshaykumar, who had embraced Brahmoism along with Debendranath, started discussing the nature of the Supreme Being. Immediately differences of approach between the two men became manifest. To Dutta acquisition of knowledge or the pursuit of it is the distinguishing quality of man and his highest attribute. Nothing could give greater pleasure to man than the pursuit of knowledge. The absolute being was knowledge incarnate. To Debendranath, God was essentially loving and merciful (this idea was developed by his friend and disciple Rajnarayan Bose). Hence love or mercy expressed the essence of God. The controversy could not be resolved and ultimately led to the total overhaul of the editorial staff of the *T.P.* and dissolution of the *T. S.* (1859).

However, the immediate controversy was about the foundation of the Brahmo faith. Debendranath wanted the *Vedas*, considered eternal and not of human origin by the Hindus, to be the immutable foundation of Brahmoism. He preached that creed in the 1840s. His biographer Jogeshchandra Bagal mentions that Debendranath wrote a series of articles in the *T.P.* from its inception on the Brahmo creed based on the immutable *Vedas* to defend it from attacks launched by Christian missionaries in Calcutta like Rev. Alexander Duff and Rev.

¹ See Satishchandra Chakraborty, ed., *Atmajibani* (Autobiography). Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 1962, pp. 36-37

Krishnamohan Bandopadhyay.¹ These were translated into English and published at the later half of 1845 as *Vedantic Doctrines Vindicated*. Debendranath asserted :

In our endeavours to spread a knowledge of our ancient theological doctrines we declare our firm conviction in them to be the only....principle by which our exertions are guided. ...The reviewer is correct in remarking that we 'consider the *Vaids* [*Vedas*] and *Vaids* alone as the authorized rule of Hindu theology'. They are the sole foundation of all our beliefs and the truths of all other shastras must be judged of, according to their agreement with....²

Akshaykumar challenged the view and held out firmly that no particular book can be the source of religion. The *Vedas*, he held, are human creations of a particular period and its teachings cannot be considered immutable. He campaigned against what he called the Vedic shackles and ultimately persuaded Debendranath by 1850 to give up his initial desire to hold up the *Vedas* as the foundation of Brahmoism.³

Debendranath had to adopt the views of Akshaykumar but did so with great reluctance. He culled hymns from the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads* which agreed with his intuitive understanding or realization of spiritual truth. Thus a compromise was effected between the authority of the *Vedas* and the spiritual needs of western educated men of 19th century Bengal. The emancipation of Brahmoism from the shackles of the *Vedas* that Akshaykumar had brought about was amply recognized by all his contemporaries. This, however, may have been a pyrrhic victory personally for Akshaykumar for it marked the beginning of a growing gulf between him and Debendranath.

Akshaykumar and the Tattvabodhini Patrika

Religious views apart, the importance of the *T.P.* in the development of modern Bengali language and culture can

- 1 'The Transition-State of the Hindu Mind', *The Calcutta Review*, Jan-March 1845.
- 2 Bagal quoted in S.S. Charitmala, Vol. 3, No. 45, p. 27.
- 3 Debendranath had difficulties in upholding this faith increasingly from 1846 onwards & was reasoned out of it by Akshaykumar Dutta when he compiled the *Brahmo-Dharma* in 1849 (pub. 1850).

hardly be overestimated. Modern Bengali prose in all its beauty and vigour was born in its pages. It nursed science and literary culture in Bengali and disseminated scientific knowledge and information in Bengali such has not been done before or even afterwards.

We have mentioned that Akshaykumar Dutta was the editor of the *T.P.* for twelve years from its inception in August 1843 to July 1855, when he had to retire after a stroke. *T.P.* became the vehicle of modern thought and scientific knowledge during this period. It ceased to be so after Akshaykumar ceased to be its editor. (In later years it even supported social reaction discouraging university education for women.) It is noteworthy that Akshaykumar never again contributed to the *T.P.* though requested to do so.

The *T.P.* was started by Debendranath as a serious proposition. He had set up a 'Paper Committee' of five for the selection of articles for publication in the *T.P.* Among those who served in the Committee was Iswarchandra Vidyasagar who remained a firm friend and warm admirer of Dutta throughout. Vidyasagar was closely associated with the *T.S.* also. He was indeed its secretary when Debendranath finally chose to dissolve the body in 1859.

Akshaykumar's development as a serious thinker began with his association with the *Tattvabodhinī*. His theological opinions started taking shape. He wrote in 1850: 'This overt and visible world is the greatest and best book, it is the scripture written by the supreme being himself.' And the duty of a true believer therefore, was to 'study and discuss things relating to that [nature].' Rejecting all scriptures and revelations as source of knowledge, he declared that God had revealed Himself by this 'best of all books – the cosmic world'. To study the mind of God, therefore, one has only to turn to physics and natural sciences. All existing scriptures being 'imaginary' one cannot depend on them.¹

We shall see that this struck Debendranath as a pernicious

1 *T. P.* Phalgun S.E 1771 (Feb-March 1850)

doctrine and he reacted predictably. It is necessary, however, to have a look at the views of Akshaykumar at the time which he discarded subsequently. *Bāhyabastur sahit Mānabprakitir Sambandha Vichār* (Treatise on the relation between human mind and external objects. To be referred to as Treatise hereafter) Vol. I (1851) Vol. II (1853) was written on the basis of the constitution of Man by George Combe. In the first volume Akshaykumar elaborated the following themes.

The laws of nature; physical, physiological and mental constitution of man; rules of behaviour in accordance with natural laws; causes of human happiness; consequences of transgression of physical and physiological laws; physical health and strength; food intake; enjoyment of light, air etc; exercise of physical and mental faculties; examples of harm that follows from transgression of laws relating to the body; statement about heredity or transmission of parents' qualities to the child, why the young, the old, the cripple and the seriously diseased should not marry; the wisdom of marrying women outside caste; determination of human nature and its relation with the objective world; attainment of long life; labour pain; consequences of marriage within forbidden degrees; the harm following meat eating etc. (MNR p 114 – 15)

The major themes discussed in the second volume are :

The sorrows of man resulting from transgression of moral laws; social rules; penal laws in terms of natural laws; combined effect of various natural laws; whether natural laws are beneficial for all; the relation between knowledge and morality; drinking; opinions of medical authorities on the matter. (MNR p 115)

Akshaykumar's *Treatise* though based on George Combe's book was not a translation of the same. Rev. Long in his *Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Books* mentioned that Akshaykumar 'takes Combe's line of argument' but uses 'Indian similes and illustrations to show the evils resulting from violating the laws of nature.'¹

In spite of the philosophical limitations of the *Treatise* to which we turn in the subsequent pages, the book promoted a

¹ Quoted in MNR p. 116

will for radical reform in Hindu social attitudes and is known to have deeply influenced sections of contemporary youth. It inspired Dwarkanath Ganguly (1844–1898) in his lifelong work for the education and emancipation of women. It also prompted many young men to challenge the scandalous marriage system then prevalent among the upper castes of Bengal that would permit an old man of sixty to marry a girl of eight if the man came from the right segment of the right caste. It also challenged the shackles of caste and hence of established social pattern. It is the only Bengali book published in the 19th century that disapproved of the system of arranged marriages. None the less the intellectual approach adopted in the *Treatise* had its own pitfalls. There was first of all the basic assumption about an unchangeable human nature which in itself was supposed to be rational. Psychology as a discipline was yet to appear on the scene and the dark recesses of the human mind lay unexplored. The main springs of human action were assumed to be given by rationality which was also considered to be the distinguishing feature of man. As a result, like other early rationalists Akshaykumar had to make a number of suppositions about the true character of human nature and one gets the impression that human nature has been defined in a way that suits the purpose of philosophy rather than philosophy taking the cue from human nature.

The philosophical objection to this approach is even more serious. In effect it is not scientific. It is based on unsubstantiated assumptions or faith and not on observation and experiments as his adherence to Baconian philosophy demanded.¹ In fact the method leads to what is known as the teleological fallacy. One can, at a point of time, talk of the functions of objects in so far as one has observed them. But if one starts talking of their purpose one has to make anthropocentric assumptions about the general scheme of things on *a priori*

¹ Bacon, *Novum Organum*, First Aphorism: Man the servant and interpreter of nature, performs and understands so much as he has collected concerning the order of nature by observation or reason nor do his power or reason extend farther.

grounds and correlate the known functions of each definite object or distinct event to this assumed scheme as its purpose. This is what Akshaykumar was led to do in his *Treatise*.

It is more than of usual interest that Akshaykumar considered that the *Treatise* could be the foundation of the new faith. He believed that the universally valid principles encompassing human life as well as planetary movements alone could lay down the moral code for the educated man in the enlightened modern age. As such the new faith – Brāhmoism – should be based on these scientific laws, that are not ‘imaginary’ and do not violate human reason. This bold claim laid in the preface to the *Treatise* predictably annoyed the elder Tagore.

Even as Akshaykumar was publishing his *Treatise* deriving the laws of moral conduct from amoral physical laws, Debendranath was publishing a series of articles in the *T. P.* from November 1850 (Agrahayana 1772, S. E.) on the nature of the soul. The series completed in five articles was published in 1852 as a slim volume entitled *Ātmatattvavidyā* which can be loosely translated as the *Philosophy of the Soul*.

His despair about Akshaykumar’s philosophy emerges clearly from his reflections. He says with dismay :

People only see external objects, they do not view themselves. They always observe objects with form, with essence that they can hear, smell and touch but they do not see the being who observes the form, the essence, the sounds and smells and tactile qualities. Being always in contact with external objects, people have developed such a mental habit that they cannot imagine a separate being who has no form, no discrete essence, no smells, no tactile presence. Such is their intelligence that they can not think of any thing which has not the attributes of form, essence, sounds, smells and tactile attributes Men of good sense can easily accept that the objects that can be seen, heard, touched, smelt and tasted are external objects and being that can not be seen, heard, touched, smelt and tasted is me – the soul within. Alas! how have people been spellbound by being surrounded by external objects and always looking at external objects. I am reduced to nothing, only the external objects like the sun, the moon, the planets, the stars alone matter. This consideration is not there that where would

have been the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars or this world if I [my spirit] were not there.¹

Obviously Akshaykumar's attempts to derive moral laws from the amoral laws of physics and other sciences annoyed the founder of Brāhmo creed deeply. Akshaykumar not only preached what to Debendranath was a pernicious doctrine but actually went on training himself on what he preached. He started attending natural science classes at the Calcutta Medical College to understand how God revealed Himself through nature. As the editor of the *T. P.* he contributed articles, one after another, on the position of the earth in relation to the solar system, stating how days and nights and various seasons occur. He also collected and published news of the latest discoveries in the various sciences. These came out not as mere news items but as complete articles written in inimitable prose. Invariably he emphasised that there is nothing arbitrary in Nature and we are only to know the laws of Nature to know our duties. It is perhaps just as well that he grappled with the problem of evolving a scheme of morality based on the amoral foundation of science before *The Origin of Species* (1859) appeared on the scene and altered the mechanical view to which he subscribed. He could hold the view that Nature was a machine built on the sound principles now moving at its own momentum though with a prime mover existing not quite in historical time. He could with confidence dismiss the view of the devout that Nature was the sum total of arbitrary entities moved by an equally arbitrary and always interfering Supreme Being with absolute power – which, by the way, could never be defined, for a purpose not known to anybody but Himself. By a happy accident of time, Akshaykumar did not have to face the challenges posed by the discoveries of Darwin. On the one hand he did not have to enter into elaborate arguments with the so called champions of 'scientific sociology' who equated organised class society with Nature, class and national antagonism with Darwinian struggle for existence, and the survival of the fittest with the domination of the then dominating classes.

¹ translation mine.

At a deeper level he did not face the altered perception of Nature resulting from the discoveries of Darwin. Long before the revolution in physics that brought in the uncertainty principle at the turn of the century, biology revealed that the natural order was neither benign nor designed for any humane purpose acceptable to the moral sensibility of man.

Social and Moral Philosophy

Akshaykumar published in 1856 his most important work on morals or in effect social philosophy entitled *Dharmaneetī* (Moral Principles, literally Principles of *Dharma*). Based on a series of articles published in the *T. P.* in 1850s, this work gives us the most succinct exposition of his views on man and society and the scheme of the values that he upheld. We are aware that Economics or Political Economy as a subject of enquiry originated in Britain from inquiries on moral philosophy which required an exposition of the 'right' social order which alone could ensure socioial morality.¹

Akshaykumar did not go so far as to write specifiially on economic issues but discussed the political issues involved in preserving moral order in society. He had wanted to write *Dharmaneetī* in two parts but the second part never saw the light of the day. We do not even know what was to be its contents. In the first part² which concerns us, we find eleven chapters. The first two chapters lay down the theoretical foundation of the subject. Here he discusses the importance of morality (*dharma*) and why it is especially necessary for man to acquire moral knowledge. He divides human inclinations into three major divisions – lower, intellectual and moral and evaluates each of them. He concludes that a synthesis of all

1 In European thought the search is as old as Plato and his *Republic*. In the eighteenth century however, it acquired a new dimension in Europe with the growing expansion of international trade and nascent industrial revolution in the background of the intellectual revolution going on since the sixteenth century.

2 I have used *Dharmaneetī* Part 1, tenth impression, Calcutta, 1909, S.E., 1887. And only page numbers are given in brackets in the quotations from the book. All translations are mine.

three inclinations is necessary for a meaningful life. He specifically excludes the life of a recluse or a mendicant from his view of an ideal life. He then holds a discourse on right conduct and honest behaviour. In this context he emphasized the importance of intellect and intellectual exercise. As an example of sorrows that follow from the conduct of men of limited intelligence, he mentioned child marriage then widely prevalent in society.

“Children tied to each other in marriage cannot be aware of each other's worth If unfortunately they are of opposite nature then they have to spend the rest of their lives in mutual recriminations and quarrels and suffer intolerably as long as they live. And if they give birth to children in an early age before they are physically mature, the child so born would be born weak and prone to illnesses. It dies early and leaves its intemperate parents in deep sorrow. Moreover if a son i.e. a young boy being married early does not get time to get a proper education or pick up a trade, then he is thrown into terrible poverty and suffers endlessly throughout his life.” (p.22)

In the third chapter he discusses duties of a man. He declares that to know his duties man must acquire the knowledge of laws laid down by God. Elaborating on the theme, he states that it is our duty to ‘study from our childhood the physical, physiological and psychological laws established by God and would be failing in our duty if we do not.’ In his view and realisation ‘this knowledge is the great healing medicine for the sorrows which afflict us like maladies, this knowledge is the unique treasure trove of human happiness, this knowledge is the principal means that make our human life worth- while.’ (All translations are mine).

Indeed, if any thing distinguishes the world-view of Dutta, it is his firm conviction about the unique worth and incomparable value of knowledge. However much he may praise ‘the treasures of morality’, nowhere do we find him showering praises on the cultivation of a moral life to the exclusion of intellectual life. On the contrary the supreme importance of the pursuit of knowledge is stressed repeatedly without reference

to morality as such. While discussing the pleasure that a man of science (or learning) derives from his intellectual work, he refers to the pleasures of the discoveries of Newton which according to him render contemptible heaps of gold as high as the Himalayas (p.33).

In his fourth chapter (p. 38-58) Akshaykumar elaborates his views on society. He mentions that the first duty of man is the acquisition of knowledge while the second is the preservation of good health. Knowledge comes first. This is because 'animals adopt healthy habits being guided by instincts' given by God. Human beings do not have such infallible instincts. But they can discern and follow rules relating to good health and enjoy the pleasures of a life free from illness. Without knowledge one cannot know the rules relating to health and so cannot observe them.' Even for health, therefore, acquisition of knowledge comes first.

The third major duty enjoined on men is the improvement of 'moral instincts.' In his evaluation of moral behaviour he shows a refreshing change from the usual Hindu view of renunciation. He states openly that, 'We have full right to the legitimate enjoyment of our sensual pleasures.... The acquisition of wealth, honours and fame within the bounds of justice, is a matter of great enjoyment. The application of these faculties² in order to enjoy pleasures and wealth is by no means to be condemned' (p. 55).

It is in this context that he expressed his outspoken views about a recluse or mendicant as an ideal. 'Certain sects view sensual pleasures as poison and advise their total renunciation, some others consider the total annihilation of sensuality as restraint and try to practise it... but these views appear as quite false if we review the faculties that God has given to man. We should gracefully acknowledge and enjoy the pleasures that God has in his kindness given us the power to enjoy' (p. 56).

In the same way, he points out that men should not always

1 This is no longer valid.

2 Earlier referred to as 'low' in the text.

stay satisfied with the conditions in which they find themselves. The conditions that he wants men to make an effort to change are (a) lack of food (b) unhealthy housing (c) lack of medical care and (d) inability to arrange proper education for one's children. If we analyse the above four conditions, we see that in essence these conditions stem from poverty. In effect, Akshaykumar was asking men to abolish their poverty first, in order to lead a moral life. Obviously he was not prepared to glorify poverty and advise people to accept without a murmur the conditions in which it has pleased God to place them.

In the two subsequent chapters he enunciated at length his views on marriage and domestic life. These views are of cardinal importance. They show us how writing more than almost a century and half ago, he had formed and forwarded views that would be considered advanced in this country even today. He asserts the superiority of domestic life¹ and states, 'It is better for men to live in organized societies in towns and villages—it is by no means proper to leave the world and live an isolated life... we should get married and observe the laws set by God as we lead a worldly life.'

He then regrets the prevailing customs of the country that permitted and often encouraged marriage practices that were obviously harmful. Prior to an examination of these harmful customs he stated what in his view was the ideal. We are struck by his modernity.

He expressed what was then an unheard of view, that the relation between husband and wife should be one of friendship. This in the Indian context was indeed revolutionary. Following that he argued that men and women should get to know each other before they get married and love each other before they take the marriage vow. It is therefore no wonder that Dutta denounced the enormous difference of age between the bride and the groom that was developing into a problem in nineteenth century Bengal.² In the same light he stressed the need—

1 It is a view fully in accordance with *Manusmriti*.

2 Traditionally children both male and female were married off, a practice

indeed the urgency of educating the female child before marrying her off. His observations on the contemporary social scene give evidence of the deep agony that he shared with many young men and women of nineteenth century Bengal who were tied to each other for life by marriage but by no common bond of sympathies or intellectual interests. Differences in age and education were effective barriers against the development of a meaningful life for both. In this situation traditionalists increasingly enjoined on women to look upon their husbands as gods or the supreme Guru (*Param Guru*) so that the husbands i.e. men could be sure of their submission and obedience. Love was ruled out. Even Bankimchandra lent powerful support to this retrograde view in the 1880s.¹

Dutta took the opposite view. He denounced child marriage unequivocally and repeatedly stressed the need for educating the female child if only for genuine companionship between men and women in marriage. He declared that to 'consider one's wife simply as a sex object is stupid and uncivilised.... it is a matter of joy if both men and women are well educated. Mutual affections grow if both can discuss interesting [literally 'good'] matters.' (p. 89 – 90)

We shall see in our discussion of his views on education that he stressed women's education for the development of women's personality and not just to equip them for marriage. His awareness of social reality led him to point out the problems created by illiteracy of women.

It is therefore no wonder that he stressed the need for widow remarriage which would allow a widowed woman the right to fulfil herself and raise a family. He was not an activist like

understandable due to low life expectancy of both in pre-modern societies. With the expanding cash economy and well defined property rights under the British, rich old men could and did marry young girls of poorer families. When men of upper castes took to western education in the hope of securing government jobs, the age of marriage for men shot up while for the female child to whom the access to education was denied, the age of marriage remained unchanged.

1 *Dharmatattwa* (1886) as also *Devi Choudhurani*.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, his colleague in the T. S. and a friend who admired his qualities as a writer. Dutta's writings, strongly advocating the cause of widow remarriage, lent support to Vidyasagar in his relentless struggle to introduce widow remarriage in Hindu society. The problem was serious, because of the large number of child widows in Hindu society especially among the upper castes who considered it an act of virtue to marry off a girl of eight to a groom considered suitable if he was of the right caste and lineage, no matter how old!

This obsession with 'lineage' was the direct outcome of *Kulinism*, a legacy of the middle ages but still prevalent among sections of Brahmins in Bengal. Certain families had been designated in the late middle ages as particularly elevated (*Kulin*) and it was still considered a matter of great social prestige to marry one's daughter to a man of that lineage, however unworthy he might be by any reasonable standard. *Kulinism* bred polygamy for a *Kulin* man could marry any number of wives. His hands were sought after in marriage by families with lesser status even if he were already married many times over. This cruel custom made many girls acutely unhappy and unfulfilled. With no age bar for grooms and the practice of polygamy, it also created the problem of child and young widows who were considered lost to society. Dutta condemned this retrograde practice and appealed to his compatriots to shed their superstitious beliefs so that men and women could lead meaningful and happy lives.

Akshaykumar's views on widow remarriage deserves special attention because *it was based on equal rights of men and women*. He asked pointedly, 'why should a woman be considered polluted if she remarries after she has lost her husband, when a man who has lost his wife is not believed to be committing a sinful act [literally, not seized with sin] if he marries again?' (p. 87) Stating that human instincts are the same for both men and women he drew attention to the obvious fact that if instincts are not fulfilled through legitimate means they will seek their fulfilment through illegitimate ones. With vast numbers of child widows condemned to lifelong celibacy

by cruel custom, the crusade of Vidyasagar and Dutta was necessary to make the literate society of Bengal aware of its own enormous problems and introduce a new set of values to reconstruct itself. Dutta was particularly insistent on these new values in his writings which left a deep imprint on many growing minds. He also supported divorce under certain conditions.

Views on Education

Education was the cornerstone of Akshaykumar's system of social morality. We have seen that education was in his view the precondition for leading a moral life which required a healthy body and a happy marriage. In chapters 8 and 9 of *Dharmaneeti* he elaborates on the scheme of education of children from their very birth stressing the duties of parents and also the polity in this regard.

He considered it to be the first duty of parents to see that children are born without illness and deformities. Further they have to see that the rules of health are observed in rearing children from their infancy. In order to do so, both *parents have to be educated themselves and learn these rules*. Since babes in arms draw their sustenance from their mothers and so must be looked after by them, the education of young mothers is of paramount importance.

However, the uniqueness of Dutta comes out from the fact that *he stresses the role of society and specifically of the government in preventing child mortality and does not leave the question of children's health to their parents alone*. This awareness of the larger socio-political perspective of the problem is unique for any writer in Bengal in the 19th century. To prove his point he reproduces a table giving the data on age specific infant birth and death rates in London for five twenty year periods beginning from 1730 – 49 to 1810 – 29. It showed that the average death rate of infants under five declined from 74.49 percent in the first period (1730 – 49) to 31.80 percent in the last (1810 – 29). He pointed out that this was due to

favourable laws enacted during the period. In presenting the data he coined the Bengali synonym for statistics which is still in use.

We have already stated that in his view the highest aim and greatest joy in human life lies in the pursuit of knowledge. The pleasure of knowledge distinguishes man from all other creatures and has made him the noble being he is. Spiritual salvation has no place in his scheme. Spiritual pursuit for him means unconditional pursuit of knowledge without any hope of gain. In this he makes no distinction between men and women and affirms that women are quite as capable of feeling this pleasure as are men¹. To support his view he refers to women sages of ancient India and scholarly women of Europe. He is quite explicit that education of women is an end in itself, necessary for their self fulfilment. It is not to be restricted to their role as wife and mother.

Education in boyhood and youth

Akshaykumar considered that arrangement for children's education was the first duty of parents. 'To send your children to the wide world without education is the same as unleashing a rabid dog and letting it loose in the street', said he. Men must be educated to do their duty to their country, their fellowmen and God.

Akshaykumar divided education of boys and girls up to their youth into three stages. The first from birth till the age of two when the infant has necessarily to be educated by its mother. The second stage is from the age of two to six. The third stage is from the age of six or seven to fourteen or fifteen. Formal or systematic education is to be imparted in the second and last stage.

¹ 'There is good deal of [literally 'heap of'] evidence that women can cultivate the sciences [learning] and can come to love the pursuit of knowledge finding pleasure in mental labours same as men.' (p. 127) and again, 'There is no doubt that women can be erudite in all branches of knowledge.' (p. 128).

The curriculum he laid down was indeed extensive and quite beyond the capacity of an average boy or girl of fourteen or fifteen. It shows his zeal for learning and unawareness of ground realities in an equal measure.

There is no point discussing it at any length except to see the subjects he valued most and considered essential for proper education. The pride of place is given to physics, a study of which can, in his view, give us the ability to form an idea of the glory of God for it teaches us the laws of nature. That alone is real knowledge. The other subjects of study included 1) languages 2) Mathematics (Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry and Trigonometry) 3) Geography including government of different lands 4) Natural History 5) Chemistry 6) Physiology and Anatomy 7) History 8) Psychology and moral sciences 9) Law 10) Literature 11) Fine Arts. It is interesting that he also includes 12) Metaphysics which in his exposition covers the ground he traversed in his *Treatise*. It is obvious that in his scheme, literature and the fine arts have a low priority in contrast to the sciences especially physics.

What is more important than the oceanic expanse of the curriculum he recommended is the fact that *he demanded universal education*. He also stated that children of the artisans and the poor may attend vocational schools after they have finished their schooling. The suggestion of vocational schools for craftsmen was also a novel suggestion at the time.

Some other matters relating to his recommended school system seem striking even at this distance of time. First was his view about the environment of the school. The second matter was the importance he attached to school laboratories and museums which he considered essential for proper education. The country had to wait for a hundred years to get a diluted version of what he had envisaged. Lastly was his view about maintaining discipline in the school for which his recommendations were revolutionary but still within the limits of practicality.

First about environment. The school building—well main-

tained and ventilated—should be set among trees and playground where children could play and exercise. Statues of greatmen among whom he listed Socrates, Bacon, Franklin, Pascal, Washington, Aryabhata, Bhaskaracharya and Rammohan Roy were to be placed along the garden path leading to the school. It is interesting how he followed his recommendation to the best of his abilities twenty years later when he lived in retirement in a suburban house with a garden in Bali, then a village, north of Calcutta. Discipline among the students must be maintained but the way to do it is first to judge the errant student by his classmates who have to make him ashamed of himself. Also 'the teacher may act as the judge with the boys as juries' (p. 148). It is interesting that his recommendations about the self-administration of justice by the student body was later adopted by Tagore when he started his school at Santiniketan at the turn of the century.

Akshaykumar attached enormous importance to school laboratories, an unknown thing in India during British days. 'In order to understand matters relating to physics students should directly conduct experiments' (p. 152) and he recommended that there should be telescopes, microscopes, thermometers and barometers, compass and similar instruments as also the model replicas of things like rain gauge, steam engines in the school. He listed the trees and animals and metal ores at least their pictures or clay models that should be preserved in school museums for the instruction of students.

It is obvious that his ideas were far ahead of the times. We can find some of his sources in his references to the system of education in Germany and some experiments on the matter in America (i.e. the United States). His views on education of young children show the influence of Froebel though he does not mention him as such.

In the end he squarely faced the problem of funding the elaborate school system he had recommended. His answer to the problem can best be stated in his own words, 'Let government officials in all countries control their greed, suppress the

desire for war ... stop the enormous resources they waste by flooding the earth by the flow of human blood in offering oblations to the sacrificial fire lighted for the god of war... if the resources now wasted by the rich in drinking poison in the form of alcohol and in unholy sports and festivities are used for the benefit of the general public then how long would the common man remain in the present miserable state?' (pp. 166 – 167)

It is this awareness of the role of the social order in introducing a better system of education to improve moral standard in society that distinguished him from the run of the mill moralists. We know these preachers sermonizing can admonish the common people in a hectoring tone while maintaining a calculated silence about the policies pursued by the powers that be that ultimately determine the behaviour pattern of the public.

He also held that the king (the State or government) owes it to the people to arrange for their proper education. In short then his view was that the government has a decided obligation in improving the standards of health of the people and both the government and the rich need to divert their resources for the improvement of their educational standard.

The last two chapters of *Dharmaneeti* discuss the canons of morality within the family. He stressed one's duty to maintain one's old parents. His strong condemnation of anyone living in comfort while letting one's aged parents languish in poverty suggests that the problem was there even in mid-19th century. He advocated patience in dealing with parents grown old and infirm but in sharp contrast to traditionalists did not advocate unquestioning obedience to parents as an ideal. Quite sensibly he stated that when a person has reached adulthood he is not bound to obey parental commands if they go against his moral convictions. In an attempt to maintain the old value system and resist the new, traditionalists in the 19th century overstressed the importance of obedience to parents as an absolute virtue. Akshaykumar refused to lend his support to such views.

The other point of importance in his treatment of the family

is his clear enumeration of the view that the joint family – almost universal in Bengal during the period – need not be preserved. The reasons adduced by Dutta cannot be brushed aside. We may perhaps look into the matter in depth. Laws of inheritance in Hindu Society of Bengal (unlike Hindus in North India) were founded on *Dāyabhāga*. This meant that a father remained the sole owner of property which all his sons inherited at an equal measure at his death. Daughters were excluded. In Bengal the caste system had little functional role even in mid-19th century. On the death of a man, property disputes often broke out among his sons over their respective shares of parental property. In many parts of India, elders of the caste or the caste panchayat intervene in such situations and settle a nascent dispute to which the parties must submit or else they become outcastes. In Bengal, however, the disputants take recourse to law as a matter of course in the absence of a clan organisation to settle property disputes. And in the end, they all turn losers. Litigation in British Indian courts had been a tediously long and extremely expensive affair. Consequently parties who took to litigation were financially ruined as they fought out their cases. Such ruinous disputes were apparently increasing in incidence in the metropolitan centre Calcutta among the educated and the well-to-do at the time of Akshaykumar. Hence he opined that ‘it is better to separate first and not to do so after heart-rending disputes and quarrels’ (p.193). However, he had no solutions to offer to solve such disputes nor has any one else to this day.

The second reason he adduced was the obstacle to capital formation in a joint family in which numerous members of an extended family have traditionally depended on one man's earnings. It is, he points out with some justice, dishonourable for any grown up man to depend on others while the one who has to support an entire clan as it were, gets impoverished. That this is so is an undeniable fact. However, the joint family also provided a measure of security to its members providing food and shelter to widows and orphans who would have been thrown into streets in its absence. This is why people clung to

to it as long as they could. Akshaykumar's particular ire however is directed against the social parasitism the system breeds and the habits of dependence that it generates.

Akshaykumar sees the need for sustaining brotherly feeling which guarantees mutual help and assistance in times of needs. This was getting scarce among the well-to-do in Hindu Bengal. To this day, the problems created by the gradual erosion and subsequent break down of the joint family with the erosion and loss of communitarian values, help and assistance continue to bedevil Bengali society. Akshaykumar could at least identify the nature and role of the community in a socio-historical setting which goes a good deal forward to indicate the direction wherein the solution lies.

He mentions in the concluding section of *Dharmaneeti* :

The states [literally, kingdoms] in which laws are so just and good and the government officials enforce these rules with such fairness and justice that ... the citizens [literally, subjects] can maintain their life and property at ease and without fear, in such countries people [i.e. relations] do not much care to depend on one another. They take to a trade or profession in accordance with their talents and live in different places without much social intercourse.

However, in countries where government authority cannot ensure justice and security, there the citizens [subjects] live in mutual dependence and are tied by mutual affections through many generations. In such a situation members of a clan consider themselves as one family and if any one of them is in danger or difficulty all others try to give him help and protection. (p. 197 and 198)

As an example of the first sort of situation he mentioned England and France, while for the second sort he referred to Arabians, Tartars and Turcomans. Obviously, he held the view that in the absence of a functional state, societies devise clan organizations for their own security. His observation was unexceptionable. What remain unanswered to these days, however, is the solution to a problematic situation as in Bengal where community ties have been eroded away while state formation is as yet incomplete.

Illness and withdrawal

In a July evening in 1855 (Asad 1777 S.E or 1262 B.S.) Akshaykumar was attending a prayer meeting of the Brāhmo Samaj (his health was seen to be deteriorating in the preceding months). Suddenly he suffered a stroke and fainted in the hall. And he had suffered fainting fits twice before (MNR 227 f.n). But on this occasion the stroke inflicted permanent damage. Even after recovery he found that he felt a burning pain in his head if he tried to take up the pen. He had to give up writing himself. In a vain bid to regain normal health he travelled to north India. In a moving article on Dutta, (published in his *Sambad Prabhakar* in December 1863), Iswar Chandra Gupta while referring to Akshaykumar as 'once my pupil and now my teacher' mentioned that Dutta was approaching Gazipur and would soon be in Banaras (MNR p.231). In the annual report of *T.S.* (published in *T.P.* 1857 November, Kartick 1779 S.E, 1264 B. S) written and submitted by Vidyasagar, deep appreciation was expressed of Akshaykumar's great work for *T.P.* It was further reported that in July that year (1857) the *T.P.* in a meeting resolved to grant Akshaykumar a pension of Rs. 25/- per month. Soon however as his writings were collected and accepted as text books and he gained a welcome economic independence, he declined in November 1862 the pension the *T.S.* had granted him in 1857. (§.S Ch. 1:12 p.29)

When he suffered a stroke in July 1855, Akshaykumar was not getting on well with the Brahmo Samaj. He had long lost faith in prayers, believing as he did that the universe is guided by immutable natural laws that cannot be altered by man or God. Attendance at prayer meetings had become irksome to him. His views on God and religion had never been the same as those of Debendranath Tagore and their difference centered on the question of the nature or essence of Godhead and showed itself in the pages of *T.P.* from the very beginning. While in the early fifties Akshaykumar projected the view that the essence of divinity is knowledge, elder Tagore preached that his essence was love. Akshaykumar was to change his in

later life and even in the fifties he was not too sure of his faith. In October 1852 Akshaykumar has started an association, called *Ātmiya Sabhā* (Association of Friends) with two other Brāhmos who were also not quite sure about the essence of God. While the name (*Ātmiya Sabhā*) echoed the first monotheistic association of Rammohan Roy and Debendranath was made its President with Akshaykumar as Secretary, the way the association functioned annoyed its President deeply. In the meetings of the *Ātmiyā Sabhā* the members discussed their views on the nature of Godhead and expressed their agreement or disagreement on different views by a show of hand. Writting more than forty years later in his *Autobiography* (1897), Debendranath gave expression to his sense of outrage at this treatment of God as a matter of mere opinion. We have already seen that in 1854 Debendranath, in his letter to Rajnarain, regretting the rejection of the latter's contribution for the *T.P.*, had excluded Akshaykumar and indeed the members of the Paper Committee of the journal from his circle of friends. They were all atheists, in his view, and he wanted to get rid of them. It is therefore no wonder that by 1855 the relation between the two men had become so strained that Dutta sought a new opening for himself.

It was at this juncture that Vidyasagar came forward with an offer that Dutta was only too happy to accept. Vidyasagar in his zeal to spread education in Bengal had set up in the first half of 1855 a number of 'model vernacular (Bengali) schools' in the districts. He then turned his attention to recruiting teachers for these schools. Very soon he found out that few were really qualified to teach. He then turned his attention to training teachers for his model schools and set up Normal School for teachers' training. He felt that Akshay Dutta, his longtime colleague in the *T. S. Paper Committee* would be the right man to be the first headmaster of his proposed Normal School and Akshaykumar gladly accepted the offer. On July 2, 1855, a few days before Akshaykumar was to suffer a stroke, we find Vidyasagar writing the following to the government in recom-

mending Dutta for the post of Headmaster, Normal School.

I would propose that two masters, one at Rs. 150/- and the other at Rs. 50/- per month, be employed for the present to undertake the task of training up the teachers for our new vernacular school.

*

*

*

For the post of Headmaster of the Normal classes, I would recommend Babu Akshoy Kumar Dutt, the well-known editor of the *Tatwabodhini Patrika*. He is one of the very few of the best Bengali writers of the time. His knowledge of the English language is very respectable and he is well informed in the elements of general knowledge, and well-acquainted with the art of teaching. On the whole, I do not think that we can secure the services of a better man for the post.¹

The proposed Normal School started functioning on 17 July 1855 from the premises of the Calcutta Sanskrit College. The exact date Akshaykumar joined his new post is not available but he must have joined at the start or soon after. He was forced to take a year's leave in August 1856 and had to extend it for another year. He finally resigned in August 1858.

We have earlier noted that Akshaykumar had declined the stipend of Rs. 25/- per month that the T.S. had granted him at the initiative of Vidyasagar. We have mentioned that this was possible because many of his educative articles were collected and published under the title *Chārupāth* Vol. I (1853), Vol. II (1854), Vol. III (1859) and introduced as text books in Bengali schools. There is little doubt that this was possible because of the support extended to him by Vidyasagar. Even the radical volume *Dharmaneeeti*² (1856) later forgotten, was accepted as a text book for some time.

For some time after his stroke in 1855, Akshaykumar moved from one place to another in a vain bid to regain health. Ultimately he settled down in Bally (then a village) on the river Ganga, situated a few miles to the north-west of Calcutta. The

1 Quoted in BB: S.S. Ch 1:12 *Akshaykumar Dutta* p. 25-26.

2 We have consulted the tenth impression printed in Calcutta, 1887.

exact date when he settled down there is not given by his biographers though it is certain that he lived there in the 1870s and later. His house at Bally with a small garden was transformed into a botanical garden-cum-museum such as he had recommended for schools in the *Dharmaneeti*. It was in this state of what we would call withdrawal rather than retirement that he finished his *magnum opus Bhāratvarshiya Upāsak Sampradāya* Vol. I (1870), Vol. II (1883).

Analysis of Indian Religious Sects

Bhāratvarshiya Upāsak Sampradāya

It is well-known that Akshaykumar's two-volume study of religious sects was based on an earlier publication of H. H. Wilson bearing the same title in English. Dutta himself stated in the preface to his first volume what he owed to Wilson and what Wilson owed to other schools.

It is now necessary to inform the reading public how this *Upāsak Sampradāya* came to be written and collected. Sri Sheetal Sinha, Munshi [Persian Secretary] to the Raja of Kashi and Mathuranath, Principal of the college there [i.e. Kashi] wrote a book each in Persian on this subject. Varied matters relating to the origin and customs of diverse sects were included in those two volumes. We find many anecdotes about the founders of different Vaishnava sects and other devouts and accounts relating to their respective cults in the *Bhaktamāl* composed in Hindi by Navaji and Narayan Das and in the commentary on the same in Brajabhaṣā by Priyadas, in the detailed exposition on the selfsame commentary in Bengali by Krishnadas and elsewhere in many books of different religious sects in different Indian languages. H. H. Wilson, a famous scholar, composed two articles in English on the history of Hindu religious sects based on the above two Persian volumes and sectarian publications in Hindi and Sanskrit like the *Bhaktamāl* and others. These two articles were first published in volume 16 and 17 of the *Asiatic Researches*. I have composed large parts of my Bengali account on different sects on the basis of the two articles by Wilson. Needless to add, certain parts of Wilson have been changed, omitted altogether and new materials added. That apart, description of 22 sects like Ramsanehee, Bittthal-Bhakta, Kartabhaja Baul, Naera, Sain, Darbesh, Balarami and others have been gathered by other means. Two have been taken from other volumes while *twenty have been collected anew*. [italics added]

About twenty two years ago much of this volume had been published in the *Tattwabodhinī Patrikā*. Matters like these that have been published long ago need to be thoroughly edited before republication. However, the deplorable state in which my health continues to languish is not wholly unknown in polite society.¹

The twenty new studies that he mentions were collected by direct field study and observation. He did not rely on Wilson blindly. He was at home in Persian and Sanskrit and had no problems in handling Hindi. Consequently he edited what he took from Wilson. Mahendranath Roy, the biographer and devoted friend of Akshaykumar especially during his years in Bally has analysed the coverage of different sects by Wilson and Akshaykumar and pointed out how Akshaykumar edited Wilson. We find that what Akshaykumar wrote was in fact a different volume from Wilson's. Wilson had covered forty-five sects, while Akshaykumar in the end had covered one hundred and eighty two (182). The following tables list the sects that each covered in their respective studies.

¹ *BhUS* Vol. I, Calcutta, 1888, Preface p. 119-120. BB mentions (SSCh 1:12., AKD p. 36) that accounts by Akshaykumar of the following sects were published posthumously.

- i) (Jaina in *Hitaishi* in Pous, Phalgun and Chaitra 1305 B.S (December, 1898 February and March 1899).
- ii) 'Babalali Upasak Sampraday' in *Hitaishi*, Magh 1305. (January 1899).
- iii) 'Shibnarayani Sampradāya' in *Sahitya*, Baisakh 1306 (April 1899).
- iv) 'Bharatiya Upāsak Sampradāya' in *Prabasi*, Shravana 1317 (July 1910).

Table 1

List of Vaishnavite sects covered by both
Akshaykumar and Wilson.

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Ramanuja sect | 12. Radhaballabhi |
| 2. Ramanandi or Ramat | 13. Sakhibhavak |
| 3. Kabirpanthi | 14. Charandasi |
| 4. Khaki | 15. Harishchandi |
| 5. Mallukdasi | 16. Sadhnapanthi |
| 6. Dadupanthi | 17. Madhavi |
| 7. Raidasi | 18. Bairagi |
| 8. Senpanthi | 19. Naga |
| 9. Madhvachari | 20. Satnami |
| 10. Ballabhachari | 21. Chaitanya Sampradaya |
| 11. Mirabai | |

Table 2

List of Vaisnavite sects covered by Akshaykumar alone

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Ramsanehi | 14. Sahaji |
| 2. Nimat | 15. Khushi Biswasi |
| 3. Vithwalbhakta | 16. Gaurbadi |
| 4. Spastadayak | 17. Balarami |
| 5. Kartabhaja | 18. Hazarati |
| 6. Ramaballabhi | 19. Gobrai |
| 7. Sahebdhani | 20. Pagalnathi |
| 8. Baul | 21. Tilakdasi |
| 9. Naera | 22. Darpanarayani |
| 10. Darbesh | 23. Atibadi |
| 11. Sain | 24. Chuhadpanthi |
| 12. Aul | 25. Kudapanthi |
| 13. Sadhwini | 26. Kamdhenwi |

| | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 27. Matukadhari | 52. Badgal |
| 28. Sangjogi | 53. Laskari |
| 29. Charu Sampradaya | 54. Chaturbhuji |
| Bhant or Vaishnava Bhant | |
| 30. Jaganmohini Sampradaya | 55. Pharari |
| 31. Haribola | 56. Banashajji |
| 32. Ratbhikari | 57. Panchadhuni |
| 33. Utkala Vaishnava | 58. Achari |
| 34. Bindudhari | 59. Vaishnava Dandi |
| 35. Kaviraji | 60. Vaishnava Brahmachari |
| 36. Satkuli | 61. Vaishnava Paramahansa |
| 37. Anantakuli | 62. Margi |
| 38. Jogi | 63. Paltudasi |
| 39. Giri | 64. Apapanthi |
| 40. Gurubasi Vaishnava | 65. Dariyadasi |
| 41. Brahmin Vaishnava | 66. Buniyaddasi |
| 42. Karana Vaishnava | 67. Anhadpanthi |
| 43. Khandait Vaishnava | 68. Beejamargi |
| 44. Gopa Vaishnava | 69. Tingal |
| 45. Birakat | 70. Shakta Vaishnava |
| 46. Abhyahata | 71. Warckari |
| 47. Nihanga | 72. Niranjani Sadhu |
| 48. Kalindi | 73. Manbhab |
| 49. Chamar Vaishnava | 74. Kishoribhajan |
| 50. Haribyasi | 75. Kuligayen |
| 51. Ramprasadi | 76. Tahaliya or Nemo Vaishnava |

Table 3

Shaivite sects covered by both Wilson and Akshaykumar

1. Shaiva Sampradaya
2. Dashnami

| | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 3. Dandi | 11. Urdhabahu |
| 4. Kutichak | 12. Akashmukhi |
| 5. Bahudak | 13. Nakhi |
| 6. Hansa | 14. Kadalingdi |
| 7. Paramahansa | 15. Ukhad |
| 8. Sannyasi | 16. Gudad |
| 9. Naga | 17. Sukhad |
| 10. Aghori | 18. Rukhad |

Table 4

Shaivite sects covered by Akshaykumar alone

| | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Shivaradhana | 20. Swarbhangi |
| 2. Gharbari Dandi | 21. Tyagasannyasi |
| 3. Alekhiya | 22. Atursannyasi |
| 4. Dangali | 23. Manasasannyasi |
| 5. Thadeshwari | 24. Antasannyasi |
| 6. Urdhamukhi | 25. Kanipajogi |
| 7. Panchadhuli | 26. Brahmachari |
| 8. Mounabrati | 27. Jogi |
| 9. Jalashajyee | 28. Kanphatjogi |
| 10. Jaladharatapasyee | 29. Aoghadjogi |
| 11. Farari | 30. Matswendri |
| 12. Dudhadhari | 31. Sharangihar |
| 13. Aluna | 32. Durihar |
| 14. Bhukhad | 33. Bhartrihari |
| 15. Kukad | 34. Agharpanthijogi |
| 16. Aoghad | 35. Jogini |
| 17. Abadhutani | 36. Sangjogi |
| 18. Gharbari Sannyasi | 37. Lingopasana |
| 19. Thikarnath | 38. Lingayat |

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------|
| 39. Bhopa | 41. Chandrabhant |
| 40. Dashnami Bhant | |

Table 5

Shakta and other sects common to Akshaykumar and Wilson.

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| 1. Shakti upasana | 4. Karari |
| 2. Dakhinachari | 5. Soura |
| 3. Bamachari | 6. Ganapatya |

Table 6

Shakta and other sects covered by Akshaykumar alone

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Pashwachari | 10. Bhairavi |
| 2. Veerachari | 11. Bhairava |
| 3. Vedachari | 12. Sheetala Pundit |
| 4. Vaishnavachari | 13. Dashamargi (Mayikapanthi) |
| 5. Shaivachari | 14. Yogni |
| 6. Khoja | 15. Shankhi |
| 7. Siddhantachari | 16. Pangul |
| 8. Koulachari | 17. Kumbhupatiya |
| 9. Chaliapanthi | 18. Fakir-Sampradaya |

It is clear from the above six tables that how much more extensive was the coverage of Akshaykumar as compared to that of Wilson. His treatment is also more extensive. While Dutta devotes 23 pages to *Dashnami* and seven pages to the *Dandi* sect respectively, Wilson covers both in nine pages. Akshaykumar devotes twenty pages to the *Jogi* sect which Wilson ignores. Equally, the *Soura* (sun worship) sect, once very important in India is dismissed by Wilson in just about nine lines while Akshaykumar devotes full four pages to it.

However, what distinguishes the study of Akshaykumar is

the fact that much of what he wrote was based on field research, a practice not followed till then by anyone in this country.

Even more important however, is the exhaustive discussion of the entire range of Hindu Philosophy from a strictly rationalist standpoint that Akshaykumar carried out. Such has never been attempted before. It remains a landmark in the evolution of thought and culture in Bengali. It is doubtful if any scholarly volume of equal import has been written in the language especially as scholars increasingly took to writing in English, the language recognized as the medium for university education in India just as Latin had been in medieval Europe. This endeavour remains important because the rising tide of Hindu nationalism in the last two decades of the 19th century with its worship of India's hoary past and opposition to social reform was soon to submerge the spirit of rationalism altogether.

The *BhUS* is divided into two volumes. The preface to the first deals with Vedic literature including the Upaniṣads. In the preface to the second volume, we find a critical review of the six systems of philosophy and other philosophies including that of cārvāka; the Purāṇas, the epics— *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* and the Rama and Kṛṣṇa cult, as also the Manusmṛiti. He also discusses Buddhism but his sources do not seem to be equally dependable as in his discussion of Hindu philosophy.

Akshaykumar starts his discussion of Vedic literature with an exposition of the Indo-Aryan family of languages and following Max Mueller accepts the view of an Aryan race. This was to lead him to further errors regarding history but fortunately this deviation into history does not affect his discussion of philosophy. He considers the religion of the ancient Aryans to be enshrined in the Avesta of the Iranians and the Veda of the Indians.

Prior to his detailed discussion of Vedic literature, Akshaykumar discussed at length the religion of the ancient Iranians as given in the Avesta (he mentions the Zend-Avesta to be that part of the Avesta that had been translated in the

Pahlavi language). Akshaykumar's exposition of the Avesta deserves quoting in full.

Avesta is the ancient scriptures of the Persians. It is divided into many parts. One part is called Yaśna. Yaśna of the Avesta and Vedic *yagna* are the same in word and meaning. The second part of it comprises five chapters called *gātha* and a few other chapters are written in a language more ancient than that of the other parts of the Avesta. Much of it is full of verses in praise of gods like *sūktas* as in Vedic Saṃhitās. *Gātha* is the same as *gāthā* in Sanskrit and Pali. The second part of Avesta is Bīnsparad. This is divided into twenty-three chapters. The third part is Bendidad. This is in the form of a dialogue between Zarathrustra and Ahurmazd. It indicates many religious duties and contains moral and religious principles. The fourth part is Yašt. It is full of praises of the gods and their qualities. Yašt (or Yesti) Means *stuti* and worship of gods with oblations. We can clearly see the phonetic and semantic similarity of Vedic *iṣṭi* and *yašt* in Avesta. The other parts of the Avesta are not relevant in this context.... The language [of Avesta] was the ancient language of Bahlik or the area known as Balkh.¹

Akshaykumar further mentions that *Ahura* in the Avesta which is *Asura* in Sanskrit is really the ancient word for gods. It did not represent evil force as it does now. He refers to Sayanacharya's commentary to establish his view that in the ancient Samhitā section of the Vedas, Asuras have divine qualities as giver of life to all creatures. The Word *Sura* (to mean gods) as opposed to *Asura* (to mean demons) is a later creation. It dominates the Purāṇas and not the Vedas. Throughout his discussion on Avesta Akshaykumar refers to source materials in the original. To my knowledge no other scholar in India had mastered ancient Iranian prior to Akshaykumar.

Coming to the Vedas proper, he upholds the view that RK, Sama and Kriṣṇayaju to be the most ancient Vedas while the Shuklayaju compiled by Yagnabalka had been a later addition. He refers to Panini and Katyayana in support of his view.² He

1 *BhUS* I preface, p. 28 footnote (translation mine)

2 Above p. 63 footnote

holds the Atharva-Veda to have been a much later addition. Not only this, he does not consider each Veda to have been compiled within a given time frame. 'Each Veda,' he mentions, 'is divided into two parts – Mantra and Brāhmaṇa. Of these, the Mantra section is especially of ancient origin.' These mantras compiled in different forms are presented as *Samhitās*. Of these, the RK and Samaveda *Samhitās* are entirely in verse, the Yaju and Atharva Veda *Samhitās* are partly in prose and partly in verse. He mentions that the language used in the *Samhitās* indicate them to be of the most ancient origin (excepting the Nibid which is the oldest), though at the same time he warns that not all the *Samhitās* were 'written and compiled' at one time nor do they collectively and even individually reflect the religious belief of any one period.

Akshaykumar points out that the religious belief in the RK Veda indicated worship of or oblation and sacrifice to please many deities associated with natural phenomena (i.e fire, rains, the wind etc). In opposition to Max Mueller he supported the view of Goldstucker that the Vedic Aryans were polytheists. He finds the combination of elaborate and intricate rites and rituals, forming a part of such worship, with the simplicity of Vedic religious faith quite puzzling. Obviously anthropology was yet to develop to a stage that explains that the intricacy of rites and rituals guaranteed the preservation of technology and tradition from generation to generation in ancient societies with limited use of literacy. Hence elaborate and intricate rites and rituals can go well together with a state of society designated primitive.

Brāhmaṇas

He mentions that elaboration of rites and rituals predominate the Brāhmaṇa part of the Vedas. 'It would be no exaggeration', he says that 'the Brāhmaṇas were commentaries on the Samhitās.' These (i.e. the Brāhmaṇas) were compiled much later than the Mantras. However the Brāhmaṇas also express profound ideas at places and he quotes the following from the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa :

'Through learning (vidya) men reach that state [of being] where there is no desire. One does not arrive there through gifts (*dakshina*).'¹

Kalpasūtra

He mentions that in the view of the Hindus, the Mantra and Brahmana sections of the Vedas, generally called Śruti are of divine (literally not made by man) origin. The sages who utter them are 'seers'. They can be cited as proof and need no further proof to validate them. Kalpasūtra had no such authority. However, it is one of the six Vedangas (literally limbs of the Vedas). Kalpasūtras are divided into three books, i. e. the Śrouta, the Grihya and the Samayacarika also called *Dharma Sutra*. The Śrouta deals primarily with the major sacrifices, the Grihya with the rites and rituals associated with orderly family life while Samayacarika or *Dharma Sutra* deals with daily religious practices of individuals, laws and practices relating to *Brahmacharya* (abstinence) and other *Āshramas* and even socio-political rules. The *Kalpasutras* appear to have a profound influence on the later development of Hinduism with its many rites and rituals and elaborate forms of worship. Akshaykumar states that the laws of Manu and Yagnabalkya were derived from *Kalpasutras*.

Akshaykumar also cites instances of religious differences between the different *Vedas* which led them to denounce each other in strong terms. It is for these, among other reasons, that Akshaykumar refuses to accept the authority of the *Vedas* and states : 'Clear intellect [alone] indicates the steps to gain theoretical knowledge. Those who make up their minds to go wherever or to whichever state clear intelligence leads them in the sacred field of knowledge, alone love knowledge..... Those who do not feel this way do not care for truth. They love their long cherished superstitions and opinions with no foundation in facts.'²

1 *BhUS* I. Preface, p. 101

1 Above p. 115-116

Upaniṣads

Akshaykumar holds the *Upaniṣads* in high regard. It expresses man's yearning to know the truth about this universe, about its creator ('prime cause' in his words), the way it all came about and the purpose of life. He states that one can see the beginnings of these questionings in the RK Veda but they are dealt with systematically in the *Upaniṣads* which mark the final stage of the *Vedas*.

At the very start of his discussion of the *Upaniṣads* Akshaykumar refers to the problem as to how many can be accepted as genuine. Prince Dara Shukoh in the 17th century had 50 books identified as *Upaniṣads* and got them translated into Persian which were later translated into Latin by a French scholar. Colebrook and Weber identified 95 *Upaniṣads* while Walter Eliot had come across 111 *Upaniṣads* from South Indian scholars. Referring to a discussion on the problem in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (Vol XX pp. 607 – 619), Akshaykumar mentions that the number of *Upaniṣads* would swell up to 154 if diverse traditions are to be accommodated. It is of some interest that Surendranath Dasgupta writing half a century later follows the same line of argument. He states that, 'The earliest and most important are probably those that have been commented upon by Sankara namely Bṛhadāraṇyaka, Chāndogya, Aitareya, Taittirīya, Iśa, Kena, Katha, Praśna, Muṇḍaka and Māṇḍūkya.' (*A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol 1, p 39). He refers that if all the later works that go by the name of *Upaniṣad* are to be counted as such then their number would be 108.

Akshaykumar mentions that the original *Upaniṣads* were included in the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Āraṇyakas*. Only the *Ishopaniṣad* and *Sankalponiṣad* form a part of the *Bajasaneyisamhitā*. He considers the last two to have been of comparatively recent origin. He does not include the above two in his discussion of the *Upaniṣads* but concentrates on the famous ten *Upaniṣads* (e.g. *Kena*, *Katha* etc) and also *Svetāsvātara Upaniṣad*.

He mentions that the *Upaniṣads* do not posit any definite philosophical view as does the *Vedānta*. It indicates at places the identity of the creature and the creator (Jeeva and Brahman), while at places it upholds the opposite view. Even in regard to the absolute being the sages use the masculine gender at times while on some occasions the neuter gender is used. Akshaykumar therefore holds that the sages describe the supreme in terms of their own perception.

However, the nobility of thought and feeling and the complete absence of dogma in the *Upaniṣads* won his highest regard and he gave full expression to his high regard. He paid homage to the *Upaniṣads* especially because in his view many *Upaniṣads* express with certainty the irrefutable view that the prime cause (literally, cause of the world) is unknown and can not be known. As a support of this view he quotes the following from the *Talavakāropaniṣad* : 'He who believes with certainty that the Brahman can not be known, alone has known Him ... only the ignorant believe that He can be known' (TU. 1/11) and again, 'Eyes cannot see Him, words cannot express Him, the mind cannot comprehend Him. We cannot know Him' (T.U. 1/13). And again : 'The Brahman cannot be realised' by words, mind or the eyes. He alone knows Him who says He is. How else can people know Him?' (Katha 6/12). And finally the Kathopaniṣad refers to Brahman as different from *dharma*, different from *adharma*, different from [both] cause and effect and different from the past, present or the future' (2/14).

Dutta holds these statements to be supportive of his agnosticism.

Society and civilization in the Vedic age

Akshaykumar gave a detailed exposition of the state of society and civilization in the Vedic age from facts mentioned in the *Samhitās* and *Brāhmanas*. The following was the state of civilization in the *RK Samhitā* :

They built towns and villages and lived in them; cultivated land

1 Literally, we cannot get.

and grew cereals such as barley, governed kingdoms by creating kingship and establishing royal order. They could make and use chariots, weave and sew clothes to indicate their growing status. Repeated references to serious worldly matters e.g. wealth and the wealthy, gold and treasure, debts, debtors, increase and rate of increase, ocean going vessels and sea-going merchants, travellers and inns, medicines and the profession of medicine, watching of the skies and determination of time periods like months and fractions thereof testify to the high excellence of the Hindu (?) society during the *Samhitā* period. References to theft and thieves, adultery, adulteress, secret births and elimination of foetus, gambling and gamblers also do not indicate a primitive state of society¹.

Akshaykumar also discussed the position of women in Vedic society at length. 'They were', he mentions, 'entitled to worship [Vedic] deities, hold sacrifices [*Yagnas*], be present in society when a *Yagna* was being held, receive dowries at the time of their marriage and in certain cases the sons of a daughter could, following scriptural rules, inherit the wealth of their [maternal] grandfather.'²

All in all he considered the Vedic age to have been far better than the later ages of Hinduism. In Vedic faith there is heaven and hell but no transmigration of soul through barriers of species. There is no suggestion that one would be born as a lower animal in his next birth for sins committed in this. There are gods but no images, no references to aeons of time passed in heaven or hell as in the *Purāṇas*. A life-span of hundred years is considered a long life. Nor is there any difference in prayers for world success or happiness in this life. All in all, it depicts a human world acceptable to common sense and plain good reason.

The second volume of the *BhUS* commands greater attention because he states here his own views and comments on the then prevailing state of society over and above the great scholarship he displays in going over the six systems of philoso-

1 *BhUS* I preface p. 81-82

2 See above p. 82.

phy, the Puranas and the two great epics. It is obvious that in spite of his illness he never lost touch with contemporary social and economic situation in the land and continued to care and worry about it just as much as he did when he was at the height of his powers.

We will not attempt to go into his detailed critique of the six systems of philosophy. He first gave a succinct summary of the atheistic Sāṃkhya school with its two eternal verities, *puruṣa* and *prakṛiti*, the three *guṇas*, the twenty five *tattvas* with the help of profuse quotations from the original. He dismissed much of this discussion as 'abstruse, involved and unreal' but admired the penetrating intellect of the Sāṃkhya schoolmen. He saw in Vijnanabhaṭṭa's commentary the 'seeds' of 19th century theories of evolution. In spite of its materialism and total rejection of God, the creator, the Sāṃkhya school held a metaphysical state of being – *Mukti* or deliverance from mortal chains [of Triguna] which quite a few see as the same as Buddhist *Nirvana*.

Sāṃkhya is generally admitted to have been the earliest school of philosophy. Akshaykumar discusses the Yoga Darshana of Patanjali after Sāṃkhya for this school originated from Sāṃkhya and is sometimes called theistic Sāṃkhya school. He did not go into the praxis part of Yoga. Akshaykumar discusses Vaiśeṣika school of Kanada at greater length. He noted that Kanada had recognized atoms (absolute small particles) as eternal but had recognized a 'special element' (*viśeṣa*) in creation. Kanada recognized no creator and considered all things as combination of atoms. Akshaykumar noted the similarity of Kanada's teachings with those of Democritus and mentioned in this context the atomic theory of Dalton. He noted with warm appreciation Kanada's interest in physical phenomena¹ and regretted that this interest was not maintained in later periods.

¹ Akshaykumar listed these phenomena as clouds, electricity, thunderclaps, earthquakes, trees, glaciers and snowfall, magnets and magnetic attraction, matter and its properties and motion etc.

However the end of Vaiśeṣika is also given as metaphysical. Deliverance is set as the goal of human life, this being defined as the result of a conscious recognition of the separateness of human body and soul. His commentators elaborated this aspect of Vaiśeṣika and ultimately made this materialist school subservient to spirituality.

Akshaykumar states that Gotama, the founder of Nyāya school 'does not seem to have accepted the concept of God.' Later writers accepted God as the 'maker' but not as the creator of the universe. Akshaykumar noted that Nyāya is actually a system of logic and the most important section of it deals with *anumana* or the inductive method. In his view Aristotle's inductive logic presents Gotama's in a purer form. He regrets that Gotama accepted – under what social pressure he does not mention – the Vedas as proof. He congratulated Kanada for not doing so.

Though it embodies logic, the Nyāya school also referred to metaphysical 'deliverance' as the ultimate goal. It did not try to show the way to it however, but referred to Yoga philosophers to the seekers. Dutta also discuss the Mīmāṃsā attributed to Jaimini. He pointed out that the aim of this school was ostensibly 'practical' i. e. to reconcile *śruti* and *smṛiti* and regrets its compromises with dominant social opinion exemplified by its acceptance of the Vedas as proof. In this connection he showers high praise on Rammohan Roy for his rejection of Sanskrit learning. Akshaykumar quotes with warm approval Rammohan Roy's letter of 1823 to Lord Amherst, then the Governor General of India, on the educational system based on English and the teaching of the sciences that Rammohan had recommended for this country.

In dealing with the philosophy *per se* of Jaimini he points out its highly refined abstractions which held that the gods have forms given by hymns (*matramaya śarira*) only. He drew the attention of his contemporaries to the revolutionary content of the views of ancient philosophers who in his opinion 'accepted neither God nor deities.'

Vedānta

Akshaykumar mentions that in philosophical discussion Mīmāṃsā proper is referred to as Karma-Mīmāṃsā defining the moral and religious duties of man in society. Vedānta is defined as Brahma-Mīmāṃsā relating to the supreme being Brahman. The two are also known as Purva Mīmāṃsā and Uttara Mīmāṃsā, respectively. He states that according to Vedānta Sutra, 'Brahman is from what the world originates, [in which] stays and dissolves. He in his essence is truth, knowledge and without end. He has no equals... .' This in effect means that Brahman alone is real in the sense that Brahman alone continues to exist and has always existed while all else is transitory. In Akshaykumar's view this can easily lead to Māyāvāda (i.e. the view that the external world of phenomena is illusory). He holds that this view inserted into Hinduism by Śāṅkara and others of his opinion was not there in the Vedas i.e. in the Saṃhitās and the Brāhmaṇas. He suggests that this may have seeped into Hinduism under the influence of Buddhism.

However, the *Vedānta* did not aim at establishing *Māyāvāda* as such. Its aim was to show the way of deliverance of the spirit which in its view came from a realisation of the unity of the *ātman* with the Brahman. Dutta exemplifies the view in his discussion.

Akshaykumar concludes his discussion of the six systems of philosophy with a sense of regret. He laments that so much intellectual energy as was displayed by Indian philosophers was not channelised to a systematic study of the sciences which in his views shows the 'real road to an acquisition of theoretical knowledge.' 'If Indian thought had followed that road, India would have been a paradise on earth,' concludes Akshaykumar. As it is, he observes that what this country lacked was a Bacon who could have shown us the true path of knowledge.

Manusamhitā (the laws of Manu)

In introducing the *Manusamhitā* Dutta discussed the nature and state of society of the age and its intellectual

forbears. He holds Hindu society during this period to be midway between the ancient Vedic and the later form shaped by the *Purāṇas*. In this connection he diverts into a lengthy discourse on the evolution of Sanskrit from the Vedic times to its better known later form. He goes into a detailed discussion of the laws of Manu which largely shows that during this period a woman in the child bearing age was not forbidden to exercise her right to sexual fulfilment and various sexual transgressions were brought within the fold of marriage.¹

Akshaykumar found the laws of Manu, at least relating to marriage, much better than the customs prevailing in nineteenth century Hindu society of Bengal. He comments that 'the Hindu society of the period was not perfect in all parts, yet... was better than what it is now..... At present widow remarriage is forbidden, inter-caste marriages are forbidden, marriages by mutual consent (*Gāndharva bibāha*) are forbidden, as is the woman's right to choose her own husband. Child marriages are widely practised as are the ravages of the monstrous customs of *Kulin* polygamy'². Akshaykumar gives a very interesting summary of the economic life of the period as given in Manu's laws relating to *Vaiśyas*, i.e. the merchant caste. Says Manu, 'Vaiśyas will have to be informed about the quality of goods, the character of the country, matters relating to profit and loss through trade, improved animal breeding.... of servants, diverse languages...'³ About seafaring and trade across the seas, Manu states: 'The decisions of merchants who are experts in crossing seas, and are experienced about lands, periods, profit and loss are decisive proofs relating to rates [hiring charges].'⁴

Thus Akshaykumar shows that seafaring and oceanic trade were quite the custom during the period of Manu. Hence the

1 Manu also denounced the practice of renouncing the world without first procreating sons. In this as in many open denunciations, we see his opposition of Buddhist views and practices.

2 *BhUS* Vol. II, preface, p. 64.

3 See above p. 58

4 See above p. 59

interdiction against crossing the seas (the dark waters) in Hindu society so widely prevalent even in the 19th century can be seen to have been a later corruption.

Akshaykumar also mentions the theology of Manu. In short, Brahmā alone of the Purāṇic trinity of Hinduism is prominent during the period. Neither Śiva nor Viṣṇu seems to be so. The Vedic gods are definitely on the decline. Akshaykumar quotes slokas from Manu and from Saṃhitās and Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa to establish his thesis that Brahmā of Manu and Puruṣa in the Vedas refer to the same deity.

Rāmāyaṇa

Akshaykumar's treatment of the *Rāmāyaṇa* deserves attention. He holds that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is more ancient than the Purāṇas and the *Mahābhārata*. One proof adduced by him refers to its language which used many words that go against later uses, as in Kalidasa or Sudraka. He gives a list of such terms.

Dutta mentions that the religion of *Rāmāyaṇa* had been in essence Vedic. He quotes from *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (11/13) in which Indra is invoked as a witness to a boon duly granted and also from *Aranyakāṇḍa* (14/14 and 15) in which the number of gods referred to is 33 and they are Vedic gods. The number popularly increased to 33 crores under the influence of the Purāṇas, he mentions. Vedic sacrifices like *Aśvamedha* and social customs including marriage outside caste are followed in the epic. Akshaykumar holds that Rama knew himself as a man, as the son of king Dasarath. Later under the influence of Purāṇas a divine status was attributed to him and he was represented as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. However, Akshaykumar maintains that the Puranic trinity was not only unknown in the Vedic age, it is absent in *Manu-Saṃhita* also. Viṣṇu is occasionally referred to in the Vedas, but he is not an important deity there, while in Manu, Brahmā alone figures. Parts of *Rāmāyaṇa* were written well after *Manusmṛiti* was codified, for ślokas 31 and 32 in *Kiṣkindhyā Kāṇḍa* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are taken bodily

out of śloka 316 and 318 in the 8th chapter (*adhyāya*) of Manu.

According to Akshaykumar all the ślokas in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in praise of Viṣṇu and Śiva are later accretions. Parts of *Rāmāyaṇa* purporting to show Rama as an incarnation of Viṣṇu are interpolations and this is clear from the way the modern story is told. According to ancient śāstras, a properly conducted *Aśwamedha Yagna* (the Horse sacrifice) is sure to be fruitful. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, King Dasaratha desirous of begetting a son first performs the Horse sacrifice with the help of the sage Rshyaśringa, yet he decides on holding another sacrifice the *Putreṣṭi Yagna* by recalling Rshyaśringa even before the guests have returned home. This is unheard of and in terms of scriptural injunctions impermissible. It is on the eve of the second sacrifice (*Putreṣṭi Yagna*) that the gods (of the Puranic period) confer in heaven and request Viṣṇu to be born as a human being as the son of Dasaratha's queen Kauśalyā in order to annihilate the demon king Rāvaṇa. Akshaykumar observes that, 'the story of the *Putreṣṭi Yagna* has started suddenly. The narrative of Rāma does not suffer in the least if it is dropped. ...The 15th, 16th and 17th Sargas of the *Rāmāyaṇa* describe *Putreṣṭi Yagna*, assumption of human form by Viṣṇu and the genesis of the army of monkeys as a part of the divine scheme. The *Rāmāyaṇa* does not suffer, [in fact] it improves if the above three *Sargas* are omitted.' He iterates that Manu neither mentions Rāma nor Kṛiṣṇa as divinities. Hence all the parts of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, that mention the divine powers of Rama or Kṛiṣṇa were composed well after the age of Manu. He concludes that the original version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was an ancient narrative in which changes and interpolations were made by writers in the centuries that followed. Current versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are related to the rise of Puranic Hinduism and seek to strengthen the faith in the Puranic god Viṣṇu by projecting Rāma as his incarnation.

We do not propose to discuss at length Akshaykumar's treatment of the *Mahābhārata*. It would suffice to mention that

Akshaykumar states what most eminent scholars have also maintained about the great epic. The story of the Bharata war had existed from a hoary past and it shows traces of many old customs and practices as also forms of worship (especially *Yagnas*). New materials were added to it continually so that while in *Parva Saṃgraha* the *Mahābhārata* (without *Haribansā*) has 84836 ślokas, it has 88816 ślokas in its current form.

Akshaykumar finds at least four to five stages (literally layers) in the *Mahābhārata*.¹ The first is very old as is the story of Nala and Damayanti. These are contemporaneous with the Vedas. We find that the Vedic gods came down to Damayanti's *swayambara* while the Puranic gods are just not mentioned. He also listed the stories that occur both in the Vedic *Samhitās*, *Brāhmanas* and the *Mahābhārata*, e.g. the story of Shunahshep in *Rg. Samhitā* and the *Vanaparva*, the story of Urvasi and Pururaba in *Rg* and *Bājasaneyya Samhitās* and in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* as also in the *Adiparva*, *Vanaparva* and *Santiparva*. The story of Uddalaka and Aruni is to be found in *Aitareya* and *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* in the *Vrhadaranyaka* and the *Kathopanishad* and on the other hand in the *Adi Parva*. He also gave many other instances.

The last stage or stratum of the *Mahābhārata* is related to the post-Puranic period after the Purāṇic gods have been firmly entrenched in the Hindu Pantheon. The Bengali *Mahābhārata* of Kasiram Das for example is known to have been composed as late as the 17th century and bears marks of late medieval Hinduism of Bengal.

Purāṇas

Akshaykumar forwards the view that historically Hinduism is divided into two distinct periods – one before the rise of Buddhism, the other follows its decline. It is seen that Buddhism in its later phase created a plethora of divinities but still could not maintain its hold on people's mind. The more the influence of Buddhism waned, the greater became the

¹ The *Mahābhārata* is traditionally divided into eighteen *parvas*.

influences of Purāṇic Hinduism, and the Buddhist divinities, transformed and transfixed within the fold of Hindu mythology, were adopted by Hinduism. Their earlier associations were lost or obliterated as they came to be worshipped as Hindu gods. The *Purāṇas* played a crucial role in this process of transformation and adoption.

Akshaykumar does not mention it in so many words but it can be seen that in contrast to Buddhism which advocated renunciation of sex and attached little importance to family life (as against Manu and the religion of the Vedas), the religion of the *Purāṇas* extolled the worship of the Couple. The common element between the cults of Hara and Pārvati, Rāma and Sitā or Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa lies in this that they all uphold the couple and consecrate love which Buddhism did not.

Akshaykumar starts his discussion on the subject with a reference to Sayanacharya's commentary and also Sankara's views on the *Purāṇas*. He concludes that originally *Purāṇas* meant the story of creation as stated in the *Vedas* while narrations of wars between gods and demons or the episode of Urvasi and Pururaba was called *Itihāsa*.

In his discussion of the *Purāṇas* Dutta dispels the popular view that there are eighteen *Purāṇas*, all written by one Vedavyasa.

He quotes from *Amarkosā*¹ to establish the point that a *Purāṇa* has five indicators. These are : narration of creation, special creation, apocalypse, dynastic history and character of heroes born in great dynasties. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the *Vāyu Purāṇa* satisfy the above criteria and are, in view of Dutta, undoubtedly of ancient origin. In the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, however, it is maintained that *Purāṇas* have ten characteristics including the praise of Sri Hari (i.e. Viṣṇu) and description of gods. The same Purana however invests not only Kṛṣṇa but even Rādhā with divine power and claims this to have been sung in the *Sāma-Veda*. Akshaykumar concludes from this that the knowledge of the Vedas had vanished from the land by the

¹ He proves its author Amarsingha to have lived in the 6th century A. D.

time the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* had come to be written. He traces the origin of the cult of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa to the 13th century and dates the Bhagāvata accordingly.

After a detailed discussion of the twenty-one *Purāṇas* and twenty-one *Upa-Purāṇas* Akshaykumar concludes that not a single of these could have been composed by Vedavyasa and most of these titles are not of ancient origin. They evolved with the emergence of later cults. Each *Purāṇa* sought to popularize the deity in praise of whom it was composed and most of the present deities and their cults are of later origin.

Critique of Political and Social Milieu

We have seen that what distinguishes the *Bharatvarshiya Upasak Sampradaya* from a mere description of religious sects as in Wilson is firstly its magnificent introduction giving a critical review of the entire range of Hindu philosophy including the epics. No less important, at least to present historians, are the penetrating analysis of the prevailing social and economic situation in Bengal in the 1860s and 70s and his open indictment of British rule as the prime cause of it.

His greatest regret was the subjection of India. While discussing the character and quality of the Vedic age in India he suddenly bursts forth to lament the state of all round degeneration of the country.

Are we the same Hindus? India – once the mother of a race of lions and tigers is now the mother of a race of rabbits and rats – how humiliated she stands ! ...She is now in fire, her future enveloped in dark and dense smoke. (*BhUS* Vol. II, Preface, p. 153)

Following the established pattern of the 19th century he traces India's subjection to Turkish invasion of the 12th/13th century but unlike the run of the mill Hindu publicists he does not transfer the responsibility of the then current distress to the invaders who came hundreds of years ago. He discusses what was then the prevailing reality and states : 'England ! England! you have achieved the impossible... you have brightened your throne by placing under your feet men of the race of Valmiki, Kalidasa, Kanada and Aryabhata.' (*BhUS* II, preface, p. 156) The English throne has been 'brightened' by her sway of this land but what is the state of India under English rule? Addressing England Akshaykumar states :

Under your occupation we are losing our health, our strength, our span of life and our moral sense. Who could say whether you are extracting more from us or giving us more.¹ You are ruining our health in imparting education, intensifying exploitation of labour in opening up new ways of making money – generating rising prices, the source of endless evils in your attempts to expand trade. ...Your subjects are not happy. The aim of life for tens of millions in the land is to subsist somehow through pain, strenuous effort... Almost everybody is a prey to some disease, everyone is harassed and worried. There is no comfort, no trace of comfort anywhere. Many do without necessary food and nourishment because of high prices. (*BhUS II*, preface, pp. 156-157)

The general distress to which Akshaykumar refers had its roots in the economic situation in India at the time. From the beginning of the 1860s rice prices started rising in such a way that people of fixed income — wage and salary earners, found it increasingly difficult to make both ends meet. In 1866, the year of famine in Bengal and Orissa, price of rice in general was about thrice as high as in 1862. It declined in 1868 but shot up again in 1869 so that price of rice in 1869 was 80% higher than in 1862. Rise in the prices of all commodities became even more unbridled in 1870s. Due to a number of factors the price of silver in the international market began to fall while the price of gold did not. In fact as a number of countries especially the newfound German empire shifted from bi-metalism to gold standard, the demand for gold increased. Indian rupee based on silver suffered a continuous fall in its external exchange rate from about 1873 to 1897. The net result of this was that Indian producers had to part with more and more of their produce which were underpriced to get the same amount of foreign goods. The Indian government had to sacrifice an increasingly greater proportion of their revenues to meet the home charges

¹ It is hardly remembered now but in the 19th century the imperialists stoutly maintained that they were here in India for the good of India. Terms like 'white man's burden' were common currency and Indian students appearing in the Calcutta University Entrance examination had to read a book entitled *England's work in India* eulogising British rule. It was written by a sycophant of Bengal origin.

of the British calculated in pound sterling based on gold. All in all there was increasing exploitation of India under the Crown and greater impoverishment of the land.

It was to this situation that Dutta refers. He is the only author in the 19th century to quote actual data to establish his thesis. Quoting from the administration report of the jails in Bengal (1871-1878) he states that the number of persons sent to jail or police custody increased from 57.9 thousand in 1871 to 78.0 thousand in 1878. In 1874, immediately after the sudden spurt in prices, the number had increased to 82.2 thousand.

The social anarchy and the moral chaos resulting from this situation were described by Akshaykumar with rare force and intense agony. If he has to describe the present, says he, he views the 'emergence of a race of dwarfs, unworthy to be classed among humans, waiting for a terrible end'. He laments as he sees the 'subject population singed endlessly by the fire of high prices, weighed down by taxes imposed by the government, harassed and restless.' He observes the morally irresponsible community of the rich 'attached to good food and decorations, fond of luxuries, light-hearted to the detriment of their own health and wealth, tossed in the river of alchohol like boats sinking in water.' On the other hand he sees in the India of common people the picture of degradation, 'people reduced to skeletons and ashes, repeatedly ravaged by famines, ... seized with the fear of famines, with deserted houses covered by weeds and tree trunks strewn over the land.' (*BhUS* II, preface, p. 159)

The moral degradation of the middle classes that he views is no less painful. He observes,

whether I enter a village or walk along a high road I seldom hear anything except noises arising from selfishness, conflict and pleasures of vice. Can the ultimate aim of human life be only money and wealth, rates and prices, shortages and profits, legal documents, proofs and witnesses, pleaders and counsels, courts and lawsuits, forgeries and forgerers? (*BhUS* II, preface, p. 158)

This awareness of contemporary reality and the depth and vigour of his statement set Akshaykumar and his *BhUS* way out of the reach of mere scholarly treatises though in sheer scholarship he stands among the Olympians who can only be emulated by generations that followed.

As editor of Tattwabodhinī Patrika : Social awareness

The *Tattwabodhinī Patrika* was the cradle of modern Bengali prose. Under the editorship of Akshaykumar, with Vidyasagar among others in the editorial committee who helped him, the journal shaped the mind and moulded the opinion of educated Bengal in mid-nineteenth century. Debendranath, the founder, was also a steady contributor and came next in importance to the two founders of prose literature in Bengal. It needs to be emphasized that the *Patrika* was set as a text for study to Bankimchandra when he was a student. We have seen that most of what Akshaykumar wrote during the period (1843-55) had first come out in the *T.P.* and later collected and published as books. Much of his most important writings especially on contemporary social and economic problems were however not remembered later in the 19th century.

The writings of Akshaykumar published in *T.P.* can be divided into two categories. Those based on philosophical and scientific themes were later collected in *Bahyabastu*, *Dharmaneeti* and *Charupath* (Parts I, II, III). We have discussed at some length these writings in our discussion of the books *Bahyabastu* and *Dharmaneeti*. It is his writings on contemporary society and politics that had been so long neglected. These concerns go much beyond his writings on issues like widow remarriage which exercised considerable influence in that age. Here I have in mind particularly his objective and powerful writings about the problems of the peasants and life in the villages. Dutta was the pioneer in discussing the land questions in Bengali. I quote below from Dutta's article published in *T.P.*¹ on the predicament of the tenants living in the villages.

¹ *T.P.*, Baisakh, Sravana and Agrahayana, 1772 S. E.

It is well known that the chief means of livelihood of the people of Bengal is their fertile land. Unlike the primitive forest dwellers, we do not live on mere hunting. Nor are we as industrialized as the English. ... *The land is our capital and the peasants sustain us.* But what a pity ! One feels perturbed to see the terrible misery of those very people who contribute so much to others' happiness. They feed the world [country], but are unable to procure enough food for themselves... the cause of their sufferings lies indeed in the greed of man [the landlords].. The proverb 'the protector is the plunderer,' may have come into use from the ways of the Bengali landlords. In exercising his rights is a landlord satisfied by merely collecting the fixed revenue? In addition to the *legitimate taxes, he extricates from them payments like premium, illegal enhancement of taxes not paid in time, increase in premium, enhancement of the increase... and keep on torturing the tenants under innumerable pretexts.* Some landlords levy one fourth enhancement on taxes not paid within due time. *Twentyfive rupees extra on every hundred rupees!* What can be a more harmful thing than this ? (translation and italics mine)

It is well known that in 1793 at the time of Permanent Settlement Lord Cornwallis fixed for all times the amount of revenue due to the government from the Zamindars. The Company's demand of revenue was exorbitant in terms of the price level of the 18th century. It was 88 per cent of the amount paid by tenants to the landlord. The landlords agreed to the excessive demand of the government in expectation of future profit. But by 1799 the old and wellknown zamindar families of Bengal – for instance the family of Krishnachandra of Nadia, that of Rani Bhabani of Rajasahi etc. became bankrupt in their efforts to meet this excessive tax due to the government. The 'great' Lord Cornwallis suggested at the time of Permanent Settlement that the landlords too should get into a permanent settlement with their tenants. But this did not take place nor was it feasible. The landlords could not possibly have met the excessive tax demand of the government if they did not extract high taxes from their tenants. This is what Ramakrishna, the adopted son of Rani Bhabani said at the close of the 18th century. And long before that Philip Francis said it to his

adversary Warren Hastings that the government that aimed at extracting the maximum revenue had no right to talk of safeguarding the interest of the subject (Ranajit Guha). At the close of the 18th century the Company's government found the landlords unable to meet its demand of excessive amount of tax. Then it granted unlimited power to the landlord so that they could torture their tenants to extort money with which to meet the demand of the government. This policy of the government was proclaimed by the Regulation VII of 1799. The Regulation VII empowered the landlords to attach the property of a tenant, put it to auction or even detain him if he had failed to pay his taxes. Even the police had no power to come to the rescue of the tenant in the absence of a certificate from the landlord himself. In fact this Regulation reduced the tenants to the position of slaves.¹

The meagre measures adopted by the government in 1820s were insignificant and there was no substantial change in the legal position of the peasant tenants before 1859. Their position as virtual slaves without any rights still persisted when Akshaykumar Dutta recorded his observations on the plight of the poor villagers. But in the meantime there has been an increase in the population as well as rise in prices. As the tax due to the government remained fixed, the landlords had unlimited and ever increasing opportunities to increase their income. And just as the industrialists in England refused to pay their labour more than the subsistence wage, the landlords of Bengal too did not agree to share the least part of their ever increasing income from land with their tenants. The inevitable result of this system was oppression perpetrated on the tenants and Akshaykumar Dutta drew our attention to this situation. N. K. Sinha in his *The Economic History of Bengal* (1793-1843) Vol. III. p. 125, mentions, 'In a case instituted in 1847 we find that for payment of land revenue of Rs. 13,454 in 14 mahals the rent realized amounted to Rs. 40,291. We would

¹ See M. N. Gupta, *Land System of Bengal*, Calcutta University, Calcutta, 1940.

not be wrong if we regard this state of things as more or less typical by the middle of the nineteenth century.' Thus by the middle of the nineteenth century Zamindari became a very lucrative proposition. The landlords were determined to maintain and if possible to increase the amount of revenue by oppressing the tenants. A graphic picture of the above situation is given by Akshaykumar in his writings.

Many of our scholars seem to forget that the above situation was an outcome of the policies of the colonial government. It is the colonial government that thrust the peasantry of Bengal into a lawless situation in order to safeguard its revenue. By its Regulation VII (1799) and V (1821) it took away all the rights of the peasants and denied them all access to the judiciary. These created a situation which allowed the landlords to indulge in unlimited tyranny. Akshaykumar never lost sight of this fact. In his description of the plight of the tenants, he said: '...the government officials do not show the least lapse in their efforts, abilities and show of power in enforcing the tenants into doing their duty to the government. *But the exact reverse of this attitude is visible with regard to the government's duties to the subject. In the light of this situation the whole of Bengal appears to be a dense forest infested with lions, tigers and the like, in which no laws hold, no administration prevails...*' (translation and italics mine).•

The absence of governmental judiciary system in the villages clearly indicated that but for the collection of taxes, the colonial government was totally indifferent to the villages. The Regulation VII had left the tenants wholly to the mercy of their landlords. As a result, the landlord's office became the court to settle all disputes arising among the tenants themselves. This was however, nothing new. From the end of the 18th century the Residents of the East India Company acted as the magistrates and judges wherever they were posted. We get a thorough account of this system as it prevailed in Surul of Birbhm district in W. A. Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal*. The Permanent Settlement placed the Zamindars in that same position in

all the villages. The consequences that followed this were in the words of Akshaykumar :

In many places in case of disputes among tenants, they have to complain to the landlord. But posing as the judge, he in everyway perpetrates injustice... a minute and equitable *judgement is out of the question, his sentences vary in accordance with the difference in bribe*. He who satisfies him more is sure to win and his intentions are fulfilled. ('The plight of the tenants in villages,' *T.P.*, 1850).

Only three months after this, in November-December 1850 (1772 S.E. Agrahayan) in his third instalment of 'The plight of the tenants in villages' in *T.P.* he discussed at length the terrible torture inflicted on the villagers by indigo-planters. Since this came out ten years before the publication of *Neeldarpan*¹ it has considerable historical importance. In the words of Dutta the torture perpetrated by the indigo planters exceeds even that of the landlords and the '*tenants are threatened with extinction by their torture.*'

...They, the indigo-planters procure indigo in two ways. They pay earnest money to the tenants and buy the indigo in advance...The peasants are not inclined to produce indigo. They are forced to do so by the indigo-planters who demarcate their best land for cultivation of indigo. As a rule they do not pay fair price for the produce.

How did these indigo-planters acquire the right to force the peasants accept advance payment and make them cultivate indigo and then to buy it in unfair price? Dutta writes clearly on the matter:

An indigo-planter is an autocrat within the domain of his power. He can plunder the tenants if he so wishes... *The people of this land do not have the right to complain against the indigo-planters to the town magistrates but the planters have the full right to complain against the native people. This expresses the supremacy and power of the indigo-planters even in the judiciary.* (italics)

¹ Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neeldarpan* (pub 1860) gives a graphic description of the torture of indigo-planters.

mine)

So in 1850 Akshaykumar did not fail to indicate the basic truth that the torture of the indigo-planters was a manifestation of that very imperial system that legally discriminated between the white rulers and their non-white subject race. After the suppression of the widespread rising in the north India against the rule of the Company in 1857, the British crown took over the responsibility of ruling India directly. The Proclamation of Queen Victoria declared equality of rights for all Indian subjects but that did not curb the power of the indigo-planters. As a result of this all sections among the Bengalis, especially the leaders of the educated class in Calcutta and the native newspapers (e.g. *Hindu Patriot*) jointly launched a movement. It is in this movement that we see the first expression of nationalism in this country.¹

Akshaykumar Dutta observes the following about the mode of indigo production by the planters, 'As in his first preoccupation [cultivation] he refuses to pay fair price to the peasants, similarly in the second act [production of indigo] deprives them fair wage. He has set it as a fixed principle that he *would not pay fair wage to anybody*'. (italics mine)

Akshaykumar also mentioned that being intimidated by the supreme power and terrible torture of the indigo-planters, the peasants were forced to produce indigo.

The economic historians (for instance K. N. Choudhury, N. K. Sinha, Benoy Choudhury), writing on the 18th and 19th century Indian economy, mention that from the end of the 18th century till the first few decades of the 19th, the trade policy of the British Government and the plundering by the Company in the name of trade, ruined the export of Indian cotton textile to foreign countries. And then the British themselves wondered how could the Indians import British goods as before if their income from export was seriously reduced. Without the in-

¹ See *Banglar Nabajug O Bankimchander Chintadhara* (the New Age in Bengal and the thoughts of Bankimchandra), p. 83-84 by the present author.

come from export, the country could not possibly pay for their import. As a solution to this problem, the idea of transforming India into a raw material producing country gradually gained importance among the British rulers. Between 1814 and 1834 the export of Indian handicrafts was totally stopped and indigo, opium and raw cotton became the most important Indian export items.¹ In the middle of the century the most important items of Indian export were indigo and opium. The foreign traders perpetrated all kinds of torture on the cultivators of these things. Cultivation of indigo and opium became synonymous with torture and injustice. We are more in the know about indigo cultivation because in later years our feeling of nationalism flourished centred round indigo cultivation. But Benoy Choudhury's book² informs us that in the first few decades of the 19th century opium cultivation was also associated with equal amount of force and torture. Such treatment was the rule of the day.

Maurice Dobb in his well-known book *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* has stated clearly that torture was integrally connected with the primitive mercantilist system of West European trade. By an unfair use of political power, the foreign traders made the native producers part with their goods at loss and then obtained maximum profit by selling these outside the land in the highest possible price. This was more in the nature of plunder than trade. This observation of Dobb applies very well in the case of Bengal. The big and small trade centres of the Company in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were ruined by the time the Charter Act of 1833 was passed. Dacca provides the most striking example for this³.

1 See N.K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal* Vol. III, Calcutta p.121 and N.K. Sinha, ed., *The History of Bengal (1757-1905)*, Univ. of Calcutta, 1967, pp. 116-211.

2 Benoy Choudhury, *Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal* Vol. I Calcutta, May, 1964.

3 For Dacca see N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal* Vol. III p. 4. The number of houses to pay tax was reduced from 50 thousand (49.95) to 10.7 thousand from 1813 to 1833.

How trade in Dacca was fast reduced to almost nothing due to the Company's policy can be seen from the table below:

Textile trade in Dacca (in lacs of rupees)

| Year | Company's Trade | Other Trades | Total Trades |
|------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1790 | 7.46 | 14.91 | 22.37 |
| 1800 | 5.04 | 7.52 | 12.56 |

In 1818, that is four years after the Company's monopoly in trade was withdrawn, the Company's court of Directors in England ordered the closure of business house in Dacca.

In fact the Company's other main export trade centres too were soon reduced to bankruptcy and were depopulated or were transformed into agriculture based villages. Many places well-known for production and collection of silk—for instance Rajshahi (Rampuri Boalia or only Boalia), Kumarkhali, Kashimbazar, Jangipur, Malda (the old name of which is understandably Ingrajbazar, i.e. the market of the English), Radhanagar, Surul, Ganutia, Haripal, Santipur, Sonamukhi—were thrust into poverty and neglect. We have to keep in mind this context in our assessment of cultivation, production and export of indigo. The export of yarn and cotton textile was totally ruined between 1814 and 1834. Production of silk textile was also destroyed at the same time. Only raw silk was spared for a while because like indigo and opium, it was considered an item for export.

Quite a few informative studies have come out in recent years on the peasant revolts and other popular uprisings as a result of the oppression perpetrated by the Company and its excessive demand for taxes.¹ However, the difference between the movement against the oppression of indigo cultivators in which the educated section of the country participated and

¹ See Suprakash Roy, *Bharater Krishak Bidroha O Ganatantrik Sangram* (The peasant revolts in India and democratic struggle) Calcutta, 1966.

these local or sporadic uprisings has to be understood before we can realise the significance of the present day politics and political movements. The movement against the indigo cultivators was a politically aware movement and it laid the foundation of nationalism in this country. The question of human rights was a direct outcome of this democratic nationalism. The sporadic, localised uprisings cannot be treated as similar to these. These uprisings did not create any new consciousness among the people. They did not lead to the formation of any political organization or give rise to the concept of a new society or political system. Redressing one particular wrong or doing away with a particular oppressor does not involve the promise of a new age. History is strewn with such incidents. But in the protests against the indigo-cultivators the people of this country acquired this new consciousness.

Akshaykumar Dutta, however, in his serialized writings on the predicament of the rural tenants did not clearly demarcate between the oppression perpetrated by the landlords and the indigo-cultivators. What he emphasized was that the peasants were the victims of the torture of both the groups. He, however, mentioned that the indigo-traders perpetrated suffering on all sections of the village population from the landlords to the peasants: 'What would be the condition of the poor dependent peasants when even the landlords had to yield to them [the indigo merchants] at times?'

Akshaykumar Dutta's description of the activities of the indigo merchants confirms the previously quoted views of Maurice Dobb. Their forcible extortion of the produce made the producers bankrupt and destroyed the very source of production. In words of Akshaykumar Dutta, '...the land which could easily yield enough for their yearlong maintenance if cultivated with rice and other crops, *entangles them into inextricable maze of debt if cultivated with indigo. So they never engage in it out of their free will...* If an indigo planter demarcates a piece of land against the wish of a peasant and that impoverished peasant unable to resist himself ...cultivates

in it oilseeds or rice and if the sahib comes to hear of it, he himself appears and *that land full of crops* is tilled again to sow indigo seeds there.'

The same kind of oppression drove the helpless craftsmen to cultivation. They being much smaller in number could offer no resistance. But the peasants were much grater in number and they had no alternative field of employment. Hence a resistance was formed.

We need to mention one thing before closing this discussion. In recent times, such an idea has been ventilated that the leaders of the New Age in Bengal were submissive to the British rulers and were totally indifferent to the sufferings of the common people of the land. The aforesaid article of Dutta serialized in *T. P.* amply demonstrates the fallacy of such a notion. We must further remember that the article was by Dutta but the approval of the editorial committee was necessary for its publication. So we have legitimate reasons to believe that Vidyasagar and Debendranath supported the views of Dutta. They in fact welcomed the new education and thoughts of the New Age.

We have mentioned earlier how Akshaykumar Dutta trained himself as the editor by regularly attending medical college for scient'fic training. The editor's responsibility, however, does not end with theoretical discussions. Mahendranath Roy records in his biography of Dutta that a hundred years back from now Dutta initiated what we today term field study in social sciences. This was the result of his inborn urge for knowledge. Mahendranath states, 'He [Dutta] greatly enjoyed roaming like an unknown stranger in solitary places and human habitations. He was usually accompanied by two men versed in Persian ...At times he used to roam in gardens or walked through wild tracts. Sometimes he would go to villages and talk to poor villagers, observe the work of the cultivators or examine the amount of work they did, sometimes observed the art of weaving of the weavers, sometimes, especially when he was studying technology, he visited sugar mills, flour mills,

cotton mills, paper mills, mint etc. and at times investigated the ways of the landlords and indigo-planters.' (pp. 300-301) This established that his observations on the social situation in the villages and the techniques used at the time, were firmly based on direct experience. The same eagerness for knowledge made him interested in the ways and manners as well as views and convictions of various communities in the country. The facts he collected from verbal queries and conversation with the members of different communities were filtered and refined through his painstaking studies and theoretical knowledge. These findings were first published in *T.P.* and later incorporated into his *Bharatbarshiya Upāsak Sampradāya*.

A detailed account of all that Akshaykumar did as the editor of *T.P.* needs a much larger space than this study permits. However, I would like to mention his analytical and emotional defence of widow remarriage (Chaitra, 1776 S.E. March 1853). This defence no doubt was to help to Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. In *T.P.* he initiated discussions on the spread of prostitution in Calcutta though he did not try to probe into the cause of it. In every respect, he tried to focus on the principal problems of the contemporary society in the pages of *Tattwabodhinī Patrikā*.

Even when he was lying ill at Baligram, Akshaykumar continued his research on social issues. An authentic account on this has been recorded by M. N. Roy. Roy writes : 'How untimely he has been plagued with severe illness.... He by no means can visit the places which are inaccessible by vehicles, if somehow... he can visit a place, you find him... sometimes conversing with the *sanyasis* and *bairagis* about ... their public and secret rituals. His employee accompanies him with paper and pencil and notes down whatever is important to record.' (M.N.R. p. 308-309)

Akshaykumar's biographer has further recorded from his direct experience : 'I went out with Akshaybabu on Baisakh 7, 1290 (April 1883) in his carriage. Akshaybabu asked the carriage to be stopped as he noticed a sweeper on the road. He

called this man and asked him all about their customs and the deities they worshipped. One or two more sweepers joined him later. They started describing the customs of their community.' (M.N.R. p.285) But they refused to answer when Mahendranath asked them anything. They pointed to Dutta and said, 'He has been to our place and has done away with our difference from him. That is to say he has known all about our manners and customs.' (p. 286). In fact the above incident was not a stray one at all. In the same context M.N. Roy mentions, 'If I ever accompanied him to any place, he would talk to so many ascetics (*sanyasis*) and anchorites (*bairagis*) ... and on return he used to get all these recorded by his employees in my presence.' (p. 286)

Understandably, after describing in details the research methodology of Akshaykumar, Mahendranath addressed the educated class of the country : 'O you the educated of this country! Even now try to emulate him a little.' (p. 310) This exhortation of Mahendranath is perhaps no less relevant for so many of our present educated elite dependent on the stamp of the western universities.

The Last Years

Even as *BhUS*, this testament of rational thought was being published, powerful forces were rising within Indian society that challenged free enquiry or rather the spirit behind it. It has often been said that Imperialism at least introduced western ideas in India. In fact it did just the reverse. It raised barriers in Indian mind against critical ideas and western criticism in particular, because these ideas and criticism came from the sources that were holding India down. Henceforward, even such a master mind as Bankimchandra Chatterjee's (1838-1894) was turned to write apologies for Hinduism because by then it had become the mark of national identity. Against rationality joined such men as Kesabchandra Sen¹, (1838-1884) who superimposed Biblical rhetoric and Christian my-

1 K. C. Sen, Leader of the young Brahmos from 1865 to 1878

thology on the Hindu mind and introduced a sense of sin among the pious.

This was a far cry from Akshaykumar who had laid all stress on observation and intellect and thought virtue to lie in the simultaneous development of all human faculties, and ignoring the dark recesses of the human mind, believed that intellectual understanding of nature to be the most human and therefore the most important aspect of human nature.

It is therefore no wonder, that Akshaykumar spent his last years in isolation. In 'auspicious' days when millions rushed to take a holy dip in the Ganga, he would set out in the opposite direction to bathe in a pond. He chose to set out on a journey on days and hours marked 'inauspicious' by the astrologers. He would break all taboos regarding caste and encouraged youngmen to study medicine defying their fathers who tried to push them to take up law.

Forsaken by the Brahmos who flattered themselves on being modern, and forgotten by the orthodox, Akshaykumar died in 1886 in his own home. Bengal was then in the throes of what has come to be known as neo-Hindu revival. This new-Hinduism joined hands with the growing middle class discontent created by the political and economic situation then prevailing in India and laid the ideological basis for the first nationalist movement in Bengal known as the *Sivadeshi* movement (1905). Men like Akshaykumar were eclipsed in the emotional fervour generated by challenging nationalism. The cultivation of scientific learning and rationalistic thought initiated in Bengali by Akshaykumar did not develop into a tradition. The neo-Hindu revival counteracted the movement of social reform in Bengal as well. And it is in this unfortunate turn of history when the spirit of nationalism contradicated the spirit of rationalism that Akshaykumar's work was forgotten.

However, Akshaykumar Dutta, the pioneer of Indian rationalism, had not lived in vain. If we are to achieve what we profess today and mean to come out of the shackles of age-old superstitions and practices to build a society on the basis of

scientific rational thought and a liberal approach to human relationships and problems, we should not allow the pioneer work of men like Akshaykumar to be lost in the tremendous contradictions of Indian society.

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works of Akshaykumar Dutta (Books only)

(As found in *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmala* Vol. I No 12)

Anangamohan 1834 (?)

Bhūgol 1841

Bāhyabastur Sahit Mānabprakritir

Sambandha Vichār Vol. I 1851 Vol. II 1853

Chārupāth part I 1853 part II 1854 part III 1859

Dharmaneeti 1856

Padārthavidyā 1856

Bhāratvarshiya Upāsak Sampradāya Vol. I 1870 Vol. II 1883

Posthumous

Prāchin Hindudiger Samudrajātrā O Bāñijyavistār 1901

